

Adam Honeycutt

Writing Sample

The Moral Equality of Beowulf and the Dragon

The immaterial differences between mankind and the dragon are few, if any, in *Beowulf*, and this juxtaposition with the physical attributes of Beowulf and the dragon creates a sense of irony in that neither Beowulf nor the dragon are monstrous. Both the dragon and Beowulf live their lives off of two principles, revenge and greed. Their way of thinking is also parallel to each other to the point that the only thing that is different between them is the bias the narrator uses in describing their actions and what species of animal they are. The only reason the dragon awoke is because “of the prowler who had stolen too close to his dreaming head” and as a result “he scoured and hunted for the trespasser who had troubled his sleep.”

Once the dragon realized this theft he was “writhing with anger” and is “hot and savage.” The dragon is irate because of another’s action, just as Beowulf acts in kind when he learns “his own home ... had been burned to a cinder.” Beowulf experiences the same emotions and reactions in that he is thrown “into deep anguish” and this news “darkened his mood.” Where the dragon “worked himself up” and waited with “fierce impatience”, Beowulf’s “mind was in turmoil, unaccustomed to anxiety.” This thief disturbed a very delicate balance within nature and the dragon responds in a very human-like way just as Beowulf does in response to the dragon’s response. The irony here is the reader would expect the dragon to “blech out flames and burn bright homesteads” simply because he is a dragon, but he attacks because he feels justified in doing so. There is logical reasoning in the dragons attack against the Geats that makes the dragon seem more reasonable than mankind, for in the saga of Finn there is much bloodshed with less cause. It is not a monstrous act for the dragon to get revenge on the people who wronged him and likewise Beowulf is no more monstrous to defend his people. What is monstrous is unnatural, but there is nothing unnatural about anger and retribution.

This revenge that the dragon and Beowulf both seek against each other is a defining principle for how they both live. Beowulf even claims that “it is better to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning” and the dragon also abides by this philosophy for he only waits a day till he “hurled forth in a fiery blaze” to seek retribution in the form of blood from the Geats. This instance is just one of many in *Beowulf* where this continuous loop of revenge occurs until everyone involved ends up dead. Beowulf must get revenge on the dragon for the loss of his people and the promise of “golden treasures” only perpetuates the violence. Both characters value treasure as the most important thing in their respective lives, the dragon rages over the loss of a single “gold-plated cup” and Beowulf spends his dying moments to see this vast hoard of wealth. There is no difference here in these key ethics and because of this one cannot be more monstrous than the other. They both fight for the same reasons and live and die by the same gold. The only reason why one would be mistaken as more monstrous is because of perception.

The narrator telling the story presents it from the human perspective, as this is a human telling the story, and thusly describes Beowulf as “the hero” and the dragon as “the sky-plague”. In the telling of the story there is little consideration given to the reasoning of the dragon, only to how “vile” he is and about the “havoc he wrought”. This negative description devalues the legitimacy of the dragon’s grievance in the eyes of the reader and lends credibility to Beowulf’s cause to slay the dragon. Beowulf has the “ancient ordinance of the eternal Lord” on his side to bolster the ‘good’ he is fighting for. But this ‘good’ is just a matter of who it is good for and because it benefits the hero of the story, he is not considered the monster. By this logic, the narrator is depicting the dragon as the evil that plagues the innocent victims but this is simply not the case. This biased the narrator has is a part of the story but it covers the truth that the “war-king” and “the hoard-guardian” are of the same nature. In order for one to be monstrous one must act differently from the other, one being what is natural and the other being what is unnatural. But in this instance, their actions can only be described as natural for each party has

been wronged. The physical attributes are not what makes one unnatural or monstrous, it is their character and their morals and here they are fighting for the same reasons, greed and revenge. The writers prejudice is the physical characteristics that is a forceful use of melodramatic symbolism in the text. The writer crafts the text so reader is supposed to assume the dragon is evil because he is not human and Beowulf is good because he is the man with "the eternal Lord" on his side. However, the facts within the text do not support this claim. In the end, they will both meet death over their greed, for one is not morally superior to the other. This is part of the greater irony, the omnipresent narrator is wrong about his own work surrounding his perceived moral character of his characters.