

## **BEOWULF: A GAME OF PRIDE, PUNISHMENT AND PURIFICATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Beowulf , a poem written sometimes between the age of Bede and the eleventh century is still famous for its maturity that deals with the common values and basic human follies, deeply. The effects of actions, good or bad are temporary within the world of Beowulf. Hrothgar's building of Heorot and declaration of his owner of the Hall of all Halls, is quickly undone by Grendel's appearance on the scene. Likewise, Grendel's ravenous attacks are briefly alleviated by Beowulf's arrival and success in removing Grendel and its mother. The journey of rise and fall was completed when Beowulf was doomed by the poisonous attack of the dragon. So the poem is presented as a game of God where Beowulf and Hrothgar are the two major players, and 'Pride' the very natural instinct of human being works as a force to complete the game. This work illustrates how the pride of power entangles the minds of the towering figure of a nation, bringing the eternal wrath to the mundane world. The paper explores the conflict between the imperishable spirit and mortal flesh between which the second suffers, groans and sometimes pines and surrenders, like Hrothgar or clings to till doom, similar to Beowulf.

**Keywords:** pride, punishment, purification, Hrothgar, Beowulf.

## INTRODUCTION:

The theme of man's smugness, his selfish acceptance of all the world's gifts without thinking of the Giver, is very common in old English verse; it is the presiding theme of the Junius Manuscript poems where the reversal of fortune is seen as a microcosmic fall of Human being. Pride is a cracking issue in this case that brings disgrace to human life. Repeated warning about the excesses of pride and constant struggle to sustain the line between mortal power and the immortal wrath get tremendous importance in *Beowulf*.

In it the presence of Pride is acute especially in the two major characters- Hrothgar and Beowulf. It has two phases. The realization of the great king Hrothgar through long suffering in one part, and in another part we get the heroic rise and fall of the great hero Beowulf. "It is divided in consequence into two opposite portions, different in matter, and length..." (Tolkien, 1975:108). Both of their tragic sufferings as well as downfall are the result of their hidden pride.

Pride in early medieval thought is the worst sin possible, the sin of Satan that damns more souls than any other. God hates the sin of pride seemingly more than any other sins. Truly He hates sin, and will punish all sins; irrespective of intensity for God cannot condone anything contrary to His nature. But His hatred seems to go out more forcibly against the sin of pride, as it robs him of His glory; and through His rebellious, sinful creatures it even tries to take Him off His Throne.

Although the primary focus of the epic is on Beowulf the thane, the concept of kingship is addressed to Hrothgar the good but ineffective elderly king of the Danes in the first section. We get examples of kings who build great halls in which they host and reward their thanes. They were happy and completed their tenure peacefully. But the nexus of change comes when Hrothgar declares him the owner of the hall of all halls by building Heorot, a marvelous wonder of the skilled smiths. His pride stirs God indirectly.

In *Beowulf* pride was the first sin to destroy the calm of eternity. Satan began to be occupied with his own splendour and beauty, according to Ezekiel 28 and his lofty thoughts led to his expulsion from heaven. "...I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit upon the mount of the congregation...I will be like the most High." (The Bible, New Testament, Today's English Version) Like Satan, Hrothgar starts to think himself a superior one although he never declares it in public. He begins to make the law surpassing the Divine law.

And soon it stood there  
finished and ready, in full view,  
the hall of all halls. Heorot was the name  
he had settled on it, whose utterance was law. (II-76-9)

Satan is quickly punished as his pride is openly declared but the luckless king Hrothgar cannot realize that his towering hall and prosperous life is leading him to the snare of pride slowly, ultimately to be punished by God. The pent up anger and hostility of Grendel is nothing but God's curse. "In retrospect, the old king recognizes this visitation as allowed by God because of his own pride in his power and his wealth." (Goldsmith, 1962 :72). God gives time to an ignorant person. Hrothgar was blind when he boastfully declares his ownership on the highest tower of the world. Demanding supreme status in any field is nothing but to challenge God. God never punishes without letting anyone aware that s/he has completely turned into a haughty, supercilious man. So the marring of Heorot by the monster Grendel was inevitable. 'Grendel the kinsman of Cain is certainly and unambiguously evil; but his persecution of Hrothgar has served a purpose, as a needed moral corrective for the king. In the end, its effect has been salutary, at least in this one particular way. Grendel began his persecution precisely at that time when Hrothgar had become misled, by his own success as a king, into believing that his power might be unchallengeable.' (<http://www.jstor.org>).

At the beginning of the poem, as Grendel is preparing his first attack upon Heorot, we are told that the Danes who are sleeping in the hall 'did not know the sorrow' the dark fate of men. With their King they also forget the presence and necessity of the Supreme Power. Prosperity and glorious life have made them ignorant. '...the Beowulf poet, writing of strength and riches, is synchronously aware, not only that strength and riches are transient, but also that the greatest human strength is inadequate, and the greatest wealth valueless, when the soul is in jeopardy.' (Goldsmith, 1962:72)

God chooses this dark side of his character and allows the continuous visitation of Grendel, every night, whom no sword can kill. Night after night, for twelve long years, Grendel steers his unflagging feud against the Danish race. The long term continuous attack seems necessary because Hrothgar and his men's hearts are completely devoid of the light of the Supreme Power.

They could not find the clues why the monster is avoiding the throne, why Heorot not the bothies are targeted, why the attack, murder, cannibalism, and destruction are only against the hall, not against the countryside.

They began to pull the cloak of God but now their own garments are torn apart. The dweller of the greatest hall has been sent to the little hut to take shelter.

It was then easy to meet with a man  
shifting himself to a safer distance  
to bed in the bothies, ... (ll-138- 40)

Hrothgar's pride is tossed but still he does not surrender to the Lord Almighty. Instead he vows down in front of the idols. God finds a little change in their mood, so wants to give a chance to them. This paves the way for Beowulf to land in Denmark.

He announces his plan:  
to sail the swans road and seek out that king,  
the famous king who needed defenders. (ll-198-200)

Hrothgar hails Beowulf as God sent deliverer although Beowulf does not have the intention to play the role of Jesus Christ. His own land did not offer him enough scope to foster and prove his God gifted power, henceforth he targeted Heorot.

Wulfger informs Hrothgar about the team of Beowulf, advises him to accept their request for he knew the haughty mood of the king.

Most gracious Hrothgar,  
Do not refuse them, but grant them a reply.(ll-365-66)

Being old as well as fed up with Grendel's power, the king accepts Beowulf as a saviour but fails to throw his vanity away. He is expecting the help from somewhere, but is not prepare to seek it only for his pride. Even when Beowulf willingly wants to take the risk of killing Grendel, he reminds him about the help which he offered to Beowulf's father in the past. 'When Hrothgar is told of Beowulf's arrival he talks first of his lineage, then of his *maegen*, then of the mercy of God in sending him to deal with Grendel...' (Rogers,1955:345). He even allows Unferth's jealous, proud outburst against Beowulf in the presence of the entire Danish court.

When the night approaches and Hrothgar has to handle the key, he reminds Beowulf that he never gave the key of Heorot to anybody in his whole life which is a sign of his pride.

Never since my hand could hold a shield  
have I entrusted or given control  
of the Danes' hall to anyone but you. (ll-655-57)

Still the possession of the highest hall entangles his mind. The proud, wrongheaded king forgets that every night God's curse Grendel does not need any key even to enter Heorot. God allows the monster to pass its night inside the hall but never permits it to touch the throne which is the symbol of Divine power. This should be an indication for Hrothgar though he never takes it as a holy sign.

He took over Heorot,  
Haunted the glittering hall after dark,  
But the throne itself, the treasure-seat,  
He was kept from approaching; he was Lord's outcast.(ll-166-70)

Pride not only ensnares Hrothgar's mind but also changes his behavior and he gets confused about his doing. Heorot was blood stained and standing on the blood of his comrades he arranged the feast for the thanes regularly, even for Beowulf. Like an ostrich he hides the head inside the sand not to face the storm. Arranging the party in the hall during the day he tries to forget what happened the night before. His egomania does not let him confess and seek pardon from God.

Whereas the cool brained hero Beowulf has endured all only to prove his knack. 'The character of Beowulf, especially as a young knight, who used his great gift of *maegen* (strength) to earn *dom*(glory) and *lof* (renown) among men and posterity' (Tolkien,1975:107).

The acceptance of Hrothgar makes Beowulf hopeful; nevertheless the seed of pride also has been implanted in his heart. This seed will be turned into a big tree which will be uprooted, later on.

Beowulf starts his work. He believes in God but 'his real trust was in his own might' (Wilson,1975:60). Narcissism grasps him throughout the whole poem though it remains hidden at the very onset. Though he is skilled in swordsmanship, his strength is God's special favour. God inflicts diseases on humans and he shows remedy as well. Grendel can kill thirty men at a time, at the same time Beowulf has the God gifted power of thirty men in his single grip. God arranges an equal combat, so Grendel, the evil also does not get injustice. 'Our hero himself is confident when he lays his head to rest in Heorot, waiting for Grendel; he delivers a final boast... in which he resolves to fight Grendel barehanded, without weapons.' (Schell, 2008:89) Beowulf does not allow any chance to his opponent and plays the role of a striker. He seizes Grendel's arm, and as the fiend

struggles to get away, rips it out of its socket.

The monster's whole  
body was in pain; a tremendous wound  
appeared in his shoulder. Sinews split  
and the bone-lappings burst. Beowulf was granted  
the glory of winning... (ll-814-18)

Being fatally wounded, the demon escapes to its home. The poet shows here that a man should trust rather in God and on natural power that God gives him, for these will not fail him. The *Beowulf* poet understands the distinction between physical and spiritual weapons, which Beowulf forgets later when he also becomes proud like Hrothgar.

Heorot is cleansed, only externally. Hrothgar and his men yet to suffer more, learn many. They need to be resolved to receive more shocks. Moreover, pride ponders its next move in the story. It begins to grow in Beowulf's heart, slowly. When his bag of achievement was empty, he relies on God for the success. But Grendel's death increases his narcissist manner. He places the trophy, the crucified arms of Grendel on the wall of Heorot so that everyone can see those and praise him.

When Hrothgar arrived at the hall, he spoke,  
standing on the steps, under the steep eaves,  
gazing towards the roof work and Grendel's talon... (ll-924-26)

Hrothgar is relieved and has made a speech in which he thanks Beowulf for having got rid of the murderous impostor. However the visible power (Beowulf) gets more praises and gifts than the invisible force (God). Distributing gifts among thanes and heroes is a prestigious job for their King. It increases the pride of Hrothgar also. So feast, in place of thanking prayer to God starts again.

Now for God the final blow is inevitable to purify the king and his men. So emergence of Grendel's mother and *Æschere's* (the right hand of Hrothgar) deaths are obligatory. It is also needed to check if Beowulf is nursing his hidden pride or not.

'The most prominent role of the Christian God in *Beowulf* is that of bestowing rewards upon men according to their merit. The favor of God in the poem is a deserved favor, and the wrath of God is a deserved wrath.' (Wilson, 1975:166).

The essential weakness of Hrothgar's martial strength is again exposed by the arrival of Grendel's mother to the hall. The futility of the Danes' martial customs is demonstrated. They fail to prevent the she monster from carrying off *Æschere* as well as the booty, the arms of Grendel.

She had snatched their trophy,  
Grendel's bloodied hand. It was a fresh blow  
to the afflicted bawn. The bargain was hard,  
both parties having to pay with the lives of friends. (ll-1302-06)

Again Heorot is enveloped in gloom. Though Hrothgar's disdain can be frowned upon, his love for the nation is beyond doubt. He never sends any of his soldiers forcibly to face Grendel, let alone the courtiers. So the death of *Æschere* shocks him and he behaves madly. Hrothgar melts by losing his best friend. He comes down several steps and seeks help from the young hero, for the first time.

However, Beowulf's Pride is also injured. We are told he is more of a Germanic hero than of a Christian thane. He speaks now of revenge and glory, not of God's judgment.

Wise sir, do not grieve. It is always better  
to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning. (ll-1382-83)

From now on Beowulf's self-dependency increases. It is notable that in the account of the second fight there is much less reference to the Almighty than there was in that of the first. From Lines 1398 until 1553 God is tacit. Beowulf does not refer to the God at all until the fight is over.

Before leaving the king for the moor, he requests to send the gifts to Hygelac so that his pride must be erected even after his death, in his own land.

And be sure also, my beloved Hrothgar,  
to send Hygelac the treasures I received.  
Let the Lord of the Geats gaze on the gold... (ll-481-83)

Although Beowulf takes the responsibility to kill the mother of Grendel, Danes' security is not in his heart. He only worries about his reputation robbed by a female force. He desires to regain the honor so does not allow any of the thirteen comrades to go with him. In fact, he distrusts on his companions and takes no help from them though they are all faithful to him.

Arming himself with Hrunting, a fine sword generously offered him by Unferth(now more friendly), the hero plunges into the pool. Unferth boastfully assures Beowulf about the incessant success of Hrunting. His acceptance of the sword proves he is depending more on weapon, than on God. 'The excellence of Hrunting is stressed so that its subsequent failure is made to seem more remarkable. Beowulf's final words before diving into the mere are that he will win glory with Hrunting or die; but this is a boast that cannot be fulfilled'.(Roger,1955:348). His vanity restrains him from seeking help from God even in the water where everything goes against him. God tries to warn him so the borrowed sword proves useless. For generation after generation Hrunting got success, but Beowulf, the greatest hero, fails to use it. Beowulf is hinted that without God's help success is unattainable for all. Success, power, treasures are God's gifts to men. He showers these on men sometimes to acknowledge their toil or to test them. Beowulf's test is started. He kills the monster with a weapon different in its very nature from the useless Hrunting. It is so heavy that only giant or man like Beowulf can carry.

Then he saw a blade that boded well  
a sword in her armory, an ancient heirloom  
from the days of the giants, an ideal weapon...  
Only Beowulf could wield it in a battle. (II-1556-63)

In fact the most wondrous, unexpected event happens when the giant sword blade melts away like ice. This is the sign of the greatest power of Almighty but the self-loving hero hardly gets any message from it. Beowulf brings the precious, God gifted hilt of the sword and Grendel's head, back with him as his booties.

The transformation of both Hrothgar and Beowulf starts after the death of Grendel's mother. When Hrothgar observes the engraved pictures, the giants' rise and fall on the hilt, these touch his heart. Sense of guilt conciliates his mind. God offers him the chance and the proud king gives up his vanity by sermonizing to Beowulf publicly. He acknowledges his own spiritual sloth has let envy and murder reach Heorot. His error comes to light and so he begs Beowulf to guard himself against covetousness and pride. '...Hrothgar's warning to Beowulf. We remember how he urged Beowulf to look to his spiritual armor, to shun pride, to seek eternal gain not earthly treasure, knowing that death must overcome him at last and another dispose of his wealth.'(Goldsmith,1972 :82)

Although Hrothgar is grateful to Beowulf, he has sensed the pride of the hero. He can perceive the exaggerated desire for glory of the hero. As he loves him like his own son, he cannot restrain himself of sharing his view on life and death. Consequently, he cautions Beowulf to make honorable use of the power that Almighty has showered on him and to keep the ravages of fate in mind .God warns Beowulf in many ways, through many examples. 'We remember that Hrothgar reviews Heremod's career to exemplify the misuse of God's gifts of strength and power. Heroic strength, it should be noted here, is considered a gift of God whether it is abused or rightly used. The proper use of one's strength, however, involves recognizing that it is God's gift and consequently attributing the deeds produced by that gift to the grace of God.'(Wilson,1975:159)

At last God accepts the sacrifices of Hrothgar when he stoops himself and let his audience to know what he is talking about. Despite a king, he accomplishes the role of a preacher of God's power and supremacy. '...lies in the poet's portrayal of Hrothgar as a kind of Old Testament prophet, to whom God has revealed that pride and greed are prime causes of man's afflictions.'(Goldsmith,1972:85). So Hrothgar's analysis of his own persecution at the end of his sermon is actually an attempt to understand his own life – he searches for the moral from it and gets it. He informs Beowulf of his discovery, allowing the reader to learn from the first part of the poem in retrospect, and also to understand better the meaning of the second part as it unfolds.

O flower of warriors, beware of that trap.  
Choose, dear Beowulf, the better part,  
eternal rewards. Do not give way to pride... (II-1758-60)

Purgation is over, tears in the king's eyes during the farewell of Beowulf, proves his purification is done, and he is saved to face the tragic death.

Hrothgar's prophecy hardly helps the young hero. Beowulf, the unappreciated boy tries to develop into a man of tremendous strength. A disappointment to his father Eegtheow, fostered in the house of the Geatish king Hrethel, he wants to be the shaper of his own fate. Through the 'strength of thirty' in his hands, he desires to transform himself from the son of an outcast to the greatest hero of the domain.

He is such a person who likes to show the whole world, how important and valuable he is to them. To most heroes, their honor and pride are usually unfolded by the narrator or a friend. Beowulf does not wait for any of his comrades to narrate the 'Swimming contest' event in the court of Hrothgar. Boastfully he



himself takes the opportunity to explain and it proves his proud recklessness although the king was convinced. He, at this young stage, has no need to think about death. All he thinks about is to have fun foolishly to prove his self to the spectators.

Success in the second fight expands not only his power but also his arrogance. Now he begins to believe

‘Often for undaunted courage,

Fate spares the man it has not already marked.’(ll-570-1)

Having purged Denmark of its plagues and established himself as a hero, he is ready to enter into a new phase of life, a complete narcissistic one, where God’s accessory becomes minor. He passes over to fight against his inner monster, pride.

When Beowulf returns to his native land and gives a placid description of the events in the kingdom of Hrothgar to Hygelac we comprehend Hrothgar’s sermon and good advice are complete wastes.

Like any Christian hero, Beowulf’s fatal flaw becomes visible after the death of Hygelac and his son, when he progresses from hero to hero- king. Swedish attack comes more than once on the country, Beowulf loses many of his fellow fighters but never thinks of training up a new group. His martial appearance at the opening, expects to find a trainer like Beow who gets all beside him during the odds. “It is a truism of the poem and early mediaval heroic convention that men will be loyal to their lord if rewarded and well lead. And so in the poem’s prologue, we learn that Beow(Scyld’s son) was a model young leader, rewarding his household men; the narrator approves and explains that a leader should be generous and give freely so that in old age dear companions will stand by him and serve him whenever war comes.”(“Schell,2008: 88)

Yet the prince of the rings was too proud

to line up with a large army

against the sky-plague. (ll-2345-47)

In the course of battle with the dragon, Beowulf is mortally wounded and needs assistance.

All but one of his thanes, Wiglaf runs “for their lives / to the safety of the wood.” Beowulf, with the help of the young thane, slays the dragon. Nevertheless, his haughty nature disallows him from seeking help from Wiglaf at that crucial moment, when he is lacking breathe, not even from God. This defiant spirit finally brings his doom.

Man since his birth is doomed to die. But God needs to see the hearts of men. Therefore it is not surprising, when Beowulf, the great figure is tested. God supported him by showering strength, power and wealth successively. Help came when the bladed Grendel was unobstructed. Beowulf applied the extraordinary strength of grip against it to break its arms. When Hrunting failed, the giant blade was discovered in the hall of Grendel’s mother. But God never gets the love in return. Beowulf is both sacrificial and shrewd and his self-love surpasses all. So, God begins to withdraw the entire honour, those were offered to the hero, one after another.

Against the fire breathing Dragon his gripping power does not work and “he could reap no advantage.”(ll-2687)

He is not honored by fatherhood not even be awarded to assemble his nation around him. His men leave him when help is necessary. As Beowulf silently observed his friend’s murder by Grendel in Heorot, only to prove himself the greatest hero, against the dragon his men also observe him to die, not providing any assistance to their dearest king. All these are the indication of God’s power and pride Who wants to teach Beowulf the meaning of Hrothgar’s sermon. But like a wicked boy he never tries to get any lesson from these. A long heroic life is enmeshed in pride and surrenders to the tragic destiny of life. So the climactic scene emerges where he does not get the chance to seek pardon from God even. God grants him only one final earthly honor, victory over the Dragon when he surrenders his life with all strength, and pride. “His last battle completes a trinity of Christian symbols: Crucifixion through Grendel’s dismemberment, a baptism in the subterranean world of Grendel’s mother, and a purifying fire fight with the dragon,” (Bartz,2010:11)

At last, the blind egoist king gets the consolation, advising his coward people of an extra-ordinary funeral and a barrow for him. He desires to be honoured after his death. Unfortunately, God cracks his last desire also. Being leaderless his men becomes the target of the Swedish attack. The coward nation is destroyed and Beowulf’s Barrow becomes deserted forever.

So, in fine, it can be said that the poet of *Beowulf* proves the very ideal of Bible ‘the eyes of the arrogant man will be humbled and the pride of men brought low; the Lord alone will be exalted’. (The Bible, New Testament, Today’s English Version, Isaiah 13:11).

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