

Beowulf and Tolkien: Element Similarities

By James S

Beowulf is one of the finest examples of Anglo-Saxon literature, so it's no wonder that many writers of the past and present have borrowed themes and examples from it's content. J.R.R. Tolkien is a perfect example. A noted British author of the twentieth century, Tolkien created a fantasy realm that has captured the hearts and imagination of countless readers around the world. His works take place in a mythical land called Middle Earth, where noble creatures like elves, dwarves, hobbits, and men battle evil trolls, orcs, and other incarnations of evil (Boyd-Graber 1). As a devoted scholar, Tolkien spent a great deal of his time and energy to decipher and understand Beowulf, and in doing so, has borrowed elements from it to add to his own works of epic proportion. "He has rearranged material in Beowulf as he interprets it from his own scholarly and Christian perspective to create The Hobbit" (Cupitt 1). The elements borrowed include the character of Beowulf himself, the ending of an era, and the ambitious quest that the hero had to embark on.

The first element from Beowulf that Tolkien "borrowed" was the character of Beowulf. In The Hobbit, Tolkien obviously compares Bilbo to Beowulf. Both Characters undergo a massive quest [written at eastern alamance high school in 04] and begin their struggle with fights against Gollum and Grendel, who are also quite alike. Beowulf, much the same as Bilbo, leads his crew through dangerous conditions and ultimately uses his mind and strength to outwit and defeat the enemy. Confidence in their abilities is a trait that both possess, an example being when Bilbo is talking to Smaug, a fearsome dragon. He says, "I come from under the hill, and under the hills and over the

hills my paths led. And through the air. I am he that walks unseen” (Tolkien 256). To best their devilish enemies, a legendary weapon is used; in Beowulf’s case this is a priceless sword, and in Bilbo’s case a magic ring. Consequently, after all their enemies have been defeated, both heroes become mythical figures that live on in the culture and lifestyle of their races, whether real-life or fantasy.

The ending of an important era and the passing of the epic heroes is a second element that Tolkien incorporated into his novels. In the case of Beowulf, his death marked the beginning of wars fought to capture his wealthy kingdom by kings who were no longer honor-driven, [written at eastern alamance h. s. in 04] but fortune-seeking. Once Frodo completed his quest in The Return of the King, the Third Age ended, and the race of man resurfaced. The ending of this era is a sad one, as demonstrated in Beowulf:

Then the people of the Geats made ready for him a funeral pyre on the earth, no small one, hung with helmets, battle-shields, bright mail-shirts, just as he had asked. Then in the midst they laid the great prince, lamenting their hero, their beloved lord. Then warriors began to awaken on the barrow the greatest of funeral-fires; the wood-smoke climbed, black over the fire; the roaring flame mixed with weeping - the wind-surge died down - until it had broken the bon-house, hot at its heart. Sad in spirit they lamented their heart-care, the death of their liege lord (Beowulf 64.)

The time of heroes, in both cases, is over. Greatness and the mythic power of the captains is now just a memory (Boyd-Graber 5) .

A final constituent of Beowulf that Tolkien bases some of his ideas from is the “epic quest” that Beowulf undergoes. “The party of Beowulf and Bilbo is probably the most obvious and easy comparison to make between the works of The Hobbit and Beowulf. Both the goal and the composition of the parties are the same - only the conclusion differs” (Boyd-Graber 6). The parties that travel alongside both heroes sometimes consist of twelve members, and since Beowulf was written under the influence of Christianity, [written at e. alamance h.s. in 04] it is safe to assume this number could only represent the twelve apostles. It is easy to compare Beowulf and Frodo, since they were both “saviors” in their stories. Beowulf defeated Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and finally the dragon, causing much relief among the common people, and making him a national hero. Frodo, much in the same way, destroyed the ring at Mt. Doom, and in doing so created a name for himself amongst Middle Earth lore.

In summary, Beowulf and many of Tolkien’s novels have much in common. Being a wonderful example of an Anglo-Saxon epic, it is easy to see why Tolkien borrowed elements from it. The character of Beowulf, the ending of an important era, and a heroic quest were just a few rudiments that contributed to the success of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, known as two of the greatest works of fantasy literature to date. Artists today still look toward Beowulf for inspiration, and in doing so continue the line of epic novels and fantasy writing that will be passed on for generations on end.