Undergraduate Research Initiative
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Beowulf: Medieval and Modern

Many interpretive issues have appeared in *Beowulf* scholarship throughout the many years of its prominence as the most well-known and studied English epic poem. Characters, themes, and religious character of the poem have all engendered much debate in academia and modern culture in general. Many retellings of the *Beowulf*-story have emerged over the past forty years, especially in the last decade, which have interpreted these controversial subjects for their own specific means and purposes. Novels, films, comic books, and even plays have been written or created using the story of Beowulf. Each of the new storytellers has picked a side on one or more of the controversial topics in the story, in many cases adding their own commentary on the issue. One of the versions even combined material from the Norse story of Fafnir with the story of Beowulf. And so I've looked at *Beowulf* and the medieval works that tell the story of Fafnir in order to compare the new stories of Beowulf to the original work in their portrayal of the characters and themes and the sides they take on some of the most prominent points of controversy. Also, I have examined *why* modern writers and film makers are drawn to this story and continually adapting and retelling it.

One of the most prominent interpretive issues in scholarly debate, as well as in all the film, comic book, and novel versions of the poem, and an issue that has much significance regarding how the characters and themes are interpreted throughout, is the controversy over whether *Beowulf* is a Christian or pagan poem. This controversy goes back many years and stems from Christian aspects of the poem that seem out of place to some readers. They argue that these passages contradict other parts of the text, and these passages were obviously added later by a

Christian scribe. As Henry Bradley said in 1928, “Though there are some distinctly Christian passages, they are so incongruous in tone with the rest of the poem that they must be regarded as interpolations” (Stanley 327). This has been countered by many academics, like Morton Bloomfield, who asserted, “It has been difficult to shed this point of view and see the essential Christianity of *Beowulf.* It belongs to the Christian tradition, not only in mood and ideals, and occasional Biblical references, but, at least partially and tentatively, in literary technique” (Stanley 329). Bloomfield can assert these things because Beowulf is a great hero with Christian motivation and morals. Beowulf demonstrates pride, but it is not the Christian sin; rather, a pride leading to an eagerness for fame resulting in great deeds. Also, elements of the story, such as Grendel’s motivation to attack, are essential both to the very plot of the story and also to Christian tradition. Taking out all the Christian elements of the story leaves a scattered plot with heroic, but immoral characters. This is why A.G. Brodeur can say, “In the figure of Beowulf the heroic ideals of Germanic paganism and Anglo-Saxon Christendom have been reconciled and fused, so that the hero exemplifies the best of both…. The pagan and the Christian elements that combine in the person of Beowulf complement, rather than oppose, one another” (Stanley 330). The poem is thus essentially Christian even though the characters themselves may have been pagan, and how the reader interprets the characters is partially determined by whether he views the poem as Christian or pagan.

The characters in *Beowulf*, and specifically Beowulf himself, can be interpreted in vastly different ways depending on how the reader thinks pride, glory, fame, and boasting are perceived by the characters in the poem as well as by the poet and his original audience. One possible interpretation of the term pride is that it is arrogant and boastful, a selfish pride. In the Christian tradition, pride was the chief of the deadly sins, and it was pride that was Satan’s major fault.

Satan's flaw was that he thought he was better than God, which he clearly was not. And so it was this *false* pride that got him into trouble and is condemned by Christianity. As such, this kind of sinful pride was to be avoided at all cost. Whether there is any good kind of pride was and is up for debate in Christianity even today. There are many lines that would seem to support this view of Beowulf having a selfish pride throughout the poem. Another possible interpretation is that this pride is a good thing; it is not merely a selfish pride but rather an "eagerness for fame" (l. 3182) that results in the performance of selfless acts to achieve a lasting and worthwhile result: immortality through glory and fame. The first interpretation buttresses the argument for Beowulf as a deeply flawed character, but the second lends support to the argument for Beowulf as a moral and glorious hero.

When Beowulf is introduced to Hrothgar, he tells of his errand and how he is fit for the task. He relates how he has done "many a glorious deed," including capturing enemies, slaying giants, and battling sea-monsters (ll. 409, 421-3). Interestingly, he claims to have come at others' bidding, who had "advised me… that I should, lord Hrothgar, seek you out,/ because they knew of the might of my strength" (ll. 415, 417-18). He goes on to request that he be allowed to fight the monster alone and unarmed, his justification for this being "so that Hygelac,/ my liege-lord, may be glad of me… with my grip/ I shall grapple with the fiend… Let him put his faith in the Lord's judgment,/ whom death takes" (ll. 435-6, 38-41). Many would point to Beowulf's boasting of deeds done in past years as a sign of arrogant pride, but what he is really doing is relating his "job-qualifications." Many have died fighting Grendel, so Beowulf tells why his fight will be different. Also, he comes not of his own accord and search for glory, but rather at others' behest, because they knew his strength. This is significant because he is motivated by service to others rather than his own glory. His reason for fighting Grendel only with his own

thanes and without armor is so his uncle and king might be proud of him; he fights for the glory of his tribe. Throughout this encounter, Beowulf does not appear to be possessed of a false pride at all. He boasts, but it is of past deeds that qualify him for his present quest, and his motivations are selfless.

Unferth (whose position in Hrothgar's hall is debatable) is annoyed at Beowulf's boasting because "he did not wish that any other man/ on this middle-earth should care for glory/… more than he himself" (ll. 503-5). Unferth accuses Beowulf of a false pride and a foolish boast by telling how he heard that Beowulf lost a swimming contest with Breca. Each contestant had boasted that he could beat the other, but Breca was stronger and outswam Beowulf. Beowulf responds by recounting his own version of the events, in which he was dragged to the bottom of the ocean by sea-monsters, of which he slew nine, and later washed up on the shore of Finland. Beowulf's motive in this encounter was clearly self-preservation, but he does mention that others have benefited from this deed because the sea-passages are now clear (ll. 567-9). He claims that neither Breca nor Unferth has ever done such a "bold and daring" deed, and he goes on to attack Unferth's false pride, saying, "never would Grendel have worked such terror,/that gruesome beast, against your lord,/ or shames in Heorot, if your courage and spirit/ were as fierce as you yourself fancy they are" (ll. 585, 590-4). The point of Beowulf's verbal counter-attack was not to glorify himself, although it did have that effect, but to show that he fulfilled his boasts. Unlike Unferth, as Beowulf so aptly points out, Beowulf fulfills his promises or goes beyond them to do an even greater deed. Many see in this speech a prideful Beowulf giving a speech of self-glorification. What inspires Beowulf to give this account, however, is Unferth's accusation of false pride and unfulfilled boasting, which Beowulf turns against him.

Hrothgar is quite pleased at Beowulf's speech and "recognized Beowulf's firm resolution" (l. 610). Hrothgar does not see Beowulf's promise to kill Grendel as empty because Beowulf fulfills his boasts, and so he has faith in Beowulf. As the night wears on and the contest approaches, Beowulf becomes "eager for battle" (l. 630), announcing that he will kill Grendel or die in the attempt. Wealtheow is pleased by his boasting, a sign that she too trusts in his strength. Hrothgar instructs Beowulf to "be mindful of glory, show your mighty valor" (l. 659) in the coming fight so that he might defeat the monster. This is quite interesting because Hrothgar uses Beowulf's boasting to motivate him to win. The unspoken result of a failure would be a false boast on Beowulf's part, and so in a way Hrothgar is trying to pump Beowulf up for the coming encounter. Before lying down, Beowulf makes one more boast. He says that he is just as strong as Grendel, but also that the outcome of the battle is in the Lord's hands. If he is being prideful or arrogant in his boasting there is no reason for him to commit the battle to God. When Grendel attacks, Beowulf "remembered then his evening speech, and stood upright and seized [Grendel] fast" (l. 760). He is clearly motivated by memory of his boasting, so it turns out that boasting is not pointless, but its main purpose is to motivate the boaster performing the deed he boasted of, rather than to glorify the boaster. Later in the poem, Hrothgar says, "Often have I offered rewards for less,/ honored with gifts a humbler man, weaker in battle" (l. 951-2), seeming to equate humbler with weaker. After Beowulf's defeat of Grendel, the text states "that man of the Geats had fulfilled his boast to the East-Danes" (l. 830), alleviating their suffering. Since Beowulf's great boasts are in proportion to his great deeds, Beowulf is a great hero.

Beowulf receives much glory and fame from his battle with Grendel; "they celebrated Beowulf's glory" (l. 855) in Hrothgar's hall. This glory and fame are clearly deserved and unmitigated. Beowulf had achieved a great deed, so he was glorified. Hrothgar tells Beowulf that

"Now by yourself/ you have done such deeds that your fame will endure/ always and forever—may the Almighty/ reward you with good, as He has already done!" (ll. 953-6) Beowulf achieves fame while helping others, a truly admirable feat, for he did it unselfishly, not only for his own pride.

That night, Grendel's mother attacks and kills Aeschere, Hrothgar's trusted counselor. Hrothgar tells Beowulf that he is their only hope, to which Beowulf responds that "It is always better/ to avenge one's friend than to mourn overmuch./ Each of us shall abide the end/ of this world's life; let him who can/ bring about fame before death—that is best/ for the unliving man after he is gone" (ll. 1384-9). Beowulf says that this venture will bring him fame, so that fame itself is good enough reason to pursue it. At this point, a critic might say that Beowulf's seeking fame as a type of immortality is clearly selfish and prideful. However, in the Christian point of view, eternity/immortality in heaven is one driving motivation behind someone's seeking salvation, and this is not frowned upon; rather, it is applauded. Some could argue that Beowulf's search for *worldly* fame is wrong, since it is inferior to true immortality. No one really knows what the pagan Anglo-Saxon conception of the after-life was, but most scholars believe that the view of all Germanic tribes was probably similar to that of the Norse. The only type of immortality a Norseman could achieve was fame and glory. If he died in battle, he would proceed to Valhalla, where he would feast and fight all day long. This would continue until Ragnarok, when the warriors all go out to one final battle, but they would inevitably be destroyed. Thus, as a Geat, Beowulf seeks the only possible kind of immortality available to him. However, in his search for immortality, Beowulf in some sense participates in a Christian-like process of thought. He does moral deeds in an attempt to become immortal, similar to the Christian way to immortality. There is, of course, a right way to go about seeking fame and

glory, for there are many men famous for evil deeds. However, Beowulf seeks fame and glory by alleviating the suffering of others, clearly a righteous cause. It would be difficult for anyone to argue that by defeating evil and thus receiving glory, Beowulf is guilty of the sin of pride.

Beowulf swims down to fight Grendel's mother, and "Again he was stalwart, not slow of zeal, mindful of glory… He trusted his strength—as a man should do if by his warfare he thinks to win long-lasting praise: he cares nothing for his life" (ll. 1529-30, 33-6). The author clearly views this search for glory in a positive light, and so the reader is meant to. After defeating Grendel's mother, Beowulf returns to Hrothgar's hall with Grendel's head. Hrothgar says to him, "My friend Beowulf,/ your glory is exalted throughout the world,/ over every people; you hold it all with patient care,/ and temper strength with wisdom" (ll. 1703-5). But Hrothgar goes on to warn Beowulf against the sinful pride and greed of Heremod, a past Danish king, "At last his portion of pride within him/ grows and flourishes… What he has long held seems too little,/ angry and greedy… his final destiny/ he neglects and forgets, since God, Ruler of glories,/ has given him a portion of honors… Defend yourself from wickedness… choose the better, eternal counsel;/ care not for pride, great champion!/ The glory of your might/ is but a little while…" (ll. 1740-1, 1748-9, 1750-2, 1758-62). This speech is a clear warning against the sinful selfish pride that can ruin a man. Beowulf clearly has not reached this point yet, but Hrothgar wisely advises him against sinful pride and greed, distinct from the unselfish pride he praises Beowulf for earlier. Returning to Geatland, Beowulf takes Hrothgar's advice to heart. After becoming king, he rules wisely and generously for many years, never overcome by pride. After fifty years, his peaceful rule is interrupted by a dragon.

The appearance of the dragon tests Beowulf's pride one last time. Beowulf vows to kill the dragon, and before fighting it, speaks "boasting words/ for the very last time: '… I will yet/

seek out, an old folk-guardian, a feud/ and do a glorious deed…'" (ll. 2510-14). For the last time, Beowulf fulfills his boasting, although he has help this time. He gives his life for his people and for glory, and immortality through fame is his. Some argue that by fighting the dragon, Beowulf wrongs his people by leaving them without an heir, thus leaving them to the mercies of other tribes, particularly the Swedes. True, Beowulf does not think that he himself has much chance of defeating the dragon due to his great age, but he considers the feat all but impossible for anyone else. As for leaving his people defenseless against the Swedes, Beowulf is ancient by this point, and how long he would have lived had he not fought the dragon is uncertain, but it would not have been much longer. Also, Beowulf does leave an heir for his kingdom, though he has no sons, in the person of Wiglaf. He helps Beowulf defeat the dragon and remains by his side when his death approaches. Before his death Beowulf states, "Now I should wish to give my war-gear/ to my son…" (ll. 2729-30) Shortly afterward, he does indeed bestow his armor upon Wiglaf. "[Beowulf] took from his neck/ a golden circlet, and gave it to [Wiglaf], the young spear-carrier, and the gold covered helmet,/ ring and byrnie, bid him use them well" (ll. 2809-12). The implication is that Wiglaf takes the place of the heir which Beowulf never produced and rules as king of the Geats. In leaving his people with an heir to take his place, Beowulf has his people in mind until the very end.

In the very last lines of the poem, the Geats mourn their slain king, saying "that he was of all kings of the world/ the mildest of men and the most gentle,/ the kindest to his folk and the most eager for fame" (ll. 3180-2). Their praise for him knew no bounds, but the fact that they included "eager for fame" in with mildness, kindness, and gentleness indicates that they prized that characteristic of Beowulf just as much. The poet agrees with their praise of Beowulf: "As it is proper/ that one should praise his lord with words…" (l. 3174-5). The implication of their

praise is that Beowulf's eagerness for fame, or that form of immortality, led him to commit many great deeds. It is clear throughout the poem, and especially in this last line, that Beowulf's pride, boasting, and search for fame and glory are not intended to be interpreted as sinful things. These things can drive men to great and good deeds, as they did in Beowulf's case, and he is remembered for it. However, a "care for glory" that is unsubstantiated and purely selfish, such as Unferth's or Heremod's, is frowned upon. Beowulf is remembered as mild, kind, gentle, and eager for fame, all of which are clearly positive aspects of his kingship.

While Beowulf is clearly supposed to be viewed as a good character, the first monster he faces, Grendel, is undoubtedly an evil character. Grendel is the initial villain of the story and the slayer of many of Hrothgar's thanes. The motivation for his attack on Heorot is of some significance as it distinguishes him from the other monsters in the poem. "A bold demon who waited in darkness/ wretchedly suffered all the while,/ for every day he heard the joyful din/ loud in the hall, with the harp's sound,/ the clear song of the scop. He said/… that the Almighty created the earth…" (ll. 86-90, 92). Grendel heard the merrymaking in the hall and the bible stories told by the scop and knew that he could never take part in the celebration. The poet goes on to say that Grendel is a descendant of Cain, one of the misbegotten things that Cain begat after his sin. Both Cain and Grendel were guilty of the sins of jealousy and wrath at those they were jealous of, and both lashed out against those they envied and slew them. Envy and wrath are two of the seven deadly sins of Christian tradition, showing the enormity of Grendel's sins. The poet does say that Grendel suffered, but it was clearly not a physical pain; Grendel suffered from pure jealousy and wrath. Grendel ruined the cheer and revelry of the Danes since he could not take part in it.

Grendel's motivation for the slaughter throughout the poem is significant in several respects. First, it gives credence to the argument for *Beowulf* as a Christian poem. The overwhelming parallels between Cain and Grendel show that the poet had knowledge of the bible stories when he created this epic. It has been argued that this passage was added by a Christian editor at some point in history, but this raises several problems. Without this passage, Grendel has no motivation to attack. Grendel's motivation is jealousy at the sound of the scop telling the story of creation and the knowledge that he could not be part of the merrymaking because he was a descendant of Cain. Another significant feature of Cain's sin was that he was a kinslayer, one of the most despised actions in Germanic culture. And so while Grendel does not participate in any literal kinslaying, he is part of a line defined by this sin, cursed by God. Taking the clearly Christian reference to Cain out of the poem would leave Grendel with no motivation to kill. Simply hearing music is no reason for a monster to attack. The reader seems to be meant to interpret Grendel as a character motivated by somewhat human reasons. He does not attack out of animalistic instinct or an attempt to survive. He goes out of his way to attack out of jealousy, and he enjoys the slaughter he brings down upon the hall. "—and he laughed inside;/ he meant to divide, before day came,/ this loathsome creature, the life of each/ man from his body, when there befell him the hope of a feast" (ll. 730-4). In memory of the times before when he attacked and gorged himself, Grendel laughs at the prospect of another feast. He enjoys murdering and gorging himself, and the first time he attacks he kills thirty thanes. This is beyond any animal attempt to feed in order to survive. This is gluttony, so Grendel is guilty of another of the deadly sins. To make his sin even more heinous, he repeats it without any remorse. "It was not longer/ than the next night until he committed/ a greater murder, mourned not at all/ for his feuds and sins—he was too fixed in them" (ll. 134-7). Furthermore, Grendel does not regret his actions at

all. The poet finds fault with Grendel for not regretting his actions, so presumably Grendel is capable of regret, but he is not remorseful in any way. Grendel is clearly a character not meant to be pitied in any way, but one guilty of the sins of envy, wrath, and joy at killing.

As a character capable of envy, anger, and regret, even though he does not display regret, Grendel is distinguished from the other monsters in the poem. His mother attacks out of pure animalistic instinct that mothers have for their children. She is an "avenger" for her son (l. 1256), and she retrieves his bloody arm. The dragon attacks because a thief has stolen from him. Both Grendel's mother and the dragon attack because something has been taken from them and they perceive themselves wronged in some way. This instinctive response distinguishes them from Grendel, who initiates the wrong-doing. All the monsters are inherently evil, but Grendel is the only one who kills without having had something taken from him in the first place. Furthermore, he has no interest at all in treasure, unlike both his mother and the dragon. "[Grendel] scorned the treasures; he did not know their love" (l. 169). In contrast, Grendel's mother has a hoard of armor, from which Beowulf takes the giant's sword which proves to be her bane (l. 1557). The dragon has been sitting on his own treasure-hoard for the past three hundred years (l. 2278), and his motivation for attack is that a thief stole a jeweled cup precious to him (l. 2231). It is instinctive for an animal to hoard something that it values in its lair, even if it is useless, like gold, and to protect it at all cost and strike out against those who try to take it. But Grendel displays a kind of evil that goes beyond instinctual responses and enters the realm of Cain's evil, and by extension possibly even the devil's evil. That is why the comparison between Cain and Grendel is so essential to the story. All the "non-instinctive evils" that defined Cain define his descendant Grendel, and this passage is essential to any interpretation of Grendel. The

importance of the parallels between Grendel's and Cain's actions are too important for this to be a mere addition on the part of a Christian editor.

Unferth is guilty of the same sins of kinslaying and envy as Grendel, and the confrontation between Unferth and Beowulf is a foreshadowing of Beowulf's contest with Grendel. Even though he is guilty of the same wrongs as Grendel, Unferth does not seem to be viewed in the same negative light by the other characters in the poem or the poet himself. It is somewhat difficult to interpret his character because his name is twice followed by the, presumably, descriptor word *thyle* in Old English. The problem is no one really knows what the word means, but it has been translated as "court jester," "official speechmaker," "advisor," "champion," or as "spokesman" by Liuzza (89). These different translations direct the reader in a certain interpretation of Unferth's character. As argued previously, Unferth is clearly a foil to Beowulf when it comes to boasting and pride. He is the image of a warrior who cannot fulfill his boasts, and so he is ashamed and jealous of Beowulf's ability to follow through on the same boasts. His name, as Liuzza notes, means "un-peace" or "un-reason," which could be considered the opposites of Beowulf (68). When he first challenges Beowulf concerning the race with Breca, the poet makes clear to his audience that the motivation for this challenge was that "[Unferth] did not wish that any other man on this middle-earth should care for glory/ under the heavens, more than he himself" (l. 504-5). This is clearly an unreasonable motive, but it is not the motive of a court jester or an official speechmaker, for they would have no reason to care about the kind of glory Beowulf sought. Only a warrior who could not kill Grendel himself would be vexed by another coming to kill the monster instead.

In his response to Unferth's challenge, Beowulf brings up a matter of great shame to Unferth: the slaughter of his brothers by his own sword. Unferth is a kinslayer, a great shame

because loyalty to kin and loyalty to one's lord were perhaps the greatest virtues of their culture (pg. 71). Beowulf says that Unferth deserves to suffer punishment in hell for that sin (l. 589). Unferth is not mentioned again until after the battle with Grendel when the poet says, "Then the son of Ecglaf (Unferth) was more silent in boasting words about his battle-works…" (l. 980-1). He is also mentioned after songs in Beowulf's praise are sung. The texts states, "Likewise Unferth, spokesman,/ sat at the foot of the Scylding lord; everyone trusted his spirit,/ though to his kinsmen he had not been/ merciful in sword-play" (ll. 1165-8). These lines eradicate any argument for Unferth as the court jester, for no one would have reason to trust in a court jester's courage. He is clearly some kind of warrior, although he is clever with words as well, as is Beowulf. Unferth is said to have "unbound his battle-runes" (l. 501), just as Beowulf "unlocked his word-hoard" (l. 259). Unferth is also referred to as "crafty in strength" (l. 1465), although he would not have dared "to risk his life under the rushing waves,/ perform a lordly act; for that he lost honor,/ his fame for courage" (ll. 1468-71). The text leads the reader to interpret Unferth as a hero who can not fulfill his boasts, a kind of anti-hero and a clear foil to Beowulf.

Although Unferth is generally depicted in a negative way, he does make progress after his harsh words to Beowulf by lending Beowulf the great sword Hrunting. The poet uses litotes to describe the sword, saying "Not the smallest of powerful supports was that/ which Hrothgar's spokesman lent him at need… unique among ancient treasures… it was not the first time that it had to perform a work of high courage" (ll. 1455-6,1458, 1464). The greatness of the sword is made explicit, so Unferth clearly intends to help Beowulf and repent of his earlier words, "[Unferth] did not remember what he had said before,/ drunk with wine, when he lent that weapon/ to a better swordsman" (ll. 1466-8). Ironically, the sword is ineffective against Grendel's mother, and Beowulf has to use a different sword to kill her. Beowulf later returns

Hrunting to Unferth and thanks him for the use of the sword. There is no evidence for hard feelings in this encounter, but perhaps Hrunting's failure is intended to represent Unferth's failure. Apparently Unferth is honored and trusted by his people, so he must have done something to deserve that honor and trust. The high praise the poet has for Unferth's sword reflects to some extent on Unferth, the owner of the sword. How many great deeds Unferth has done with it is unclear, but he is clearly a man of no small repute since he owns such a weapon. However, his great shame is that he can not defeat Grendel, and his sword's failure to pierce the hide of Grendel's mother seems to be representative of that.

That is the extent of Unferth's participation in the story, but his interpretation is a matter of importance specifically in contrast to Beowulf. Unferth is the picture of what Beowulf would be if he could not fulfill his boasts, a false hero, and an anti-hero. However, his courage is still trusted by the people, so he clearly had some strength, but it was more in craftiness than displayed courage. The most feasible interpretation for the word *thyle* seems to be champion or advisor. Either way, Unferth is the top dog next to Hrothgar himself, and the one who is hurt the most by Beowulf's coming and killing Grendel and his mother. The character of Unferth works to strengthen the reader's opinion of Beowulf by providing the reader with a view of what Beowulf might have been had he failed. He is initially viewed as a rather negative character, but the reader is clearly meant to view him in somewhat of a positive light as the story unfolds.

A character who has a greatness of his own, but who is lesser in comparison to Beowulf, is the Danish king Hrothgar. The first several sections of the poem establish king Hrothgar as a good king, save one flaw, one which Beowulf does not have, contributing to his portrayal as the Christian ideal hero. Initially, Hrothgar ruled over his people, and "success in war was given to Hrothgar,/ honor in battle, so that his beloved kinsmen/ eagerly served him…" (ll. 64-6). With

his band of thanes at his back, Hrothgar quickly becomes a great king, great enough to build a marvelous mead-hall. “It came to his mind/ that he should order a hall-building,/ have men make a great mead-house/ which the sons of men should remember forever,/ and there inside he would share everything/ with young and old that God had given him,/ except for the common land and the lives of men” (ll. 67-73). One of the reasons the hall is built is so that Hrothgar may share all his treasure with his people, not only treasure, but everything he has. Hrothgar is clearly portrayed as a great king because he gives greatly. When he finishes the hall, “He remembered his boast; he gave out rings,/ treasure at table” (ll. 80-1). And so Hrothgar fulfills his boast, adding to his heroism. The theme of treasure is also quite significant in the poem, as all great men are known for their ability to give, not for what they take. And so Hrothgar is a great king because he is generous, and he is referred to with epithets like “giver of treasure” or “gold-friend to man” (ll. 606, 1476). His heroism is unquestioned at this point in the poem, and many nations heard of the greatness of Hrothgar’s realm. However, when Grendel attacks, Hrothgar loses his ability to protect his people because he is not physically capable of defeating Grendel. Hrothgar says, “a hundred half-years I held the Ring-Danes/ under the skies, and kept them safe from war… so that I considered none under the expanse of heaven my enemy” (ll. 1769-73). Hrothgar has already ruled for fifty years when Grendel attacks, and he sorrows much at his own and his thanes’ inability to defeat this monster, but he is too old and weak to defeat it. “With the sorrows of that time the son of Healfdene [Hrothgar]/ seethed constantly; nor could the wise hero/ turn aside his woe—too great was the strife,/ long and loathsome, which befell that nation” (ll. 189-92). Hrothgar sorrows constantly for the next twelve years because he is incapable of defeating Grendel.

Hrothgar's meadhall is a testament to his own greatness and a place of great cheer, and the activities that occur in the meadhall are eating and drinking (ll. 1014-15), giving of treasure (l. 1052), music, and telling of tales (ll. 1063-65). Hrothgar displays hospitality worthy of a king by welcoming Beowulf and treating him to a great feast: "Now sit down at my feast, drink mead in my hall,/ men's reward of victory, as your mood urges" (ll. 489-90). Hrothgar treats his guests hospitably, especially since the errand they come on is one of greatest import. However, it is not clear whether he participates in the feasts himself. After Beowulf has killed Grendel, "the king himself wished to share in the feast" (l. 1010). This implies that the king participated in feasting only on great occasions; after all, the feasts were for his people. He gives out treasure and advice, but does not necessarily participate in the feast. After Beowulf's defeat of Grendel's mother, Hrothgar congratulates him but, as noted before, advises him to learn from the wrongs of Heremod and avoid the pride that brings many men low. He says that all strength will fade, as testified to by his own rule (ll. 1710-68). Throughout the poem, Hrothgar is clearly viewed as a good king by the poet and his people. "They found no fault with their own friendly lord,/ gracious Hrothgar, but said he was a good king" (l. 862-3). He is referred to as "the wise old king" (l. 1306), and "gray-haired war-chief" (l. 1678). He clearly does the duties of a king, but he is too old and weak to fight Grendel with any chance of success. This passage sets up Beowulf in contrast to Hrothgar throughout the poem because Beowulf does eventually become a king of his own people. Each of his own thanes "longed to protect the life of his liege-lord,/ the famous captain, however they could" (l. 796-7). Like Hrothgar, Beowulf commands the loyalties of people and rules well for fifty years (l. 2209) before a monster attacks his people, so they are both immeasurably old for that time. However, rather than sit back and suffer the attacks of the monster like Hrothgar, who rules for an additional twelve years, putting his total known reign to

sixty-two years, Beowulf chooses to fight. Hrothgar did not fight because he knew he had no chance of winning, but Beowulf thinks he does, although he knows it may be his own end. The blatant contrast between Beowulf and Hrothgar is a testament to Beowulf's greatness. Hrothgar was beloved by his people and considered a great king, and Beowulf is that much greater because he did everything that Hrothgar had done and more. He kills a monster in his old age after ruling for fifty years, a true verification of the greatness and service of Beowulf to his people. And so it is important that Hrothgar is such a good king, because Beowulf is compared to him at many points in the poem. Hrothgar does everything right, except he is too old to kill Grendel. Beowulf also does everything right, but he is so strong and powerful that even in his old age he overcomes a dragon. The strength of Hrothgar contributes to the strength and might of Beowulf.

We can get an even better sense of the greatness of Beowulf by comparing him to another medieval counterpart, the Norse dragon-slayer, Sigurth, whose story influences at least one modern version of *Beowulf.* The story of Sigurth and the dragon is told in three separate works, *The Prose Edda*, by Snorri Sturluson, *The Poetic Edda*, and the *Volsunga Saga*, and some differences exist in each tale. The similarities and differences between *Beowulf* and these Norse works show the similar cultures and traditions portrayed in the two traditions and also shed light on *Beowulf's* unique morality and characters. The Norse stories seem to have little of the same moral content. The tale itself is of Hreithmar and his three sons, Fafnir, Regin, and Otr. Fafnir and Otr are shape changers, and Loki kills Otr when he is in the shape of an otter, thinking he would be a good catch. Hreithmar and his sons catch Loki and make him pay *wergild*, and he gives Hreithmar and his remaining sons cursed gold, which Hreithmar keeps for himself. Fafnir kills Hreithmar, turns into a dragon, and sits on the gold. In *The Prose Edda,* Regin helps with

the murder, and in all three he asks for his share of the gold but is refused. Meanwhile, Regin persuades the hero, Sigurth, to slay Fafnir. Sigurth does this and learns that Regin plans to betray him, whereupon he kills Regin and keeps the cursed gold for himself.

The hero figures in both stories have similar goals and motivations, arising out of the similar cultures in which they lived. Sigurth and Beowulf are both heroes seeking glory. By searching for fame, they come to perform acts of great courage and strength that contribute to the immortalization of the two characters. Sigurth kills Fafnir for Regin for much the same reason that Beowulf kills Grendel for Hrothgar. They seek out a monster who has committed some evil, and they slay it. Sigurth says things like, "My forefathers to fame are known" (*Poetic Edda* 224), and "Whenas men meet foes in fight, better is stout heart than sharp sword" (*Volsunga Saga* 82), and "Courage is better than keenest steel when bold men bare their brands" (*Poetic Edda* 228), that sound very similar to things Beowulf says. Boewulf proclaims his father's fame when he first arrives in Daneland (l. 263-4), and he promotes courage throughout the entire poem. Courage is, of course, a prominent aspect of the similar cultures Beowulf and Sigurth live in. The warrior mentality they have and their search for glory makes the heroes of the two stories quite similar, indeed.

The respective villains also share some similarities. An essential aspect of both stories is the monstrous, fire-breathing dragon that finds a pile of gold and sits on it. Dragons do not appear very often in Germanic tales, but when they do, they are quite significant. Dragons are often associated with hoarding vast amounts of treasure and just sitting on it, an entirely irrational act, for a dragon can do nothing with treasure. It is pure greed that motivates the dragons of both stories. This irrationality is one of a dragon's characteristics that associate it with the devil. The devil performed the ultimate act of irrationality by sinning against God, and

dragons continue that irrationality by hoarding treasure they have no use for. Also, both the devil and dragons are associated with fire and the underworld. Hell will be a place of flame in the earth, and dragons live underground and spew fire from their mouths. Dragons are also referred to as worms or serpents (Liuzza ll. 2290, 2267). Of course the devil is most famous for tempting Adam and Eve in the garden while in the form of a serpent. The relationship of dragons to the devil is significant because dragons are always evil creatures who act quite irrationally. In both stories, there is no question as to the villainous nature of the dragons.

What defines the villains of both stories is also very similar. Kinslaying is one of the defining aspects of the villains in the Norse story. Immediately after Hreithmar and his sons Fafnir and Regin obtain the necessary *wergild* from Loki for the slaying of their brother Otr, Fafnir and Regin ask their father for their share of the *wergild* (*Poetic Edda* 217). Hreithmar refuses out of greed, clearly not a generous king-like figure, saying "My hoard of gold to hold I mean/ the while my life does last" (*Poetic Edda* 217). Upon realizing that his father is not going to give him any gold, Fafnir kills Hreithmar in his sleep. This action is related with condemnation by the authors of the *Prose Edda* and the *Volsunga Saga*. In the *Volsunga Saga*, Regin is the one telling the tale to Sigurth, and he says, "so evil [Fafnir] grew, that he fell to lying abroad… and ever now lies brooding upon that treasure" (*Volsunga Saga* 71). Regin is implying that Fafnir's first evil action was the kinslaying, from which he grew into even greater evil. In the prose Edda, Snorri says "The brothers were wicked enough to kill their father for the gold" (Snorri 112). However, in none of the accounts does Fafnir have any qualms about what he is doing. His greed is the only thing in his mind when he kills his own father. Later, Regin spends a significant amount of time persuading Sigurth to kill Fafnir, his own brother. He even advises Sigurth on how to do it. Regin, while not being strong enough to kill Fafnir, has another

motivation in the *Volsunga Saga* and *Poetic Edda*. He is required to avenge his father's death, but killing his brother would make him a kinslayer, as well. This situation demonstrates the paradoxes of the blood-feud principle, which Regin attempts to overcome by getting Sigurth to kill Fafnir. In *The Poetic Edda,* When Hreithmar is dying, he calls out to his daughters to seek vengeance for his murder. His daughters respond: "'Though their father be felled, few sisters/ seek their brother's blood'" (*Poetic Edda* 219), further demonstrating the problem Regin faces. However, blood-vengeance is only a superficial motive, because Regin really wants Fafnir dead so he can have the gold. He even uses the blood-vengeance principle as a justification for his plan to kill Sigurth, ostensibly for killing his brother, Fafnir, although Regin put him up to it. If Regin's scheme would have gone as planned, he would have the gold without strictly being guilty of kin-murder.

In *Beowulf,* too, kinslaying is a matter of great shame to Unferth and one of the greatest wrongs someone in that culture could commit. Nearing death, Beowulf says "the Ruler of men need not reproach me/ with the murder of kinsmen, when my life/ quits my body" (ll. 2741-3). The enormity of the sin is such that it relates whoever commits it to Cain, the very first kinslayer. Beowulf revels in the fact that he need not be reproached with what he viewed as one of the most heinous sins. In contrast, Fafnir and Regin display no regret after they participate in the murder of kin, verifying their villainous nature. All Regin says after Sigurth kills Fafnir is "'Mine own brother hast thou slain, and scarce may I be called sackless of the deed'" (*Volsunga Saga* 81). This is not regret at participating in the slaying of his own kin, but Regin does seem to resent the fact that Sigurth kills his brother, which is completely contradictory to what Regin has been telling Sigurth the whole time. However, the appearance of "righteous anger" is mainly because Regin needs some type of justification for his planned murder of Sigurth. "There lies Regin…

revolving in his mind how to betray the lad who trusts him… he longs contriver-of-evil to avenge his brother" (Snorri 113). This justification is absurd, because it is Regin who persuades Sigurth to kill Fafnir in the first place. The Norse stories frown upon kinslaying, but Fafnir and Regin contradict their own culture's standards of morality by participating in these acts without any remorse, demonstrating how evil they are. Similarly, in *Beowulf*, kinslaying is a horrifying prospect, though Unferth seems to have overcome or repented of his sin in some way, because the poet and his audience do not view him as an evil character. The act of kinslaying appears to be a speed bump on Unferth's otherwise righteous past. It is an act that Unferth is eternally shamed for.

While the Norse stories and *Beowulf* have the same standards when it comes to kinslaying and blood-vengeance, the overall morality of the heroes is significantly different in the two stories. There is not a single head-to-head battle in the Norse texts. There are four killings throughout the story; two while the victim sleeps, and two while the victim is engaged in eating or drinking. It makes no difference if the killers are a god, a hero, or a villain. Loki kills Otr with a stone while Otr is eating a fish; Fafnir, with Regin's help or his acquiescence, murders his father in his sleep; Sigurth slays Fafnir by stabbing him from a pit beneath him while the dragon is crawling down to the water to drink; and Sigurth decapitates Regin while he is sleeping. In contrast, each contest that Beowulf has is in an actual combat scenario. In the combat with Grendel, Beowulf grabs the monster and rips off his arm after a long struggle in which Heorot is almost torn to pieces. In the fight with Grendel's mother, Beowulf triumphs only after a long and tiring struggle with the demon. The dragon and Beowulf face off and inflict grievous wounds on each other before they both die. The fights are contests of strength, in the open, and with a capable opponent. It is Grendel's and his mother's style to sneak up on men in

their sleep, looking for easy pickings. When he is actually encountered by a capable opponent, Grendel tries to flee. “In his heart he was/ afraid for his life, but none the sooner could he flee./ His mind was eager to escape to the darkness,/ seek out a host of devils” (ll. 753-6). It may not have been possible for Beowulf to sneak up on the monsters, but perhaps that is because the style of the killings matches the intent of the killer. Grendel is motivated by envy, wrath, and gluttony, while Beowulf is motivated by justice and eager for glory. Loki kills Otr because he saw him and thought he would be a good catch. “Loki took a stone and cast it at Otter, so that he gat his death thereby; the gods were well content with their catch, and fell to flaying off the otter’s skin; and in the evening they came to Hreidmar’s house…” (*Volsunga Saga* 70). They do not realize that Otr is a shape-changer until after he is dead, but this is still killing for sport, even though it is clearly not a murder. Fafnir’s only thoughts when he kills his father are of all the gold he can get and sit on. Greed motivates his killing. In contrast to Fafnir’s treatment of his father, Beowulf honors his father’s memory: “My father was well-known among men, a noble commander named Ecgtheow… nearly everyone throughout the world remembers him well” (ll. 262-6). Beowulf honors his father the very first time he speaks, quite differently from Fafnir.

It is clear that Regin wants to kill Fafnir for the gold, not because he murdered their father. Regin makes no attempt to prevent Fafnir from murdering their father, and in Snorri he even participates in the murder, nor does he show any regret at Hreithmar’s death. So it is apparent that he is motivated by greed, and he gets Sigurth to kill Fafnir. Sigurth’s killing of Fafnir can bear little criticism, for he is ridding the world of an evil beast and gaining glory. He comes off much better than Fafnir and Regin, especially because, in *The Poetic Edda* and *Volsunga Saga,* he makes avenging his father a priority over killing Fafnir. But the fact that he kills Fafnir by digging a pit, waiting for Fafnir to drag his hulk over it, then stabbing Fafnir from

below still significantly differentiates Sigurth from Beowulf. Finally, Sigurth's slaying of Regin seems odd. While Regin sleeps, Sigurth tastes some blood from Fafnir's heart and becomes able to understand the speech of birds. He hears birds in the surrounding area talking about how he is about to be betrayed and killed by Regin. It should have seemed prudent to Sigurth to try to verify the facts spoken by the various birds before killing Regin. How do the birds know what Regin is planning? Sigurth should have at least verified the truth of the matter before lopping of Regin's head. In any case, the method of killing is decidedly unheroic and echoes the murder of Hreithmar. Also, the birds say "'Let him smite the head from off him then, and be the only lord of all that gold'… 'Ah, the wiser were he if he took to him that mighty treasure that lieth there…'" (*Volsunga Saga* 83). And so there is at least a possibility that Sigurth kills Regin because he wants the gold all for himself, in addition to taking pre-emptive action against Regin.

In comparison with *Beowulf*, the Norse stories present a more brutish and less moral society. Perhaps the lack of morals reflects a lack of Christian influence in the poem. Or perhaps it reflects a different kind of society from the one told of in Beowulf. King Hrothgar serves his people wisely and nobly for many years with his queen by his side. The characters in the Norse tale, even Sigurth, serve only their own interests and do so without regret. In Beowulf, the only characters who perform these kinds of acts for similar motivations are monsters, not men. The dragon in Beowulf is pure monster, but Fafnir is dragon and man, yet he acts from the same motives. Also, the characters from Sigurth's tale participate in acts like eating the heart of the dragon (*Volsunga Saga* 83), of which the *Beowulf*-poet might likely say, "Such was their custom,/ the hope of heathens" (ll. 178-9). In any case, the culture and morals from "The Lay of Fafnir" are much more primitive and barbaric than the culture and morals in *Beowulf.* This is echoed in several modern versions, the writers of which seem to think that this more primitive

culture is the *real* medieval Germanic culture, whereas the moral and complex culture of the *Beowulf* poem is simply an inaccurate account, probably a Christian interpolation.

The attempt to get back to the *real* story behind the *Beowulf*-poem is prevalent in several modern versions, and it is most apparent in Michael Crichton's version of the story, published in 1976 and titled *Eaters of the Dead.* Crichton's motivation to tell this story arose from a desire to propose a realistic and scientific narrative that could have stemmed from actual events. "…It seemed reasonable… to imagine that *Beowulf*... had originally been based on an actual event. That event had been embellished over the centuries of oral retelling, producing the fantastic narrative we read today. But I thought it might be possible to reverse the process, peeling away the poetic invention, and returning to a kernel of genuine human experience—something that had actually happened" (Crichton 284). This attempt to posit a possible explanation for the story resulted in the incorporation of plausible characters like the remnants of Neanderthal man rather than monsters like Grendel and his mother.

Crichton's version of the story of Beowulf as a plausible account of the type of events that may have led to the origins of such a poem results in a change in characters, theme, and emphasis of the story. Many of the characters have changed motives and aspirations, and some characters disappear altogether. The most prominent example of this is Grendel. Since Crichton assumed that no modern person in their right mind could believe in the existence of a monster like Grendel, he chose to pluralize Grendel into many mini-monsters, known as the "wendol" or "windon," which mean "the black mist" (Crichton 136). These are the nameless terrors which attack Rothgar's hall Hurot and cannibalize his people. The elimination of Grendel as a single entity has a ripple effect on the story.

One of its effects is to change the nature of Buliwyf's struggle against his enemies. The Norsemen fear the black mist and the terrors that it brings, but the terrors themselves are naught but the last, presumably, remnants of Neanderthal man. These men revere bears and wear bear skins to frighten their opponents. There is nothing supernatural about them, and so when Buliwyf combats them, he is taking on a task, as Tengol the dwarf points out to him, which is the "work of a mere man and not a proper hero" (Crichton 218). The more Buliwyf and his men find out about these creatures, the less they fear them. Buliwyf himself or any single man from his company would be more than a match for any single one of the wendol. That is not to say that the wendol are not formidable opponents, for they slay strong warriors every attack. However, in the original poem, Grendel cannot be defeated by any warrior, and he has magical protection preventing any blade from harming him. He is a terror to Hrothgar's hall and people, and when Beowulf faces him the terror is justified. As Buliwyf approaches his foes, he becomes calm since his foes are but men. The heroism of Beowulf is partially in the enormity of the struggle against Grendel and later his mother. He fights Grendel without weapons, a truly heroic act. His fight with Grendel is such that the hall itself was in danger of collapse (l. 772). Beowulf's struggle with Grendel's mother almost ends his life, if not for the protection his armored shirt offers. The outcome of the contest is unclear until Beowulf ended her life with the giant-sword. At no point is the outcome of the contest between Buliwyf and the wendols' mother ever unclear. From the outset he hacks her to bits with his sword, and all the while she simply screams. It is unclear how she manages to stab him with a pin while being hacked to bits, but nevertheless she does deal Buliwyf a mortal wound. However, the fight itself is one-sided the whole way. In Beowulf's case, the struggle is monumental and of epic proportions. The same is true of his fight with the dragon, which in Crichton is simply wendol on horseback with torches. The true heroism for

Beowulf is his taking on some type of monster greater than any one man, and in slaying it through his own courage and strength, although he does have help with the dragon. In a way, the diminishing of Buliwyf's struggle with his enemies by making him greater than any one of them diminishes his heroism, even though he kills them with greater ease. Beowulf's glory lies in the scale of his undertaking and the struggle it took to accomplish his goals.

Another effect of pluralizing the monsters is that by making the monsters human, Crichton "factualizes" *Beowulf*. Crichton is interested in creating the type of story which, although fiction, is more relevant to modern readers because it is more plausible in the modern scientific way of thinking. In a realistic modern work, an author cannot have monsters running around wreaking havoc who are the descendants of (God forbid) the biblical character Cain. And so Crichton portrays the Norsemen as primitive in many ways, including their tendency to have sex with every slave girl they see, but there appears to be some value to Norse culture apparent from Ibn-Fadlan's appreciation of their culture by the end of the book. Another aspect of modern thinking apparent in the work is that the more an outsider understands a culture, the more he begins to appreciate it, or at least the less fearful of it he becomes. This is true of Ibn-Fadlan in relation to the Norsemen, and it is also true of Ibn-Fadlan and the Norse attitude toward the wendol. When they discover that the wendol are mere men with a culture and traditions of their own, they are less to be feared. This brings up the issue of culture-clash which Crichton, whether consciously or unconsciously, makes into a main them of his work. *Beowulf* lends itself to this type of theme because of all the various tribes of the Swedes, Geats, Danes etc. that appear in the poem. However, all these tribes have similar culture, whereas the Arabs, Norse, and wendol in Crichton represent entirely different cultures with different languages and customs. The modern

need for "diversity" becomes apparent in the different cultures of Crichton's work becoming more accepting, or at least more understanding of each other.

Buliwyf's character is affected by another significant change from poem to novel. In Crichton, the warriors blame Rothgar's vanity for his predicament (Crichton 110). There is no evidence in the poem that Hrothgar's pride brings Grendel. Grendel's motivations are envy and wrath. His attacks are not seen as judgment upon Hrothgar, for his hall is truly something to be admired. He has been a great king and ruled for many years, and so he builds a hall in testimony to his glory. Rothgar knows he will not be remembered for any of his battles or deeds, and so he builds a hall that he may be remembered for even though he is not truly great. This false and selfish pride is what brings the wendol down upon Rothgar's people. It is interesting to note that it is this same selfish pride in Unferth that puts him in the wrong. Unferth's loud but unsustainable boasts and Rothgar's unworthiness of his own magnificent hall represent the same kind of arrogant pride that is a sin in the Christian tradition.

The Christianity apparent in *Beowulf* is all but left out in *Eaters.* Especially in the area of sex, Crichton's Norsemen lack Christian values. They take whatever slave girl pleases them, although they do not mistreat them. Theirs is a culture of shame rather than guilt. The morals of their culture are courage and strength, both of which are good things in themselves according to the Christian tradition. But Crichton strips away all the rules governing the use of courage and strength, rendering their culture what modernists think it was: primitive and simple. Much of the complexity and depth of character that gives *Beowulf* its beauty and flavor is lost in Crichton's modern retelling. Crichton's endeavor yields interesting fruit but changes the story into something more dull and factual, a true modern rendering.

The other modern author who retells *Beowulf* in novel form is John Gardner. In 1971, John Gardner published his novel *Grendel*, but he uses the story of Beowulf, with Grendel as the first person narrator, to present his thoughts on several modern philosophies. The philosophy of nihilism is embodied in the dragon, to whom Grendel goes in chapter five to learn about the Shaper, who is the poet in *Beowulf*. The Shaper is a kind of embodiment of all the hopes and dreams of men. He sings to them of beauty, honor, and glory, and makes them believe that these things give purpose to life. The dragon instantly dismisses the Shaper and his promises: "'Illusion,' he said" (Gardner 53). He goes on to claim that he sees the past, present, and future all at once, which protects him from buying into the Shaper's illusion. The humans do not see with the "total vision" of the dragon; rather, they perceive things only from a certain point of view. The dragon uses figurative imagery to show that the problem with this is that from a human view, a spider web could be misconstrued as a bridge upon which they base all their beliefs. The Shaper provides the illusion of the bridge and the illusion of thought, but humans "only think they think" (Gardner 55). He describes the difference between an animal and an inanimate object simply as a matter of molecular organization, which would refute the concepts of the soul or afterlife. He concludes his lecture to Grendel by saying: "Things come and go… That's the gist of it" (Gardner 60). He claims that whatever anyone does on earth is essentially meaningless in the grand scheme of things. And so, the dragon's advice to Grendel is "'to seek out gold and sit on it'" (Gardner 63). The dragon rejects any idea of real hope or purpose in existence, and so his solution is to do something pleasing to him (but in the end pointless) in order to give himself some kind of meaning in life. Gardner presents the nihilist view in all its hopelessness, and he creates two other characters with differing philosophies of life in contrast to the dragon.

Grendel strives to find meaning in life, but he has the "existential angst" that always gnaws at him and threatens to drive him to despair. Grendel is rejected by society when he tries to join it. "I staggered out into the open and up toward the hall with my burden, groaning out, 'Mercy! Peace!' The harper broke off, the people screamed" (Gardner 44). Since Grendel cannot join society, he turns on it and attacks it. He scorns men and the wastefulness of their wars and feuds, but there is something in them he envies: their hope, embodied in the Shaper's tales. When he first hears the Shaper sing, Grendel's world is torn apart. "What was he? This man had changed the world, had torn up the past by its thick, gnarled roots and had transmuted it, and they, who knew the truth, remembered it his way—and so did I" (Gardner 36). The Shaper's perception and retelling of the truth gives hope to men, and Grendel is affected by it, even though he knows it is all lies. He argues with himself over the veracity of the things the Shaper says, hoping against hope that the Shaper is telling the truth. When Grendel goes to the dragon, he fights hard for the possibility of truth in the Shaper's words, but the dragon has a cold and dark grasp on "what is" and Grendel knows it. "Futility, doom, became a smell in the air" (Gardner 65). These things become the scent of the dragon that follows Grendel throughout the rest of the book. Perhaps this is Grendel's "existential angst," the sense of ultimate purposelessness that never leaves him. However, as Grendel repeats often throughout the poem, "Tedium is the worst pain" (Gardner 138), so he comes up with something to fill his time and give him some finite sense of purpose and importance. He decides on the wrecking of Hrothgar's hall. He creates his own subjective reality since there is no objective reality for him. His only purpose is to destroy others' hope, to bring down man. He is the anti-man. As long as man finds purpose in pursuit of beauty, glory, and fame, Grendel can find purpose in the destruction of these things. After he leaves the dragon, he begins acting upon this purpose, becoming the anti-

hero. He does not kill Unferth; he only destroys Unferth's purpose and shames him. He is the contradiction of the hero. Grendel finds some type of satisfaction with his purpose. He enjoys destruction, especially that of heroes and the hope that men have. The only thing to ever again shake his resolve in following this path is the appearance of Wealtheow and her beauty. "She tore me apart as once the Shaper's song had done" (Gardner 87). But Grendel becomes anti-beauty by breaking into the mead-hall and, in a sense, defiling her beauty. Grendel knows the truth as told to him by the dragon, but rather than choose something pointless and absurd to become his purpose, he chooses the destruction of man's hope. In a sense, however, in attacking them out of hate and wrath in order to destroy their hope, Grendel becomes the very thing that drives them to great deeds, which will later be sung about by some Shaper and give hope to future generations. As the dragon says, "you drive them to poetry, science, religion, all that makes them what they are for as long as they last" (Gardner 62). In effect, Grendel contributes to the hope of men by being the anti-hope. This is no *real* purpose, only a reaction to man's sense of purpose. Even though Grendel tries very hard to believe in the hope of men, he finds he cannot accept it because he knows it to be an illusion. He will have either the illusion of the Shaper's song and Wealtheow's beauty or the purposelessness of an existence devoted only to the destruction of others' hope. He does not want his deeds to matter, because he enjoys the destruction he causes. When Beowulf comes and defeats him, Grendel claims that it is only by accident. It is a senseless act, devoid of purpose or importance, a mere accident. At the end, Grendel says "'Poor Grendel's had an accident… *So may you all"* (Gardner 152). He still holds to the theory that nothing really matters and chance, not the actions of men or a divine plan, decides the future. He does not recant his view in this last line, as some would argue (Lee), but

displays the ultimate measure of hopelessness by holding to his existential philosophy. Grendel learns nothing throughout his miserable life, and even in death he remains willfully hopeless.

Beowulf represents a different kind of philosophy. He represents purpose, choice, and control in an objective reality that man can make something of if he so chooses. Grendel is a leech, deriving importance and purpose only from the damage he does to others. He thinks that nothing ultimately matters and he cannot really change anything, so he decides to make his own purpose by murdering and gorging himself on the blood of innocents. Why not? As the dragon says, "Why anything?" (Gardner 62) Beowulf comes along and attacks this view: "*Grendel, Grendel! You make the world by whispers, second by second. Are you blind to that? Whether you make it a grave or a garden of roses is not the point"* (Gardner 150). Beowulf argues that he has a certain degree of control over his life and that his actions have an effect. In the next several lines, he bangs Grendel's head against the wall and tells him to sing of walls and their hardness. The walls are real and hard, and each time he bangs Grendel's head against the wall, Grendel feels the pain of its hardness. Beowulf states that what he does has effect and importance, and so he has purpose. In this specific instance, his purpose is to make the world more like a "garden of roses" by killing a monster. He takes hope in the cycle of life, that even if a life is destroyed, it will live on in various ways and forms through all eternity. He says to Grendel: "*Though you murder the world, turn plains to stone, transmogrify life into I and it, strong searching roots will crack your cave and rain will cleanse it: The world will burn green, sperm build again. My promise. Time is the mind, the hand that makes (fingers on harpstrings, hero-swords, the acts, the eyes of queens)*" (Gardner 150), conflating the figures of the Shaper and Wealhtheow in this last parenthetical phrase. This concept of rebirth and continuation is at the root of Beowulf's philosophy. Life will continue on, though monsters attempt to destroy it, and in this life man *can*

do something of value, of importance. He is not fated to exist without purpose or importance or meaning in life. This is a somewhat comforting view of life in light of Grendel's description of Beowulf as a seemingly cold and hard man. Grendel says that Beowulf has the "Voice of a dead thing, calm as dry sticks and ice when the wind blows over them… The eyes slanted downward, never blinking, unfeeling as a snake's…" (Gardner 135), and later, when Beowulf speaks to Grendel, "*The world is my bone-cave, I shall not want…"* (Gardner 149). With regards to the first passage, it must be remembered that this is only Grendel's account of the proceedings, but assuming he tells the unexaggerated truth, Beowulf's physical appearance does seem cold and harsh in contrast to the philosophy he propounds. This view of Beowulf can be seen in the poem itself, for when Grendel attacks, Beowulf sits and watches one of his own men get devoured before grabbing Grendel (ll. 740-5). He does this in order to learn Grendel's strategy, but it still seems rather heartless of him to watch one of his own men get eaten in order to learn the enemy's strategy. Also, Beowulf's belief in the "realness" of an objective world makes him a kind of Rationalist, almost a scientist, which seems to explain Grendel's perception of him as cold. Rationalism does have a sense of coldness about it.

However, the passage in which Beowulf talks about his bone-cave, instead of contributing to the concept of Beowulf as a cold killer, as it would initially seem to, enhances Beowulf's own philosophy. He uses the biblical reference to the Psalms and the Anglo-Saxon kenning of a bone-cave as a physical body to present the comfort of his way of thought. Psalm 23 is all about taking comfort in the Lord, and so Beowulf took a Psalm about comfort and used it in relation to his body, his life in this world. The world is *his* bone-cave; he can make it into what he wants. He has some definite control over his life in this world. These lines present Beowulf's optimistic view of things, even though he appears to be a cold and harsh character.

Gardner clearly wants the reader to side with Beowulf's philosophical view of things, as he presents a hopeful and comforting view of life imbued with sense of purpose and a certain amount of importance. But why would Gardner choose Beowulf as his vehicle for this treatise on modern philosophy in the first place? As he says in his book *On Moral Fiction*, "There is no [such] truth of setting (or very little) in *Beowulf*, and no one cares: the moral causality is inexorable, and that's enough" (Gardner 141). Beowulf clearly influences his own and others' lives in a significant and moral way, and so the story of Beowulf fits very well into this kind of philosophical model. Man, with his hope and purpose, clashes with the "monsters" of nihilism and existentialism which threaten to take away hope from him. Gardner clearly views nihilism in a negative light. "As cynicism, despair, greed, sadism, and nihilism become increasingly chic, more and more meanness creeps into escapist fiction" (Gardner 44). Equating nihilism with despair, greed, and sadism is clearly meant to denigrate it as much as possible. Also, he refers to "self-regarding existentialism" (Gardner 93), clearly a statement that the philosophy is essentially selfish. In overcoming these philosophical monsters, Beowulf proves his own philosophy by having a real and lasting effect on the world and holding a certain amount of control over his own life. Beowulf's deeds are still being sung today, and so they *have* had a real and lasting influence on men over a thousand years later. Small, perhaps, in the grand scheme of things, but nonetheless still part of culture over a millennium from the time when Beowulf slew Grendel.

In addition to the modern retellings of the story in novel form, popular culture has produced three comic books and three movie versions of *Beowulf*. These versions are all very different from each other in their interpretations of the poem and depictions of the characters and themes within it. Some retell the story in entirely new ways and add or subtract characters from

the plot. Others stay fairly true to the story with only slight changes. The interpretive issues in *Beowulf* outlined in the earlier sections of the paper are all dealt with, one way or another, in the film and comic book versions. The changes made to the story can be seen as good or bad, depending on what the viewer or reader likes or dislikes about the original poem. The purpose of this paper is to analyze *how* these modern versions change the story and what effect this has upon the characters and themes.

The first movie about Beowulf was released in 1999 and was titled, unsurprisingly, *Beowulf*. This was a sci-fi thriller that placed Beowulf's story in a different time. Medieval-like weapons are still used in the movie, but certain technologies have developed more rapidly (Hrothgar's people live in a castle which has a loudspeaker system installed so that they can be informed of relevant information). The action unfolds in this odd mix of medieval and modern, and the movie opens with the scene of a girl attempting to escape from Hrothgar's castle (or outpost as it is most often referred to), but the castle is besieged by men who are trying to quarantine an evil within the castle. Beowulf rides up while the besiegers prepare to execute the girl and rescues her, but only temporarily, for she flees him when she realizes he is riding to the outpost and is cut in two. Inevitably drawn to evil, Beowulf learns that the castle is plagued by a monster who attacks and kills the inhabitants only at night, but in the morning it is nowhere to be found. The monster is surrounded by a purplish haze and can seemingly disappear and reappear at will. Hrothgar lets Beowulf stay but thinks him crazy for coming and says that he will most likely be either dead or riding away by the next day. Beowulf is also introduced to two other key characters: Kyra, Hrothgar's chesty daughter, and Roland, Hrothgar's champion. Hrothgar's wife died long ago in an accident—falling off one of the castle walls. That night, the monster attacks and kills the outpost's weapons-master. Also that night, Hrothgar is visited in his sleep by a

beautiful naked woman while he dreams of his wife's death. The next day, the monster attacks in broad daylight, first killing a warrior and later many of the women and children who were sheltered in a protective enclave. Beowulf gives chase and battles him and wounds him while saving Roland, and the monster flees. However, Beowulf receives grievous wounds during the fight and is thought to be dying. While waiting for Beowulf to die, Hrothgar is again visited in his sleep by the beautiful seductress. After a remarkable recovery (gaping claw-wounds in his chest heal in about an hour), Beowulf goes to a watery sewer underneath the castle to face the monster alone. He tears off the monster's arm and hangs it high for everyone to see. The besiegers see the arm of the monster and think the curse is over, so they call off the siege. Hrothgar calls for a feast celebrating the end of their curse and the siege. Kyra, who has developed quite an attachment for Beowulf over the past days, sleeps with him and discovers the story of Beowulf's past and the explanation for his remarkable healing powers. Beowulf says that his mother was seduced and impregnated by the god Baal, and Beowulf was the child she bore. As the son of Baal, Beowulf believes that he is essentially evil. Throughout the movie, Beowulf says things like: "I am trapped between two worlds," "I am one of the damned," and "The only thing that stops me from becoming evil is fighting evil." While Beowulf and Kyra talk of his past, Roland walks out from the feast and meets the same woman who had earlier visited Hrothgar. She seduces and kills him, and she slays the rest of those at the feast. Hrothgar, who had left the feast, returns with Kyra and Beowulf to find the last of his people dead. The seductress appears and reveals Hrothgar's greatest secret, that his wife had killed herself when she learned that Hrothgar had impregnated another woman. The result of this pregnancy was a monster, Grendel, and the seductress was Grendel's mother. Grendel's mother claims that before Hrothgar and his people came, the land was theirs, and Grendel was only seeking his birthright,

strongly resembling Caliban and his mother Sycorax in *The Tempest.* Grendel, who is not yet dead, jumps out of the shadows and kills Hrothgar, but Beowulf stabs Grendel and finishes him off. Grendel's mother then attempts to bring out the animal-side of Beowulf by telling him that he is not so much different than her; they both kill, and they both belong to a different world. Beowulf resists her seduction, claiming that he is better from her because "I only kill when I have to; you kill for pleasure." Grendel's mother then transforms into a monster, only to be slain by Beowulf. The outpost catches fire and begins to burn during the fight, and Beowulf and Kyra ride off while the outpost is consumed by flames.

The sci-fi version presents Beowulf being a type of tortured hero, a son of Baal who fights evil because that is the only thing that stops him from becoming evil. While this interpretation embraces Beowulf's great power, it puts him in debt to a god for his strength. In the poem, Beowulf is a hero because he is a man who can slay monsters. He does not have any magical powers, only has his own superhuman strength, which no one seems to view as magical. In the movie, Beowulf fights not because he is seeking after glory or because he is trying to help the innocent people getting slaughtered. He says that he does it because he has to. Reducing Beowulf's motivation for killing to a mere necessity so that he will not become evil makes his motivation somewhat selfish. He fights only because of what might happen to him if he doesn't. In the poem, Beowulf could have gone on living his life without killing Grendel, and he would have been perfectly justified in doing so. Part of Beowulf's greatness is that he goes out of his way to help others and ensure their well-being. When the dragon rose, Beowulf could have just kicked back like Hrothgar and let a younger man fight the dragon, but he didn't, and that is what made him a hero.

In the film, Beowulf's heroism is called into question by Grendel's mother, a beautiful (and naked most of the time) character. She tries to tempt him to his animal side, asking him, "Which world do you belong to?" She claims that he is similar to her because they are both killers, and she tempts him with the thought of more blood. To his credit, Beowulf overcomes the temptation of evil and slays Grendel's mother. This type of temptation is strongly influence by *Star Wars*, in which Luke is tempted by both Darth Vader and Emperor Palpatine to the dark side of the force. Grendel's mother acts as the instrument of the dark side. The reconceiving of her as a beautiful woman does two major things: it makes Hrothgar flawed, but it also adds to Beowulf's glory because he overcomes her seduction.

The concept of Grendel's mother as a beautiful succubus has its roots in the story of Lilith. Traditionally, Lilith is the first wife of Adam who argues with him because he wants to be the dominant one in the relationship (i.e., he wants to be on top during sex). She states that they were both made out of earth, as opposed to Eve, who is later made from Adam's rib, and she leaves him. The children she bears are all demons and night-monsters. She becomes known as an infant-killer and succubus who rapes men in their sleep (an explanation for wet dreams). Her husband is the devil, and she is associated with snakes, also a devilish feature (*Wikipedia*). Several things connect Lilith to the movie's depiction of Grendel's mother. At one point, Grendel's mother says, "I'm old, older than sin," and Lilith existed before Adam and Eve's sin in the garden. Grendel's mother visits Hrothgar and seems to be raping him in his sleep, while he has nightmares of his wife's death. As a succubus, Grendel's mother is related to the original succubus, Lilith. While the use of this concept is clearly an addition on the screenwriters' part, it enhances Beowulf's heroism because he does, after all, defeat one of the most ancient kinds of evil, which seem to keep getting older and more difficult to defeat. And so while Beowulf's

motivation to kill Grendel suffers from a reduction to mere necessity, the sci-fi Beowulf, although different in many respects, is still clearly the great hero that the *Beowulf*- poet intended.

The emphasis in the movie is mostly on Beowulf, but Hrothgar's character does get some attention. His character, though flawed, is unaware until shortly before his death that he is the cause of the attacks of the monster. Grendel will not fight him, but Hrothgar does not understand why. He seems to be a good king, and he still rules his domain proudly, though he is beset by evil. He has committed a great sin in the past, but he does not lie about it; he just never tells anyone about it. His sin comes back to haunt him, and he pays for it with his life. Hrothgar is clearly meant to be viewed as a good king who made one grave mistake long ago, a mistake which Beowulf does not repeat. Hrothgar's mistake results in Grendel, a horrifying monster who lusts for blood. However, Grendel's mother reveals that she had lived in the land before Hrothgar took it. This, in turn, provides some justification for Grendel's attacks. He is not merely a mindless beast; he wants his birthright. While the screenwriters do not make him pitiful in any respect, he clearly has an arguably justifiable motivation to attack. This is quite different from the poem, in which Grendel attacks out of envy and rage.

Although changed in many respects, the sci-fi movie version does not do as much damage to the characters as one might think. Beowulf survives, having overcome all obstacles and temptations, even gaining a beautiful woman to be his. Hrothgar's character takes a big hit, although he continues to rule well until his death, but he clearly is nowhere near Beowulf's level of greatness. Grendel is somewhat of a mindless beast who does his mother's bidding, and she slays because she lived there first, but also because she loves the taste of blood. Good and evil are clearly defined, as in the poem, and good triumphs.

Another film version of the poem, titled *Beowulf and Grendel*, was released in 2006 and the story is set in the original time period. The decision to bring Beowulf back to his original time is one of many attempts on the part of the film-makers to make this version seem "realistic." In his early years, Hrothgar and his band of thanes come upon a troll with his child. The troll, who resembles a Neanderthal, had stolen a fish, and he also happens to be in their way, so they kill him for sport. The troll's child hides over the edge of a cliff, and Hrothgar is the only one to see him, but pity stays his hand. This troll grows up to become Grendel and seeks revenge upon the Danes for the murder of his father by breaking into Heorot and killing several drunken men. He continues his attacks uncontested, since none of Hrothgar's warriors, including the cowardly Unferth, have the guts to fight Grendel, and Hrothgar's nightmare begins.

Meanwhile, Beowulf washes up on the shores of Geatland after losing his boat in a storm, and he hears of Hrothgar's misfortunes. One night around the campfire, the Geats decide that Beowulf and his men should go kill Hrothgar's monster and show the Danes the might of the Geats. This is in contrast to the sci-fi version, in which Beowulf is a lone wanderer. Traveling to Daneland by boat, one of Beowulf's warriors is grabbed by the pale hand of a sea-hag. He survives, but the hand disappears into the depths of the sea. Beowulf and his men arrive in Daneland to find that Hrothgar has descended from a kingly warrior to a drunken sot. He is, however, pleased to see them and feasts them to their hearts' content. A Christian priest named Brendan has also arrived, claiming he can kill the monster, but he immediately falls to the ground in an epileptic fit. At the feast, Hrothgar's fat thane Unferth mocks Beowulf, asking him why a Geat will be able to overcome Grendel when so many have failed. Beowulf says that he will be ready and not drunk when Grendel attacks. Grendel sees the newcomers arrive and decides to go to the hall that night and urinate on the doorstep. By the time Beowulf and his men

realize what is happening, Grendel is long gone. Beowulf attempts to seek out the monster, but he can never find him. He asks the local red-headed witch-woman, Selma, why Grendel will not fight him. She says it is because he is a Geat, and the Geats have done Grendel no harm. Learning this, Beowulf asks Hrothgar why Grendel has been attacking, to which Hrothgar replies, "He's a fucking troll!" Beowulf suspects that there is more, and he continues his visits to Selma in an attempt to learn more of the troll. Beowulf himself eventually has sex with her, although she still treats him quite coolly.

The mood of Hrothgar's people is ever darkening, as the king himself declines into impotence. They pray to many gods, and the priest Brendan baptizes many, claiming that God will give them protection against the monster. Unferth and Hrothgar participate in the baptism, hoping it will help them. One of the baptized, a physically disabled man, offers to lead Beowulf to Grendel's lair. When they arrive, Grendel is not there, and in a rage one of Beowulf's thanes smashes the skull of Grendel's father and curses Grendel's race. That night, Grendel attacks, killing only the man who dishonored his father's skull. While Grendel is escaping, Beowulf attaches a rope to his arm, which hangs him from the hall's roof. In an animalistic attempt to escape, Grendel saws off his own arm and runs to his death. Again, Beowulf visits Selma, only to find that she mourns the troll's death. He learns that Grendel had come and raped her one night, although later he protected her from others that would do the same. The others celebrate in the hall, but that night Grendel's mother, the old sea-hag who had attacked them on their journey to Daneland, attacks the hall. Striding up the hill, she smashes Brendan's face and slays several of Hrothgar's men.

In the morning, Beowulf and his men return to Grendel's cave and find a pool in the back of it. Beowulf dives in and encounters Grendel's mother on the other side. He slays her, but

before he leaves he sees a red-haired boy holding a sword as if to challenge him, whom he recognizes as Grendel's son by Selma. Beowulf pities him and lets him live, telling him that "[Grendel] would be proud." Encountering Selma in the morning, he tells her of what he did, but all she says is, "Then Hrothgar taught you nothing." Beowulf builds a cairn to honor Grendel's memory. Selma and her son watch while Beowulf sails away with his men.

The Beowulf of *Beowulf and Grendel* seems to be motivated by the right reasons; he fights to help Hrothgar and for Geatish glory. However, a change made by the screenwriters in Grendel's character, that Grendel fights only because he was wronged, changes the scenario significantly. Throughout the entire movie, Beowulf keeps getting this vibe that Grendel is not attacking just because he is "a fucking troll." Beowulf has an uneasy feeling that he is compliant in injustice, and so he seeks to *learn* about the troll in order to better understand its motives. This is a uniquely modern concept, and one that Crichton used in *Eaters of the Dead.* The general idea is that that the more one learns of something he doesn't know much about, the less he will become frightened of or confused by its ways. This is a prominent idea in many modern versions of *Beowulf*. In seeking to learn about Grendel, Beowulf finally learns that Grendel is motivated by revenge for his father's death, whom Hrothgar killed many years ago. When Grendel finally attacks, he is slain because he cuts his own arm off rather than Beowulf ripping it off. This does not detract from Beowulf's heroism, however, because Beowulf succeeds in killing the troll's mother, quite a feat in itself. He also does this alone, whereas he initially fought side-by-side with his Geat companions. After killing Grendel's mother and learning that Grendel himself was wronged, Beowulf builds a cairn to commemorate Grendel because Grendel was not the monster Beowulf had originally believed. Beowulf displays a moral sensibility through this act and his attempts to find out Grendel's motivations that set him above Hrothgar. Near the end, Selma

claims that Beowulf is no better than Hrothgar because he let her son live, but the meaning of this is unclear, because in order to be different from Hrothgar in the way she is implying, Beowulf would have to kill her son. This seems to just be a slip-up in the screen-writing, for it doesn't make any sense for Selma to criticize Beowulf for *not* killing her son. In the poem, Beowulf never has to worry about whether what he is doing is right, and his glory comes from the accomplishment of a good and heroic deed. The screen-writers take away from Beowulf's glory because it is not clear whether he was in the right. If what Beowulf does is unjust, then the only fame he makes for himself is that of infamy. If only because the question is asked, Beowulf's glory diminishes. Such moral ambivalence is typically modern but also part of the film's more realistic mode. And so while Beowulf is not ultimately in the wrong, the uncertainty through most of the movie seems to detract from Beowulf's glory and make him more of a normal man.

Grendel's character has been changed most significantly in the movie. As mentioned earlier, Grendel is a troll who looks somewhat like a large Neanderthal man, which may have been an attempt on the part of the screenwriters to make Grendel seem more believable. He is a cross between animal and man, displaying the instinctive behavior of an animal while having speech and a level of understanding. Grendel is definitely portrayed as a pitiable character from the opening scene, in which his father is brutally murdered while he watches. When Hrothgar spots him, Grendel bares his little teeth and growls defiantly, an extraordinarily pitiful image. Hrothgar feels the same way and lets him live. After Hrothgar and his men have gone, little Grendel tries to hauls his father's body away but is unsuccessful, whereupon he hacks his father's head off and cradles it in his arms. When he has grown up, Grendel prepares to avenge himself upon the Danes for the murder of his father. He yells and smashes his own head with a

rock, demonstrating the primitive behavior that defines him. Later, after Beowulf has come, Grendel enjoys taunting his prey by urinating on the doorstep to Heorot. Beowulf chases him into the moors, where Beowulf learns from Selma that Grendel has his own language, which Selma can understand. She says that his name means "grinder," but not of bones as Beowulf guessed, but of teeth, because he grinds his teeth in his sleep, a sign of emotional stress. Selma also informs Beowulf that Grendel had come and raped her one night, and the viewer sees the action in a flashback. While she is being raped, Selma does not appear angry or scared, perhaps because she has sympathy for other outcasts like herself. When Grendel finally attacks Heorot, it is because one of Beowulf's men had smashed the beloved skull of his father. Grendel kills only the man who defiled his father's skulls, but gets caught in his attempt to escape. Like a cornered wolf, Grendel cuts off his own arm and flees to a river, where he dies. This entire scene is very pitiful, as a creature is forced to cut his own arm off in order to remain free. The depiction of Grendel as a kind of wronged native makes him pitiable and likeable to some extent, as in one scene where he uses men's skulls as bowling pins and knocks them down with rocks, rejoicing whenever he hits one. The resulting character is no longer a monster, only a man with some animal characteristics.

Hrothgar does not care whether Grendel is truly a monster, and he refuses to tell Beowulf the reason for Grendel's attacks for some time. Before Beowulf arrives, Hrothgar wallows in his own misery, drinking all day to escape from the pain of his existence. He and his people, including Unferth, drink and fornicate as if they have nothing else to do. At one point, Hrothgar is lying on the ground in a drunken stupor, and his wife is forced to come pick him off the ground while his subjects watch. When Beowulf arrives, Hrothgar is drunk in the middle of the day, a fairly sad circumstance, as he himself points out. Hrothgar's decline into impotence marks

a significant difference between the movie and poetic versions. The Hrothgar of the poem maintains his regal bearing and kingly stature, although he grieves that he can no longer protect his people. In the movie, Hrothgar is only the lead drunk. His thanes, especially Unferth, are also drunks, which Beowulf points out. Hrothgar, Unferth, and the Danes have declined into a state of impotence. They fear for their lives so much that they turn to Christianity.

This movie is the first version of *Beowulf* to make an issue of Christianity. Early in the movie, a Christian monk named Brendan comes and claims that he can defeat Grendel. Drawing a circle and chanting in Latin outside the hall one night, Brendan becomes aware of Grendel, who mocks his strange words but leaves him alive. Claiming that the power of God saved him, Brendan sets about baptizing all those who would have God on their side. Hrothgar watches while Unferth is baptized, a particularly disgusting scene as Unferth's massive fat body is submersed with some difficulty by Brendan. Hrothgar asks Beowulf what he thinks of the whole procedure. Beowulf scorns it, as only the weak and helpless flock to the baptism. It turns out that a retarded and physically deformed man is one of the baptized, not a positive portrayal of Christians, who leads them to Grendel's cave. After continued lack of success against Grendel, Hrothgar himself is baptized, claiming that one more god can't hurt him. Brendan meets his end when Grendel's mother strides up the hill to the hall and smashes his face in. At the end of the movie, when Beowulf and his men are sailing back to Geatland, their scop, also a Christian convert, talks of how Beowulf slew Grendel, the descendant of Cain. One of Beowulf's men asks another if this is true, to which the other replies that the scop is drawing a comparison between Grendel and Cain, in that they are both killers. "But we are all killers, so [the scop] is full of shit," he replies. This seems to propound the idea that the poem was originally pagan, but that Christians later added their own coloring. And so while clearly depicting Christianity in a

negative way, the characters in the movie do not seem to show any hate for it, they just treat it somewhat scornfully.

Overall, the movie takes a much more positive outlook on the character of Grendel than the poem does, and Beowulf's heroism is somewhat hurt because of it, although he does have a moral sensibility superior to that of Hrothgar. Hrothgar, Unferth, and the Danes are portrayed quite badly in the movie, appearing as drunken and weak men who are not strong enough to fend for themselves, and so they embrace Christianity, which teaches that God will fight for them. The line between good and evil is blurred in this retelling, with Beowulf having to determine for himself who is good and who is bad. He triumphs, but his triumph is somewhat empty as he has killed what should have been a harmless creature. Although Beowulf is strong and heroic, he is not depicted as the great hero of the poem.

The most recent movie based on the *Beowulf*-story was released in 2007, and it used computer generated animation to create the final product. There is also a comic book version of the screenplay that only differs slightly from the movie itself. This version is also set in the original time period, and it begins with a lively feast in Hrothgar's hall. Hrothgar leads his men in the drinking and raucous behavior. Far away, Grendel hears the sounds of their merriment, which pains his sensitive ear. He looks like a rotting corpse, with parts of his face missing and a bulbous ear drum that throbs painfully at loud noises. He attacks Heorot and kills many men, although he does not touch Hrothgar, even though Hrothgar challenges him. After Grendel leaves, Hrothgar orders the hall to be closed and no feasting or merry-making to occur, for that would draw Grendel. Grendel returns to his cave, and his mother's voice tells him not to touch Hrothgar, which he says he has not done.

Beowulf arrives, seeking glory and proclaiming that he will kill the monster. Hrothgar re-opens the meadhall and treats his visitors to a feast. At the feast, Unferth challenges Beowulf, telling of Beowulf's failure to win even a swimming competition. Beowulf replies by telling how he slew nine sea-monsters and still beating his opponent. Later, Hrothgar's queen Wealhtheow treats them all by singing and playing on her harp. Beowulf stares in awe at her beauty and her song, but Hrothgar pulls him aside to show him the greatest of all Hrothgar's treasure, a golden drinking horn in the form of a dragon. Hrothgar tells Beowulf that it will be his if he defeats Grendel. The night wears on, and Hrothgar and his men retire. Beowulf lies down naked, saying he will fight the monster without weapons and telling his men to keep singing. Grendel bursts through the doors and devours one of Beowulf's men. After a significant struggle, Beowulf succeeds in battering Grendel's sensitive ear, causing him to shrink. Beowulf then traps Grendel's arm in the door, yelling "*I am Beowulf!"* and smashing his arm off. Grendel flees, whimpering, to his cave, where he shrinks to near-fetus size. His mother, who the viewer can only see in reflections, is a golden lizard-like woman who vows revenge for her son.

The Danes and Geats celebrate in the hall, and all fall into a drunken sleep. In the night, Beowulf dreams that Wealhtheow comes to him, telling him that she wants him and that Hrothgar is dead. Beowulf wakes to find many of his men hanging from the rafters of the hall, all dead. He rushes to Hrothgar, who tells him that the murderer is Grendel's mother, whom he thought long gone from this part of the world. Unferth offers Beowulf his sword Hrunting by way of apology, which Beowulf accepts and takes to Grendel's cave. He enters alone, using the golden dragon-horn to light his way. He sees the dead body of Grendel, and Grendel's mother appears to him in the form of a gorgeous naked woman. She tempts him with power and wealth and her beauty. She melts his sword with her hands, and Beowulf is defenseless against her

wiles. She says that as long as she holds the drinking horn, Beowulf will be the mightiest king alive. Returning with Grendel's head to Hrothgar's hall, Beowulf boasts that he killed the hag Grendel's mother with great sword Hrunting, leaving the sword in her dead body. Hrothgar asks Beowulf if he has really killed Grendel's mother, for they both know her to be no hag. Beowulf assures him that he has, whereupon Hrothgar declares Beowulf to be heir of everything he has. Hrothgar goes to the castle wall, where he promptly jumps to his death on the rocks below. And so Beowulf becomes king of the Danes, rather than the Geats as in the poem.

Many years later, Beowulf watches while his army annihilates an army of Frisian invaders, come to die gloriously fighting against Beowulf. Returning from battle, Beowulf speaks to his young bed-woman, who reminds him that the next day is Beowulf's day. At the feast honoring Beowulf's accomplishments, Unferth, now a Christian monk of sorts, brings Beowulf the golden drinking horn, which he says one of his slaves found on the moors. That night, a dragon burns an outlying village, and Unferth brings word that he has a message from Beowulf's son. Beowulf realizes that the dragon must be his son by Grendel's mother, and he returns to Grendel's mother's cave, where he tries to give back the golden drinking cup. She laughs that it is too late and a dragon rises from the shadows behind her. The dragon flies toward the castle, and Beowulf chases it, managing to attach himself with a chain to the dragon's back. Cutting through the dragon's neck, Beowulf tries to reach the heart, but the chain holds him back. He cuts his arm off with his own sword and rips out the dragon's heart. The dragon falls to the beach, where it changes back into a human form. The human form of his son is covered by solid gold sheen, similar to his mother. Beowulf looks into his dead son's eyes before the sea sweeps away his son's body. Beowulf's right-hand man Wiglaf arrives to find Beowulf just about dead. Beowulf is burned on a burial ship, and Wiglaf watches while Grendel's mother

alights on Beowulf's body and kisses him. Wiglaf then finds the golden drinking horn in the sand by his feet and looks up to see Grendel's mother beckoning him. He takes several strides toward her before stopping and staring at her. The movie ends on this ambiguous note.

Unlike the science fiction movie, Beowulf is not the son of a monstrous god of evil, but he is guilty of many wrongs, and this depiction is by far the most negative. Whether he is to be viewed as a hero or a monster is one of the main controversies in the movie. When Beowulf arrives at Heorot and is challenged by Unferth, he tells the story of his fight with the sea-monsters. While he is telling it, the viewer can see the action unfolding on screen. We see Beowulf kill several monsters, and his voice says he killed nine, the same number as the poem, the last of which dragged him to the bottom. However, on screen we see a beautiful topless mermaid seduce Beowulf underwater. This is a clear foreshadowing of Grendel's mother, but it also establishes that Beowulf is susceptible to seduction. Interestingly, after Beowulf finishes his story, Wiglaf says to another of Beowulf's men that it was only four sea-monsters last time. This implies that Beowulf also exaggerates the truth, perhaps even lies. While Beowulf is clearly strong and brave, Wealhtheow notes, after his attempt to seduce her in the deleted scenes and the comic book version of the movie, "First driven by greed, now by lust. You may be beautiful, lord Beowulf, but I fear you've the heart of a monster" (Ryall, 48-9). And so Beowulf is drawn into comparison with a monster.

When Beowulf goes to battle Grendel's mother, he unexpectedly finds a beautiful woman who tempts him with fame, riches, power, and her body, as in the sci-fi movie. She also says that "Underneath, you're as much a monster as my son, Grendel. Perhaps more" (Ryall 57). Granted, he does try to stab her, but she walks through his sword and melts it in her hands, a clearly phallic object. Beowulf gives in to the combination of her promises with her supernaturally

beautiful body, becoming the monster Wealhtheow and Grendel's mother knew him to be. Furthermore, upon his return to Heorot, he lies and claims to have killed Grendel's mother, persisting in his lie even to Hrothgar, who knows the truth of the matter. Lying, lust, greed, and pride are characteristics of monsters, which Beowulf has clearly become.

He rules for many years and gains wealth, glory, and fame. In the battle with the Frisians claims that, "We are the monsters now," because it is more of a fight than a slaughter. Beowulf has realized his own flaws, which is one step toward correcting them, but as far as he is concerned, the damage has already been done. He expects his sins to come back and haunt him, which they do in the form of his son the dragon. Unferth tells Beowulf that the last thing he heard Beowulf's son say before Unferth passed out was, "The sins of the fathers…" This is already a clearly established theme in the movie due to Hrothgar, and Beowulf is put in comparison to him because they both made the same mistake. Beowulf attempts to remedy his mistake by killing the dragon. In battle with the dragon, Beowulf is forced to cut off his own arm, a clear parallel to Grendel, the monster whose arm Beowulf cut off. Beowulf now has to cut off his own arm, and it seems that things are coming full circle. Beowulf does succeed in killing the dragon, which seems to put him a step above Hrothgar because Beowulf seems to make up for his sins. However, Hrothgar never lied about killing Grendel's mother, he simply lived with his mistake. Beowulf is not entirely exonerated by this action, but perhaps some blame can be lifted from him because he takes care of his own mistake rather than allow someone else to do it for him.

Before going to find Grendel's mother a second time, Beowulf begs Wealhtheow to remember him, "not as a king or hero, but as a man, fallible and flawed." This perfectly describes how the screenwriters depict him, in direct contrast to how the poet describes Beowulf.

Beowulf is not the hero of the movie, at least for the first part, but rather the monster. He is guilty of the sins of lust, pride, greed, and blatant lying, all on a grand scale. He is flawed in many respects and really his only good deeds are making up for mistakes. He slays Grendel, making up for Hrothgar's mistake, and he kills his own son, the dragon, in an attempt to remedy his own mistake. He is a terribly flawed protagonist who only becomes pitiful, not even really admirable, at the end. The *Beowulf*-poet would most likely have been horrified if he saw this depiction of his hero, and he would have agreed that, yes, this Beowulf is a monster. This movie turns Beowulf's great and noble acts into selfish and sinful acts. The fallible and flawed hero that the screenwriters created turns an originally admirable character into, at best, a pitiful character.

Hrothgar's character also suffers much in the movie portrayal. He enters Heorot upon a wooden throne held by four men, all the while drinking mead and proclaiming that his new mead-hall shall be a place of drinking, carousal, and fornication. His thanes tell bawdy jokes while their women show off the full extent of their cleavage and moan suggestively. In the comic book version of the screenplay, Hrothgar even asks, "Are we not the most powerful men? Can we not do as we please?" (Ryall 7). He is depicted as a fat old drunk whose clothes slip off in front of all his subjects. When Grendel attacks, Hrothgar tries to fight him, a rather pitiful gesture in itself, but Grendel just stares at him and refuses to attack him. Hrothgar realizes that Grendel is his own son and that his sins have come back to haunt him. When Beowulf arrives, Hrothgar welcomes him and shows him the most valuable treasure, Hrothgar's golden drinking horn. He tells Beowulf that he won this by slaying Fafnir, a dragon, and that a dragon's weak point is on its throat. Clearly Hrothgar had once been a great warrior and hero, but now he has fallen, like the Hrothgar from *Beowulf and Grendel*, into impotence. His own wife resists his touch, and there is a board between them in bed. When Hrothgar hears shouts of victory that Beowulf has

killed Grendel, he turns to Wealhtheow and tells her that his kingdom needs an heir, to which she responds, “How can I ever lay with you, knowing you laid with her?” Hrothgar says that he never should have told her about Grendel’s mother and her son by Hrothgar, a clear contrast to Beowulf, who later claims to have killed her. After Grendel’s mother attacks that night, Hrothgar tells Beowulf that she was a demon who he hoped had left the land long ago. Hrothgar simply tries to ignore his sins and hope they will not bother him. After Beowulf returns from visiting Grendel’s mother, Hrothgar asks him if he has really defeated her, because they both know Beowulf’s account to be false. Beowulf assures Hrothgar that she is dead, whereupon Hrothgar says, “Grendel is dead. That’s all that matters to me. The hag is not my curse. Not anymore” (Ryall 60). Hrothgar proclaims Beowulf heir to all that he has, and, his curse being lifted, commits suicide, perhaps because Grendel’s mother has some power over him yet.

Hrothgar’s son Grendel receives an interesting treatment because he seems pitiable at some moments, but is still clearly a monster. Grendel attacks Heorot because the music is amplified in the cave, causing his overly sensitive ear to throb painfully. Having Grendel attack out of physical pain is a new concept, and it is another justification for his attack without making Grendel appear like too much of a villain. Grendel’s voice is very whiny, always bemoaning his own pain and full of self-pity. Grendel shrinks after his weak ear is beaten to a pulp by Beowulf, although his head stays the same size. When Beowulf finds Grendel’s body in the cave, Grendel appears very fetus-like, a pitiful image. While Grendel is not entirely justified in his attacks, the viewer is still supposed to see him with some element of pity.

On the other hand, Christianity takes quite a hard knocking in this movie, as does Unferth, by being connected to it. In the first scene, Unferth is urinating next to another of Hrothgar’s thanes, and tells him that they must take Christianity seriously because Christians are

conquering many lands. In the comic book version, the other thane responds by mocking Christ, saying "Who do you think would win a knife fight, Odin or this Christ Jesus?" (Ryall 5). Unferth's receptiveness to Christianity is insulted, and he is portrayed as angry and mean, always beating his servant. When Beowulf arrives, Unferth drunkenly insults Beowulf, who responds with his sea-monster story and by accusing Unferth of slaying his brothers while they were having sex with their mother, a detail added by the screenwriters. Unferth's disgrace is complete. He later apologizes to Beowulf and offers him the sword Hrunting, which Beowulf accepts, but even though Unferth seems sincere, he is still depicted as sour and nasty. He ends up getting severely burned in the dragon's first attack, holding up a cross to protect himself, but a clearly hopeless image. Unferth is portrayed as helpless character and receives a bad rep throughout the movie. In battle with the Frisians, Beowulf claims that the Christ-god has killed the time of heroes, replacing it with weeping martyrs and fear. This is a blatant attack on Christianity, similar to the view presented in *Beowulf and Grendel*, but somewhat harsher.

While Christianity receives harsh treatment in the movie, Hrothgar's wife Wealhtheow is portrayed well, perhaps one of the only good characters in the movie. She plays a much more prominent role in this movie than in any of the others. She and Grendel's mother are the only ones who know Beowulf for what he truly is, a monster. In the poem, Wealhtheow takes a drinking cup around to her guests and ensures that her sons will ascend Hrothgar's throne when he is dead. The only time she speaks to Beowulf is when she gives him advice and tells him to treat her sons kindly (ll. 1216-31). In the movie she bears the cup only to Beowulf himself, and Beowulf makes a move on her, which she resists, foreseeing that he has the heart of a monster. The other prominent female character in the movie, Grendel's mother, also realizes that Beowulf is a monster at heart. She plans to use this against him, as she specifically says in the comic book

version of the screenplay (Ryall 50). Beowulf has no defense against her otherworldly golden beauty and promises. She tempts him with everything a man could possibly want, all at once. She is the downfall of heroes and the root of otherworldly evil. She seems to represent the sins of pride, envy, and lust. Men cannot resist her, or can they? At the very end, it seems as though Beowulf's heir, Wiglaf, will give in to her, for the scene freezes in a golden sheen focused on his face, similar to the golden sheen about Grendel's mother and Beowulf's son, the dragon.

The movie seems to present quite a depressing view of things— even great heroes will do very evil things. However, that seems to be the purpose of the final scene, and the main theme of the movie. The movie achieves this by completely and utterly destroying any view of Beowulf as a hero. As he himself says, he should not be viewed as a hero, only a man, fallible and flawed. The movie degrades the characters of Beowulf, Hrothgar, Unferth, and the Danes. It makes Wealhtheow out to be a good character and makes Grendel seem somewhat pitiful. It makes out all male characters to be sinful, weak, or both. Wealhtheow is the only character who is presented in a good light. It breaks down the heroes until only ordinary men are left, and none of the men in this story are admirable.

The comic book portrayals of Beowulf tend to be much closer to the poem itself, other than the one based of the *Beowulf* screenplay. His glory is alive and well in two other comic book retellings of the poem. A comic by Stephen Stern includes all of the basic plotline and character depictions of the poem, other than Unferth. The major deviations of this story both included Unferth. First, he accuses Beowulf of trying to drown Breca. Beowulf, of course, denies this, saying that he was attacked by sea-monster, but that Breca did beat him. He goes on to reprimand Unferth for boasting and accusing himself of cowardice when Grendel attacks Heorot, Unferth's own home, without fear of reprisal (Stern). Second, Unferth is so enraged by this

reprimand that after Beowulf has defeated Grendel, he betrays the Danes to Grendel's mother, killing one of the Danes himself. When Beowulf and his company ride to find Grendel's mother's lair, they find Unferth's head impaled on a branch. His sin had come back to haunt him. This is obviously the most negative treatment of Unferth's character in the modern versions; he is a full-blown traitor.

This version also treats Beowulf's Geats and Hrothgar's Danes differently than the poem. The women throughout the poem are scantily clad and big-breasted, and the men, including Hrothgar and Beowulf, carouse to their hearts' content, taking women as they please. This is not the first time the Danes are depicted in this way, for both *Beowulf and Grendel* and *Beowulf* (2007) did the same. A seemingly more primitive and barbaric picture of the Danes is common in modern versions.

A comic by Gareth Hinds follows the story even more closely and is quite lengthy for a comic book. Beowulf maintains his pride and glory, but these are both seen as good things. Beowulf says that he was persuaded by his comrades to fight this monster, and he swore an oath to do battle with it. Grendel attacks and rules the hall in rage; he is not wronged in any way. In the fight with Grendel, there is a moment when the artist depicts only Beowulf's and Grendel's eyes. Beowulf's stern and grim gaze lock onto Grendel's enraged and gluttonous yellow eyes, and it is clear that Beowulf is fighting evil. There is no doubt as to Grendel's evil character and intentions. Each of the monsters Beowulf fights is clearly evil, and even though the dragon kills him, Beowulf is not sad at his own passing. After he has killed the dragon, Beowulf says, "Fifty years have I watched well over my people, nor has any ruler of the nations round about dared to cross my borders with hostile purpose. I have meted out judgment and justice; feuds I sought not, nor falsely swore ever on oath. For all these things, though mortally wounded, glad am I. No sin

shall keep me from the heavenly company of my forbears" (Hinds). This is almost directly from the poem itself, and it is apparent that Hinds thinks it of vital importance that Beowulf remains a heroic character. One page depicts Beowulf, completely covered in blood, coming out of the water holding Grendel's mother's head by her hair with his teeth, a rather disturbing image. In his right hand he holds the hilt of the sword that slew her, shaped like a cross. The sun is directly behind the sword, and it appears as if the sword is emitting a blinding light. This seems to be a Christian reference, for Beowulf is a Jesus-like figure emerging from victory over evil, emitting light and radiance. Scenes like this acknowledge the Christian content of the poem while not making it a theme, but applying it to appropriate situations. Beowulf is clearly great hero in this comic, and one to be admired.

Hrothgar and his Danes are also portrayed much more in accordance with the poem than in other versions. Hrothgar is not a drunk, nor does he carouse with women, but he is an old and wise ruler. He builds Heorot and "many an hour the clansmen spent there, in cheer and revel" (Hinds). The comic does not depict any scenes of drunken carousal, only men and women cheerfully eating and drinking around tables. In addition to ruling a more noble and stately court than any Hrothgars from other modern versions, Hrothgar gives Beowulf significant moral advice. This version includes the scene in which Hrothgar warns Beowulf against the pride and greed of Heremod, who "used [strength and power] so ill that there was none who loved or honored him" (Hinds). Hrothgar gives significant and important moral advice, showing that he and his people are not the uncultured and primitive Danes portrayed thusly in other versions.

Visually, the comic sticks close to the story by including segments of narrative directly from the poem itself instead of using added dialogue. This leaves, at times, several pages with no dialogue, but the effect is rather peculiar. The illustrators help the reader focus on important

action sequences by including no dialogue, so the reader can only follow the action. This comic book version tells the *Beowulf* story most accurately and positively, keeping Beowulf honorable and heroic, and without any of the modern impositions that changed other versions of *Beowulf* so greatly.

Beowulf's heroism is called into question in every film version of the story. This is apparent most clearly in *Beowulf* (2007), where Beowulf is guilty of the sins of pride, greed, lust, and lying. An interesting caption at the end of the comic book version of the movie says, "Pride is the curse" (Ryall). The screenwriters make no attempt to present Beowulf in a positive light, and the theme of the movie seems to be the cycle of sin that man lets himself slide into and from which he cannot escape. With Beowulf's credibility shot, the story fails to present a truly admirable character, which would seem to be the purpose of a heroic epic. However, this is not the only version that calls Beowulf's heroism into question, in *Beowulf* (1999), Beowulf is the son of Baal, an evil god, not quite the hero of the poem. And in *Beowulf and Grendel*, Grendel is not necessarily evil, making Beowulf into a somewhat unjust killer. These stories each change Beowulf such that he is unrecognizable as the hero of the poem.

Removing Beowulf from his position as hero contributes to another modern theme, a tendency toward moral ambivalence. There is no clear-cut distinction between good and evil in the majority of modern works that retell this story. While Christianity is presented as good in the poem, the last two movies treat it with scorn, a clear display of their familiarity with the modern controversy over whether the poem is essentially Christian or pagan. However, all three movies and one of the comics present the idea that Grendel attacks out of a desire for vengeance, giving him a justification not inherent in the poem. The idea that Grendel's attacks are punishment for human sins is, ironically, a very Christian notion. And so while the modern storytellers remove

Christianity from its place at the moral center of the story and treat it with disgust, they add Christian morals which they portray as good and moral, although they do not seem to realize that these are the morals they removed in the first place.

The removal of Christianity from the story is representative of a greater trend in modern versions: the attempt to strip away the unbelievable aspects of *Beowulf* and replace them with something more real and plausible. Hinds and Gardner appear to be exceptions to this trend. Hinds tried to remain as straightforwardly medieval as possible, and Gardner used the story to critique modern philosophies. However, Crichton admittedly tried very hard to strip away all fantasy in *Eaters of the Dead,* and the screenwriters for *Beowulf and Grendel* tried to do the same on screen. The portrayal of the Danes and Hrothgar himself reflects that tendency. Just because the *Beowulf* text refers to Heorot as a mead-hall does not mean that all the Danes went there to get drunk and fornicate. This stems from the modern idea that the people and culture of that time were primitive and immoral. In many senses, as we can see from *Beowulf*, the Germanic peoples had an arguably better system of rule and morals than we do today. How much of this depiction is pure modern prejudice when looking at an ancient culture, and how much of it is influenced by legitimate sources is important to determine. Norse stories, such as the lay of Fafnir, may have influenced the screenwriters' depictions of the Geats and Danes. It is clear that at least the screenwriters for *Beowulf* (2007) had read this story, because Hrothgar mentions that he won the golden drinking horn by defeating Fafnir, the dragon of the northern moors. Since we know they read this story, they must have borrowed the idea of a shape-changing dragon from the Norse works. As argued earlier, the Norse stories present a much looser view of morality than *Beowulf.* With no clear moral values, the heroes become flawed at times, and men commit the sins of monsters. Medieval heroes have become modern monsters.

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