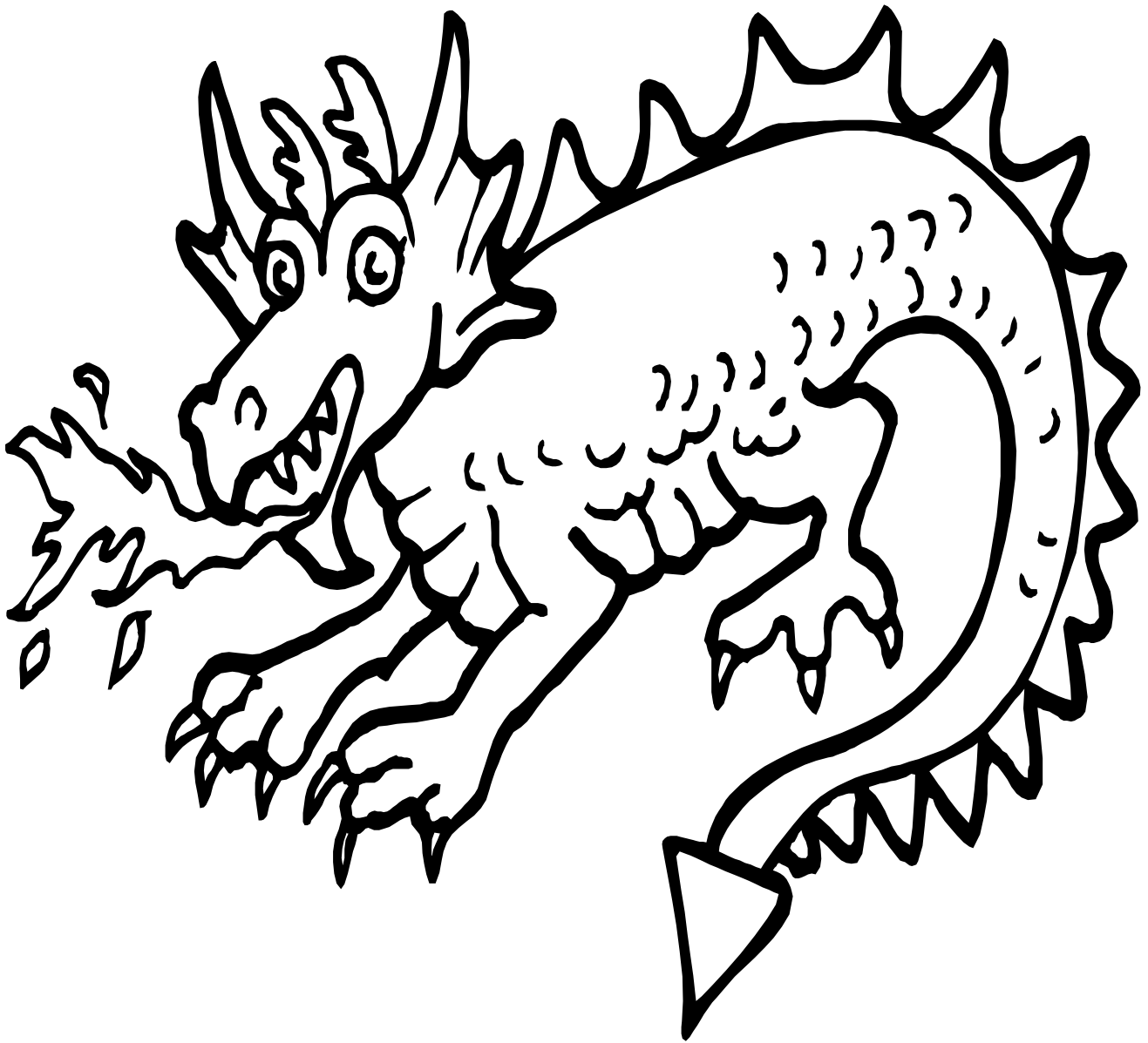


The Hero and the Beast



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The story to be told is as ancient as any fairy tale; it includes evil monsters, gleaming treasures, and brave soldiers that save the day. Beowulf captures all of these elements, making it an oral epic that has become a staple in English literature to this day. However, though, did this one story evolve into the numerous translations that are available today? Furthermore, how did the one text give so many different portrayals of the same main characters? Through much research, insights into possible answers to these questions can be found, as well as surprising notes on how the different translations portray the two main characters, Grendel and Beowulf, in some very different ways. Before delving into the depths of Beowulf and his adventures, it is important to have a basic understanding of the story and how the great battle between Grendel and Beowulf came to be.

While there are many different translations to Beowulf, the storyline remains the same. The story takes place in Scandinavia around the sixth century, where a rampaging monster named Grendel is plaguing one kingdom. This monster is destroying the lands of the Danes, ruled by Hrothgar, by terrorizing the people, demolishing crops, eating livestock, and murdering the townsfolk. The peril of the Danes crosses the sea to the Geats, where a great warrior, Beowulf, the son of Ecgtheow, hears of the trouble that the Danes are in. The lord of the Geats, Hygelac, agrees to send a band of warriors to help Hrothgar, led by the bravest of warriors, Beowulf. Upon arrival at Herot, the mead hall of Hrothgar, Beowulf boasts of his skills and successes, promising King Hrothgar that he will fight Grendel in a hand-to-hand battle to the death. That night, Grendel comes to the mead hall and eats one of the brave warriors and Beowulf attacks Grendel with his bare hand, ripping off Grendel's arm. Although Grendel slinks away, the next night, his mother, a she-monster that is even more horrible than Grendel, comes and wreaks havoc upon the mead hall, this time without Beowulf there. A challenge is thus put before Beowulf that he feels he must take up.

Beowulf is led to the lair where Grendel and his mother live by the Danes, and he proceeds to battle the she-monster and then Grendel. This battle takes place underwater where Beowulf nearly fails, but is saved by an invincible sword at the bottom of the sea. Using this sword, he slays the she-monster and beheads Grendel, claiming success. Now that his mission has been accomplished, he returns to Geatland where years later, he becomes King of the Geats and rules successfully for about fifty years. When he is an old king, a dragon hoarding treasure begins to set his kingdom aflame, and Beowulf once again sets out to conquer the evil forces. Even though he is an old man, he still has powerful strength and manages to slay the dragon, but dies in his attempt. The king passes his jewels and armor to a loyal kinsman, Wiglaf, and is mourned by his country. A funeral and celebration of his life follows, where the people reflect on all his good qualities. Thus, the story of Beowulf can be considered one of the first classic English stories that extol the courageous warrior and his battles against evil.

This epic story was first written down on paper in approximately 1100 A.D. and has since become a base in English studies because of its relevance to the roots of the English language. The different translations throughout the years have different connotations, but are still translated from the same Old English text. The differences may not be noticeable right away, but upon a

second look, a noticeable difference can be found. For myself, I began my Beowulf journey in high school when my English class read Seamus Heaney's translation of Beowulf in class. Since the conclusion of that lesson, I had thus forgotten about the epic story until the next year, when I had read the book Grendel, by John Gardner, the story from Grendel's point of view. Hearing that side of the story made the epic come alive for me yet again, but soon afterward, I again filed it away in my memory of books I have read. That is, until coming to college and listening to my roommate discuss how her class was reading Beowulf. When I saw her book, I realized that her copy was by a different translator, which was a concept that never occurred to me. From then on, I began my research into the different translations and portrayals of Grendel and Beowulf. My first impression of Beowulf was the common one associated with protagonists of heroic tales; he was a brave warrior who defeated the evil monsters. However, when I read the book Grendel, a different image of Grendel formed in my head: an image of a tortured, pathetic, and confused monster. With this in mind, I thought about how this different perspective changed my point of view drastically.

The version that I started to read first was the translation by Seamus Heaney, published in 2000. This was the most recent translation out and one that became a New York Times best seller. That in itself told me something about the poem; that it never died, that it stayed alive in a world ages after it had first been told. Becoming a best seller was a notable accomplishment for such an old story. How did that happen and what was different about this one from the other tales? It turned out that this new verse translation was easier to read than some of the older translations from the 1960's. I asked why and thus began my research on the life of Seamus Heaney and what thought process went into his translations. As it turned out, Heaney had a strong Irish influence in his writing because of his background of Irish ancestry. This went into how he determined the context of various words that he could also translate into Irish. The voice and tone of this work also has its Irish influence in a poetic sense. The meter and format of the poem is different than the original Old English because Heaney does not put the break in the line after four syllables like the original. However, Heaney's version is bilingual, having the Old English parallel to the modern day English translation. While I am not versed in Old English, nor German, which has ties to Old English, I was able to pick out certain words and even a few phrases and translate them to contemporary English. This was one of the first reasons why I saw English as a living and evolving language and found that to be fascinating.

I began to pick out sections of the text in Heaney's version as well as a translation by Howell D. Chickering, Jr. published in 1977. Even in these two translations within the first few hundred lines, I could tell that there was a difference that would be noticeable and relevant to the personality and descriptions of Beowulf and Grendel. The earlier 1977 version of Beowulf is a harder read, filled with more formality and not as flowing as the other translation. I have found thus far that the verbs and adjectives combined make the largest impact on how the image of Beowulf and Grendel are portrayed. Chickering's version is also bilingual and has other literary notations in the book, including a genealogy and commentary. While I did pick this translation randomly, I did want to make sure that the two versions I picked were not in the same year or close together. While twenty years is still relatively close considering the longevity of Beowulf, I found there to be enough of a difference in the translations to study them. The two translations both follow the same plotline, but their different portrayals of Grendel and Beowulf are still noticeable, even though they are translated from the same Old English manuscript. The only manuscript of Beowulf is still intact today, even though it was burned in a fire, and it is located

at the British Library. Luckily though, this piece of ancient literature has still been able to be preserved.

Through the preservation of this document, research of the English language has been able to be extended to all levels of intellects. With the many different translations available, the general public is able to read the Modern English, see the Old English and make inferences of their own on how it has changed and why. Giving the visual of the Old and Modern English next to each other is a technique that helps one look at how much this language has changed. In line 856, “beornas on blancum” is roughly translated to “warriors on horseback,” and the reader can see that the word “on” is one of the few words that has been able to stand the test of time and evolution to retain the same meaning today. Also, there are other phrases that, if looked at, can bear resemblance to the English that is known today. This happens right away in such as in line 11 with, “þæt wæs gōd cyning.” Translated, it reads, “that was a good king,” or “he was a good king.” The phrase makes sense when sounded out phonetically, and the beginning of Modern English can be heard. There are even some sentences that are easily read in English today. This specific example from line 1323 shows that with just a switch of the placement of a few words, the sentence reads the same in Old English and Modern English. “Dēad is Æschere” can be read easily today by a Modern English reader and can understand that Æschere, one of the warriors, is dead. The positive elements of having a bilingual text include actually seeing the differences in the language and the evolution that has occurred within the English language. Another element that is important to take into account when comparing two translations is to see how the same words provoke two different versions of the story. The two versions do show some key differences that can be seen in the following examples.

The first such an example occurs in lines 100-104 in the Heaney version and the Chickering version. Heaney translates an account of Grendel as:

“...a fiend out of hell,/ began to
work his evil in the world./ Grendel was the
name of this grim demon/ haunting the
marches, marauding round the heath/ and
the desolater fens...” **Heaney**

“...a certain one/ began to do evil, an
enemy from Hell./ That murderous spirit
was named Grendel,/ huge moor-stalker
who held the wasteland,/ fens, and marshes;
unblessed, unhappy...” **Chickering**

Within these two passages, a huge difference in the word choices can be seen. The Chickering version follows the original Old English with the break in the middle and is choppy than the poetic Heaney translation. The adjectives that describe Grendel are dark and forceful, conjuring up images of a beast unlike any other who stalks and haunts the Danes. Grendel is seen as a spirit in Chickering’s version, and as a demon Heaney’s, however both images that are conjured up are horrific and evil.

Another passage to look at that shows an insight into the life of Beowulf, is when he and his small band of men first enter the land of the Danes and that night had a feast at Herot and Beowulf recounts a time when he had slain a monster in the sea with his awesome strength and endurance. This section describes the last few moments of battle with this sea monster as it holds down Beowulf. In Heaney’s version, lines 554-558, state,

“Pinioned fast/ and swathed in its grip, I was
granted one/ final chance: my sword
plunged/ and the ordeal was over. Through
my own hands, / the fury of the battle had
finished off the sea-beast.” **Heaney**

...held me on the bottom/ in his cruel grip.
However, it was granted/ that my point
reached him; I stabbed as I could/ with
my sharp sword, with battle-thrust killed/
the huge sea-beast by my own hand.”

Heaney gives Beowulf a manly image, one of being human, nearly losing before fate intervenes. Also, he finishes his story briefly and simply, “the ordeal was over” without overly boasting of his deed. Chickering’s same lines hold the same plot, but bring about some different images. In this translation Beowulf is portrayed more brutally, using the words “battle-thrust” and “stabbed” as opposed to simply “plunged” in the first version. Also, in the second version, Beowulf seems to be boasting more by mentioning the size of the “huge” beast, while Heaney chose not to include that possible exaggeration. More emphasis is placed on how Beowulf, strong and able, has killed the monster in Chickering’s rendition while Heaney focuses in more on the human aspect of Beowulf through his fight for his life.

However, images of Grendel are just as easily swayed, such as in lines 710-719. Both versions give the general idea of what happens, but in this section, the word choice gives two interesting portrayals of Grendel. Chickering’s begins with

“Then up from the marsh, under the misty
cliffs,/ Grendel came walking; he bore
God’s wrath./ The evil thief planned to
trap some human,/ one of man’s kind, in
the towering hall./ Under the dark skies he
came till he saw/ the shining wine-hall,
house of gold-giving,/ a joy to men,
plated high with gold./ It was not the first
time he had visited Hrothgar;/ never in his
life, before or after,/ did he find harder
luck or retainers in hall.” **Chickering**

“In off the moors, down through the mist
bands/ God cursed Grendel came greedily
loping./ The bane of the race of men roamed
forth,/ hunting for a prey in the high hall./
Under the cloud-murk he moved towards it/
until it shone above him, a sheer keep/ of
fortified gold. Nor was this the first time/ he
had scouted the grounds of Hrothgar’s
dwelling-/ although never in his life, before
or since,/ did he find harder fortune or hall-
defenders.” **Heaney**

Heaney’s section continues in the same manner, but with a few notable changes.

Starting with the beginning of the section, look at the verb used to describe Grendel’s coming. Chickering simply says that Grendel comes “walking” as if he was taking a stroll through the marshes like any other night. However, Heaney states that Grendel does not walk, but instead “greedily [lopes]” and not only that, he is “hunting for prey in the high hall” which portrays him as more of a savage beast looking for food rather than a “thief” as in Chickering’s. Also, the placement of God’s disapproval is another slight indicator to the image of Grendel. “God cursed” in Heaney’s does not seem as harsh or singled out as Chickering’s “[bearing] God’s wrath.” Again, in support of Grendel as a predator in Heaney’s version, he “scouted the grounds” which draws the image of him searching, preying on his soon to be victims. However, this image still is drawn up with Chickering’s version, but in a different manner. Chickering describes him as a “thief” planning to trap his victims. While this is also animalistic, it portrays Grendel as more of a conniving, thinking beast, who is evil, planning his next attack instead of just relying on basic animal instinct to find prey. Finally, a part of this section that I find interesting is the description of Grendel coming to the mead hall and “[visiting] Hrothgar” at his home in Chickering’s rendition. This gives the image an almost ironic, homey feel as if Grendel was a guest that has visited Hrothgar, and has since turned his back and become a thief. These two different images, though still following the same basic plot line, give some different insights into the characteristics of Grendel and his habits.

Beowulf is often also portrayed in a different light, especially in the scene describing his death. In lines 2819-2820, Chickering describes Beowulf’s last moments as “...out from his breast/ his soul went to seek the doom of the just.” The word doom gives the whole end a

negative connotation. Also, by using 'seek', Chickering implies that Beowulf has to journey to find his place, even though he is seeking "the doom of the just". Meanwhile, Heaney's version describes the death with "His soul fled from his breast/ to its destined place among the steadfast ones." In this version, there is a heroic end for the "steadfast one" and Beowulf is esteemed as a good man who is destined to go to a just place. With "destiny" in these lines, there is implication that Beowulf not only knows where he is going, but also knows that he is going to a good place. These differences are again a notable change in the portrayal of Beowulf and his characteristics.

Throughout the entire poem, both Chickering and Heaney give these different portrayals of Beowulf and Grendel, alluding to an overall theme in the translations. In the examples given in this study, Chickering portrays Beowulf as an over the top warrior, who attracts all the attention. Beowulf is the warrior who fights the huge beast triumphantly in Chickering's translation, while Heaney has Beowulf as a manlier image, as a heroic human. Beowulf fights for his life like any man would in his battle against the sea monster, and at his death, he is a heroic man who is destined to a good place. This difference in the translations would most likely not be noticed with a first time reading, but perhaps would be more obvious after a well studied and through reading of the two texts. Upon the first and even second readings, the reader is gaining a general understanding of the plot, attempting to piece together the chronology and events, and form his or her own image of the main characters. Again, a difference in portrayals of characters, such as Grendel, makes a change in how he is perceived. Chickering portrays him as a more evil, conniving beast with some human like qualities whereas Heaney gives him more animalistic characteristics. Heaney uses more language that revolves around Grendel being a predator attacking the Danes, while Chickering is able to make his words describe him as a thief, preparing and thinking of a plan to capture the Danes. These differences are noticeable upon in-depth research and reading and can stick in the head of the reader, offering further thought on the subject.

For myself personally, there are a few different perceptions that I have formed of Beowulf and Grendel after my readings of Heaney and Chickering. I see Heaney's version with a heroic man and a beast with horrendous animal characteristics. Yet, at the same time, I can see Chickering's version of an exulted warrior who triumphs over a conniving creature. As each reader delves into the epic story of Beowulf and the journey of his battles, they form their own conclusions and interpretations of the story.

Some theories presented in class relate to how the time period would affect the image of the two characters. By having a 21st century translation, Heaney may have been trying to relate Beowulf to men of this day and age by having him face battles in a manly fashion, with chances of losing. Beowulf is more humble and yet he is still heroic, defeating the evil and animalistic beast. While Grendel is portrayed as a creature that is not found in today's world, he may have been portrayed in this light to make Beowulf a more heroic figure. Grendel is an animal that the audience maybe able to relate to in some way. In Chickering's version of Beowulf, Grendel has more humanistic qualities, and Beowulf is portrayed as a more warrior-like figure. While I am not sure how that could be relevant to contemporary times, a reader somewhere may be able to find a connection. Again, as with all reading, interpretations are based on the readers, their experience, ideas, and beliefs about what they are reading.

Throughout my research, I have found that even though there is only one physical text of Beowulf, stories can evolve orally, without the written work. Also, the readers own experiences, ideas, and beliefs, will ultimately decide their interpretation of a piece and its characters. As for Beowulf and Grendel, their image in these two translations is based as much on the translators

own interpretations and experience of the story. The words evoke the same plot, but different perceptions of how the two characters are, and a close study of the two shows this. Through the examples of the text, one can make his or her own opinion of how they perceive Grendel and Beowulf. The translations do not limit opinion or say which the correct viewpoint is, but instead, offer a perspective on how one can view the different characters, based on the varieties that are available to the readership of Beowulf.

Works Cited

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