Grendel, The Biting Baby Monster

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My presentation today entitled “Grendel, The Biting Baby Monster” is part of a larger recently completed manuscript. In this manuscript I argue that Beowulf contains a pattern of metaphor, from the beginning of the poem to the end, which follows the pregenital psychological development of a male child. My argument is primarily based on the theories of Erik Erikson and Melanie Klein.

Using the theories of Erikson and Klein, I look at the characters, events, settings, imagery, and word meanings as representative of the psychology of one evolving male pregenital self. From this perspective, I argue that none of the characters and events of the story depict real or fictional people or events; rather, they are metaphors for the internal struggles of a male child. For instance, I see Grendel as a metaphor for the greed and envy of the oral sadistic stage when, according to Klein, the child projects these inner feelings onto an object outside himself.

As you may recall, Beowulf is the oldest piece of vernacular literature to survive in written form. It is 3,183 lines long and was composed in Old English between the eighth and the tenth centuries. Most scholars believe that there was one author, although this is still debated. The poem takes place in Denmark and Geatland which is north of Denmark on the Scandinavian peninsula. In Part I of the poem we are told briefly of Scyld Scefing the noble founder of the Scylding line. Scyld’s descendant King Hrothgar, his Queen Wealththeow and the Danish people suffer the attacks of Grendel for 12 years, until Beowulf arrives from Geatland to help rid the land of this monster. After he succeeds in defeating Grendel, he goes on to defeat Grendel’s mother who has exacted revenge for her son’s death. In Part II Beowulf sails triumphantly for home carrying abundant treasure awarded to him by Hrothgar.
for his brave deeds. Eventually, the hero becomes king of Geatland, ruling in peace for fifty years until a dragon begins his fiery destruction of the land. Beowulf defeats this monster, as well, but loses his own life in the process. The poem ends with Beowulf’s burial by the sea.

Unlike the first 67 lines of the poem which unfold metaphorically as the preambivalent oral stage of child development, the Grendel segment, which I am discussing, follows the pattern of the next phase when the infant is better able to differentiate between his inner and outer worlds.

Let’s look for a moment at Erikson’s and Klein’s theories regarding the oral sadistic phase, before turning to the text. At this stage, the most important physical event is the painful emergence of the baby’s teeth which coincides with the strengthening of his jaw muscles. In his seminal work *Childhood and Society* Erikson gives us a particularly rich description. He says,

It is, of course, impossible to know what the infant feels, as his teeth “bore from within” – in the very oral cavity which until then was the main seat of pleasure, and a seat mainly of pleasure; and what kind of masochistic dilemma results from the fact that the tension and pain caused by the teeth, these inner saboteurs, can be alleviated only by biting harder.

And Erikson continues,

This, in turn, adds a social dilemma to a physical one. For where breast feeding lasts into the biting stage (and, all in all, this has been the rule on earth) it is now necessary to learn how to continue sucking without biting, so that the mother may not withdraw the nipple in pain or anger. (78-9).

The resolution of this social dilemma, the maintaining of the nursing relationship with the mother during the biting stage, is fraught with fear and anxiety. This is due not only to the pain of “inner saboteurs,” the emerging teeth, but also, according to Melanie Klein, to feelings of greed and envy toward the breast: “My work shows me that the first object to be envied is the feeding breast, for the infant feels that it possesses everything that he desires and
that it has an unlimited flow of milk and love which it keeps for its own gratification” ("Study" 213).

Klein asserts that in order to cope with his greed and envy, as well as the pain of the emerging teeth, the infant projects his emotions, and the destructive impulses that go with them, outward onto an object. That outside object then becomes an “uncontrollable overpowering” persecutor which the baby fears ("Notes" 179-180). This splitting of the self, as many of you may know, Klein calls the paranoid-schizoid position and she considers it a normal part of child development.

Klein is well known for her theory that in the infant’s rudimentary thoughts, the mother’s breast, itself, is split into the good and bad object ("Study" 212). She also asserts that there are other forms of splitting at this stage. When anxiety arises due to destructive impulses caused by greed, envy, and/or the pain of emerging teeth, these destructive impulses are projected outward onto the bad breast and/or an imaginary object. Feelings of paranoia and persecutory anxiety arise, directed at the object onto which the destructive impulses have been projected. Klein labeled this early mental process “projective identification,” which she found to be active in various forms throughout life and which has become an almost universally accepted concept in contemporary psychoanalysis.

Heorot

Turning now from theory to text, my discussion begins with the mead hall Heorot since it is the central arena of celebration and conflict associated with Grendel and this section of the poem. Hrothgar, unlike his forefathers who were seemingly content to be triumphant in battle, loved by their people and powerful rulers, decides to build a mead hall, a glittering gabled monument to himself and the Danish kingdom. This, in itself, would indicate a developmental shift; after all it did not come to the minds of any of his forefathers to “command a royal building.”

To clarify what exactly this “royal building” is metaphorically, let us look at the ways the poet describes it throughout the episode. He says that, “The hall towered high, cliff-like,
horn-gabled” (81-82); that it is “jewel-decorated” (167). When the coast-guard leads Beowulf and his men to Heorot, the poet describes it as, “the gold-laced hall, the high timbers, most splendid building among earth-dwellers” (308-09).

Later, as Grendel approaches Heorot, the hall is again described in imposing and dazzling terms. It is a “towering hall” (713); “the shining wine-hall, house of gold-giving, a joy to men plated high with gold” (715-16).

And what mainly goes on inside this “most splendid building among earth-dwellers”? Feasting and drinking.² Hrothgar, Beowulf and their retainers drink wine, beer or mead while they listen to the scop sing. Although the Old English word *symbel* which means “feast,” is used to describe the social gathering, the only specific types of nourishment mentioned are beverages -- drinks. Special focus is on Wealhtheow giving the jeweled mead cup to Hrothgar, Beowulf and the thanes, just as an early oral stage infant would be offered milk.

If we view Heorot through the schema of early child development, what would be the most significant edifice for an infant, one that is the center of that infant’s world as Heorot is the central “high timbered,” “jewel-decorated” landmark of the Danish kingdom where liquid nourishment is offered by an idealized woman, a Queen? It would be the mother’s nursing breast.

Later, we see images relating to breastfeeding in the description of Grendel entering the hall on the night he is finally defeated:

The evil warrior, deprived of joys,
came up to the building; the door burst open,
though bound with iron, as soon as he touched it,
huge in his blood-lust; enraged, he ripped open
the mouth of the hall; quickly rushed in (720-24)
The door bursts open at Grendel’s touch; he doesn’t have to knock down the iron bound door as you might expect from a heavily secured mead-hall. Like the breast which “lets down” and bursts forth milk at the baby’s touch, so the door of Heorot bursts open as soon as
Grendel touches it. Grendel’s ripping open the “mouth” of the hall and quickly rushing in resonate with strikingly precise language as undifferentiated descriptions of the baby’s nursing mouth and the breast. Grendel is ripping open the mouth of the hall, like the baby’s mouth would be avariciously sucking on the nipple forcing the milk to rush quickly into his mouth. Mouth, milk, breast, nipple are conflated in this scene of greedy attack.

Turning from the idealized breast Heorot, let us look further at Grendel’s relationship to that breast. Klein says of the oral sadistic stage child, “[T]he infant’s longing for an inexhaustible and always present breast – would not only satisfy him but prevent destructive impulses and persecutory anxiety – cannot ever be fully satisfied” (“Study” 212). There is a necessary break with what Erikson calls the “maternal matrix” (79). Those Kleinian “destructive impulses” and the “persecutory anxiety” are alluded to in the poem in quick succession immediately after Heorot is built:

The hall towered high,
cliff-like, horn-gabled, awaited the war-flames
malicious burning; it was still not the time
for the sharp-edged hate of his sworn son-in-law
to rise against Hrothgar in murderous rage. (81b-85)

And on the heels of these fiery, murderous “destructive impulses” we see, in the very next line of the poem, “persecutory anxiety” in the form of Grendel: “Then the great monster in the outer darkness/suffered fierce pain, for each new day/he heard happy laughter loud in the hall,” (86a-88). In relation to Grendel, Heorot is the Kleinian breast that contains an infinite amount of milk and love that it keeps for its own satisfaction (“Study” 213). Grendel is, then, the phantasied projection of the self’s own greed and envy, split off as a defense mechanism, then feared as an attacker of the good breast as well as the self.

Beowulf, on the other hand, is the ego ideal, the inheritor of the nobility of Hrothgar and the primary narcissism of the preambivalent oral stage when the infant is his own ideal. In his 1914 essay “On Narcissism” Freud explains the ego ideal:
The development of the ego consists in a departure from primary narcissism and gives rise to a vigorous attempt to recover that state. This departure is brought about by means of the displacement of libido onto an ego ideal.

(547)

French psychoanalyst Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel argues that “the ego ideal implies the idea of a project” as well as hope (29). She says that together they “suggest the idea of development, of evolution” (30). The ego ideal, which embodies the pervasive wish to return to the paradisial state of unity with the mother, is, ironically, the impetus for growth, in the unconscious hope that a return to this state can be achieved. Beowulf’s project in Hrothgar’s court is to rid the land of the biting baby monster Grendel with the unconscious hope of returning the self to the glorious state of primary narcissism.

Grendel’s Attack

And the biting baby monster’s attacks are quite rapacious and violent. In Kleinian terms Grendel is the expression of the infant’s “phan-tasied oral-sadistic attacks on the mother’s breast” (“Notes” 177). As he looks upon the sleeping young thanes the poet tells us that Grendel’s “heart laughed” (730); he “thought he would take the life from each body, eat them all before day came; the glutonous thought of a full-bellied feast was hot upon him” (731-34). Then he seizes a warrior and “gutted him sleeping – ripped him apart – bit into muscles, swilled blood from veins, tore off gobbets, in hardly a moment had eaten him up, all of the dead man, even hands and feet” (741-45). This gory description of Grendel’s avarice closely parallels Klein’s description of the oral-sadistic baby’s projection of his own aggression onto outside objects. She writes, “[T]he child conceives of them as actually dangerous – persecutors who it fears will devour it, scoop out the inside of its body, cut it to pieces, poison it – in short, compassing its destruction by all the means which sadism can devise. …” (“Contribution” 116).

We see another dimension of the oral sadistic phase in the monumental battle between Grendel and Beowulf that follows the bloody slaughter of the retainer. While the
emergence of the baby’s teeth is the most important physical event of this stage, the
development and co-ordination of the arm reach and the hand grasp are significant as well.
As Erikson puts it, “The arms have learned to reach out and the hands to grasp more
purposefully” (77). Beowulf, we are told, has “the strength of thirty in his mighty hand
grip”(380-81) and has vowed to set aside his sword and fight Grendel barehanded.

Grendel’s attack on the Geat begins with violent hand and claw imagery: he “caught
in his claws the strong-minded man – the evil assailant snatched at him, clutching; hand met
claw” (746-48). At this, Beowulf “sat straight at once, thrust the arm back” (749). The poet
tells us: Grendel “had never encountered, in any region of this middle-earth, in any other
man, a stronger hand-grip” (751-53), Beowulf “held him close; fingers snapped ” (760),
Grendel “felt his fingers in a terrible grip” (764-65), the grapplers were furious” (769), and
“[T]he bold-hearted man, had him in hand (813-14). At the end of the fight, we are given a
brief, but vivid description of Grendel’s whole arm being torn off:

The terrible creature
took a body wound there; a gaping tear
opened in his shoulder; tendons popped,
muscle slipped the bone. (815-18)

And, as a sign of victory, Beowulf fastens Grendel’s arm “from hand to shoulder – there all
together was Grendel’s claw – under the high roof” of Heorot (835-36).

All Weapons of Battle are “Bespelled”

While the most powerful weapon of the oral sadistic stage, besides the jaw and teeth,
is ripped off the body, there are other indications that we are in a world of pregenital
modalities. Swords, the symbols of the genital phase, do not work. The poet tells us,
 “[Grendel] had bespelled all weapons of battle” (804-05). Even before the retainers try to use
their swords against the attacker, Beowulf has decided not to use his weapon on Grendel:
“And so I will not kill him by sword, shear off his life” (679-80). If Beowulf describes
metaphorically the pregenital development of a male child, then it would make sense that the
intrusive swords do not work. We are in a world where the phallic swords passed down from father to son are not privileged or powerful. (This, of course, is a great irony in a poem depicting the warrior culture of Germanic tribes). The concept of the difference between the sexes and the difference between the generations has not yet entered the mind or experience of the child. The center of libidinal pleasure or power is not associated with the penis; it is with the mouth area and with the growing mastery of the arm reach and the hand grasp. The modality of the mouth and the grasp is the same: opening, taking in, closing and holding onto an object. The intrusive modality of the penis, which the sword represents, becomes dominant later, at the genital stage of development.⁴

And so let me conclude.

In Beowulf, the oral sadistic stage begins with the building of Heorot; it is the baby’s first realization that the breast – Heorot – is separate from himself. Almost as soon as this glittering monument comes into consciousness as a separate entity, the biting baby monster Grendel begins his nightly raids. Grendel is the Kleinian projection of the greed and envy of the paranoid-schizoid position whom the ego ideal Beowulf must defeat in order that the breast not be destroyed. Further, Beowulf must defeat the monster in hand to hand combat because all weapons of battle have been “bespelled” by the fiend. There is a spate of hand, finger, and grasping imagery during the fight, which is appropriate for the oral sadistic stage when there is improved mastery of these parts of the body.

Beowulf scholars tell us that the poem is a masculine story, but what I’ve presented today indicates that, yes, it is a masculine story, but it is a masculine story within the context of the powerfully feminine. It is a Mother-Son story told from the point of view of the son. This ancient poem records metaphorically the growth of a male pregenital self. This primary vernacular work of literature in the English canon is also about the primary stages of human development.
1 All references to the poem are to Howell Chickering’s *Beowulf, A Dual Language Edition*.

2 Howell Chickering says, “References to feasting appear more frequently in the first eight hundred lines than anywhere else” (302).

3 See Freud’s “On Narcissism: an Introduction.” He says, “The ideal ego is now the target of the self-love which was enjoyed in childhood by the actual ego. The subject’s narcissism makes its appearance displace on this new ideal ego, which, like the infantile ego, finds itself possessed of every perfection that is of value” (558).

4 Other swords in the poem, such as Hrunting and Naegling, are problematic, as well; I will discuss these as they appear in the text.

Works Cited


