Of Flood and Flame: Doubles in Beowulf and its Cyclic Structure

It has been widely accepted that the poem has a cyclic form, but not many scholarly literatures had attempted to delve deep into this very interesting structure. In this essay, I will try to examine the cyclic structure of the poem by looking closely at the poet’s intentional use of pairs to develop his theme, and the way he used this technique to develop a cyclic structure by which almost all the elements of the poem are interconnected with each other. In this essay, I will argue that these pairs are linked to the poet’s quest for an answer in the cultural duality of the Anglo-Saxon England in the 7th and 8th century when the Germanic past was not yet forgotten and the Romanic Christianity had not reached its height, and I will show that the poet refuses to make a choice between the two: by using a cyclic structure, he left the question open.

The first thing that Beowulf strikes its reader is that it begins with the funeral of someone almost totally unrelated to the plot. The poet begins with describing the achievements of the old king Scyld Scefing. This was followed by the funeral of Scyld, who died at his “appointed time” (to gescæp-hwile, 26). Scyld’s funeral takes the form of a traditional Germanic ship funeral, where the dead is carried in the middle of the ship. The poet remarks (38-43):

I have not heard of a ship so decked
with better war dress, weapons of battle,
swords and mail shirts; on his breast there lay
heaps of jewels that were to drift away,
brilliant, with him, far on the power of the flood.

While his retainers are mourning sadly for his death, the poet again comments (50-52):

… Men cannot say,
Wise men in hall nor warriors in the field,
Not truly, who received that cargo.

Here we see that the good king Scefing is sent to the sea, and the sea symbolizes a journey with unknown destiny, just like the fate of the afterlife of the king, though good, is unknown to anyone, including the poet; thus “men cannot say… who received that cargo.” This belief in an unknown fate seems to be a feature of the Germanic tradition.

It was not until the ending of the poem the reader will find something in parallel, something that projects this weird opening to the ending of the poem, and to the fate of the hero, Beowulf. The first

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1 The lines refer to the corresponding OE lines as in the version given by Chickering, Howell D. Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition. The modern English translations are also from this book.
instance we realize that Scefing is related to Beowulf is when we find that the poet refers to Beowulf (2390) later in the poem using exactly the same phrase he used to refer to Scefing (11):

That was a good king.

Þæt wæs god cyning.

What is more striking is that the funeral of Beowulf also resembles that of Scefing, such as the heavy decoration of the burial of both with armors and jewel. While Scefing’s ship is decorated with weapons swords and heaps of jewels, that of Beowulf’s is (3139-3142):

Hung with helmets, strong battle-boards,

Bright coats of mail, as he had requested,

And then they laid high in the center

their famous king…

Along with this similar taste for weapon and decoration, the reactions of the mourning retainers also echo each other. However, the resemblance of the funerals ends here. If the reader tries to find a doppelganger to the water burial of Scefing, who is ‘consigned’, consciously or unconsciously by the poet, to water, where no one knows who will receive the “cargo”, one will be surprised that the actual parallel is not Beowulf, but the dragon, a being that is not given name in the poem (3131-3133):

[the eight of thanes] then pushed the dragon

Over the cliff-wall, gave to the waves

The hoard keeper, let the sea take him.

Given that both the kings and the dragon were once owner of huge halls and keepers of abundant treasures, it is not hard to imagine the dragon as metaphorically a king, someone like Scefing, like any other king, kindred of Hrothgar, of Hygelac, and of Beowulf. At same time, even more surprisingly, if we conceptualize fire as an opposite of water, we find that the poet consigned Beowulf to fire (3143-3148):

… Then on that headland

The great fire was wakened…

Black above flames; the roaring one danced

Encircled by wailing; the wind died away

Until the fire had broken that bone-house,

Had burned to the heart.

This drives the audience to go back to the beginning to look for another parallel. If we take it as a parallel that the poem both starts and ends in a funeral, then it should not be a false move to look for more and deeper parallels, something also fiery, corresponding to Beowulf’s cremation, especially given that the poet seems to cherish this technique of contrasting and pairing the main plot with
another minor plot. Then the reader should not be surprised to find that the image of fire rises immediately after the funeral of Scefing (81-85):

… The hall towered high,
Cliff-like, horn-gabled, awaited the war flames,
Malicious burning; it was still not the time
for the sharp-edged hate of his sworn son-in-law
to rise against Hrothgar in murderous rage.

Here the hall is the famous hall of Hrothgar, this hall not only physically resembles of high, towering barrow of Beowulf’s burial, but also has a relationship with Beowulf’s own body when the poet refers to the body of Beowulf as the “bone house” (3147, banhus) and the “body home” (3177, lic-haman). Heorot is the home of Hrothgar; Beowulf’s body is the home of his soul, and both will be on fire. On the other hand, the image of the flame foreshadows the ominous destiny of the kingdom of the Danes and of the Hrothgar family, that, despite many efforts, goes to doom. Thus, if we associate water with unknown, then it is reasonable to associate fire with a destined fate, because fire, however bright it once was, will ultimately turn to black smoke and(3155):

Heaven swallowed the smoke.

Heofon rece swealg.

It is the fear of the unknown that drove Beowulf to this “whale’s cliff,” and he died in glory, along with his anxiety to preserve his name for ever. To Wiglaf he said (2802-2808):

Order a bright mound made by the brave,
After the pyre, at the sea’s edge;
Let it rise high on whale’s cliff,
A memorial to my people, that ever after
sailors will call it ‘Beowulf’s barrow’
when the steep ships drive out on the sea,
on the darkness of waters, from lands far away.

What remains to be answered, then, is whether his death will will be realized or not. Is his people going to carry on the remembrance of him “ever after?” The answer seems to be negative when we recall the second funeral in the poem, the only other funeral where fire and pyre are present, and we see that this funeral follows the same procedure as that of Beowulf, with a woman beginning her mourning song (1117-1124):

Besides them both the noblewoman wept
Mourned with songs. The warrior rose up;
The mighty death-fire spiraled to heaven,
Thundered before the mound. Their heads melted,
Their gashes spread open, the blood shot out
of the body’s feud-bites. Fire swallowed up,
greediest spirit, ate all of both tribes
whom war had taken. Their glory was gone.

Here we see that the fire is not only a symbol of fate, but also something of purgative nature that purified the “greedy” souls of their glory. Only upon these purification can a soul be accepted by heaven, or, literally, “swallowed.” In this sense, both Beowulf’s demanding of gold at his death and his constant hunger for glory prove his greed. In this sense, Beowulf is really kindred of Grendel and the dragon whose hunger for vainglory, and for revenge settled their fate. The fate of Beowulf is even more clear when we compare his concept of courage with that of Wiglaf. Beowulf said earlier in the text (572-573):

… Wyrd oft nereÞ
Unfægne eorl, Þonne his ellen deah

Which is in direct contrast to Wiglaf’s words (3063-3064):

… It is a mystery where
A courageous man will meet his fated end

While Beowulf believes until his death that his undaunted character will always save him from fate, Wiglaf correctly states that no one really knows what courage will bring, and this is the cause of Beowulf’s death, because, obviously in Beowulf’s case, bravery is not the remedy to fate.

To further prove this point I would like to draw a connection between Beowulf and Grendel, because if we identify the dragon, kindred of Grendel and of Cain, with Sceafing, then we should also be able to draw a similar connection between Beowulf and one kindred of Cain, and it is not hard to find that it is Grendel whom we are looking for. This comparison is not drawn from the funerals because Grendel did not have one, but from what Beowulf and Grendel actually did and how they died. The wounding of Beowulf and Grendel are possibly the bloodiest scenes of the poem. At Beowulf’s battle, the dragon (2691-2693):

Caught and pierced him right through the neck
With his sharp fangs; all bloodied he was,
Dark life-blood; it flowed out in waves.

This recalls the scene of Beowulf wounding Grendel (815-818):

… the terrible creature
took a body wound there; a gaping tear
opened in his shoulder; tendons popped, muscle slipped the bone.

Both do not die immediately and both are aware of that the end of their lives are reached. A further connection can be drawn when we see the parallel between Grendel’s lonely attacking of the hall of Hrothgar and Beowulf’s sole challenge to the hall of the dragon, and both are fatally wounded there. The fact that Grendel is formless is also significant. Grendel is constantly associated with darkness and, when his body is addressed, it is referred to as a “shadow” (scua, 160), and this urges us to ask: a shadow of whom? That is, an evil double, a doppelganger of whom? The fact that people fail to discern between Beowulf and Grendel is also significant (783-788):

A sound went out, loud and high,

Raised horrible fear in Danish hearts,

In each of the men on the palisade wall

Who heard the cry-- God’s enemy

screaming his hate-song, a victory-less tune,

the hellish captive moaning his pain.

In this sense it is hard even for those are present to discern who is who and tell which side is winning. This is because, ultimately, Beowulf is kindred of Grendel, of Cain’s race. But does the poet intend to demonize Beowulf and use him as an “anti-example” to dissuade the Christian Anglo-Saxons from violence and pride? The answer is possibly negative. While Beowulf is not Christian, he serves as the transitional figure from the old Germanic pagan past to the Christian world where God’s fire purifies the vanities and his grace redeems the sinners.

It is important to note that the funeral of Scefing, someone lived four generations before Beowulf, had a traditional Germanic ship burial in which the dead is, symbolically, sent to the unknown, while Beowulf’s funeral is, more likely than not, a Romanized burial, but Beowulf is aware of his own fate and believes that his courage will leave him undoomed (unfægne). In this sense, I argue that the poet is sympathetic towards the lost Germanic past for his sympathizing portrayal of the heroic virtues such as bravery and loyalty to the lord, but is also supportive of the Christian ideas such as the abandonment of material pleasure. While the Anglo-Saxons abandoned the Germanic tradition (in sending the dragon to water) for their fear of the old, unknown inexplicable wyrd that is random and not merit-based, they chose to settle in a Christian culture where good shall be rewarded and bad is to be punished. The poet is certainly critical of some of Germanic traditions such as feud (fæhPe)

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because all the violence and killings in the poem is associated with feud, and the “last survivor’s” lament of the joylessness after the killing reveals the poet’s attitude (2236-2241):

… Death swept them off

In those distant times, and the one man left

Of the nation’s war-troop who survived the longest,

Mourning his friends, knew his fate,

That a short time only would he enjoy

the heaped treasures.

The poet refrains from making a choice between the Germanic past and the Roman Christianity, and it was because of this indecision that he chose to put the poem in a cyclic form. Every plot (Scefing and Beowulf’s funerals), every theme (fate and feud), every motif (fire and water, brightness and darkness), and every character seem to have their own doppelganger, either in their likeness or in direct opposite. This creates a sense of recurring-ness that never ends. Therefore it is not surprising to find that the poem starts and ends in a funeral, just as Scefing’s life, in the opening, begins and ends in an aimless wandering in the sea, and just as the young Wiglaf, like Beowulf in his youth, takes over the burden and let the story go on, supposedly, forever. When we look back to the very first sentence of the poem, we will find that there is also no beginning for the poem, because the audiences just finished their enjoyment of the story about the old days of the spear-Danes. The poem never ends, and it is left to wonder that what will be the next story, and what will be the fate of Wiglaf.

The poet’s search for the future of the Anglo-Saxon people did not end neither. Will it be a return to the Germanic past? Will it be a complete Christianization? The poet did not give an answer, instead, he said to us:

Men cannot say,

wise men in hall, nor warriors in the field,

not truly, who received the cargo.
Bibliography

