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All that Glitters is not Good

Considering the ultimate finality of death, it may seem odd that a word as infused with death and decay as "elegy" would have a definition that has evolved drastically over time. Though modern readers know only the meaning which denotes a sort of requiem on the death of someone, originally the term meant nothing more than a poem following the rules of elegiac meter, or alternating hexameter and pentameter lines. Over time, the term came to describe poems dealing with themes of love and change. As noted in MH Abrams' A Glossary of Literary Terms, it wasn't until the 17th Century that "the term elegy began to be limited to its most common present usage: a formal and sustained lament in verse for the death of a particular person, usually ending in a consolation." Within the Anglo-Saxon poem Beowulf, we find a pristine example of elegy that seems to fit all of the noted definitions of the word. The so-called "Lay of the Lone Survivor" seems almost completely out of place with its careful admonition to mankind that all this too shall pass, considering the absolute fawning over gold and other metals throughout the rest of the poem. Found in Section XXXII, this brief lecture on the unimportance or transience of material wealth is perhaps the most meaningful section of the entire work, and is worthy of closer inspection.

We are not told who the Lone Survivor is. He enters the story as an explanation for the presence of the dragon's hoard of gold. His lamentation is for his people, all of whom are either dead or vanished. Since no one exists to accept gifts of treasure,

good

he consigns the lot of it to decay inside of a creatively crafted barrow. Intrinsic to this action is the idea that life is short, and the "stuff" of this life ultimately non-essential. Since barrows are places of burial, this act could be symbolic for the act of killing the search for material gain. The life of man is short, he seems to say, and joy is even shorter. This is a peculiar thing to say, as much of the narrative of Beowulf concerns itself with the giving and accepting of treasure. Kings are called "ring-givers," and men pledge their lives and their deaths to rulers in exchange for these trinkets. Perhaps on this subject we see the creeping intrusion of later Christian writers, slowly shaping the pagan myth of Beowulf into something more theologically palatable. If gold is meant to signify earthly treasures - as an opposing force to the command to store up "treasures in heaven"- then having a dragon seize the ~~hoard~~ seems appropriate. Satan is often described as a dragon in the epileptic snuff film of John of Patmos, later canonized erroneously as the biblical book of Revelation. Despite this windfall, the Lone Survivor (or the poet, depending on which voice you feel is speaking) comments that the dragon "is none the better for" guarding "heathen gold." Considering the riches still on display in the Vatican, it would seem a touch hypocritical of this pious evangelizer to comment on dragons and gold, heathen or otherwise.

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The narrator seems confused on this issue, as Beowulf asks to see some of the baubles hidden in the dragon's den as his last mortal action. Is Beowulf a good Christian, as advertised? Or is he just another money-grubbing despot in need of additional sources of ready cash? The poet attempts to sell us on the former, while seeming just a bit too interested in all of the loot to be believable. The confusion is itself lamentable, because the

cognitive dissonance existent in pious religious people over the concept of wealth and equal distribution of that wealth is the source of much misery to this day. Had Christianity (or any religion, for that matter) found a convincing way to drive home the point of this elegy and dispell the grasping greed natural to mankind, we might now all live in a very different world, where social justice is not merely a dream for liberals to get worked into a lather over. What the Lone Survivor has to say is vital, and, one would hope, conducive to allowing us to focus on what really matters in this life: other people.

maybe

Nice

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