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Beowulf Analysis

Throughout Beowulf, we get multiple different themes. One of these themes being fratricide. According to Cambridge Dictionary, fratricide is defined as “the crime of murdering your brother, or killing members of your own group or country” (*Fratricide*, 2024). One of the times we encounter the theme of fratricide is when Beowulf first arrives at Heorot and is speaking with Unferth after Beowulf has given his formal boast about how he will kill Grendal the demon and save King Hrothgar’s tribe. At first, Unferth is unamused with Beowulf, but Beowulf then turns around and says to Unferth “þéah ðú þínum bróðrum tó banan wurde héafodmaégum. þæs þú in helle scealt werhðo dreogan þéah þín wit duge. secge ic þé to sóðe, sunu Ecgláfes, atol aéglaéca ealdre þínum, hýnðo on Heorote gif þín hige waére sefa swá searogrim swá þú self talast.” (Line 587-595). Fratricide was a big deal during the time that Beowulf was written, due the fact that there is no way for any type of wergild. Weregild is a type of monetary payment, however, there is also something called the blood law, where if someone kills a member of your family, you have the right to kill one of theirs (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998). This law is disrupted when fratricide is committed. In this paper I will attempt to connect the theme of fratricide to other quotes in the text and how that applies to the overall story of Beowulf.

When considering fratricide and how it is not only just one of the worst things a person can do, but also rather the biggest betrayal, there is a much larger theme we are able to take a look at if we take a look at the theme of betrayal as well as fratricide on its own.

As stated earlier, Unferth and Beowulf did not see eye to eye when they first met, partially due to the fact that Beowulf is aware that Unferth has committed fratricide. Beowulf says “​​nevertheless, you your brothers' killer were, near relatives; for that you must with Hel suffer torment, though your mind is strong; I say to you in truth, son of Edgelaf, that Grendel would have never so many atrocities committed, –that terrible demon– to your leader, humiliation on Heorot, if your heart were,and your spirit so battle-fierce.” (Line 587-594) (*BEOWULF*, n.d.). However, we get a more literal interpretation of the text in the book translated by Seamus Heany which is, “You killed your own kith and kin, so for all your cleverness and quick tongue, you will suffer damnation in the depths of hell. The fact is, Unferth, if you were truly as keen or courageous as you claim to be Grendal would never have gotten away with such unchecked atrocity, attacks on your king, havoc in Heorot and horrors everywhere.” (Heany, line 587-595). Here we can see that Beowulf obviously believes that he is not only braver than Unferth, but has a better character overall than him too, bringing up a moment in Unferth’s past that is meant to demean his character and show that Unferth is a flawed man. This theme is common throughout the story, as we see with Beowulf’s consistent formal boasts. Beowulf is somebody who seems to view himself as higher than the people around him, purely because he is a great warrior. This is a common theme we see from Beowulf and is pretty consistent throughout the story, but eventually comes back to bite him.

When attempting to take a look at some of the similarities in the Anglo-Saxon text versus the English text we are familiar with today, we can see there are a few words that we can makeout. One of these is “helle” or “hell”. Unfortunately, when it comes to this specific passage, there are not many other similarities or kennings, simply because this passage is more focused on the idea that Unferth has done something that is unpayable in the world of Beowulf. However, the name “Grendel” is still completely recognizable which is just something I found interesting.

When considering the tensions that are caused because of Unferth’s immediate distrust for Beowulf, Beowulf sees no other option than to retaliate. This is later resolved when Unferth gives Beowulf his sword, Hrunting, to Beowulf before he goes to fight Grendel’s mother.

As stated previously, there is another connection to the theme of fratricide in this epic poem. This is actually the very first time we encounter the idea of fratricide and how that has affected the story as a whole. The monster, Grendel, is a descendant of Cain, the original fratricide committer. We are introduced to the pair in an imbedded story that states “Grendal was the name of this grim demon haunting the marches, marauding round the heath and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time in misery among the banished monsters, Cain’s clan, whom the Creator had outlawed and condemned as outcasts. For the killing of Abel the Eternal Lord had exacted a price:” (Heany, line 102-108). From that, we are able to understand that due to Cain killing Abel, he has been forced into exile by the Creator and so Cain’s clan is essentially the “outlaw clan”. From this, we can now understand that Cain has committed a crime against humanity in a way. Cain has killed his own brother, Abel and therefore has committed one of the worst crimes someone could have committed during the Anglo-Saxon times.

This brings me to my next point about why the idea of fratricide is such an interesting theme in Beowulf and how it, in some way, affects the entire story of Beowulf. As I have previously mentioned, Unferth committed fratricide, which Beowulf brings up, in front of everyone by the way. However, this detail is vital to the story because Grendel is a descendent of Cain’s clan, and we know Cain was the first time we see the idea of fratricide being mentioned. Here is why this idea is so intriguing; Unferth can not kill Grendel because he is no better than the creature himself, or at least no better than Cain. Unferth would not have even been able to fight off Grendel or Grendel’s mother no matter how hard he tried because he is basically of the same ‘species’, he is just lucky that he was not banished from Hrothgar’s tribe.

This brings me to my last point about betrayal being related to fratricide but not directly connected. After Beowulf was able to not only defeat Grendel, but also Grendel’s mother, he resides as king back in his own tribe, the Geats. He rules the Geats for about fifty years and then we get another monster, the dragon. Now, some may think it to be noble for Beowulf to be the one to fight the dragon, but in reality, he betrayed his people. Beowulf thinking he would be able to defeat this dragon at his essentially old age, was ridiculous and selfish. His pride got the better of him and because of this, he died in battle, without a single person in his bloodline to pass on the crown to. Not only that, but now that Beowulf is dead, Wiglaf, Beowulf’s bravest soldier, predicts that their enemies are now going to attack the Geats since they are at their lowest. At the end of the day, Beowulf may have been the hero, but he was also blinded by his own ego and put his own needs before his whole kingdom, which is the biggest betrayal of all.

In conclusion, the theme of not only fratricide but also betrayal is prominent throughout the story and not only plays a direct role in the actual narrative, but also serves as a type of symbolism for the characters and the reasons some of the characters do the things they decide are right etc. If given the opportunity for further research, I would like to dive deeper into the ideas of why Grendel felt like he needed to attack since he was outlawed and is always alone. I feel like there is a deeper meaning behind his attack in Heorot. Possibly a sense of longing to belong is a tribe like everyone else does. However, I do believe that the theme of fratricide and betrayal is one of the most important themes in Beowulf overall. It is the pushing factor into the very first attack, the attack that kicks starts the entire story and ultimately is the reason why the story ends. Cain and Grendel, to Beowulf and Unferth, all the way back to when Beowulf decides that trying to prove something to his kingdom was more important than just acting like a king instead of a soldier, leads to his bloody death and the story of Beowulf ends there. It highlights that although Beowulf views himself as superior, at the end of the day, he is just another man with the fear of being looked at as weak.

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