

THE HERO'S JOURNEY:  
BEOWULF, FILM, AND MASCULINITY

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## Table Of Contents

Introduction	2
<i>Beowulf</i> the poem	6
<i>Beowulf</i> the film	20
Conclusion	25
References	30

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## Introduction

Let me tell you a story. It is not a new story, nor is it one that is very complicated. It is a story about the way the world is. It is a story about why thousands of young men continue to enlist in the army and the story about why television shows about conflict and combat continues to be so popular. This story finds its way into the crevices of our lives, influencing behaviors, attitudes, and cultural norms. The story is about a hero who must overcome challenges, face unparalleled dangers, and remain virtuous throughout his pursuit of glory and honor. The hero will be subject to his own personal flaws, but the hero will also be victorious. The hero can assume many different forms: he can be a Greek god, a gladiator, an outlaw, or even the modern businessman or athlete. Yet despite all of his different images, the hero remains inherently the same, governed by an epistemological framework and clothed in a rhetoric that has evolved over time to create the idealized masculine image. Though it can be subtle, the story and its rhetoric continue to dominate American cultural beliefs, and is indeed so ingrained in our daily lives that is difficult to distinguish and impossible to avoid.

Just the single word *hero* conveys an entire epistemology and set of characteristics regarding what it means to be an honorable and respected individual – most specifically an honorable and respected *male* individual. Within this rhetoric, men and women are denoted as having specific tasks and expectations, and there is an understanding that these men and women will not deviate from these expectations. The rhetoric of the hero describes both behavioral and physical expectations for the male hero, which has been reinforced in ancient epic tales as well as modern cinema. There seems to be a growing trend in popular film to depict

“hypermasculine”<sup>1</sup> characters from ancient worlds battling to the death using their swords and brawn. Such films (listed with their writers) as Zack Snyder’s *300* (2007), David Franzoni’s *Gladiator* (2000), David Benioff’s *Troy* (2004) and most recently Beacham and Hay’s *Clash of the Titans* (2010) are all blockbuster films that follow the model of the “ancient epic”<sup>2</sup> and whose central theme can be encapsulated into a single word: hero. Following the epic model, the hero or heroes of each of these films must overcome seemingly insurmountable tasks, partake in incredible physical violence, and prove themselves worthy of glory by defeating their enemy, human or beast. There are also religious undertones at work in each of the films, which follow suit with the classical model of the epic story. In *Gladiator*, the hero Maximus is depicted as being a religious man, while the entire plot of *Clash of the Titans* is concerned with a battle between the gods and mankind. Often times, the hero dies in the end of these films, but it remains clear that the story of his heroism will live on and his name will echo through the ages of eternity.

The journey of the hero teaches those who watch it unfold or read it from the pages of a book about honor and courage. Brian Baker draws parallels between men’s history and popular culture to aid in our understanding about how fictionalized masculinities in film work to shape the lives of men.<sup>3</sup> In film and literature, the audience or reader is swayed to sympathize with the hero’s situation and wants to see him succeed. The persuasion that takes place in the epic

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<sup>1</sup> The term hypermasculinity generally refers to “expressions of extreme, exaggerated, or Stereotypic masculine attributes and behaviors.” Rosen, et al. “Cohesion and Culture of Hypermasculinity in US Army Units.” *Armed Forces and Society*, 2003. P. 326

<sup>2</sup> The epic formula is often described as one “which either concentrates on the fortunes of a great hero or perhaps a great civilization and the interactions of this hero and his civilizations with the gods.” Peter Toohey *An Introduction to Ancient Narratives*. New York: Routledge, 1992. P. 3

<sup>3</sup> Brian Baker. *Masculinity in Fiction and Film: Representing Men in Popular Genres 1945-2000*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006. P. 176.

narrative is one of great power and deserves critical examination. In his research, Baker explains: “a nation has a need to produce men who can fill certain roles and therefore generates a fictionalized masculine role model for men to emulate” (McLeod, 143). There are ways for the writer to make the story appealing, to create a hero that is believable and likeable, and to provide enough action and gore to keep the interest of the audience or reader going. The audience must desire to be like the hero once the story concludes, or at least envy what the hero has been able to accomplish. For who hasn’t watched *Gladiator* without thinking that Maximus is a man above the rest, of incredible honor and fighting skill? Who hasn’t seen *300* and been envious of the perfect abdominal muscles of the Spartan actors? Popular cinema is able to “provide highly crafted, alluring and accessible role models for boys and young men” that influence them to pursue idealized masculinity (Beyon, 64). Within these stories the hero thus becomes an image that must be upheld and is governed by specific expectations and a series of tasks that he must overcome. There is a formula that his journey must follow, a formula that has roots that go as far back as the time of the Anglo-Saxons in medieval Europe. Indeed, perhaps one of the most famed heroic epic stories of that time period is that of *Beowulf* -- a story about a man of great pride and heroism who faces three key battles with monsters from the old pagan Germanic world. *Beowulf* is an epic poem laid down in the oral tradition of the Anglo-Saxons and rued with Christian and pagan influence. It follows the classic structure of the epic and has received much critical analysis from scholars and enthusiasts alike.

*Beowulf* is one of many examples of a story that employs the rhetoric of the hero. The plight of the main character Beowulf is the focus of the tale, and the tasks that he must overcome throughout the course of the poem provide insight into the development of the character of the hero. In addition, *Beowulf* has had a recent film adaptation that provides an interesting point of

comparison between the ancient text and the modern film. My aim in this paper is to develop an understanding of how a character evolves within a text to become the idealized hero through the process of the hero's journey. *Beowulf* as a text and film version provide an excellent starting point for tracing the process that a male character must go through in order to properly become a hero. I will examine this process in both of these versions of the story through a Jungian psychoanalytical lens. In his influential work, *Symbols of Transformation*, Jung explains that the hero is one of the most powerful images of the dynamic process that occurs within the male human psyche during the process of individuation.<sup>4</sup> Jung was primarily concerned with the transformation that the male psyche (hero-ego) must undergo in order to achieve the idealized status of a complete heroic character, which involves the outgrowth and separation from the feminine mother (Tatham, 5). This transformation involves confrontation with and acceptance of three personality archetypes by the male ego: the shadow, the anima, and the Self. Jung explains that if the archetypes are not confronted and adequately dealt with, this will lead to psychological issues in which "a man will feel inadequate as a traditional man and will not have the security to proceed further in his masculine development" (Steinberg, 3). These three archetypes can be identified in the story of *Beowulf* and will be examined in great detail. Thus, Jungian psychoanalysis is a helpful tool in uncovering the psychology behind the journey of the hero, and the appropriate development of an individual into a male. I will begin the journey of the hero in this analysis by making some historical considerations about *Beowulf* the poem and then will move on to the Jungian analysis of the development of the hero in the text and the modern film.

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<sup>4</sup> Individuation refers to a "drive to integrate the unconscious, unite the opposites, and achieve wholeness." Warren Stienberg. *Masculinity: Identity, Conflict, and Transformation*. Shambala Pulications, 1993. P.3-4

## ***Beowulf* the poem**

*Beowulf* is the only Germanic epic left us. Like all epics, it celebrates the fidelity of a great man to an ideal of excellence.

William Alfred, *Medieval Epics: Beowulf*

*Beowulf* first emerged as a great tale told in the oral tradition of Anglo-Saxon society sometime between the middle of the seventh and end of the tenth century (*Beowulf a Verse Translation*, xxii). The exact date in which the tale was first told is ambiguous, and the original author remains unknown as well. The tale was originally told in the Anglo-Saxon tongue, a language that has a very distinct style and vocabulary, and is written and spoken very differently from modern English today. The oral nature of the original poem is one of the most important historical considerations of the story. The spelling and pronunciation of words and names of the characters in the Anglo-Saxon language of *Beowulf*, is unique to the time period of the original poem and the geography in which it emerged. In addition, the poem has a very distinct pattern and rhythm that adds to the difficulty that modern readers have had in translating its meaning. Over the years, *Beowulf* has been called an epic, heroic, narrative, and a folk-tale (ix). Like the historical period and author, the actual genre of the poem remains at large due to the oral nature of the original tale. Much like the Greek oral tradition in which Homer's *The Odyessy* and *The Illiad* were told, when a story has emerged by word of mouth some aspects may be lost or reworked over time. The oral tradition of epic poems was one based on performance, in which the oral poet to "express himself anew with each successive performance" (Opland, 364). Thus, the actual transcribed versions of the poem may not include some of the important nuances of the original oral version, however, the transcribed version of *Beowulf* is the main text that I will consider in this analysis.



The written Old English version of the poem is a verse narrative that survives as a single manuscript transcribed around the year 1000 (*Beowulf a Verse Translation*, ix). Although this version was transcribed in England, the actual events described in the tale take place in Scandinavia, and the events of the story are partly historical and partly fictional. Over sixty translations of the original transcribed manuscript have appeared since the early nineteenth century, but the most acclaimed and widely used is the recent poetic translation by Seamus Heaney (2000). This will be the translated version used in this analysis. In his translation, Heaney pays special attention to the “voice” of the poem, being careful to preserve the archaic language and form of the original poem (ix). In addition, Heaney does not add or drop any episodes or lines from the original Old English manuscript. Thus, not only is there the potential for discrepancy between the original oral tale and the transcribed work, but there are also potential discrepancies between the translated versions. All of the aspects have been taken into consideration in the various readings and critiques of the poem, and this ambiguity will be kept in mind in my reading of the poem as well.

Translations of the transcribed poem interpret Beowulf to be a fictional character who moves in and out of the world of myth and legend (*Beowulf a Verse Translation*, xi). The poem itself must deal with this juxtaposition of reality and myth, and throughout the events that are described there is an undertone of a synthesis that is taking place between the emerging Christian view of life and the old-world “pagan” beliefs that were present during the time. The special attention paid to religion in the story can be likened to the elements of the epic narrative that were described in this introduction. Throughout the poem there is special emphasis on some key elements of Anglo-Saxon community and life. Kinship (the bond between a lord and than and one’s bloodline, including the concept of *wergild*), glory (*dom*), and the principle of *comitatus*

are all important historical elements of the poem. Kinship in the Middle Ages was something of great importance to the people, and included the bond between a lord and his thanes as well as the blood connections of family (Alfred, 4). The concept of *wergild* was especially important during Anglo-Saxon times and is an important component of *Beowulf*. Essentially, *wergild* refers to the obligation of an individual to avenge a fallen relative or anyone bound by kinship. The characters in the poem are bound by this creed, and the retaliation of Grendel's mother after his death is one of the most poignant examples of this tradition. There are references to kinship throughout the poem, and even in Beowulf's dying words to Wiglaf, the young soldier who accompanies him to fight the dragon, "You are the last of us, the only one left/of the Waegmundings. Fate swept us away,/sent my whole brave highborn clan/to their final doom. Now I must follow them" (l. 2813-2816).

Glory, called *dom* in the Anglo-Saxon tongue, is another important element of the poem. Translations of *dom* interpret the concept to mean the "judgment of men on the deeds of their lifetime" (Alfred, 4). Throughout the poem, Beowulf is judged by the deeds he partakes in and can only achieve glory by gaining the respect and admiration of his kinsmen. In the beginning of the poem when he first arrives in the mead-hall of Hrothgar, Unferth thane of Hrothgar, confronts Beowulf asking "Are you the Beowulf who ton on Breca/ in a swimming match on the open sea/risking the water just to prove that you could win?/It was sheer vanity that made you venture out" (l. 506-509). In this confrontation, Unferth challenges the motives and integrity of the deeds that Beowulf has done. Unferth believes Beowulf to be vain and too full of pride to be an honorable warrior. Indeed the pride of Beowulf has been the subject of critical examination and analysis.<sup>5</sup> However, rather than reacting violently to the insults of Unferth,

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<sup>5</sup> For example: Andy Orchard. *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript*.

Beowulf explains his swimming challenge with his kinsmen Breca, how he defeated nine sea-monsters during the challenge, and that Unferth is not celebrated for his swordmanship or honor and is talking under the influence of mead. The clam, intelligent, and awe inspiring reaction of Beowulf ameliorates the tension between the Danes and Beowulf and his Geats, and shows that Beowulf is a man of skill and glory. Beowulf's pride remains a theme throughout the remainder of the story, and reappears in his final confrontation with the dragon. However, his achievements throughout his lifetime reinforce the concept of *dom* and Beowulf lives and dies with this idea of glory in his mind.

The concept of *comitatus* is a third historical element of the poem to consider. It is another concept that held great importance in the Anglo-Saxon communities. *Comitatus* is most simply defined as "the classical description of the ideal of excellence" (Alfred, 3). This ideal of excellence to which great men were expected to adhere was set down by Tacitus in the manuscript, *Germania*, a treatise of the Germanic peoples of the first century (3). The principle of *comitatus* is achieved through the heroic deeds of a lord, or prince, and his thanes. The thanes fight for their lord and their lord fights for victory (4). The greater the number of thanes a prince has to serve him, and the braver they are, the better the reputation of the prince. However his thanes must not surpass the prince in bravery. Thus, although Beowulf travels with a band of skilled and courageous men, it is clear in the poem that he is the bravest and most courageous of them all. The incredible importance that the Anglo-Saxons placed on *comitatus* is part of the reason behind the strength of the bonds of kinship between a lord and his thanes. Modern interpretations characterize the concept of *comitatus* as one placing great emphasis on

community. Essentially, *comitatus* is the creed by which Medieval people were expected to live and dictates acceptable and honorable codes of conduct that great man and simple men alike strove to achieve. *Comitatus* was built into the culture and reflected in the social norms of the Anglo-Saxon people and is a key element of the poem *Beowulf*.

All three of these elements described represent some of the historic ideology that governed the time period of the original manuscript. Kinship, glory, and *comitatus* are all aspects of Medieval life that citizens were expected to honor and uphold, and Beowulf, being an example of these people, also must uphold them in the poem. Through the use of these elements in the poem, we can begin to see that the story of Beowulf is something of a teaching tool for regular men, recall Baker's argument that nations need fictionalized masculinities for men to emulate. Beowulf as a respected and honorable hero figure may have served this purpose in Anglo-Saxon communities, though this is an entirely different debate. From this point, I would like to delve into the specific events that occur in the poem that trace the development of the hero, from a Jungian perspective. The plot of the poem follows the path of Beowulf as he confronts three challenges ranging across time from his young adulthood into his old age. I will briefly describe them here and then break them apart to describe each one's significance in the development of the hero character in detail. In the first challenge, Beowulf is a young and proud hero of the Geats who rescues the mead-hall of the great Danish king Hrothgar from the man-eating monster Grendel. The second confrontation comes soon after and is against Grendel's mother who seeks revenge for her fallen son in the tradition of *wergild*. In the last battle of the poem, Beowulf confronts a greedy dragon and takes place when Beowulf is an aged king. In this third battle, Beowulf meets his demise.

The structure of the poem is epic heroic in nature in which Beowulf the hero is presented with “three agons – three struggles in which the preternatural force-for-evil of the hero’s enemies come springing at him in demonic shapes...three archetypal sites of fear” (Heaney, xxv). Heaney’s description of the events as “three archetypal sites of fear” blends nicely with a Jungian reading of the text. Jung’s archetypes of the shadow, anima, and Self can all be identified in the three challenges that Beowulf must face in the poem.<sup>6</sup> Grendel as been identified as the shadow archetype, Grendel’s mother the anima, and the dragon represents the Self. The Self refers tot the unified personality of the individual and includes the unconscious, conscious, and the ego. Society and cultural norms shape the creation of the Self. Gender roles also hold incredible influence over the creation of the Self, as they create powerful expectations that outline acceptable behavior for both men and women. The anima represents the unconscious desire for connection with the feminine that men have, something that must be consciously rejected in order to be come an accepted male. The shadow is also part of the unconscious and represents the weaknesses or shortcomings of an individual that are often instinctual and irrational. These three universal structures, along with the process of individual transformation that goes along with them, “provide the teleological drive for wholeness inherent in their [male] personalities: the need to develop into a male being” (Steinberg, 1). Thus, as Beowulf encounters the archetypes he is in essence working to achieve his complete male form, and become the idealized hero that Jung argues is the highest achievement that a male individual can attain.

The first trial of the poem concerns the monster Grendel. From a Jungian psychoanalytic perspective, Grendel is representative of the shadow archetype. Grendel is, in essence, a weaker and irrational form of the hero of the poem, Beowulf. Grendel is observed as the shadow of

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<sup>6</sup> See works such as: Judy Anne White’s *Hero-Ego in Search of Self: A Jungian Reading of Beowulf*, Jeffrey Helterman’s *Beowulf: the Archetype Enters History* for references to a Jungian analysis of *Beowulf* the poem.

Beowulf, representing a cluster of psychological flaws and shortcomings of the hero himself. Grendel is first and foremost a monster – he ravages the mead-hall of Hrothgar and murders many people in the process, devouring their corpses. Everything about Grendel is primal and disorderly. In addition, Grendel is a biblical creature, described as being a descendant of Cain. Thus Grendel is both a monster in form and in psychology, his bloodline is tainted by the sins of Cain and his being represents an inversion of the ideals of kinship that are the foundation of *comitatus* (White, 9). In this regard, Grendel becomes the shadow archetype, the example of how the ideals and strengths of Beowulf can be distorted and destroyed. Grendel's behavior is also indicative of his status as the shadow. Whereas Beowulf is an articulate and grandiose speaker, Grendel is incoherent and unable to communicate. Grendel is driven by careless impulses, while Beowulf is driven by reason and self-confidence. Judy Anne White describes the situation of Grendel as an “Anglo-Saxon's greatest nightmare” (17). This is due to the fact that Grendel is outcast from the Danish community. He has no significant kinsmen, he has no king to serve, and is denied entry into the mead-hall of Hrothgar. Grendel represents the extreme isolation of the outsider, something that Beowulf wants to avoid at all costs. He wants to gain the respect of Hrothgar and his thanes and fulfill the expectations of *comitatus*. Yet in some respects, Beowulf is an outsider. He is a foreigner in Danish lands and Unferth challenges his legitimacy as a warrior. Beowulf has something to prove, as does Grendel. Thus they are bound by the relationship of the hero-ego to the shadow archetype, one being the polar opposite of the other in actions and behavior but also bound to the other by similarities in circumstances.

The battle that takes place between Grendel and Beowulf is part of the Jungian process of individuation in which the hero-ego confronts the shadow. In the poem, Grendel breaks into the mead-hall while Beowulf and his companions are sleeping. Beowulf has chosen to sleep

unarmed, which the reader assumes is out of his hero's pride. However, this act actually serves a higher purpose that is later discovered in the confrontation. If one is to take the confrontation of with the shadow archetype to the most literal level, the hero-ego must be completely unarmed and open to the acceptance of the shadow, just as Beowulf is before he encounters Grendel. When Grendel enters the scene, confusion and fighting ensues. Initially Beowulf watches his men being savagely killed by the monster right before his eyes. The hero's delay of action ultimately gives Beowulf the upper hand, as does his lack of armor, and when Grendel reaches for him after slaughtering many men, Beowulf surprises the monster with his impressive strength. As Beowulf tightens his grip on the monster, Grendel realizes that Beowulf is not just another thane, but a formidable adversary. As the shadow is driven by impulse and irrationality, Grendel becomes fearful and attempts to flee. Beowulf is able to take advantage of Grendel's fear, and uses his own heroic characteristics of reason and self-confidence to pursue the monster.

The retreat of Grendel is problematic for retaining the traditional code of honor in battle (White, 28). In traditional battles in warriors, they are depicted as fighting willingly to the death. However, as Grendel is the shadow, he acts in the opposite way of the honorable warrior and instead attempts to flee the situation out of cowardice. The poet of *Beowulf* resolves this problem and retains the heroic nature of the fight by placing the rest of the thanes outside of the mead-hall. Thus, the battle between the hero-ego and the shadow is one that can be privately resolved, as the thanes can only listen to the events taking place within the hall. Beowulf is therefore able to remain in the position of the heroic warrior fighting a valorous contest against a formidable enemy, preserving his glory. The battle concludes with Beowulf ripping off Grendel's arm from his shoulder, a wound that is fatal for the monster. After the injury, Grendel retreats from the hall to die alone in the depths of his cave. Symbolically, Beowulf's defeat of Grendel is the hero-

ego's defeat of the shadow archetype. Beowulf overcomes his shadow by bringing it into the control of his conscious and successfully moves through the first step in the process of individuation. Grendel was the fearful, careless, and weak shadow of the heroic ideal and with his defeat, Beowulf can move forward in the journey of the hero.

The next battle of the poem is against Grendel's mother. This battle is significant in a variety of ways. First, Grendel's mother represents the anima archetype. Her status of the anima holds implications for gender expectations and stereotypes within the battle. However, Grendel's mother is also attempting to avenge the death of Grendel following the code of *wergild*. Taking this code into account, her quarrel with Beowulf is understandable and even justifiable by Anglo-Saxon standards. In addition, Grendel's mother is a mythical creature, one of great power and age, and represents the bridge between the old world and the new. She is part of a dying breed, and her mysticism and pagan ways are being replaced by Christian ideology. These are all important aspects of her presence in the poem to consider. As the anima archetype, Grendel's mother represents the archetypal personification of Woman. In Jungian psychoanalysis, the anima emerges during individuation in order to facilitate the migration of unconscious feminine elements into the consciousness (White, 44). The emergence of the anima suggests that the hero has not yet achieved the inner balance between his traditional male outlook and the feminine desire to connect emotionally with other people. To become properly masculine, the hero must be able to recognize the anima and overcome it. For Beowulf, this means that he must kill Grendel's mother.

The hero-ego's confrontation with the shadow archetype involves the acceptance of undesirable masculine personality traits, including cowardice and impulsive action. However, the process of individuation is complicated with the confrontation with the anima and involves the



acceptance of and rejection of the aspects that the hero possesses himself that are traditionally considered feminine. Thus, whereas Grendel represents the masculine shadow and opposite of Beowulf, Grendel's mother represents Beowulf's feminine counterpart. Jung describes that the anima can have an exceptionally strong influence upon the hero's psyche (White, 44). Indeed in the poem Grendel's mother is a formidable enemy to Beowulf, described as a creature of "terrible strength" (line 1519). It is no easy task for Beowulf to confront her, and during the course of the battle she causes Beowulf to stumble and fall (line 1519). Just as the anima is a more difficult archetype for the hero-ego to confront, so is Grendel's mother a more powerful and difficult to adversary for Beowulf.

The anima can manifest itself in a variety of ways, as the Mother Nurturer, as Destroyer, as Seductress of any combination of these (White, 44). In *Beowulf*, Grendel's mother most notably takes on the form of the Nurturer and Destroyer. She is referred to only as "Grendel's mother," she is not given a name, and thus is distinguished only for her nurturing of her wretched son. The anima frequently appears in dark and light forms, is seen as terrible and dangerous as well as noble (White, 49). The nobility of Grendel's mother is indicated in her attempt to avenge the death of her son, in the *wergild* tradition. She is first a Nurturer and must do everything she can to protect the honor of her offspring. On the other hand she is a Destroyer, and brutally kills men. Grendel's mother also possesses a subtle sexual aspect to her anima image. She reflects the anima-images drawn from Beowulf's own experiences with women, becoming a Seductress in some sense. Although she is not a companion or mate to Beowulf in the traditional sense, she is bound to him by means of Grendel. In the fashion of a Seductress, Grendel's mother lures Beowulf into her cave, disarms him, and physically wrestles him throughout the course of the battle. True to the anima archetype, Grendel's mother is something of a sexual temptation for

Beowulf, representing his opposite feminine form, though this is not the focus of his battle with her in the poem.

Although Grendel's mother is to be respected for her attention to the payment of *wergild* that must be made for the death of her son, her actions also serve to challenge the status quo and position of women in medieval society. In ancient Germanic societies, and in most still today, women were viewed as the "peace-makers" of society, taking an active and diplomatic role in court or marrying in order to assure allegiance between tribes (White, 50). Indeed, the other most notable female character of the poem, Queen Wealhtheow the wife of Hrothgar, is very much representative of the traditional Anglo-Saxon woman. She welcomes Beowulf and his companions to the Danish land, entertains them with songs, and raises the toast to their victory. These are all activities that were considered aspects of keeping the peace. As keepers of the peace, women are not supposed to engage in any kind of action that perpetuates some sort of feud (White, 50). By avenging the death of Grendel, Grendel's mother disrupts the status quo of the female sex, perpetuating a feud. By defeating Grendel's mother Beowulf will resolve the conflict between his hero-ego and the anima as well as reinstate the status quo as it should rightly appear by Anglo-Saxon standards. Thus, there are several issues at stake in the confrontation with Grendel's mother and for Beowulf to properly assume his title as a man and hero he must prevail. By the conclusion of the battle, Beowulf is able to gain the upper hand and kills Grendel's mother by stabbing her with a sword that he finds on the walls of her cave. The defeat of Grendel's mother is a great achievement for the hero, as he has overcome the anima, the Nurturer Destroyer, whom is representative of the "eternal feminine which plagues men" (White, 79). By defeating Grendel's mother, Beowulf becomes one step closer to the conclusion of his

hero's journey. He successfully asserts himself as a man and his hero-ego has accepted and rejected the feminine image that could potentially hinder his development into the idealized hero.

The last trial that Beowulf must face involves a great dragon and the passage of much time. After his defeat of Grendel's mother, Beowulf is honored far and wide by the Danes and Geats. He assumes kingship of Geatland and has ruled for fifty years before his last great encounter with a monster. Beowulf's confrontation with the dragon has been argued to be the most important of the conflicts of the poem, and in the Jungian process of individuation the dragon represents the hero-ego confrontation with the Self. During the early part of an individual's existence, his ego separates itself from the Self. The ego attempts to establish dominance and individuality by removing itself from the Self, which is linked to time, death, and consciousness (White, 83). When a hero approaches middle age, the ego will attempt to re-establish its connection with the Self in order to answer the question: "who am I and what am I here for?" If the reunion of the Self and the ego goes well, then there will be a unification of the inner and outer selves, the light and dark of the individual, and what Jung regards as the "most complete expression of individuality" for a male (White 84).

The passage of time has left Beowulf reflecting on his prior deeds. The past is something that Beowulf, and even his thanes, looks upon with melancholy nostalgia. His demeanor has changed since he was a young warrior and he seems to be more aware about time and the decay of the human body. From a Jungian perspective, his ego is attempting to reunite with the Self. However, the reunification of these two entities is not an easy task. Beowulf is aware that his strength is not what it used to be but still clings on to the hero-ego: "I risked my life/ often when I was young. Now I am old,/ but as king of the people I shall pursue this fight/ for the glory of winning, if the evil one will only/ abandon his earth-fort and face me in the open" (l. 2511-2515).

Up until the end Beowulf has a hero's pride, and as a consequence his ego cannot fully be resolved with the Self. He dies with this knowledge. Even in his final speech to his thanes, Beowulf addresses them using "boast-words." Indeed his final speech to his men is reminiscent of the speeches he made as a young warrior, however the key difference between these speeches and his final words is that Beowulf seems to be aware that he will not return from the battle with the dragon.

The dragon itself is a creature much different from Grendel and Grendel's mother. Whereas Grendel represents a shadow of Beowulf, Beowulf's flaws and imperfections that must be overcome, and Grendel's mother represents the separation of the hero-ego from the anima and feminine counterpart, the dragon is not so easily distinguished. Just as the true nature of Beowulf himself is not easily discernable, the dragon is not clearly defined. The dragon is not inherently evil like Grendel, nor is it maternalistic like Grendel's mother. Like the Self, the dragon is not entirely "knowable" (White, 85). The dragon is simply a beast king of his treasure, Beowulf just a man king of the Geats. The dragon guards his ancient treasure and remains peaceful so long as he is respected and undisturbed. However, when one of his treasured artifacts is stolen, the dragon is enraged, and his pride is damaged. Just like any hero or king, the dragon seeks vengeance for the wrong done against him in order to protect his image and injured conscience. Thus, the actions of the dragon are relatable on the most base level and parallel how Beowulf himself would respond to a situation in which his pride is injured. Thus, Beowulf and the dragon share similarities, and the encounter of the two is representative of the encounter between the ego and the Self. It is an encounter in which the hero-ego struggles for power, all the while knowing that it is inextricably bound to and resolves around the Self.

The conflict between the ego and the Self is designed to uncover the ego's limitations, and for Beowulf this is his pride. Recall that Unferth accuses Beowulf of being a vain and prideful man when he first comes into the Danish country. The conflict between the ego and the Self ultimately serves to create a wholeness of personality, as Jung describes, by preparing the consciousness for its ultimate limitation: physical death (White, 84). For a hero, death can be a goal and fulfillment. Judy Anne White writes "Beowulf's courageous stand against the dragon and his subsequent death in battle lead to personal fulfillment for him in that they insure his immortality...he transcends the limitations imposed upon him by his physical mortality by dying gloriously and thus providing the raw material from which myth is created" (84). Beowulf achieves his individuality by dying during the course of the battle with the dragon, as this fulfills his pursuit of glory and reinforces the concept of *comitatus*.

With the defeat of the dragon, and his own death, Beowulf completes the process of individuation. How well he attains the hero image and successfully completes the hero's journey is debatable, as the most complete expression of individuality that Jung speaks of is very difficult to attain (Steinberg, 5). However, in the original transcribed manuscript after Beowulf's death, the funeral of Beowulf and the monument that the Geats construct in his memory, called the "hero's memorial," seems to indicate that the population that knew and respected him believed that he dies as a proper hero (l. 3160). In this regard, he has achieved the status of the idealized hero figure and becomes an example for all men to follow. Some of the final words of the poem seem to conclude that Beowulf died with glory and achieved *comitatus*: "They extolled his heroic nature and exploits/and gave thanks for his greatness...They said that of all the kings upon the earth/he was the man most gracious and fair-minded,/kindest to his people and keenest to win fame" (l. 3173-3183).

## ***Beowulf* the film**

In 2007, the most recent film adaptation of the ancient poem was released. Screenwriter Neil Gaiman's *Beowulf* combines computer technology and live acting to create a spin on the traditional tale that puts emphasis on gore, sexuality, and religious undertones. In addition, several key changes to the plot of the story are changed, which I will examine in this portion of the analysis. Driver and Ray explain that it is not uncommon for film adaptations of medieval heroic tales to "cast an older story in light of current tastes or to address contemporary issues."<sup>7</sup> Though this may help explain some of the changes made to the original plot of the *Beowulf* poem, the reasons behind these changes are not the focus of this research. It is worth noting, however, that Neil Gaiman and Roger Avary wrote the film adaptation over a period of ten years and they have described their finished work as "a cheerfully violent and strange take on the Beowulf legend."<sup>8</sup> Indeed there is special attention paid to violence and gore, partly due to the capabilities of the visual effects. The fight scenes with all the monsters, particularly Grendel, are gruesome and bloody arguably to appeal to modern audiences. The differences between the transcribed manuscript and the film adaptation will be explored in this section of my analysis, and I will approach the film from the same Jungian psychoanalytical perspective that I used to analyze the text. Again, I will attempt to describe the process that Beowulf must undergo to become a hero in the film version using hero-ego's confrontation with Jung's three archetypes as the foundation of the hero's journey.

In the film version, the first battle that Beowulf faces is also against Grendel. Grendel is still representative of the shadow archetype, however there is a key distinction that has been

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<sup>7</sup> Driver & Ray. *Medieval Heroes on screen: representations from Beowulf to Buffy*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland. 2004. P.20

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Rees. *Beowulf: tenuous relationship between movie and poem*. World Socialist Website.org. 2008.

made regarding his character in the film. The audience discovers that Grendel is in fact the bastard son of Hrothgar, the product of an unholy union between the king and Grendel's mother. Thus, a new layer of complexity has been added to Grendel's character. In addition, the mead-hall of Hrothgar is cast in a different light than in the poem. Instead of being a great king, Hrothgar and his men are depicted as drunk, inappropriate men who chase after women and fall over themselves in drunken foolishness. The audience feels sympathy for Hrothgar's queen, Wealtheow, who is clearly repulsed by the behavior of her husband and his thanes. Wealtheow has much more of a presence in the film adaptation, and is depicted as a beautiful and sad queen who later becomes a love interest for Beowulf himself. Grendel is a disgusting and ugly creature who becomes enraged by the sounds coming from the festivities that take place in the mead-hall. He is a decrepit and vile looking beast, covered in slim and with a lopsided and decaying body. Grendel attacks the mead-hall at night, savagely murdering Hrothgar's men, drinking their blood and crushing their bones. The scene is violent and gory, using computer generated images to bring the bloody scene to life. Like the manuscript version, Grendel is once more a creature governed by careless impulses and primal instinct true to the shadow archetype. He attacks the mead-hall because the merrymaking coming from within its walls causes his eardrums to explode in pain. His instinctual response is to make the noise stop to preserve his own wellbeing. He does this by violently attacking the mead-hall. Like Grendel in the poem, Grendel in the film version is also unable to communicate with men, speaking in broken sentences and indiscernible utterances. Grendel, in effect, behaves like an unruly child. His status as a monster, however, makes him a dangerous unruly child. As the shadow archetype, Grendel is again representative of the masculine opposite that Beowulf does not want to become. Thus, once more Beowulf must destroy this creature in order to move forward in the hero's journey and toward his own glory.

Beowulf defeats Grendel, ripping off his arm just like in the poem. Grendel retreats once more to his cave, where he dies in the arms of his mother. Grendel's mother vows vengeance for her son, again true to the Anglo-Saxon concept of *wergild*, and she haunts the dreams of Beowulf as he sleeps. When the hero awakes in the morning, Grendel's mother has killed the remaining men in the mead-hall, brutally displaying their dead corpses by hanging them from the ceiling of the hall. Once more there is the visual display of violence and horror that was not as pronounced in the original poem. As the anima archetype, Grendel's mother assumes a slightly different role in the film version of the poem. In this version she assumes first the role of the Seductress, and then the Mother Destroyer. She appears to Beowulf as a beautiful woman who tempts him with promises about glory and honor. Her connection to Grendel and as a nurturer is not as pronounced as in the poem. For although she mourns the death of Grendel, she quickly turns her energy to getting Beowulf to give her a new son by tempting him to sleep with her. This is a major change to the plotline of the original story, in which Grendel's mother is simply another monster for Beowulf to defeat representing the Mother Destroyer, the hero's feminine counterpart but not in a highly erotic way. There is no mention about her as a sexual temptress for the hero in the transcribed manuscript, only the subtle hint that as a female her character may carry some components of feminine sexuality. Beowulf is unable to fend off Grendel's mother's advances and he succumbs to her desire for him to give her a son. Thus, Beowulf does not reject the feminine anima in this version of the story. He is unable to move forward with the hero's journey and returns back to the mead-hall of Hrothgar with a dark secret that affects his status as an idealized hero for the rest of the film. Upon his return, Beowulf boasts that he defeated Grendel's mother, however Hrothgar realizes what has happened. In a dramatic turn of events, Hrothgar relinquishes his crown, hands his kingdom and queen over to Beowulf, and then he



jumps out of a window to commit suicide. Beowulf is left to assume the Danish throne, unlike in the original tale where he returns to Geatland, and the curse of Grendel's mother is upon him.

Time passes in the film and Beowulf, like Hrothgar before him, is unable to produce any heirs. Grendel's mother has disappeared for some years and Beowulf believes her to be gone from the Danish kingdom. However, the presence of Grendel's mother and the anima, lives on in the hero-ego. The inability of Beowulf to defeat the anima and move forward with the process of individuation manifests itself in his sterility. His inability to produce an heir to the throne leads him to be perceived as a weakened and lesser male. Beowulf's prowess as a warrior and status as a hero have diminished through the years, and he has not been able to complete the hero's journey and move forward with the process of individuation. Thus, the film version of the poem grapples with the consequences of a male's inability to overcome the anima archetype. The feelings of inadequacy and despair that Beowulf feels mirror the psychological effects that Jung describes as the consequences of not adequately confronting and rejecting the anima archetype. Instead, Beowulf remains bound to the feminine and suffers for it. He takes a young lover, despite his devotion to Wealtheow, in an attempt to mask his frailties as an impotent man.

Then, seeming out of nowhere, a new monster emerges to plague the Danish court. This time the monster is an incredible dragon. The dragon, again, is the third battle that Beowulf faces in the story. Once more the dragon is representative of the Self-archetype, however another layer has been added to his character as well. The dragon is actually a shape-shifting demon who is the offspring of Beowulf and Grendel's mother. The dragon has been formed in Beowulf's own image and is a great and terrible force. He is strong and beautiful, representative of the characteristics that the aged Beowulf lacks. This adds a new layer to the concept of Jung's Self archetype. The dragon truly is the *persona* of Beowulf and they are inextricably bound to one

another in blood. Beowulf may have comforted himself in believing that Grendel's mother had left the kingdom, but he cannot escape the psychological manifestation of the dragon, his son and proof of his frailties. The emergence of the dragon is the emergence of the Self for the hero-ego. Though the hero-ego may have pushed the Self out of consciousness, it remains and reappears in order for individuation to occur. For Beowulf to accept the image of his weakness, his bastard son, and to defeat him, is to move on with the process of individuation and absolve himself as best as he can from his inability to defeat the anima. The battle with the dragon is the chance for Beowulf to undo the wrong he has committed and to regain his heroic status. The battle against the dragon is also the most difficult in the film for the aged king to undertake. His strength is not what it used to be and he has begun to doubt himself as a man and warrior. There is a power struggle going on during this fight, one between the hero-ego and the Self, and father and son. As in the poem, Beowulf dies after defeating the dragon in the film. Though he is able to destroy the dragon, it is at the cost of his own life and he is fatally wounded in the process. Beowulf dies next to the body of his dragon son, and passes over the Danish crown to his loyal thane Wiglaf. In the poem, Wiglaf is the young hero who accompanies Beowulf into the dragon's lair, but in the film he is a warrior roughly the same age as Beowulf himself. The film concludes with Wiglaf accepting the crown and watching Beowulf carried out to sea, unaware that the dragon was actually Beowulf's son. In the distance Wiglaf is able to make out the tempting form of Grendel's mother floating upon the water, presumably to fall victim to her seduction and perpetuate the curse upon the land.

It is a bit more difficult to do a Jungian analysis of the film version than *Beowulf* the text, due to some of the added complexities of the characters and plot changes to the story line itself. However, the process that Beowulf must go through in order to overcome the three trials is

essentially the same. That is, Beowulf still encounters Grendel as the shadow archetype, Grendel's mother as the anima, and the dragon as the Self. The film version provides an interesting spin on the confrontation with the anima archetype, and demonstrates the harmful consequences that can arise when the hero is unable to adequately confront and resolve his relationship with his feminine counterpart. The additional change to the character of the dragon, adds a level of complexity to the Self-archetype. In some ways, having the dragon as the son of Beowulf makes the relationship between the hero-ego and Self more distinguishable – recall how in the text the character of the dragon is relatively ambiguous. I would that this change in the film version gives the Self-archetype much more weight in the process of the hero's journey - Beowulf has much more obviously at stake with his confrontation against the dragon. He must not only battle the Self, but also his son, in an attempt to resolve his failing to overcome the anima. Once again, his death at the conclusion of the battle represents the reunification of the Self and the hero-ego. By defeating the dragon, Beowulf is able to free himself from the curse of Grendel's mother and reclaim his heroism.

## **Conclusion**

In both the film and transcribed poem of *Beowulf* the hero's journey retains many of the same characteristics. Jung's process of individuation for the male-hero ego can be traced in each of the versions, and helps to distinguish the process that a male individual must undergo in order to achieve the image of the idealized hero. There are few more components that I wish to examine about the film and text version before I conclude this analysis of the journey of the hero. Recall that there is usually a religious component at play in an epic heroic tale<sup>9</sup>. Religion, more

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<sup>9</sup> See footnote 3 on page 3

specifically Christianity, has a presence in both the film and original poem that is worthy of discussion. In addition, there is special attention paid to the physical body of Beowulf, most notably in the film but in the poem as well. This attention adds another element for the hero to strive toward and ties into the hypermasculinity of male characters in modern film discussed in the introduction. Finally the heightened component of violence in the film will be examined as an element used to appeal to modern audiences, and affects the expectations that audiences have for how a hero will proceed through his journey. Thus, all of these elements add to the complexity of the hero's journey – not only must the hero battle the three archetypes of the shadow, anima, and Self, but his journey must also have a religious presence, he must uphold a standard of physique and he must encounter great violence in the process.

The film version retains elements of the Christian influence that is interwoven in the original poem. In doing this, the film retains one of the components of the epic narrative that is discussed in this introduction and stays true to the form of the poem. However, the religious component of the film manifests itself in a very different way than in the text. Christianity has a presence in the film toward the conclusion of the story, as an ideology that some of the Danish people have begun to accept and practice. Christianity is not necessarily the religion of Beowulf in the film, though his queen adopts the religion, but it does have a significant presence. In addition, the juxtaposition of the Christian and pagan themes that are present in the written manuscript are not as pronounced in the film. Whatever the reasons behind the slight changes regarding religion in the film version of the story, the audience is aware that religion is a component of the story to consider. For the transcribed manuscript, however, Christianity has a major influence in the poem and there are some scholars that believe that the narrative voice of the poem is entirely Christian. Others side with the belief that there is a dichotomy at work

between Christianity and pagan influences and argue for one or the other as the dominant presence in the poem (Donoghue, xi). Whatever the argument may be, the influence of religion remains an element of the hero's journey in both ancient and modern interpretations.

Another component of the film that is important to consider is the physical depiction of the hero. Beowulf the character is visually impressive in height and stature. He is very muscular and obviously in good shape. The attention that is paid to his physical prowess is not unique to the film, and appears in the text version as well: "Now have I seen/a mightier man-at-arms on this earth" (l. 247-8). Using other films as examples (*Gladiator*, *Troy*, etc.) and the heroes of classical literature, it seems that the hero's physical body is another component that adds to his status as a hero. John Beynon writes:

"In epics, adventures and sports films, the male body is connotative of power and strength, celebrated as a manly spectacle in opposition to womanly gentleness and beauty. At its extreme it can be sexualized and eroticized either openly (for example the muscled, oiled and loin-clothed torso of Johnny Weissmuller as Tarzan, or quietly, as in the style-setting lounge suits of a Cary Grant or Gregory Peck). The male body is eroticized for the admiring eyes of women and the approval of men."<sup>10</sup>

In order to be a commanding presence, a hero must not only successfully go through the stages of the hero's journey to confront Jung's classic archetypes, but he must also uphold standards of appearance as well. These standards become part of the expectation of the hero as a character and represent a goal for men to strive to achieve. This leads into the hypermasculinization, or stereotypical, depiction of the heroic male body that is seen in modern film and the idealization of the masculine hero.

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<sup>10</sup> John Beynon. *Masculinities and Culture*. Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2002. P.65

Finally, the violence that is graphically displayed in the *Beowulf* film is another component of the hero's journey to consider. For the hero to be masculine, he must have physical toughness and the ability to employ violence (Beyon, 67). With the aid of computer technology, modern film has been able to take graphic violence to a whole new level without any injury to the actors themselves. As a result, filmmakers continue to release films designed to shock and awe audiences with new technology and realistic violence. In *Beowulf* the film, director Robert Zemeckis uses a combination of live acting and performance capture technology to create realistic gore in the battles Beowulf has with Grendel and the dragon. Contemporary viewers are likely to have their values, perceptions, and behaviors affected by the recurrent violence they see in film (Stone, 1). This is a topic that warrants an entire discussion on its own, but it does hold implications for how the modern audience views the process of the hero's journey. *Gladiator* is another heroic epic film whose entire plot is based around war and violence. Thus, there are expectations that a hero is a fighter - a warrior who will partake in physical, graphic acts of violence in order to prove himself. Violence has been a component of the hero's journey since the time that the *Beowulf* poem first emerged and it is certainly more visually accessible in the modern film adaptation.

The elements of religion, physical prowess, and violence are three more components that make up the hero's journey. Jung's archetypes describe the psychological process that the hero must go through in order to attain the idealized image of heroism, and these archetypes manifest themselves in the three distinguishable physical battles in *Beowulf* the poem and film. The hero's journey is a journey bound by history, tradition, and culture designed to entertain and teach those who come in contact with it. The hero character has been idealized through literature and cinema, and his journey has become a metaphor for becoming a man and achieving masculinity.

There are many implications that the hero's journey holds for the construction of masculinity, femininity, and the acceptable gender roles of each. Whether or not the idealized hero is an attainable goal for the common man is a whole new debate entirely, but it remains clear that the hero and the rhetoric of his journey will continue to echo throughout the ages. Beowulf isn't going anywhere and, in fulfillment of every hero's desire, his story will live on.

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