

Beowulf: A Poetic Weapon for Peace

By Loren Cobb

Beowulf is an ancient Saxon epic poem, probably composed in the English kingdom of Mercia more than a thousand years ago. As the earliest known substantial poetic work in Old English, it holds an honored place in English literature. Created by an unknown master bard for presentation as a form of evening entertainment, the poem resounds with thundering alliteration as it weaves a hypnotic tale of a hero's struggle to defeat Grendel, a terrifying monster, and his mother. Because Old English is nearly incomprehensible to speakers of modern English, I recommend the recent translation by Seamus Heaney, a poet from Northern Ireland and winner of the 1995 Nobel Prize for literature.¹ Heaney's translation is remarkable for its clarity, while still preserving much of the muscular poetry of the original. Here is a sample verse, in the original and as translated by Heaney, describing the attack by Grendel's mother:

*Heo wæs on ofste, wolde ut thanon,
feore beorgan, tha heo onfunden wæs.
Hrathe heo æthelinga anne hæfe
fæste befangen, tha heo to fenne gang.*

The hell-dam was in panic, desperate to get out,
in mortal terror the moment she was found.
She had pounced and taken one of the retainers
in a tight hold, then headed for the fen.

As entertainment, **Beowulf** presents a violent tale swimming in blood and gore; a tale that was certainly just as satisfying to its own mead-soaked medieval audience as it would be today to an adrenaline-soaked action-movie audience. Like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and the *Terminator* movies of our era, it addresses its audience on many levels of deeper meaning, well-disguised under a skin of exciting and bloody violence. In the first and clearest metaphorical level, for example, the confrontation between Beowulf and his monsters stands for our own heroic but ultimately fatal confrontation with the challenges of life itself. In the poem the brash strength of youth yields to the wisdom and infirmity of age, and an acceptance of fate in the end.

On a spiritual level, **Beowulf** presents a fascinating picture of the early influence of Christianity on Norse and Saxon cultures. The poet himself is probably a nominal Christian of the ninth century, and certainly addressing an audience that knows the Old Testament well. Yet Beowulf and his Nordic world of the seventh century are thoroughly imbued with the concepts and symbols of the ancient Æsir faith, only slightly refracted by a lens of early Christian views. If **Beowulf** is any indication, then the New Testament was robustly ignored by many in Saxon England. Indeed, the poet seems to use Christianity solely for its ancient legends, such as that of Cain and Abel, and not for any other purpose. I can see no attempt in any level to compare the final self-sacrifice of Beowulf to the crucifixion, for example, and the Christian concepts of sin, forgiveness, and grace are utterly absent. In their place is a moral view of society that equates goodness with peace, in the very literal sense of absence of war.

Perhaps more interestingly, **Beowulf** is also sharp social commentary, in its intent deeply subversive of elements at the core of its own ancient Saxon culture. The poet manages to convey a covert and bitterly comprehensive condemnation of the practice of the blood feud, while hiding that condemnation under a cloak of praise for the heroism of its practitioners. Grendel, a human-like manifestation of midnight evil, has been entering Heorot, the ceremonial hall of the Danish warlord Hrothgar, to kill and messily devour his finest men. Significantly, men are in danger from Grendel only in Heorot, not in any other building or place, and only while sleeping. Something is uniquely rotten in Heorot, the great hall of Denmark! Although large hints and clues are sprinkled throughout the poem, the poet's view is never stated directly. When Beowulf presents himself at Heorot for an evening of song and mead, the only conversation reported concerns the jealousy and boasting of Unferth, whom Beowulf firmly puts down with an extended tale of his own heroism, ending with the pointed accusation, "*You killed your own kith and kin, so for all your cleverness and quick tongue, you will suffer damnation in the depths of hell.*" That the impulse to fratricide lies at the heart of the problem is confirmed by the poet when he reveals that Grendel comes from the clan of Cain himself, the biblical slayer of his own brother. This message is expanded later in the story, from fratricide in particular to blood feuds in general, as we see in Beowulf's report of his adventures to his king. The very first 70 lines of this report deal not with his spectacular killing of Grendel, as one might reasonably expect, but with the tragic inevitability of yet another terrible blood feud among the Danes.

Thus the monster Grendel, the evil force that bloodily kills fighting men in their sleep, evidently serves as a symbol for the impulse to engage in blood feuds and fratricidal battles of revenge. The poet is pointing a fin-

ger of accusation at this impulse, in effect saying, “You want to know what is killing our best and brightest? Here it is; it lies in the way we use revenge to redress our grievances!”

Not content with this straightforward point, the poet then goes further, fearlessly plunging deeper into a realm that today we call the psyche. He wants answers, not mere dramatic finger-pointing. To this end he gives us the Ur-Monster, the most complex and profound symbol of the entire poem, Grendel’s mother. Despite the terror that she inspires in the Danes, Grendel’s mother is initially presented in a sympathetic way, emphasizing her feelings when her son is slain: “... *but now his mother had sallied forth on a savage journey, grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge.*” It is grief that drives her, a mother’s grief for her dying son. She enters Heorot without a plan, seizes a man, and just barely manages to escape with her prize. Fleeing amid general confusion within the hall, she returns to her lair beneath the waters of a haunted pond. It is there beneath the magical waters that Beowulf must seek her out.

In answering Hrothgar’s call to hunt down and kill Grendel’s mother, Beowulf is illustrating for the audience yet another round in the endless cycle of killing and revenge, as if such an illustration were necessary, while metaphorically trying to rid the realm of its most dreadful scourge: that very same cycle of killing and revenge. This is peacemaking of a high order. What kind of hero will it take to break this cycle? Vicious paradoxes and ironies surround the entire endeavor. In the Scandinavia of Beowulf’s era, a murderer was by definition an outlaw, fair game for anyone to kill. Yet if Beowulf kills Grendel’s mother, he will continue the very evil he needs to eliminate. If he forgives Grendel’s mother her crime, he will betray the feelings of the Danes and bring dishonor down upon his head. Being a man of his times, neither modern justice nor forgiveness are options that Beowulf can recognize, though they will have occurred to many in the poet’s audience as those sonorous lines rolled forth in the mead-halls of Mercia. Beowulf, the greatest hero of his age, is already caught in a trap he cannot even see.

The haunted pond itself is a scene of dark foreboding: “... *a frost-stiffened wood waits and keeps watch above a mere; the overhanging bank is a maze of tree-roots mirrored in its surface. At night there, something uncanny happens: the water burns. And the mere bottom has never been sounded by the sons of men. On its bank the heather-stepper halts: the hart in flight from pursuing hounds will turn to face them with firm-set horns and die in the wood rather than dive beneath its surface. That is no good place.*” The water is infested with reptiles and loathsome creatures, but Beowulf dons a coat of mail and borrows a sword from none other than Unferth, the man who killed his brothers.

Plunging below the evil waters, Beowulf finds a strange domain untouched by water and lit by flickering firelight. Grendel's mother appears: "*The hero observed that swamp-thing from hell, the tarn-hag in all her terrible strength, then heaved his war-sword and swung his arm: the decorated blade came down ringing and singing on her head. But he soon found his battle-torch extinguished: the shining blade refused to bite. It spared her and failed the man in his need.*" He flings away the sword, they grapple in hand-to-hand combat, and Beowulf falls to the floor. Sensing the moment of victory, Grendel's mother draws a knife, but her attack is turned away by his chain mail. He seizes her ancient heavy sword from where it hangs on the wall, and strikes her neck a mortal blow. She was killed by her own sword, while unworthy Unferth's weapon could do nothing against her.

Beowulf is victorious in this bloody battle but, as the poet and his audience know full well, he has not won the peace. A light appears that allows him to scout through the cave, holding the bloody sword aloft, and he finds the corpse of Grendel dead upon the floor. In a final act of furious revenge, he hacks off the lifeless head of Grendel, whereupon the blade of his heavy sword begins "...to wilt into gory icicles, to slather and thaw." The waters of the evil pool then surge with blood, and the watchers above sadly conclude that Beowulf himself has been defeated. He swims to the surface, bearing the hilt of the sword and the head of Grendel. There is a great celebration, and Beowulf and his men return to Geatland (modern Götaland), in southeastern Sweden. Though he is apparently victorious, he foresees yet another cycle of bloody revenge in the land of the Danes.

Like all powerful literary symbols, the evil waters of the lair of Grendel and his mother represent many things simultaneously. As a mirrored surface beneath which lie dangerous and disturbed human feelings, this pool was used by the poet to represent a concept that did not yet have a name: the boundary between conscious and unconscious mind. No other man could face what lay beneath those waters, but Beowulf plunged in and fought the internal monster. I believe that those who listened to the **Beowulf** poem were themselves led to an awareness of the unconscious thoughts deep within their minds, coloring their every thought and decision: fears of abandonment by parents, of being cast out like Cain from the family nest, fear of loss of loved ones, the agony of loneliness, the fear of weakness and death, the fear of being sacrificed to the gods in a sacred grove. These fears appear to have had a solid basis in history, if contemporary reports from travelers in ninth-century Sweden have any validity. Any child not judged fully fit was sacrificed or exposed in the woods, infant mortality from illness was terrible and continuous, and one person in five was sold into lifelong bondage.² The universal Viking ideals of death-defying courage in battle, honor and intense loyalty to clan derive, I believe, from a culture-wide desperate attempt by every child to hide these realistic fears from conscious

awareness. From their unconscious position, these fears gave impetus to endless demonstrations of valor and bravery, and wanton acts of cruelty towards anyone not in the clan. The suppression and denial of these feelings blinded men to the suffering of others, and particularly children. It is significant, I believe, that there is not a single mention of a child or adolescent anywhere in **Beowulf**.

In his heroic efforts to bring peace to the feuding Danes, Beowulf confronted Grendel, the personification of bloody vengeance. Defeat of Grendel inevitably led Beowulf to an infinitely more dangerous confrontation with the mother of all vengeance in her home deep inside the human unconscious mind, symbolized in the poem by the lair of Grendel's mother beneath the reflective waters. This was a war he could not win, because he only knew the way of the sword. His borrowed blade proved inadequate, so he slew Grendel's mother with her own sword. The result of his failure was not peace, but another return to war.

Ironically, what Beowulf the man could not achieve in battle, his poet and creator may have done with epic verse. The poem **Beowulf** contained a powerful but covert message, designed with all the art a master poet could muster and hidden beneath a smokescreen of heroic battles with monsters. Did Mercian audiences receive his message? We will never know for sure, but I like to believe they did. Like the *Iliad* of Homer before it, **Beowulf** is a poem at war with war itself, a brilliant weapon in the ten-thousand-year effort to end man's inhumanity to man.

¹ Heaney, Seamus. **Beowulf: A New Verse Translation, Bilingual Edition**. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.

² Moburg, Vilhelm. **A History of the Swedish People vol. I: From Prehistory to the Renaissance**. New York: Dorset Press, 1989. First published in Sweden in 1971.