Chris Newburn Mrs. Rutan AP Literature and Comprehension 7 October 1013

**Between the Lines of Beowulf**

The majesty of words and letters that create a book are incredibly impeccable and breathtaking. The thousands of words that are bound between two covers can illustrate a story that can’t be told any other way. The words jump of the page to paint a picture within the reader’s mind that no feeling can compare to. One page of literature could be much more than just a cluster of words and phrases. There are ideas, issues and connections that can be made within any book but the clues the reader is supposed to look for aren’t always easy to find. Every reader connects to a story on a different level but it is Thomas C. Foster who elaborates on the analysis that can be made within literature. His book—How to Read Literature Like a Professor—is an informational piece of writing that discusses theories, which he has construed, about reading on a more analytical level. It offers many conceptual ideas about reading beyond just the setting and the characters to discover the meaning and hidden ideas that the auther has placed within their piece of art. A multitude of his sound principles can be applied to the timeless epic poem, *Beowulf.*

It is evident in *Beowulf* that the main idea of the story is the protagonist going on his quest. Beowulf—a great warrior—was seeking a spine tingling quest that would propose some sort of challenge for the hero and he found it in the country of Denmark. Foster states that there a several necessities a story must have for there to be a quest; they are “(a) a quester; (b) a place to go; (c) a stated reason to go there; (d) challenges and trials en route; and (e) a real reason to go there.”(Foster, 3). These needs are all filled within the story since, the quester is obviously Beowulf, the place to go is Denmark, and the reason to go there is to free the people of their fears from the monster Grendel. While on the quest he faces a few challenges en route because of some seas serpents and other beasts that attack, and lastly the real reason to go on the quest is to free the Danes from “the mother of Grendel, a Devil-shaped woman”(44; 8-9). Foster also argues that quests are not only to help others. He states that “the real reason for a quest is always self-knowledge”(Foster, 3) and this idea flourished when Beowulf discovered something about himself. Beowulf had to fight the evil demon that was Grendel’s Mother, and while this was occurring he learned to not trust in the steel of man but to trust in himself and his “own hand-grip” (51; 59); at that point he learned to fully trust in himself and never let his own strength back down. Lastly Foster says that all quests have a different reason in the end as to why they journeyed on the quest. He says that in every story that the “stated goal will fade away”(Foster, 5) and this is very true within the epic poem. Beowulf originally travels to Denmark to confront the demon Grendel and in the end he defeats the demon’s mother and has to slay a giant dragon, which eventually leads to his demise. Beowulf’s mission is a suspenseful and an action-packed story that takes many twists and turns but in the end, it is still just an ordinary quest.

Foster also argues a topic that is huge within the story of Beowulf; this topic is the importance of monsters. He says that monsters always mean more than just monsters; they are there to represent or symbolize something. There is a clear use of monsters within the story of Beowulf because of the undeniable abundance of them. There are “demons”(44; 47), “sea serpents”(49; 42), and “dragons”(81; 10) throughout the story. So there is no scarcity of monsters but what do all of these terrible creatures represent? Well for starters, this is such a terrible time of the world to live in so it could signify the fact that no matter how bad a world may seem, there is still some good within its boundaries. The monsters also cannot just supply adversity for Beowulf. They tested him, helping him learn lessons about his own strength. They also gave him one other grant that nothing else could. They silenced all of his naysayers and non- believers. A man named Unferth questioned Beowulf’s strength and stamina before he had his confrontation with Grendel and he said that “Then I ween thou wilt find thee less fortunate issue, Though ever triumphant in onset of battle, A grim grappling, if Grendel thou darest, For the space of a night near-by to wait for!”(20; 27-29) This means that he is claiming Grendel will definitely outdo Beowulf if Beowulf is foolish enough to fight him. However in the end of Beowulf’s days on earth he clearly silenced everyone who ever questioned his ability or his skill since he was a distinguishably phenomenal warrior.

Foster also discusses the art of a baptism within a book. He states that when a character gets submerged underwater, they “undergo rebirth”(Foster, 159). This means that they become a changed person, whether it is positive or negative is up to the author. No one can argue that this does not occur during the story of Beowulf. When the heroin must go into battle against the evil hag that is Grendel’s mother, he must go underwater and make his way down to her lair. Before he arises from the depths, the water turned a “gory”(54; 35) red color and all the spectators thought that Beowulf had died. After a few moments he finally ascended out of the water while holding Grendel’s head on a spear to signify his triumph over the two horrendous creatures. Also when he rose from the water he didn’t just cleanse himself, but he cleansed the country as well. The population as a whole was terrified of Grendel and Beowulf came to rescue to deliver the people a rebirth. They went back to the way things were before man-eating monsters and everything was glorious after Beowulf wiped Denmark clean.

Lastly Foster addresses the impact of referencing the Bible in literature. Referencing the Bible in a story can be as simple as referencing Jesus Christ by name or it can be as subtle as the plot being close to that of a Bible’s story. In this case the stroy has a little bit of both styles. Foster stated “Beowulf is largely about the coming of Christianity into the old paganism of northern Germanic society—after being about a hero overcoming a villain named.”(Foster, 51) The book Beowulf does address many Biblical themes, much like Foster has said. The whole story of Beowulf is about a man going to a country and helping the people free themselves from a demon, and this demon is also a descendant from Cain. Now Cain is one of the worst villains in the Bible. The man killed his brother because he coveted his successfulness and he later lied about his sin to God himself. So if the monster descended from an evil person who broke 3 commandments in a matter of 3 minutes, then the he must be pretty incredulous person. If Beowulf went to a country to free people from “God’s enemy”, then he must be a Christ-like figure. He is the people of Denmark’s savior and anytime someone is a savior that almost always entails Christianity.

A minimum of four of Foster’s theories apply to Beowulf completely and there are probably many more. The epic poem in itself is a shorter read but it’s 90 pages can turn into 900 if all the information is being taken in. The story is a phenomenal classic read when all of the theories are taken into account. The reader can truly see what the author was thinking and feeling when this story was told and retold throughout the generations. Beowulf the man was clearly the savior of the people and he learned a thing or two along his quest and without Foster’s theories, these secrets would not have been revealed. There is always a little something extra in a story; the information to be found is just between the lines.

Beowulf edition:

Beowulf, an Anglo-Saxon Poem; translated by LESSLIE HALL, Ph. D.