

THE INFLUENCE OF ANCIENT LITERATURE ON THE MODERN LITERATURE ON THE EXAMPLE OF «BEOWULF» AND «THE LORD OF THE RINGS»

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In this article the author makes a deep analysis of the two great works of English literature and finds out the most similar its components. After comparing some main features such as the historical background of the works, their tribute in the national identity and linguistic means the author makes a conclusion about the impact of an ancient source.

Key words: «The Lord of the Rings»; «Beowulf»; historical background and references; similarities; influence; modernisation of the medieval text.

Nowadays, «The Lord of the Rings» is a book loved by many people of different ages and preferences. However, not all of them are familiar with the true background of this book, not everyone understands from which time the roots of the story are coming from. That is why it is important to learn about the real «ancestor» of «The Lord of the Rings» - «Beowulf» and regard through this example how the modern literature is influenced by the medieval one.

Firstly, it is essential to learn some important fact about «Beowulf». This work originally belongs to the so-called «medieval heroism» genre. Heroism at that time meant that the knights were fighting monsters and it was a heroic fight.

«Beowulf» is the oldest of the great long poems written in English. Linguistic evidence shows that the poem was originally composed in the dialect of what was then Mercia, the Midlands of England today. The date of the birth of the original oral text is about 750. But in the unique manuscript it was converted into the West-Saxon dialect of the southwest in which most of Old English literature survived. The written version we have right now dates back to the 11th century. In 1731 the manuscript was seriously damaged in the fire that destroyed the building in London where the collection of medieval English literature was kept [1].

It is now widely believed that this poem is the work of a single poet who was a Christian and that this poem reflects well-established Christian traditions. But it is not true. Beowulf still keeps its pagan origin. We can find in the text a lot of references to the old Germanic traditions such as mentioning the old Germanic gods. But taking into account that this poem, as the legend says, was written down in a monastery by two monks it can be

judged that it as a good reflection of Christian traditions - this is the influence which the church brought to the development of the English literature.

The plot of «Beowulf» has a lot of references to the history which are important to mention for better understanding. There was no such concept as the nation then among the Germanic tribes. Nowadays talking of the nation we mean the people leaving on one special territory. At that time that was more about allegiance to the king or a leader which promised to defend the people who are loyal to him. It was 'folca' (which meant folk), and the leader was the one who binds it.

This poem was created by an anonymous poet as at that time the role of a poet was small and meant nothing. As its origin is oral it was also changed in many different versions and the one we have today is only one of them.

«Beowulf» represents such historical events as the Viking raids which took place in 800-1000AD. But in the text it is shown in another way: the main character or hero – Beowulf faces many threats: Grendel who was a monstrous character, Grendel's mother and the dragon which defeated the hero by killing him in the last fight. The heroism of Beowulf is shown in his deeds: he wanted to fight alone even though he knew that it would be difficult.

The references to Christianity are shown in some phrases of the king who warns Beowulf of pride. Pagans did not believe in pride, moreover, they did not believe in something eternal, even the gods in their religion die, this is why we can assert that these parts of the text were invented already in the 11th century when the poem was written.

As this poem was a piece of an oral art, it is based on alliteration which makes it sound more like a song and which helped the person who was singing it to memorise it by heart. There are also a lot of repetitions which played the same role and helped the listeners to review everything already said. It was because this poem is really long.

«The Lord of the Rings» was written by John Ronald Reuel Tolkien who was an English writer, poet, philologist and academician. He was best known as the author of fantasy fiction. He started his career as the professor of Anglo-Saxon and afterwards English Language and Literature. Tolkien was an expert on the Anglo-Saxon epic poem «Beowulf». He also was a big fan of the medieval poetry and actually thought that «Beowulf» was the first great text in England (not Chaucer with his «Canterbury tales» who is used to be taken for the father of English poetry).

In writing «The Lord of the Rings» J. R. R. Tolkien hoped to create mythology for England. Clearly, Tolkien wished to use a variety of different texts to create a body of stories and ideas that would serve as a mythology for

English people. In creating a mythology of England, it was only fitting for Tolkien to use texts that were formative to England's culture.

In his famous trilogy «The Lord of the Rings», Tolkien uses tropes, themes, and cultural characteristics from many different medieval texts. However, one particular story that impacted his fiction most was «Beowulf».

Written between 1937 and 1945, «The Lord of the Rings» was the book which gave to the people a sense of identity, hope, and unity which they badly needed to face Hitler's tyranny. Tolkien's fictional works are full of hope for hobbits and for other good and simple people who face the terrible threat of Sauron's evil. This could be identified with the English people facing terrible threat of German army. This is the first thing which is similar to «Beowulf» which was created in its medieval meaning as a work which was meant to show how the nation could be bound fighting all together against one evil.

Secondly, Tolkien made a series of analysis on English mythology and made a conclusion that the country had no myths which belonged to it. He wrote that he was grieved by the poverty of his own beloved country from his early days: it had no stories of its own, not of the quality that he sought, and found in legends of other lands. Though while writing «The Lord of the Rings» he tried to use as many characters, archetypes, cultural references as possible, and the language from «Beowulf» in order to formulate his modern mythology. His stories indirectly reflect the experiences of Englishmen through the use of legendary stories and mythical creatures, providing English people with tales that they can relate to and use as a source of wisdom, much like the mythical tales of other cultures [2].

We can not but notice the similarities of monsters. There are some examples: Gollum and Grendel. One of the monsters in Tolkien's «The Lord of the Rings» who is most evidently connected to the story of «Beowulf» is the creature named Smeagol, who is also known as Gollum. Gollum's character is intertwined with the character of Grendel, one of the major enemies in «Beowulf». Grendel's mother who bears important connections to two different creatures in Tolkien's book, her character is similar to Shelob, the spider that resides in Cirith Ungol or another demon of the deep world, the Watcher in the Water, who waits outside of the gates of Moria deep in a murky pool. In the book we can also come across some other forms of the beasts, such as sea-beasts and dragons. With the use of the evil characters taken from the Old English literature into the modern one, Tolkien tries to resurrect country's past and epic.

In both works we find the theme connected to the importance of treasures which the heroes take from the enemy after they win the battle. Emphasis and value of treasures, found in both «The Lord of the Rings» and «Beowulf» is a

common theme in medieval literature and Anglo-Saxon culture and emphasising of its importance refers directly to the culture of England.

The reference to «Beowulf» we can see as well in the same objects playing not the last role in the plot. Beowulf's sword and Aragorn's sword could be a perfect example. The swords are powerful, they are ancient heirlooms and treasures as well. Both swords have melting blades which is not a coincidence. Both Aragorn and Beowulf, two Anglo-Saxon kinds of warriors who act as the chief protectors of their people, have ancient swords of immeasurable power.

There are two notable cultural similarities between the culture of «Beowulf» and the culture of «The Lord of the Rings». Firstly, both works bear the same connections to paganism and Christianity. Secondly, both «Beowulf» and «The Lord of the Rings» depict many elements of Anglo-Saxon culture, including a heroic code of honor and a high respect for chief-figures.

Last but not the least to mention are the similarities of themes. The first great theme of two works is hope. If «The Lord of the Rings» was meant to give hope to people during WWII, «Beowulf» just shows how one hero can bring the hope to the whole nation. In both of the works we watch the progress of people's feeling: despair and fear turns into hope.

Talking of the theme of power, Tolkien modernises Beowulf and conforms its plot and themes to the troubles of the modern world, which has so often been plagued by power-hungry dictators who seek dominion over other human beings. Simply said, Tolkien shows that any person who has power desires more of it. Throughout the trilogy, various characters struggle for power, the evil ring itself is named "The Ring of Power," and the desire for power often leads the peoples of Middle Earth into ruins and corruption [2]. In «Beowulf», power is simply glorified. Men like Beowulf use power for good purposes. But Tolkien, ultimately, turns «Beowulf» epic on its head by dethroning power and emphasising the importance of the powerless. This also contributed to giving hope to people who were fighting in the trenches or leading the guerrilla war during WWII.

The similarities between «The Lord of the Rings» and «Beowulf» are striking. There are a lot of elements which connect two books together as well as with English medieval tradition. Tolkien's passion for medieval texts allowed him to modernise a famous epic poem.

To sum up, medieval literature has that much tribute to the development of modern literature as the role which plays the modern literature in saving the greatest ancient epic poems.

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