

**Title:** Narrative Technique in *Beowulf*

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[(essay date 1963) In the excerpt that follows, Culbert examines the points of view used and the excitement generated in each of Beowulf's three battles, and concludes that Beowulf's last two battles—with Grendel's mother and with the dragon, respectively—are relatively anticlimactic.]

In recent years, attention has been called to the artistry exhibited by the *Beowulf* poet in his depiction of Beowulf's three fights. Through skillful use of various narrative techniques, he created interest in the accounts of the hero's combats with Grendel, Grendel's dam, and the dragon. Lumiansky, for instance, has described the use of a dramatic audience as a means of enhancing the interest of the combats. And Moorman has stated that the poet used various points of view to maintain interest in the fights. The present paper will explore further certain narrative techniques employed by the *Beowulf* poet for the depiction of the three combats. It will show that the combat with Grendel is reported three times, and that each version is differentiated from the other two. Both Beowulf's other combats are likewise reported three times, but in neither case do the accounts reveal narrative artistry of as high an order as that evinced in the presentation of the fight with Grendel.

For the narration of the entire poem, the *Beowulf* poet adopted the point of view of an omniscient author, of an epic teller, who observes and records the physical action, describes what Beowulf or any other character said, comments on the action, and allows himself to look into the minds and hearts of Beowulf, Hroðgar, and even of Beowulf's non-human adversaries so that he can report what they hoped, feared, and thought. That the poet is telling the story in his own person is indicated by his use of *w\_* in line 1 and by the many references to himself, the narrator, as *ic* in lines 38, 62, 74, 1011, 1027, 1196, 1197, 2163, 2172, 2694, 2752, and 2773. [All line references and quotations are from *Beowulf*, ed. Fr. Klaeber (3d ed., Boston, 1941).] The poet also refers to himself by the words *m\_ ne gefroge* that appear in lines 776, 837, 1955, 2685, and 2837. Although this may be a stock phrase, it reveals the vantage point from which the tale is told.

The epic teller observes the physical action even when he is theoretically not present. When Beowulf fights Grendel's dam in her cave, there is no witness; yet the poet reports the actions of both combatants: for example, Beowulf seizes Grendel's dam by the shoulder (lines 1537-38), and she attacks the hero and draws her dagger (lines 1545-46a). The story-teller also relates what is said, directly by quoting speeches verbatim and indirectly by asserting that such-and-such a character said so-and-so. Thus the poet quotes Beowulf's first person report to Hroðgar concerning his fight with Grendel's dam (lines 1651-76). The fact that during this speech Beowulf refers to

himself as *ic* (lines 1655, 1659, 1662, 1668, etc.) does not signify that the point of view has changed. The epic teller—omniscient author—is still reporting what he heard and saw. He prefaces his report with the words “B\_owulf mabelode, bearn Ecgb\_owes” (1651); and he heard Beowulf give a speech in these very words. The teller occasionally presents indirectly what his characters said. The watchers on the shore are pictured as talking about Beowulf and saying that they no longer had hopes of seeing him again, though their actual words are not given (lines 1591-99). Finally, the narrator describes what went on in the minds of characters, both human and non-human. He says, for example, that Beowulf rejoiced in his work (line 1569b), that Grendel's dam hoped to avenge her son (lines 1546b-47a), that Grendel was struck with fear and wished to flee (lines 753b-756a), and that Beowulf remembered some words that had been spoken earlier (lines 758-759a).

Now, from this point of view, the author looks particularly at some one element of the scene before him: at Beowulf, at Grendel, at the watchers, or whatnot. This object that is looked at is the narrative focus. To present Beowulf's thoughts, for instance, the narrator adopts the point of view of an omniscient author and gives us a glimpse into Beowulf's mind; or he causes Beowulf to reveal his private thoughts by having him declare them through a public utterance. In either case, a reader's attention is directed toward Beowulf. The subject that is presented to the reader's gaze, Beowulf in this case, is the focus of the narrative at this particular juncture. In practice, the point of view in *Beowulf*, that of the epic teller, remains constant, but the narrative focus varies frequently.

Moorman has asserted [in “Suspense and Foreknowledge in *Beowulf*,” *College English*, 15 (April 1954), 379-383] that the poet relied almost entirely upon two “points of view” for the first description of Beowulf's encounter with Grendel; he presented the fight principally from the “points of view” of Grendel and of the watchers in the hall, but made very sparing use of Beowulf's “point of view”. In fact, he finds only four brief passages narrated through the hero's eyes. Although his term “point of view” seems to be misleading, Moorman's conclusion that “the *Beowulf* poet is able to create a good deal of audience interest in the actual battle sequence by maneuvering the possible points of view by which he may describe his scene” at least calls attention to an important element in the presentation of this episode. It is clear that the poet is aware of point of view (or narrative focus), that he has made little use of Beowulf as a possible focal point for relating the Grendel combat, and that he has adopted several points of focus to achieve, among other results, a pleasing variety in the depiction of this fight. There is a real possibility, however, that the apparent neglect of Beowulf was deliberate and that the poet postponed use of this perspective so that he might exploit it more fully in the two later reports of the fight where the hero's views could be presented under more appropriate circumstances.

The general scheme of the poem required a description of the battle with Grendel when it occurred; a second account of the fight was demanded for the benefit of Hroðgar following the battle; and a third version, Beowulf's report of his adventures upon his return to Hygelac, was also necessary. The obvious danger of inartistic repetition inherent in presenting three versions of the same encounter was avoided in two ways: (1) by adroit handling of narrative focus so that Beowulf's two personal reports of the action, the second and third versions, stress aspects of the combat other than those stressed in the first and more nearly complete account, and (2) by the revelation of previously undisclosed details in each version of the fight, with the result that notice must be taken of all three versions in order to arrive at a complete picture of the combat.

In the initial presentation of Beowulf's fight with Grendel, six passages are focused upon the hero: lines 736b-738, Beowulf's observation of Grendel's actions; lines 748b-749, Beowulf's reactions to Grendel's advance; lines 758-760, the hero's recollection of his boasts and his attack upon the foe; line 761b, his movement toward the escaping adversary; lines 788b-794a, Beowulf's refusal to allow Grendel to escape; and lines 818b-819a, the statement that Beowulf won glory for this deed. In view of the extent of this account of the struggle, lines 710 to 824, and in view of the fact that it would seem likely that the bulk of the fight should be focused upon Beowulf—he is, after all, the hero—the few brief uses of this narrative focus are quite surprising. There must be some very good reason, in addition to a desire to vary the narrative focus, for the poet's adoption of this unusual procedure.

The explanation becomes apparent when Beowulf's report to Hroðgar is examined. After Hroðgar has thanked Beowulf for delivering him and his hall from Grendel's depredations (lines 925-956), Beowulf presents his account

of the combat. At this time, what the hero tried to accomplish, what he did achieve, and particularly what he thought during the battle can be reported with greater naturalness and appropriateness than at any other time. His speech contains several direct references to himself: *w\_* in line 958 and *ic* in lines 960, 963, 967, and 968. As a result of the quotation of Beowulf's exact words and of the personal references within the speech, the hero himself is thrust prominently before the reader. In addition, the narrative focus of Beowulf's report is divided between himself and his foe, with more than half the lines (59%, 957-970a) dwelling upon his own part in the combat. But even in lines 970b-979 (41%), in which the narrative focus rests upon Grendel, Beowulf himself, because he is the speaker, is not removed completely from the picture. Throughout the entire speech, the story-teller maintains his omniscient point of view and focuses upon Beowulf by reporting verbatim Beowulf's words to Hroðgar. In the first part of Beowulf's speech, there is in effect a double focus upon the speaker; and in the second part, the focus of the story-teller remains upon Beowulf whereas the focus of Beowulf's own words rests upon Grendel. Thus in one way or another Beowulf is on display throughout the entire passage.

Upon his return to his own land, after the encounters with Grendel and Grendel's dam, Beowulf is obliged to relate to Hygelac his adventures in Hroðgar's realm. For the duration of Beowulf's entire report, the narrative focus of the omniscient author rests upon Beowulf as he speaks to Hygelac. But within the context of the speech, the narrative focus of the speaker rests at various times upon the speaker himself, upon his adversary, and upon the bystanders. Throughout the speech, Beowulf devotes 37% of the lines to himself (lines 1999-2009a and 2091b-96a), and regards the other men in the hall 12% of the time, just long enough to mention the slaying of Hondscio (lines 2076-80); the remainder of his speech that is concerned with the combat (lines 2069b-75, 2081-91a, and 2096b-100, 51% of the total) is focused upon Grendel, describing his actions and intentions. Like his previous account of the fight, this version gives prominence to Beowulf in that his words are reported directly; and at the same time it achieves an air of vigor and movement through a shifting focus within the speech itself.

Not only has the *Beowulf*-poet rendered each telling of the battle distinctive by his handling of narrative focus, but he has further differentiated each version of the fight by the presentation of new information, with the result that a complete account of the battle can be obtained only by considering all three passages dealing with it. The second report of the fight, that delivered by Beowulf to Hroðgar, adds to our knowledge of the combat by revealing the hero's thoughts and feelings during the actual contention. We learn, for example, that "Ic hine hradl\_ ce heardan clammum / on walbedde wr\_ þan þ\_ hte" (lines 963-964), that "ic hine ne mihte, þ\_ Metod nolde, / ganges getwaman" (lines 967-968a), and that "n\_ ic him þas georne atfealh, / feorhgen\_ ðlan" (lines 968b-969a). The third account, that presented to Hygelac, adds several specific details to the picture of the battle. We are told in the first account of the fight that Grendel seized and ate a sleeping warrior (lines 739-745a), but we learn here for the first time the name of the warrior who was eaten by Grendel: Hondscio (line 2076). We hear too in this third report of the glove or pouch that Grendel carried and of his intention to stuff Beowulf and other men into it:

N\_ ðy ðr\_ t\_ ð\_ g\_ n\_ delhende  
 bona bl\_ digt\_ ð\_ bealewa gemyndig,  
 of ð\_ m\_ goldsele gongan wolde;  
 ac h\_ magnes r\_ f\_ m\_ n\_ costode,  
 gr\_ p\_ ode gearofolm. Gl\_ f\_ hangode  
 s\_ d\_ ond syll\_ c\_ , searobendum fast;  
 s\_ o\_ was orðoncum eall gegyrwed  
 d\_ ofles craftum ond draacan fellum.  
 H\_ mec þar on innan unsynnigne,  
 d\_ or dadfruma ged\_ n\_ wolde  
 manigra sumne.  
 (lines 2081-91a)

In addition, we are told that it was Grendel's right arm that was torn off and preserved as a trophy of the combat: "hwaþre him s\_ o\_ sw\_ ðre swa ðe weardade / hand on Hiorte" (2098-99a).

The depiction of Beowulf's combat with Grendel's dam exhibits traces of the same narrative methods, although they are not developed and handled with equal skill and firmness of hand. Like the Grendel combat, this fight is described three times, once as it occurs, once in the form of a report to Hroðgar, and once as the hero's account of his achievements to Hygelac. The point of view adopted for the narration of all three versions is that of the omniscient author; and from this vantage point the poet focuses upon the three participants in the action: Beowulf, the adversary, and a dramatic audience composed of watchers on the shore.

The preliminaries of this combat include the initial attack by Grendel's dam (lines 1251-309), Hroðgar's appeal to Beowulf to undertake this exploit (lines 1310-82), and Beowulf's agreement to fight, his arming, and his statements to his companions (lines 1383-491). Throughout this introduction, the narrative focus remains rather constantly upon the hero. The account of the combat itself starts with Beowulf's trip to the bottom of the lake and concludes with the slaying of the foe (lines 1492-572a). To these lines must be added the closely related post-combat events (lines 1572b-650), which include the activities of Beowulf in his adversary's lair and the reactions of the watchers on the shore during and immediately after the combat.

Because the fight takes place beneath the water, in the lair of Grendel's dam, where obviously none can be present except the two combatants, the poet had no choice but to adopt the point of view of an omniscient author and to focus the narrative upon one and then the other participant. He starts with a description of Beowulf's approach through the water (lines 1492-96), and then switches to the adversary for her discovery of the invader, her initial seizure of him, and her subsequent conveyance of him into her abode (lines 1497-512a). The next stage of the combat is portrayed by focusing upon Beowulf; he perceives that he is in an under-water cave, his sword does not bite, and he is compelled to rely upon his hand-grip (lines 1512b-44). The focus moves back to Grendel's dam for the continuation of the struggle and for a brief mention of her motive for fighting, vengeance for her son (lines 1545-47a). Finally, the focus of narration returns to the hero for the account of his discovery of another sword and the slaying of his foe (lines 1547b-72a). Up to this point in the fight, Beowulf has held the center of the stage; 78% of the lines have been focused upon him and 22% upon Grendel's dam. The accounts of Beowulf's activities immediately after the combat (lines 1572b-90 and 1605b-25) are interrupted by a glance at the warriors waiting on the shore who note the blood-stained waters and infer that Beowulf has been slain (lines 1591-605a). The final passages pertaining to this combat are concerned with Beowulf's rejoining his faithful companions and their return to Heorot and Hroðgar (lines 1626-50). In this case, the dramatic audience cannot be used as it was in the Grendel combat as a means of commenting upon the fight while it is actually in progress; here, it can be employed only after the fighting is completed and the effects of the combat, the blood in the water, are observed. Even if the post-combat actions of Beowulf in the cave and the reactions of the dramatic audience are added to the fight itself, the narrative focus rests on Beowulf for 64% of the lines (1011/2), on Grendel's dam for 11% of the lines (18), and on the dramatic audience for 25% of the lines (391/2). Although the poet has concentrated upon the three elements of the scene that he worked with previously and has shifted the focus frequently from one element to another, it is apparent that he has not kept Beowulf in the background as he did in the corresponding account of the Grendel combat.

As was done in the case of the Grendel combat, a report is given by Beowulf to Hroðgar shortly after the termination of the fight (lines 1651-98a). The report is necessary because Hroðgar was not a witness to the combat; and, after all, it was at his request that Beowulf undertook to fight Grendel's dam. As soon as he reaches Heorot, Beowulf gives his version of the fight in his own words. Once more, there is a double focus: the introductory words, "Beowulf mapelode, bearn Ecgb\_owes" (line 1651), followed by the hero's actual words indicate that the focus of the narrator rests throughout the speech upon Beowulf. Within the speech, however, *ic* is the subject of virtually every sentence, an indication that the narrative focus is upon Beowulf himself. Beowulf says that "Ic þat uns\_fte ealdre ged\_gde" (line 1655), that "Ne meahte ic at hilde mid Hruntinge/with gewyrca" (lines 1659-60a), and that "Ic þat hilt þanan / f\_ondum atferede" (lines 1668b-69a). This is a logical focus to adopt for the presentation of this particular version of the combat. Of the two combatants, only Beowulf survived; and there were no witnesses to the combat itself. This view of the action serves to stress the hero; but it is robbed of some of its effectiveness because the same focus was exploited extensively in the first account of the fight. As part of his

report, Beowulf displays the hilt of the sword that he used to slay Grendel's dam; and it is examined by all the persons in the hall (lines 1677-98a). In this manner, some use is made of the bystanders as a point of focus.

The third report of the fight with Grendel's dam is given by Beowulf to Hygelac upon his return to Hygelac's court (lines 2115-43). The poet focuses upon Beowulf as the speaker while Beowulf focuses first on his foe (lines 2115-30) and then upon himself (lines 2131-43). The first phase deals with the attack by Grendel's dam and the slaying of Aeschere; the second treats in very general terms Beowulf's behavior in the combat. The focus of the speech is divided more or less equally between the two participants; 55% of the lines (16) are concerned with the monster and 45% (13) with the hero. This passage—the third account of the Grendel's dam fight—follows a few lines after Beowulf's version of his fight with Grendel, which ends at line 2100. The technique employed for narrating both affairs is similar. In each case, the bulk of the lines are focused upon the hero and his foe. Because it exhibits no new or striking narrative method, the second report, that dealing with Grendel's dam, seems to be a continuation of the first and thereby loses novelty. It is true that the first fight led directly to the second, but, for artistic purposes, they might better have been treated separately as they were in the initial versions.

Although the three versions of the battle with Grendel's dam do not differ greatly from each other, the poet has introduced bits of new information and altered the emphasis slightly so that no one version is an exact duplicate of another. In the second telling of this fight, no new details are presented during the recital of the actual combat (lines 1651-70); however, the gold hilt of the sword used for the slaying of the foe, though mentioned both at the time of the fight and during Beowulf's report of the encounter to Hroðgar, is displayed and described in detail (lines 1677-98a). In a sense, this exhibit does add to our knowledge of one aspect of the fight.

The third report of this combat (lines 2115-43) is little more than a summary of the information given in the other two versions. Only the fact that Beowulf cut off the head of his foe is added here to our total knowledge of this fight (lines 2138b-40a). It is somewhat surprising, in view of the careful treatment of the three reports of the fight with Grendel, that this reference to the fight with Grendel's dam should be so perfunctory. It seems almost as if the poet were including it merely for the sake of symmetry, in order to complete his scheme of reporting each fight three times.

Some skill appears to mark the handling of narrative focus in the presentation of Beowulf's fight with the dragon. Because the hero will not be alive at the end of the combat to give his own account of the fray and also because the poet seeks to reveal all facets of the hero in the role of king—his character as well as his prowess—it is necessary to concentrate upon him during the actual fighting. As a result, considerable attention (581/2 lines or 34%) is devoted to Beowulf in the initial account of the fight. Even greater stress (861/2 lines or 49%), however, falls upon the actions and thoughts of Wiglaf and the *comitatus*. By developing this focus, the poet is able to suggest some consequences of the combat, to comment obliquely on the fierceness of the fight, and to gain suspense by interrupting the action with an explanation of Wiglaf's relationship to Beowulf. Once again, there are two other references to this combat, though admittedly they are rather inchoate. A very short version is given by Wiglaf to the members of Beowulf's *comitatus* after the fight is over (lines 2877-83), and another sketchy report is made by the messenger sent by Wiglaf to announce Beowulf's death to his subjects (lines 2900-10a).

In the initial account of the fight with the dragon (lines 2538-711a), four points of focus are employed: the description concentrates upon Beowulf, the dragon, both combatants together, and the bystanders—Wiglaf and the other members of the *comitatus*. With the exception of a long passage devoted to the *comitatus* (lines 2596-668), no one element is held before the reader's gaze for any considerable time; rather, the author's strategy is to shift rapidly from one focal point to another, affording the reader constantly changing points of focus. Ten times during the narration of the fight the focus rests upon Beowulf, seven times upon his adversary, three times upon both combatants together, and three times, including the long passage concerning Wiglaf and his sword, upon the *comitatus*. A representative passage reveals the poet's method: lines 2583b-91a deal with the failure of Beowulf's sword; lines 2591b-92 describe the resumption of the combat; lines 2593-94a treat the renewal of courage in the dragon's heart; and then the focus turns to Beowulf and his plight (lines 2594b-95). Thereafter the narrative is concerned with the flight of the *comitatus*, Wiglaf's loyalty, an account of his sword, his rebuke to his comrades,

and his words of comfort to Beowulf (lines 2596-668). The result is a description of a fight in which the motion of the narrative focus creates an impression of violent activity corresponding to the vigor and movement of the struggle itself.

The second report of the battle (lines 2877-83), that given by Wiglaf to the other members of the *comitatus*, is dramatically necessary as a means of reproaching them for their cowardly behavior. Apparently they were not in a position to observe the fight closely, and some comment upon the battle is required to show them the results of their defection and to justify Wiglaf's charge (lines 2882b-83) that too few of them assisted him in the fight. Within his speech, Wiglaf deals particularly with his own actions and thoughts. He refers, for example, to the fact that "Ic him I\_fwraðe lld?lytle meahte / atgifan at g\_ðe" (lines 2877-78a), that "þonne ic sweorde drep / ferhögen\_ðlan, fId? \yr unsw\_ðor / w\_oll of gewitte" (lines 2880b-82a). His words are not really a summary of the fight but rather comments upon one aspect of it, his aid to his lord and the consequences of the failure of the *comitatus* to do its duty. By focusing upon himself, Wiglaf can show his companions what they should have done; they, after all, were in a situation similar to his and could have acted as he did.

The messenger dispatched by Wiglaf to report the leader's death to the king's anxious subjects presents in a few lines a third account of the dragon combat (lines 2900-10a). He mentions Beowulf's inability to wound his foe and his death and then refers to Wiglaf and his loyalty in guarding his lord. The messenger is primarily concerned with the consequences of the fight, not with the fight itself, as his subsequent words (lines 2910b-3030a) indicate.

Neither the second nor the third report contributes new information about the combat. Nor is this illogical, for the original version of the encounter was detailed and lengthy (1731/2 lines). After the death of Beowulf, both Wiglaf and the messenger stress the outcome of the struggle, rather than the actual fighting, as the basis for predicting trouble for Beowulf's realm (lines 2884-91 and 2910b-3030a). To dwell upon the action at greater length would emphasize the manner in which the hero was killed and not the tragic consequences of his death. Nevertheless, because the poet in the second and third reports did not draw attention to the fighting, as was done in the accounts of the other two combats, the depiction of this combat is less emphatic, is likely to be less distinct in the reader's mind.

When we evaluate the results of the employment of these modes of narrating Beowulf's three fights, we conclude that the poet is most effective at precisely the wrong points in the poem. Greater narrative skill was employed in the depiction of the fight with Grendel than was displayed in the narration of either of the other combats. Because the poet controlled the narrative focus so well in this case, because he rendered the second and third accounts of that combat absolutely necessary for a full picture of the encounter, that fight strikes the reader as the most dramatic and vivid of the three. The fight with Grendel's dam follows immediately after the struggle with Grendel and loses some effectiveness simply because it is fundamentally the same kind of contention: heroic warrior versus monster. Although the poet did much to differentiate the two fights by varying the locales and the details of the fighting and made good use in each case of a dramatic audience, the impression still remains that the second is to some extent an inartistic repetition of the first. The reader even feels that the fight with Grendel's dam reveals no significant aspect of the hero that was not better exhibited in the first combat. Whereas the first two battles reveal Beowulf in the role of youthful warrior, the dragon fight displays his exemplary behavior as a mature king. Yet, in spite of the national significance attributed to the dragon affair as a consequence of Beowulf's kingship, that fight never impresses the reader as forcibly as does the battle with Grendel. Certainly, the less adroit handling of narrative focus, the fact that this is the third occasion on which Beowulf has performed in a difficult situation, and the greater attention devoted to Wiglaf, the *comitatus*, and the ramifications of the combat—all these contribute to the comparatively ineffective picture of this fight.

Theoretically, perhaps, the dire consequences attributed to Beowulf's death and the climactic position of the dragon fight within the story should elevate that struggle above the other two. But when we weigh these abstract considerations against the very striking effects achieved through narrative skill in the depiction of the Grendel episode, the fact is that we are more impressed by the Grendel fray. We seem to encounter the dramatic climax early in the story with two more combats still to be presented. To make the reader feel, as well as understand, that

the dragon fight is the real climax, the poet should have subordinated the fights with Grendel and Grendel's dam and concentrated all his artistry, all the skill that he has displayed in the depiction of the first combat, upon the last.

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