

## **Grendel's Mother: Victim, Not Villain**

Tazreen Jahan Bari<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>(Department of English, Bangladesh University of Professionals, Bangladesh)

---

**Abstract:** This paper entitled *Grendel's Mother: Victim, Not Villain* aims to analyze the character of Grendel's mother in the Old English epic "Beowulf" in order to refute the traditional interpretation of her as an evil monster and establish her as a victim. To this purpose, this paper analyzes the portrayal of Grendel's mother as a villain. This study further examines the flaws in such one-dimensional portrayal and offers a more comprehensive analysis of the victim in Grendel's mother. This study has been done by using qualitative method from the perspective of content analysis where text served as the primary source and other books and articles as the secondary source of information. In the poem "Beowulf", Grendel's mother serves as one of the three antagonists that the hero Beowulf has to defeat. Her association with her monstrous son Grendel, her 'sinful origin' and her battle with Beowulf that essentially serves as a microcosm for the battle between good and evil, makes her appear as a malicious villain. By offering a more nuanced understanding of Grendel's mother this study establishes her as a victim of unfortunate origin, prejudice, institutionalized hostility and constitutional discrimination rather than a villain. In other words, this paper shows how whether a character is a victim or villain depends to some extent on who is telling the story.

**Key Words:** *Beowulf, Grendel's Mother, Villain, Victim*

---

Date of Submission: 05-10-2020

Date of Acceptance: 18-10-2020

---

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

*Beowulf*, the Old-English epic poem, is essentially a depiction of the battle between human and monster, or good and evil. Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother serve as a microcosm for the battle between Christianity and Paganism where Grendel's mother is a manifestation of everything evil and unholy. This along with her association with her monstrous son Grendel establishes her as a villain in the poem. But her unfortunate origin, unfair treatment, portrayal as a grieving mother and the lack of ill motive in her actions begs to question whether Grendel's mother can be labelled as a typical villain at all.

The Old English epic "Beowulf", revolves around the journey of the mighty and righteous Beowulf, a traditional Germanic hero as well as a Christian king. Throughout the poem, he battles against three evil forces- Grendel the monster, Grendel's mother and the dragon. When the Danish king Hrothgar's mead hall Heorot is repeatedly attacked by Grendel the monster, Beowulf the great warrior comes to the rescue. He manages to tear Grendel's arm apart before the monster retreats to die a slow death. Enraged and grieving, Grendel's mother comes to avenge the death of her son and kills Hrothgar's kinsman Aeschere. Beowulf sets out to settle this blood feud and kills Grendel's mother in her underwater lair.

Generally, a villain refers to the antagonist that is capable of cruel or criminal activities and usually contains more negative than positive qualities (Abrams and Harpham 294). In some cases (Grendel's mother in this poem) the villain is made out to be pure evil. Grendel's mother is traditionally interpreted as a villain due to her association with Grendel as well as her fight with Beowulf the beloved hero. However, upon close observation, she can be perceived as a grieving and heroic mother who is the victim of institutionalized hatred.

This paper entitled *Grendel's Mother: Victim, Not Villain* aims to analyze the antagonist Grendel's Mother, her context and actions in order to establish her as a victim of deep-rooted hatred and decades of abuse rather than a one-dimensional villain. The primary objective of this study is to examine the character of Grendel's mother as a victim and not a villain. To this purpose, this paper aims to 1. Examine Grendel's mother as the villain that she is portrayed to be and 2. Analyze Grendel's mother as a victim of her situation. This study has been done using qualitative method from the perspective of content analysis where text served as the primary source and other books and articles as the secondary source of information.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Although Beowulf has been the center of discussion in most of the studies done on the poem "Beowulf", considerable attention has been imparted on Grendel's mother as one of the major characters in this poem. Apart from the most prominent debate about her femininity and evilness, multifarious debates have sprung from the complexity of this character.

Wendy Hennequin in her work *We've Created a Monster: The Strange Case of Grendel's Mother* (2008) argues against the tendency of interpreting Grendel's mother as a monster. According to Hennequin, unlike her son, the poem does not treat Grendel's mother like a demon or monster. Hennequin analyses the character of Grendel's mother and concludes that, "Grendel's mother is crossing gender lines, a woman performing both as a man and a warrior." (Hennequin 510).

Christine Alfano on the other hand, examines the tendency of Grendel's mother's monstrous interpretation itself and states in *The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity: A Reevaluation of Grendel's Mother* (1992), this traditional interpretation mostly originates from two factors, the assumption that Grendel's mother inevitably shares her son's evil nature and the fact that she is subverting gender role. She states that, "She finds herself implicated in her child's monstrosity, as unchallenged assumptions subsume her maternal role within a son's identity" (Alfano 12). In *Horror and the Maternal in "Beowulf"* (2006), Paul Acker analyses the uncanny in the character of Grendel's mother in the context of maternal identity and revenge from a psychoanalytic perspective. He argues, "That a female creature and more particularly a maternal one takes this revenge may have highlighted its monstrousness." (Acher 705).

Jane C. Nitzsche in *The Structural Unity of Beowulf: The Problem of Grendel's Mother* (1980) points out the episode with Grendel's mother as a seeming disruption in the structural unity of the poem. However, through her examination conducted in three parts, she comes to the conclusion that it is rather a transitional stage. Nitzsche concludes that, "Grendel's mother does occupy a transitional position in the poem: as a "retainer" attacking Heorot she resembles Grendel, but as an "attacked ruler" of her own "hall" she resembles the dragon." (Nitzsche 299). In *The Might of Grendel's Mother* (1969) Martin Puhvel examines the paradoxical nature of Grendel's mother. According to Puhvel, Grendel's mother seems to fluctuate as a character both in terms of strength and identity. Regarding the existence of Grendel's mother as one of the three main villains in this poem, Puhvel observes "occasional presence of apparent inconsistencies and illogicalities." (Puhvel 88).

"Beowulf" being one of the earliest poems in the history of English literature, almost all aspect of the poem and its characters have been discussed and debated upon. The character of Grendel's mother has been approached from various angles. From the traditional interpretation of her as a monster to the more unconventional debate surrounding her being a warrior has been discussed by many scholars. However, she is still most commonly perceived as a villain and not a victim of her situation. Which is why, this study aims to refute the general understanding of Grendel's mother as a villain.

## III. Grendel's Mother as a Victim not Villain

At first glance, Grendel's mother appears to be an enraged monster just like her son. She kills Aeschere as revenge and nearly succeeds in killing Beowulf the protagonist too. This naturally signifies her as a villain in the eyes of the protagonist as well as the readers. However, a much closer look reveals that she is hardly the "monstrous hell-bride" that she is made out to be (1259).

### Unfortunate Origins

Grendel and his mother are pointed out to be Cain's descendants. The biblical character Cain and his descendants have been cursed by God for killing his own brother Abel. Grendel's mother is thus "God-cursed" (1682). Her birth is deemed unnatural as the all-powerful almighty God has cursed her kind before she was even born. Even before she existed, Grendel's mother was outlawed and destined for hell. Because of such genesis, she is portrayed as something inherently evil and incapable of anything good. From the prevalence of such preconceived notion, she along with her kin was the victim of institutionalized hatred. She was isolated and ostracized, perceived to be something vile and unnatural.

### Association with Grendel

It could be argued that Grendel's hatred for the people he killed at the Heorot is the reflection of the hatred he has received previously due to his origin. However, from the sheer glee and excitement with which he murders the masses is indicative of his evil nature. Because of her association with Grendel, his mother too is thought to be diabolic. While Grendel was methodically slaughtering slumbering people, his mother was nowhere in sight. In fact, the Danish people only know of her existence from the few times that "they have seen two such creatures / Prowling the moors, huge marauders" (1347-1348). No one gives any account of her unleashing atrocities. Which can only mean that, before she came to avenge her son, she never harmed anyone like Grendel was consistently doing. She only killed Aeschere when she was blinded by grief and rage. And

later when she attacked Beowulf, it was a response to his intrusion. But because of her association with Grendel, she was perceived as a monster and her actions heinous. Thus, she was the victim of unjust assumption as well as constitutionalized hostility.

### **The Revenge of a Grieving Mother**

Unlike Grendel who appeared to relish the havoc he perpetrated, Grendel's mother only appeared at Heorot when she was unable to contain the grief and desperation that the cruel death of her beloved son inflicted upon her. She came to Heorot, "Grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge." (1278).

Taking revenge is seen as a sacred concept in Anglo-Saxon society. Beowulf the protagonist reaffirms this by stating, "It is always better To avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning"(1382-1383). When a kinsman is killed by someone, avenging the loss of life by taking life is expected. And so, when Beowulf takes revenge for the death of Hrothgar's people, it is depicted as a noble act. Grendel's mother comes to do the same. But when "Driven to avenge her kinsman's death", she kills Aeschere, it is portrayed as a heinous act rather than a noble one (1340).

From the fight with Beowulf where Grendel's mother almost defeats the greatest warrior, it is evident that she is much stronger and braver than any ordinary warrior. Paradoxically, when discovered in the mead-hall, "The hell-dam was in panic, desperate to get out, In mortal terror the moment she was found."(1291-1292). This is contradictory to the ferocious warrior that she proves herself to be while fighting against Beowulf's attack. Her discomfort at being discovered while committing murder indicates that, to her, killing is not normalized like every other Anglo-Saxon warrior. Ironically enough, Grendel's mother to whom killing is not normal, is accused of being the evil villain while Beowulf who basks in the glory of revenge-killing is celebrated as the hero. The way she retreated after killing one person when she had the ability to kill many and her discomfort at being found shows that she was not a cold-blooded murderer like she is commonly interpreted, but a grieving mother trying to find solace in revenge.

### **Good versus Evil**

The battle between Beowulf and Grendel's mother is essentially a portrayal of the battle between good and evil. Beowulf after coming to Hrothgar, say that he came to "purify" Heorot (431). Which signifies 'contamination' of paganism that needs purification. The manifestation of this impurity is Grendel and his mother which makes them the symbol of evil in this battle. Because of such symbolization, from an antagonist Grendel's mother turns into a nefarious villain. Her strength that almost defeats Beowulf only makes her more evil in the eyes of the reader. But in reality she was attacked by Beowulf in her home and was acting in self-defense. Even though both Grendel's mother and Beowulf appear to be strong warriors, for Grendel's mother, it was already a lost battle. She fought against the person who invaded her home with all her strength to avenge her only child. She nearly vanquished Beowulf too. But unfortunately for her, "Holy God Decided the victory. It was easy for the Lord, The Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance" (1553-1555). The opponents matched in strength but battle was inherently biased as God was against Grendel's mother. Cursed before birth and destined to hell, she was thus a victim of God's wrath.

## **IV. CONCLUSION**

Chris Colfer writes in the prologue to his book *The Wishing Spell*, "A villain is just a victim whose story hasn't been told."(7). This is very true for Grendel's mother who is interpreted as a monstrous villain when her only crime was her genesis of which she had no control over and avenging the death of her only son in a society where taking revenge is the revered custom. She is portrayed as a "hell-bride", symbolized as evil and associated with monsters (1259). Consequently, she has been robbed off her right to be interpreted on the basis of her actions without the interference of prejudice. Thus, she becomes a villain of malicious intent and sinful origin while in reality she is a victim of institutionalized hatred and unfortunate genesis.

## **REFERENCES**

- [1]. Abrams, M H, and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 10th ed., S S Publications, 1929.
- [2]. Acher, Paul. "Horror and the Maternal in 'Beowulf'." *Modern Language Association*, vol. 121, no. 3, May 2006, pp. 702-716., [www.jstor.org/stable/25486349](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25486349) .
- [3]. Alfano, Christine. "The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity: A Reevaluation of Grendel's Mother." *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1992, pp. 1-16., [escholarship.org/uc/item/39g6c6rm](http://escholarship.org/uc/item/39g6c6rm).
- [4]. Colfer, Chris. *The Land of Stories: The Wishing Spell*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2012.
- [5]. Heaney, Seamus, translator. *Beowulf: A Verse Translation (Norton Critical Editions)*. Edited by Daniel Donoghue, 1st ed., W. W. Norton & Company, 2002.

- [6]. Hennequin, M Wendy. "We've Created a Monster: The Strange Case of Grendel's Mother." *English Studies*, vol. 89, no. 5, 12 Sept. 2008, pp. 503–523., doi:10.1080/00138380802252966.
- [7]. Nitzsche, Jane c. "The Structural Unity of Beowulf: The Problem of Grendel's Mother." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1980, pp. 287–303., [www.jstor.org/stable/40754612](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40754612).
- [8]. Puhvel, Martin. "The Might of Grendel's Mother." *Folklore*, vol. 80, no. 2, 1969, pp. 81–88., doi:10.1080/0015587X.1969.9716622.

Tazreen Jahan Bari. "Grendel's Mother: Victim, Not Villain." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 25(10), 2020, pp. 35-38.