

**RECREATING VALUES: MORALITY IN ADAPTATIONS OF BEOWULF  
FOR CHILDREN**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	1
DEDICATION.....	2
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	3
INTRODUCTION .....	4
Background.....	4
Objective.....	5
Methodology.....	6
CHAPTERS	
I.    THE ORIGINAL VALUES.....	8
II.   COMMUNITY AND OSTRACISM.....	15
Hall Community.....	15
Replacing the Hall.....	20
Ostracism .....	23
III.  BALANCE OF LIFE AND DEATH.....	32
The Forgotten Funerals.....	32
The Advice of a King.....	37
Beowulf's Death .....	40
CONCLUSION.....	44
WORKS CITED .....	52

## ABSTRACT

Recreating Evil: Morality in Adaptations of Beowulf for Children

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Language and control in children's literature is a major topic of discussion within the field of children's literature. While the full extent of the effects of children's literature on shaping children's worldviews is unknown, there is stress on the importance of being aware of what values texts pass to children, particularly the more subtle values of which the author may not be aware he or she is creating. As an epic originally created for an adult audience that now has numerous adaptations for children, the epic of *Beowulf* has a unique opportunity to contribute to the understanding of this passing on of values. By examining how morality is adapted for children from the original story of *Beowulf*, I bring awareness to what has been altered in the children's versions in order create a story meant for children. This study of *Beowulf* brings to light how subtle alterations can significantly change the message within a story, expressing much different ideologies than the original in some most likely unintended ways, harming the value of the narrative and possibly the reader as well.

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to two people who I know would be very proud of me today: my Granddad, Byron Moore, a person I could always count on and patiently listened to me talk about my thesis even in his final days, and my uncle, Rodney Collier, who inspired me to be curious with his intellectual prowess during many Thursday night dinner table debates.

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Finally, I want to thank my mom and dad for always telling me that if I could read, I could do anything.

# INTRODUCTION

## Background

Beowulf is well-known as the hero of legend who slays not one, but three monsters, with the power of thirty men in his hands. While on a first read through the story it may seem like the main idea of the epic is the accomplishment of these heroic deeds, there is much more in the story of *Beowulf*. The monster Grendel touches on the idea of ostracism in society, while Grendel's mother is shown to have a similar concern for her monstrous child as Wealtheow has for her own royal children. Beowulf's character paints a description of a man who may have failed to realize the impermanence of his own heroic deeds and the ostracism that being a hero can create. As one scholar notes, in addition to the three battles there are also three funeral scenes in which the dead "leave this world of toil and trouble amidst the sorrow and grief of those who remain" (Neubauer, "Adapting an Old English Epic" 137). Although it is not the job of adaptations to recreate the original exactly as it is, the way a writer chooses the values he or she would like to express in adaptations for children says quite a bit about adult expectations for children's reading. A question comes to mind, asking at what point simplification becomes oversimplification. This point may come much sooner than one would at first think.

In Murray Knowles and Kirsten Malmkjær's book, "Language and Control in Children's Literature", the workings of ideology in children's literature are discussed, mentioning, "the values at stake are usually those which are taken for granted by the writer, and reflect the writer's integration in a society which unthinkingly accepts them" (Knowles and Malmkjær 66). Heroism may be a monster itself, overshadowing other values and turning the message of stories like *Beowulf* into something affected by the relationship of domination the writer has over their child

reader. As Janet Bottoms states in “Where Texts and Children Meet”, “we must help children to enter into and wrestle with the characters and their dilemmas”, not “weight the scales on one side or the other side” (22-23). Jack Zipes, a leading expert on children’s literature, also notes the importance of “opportunities for self-exploration and self-determination” for children (Zipes, “Sticks and Stones” x). Instead of self-exploration, however, many children’s books rely heavily on censorship and oversimplification of messages. This is more evident when able to read the original *Beowulf* in comparison to recent adaptations.

For instance, many changes can cause the text to lose the opportunity for a child to reflect on qualities of good and evil, and instead, offer preformed ideologies. Examples of this include when a character’s storyline is altered so that he or she does not achieve redemption in adaptations, the description of a character is changed to suggest that there are innately evil qualities certain beings possess, or a certain character’s successes are unquestioned and/or are not compared to the evil characters. By examining versions of *Beowulf* from 1933 until present day, it is possible to analyze these modern patterns of distancing the hero from the other and become more aware of their effects on the portrayal of good and evil. While the full effect of these tendencies and subsequently expressed ideologies on children is not the focus of this research, awareness of their existence is an important step forwards into analyzing how evil is portrayed to children in children’s literature.

### **Objective**

My research objective is to bring awareness to the way separating the hero from the villain through character changes and other variations creates polarization of good and evil, reducing the opportunity for children to practice in-depth analysis on these ideas and instead creating new ideologies. This answers my research question of “How have changes in certain

characters such as description, action, motivation, and certain omissions in adaptations of *Beowulf* for children polarized evil?” Answering this question contributes to the ongoing discussion of how ideology is expressed in sometimes unintended ways in children’s literature. I also examine whether some of the strategies used in the adaptations are beneficial or potentially harmful to the child reader, as well as briefly explore possible alternative strategies to improve adaptations of classic literature for children.

### **Methodology**

The methodology I use in my research is rhetorical analysis. I examine the ways in which certain characters are framed as being good or evil, as well as the restructuring of certain scenes, and what each of these may express intentionally or unintentionally to the reader. The analysis includes descriptions of characters, character actions and motivations, narratorial commentary on the nature of characters and their actions, and certain omissions. However, I cautiously consider omissions due to the necessity of adapting for a more appropriate length for younger readers.

The resources I use include several editions of *Beowulf* adapted for children from 1933 until present in order to examine adaptations of *Beowulf* thoroughly for patterns and trends, giving me information from after World War I until the present. I also utilize books that discuss the relationship between an author and a child reader, as well as the relationship between texts and children. Some of the books include “Language and Control in Children’s Literature” by Murray Knowles and Kirsten Malmkjær, “Where Texts and Children Meet”, edited by Eve Bearne and Victor Watson, and “Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children’s Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter” by Jack Zipes. I also reference books such as John Rowe Townsend’s “Written for Children – An Outline of English-Language Children’s Literature,” in order to gain and keep perspective on common trends in children’s literature



during the time period I am analyzing. My study contributes to the study of children's literature by showing the subtle ways in which the adaptations can give new meaning and values to a text that shows the source of many of our modern-day values, creating the opportunity to question whether these values in the adaptations of Beowulf for children are desirable for young audiences.

# CHAPTER I

## THE ORIGINAL VALUES

*Beowulf*'s role as an epic is traditional in the sense that the main character represents the values of the time, much like Odysseus in the *Odyssey* or Achilles in the *Iliad*. While it is possible to research the time period in which *Beowulf* was written from histories and other secondary sources, the story of *Beowulf* holds most of the information pertinent to this research in its lines of verse. Although reading through the text can inform the reader of much, a tool such as Voyant, which analyzes the full text for repeated words, can pick out patterns that would take much longer to find traditionally. Therefore, the tool is a valuable resource in understanding important themes in the book. Before discussing the details I find in the reading of *Beowulf*, I will discuss the patterns I have seen while using this tool. The words I discuss will also be viewable in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of Words in Voyant.<sup>1</sup>

Word	Raw Frequency
Man	113
Men	111
Lord <sup>2</sup>	82
Son	81
battle	71
Life	71
Old	69
People	66
Beowulf	57
King	57
Good	56
Hall	54
Sword	53
Great	52
Came	47

Note: This is only the top of the list of words. “Function” words that do not have significant meaning have also been removed.

After uploading the full text of Liuzza’s translation of *Beowulf* to Voyant, the Cirrus word cloud reveals the most-used words of *Beowulf*. The two most-used words are “man”, used 113 times, and “men”, used 111 times. “Lord” is the next most frequent at 82, followed closely by “son”. From this alone, there are a few important facts we can deduce about the context of *Beowulf*. For instance, it is relatively easy to deduce that the society in which *Beowulf* takes place is structured around men with standing. These men are also well regarded, as the adjectives used to describe lord, such as “ringgiving,” “beloved,” “mighty,” “friendly,” “powerful,” and “wise,” suggest. There are also signs that lineage is important, as 51 of the occurrences of “son” are followed by the word “of,” as in “son of” so-and-so.

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<sup>1</sup> In order to gather this information, I used an e-book version of Liuzza’s translation and uploaded the pdf to Voyant. In order to ensure the accuracy of the information, I carefully removed words that occurred in the copyright statement on the pdf, as well as using the Contexts tool to refine the count of words that might appear in the text and the copyright statement, specifically the word “Beowulf”.

<sup>2</sup> Lord is mentioned four additional times in the plural, and 11 of the 82 singular occurrences are in reference to the deity.

Adding to this information the traditional analysis of *Beowulf*, it is possible to see the respect given to wise leaders in the culture in which the epic of *Beowulf* took place. King Hrothgar is described by Beowulf as a “wise old king” (Liuzza, l. 279). Although Beowulf has accomplished great feats before arriving at Hrothgar’s hall, he approaches Hrothgar in a manner that seeks to honor Hrothgar rather than emphasize his own importance. Beowulf continues this method of interaction with Hrothgar throughout their time together. After he defeats Grendel’s mother, he humbly takes Hrothgar’s advice on how not to let pride overcome him with the story of Heremod, a ruler who had been blessed with strength and force and the opportunity to rise above other men, but did not have virtue and lost sight of his mortality (Liuzza 1709-84). At the end of his journey, he lets Hrothgar know that he will support his sons in the instance that they should need Beowulf’s assistance, providing a lasting connection between the old king and the young, but wise beyond his years, hero (Liuzza 1835-65).

The next most frequent words are “battle” and “life,” each at 71 words. The idea that each of these is mentioned equally in the text suggests a relationship between the two. When reading *Beowulf*, it becomes obvious that battle is something men live to engage in, as well as the cause of many deaths. The system is one where heroic deeds in battle prove a man’s worth; however, the delicacy of life is not lost on the people of the time. This quote from *Beowulf* describes the relationship quite well: “Each of us shall abide the end / of this world’s life; let him who can / bring about fame before death—that is best / for the unliving man after he is gone” (Liuzza 1386-89). While each man must die, the comfort is the battles they won and the opportunities they took to prove themselves worthy of a place in the hall as a defender of the people.

But that is not to say that winning a battle is the most important aspect of life at the time. The fame that the men seek has both consequences and limitations. When Beowulf defeats the dragon, he leaves his people at the mercy of the enemies around them, and the peace that Beowulf has held for his long reign is at an end (Liuzza 2910-3027). The gold that Beowulf thinks will save his people will do nothing of the sort, as it is buried with Beowulf and is “just as useless to men as it was before” (Liuzza 1368). These details prevent the reader from being able to say with confidence that every battle is worth the fame or will provide the security the leader seeks. In addition, Beowulf requests a tomb be built “as a monument to [his] people / and tower high on Whale's Head, / so that seafarers afterwards shall call it / 'Beowulf's Barrow', when their broad ships / drive from afar over the darkness of the flood" (Liuzza 1386-89). However, with his people in such an insecure state, it is doubtful his name will live on, as the land will be conquered by others who will not try to remember his name. In fact, mortality is something that Beowulf had been warned of by King Hrothgar when he told Beowulf the tale of Heremod. Hrothgar recapped the message of the story, saying,

Defend yourself from wickedness, dear Beowulf,  
best of men, and choose the better,  
eternal counsel; care not for pride,  
great champion! The glory of your might  
is but a little while; soon it will be  
that sickness or the sword will shatter your strength,  
of the grip of fire, or the surging flood,  
or the cut of a sword, or the flight of a spear,  
or terrible old age — or the light of your eyes

will fail and flicker out; in one fell swoop

death, o warrior, will overwhelm you. (Liuzza 1758-68)

One thing that Beowulf may be criticized for is forgetting what is best for his community.

Two other frequently used words in “Beowulf” are “people” and “hall,” which is not surprising considering the first two thirds of the epic is about preserving a hall and its people. But the reason why it is so important to preserve this hall goes much deeper than modern-day cultural structure would suggest. A hall in Beowulf’s time is somewhere that kings can “share everything / with young and old that God had given him, / except for the common land and the lives of men” (Liuzza 71-73). The mead hall is a place where knowledge is passed down and culture is preserved, a place where their social structure is celebrated. When something threatens the core of their society, it is not just a physical threat, but also a threat to their way of life.

While there were external threats, such as monsters and other warring nations, one of the threats to such a society was kinslaughter. The monster Grendel himself was descended from the biblical kin-slayer, Cain. Liuzza writes in the footnotes of *Beowulf*, “Unferth's fratricide brings the general theme of kin-slaying, represented by Grendel's descent from Cain, inside Hrothgar's hall,” as well as noting how common the situation of kinslaughter would be for the times (Liuzza 71). So while Unferth has committed fratricide, he is a close advisor to Hrothgar and is not ostracized for his actions. In what can be considered a defining moment for Unferth, he lends his famed sword Hrunting to Beowulf in order to defeat Grendel’s mother. Unferth’s actions seem to be more of a warning of how even the best warriors can commit atrocious crimes, but that redemption is not out of reach. As mentioned before, kinship and community are both valuable parts of society at the time, so redemption may be an important part of maintaining a community

facing issues such as kinslaughter and avoiding the penalty of ostracism, which is a harsh penalty for such a community-centered society.

This analysis of *Beowulf* creates an idea of what is valuable to the characters in Beowulf's story, or the ideological perspective of the epic. These aspects of *Beowulf*, the value of advice, the tenuousness of life, the hall community, and the way in which kinslaughter is addressed all contribute to the complex ideology of the story. Each of these aspects, if altered in any way, could possibly threaten the original ideology of *Beowulf* in various ways.

For instance, the tenuousness of life, or the balance between life and death, is an important part of the ideology of *Beowulf*. The search for fame in one's life is best balanced out by the awareness of death. Hrothgar warns Beowulf about death for a reason. Heremod too had strength and stature, but he made the mistake of forgetting his mortality. Even though Beowulf knew that fighting the dragon would lead to his death, he failed to realize the ramifications of his death on his people, specifically the destruction of their society. Without the proper appreciation of death expressed in the original *Beowulf*, the focus would be solely on the lives of the heroes, trivializing their deaths. This would threaten the values that the story places on the important balance between life and death, significantly altering the ideology of the epic.

Stemming from this, the idea of community is also valuable in the story of *Beowulf*. As explained before, most of the story is about preserving the hall community, which is why it is not surprising that Beowulf's people mourn the loss of their leader who had preserved their community so well until his death. However, without an understanding of the connection between the physical hall and the preservation of the culture within it, the specific concept of community that exists in *Beowulf* can be lost, most likely in inadvertent ways.

Finally, kinslaughter touches on the connection between the balance of community and ostracism and the balance between good and evil. Although Unferth is charged with kinslaughter, his opportunity to redeem himself by loaning Beowulf his sword reflects a world that values redemption. The fact that kinslaughter was rather common during that period and the value of community are perhaps the driving force behind the necessity of it. After all, it would be hard to preserve a community with kinslaughter if redemption were unachievable. The need to preserve a flawed community also emphasizes how it is hard to define the line between good and evil. If Unferth is not so clearly on either side, perhaps Grendel and Beowulf's positions are not as clear as once thought either. Changes to these complex concepts can threaten the original perspective of good versus evil, sometimes resulting in oversimplification.

While these complex topics are each fundamental aspects of *Beowulf*, they are also some of the most highly manipulated amongst the adaptations for children. The important balance between community and ostracism, the balance of power, and the balance of life and death have been altered as a most likely unintentional result of authors editing the story for children. However, each of these areas of balance deserve an exploration of not only how they have changed, but what kind of effects these changes have on the interpretation, and more centrally, the values and overall ideology presented in the story of *Beowulf*.



## CHAPTER II

### COMMUNITY AND OSTRACISM

#### **Hall Community**

Some of the more subtle changes to adaptations of *Beowulf* for children are the changes to the representation of the hall. In the original *Beowulf*, the hall was a place for the most important people in the community to gather and pass down wisdom. This is expressed throughout the story of *Beowulf*, from the songs the *scop*, or bard, sings in the beginning of the story, angering Beowulf, to the pain and heartache it causes the people when Hrothgar's hall is under threat, and later the pain of Beowulf's people when his hall is burned by the dragon. However, it is most clearly expressed early in the poem when the narrative gives the reason Hrothgar decided to build the hall, emphasizing it as a designated place to share knowledge (Liuzza 71-73).

However, when going through the nearly two dozen adaptations of *Beowulf* from 1930's to the 2010's, only three seem to reference the hall as a place where knowledge can be shared. Strafford Riggs' version from 1933 is one of the few that illustrates this point with its detailed description of hall life, saying,

When they gathered in the great drinking-hall of the king, the minstrels would come among them after they had eaten; and with horns of ale passing from hand to hand, these lords of Geatsland would listen to songs of other lands and to news of the world which lay beyond their own frontiers. They heard the stirring story of Sigmund, that great hero; or learned how this king was warring with that or how a terrible dragon had destroyed a whole army of brave fighters.

Sometimes Hygd the Wise and Fair would call upon one or another of the assembled company and beg him to recount some particular deed of valor which he had performed in the past; and often Hygelac conferred with his warriors on some point of warfare or on the building of new boats which would better withstand the fierce gales of the winter seas.

And the younger men listened, their blue eyes wide with eagerness, to the tales of bravery and battle, and struck one another upon the knee, vowing themselves to great deeds when they became older, or boasting of their youthful exploits and feats of strength. (10)

This excerpt describes every stage of the learning process; the young men learn from the stories of those with detailed experience in the matters that will someday concern them, the lords hear the news from around the world that informs them about areas that are peaceful or potential threats, and the elders, King Hygelac in this case, give information on warfare and infrastructure projects to the lords. Nicky Raven and Stefan Petrucha are the only other authors whose stories indicate that the hall is a place for knowledge to be shared.

In Nicky Raven's version, there is an implied importance of the building for both teaching and defense. In Raven's version, the narrator of the story is the character Wiglaf, who in the original story is Beowulf's kinsman and the only one to go to Beowulf's aid when he is fighting the dragon. However, this version rewrites the story to insert him from the beginning, as an orphan from the Danelands who brings Beowulf back to Heorot in order to save the inhabitants from Grendel, and later continue the plot of the original by aiding Beowulf against the dragon (Raven). Early on in the book, Wiglaf describes his first impression of the building, saying,

I took a closer look at the massive timbered building in front of me. Even in the half-light of the torches it was magnificent. Two huge beams the width of three men and the height of six rose on either side of the doorway, supporting a network of other massive planks and beams. Runes and carvings were cut into every available flat surface, for the carpenters and builders liked to leave reminders of their art. The doorway itself was built for defense. No more than two men could stand side by side in it, but even the briefest glance told of the thickness and durability of the ancient wood. A golden carving of a serpent—the sign of Hrothgar’s house—was planted firmly in the center; the creature’s jeweled eye seemed to bore into the heart of any who approached. (Raven 7)

While the strength of the wood and his comment about the door being an object of defense suggest the building’s purpose in a very straightforward way, the comment about the age of the wood suggests where the strength comes from—age and experience. The hall as a place of learning is not obvious, but it is implied, especially when considering the role of the hall in Wiglaf’s life. He describes himself before he comes to the hall, saying “Then I was nobody, a boy from the Dane lands, full of sorrow and eager to fight” (Raven 4). As an orphan, the hall becomes a place where he and his brother are allowed to grow and become warriors.

Stefan Petrucha’s comic book version is a bit more straightforward. The medium relies heavily on images, creating a need for the text be shorter so as to avoid taking up too much space. On the page discussing the construction of Heorot, there are rectangular boxes, each one representing the same scene in a different season, from spring to winter (Petrucha). This transition represents the transition Hrothgar’s ancestor “Shefing,” all the way to Hrothgar’s construction of his hall, with winter signifying the end of peaceful times and the beginning of Grendel’s time of torment.

Although much time has passed, the dialogue remains short. The second rectangular box contains the most text, saying “Among Healfene’s four children, Hrothgar was so great in battle that many followed him, and he became the next king. He ordered built the greatest mead-hall middle-earth would ever see, that from there he might share the gifts of his kingdom with young and old alike (Petruca).” The word gifts could involve a large number of different options, from wealth to wisdom. However, the fact that it is possible to consider education, as well as the additional information of both young and old being invited, suggests it is highly probable that information shared between generations is involved. There is a strong sense of traditional community gathered from this description of the hall.

Other versions have a much different take on the hall. While a few books describe the hall as some sort of fortress protecting the people, which somewhat expresses its importance, albeit in a physical way, the majority of the adaptations simply describe it as grander than all other halls and a place for guests to eat, sleep, and celebrate. Some examples of this include versions by C.F. Bricknell Smith and Rosemary Sutcliff.

C.F. Bricknell Smith’s version was printed in 1951 as part of “The Young Readers’ Library” and is an extremely simplified adaptation of *Beowulf*. One of the many areas of simplification involves the description of Hrothgar’s hall, with the scene beginning with the cliché words used by many children’s stories:

One day Hrothgar thought that his great band of warriors should be rewarded for all their fine deeds over so many years. He wondered how he could best repay them and finally he decided to build a new and mighty hall, one finer and greater than any other in the world. In this hall they could eat and sleep, enjoy fine banquets and listen to the song of the minstrels. . .

“Many of you know,” [Hrothgar] said, “why I have asked you here. You have not forgotten the promises I have often made to you in the past when we fought against our evil foes. I promised you gifts from my treasures. These I will give you, and also this fine hall, where you, my trusty thanes, may live, may eat and drink and be my close companions in the evening of my years” (Smith 10-11).

Hrothgar clearly describes the purpose of the hall as a place where his thanes will be rewarded. There is no mention of it being a place of learning; in fact, its description is tantamount to a retirement home when taking into consideration Hrothgar’s statement about wanting company in his last years. There is also no mention or suggestion of a new generation of warriors that would learn from the wisdom of the trusted thanes and elderly king.

Rosemary Sutcliff’s version, an objectively much more creative adaptation of *Beowulf* from the 1960’s, creates a version of the hall that is more of a visiting place with entertainment value than a place of learning. The narration of Sutcliff’s work begins describing hall life, and Hrothgar’s hall specifically, on the first page, saying,

Hrothgar, the great warrior king of the Danish folk, had built for himself a mighty mead-hall where he and his household warriors might feast and make merry, and give a fitting welcome to any strangers and wayfarers who came among them.

‘A great hall, a most fine hall!’ said the Sea Captain, while the rest of his crew on the mead benches nodded and muttered their agreement. ‘Longer and loftier even than this in which my lord Hygelac has feasted us so royally tonight. And Hrothgar set up high on its gable end the gilded antlers of a stag, and called the place for that reason, Heorot the Hart. . . (8-9)

The hall, as described here, is not just a place for members of Hrothgar's community, but also for travelers, making the hall similar to a high-end hotel that acts as a venue for notable visitors. This entertainment value and hotel-like atmosphere is reflected in many of the *Beowulf* adaptations for children, and detracts from the hall's ability to represent the community.

The change in the way the stories go about describing the purpose of the hall is an example of how easily ideology can be transformed in small changes. If the hall were only a physical place to the characters of *Beowulf*, it would be possible to question why the people living in Hrothgar's kingdom would even bother to defend the hall, and instead just relocate further away from the dangerous fen. The issue involves more than the practical problem of relocating a town. It involves what the hall represents: community. By only changing the description of the building and its purpose ever so slightly, the authors alter the community that it represents. Altering the community reshapes not only the setting, but the events that will take place in it.

### **Replacing the Hall**

These changes to the community's values prompt a question over what, if anything, is replacing the hall community. In a way, the change can be seen as both a replacement and an absence simultaneously. When a strong sense of community is absent, what is left could be an ideology with a stronger emphasis on smaller units in society. However, the question is not raised for its own sake, but to better inform on why it matters that community is less important in children's adaptations of *Beowulf*. By exploring what is possibly replacing community, I raise the question of whether there are detrimental results for the modern-day adaptations of the story and its altered ideology.

There are many instances in the *Beowulf* adaptations for children that provide convincing evidence of this move away from community and towards smaller units, such as the family unit and individual unit, specifically regarding the actions and motivations of the main character Beowulf (and other iterations of the name). In Strafford Rigg's and Stefan Petrucha's adaptations, the character of Beowulf is not so much the proven warrior that he was originally, but a youth who sets off to prove himself as a warrior. In Riggs's version, Beowulf has a much more individualistic goal. The narration reveals these private thoughts at the beginning of the book, saying,

“His strength was great, but there was no use for him to put it to, and he longed for wild adventure and the chance to stretch his muscles to the limit of their power.

True, he thought, I have fought small dragons and hunted wild boars, but such hazards are mere games for boys, and I am now a man. My uncle Hygelac is at peace with his neighbors, and there is no war in which I can take part. He sat stonily in his place, and his blue eyes were scornful of the earls about him and their big talk of little battles (Riggs 10-11).

Beowulf's thoughts here are not concerned with anyone but himself. Although this is not necessarily a negative thing, it is a tremendous change from the community-minded Beowulf of the original tale. His thoughts imply that he wishes for malevolence to occur just to be able to prove himself, but it does not seem to be from malevolent intentions on Beowulf's part. Later, when he sets off on his quest, Beowulf only takes men with him begrudgingly because he wanted to complete the task alone (Riggs 17). This is in huge contrast to the original Beowulf, showing a character that is not so much concerned with his brother warriors as he is with his own accomplishments. Beowulf's goals are also individualistic in Petrucha's version. He clearly

states “Let me prove my worth by aiding your most noble King”, which serves as another example of a character who is focused on furthering himself, if not to the extreme that Riggs’ Beowulf goes to. This move towards individualism reshapes what a reader comes to expect from a hero, leaving behind the commitment to the larger community and replacing it with a desire to prove one’s self-worth, which could be detrimental to a child’s understanding of what a hero is.

Another way that the stories move away from the importance of community is the emphasis on smaller units of connection, such as immediate family and friends. While the importance of family is also present in the original, it is particularly emphasized in the newest adaptations of *Beowulf*. Raven’s use of the young orphaned Wiglaf as a narrator is proof of this trend. In addition to emphasizing brotherhood, it also emphasizes the close connection between Beowulf and his band of companions, a few of whom become close with the Wiglaf.

Another version emphasizes the family unit in a different way. In the original story, Beowulf’s hall is burned down, symbolizing the kind of threat the dragon is to the whole community if it were to live. Beowulf mourns the loss, and later the village people mourn the loss of both Beowulf and this community as well (Liuzza 3145-55). However, in many adaptations, Beowulf’s hall is not burned down, and in many more, only his people’s homes are seen to be affected. In Stern and Steininger’s version, about a page worth of illustrations and dialogue is used to express the dragon’s devastation on families and their homes. These images are interesting because it represents the subtle movement of the adaptations from suffering as a community because of Beowulf’s hall being destroyed to suffering in individual family units due to the destruction of individual family homes. Well less negative than the trend towards individualism, the trend towards smaller units may indicate an overall shift away from the value of the community as a whole.



Jack Zipes, a well-known academic in the field of children's literature, provides a theory that is useful in understanding why deemphasizing community is possibly harmful to a child's development. The theory is about the substitution of consumerism and the global consumer market for individual moral development in childhood. Zipes believes "that we are positioning children to experience and to read the world in a manner that alienates them from families and communities and causes immense problems in identity formation" ("Relentless Progress" 11). Zipes emphasizes throughout his book that he is not blaming the global consumer market for these issues, but rather the lack of action that has been taken to correct it. Therefore, the problem was not consumerism alone, but the resulting lack of focus on issues like individual moral development, community, and civic responsibility. Zipe's approach to this issue suggests that neglecting the values of community is detrimental to the ideology in children's literature. Put simply, the individualism itself is not what is so detrimental, but rather the act of deemphasizing community,

### **Ostracism**

Another subtle change that affects how both community and the concepts of good and evil are perceived is the way adaptations often deal with ostracism. Two villains' portrayals in particular, Grendel and Unferth, are affected by these changes. While their behavior was somewhat more complexly explained in the original versions, the absence of ostracism in Grendel's explanatory backstory in almost all adaptations provides a much different, more simplistic view of the villain. Other character traits are added to Grendel to replace the gap left. Unferth faces a similar fate with his character alterations that skate around some dark aspects of the original character. These changes alter several major values of the story that affect both concepts of community and concepts of good and evil for a potential child reader.

## *Grendel*

Grendel's backstory varies wildly from the original in many of the adaptations, creating slightly different reasons to explain the need for the character's demise. These variations, including the examples given, fall into one or more of these main categories: Grendel is evil, and there is no other explanation; Grendel is described or shown to be very animalistic in nature; and Grendel is given additional character traits in order to further separate him from the norm and identify him as evil. The first category is the most common, with authors and illustrators such as Welwyn Wilton Katz, Nicky Raven, Stern and Steininger, Gray and Yates, Paul D. Storrie, and James Rumford offering no explanation as to why Grendel hates the sound of celebration from Heorot in version after version of *Beowulf*. Many of these same authors and some additional ones also use the second and/or third variation in combination with the first.

These three categories all contribute to the replacement of the serious topic of ostracism with a much simpler, easier-to-identify evil character. Gray and Yates' version offers the most straightforward example of this category. Labeled as "a verse adaptation with young readers in mind", Joshua Gray's adaptation opens with the following lines, emphasizing some of these examples:

"Here, let me tell you of the time Hrothgar, king of Denmark, built a hall in his castle. When it was complete, he named it Heorot. Heorot was a hall where the people in the palace ate supper and then slept when it was time for bed. Nearby there lived a beast who lurked in the dark. He was called Grendel, and was grand and gruesome. Grendel abhorred Heorot (no one knows why); one night he went to the hall, broke through a wall, and found many men to feast on. Grendel growled ferocious and loud, and his red eyes glared in the dark."

The first category, which can be seen in the straightforward declaration that no one knows why Grendel behaves the way he does, removes any opportunity to question Grendel's relationship with the people of Heorot, as humans would be seen as rational beings as opposed to creatures subject to irrational whims.

Welwyn Wilton Katz's version is another adaptation that emphasizes a lack of knowledge about Grendel's past with a simple explanation of Grendel's hatred for humans. In this version, Aelfhere, the character who acts as uncle to Wiglaf and joined Beowulf in his original fight against Grendel, describes the scenario to Wiglaf, saying to the young boy,

Well, then, it was Grendel who despoiled Heorot. He hated humans, and King Hrothgar and his Danes lived near enough to him that he couldn't prevent himself hearing the sounds of their singing and laughter. So he went to Heorot one night when all the warriors were drunk or asleep and he killed and ate fifteen on the spot, and killed and took away fifteen others (Katz 12).

Katz's story, which perhaps tends to be *too* straightforward, does not illustrate why Grendel is predisposed to hate humans. In this example and others, the substance that gives depth to Grendel as a character and that can create empathy toward him is missing.

The second category uses physical description to separate Grendel from human-kind and remove any opportunity for the reader to empathize with his character. Gray's version is a good example of this as well. Grendel is further dehumanized with his noises described as growls, and his eyes red, like that of an animal predator, making him seem much less human. In addition, comic books and illustrated children's books are the main source of this category. One of the earlier children's books describes him as "part animal, part man, part bird" (Riggs 13). Comic books tend to create a much more graphic representation of Grendel's character, adding features

such as spines, fins, and fur in order to clarify that while he may be a descendent of Cain (depending on the version), he is far from human. Some of the best examples of this can be found in the *Beowulf* comics by Stern and Steininger and Morley and Li. Stern and Steininger's book offers only a two-page wordless spread showing Grendel's journey from the swamp to Heorot and his attack. Grendel's arm joints are horned, his teeth long and sharp. In Morley and Li's version, they do explain that Grendel is cursed by God, but the illustrations depict Grendel with a giant fish fin and webbed appendages (10). While Grendel was still a monster in the original, these images help create distance between humanity and Grendel nonetheless.

The undesirable qualities given to Grendel by the third category reaffirm the separation between Grendel and human-kind by emphasizing the character as naturally immoral. One such book is Nicky Raven's adaptation. The book describes Grendel's emotions in one paragraph with multiple negative characteristics, stating, "*The beast panted and slavered, half in anticipation of the bloody feast it dreamed of, half in dread of the steel that it feared was waiting. But it could not turn back. Driven to madness and despair by the snatches of laughter and song that mocked its wretched existence, the monster lurched toward Heorot*" (Raven 7). By describing Grendel as a deranged creature who naturally desires flesh and is full of cowardice, the motive of Grendel's actions goes from being a sort of vengeance on his part (a human-like action) to something like the attack of a wolf: the natural act of a predator. As an immoral predator, his loss is much less likely to be mourned than if he had been a cousin of humankind who felt he had been wronged, an inference that is possible to make from the original.

Each of these categories change Grendel's role from one who is ostracized by society to a being who is not really ostracized because he is in a dramatically different category. Much like one wouldn't say a bear or a tiger is ostracized from society, one can hardly say this new Grendel

has been excluded. This reclassification of sorts upsets the balance between community and isolation that is created in the original *Beowulf*, which emphasizes the importance of community, as well as the seriousness of its dissolution. It also creates a polarizing effect by further separating the character from what is considered “good.”

### *Unferth*

Unferth, like Grendel, has been shaped into a different type of character in many of the adaptations. Large parts of his original background are erased and his character further vilified not only through various edits and additions to the story narration, but also through edits to the dialogue of other characters and his appearance. What is left is an imbalanced character with a desire to consort with evil and a storyline that leads the reader to believe he can find no redemption. He is a curious outsider on the inside of Hrothgar’s court, leaving the question of why he remains in court at all. Because of these changes, it is necessary to explore Unferth’s precarious position in the court in both the original and the adaptations, as well as the resulting effects of the changes to his character in the adaptations.

Unferth’s presence in Hrothgar’s hall is not a simple matter to explain. He has committed fratricide, tying his history and that of Grendel’s closely together. Yet, Unferth is Hrothgar’s spokesman and an important member of the court, while Grendel, a descendent of Cain, is a monster who lives in the fen, ostracized from society. Unferth is also not the only member of Hrothgar’s court that possibly poses a threat to the community. Hrothgar’s nephew, Hrothulf, is foreshadowed to be the man who will usurp his cousin in multiple parts of the original, with one section describing the relationship between Hrothgar and Hrothulf at the time of the story, saying that “their peace was still whole then” (Liuzza 1164). Because of the court’s rather questionable members and the foreshadowing of treachery to come, it is possible for some to reason that

Unferth was not so trusted by the authority in the court. There is also the possible translation issue with the word describing Unferth's position in the court, which has been translated to mean both spokesman and jester (Liuzza 89).

However, there is evidence to suggest an alternative interpretation to the idea that Unferth was not a trusted member of the court. Liuzza's translation states, "Unferth, spokesman, / sat at the foot of the Scylding lord; everyone trusted his spirit, / that he had great courage, though to his kinsmen he had not been / merciful in swordplay" (1165-67). Not only is Unferth trusted, but it is stated later that "fairly those kinsmen/ took many a full meadcup, / stouthearted in the high hall, / Hrothgar and Hrothulf. Heorot within was filled with friends – no false treacheries did the people of the Scyldings plot at that time," a statement which clears not only Hrothulf of any immediate wrongdoing, but also Unferth (Liuzza 1014-19). This evidence is important to my argument, as I believe that Unferth, while flawed, had been allowed redemption at least once and is not nearly as nefarious as he is portrayed to be in later adaptations.

This is important to the understanding of the creation of Unferth in the adaptations, as authors attempting to adapt *Beowulf* for children must decide how to contend with the issue of portraying Unferth. Some have leaned more towards portraying the character as that of a jester, and some have taken the more serious translation as their model. However, most of the changes to Unferth's character have changed him in ways that have both shape the topic of death differently and upset the important balance between community and ostracism.

Table 2. Variations of Unferth by Author

<b>Author</b>	<b>Presence of Unferth</b>	<b>Presence of Kin-slaying</b>	<b>Loaning of Sword</b>
Strafford Riggs	Present	No	Unferth
Dorothy Hosford	Present	No	Unferth
C.F. Bricknell Smith	Present	No	Hrothgar
Dorothy Heiderstadt	Not Present	No	None
Ian Serraillier	Present	No	None
Rosemary Sutcliff	Present	No	Unferth (Hunferth)
Robert Nye	Present	No	None
Roger Green	Not Present	No	None
Jerry Bingham	Not Present	No	None
Welwyn Wilton Katz	Present	No	Unferth
Paul D. Storrie	Present	Yes	Unferth
Rumford	Not Present	No	None
Stefan Petrucha	Present	No	Unferth
Nicky Raven	Present	No	Unferth
Stephen Stern	Present	No	None
Jacqueline Morley	Present	No	Unferth
Joshua Gray	Present	No	Hrothgar's Men

One of the most significant actions taken to alter Unferth's storyline is to remove the past murder of his kin. Table 2 illustrates this occurrence. The removal of kinslaughter occurs in at least sixteen different adaptations, with four of these removing Unferth's character completely, highlighting a resistance to explaining the concept of murdering relatives to children. Of the remaining twelve, some interesting changes take place in the effort to avoid kinslaughter. Unferth goes from a jealous and drunken man who confronts Beowulf once while intoxicated to a man who is drastically more cowardly and conniving. His is often as ugly in appearance as he is in character in these children's books, and sometimes still equally if not more violent.

Two books where Unferth's appearance comes into play are Strafford Riggs' and Robert Nye's versions. In Riggs' version, Unferth is described, saying, "On Beowulf's left was Unferth, the king's favorite, of whom the Wanderer had sung in no uncertain terms concerning his lack of bravery. He was lean and black of hair, with a black divided beard, and he was dressed from

head to foot in black and silver” (34). Unferth’s blackness and hairiness reflects his character defects, describing a man that is outwardly as dark as he is dark on the inside. Unferth is noted as having “sat moody in his place, scarcely touching the meats before him, and drinking only lightly of the mead as it was passed to him” at the feast before Beowulf faced Grendel (Riggs 34).

The second book by Robert Nye is even more judgmental of Unferth’s appearance. Nye’s book reshapes the tale of *Beowulf* significantly to tell the story of a Beowulf who is more physically flawed and yet psychologically more pure than the Beowulf of the original tale, as well as being hesitant to use violence when other options are available. However, this purity of character is balanced with a much less pure Unferth, whose description is unfortunate. After Hrothgar witnesses the first slaughter by Grendel, Unferth is introduced, giving his rather malevolent opinions to his king:

Unferth, the son of Ecglaf, was standing nearby. He was a rude and drunken fellow, always ready to argue, even with the king himself. “You’ll never have revenge, great Hrothgar, mighty as you are,” he said, rather sneeringly, in a hard, dull voice.

“How’s that?” demanded Hrothgar.

Unferth shrugged. His shoulders were narrow and he had a boil on his neck (20).

Unferth is not only nasty in opinion and temperament, but has a physically unattractive features, including narrow shoulders and a boil. This surprisingly dark turn creates negative connotations for those with physical deformities, an unpleasant side effect of the seeming avoidance of introducing kinslaughter. However, it is not the only outcome of this avoidance.

While many of the books offer examples of Unferth as jealous, cowardly, and ugly, it is in part what they do not do that creates a more detestable character. Unferth’s one redeeming act,



loaning his sword to Beowulf, is often eliminated. In some books, such as by C.F. Bricknell Smith, Hrothgar is the one to loan him his sword (32). In others, like Dorothy Heiderstadt's adaptations, the sword belongs to Beowulf already. Strangely, Ian Serrailier's version has Beowulf leave his sword to Unferth, despite the fact that Unferth did not give it to him or ever make amends for insulting him earlier in the story. These efforts to suppress redemption significantly hinder the reader's ability to sympathize with Unferth.

One of the extreme examples of this comes from Robert Nye's adaptation. In one episode, Beowulf is explaining a moral lesson to the King and his court regarding concepts of good and evil, but Unferth is resistant. Beowulf tries to explain the concept to him, saying, "You think that bad brings forth bad only, and that the good man should hold apart from it. I suggest that things aren't so simple, so black and white. Even the wickedest person can do good for someone. The truly good man finds good where he can" (Nye 36-37). His explanation tries to show a more complex understanding of good and evil, yet later in the book, the narration describes Unferth facing temptation, saying, "And the tree of evil looked taller and more familiar to Unferth than the green slender tree of good. Its twisted roots went down into his own being. He could feel it festering sap in every fibre of him. Even his boil, he reasoned, was an outward mark of his difference from such as Beowulf" (Nye 60-61). Unferth, as one of the most evil characters in the book, cannot even perform one act of good that would prove this complexity. His redemption is unreachable, and his character is left simplified and unrelatable.

## CHAPTER III

### BALANCE OF LIFE AND DEATH

The relationship between community and ostracism is not the only thing that puts off balance by the changes in the adaptations. The tenuousness of life, or the careful balance between life and death, is also off-kilter and mostly forgotten in the adaptations. The removal of a majority of the funerals and the advice of the king, as well as the altered telling of Beowulf's death, are all significantly altered plot points that create a story emphasizing the heroic deeds in a hero's life while minimizing their faults and the role of death in the community. Because of this, an emphasis on the "purity" of the good characters is created, further dividing the perception of good versus evil, as well as creating a more obvious disregard for the consequences of death.

#### **The Forgotten Funerals**

There are three funerals in the story of *Beowulf*: the funeral of Scyld Scefing, the ancestor of Hrothgar, the funeral of Hildeburh's relatives, and the funeral of Beowulf. Each of these funerals provides a description that emphasizes the significance of death compared to life. The funeral of Scyld Scefing is described in Liuzza's translation, saying:

Scyld passed away at his appointed hour,  
the mighty lord went into the Lord's keeping;  
they bore him down to the brimming sea,  
his dear comrades... In the harbor stood a ringprowed ship,  
icy, outbound, a nobleman's vessel;  
there they laid down their dear lord,  
dispenser of rings, in the bosom of the ship,

glorious, by the mast. There were many treasures  
loaded there, adornments from distant lands;  
I have never heard of a more lovely ship  
bedecked with battleweapons and wargear,  
blades and byrnies in its bosom lay  
many treasures, which were to travel  
far with him into the keeping of the flood.  
With no fewer gifts did they furnish him there,  
the wealth of nations, than those did who  
at his beginning first sent him forth  
alone over the waves while still a small child.  
Then they set a golden ensign  
high over his head, and let the waves have him,  
gave him to the Deep with grieving spirits,  
mournful in mind. Men do not know  
how to say truly — not trusted counselors,  
nor heroes under the heavens — who received that cargo. (26-52)

In this scene, the hero that began the lineage of the Danish kings comes to an end, showing that even the greatest of heroes who have dispensed rings and commanded ships must die. The valuables that Scyld's people leave with him are also significant. Their value indicates the high level of ceremony the moment requires and the significance of death in the culture. Scefing's funeral, which celebrated his life and possibly prepared him for the afterlife, also emphasizes the

gravity of death in that no man, no matter his station in life, truly knows what happens after death, as can be seen in the last statement from the quote.

The second funeral scene is also significant in reasons both similar and different to the first funeral scene. The funeral of Hildeburh's relatives is described in Liuzza's translation as saying:

The oath was made ready, and ancient gold  
was brought from the hoard; the Battle-Scyldings  
best fighting-man was ready for the fire.  
It was easy to see upon that pyre  
the bloodstained battle-shirt, the gilded swine,  
iron-hard boar-images, the nobleman  
with fatal wounds—so many felled by war!  
Then Hildeburh commanded at Hnæf's pyre  
that her own son be consigned to the flames  
to be burnt, flesh and bone, placed upon the pyre  
at his uncle's shoulder; the lady sang  
a sad lament. The warrior ascended;  
to the clouds coiled the mighty funeral fire,  
and roared before their mound; their heads melted,  
their gashes burst open and spurted blood,  
the deadly body-bites. The flame devoured,  
most greedy spirit, those whom war destroyed  
of both peoples—their glory departed. (1107-24)

This funeral scene describes not only the significance of death, but also the death every warrior risks having in battle. Not only can death occur at an old age, death can occur at any time in conflict, and as the last line states, their glory departs with the flames. The body, no matter how strong it was in life, is now consumed by the flame.

However, despite the significance of these two funeral scenes in maintaining the balance between life and death, they are often eliminated. As Table 3 below illustrates, the first funeral scene is mentioned only twice in seventeen adaptations, and the second funeral scene is never mentioned. Some even go so far as to eliminate all funeral scenes from the books, stopping with Beowulf’s death scene. There is no attempt to replace or edit these funerals; they are simply omitted.

Table 3. Presence of Funerals in Adaptations of *Beowulf* for Children.

<b>Author</b>	<b>Funerals</b>
Strafford Riggs	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Dorothy Hosford	3 <sup>rd</sup>
C.F. Bricknell Smith	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Dorothy Heiderstadt	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Ian Serrailier	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Rosemary Sutcliff	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Robert Nye	1 <sup>st</sup> , 3 <sup>rd</sup>
Roger Green	None
Jerry Bingham	None
Welwyn Wilton Katz	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Paul D. Storrie	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Rumford	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Stefan Petrucha	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Nicky Raven	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Stephen Stern	1 <sup>st</sup> , 3 <sup>rd</sup>
Jacqueline Morley	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Joshua Gray	None

Some effects are seen because of these changes, mainly in a new disregard for the penalty of death. One scene that emphasizes this disregard is when Grendel attacks and kills one of Beowulf’s men. While most stories keep the slaying of the character known as Hondscio, they

delete an important element that happens next: the paying of the wergild. Liuzza's translation says,

Then the lord of earls, to each of those  
on the meadbenches who had made with Beowulf  
a seajourney, gave jeweled treasures,  
antique heirlooms, and then ordered  
that gold be paid for the man whom Grendel  
had wickedly slain — he would have done more,  
if wise God and one man's courage  
had not prevented that fate. The Maker ruled all  
of the race of mankind, as He still does.  
Therefore understanding is always best,  
spiritual foresight — he must face much,  
both love and hate, who long here  
endures this world in these days of strife. (1050-62)

This passage relates the value of the life that was lost. Gold is given to compensate for the death of the young hero, who was seen as having the potential to do much more if he had not been slain. The passage also contains what may be a call for understanding for deaths such as these, with this last lines describing how life holds many trials, perhaps trying to show a balance between the hardships of life and the hardship of death.

Despite the relative importance of the character, very few of the adaptations name Hondscio, with one of those exceptions being the 1933 adaptation of *Beowulf* by Strafford Riggs, saying only “[Beowulf] saw the great form of Grendel swoop down upon the innocent form of

young Hondscio, catch him up in enormous hands, and tear him limb from sleeping limb” (43). Only a few of the books mourn his death, namely Rosemary Sutcliff’s and Nicky Raven’s adaptations. However, the majority, including adaptations from Serrailier, Hosford, Rumford, Bingham, Riggs, and Heiderstadt leave out both the name and any second mention of the character beyond his slaying.

The wergild was an extremely important part of the Anglo Saxon system of justice , as emphasized by the lines in *Beowulf* that discuss how party of Grendel’s horribleness is that he does not pay the wergild for any of his victims (Liuzza 154-58). By leaving it out, the significance of death is changed, if not lessened. If Hondscio goes unnamed and/or un-mourned, and his family is not paid for his death, then Hondscio is no longer as valued, and his death no longer bears the same weight, throwing off the balance between death and life. This change in significance sets the foreground for changes in the *Beowulf* character later on, as he too will face death and succumb by the end of the poem.

### **The Advice of a King**

Another change that affects the balance of life and death also takes place after Grendel’s death at the celebration feast. As has been previously discussed, the advice Hrothgar gives Beowulf is important to understanding the consequences of Beowulf’s choices later in the epic. The story of Heremod is a warning of what may come, namely Beowulf’s death and the tragedy that will befall his nation due to his choice to rely on his strength and face the dragon alone. Because of Beowulf’s choice, his people are left with no leader and mourn the loss of their stability. The negative effects of Beowulf’s choices are emphasized in the following passage from the epic, which after recounting the enemies that Beowulf has made, says:

That is the feud and the fierce enmity,

savage hatred among men, that I expect now,  
when the Swedish people seek us out  
after they have learned that our lord  
has perished, who had once protected  
his hoard and kingdom against all hostility,  
after the fall of heroes, the valiant Scyldings,  
worked for the people's good, and what is more,  
performed noble deeds. Now we must hurry  
and look upon our people's king,  
and go with him who gave us rings  
on the way to the pyre. No small part  
of the hoard shall burn with that brave man,  
but countless gold treasures, grimly purchased,  
and rings, here at last with his own life  
paid for; then the flames shall devour,  
the fire enfold — let no warrior wear  
treasures for remembrance, nor no fair maiden  
have a ringornament around her neck,  
but sad in mind, stripped of gold, she must  
walk a foreign path, not once but often,  
now that leader of our troop has laid aside laughter,  
his mirth and joy. Thus many a cold morning



shall the spear be grasped in frozen fingers,  
hefted by hands, nor shall the sound of the harp  
rouse the warriors, but the dark raven,  
greedy for carrion, shall speak a great deal,  
ask the eagle how he fared at his feast  
when he plundered corpses with the wolf. (Liuzza 2999-3027)

While there may be others at fault, such as the warriors who abandoned Beowulf, there is ultimately a failure of Beowulf's judgment that cannot be ignored. His choice to battle the dragon alone and his failure to select thanes truly loyal to him in his time of need suggest a breakdown caused by Beowulf's tendency to rely on his strength, despite Hrothgar's warning to have wise counsel.

However, in the adaptations, this advice from Hrothgar that is worth critical reflection is mostly missing. Version after version completely cut out both the story of Heremod and the advice pertaining to the story that Hrothgar gives. Sometimes, in its place, there is praise of Beowulf from Hrothgar or predictions of success from the king. One example of the praise that replaces Hrothgar's warning is in Dorothy Hosford's adaptation. After Beowulf kills Grendel, King Hrothgar says, "You have done such deeds that your fame shall endure through all ages. May God reward you with good as He has done in the past" (Hosford 20). This passage offers good fortune to Beowulf, and foreshadows nothing of the dragon that will come to kill the hero or the problems he will face with the loyalty of his thanes.

A few of the versions of *Beowulf* do have advice, albeit in an extremely watered-down form that does not foreshadow the troubles that Beowulf will face. In Paul Storrie's adaptation, before Beowulf departs back to his own land after killing Grendel and Grendel's mother,

Hrothgar gives his parting words, saying, “May you live all your life with the same courage and good faith you have shown here” (Storrie). These words are as close to advice as Hrothgar gets in his communication with Beowulf. The wording creates the expectation that Beowulf will find nothing but positive outcomes if he maintains his same courage and faith, creating a purity in Beowulf’s character that is not seen in the original.

### **Beowulf’s Death**

Beowulf’s death is closely related to the issue of King Hrothgar’s advice. Beowulf’s people heavily mourned his death, and as the last quote from Liuzza’s translation explains, they mourned for both the loss of a hero and for what the future would bring. The valuable offerings at his funeral represent the grim price paid for the death of the dragon. Their hero, Beowulf, has died, and they will have no use for the gold because their leader will not be there to ensure it stays with his people rather than be taken by their enemies, hence its uselessness. The seriousness of the situation can be seen in the somber recounting of the mourners at the funeral, which states,

With heavy spirits  
they mourned their despair, the death of their lord;  
and a sorrowful song sang the Geatish woman,  
with hair bound up, for Beowulf the king,  
with sad cares, earnestly said  
that she dreaded the hard days ahead,  
the times of slaughter, the host's terror,  
harm and captivity. Heaven swallowed the smoke (Liuzza 3148-55).

The language of the text exudes sadness and despair. There is no real triumphant outcome from Beowulf's slaying of the dragon; there is just as much threat to his people as before, as the woman's words describe.

The adaptations of *Beowulf* tell a much different story, with most of them neglecting to tell of the hardship that his people will suffer. The consequence of this reshaping is that the significance of Beowulf's death is lessened. Death is not taken as seriously as it should be, and there seem to be no real consequences to Beowulf's choice to act "heroically." A few examples include the adaptations of Strafford Riggs and C.F. Bricknell Smith. Riggs is a great example of blame shifting. In this version, when Beowulf is dying after the dragon has mortally wounded him, Beowulf says "I die, . . . and forgive those others-those foolish ones who deserted me in my hour..." removing the blame from himself and placing it fully on the men who would not help him fight the dragon (Riggs 79). The narration then states, "And so died Beowulf, greatest and truest of all the early heroes of legend," and goes on to talk about his funeral with the same tone, saying,

Now, at the last, Beowulf was laid upon the sweet-scented pyre, and all about him were heaped the countless treasures from the dragon's mound. Then Wiglaf approached with two flaming torches, to do the dead king honor. Proclaiming the greatness of his dear lord, he held high above his head the flares and plunged them into the pyre. The flames leaped up, staining crimson the dark night, and so great was the glare from the burning that the stars put out their own light, and the sea stopped its sad mourning.

Higher and higher rose the flames and with them the lamentations of the people. And the noble earls took up again their sad marching about the burning pyre, and all night hey

marched, until there was nothing left of the pyre but a high mound of gray ashes in the gray dawn.

Thus passed to his own gods Beowulf, King of Geatsland, in the North (79-84).

Nothing is mentioned about the disaster that will strike Beowulf's people in his funeral scene or before. The mourners seem only to mourn the loss of their hero, not the loss of their safety or community as has been emphasized previously.

Smith's version goes a step further and provides an instance where not even the uselessness of the treasure is recognized. The story states,

“We have lost our King and master. He has died bravely and gallantly and he gave his life to save us from the foul death and destruction, which the fire-dragon would have brought upon us all. In freeing us from that horror Beowulf also won for us this treasure.”

Wiglaf pointed to the huge piles of golden ornamented weapons, the banners woven in gold and silver and the many fine dishes, goblets, rings and bracelets, which had all been carried down from the rocky cavern in the mountains, where the dragon had guarded them for so long, and which were now lying in the great hall around the body of the King...

When the pyre had burned out they built a great mound of rock so that sea-farers from far could see it, and so that it stood clear against the sky for all the people of the Geats to see.

Thus they honoured a hero, who had been a mild and gentle King, a man of kindness and honour and a warrior of fearless courage, who laid down his life for his people (Smith 51-52).

The gold, rather than being cursed and labeled as useless, is seen as Beowulf's gift to the people.

The last lines, of which the first part is quoting the translations of the original, goes further by

saying that Beowulf had fearless courage and his death was for his people. Beowulf's act becomes completely unselfish.

These two quotes, combined with the lack of Hrothgar's advice, create a story where the tenuousness of life is not observed and the hero's actions need not be judged. When the consequences of death, whether they be the death of a minor character or the death of a hero, are not fully observed, what is left becomes a hero who is above these things. The problem, however, is that the hero is expected to be admired, and heroes that are admired are emulated. The morality of this newly created narrative is questionable at best for the ideas it propagates to its child readers who are seemingly being told that heroism is simply risking one's life, and the consequences of that, and perhaps the better alternatives, are not to be thought of.

However, not all examples exude this questionable morality. In the adaptation by Nye, which was written during the turbulent times of the Vietnam War, there is a message worthy of note. Although Beowulf does not mourn Hondscio, he devises an alternative solution to killing the dragon that involves both assistance and a least violent method of using bees. Beowulf says of his plan "Listen, Wiglaf. When I was young I'd never have done a thing like that. I'd have thought it was dishonourable, or something. Well, the dragon lies dead and the treasure is there for the good of our people," which really emphasizes that heroic decisions are not something to be made lightly, but involve wisdom as well (Nye 106). However, examples like that of Nye are few and far between, and it is important to realize that the overall trend is far from that of Nye's creative story.

## CONCLUSION

The original values of *Beowulf* are crucial to the meaning of the epic for readers, including children. By analyzing word frequency along with the more traditional close reading of the story of *Beowulf*, the values can be more clearly ascertained. One of these values is a strong sense of importance for community, which is preserved in the hall through the passing-down of traditions and other information. Other values include the careful balance between community and ostracism and the balance between life and death. These values are some of the most dramatically changed in the adaptations for children, and therefore deserve careful scrutiny in order to see the exactly how these values are being changed, as well as possible better ways to adapt the story for children.

Community and ostracism create an important balance in the story of *Beowulf* through both the hall community and the ostracism of certain characters. In the adaptations, the replacement of the hall and the changes to the ostracism of certain characters, specifically Unferth and Grendel, creates an imbalance in the adaptations. This imbalance is significant because it also creates an imbalance between good and evil. The line between the goodness of the community and the evilness of those ostracized actually becomes more clear, which is less reflective of the complex reality of Anglo Saxon values, as well as modern-day ones. These subtle changes also significantly alter the community it is meant to represent, replacing it with a focus on smaller units, such as the family and the individual.

Similar to the balance between community and ostracism, the balance between life and death is disrupted by the adaptations as well. Many of the funerals mentioned in the original *Beowulf* that emphasize the significance of death are forgotten, throwing off the balance

between death and life, which were valued more equally by the people of the time. The advice of King Hrothgar, and the changes to *Beowulf's* death and funeral scene both contribute to the neglect of the negative aspects of *Beowulf's* leadership and the consequences of his actions. This rewriting of the values of *Beowulf* causes a disruption of the balance between life and death similar to that caused by the neglect of the funerals.

Regarding the literature on adaptations for children, there are two significant threads that I found useful when considering this information from adaptations of *Beowulf* for children. The first is the idea that in order to perpetuate canonical texts, it is important to introduce them properly to children. While this is not a statement that I hold to be an absolute truth due to the improbability of *Beowulf's* survival relying on the ability for the text to be adapted for children, it needs to be considered in order to better understand author motivations. The second is the concern with how ideology is shared through these texts with children, as well as what ideology is shared, which is the main concern I wish to address. Each of these roles has been a concern of those in the field of children's literature, and I seek to combine them in order to provide a fuller picture of the concerns regarding adapting the text of *Beowulf* for children.

One of the concerns regarding *Beowulf* is the need to perpetuate the text as something future generations will be able to enjoy. One quality that all of the adaptations have in common is the fact that they are all trying to retell the story of *Beowulf*, which shows the concern the authors must have had for the text and their motivation to share its importance in some way with future generations. Because of this, the preservation of a text is an important topic that needs to be addressed in discussing adaptations of *Beowulf*. One scholar named Elizabeth Thiel has discussed this issue in a chapter of the book *Adapting Canonical Texts in Children's Literature* entitled "Downsizing Dickens: Adaptations of *Oliver Twist* for the Child Reader". As she

discusses Dickens' tale, she notes the many issues there are with adapting such a text, saying, "adapting the classics for children can undoubtedly diminish the source text and invalidate the historicity of the work" (Thiel 143). This is true in the story of *Beowulf*. Many of the changes, such as the removal of kinslaughter, have taken away a key part of the historical aspect of the work. However, Thiel counters that "adaptations can also invite extensive contemplation of the past, the present and the importance of the written word, ultimately eliminate any likelihood of such classic texts being forgotten and assist in perpetuating knowledge and some understanding of the young reader's cultural heritage" (143). This second point emphasizes the need for adaptations of classics for children, even without considering the slightly overdramatic concern that classic texts will be forgotten if children are not exposed to them. However, it does not capture the importance of the issues of ideology in the text.

As Jack Zipes points out, "The assumption was—and still is—that we know what is appropriate for children, that we know children, and that we know exactly what effects a tale will have on a child" (Zipes, "Sticks and Stones" 92). He notes Karin Lesnik-Oberstein's statement that says, "children's fiction can be seen not only as an expression of constriction and regulation of the child for the adult's sake, but also as an expression of a paradoxical wish to resolve the self-imposed and self-defined separations: efforts to remain in touch with, and deal with, the anxieties of ignorance and knowledge, of being and becoming, of presence and absence for their own sake" (Lesnik-Oberstein 75). We see this adult expression in many of the adaptations. Whether it is an anxiety to explain kinslaughter, found in almost all of the adaptations, or the adding-in of overtly didactic speeches, like in Robert Nye's adaptation, there is an obvious attempt to reshape the story based on moral grounds.



One of the issues with Thiel's statement that emphasizes the problem of adults imposing their views is in regards to the statement about these adaptations helping children to understand their cultural heritage. Janet Bottoms, a professor in the English Department at Homerton College, Cambridge, discusses this issue in "'Familiar Shakespeare'" in a discussion over 'universal values'. She states that "examination of the ways in which the plays have been reworked or abridged shows not only how strongly each of these representations relates to contemporary morality, but how they are tied to the age, gender, social class and race of the interpreter, and how much may not only be added to, but also lost from, the possible 'meanings' of the play" (Bottoms 19). As Bottoms is beginning to hint at in this passage, there are many barriers that keep adaptations from being similar to the original. She states later on that, "in the increasingly diverse society which is Britain today, Western Christian, white and middle-class values can no longer be automatically assumed to be 'universal'" (Bottoms 22). The same can be said of *Beowulf*, a compelling reason to be more critical of the adaptations of the story for children.

While the stories of *Beowulf* discussed in this paper are adaptations of the original and have no obligation to be completely true to the text, there is obviously still a conflict in these adaptations between their adapted text and that of the original that cause issues with the ideology. On one side, there is the desire to share great literary stories with children in a way in which they will enjoy, and on the other side is the desire to simplify the stories to make sure certain points get across, like the heroism of Beowulf, and to make sure certain other points are not even discussed, such as kinslaughter. While some of the more troubling issues of *Beowulf* are left out, equally troubling ones are created, and the delicate balance that could be found is the original text amongst important ideas such as community and ostracism or life and death has

been disrupted. Some explanations for what is observed here can be found in analysis regarding children's literature. Issues such as what adults believe to be right for children and how that is acted out through adaptations of literature are highlighted as extremely problematic, yet solvable issues.

One important concept from scholars is the importance of allowing children more freedom to create their own questions regarding works like *Beowulf*. Bottoms, in her work on Shakespeare, suggest that it is important to allow children the freedom to explore texts rather than trying to shape the message for them too much (22). Allowing children to explore *Beowulf* more by avoiding reshaping the story into something more "appropriate" would not only help perpetuate the story, but also help avoid the negative consequences to the reader of reshaping the values of *Beowulf*. Critical reflection of the text would still be needed, and the problems of the original text would not disappear. However, the act of considering the troubling issues created in the adaptations of *Beowulf*, as well as how that changes ideas about what *Beowulf* is about, is the important part of the concept.

One possible solution to the issues in *Beowulf* would be to simply follow the earlier trend of offering abridged versions of *Beowulf*. As John Stephens states in his book, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, sometimes the "more powerful vehicle for an ideology" is the book that shows "no obvious intent to be exemplary" because "implicit, and therefore invisible, ideological positions are invested with legitimacy through the implication that things are simply 'so'" (9). For instance, Clara Thomson's 1899 adaptation of *Beowulf* had a preface that clearly stated the intentions of the work, saying "scholars will find much to criticize in this little book; ... I can only beg for their indulgence on the ground that it is meant mainly to arouse in children an interest in the beginnings of our literature—a subject that is till terribly neglected in schools"

(6). However, in modern-day adaptations, para text with such straightforward claims has become a rarity, and more subtle and implicit meanings hidden within the text seem to have taken their place. The lack of para text itself is not what is alarming, but rather the increasing difficulty in the ability to detect ideology being given to children. When ideology is not clearly visible, it is more difficult to refute for both children and adults. Because of this, an abridged text is one option, but not the only option, available for improving adaptations of *Beowulf*.

One option that might help reverse the trend of increasingly implicit meaning in adaptations of *Beowulf* would be to add the para text that has gone unused so often. If the author were to clearly lay out their motives in retelling the story, perhaps it would be easier for the reader to be, at the minimum, aware of the changes happening in the text. More modern examples of adaptations of *Beowulf* for Children that have para text are available (specifically a few by J.R.R. Tolkien, on which I will elaborate later on), and they seem to support the idea that para text reduces the amount of implicit ideology available, as well as support an additional idea that creativity plays a valuable role in preventing some of the negative outcomes seen in adaptations of *Beowulf* for children.

Another, more promising option exists in the creative realm. Other, more creative versions of *Beowulf* also exemplify how *Beowulf* can be adapted for children as something other than simply an abridged version. Two different adaptations of *Beowulf*, “Sellic Spell” and “The Lay of Beowulf,” offer insight into how creative versions of *Beowulf* can benefit a child reader through much more creative retellings that deserve critical praise separate from the original tale. Because of these stories’ complex and more original retellings, they are more easily seen as a separate entity from the original, and therefore not endangering the meaning of the original, but

still providing a valuable intermediate connection between children and the text that provoke critical thought.

“Sellic Spell,” an adaptation by J.R.R. Tolkien, not only selects a different name for the title of his short story, but also selects a different construction of the story, creating a folktale that *Beowulf* might have come from. In the tale, there is a myth of a boy raised by bears, and it is not clear that the boy will amount to much. The repetition of a folk tale is added, with three challengers taking Grendel on, one at a time, until one finally succeeds. In Tolkien’s own words taken from the introduction (which is also some of the important para text I mentioned previously): “This version is *a* story, not *the* story. It is only to a limited extent an attempt to reconstruct the Anglo-Saxon tale that lies behind the folk-tale element of *Beowulf*” (Tolkien, “Sellic Spell” 355). Like many folk-tales, it creates a story suitable for a child audience, creating a combination that can stir interest for children without many of the consequences discussed in this thesis. The creativity of the piece, aided by the exculpatory presence of some explicit para text, are the main reasons for this successful avoidance of these consequences.

“The Lay of Beowulf” is another example of an adaptation of *Beowulf* that allows for a complex reading experience for children (Tolkien). As Christopher Tolkien notes in the introduction to “The Lay of Beowulf,” there is evidence to suggest that the lay, or at least the first of the two versions, was intended for a child audience, as Christopher Tolkien could remember his father singing the lay to him (Tolkien 416). Each version of the lay transforms the epic of *Beowulf*, originally over 3,000 lines of verse, into a lay between 56 lines long (in the first version) and 130 lines long (in the second version). Rather than simply being an abridged version of *Beowulf*, the lay makes up for its length by having much of the meaning of each lay hidden between the lines. This creates the possibility of piquing interest in children not only in the story

itself, but also in the work it is derived from in a possible attempt to explore the meaning within *Beowulf*. However, the lay itself, through both its form and its title, do not claim to be the story of *Beowulf*.

Even in these stories, however, implicit ideology is present. While there remains no exact answer as to how *Beowulf* can be adapted to avoid issues such as inaccurately portraying the ideology of the original and creating new ideologies that have troubling aspects, such as the polarization of good and evil, becoming aware of the issues already existing in previous texts can help us to improve adaptations in the future. Looking to some of the few versions that offer up alternatives may also lead to improvement, as well as further exploration of possible options.

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