

# Pagan Elements in "Beowulf"

---

**Bračko, Iva**

**Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad**

**2020**

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište u Rijeci, Filozofski fakultet**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:186:067759>

*Rights / Prava:* [In copyright](#)/[Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2024-09-28**



*Repository / Repozitorij:*

[Repository of the University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences - FHSSRI Repository](#)



UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA  
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

**Iva Bračko**

**PAGAN ELEMENTS IN *BEOWULF***

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language and  
Literature and Philosophy at the University of Rijeka

Supervisor:

Sintija Čuljat, PhD

September 2020

## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to elaborate on the concept of Paganism and the pagan constituents of the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*. I have studied the impact and development of Paganism through the centuries from a variety of sources, books, and research papers, which will all be noted and analyzed later in this paper. In the first part of my study Paganism is defined and the properties of the old pagan beliefs foregrounded. Further in the account of Paganism, I convey the importance of the relations between man, God(s), nature, animals, and things, showing that Paganism in its core is neither faith nor religion, but spirituality. This form of spirituality has been employed in manifold art forms, including poetic works such as *Beowulf*. Because of *Beowulf* merging varied strands of knowledge, the poem's central representational strategy of euphemism is tackled.

*Beowulf*, a masterly literary art form, can be analyzed in a countless number of ways, but as Paganism has remained a mystifying subject, I find it most compelling to delve deeper into the history of *Beowulf* as Pagan artistry.

Keywords: paganism, literature, society, religion, nature, spirituality, art forms, *Beowulf*

## Table of contents

Introduction .....	1
1. Paganism at its core .....	2
2. The development of Paganism in society throughout the ages .....	5
3. Influence of Paganism and Christianity on English literature .....	9
4. Paganism in <i>Beowulf</i> .....	11
5. Christian vs. Pagan concepts in <i>Beowulf</i> .....	16
Conclusion .....	20
Bibliography.....	22

## **Introduction**

During the last few centuries, Paganism has rapidly become one of the most represented religions in the world, as it rounds up a large number of beliefs (both religious and spiritual), which might individually be incompatible. First used in the ancient times and civilizations, the primary instance of which may be accredited to Ancient Romans, the term ‘Pagan’ was used for people that rejected the belief in one specific God and instead laid their belief into multiple Gods and/or Goddesses. Pagans did not plead to the fundamental beliefs of the Christian religion, they rejected it altogether and tended to focus on their spirituality, connection with nature, remaining adherent to their traditional values. The early Christians would consider polytheist Pagans as heathens, or the uncultured and uncivilized individuals who did not belong to a common religion. A lot of the appeal of Paganism can be attributed to the very fact that it has been, and still is, mostly composed of religions and beliefs which do not seem to be entirely known to the overall population, and the mysticism of it attracts people’s attention.

As time passed and civilizations changed, Paganism became more and more accepted, which can be accredited to artists, who through their art familiarized people with this new conceptualization of religion and the newly found outlook on life; art made Paganism available to the general public, and today, we can study art to learn about the source and development of Paganism as a new-age religion.

This paper is divided into two major parts. The first part provides an outline of the subject and its essential components, it focuses on the rise, development, understanding, and modernization of Paganism as a religion, and the influence this ancient but also modern religion had on Old English literature. In contrast to Paganism stands Christianity, which tried to uproot the Pagan religion from Europe (mostly because of the polytheism and the witchcraft practices that

are present in Paganism), but even though Christianity was so against Pagan practices and traditions, it still encompasses some elements that coincide with Paganism. The primary focus is on the literary masterpiece of *Beowulf*. I will be regarding the blend of Pagan and Christian elements and themes in it, since it was written in the period when the Pagan traditions were being refracted in the teachings of Christianity. The research paper ends with the second chapter which concludes it, specifying the expansion of Pagan culture and religions and its representation in one of humanity's greatest literary works of art.

## **1. Paganism at its core**

For the most worldwide religions of the world, belief is in the center of their religious pursuit, while for Paganism, belief is not as important as the practice of the religion is – since Paganism consists of many different religions and beliefs, it becomes one whole with shared practice. For example, many Pagans uphold their religion by praying to their God(s) but many also just honor their ancestors, heritage, and the culture they came from, the focus of Paganism is the community and the rituals they uphold rather than their individual and diverse beliefs. Many Pagans use the words God and Goddess just as metaphors for the unfathomable; some Pagans believe that Gods and Goddesses are the entities with whom they can have relationships with; there are the Pagans who believe in the existence of ethereal beings who they pray to and perform rituals for. It is really difficult to elicit the exact meaning of Paganism or the Pagan beliefs, as present-day Paganism comprises of hundreds, if not thousands, groups of which all have their own

beliefs, traditions, and rituals, but some of those groups are more notable than others. One of the most notable Pagan groups is Wicca, also known as Pagan Witchcraft, which has since its origin in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century developed diverse rituals and traditions, most of which were drawn from the Ancient era. Some other more notable Pagan groups are reconstructionism, Heathenry, and Druidry. All of these collective religions allow their community to practice their religion in different ways: they can choose if they want to be part of a community, if they want to practice their religion by themselves, or even draw their practices and beliefs from various traditions and Pagan groups.

Although there are many different doctrines in Pagan religions, most of the followers of this religion uphold the following views:

- **Pantheism, panentheism, and/or animism** – these attitudes follow the view that everything in our physical world can be perceived as some sort of a deity and also that all deity can be perceived as something from our world. Animism upholds similar values as pantheism and panentheism, the difference is that they do not acknowledge one God or Goddess but acknowledge some sort of a spirit or soul in all things, natural and man-made.
- **Polytheism** – this attitude towards religion is one that recognizes multiple deities, some recognize multiple Gods and Goddesses as one but some also recognize as unique beings.
- **Respect towards nature and self** – as mentioned earlier, Paganism is a religion that tends to focus on an individual's connection with nature, but the individuals also tend to view their bodies and minds as sacred.
- **Ritual practices** – rituals are viewed as a way of honoring their deities and ancestors, and most of the rituals are represented with sensory elements, such as dance, fires, water cleansing, song, or manifesting.

- **Personal experience** – this is the view that all personal experiences of an individual are sacred and that they bring more knowledge of the deities; can also be related to the respect of the self, one's body, and mind, and intuition are greatly accentuated as something sacred and of great importance
- **Magic(k)** – many Pagan rituals are performed with the intention of altering reality, which is essentially similar to prayer in other religions. Those who do practice rituals with these intentions are often referred to as witches and/or magicians.
- **Ethics** – Pagans uphold their morals in all aspects of their lives and are generally considered more important than rules - respecting and bettering oneself and the community while also doing no harm to others is essential in this religion.
- **Pluralism** – the view in which no other religion is lesser than Paganism, all religions have some values and Pagans believe that there cannot be only one religion that is right for every individual.

(Hoff Kraemer 11-13)

Contemporary Paganism is much different than it used to be centuries ago as it is constantly evolving, as time and new members of the community bring to its growth. Through their doctrines, magic(k) and witchcraft, rituals, and symbols, Pagans have achieved effective results in their religion, and with the mystery of this religion, Paganism will keep evolving as time goes by and new people join. To be more exact, Paganism is essentially a contemporary form of spirituality that encompasses and honors the past as much as it does the present.



## **1.2. The development of paganism in society through the ages**

Just like most other wide-spread religions were based on worshipping the nature and its forces, so was Paganism. People have noticed that all-natural forces and changes, and they have accredited those occurrences to the invisible but powerful beings which they later pronounced Gods and Goddesses. They have come to worship these natural forces and believed that all-natural occurrences have some sort of soul, and this has become the basis for Paganism. Although Paganism has changed from its beginnings to the contemporary spirituality it is today, the previously mentioned values have continually stayed the same, paganism as a “religion of nature” has never stopped celebrating nature and cosmic forces, and people following it have never stopped trying to be one with nature and living by ethical and moral principles, respecting themselves, others and nature equally.

From the first instances of Paganism to modern Paganism, the development of this spirituality can be divided into 4 phases:

### **1. Prehistoric Paganism ( $\approx$ 40.000. – 2500. BC)**

It has evolved since the appearance of the first humans. In the late Stone Age (Paleolithic), we can find first cave paintings, figurines, and other archeological objects which point to the cults of the Horned God and the Mother Goddess, as well as the practice of magic, divination, healing, and herbalism.

### **2. Classic (Ancient) Paganism (2500. BC – 392.)**

It has evolved in Ancient European civilizations – Ancient Greece and Rome, but also among the Indo-European nations (Indians, Slavic people, Germanic people, Celts, etc.) who settled on the territories of Europe, the Middle East, and northern India. The development of Paganism in Europe

was violently interrupted by the establishment of Christianity in the Roman Empire in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

### 3. Medieval and modern Paganism (392. – 1951.)

In this period, Paganism was forbidden, so it was kept and maintained to this day among witches who practiced natural magic, as well as in occult hermetic circles who practiced ceremonial magic. After the ban, paganism was preserved for another thousand years in the form of folk beliefs and customs, and the process of baptizing Europe was abolished by the 15th century.

### 4. Neo-Paganism (1951. – today)

After the end of the persecution, paganism is once again developing in freedom. Countless communities, groups, and organizations are evolving. The most famous is Wicca.

(Iolar 39)

There has been a decline in Christianity in Europe since the Medieval times, people have been progressively gaining more knowledge about the history of religion and learning of other cultures outside of their own, which has also caused a rise in other religions, such as Paganism. Art forms, such as philosophy, painting, and literature, has caused the general population to be more aware of their surroundings and cultures that they have not been introduced to before; art was used to introduce people to the knowledge they had no way of getting to other than through art, like what life was like before the Middle ages – the most famous example of this is life and culture in Ancient Greece. The Olympian Gods and Goddesses are considered to be classic Ancient Greek religious elements, but they can also be viewed as a branch of one of the original Pagan deities. This Ancient Greek form of Paganism is also sometimes called Hellenic Paganism, and it was banned in the fourth century by Emperor Theodosius I, and although it was forbidden to worship the Olympian

Gods and Goddesses, the tradition has survived for long after the ban thanks to the villagers living in the rural parts of Europe. In many traditionalist families, the practice of Hellenic Paganism has stayed alive to this date, as it has been passed down for generations, and many members of this community have been trying to achieve the revival and reconstruction of this ancient religion. To be more precise about the construction of this branch of Paganism, they believed in and worshipped the Olympian Gods and Goddesses, but their belief extended beyond just the Olympians, it also encompassed the deities that could be found in nature as well as in heroes. Examples of deities found in nature are Nymphs, who are divided into 12 types: Acheloids (from the river Achelous), Alseids (groves), Dryads (forests), Hamadryads (trees), Hydriads (water), Leimoniads (meadows), Meliads (ash trees), Naiads (springs and rivers), Napaea (valleys), Nereid (the Mediterranean), Oceanids (the sea), and Oreads (mountains) (Hedreen Guy 47-69), and since there were many worshipped heroes in the Greek hero cult, some of the most noted examples are Perseus - considered to be the greatest of all the Greek heroes and monster-slayers, along with Heracles, Achilles - the hero of the Trojan War, Alexander the Great - the founder of Alexandria, Odysseus - the king of Ithaca and the main character in Homer's epic poem "Odyssey", Theseus - the founder of Athens, and Pandora – the first woman hero, who unleashed all evil to this earth due to her curiosity.

The Greek myths and Hellenic Pagan stories, at least when it comes to their heroes, can be interpreted through the use of Euphemerism, which was a view according to which all the stories, legends, and myths were based on real-life events and people, meaning that Gods, Goddesses, and heroes were all once real people who achieved something extraordinary and through that gained the status of mythical beings.

All forms of modern Paganism can be traced back to the ancient Hellenic Paganism of some kind, whether it is in the form of worshipping multiple deities, the form of natural deities or heroes being considered super-human types of beings, Hellenic Paganism developed by the Ancient Greeks can be considered as one of the starting points for all later branches and groups of modern Paganism.

Although the religious situation of Europe and the world has much improved since the strict and unforgiving Medieval Ages, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, beginning with the religious reformation of Britain, many people who were not accepting Protestant religion and decided to keep practicing their own, were accused of being heretics and witches, and since they posed a menace to the society, they were prosecuted as such by being burned alive at the stake. This resulted in many people fleeing their cities and counties to seek refuge and hiding places in rural and more accepting areas, and many even conformed to the religions that were acceptable at the time, which were Christianity and Protestantism (mostly in Britain).

With the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century came a new era, an era of stronger governments being founded with stricter and more unbendable laws, and these governments have outlawed witch trials for being cruel torture methods that got out of hand and couldn't be controlled properly by the weaker legal systems that were in place before the eighteen-hundreds. The ban on witch hunts and witch trials allowed people to once again practice Paganism more freely and without the fear of being prosecuted for it, and it even meant that the Greek religion, way of life, and the traditions could be learned in schools freely. The restoration of Paganism was gradual and it started with restoring the Druid traditions first as scientists began studying stone monuments which were believed to be built by the original and ancient Druids (most famous of which is Stonehenge), the revival continued as people gained a new outlook on religion when scientist began outlying different types of religion in different time periods and places in their scientific publications – the

general population, who once believed there was only one religion, was introduced to the likes of Hinduism, Buddhism, Egyptian religion, and Norse religion/traditions (Norse Paganism), all from which modern Paganism drew inspiration for polytheism, connection with nature and spirituality.

In the 1960s and the 1970s, with the hippy culture, came the freedom for social change – many Pagan traditions were assumed as the activists (freedom rights movements, feminists, eco-activists) recognized and considered the nature to be something sacred. Feminists also drew from the witch trials in the earlier centuries, they took the tarnished and disgraced image of a witch and turned it into a sign of power and independence, and from this new outlook on witchcraft came the practice of traditional Pagan magic(k).

The gradual and continual revival of Paganism led to it being the widespread, modern religion it is today, with many followers and different practices – it is widely accepted and recognized as a part of modern society.

## **2. Influence of Paganism and Christianity on English literature**

The Old English literature opus is very scarce and is comprised of poems, religious texts, and historical documentation, and the reason for this is that the stories and poems were not being written down but rather orally passed on from one person to another. Many of those poems and stories which were being passed on orally were later written down and published, but because there is no exact and precise source, they are mostly anonymous. The Old English literature drew inspiration from German poetry and Anglo-Saxon songs, legends, folklore, and poems, and these literary works are characterized as being Pagan because of the elements of Paganism they contain

– legends, mythical monsters, heroes, deities, and God-like creatures found in nature. The earlier Anglo-Saxon literary works allude to Pagan traditions, such as many different celebratory songs and dances. All of the earlier works which were written down were forced to be rewritten because of the influence of Christianity in Europe, which led to a very distinctive overlap in writing styles and elements, for example, the variety of deities is replaced with the Christian God and even though nature still holds a big part in these poems, it is characterized as being created by God and not as being a God-like element.

Literature in this period was used to persuade people to start believing in the divine and to lead them into the “right” way of life, it was written/passed on in such a way that it was easily believable and understandable, and the fact that it was mostly passed on orally was very beneficial to the people due to the fact that they were largely illiterate. With Christianity, the texts were focused on explain how one should live to get to Heaven in the afterlife and that the good and bad things you do in your life can affect the outcome of the afterlife, and that God can be found everywhere around us, while Pagan texts were focused mainly on the effects nature has on us and the effects we have on nature, both directly and indirectly, and the importance of magic, rituals, and tradition.

Allegory was freely used in both Pagan and Christian texts, but it has an entirely different meaning – allegory in Paganism was used to defend the pagan “unbelievable” stories of heroes, monsters, and deities all around us, while in Christianity allegory was used as a means of making pagan stories more available to the newly Christian public, and making them morally acceptable.

(Gardner John 2)

There is also a lot of juxtaposition present in Old English literature, especially when we are taking into account the literature which was first of Pagan origins and was rewritten in the Christian image, namely some of the most common juxtaposition examples are summer vs. winter, soul vs.

body, and fleeting vs. fixed. These contrasts bring a better understanding to the text we are reading as it can determine the whole setting and atmosphere for the plot.

When it comes to the influence of Paganism on Old English literature, *Beowulf* is one of the prominent works that contains both a pagan topic and a pagan setting – I will be relating to their interrelation in the next chapter.

#### **4. Paganism in *Beowulf***

This widely-known Old English epic poem, originally a Pagan fable, which was written somewhere between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century, is considered to have been written by a Christian scribe based on its plot and style of writing. It was not uncommon for that time for Christian scribes to rewrite Pagan texts in a Christian image by taking the Pagan elements which could be found in the text and making them all about the Christian God, instead of for example nature and natural deities who the Pagans valued and worshipped.

Although there are the pertinent Christian elements to this heroic poem, this is still a largely Pagan story – the topic of a hero who has supernatural strength and needs to fight and kill monsters in order to protect the people is a plot very characteristic of the Pagan literature, along with the story being set in Denmark and the characteristics being blind loyalty of a soldier to the lord and vice versa, the loyalty to one's origin and ancestry, heroic courage to defend one's property and beliefs, an instilled sense for revenge, courtesy and respect towards - all very dignified Pagan characteristics. Most of the Pagan elements are accredited to the idea of what Norse Paganism was,

an example of which is Grendel, who is called both a demon and a monster, and is presented in an evil manner. Beowulf is on a quest to defeat Grendel in order to protect the people since Grendel is a demonic creature and a Pagan figure who opposes Christian values and ideals. Despite this poor representation of Paganism through Grendel, there are many other Pagan elements present in *Beowulf*, most noted of which are the belief in the supernatural, the use of swords in combat which bear special meaning, the tradition of ship burials and cremation, and “wyrd”. Wyrd is a sense of predetermination, the belief that something is set by fate or is destined to happen – this is expressed in *Beowulf* in many instances, for example, through the dialogue between Beowulf and Hrothgar with Hrothgar says “Fate always goes as it must.” (Heaney Seamus 455), which indicates that fate will determine the outcome of Beowulf’s battle with Grendel, not his skill, strength, or any other external influence; Beowulf is also a man who holds the Pagan values of Wyrd and puts his life and the life of others in the hands of fate, he expressed this by saying “Often, for undaunted courage, fate spares the man it has not already marked.” (Seamus Heaney 572-573).

Beowulf is the ideal warrior, a hero, who has more power and strength than an ordinary person, and for this reason, he is the perfect knight to be sent into the battle against a bloodthirsty monster. Since he knows of the troubles that befell the King of the Danes and because he is an epic hero, he feels the need to help Hrothgar’s subjects and liberate the people of their fears. Although he fights for honor and glory, it is natural for a Pagan hero to expect some sort of a reward for his battle, but that reward does not need to be materialistic; whether he lives or dies, the reward of immortalizing him and his heroism in song and text would be enough as it would give him fame, which means he would have the only treasure that matters – eternal life.

Since this is a work of Anglo-Saxon art, their Pagan views and traditions are incorporated in *Beowulf*, as well as Norse Pagan traditions. This is important for understanding the way that the



very nature of good and evil is viewed in *Beowulf* as something that combines character traits with natural occurrences such as rain, storms, thunder and lightning, changes in season, day and night, but also natural elements such as flowers, trees, crops, fruits and vegetables, and so on. As Beowulf defeats Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon, he essentially also defeats the natural elements and dominates them. His victories are all depicted during the summer and his tragic death caused by the dragon's venom happens to be depicted in the winter, which coincides with the Pagan understanding of good and evil being brought closer to the reader through the natural occurrences of changing seasons, describing the strongest shifts in the good and evil events with the symbolism of the opposites – summer and winter.

Normally, Pagan heroic poems are divided into two worlds: the first one consisting of the hero and all of the good people who lay their faith in him, and the second one consisting of the hero's enemies and the monsters which attack the hero and the good people; *Beowulf's* characters are also divided into two parts: the first part has Beowulf in the center of it and the second part is based around Grendel, Grendel's mother and the dragon, all the other elements and characters of the poem gravitate towards one of these categories, some gravitate more and some less, but there are no neutral characters and elements in this poem. Another element of Paganism is the importance of swords, a sword which the hero uses always bears a name and is treated almost like a person, the hero is loyal to it and treats it with respect. In *Beowulf*, the sword's name is "Hrunting", and it is described in detail and with awe:

*"And another item lent by Unferth*

*at that moment of need was of no small importance:*

*the brehon handed him a hilted weapon,*

*a rare and ancient sword named Hrunting.  
The iron blade with its ill-boding patterns  
had been tempered in blood. It had never failed  
the hand of anyone who hefted it in battle,  
anyone who had fought and faced the worst  
in the gap of danger. This was not the first time  
it had been called to perform heroic feats.”*

(Seamus Heaney 1455-1464)

Pagan heroes considered dying in combat the most honorable death of all and this is expressed in regards to Beowulf's battle with Grendel's mother:

*“So must a man do  
who intends to gain enduring glory  
in a combat. Life doesn't cost him a thought.  
Then the prince of War-Geats, warming to this fight  
with Grendel's mother, gripped her shoulder  
and laid about him in a battle frenzy (...)”*

(Seamus Heaney 1534-1539)

The element of revenge and avenging also plays a big part in Pagan society as well as in *Beowulf*. A great instance of this element is the fact that Grendel's mother follows this rule of the Pagan warriors and tries to kill Beowulf in order to avenge her son's death, but Beowulf also must kill Grendel's mother to preserve his status of a Pagan warrior as Grendel's mother has killed Aeschere, Beowulf's relative. Beowulf's desire for revenge can be clearly seen in the following lines:

*"(...) an ideal weapon,  
one that any warrior would envy,  
but so huge and heavy of itself  
only Beowulf could wield it in a battle.  
So the Shieldings' hero, hard-pressed and enraged,  
took a firm hold of the hilt and swung  
the blade in an arc, a resolute blow  
that bit deep into her neck-bone  
and severed it entirely, toppling the doomed  
house of her flesh; she fell to the floor.  
The sword dripped blood, the swordsman was elated."*

(Seamus Heaney 1559-1569)

Even though *Beowulf* has a lot of Pagan elements and is known worldwide as a Pagan poem, by perusing it and separating Pagan and Christian elements of the poem, we can see that it is equally

a Pagan poem as it is a Christian one. It was based on the Anglo-Saxon legends and fables, but with the Christianization of Europe, some of those predominantly Pagan elements have been changed under the influence of Christianity. I will be discussing these differences between Pagan and Christian elements in the next chapter, “Christian vs Pagan concepts in *Beowulf*”.

### **5. Christian vs. Pagan concepts in *Beowulf***

*Beowulf* is of obvious Pagan legend and folklore origin, but while it was being written down, it was Christianized by the person who wrote it. With the Christian understanding of this heroic poem, Beowulf is no longer driven by his virtues, morality, loyalty, and revenge, but is now being a hero and acting in the name of God. The differences between Pagan and Christian elements can often melt together, but on the close reading, the differences are very distinctive. For example, the nature of good and evil in the Pagan viewing of *Beowulf* is represented through natural occurrences, seasons, weather, and crops, but in Christianity, the good and the evil are always in battle, and so are life and death, the good/life always being the hero and the people supporting him, while the evil/death are represented through demonic creatures and satanic forces. In the Christian version of this heroic poem, Beowulf can be seen as a God’s warrior or even God’s messenger, he is a savior of the people who is spreading good forces and morality into their lives – he explains and puts Hrothgar and his subjects on the path towards the “good”, he explains good life values and righteousness to them, and therefore, by being considered a warrior of God, by having faith and believing in Beowulf, the people are also believing in God, who in the end saves them from the ultimate evil and demonic fate by acting through Beowulf.

In the fight with Grendel's mother, when she gained control and tried to stab Beowulf, he is saved by God himself as he puts his whole faith in the Lord keeping him alive:

*“So she pounced upon him and pulled out  
a broad, whetted knife: now she would avenge  
her only child. But the mesh of chain-mail  
on Beowulf's shoulder shielded his life,  
turned the edge and tip of the blade.  
The son of Ecgtheow would have surely perished  
and the Geats lost their warrior under the wide earth  
had the strong links and locks of his war-gear  
not helped to save him: holy God  
decided the victory. It was easy for the Lord,  
the Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance  
once Beowulf got back up on his feet.”*

(Seamus Heaney 1545-1556)

Once he gets out of the water after the battle with Grendel's mother, the emergence from the lake symbolizes the cleansing of all the monsters he fought and all the monsters which were in that lake, and this is a Christian representation of cleansing the soul and body of all the evil, a form of baptism and redemption from hell. One can even go as far as to make a connection between Jesus

and Beowulf based on the fact that they both exert immense power – Jesus is able to make miracles and Beowulf has extraordinary strength and fighting skills against monsters. The dragon that Beowulf fights, in the end, can be seen as the literal devil, as dragons were seen in Christianity (the serpent of Eden is a form of a dragon and the dragon of the Apocalypse). Unlike the Pagan viewing of free will and predetermination, which is controlled by fate and destiny above all, God has given free will to the people and therefore, fate and destiny can no longer be implied to the events of the world, they are no longer predetermined by Wyrð but are controlled by God himself. And finally, the most important entanglement of Pagan and Christian concepts in *Beowulf* revolves around Grendel – the creature is represented with direct references to Cain:

*„Grendel was the name of this grim demon*

*haunting the marches, marauding round the heath*

*and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time*

*in misery among the banished monsters,*

*Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed*

*and condemned as outcasts. For the killing of Abel*

*the Eternal Lord had exacted a price:*

*Cain got no good from committing that murder*

*because the Almighty made him anathema*

*and out of the curse of his exile there sprang*

*ogres and elves and evil phantoms*

*and the giants too who strove with God*

*time and again until He gave them their reward.”*

(Seamus Heaney 102-114)

Cain is one of the most important biblical figures, he was the son of Adam and Eve who killed his brother Abel, and when God found out, He banished Cain and cursed him so that his descendants would all be monsters and demon-like creatures. The relation between Cain and Grendel is considered to be the most important composite of the Christian and Pagan concepts in *Beowulf* as it unites both the Pagan element of the supernatural and the demonic representation of evil and the Christian concept of God and Satan, as well as the constant battle of good and evil.

Although this is a Pagan heroic poem, Christianity is imbued deeply in it and that is the reason why it is considered to be written in the time of the Christianization of Europe, but its exact origin and the backdrop have remained a mystery to this day.

## Conclusion

Paganism has changed from an Ancient religion to a new-age, modern religion whose appeal lies with its encompassing many different beliefs, traditions, and rituals. The Pagan beliefs stem from Ancient Roman and Greek cultures, where the people practiced polytheism, believed in the deities found in nature and respected their connection with them, and emphasized the importance of song, dance, rituals, and ceremonies. Although centuries ago Pagans were considered uncivilized, the Pagan religion has always been one of acceptance and spirituality. There are many different branches and forms of Paganism that can be practiced, and every individual can choose for themselves what kind of Paganism they want to follow. Paganism is constantly evolving and growing in size, with many people from different religions and walks of life joining it, and it will keep developing and growing as it is essentially a spirituality that encompasses and honors the past as much as it does the present.

The Old English literature drew inspiration from German poetry and Anglo-Saxon songs, legends, folklore, poems, and the literary works which are considered to be of this origin are almost entirely considered to be Pagan because of the elements of Paganism that can be found in them – the legends, mythical monsters, heroes, deities, God-like creatures found in nature, many different ceremonies, celebratory songs and dances, and rituals. While the Christian texts focused on explaining what way of life one should live in order to avoid hell and instead be placed in heaven in the afterlife, the Pagan texts focused on our relationship with nature and the effect it has on us, the importance of magic, rituals, tradition, and one's culture, which was very easy, believable and understandable to the people.

The extraordinary literary work of *Beowulf* is known as a Pagan epic poem about a hero who protects and saves the people from great evil and according to its plot, we can easily see that it is



of Anglo-Saxon and Nordic origin, which makes it easier for us to determine that this is indeed a Pagan poem. Although the elements of Paganism are clearly expressed, we cannot say that this is exclusively a Pagan piece; there are instances of Christianity all over this poem, somewhere indirectly and somewhere directly stated. In the Christian understanding of this poem, Beowulf would no longer be driven by the typical Pagan motives of virtue, morality, loyalty, and revenge, but would now be presented as God's warrior and hero, essentially he is a messenger sent from God to spread his message so that the people who follow him can be saved from eternal damnation and instead be sent to the good afterlife in Heaven. Even Beowulf himself, during the battle with Grendel's mother, rejects the notion of Wyrd and the trust that he placed in fate, and says that God has decided his victory and saved his life, which goes directly against his earlier belief that destiny determines every man's life and the afterlife, and that no matter what you do, everything is always predetermined by fate.

Parallels to the characters and the plot of the story can be drawn from both the Pagan and the Christian point of view, and depending on from which perspective you start reading this poem, it changes meaning; the themes and the characters can be interpreted from either of the two viewpoints and even though the meaning of the story would change for the individual depending on which point of view he chose, one thing would remain the same – *Beowulf* would still remain an extraordinary literary art form and a poem which can be read over and over again, with the individual uncovering new meanings, moral messages and lessons with each new reading. Whether *Beowulf* is the work of Christian or Pagan artistry, it is undeniably a masterpiece of the epic and heroic poem genre, and an important piece of historic literature which can teach us both of Pagan and Christian society and way of life.

## Bibliography

- Hoff Kraemer, Christine. *Seeking the Mystery: An Introduction to Pagan Theologies*. Englewood: Patheos Press, 2012.
- Iolar. *The Doctrine of Paganism*. Zagreb: Despot Infinitus d.o.o. 2013.
- Hedreen, Guy. *Silens, nymphs, and maenads*. *Journal of Hellenic Studies*. The PhilPapers Foundation, 1994.
- Gardner, John. *The Construction of Christian Poetry in Old English*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1975.
- Mandel, Jerome. *The Chaucer Review: Contrast in Old English Poetry*. vol. 6. The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971.
- Heaney, Seamus. *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000.
- Hall, Lesslie. *Beowulf: An Anglo-Saxon Epic Poem (Translated From The Heyne-Socin Text)*. Boston: D.C. Heath & Co., 2005.
- Rollinson, Philip B. *Anglo-Saxon England*. Vol. 2. Cambridge University Press, 1973.

- Cavill, Paul. *The Christian Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England: Approaches to Current Scholarship and Teaching*. DS Brewer, 2004.
- Blackburn, F. A. *The Christian Coloring in the Beowulf*. PMLA, vol. 12. Modern Language Association, 1897.
- Irving, Edward B. *The Nature of Christianity in Beowulf*. Anglo-Saxon England, 1984.
- McNamee, M. B. '*Beowulf*': *An Allegory of Salvation?*. vol. 59. The Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 1960.
- Tietjen, Mary C. Wilson. *God, Fate, and the Hero of 'Beowulf.'*. vol. 74. The Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 1975.
- Iolar. *Magic and Witchcraft*. Zagreb: Despot Infinitus d.o.o. 2013.
- Iolar. *Rituals and Symbols*. Zagreb: Despot Infinitus d.o.o. 2014.
- Lozica, Ivan. *Pagan Heritage*. Zagreb: Golden marketing, 2002.