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BACHELOR THESIS

Christian and Pagan Symbols in Old English Literature
Křesťanské a Pohanské symboly ve Staroanglické literatuře

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I have written this bachelor thesis titled “*Christian and Pagan Symbols in Old English Literature*” by myself and that I did not use any sources other than those listed. I further declare that this thesis was not used to obtain another academic title.

In Prague November 1, 2024

I would like to express my gratitude to Bernadette Higgins, M.A, for her patience and to my parents for their support.

ABSTRACT

This bachelor's thesis deals with the influence that Christianity and the original Anglo-Saxon Pagan religions had on each other during the Christianization of Anglo-Saxon Britain. Above all, it deals with the coexistence of Christian and pagan symbols in the texts of Old English literature. The theoretical part deals with the historical context of the time in which the examined texts were written. It focuses on the Christianization of Anglo-Saxon Britain and the continuing influence of the original pagan faith and its symbols on literary art, mainly the epic poem *Beowulf*.

The practical part of this work deals with the analysis of the text of the epic poem *Beowulf*, the symbols used in it and their meanings.

KEYWORDS

Pagan symbols, Christian symbols, Beowulf, Old English literature

ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá vlivem, který na sebe měli křesťanství a původní Anglosaská pohanská náboženství v období christianizace Anglosaské Británie. Především se pak zabývá soužitím křesťanských a pohanských symbolů v textech Staroanglické literatury. Teoretická část se zabývá historickým kontextem doby, v níž byly zkoumané texty napsány. Zaměřuje se na christianizaci Anglosaské Británie a přetrvávajícím vlivu původní pohanské víry a jejich symbolů v literárním umění, převážně pak v epické básni *Beowulf*.

Praktická část této práce se pak zabývá rozбором textu epické básně *Beowulf*, s ohledem na využití symboly a jejich významy.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Pohanské symboly, Křesťanské symboly, Beowulf, Staroanglická literatura

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1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis is concerned with the coexistence of Pagan and Christian symbols throughout Old English literature and more broadly, the influence the remains of Paganism had on the newly Christianised Britain. It analyses the overall historical and social context of the period before and during the Christianisation of Anglo-Saxon Britain. It illustrates these points through the deeper analysis of the earliest surviving Old English poem, *Beowulf*. Written by an unknown author and with its origin being dated between the eight and eleventh centuries, *Beowulf* is one of the most important works of Anglo-Saxon literature. There are many elements within this poem that make it truly fascinating and its significant cultural influence continues to be felt even during this modern era. Almost everyone has heard of the poem, or at least consumed some piece media inspired by it. Be it *The Hobbit* and then *The Lord of the Ring* trilogy by Tolkien, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the video game *Skyrim* or the many movie adaptations of the tale, these are only some of the examples of the deep cultural impact the poem has had on culture and art throughout the ages. There seems to be something about the tale that inspires people to tell the story over and over again.

There are many elements of the original poem that make it so fascinating, among those, is the rare coexistence of Pagan and Christian themes and symbols. Within the epic, those very different religions exist beside one another and influence each other in deeply interesting ways, creating a story that somehow carries within itself the memory of an age long gone.

The goal of the practical part of this thesis is to analyse and determine the ways *Beowulf* reconciles its Pagan and Christian symbolism and themes. It focuses on the context in which the work was created and how it may reflect the time and society within which it was written. It analyses the way the spread of Christianity across Britain occurred and the effect the event had on the Pagan religions practiced there at the time. Furthermore, the thesis concentrates on the way the process of Christianisation in Anglo-Saxon Britain attempted to erase the pre-existing myths, legends and sacred cultic practices of the Pagan tribes populating the country. It also concentrates on the ways in which pieces of these ancient rituals, practices and myths survived. Be it in the form of folktales or as stories

transcribed by Christian scholars, the same way *Beowulf* was, and the effect such transcriptions had on the original form of these tales. The ways in which their original meanings bled through even in their Christianised form.

The theoretical part of the thesis focuses on the specific analysis of the epic poem, and the specific symbols and themes it contains. It focuses on the ways Christian themes, symbols and philosophies are represented throughout the poem and on the original Pagan elements, that remain present within the text. It puts both sets of symbols in context and further analyses the ways in which they influenced each other. It does so by analysing specific parts of the poem in context with the symbols they contain and providing an explanation as to their meaning within the story, the reason of their use as well as the context that might explain their addition to the story.

Beowulf is incredibly significant, both as a work of art and as an incredibly important piece of history. Containing philosophical views originating from two very different perspectives, *Beowulf* offers us a unique insight into the complicated period of time in which it originated.

2 THEORETICAL PART

2.1 Historical background

2.1.1 Paganism

Paganism is one of the most represented religions in the world, this is due to the fact that it encompasses a large number of spiritual and religious beliefs and practices which might otherwise be individually incompatible. The term 'Pagan' originates from the Latin word *paganus*, meaning villager, rustic or civilian which itself came from the term *pāgus* that itself refers to a rural district or a small unit of land (Aufderbruck-Londres 5). The use of the word itself can be traced back to Ancient Rome, there it was used to describe those, who instead of believing into one specific God worshipped pantheons consisting of multiple Gods, Goddesses and even various spirits. Paganism as a religion, tends to focus on a deeper connection with nature and spirituality, at its centre were traditional rituals transmitted for generations within tribes (Aufderbruck-Londres 7-8).

As opposed to most worldwide religions that place belief in the very centre of their pursuit, Paganist belief systems place the utmost importance on the practice of the religion itself. For those belief systems that have been called Pagan, the practice of traditional rituals and rites are at their very centre. It is also this disparity in the approach to belief and worship that further helped to widen the divide between Paganism and Christianity. In the eyes of the early Christians, the polytheistic religions they labelled as Pagan were seen as sacrilegious, their sacred rituals were seen as misguided and even demonic.

As was already established earlier, Paganism as a whole consists of a wide number of different religions and disparate beliefs, where those separate belief systems become one whole is in their shared practices. Many Pagans practice their religion by praying to their God(s) while others do so through honouring their ancestors, heritage and the traditions of their culture of origin. The honouring of ancestors is, in and of itself an incredibly important part of Pagan religious practices (Aufderbruck-Londres 5-6)..

In Paganism the words God and Goddess are often used simply as a metaphor for the unfathomable, they are often utilised to describe the various forces of nature that are seen as responsible for the happenings in the world. However, as was established earlier, Paganism serves as an umbrella term for a large number of different belief systems that are united under its metaphorical banner. In these various Pagan religions the different forces that hold sway over the lives of mortals are understood differently in each of them. Some practitioners see them as personified entities with which they can directly communicate and cultivate relationships, others, in contrast, believe in ethereal beings that serve, more as personifications of natural phenomena than sentient entities.

In the modern era, Paganism consists of hundreds, if not thousands of widely different groups with each having their own traditions, beliefs and rituals. Some of those groups are more notable than others, such as Wicca, also known as Pagan Witchcraft, they are now fast growing religions. Since its emergence in the 20th century, the religion has developed a large amount of diverse rituals and traditions that draw on ancient practices from times long gone dating to the Ancient Era. Among other contemporary Pagan religions, are reconstructionism, Heathenry, and Druidry. All of them repurpose and reframe the practices of religions that have preceded them and in so doing continue the traditions of Pagans that have come them (Bračko 6-7).

Some examples of the diverse ways in which Paganism is and was practiced throughout the are:

- Pantheism, panentheism, and/or animism – these attitudes follow the view that everything in our physical world can be perceived as some sort of a deity and also that all deity can be perceived as something from our world. Animism upholds similar values as pantheism and panentheism, the difference is that they do not acknowledge one God or Goddess but acknowledge some sort of a spirit or soul in all things, natural and man-made.
- Polytheism – this attitude towards religion is one that recognizes multiple deities, some recognize multiple Gods and Goddesses as one but some also recognize as unique beings.

- Respect towards nature and self – as mentioned earlier, Paganism is a religion that tends to focus on an individual's connection with nature, but the individuals also tend to view their bodies and minds as sacred.
- Ritual practices – rituals are viewed as a way of honouring their deities and ancestors, and most of the rituals are represented with sensory elements, such as dance, fires, water cleansing, song, or manifesting.
- Personal experience – this is the view that all personal experiences of an individual are sacred and that they bring more knowledge of the deities; can also be related to the respect of the self, one's body, and mind, and intuition are greatly accentuated as something sacred and of great importance
- Magic(k) – many Pagan rituals are performed with the intention of altering reality, which is essentially similar to prayer in other religions. Those who do practice rituals with these intentions are often referred to as witches and/or magicians.
- Ethics – Pagans uphold their morals in all aspects of their lives and are generally considered more important than rules - respecting and bettering oneself and the community while also doing no harm to others is essential in this religion.
- Pluralism – the view in which no other religion is lesser than Paganism, all religions have some values and Pagans believe that there cannot be only one religion that is right for every individual.

(Kraemer 11-13)

2.1.2 Paganism in society throughout the ages

Paganism, just as all other religions, was a way by which our ancestors could explain, understand and hopefully even influence nature and its forces. Natural phenomena were observed and in the absence of scientific explanations they were attributed to intangible, invisible and incredibly powerful beings, to spirits and Gods. The belief that all natural phenomena were to some degree alive, possessed of a sort of soul is the very core of Paganist religions (Bračko 9).

As our understanding of the world around us evolved and science continues to make great leaps the true cause of the various natural events, that first led ancient people to their gods have been discovered and explained.

Paganism has, therefore, evolved alongside our understanding of the world. But even throughout its evolution that eventually to the religion's current form, contemporary spirituality, its core values have stayed largely similar to their ancient origins. Paganism, as a whole, is oftentimes viewed as a “religion of nature”, and to good reason. It has always celebrated and worshipped, through its prayers and rituals, the natural and cosmic forces that govern the world of men.

From the first recorded instances of Paganist religions to the current form of the religion, the development of Paganism throughout the ages can be roughly divided into four main phases:

1. Prehistoric Paganism (\approx 40.000. – 2500. BC) It has evolved since the appearance of the first humans. In the late Stone Age (Palaeolithic), we can find first cave paintings, figurines, and other archaeological objects which point to the cults of the Horned God and the Mother Goddess, as well as the practice of magic, divination, healing, and herbalism.
2. Classic (Ancient) Paganism (2500. BC – 392.) It has evolved in Ancient European civilizations – Ancient Greece and Rome, but also among the Indo-European nations (Indians, Slavic people. Germanic people, Celts, etc.) who settled on the territories of Europe, the Middle East, and northern India. The development of Paganism in Europe was violently interrupted by the establishment of Christianity in the Roman Empire in the 4th century.

3. Medieval and modern Paganism (392. – 1951.) In this period, Paganism was forbidden, so it was kept and maintained to this day among witches who practiced natural magic, as well as in occult hermetic circles who practiced ceremonial magic. After the ban, paganism was preserved for another thousand years in the form of folk beliefs and customs, and the process of baptizing Europe was abolished by the 15th century.

4. Neo-Paganism (1951. – today) After the end of the persecution, paganism is once again developing in freedom. Countless communities, groups, and organizations are evolving. The most famous is Wicca.

(Iolar 39)

Every form of modern paganism can be, in some way, traced back to some form of Ancient Hellenistic Paganism, whether it be the worship of a multitude of different deities, natural deities or the cult of super human heroes. Hellenic Paganism that originated in Ancient Greece, can be considered as one of the original points from which all later branches of Paganism developed (Bračko 11).

2.1.3 Anglo-Saxon Paganism

The religion practised by the Anglo-Saxon people before their conversion to Christianity is commonly referred to as Anglo-Saxon Paganism, sometimes also called Anglo-Saxon heathenism. It is a polytheistic belief system that was practised by the Anglo-Saxons between the 5th and 8th centuries AD, this period of time is also referred to as Early Medieval England. The first signs of the development of this religion, however, can be found even earlier, tracing its roots as far back To the Iron Age of Europe and its, now forgotten religions. As a variation on traditional Germanic Paganism that was spread across the north-west of Europe, it was introduced to the British Isles following the Anglo-Saxon migration that took place during the middle of the 5th century. The varied and widespread collection of belief systems and cultic practices served as the dominant belief system across the whole of England up until its Christianisation, which took place between the 7th and 8th centuries AD. Some parts of Anglo-Saxon Paganism have through the ages transformed into folk tales and legends; these are now an intrinsic part of the folklore of the British Isles (Chaney 197-200).

Anglo-Saxon Paganism is a broad term that encompasses a large number of regional belief systems and cultic practices belonging to the different tribes that populated the area. The impressive number of different ways in which these practices manifested themselves varied widely on a regional level. This stems from the way Pagans perceived their religious beliefs and their relationships to the divine (Brennan 1).

Christian Romans and Christianised Anglo-Saxons first utilised the terms Paganism and Heathenism as pejorative and diminutive words to describe the practitioners of these religions. Those words, however, do not seem to have been the terms by which the practising Pagans would have described themselves. Due to the unique nature of Paganism, not as a single unified organised religion but as varied system of disparate beliefs and ancestral traditions that highly varied not only from region to region or tribe to tribe but also amongst individual pagan practitioners, it is highly difficult to gain information about the concrete rites that we only know how to describe through the lenses of Christian terminology and bias (Brennan,).

All of the contemporary knowledge about Anglo-Saxon Paganism we possess today is derived mainly from a few select sources. The textual records we have from the hands of Christian Anglo-Saxon converts, some examples of whom are authors like the Venerable Bede and Aldhelm, the first Anglo-Saxon we know wrote in Latin verse (Brennan 28-29). The various archaeological sites that still hold remaining evidence of cultic practices are also a crucial resource when it comes to the research concerning Paganism. Other ways by which contemporary researchers try to learn about the nature of Anglo-Saxon Paganism is by the analysis and subsequent comparisons and study of better recorded belief systems of neighbouring cultures such as were, for example, the Norse and their polytheistic pantheon gods and goddesses, divided into two groups. The Æsir and the Vanir.

Anglo-Saxon paganism was a polytheistic belief focused around a belief in deities known as the ése (singular ós). Among those deities one of the most prominent was probably Woden, king of the gods and god of wisdom, others included Thunor and Tiw. Besides gods, the ancient British Isles were, according to their inhabitants, home to many more supernatural beings amongst which were such creatures as elves, the nicor and dragons. Cultic practice oftentimes involved various demonstrations of devotion towards the concrete deity the ritual was meant to satisfy, this included the practice of sacrifice, be it of inanimate objects or that of animals. These Ritualistic sacrifices happened all throughout the year during certain religious festivals (Brennan).

Though there exists some evidence of wooden structures that would have probably filled the role of temples, other spaces devoted to cultic practices might have been out in the open; those would include some sacred trees or groves. Another, better known example of ancient places of worship are, what we today call megalithic structures such as menhirs, dolmens and stone circles. The best known example of such a structure is the famous megalithic site, known under the name Stonehenge. It is a prehistoric monument consisting of an outer and inner ring of standing stones that have over two meters in height.

Archaeologists believe the monument was constructed from around 3000 BC to 2000 BC. Throughout its long existence it has been used as a ritual site by various cultures, including the Anglo-Saxon Pagans and now continues to host modern druidic rituals to this day.

There is only very little we know about the way Pagans perceived and interpreted the world, we have, for example hardly any idea of the conception the Pagans had of the afterlife. The little evidence we have comes from the archaeological remains of funerary practices that involved the dead being either inhumed or cremated typically in the presence of a selection of grave goods, items buried with the deceased. It is also likely the belief systems of ancient pagans included practices such as magic and witchcraft, alongside elements that could be classified as forms of shamanism. What little is known about the religion and its mythology has since served as an influence for modern Paganism (Bračko 10-12).

One of the surprising ways in which ancient Anglo-Saxon paganism left its mark on the modern world are, interestingly, the names of the days of the week, as the deities of those forgotten religions provided the basis for their names in the English language..

Almost all the information we today have on European and thus Anglo Saxon Pagan religions and their cult practices come from the records Christian missionaries and monks kept of them. As the ancient tribes that inhabited Britain before the Roman occupation in the 50th century AD had kept almost no written records concerning their practices, we are forced to rely on the highly unreliable and biased records left behind by Christian scribes and poets that either tried to somehow preserve something of the myths and legends being actively erased by their own church or rewrote those stories to better place them in a Christian context and therefore further facilitate the transition to Christianity of the newly converted population. We are therefore left to rely on those sources and search for context clues that could lead us to similar stories that were orally passed down, hopefully unchanged, to try and guess what different cultic practices may have been taking place in Anglo-Saxon Britain before its Christianisation.

Paganism as a term, as was already mentioned in a previous part of this dissertation, has been used to describe and identify polytheistic worship specifically from the perspective of Abrahamic monotheism. The concept of monotheism and polytheism, these concepts were however constructed within monotheistic doctrine and would have been, therefore, mostly meaningless to an actual pagan practitioner (Brennan 1). A pagan would have viewed religion as a rather discrete and personal matter. Paganism was understood as highly

particular forms of speech and actions that were established, according to custom, as a way as to establish a conduit to the realm of the divine and thus maintain relationships with it and even, in some cases, harness its power in the hope that this divine favour would mean a favourable outcome in the present lives of the worshippers (Brennan 25).

The very recognition and perpetuation of these rituals and specific acts of worship was a matter of communal inheritance (Brennan 25). Social and religious lives were completely inseparable from one another. In sixth century England, the Pagans of the time would have understood themselves as simply upholding the traditional beliefs and cults particular to the role they filled in society or the tribe they belonged to. The matter of religion was not regarded as a personal choice but as a birth right, a connection through community in the practice of rituals to those who were kin to them from across the centuries. In this ancient world, the thing that came closest to the modern definition of religion would have been ones adherence to a personal philosophy (Brennan 25-26).

A cult is a communal setting within which the relations between mortals and the divine are secured through traditional rituals passed down from earlier generations. The goal is for the divine to look favourably upon the worshipper and thus secure the most desired outcome. On the other side of this is the more individualistic practice of magic. It is defined as an entirely instrumental pursuit aimed at manipulating and directly influencing the matters of the world (Brennan 26).

The term Pagan emerges from the encounter between the universalistic religion that Christianity was becoming and the traditional cults that were being practiced all across the Roman Empire. It was a way to characterise the Christian faith and its adherents in accordance to the highly moralised Christian self against a useful other, a spiritually and morally inferior collective that opposed the belief systems of Christianity and at the same time could not ever get the upper hand due to its very nature of sinfulness and immorality. *Paganus*, as a term, was first adopted by military circles in the third century and used to describe a so called 'country dweller', an inhabitant from the border regions. It was a demeaning term used for civilians that had not yet converted to the one true faith that Christianity viewed itself as. The colloquialism also served as to give newly converted Christians as well as potential converts a way to feel better and special in opposition to the

barbaric Pagans. Following the establishment of Christianity within the Roman Empire by the fourth century, the word *paganus* returned to its previous literal meaning, it however remained associated with its previous negative social connotations. It was a way for the newly Christianised urban elite city-dwellers to refer to mostly rural, Roman or barbarian, people that still followed and practiced their ancestral, tribal and civic traditions (Brennan 25-27).

2.1.4 The Christianisation of Anglo-Saxon Britain

The Christianisation of Anglo-Saxon Britain was a process that spans the whole of the 7th century. Starting with the arrival of a Gregorian mission, sent by the Pope Gregory the Great and with the monk Augustine of Canterbury at its head. The mission had, by the year 653, when the last missionary died, managed to establish Christianity in the south of Britain. By the 630s, Irish missionaries had made early inroads in Kent and Northumbria the death in 655 of King Penda of Mercia Following conversion of the South Saxons in 686, the Christianisation of the Germanic tribes in Britain was politically complete and an ecclesiastical infrastructure now in waiting (Brennan 25-30).

Most of the information available regarding this period of history can be found within the work of the English monk, scholar and writer known as the Venerable Bede. His most famous work, the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* the writing of which is estimated to have taken place in 731 AD, contains the history of Christian churches in England, and furthermore, the general history of England. The account of the events the Venerable Bede provides in his writing was then accepted as England's founding myth for ensuing centuries.

The Roman Empire legally adopted Christianity, especially Nicene Christianity as its official religion in the fourth century. Ever since that time, the religion had become accustomed to accommodating and incorporating different forms of classical Paganist practices while pushing itself into the already established political structures present within the empire. The missionary activities that took place in Britain in the seventh century had been regarded as the re-Romanisation of a previously lost province (Brennan 29). The Nicene Christianity that came from Rome was, as opposed to the 'natural inequality' commonly found in hierarchical systems present within the Germanic social structure, founded on the idea of human equality (Crehan 216-231). Other cults such as Germanic Arianism, a Christological doctrine attributed to the Arian missionary Ulifas that was dominant among the Longobards, Vandals and Goths, managed to maintain, at least within the Gothic their own rites, hierarchy and even in some cases their vernacular scriptures in a derivative of the runic alphabet. Arianism

provided the barbarian tribes that had recently migrated to former Roman provinces with a sense of cultural security and control over their religion (Fletcher 104-105)

The barbarian tribes that populated the British Isles did not understand or perceive Christianity as a theory but rather in context with their own connections with existing power structures (Cusack 19). This makes sense as the context we have already established places the pagan religious practices as inseparable from the civic and personal lives of their practitioners. In this context, it therefore makes sense that those same practitioners would see the newly arriving Christian religion in terms that were familiar to them and that they could easily understand as they were intrinsic to their lives and experiences.

The Roman missionaries of the time would have perceived the Germanic tribes they were attempting to Christianise through their previous experiences with the Goths, Franks and Lombards. They understood these people's relationships with their faith and in order to persuade the tribes into converting to their own religion, they introduced Christianity as simply a new tribal cult replacing the old ones. Presenting and explaining it as an established set of technical ritual actions that were simply demonstrably more effective in the maintaining of human relations with the divine than the old ancestral practices of the peoples they were converting. These replacement rituals were instrumental in the weakening and dissipating of heathen cultic practices and were therefore and inseparable part of these early missionary efforts (Brennan 30).

Alongside the replacements of rituals it was also crucial to replace the divine personas worshipped in the old cults. And so, replacement rituals came hand in hand with replacement myths. Basic replacement myths such as those recounting the tale of the Ruler of Victories and his heroic Son were needed in order to persuade the barbarians that the Triune God was a deity worth following. This modified type of Christianity would, therefore, appeal to the things the barbarian leaders valued in religion. Things like effective rituals, as well as a sense of continuity with the tribal past in syncretised forms of cult (Brennan 31). The present scientific consensus argues that because of their relatively recent history as a settler people, the Anglo-Saxon tribes might have been particularly receptive to a form of Christianity that supported a strong sense of traditional tribal identity and also permitted its refashion under new circumstances. The tribes that migrated to

Britain from the north of Germany and the south of Scandinavia, among others the Angles, Saxons and Jutes arrived in *in* 'small, unconnected parties of adventurers, with warrior leaders surrounded by their companions' (Mayr-Harting 15). Among these migrating Germanic peoples the disconnection from ancient places of worship strongly weakened the integrity of their ancestral traditions (Thompson 101). These settlers would arrive via the waterways and disembark whenever they found land good enough to settle and by the middle of the 6th century a variety of small kingdoms began to emerge. While some of these newly created Pagan Anglo-Saxon kingdoms could be identified according to the traditional Germanic tribal identities, the West Saxons, East Saxons, East Angles are an example of this, these identifiers were not translated into political unity. Those types of settler societies are usually characterised by a strong tension between the ideas of traditionalism and innovation (Semple 381-385). The Anglo-Saxons had a strong need for cohesion and traditionalism, having lost the tangible features of cult by which their tribal identities would have been defined in their homelands. In order to fulfil this need, they would have been open to rapidly adopting a new cultic infrastructure.

While contemporary English Christianity is officially Orthodox, upon further inspection, it appears to have incorporated aspects of the original Anglo-Saxon traditions, specifically via this negotiated reinterpretation of the ancient Roman missionaries.

2.1.5 The influence of Paganism and Christianity on Old English literature

What little is left of Old English literature is a rather scarce collection of works comprised mostly of religious texts, poems and historical documentation (Bračko 13). The reason for this is the way the Saxons and Britons used to pass their stories down. The long tradition of passing stories down as oral tales rather than them being written down is the reason why our modern collection of these works is so very scarce. Although many of these orally passed down works were later written down and even published, their original source generally remains unknown, we rarely know the name or even the exact time during which most of these works were created and composed (Bračko 13-14).

Old English literature mostly draws from a large collection of German poetry, Anglo-Saxon songs, folklore, legends and poems. Despite their overall disparity the thing all of these literary works have in common is their characterisation as Pagan. The elements of the Paganist faith they contain are, amongst others, the appearances of mythical monsters, the heroes who slay them, the various deities and nature spirits that appear in both benevolent and malevolent roles (Bračko 13). All of the Old English works thusly written down were heavily edited by the Christian clergymen, as it was the church who at the time counted most of the literate population within its ranks. As the Pagan religions, along with all religions other than the Christian one were at odds with the very doctrine at the centre of the belief system, the existence of a one true god could only ever possible if all other religions were themselves, false.

Due to this fact, all of these works have been heavily rewritten and edited to tone down the more obvious Pagan traditions, while, at the same time, keeping and preserving some of the history of the now subjugated people. It was also this way that the church assimilated these various cultures and tribes. This, however, led to a fascinating and distinctive overlap between the writing and stylistic elements of both faith systems. Although the natural deities were replaced by the Christian God throughout such rewritten texts, nature still tends to hold an important part in these new stories. It is now, however, clearly characterised as being one of His creations, not as a sentient all powerful and God-like entity of its own. The literature of this period was used, mainly, as a persuasion tool, to lead the lost heathens to the “right” way of life (Bračko 14). The existence of the divine, of

the one true Christian God permeates these texts throughout and yet, some of the original themes and philosophies are still present within them. Sometimes well-hidden, right beneath the surface and on other occasions not really hidden at all. Those clearly Pagan symbols that contradict but also complement the Christian symbolism and imagery that within the works of Old English literature, exist alongside the all-encompassing presence of a God whose worshippers would see them all destroyed and forgotten. It is also that inherent contrast that defines the literature of the time.

These newly Christianised texts were focused mostly on the explanations of how one should lead a holy and repentant life with the intentions of getting into Heaven, on the importance of the afterlife as the ultimate reward or the ultimate punishment in the forms of Heaven and Hell, for those who did not let go of their sinful ways. The idea that God is present and can be found everywhere and in anything around us is a core concept in Christianity (Bračko 13-15).

Contrary to this, the original Pagan tales tended to focus on the effects nature had on men and in their turn, the effect men have on nature, both directly and indirectly. They focused on the importance of magic, rituals, and tradition while still providing tales and lessons of morality, although it was a morality very different to the one of the Christian god. Pagan tales were those of very flawed heroes whose assets were their strangest and whose worth was measured through their heroic deeds. Deeds such as the slaying of monsters that, although mostly malevolent, was in no way demonic. They simply represented very real and tangible harms the societies of the time could come across. Sometimes these creatures even played neutral roles in their stories, serving simply as a symbol of the natural force they were supposed to embody. On other occasions, they were presented as helpful beings, bestowing gifts of strength and magic on those mortals who somehow proved themselves to them. These beings, monsters and deities alike, were as complex in character as any person made of flesh and blood, even more so perhaps in their very nature, incomprehensible to humans. They did not embody the concepts of ultimate good and evil, they were simply the personifications of the capricious natural phenomena that so greatly influenced the lives of people. Their personalities were unpredictable and mostly beyond the understanding of mortals, just as the forces they embodied, with their strange and

unfathomable rules and their tendency to bestow either wonderful gifts or terrible and cruel curses seemingly on a whim. But despite that, even with their fickle nature, these spirits have always been very close to humans. The people who worshipped them, be it out of fear or wonder, felt close to their gods in a way the monotheistic Christianity with its black and white absolute morality could not provide. That is maybe also the reason why these Pagan symbols and entities, despite the enduring efforts to erase them, endured in the translated Christianised texts.

Although allegory was heavily utilised in both Pagan and Christian texts, the ends toward which it was employed varied greatly between the two belief systems (Bračko 14). In Paganism allegory was a way to somehow defend and explain the unbelievable occurrences and acts that pagan myths were based on. Meanwhile, Christian texts used their allegorical devices as a way to make the originally Pagan stories more morally acceptable and easily available to the newly Christian public (Gardner John 2). There is also a lot of juxtaposition present in those texts that were retroactively adapted from their original Paganist themes by their Christian writers. Some of the most common examples of such juxtapositions are summer vs. winter, soul vs. body, and fleeting vs. fixed.

Pagan themes and symbols can be found all throughout the works of Old English literature. In the *The Dream of the Rood*, a Christian poem preserved inside of the 10th century *Vercelli Book* Pagan and Christian themes coexist clearly alongside each other. The poem attempts to reconcile the vast differences between both religions by blending together symbols and themes familiar to both beliefs systems. The aim of this enterprise may very well have been the attempt to attract Germanic Pagans toward the Christian faith and make the religion more appealing to those who still hold on to their ancestral values. It supports Christian beliefs using heroic qualities valued by Paganism. The unknown author of the poem utilises heroic elements of fame, honour and wealth to further uplift the Christian story of the crucifixion of Christ. Other than that, the poem contains other Pagan elements, such as the talking tree, in some ways reminiscent of the world tree Yggdrasil (Kennedy 2-3).

The Seafarer is a poem discovered in the *Exeter Book*, a manuscript containing the largest known collection of Old English poetry. It contains themes of suffering and loneliness that

are characteristic of Old English poetry. These harsh states of being are, in turn, faced with stoic endurance. Ways to overcome this suffering are addressed from both a Pagan and a Christian point of view. Within the story, the “hero” discusses both the Pagan notion of winning glory in battle and being buried with treasure alongside the fear of God’s judgement in the afterlife.

The epic poem *Beowulf* is, without a doubt, one of the best known and most striking examples of Old English poetry. The poem contains both, a very clear Pagan setting, Pagan topics and symbols as well as an abundance of symbols and themes belonging to Christianity. It is probably among the most interesting examples of the strange coexistence of Pagan and Christian philosophies within Old English texts. The poem offers an insight into the real world tensions and the circumstances that led it to exist in its current form. These contrasts bring a better understanding of the time period within which *Beowulf* was written.

2.2 Epic poetry

Epic poetry, or simply epic for short is a type of narrative poetry recounting the incredible stories of great civilisations, heroic deeds and accomplishments performed by extraordinary characters as they encounter and interact with various godly or otherwise supernatural entities (Meyer). An epic usually deals with various subjects such as heroic legends, myths, histories, animal stories, philosophical and moral theories or edifying religious tales. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary* the English word *epic* has its etymological roots in the Latin word *epicus* which in turn comes from the Hellenistic Greek adjective ἐπικός (*epikos*) “...relating to the epic genre of poetry “ (Ibid.), ἐπικός (*epikos*) then comes from the Ancient Greek word ἔπος (*epos*) which can be translated as word, narrative or song. Furthermore the primary definition of an epic given to us by *The Oxford English Dictionary* is “... a poem, typically derived from ancient oral tradition, which celebrates in the form of a continuous narrative the achievements of one or more heroic characters of history or legend.“

Epic poetry has a long and varied history; people of different cultures all over the world have used it as a tool to help transmit their unique traditions from one generation to another without the help of written language. As such, the origins of epic poems can be traced to a time before the invention of writing. Those oldest epics were composed and performed by bards. The poems thusly told usually consist of legendary narratives recounting tales of national heroes and the glorious deeds they accomplished during their lifetimes. The study of living oral traditions from the early 20th century, explains how these lengthy texts could be remembered. The literary technique known as parataxis shows that to facilitate their memorisation the bards favoured short and simple sentences, using coordinating and avoiding the use of conjunction (Chadwick 41).

One of the oldest recognised examples of epic literature is the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 2500–1300 BCE which has its origins in ancient Mesopotamia and details the exploits and accomplishment of its titular character, the legendary king, Gilgamesh. The *Iliad*, written between the 7th and 8th century BC and the *Odyssey*, written in the 8th century BCE, the two epic poems fundamentally important to ancient Greek literature, composed by the legendary author Homer, also serve as an example of primary epics. In later years,

Homer's style was adapted to accommodate written language by other authors. This includes writers such as Virgil and his epic poem the *Aeneid*, written between 29 and 19 BC, in which he tells the legendary tale of the Trojan Aeneas who, after fleeing the fall of Troy travelled to Italy and became the ancestor to the Romans. Dante Alighieri, and his three part epic the *Divine Comedy*, 1308-1320 in which the reader is taken through an imaginative representation of the afterlife, in the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. The poem concerned with the biblical story of the Fall of Man by [John Milton](#), *Paradise Lost*, first published in 1667 are only some of the examples.

The epic has sometimes been identified as a specific kind of heroic oral poetry that manifests itself during what is commonly referred to as a "heroic age", a period of history in an ancient culture when legendary heroes possessed of super human abilities are said to have lived in the world. Those times have been experienced by several nations throughout history. The Greek Heroic Age, for example, is the period of time when Greek mythology is supposed to have happened, semi-divine human heroes walked the earth and performed incredible deeds. The Germanic Heroic Age, a period of early history and quasi-historical events in the 4th and 5th centuries AD, is reflected in Germanic heroic poetry. And the British Heroic Age, taking place from the 4th to the 7th centuries AD, is defined by the Celtic culture and texts in the early Welsh language. It is also the period of history when the myth of King Arthur first emerges. In most cases, the times of the heroic age are experienced by cultures in the early stages of their development during which they struggle to find a unified national identity. In such a context, the emergence epic poems recounting the exploits of god like national heroes is not surprising in the least (Chadwick 41).

The medium of the epic has been and continues to be used by various cultures throughout the world as a way to transmit traditions from one generation to another and do so even without an established system of writing. And even in modern times those stories consisting of legendary narratives continue to be remembered and preserved.

2.3 *Beowulf*

To accurately determine the origin of the epic poem *Beowulf* is not a simple task. The poem itself survives and is brought to us in the form of a Post-Conquest manuscript. Regarding its dating it is vital to differentiate between the most likely date of the initial composition of the poem and the date of the only surviving manuscript that now carries this fascinating poem.

Generally, the manuscript is dated to have been created sometime during the 11th century. Even so, it is agreed by most researchers that the composition of the poem itself had taken place much earlier. In the dating of *Beowulf*, the problem that comes with using the for anything historical while using only historical evidence to date it, can be avoided when the poem is dated based on linguistics rather than historical grounds (Neidorf).

Beowulf offers a fascinating insight into the principles and values held by the early Anglo-Saxons. It is, however, crucial to point out that literature does not reflect the truth as it would be understood from a historical perspective. It rather provides us with an insight into the cultural understandings of such things such as morality and the ways in which these ancient peoples comprehended their places in society as well as their view of the world around them and the ways in which it influenced them and they influenced it in turn.

A collection of different tests, linguistic, lexical and metrical, all lead to the conclusion that the text of *Beowulf* likely originates sometime in the 8th or 9th century, it is usually assumed the poem was originally composed between the years 685-825. Joseph Bachlechner, who attempted to date *Beowulf* purely through a linguistic framework centered his analysis of the work on the usage, within the poem, of the dynastic name mere-wioing ('Merovingian') within the text (*Beowulf* line 2921). Bachlechner then argued, it likely demonstrated the text had its origin in the 8th century (Chase 3). This view has also been adopted by the British medievalist Tom Shippey, who argued that the use of the word 'Merovingian' within *Beowulf* was especially significant, as the usage of the word declined after the 8th century (Shippey 402). In his dating of *Beowulf*, the author Thomas Bredehoft focuses on metrical evidence instead of lexis. Through this linguistic framework, he also determines that the probable date of origin of this poem is indeed the

8th century (Bredehoft 97–111). This theory has been largely accepted by the scholarly community.

Beowulf defines itself clearly as a post-conversion poem, and within the text, there can be found internal evidence that the author was indeed Christian. As was discussed earlier in the text, however, *Beowulf* first took shape within the oral tradition and so the history of the tale told by the poem is much older. While the fights and battles depicted in the *Beowulf*, such as the battles between the titular hero and sea monsters, Grendel and his mother and the dragon have, obviously, no historical foundation, the story itself is set in a semi-historical world. That fact is made clear throughout the tale as the titular hero meets and interacts with characters who have a basis in the real world. Amongst them is, for example, Hygelac. His raid on Frankish lands, that is alluded to in the poem has also been recorded in the *Historia Francorum* by Bishop Gregory of Tours and is datable to the year 521 (Day, 11). The story told by the epic is clearly Pagan in nature and generally approaches Paganism sympathetically. Although it does not overly dwell on religious differences, there are passages where Christian morality denounces pagan practices outwardly (Heaney 179-180). The main purpose of this poem can be understood as a way to represent a part of Germanic history before the Christian conversion. The epic of *Beowulf*, however, does not find its origin in the written word. It has been theorised, and even suggested within the lines of the poem itself, that this tale has lived in the oral tradition long before it was put to paper (Heaney 1-2), (Day, 11).

When the poet mentions the Christian god, the idea clearly is not thought to be incompatible with the notion of pre-Christian heroic ideals. Through this lens, *Beowulf* should not be viewed as a work of Christian revisionism but in the contrary, as a poem that tries to paint a sympathetic picture of the culture and the society that existed before the Christian faith became dominant (Day, 11). As was mentioned before, the poem itself, in some places (Heaney 1-2), suggests that long before it was ever first written down, an older version of the story came to the poet in oral form. While it is commonly safe to assume, that the poem as we know it took its recognisable form during the 8th century, the legend of which it speaks is probably much older and has itself a long history of oral transmission. In its duality, the poem demonstrates the compatibility of such notions as the

Pagan understanding of warrior kings with Christian ideals. It is also important to keep in mind the complex chronological layers that are inseparable from any study of the poem (the manuscript originating in the 11th-century, the written poem originating in the 8th century and the historical legend from the 6th century), or the context within which it was created.

Beowulf as a poem is part of a storytelling tradition going back to the times before the establishment of the Christian church in England. (Orchard 99-105). With *Beowulf* conveying both pre-Christian and Christian ideas, it demonstrates the potential compatibilities between Pagan and Christian ideals. (Wormald 40).

3 PRACTICAL PART

3.1 The story of *Beowulf*

The epic poem *Beowulf* is composed of two parts. The first part of the story begins in Denmark, with Hrothgar, King of the Danes and his fabulous mead hall Heorot. In this place of celebrations, the joyous merriment of the Danes angers the monster living in a nearby swamp, Grendel. For the following twelve years the creature attacks and devours Hrothgar's warriors (*The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

Upon learning of the Dane's trouble, the young prince of the Geats, Beowulf arrives with a small group of warriors and offers his help in slaying the vile beast. Hrothgar welcomes the young hero, and after some discourtesy, when one of Hrothgar's men insults Beowulf, the night comes and with it comes Grendel. Beowulf engages him in battle and, refusing to use a weapon, he grips one of the monster's hands and tears it off at the shoulder. Thus mortally wounded, Grendel returns to his swamps to die. The arm is then displayed in the mead hall for all to admire (*The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

The following day there is much rejoicing in the halls of Heorot, with a feast thrown in the honour of the hero. But then, as all the warriors are asleep, Grendel's mother, another monster, comes to avenge the death of her son. She kills one of Hrothgar's men and in the following morning, Beowulf dives into her lake to find her. The monster attacks him and after a struggle at the bottom of a cave, he finally slays her with a sword. He discovers Grendel's corpse and takes his head back to Heorot. Beowulf is gifted many priceless gifts, is described as a true hero in a speech made by Hrothgar and returns home to King Hygelac of the Geats (*The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

The second part of the poem rapidly passes over the deaths of Hygelac and his son. Beowulf inherits the kingship and his rule is peaceful for 50 years. Then the calm is disturbed by the coming of a fire-breathing dragon, enraged after a man stole from his lair. To stop the ravages the creature is causing, the aging Beowulf chooses to battle the monster, despite knowing it will likely result in his death. After a long and terrible fight, during which all but one of Beowulf's kinsmen, the young Wiglaf, desert the battlefield,

the dragon is ultimately killed. Beowulf is, however,, mortally wounded by the dragon's poison, before his death, he names Wiglaf his successor. The old lord is then cremated and buried in a barrow by the sea. As his kinsmen mourn his death, they express the worry that without the legendary hero, their lands will be invaded by neighbouring tribes (*The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

3.2 Pagan and Christian themes on *Beowulf*

As has been established earlier in this dissertation *Beowulf* is a Pagan poem of Anglo-Saxon origin. The poem probably originates in the form of a pre-existing Pagan fable, and given the plot and writing style, it was almost certainly written down by a Christian author sometime between the 8th and 11th century. The story itself is set in Denmark, from where it form probably originated. Even though its Pagan themes are clearly expressed throughout, the work it is not universally Pagan, as Christian themes and symbols can be found all throughout the poem. Some examples include the parts where the Christian god is clearly mentioned in the text (Haney 14). The practice of Christians rewriting older Pagan stories and imbuing them with new Christian symbols and themes was not uncommon during the period of Christianisation of Anglo-Saxon Britain. The titular hero, *Beowulf*, is viewed through a different lens in the Christian context, than in the original Pagan context of the tale. He is no longer driven by the motives typical for Pagan stories, some of which are virtue, morality, loyalty, and revenge. He can now be presented as a warrior of God, almost acting as His messenger. His mission being the spreading of God's message so that those who follow him can be spared from the fires of eternal damnation and can be, instead awarded an afterlife in Heaven. He puts Hrothgar and his subjects on the path towards good. He teaches them the right values and righteousness and through the faith they have in him they also believe in God and are subsequently saved from the malevolent demonic forces that menaced them (Bračko 15-16). In this new context, *Beowulf* embodies, not the Pagan heroic ideal, but he becomes an almost Christ-like figure. Just as Jesus is able to perform miracles, *Beowulf*'s displays extraordinary feats of strength and miraculous prowess in the fighting of monsters.

An example to further demonstrate the ways in which Christian concepts influenced this Pagan story takes place after *Beowulf*'s battle with Grendel's mother. *Wyrd* as a term originates in the Old Norse and is sometimes personified as one of the Norns, deities from Norse mythology that are responsible for shaping destinies. In Anglo-Saxon culture, the term roughly corresponds to the concept of fate. It represents the Pagan belief that all things are predetermined. Yet, during the fight, *Beowulf* rejects the Pagan notion and says that it is God that has decided his victory and saved his life (Haney 115). This rejection

goes directly against the commonly held Pagan belief that it is destiny that determines the life of every man, and no matter one's actions, everything is always predetermined by fate. In opposition to the Pagan understanding of free will, where the lives of heroes and monsters alike were controlled by fate above all else, Christians believe that God has given free will to all people, the fates of mortals are no longer predetermined by *wyrd* but are now looked after by god himself.

Even though Christian themes can be consistently found within the text, it is still largely a Pagan story. *Beowulf* tells the clearly Pagan tale of a legendary hero gifted with supernatural strength that battles and kills monsters in order to protect those that the vile creatures put in danger. *Beowulf* contains, amongst others, various themes of loyalty, the blind loyalty of a soldier towards his lord, the loyalty the lord has toward his soldier in return, loyalty to ones ancestors and the heritage they left to their descendants. The titular hero of the tale, along with other characters, display clear Pagan values and embody the ideals the people of this faith valued. Beowulf's heroic courage to defend ones belief and possessions, a great sense for revenge, curtesy and respect towards the ancestors and the supernatural are amongst those.

Pagan heroic poems are commonly divided into two distinctive parts. One is populated by the hero and all the people who put their faith in him, the second one consists of the hero's enemies, the monsters that attack the innocent and the hero has to. The characters in *Beowulf* also follow this rule. On one side stands Beowulf, the titular hero in the centre of the story, beside him are the people who put their faith in him. On the opposing side consists of Grendel, Grendel's mother and the dragon (Bračko 17).

Most of the Pagan elements found throughout the story can be attributed to its origin in Norse Paganism. The character of Grendel, for example, offers a fascinating example of the two different belief and ideological systems that influence the text. Throughout the story, Grendel, the monster who terrorises the mead hall Heorot, is described not only as a *jötunn*, or *eoten* in Old English, a supernatural being from in Norse and Germanic mythology but also as a demonic being. Despite this example of negative representation of Paganism through the character of Grendel, many other Pagan elements present in the poem are presented in a more sympathetic light (Bračko 16). A widespread belief in the

supernatural is common all throughout the work. Other clearly Pagan themes include the funerary traditions of ship burials and cremation, the before mentioned concept of *wyrd* and swords that hold special meanings such as the three swords Beowulf uses during the story (Olexová 8), (Bračko 16). First his own sword Naegling, then the sword Hrunting he receives during the quest to kill Grendel's mother, and finally a giant sword that remains unnamed he finds within Grendel's mother's cave.

Another fascinating marriage of Pagan and Christian symbols is found in the part of the text that describes the engravings on the hilt of the weapon used to slay Grendel's mother. They are said to depict the story of the Christian god punishing evil forces in the world. The symbolism of the biblical flood wiping out giants, creatures originating from Nordic Paganism, is yet another way in which parts of both religions blend together:

*Hrothgar spoke; he examined the hilt,
that relic of old times. It was engraved all over
and showed how war first came into the world
and the flood destroyed the tribe of giants.
They suffered a terrible severance from the Lord;
the Almighty made the waters rise,
drowned them in the deluge for retribution.*

(Haney 1687-1693)

The notion of *wyrd* is present many times throughout the poem. Through the dialogue between Beowulf and Hrothgar where the King of the Danes says that "*Fate always goes as it must.*" (Heaney 455). This line is indicative of the common Pagan belief, that instead of individual skill, strength, heroics any other external factor within Beowulf's control or even the will of God, the thing that will ultimately determine the issue of his battle with Grendel, is going to be fate. The hero Beowulf also holds the Pagan values of *wyrd* and puts his life and the life of others in the hands of fate, he expresses this by saying "*Often, for undaunted courage, fate spares the man it has not already marked.*" (Heaney 572-573).

The concept of *wyrd* is extremely common in pagan stories. Throughout different tales and legends, the idea of prophecies that predict inevitable events is very prevalent. Beowulf himself is the ideal of the warrior, a hero by the Pagan understanding of the term, he has far more power and strength than an ordinary person that is also the reason he is the one chosen for the task of slaying a bloodthirsty monster. Even though Beowulf, as a warrior, fights for honour and glory it is in keeping with the pagan themes of the text that he expects some sort of reward for his heroic deeds, the form of the reward, however, is not necessarily material in nature. The form the reward might take can be a multitude of things, whether the hero lives or perishes, the reward of being immortalised through his heroic actions, in song or in text, therefore providing him with great fame and furthermore, a form of eternal life (Bračko 16).

In this piece of Anglo-Saxon art, pagan views and traditions are part of the story, this is especially important for the understanding of another crucial theme in the epic poem. And that is the way the very nature of good and evil is addressed throughout the *Beowulf*. Within Paganism tends to combine character traits with natural occurrences such as are storms, the changes in seasons, the cycle of days and nights. As Beowulf defeats various supernatural foes throughout the course of the story, his victories against Grendel, Grendel's mother and, ultimately, the dragon, essentially allow him to also defeat the natural element that they embody (Bračko 17). In Christianity, good and evil are always in battle, just as life and death. Beowulf's victories are all described to take place during the summer months, except for his final one. His defeat of the dragon, whose poison is ultimately responsible for his demise is in contrast, depicted as taking place in the winter. This is symbolism that clearly coincides with the Pagan understanding that good and evil are being brought closer to the reader through the natural phenomena that is the changing of the seasons (Bračko 17). Those accompany important actions and events; they help to describe the strongest shifts in good and evil with the help of symbolism of the opposites – summer and winter.

Another important Pagan theme often present in the text is the importance placed on swords. A sword used by the hero bears a name that is thematically important to either, its wielder, the context in which it was created and obtained or the battles it helped win.

Throughout the story Beowulf uses three different swords, all of which have their thematic meaning. Within the text, named swords are treated almost like characters of their own, the hero shows loyalty towards it and treats it respectfully (Bračko 17).

In the poem, Beowulf's sword named "Hrunting", given to Beowulf by Unferth, is described in great detail and reverence towards it:

And another item lent by Unferth

at that moment of need was of no small importance:

the brehon handed him a hilted weapon,

a rare and ancient sword named Hrunting.

The iron blade with its ill-boding patterns

had been tempered in blood. It had never failed

the hand of anyone who hefted it in battle,

anyone who had fought and faced the worst

in the gap of danger. This was not the first time

it had been called to perform heroic feats.

(Heaney 1455-1464)

Unferth's sword, who failed to defeat Grendel, as he admits the loss of his former glory and his submission to the superior warrior, is very interesting in its symbolism. The exchange of weapons had a great significance in the Anglo-Saxon world and a clear emphasis is strongly placed on the exchange of weapons of war. This makes subsequent failure of the sword to defeat the mother of the monstrous Grendel a possible representation of the failure of the sword's previous owner.

In pagan poems, heroes considered death in combat to be the most honourable way to depart the world. This is expressed especially, during Beowulf's battle with Grendel's mother (Bračko 18):

So must a man do

*who intends to gain enduring glory
in a combat. Life doesn't cost him a thought.
Then the prince of War-Geats, warming to this fight
with Grendel's mother, gripped her shoulder
and laid about him in a battle frenzy (...)*

(Seamus Heaney 1534-1539)

The theme of vengeance and revenge, the retaliation for past wrongs is also an important part of Pagan culture and this is clearly shown in Beowulf. This principle is obeyed by heroes and monsters alike. The whole of the second battle, in which Beowulf participates, is caused only by revenge. Grendel's mother, following the rule common to pagan warriors, sets to avenge the death of her monstrous son by killing his killer Beowulf. Beowulf in turn, must kill Grendel's mother as revenge for Aeschere, Beowulf's relative she killed. This desire for revenge can be clearly seen in the following verses (Bračko 19):

*"(...) an ideal weapon,
one that any warrior would envy,
but so huge and heavy of itself
only Beowulf could wield it in a battle.
So the Shieldings' hero, hard-pressed and enraged,
took a firm hold of the hilt and swung
the blade in an arc, a resolute blow
that bit deep into her neck-bone
and severed it entirely, toppling the doomed
house of her flesh; she fell to the floor.
The sword dripped blood, the swordsman was elated."*

(Heaney 1559-1569)

Despite the Christian themes overall present in the poem, *Beowulf* is not, as we have previously established, a purely Pagan poem. In the poem, differences between Pagan and Christian elements are oftentimes hard to distinguish from one another. On a close reading, the separate influences can be identified more clearly.

During the fight that takes place between Beowulf and Grendel's mother, when she momentarily gains the upper hand and is preparing to deal a fatal blow to the hero, Beowulf is saved by his faith through an act of God himself. It is in this part of the text we can see a clear difference between the Pagan concept of *wyrd*, and Christian free will and divine intervention:

*“So she pounced upon him and pulled out
a broad, whetted knife: now she would avenge
her only child. But the mesh of chain-mail
on Beowulf's shoulder shielded his life,
turned the edge and tip of the blade.
The son of Ecgtheow would have surely perished
and the Geats lost their warrior under the wide earth
had the strong links and locks of his war-gear
not helped to save him: holy God
decided the victory. It was easy for the Lord,
the Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance
once Beowulf got back up on his feet.”*

(Heaney 1545-1556)

Once the battle is over, Beowulf, victorious, emerges from the cursed waters of The Lake of the Monsters in a fashion highly reminiscent of the biblical baptism. Through the now purified water, Beowulf is cleansed in return, both in his body and his soul:

*Then away he swan, the one who had survived
the fall of his enemies, flailing to the surface.
The wide water, the waves and pools
were no longer infested once the wandering fiend
let go of her life and this unreliable world.
The seafarers' leader made for land,
resolutely swimming, delighted with his prize,
the mighty load he was lugging to the surface.*

(Heaney 1618-1625)

Arguably the most important and interesting blend between Pagan and Christian themes in the poem can be observed in the character of the monster whose actions serve as the catalyst for the start of the plot, Grendel himself. While the creature clearly is a Pagan monster in origin, reminiscent of Nordic *jötunns*, his existence within the text is irrevocably tied to several biblical themes. Amongst other things, he and his mother are referred to as descendants of the biblical Cain, whose children were cursed by God as punishment for his killing of his brother, Abel:

*Grendel was the name of this grim demon
haunting the marches, marauding round the heath
and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time
in misery among the banished monsters,
Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed
and condemned as outcasts. For the killing of Abel*

*the Eternal Lord had exacted a price:
Cain got no good from committing that murder
because the Almighty made him anathema
and out of the curse of his exile there sprang
ogres and elves and evil phantoms
and the giants too who strove with God
time and again until He gave them their reward.*
(Heaney 102-114)

Cain, one of the most important figures in the Bible, one of the sons Adam and Eve had after their banishment from the Garden of Eden. Cain, the first murderer, who killed his brother Abel in a fit of rage and was subsequently banished by God himself, cursed so that his lineage would bear only monsters. This relation between Cain and Grendel that directly links the poem to the events that occurred in the Bible serves as one of the most important blends of Christian and Pagan symbols in the epic poems. It directly unites both the demonic and the supernatural representation of evil, the Christian god and Satan are linked with Pagan monsters (Bračko 23).

The final battle of the story, where Beowulf now king, along with a group of warriors, fights the dragon and ultimately meets his death. In this context the dragon itself serves as maybe the poem's most important symbol, it embodies the idea of *wyrd*. It imbues the rest of the story with an atmosphere of gloom and death. Where Beowulf was essentially invulnerable to Grendel and his mother he is very mortal in front of the dragon. The dragon emerges from below the earth as the hero feels the coming of his own death approaching (*SparkNotes: Beowulf: Lines 2516–2820*). Beowulf's unwillingness to meet his own death is emphasised within the text:

*(...) give ground like that and go
unwillingly to inhabit another home*

in a place beyond (...)

(Heaney 2588–2590)

This poetic depiction of death poetic as the movement from one realm to the next, from the earthly realm to the spiritual one, showcases the influence of Christian ideology on poem. Through this lens, the dragon can also be seen as a Biblical creature, the embodiment of absolute evil. It is reminiscent of the serpentine form the Devil takes in his tempting of Eve in the Garden of Eden. It can also be associated with the deadly sin of Gluttony, as the monster hoards its golden treasure, hidden from the world.

What ultimately kills Beowulf is the venom of the dragon he slew. The hero of the story is mortally wounded from a bite to his neck. The scene of Beowulf's death has many layers of interconnected Pagan and Christian symbols. His death was almost, as was established in an earlier paragraph a manifestation of destiny, the manifestation of the very concept of *wyrd*. There was nothing the warrior could have done to escape his destiny, as the old king lies dying he expresses the desire to see the dragon's hoard, the spoils of war he won. When Wiglaf, the only one of Beowulf's companions brave enough to stay by his side during the battle with the dragon, carries the treasures out for the dying hero to see, Beowulf thanks God for allowing him to witness them:

*To the everlasting Lord of All,
to the King of Glory, I give thanks
that I beheld this treasure here in front of me,
that I have been allowed to leave my people
so well endowed on the day I die.
Now that I have bartered my last breath
to own this fortune, it is up to you
to look after their needs. I can hold out no longer.*

(Heaney 2704–2801)

When Beowulf dies, it is implied in the text that his soul enters Heaven, his funeral however, is typically pagan. His body is cremated on a funeral pyre and his remains are buried on a burrow built by the sea with his treasure buried with him:

*He had no more to confide. The furious heat
of the pyre would assail him. His soul fled from his breast
to its destined place among the steadfast ones.*

(Heaney 2818–2820)

Although Beowulf is undoubtedly a pagan poem Christianity is deeply tied to its themes. The story fascinated the early Anglo-Saxon Christians and it continues to captivate people to this day.

4 CONCLUSION

Christianity does not have a history of getting along with different religions. Across history, it has spread itself across different cultures engulfing them and trying to erase their very way of being, their beliefs and their gods alike. The Christianisation of Britain is only one of such occurrences across history. There is only very little we know about the lives and rituals that were performed by the pagans that first populated the land we now call England. Most of their history can now only be guessed through folk tales and legends. The few surviving texts from the time period are tainted by the Christians who transcribed them, who reshaped them to mirror their own beliefs and, in many cases, tried to superpose those over the original message of the rewritten tale. However, we can still gleam bits and pieces of this old and mysterious culture precisely from the way some of it blended with The Christian religion that came to replace it. Besides archaeological sites, megalithic structures and the legend it left us with, we can see that echoes of it survived even within the new Christian religion. Inside of old churches, there can be found pagan symbols. And this is not a fact unique to architecture, within works of Old English literature there can be found pagan symbols alongside the Christian themes. Sometimes hidden and written over, sometimes they create fascinating blend of two cultures, that at least in some cases, cohabitated with each other and influenced one another.

The reason Beowulf is as significant of a poem as it is, is because of its blending of the original Pagan myths with the Christian symbols that got added to it. It serves as a witness of an era long gone. The story, told since ages long past, first by bards across a fire place, later transcribed by Christian monks, even though changed, it still captured the collective imagination of all who come across it.

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