

**Masaryk University  
Faculty of Arts**

**Department of English  
and American Studies**

English Language and Literature

Tereza Šedivá

**The Influence of *Beowulf* on *The Lord of the  
Rings***

B.A. Major Thesis

Supervisor: doc. Mgr. Milada Franková, CSc., M.A.

2007

*I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently, using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.*

---

Tereza Šedivá

### **Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank doc. Mgr. Milada Franková, CSc., M.A. for her supervising and  
valuable advice.

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. <i>Beowulf</i> and <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> .....	3
3. The Heroes and the Concept of Heroism.....	9
4. The Monsters.....	15
5. The Heroic Society and the Relationships between the Characters.....	22
6. Songs and Storytelling.....	31
7. Conclusion.....	38
Bibliography.....	40

## Introduction

In my thesis I will try to trace the similarities between the Old English heroic epic poem *Beowulf* and modern fiction, *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien. Tolkien devoted much of his scholarly work to this Anglo-Saxon poem and he called *Beowulf* “one of his most valuable sources” (Bolintineanu 263). I will examine what influence Tolkien’s academic preoccupation with *Beowulf* had on his writing of his most famous literary work and what features of Old English heroic poetry can be found in *The Lord of the Rings*.

The first chapter, *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings*, is introductory. It provides basic information about *Beowulf*, its origin, approximate length and age, outlines the storyline of the poem and describes Tolkien’s attitude to this work of heroic poetry. The rest of the chapter is devoted to Tolkien’s works and creation of his mythology that eventually resulted in writing *The Lord of the Rings*.

The second chapter, as its title says, is concerned with heroes and the concept of heroism in both works. It describes the qualities of the typical medieval epic hero and compares the characteristics of the medieval hero, *Beowulf*, with those of the main protagonists of *The Lord of the Rings*, what qualities they have in common and in what features they differ.

The next chapter focuses on the role of the monsters in the two works. In Tolkien’s view their role was crucial to the whole story of *Beowulf*. In this chapter I try to compare the monsters of the poem with the monster figures of Tolkien’s fiction, what the individual monsters symbolize, what antiheroic forces they represent and how a hero himself can become a monster.

The following chapter analyzes the two works from the point of view of the society in which the stories take place. It examines the features of the Anglo-Saxon heroic society as described in *Beowulf* – the loyalty of the thanes to their lord, the qualities of a good king of

his people, loyalty and friendship between the men, blood feuds – and compares these features with the societies described in *The Lord of the Rings* and the relationships between Tolkien's individual characters.

The last chapter concentrates on the way in which the past echoes in the present and how the past events are commemorated in songs, poems or stories that are inset into the main storyline. For both works these subsidiary stories or poems play a very important part. I examine what purpose they serve, i.e. either as a good example or a warning for the characters, the celebration of the heroic deeds of the protagonists. This chapter is also devoted to the usage of more competing versions of one story that appear in both texts and how the present actions of the heroes provide material for legends.

## ***Beowulf and The Lord of the Rings***

*Beowulf* is an Anglo-Saxon heroic epic poem. It is the only Old English heroic poem to survive complete and with its 3,182 verses it is also the longest of all poems of that time. It was composed probably in the eighth century and originally it was meant to be recited aloud. And so it is the first large poem in English to survive the transplanting from an oral to a literary mode: it stands as one of the foundation works of English literature. The only manuscript of the poem which was preserved comes from the year 1000. It is known as Cotton Vitellius A. XV; for once it belonged to the collection of Sir Robert Cotton. It is written in the late West-Saxon language of the Wessex of Ethelred and Aelfric and it uses alliterative verse.

Though it probably first assumed its present shape in Mercia or Northumbria, the story of the poem is set to southern Scandinavia of the fifth or sixth century. The story of the poem opens with Hrothgar, King of the Danes building a great feasting hall named Heorot. A monster called Grendel disturbed by the sounds of revelry, attacks the hall and kills and eats many thanes every night. And since Hrothgar is too old to fight the monster, Heorot is deserted. Then Beowulf, a mighty warrior of the Geats and the nephew of their king Hygelac, hears of Grendel, takes fourteen comrades and crosses the sea to help Hrothgar. He keeps watch in Heorot, fights Grendel with his bare hands and pulls off his whole arm. Grendel escapes and later dies.

The following night, when the Danes are again in possession of the hall and Beowulf is lodged elsewhere, Grendel's mother attacks the hall to revenge the death of her son and kills Aeschere, King Hrothgar's favourite counselor. Beowulf decides to undertake another fight and tracks the monster to her lair underwater. There he fights her and when a borrowed sword fails him, he kills the monster with her own weapon. As a trophy he brings Grendel's head that he cut from his corpse. He receives many gifts and much praise and

returns with his men to the land of the Geats. After the death of their king Hygelac, Beowulf acts as a counselor to the young king Heardred and after Heardred is slain in battle, Beowulf becomes king himself and rules for fifty years. When he is already old, a dragon is disturbed and begins to lay waste the land. Beowulf feels as his duty to fight the dragon. Deserted by all his chosen comrades, except for one, a thane named Wiglaf, he manages to kill the dragon but is himself mortally wounded. His body is burnt and his men build a huge barrow above the pyre as his memorial. The story of this legend is entangled with stories of several tales we can find in other, later, Germanic histories, sagas and poems.

Some of the events and persons described in the poem are historical, some purely mythical. Around the year 521 the Frankish historian Gregory of Tours talks about an unsuccessful raid on Frankish territory near the mouth of the Rhine, led by a Scandinavian king whom Gregory calls Chochilaicus. This is beyond doubt the Hygelac from *Beowulf*, and the disastrous raid itself, in which Hygelac dies, is often mentioned in the poem (Irving 5).

The nation of the Geats, whose land was probably situated in today's southern Sweden, is also historical. Although Beowulf or the Danish king Scyld are completely mythical figures and are not mentioned in any other legends, the later Scyldings ("Sons of Scyld") seem to have been a dynasty that ruled Denmark from around the middle of the fifth century to the middle of the sixth century (Zesmer 28).

For a long time this heroic poem was merely a document of philological, cultural and historical interest. There developed a body of research into its analogues and sources in episodes in the folklore and legends of the Nordic peoples, scholars tried to fix the exact time of its composition and to establish the history of the dynasties of the Danes, Geats and

Swedes and students concentrated mainly on its language and grammar. But its literary value had long been neglected.

This changed in 1936 when the Oxford professor J.R.R. Tolkien delivered to the British Academy his lecture on *Beowulf* called “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*” which was published in the following year. Tolkien said in the lecture that “*Beowulf* is a poem and not (as other commentators had often suggested) merely a jumble of confused literary traditions, or a text for scholarly examination” (Carpenter 138). He wanted to show in this lecture that *Beowulf* is a work of art and a work of art with its integrity and distinction. “He declared that although *Beowulf* is about monsters and a dragon, that does not make it negligible as heroic poetry. ‘A dragon is no idle fancy,’ he told the audience. ‘Even today (despite the critics) you may find men not ignorant of tragic legend and history, who have heard of heroes and indeed seen them, who have yet been caught by the fascination of the worm’” (Carpenter 139). Here Tolkien was not talking as a philologist or a literary critic, but as a storyteller, as the author of *The Silmarillion* and – by this time – *The Hobbit*. And he changed the way in which the poem was valued.

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in 1892 in Bloemfontein, South Africa, but he grew up and spent his whole life in Britain. He studied at Oxford where he became a professor of Anglo-Saxon in 1925. From 1919 – 1920 he worked on The New English Dictionary and researching the etymology of words he showed great mastery of Anglo-Saxon, and very good knowledge of comparative grammar of Germanic languages. In fact, he had always been interested in the study and inventing of languages. Among the languages he was most inspired by were Anglo-Saxon (Old English), Welsh and Finnish. And it was his partiality for inventing languages that led him to the idea of creating an entire mythology, a mythology “for England”. For he knew that “to carry out such inventions to any degree of complexity he must create for the languages a ‘history’ in which

they could develop” (Carpenter 89). And he started to write “The Book of Lost Tales” which eventually came to be known as *The Silmarillion*. It tells the story of the creation of the world, the fashioning of the Silmarils, their theft from the blessed land Valinor by Morgoth and the wars of the elves to regain them. But Tolkien never really finished it, he was always revising and rewriting it and *The Silmarillion* was published only after his death by his son Christopher.

Telling bed-time stories to his children Tolkien discovered that he could use the imagination which created *The Silmarillion* to invent simpler stories to amuse his and maybe some other people’s children. In the early 1930s he started to work on *The Hobbit*. It tells the story of a hobbit, Bilbo Baggins, who leaves his comfortable hobbit-hole and sets off for an adventure together with a group of dwarves and a wizard Gandalf. After a dragon Smaug is killed, he returns home with much of the treasure that the dragon had guarded.

Originally, there was no intention that the story of a hobbit Bilbo Baggins would be related in any way to the world of *The Silmarillion*. Gradually, however, there developed certain connections and in the end it was apparent that the journey of Bilbo takes place in the Third Age of Middle-earth, that Middle-earth which had its history chronicled in *The Silmarillion*. Even in *The Hobbit* we can see that Tolkien was inspired by old Germanic languages and legends including *Beowulf*, for instance when a cup is stolen from a sleeping dragon. Despite the fact that the story had been drawn into his complex mythology, it did not cease to be a children’s story. It did not become very serious or profound.

*The Hobbit* was published by Allen & Unwin in September 1937 and it had been sold out before Christmas. It became a children’s bestseller and the publishers urged Tolkien to write a successor to *The Hobbit*. Tolkien decided to expand the story of the ring which Bilbo steals in Gollum’s cave in *The Hobbit*. It had become “the one ruling ring...the ring that was the source and instrument of power of Sauron, the Dark Lord of Mordor”

(Carpenter 188). The author did not want to write another *Hobbit* but a more serious story that would draw more from his mythology. “The story was lifted from the ‘juvenile’ level of *The Hobbit* into the sphere of grand and heroic romance” (Carpenter 188). He titled it *The Lord of the Rings*. In the six books that make up the novel the author tells the story of Frodo, Bilbo’s nephew, who inherits the One Ring from Bilbo and who undertakes a dangerous journey to Mordor to destroy the ring. He is accompanied and helped by three other hobbits, Merry, Pippin and above all, his best friend Sam. There are also two men, Boromir and Aragorn, a descendant of ancient kings, a Dwarf Gimli and an Elf named Legolas. They are led, at the beginning at least, by Gandalf, the wizard from *The Hobbit*. During the quest they must fight various creatures and men in services of Sauron, in the mines of Moria Gandalf “falls into shadow” when fighting a monster and the fellowship is then led by Aragorn until it splits. Frodo and his faithful friend Sam go on to Mordor to destroy the ring, Boromir is killed in a battle with orcs, the two other hobbits are captured by the orcs and Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli chase them. They meet the hobbits again after they had defeated, with the help of Ents, Saruman, a wizard who had joined with Sauron. They also meet Gandalf who had come back from the shadow. Three large battles take place between the armies of Mordor and those of Men and Elves. After Frodo manages to destroy the ring with the “help” of Gollum, the dark powers are defeated, Aragorn becomes the rightful King of Gondor and the hobbits return back to their Shire. Frodo, Bilbo and Gandalf leave on the ship to the west and together with three Elves leave the Middle-earth forever.

This is no more a children’s story. The atmosphere of the novel is much more solemn and the inspiration by *Beowulf* is more apparent. The story, in all its aspects, is coming closer to the heroic epic. In the following chapters I will examine some of the aspects and describe the similarities between the Anglo-Saxon and the modern heroic epic.

## The Heroes and the Concept of the Heroism

During the time when the Germanic tribes still lived on the Continent, there developed a strong oral tradition of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Early Germanic poetry was recited by a *scop*, a professional bard who traveled from court to court. At feasts that kings held in their halls where all the king's thanes were gathered, the *scop* celebrated the deeds of real or legendary heroes. In all mythologies we can find the motifs of the hero, the quest, the fight of the hero against monstrous evil. It is the primary theme of all heroic poetry to celebrate the prowess, strength and courage of a central hero. The heroes gained fame and glory and they were expected to boast with their achievements. *Beowulf* is thus a heroic poem celebrating the actions of the protagonist.

Beowulf, son of Edgetheow, is the very type of a hero in that it is his eagerness to seek out and meet every challenge alone and unarmed that makes him glorious in life and brings him to his tragic death. He also has a hero's delight in his own prowess and a hero's magnanimity to lesser men (*Beowulf*, Alexander 15).

The heroes of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* are largely inspired by the character of the medieval heroic epic. I would like to compare the main protagonists of both, *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings* and to examine the qualities of the medieval hero that Tolkien ascribed to his protagonists and in what aspects the characters of *The Lord of the Rings* differ from those of *Beowulf*.

In his work Tolkien used two basic kinds of heroes, both inspired by heroes of the medieval tradition. One is the epic hero, closer in his appearance and deeds to Beowulf, Arthur or Sigurd. He will be an extraordinary hero, a great warrior, leader and king. "He represents the ultimate of human achievement in a heroic age, and embodies its ideal. Though he must die, his glory lives on" (*Beowulf*, Alexander 15).

The other kind is more like a fairy-tale hero. He is a common, little man, who by circumstances not by his making is thrown into an adventure and through the quest he undertakes he gradually becomes a hero. He accepts the burden not because he feels destined for greatness but because no one else volunteers and he feels it to be his duty.

The representatives of the first type are Beowulf and Aragorn. The typical fairy-tale heroes are Frodo or other hobbits. Yet, even in Frodo we can find heroic elements. He becomes more than himself. He can be linked to the dying Beowulf or Shield Sheafson. And at the end he, as well as Sam, prove themselves to be true heroes as well. In *The Lord of the Rings* the motifs of typical characteristics of both kinds of heroes cross at the crucial points of the narrative.

I will begin with the epic heroes and compare Aragorn and Beowulf. For both of them, their ancestry is very important and in both works it is described in detail. In *Beowulf* Hrothgar, when he hears Beowulf's name, remembers that he knows him and his lineage and that there was an old friendship between the two families.

I used to know him when he was a young boy.

His father before him was called Ecgtheow.

Hrethel the Geat gave Ecgtheow

his daughter in marriage. This man is their son,

here to follow up an old friendship (*Beowulf*, Heaney 14).

Later we learn that when Beowulf was seven years old, he was fostered out and left in the care of his grandfather, King Hrethel. He took good care of him and brought him up together with his own sons Herebeald, Haethcyn and Hygelac, Beowulf's uncles. In this we can find two common medieval motifs. First, the hero is not brought up in his own home, which reminds of the stories of Arthur or Galahad. The second motif is that of the relationship of uncle and nephew, especially that of uncle and sister's son that is "prominent

in medieval literature from *Beowulf* to Malory” (Flieger 137). In both early and late medieval epic we can find examples of uncle-nephew pairs like Diarmid and Finn, Tristan and Mark, Roland and Charlemagne, or Gawain and Arthur (Flieger 137). In *Beowulf*, there is the relationship of King Hygelac and his nephew Beowulf.

If we compare Beowulf and Aragorn, we will find some of those motifs applying also to the hero of Tolkien’s novel. First, in the Appendix A to *The Lord of the Rings* we learn that Aragorn, too, was brought up in a home other than his own. After the death of his father, his mother took him to Rivendell, Elrond’s home, where he is, much like Beowulf, brought up by Elrond together with his own sons. “Elrond took the place of his father and came to love him as a son of his own” (Tolkien 1057).

For Aragorn his lineage was very important, too, though it had not been revealed to him until he was twenty. Then he finds out from Elrond about his ancestry. He is son of Arathorn, the lineal descendant and heir of Elendil and his son Isildur, the king of Gondor, who took the Ring from Sauron. So, Aragorn is the rightful heir to the throne of Gondor, a descendant of the great northern line of his house. Coming from such ancestry already predetermines Aragorn to become the extraordinary epic hero, though his identity is concealed at the beginning.

The character of Frodo follows a similar pattern. He grows up in a home not his own. After his parents drown in a boating accident, he is first brought up by some of his relatives until his uncle Bilbo brings him to Hobbiton to live in his house, treats him like his own son and makes Frodo his only heir. He also gives him his Ring. The action of the uncle will be completed by the nephew.

Another element typical of medieval heroic epic is a certain obscurity of the hero until the right time comes and he is revealed or proves himself to be the true hero. In the case of Aragorn this motif is quite clear. He lives in obscurity as a Ranger called Strider. He is a

mysterious figure and by many considered dangerous. Mr. Butterbur, the innkeeper at Bree, having been asked about him by Frodo, answers only: “I don’t rightly know. He is one of the wandering folk – Rangers we call them....What his right name is I’ve never heard: but he’s known round here as Strider” (Tolkien 156). Aragorn’s true identity is fully revealed at the Council of Elrond where he casts his sword that he had inherited from Isildur on a table and Elrond introduces him to the assembled: “‘He is Aragorn, son of Arathorn,’ said Elrond; ‘and he is descended through many fathers from Isildur Elendil’s son of Minas Ithil’” (Tolkien 246). Here Aragorn publicly puts off Strider and assumes his rightful identity. By joining the Fellowship and undertaking his quest throughout the story he proves himself to be the hero in his own right. His change from a Ranger into the true epic hero is described in chapter 9 of Book 2:

Frodo turned and saw Strider, and yet not Strider; for the weatherworn Ranger was no longer there. In the stern sat Aragorn son of Arathorn, proud and erect, guiding the boat with skilful strokes; his hood was cast back, and his dark hair was blowing in the wind, a light was in his eyes: a king returning from exile to his own land (Tolkien 393).

As for Beowulf, he fits this pattern more loosely. We meet him first as a hero coming to aid to a foreign king and killing two monsters. Only after his triumphant return to Hygelac’s court do we learn of his unpromising beginnings:

He had been poorly regarded  
for a long time, was taken by the Geats  
for less than he was worth: and their lord too  
had never much esteemed him in the mead-hall.  
They firmly believed that he lacked force,  
that the prince was a weakling; but presently  
every affront to his deserving was reversed (*Beowulf*, Heaney 69-70).

It is interesting to compare the two heroes from the point of view of youth and age of a hero. In this view, Aragorn would derive from the pattern of a youthful hero, young Beowulf, who is strong, courageous, goes through great peril, fights monsters, all his adventures end in victory and at the end he becomes good king of his people, just like Aragorn does. All the positive, youthful elements cluster around him. He is “an obscure hero awaiting his chance to be great, an acclaimed victor in the battle against evil, the king coming to his kingdom” (Flieger 134).

Frodo, on the other hand, has the characteristics of a hero at the end of his life and adventures, the old Beowulf whose last adventure ends in death as was suggested by the age of the hero approaching his last fight, by the funeral of Shield Sheafson at the beginning of the poem, and by the knowledge that Sigemund dies in his last fight with a dragon. “There is a feeling of inevitability as Beowulf goes down before the dragon’s third attack. Everything in the poem seems to have foretold this end” (*Beowulf*, Alexander 17).

Frodo realizes that the quest may lead to his death when Sam wonders if they have enough food. He says to him that there’s need to worry about the journey back because there is probably not going to be one.

The characteristics of the great hero-king coming to the last of his adventures can be observed in another Tolkien character, the King Théoden. When Gandalf, Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas first see him at Edoras, in his beautiful golden hall with depictions of glorious young heroes on its walls, he is “a man...bent with age”, with white hair and beard, but when he stands up they see that: “bent though he was, he was still tall and must in youth have been high and proud indeed” (Tolkien 512). And like old Beowulf, despite his age this king also rides out to fight for his people, because it is his duty as the king.

Old Beowulf, as well as Frodo and Théoden, agree to carry out their quest not because they want to become great heroes, but rather because they feel that it is their duty and no

one else can or are willing to do it for them, although there are friends who want to help. It is their own fight and it cannot be appointed to anyone else. As Beowulf says before he fights the dragon:

Men at arms, remain here on the barrow,  
safe in your armour, to see which one of us  
is better in the end at bearing wounds  
in a deadly fray. This fight is not yours,  
nor is it up to any man except me  
to measure his strength against the monster  
or to prove his worth (*Beowulf*, Heaney 80).

At the end of Book 2 of *The Lord of the Rings*, when the Company decides which way to go next, Frodo realizes that the Ring is only his burden, that he must carry on to Mordor and although he knows the others would go with him, he, like Beowulf, does not want to expose them to such danger. Yet he is afraid to do it, for he feels that the quest he is going to undertake will very likely cost him his life. But despite this all, both old Beowulf and Frodo decide to do their best to complete their task. Nevertheless, neither of them would have managed that, had they not received help from their faithful friends, Beowulf from Wiglaf and Frodo from Sam, although they had previously refused it.

## The Monsters

In his 1936 lecture “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*” mentioned above, Tolkien expressed his disagreement with then *Beowulf* critics who neglected the literary value of the poem largely because of the monsters that appear in it. Tolkien regards the poem a true heroic epic, defends the language and style that the poet used and speaks of the important role the monsters play in the poem. “*Beowulf*”, says Tolkien, ‘is a poem about a man fighting with monsters’” (Flieger 140). As Michael Alexander states in the introduction to his translation of *Beowulf*: “Tolkien persuasively reinstated the monsters at the centre of the poem” (18).

What are the monsters of *Beowulf* like and how do they compare with the representation of evil in *The Lord of the Rings*?

The first monster that appears in the poem is Grendel. It is never described physically in detail. In the later Scandinavian analogues of the story of *Beowulf* the monster is either a male or female troll, a creature of human shape living in the water or near it (Irving 47). Grendel attacks the hall, kills men and devours them. He is described as “a fiend out of hell”, descending from “Cain’s clan”, “the bane of the race of men” (*Beowulf*, Heaney 24). In Grendel the antiheroic and antisocial forces are represented and related by opposition to the positive heroic and social values represented in the hero. Both Grendel and his mother possess an appropriate strength which serves to show off Beowulf’s own physical strength and courage. “They are the right enemies for a young glory-hunter” (*Beowulf*, Heaney xviii).

The physical shape and his descent from Cain suggest that Grendel is partly human. Once he may have had the human kind of strength. Now his strength grew wild and beyond any rational control. As Beowulf says before the fight:

When it comes to fighting I count myself

as dangerous any day as Grendel.  
So it won't be a cutting edge I wield  
to mow him down, easily as I might.  
He has no idea of the arts of war,  
of shield or sword-play, although he does possess  
a wild strength. No weapons therefore,  
for either this night: unarmed shall he face me  
if face me he dares (*Beowulf*, Heaney 23).

This was a wise decision, since during the fight the Geats who wanted to defend their lord found out that the monster can't be hurt by any sword. It was the strong grip of Beowulf's own hand and his strong will that defeated Grendel, or rather allowed him to defeat himself. But we can also feel here a certain kind of respect for Grendel. Though Beowulf laughs in triumph over the monster, all celebrate Beowulf's victory and Grendel's death, still the fate of Grendel is "painful, pitiable and in some way lamentable" (*Beowulf*, Alexander 27), a lot like the story of Gollum of *The Lord of the Rings*.

The next monster that appears in the story is Grendel's mother. She enters into the poem very surprisingly, she was never mentioned before. The shock – and perhaps the silent rebuke to human overconfidence – is the greater. She breaks into the hall to take revenge for her son's death. That is an authentic motive for attacking Heorot and taking away Aeschere. Such motive can be found also among men, not only monsters. The obligation to take vengeance was common in this society and often it led to long-lasting blood feuds. This makes Grendel's mother not only less mysterious but perhaps also less evil. The motif of revenge of the death of a family member associates her less with the "outside" monsters and more with "inside" manifestations of purely human evil of the blood feuds. Perhaps, as has been suggested, it is the reason why this fight is so much harder for Beowulf (Irving

57). Another important aspect is that this time the fight doesn't take place in the golden hall Heorot, "a little circle of light" (Flieger 140). Beowulf has to descend into a different world, to the bottom of the haunted mere, the home of the monsters. There is a sharp contrast between the banquet scene in Heorot and the chill and horror of that evil place. The place itself frightens Hrothgar and his Danes and he describes it to Beowulf as unknown, inaccessible, where "the water burns", violently repelling the hunted deer that prefer death to the contact with such a place (*Beowulf*, Heaney 45). Even the ride to its shores takes a great deal of courage of the Danes and a descent into the depth seems unimaginable. Yet Beowulf, faithful to the heroic code that governs his life, according to which hope and meaning are found only in action, decides to fight the monster in her lair. He was able to defeat Grendel with his bare hands without much difficulty but he takes Unferth's sword Hrunting for the second fight and relies on it but it fails him when he most needs it. Then suddenly he sees a giant sword hanging on the wall and eventually manages to kill the monster with its own weapon.

This was a much more difficult fight but still Beowulf wins and returns with a valuable trophy: Grendel's head that he cut off his lifeless body. Thus Grendel is ritually killed and the cleansing of the mere is complete. Grendel had for so long come to Heorot to seize men in their beds, and now he is ritually killed in his own "hall", in his own bed, with his own sword. Beowulf can triumphantly return to his own country where he becomes king and rules his people for fifty years.

Both, Grendel and his mother entered the hero's life from outside, challenges which in other circumstances he might not have taken up or from whom he might have been distracted or deflected. The dragon is quite a different matter. The dragon is a given from his home ground, an enemy against whom old Beowulf's body and soul must measure themselves. It is a "figure of real oneiric power, one that can easily survive the prejudice

that arises at the very mention of the word dragon” (*Beowulf*, Heaney xix). Though in line 2287 - “When the dragon awoke, trouble flared again. He rippled down the rock, writhing with anger...” (*Beowulf*, Heaney 73) – there the dragon is an animal-like monster, more often it is not just a fairy-tale dragon; it embodies resentment, greed and ruin (Tolkien, *Netvoři a kritikové* 23). And it has a character more like a *wyrd*, destiny, rather than *wyrm*, beast, it is the inevitable, the last fight Beowulf has to undergo, that will end in his death. “There is no need to search for an ingenious symbolic interpretation of the dragon in action, moving toward us: this is the implacable oncoming of annihilation, this is the verge of the abyss” (Irving 83).

As Tolkien says in his essay “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*”, the dragon represents an appropriate end for the hero, just as Grendel is an appropriate beginning. The poem, with all its monsters, “reflects the northern imagination, whose vision is of man at war with the hostile world and his inevitable overthrow in Time” (Flieger 140).

I would like to turn now to the monsters of *The Lord of the Rings*, for if there are heroes, there must be, according to the medieval tradition, also the monsters. As Jane Chance stated, in Tolkien we can distinguish three kinds of monsters, each of them being the focus of one part of the trilogy. The principal enemy of the heroes in *The Fellowship of the Ring* is a divided self, a monster within a hero, a hero who has become or can become a monster. In *The Two Towers* the attention shifts to the more Germanic monster seen in Saruman and especially Shelob, who occupy and guard the two towers. In the third part, *The Return of the King*, as the title suggests, the focus is on kingship. Heroes do not fight only physical, ugly monsters but their antagonist can also be a bad ruler of his people, a destroyer, here embodied in the person of Denethor. He is opposed by Aragorn, a great king, by both Germanic and Christian principles (Chance 199). This opposition and the evil that a bad ruler represents will be discussed in the next chapter on heroic society.

The Fellowship is burdened with bearing the Ring, whose presence attracts evil and whose power is so tempting for the members of the Fellowship to use. Because of that, the greatest threat to the Fellowship comes not from without (in the form of the Black Riders or orcs) but from within, whether within the macrocosm of the Fellowship, as in the case of Boromir's threat, or within the hero himself, the microcosm. "For Frodo, as for Beowulf and Bilbo, the ultimate enemy is himself" (Chance 200).

The typical "hero as monster" is represented by Gollum – Sméagol who is maybe also the central monster of the whole story. His two names remind us of his divided self and of his fall into vice. Through the name Sméagol he is connected with the group of others like him where he once belonged. He is a manlike monster, once he was some kind of hobbit. That links him to Grendel of *Beowulf* who is said to have human origin. Both creatures are also of a manlike shape in their appearance. Like Grendel, with his descent from Cain, Sméagol committed a murder; he did not kill his brother, but his cousin Déagol. And like Grendel, he is now outcast, living in the waste, mostly in caves and near water and is even cannibalistic, for he sometimes eats goblins and he would have eaten Bilbo if he had defeated him in the riddle game in *The Hobbit*.

The name Gollum, chosen to imitate the sound of his swallowing, as an expression of his gluttony and greed, links him to the bestial part of the monster and reminds us again of Grendel. The character of Gollum reflects indeed what Frodo must fight within himself. Rose Zimbardo has called Gollum "Frodo's dark counterpart" (Flieger 142), he is the embodiment of his growing, overpowering desire for the Ring.

However, Gollum is no allegorical personification of a certain quality or state of mind. He is a character in his own right, with an important part to play in the story. That is, among other things, a feature that he has in common with the dragon of *Beowulf* which represents the *wyrd*, fate, the inevitable end of Beowulf's adventures, his last fight he knows he cannot

win, but in spite of this, he undertakes the quest and in the end manages to kill the monster. Frodo fails in his quest. At the Cracks of Doom he puts the ring on his finger and wants to keep it. He succumbs to the power he had been fighting in the “battle against the offspring of the dark which ends for all, even the kings and champions, in defeat” (Flieger 144). But in losing he wins the great victory. Ironically, with the help of Gollum, the Ring is destroyed, as he bites off Frodo’s finger with the Ring, puts it on himself and falls into the fire. In the final battle, like in *Beowulf*, both the hero and the monster die, because although Frodo recovers from this battle, he is too seriously wounded to be able to live on in the Middle-earth and sails into another world.

Another motif that appears in both works is that of the heroes’ descent into an underworld when fighting the monsters. Beowulf descends into an underworld in the form of the underwater lair of Grendel’s mother. The hard fight in the frightful monster’s lair is followed by a triumphant return into the shining hall. Similarly, Frodo descends into the underworld of the Old Forest, but the presence of change, mutability and death is soon replaced by the new life and joy in the home of Tom Bombadil. The horrible and dangerous passage through the Mines of Moria ends in beautiful and safe Lothlórien, where all is new and young. Finally, Gandalf the Grey descends into the underworld when fighting the Balrog. He falls into shadow but comes back revived, with new strength, as Gandalf the White.

The Balrog, another one of the evil figures, is a monster similar to dragons and nearly as strong and horrible. It is a giant manlike demon always surrounded by flame and shadow. There used to be many of those demons in Middle-earth, but finally there remained only this one. For a very long time he had been dwelling under Moria and no one knew about him. Until the dwarves digging there to win the treasure disturbed him, much like the thief disturbed the dragon in *Beowulf*. He killed many dwarves and came to be known among the

others as “Durin’s Bane” (Tolkien 330). Grendel is called “the bane of the race of men” (*Beowulf*, Heaney 24). And like Beowulf, Gandalf fights the monster alone, having told the rest of the Fellowship to flee to safety because: “This is a foe beyond any of you. I must hold the narrow way” (Tolkien 330), though he feels that there is not much strength left in his body and soul. After descending into the deep and ascending to the highest peak Gandalf finally threw the enemy down and defeated him. Like in the case of Beowulf and Frodo, both the hero and the enemy die in the fight, but Gandalf comes back to finish his part in the story.

The last monster I would like to mention here is Shelob, the only she-monster in the story. That could link her to Grendel’s mother but in fact there is no other similarity. She is not a manlike monster and she does not want to take revenge. She kills only to eat the victims. She is a giant spider and she has a lair in the pass of Cirith Ungol. She devours any living creature that gets caught in her web and symbolizes gluttony as well as Gollum and Grendel. Sam defeated her with the help of the phial of light, a gift by Galadriel, and the elfish blade. He did not really kill her but let her creep back into her lair where she probably died afterwards (like Grendel).

As can be seen, Tolkien was inspired by medieval heroic literature not only when he created his heroes but the monsters as well. Like a story in the medieval tradition, Tolkien’s story depends as much on the hero as on the monster.

## The Heroic Society and the Relationships between the Characters

The central figure of Germanic society was the king. He assigned the land of the new country to his followers recognizing traditional ranks of nobility. He also rewarded special services performed by the warriors. The group of nobles around him constituted his court and acted as his advisers. Roman historian Tacitus in his *Germania* written in 98 A.D. calls those *comitatus*, meaning retinue. Except for the nobility the Anglo-Saxon society recognized also a large group of free peasants and finally the group of slaves (Schlauch 7). The heroic epic poetry concentrates mainly on the aristocratic part of society, the king and his warriors.

The prominent relationship in the Germanic heroic society was the king–thane relationship. The king acted as a “shepherd of his people”, *folces hyrde* (*Beowulf*, Alexander 15). He gave them shelter, food and drink in his halls. And he rewarded his loyal retainers with treasure. He was their “ring-giver” or “gold-friend” (*Beowulf*, Alexander 15). The king distributed golden jewels, bracelets or rings and great armour to the thanes in return for military service, their loyalty and courage in war. “The chief, writes Tacitus, fought for victory, and the followers fought for their chief” (Zesmer 8) The obligations of the king were to be a mighty warrior and gain fame through individual heroism and to win the subjects’ loyalty and affection by generous gifts.

Ideally, there existed a bond of love between the lord and his loyal people. The opening scene of the poem serves as a good picture of this kind of social order and of the qualities of a good king. The poet describes Shield Sheafson, the founder of the ruling house who as a founding came to Denmark to grow in power and eventually to become a “scourge of many tribes”, “a wrecker of mead-benches” to whom all the neighbouring tribes had to pay tribute. “That was one good king,” the poet says (*Beowulf*, Heaney 3). Then a son is born to

Shield and the dynasty is founded but the secure future must be insured by the generosity of the prince toward his men.

And a young prince must be prudent like that,  
giving freely while his father lives  
so that afterwards in age when fighting starts  
steadfast companions will stand by him  
and hold the line. Behaviour that's admired  
is the path to power among people everywhere (*Beowulf*, Heaney 3).

Then in the description of Shield's funeral we can observe the bond between the king and the thanes. They place his body in a ship laden with great treasure and send it drifting out to sea. The poet says:

They stretched their beloved lord in his boat  
laid out by the mast, amidships,  
the great ring-giver. Far-fetched treasures  
were piled upon him, and precious gear...

and they were "bemoaning him and mourning their loss" (*Beowulf*, Heaney 4).

The weapons, mail or a golden standard that his people bring him are representations of their love and grief. The same motifs appear also during Beowulf's reign and funeral.

The Geat people built a pyre for Beowulf,  
stacked and decked it until it stood foursquare,  
hung with helmets, heavy war-shields  
and shining armour, just as he had ordered.  
Then his warriors laid him in the middle of it,  
mourning a lord far-famed and beloved (*Beowulf*, Heaney 98).

The other part of this relationship is made up by thanes or the *comitatus*, the group of chosen men fighting for the king who are feasted and rewarded for their heroic deeds in the king's halls. Some of the terms used for this group in *Beowulf* may suggest something of the nature of the relationship they had to each other and to the king or lord: "friends, kinsmen, table comrades, hearth comrades, hall-sitters, and hand companions, i.e. close at hand" (Irving 22). These men were always in the heroic poetry and often in the actual practice of the Anglo-Saxons bound to their lord by a sacred oath of homage. Some members of the *comitatus* were even closely related to the king by blood, like Beowulf and his uncle Hygelac, for instance, and the heroic tradition often regarded the entire tribe or clan as sharing the bond of a single family. The result was a tightly knit community.

The society largely depends on the honouring of mutual obligations between lord and thanes. Breaking the oaths may bring destruction for the entire society. Beowulf's fights with Grendel and Grendel's mother are not only heroic exploits of a single individual. The desired result of the fight is also the knitting back the community. It was in the first two fights where Beowulf was fighting for his lord and the lord's people, he volunteered to serve, and they both ended in victory. The third fight he was the king but no one fought for him, except for Wiglaf. All the other thanes ran away to safety. If Wiglaf had not come to help him, he would have died without killing the dragon. With his help the monster is killed but the society of the Geats faces destruction because they have no strong king and because all the necessary relationships failed and the heroic code is broken.

Good examples of loyalty to the lord can be seen in Beowulf himself and Wiglaf. When Beowulf returns to his country he tells Hygelac of all his adventures, delivers Hrothgar's messages of friendship and presents all the gifts he received with the words of courtesy:

These, King Hygelac, I am happy to present  
to you as gifts. It is still upon your grace

that all favour depends. I have few kinsmen

who are close, my king, except for your kind self (*Beowulf*, Heaney 68).

To show his generosity, the King presents many precious gifts to Beowulf. When Beowulf himself becomes king he feels as his obligation to fight the dragon. Although he instructs his thanes to stay away from the fight, Wiglaf tells his comrades that their lord needs them and reminds them of the promises they made to their king. But now when the time has come for them to keep the oaths, he is the only one who stands by Beowulf in his last fight. “I would rather my body were robed in the same burning blaze as my gold-giver’s body than go back home bearing arms” (*Beowulf*, Heaney 83).

However, in this society not only such good relationships of loyalty were present. The men were also bound by the oath to revenge a slain kinsman. Such vengeance usually led to bloody feuds between families or even nations. Later vendetta was substituted by paying a certain amount of money, wergild, to the families of the killed or injured enemies.

As we can see, in Germanic heroic world, every man found meaning primarily as a member of a closely knit society where he had a well-defined role to play. A man outside society was considered a pitiable or contemptible figure of exile or outlaw, like Grendel in *Beowulf* or like Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Many of these principles are to be found in Tolkien’s work as well – the kings as good leaders, loyalty of the men to their lord, the promise of service, tight bonds within a society or a group. And in Tolkien’s world too, these bonds are necessary for the survival of the society. As Gandalf wisely remarks: “Now all friends should gather together, lest each singly be destroyed” (Tolkien 512).

The lords are represented by Aragorn, Théoden and Denethor, the steward of Gondor. “The Lord of the Rings” of the title represents a bad lord, Sauron, a ruler with power over his slaves but no generosity or even responsibility toward them. As opposed to the Dark

Lord, Aragorn, the king of light, typifies the good leader, great warrior but also a healer, a righteous king who knows how to reward and value the heroic deeds of his men. “The Fellowship of the Ring” suggests the heroic mission of Aragorn’s *comitatus*, his followers to advance the cause of the good king (Chance 200).

In Aragorn, the characteristics of the Germanic and Christian hero-king come together. He is the subject of hero worship from the part of the other characters. It is the hero worship of a young man for one older, braver and wiser, much like that in the Germanic society, where a youth would attach himself to a strong leader. Frodo says of him: “...I have become very fond of Strider. Well, fond is not the right word. I mean he is dear to me...” (Tolkien 220). With the only exception of Boromir, all the other members of the Fellowship admire him as a true hero and respect him as their leader after Gandalf had been lost in Moria. Boromir is the only one of the “good” characters who does not fall under Aragorn’s spell. In small episodes we can observe that he competes for Aragorn’s place.

The hero worship, on the other hand, can be seen in Éowyn’s relationship to Aragorn. Faramir sees it most clearly when he describes her love for Aragorn: “And as a great captain may to a young soldier he seemed to you admirable. For so he is, a lord among men, the greatest that now is” (Tolkien 964).

Only later in the course of the story do the others recognize and respect him as a rightful king. Merry realizes Aragorn’s real stature when he says: “I am frightfully sorry. Ever since that night at Bree we have been a nuisance to you” (Tolkien 870). Faramir, after he had been healed and awakened by Aragorn, he opened his eyes and saw Aragorn bent over him and “a light of knowledge and love was kindled in his eyes” and he said to him: “My lord, you called, I come. What does the king command” (Tolkien 866)?

The episode which perhaps most reveals Aragorn as a true king and which links him to the more Germanic characteristics of his kingship is that described in the chapter entitled

“The Passing of the Grey Company”. Aragorn knows that as Isildur’s heir and the rightful king of Gondor he can summon “the Dead”. They are the army that had once sworn an oath of allegiance to Isildur but who have not kept it and did not come to Isildur’s aid. And for that Isildur cursed them. They will not find peace until they fulfill their oath and fight for the king of Gondor. They have been punished for not keeping their oath; much like Beowulf’s company and the whole society of the Geats will be punished for not helping Beowulf in his last fight. And now Aragorn is in need and when he summons them, they follow him to the battle, like loyal Germanic warriors would follow their king. What links Aragorn more to the Christian king are his moral, as well as physical, heroism, and his power as a healer rather than his valor as a destroyer (Chance 227).

In Book 3 Théoden is transformed by Gandalf’s encouragement from a weak leader of Rohan into a very heroic Germanic king. Rohan is described as a typical Germanic nation with courageous warriors loyal to their king; they even have a hall and feasts. Théoden, as the ideal Germanic lord, rides out to fight for his nation, and really loves, rather than uses, his men. And Merry, as a true Germanic subordinate, offers his service to him not as an expression of involuntary duty, but rather as a loving and spontaneous gesture. When Théoden invites Merry to eat, drink and ride with him, Merry reacts in this way: “Filled suddenly with love for this old man, he knelt on one knee, and took his hand and kissed it. ‘May I lay the sword of Merriadoc of the Shire on your lap, Théoden King?’ he cried. ‘Receive my service, if you will!’” (Tolkien 777) When the king receives it, Merry says: “As a father you shall be to me” (Tolkien 777). Éowyn also loves her uncle and king as a father. And although both Éowyn and Merry break the orders the king has given them, they do so only not to be left behind and as good loyal subordinates fight for the king in battle. “These subordinates have completely fulfilled the spirit, if not the letter, of their pledges of allegiance to their lords” (Chance 225). And they did so for the simple love of a father,

Théoden. Such strong bond of love exists not only between Éowyn and Merry and Théoden but also between other characters. Love binds together members of the Fellowship, whether the original Fellowship of the Ring, or the later extended fellowship when the heroes join to serve and battle with their enemies. When Boromir is slain and Legolas and Gimli find Aragorn at his side, he is “bent with weeping” (Tolkien 414). Similarly, when Beowulf prepares to depart from Denmark, Hrothgar cannot help crying: “...that high-born king kissed Beowulf and embraced his neck, then broke down in sudden tears” (*Beowulf*, Heaney 60) and the Geats “wailed aloud for their lord’s decease” (*Beowulf*, Heaney 98) when Beowulf died.

Unlike Théoden, Denethor symbolizes a bad Germanic lord. He fails as a father, a master and a steward. He reveals his inability to love his son Faramir when he prefers the dead Boromir. He fails as a master when he “belittles Pippin because he assumes that smallness of size equals smallness of service” (Chance 223). Pippin feels moved – by pride, rather than love – to offer Denethor his service in return for the loss of his son Boromir who had died defending him and Merry. But Denethor wrongly assumes that the service of such a small individual must be domestic and menial in character. As a steward he fails by usurping the role of lord in his desire for power and by using men as weapons to further his own ends (Chance 225). Unlike Théoden who rides out to battle as the head of his troops, Denethor remains secure in his tower while his warriors die in the siege of Gondor. The most significant failure is the inability to keep his self-control which results in madness and leads him to suicide. When he adds even his son Faramir to the pyre, Gandalf compares him to “heathen kings, under the domination of the Dark power [who] did thus, slaying themselves in pride and despair, murdering their kin to ease their own death” (Tolkien 853). And finally Denethor fails as a possible thane refusing to respect Aragorn’s kingship: “I will not step down to be the dotard chamberlain of an upstart...I will not bow to such a one,

last of the ragged house long bereft of lordship and dignity” (Tolkien 854). He reminds us of Heremod, who serves as a warning for Beowulf not to succumb to his pride.

His rise in the world brought little joy  
to the Danish people, only death and destruction.  
He vented his rage on men he caroused with,  
killed his own comrades, a pariah king  
who cut himself off from his own kind (*Beowulf*, Heaney 55).

Not only Merry, Pippin and Éowyn pledge allegiance to their lord. Frodo offers his service to Faramir because Faramir has granted him protection. Faramir has vowed to serve his father Denethor and he keeps the promise, though Denethor sees his service as incomplete. Gollum swears to serve the master of the Precious. Even Aragorn promises Frodo “...if by life or death I can save you, I will” (Tolkien 171) and he is committed to his word.

The most significant relationship of service, loyalty and friendship is that of Frodo and Sam. Before they set out, Sam was Frodo’s gardener, he was thus in his service. During the quest the character of the service changed into protecting his master and not leaving him at any cost. And through the many dangers and hardships the relationship turns into “idealized friendship” (Chance 83). Sam achieves heroism unrecognized and totally undesired. He does not care for heroic deeds; he only wishes to remain with Frodo. When Frodo decides to go to Mordor alone, Sam is the only one who can read his heart and he finally goes with him. As Frodo is weakened every day by the burden of the Ring, Sam becomes every day more protective. Though he still calls him “Mr. Frodo”, their relationship is that of equal friends and Frodo realizes how important Sam is for him: “Frodo wouldn’t have got far without Sam, would he” (Tolkien 712)? Even if it seems hopeless and they are so close to death, Sam would not leave Frodo and he goes with him all the way to the Cracks of Doom, and, like Wiglaf, who would rather die than leave his lord unaided, stands by him in his last

fight, although, like Wiglaf he has not been asked to, and, like Wiglaf, he cannot change his master's destiny. Only at the very end they part, as Frodo leaves the Middle-earth. For Sam is torn by two loyalties: to his master and to his family and land. For Frodo there is no return, he is not able to live the life he had lived before, but Sam has returned to his heart and soul. Frodo sees it clearly: "You cannot always be torn in two. You will have to be one and whole, for many years" (Tolkien 1029). Their parting symbolizes the passing of the Heroic Age in which community bond has overpowered that of family. It is the age of Germanic heroic society. In *The Lord of the Rings* it is symbolized by the Third Age, dominated by elves. As Sam returns to his family and the Shire, he symbolically enters the Fourth Age, dominated by men.

## Songs and Storytelling

As I have already mentioned *Beowulf* was composed as a part of a tradition of oral Germanic heroic poetry. This poetry was usually created and recited by a scop or a minstrel, as he was later called. Its purpose was to celebrate the heroic deeds of warriors who gathered in the king's hall for a feast. The warriors were expected to boast of their achievements and the scop could help them with this. He traveled from court to court and was rewarded for his work as well as the warriors for their loyalty. Poems or songs performed by scops were very important for Old English heroic society and we can find a few glimpses of how this poetry may have been produced in the poem itself. Throughout the whole story of *Beowulf* we can find instances when a minstrel describes some events and heroic exploits of the past or invents a brand new poem to celebrate acts of courage and heroism that Beowulf has just performed. Besides the main storyline there are stray allusions and subsidiary episodes about kings, queens and warriors, wars, combats or domestic feuds: the narrative about Shield Sheafson, the glorious Danish king, the song about Sigemund, the dragon-slayer, or the lay of the fight at Finn's hall. In this fight a Danish princess Hildeburh married to the Frisian King Finn loses her son and her brother Hnaef, king of the Danes who attacked the hall. The bloody feud between the Danes and the Frisians ends when Finn is killed. Another story speaks about Queen Modthryth who had once been very cruel but then she married the young prince Offa and became famous for her good deeds. We also find out about the long feuds between the Swedes and the Geats.

Telling stories, reciting poems and commemorating important events of the past is also important in *The Lord of the Rings*. In both texts numerous episodes from the legendary past resurface in the present, either through narratorial allusions or through a character's voice. Both texts are "charged with evocation of an ancient unrealizable world of which the details may sound precise and solid, but it is their resonance that matters" (Shepherd 94).

Diana Wynne Jones, discussing Tolkien's narrative technique, observes that Tolkien "took over the idea of the inset histories and legends from...*Beowulf*, in which each inset vaguely echoes the action in the poem's present" (Bolintineanu 264). This connection between the past and the present is perhaps most striking when Frodo enters Lothlórien and the legendary past becomes actual reality: "As soon as he set foot upon the far bank of Silverlode a strange feeling had come upon him, and it deepened as he walked on into the Naith: it seemed to him that he had stepped over a bridge of time into a corner of the Elder Days, and now was walking in a world that was no more. In Rivendell there was memory of ancient things; in Lórien the ancient things still lived on in the waking world" (Tolkien 349). Rivendell was really a place full of memory of the past. Like in an Anglo-Saxon feasting hall, here, too, singing songs to celebrate heroic deeds or to commemorate ancient times was an essential part of merrymaking. The Elves "seem to like [music and poetry] as much as food, or more" (Tolkien 237). And it was not only the Elves who recited poetry or sang songs there. Even Bilbo and Aragorn took part in song composing and performing. Similarly, in *Beowulf* King Hrothgar took his turn in reciting verse during the feast at Heorot after Beowulf had defeated Grendel. Beowulf describes the feast to Hygelac: "...at times the king gave the proper turn to some fantastic tale" (*Beowulf*, Heaney 67).

In neither text is the past actually summoned back by recitation; in fact often the poems themselves lament the irrecoverability of the past, of the ancient, mythic Time. In *Beowulf*,

a battle-scarred veteran, bowed with age,  
would begin to remember the martial deeds  
of his youth and prime and be overcome  
as the past welled up in his wintry heart (*Beowulf*, Heaney 67).

Many of the inset narratives of *The Lord of the Rings* suggest a similar loss of something good or fair that once was but now is lost and cannot be restored. The piece of the lay of

“The Fall of Gil-galad” that Sam sings to the other Hobbits and Aragorn on Weathertop emphasises that Gil-galad and his kingship are gone beyond recovery:

Gil-galad was an Elven-king.

Of him the harpers sadly sing:

the last whose realm was fair and free

between the Mountains and the Sea (Tolkien 265).

Though retelling stories of the past does not bring the past back, the past is still active in the present. Characters of both texts create legend as they live and act. By their present deeds they provide material for the legends that will be told of them in the future; and sometimes not in much remote future. When Beowulf defeats Grendel, Danish warriors track the wounded Grendel. On their way back, a scop not only compares Beowulf’s heroism to that of Sigemund, the dragon-slayer, described in the tale of Sigemund, but he also starts to recite verses about Beowulf’s triumph. Only a few hours after the fight there is already a new poem celebrating the hero of the fight. Frodo and Sam, as they are climbing the stairs of Cirith Ungol, wonder if they will ever be put in a song or a tale. Sam says: “We’re in one, of course; but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the fireside or read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards” (Tolkien 712). And in the end they really are put in both a tale and a song. In Minas Tirith many men sang in many languages when the Hobbits approached: “Long live the Halflings! Praise them with great praise!” (Tolkien 953) And later, at Aragorn’s coronation, a woman tells her cousin a story of the Hobbits’ journey to Mordor, though in a little exaggerated proportions: “Those are *Periain*, out of the far country of the Halflings, where they are princes of great fame, it is said. ... Why, cousin, one of them went with only his esquire into the Black Country and fought with the Dark Lord all by himself, and set fire to his Tower, if you can believe it” (Tolkien 966). The woman took the material of some stories she had

heard before and with the help of her own imagination and something she really witnessed, she created a legend about the Hobbits.

Moreover, in both works there appear competing versions of one event of the past, usually one is authoritative and the other suspect, showing that the legendary past can be distorted in the telling, either from conscious desire or ignorance. In *Beowulf* it is the case of Beowulf's and Unferth's versions of Beowulf's legendary contest with Breca. Unferth, who envies Beowulf, wishes to discredit him and tells a twisted version of it. Beowulf offers his own version which is more believable because he is a participant of the contest and because this version is more appropriate for his heroic qualities. Beowulf also lowers Unferth's authority as a narrator by reminding the audience of the fratricide Unferth has committed.

In Tolkien there are two versions of the story of how Bilbo gained the Ring. The first version that Bilbo told his companions was that Gollum had promised to give him a present, the Ring, if he won the riddle-game. But because it was already in Bilbo's pocket, Gollum showed him the way out instead of the present. According to this version, Bilbo was not a thief, for as he won the riddle-game the Ring was rightly his. The true version, which Bilbo later told Gandalf and also to those gathered at the Council of Elrond, was that Bilbo found the Ring in a cave, put it in his pocket and said nothing of it. If he won the game Gollum had promised Bilbo to lead him out of a tunnel. When Gollum realized that Bilbo stole his "Precious", it was too late for him to regain it and he called Bilbo a thief.

However, even if the tales may suffer from faults of interpretation or conscious twisting, they are based, however loosely, on actual events. In *Beowulf*, for instance, Grendel becomes a legend in his lifetime; stories of his raids reach even to the Geatish court. When Éomer hears of Halflings, he cannot believe what he hears and exclaims: "Halflings! But they are only a little people in old songs and children's tales out of the North. Do we walk

in legends or on the green earth in the daylight” (Tolkien 434)? Aragorn assures him that “A man may do both ...For not we but those who come after will make the legends of our time” (Tolkien 434).

In both texts characters use the tales as exempla, either to encourage them or to warn them. In *Beowulf* the exempla are mostly negative. After Beowulf had killed the two monsters, Hrothgar tells him about Heremod, who had seemed a courageous protector of the Danes but later proved bloodthirsty, desired only power and finally he brought the Danes only death and destruction. This is to serve as a warning for Beowulf who is now in the same position as was the young Heremod. In *The Lord of the Rings* the exempla are mostly positive. The characters use legends as a source of positive inspiration to encourage them and help turn their thoughts from the possibility of defeat. Sam, for instance, encourages Frodo by remembering the story of Beren and Lúthien. Beren set out to a dangerous quest to get the Silmaril to be allowed to marry Lúthien. Sam says: “Beren now, he never thought he was going to get that Silmaril from the Iron Crown in Thangorodrim, and yet he did, and that was a worse place and a blacker danger than ours” (Tolkien 712).

“In both texts ‘history’ repeats itself, as present actions fulfil the same universal patterns of fratricide or heroic sacrifice or transience that inform the legendary episodes. Such echoes integrate the events of the main story into the thematic currents traversing each text” (Bolinteanu 268). This occurs in *Beowulf*, for example as Beowulf prepares for his last fight with the dragon. He knows it is going to be his last fight. He recalls several sad stories about feuds and royal families. At least three episodes echo his situation. One is that of the old King Hrethel whose elder son was killed and he cannot take revenge because the killer is also his son. This is closely followed by the analogous predicament of an old man “who has lived to see his son’s body swing on the gallows” (*Beowulf*, Heaney 77). And finally, Beowulf recalls the death of King Ongentheow assailed by two younger warriors. These

three echo Beowulf's own plights. He is old, childless, at the end of his days. Beowulf's last battle has wider significance. "Even for heroes and kings, there comes one enemy at the end of his life – be it heartbreak or human enemy, man-eating monster or fire-breathing dragon – whom he may struggle against but not survive" (Bolintineanu 269).

The same motif can also be found in *The Lord of the Rings*. Three episodes in particular echo the main story: that of the Last Alliance, that of Eärendil, and that of Beren and Lúthien (Bolintineanu 270-271). The first concerns the lure of the Ring to which Isildur succumbs as surely as Gollum and at last even Frodo. It shows the power of the Ring and also that the failure is not a matter of individual weakness but of the universal pattern of things. Eärendil, of whom Bilbo writes a song in Rivendell, carries, like Frodo, a jewel of great significance. Like Frodo, he undertakes a perilous quest and like Frodo, when he has accomplished it, he cannot return to his native land and must renounce the mortal world altogether. The quest of Beren and Lúthien resembles Frodo's journey to Mordor. It involves a precious jewel, a struggle against all odds with the incarnate evil in its own domain and a victory seasoned with grief (Bolintineanu 271). Another parallel is that of the love of Beren, a mortal, and Lúthien, an immortal elf princess, with the love of Aragorn and Arwen.

In both, *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings*, events of the past are remembered, tales serve as guides to the present situations, legends are in the constant interplay with the main story and the past mingles with the present. As Bolintineanu puts it: "Like voices in talk, legendary narrative and current events echo or contradict each other, question or build on each other's arguments, enrich and complete one another" (Bolintineanu 272). The past still has an important part to play in the story and it is remembered and even enacted in the present.

## Conclusion

To conclude my major thesis I think I may say that Tolkien really was largely influenced by the Anglo-Saxon heroic epic tradition of *Beowulf* and that his inspiration by this poem was not just a question of a few borrowed elements, like the theft of the dragon's cup. He was inspired by the medieval epic in a much more complex way.

In all the aspects I was examining in this thesis I found similarities between the two works. First, there is the concept of heroism and the heroes. Tolkien used two main types of heroes in his epic – the extraordinary, strong hero-king who is closer in his characteristics to *Beowulf*, and the hero as a little man who, due to the circumstances, becomes the true hero. This one comes closer to the fairy-tale hero, but both of them draw from the medieval tradition and the typical characteristics of both cross throughout the story. In both works we can find the common motifs of a hero and his quest, the importance of the ancestry of the hero or a hero as a king.

The societies, kingdoms and social order described in *The Lord of the Rings* often reflect those of *Beowulf*. The Kings Théoden and Aragorn symbolize the good Germanic king, embodied in *Beowulf* by Hygelac or *Beowulf* himself. They are in contrast with Denethor, the evil lord. Much space is devoted to the description of the relationships between the characters, their loyalty and service to their lords or their unfaithfulness and the role the individuals play in the society. This motif is typical of the Anglo-Saxon life as well as poetry.

As for the monsters, whose usage in the poem Tolkien defended in his essay mentioned above, they are central to the story of *The Lord of the Rings*, too and the inspiration by *Beowulf* is visible here, only in Tolkien there is bigger emphasis not on the physical monstrous evil, but rather on the spiritual evil within the people, the monsters within the heroes.

I also examined the inset narratives in both works and found out that they mostly serve the same purpose. They are either used for celebrating the heroic deeds of the past, as good exempla to guide the heroes in the present and to encourage them, or to warn them not to follow the way of some who had failed in the past. The role of the medieval scops is played in *The Lord of the Rings* by the Elves, Bilbo, Sam and other characters who like composing and performing stories or poems.

J.R.R. Tolkien not only made *Beowulf* more accessible, understandable and interesting for the students attending his lectures and seminars or reading his paper. He also put the essential characteristics of the medieval heroic epic poetry into his most popular books and thus made this genre accessible even to the readers of modern fiction.

As Jane Chance puts it “the Tolkien reader, like Bilbo in *The Hobbit* and Sam in *The Lord of the Rings*, must return to the beginning – not to the Shire, but to the origin of the artist Tolkien – in “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*” (Chance 232). For not only helps us *The Lord of the Rings* understand the medieval heroic epic. *Beowulf* also helps us understand many things in Tolkien’s books.

## Bibliography

### Primary sources

Beowulf. Trans. Michael Alexander. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973.

Beowulf. Trans. Seamus Heaney. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2000.

Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. The Hobbit. London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2000.

Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. The Lord of the Rings. London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2005.

### Secondary sources

Bolintineanu, Alexandra. "Enacting the Past in *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings*." Tolkien and the Invention of Myth. Ed. Jane Chance. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004. 263 – 273.

Bradley, Marion Zimmer. "Men, Halflings and Hero Worship." Understanding *The Lord of the Rings*. Ed. Rose A. Zimbardo and Neil D. Isaacs. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. 76 – 92.

Carpenter, Humphrey. J.R.R. Tolkien, a biography. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1977.

Chance, Jane. "*The Lord of the Rings*: Tolkien's Epic." Understanding *The Lord of the Rings*. Ed. Rose A. Zimbardo and Neil D. Isaacs. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. 195 – 232.

Day, David. Průvodce světem J.R.R. Tolkiena. Trans. Stanislava Pošustová. Praha, Litomyšl: Ladislav Horáček – Paseka, 2003.

Dixon, William Macneile. English Epic and Heroic Poetry. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1912.

Flieger, Verlyn. "Frodo and Aragorn: The Concept of the Hero." Understanding *The Lord of the Rings*. Ed. Rose A. Zimbardo and Neil D. Isaacs. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. 122 – 145.

Irving, Edward B., Jr. Introduction to *Beowulf*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969.

Schlauch, Margaret. English Medieval Literature and its Social Foundations. Warszawa: PWN – Polish Scientific Publishers, 1967.

Shepherd, G.T. "*Beowulf*: An Epic Fairy-Tale." Medieval Literature: The European Inheritance. Ed. Boris Ford. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, c1995. 85 – 96.

Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. Netvoři a kritikové a jiné eseje. Trans. Jan Čermák. Praha: Argo, 2006.

Zesmer, David M. Guide to English Literature from *Beowulf* through Chaucer and Medieval Drama. Bibliographies by Stanley B. Greenfield. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1966.



THE AIMS OF ENGLISH A: LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE ARE TO: 1.Introduce students to a range of texts from different periods, styles and genres 2.Develop in students the ability to engage in close, detailed analysis of individual texts and make relevant connections 3.Develop the studentsâ€™ powers of expression, both in oral and written communication 4.Encourage students to recognize the importance of the contexts in which texts are written and received 5.Encourage, through the study of texts, an appreciation of the different perspectives of people from other cultures, and how these perspectives cons

Category:English-language literature. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Jump to navigation Jump to search. This category contains categories and articles relating to literature written in the English language regardless of the country in which it is produced. Please note that some of the sub-categories may contain articles on literature in articles other than English. For example, the British literature category contains articles on literature in other languages in the United Kingdom, the Canadian literature category contains articles on French language writers, the Irish literature categ