Fire and light: Breaking the boundaries of dichotomy in the *Beowulf* poem

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Many critical readings of the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* emphasize its dualistic vision, its several binomials and oppositions. In this paper, I shall argue that dichotomies such as those of light and darkness, of human and nonhuman, of human society and anarchic nature, and of pagan and Christian beliefs are both strengthened and reversed by the representation of light and fire, which acts as a counteracting theme that negates such binomials and provides a bridge between them. Firstly, I shall examine the various dichotomous readings hitherto offered by critics such as Fred C. Robinson and Bruce Mitchell. Secondly, I shall specifically analyse in detail the presence of light in the various descriptions of dawns, in the characterization of Grendel's eyes, and shall then link it to the representation of fire given in the poem. My argument shall therefore establish that there need not be a strictly demarcated vision of the poem, but opposite elements coexist with equal representation.

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In its capacity to allow for multiple (and often contrasting) interpretations, the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* has been seen as essentially ambiguous. As Carol Braun Pasternack has specifically pointed out, structuralist and post-structuralist studies of the text have attempted to identify the central, fundamental and underlying oppositional differences of the poem (1997: 172). These oppositions are primarily used by the narrator to emphasize the difference between the good characters and the villains, between the different settings such characters come from and reside in (Staver 2005: 114) as well as

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between pagan and Christian beliefs.[1] In the studies conducted by Herbert G. Wright, Bernard F. Huppé, Jerome Mandel and Bruce A. Rosenberg, and Joyce Tally Lionarons, *Beowulf* has been read as characterized by a dualistic vision. Lionarons, for example, considers the narrative as characterized by "an unresolved semantic dialogue" between the two separate discourses of heroic poetry and Christian orthodoxy (1998: 47).

On the other hand, critics such as Ward Parks, Andy Orchard and Alvin A. Lee have evidenced that such binomials are not necessarily dichotomous and do not therefore imply readings of the poem that mutually exclude each other. These interpretations, based on the different translations of the Anglo-Saxon terms and on a study of the characters or of the primary sources of influence and inspiration (such as Biblical and/or Classical literature), have not hitherto analysed in detail the narrative's representation of fire and light. I shall specifically affirm that such a representation both sustains and annihilates the binomials of the poem such as human/nonhuman, light/darkness, hospitable/hostile environments and pagan/Christian beliefs.

A reading of *Beowulf* as a poem characterized by binomials had been initially suggested by J. R. R. Tolkien when focusing on the representation of the monsters and on the "deadly seriousness" of the text's themes (1936: 260). Tolkien classified Grendel, Grendel's mother and the dragon as enemies of all humanity and God, and not merely of the people of Heorot and Beowulf (1936: 259). Subsequently, the contraposition of Grendel, Grendel's mother and the dragon to the human community living in Heorot and specifically to the hero Beowulf has been a point of major discussion among critics, who categorize the villains of this narrative according to the resemblance of their actions to (or difference from) the behaviour of the human beings. Such dichotomous critical readings are primarily due to the fact that Grendel and his mother are never described in detail in the poem. Specifically, there are no clear indications of Grendel's physical appearance that could help the reader's visual perception of him (Lapidge 1993: 382–383). His "shapelessness" (Sandner 1999: 163) does not allow the reader and the critic to ultimately establish whether he is a monster or a human individual. In this way,

[1] The opposition between pagan and Christian beliefs reflects what Joyce Hill has defined as the 'Germania' and 'Latina' approaches, "the two extreme positions from which scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have approached" Anglo-Saxon texts (2002: 1). Hill specifically deals with poems in the *Junius MS*, but his argument could be applied to the *Beowulf* text as well.

categorizing him as a human or nonhuman being rather depends on the interpretation of his actions and motives. On the one hand, Ward Parks ascribes him a nonhuman behaviour because of his cannibalistic practices, his predatory violence and his "outright disdain for the symbols and ceremonies of human order" (1993: 6).

On the other hand, Andy Orchard (2003: 36) argues that Grendel is a sentient human being because he has a soul. According to Orchard, this is demonstrated by the fact that, after returning to his own lair after being mortally wounded by Beowulf, Grendel

> *in fenfreoðo feorh āleġde,*
> *hæþene sāwle; þær him hel onfēng.*
> *Þanon eft ġewiton ealdġesīðas,*[2]
>
> delightless laid down his life
> And his heathen soul in the fen-fastness
> Where hell engulfed him. (851–853)[3]

This argument is maintained also by Johann Köberl, who affirms that the Anglo-Saxon terms utilized by the poet in order to describe Grendel are those used in Old English poetry for the themes of exile and outlawry (2002: 96). According to this interpretation, Grendel is actually a human being who is seen a priori as monstrous by the people of Heorot because of his refusal to remain in exile. In this sense, the first adversary of Beowulf can be dichotomously read as either monstrous or human.

Such a dualistic reading has been also offered for Grendel's unnamed mother, the main female character represented in the story. On the one hand, critics such as Paul Acker read her as "a kind of feminine antitype" (2006: 704), as behaving according to a vengeful, destructive and aggressive manner which, within the specific context of *Beowulf* itself, would have characterized only the behaviour of men and particularly of male warriors. The predatory conduct of Grendel's mother is interpreted as monstrous because it is irrespective of her sex, and because she enacts a behaviour which would have been appropriate only to male avengers, to those fathers, brothers and sons deprived of a relative. According to Gillian R. Overing, she can be seen as a

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[2] All references to *Beowulf* are from *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 4th edition.
[3] All translations are from Edwin Morgan.

feminine antitype if we consider also that, contrary to the women depicted in the tale who "have no space to occupy, to claim, to speak from" (1990: 72), Grendel's mother has her own dwelling. She then attacks and endangers the male-dominated reign of Heorot, or, as Acker specifies, "the whole system of male dominance" (2006: 708).

On the other hand, Parks instead argues that Grendel's mother "exhibit[s] human life habits and [...] ha[s] mastered certain human arts" (1993: 9), such as living in a hall and owning an heirloom sword. Considering the fact that "a large part of her reputed monstrosity lies [...] in Grendel himself" (Alfano 1992: 12), Grendel's mother could actually be seen as a female human being who attacks the people of Heorot exclusively with the noble purpose of avenging the death of her only child and heir.[4] According to the critics of the poem, Grendel's mother can then be seen as either respecting or disrupting conventional gender stereotypes, as either a monstrous and bloodthirsty being or a female warrior who is forced to *ġegān wolde / sorhfulne sīð, sunu dēoð wrecan* (set out / On a journey of death to avenge her son's death; 1277–1278). It is a matter of interpretation and translation to establish an ultimate reading of such a character, to prove as final only one of the dichotomous readings which can be given of her. However, as we shall see later in detail, the possibility to read both Grendel and his mother as human or non-human is further sustained by their connection with the representation of light and fire.

Another dualistic opposition which defines the monsters of *Beowulf* is based on the classification of Beowulf's adversaries as either pagan or Christian enemies. On the one hand, Marijane Osborn (1995: 116) and Fred C. Robinson (1993: 66) argue that Grendel and his mother represent the adversaries of all Christians because of their descent from Cain's progeny. Similarly, in Robert L. Schichler's view (2000: 102), these hostile beings embody the Christian conception of sin and, consequently, they represent the

[4] Keith P. Taylor and Christine Alfano suggest that defining the behaviour of Grendel's mother as feminine or masculine rather depends on the translation of the terms which describe and define her. Indeed, Taylor (2004: 15) and Alfano (1992: 12) argue that the first term which characterizes her —the word *aglæewif* (1259)— should be translated as 'female warrior woman', and not as 'monstrous woman'. According to this translation, Grendel's mother is not a monstrous creature, but a female warrior. Her murderous behaviour can therefore be considered as appropriate for a woman who is forced to avenge the death of her only son because of the absence of a male partner or father.

enemies of the Christian God. According to these readings of the poem, Grendel and his mother are defeated by the hero Beowulf in order for the right divine order of things to be restored. Beowulf and the heathen people of Heorot are therefore inscribed in a Christian design intended to restore the rightness of God and to obliterate evil from the world. Consequently, Beowulf's battles become a metaphor for the struggle of each individual against the malignity of the Devil, against all the evil present in the world. The pagan hero becomes, according to Bruce Mitchell & Fred C. Robinson, "an unwitting allay of the Christian forces arrayed against evil as embodied in Cain" (2000: 21).

An interpretation of *Beowulf* as a Christian allegorical tale is validated also by the poet's choice of the dragon as Beowulf's adversary in the third part of the narrative. According to Bill Griffiths (1996: 21, 26) and Joyce Tally Lionarons (1998: 18), indeed, the presence of such a creature is due to a Christian influence because of its association with Satan and the fires of hell in the New Testament. Together with Grendel and his mother, the dragon as well would then represent an enemy of Christianity in the perennial battle of all human beings against the Devil and creatures from hell.

On the other hand, Grendel, his mother and the dragon can instead be read as a representation of a pagan world, the world of the heathen people of Heorot, who are explicitly described as making heathen vows and *wīġweorþunga* (sacrifices to their idols; 176). In this way, the story of *Beowulf* is not necessarily to be read as a Christian allegory. This is due to the fact that, first of all, the description of Grendel as a specific adversary of the pagan or Christian people largely depends on the translation of the terms utilized to describe and refer to him. According to Michael Lapidge, for instance, the name *Grendel* is a reference to the *draugr*, the 'undead man', 'ghost', or 'zombie' often present in the Old Norse sagas (1993: 375). A similar argument is maintained also by Trubshaw (1998: 1) and Griffiths (1996: 4), who affirm that the dragon is depicted in terms which evidently reproduce a pagan vision of monsters. Indeed, Beowulf's third adversary is present as the divinity's or hero's antagonist in many Northern sagas (Trubshaw 1998: 11), where it is pictured as a legless serpent, such as could be imagined according to its description in *Beowulf*. The three major enemies of Beowulf can all be alternatively read as either pagan or Christian adversaries.

Secondly, *Beowulf* is not necessarily to be read as a Christian allegory because the poem's narrator never makes any explicit references to the great dogmas of Christianity or any mention of Christ himself, as Mitchell &

Robinson have pointed out (2000: 33). The Christian poet's mentions of God can be then considered merely as an attempt to create distance between the past age in which the story is set and the present act of narration as a means of framing the narrative according to a set of religious beliefs which are closer to those of the poet's contemporary audience.

Human or nonhuman, a behaviour which either respects or contradicts the female sex, a Christian allegorical tale or a narrative about the pagan past: these are but some of the oppositions that critics have extrapolated from *Beowulf*. Another dichotomy that can be traced in the Anglo-Saxon text is the opposition between light and darkness, which also strengthens the dichotomies of human versus nonhuman and natural world versus human society. Indeed, the opposition between light and darkness has been seen by the critics as identifying the two main locations of the tale: Heorot and Grendel's lair. The former has been repeatedly read as a setting characterized by the presence of light as well as epitomizing luminosity itself. For example, David Sandner affirms that "the hall itself is the center and the light" (1999: 171). In fact, Heorot is explicitly compared to *līxte se lēoma ofer landa fela* (a lantern illuminating many lands; 311): the hall of the Danes, the residence of humankind, is depicted as itself illuminating the surrounding lands, as a lantern visible by the mariners and the foreigners coming from the sea. The various adjectives used by the poet to describe the hall —such as *fætum fāhne* (Gold-panelled and glittering; 716) and *beorhte* (shining; 997)— definitely characterize it as a luminous building which is a symbol of joy as well as a metaphor for the value of the warriors living in it.

By contrast, after Grendel's murderous assaults, light itself cannot shine anymore for human beings in the hall, which is left *īdel ond unnyt, siððan æfenlēoht / under heofenes hador beholen weorþeð* (Void and unused when the light of evening / Has been hidden under the hood of heaven; 413–414). Before the hero's arrival and after the attacks of the two evil creatures, the dark of the night is made to correspond with the emptiness of the hall, with the absence of the Danes from Heorot and the end of the celebrations for the value of warriors in battle. Light is therefore associated with the hall of Heorot, whereas darkness apparently characterizes the residence of the poem's villains.

In fact, the enemies of the people of Heorot (Grendel and his mother) live in a *dyġel* (uncouth; 1357) region, at the bottom of a lake which is shadowed (and rendered, therefore, dark) by a *wudu wyrtum fæst* (deep-rooted wood; 1364). Such a *hēoru* (unholy; 1372) place is located very far from the light of

Heorot as well as it is depicted as the opposite of the joyous atmosphere of the human hall, especially if we consider that the forest around the lake is specifically defined as *wynlēasne* (joyless; 1416). The places surrounding the dwelling of Grendel and his mother, places in which the people of Heorot do not dare to venture, are definitely characterized as dark. Darkness seems also to characterize the path to these creatures' residence. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that the end of the journey of Beowulf through the dark waters of the lake towards the enemy's den is established by light. In fact, it is precisely when Beowulf reaches his destination at the bottom of the lake that the light of the sun shines on the surface (1495).[5] As soon as the hero defeats the hostile creatures living in the lake and manages to *ær hē þone grundwong onġytan mehte* (make out of the field of floods; 1496), light shines over the

[5] This interpretation would be consistent with the translation of the poem's verse 1495 given by Fred C. Robinson, who interprets Beowulf's underwater journey towards Grendel's lair as lasting until daylight and not, as other translators have argued, as long as a whole day (22–25). Furthermore, according to Alvin A. Lee, in this passage there is an "unspoken identification of Beowulf with Christ in his descent into hell, conquest and return to earth" (1998: 397). This could be specifically evidenced by the passage of 'The Descent into Hell' which clearly associates Christ's arrival in hell with the rising of light:

> Geseah þa Iohannis sigebearn godes
> mid þy cyneþrymme cuman to helle,
> ongeat þa geomormod godes sylfes sið.
> Geseah he helle duru hædre scinan,
> þa þe longe ær bilocen wæron,
>
> John then saw the victorious Son of God
> come with kingly majesty to hell;
> the man of sorrowing heart then recognized the coming of God's own self.
> He saw the doors of hell brilliantly gleaming
> which long since had been locked and shrouded in darkness. (50–55)
> [The translation is from S.A.J. Bradley.]

This has been noted as well by Ruth Johnston Staver (2005: 86) and Andy Orchard (2003: 42), who point out the evident similarity between the depiction of Grendel's mere and the description of the entrance to hell in the Christian tenth-century sermon 'Blicking Homily 17', an entrance which is surrounded by a forest and a lake.

waters and seems to decree Beowulf's first success over the natural world and nonhumanity.

The presence of light is then indicative of the strength and power of Beowulf in battle. Later in the narrative, light confirms the victory of the hero over Grendel's mother. Indeed, immediately after the death of Beowulf's female adversary,

> *Līxte se lēoma, lēoht inne stōd,*
> *afne swā of hefene hādre scīneð*
> *rodores candel.*
>
> Radiance flashed out, the light sprang within,
> Twin to the candle of heaven as in clearness
> It shines from the sky. (1570–1572)

The value of the hero, his success in defeating an enemy of Heorot is concomitant to the sudden appearance of light. One could also argue that in this case light is a metaphor for God's presence and approval, because the light that unexpectedly illuminates the subterranean mere is explicitly compared and is equal in intensity to that of the sun, to *rodores candel* (the candle of heaven; 1572). The shining light can be metaphorically interpreted as representing the sudden appearance of God before the victorious hero: God is thankful for the vanquishing of Cain's progeny. This argument seems to be corroborated by the religious references present in the text of *Beowulf* which associate the divine with the appearance of light. In fact, in the poem God is initially mentioned in the context of the Creation Song, and particularly when referring to the creation of light: *se ælmihtiga [...] / ġesette siġehrēþiġ sunnan ond mōnan, / lēoman tō lēohte landbūendum* (the Almighty [...] / Set exulting sun and moon / As lamps for the light of living men; 92, 94–95). Light is associated with the divine and with God's approval of human actions.

The dichotomies of this poem thus characterize also the very landscape surrounding the characters. This has been recognized by Robinson (1993: 62), who underlines the fact that, in the poem, nature is described almost exclusively as a set of anarchic forces and elements such as storms and fire which are set against the civilized community of human beings who reside in Heorot. The natural world is composed of *wætereġesan* (terrible streams; 1260) and *wynlēasne wudu* (a joyless forest; 1416), and it is populated by voracious animals such as wolves and hostile creatures such as Grendel, his mother and the dragon. Nature is thus presented by the poet as characterized by places

where terrible creatures live and endanger human life and where, contrary to Heorot, no joy resides. Indeed, Heorot is a place where happiness reigns, and this joy resounds even in the adjacent territories. This is confirmed by the fact that Grendel himself, though living in a subterranean chamber very remote from the hall, is said to suffer the joy felt in the hall:

Đā se ellengæst earfoðlīċe,
þrāge ġeþolode, sē þe in þystrum bād,
þæt hē dōgora ġehwām drēam ġehyrde
hlūdne in healle.

But the outcast spirit haunting darkness
Began to suffer bitter sorrow
When day after day he heard the happiness
of the hall resounding. (86–89)

Nature and the human community are thus the two terms of an opposition which further connotes Grendel, Grendel's mother and the dragon as nonhuman creatures because they are associated with an environment that is hostile to human beings.

It is interesting to note, however, that, apart from being directly set against the community of human beings, the natural landscape pictured in the *Beowulf* tale is also characterized by elements and locations which themselves are or can be easily read as dichotomous. According to Köberl, Grendel's lair is a "place characterized by opposites" (2002: 125) such as fire and frost, opposites which are rendered evident by the very physical union of the two elements of the water of the lake and the *fyr on flōde* (blaze on the stream; 1366) that can be seen at night.[6] The mere of Grendel and his mother is depicted as definitely

[6] Such a description of Grendel's mere is also very similar to the depiction of hell given in the Anglo-Saxon version of 'Genesis' as a place characterized by opposites

þær hæbbað heo on æfyn ungemet lange,
ealra feonda gehwilc, fyr edneowe,
þonne cymð on uhtan easterne wind,
forst fyrnum cald. Symble fyr oððe gar,
sum heard geswinc habban sceoldon.

not fit for human beings. We could even argue that it is the union of opposite elements and the impossibility for human beings to explain and understand it —if we specifically consider that the presence of fire on the water is defined as *nīðwundor* (a strange horror; 1365)— that characterizes such a setting as inappropriate for human presence and life.

Furthermore, the union of water and fire establishes an association between Grendel and his own dwelling. According to Felicia Jean Steele (2001: 2), the name of Beowulf's first opponent is derived from the term **grandil*, which means 'bottom of a body of water' rather than 'water-sprite' or 'water-demon', as other translators have suggested. In this way, the character of Grendel can be interpreted as representing the very place he comes from, a place which, within the poem, is made of the opposites of water and fire. Indeed, Grendel himself is made of such oppositions. The poet specifies that, during his nocturnal attacks against the people of Heorot, Grendel's eyes emit a *liġġe ġelīcost lēoht unfæġer* (Unlovely light in the very form of fire; 727). The poet explains that the villain *Wōd under wol(c)num tō þæs þe hē wīnreċed, / goldsele gumena ġearwost wisse* (moved through the night till with perfect clearness / He could see the banquet-building, treasure-home of men; 714–715). In this way, the figure of Grendel includes both the water his name derives from and the fire of his eyes in the same respect that the creature's mere is located in a place where a fire can be seen at night over the waters of the lake. These opposite elements are coupled also in the place from which the third and final adversary of Beowulf comes. In fact, the cave of the fire-breathing dragon is located in front of a watercourse with *heaðofyrum hāt* (killing flames; 2547). Both Grendel's mere and the dragon's cave include fire and water as much as they both host creatures which are able to emit fire, respectively through their eyes (Grendel) and mouth (the dragon).

Nevertheless, the fact that Grendel is capable of emitting light from his eyes invalidates his classification as a creature exclusively epitomizing and belonging to darkness. This occurs also during Grendel's attack inside the hall of Heorot, when he is about to kill thirty human beings. As the poet specifies,

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There during nights inordinately long they endure,
each and every one of those fiends, ever-replenished fire,
then with the dawn comes an east wind
and frost intensely cold. Fire or piercing cold,
they constantly had to endure some harsh wringing torment. (313–317)
[The translation is from S.A.J. Bradley.]

Grendel *ēode yrremōd; him of ēagum stōd / liġġe ġelīcost lēoht unfæġer* (Moved with fury: there started from his eyes / Unlovely light in the very form of fire; 726–727). The reference to a light (which is explicitly compared to a fire) thus characterizes Grendel as both human and nonhuman: such a dichotomy is both strengthened and broken. In fact, no human being would be capable of emitting such an "unlovely" light from his/her eyes. This occurs precisely when a murderous action is being accomplished, when Grendel is following a conduct completely contrary to the laws and values of the human community. However, Grendel cannot be considered as exclusively belonging to the realm of darkness —to nature and nonhumanity— precisely because light is part of his body: the light which shines in the moments of celebration of Beowulf's strength as well as the light which characterizes the glorious hall of men are indeed part of this hostile creature's body too.

The boundaries of the dichotomy of light and darkness, although often utilized by the poet in order to sustain oppositions such as human and nonhuman or nature against society, are further broken by references to light as belonging to both terms of such oppositions. The binomials of human and nonhuman are partly negated also by the fact that it is when the light of the sun is shining that the value in battle of Grendel and his mother as well —the fact that only a very powerful being could have caused such a violent carnage of men— is recognized by the entire community of individuals of Heorot. Indeed, *Đā wæs on ūhtan mid ærdæġe / Grendles gūðcræft gumum undyrne* (When the dawn broke and day began Grendel's battle-strength filled men's eyes; 126–127).

Furthermore, we should consider that Grendel's movements as well as those of his mother are precisely directed at those places where there is a fire. In fact, both of these monstrous beings move from the vaulted chamber illuminated by fire, which is their own dwelling, through the lake's waters, in which a flame is present at night, towards the luminous "lantern," which is Heorot. Fire also represents the hostile creatures' wanderings themselves. In fact, Grendel's movements towards the hall are described as unpredictable and not straightforward, as are those of the flames. Before reaching Heorot during the night, Grendel moves erratically like the flames of a fire, which do not exist except in motion and similarly causes destruction and brings death when he reaches Heorot. In the same respect, as Guillemette Bolens has noted (2001: 122), the dragon provides fire for the illumination of its own path, for its homicidal actions and its circling and unpredictable movements reproduce those of the flames. Indeed, the poet says that, after its escape from the burial

ground in which it had been resting, the fire-breathing creature *hāt ond hrēohmōd hlæw oft ymbehwearf* (circled and circled in his flames, savage; 2296). The movements of the dragon's wanderings —which alternate between the hall of Heorot and a cave whose entrance has a *þære burnan wælm / heaðofyrum hāt* (boiling watercourse with killing flames; 2546–2547)— are associated with those of the luminous flames such a creature is able to emit.

It is interesting to note that Grendel and the dragon are rendered similar also by the fact that they both emit light and fire precisely when motivated by a feeling of hostility against the human beings. Indeed, fire is mentioned in reference to Grendel's eyes in the precise moment in which the monster *ēode yrremōd* (moved with fury; 726) against the warriors in Heorot. In the same respect, the dragon is specifically defined as *hrēohmōd* (savage; 2296) during its nocturnal peregrinations and when assaulting the people of the shining hall. The association of the flames with a feeling of hostility is made again in the following verses of the poem which narrate that the dragon

> *wæs ðā ġebolgen beorges hyrde,*
> *wolde se lāða līġe forġyldan*
> *drinċfæt dyre.*
>
> found his rage,
> His hateful purpose to have the price in fire
> Of the precious drinking-cup; (2304–2306)

In all of these examples, fire is linked to the idea of the cruelty and savagery of the monsters against the human beings.

Nevertheless, the movements of Beowulf as well are described as alternating between those places where light and fire are present. Indeed, the peregrinations of the hero after his arrival at Heorot reflect those of his adversaries. Beowulf retraces the steps of his enemies in order to find and kill them. Therefore, he directs his movements from the luminous "lantern" of Heorot towards the light and fire present in Grendel's and the dragon's dwellings. Fire is depicted in the destinations of the journeys of both the hero and his adversaries as well as it characterizes the murderous intentions of all of them. We should remember, in fact, that Beowulf and his three adversaries are all set on what the poet (when specifically referring to Grendel's mother) defines as a *sorhfulne sīð* (journey of death; 1278). I think we can relate this specific phrase to the journeys of Grendel, of the dragon and of Beowulf as well. In fact, Grendel travels between the fires of his lair and those of Heorot

in order to kill the human beings who make him suffer with their joy. Grendel's mother begins a "journey of death" with the evil intention of avenging her son's death; likewise, the dragon moves towards the light and fire of Heorot in order to avenge the theft of the precious cup stolen from its own treasure. Similarly, Beowulf begins a "journey of death" towards Grendel's lair and the dragon's cave with the intention of killing his adversaries. All of these characters are therefore motivated by the feelings of rage or revenge precisely when their movements are directed to the places where a fire is burning. The representation of fire too associates Beowulf with all of his adversaries, thus invalidating some of the boundaries of the poem's dichotomies.

Many of the binomials present in the text of *Beowulf* are therefore complicated through the imagery of light and fire. These are pictured as the elements which characterize Heorot as well as Grendel's and the dragon's dwellings. In this way, they can be interpreted as blurring the boundaries between the binomials of human/nonhuman and nature/society. In addition, light and fire are utilized to characterize some physical details of the monsters (the eyes of Grendel and the breath of the dragon) as well as their movements. The contraposition of the murderous intentions of such monsters with the civility of the actions of the human beings is strengthened by means of light and fire being shown as fundamental in those moments in which the human community of Heorot recognizes the value and strength of a warrior. However, such a contraposition is negated by the fact that light is shining also when the strength of the monsters who have committed a carnage of human beings is acknowledged. It is in this respect that we can argue that fire and light can be interpreted as allowing the coexistence of opposites in the text of *Beowulf*.

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