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## Envy, Revenge, and Death: The Monsters of *Beowulf*

The poem *Beowulf* has become a classic story in Western culture, with numerous films, graphic novels, and written adaptations. While many of these adaptations involve the literal story, a more compelling interpretation involves the allegory within the poem. The poem involves three major battle scenes where Beowulf triumphs over a separate monster. Literally, these are very exciting scenes, exemplifying Beowulf's prowess as a warrior, and solidifying his reputation as a brave hero. Allegorically, the monsters can be seen to represent the human frailties of envy, revenge, and death that a hero must face heroically.

The first monster encountered is Grendel, who has been attacking King Hrothgar's mead-hall, Heorot. Beowulf expressly journeys to Denmark to fight Grendel and free the Danes of his destructive force. Grendel is described as being descended from the biblical Cain:

Grendel was the name of this grim demon  
haunting the marches, marauding round the heath  
and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time  
in misery among the banished monsters,  
Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed  
and condemned as outcasts. (102-107)

To put this description in better context, we know that Cain killed his brother, Abel, because he was jealous of the Lord's regard for Abel:

In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. ... Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let us go out to the field." And they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. (Genesis 4:3-8)

So to describe Grendel as being descended from Cain, the author is personifying Cain's destructive envy in Grendel, which we can read allegorically as Beowulf fighting against envy. When Beowulf defeats Grendel, with no weapons or armour, we understand that Beowulf has defeated envy.

When Grendel's mother appears to avenge the death of her son, the author directly states that she "sallied forth on a savage journey, / grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge" (1276-1278). When she attacks Heorot and kills Aeschere, the audience is reminded that "this force for evil / [is] driven to avenge her kinsman's death" (1339-1340). Grendel's mother's bold, ferocious attack on Heorot is a personification of the evil of revenge. When Beowulf responds to Hrothgar, "It is always better / to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning" (1384-1385), we understand it as Beowulf's need to conclude the situation, rather than condoning vengeance, and by extension Grendel's mother's behaviour.

When Beowulf defeats Grendel's mother, we understand that he has vanquished revenge.

The dragon that Beowulf meets at the end of his life does not represent evil in the same vein as Grendel and Grendel's mother. The dragon represents a fitting end for a noble and heroic warrior. We can see a number of appropriate themes relating to the dragon: the destruction wrought by the dragon foreshadows the war that will result from Beowulf's death (leaders of rival nations will attack the Geats without Beowulf's leadership); the fear that the dragon causes in the people as he ravages the countryside is mirrored by Beowulf's thanes, who retreat from the dragon. But the author explains that it is natural to face death at the end of a heroic life, regardless of the possible outcome: "so every man must yield / the leasehold of his days" (2590-2591). And Beowulf foreshadowed this ending just before he went to attack Grendel's mother when he said, "Let whoever can / win glory before death. When a warrior is gone, / that will be his best and only bulwark" (1387-1389). Beowulf willingly fights the dragon, and rather than vanquishing death, in this case he accepts it.

Beowulf establishes and maintains his heroic standing from fighting and defeating three allegorical monsters, which represent envy, revenge, and death. Heroes must transcend common human weakness and rise above their peers. While Beowulf almost certainly seeks glory and fame, he also commands loyalty from his thanes leading by example. By defeating envy and revenge, and not allowing them to control him, and by facing death courageously and valiantly, regardless of the outcome, Beowulf is a worthy example to his followers.

## Work Cited

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