

Beowulf as an epic

Beowulf, an epic of 3182 lines is the work of the Teutonic race, a branch of which came to England in the 5th and 6th centuries. It is the only extant Germanic epic that we have today. Before *Beowulf* was put to writing, it existed in short Pagan ballads, each celebrating some separate act of the hero. It was reduced to writing in the first half of the 8th century by a poet who had keenest sympathy for the heathen traditions. The Christian interpolations might have been made, not by him, but by the Wessex editor of the saga in the 10th century. At any rate, they are few and of slight importance.

Judged from the standpoint of true epic there is no denying of the fact that it lacks some of the essential qualities of an epic. We do not find in it the high seriousness, and dignity which we find in Milton's *Paradise Lost* or the *Iliad* and *the Odyssey*. Again the poem lacks the larger epic dimension, conception and also the finer polish that are found in the great epics of the world. Moreover the subject doesn't have the weight and dignity of an epic poem. "Its story is rather personal than national." (Stopford A. Brooke). Nay, *Beowulf* is too short to be called an epic. It is hardly more than three thousand lines or is about the length of 3 or 4 books of Homer and Milton. Last but not the least the poem has no minute characterization. The numerous characters that throng the canvas of the poem do not play any part in *Beowulf*'s immediate adventure. However even in spite of such defects *Beowulf* remains an example of early English epic for reasons more than one.

One of the great qualities of the epic is the unity of design. *Beowulf* possesses this epic quality, though its unity of the plot is not like the unity of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* or the *Paradise Lost*. There is perfect unity in the first part of the epic which narrates *Beowulf*'s expedition, his voyage to Denmark, his fight with Grendel and Grendel's mother, his return to the land of the Geats and his report of the whole adventure to king Hygelac. Thus W. P. Ker says, "in this part of the poem, taken by itself there is no defect of unity." We come across in this part innumerable episodes and digressions, but they are quite consistent and relevant. Even the episodes like the interlude of *Finnsburg* which are not strictly relevant are duly proportioned and subordinated to the main story. This unity is however broken to some extent by the addition of the sequel dealing with *Beowulf*'s adventure with the fire-spitting dragon. But the sequel does not hang independently as many of the critics think; rather it is connected with the first part because the same person (i.e. *Beowulf*) is involved in both.

Dealing with the qualities of an epic Dr. Tillyard mentioned that an epic should serve as the mouthpiece of an age, or of a nation or a religion, and not merely of its author. In other words, an epic should give deathless expression to the spirit of a particular age or a tribe. *Beowulf* amply shows this quality. It gives us a vivid description of the Heroic Age, and in this respect it betrays striking resemblance to the *Odyssey*. In it, as in the *Odyssey* we find "the grave courtesy with which men of rank are received and dismissed, the generosity of rulers and the loyalty of retainers, the thirst for fame through the achievement of deeds of courage and endurance, the solemn boasting of warriors before and after performance, the interest in genealogies and pride in a noble heredity" (David Daiches).

Beowulf is full of all sorts of references and allusions to great events, and the fortunes of kings and nations. According to W.P Ker these historical allusions make *Beowulf* a true epic poem. "They give", he says, "the impression of reality and weight. The story is not set in air, or in a fabulous country like that of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. It is a part of the solid world". These allusions also lend some amount of seriousness to the narrative of *Beowulf*.

In *Beowulf* we also come across some of the epic conventions such as the prologue, the description of a long and dangerous journey undertaken by the hero (or some other person) and the scenes of athletic competitions and games. Remarkably *Beowulf* opens with a prologue in the true epic manner. The poem also contains the description of fearful and dangerous journey *Beowulf* undertakes to reach the

dwelling-place of Grendel's mother. It also contains the reference to the swimming competition Beowulf had with Breea, his rival.

The language of *Beowulf* is cast in the epic style. Truly like the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* and the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, *Beowulf* is characterized by the formality, dignity and vigorousness of speeches. Contextually Hrothgar's addressing a sermon to Beowulf, illustrating Danish historical events and Beowulf's narration of the great wars which preceded Hygelac's accession to throne are marked by a dignified and elevated tone which in turn is a predominant characteristic of an epic.

Again like a true epic, *Beowulf* traces the development of the character of its central protagonist to perfection. In the second part of the poem, when Beowulf appears again after fifty years, we find in him great courage, heroism and moral dignity as we have seen before. But he has grown wiser and nobler with the decline of his physical strength. He has become a father for his people. Beowulf even dies for his subjects in the end and doing so he wins an undying fame for himself.

So to conclude, for centuries the scholars have debated, not without reason, whether Beowulf can really be considered as a true epic poem. But in spite of all such debates, *Beowulf*, has achieved the status of the first national epic in England, as it possesses some of the great qualities of an epic while lacking some others.