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Context: Essay written for an undergraduate British Literature class, Fall of 2007.

Prompt: Show how Tolkien's "The Monsters and The Critics" creates a dialogue that is continued by Leyerle and one other critic of *Beowulf*.

Length: 5 pages (plus a Works Cited page)

Tolkien, Leyerle, and Chance: Exposing Literary Value in a "Historical Document"

J.R.R. Tolkien's "Beowulf: The Monsters and The Critics" brought a certain peace to *Beowulf*. Tolkien managed, with his bare hands, to completely reconfigure the way in which critics looked at *Beowulf*. No longer was a quick attack and retreat on the heroic poem an option; such criticisms first had to encounter Tolkien's lecture. His discussion of *Beowulf* became the fortification of the poem against all criticism, and even innocent critical guests such as Leyerle were forced to consider Tolkien's "The Monsters and The Critics" before stepping into the hall of literature that is *Beowulf*.

Unabashed Tolkien to *Beowulf* comparisons aside, enough cannot be said about what Tolkien created within the realm of *Beowulf* criticism. Tolkien quotes Archibald Strong, who translated *Beowulf* to modern English in 1925, as stating "The main interest which the poem has for us is thus not a purely literary interest. *Beowulf* is an important historical document" (Tolkien 104). No denial can be made of *Beowulf*'s value as a piece of early Anglo-Saxon history that has survived over 1200 years- but why the lack of insight into *Beowulf* as a powerful piece of literature?

Tolkien believes this is due to the "shadow of research lain upon [the] criticism" (111). To Tolkien, summarized plots of the *Beowulf* story have taken the place of critical readings, due mostly to the view of *Beowulf* as belonging to 'history,' and not 'literature.' The focus on both the historical context of *Beowulf* and its allusions (111), have led to the dismissal of *Beowulf* as a poem first and foremost. Tolkien's discussion of his ideas of *Beowulf*'s theme ("life is

transitory” on page 115), Christianity and mythology, and the poem’s structure pushed *Beowulf* forward, as far as criticism is concerned.

Leyerle spoke roughly thirty years later on *Beowulf*, and clearly his criticism was influenced by Tolkien. His discussion, entitled “The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*,” focuses on the ways in which *Beowulf*’s structure works, and its comparison to other art and literature at the time period *Beowulf* was written.

Due to the effectiveness of Tolkien’s essay, it comes as no surprise that a later criticism such as Leyerle’s would expand upon Tolkien’s views. Tolkien states that “[w]e must dismiss ... from mind the notion that *Beowulf* is a ‘narrative poem’, that it tells a tale ... sequentially” (Tolkien 124). With no coincidence, Leyerle makes a statement that works off of Tolkien’s earlier acknowledgement:

Examples of narrative threads, intersected by other material, are easy to perceive in the poem once the structural principal is understood. The full account of Hygelac’s Frisian expedition is segmented into four episodes ... in which chronology is ignored. (Leyerle 145)

In fact, much of Leyerle’s argument about the interlaced structure of *Beowulf* seems to come from the ideas put forth in Tolkien’s essay. What Leyerle gains and improves upon that Tolkien did not offer is the depth of the argument, as well as the reference to other art created at the time of *Beowulf*’s writing.

Tolkien discussed *Beowulf*’s theme as one of eventual loss; that is, that everything we hold dear, including our own lives, is transient (115). Leyerle investigates this idea further, by pointing out kinship (148-149) and the idea of gold’s value to mankind. Only mankind saw it fit to repay the “[i]njury or slaughter of a man” with a “monetary price” (149). Monsters, Leyerle

claims, were “outside this society” (149); they had no need to gather treasure because they neither gave nor received. Only mankind was interested in kinship and gold, the cause of good and evil.

Jane Chance’s “The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*: The Problem of Grendel’s Mother” also appears to have been at least partially influenced by the points made (or overlooked) by Tolkien and Leyerle. Chance’s article was published in 1980, roughly sixty years after Tolkien’s *Beowulf* article.

Although Tolkien discusses both Grendel and the Dragon as monsters and plot devices (112-114), he fails to mention Grendel’s mother in a satisfactory manner. Chance begins her discussion of Grendel’s mother by stating that her section seems to disrupt the overall structure of the story. Taking the story as either two or three sections still leaves the line count of portions containing Grendel’s mother in disproportion (153). Chance points out also the duality of her sexuality: “[the poet] occasionally uses a masculine pronoun when referring to her” and “epithets applied to her are usually applied to male figures” (155).

Tolkien’s discussion of Cain and *Beowulf*’s connection to scripture (122) is developed upon further by Chance when she discusses Grendel’s mother as “the monster that specifically epitomizes pride in *Beowulf*, as in Genesis, [a] female” (166). Chance attempts to dissect Grendel’s mother in ways that Tolkien did not, but she uses the same idea of Old Testament ideas being spliced with Germanic values.

While Leyerle describes the structure as interlacing, Chance deals with structure as the episodes of women throughout *Beowulf* (157). The contrast between women throughout the poem, and their roles as giving “peace” and “joy” (156-157), is a more linear view of structure than what Leyerle proposes. Chance describes the ways in which the women before and after

Grendel's mother create an "ironic contrast" (157) between a women's traditional role and the place of Grendel's mother. The focus of newer criticism of *Beowulf* has been opened up by older critics such as Leyerle and Tolkien; it is now possible to look specifically at women or certain characters within the poem, which was entirely impossible when *Beowulf* was regarded as merely an important historical document.

These three critics, although working years apart, have been influenced by and worked around each other's varying ideas on the poem *Beowulf*. Tolkien sets the standard for future criticism; Leyerle and Chance play off of this standard. Each gives a new breath of life to the old poem and, although each remains cognizant of the importance of *Beowulf* to the historian, *Beowulf* is finally free to be dissected by literary scholars, allowing us to see its true literary merit.

Works Cited

Chance, Jane. "The Structural Unity of Beowulf: The Problem of Grendel's Mother." Beowulf: A Verse Translation. Ed. Daniel Donoghue. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002.

Leyerle, John. "The Structural Interlace of *Beowulf*." Beowulf: A Verse Translation. Ed. Daniel Donoghue. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002.

Tolkien, J.R.R. "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics." Beowulf: A Verse Translation. Ed. Daniel Donoghue. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002.