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The Aesthetics of Storytelling and Literary Criticism as Mythological Ritual: The Myth of the Human Tragic Hero, Intertextual Comparisons Between the Heroes and Monsters of Beowulf and the Anglo-Saxon Exodus

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The Aesthetics of Storytelling and Literary Criticism as Mythological Ritual: The Myth of the Human Tragic Hero, Intertextual Comparisons Between the Heroes and Monsters of *Beowulf* and the Anglo-Saxon *Exodus*

By

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Abstract

For thousands of years, people have been hearing, reading, and interpreting stories and myths in light of their own experience. To read a work by a different author living in a different era and setting, people tend to imagine works of literature to be something they are not. To avoid this fateful tendency, I hope to elucidate what it means to read a work of literature and interpret it: love it to the point of wanting to foremost discuss its excellence of being a piece of art. Rather than this being a defense, I would rather call it a musing, an examination on two texts that I adore: *Beowulf* and the Anglo-Saxon *Exodus.*

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"For everyone one of us, living in this world means waiting for our end. Let whoever can win glory before death. When a warrior is gone, that will be his best and only bulwark."
(Beowulf, lines 1386-1389, Translation by Seamus Heaney)

Throughout this paper, I divide different sections of thoughts by quotes in bold. I do not use chapters because I find my paper to pursue one specific idea. While the paper does contain divided sections, the quotes, rather than chapters, help to center the reader on what I am pursuing, the importance of the humane tragic hero in *Beowulf*[1] and the Old English *Exodus.*[2]

"The significance of a myth is not easily to be pinned on paper by analytical reasoning. It is at its best when it is presented by a poet who feels rather than makes explicit what his theme portends; who presents it incarnate in the world of history and geography, as our poet has done." (J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: Monsters and the Critics," 15)

Studying myth through literary criticism allows critics to explain what history cannot. Myth does not strictly concern itself with authenticity or even plausibility; rather, it toils over stretched-out-truth, uncertainty, and the abstract.[3] Its place in the world seems to reside in its ability to be put to use, to be applied to stories as a way to understand the aesthetic qualities that make the story itself something to be examined.[4] While the pursuit of the historian, the anthropologist, and the archeologist is a noble one,[5] literary criticism, performed with myth, allows us the opportunity to elaborate on what lies beyond the surface of the poem or the story, the metaphorical and the abstract. Myth-focused criticism grants interpreters the ability to peel back the dirty, oversaturated curtain of research previously conducted on stories and texts without an emphasis on myth, to ritualize literary criticism as mythological and discover the breath of the divine.

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[1] My quotations from *Beowulf* will be from Seamus Heaney's translation (1999) and the Old English *Exodus (1982)* will be from S.A.J. Bradley's translation. While any translation could serve the purpose of this paper's discussion, I use these two because certain passages in both tend to use certain translations of words and phrases that highlight the mythological qualities of the stories.

[2] Throughout this paper, I will be using *Exodus*, the Old English Exodus, the *Exodus*, the *Exodus*-paraphrase, and the Biblical paraphrase of *Exodus* interchangeably.

[3] In *A Short History of Myth*, Karen Armstrong writes, "A myth, therefore, is true because it is effective, not because it gives us factual information" (10).

[4] Walter Burkert expounds upon this point, "The specific character of myth seems to lie neither in the structure nor in the content of a tale, but in the use to which it is put" (*Structure and History*, 22).

[5] According to J.R.R. Tolkien in "*Beowulf*: Monsters and the Critics, "The historian's search is, of course, perfectly legitimate, even if it does not assist criticism in general at all, so long as it is not mistaken for criticism" (7).

When examining literature from the past, it is fruitful for critics to rely on a mythic lens to interpret texts due to the inevitable problem with history, archeology, anthropology, and other more or less scientific approaches to the literature: limitations based upon the field of study desiring answers rather than truth revealed from questions. Unlike a study of science and history, literature should value studying works of art for truth rather than answers, and that truth can reside in studying the mythical qualities implemented inside the stories to live more richly.[6] Walter Burkert says that "Language, let alone myth, is not produced by facts. More often the incongruence, the tension, between facts and verbalization will become manifest" (*Structure and History*, 26-27). Myth allows qualities of a story to "manifest" that have been hidden, qualities that criticism and research outside of texts with mythic qualities have been unable to uncover. To keep myths relevant in our society and criticism, myth-based literary criticism provides an interesting method separate from the historical aims of other sciences. Mythology applied to literary criticism serves as a performative effort, one that should hold significant value in a society always trying to determine meaning. Therefore, myth-based criticism needs to be kept alive;[7] it is a performative artform[8] that allows critics to engage with stories on the overwhelming certainty that meaning not rest in answers but questions, with truth. Indeed, this only seems to highlight the importance of literary criticism as an artform.

To mythologically engage with stories in the way I propose, myth must first be defined.[9] Then, we may begin to see mythology applied to literary criticism as ritual, a connection quite

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[6] Karen Armstrong in *A Short History of Myth* writes, "A myth is essentially a guide; it tells us what we must do in order to live more richly" (10).

[7] Joseph Campbell said, "Myths must be kept alive. The people who keep it alive are artists of one kind or another" (*The Power of Myth*, 107).

[8] Harold Bloom states, "Literary criticism is an ancient art" (17). Furthermore, this paper also desires to see myth once applied with literary criticism as an ancient artform that enhances our engagement with stories.

[9] At the time of John Niles writing "Myth and History," he said that "Although the term [myth] appears often in *Beowulf* criticism, it is seldom defined" (218). I find this statement to not be a comment stating that there was an

helpful in understanding the aesthetic qualities of great stories. Broadly, myths allow cultures to search for instruction[10] and ultimately form "basic assumptions and fundamental beliefs about how things work" (Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 169). Outside of literary criticism, an explanation for what myth can do remains incredibly cosmic full of universal potential without human application. Through its relation to stories themselves, myths can then convey truths that do not solely deal with the divine, otherworldly, or cosmic; they teach us about the art and history of storytelling focusing on the feat of the individual.[11] Without their attachment to stories themselves, individual qualities like perseverance and courage stand as abstract concepts, and their presence in myths helps critics consider a concept in literary criticism called aesthetics. On a cosmic level, the aesthetic qualities of a hero in mythology always tend to reveal aspects about the culture from which the story emanates such as what is valued or what is thought of as beautiful. More specifically, aesthetics applied to mythical heroes can help critics see the beauty behind mythological heroes. Harold Bloom, a critic deeply concerned with the study of how aesthetics applies to literature, writes, "Aesthetic value is by definition engendered by an interaction between artists, an influencing that is always an interpretation" (24). This "interaction" Bloom mentions can be understood as intertextual criticism. When engaging with multiple texts, the beauty of certain myths inevitably arises between *ἀγών* experienced between these texts.[12] Therefore, literary criticism aided by a study of myth and aesthetics ultimately allows interpreters to perceive and discuss not only the practice of storytelling but compare mythic heroes through intertextual criticism.

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abundance of *Beowulf*-based myth criticism at this time, but rather that in the few articles in existence that connected *Beowulf* with myth, the term was seldom defined.

[10] "Myths are stories of our search through the ages for truth, for significance" (Campbell, 4).

[11] While I do not explicitly state it here, the "feat of the individual" is intertwined with the search for the importance of the humane tragic hero.

[12] Harold Bloom writes, "[A]esthetic value emanates from class struggle" (23).

In mythological terms, conducting a ritual should reveal truths about the self and the world previously unseen, and literary criticism itself maintains the ability to ritualize a reading of a story or text.[13] Walter Burkert, who was a critic deeply concerned with the developing relationship between myth and ritual, writes, "Of course, man has many modes of expression that are not of this origin and that can be ritualized" (*Homo Necans,* 24). On a basic level, people conducting a ritual should feel a deep sense of connectivity to something; it is a way to communicate with the words of authors long dead, a methodology to ultimately communicate with the self. Indeed, its description seems quite analogous to the act of a literary critic. In fact, Campbell, in *The Power of Myth*, states, "A ritual is the enactment of a myth. By participating in a ritual, you are participating in a myth" (103). To participate in ritual and myth, literary criticism, because it too is an artistic ritual that is "accompanied by ideas, surrounded by images and words" (Burkert, *Homo Necans,* 28), may be connected to ritual, a practice analogous with myth that helps illuminate a deep understanding of what it means to be human. Ritual itself is a kind of communication, a kind of language,[14] which allows us to connect with the art of myth and storytelling. When literary criticism is connected to mythology, we observe "myths containing and at the same time revealing the meaning of rituals and ceremonies" (Lee, 251). Ritual, once applied to mythological heroes, allows interpreters of texts to grasp what has previously been unseen, what has been in the dark.[15] So, when using mythology to engage with

[13] Discussing the relationship between ritual, language, and myth, Walter Burkert states, "[R]itual and language have gone hand in hand since language began" (*Homo Necans,* 30).
[14] "Ritual, as a form of communication, is a kind of language. It is natural, then, that verbalized language, man's most effective system of communication, should be associated with ritual" (Burkert, *Homo Necans,* 29).
[15] Joseph Campbell, perhaps the most famous mythologist of the 20th century, expounds, "Mythology teaches you what's behind literature and the arts" (14).

stories, ritualizing literary criticism endures as a methodological artform to intertextually engage with stories.[16]

"Human beings have always been mythmakers." (Karen Armstrong, A Short History of Myth, 1)

The earliest storytellers, our primitive mythmakers, gravitated heavily toward the fantastic deeds of heroes from the distant past. Thus, what we know of our earliest storytellers seems to imply they were engaged in mythmaking, composing and recounting history, creating a duality between the fantastic and real, therefore between folk-tale and history.[17] Following the cognitive revolution and development of oral communication, however we date this event, humanity started to form histories and mythologies through the process of storytelling. This new activity allowed societies to explain phenomena by new creative means, by mythology,[18] not needing to depend upon the logic, facts, and precise details behind events and happenings of their world.[19] Karen Armstrong asserts, "Because of our strictly chronological view of history, we have no word for such an occurrence, but mythology is an art form that points beyond history to what is timeless in human existence" (7). People then had the chance to start composing myths that described their tribe's history of the distant past, ultimately creating community and culture. In his revolutionary book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Yuval Noah Harari states regarding the beginning of the cognitive revolution, "Homo sapiens started to form even more elaborate structures called cultures. The subsequent development of these human cultures is

[16] According to Karen Armstrong in *A Short History of Myth*, "The function of the artist is the mythologization of the world" (107).
[17] Regarding *Beowulf*, E.E. Wardale writes, "The subject matter of Beowulf contains both historical and fabulous elements. It has grown up out of a union of history and folk-tale" (88).
[18] Related to this new development for humanity, Walter Burkert states, "Myth, then, within the class of traditional tales, is nonfactual storytelling" (*Structure and History*, 3).
[19] In *A Short History of Myth*, Karen Armstrong states, "[F]rom the beginning we invented stories that enabled us to place our lives in a larger setting, that revealed an underlying pattern, and gave us a sense that, against all the depressing and chaotic evidence to the contrary, life had meaning and value" (2).

called history" (3). To form culture, people needed communication first; then, we probably desired something to bind groups of people together in a group by commonalities. Oral storytelling allowed people to share a common, composed history. Indeed, the history of language and communication, community and culture, history and mythology, as it connects to mankind, coalesce around the constantly developing art of storytelling.

Without stories (encapsulating all forms of literature and creative storytelling), we would not have history. Therefore, the relationship between mythmaking and storytelling contains universal truths binding all people who create and experience art together, thus creating historical consciousness itself. Whatever the method for telling a story, whether it be television, novel, or the epic,[20] all play a part in determining and representing history, especially stories and literature from the remote past. Without our ability to tell a story, humanity does not have history, communication,[21] relationships; really, everything in this world is produced by a story. Hinting at this concept in popular art, David Benioff and D.B. Weiss in the final season of *Game of Thrones* rendered this concept well through a conversation between Brandon Stark and Samwell Tarly. Talking to Brandon, the keeper of their society's memory, Samwell Tarly states, "Your [Brandon's] memories don't come from books. Your stories aren't just stories. If I wanted to erase the world of men, I'd start with you" (*Season 8 Episode 2, A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms*). Additionally, in Jewish mythology, God orally speaks the world into existence: "Let there be light." The ancient Greek word for spirit, *πνεὐμα*, simultaneously means not only spirit but also breath; a duality that illustrates humanity's most important quality, our storytelling

[20] Classifying ancient and older works of literature as epic has been problematic for critics for quite some time. This paper will not focus on the validity of genre studies due to the topic being centered around examining the important presence of myths inside these stories.

[21] For me to connect communication with myth, ritual, and storytelling, I find beauty in the value of speech and its connection to the full scope of what this project wishes to discuss, and this is encapsulated in this quote: "[W]hereas myth only became possible with the advent of speech, a specifically human ability" (Burkert, *Homo Necans*, 31)

spirit. Storytelling is central to what it means to be a human. It, as well as the aesthetic qualities of texts, mainly the mythic qualities of heroes, "enable us to learn how to talk to ourselves and how to endure ourselves" (Bloom, 30). For thousands of years, we have been "enduring ourselves" through the art of storytelling.

Thus, foundational to humanity's development are stories as well as ritual, a methodology that helps us understand these stories, to uncover their importance and ability to speak and define life.[22] Because the way to convey cosmic truth in writing is to be as specific as possible, these storytellers, our earliest historians, our earliest mythmakers, tended to implicate cosmic truths about an entire nation, tribe, or people group based upon stories of one person's heroic exploits. Donna Rosenberg states, "Heroes are the models of human behavior for their society…by performing great deeds that help their community, and they inspire others to emulate them" (xvii). Because of the cosmic significance these heroes possess, heroes fighting against the forces of evil appear in the earliest stories across the world. While no two heroes are the exact same,[23] historically, storytellers have been drawn to the creative archetypal framework of the hero combating evil monsters or villains. Indeed, two heroes in different stories are never the same; however, their motives seem to rest on common ground. This is put very succinctly in an interview of Joseph Campbell by Bill Moyers:

> Moyers: Why are there so many stories of the hero in mythology?
>
> Campbell: Because that's worth writing about. Even in popular novels, the main character is a hero or heroine who has found or done something beyond the

[22] "Ritual creates and affirms social interaction" (Burkert, *Homo Necans*, 23).

[23] Donna Rosenberg expounds, "[H]eroes are not the same throughout the world. Achilles, Odysseus, Gilgamesh, Sigurd, and Sunjata, for example, come from cultures where individuals may earn fame in a variety of ways. This permits them to express their individuality. In contrast, Rama must remember and follow dharma, the particular form of proper and righteous behavior that the Hindu culture expects of a person in his or her political and social position" (xvii).

> normal range of achievement and experience. A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself. (*The Power of Myth*, 151)[24]

The beginning of storytelling not only intrinsically connects to mythology and history composition; it is also the beginning of storytellers gravitating toward heroes and how a singular person could represent their people in a cosmic way. By people realizing this and composing myths, we start to see the emergence of heroes defending their people against opposition. In these stories, the opponents of the heroes are frequently described as monsters, and their purpose, in certain stories, serves to highlight the mythological qualities of the heroes.

"At the center of the story is the hero himself, an heroic spirit in a narrow place against odds, undaunted even in death. Potent in their effect on the hero, who is never wholly independent, are the externals of the heroic world." (H.L. Rogers, "Three Great Fights," 234)

One of the most fantastic displays of a heroic tale is the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, a story containing a variety of deeply mythical qualities. *Beowulf*, of course, has received the most attention out of all Anglo-Saxon poetry due to its beautiful language, endearing story, and unique approach to what is heroism. In "*Beowulf*: Monsters and the Critics," Tolkien writes concerning the heroic nature of Beowulf:

> Let us by all means esteem the old heroes: men caught in the chains of circumstances or of their own character, torn between duties equally sacred, dying with their backs to the wall. But Beowulf, I fancy, plays a larger part than is recognized in helping us to esteem them. (17)

To examine the excellence of a hero such as Beowulf, one must compare him with the attributes of other heroes, particularly Anglo-Saxon heroes. In fact, to gain an understanding of anything, we must compare and contrast our understanding of something with another.[25] Thus, our greatest

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[24] This interview is both in video and book format. For the purpose of this paper, this conversation between Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers is around the middle of the interview, occurring over several sessions, and the middle of the book.

[25] Campbell states that "Everything we know is within the terminology of the concepts of being and not being, many and single, true and untrue, we always think in terms of opposites" (57). This is precisely why most essays describe

knowledge of *Beowulf* throughout the years has been the result of intertextual criticism comparing aspects of *Beowulf* to other stories and myths. Focusing specifically on Beowulf's character as a hero, *Beowulf*-criticism has typically compared him to Scandinavian and Greco-Roman heroes; however, criticism does not frequently compare *Beowulf* with other Anglo-Saxon poetry, especially the Anglo-Saxon Biblical paraphrases, and least of all from a mythological framework. Theodore Anderson states, "[T]he most immediate sources of a poem should be considered first, English sources in the case of an English poem. In the present survey, they appear last because they have figured only at the periphery of the discussion" (143). Because comparison between *Beowulf* and other Anglo-Saxon poems has remained at the back of literary discussion, a longer project need exist to explore the alluring aesthetics displayed between Anglo-Saxon texts of deep mythological background. With understanding our earliest storytellers and elder mythology from the past, mythological interpretive methods seem not only the best approach to understanding abstract themes with works of literature, but also the mythical importance of being a human. While the practice of observing myths has taken many different forms throughout the years,[26] this paper concerns itself with an examination of mythological imagery within distant texts regarding heroes and monsters. Through the methodological pursuit of the mythologist, literary critics —we the artists — are tasked with conducting a ritual, one that potentially uncovers previously not emphasized qualities of a story.

Longer Anglo-Saxon poems embody what Joseph Campbell calls "literature of the spirit" (*The Power of Myth*, 1), and the main attraction to these poems have been the cosmic fight of good versus evil represented in the poems' heroes and villains. A significant number of mythical

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Beowulf as a foil to Grendel. To understand Beowulf, we must also understand Grendel. Additionally, Beowulf's frequent comparison to other heroes in other tales holds the same purpose.

[26] "Because myths are symbols of human experience, they can be analyzed in a variety of ways, depending upon the scholar" (Rosenberg, xx).

undertones exists between the heroes of *Beowulf* and the Old English *Exodus* and to a lesser extent the monsters of *Beowulf* with Pharaoh. To encounter how the mythic qualities of these characters define these stories, we need first observe the imagery attached to Beowulf and Moses as well as the monsters of *Beowulf* with Pharaoh. "Scholars must infer their presence [myths] in a given literary work by probing its plot, patterns of imagery, and the like as well as through the study of names and their possible etymological meanings" (Niles, 216). A study of imagery plays an important part in understanding the connection between the heroes and monsters of Anglo-Saxon poetry. In this project, we must examine what makes Beowulf and Moses such interesting heroes: the tragedy of them being only human.[27] Additionally, by examining the monsters of *Beowulf* and Pharaoh in the *Exodus*, we see how their mythic presence in the works seems to only heighten the importance of Beowulf and Moses as mythically human heroes, constantly threatened by the prospect of death.

As stated, deep intertextual, mythical similarities exist between both the heroes and monsters of *Beowulf* and *Exodus*. Beowulf, Shield Sheafson,[28] and Moses are mythologically connected to water; Grendel and Grendel's mother are mythologically connected to the darkness, and imagery describing their appearance serves as a dark foil to Beowulf, a representation of humanity and the light. The important myth of the heroic monster-slayer is paralleled between Beowulf and Sigemund.[29] Wholly, this seems to instate the important myth of the humane tragic hero in Anglo-Saxon poetry. By examining these intertextual similarities between these stories, we gain a deep appreciation of what these stories are: brilliant myths about the struggle of

[27] Tolkien states, "He [Beowulf] has no enmeshed loyalties, nor hapless love. He is a man, and that for him and many is sufficient tragedy" (18-19).
[28] In this paper, quotations from other writers will spell Shield Sheafson differently or refer to his mythological presence in other stories. My writing will spell his name as Shield Sheafson.
[29] Throughout this paper, I will be using the spelling of Sigemund instead of Sigmund. In some sections, his name will be spelled as Sigmund when quoting from other authors.

mankind. J.R.R Tolkien said regarding *Beowulf* criticism, "But is plainly only in the consideration of *Beowulf* as a poem, with an inherent poetic significance, that any view or conviction can be reached or steadily held" (9). Alongside the conviction of Tolkien to read poetry as poetry, I posit reading not only poems as poems,[30] but myths as myths. Because *Beowulf* and *Exodus* are poems as well as myths, attaching ritual to literary criticism, using mythology to interpret texts as well as understanding the art of storytelling help us grasp the cosmic, mythical significance of heroes and monsters within the aesthetics of Anglo-Saxon poetry.

[30] I make this statement in light of a quote by J.R.R. Tolkien. He said that, "*Beowulf* is in fact so interesting as poetry, in places poetry so powerful, that this quite overshadows the historical content, and is largely independent even of the most important facts that research has discovered" (7).

"The Old English poetic world is intensely focused upon human experience." (Megan Cavell, "Constructing the monstrous body in Beowulf," 155)

Great stories and myths should speak for themselves,[31] and the Anglo-Saxon poems *Beowulf* and *Exodus* certainly do throughout both stories, especially in their opening words. To begin with Anglo-Saxon poetry is to begin with one of its most important words: *hwæt*. Scholars frequently define this word as denoting a beginning we mean by expressions like "so," "let us begin," or "here." Nevertheless, this word represents so much more than any translator could bring into another language. Using Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*, he begins the story: "So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by / and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness. / We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns" (lines 1-3). The word *hwæt*, "so" in this translation, produces the command to be present, to be still. When performers of Old English poetry pronounce this word, it is supposed to ring in the ears of the listener and stick. Literary critics for some time have taken interest in this word also appearing at the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon poem *Exodus*.[32] Due to the fact that Anglo-Saxon epic poetry overflows with mythological undertones, mythologists can uncover certain tropes and ideas from understanding the etymologically significant images that words can create. Undoubtedly, its presence serves the same purpose carrying the same spirit in both works: a performative effort to draw attention to the heroic, mythological nature of Beowulf and Moses.

In Anglo-Saxon criticism, most critics unfortunately do not seem concerned with the mythological aesthetics of these poems but rather focus on extraneous musings that serve the

[31] In no way is this a statement suggesting that we need not conduct literary criticism on both *Beowulf* and the *Exodus*. It merely suggests that when examining strictly the contents of both texts the mythological aspects of both stories shine brightly.

[32] E.E. Wardale states, "The first lines recall the beginning of *Beowulf* rather than that of the Genesis" (125). The *Exodus*-poet writes, "Listen! Far and near throughout the world we have heard worthies tell of the decrees of Moses and of exilic promises to the generations of mortals" (1-3).

interpreter, not the poet.[33] John Niles writes, "The result of this self-reflective criticism will be to cast doubt on anyone's claim to have the power to name the meaning of *Beowulf*" (9). Without naming the poet's intention, we may understand a story's aesthetics by comparing its mythical qualities to other stories. In an interview between Harold Bloom and Charlie Rose, Harold Bloom made the statement that "Western literature, whether we like it or not, aesthetically speaking is agonistic to the heart's core" ("Harold Bloom interviewed on *The Western Canon*, 19:00-19:30). When comparing the heroes of *Beowulf* and *Exodus*, all mythological aspects of the poems seem to point back to the importance of Beowulf and Moses being humane tragic heroes constantly threatened by death. According to Tolkien, "It [*Beowulf*] is poor in criticism, criticism that is directed to the understanding of a poem as a poem" (5). Meaning, or what we perceive as meaning, need not be reflective of the interpreter when focusing on the poem's qualities of its excellent, mythic hero.[34] With critics have a tendency to discuss *Beowulf* in an incorrect fashion, the "meaning" of *Beowulf* or *Exodus* are not important, but instead the aesthetic qualities that merit their place in the western canon.

To begin describing *Beowulf* before intertextual comparison with *Exodus*, we must first understand the mythical tapestry of *Beowulf*, which inhabits the story While the setting of the poem can be rooted in geography, it is troubling how many critics have searched strictly for the historicity of the text. One would think that historical research would have a tendency to disregard or go against mythic research; however, this is not the case. All research seems to

[33] "[O]ur present situation in the cultural milieu of the Western society of the late twentieth century makes Beowulf a palimpsest on which we cannot help but inscribe our twentieth-century presuppositions" (Waterhouse, 26).
[34] John Niles expounds, "In a realm so far removed from the poem's original context, interpretive statements are likely to reveal as much about the interpreter as they do about the 'authentic, true' poem, which is bound to remain an inscrutable object of desire" (2).

simply point back to the poem being a mythical masterpiece.[35] Marie Padgett Hamilton calls *Beowulf* "a timeless element in the role of antagonists and hero, as they move against a circumstantial background of Scandinavian dynasties and semi-historical events" (135). Indeed, when searching for history in *Beowulf,* one only seems only to keep finding deep indications of its mythical quality rather than the history (Niles, 229). While no explicit setting date is provided in the poem besides the "distant past,"[36] the names of certain tribes and possible locations do appear. Rather than a search for the "historical" Geatland or Heorot, these qualities of the story simply contribute to its ability to provide truth rather than answers. John Niles is deeply concerned with this fact, and in his essay "Myth and History," he writes, "*Beowulf* creates its own history, chronology, and geography that are operative only within the confines of the poem and that cannot be related directly to anything outside it" (230). Because of our limited geographical, cultural, and anthropological scope of understanding this text, we should engage with this story as a mythological masterpiece rather than historical. Being present in *Beowulf* is being present in its history, or its created mythology. In this case, Beowulf's opening, *hwæt,* serves the story well. The need for being present in Beowulf is required for its poet, interpreters, and mythologists. Therefore, the story's duality of myth and history itself creates the dark, dreary, elegiac landscape of *Beowulf* that overflows with a sense of myth.[37]

Examining the mythic qualities of both stories provide the literary critic respite from trying to propose what the poem itself represents. Interpretation may rest in the repeated, aesthetic qualities of the poem itself, displaying the myth's power. H.L. Rogers states, "[W]hen a

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[35] In "Myth and History," John Niles states, "The question of the historicity of the elements of *Beowulf* was a distraction from the text as an example of magnificent fiction" (217).
[36] Niles said that, "It is worth stressing that no date is part of the fabric of the poem itself. In the poem, the past is the past" (225).
[37] "More useful may be attempts to identify the poem as 'mythhistory' that confirmed a set of values among the Anglo-Saxons by connecting their current world to fabulous ancestral past" (Niles, 213).

well-defined pattern has been identified, it cannot be dismissed as the product of a series of coincidences. The pattern as a whole must somehow reflect the mind of the poet" (237). Avoiding the tendency of critics to place the poem in context or provide answers,[38] we seek intertextual similarities in mythical imagery between the heroes of *Beowulf* and the Old English *Exodus*, mainly Shield Sheafson, Beowulf, Sigemund, and Moses from the *Exodus* being connected by their ability to defend their people from opposition and their association with water. Thus, we must follow our examination of the stories' heroes with the opponents, or monsters of *Beowulf* and *Exodus*, seeing their presence as mythologically opposed to the heroes. Ultimately, this analysis serves to emphasize the heroically humane qualities of Beowulf and Moses as well as heroes being exposed to death, which is expressed by Anglo poets in the form of elegy.

"In particular, his hero, in all he says and does shows himself high-minded, gentle, and virtuous, a man dedicated to the heroic life, and the poet presents this life in terms of service: Beowulf serves his lord, his people, and all mankind, and in so doing he does not shrink from hardship, danger, and death itself." (Kemp Malone, "Beowulf," 140)

Beowulf circulated orally as a performative text far before taking a literary shape.[39] With the poet "placing his personal emphasis upon it [the poem]" (Rogers, 233), the myth then began to compile a structure that could be dissected and examined. Because the story most likely existed orally far before becoming something structurally fixed, great opportunity emerged for a variety of storytellers to embed their own mythological embellishments to the story. Once *Beowulf* arrived at the compiled 3182 lines of written text, its hero, a man against the forces of evil, controls central importance in the poem. Nevertheless, both the *Beowulf*-poet and scops at

[38] "Nearly all the censure has been due either to the belief that it was something that is was not" (Tolkien, 7).
[39] Regarding *Beowulf's* previous history, H.L. Rogers states, "Most of the subject-matter was not invented by him; a good deal of it was probably in metrical form already. The poet fashioned this material to his own purpose, placing his personal emphasis on it" (233).

the mead-hall, within the narrative, frequently detail the myths of past heroes after Beowulf returns from his heroic exploits, ultimately creating a parallel between the mythical qualities of Beowulf himself with past Germanic figures. By comparing the heroes mentioned in the poem with Beowulf, we understand the deeply rooted mythology of the text and how Beowulf himself serves as a mythological hero of his people as well as a mere man constantly exposed to the prospect of death. Mythologically, two qualities coalesce to create the importance of Beowulf as a mythic hero: his ability to vanquish monsters, defending mankind, and his mythological connection to water in which most of the monster-fighting occurs in or near water.

While we will observe later his connection to water, monster-slaying defines Beowulf as a hero; it creates a need for tribes to trust in his ability to protect them from destruction. Additionally, while we will see how the monsters in the narrative highlight Beowulf's heroism as a mere man,[40] one main way the *Beowulf*-poet creates Beowulf as a monster-slayer is through his association to past Germanic heroes. To create this connection, the *Beowulf*-poet includes digressions in the narrative that detail the exploits of other heroes. Without explicitly learning how or why they are connected with Beowulf, readers should unconsciously conceive the conclusion they are connected by their heroic deeds. Additionally, they are not only connected heroes, but mythologically connected. Early, in the narrative, we see an association created between Beowulf and a mythological hero named Sigemund. Sigemund appears in many medieval stories, and what defines his character more than anything else is the epithet attached to his name, the dragon-slayer. Shortly, after Beowulf defends Heorot against Grendel, far before his fight with the dragon, a scop details a brief digression on Sigemund. At the beginning of the digression, the *Beowulf*-poet states, "Sigemund's glory grew and grew / because of his courage

[40] Kemp Malone states, "Beowulf was famous chiefly as a queller of monsters" (148).

when he killed the dragon" (884-886). Of course, this digression appears before we see Beowulf slay the dragon; nevertheless, it appears directly after he vanquishes Grendel from Heorot. While the slaying of monsters is vital to *Beowulf* and many other mythological texts, "[T]he slaying of a dragon is the achievement of heroes—of Siegmund, of Beowulf" (Davis, 33). While Sigemund lives following his fight with the dragon, Beowulf's death at the hands of the beast in no way represents failure.[41] Ultimately, Beowulf defends his reputation as a monster-slayer, what holds central importance for him as a hero. Moreover, his encounter with the dragon also seems to subliminally encourage his association with water.[42] E.E. Wardale states, "When Beowulf is killed it is again in dreary country near the sea and with forests close by in which his followers can hide themselves" (102). Indeed, we can see the importance of Beowulf being a monster-slayer, but aquatic imagery seems to bleed into every mythological aspect of the poem, only highlighting our sense of Beowulf as a monster-slayer and humane defender of mankind.

"The first part of the poem is dominated by water and water crossings…Scyld's arriving and departing by sea, Beowulf's arriving and departing by sea, Beowulf's swimming prowess and fighting water monsters, Beowulf's descent into the mere, and mention of the deluge." (Robert E. Bjork, "Digressions and Episodes," 203)

Many critics have noted Beowulf's connection to water; however, none have ever detailed this imagery as mythological. Of course, the Anglo-Saxon people were deeply influenced and connected to the sea; they lived on an island, and their livelihood was significantly influenced by their migration to a land surrounded by water. In *Migration and*

[41] "Beowulf had rid his own people of the subversive monster kind; and he was to meet death at the grips with the Dragon" (Hamilton, 134).
[42] Along with Beowulf dying near the waters, dragons also foster an association with water. S. Davis states, "Wherever it is found the dragon displays a special partiality for water. It dwells in pools or wells or in the clouds on the tops of mountains, or at the bottom of the sea where it guards vast treasures, or even on the top of a high mountain" (33).

Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England, Nicholas Howe describes this event as a migration myth,[43] writing, "In its richness, the sea language of the Anglo-Saxons expresses their condition as an island people" (83). Scholarship has seen frequent water imagery in Anglo-Saxon poetry as natural given part of their identity as seafarers.[44] Indeed, the *Beowulf* and the *Exodus* poets seem deeply concerned with rich language aesthetically centered on the water. Describing the *Exodus*-poet, Nicholas Howe writes, "When the poet turns to describe the miracle at the Red Sea, he reveals his daring and brilliance most fully. In its richness, the sea language of the Anglo-Saxons expresses their condition as an island people" (83). While these poets are island people and naturally should include the sea into their narratives, there seems to be something more than water imagery created in these two beautiful poems.[45] In texts such as *Beowulf* and the paraphrase of *Exodus*, something mythological rather than historical is being developed through the imagery and hero's connection to water. "I am convinced, however, that this migration myth animates such representative works of the culture as *Beowulf*, *Exodus*" (Howe, 3). Alongside the aesthetic quality of *Beowulf* being enhanced by Shield and Beowulf being mythologically connected to water, not only is Moses's parting of the Red Sea worthy of discussion; additionally, Shield has a mythologically confusing past, an origin story quite Mosaic.

From beginning to end, *Beowulf* concerns itself with how water could be connected to its hero. In fact, the beginning of *Beowulf* does not open with its hero but instead another important

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[43] Regarding the "migration myth," Nicholas Howe states, "More obliquely and yet more radically, some OE [Old English] poets found their inspiration in the ancestral migration. By my reading, *Exodus* and *Beowulf* display a deeply absorbed sense of this myth as they portray the geographical circumstances and religious history of the Anglo-Saxons" (2-3).

[44] "If a knowledge of the sea was inescapable for the Anglo-Saxons it also provided the setting for some of their most haunting poetry. The sea as the lot of the exile, the sea as the scene for the initiation of the hero, the sea as a barrier to be crossed by enemies and friends-all this and more was registered by OE [Old English] poets" (Howe, 83).

[45] Alvin Lee writes about *Beowulf*, "[A] poem that shows a thoroughly Christian symbolization of nature, especially in its use of sea imagery" (244). Again, I find this statement alongside the thought that the Anglo-Saxon poets wrote about the sea simply because they were an island people to be a simplification.

but short episode detailing a past hero, Shield Sheafson. He was a great king that had resemblance with Beowulf not by monster-slaying but through a mythical connection to water. Noticing the importance of mythology attached to Shield, Robert E. Bjork expounds, "Scholars also generally agree that Scyld ha[s] mythic, not historical, origins" (201). In the beginning of the poem, before Beowulf is introduced, a brief introduction details Shield's mythological legacy as well as a mention of his funeral.[46] As we will see later, *Beowulf* is framed around two funerals, that of Shield and Beowulf, only contributing to the story's deep sense of myth and connection to mankind's certain demise. "The poem ends in the present, with the funeral of the hero" (Malone, 152). However, now, we will not focus on death and funeral of Shield, but rather the brief segment detailing Shield's birth. Directly after the episode in *Beowulf* describing Shield's funeral, the poet makes an important mention involving the hero's past. The *Beowulf*-poet writes:

> They decked his body no less bountifully
> With offerings than those first ones did
> Who cast him away when he was a child
> And launched him alone out over the waves. (43-46)

Many myths include infant heroes being placed into baskets and being placed on the water. It seems to be a timeless mythological trope that storytellers have come back to for thousands of years. Because of our certainty that Christianity spread to the British Isles sometime before the development of the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* and *Exodus*, we can absolutely assume that the basket myth most available and relevant to the Anglo-Saxons would be Moses.[47] E.E. Wardale

[46] "The story of Scyld, mythical founder of Danish royal house, gives us a taste of an old legend, and the description of his funeral takes us back to pagan rites dim with antiquity" (Malone, 151).
[47] E.E. Wardale says about *Beowulf*, "We have proof of the popularity of its themes, especially of those of the Creation and the *Exodus*" (109).

expounds, “The poet starts with a short account of the prosperous reign of Scyld Scefing…he departed in a ship loaded with treasures and arms, in the same mysterious way in which he had come to the Danish shores as a child” (78-79). Because no specific reason surfaces explaining the mythical reasons to connect him with water, we, as interpreters, must assume this a mythologically aesthetic choice by the poet for one reason or another. Therefore, not only is Shield mythologically connected to Beowulf; he is analogous to Moses. Robert Bjork tells us that, “Scyld’s arrival by sea has intrigued scholars, and so has his ship burial, which does not have analogue in the Germanic tradition” (203). Indeed, the figure most analogous to both Shield and Beowulf is not Germanic at all, but rather Hebraic. *Beowulf* parallels Shield as well as its hero associated with water;[48] it is undoubtedly connected to the poet’s view of what it means for an Anglo-Saxon hero to mythologically accomplish heroic deeds.

Moreover, like Shield mysteriously entering and leaving the mythological framework of the story on water, so does Beowulf. We hear from Beowulf across the waters, on his home ground in Geatland (194-195), and his first command and action in the story involves him ordering a boat to cross the waters (198-200). Following the immediacy the text indicates of Beowulf desiring to travel to help Hrothgar, his retainers promptly begin to gather supplies to furnish their voyage. In *Beowulf*, thanes compiling weapons and war-gear atop a boat is an image that frequently appears in in the text, first with Shield and then with Beowulf. The *Beowulf*-poet states, “[W]arriors loaded / a cargo of weapons, shinning war-gear / in the vessel’s hold” (213-215). Linguistically and mythologically, this scene sounds quite similar to both the funeral of Shield and Beowulf. Additionally, when Beowulf arrives in Denmark, the guard addresses them

[48] “[I]t also establishes a parallel between Scyld and Beowulf. Both come across the sea to save the Danes. Furthermore, the glorious past of the Scyldlings makes Beowulf’s undertaking all the more glorious” (Bjork, 204).

as “Outsiders from across the water” (255), emphasizing not only the importance of home being separated as islanders but the people as seafarers. John Niles states, “Sea is a trope that indicates distance, not just water” (230). To the guard, Beowulf is a foreigner, and his boast must uphold his desire to rid Heorot of its demon. Indeed, once he addresses the guard, “unlock[ing] his word-hoard” (258), the guard understands him as not only the noblest of all men, but the perfect seafarer and aquatic hero. While he does not here boast of his swimming ability, he does boast about his aristocratic lineage and promise to free Heorot of its demon.

Once he arrives at Heorot, a vital part of his initial boast to Hrothgar resides in his ability to vanquish sea monsters (421-425). After this initial boast, he is soon bombarded by a verbal challenge from Unferth, the first instance in the poem where Beowulf’s renown is threatened.[49] Unferth recalls a youthful story involving a past swimming match between Beowulf and a man named Breca, where they had a contest to see who could last the longest in the ocean. Additionally, Beowulf encountered several monsters he had to fend off to defend his life and win the contest. In this scene, Unferth not only threatens the hero’s renown as a monster fighter, a champion of mankind, but also his swimming ability.[50] Reassuring the court rather than losing his temper,[51] Beowulf recounts his swimming match: “I was the strongest swimmer of all…But Breca / could never move out father or faster than me” (535, 541-542). In the story, Unferth is the first antagonist to Beowulf fulfilling his boast. Addressing this point, Morton W. Bloomfield states, “He is the opponent and the foil of the hero; he enhances his might; he is proof of his moderation, faith, and glory” (164). It is interesting that Bloomfield describes Unferth as an

[49] Morton Bloomfield says, “To the author, Unferth had a function in his epic” (160).
[50] E.E. Wardale remarks on Beowulf’s swimming ability, “If some warrior did distinguish himself by a conspicuous feat of swimming he might gradually have been made the hero of other tales of similar deeds of prowess, and been merged finally in the figure of the folk-tale hero, who performed his great feat under the water” (90).
[51] Levin L. Shucking states, “The test of man is above all his relationship to the irascible impulses” (47).

"antagonist" due to Beowulf's entire presence in the myth resting in his ability to vanquish monsters, or antagonists. While Unferth is not a monster nor physically fights Beowulf, he serves as the first instance of readers seeing Beowulf defend his boast representing his general claim to mythological status or significance.[52] When the *Beowulf*-poet describes its hero, the poet does not hesitate to indicate his incredible physical strength,[53] as well as his ability to constantly uphold his boast, what lies at the heart of the Anglo-Saxon ethical code. In the words of the coast guard, "Anyone with gumption / and a sharp mind will take the measure of two things: what's said and what's done" (287-289). Central to Beowulf's boast is his ability to vanquish forces of evil.[54] Actually, all his boasts are connected to his aquatic abilities as well as his prowess of monster-fighting, and this dual mythical importance attached to Beowulf instates him as an important mythological figure.

In fact, Beowulf's boast not only reassures readers he is a great swimmer and vanquisher of foes; the language of Beowulf describing the ocean hints at a deeper mythological connection between him and the waters. In the final lines of his boast, he states, "The ocean lifted / and laid me ashore, I landed safe / on the coast of Finland" (579-581). While this might have been a subtle, aesthetic touch of the poet, it seems as if the ocean physically aids Beowulf in his hunting of monsters. We see this physically manifest in his encounter with Grendel's mother. More language appears describing the ocean as biding to the will of Beowulf, mainly in the phrase "the water did not work against him" (1514) as well as "the lake settled, / clouds darkened above the bloodshot depths" (1630-1631). Beowulf emerges from the underwater lair of Grendel's mother

[52] Levin L. Shucking writes, "His intellectual achievement in the epic is shown not the least by the fact that he is wise in a special way, namely, 'wis wordcwida,' that is, he is a good orator" (42).
[53] "The hero's mægen, equal to that of thirty normal men, is his outstanding quality" (Rogers, 239).
[54] Kemp Malone states, "Beowulf's mention of sea-monsters which he had slain by night takes us back to the swimming match with Breca, one detail of which is precisely this monster-quelling on the part of the hero" (146).

once more illustrating his heroic ability in aquatic battle. Though Beowulf does not have a mythological beginning in a basket on the water (as far as we know), he controls the waters in an analogous way to Moses. On the most basic level, both Beowulf and Moses are deliverers of their people, vanquishers of opposition (monsters in Beowulf's case), and they can fill these roles because of their mythological connection to water, perhaps an ability for both to command the seas. In the *Exodus*, in one of the few instances where Moses speaks, he says, "I myself and this stronger hand have struck with a living emblem the ocean deep" (279-281). Indeed, their command of the sea enhances our understanding of them as mythologically significant because it highlights their ability to lead their tribes to safety, to penetrate the darkness of the deep and emerge on the other side. Gernot Wieland states, "Both men are leaders—Moses of the Israelites, Beowulf of the Geats. Both men are rescuers: Moses frees the Israelites from Egyptian slavery; Beowulf frees the Danes from the attacks of Grendel and his mother" (89-90). They are both leaders and heroes precisely because of their association with the sea itself.

Furthermore, not only do both heroes purge monsters by an association and command of the waters; blood appears in the water, washing away the monstrous embodiments that threaten mankind's safety in both *Beowulf* and the *Exodus*.[55] Especially, in *Exodus*, a surprisingly amount of lines are devoted to imagery describing blood appearing in water, nearly the last one hundred lines describe this imagery. To detail a few passages, the poet of the Exodus-paraphrase writes, "The mountainous screes were debabbled with blood" (449); "blood infused the flood" (463); "The seas appeared to them all bloody, through which they had carried their fighting-gear" (572-573). Because the *Exodus*-poet could have simply concluded with a speech by Moses giving God

[55] "Outside of Beowulf, we see these terms appearing in poetic collocations, especially in Exodus, where it is Pharaoh's men whose blood stains the water" (Cavell, 174).

recognition of deliverance, we see not only an image being developed, but a deep mythological concept. On its most basic level, this certainly creates a heroic parallel between Beowulf and Moses.[56] However, its purpose also seems to be concerned with developing a myth. Because of the poet's decision to frequently reference this imagery, Moses not only becomes the man who parted the Red Sea; he is an Anglo-Saxon vanquisher of opposition. The presence of water in both *Beowulf* and the *Exodus* also incites a mythological commentary on the waters serving both heroes as a kind of baptism.[57] After Beowulf delivers his tribe from the oppression of Grendel and Grendel's mother from the lake and the Israelites with Moses parting the red sea, the men are reborn as heroes, who have validated their boasts. Their significance as defenders of mankind reside in the watchful eyes of those around them who will later sing of their exploits, emphasizing Beowulf and Moses as heroes being constantly watched.

Alongside *Beowulf* and the *Exodus* emphasizing their heroes as constantly watched, their handling of crowds seem to intertextually advance their development as mythological.[58] Throughout the narratives of both *Beowulf* and the *Exodus*, people are constantly following both heroes and questioning their ability to lead them to safety in times of conflict and monstrous opposition. E.E. Wardale calls this aspect of *Exodus* "an outstanding feature of the *Exodus*…It is the whole band of Israelites whom we follow as they escape from Egypt, and whom we are made to see in their nightly encampments, especially in that by the Red Sea" (130). Moreover, both heroes maintain the trust of their tribes and crowd in the same way: they defend their boast

[56] Gernot Wieland states, "[T]he bloody waters create a parallel between the two events and therefore also, to a certain degree, between Moses and Beowulf" (90).
[57] "Since it has been demonstrated that the *Exodus* shows the effect of the ancient liturgy of baptism and Holy Saturday, one goes not too far afield in presuming that a similar relationship exists in reference to *Beowulf*" (Cabaniss, 230).
[58] Regarding this importance in *Beowulf*, "Such strong emphasis on a prince's popularity and on good relations between a king and his people runs through the entire *Beowulf*" (Shucking, 41).

through their actions rather than reassuring them through words. Commenting on this, Gernot Wieland notes, "In the entire *Exodus*, Moses speaks only twice" (89). Really, besides Beowulf being a monster-slayer, Moses, while Pharaoh is not a monster, can be seen as fulfilling the same function: dedication to deliver his people from oppression.[59] While Moses does not die in his heroic exploits to bring his tribe to safety, the possibility of his death at the hands of Pharaoh is precisely where his purpose lies, like Beowulf.[60] Kemp Malone perfectly states, "[T]he fate of the hero and the fate of the tribe are bound together in such a way that each lends weight and worth to the other" (153). Indeed, not only does Moses not die at the end of *Exodus*; he also cannot bear the exact title of being a monster-slayer. While Pharaoh may not appropriately inherit the title of monster as sufficiently as the antagonists of *Beowulf*, his presence serves the same purpose of heightening the humane and heroic qualities of the heroes.

In Anglo-Saxon intertextual research, people have noted that Moses contains a significant number of qualities comparable to an Anglo-Saxon hero, being called a "wayleader in war" (322) as well as other titles that signify his ability to lead by conquest. However, people often catalogue this point and continue with other discussions.[61] Also, people have noticed linguistically the works are quite similar in phrasing,[62] most often drawing the conclusion that this is another way by the author to parallel Moses with Beowulf as an Anglo-Saxon hero.[63] Theodore Anderson expounds, "But the identity of phrasing remains haunting, and in the most

[59] "Here the future champion of mankind against the world of monsters is already a monster-queller, though not yet informed with a high moral purpose. He plays with the heroic life to which, later on, he will dedicate himself in earnest" (Malone, 146).
[60] "For him, Beowulf would not have been a hero if he had not had a people to die for" (Malone, 153).
[61] Theodore Anderson writes, "The least resolved discussion surrounds *Beowulf* and *Exodus*" (143).
[62] "The most persuasive cases of verbal borrowing have linked Beowulf with Exodus and Genesis A" (Anderson, 143).
[63] Most critics and historians believe *Beowulf* to have been written before the *Exodus*. This paper shall not take a stance on this question, and rather simply notice their connection through mythology.

recent well-informed and broadly conceived argument Gernot Wieland maintains that the *Beowulf* poet drew on *Exodus* and equated Beowulf with Moses" (144).[64] While I do think Moses is meant to reflect the qualities of an Anglo-Saxon hero,[65] it should not simply stop here when doing a mythological intertextual comparison between the texts. Because of both poets describing the blood in the water as well as their heroes controlling the waters for both their mythological significance and tribe, they are analogous mythical heroes. They are not only comparable heroes; they are comparable mythic heroes. Therefore, mythologically, the heroic deeds of Moses are connected to water in the same way Beowulf must grapple with the lair and Grendel's mother. On the seashore, Moses does not only address the Israelites as their leader and deliverer; he reassures them that he fulfilled his boast, that he parted the Red Sea for their safety (516-518). We are immediately reminded of Beowulf's boast following his aquatic battle with Grendel's mother at the court of Heorot. While Grendel and Grendel's mother represent a different mythological image than Pharaoh and the Egyptians, the heroic exploits of both men are not only highlighted in the same way but their mythological connection to water serves the same purpose of delivering their people from the oppression of monstrous entities.

"Monsters are good, critics bad; monsters are poets, critics historians; monsters bring the poem to life, critics kill it." (Seth Lerer, "Beowulf and Contemporary Critical Theory," 329)

Transitioning from the discussion centrally focused on developing Beowulf and Moses as mythologically important, we must now discuss how the monsters and antagonists of both works highlight their heroes as only human. To agree with Tolkien that Grendel, Grendel's mother, and

[64] Another critic, E.E. Wardale, notices similar phrasings in both works saying, "The resemblance in phraseology between this poem and *Beowulf* is very noticeable and emphasizes the connection of the *Exodus* with the native poetry generally" (129).

[65] E.E Wardale states, "Having thus introduced his hero, the poet goes on to do the same by his subject, telling us briefly how Moses triumphed over Pharaoh" (125).

the dragon are monsters,[66] labelling them as such certainly enhances our understanding of Beowulf as humane and grounded in reality. For years, criticism has instated Grendel, and to a lesser extent his mother, as mythological "other,"[67] a literary foil to Beowulf,[68] displaying how imagery in the text associates Grendel and Grendel's mother with darkness and mythological implications of the monstrous body.[69] Megan Cavell states, "An examination of both characters' bodies has led to interesting correspondences between the realms of monster and human, nature and culture" (181). In a similar fashion to the poem being framed around funerals, it is also framed around monsters, more specifically Beowulf's fights with them. "If the dragon is the right end for *Beowulf,* and I agree with the author that it is, then Grendel is an eminently suitable beginning" (Tolkien, 32). Because Beowulf opposes monsters and the supernatural, he is a man who defends and is defined by reality. While the monsters of *Beowulf* represent "embodiments of the forces of evil, adversaries so formidable that only the greatest of heroes could cope with them" (Malone, 143), mythologically, Beowulf exists as a foil to supernaturalism. Therefore, what produces his importance in fact is that he is a mere human set against supernatural forces.

With Grendel being a mythological "other," the *Beowulf*-poet associates him with the dark and more specifically the shadows, affirming his origins as being inhuman and

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[66] Tolkien writes, "It is just because the main foes in *Beowulf* are inhuman that the story is larger and more significant than this imaginary poem of a great king's fall" (33). According to another critic, "Tolkien popularized him [Grendel] as a monster" (Waterhouse, 26).

[67] Ruth Waterhouse states, "The definition stress that monsters are Other, as contrasted with the subjectivity of Self that classes them as alien in some way, though they do not include on aspect relevant to most 'monsters': the emotive impact that they make as Other, usually terror or dread" (28).

[68] Ruth Waterhouse tells, "More important is Grendel's relationship to Beowulf, and the extent to which the two can be regarded as obverse and reverse of the same paradigm, or as doubles or second selves" (33-34).

[69] Megan Cavell writes, "A flipside to the frequent personification of objects is the objectification of the human body, again a commonplace in Old English poetry" (156). In this project, we will discuss the human as well as monstrous body.

otherworldly.[70] Throughout the first half of *Beowulf*, the events that have the most significance in the overall narrative all happen in the dark. Specifically, this would detail Beowulf's struggle with both Grendel and Grendel's mother. Herbert G. Wright makes note of this saying:

> Beowulf's grim struggle with the sea-beasts takes place by night; only the coming of morning reveals the deadliness of the encounter, when they are seen lying dead along the shore. This is a prelude to the fight with Grendel, and the very fact that Beowulf has dealt so successfully with nocturnal foes inspires confidence. (259)

Indeed, darkness seems to be associated with far more than Grendel in the poem; it is associated with supernaturalism and the very things Beowulf must defend mankind against. So, Beowulf must mythologically fight not only in the night but against the night, against the forces of evil that are produced in the dark. A brilliant Torah scholar named Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, who devotes a great deal of her time with the Bible's deep sense of mythology, describes the importance of night and darkness in mythological texts as containing a "Narrative of the Night." She sees in stories such as the Hebraic *Exodus* two narratives: "the Israelites leave Egypt by night; the Israelites leave Egypt by day (164), and states that "[t]o leave by night is to be surreptitious, unsure of one's claims, shy of the gaze of others" (164). Although she deals with a version of *Exodus* different from the Anglo-Saxon, this concept can certainly be applied to both Beowulf and Old English *Exodus* to mythologically examine its monsters and highlight Beowulf's association with the light and grounding in reality in contrast.

Before Beowulf travels to the lake encountering Grendel's mother as also mythologically associated with darkness, the first instance of imagery associating a monster with darkness, as stated, is Grendel. In fact, the poet also parallels the final monster of *Beowulf*, the dragon, with

[70] In this paper, we shall not discuss Grendel or his mother's origins. Many critics have noted their association "as stemming from the devil, giants, and the race of Cain — all of whom are depicted elsewhere as enemies and oath breakers in a feud against God" (Cavell, 160).

darkness;[71] however, our discussion will simply focus on the monstrous entities that appear in the first half of the narrative. The *Beowulf*-poet states, "Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark, / nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him / to hear the din of the lord's banquet" (86-88). Alongside an image being difficult to conjure for his body, his hatred of music and Heorot seems to distance him further from reality, and thus Beowulf.[72] While his first description contains an epithet connecting him to the night, the poet's use of night imagery does not stop here. To name a few instances, the poet describes him as "a fiend out of hell" (100), "after nightfall, Grendel set out" (115), "dark death-shadow" (160), him inspiring "panic after dark" (192) and conducting "raids in the night" (193). Indeed, because of this recurring imagery, it seems clear that something must be occurring here mythologically significant rather than simply just one opposer harassing the livelihood of these people. With the poet so intensely associating Grendel with the night, readers are supposed to obtain a complex image in their head early in the narrative of Grendel, an image of him being mythologically inhuman and hard to describe. Megan Cavell states, "Despite Grendel's shadowy entrance in the poem, early on the *Beowulf*-poet draws attention to parts of the monster's body, whether directly or indirectly" (158). I find this decision to be quite "direct" with the *Beowulf*-poet intentionally using the mythological qualities of the night to complicate our understanding on the shape of Grendel and his mother.[73]

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[71] "He [dragon], too, is a creature of darkness and lurks in his barrow like Grendel in his den, awaiting impatiently the waning of daylight, and hastening back as dawn approaches" (Wright, 261).

[72] Herbert G. Wright states, "Enveloped in darkness, he is irritated by the erection of Heorot, and the poet heightens the general impression of blackness by calling him a feond on helle [hellish fiend] (101) and deorc deþscura [dark death-shadow (160)" (258).

[73] Megan Cavell writes, "[D]escriptions of Grendel and his mother frequently blur the line between body and object" (158).

Reading *Beowulf*, it does not seem possible for interpreters to view Grendel or his mother as human. While Grendel's body is depicted as being in the likeness of a human,[74] he certainly inhabits the story as a monster with a monstrous figure. Their bodies, particularly Grendel, are constructed by the poet as monstrous and in direct opposition to Beowulf having a man's body. With Grendel and Beowulf being the first representation in the narrative of a literary foil, when they come together to fight, their bodies become intertwined. Megan Cavell writes that "the monstrous body is a living artifact, a poetic construction made out of the treasures of humankind" (158). In the same way that the "poetic construction" of a monster's body comes from our understanding of mankind, so does the *Beowulf*-poet describe the struggle between Beowulf and monster with imagery focused on the body. The poet writes of this encounter, "Every bone in his body / quailed and recoiled, but he could not escape" (752-753). Later, the poet also details, "The monster's whole / body was in pain, a tremendous wound / appeared on his shoulder" (814-816). Because we observe the mythological association with darkness as connected with descriptions of the body, Grendel's arm being torn off and Beowulf using it as a symbol of his triumph signifies a victory over darkness and the monstrous body.

While Grendel obviously serves as a foil to Beowulf, the segment of the story detailing Grendel's mother, the most difficult monster to describe and understand,[75] emphasizes not only the monsters of the text as supernatural, but also the environment that surrounds them. As we have developed Beowulf's mythology with the sea, no scene in *Beowulf* illustrates the mythological undertones of the poem as much as his fight in the underwater lair with Grendel's mother. Several *Beowulf* critics have noticed supernatural element in this narrative such as the

[74] Marie Padgett Hamilton states, "In the life temporal Grendel is but a cannibalistic monster in the likeness of a man, a stranger to grace, a murderous outlaw who meets death at the hands of a better wrestler" (124).
[75] Ruth Waterhouse writes, "The second monster in *Beowulf* is one for whom there is no real parallel in nineteenth and twentieth-century century monsters" (35).

lake brimming with evil spirits and death and Beowulf taking several hours to reach the cave and fight the mother, but once again, barely any have ever detailed this section of the text as mythological.[76] Of course, the lake is described in the narrative by many translators as a kind of hell[77] as well as its inhabitants,[78] where monstrous entities breed and death and disease overflow its waters. Importantly, this "hellish" cave contains weapons that are explicitly detailed in the text as magical.[79] Indeed, the cave, and its monsters, certainly seem to imply their dissociation from reality and from the living: it is always dark and supernatural, ultimately distancing itself from humanity. While the cave does seem to be in direct opposition to reality as a whole, its environmental foil would certainly be Heorot. Before Beowulf defends his land and people from the dragon, he protects Heorot from the monsters of the lair. Interestingly, opposing the darkness of the lake and the monster are both Beowulf and Heorot, represented by the poet connecting their mythological imagery with the light and sun. Indeed, to additionally complicate our understanding of Grendel with night-centered mythic imagery, the *Beowulf*-poet also connects Beowulf, as well as Heorot, with the light to further display the stark contrast in the text between reality and the supernatural world, between what is fantasy and what is real.

Before we begin our discussion on Heorot as an environmental foil to the lake, we must briefly digress from *Beowulf* to the *Exodus*, to a section that details a setting quite analogous to the lake and supernatural cave: the desert itself that the Israelites travel while fleeing. In his

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[76] E.E. Wardale expounds upon this point, "While the first fight is a real tough and tumble struggle between two men, monstrous but human, in the second we have a large supernatural element. Beowulf takes several hours to swim down to the cave" (99).

[77] "[T]he mere in which Grendel and his mother lived and into which Beowulf plunged is identified by the poet as hell" (Cabaniss, 224).

[78] Marie Padgett Hamilton states regarding the hellish qualities of the lake and the monsters that the poet "envisioned the race of Cain in its timeless as well as its transitory state, and thus, as by a bold metaphor, conceived of Grendel and his dam as already denizens of hell" (124).

[79] Marie Padgett Hamilton writes, "The connection of Grendel and his mother with magic, as in their power to put a spell on swords, the magic sword in their possession, or Grendel's bag made by dēofles crǣftum [by the skills of the devil], further suggests the progeny of Cain, who were credited with the invention of magic and weapons" (115).

translation, S.A.J. Bradley at one point calls the desert "the wasteland" (115), signifying it as a land that breeds death and destruction. Of course, not as many sections of narrative include this desert as mythological, but one does in particular that describes the animals in the desert while the Egyptians are chasing the Israelites. The poet writes:

> Wolves sang hideous vespers in anticipation of feasting; brazen beasts bold at dusk, they awaited in the wake of the antagonists the slaughter of a mighty throng of people. They would how, these haunters of the hinterland, in the middle of the nights: the doomed soul would flit away and the populace was reduced. (160-169)

Perhaps, this instance could be inspired by the sea beasts in the cave of Beowulf, where they are crying out in search of blood and death. Nevertheless, this "wasteland" serves both the narrative of *Beowulf* and *Exodus* as a mythological setting where men are tested, and to live they must conquer their opposition and appear at the other side. Alongside the mythological duality of the "Narrative of the Day" with the "Narrative of the Night," opposing light and dark imagery appears in the *Exodus*. The poet writes, "Bright rays gleamed glisteningly above the soldiers – their protective shields shone – shadows melted away; the abysmal shades of night could not keep their hiding-place close concealed" (110-113). For the Israelites and Moses to remain concealed, they must traverse the night to appear at the other side, in the "Narrative of Day." Lastly, while we do not get to physically see the promised land in the Old English *Exodus*, it would certainly be mythologically comparable to Heorot, a foil of the lake and darkness.

Returning to *Beowulf*, for its hero to triumph over darkness, he must purge the mythological monsters of the night, bringing a new day of peace and rest with the rise of the sun. During Beowulf's encounter with Grendel's mother, the poet states, "A light appeared and the place brightened / the way the sky does when heaven's candle / is shining clearly" (1570-1572). Among the previous mention of the "Narrative of the Night," Beowulf, once he reappears at Heorot after the rising sun, certainly inhabits the "Narrative of Day," where he brings to light his

accomplishments, thus defending his boast as a "bright remedy" from the night slayers.[80] Of course, reference to the light does not cease here. At an earlier part in the story, the narrative contains several passages by the poet developing mythical imagery associated with light, and Heorot certainly receives a stark amount of the poet's attention.[81] As stated, while the lake represents a looming sense of darkness, a place humans are unable to penetrate, Heorot inevitably represents "earthly life"[82] and the light. When Grendel and his mother invade Heorot, they are invading the human world, resulting in Beowulf being the only person who may help Hrothgar and Heorot, thus reality. H.L. Rogers writes, "In his poem, heroic material and worldly things all fail: joy in the hall is the prelude to disaster" (233-234). The plundering of Heorot is so tragic because it does not simply represent a tribe of people being bullied: it is reality itself crumbling at the seams.[83] While the story is located in the physical world, Beowulf battles with monsters of epic proportions that are products of the story's supernatural environment.[84] Rather than an Anglo-Saxon poet making the struggle of his poem cosmically significant beyond reality, it should seem much more likely he sought for something more tangible: one man trying to protect his earth against the forces of evil.

Regarding heroes that are created as heroically human, "Their manmade status elevates them, doing so all the more when their construction requires great effort and skill" (Cavell, 155).

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[80] Herbert G. Wright states, "It is precisely because Grendel is a monster of darkness that the author of *Beowulf,* choosing his words with all care, says that Hrothgar's councilors could not expect a 'bright remedy' from the slayer" (258).

[81] Referring to a specific moment in the text where Beowulf is in Heorot speaking to Hrothgar, Herbert G. Wright expounds, "[W]hen Beowulf stands before Hrothgar to announce his errand, his coat of mail becomes associated with the evening light that precedes he coming of darkness" (259).

[82] I use quotation marks here due to this phrase coming from a quote by Kemp Malone on the next page.

[83] Regarding this concept, H.L. Rogers writes, "[T]he tragedy is made so inevitable that it ceases to be tragic in terms of the heroic world" (235).

[84] Alvin Lee writes in "Symbolism and Allegory" regarding the opinion of Tolkien, "Tolkien sees Beowulf as written in the language of myth and symbol, not of allegorical homily, and as firmly located in the physical world" (240).

As demonstrated, the "status" of Beowulf rests in his ability to defend people against monsters, mythologically opposing mankind and the light. In the story, the monsters need not represent an enemy of God himself, of Christianity, or anything cosmic. Rather, they seem to simply possess an opposition to mankind,[85] and the text does not seem to be concerned with producing conflict on a grander scale than this. Because "Beowulf fights as the champion of mankind, against monstrous embodiments of the forces of evil, adversaries so formidable that only the greatest of heroes could possibly cope with them" (Malone, 143), rather than being only the foil to Grendel, he is the foil to everything that is supernatural. Indeed, his myth deeply concerns reality and the limits of the human world. This could be precisely why Tolkien thought the tone of the poem so high and the theme so low (18-19); one man constantly set against the odds of possibility until the ending funeral. To see Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the Dragon as monsters, we tend to implicate an otherness to them automatically, setting them on a stage much larger than Beowulf himself. While it is important to see these monsters as much grander and disconnected from reality, we unfortunately tend to lose sight of their purpose in the narrative in comparison to Beowulf. Kemp Malone writes, "The struggle between hero and monster symbolizes the struggle between good and evil in our earthly life" (143). Not only do the monsters and Beowulf occupy struggle between good and evil; they represent contest between dark and light forces through mythological imagery. Furthermore, not only does an examination of how the poet develops Beowulf as a mythological hero highlight the qualities of him being only a man, but also the monsters of the text due to their "otherness" and opposition to reality.

As stated, it would be difficult to call Pharaoh from the Old English *Exodus* a monster. While the narrative does devote a certain amount of time and energy to detail him as evil and

[85] Tolkien states, "The monsters remained the enemies of mankind" (22).

opposing Moses, the figure who obviously stands for mankind and the light, it does not focus on his body being monstrous nor develop him much as an autonomously significant, mythological figure. Only through an association between Pharaoh with Moses does Pharaoh seem to represent something mythically evil, and that is through the important myth of the humane tragic hero. So, if Pharaoh is not a mythical monster, what exactly is he?[86] Unlike Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon being monstrous and otherworldly, Pharaoh is confined to reality just like Beowulf and Moses. He is a mere man, and while the descriptions of him and his inclinations portray him as evil, he is still grounded in reality. Using *Beowulf* as a way to understand Pharaoh's significance, while Beowulf is killed by the dragon and rescue mankind from the threat of monsters, one threat still remains: mankind. In *Beowulf*, besides the funeral and death of Beowulf being elegiacally portrayed as something to mourn, a level of ominous uncertainty stands in the Geats not knowing how long it will be before the raid of the Swedes. The *Beowulf*-poet writes:

> So this bad blood between us and the Swedes,
> this vicious feud, I am convinced,
> is bound to revive; they will cross our borders
> and attack in force when they find out
> that Beowulf is dead. (2999-3003)

It would not be a stretch to see a connection between Pharaoh from the Old English *Exodus* with the Swedes from *Beowulf*. Since the *Exodus* story surfaced with the Torah, Pharaoh mythologically has represented an evil man who reaped the benefits of a tribe in a poor position to defend themselves from oppression. So, that others could live, Moses put his life on the line

[86] In no way is this me saying that Pharaoh is not a mythological character. I am simply saying he is not a mythological monster in the same way as Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon.

for the Israelites in the same way Beowulf does for the Geats and Danes, and more generally mankind in general against monstrous opposition. Thus, the monsters of *Beowulf* and Pharaoh serve the same purpose: both contribute to the mythological importance of the humane tragic hero. By lastly examining how this myth manifests at the end of *Beowulf*, we can finally see not only how the mythological aspects of the poems point toward this myth, but how at the end of *Beowulf* it seems to be physically present in all aspects of its ending.

"In this world, defeat and death are sure to come in the end. The hero is he who, like Beowulf, faces the worst without flinching and dies that others may live." (Kemp Malone, "Beowulf," 154)

To say that the *Beowulf*-poet certainly seemed to be deeply conscious of the tragedy of a hero being only human is an understatement. I would go as far to say that this holds central importance for the story itself, as well as the Old English *Exodus*. This theme is seen through the heroic exploits of Beowulf and Moses, mere man who must face monsters of darkness. As we have stated, Moses does not die at the end of his narrative. Therefore, with Moses, the myth of the humane tragic hero does not manifest. While it is implied as I have displayed throughout the mythological aspects of the story, our final discussion of these poems will conclude with *Beowulf* in the moments where the myth incarnates into something that is physical by his funeral and what follows in the text.

While most of *Beowulf* is dominated by its hero's success, we feel throughout the narrative the inevitability of his fall, and this produces the heroic-elegiac resonance of the myth.[87] While the *Exodus*-poet repeatedly makes note that Moses is a mere man, mostly alluding to the vitality of God aiding Moses, a sense of accomplishment and freedom inhabits the end of

[87] According to Tolkien, he states, "Beowulf is not an 'epic,' not even a magnified 'lay'. No terms borrowed from Greek or other literature exactly fit: there is no reason why they should. Though if we must have a term, we should choose rather 'elegy'. It is an heroic-elegiac poem" (31).

Exodus whereas grief, death, and fatality highlight *Beowulf*, contributing in a greater sense to the humane tragic hero. Because of death's association with the repeated phrase *pæt wæs gōd cyning*, a significant duality exists between life (light) and death (dark) and highlights the myth of the humane tragic hero. Herbert G. Wright states, "Closely related to the coming and going of light and darkness are the fluctuations of joy and sorrow in *Beowulf*" (261). Throughout Beowulf's life, he earns the title of a *gōd cyning* because of his ability to defend mankind against monsters, the quality that defines his heroism most. This phrase is repeated several times in the text, not only applying to Beowulf; it first emerges in the text's eleventh line applied to Shield Sheafson, a mythological hero, as demonstrated, quite analogous to Beowulf himself. Along with their mythological associated with water, both heroes are also connected to the myth of the humane tragic hero, manifesting in the sadness of Beowulf's death.[88]

As stated, the phrase, *þæt wæs gōd cyning*, repeatedly occurs in the text applying to different heroes, Danish or Geatish kings, who reign for a period of time. In many ways, this phrase serves as a plea by the Anglo-Saxons who know the reality of a good man's reign. Indeed, a *gōd cyning* seems to frequently appear for a brief period before their untimely death. In *Beowulf*, the phrase, not only by its tense but its very nature, suggests a king of the past. In fact, its importance never lies in describing a king or hero from the present. The phrase itself adopts a realization on the inevitability of a humane hero's death. Tolkien states, "Its author is still concerned primarily with man on earth, rehandling in a new perspective an ancient theme: that man, each man, and all men, and all their works shall die" (23). Beowulf is a hero unlike Hercules or Thor, two mythological characters to whom he is frequently compared; he is a not

[88] Levin L. Shucking states, "The final words of the epic celebrating the deceases as the kindest and friendliest of all men characterize most strongly this striving to show benevolence and warmth of heart in his relation with those around him" (41).

part-God but simply a man, and no moral interpretation need be conducted to observe what kind of man he really is. He is a man who defends others against supernatural forces until his death, ultimately defining his mythical heroism. In "The Hero and the Theme," George Clark writes, "[T]the poem constructs Beowulf, the hero, as a person, not simply an Everyman or a model for emulation or of what should be avoided" (276). To write a story of one man against all odds: that creates an aesthetic environment for a hero with which all readers may identify.

From the poem itself being framed by death, more specifically funerals, the inevitability of sadness and elegiac tone resides throughout the entire story and manifests into something physical in the second half describing the hero's death and funeral.[89] Representing this inevitability of a humane hero's fall from the beginning, the *Beowulf*-poet writes of Shield's funeral: "Shield was still thriving when his time came, and he crossed over into the Lord's keeping…/ [T]hey shouldered him out to the sea's flood…/ They stretched their beloved lord in his boat" (26, 30, 34). The sadness that underlies the entire poem rests in the inevitability of their defender's death.[90] Even though Beowulf as a man can conquer monsters, the biggest threat toward both the livelihood of the Danes and Geats, he too must eventually die, showing that life is transitory.[91] Herbert G. Wright expounds, "[S]uch fluctuations of emotion are naturally most prominent in the human figures of the poem" (263), and ultimately I find the "human figures of the poem" to underlie the entire narrative, finally manifesting into something physical with Beowulf's funeral. The hero's funeral, a return to inevitability and sadness present in the beginning, incarnate these feelings into the physical world where great weeping, sadness, and

[89] Herbert G. Wright reaffirms this saying, "In the second part of *Beowulf* there is a constant preoccupation with death" (265).
[90] Levin L. Shucking writes, "Beowulf, who kills the dragon is the good shepherd, who perishes in protecting his flock" (40).
[91] "[H]is [*Beowulf*-poet's] acceptance of the idea that man is mortal and the things of this world are transitory" (Rogers, 234).

lament enter the text. The poet states, “They were disconsolate / and wailed aloud for their lord’s decease / A Geat woman too sang out in grief” (3148-3150). Their sadness resonates with readers of *Beowulf* because we too understand the importance of an elegy for a life worthily lived. While Beowulf lives until old age and dies by his own actions, not tragically taken too soon, the text does imply by the final funeral the importance of life being transitory and remembrance of humane heroes.

Although Beowulf’s life was a testament to purging monsters and supernaturalism for mankind’s safety, threat and “panic after dark” (192) remain at the end of *Beowulf* by the prospect of a suspected Swedish invasion.[92] Indeed, what threatens mankind at the end of *Beowulf* the most is not monsters; it is fellow man. The monsters posed a threat, and Beowulf was thrice able to defend the Geats and Danes against them. However, the prospect of mankind being the biggest threat to the livelihood of mankind not only emphasizes but instates the importance of the myth of the humane tragic hero. The human hero is tragic not only because he must eventually experience death, but he can never anticipate the evil demands of man. In *Beowulf*, its hero’s death is the crux of the humane tragic hero, where danger persists even after all the monsters are vanquished. As we specified earlier in the paper, Tolkien was concerned with the tone of *Beowulf*,[93] and he found there to be a great tonal shift occurring after Beowulf’s fight with Grendel’s mother and before the dragon. Additionally, I think it worthy to note another instance of tonal shift near the last 140 lines of the text, starting with “The Geat people built a pyre for Beowulf, stacked and decked it until it stood four-square” (3137-3138) and

[92] While I did mention the Swedish invasion earlier in this paper, that section served our discussion of highlighting Pharaoh as an evil mythological figure analogous to the Swedes. Here, this section explicitly uses it to discuss the importance of the humane tragic hero.

[93] Tolkien states, “There is in fact a double division in the poem: the fundamental one already referred to, and a secondary but important division at line 1887” (29).

continuing until the end. Near this moment in the story, the poet explicitly mentions the potential threat of the Swedes. While their mention occurs a moment after what Tolkien called the tonal shift, this instance seems to be really just the myth of the humane hero manifesting into the open of the narrative. I suspect that readers must understand the mythologically significant aspects of the story to see what finally comes to fruition: a beautiful story testifying to a mere man's life who protected mankind against monsters and supernaturalism.

The myth of the humane tragic hero helps us understand *Beowulf* as a hero, but also literary criticism as ritual. Throughout this paper, we have treated secondary sources as primary, seeing them as a way to enhance our understanding on the words of the story itself. Mythologically, to see the myth of the humane tragic hero in *Beowulf* is participating in ritual. It is a way to be deeply conscious of what is occurring abstractly behind the actual narrative of the text: what is occurring in the dark. For fallibility and death to be mythological, they must be developed through heroes that not only boast but accomplish their boast in heroic ways, until the very end. Both Beowulf and Moses deliver their people successfully from opposition, monsters and evil, living out the ethical code of Anglo-Saxons. Because "[b]ehavior that's admired is the path to power among people everywhere" (24-25), developing the stories of *Beowulf* and the Old English *Exodus* as myths seems to point back to the importance of a human hero. To conclude this paper's discussion on what mythically is suggested and developed in these stories themselves, we will finish with a quote that incapsulates what this paper seems to point toward. As has been displayed, the aesthetics of a text itself may point toward mythological undertones. The *Beowulf*-poet writes:

> But death is not easily
> escaped from by anyone:

> all of us with souls, earth-dwellers
> and children of men, must make our way
> to a destination already ordained
> where the body, after the banqueting,
> sleeps on its deathbed. (1001-1007)

For literary critics, storytellers, mythologists, those engaging in ritual, let us "make our way to a destination already ordained," seeking what the myth of a dead hero can teach us: that life is ultimately fallible and an engagement with texts on a mythological level can cosmically reveal the importance of the art of storytelling. Because the greatest way to convey cosmic truths is to be as specific as possible, let us "esteem the old heroes: men caught in the chains of circumstances or of their own character, torn between duties equally sacred, dying with their backs to the wall" (Tolkien, 17).

Conclusion:

More than ever, we need people to be studying the aesthetics of storytelling through literary criticism. By applying ritual to literary criticism, there is great opportunity to grasp more closely certain mythic ideas that underlie texts. More so than "what the author is trying to say," the mythic undertones of stories provide truth rather than answers. As this project has displayed, answers are not required for growth or the ability to grasp the importance of a literary text. Literary criticism, itself being a subjective art form, can be enhanced by ritual as a way to closer see what the author is trying to say to you rather than what he or she is trying to say to all.

Alongside literary criticism being an artform, the invention of mythology by our primitive storytellers allows us to greater understand the importance of telling stories. It seems to be the foundation for life: we all desire to hear and be heard, a product of our storytelling spirit. To once again "endure ourselves," we have been composing stories for thousands of years, and myth applied to tale allows these stories to obtain a significance and level of aesthetics worth being studied by literary critics.

As we progress further into the future, engaging in ritual seems to be increasingly removed from our society and harder to grasp. While no singular individual will ever be able to render the importance of ritual for our society, we may engage in this artform through literary criticism as a way to access an aspect of ourselves that needs to be discovered. To discover the breath of the divine, one may be a literary critic, by ritual, to study the myths humanity has created throughout the millennia.

Beowulf and the Old English *Exodus* are worth studying because they reveal the aesthetics of storytelling and how mythology applied to tale can enhance our understanding of the myths imbedded inside stories. The myth of the humane tragic hero is so relatable because

we too are destined to eventually fall. Indeed, the deeds of heroes from the mythic past, such as Beowulf and Moses, help us to see ourselves also as men and women who are humanely fallible. Even more so, the myth of a hero fighting against monstrous opposition is a story that need be read and studied today more than ever. One man or woman's exploits in a life lived worthily is a testament to our storytelling spirit. We love to tell these stories because we ourselves are living inside a world which requires these stories of fantastic deeds and heroes. It helps us to live our lives more richly, to understand the art of ritual. Therefore, let ritual not fall out of life, apply it to literary criticism as a way to mythologically engage with the aesthetics of storytelling, and let us seek the heroes who can teach us something about our humaneness and storytelling spirit.

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