Imagery of 'Surging Water' in 

Beowulf

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(1)

It may be safe to say that Beowulf has only one main plot in it, that is, Beowulf's three conflicts with Grendel, his mother and the dragon. The plot itself is quite simple. And so are the characters in it. But the simple plot is made to be a complicated one both by the poet's dramatic technique and the digressions. The poet is at his best when he is describing the natural scenes and the characters' emotions before and after the conflicts. And also, with the help of many picturesque and vivid descriptions of nature, the poet succeeds in arousing the reader's emotions effectively.

To be more exact, one of the main factors which make Beowulf impressive to the reader is its imagery. By using varied images, which powerfully affect the imagination of the reader, the poet of Beowulf succeeds in capturing emotion, psychology and hence, in making the poem appealing to our feelings, because imagery emphasizes mood, and sometimes prefigures the events to come. In other words, recurrent images play a part in raising, developing, sustaining, and repeating emotion. And in some cases, the poet apparently expresses his own emotion also.

In this short article, I will confine myself to considering chiefly the recurrent imagery of 'surging water' and a few related problems. But I will not take into consideration such minute differences as C. Brady distinguishes with regards to the meanings of the synonyms for 'sea', (1) because I do not think it necessary to consider them in this article.

(2)

When Beowulf visits Grendel and his mother's abode, guided by Hroðgár, he sees the giant trees leaning on the grey rock; (Note: modern English translation will be given below the notes.)

Oferčode pâ æþelinga bearn
stēap stānhlið, stige nearwe;
enge āńpaðas, uncūð gelāð,
neowle naessas, nicorhūsa fela;
hē føara sum beforan gengde
wisra monna wong sceawian,
The imagery of giant trees as well as the adjective ‘har’ apparently creates the feeling of fear, and moreover, it implies, I think, the fear of the poet. In the passage quoted above, we have come across the verb ‘drefan’. The image of the verb seems very important to me in the whole poem, because it suggests fear, anger, anxiety, and sorrow in a great number of important passages. In such instances, the poet generally uses the verb ‘weallan’ or the noun ‘wylm’. The imagery of ‘boiling or stirring’ is associated with the dreadful sea in lines 516 and 546 (‘sintrys wylm’, ‘wado weallende’) and also in the following lines:

\[ ðær wæs on blōde brim weallende, atol űða geswing, eal gemenged, hāton heolfre, heoro-drēore weol. (11. 847-9) \]

The same verb is used twice in these two lines. It certainly serves to create the sensation of cruelty, horror and bodily pain, and we are conscious of the cumulative effect on our imaginative sensibility.

Here we stand before an amazing, clear and remarkable image to be found in Beowulf. This image of ‘surging water’ is, in most cases, applied to various concrete situations, and hence, to various emotions. First of all we have to know what particular purpose this image serves when it occurs, because every image gains life and significance only from its context, and in many ways it is closely linked with the whole poem. Let me cite some remarkable passages where the image occurs and analyse what kind of emotion is revealed in a particular context, and, if possible, how the emotion is related to another context.

After Hrōthgār laments the death of Æschere, he asks Beowulf to find the monster’s abode and to avenge it on Grendel’s mother. As part of his account of that abode, he says:

\[ þonon ũðgeblond up āstigeð won tō wolcnum, þonne wind styrep lāð gewidru, oð þæt lyft drysmap, roderas rētað. (11.1373-6a) \]

This description of the weird, turbulent and gloomy weather appears to foretell a more dangerous battle against Grendel’s mother. Beowulf barely escapes defeat, and kills the monster with a giant sword near by, and blood mingles with the water:
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Sōna þæt gesāwon snottre ceorlas,
på ðæ at Hrōðgāre on holm wilton,
þæt wæs Yōgeblond eal gemenged,
brim blōde fāh. (11.1591-4b)

The tossing water mingled with blood in the above passage indicates the wise men’s anxiety about Beowulf’s safety in the murderous fight between Beowulf and Grendel’s mother. This scene makes a vivid contrast to the scenes in the following two passages.

The first one that tells us how the waters were being purged enables us to imagine vividly how the demon expires. On the other hand, in the second one the stagnant waters would imply Beowulf’s sensation of exhaustion, relaxation and relief after the terrible strife.

wæron Yōgebland eal gefēlsod,
ēacne eardas, þæ se ellorgāst
offēt lifðagas ond þæs lænan gesceaf. (11.1620-22)

Lagu drūsade,
wæter under wolcnum, wældrēore fāg. (11.1630b-1)

This kind of contrast is almost equally applicable to the following two passages:

på wæs pēodsceāda priddan siðe,
frēcne fydraca fæhōa gemyndig,
rēasley on ðone rōfan, þæ him rūm āgeald,
hēt ond headogrīm,heals ealne ymbefēng
biteran bānum; hē geblōdegod wearō
sāwuldriore, swāt Yōum wēoll. (11.2688-93)

þæt ðæt fyr ongon
swēārian syððan. (11.2701b-2a)

That is, although with the assistance of Wiglāf Beowulf swings his sword Naegling at the dragon’s head, it breaks and the dragon fastens its tusks in Beowulf’s neck. The dragon’s surging fire, which has harassed Beowulf thoroughly, begins to diminish at last. The diminishing fire symbolizes the end of the long fight as well as Beowulf’s suffering of a death blow.

The vivid ddescription of Beowulf’s fight against the dragon sometimes makes the reader feel as if he could hear the monster’s hard and jerky breathing and the sound of the surging fire. Through the whole battle, the reader is many times told how venomous, powerful and terrible the dragon’s fire is.
That is certainly one reason the diminishing fire is quite effective in impressing the reader deeply.

The fight between Beowulf and dragon reminds the reader of the two former battles. Comparing the three battles, one is now aware of some differences found in the descriptions of them. First of all Beowulf’s attitude towards the last fight is remarkably different from those he assumed towards the former ones. That is, his attitude becomes elegiac more and more, though he wishes to be armed more strongly. Old as he is, he knows well that he has lost power and that his third adversary is the most terrible one that he has ever met. Secondly the description of the battle against Grendel is the shortest (11.710-65) and gives us very few of the two fighters’ excited feelings. The description of his second fight is a little longer (11.1492-1590). The last one is the longest (11.2546b-2601, and 11.2669-2711) and most elegiac. Before the final conflict even starts, the image of ‘surging’ or ‘tossing’ is shown in the following passages:

\[
\text{bëcost innan wëoll} \\
\text{þæstrostrum geþoncum, swä him geþywe ne wæs. (11.2331b-2)}
\]

\[
\text{Hë ofer willan giong} \\
\text{tô ðæes ðe hë eorðsele änze wisse,} \\
\text{hiw under hrûsan holmwylyme nëh,} \\
\text{yôgwinne; (11.2409b-12a)}
\]

Especially in the description of the third fight, the image is most remarkably used as is seen in the following:

\[
\text{Æfter ðâm wordum wyrm yrre cwôm,} \\
\text{atol inwitgæst ðûre siðe} \\
\text{fyrwylmum fåh fionda njosian,} \\
\text{låðre manna. Lìgìðum forborn} \\
\text{bord wið rond, (11.2669-73a)}
\]

\[
\text{på wæs þëodsceåda priddan siðe,} \\
\text{frëcne fyrdrada fæða gemyndig,} \\
\text{ræsde on ðone rôfan. på him rûm ógeald,} \\
\text{håt ond headôgrim, healne ymbefêng} \\
\text{biteran bånurn ; hë geblôdegod weary} \\
\text{såwuldriore, swät yôum wëoll. (11.2688-93)}
\]
The dragon's emotions are fully shown here. The meaningful image of 'surging' or 'tossing' is certainly an expressive device that helps to stir our emotions and excite our imagination especially by describing the feeling of anger, hatred, pain, horror, and anxiety as well.

In view of these considerations, Beowulf poet must have been strongly impressed by this image. That is why he uses it repeatedly in describing terrible natural scenes, a variety of emotional feelings.

Thus we cannot help being impressed with the general sense of excitement which is much increased and kept constantly before us. We discover, therefore, how much our interest in the poem is kept up and repeatedly stimulated by the poet's skilful manipulation of imagery and his use of contrast.

Notes

(1) Professor Stanley B. Greenfield of the University of Oregon was kind enough to let me read C. Brady's article entitled The Synonyms for "Sea" in Beowulf. Unfortunately I do not know which book includes her article.

(2) C. Brady says, 'The probability is that the word (wylm) refers to the movement itself, for in other applications in the poem it refers to the gushing of the burn (1.2507), and—most vividly, with the verb not only adding to the sense of movement but also revealing the nature of the movement—the swelling rise of death in the image dægas wylm/ hrān æt heortan (11.2269-70), (op. cit. p. 34)

(3) The clearness and concreteness of this image offers, I believe, a striking contrast to the vagueness of such images as 'þystru', 'niht', 'mist-hlīp', 'myrce', 'ellengæst', 'grimma gæst', 'sceadugenga', and so on. C. L. Wrenn says, by the way, in the introduction to his edition of Beowulf, 'the implicit symbolism of the powers of darkness helps to give it an ageless quality.' (p. 66)

(4) Speaking of contrast, the passage (11.2689-93) offers another kind of contrast—a pictorial contrast between the dragon's white tusks and the red blood.

(5) C. L. Wrenn is of the same opinion and says, 'The two main divisions of the poem—Beowulf's fights with Grendel and his mother, and the dragon-slaying—are the means of bringing out these two contrasted stages in the hero's life.... The style and tone of the two main parts of Beowulf are rightly contrasted, as they must correspond to the rise and fall of the hero.' (op. cit. p.66)
(Modern English translation of each quotation from Beowulf.)

(1400-17a) Then the son of princes strode over the high rocky cliffs, the narrow paths, the straitened tracks, the unknown road, the steep crags, many a monster's abode. He with a few other wise men went ahead to spy out the the land, until suddenly he found the mountain trees, the dreary wood hanging above the grey rock. The water beneath lay blood-stained and troubled.

(847-9) There the water was surging with blood, the foul welter of waves all mingled with hot gore; it boiled with the blood of battle.

(1373-6a) Thence the surge of waves mounts up dark to the clouds, when the wind stirs up hostile storms till the air darkens, the skies weep.

(1591-4b) Straightway the wise men who gazed on the mere with Hrothgar saw that the surge of waves was all troubled, the water stained with blood.

(1620-22) The wave-sorges were all cleansed, the great haunts where the alien spirit gave up his life and this transitory world.

(1630b-1) The lake stagnated, the water under the clouds, stained with the blood of battle.

(2668-93) Then for the third time the enemy of the people, the bold fire-dragon, was set on fighting; he rushed on the mighty man, when a chance offered, hot and fierce in fight; he clutched his whole neck with sharp teeth; Beowulf grew stained with his lifeblood; the gore welled out in surges.

(2701b-2a) and the fire afterwards began to diminish.

(2409b-12a) He went against his will, to the point where he could spy that cave, the barrow under the ground, hard by the surge of the waters, the struggle of the waves.

(2669-73) After these words the dragon came raging once more, the dread evil creature, flashing with surges of flame, to seek out his foes, the hated man. The shield was burnt away to the rim by waves of fire.

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