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Beowulf's Layers

Out of the seven most acknowledged characteristics of an epic poem, five stuck out to me while reading *Beowulf*. This epic poem is dripping with many examples of all seven characteristics typical of an epic poem, I will expand on some that seem to be most common in *Beowulf*.

Him being an “outstanding hero”, having completed “actions made of deeds of great valor” would have to be the two most obvious characteristics consistently displayed throughout the classic tale of his life told through poetry. If we take a look at some of the descriptions given to us through several different characters in this epic poem, we see how accurate Beowulf’s personality is considered to be “historically specific” in regards to being a hero. Right from the start, Beowulf introduces himself to king Hrothgar, “I am Hygelac’s thane and kinsman; mighty the deeds I have done in my youth” (Beowulf 6.408-409). Right away, he completes the characteristic of having deeds in his life that demonstrated his courage not commonly found among most soldiers. “My people advised me...that I should seek you...since they had known my tested strength;” (Beowulf 6.415-418). He goes on to describe the many heroic battles he fought that proved his strength among the people: fighting giants, crushing enemies despite being outnumbered, slaying “water-beasts” while in the midst of tempestuous waves, the list goes on.

Beowulf has shown his valor and qualifying hero attributes that gave him more power to be a true hero with superhuman courage. The fact that he fought Grendel with his own bare hands, even declining “to take any sword or broad-braced shield, yellow war-wood, into this combat, but with my own hand-grip I will meet this enemy and fight for life, foe against foe” (Beowulf 7.435-440) plainly tells me that he was brave to the extent of ignorant superiority, thinking he could do anything because his courage surpassed those who wouldn’t dare take on a dragon with nothing but his own strength.

The setting of Beowulf being in Sweden, Denmark, and the areas surrounding the two countries cover the next characteristic I’d like to point out. Having an epic poem’s background cover nations or the known world (at the time) certainly gives it deeper merit, acting more as a “true story” told from generation to generation, an untouchable legend that no one dare dispute since it must be true if it happened in a larger setting than say, one neighborhood.

The world, having not yet been discovered to its vast extent, its people having few ideas of what lay on the other side of the ocean, save it for those who dared venture into uncharted territory, gave the poet a chance to seek more objective descriptions of the world it was creating inside this epic poem, knowing that for most, *Beowulf’s* setting would be just as real as the garden they tended to daily. They could have used the larger setting characteristic as a way to avoid having to struggle with giving precise examples of what Sweden, Denmark or any other area may have actually looked like. I think, though the idea generally being ingenious, could also have been an accurate depiction of how little most people knew of what was around the world, not having enough means or a way to transport across seas and strange lands.

Another obvious characteristic displayed throughout *Beowulf* is the way it is written. It is more in verse than in prose, having a metrical structure that is arguably the inspiration for modern poetry. I think that having epic poetry being written in such a way gives the readers a way to get more involved, interested even in such a tale. The style of reading verse seems to capture an audience a bit better, the rhythm seemingly slipping into the mind, acting as a soothing way to listen to tragedy, heartache, betrayal and proving worthy in the face of evil.

The last but probably one of the more necessary characteristics is the supernatural presence within an epic poem. *Beowulf* has that in spades, having the ultimate hero needing to defeat both Grendel and Grendel's mother, who are quite literally evil dragons. One kills for sport and greed, having great wrath for the joys of men, and one killing for revenge over a lost loved one. Both evil in their own ways, Beowulf is able to defeat them and gain the respect and admiration among the people in Hrothgar's kingdom, and become successful in his own country back home.

The dragon Beowulf defeats and ultimately dies from during the last years of his life could possibly be seen as the final act of heroism, defending his earlier title of "being the best". His only loyal warrior that stands by his side, Wiglaf, gives the cowardly soldiers who left Beowulf's side the ultimate sting, "Too few defenders pressed round the king when his worst time came...Death is better for any warrior than a shameful life!" (Beowulf 40.2882-2883, 2890-2891). I find it heartening that both Wiglaf's courageous act of staying with the king despite his weakening strength and Beowulf's determination to rid his kingdom of evil could be seen as good overcoming the supernatural forces that constantly bled into the world of adventure and unwavering bravery.

Good versus evil is more accurate than strength versus weakness, as it has been proven that both Beowulf and the dragons he fought were equal in their own with the strength they were given. The more impressive aspect of *Beowulf* are the plentiful chances given to Beowulf in overpowering ever-lurking evil and defeating it time and time again. Enjoying the depictions that are so effortlessly displayed within *Beowulf's* story, I am confident that these characteristics I've laid out have carved the way for many other tales of true heroes fighting lasting evil, and proving to all that despite being brave and strong, courage, valor, and great deeds can help prevail over the wrongdoings of supernatural forces. Long live the great Grendel slayer.