BEOWULF-AN EPIC HERO OF UNDYING VIRTUE

Dr.Venkataramana Balaga

(*Assistant Professor & HOD,Department of English (PG), Rajah RSRK Ranga Rao College, Andhra university, India*)

ABSTRACT

The Old English poem *Beowulf* is a great adventure story, and a deeply philosophical one. Scholars differ over the poem's original purpose and audience, but Beowulf probably appealed to a wide audience and garnered a range of responses. In 1939, an important archaeological discovery was made which contributed to the twentieth-century understanding of *Beowulf*. *Beowulf* is a true epic in its breadth of interests and sympathies, even though it is centered on the career of one man killing three monsters. The action and the characters of this apparently simple story have the strength to embody the experience and ideals of the original audience. The monsters participate in evil and disorder as no human, even Heremod, could, but the evil that originates purely within the human heart is not overlooked. The poem is full of a deep sense of the fragility of human institutions and of human hopes. Good men and women can do their best; their fame is assured, but not necessarily their works. The whole action of the poem happens within historical patterns where families and kingdoms rise and fall.

Keywords: *Adventure, Epic, Monsters, Ideals, Fragility, Fame.*

The Old English poem *Beowulf* is a great adventure story, and a deeply philosophical one. Scholars differ over the poem's original purpose and audience, but Beowulf probably appealed to a wide audience and garnered a range of responses. *Beowulf* survives in one manuscript, which is known as British Library, Cotton Vitellius A.15. At least one scholar believes the manuscript is the author's original, but most scholars believe it is the last in a succession of copies. *Beowulf* may have been written at any time between circa 675 A.D. and the date of the manuscript, circa 1000 A.D.

An edition of *Beowulf* was published by G. S. Thorkelin in 1815, but for over 100 years study focused on Beowulf not as poetry, but on what it revealed about the early Germanic tribes and language (philology). J. R. R. Tolkien's "The Monsters and the Critics" moved study on to the poem as literature. The excavation of the Sutton Hoo ship burial and Tolkein's own popular *Lord of the Rings*, influenced by his lifelong study of *Beowulf*, helped to interest general readers in the poem. Since then translations and adaptations of the poem have increased the poem's audience and recognition. It has influenced modern adventure fantasy and inspired at least two best-sellers, comic books, and even a *Beowulf/Star Trek Voyager* cross-over.

In 1939, an important archaeological discovery was made which contributed to the twentieth-century understanding of *Beowulf*. The remains of a ship burial were uncovered at Sutton Hoo, an estate on the estuary of the Deben river in

Suffolk, England. Some of the objects in the grave included a sword, shield, and helmet, a harp, and Frankish coins which date approximately to 650-70 A.D. — the presumed date of the action of the epic.

While the poem is Old English, it focuses on the Geats (a people who lived in the southern part of Sweden before being conquered by their traditional enemies, the Swedes, toward the end of the sixth century) and Danes. Assumed to be composed sometime in the eighth century A.D., it seems to accurately reflect Scandinavian society and history of the sixth century A.D. Many dates and places have been suggested for the composition of *Beowulf*. Recently a late date has become popular. Kevin Kiernan believes that the existing manuscript may be the author's own copy. This would mean the poem was written very close to 1000 A.D. An early date for *Beowulf* (675-700) is now usually connected with East Anglia. It has been suggested that the East Anglian royal family considered themselves descended from Wiglaf, who comes to Beowulf's aid during the dragon fight. This is a difficult poem to classify since it has no predecessors and nothing like it has survived. While usually considered an epic poem, *Beowulf* has also been labeled an elegy, perhaps for Beowulf himself or perhaps for the heroism of the past (and obviously admired by the Christian poet) pagan era. Others have felt it to be solely historical poetry about paganism.

On the other hand, there is Beowulf as the epic hero who represents his culture and is noble, has considerable military prowess, and undying virtue. Several other elements of the epic poem are also evident in the poem: the lofty tone and style, the lengthy narrative, the genealogies, the involvement of the supernatural (in the form of the monsters, dragons, and giants), the invocation, and the voyage across the sea. Beowulf's battle in the dragon's underground lair may or may not be considered the obligatory trip to the underworld as found in the epic poem. While there are epic battles, they are not between universal champions, but rather between good and evil.

Michael Alexander, a translator of *Beowulf*, begins his entry on the epic in *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* with Milton's "great argument" and "answerable style," that is, an important theme and a style to match, to define epic. He continues, "classically trained critics, expecting art to see life steadily and see it whole, look for an idealized realism and debar folklore and romance elements." Paraphrasing and then quoting the critic Northrop Frye, Alexander accepts that "these stories recapitulate the life of the individual and the race. The note of epic is its objectivity: 'It is hardly possible to overestimate the importance for western literature of the *Iliad's* demonstration that the fall of an enemy, no less than of a friend or leader, is tragic and not comic.'"According to this definition, Beowulf somehow combines the elements which define the epic with other elements which seem to come from the world of "Jack the Giant Killer" and "Three Billy Goats Gruff."

Beowulf is, indeed, on one level a very simple story told with great elaboration. A man of great strength, courage, and generosity fights three monsters, two when he is a young man, the third in his old age. Other more complicated human events precede these, others intervene, others will follow, but those more realistic events are all essentially background. To some earlier critics as to W. P. Kerr in *Epic and Romance*, the choice of a folktale main narrative was a serious fault. Monsters lacked the dignity to carry the "great argument" with "answerable style." But *Beowulf* is a true epic in its breadth of interests and sympathies, even though it is centered on the career of one man killing three monsters. The action and the characters of this apparently simple story have the strength to embody the experience and ideals of the original audience. The monsters participate in evil and disorder as no human, even Heremod, could, but the evil that originates purely within the human heart is not overlooked.

Transforming both the fairy tale monsters and the sordid power politics of the background is the objective recognition of human struggle for understanding and order. This is the hallmark of human experience seen through the lens of epic technique. In *Beowulf* the narrator and characters use human experience to understand the human

VEDA'S

JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (JOELL)

An International Peer Reviewed Journal

http://www.joell.in

Vol. 1 Issue 3
2014

condition and to find the noblest way to live their lives.

In part *Beowulf*'s epic inclusiveness comes from the narrator's often short observations, which place the poem in a larger, transcendent context. The narrator periodically reminds the reader of the overarching providence of God as in lines 1056-58: "except that God in his wisdom and the man's courageous spirit withstood him. The Lord God ruled over all men, as he now yet does." In part the epic breadth comes from the characters, particularly Beowulf and Hrothgar. It is Beowulf's generosity of spirit and imaginative sympathy for individuals, which introduce characters like the old man mourning his executed son or the young girl Freawaru facing a political marriage. It is that same generosity of spirit and sympathy which allows him to speak objectively of the "sin and crime on both sides" in the war between the Geats and Swedes (lines 2472-73). Hrothgar, the old king of the Danes, a man who has known triumph and disaster, looks back across his long life and reaches into the workings of the human heart and out into the realities of time and circumstances to understand human sorrow and evil.

The inclusiveness of *Beowulf* reaches backwards and forwards in time. The short narratives embedded in the main narrative (digressions), reflect on the main action as Adrien Bonjour demonstrated in the *Digressions in "Beowulf".* They also create a sense of continuity and universality in the situations the characters face. Character by character, incident by incident, they create the society and the universe in which the great tests of the monsters are set. They define the limits of the heroic heart and heroic society, the ideals which characters like Hrothgar and Beowulf fulfill and in some ways transcend. In these narratives, as in the poem, as Alexander writes in his translation's introduction, the operations of cause and consequence, however mysterious to the characters, whether deriving from natural forces or human will, are inescapable.

Beowulf is a carefully designed poem. A heroic king comes from the sea and is given back to the sea in death. Generations later another heroic king is buried on the cliffs overlooking the sea. Between them vengeance and feud, despair and generosity weave their way through the human life. Every idea, every theme is examined from one angle after another, with all the techniques available to the poet from an Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition rich in irony and understatement. Treasure is the lifeblood of heroic society, fame made tangible, but the poet links it with death and despair. Love of kin motivates Beowulf throughout his life, but in the society around him families destroy themselves. Song and generosity wake a monster. Just when safety seems assured the best and truest friend and counsellor dies.

The fineness of the poet's application of techniques makes the poem a sustained high point in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Although these techniques are specifically Anglo-Saxon, they can be broadly paralleled in all western epics. The poem uses an elaborate vocabulary dictated, at least in part, by the alliteration and stress patterns of Old English verse. This vocabulary, although largely that of everyday speech or prose, includes words which are rarely used outside of poetry. It is quite possible the poet has even coined words for *Beowulf*. The poet presents the material in carefully structured sentences and equally structured verse paragraphs. This structure, with its emphasis on defining things by what they are not, and by understatement, produces pointed juxtapositions of characters, themes and action. It clarifies cause and effect. It produces clear and swift narrative movement. It can be a potent source of irony.

Alexander in the introduction to his translation draws the reader's attention to the use of constant basic values in *Beowulf*. Sunlight is good, cold is bad. The words do not refer to symbols but to reality. Alexander's observations are a good introduction to the poet's use of description. The poem gains immediacy from simplicity and universality, qualities it shares with the Homeric epic. The poet always seems to find the best and fewest words to make objects real to us. Landscapes resonate with atmosphere: grey, cold and threatening as in the description of the wild lands which Grendel haunts (lines 1357-76 and 1408-23), or full of light and life, like the landscape of the creation song (lines 90-98). Sometimes space is defined by the quality of movement through it, like

Dr.Venkataramana Balaga

the landscape through which the Danish retainers ride back after tracking Grendel's last bloodstained retreat or Beowulf's two sea voyages (lines 210-24 and 1903-12).

The poem's characters, particularly Beowulf himself, are molded by the needs and aspirations of the poet and audience's society. This is true to some extent of all literature, but particularly of the epic. Beowulf, however, is different from other northern heroes and from the heroes of Greek and Roman epics. He is radically different, not just from Heremod, but from Ing and Scyld and Sigemund. He is unlike Achilles, unlike Odysseus except in his love of family. He is a hero driven not by personal glory but by affection and duty. He seems largely untouched by the darker emotions which dog Aeneas and betray him into fury at the end of the Aeneid. Only the doomed Hector of Homer's *Iliad* seems to be a hero of the same clay. Personal glory is not without meaning to Beowulf. He tells Hrothgar that the best thing men can do is to lay up fame before death (lines 1386-89). He happily accepts treasure and just as happily passes it on to others. Nevertheless, duty and sympathy and generosity are his primary motivations. Despite his great strength, he is a man with limitations, in each of his fights he is seriously challenged and clearly sees himself as relying on the help of God.

Beginning with J. R. R. Tolkein's "The Monsters and the Critics", many critics have stressed a sense of futility in *Beowulf*. This reading arose partially from factors within the poem and partially from factors external to it. These critics had lived through two world wars. Many of them had served as soldiers and known violent, often pointless death, often the death of friends. They did not cease to admire heroism, but they balanced it against what they knew of war's futility. *Beowulf* is not a pacifist's poem, but these critics have made readers more aware of the problems and fragility of its warrior society and standards. Beowulf and the rest of the characters are never allowed the luxury of assuming that any victory earns more than a respite. The poem is full of a deep sense of the fragility of human institutions and of human hopes. Good men and women can do their best, their fame is assured, but

not necessarily their works. The whole action of the poem happens within historical patterns where families and kingdoms rise and fall.

This sense of the transitory nature of human life is part of the critical re-evaluation of the implications of the poem's Christianity. J. D. A. Ogilvy and Donald Baker have suggested that Beowulf's death is like a saint's death, and the parallels, particularly with that of Bede's death are closer than even they suggest. Other critics have explored similar implications in Beowulf's burial. The real tragedy of the poem may lie not in Beowulf's own death, which transcends the tragic through his faith in God, but in his people's despair which leads to the re-burial of the treasure. He gives his life to save them from the dragon, but he cannot save them from themselves. The Geats, even Wiglaf, refuse more than his dying wish, they refuse to accept Beowulf's view of them, a people worthy of the real treasure of an old king's life.

REFERENCES

[1] Alexander, Michael. "Introduction". In *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*. Penguin Books, 1973.
[2] Backhouse, Janet, Turner, D. H. and Webster, Leslie. *The Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon Art: 966-1066*. British Museum, 1984.
[3] Basset, Steven, ed. *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*. Leicester University Press, 1989.
[4] Bradley, S. A. J. "*Beowulf*," in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, translated and edited by S. A. J. Bradley, David Campbell Publishers Ltd, 1982, pp 408-11.
[5] Chambers, R. W. *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem*, 3rd Supplement by C. L. Wrenn. Cambridge University Press, 1963.
[6] Chase, Colin, ed. *The Dating of Beowulf*. University of Toronto Press, 1981.
[7] Clark, George. "The Heroic Age, Ideal, and Challenge," and "Afterword," in *Beowulf*, Twayne
[8] Helen Conrad, O'Briain. *Epics for Students*. Gale Research, 1997.
[9] Kiernan, Kevin, S. "The Eleventh Century Origin of *Beowulf* and the *Beowulf* Manuscript." In *The Dating of Beowulf*, edited by Colin Chase. University of Toronto Press, 1981, pp. 9-22. Publishers, 1990, pp. 51-54 &143-44.
[10] Raffel, Burton. *Beowulf: A New Translation*. New York: The New American Library, 1963.
[11] ———. "Epic." In *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*, edited by Roger Fowler. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987, pp. 73-75.