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Aaron Sinkovich
Mansfield University

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The Hierarchical Structure of Beowulf

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The Hierarchical Structure of *Beowulf*

Aaron Sinkovich
Mansfield University

The story of *Beowulf* is usually divided into two parts: (1) *Beowulf*'s battle against Grendel and this monster's mother and (2) *Beowulf*'s battle against the dragon. This division of *Beowulf* is delineated through time as well. In the first part, *Beowulf* is in his youth; the second is a representation of *Beowulf* in his old age. In his essay "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*," J. R. R. Tolkien articulates the nature of this division: "It is essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings. In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death" (Tolkien 108). This interpretation is credible when the focus is primarily on *Beowulf*, but it assumes that the primary organizing force (and perhaps the most likely source of meaning) in *Beowulf* is *Beowulf*.

If we decenter *Beowulf* within the story, the text must be organized around a different principle. Although I still argue that the text is divided into two distinct sections, I believe the distinguishing agent which organizes these two divisions is different, and it is, in actuality, this agent that gives rise to the elements distinguishing the two divisions. This agent is the precipitating event that marks the beginning of each of the two parts and the subsequent movement of the narrative. In the first part, the event is the construction of the large mead hall, Heorot. In the second part, the event is the theft of a piece of treasure, a precious cup from a dragon's lair. These two events are vital to the story; without their presence, the story could not proceed or might proceed differently. As such, these two events are what determine the story, and they are the same in that they both represent a human disruption or provocation. In both parts, it is this initial human disruption and provocation which causes the monsters to wreak havoc.

Taking a step back, we can say that an equilibrium exists before the provocations in each part. Everything is at peace. The monsters co-exist without violence toward the people. And in both parts, they are co-existing

in what appears to be a balance. The people are above ground, and the monsters are below ground: Grendel and his mother live in a cave at the bottom of a mere, and the dragon inhabits a cave. This up/down balance represents harmony, peace, and order in the world. It is this balance that the people disrupt when they build the mead hall and steal the treasure.

Focusing on this up/down balance, we can describe the action within each division of the text as following a basic structure. This pattern is essentially *peace--human provocation--monster attacks--monster is destroyed--peace*. Since peace is characterized by an up/down dichotomy, I will analyze the movement associated with the actions of the basic plot pattern to illustrate how the up/down balance is disrupted and restored.

The first division of the story begins with peace or, more accurately, non-violence between Grendel and the Danes, until there is a precipitating event causing this equilibrium to be disrupted. This event is Hrothgar's construction of Heorot, because it is the mirth in this mead hall that causes Grendel to rise from the mere. The motion associated with this rising from the mere is upward, and, thus, the up/down balance is broken. The result is a twelve-year reign of terror during which Grendel viciously attacks the Danish people. Eventually, the hero Beowulf comes to the aid of the Danes and battles with Grendel. In the fight, the hero rips an arm from Grendel and the monster flees to his cave under the mere; the movement is downward here. Believing the monster's scourge is over, the people rejoice and celebrate. The up/down balance has been restored because Grendel is again under the mere. However, the equilibrium is upset again when Grendel's mother rises (upward movement) from the mere and attacks Heorot in revenge for her son's defeat. Although Grendel's mother returns to the mere, the hero sees that his work is not done and follows Grendel's mother (downward) into the mere where he finally destroys both monsters, preventing them from upsetting the equilibrium again. And with the monsters dead at the bottom of the mere, the up/down balance has been completely restored and peace returns to the Danes.

It is interesting to note that the hero brings the head of Grendel back to Heorot to show that the monster has been destroyed. I believe this illustrates that, although there are two monsters and two battles in the first division, the focus is on Grendel. This may account for Grendel's mother's lack of a proper name--a device which seems to deemphasize her role; she is more a part of Grendel, rather than a separate monster. With this in mind, I feel justified when I reduce the basic plot structure of each division to *peace--human provocation--monster attacks--monster is destroyed--peace*.)

The second division of the story follows the same structural pattern as the first. It starts with an equilibrium which is accompanied by peace in Beowulf's kingdom. The up/down balance consists of the Geats living above ground and a treasure-hoarding dragon living in a cave below ground. The

dragon, who has been living contently in his cave for over three hundred years, is also referred to as a "worm," further emphasizing his place below in the up/down balance. The equilibrium is broken, however, by a human disruption--the theft of a "precious" cup from the dragon's treasure. At this point, the angry dragon rises out the cave and attacks the people; the upward movement of the dragon upsets the up/down balance, and chaos replaces peace in the Geatish kingdom. Eventually the dragon is slain (brought down in a sense) and the carcass is pushed over the cliff wall and falls downward into the sea. The equilibrium is restored.

Since the monsters are referred to as being evil, it may be easy to interpret this story as the struggle of good against evil. Indeed, Tolkien expresses the general theme of this story as "man at war with the hostile world and his eventual overthrow in Time" (Sisam 116-17). However, his viewpoint, as I have said earlier, lays the primary focus on Beowulf; therefore, his death, which Tolkien sees as a defeat, becomes integral to the interpretation of the story. The "hostile world" wins in the end. Yet, the critic Kenneth Sisam in his book *The Structure of Beowulf* points out the fault in interpreting the monsters as evil: "The monsters Beowulf kills are inevitably evil and hostile because a reputation for heroism is not made by killing creatures that are believed to be harmless or beneficent—sheep for instance. So the fact that monsters are evil does not require or favour the explanation that, in the poet's design, they are symbols of evil" (116). In other words, the monsters are evil because the conventions of the heroic epic dictate that this must be. Even so, the poet may not have intended that the monsters' association with evil be interpreted as part of the thematic unity of the story, for they may symbolize something other than evil. This undermines support for the good/evil opposition. I might add that the monsters are humanized to some extent, for their "evil" comes from emotions and principles inherent in humans. These simply aren't monsters terrorizing without reason. Instead, they act from human motives. Grendel suffers from jealousy; his mother seeks revenge; and the dragon is angry because a piece of his treasure has been taken. This further breaks down the distinction that the monsters are evil and the humans are good. Perhaps, we should jettison the good/evil opposition.

The basic structure can then be reduced one step further by removing—at least for now—the distinction between monsters and humans. We are left with the structure in its most reduced form. Recalling the previous arguments, I stated the structure as *peace--human provocation--monster attacks--monster is destroyed--peace*. The pattern with the monsters and humans leveled is now transformed into *equilibrium--provocation--upheaval--suppression--equilibrium*. When the structure is analyzed, the story seems to be about the need to regain order after it is upset. Furthermore, provocation and suppression are linked because the underlying agent which causes them are the same. The story of the structure can be interpreted then as the need for

one to regain order after he upsets it. Is this the meaning of *Beowulf*?

Returning to the monsters, I am not ready to completely eradicate Grendel and the dragon. Perhaps, we should ask why the monsters belong to the bottom half of the equilibrium. Why is order maintained when the monsters are on the bottom and the humans are on the top? Since we have removed good and evil, we cannot say evil must be suppressed by good. Instead we must look elsewhere. Sisam points to another opposition proposed by Tolkien—youth and age—and its respective counterparts of strength and weakness, and shows how these two dichotomies breakdown because Beowulf, although he dies in the end, maintains his strength to kill monsters even in his old age (114-115). This breakdown suggests that the binary oppositions are faulty, and perhaps the two sets of oppositions simply shouldn't be related. Since we decentered Beowulf in the structure of the story, the youth and age dichotomy must be dismissed because it focuses on Beowulf. The strength and weakness dichotomy can stay because, although Sisam points out the immense strength of Beowulf, this dichotomy can be applied to the structure. The hero continually proves that human might is stronger than monster might. Therefore, the monsters belong to the bottom half of the equilibrium because they are weaker, and the humans belong to the top half because they are stronger.

This strong/weak opposition is a salient feature of *Beowulf*. It is an opposition which defines the most important ideal of warrior society—the thane/king relationship (Abrams et al. 23). This dichotomy is based on strength and weakness. The king is stronger than the thanes which he retains, but there is a mutual respect between the two: the thanes serve the king, and the king rewards them for their loyalty and service. It is a dichotomy that produces order within society. The stronger dominate the weaker. Likewise, the humans dominate the monsters. In fact, the strength of Beowulf is probably the outstanding reason for his rise to kingship. And because the stronger must dominate the weaker, it is fitting that Wiglaf believes the Geats will be attacked by the surrounding nations when Beowulf dies because this death makes the kingdom weaker.

In relation to the previously outlined structure, the equilibrium is then characterized by a strong/weak opposition. Naturally, the strong counterpart takes the upper position, and the weak counterpart takes the lower position. Perhaps, we should then describe the equilibrium as a hierarchy. It is this hierarchical balance which creates order. In *Beowulf*, the monsters cannot take the top position in the equilibrium and live above land because they are weaker; thus, they are exiled to live below ground, and thus, hierarchical order is maintained. And as with most uprisings within hierarchical societies, the weaker component usually rises up against the stronger because the stronger has provoked them, normally through its power. Similarly, the provocation within the basic structure of *equilibrium--provocation--upheaval--sup-*

pression--equilibrium can be described as a provocative use of power by the stronger component. In both cases—the construction of Heorot and the theft of the cup—the precipitating events by the stronger component are embodied in a use of power which, whether intentional or not, provokes the weaker to rise up. When the weaker breaks the equilibrium and hierarchy, strong and weak clash, resulting in disorder. The order will not return until the weaker counterpart is suppressed and returns to its place in the hierarchy. We are then left with the story of how hierarchies unravel and restore themselves.

As the main character, Beowulf brings unity to this story of hierarchies. He connects the two divisions of the text. But more importantly, Beowulf continually maintains the hierarchies within the narrative. When Grendel and the dragon leave their place in the hierarchy, Beowulf destroys the monsters and restores the hierarchy. He is the agent that always suppresses upheaval. We should also note that, although Beowulf restores order, he is not the source of the disruption which caused upheaval in the system: Beowulf did not build Heorot or steal the cup. Rather, Beowulf knows his place in the hierarchy. He does not disrupt it but seeks to preserve it. As the strongest man alive, he could easily usurp the kings Hrothgar and Hygelac. However, Beowulf remains constant in his place within the established hierarchy. Given his propensity for upholding hierarchies, Beowulf can be seen as an ultimate embodiment of the hierarchical order affirmed within the structure.

So far I have illustrated that the up/down movement of *Beowulf* illustrates the hierarchical structure of the narrative where the stronger dominate the weaker. However, this structural pattern emphasizes other hierarchies within the text. As I have said earlier, the monsters are driven to leave their place in the hierarchy by what we can consider human motives—jealousy, revenge, and anger. These can be considered all the same in that they represent emotions. In contrast, the monsters are repressed by the outstanding responsibility or duty of the king to protect his people from harm. If we classify these two elements within the up/down structure, we can say that emotion takes the lower position and duty takes the higher position. It is just as easy to see the up/down movement in terms of duty and emotion, where duty is trying to maintain precedence over emotion. Like the strong-over-weak hierarchy, the duty-over-emotion hierarchy is reflected in the structure as something that creates order within warrior society.

Another hierarchy creating order emerges when we examine the numbers of those involved in the top and bottom positions of structure. In the bottom position, the monsters act as individuals, fulfilling their personal desires when attacking the Danes and Geats. However, the top position of the hierarchy represents the group, for Beowulf's repression of the monsters benefits all the Danes and Geats: it is something that everyone desires in order to regain peace. And in the end, the group triumphs over the individual, for the monsters are destroyed. Thus, the structure suggests the precedence of the

group over the individual.

If we view these different hierarchies—strong over weak, duty over emotion, group over individual—along a continuum, we begin to see that the up/down movement of the structure illustrates not only a hierarchy of power, but also a hierarchical system of values in the story. The character of Beowulf can be seen as an extension of this hierarchical structure, for his behavior always adheres to these various hierarchies which order life. Appropriately, the text emphasizes Beowulf's exemplary conduct by utilizing the up/down movement of the basic plot structure, for when Beowulf conquers the dragon as his last heroic deed, the news of his accomplishment is carried up to a cliff top and announced to the city. And when Beowulf dies, the text says that the funeral pyre was to have a high barrow appropriate to Beowulf's deeds. The Geats are even described as building a high monument on a promontory to commemorate Beowulf. These "high" references in regard to Beowulf further suggest the importance of the hierarchies illustrated by the up/down movement of structure and the preference for the values along the top half of the continuum since it is these values that Beowulf demonstrates.

To maintain peace and harmony within society, the need for order is paramount. The various hierarchies illustrated by the structure are the source of order for society in this story.

After deemphasizing Beowulf in *Beowulf* and looking closely at the up/down movement of the structure, we have seen how hierarchy of strong over weak was unraveled and restored. Now, after illustrating the existence of other hierarchies within the structure, we can say that analyzing the structure leads to this assertion: disrupting or breaking the hierarchies which order society will result in chaos and destruction that can only be suppressed when the hierarchies are restored. This seems to be the underlying message of *Beowulf* buried in the structure. And although Beowulf is the great hero of this story, he is only great because he is a reflection of the hierarchies established in the structure for ordering life within society.

At the outset, I stated that J. R. R. Tolkien describes the structure of *Beowulf* as essentially a balance. If we look at Beowulf the hero, this may be so; but even then, it has been shown that the binary oppositions which characterize this proposition are in some ways faulty. However, when we look at *Beowulf* the story, the structure may be better described as a hierarchy, with the structure's movement between top and bottom illustrating the strong and weak components that exist and struggle within hierarchies. Indeed, the up/down movement of the structure reveals that there are many hierarchies present within the text which contribute to the search for meaning in *Beowulf*. Consequently, it is the hierarchical nature of the structure that should be emphasized rather than the balance.

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