

Supernatural Entities and Natural Propensities

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Antone Minard's English 111W course *Literary Classics in English*. The assignment asked students to compare and contrast two literary works. The paper uses MLA citation style.

In contemporary society, supernatural beliefs are seen as a thing of the past; however, like many ancient artifacts in history, they represent the shared values of civilizations long dead but not yet forgotten. The impact of the supernatural is not lost in literature. In *Beowulf*, it manifests in Grendel, a monster who terrorizes the Danes. Their leader, King Hrothgar, beseeches a warrior named Beowulf to help him destroy Grendel, promising rewards of gold and other treasures. In *Hamlet*, the supernatural is represented by the ghost of Hamlet's deceased father, who urges his son to avenge his murder. Both Hamlet, at the ghost of his father's behest, and his father's murderer, King Claudius, plot to kill each other. Each work compares and contrasts the supernatural against human qualities, bringing out the impact that these antiquated beliefs have had in the old world. The supernatural elements in *Beowulf* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are connected to the relationship the kings have with their respective antagonists; the manifestation of each otherworldly entity is a direct reflection of the underlying flaws of each king's leadership.

In *Beowulf*, the supernatural element is Grendel, a vaguely described creature who threatens the peace and security of King Hrothgar's kingdom. Grendel is an archetypal monster, expected to be slain by a strong, dashing hero. The monster is characterized as "ruthless and cruel" by the narrator, suggesting that he is a harbinger of violence, death, and destruction (l. 122). Grendel's destructive nature juxtaposes with King Hrothgar's wisdom and generosity; the havoc he causes, while in direct opposition to the king's affable nature, is an immediate result of the weakened state of King Hrothgar. The potency of Grendel is a representation of the vulnerability of King Hrothgar; because the

king is too weak to protect his people, Grendel is able to kill many of them. The king's weakness and inability to defend his kingdom eventually leads to the death of one of his most trusted friends, the chief thane Æschere. The stereotypical nature of Grendel, when contrasted with the deterioration of King Hrothgar, emphasizes the reliance that the king has on outside forces to help him combat what he cannot control.

King Hrothgar's old age is distinguished by his dependency on others. He depends on his past heroic deeds to shield his people from danger, "consider[ing] none...[his] enemy" (ll. 1772-1773). As well, his accumulation of various "ancient riches" (ll. 1380) from past conquests provides King Hrothgar with a way to reward those he depends on. However, in spite of all his wisdom and experience, the "grey-bearded warrior" (l. 1307) still could not predict the existence of Grendel, although he tries everything in his power to thwart the monster—for King Hrothgar's power does not lie in his physical strength, but in his wealth and the trust of his people. King Hrothgar knows this, and he warns Beowulf, whom he sees as a younger version of himself, against pride and greed. Beowulf later proves himself when he becomes king: he fights his own monster, the dragon, instead of depending on material rewards to incentivize others to rescue his kingdom. Despite differences in power and strength, in the end, the defeats of both kings are caused by supernatural forces.

Conversely, the supernatural creature in *Hamlet* is the non-threatening ghost of Hamlet's father, who appears as a result of King Claudius' treachery. This ghost differs from the supernatural creatures in *Beowulf* in that it does not directly inflict physical violence—rather, it encourages Hamlet to avenge his father's death by killing King Claudius, his uncle-stepfather. The purpose of the ghost's manifestation is to help Hamlet voice his suspicions and dissent, therefore galvanizing him into a plot. Despite the fact that the ghost does not directly induce bloodshed, his actions and words ultimately lead to the death of Hamlet, as well as those of many others. For example, the ghost encourages Hamlet to "revenge his foul and most unnatural murder", which consumes the impressionable young man with both doubt and vengeance (I. v. 761). The apparition is a direct result of King Claudius' poor character as well as his sinful actions and his lust for power—while different in temperament, the ghost of Hamlet's father, like Grendel in *Beowulf*, highlights the king's weakness, which eventually leads to his undoing.

Although King Claudius meticulously and cunningly plans for his rise to power, much like King Hrothgar, he does not account for anomalies such as the

presence of the supernatural. However, unlike King Hrothgar, King Claudius holds a stronger position; despite being equally vulnerable and susceptible to the people, King Claudius is able to take fate into his own hands through his scheming. He can also be seen as a dictatorial usurper: he allegedly poisons his brother in order to take the throne for himself. Nevertheless, King Claudius' manipulative and autocratic nature does not reflect his leadership skills. For example, he manages to avoid war with Norway, and marries his sister-in-law, Gertrude, for the stability of his kingdom (or so he claims). By referring to his new bride as "the imperial jointress to this warlike state" (I. ii. 209), King Claudius is diverting the attention of his people away from the incestuous nature of the marriage and towards the tensions surrounding the kingdom. While King Claudius has proven himself to be stronger than King Hrothgar, his downfall is still attributed to those of the supernatural nature.

Although *Beowulf* and *Hamlet* are fundamentally different literary works written hundreds of years apart, there are many similarities between them. In both, the supernatural entities symbolize the underlying dissatisfaction in each kingdom, and in doing so, reveal their respective kings' weaknesses. In *Beowulf*, Grendel represents the uncertainty of King Hrothgar's heir, as well as his weakened state. The disparity between Grendel and King Hrothgar also plays an important role in analyzing the impact Grendel has on the king and his people. Grendel and King Hrothgar are polar opposites: one is strong while the other is weak, and one is selfish while the other is generous. In *Hamlet*, King Claudius relies on his manipulation and cunning to win over his people, whether he has their best interests in heart or not. It is because of this that the ghost of Hamlet's murdered father and King Claudius are two sides of the same coin. Each rely on others to accomplish his goals—for example, King Claudius relies on poison, as well as Ophelia's brother Laertes, to kill Hamlet. On the other hand, the ghost relies on Hamlet to avenge his death. This dependency on others also ties King Hrothgar and King Claudius together: both kings depend on other, stronger heroes, such as Beowulf or Laertes, to combat their own weaknesses. Even if both works are written in the backdrop of different times, there are themes that link them together, proving that some human values never change.

In both *Beowulf* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the supernatural beings are connected to their kings because they represent the concealed imperfections stemming from each king's relationship with his respective adversary. The varying nature of these relationships leads as a precursor to the ultimate loss—for King Hrothgar, it was the death of his dear friend Æschere; for King Claudius, it was

the loss of his own life, as well as his queen's. Although these supernatural creatures are merely fiction, their effect on the literary world is extraordinarily real; the legacy of these fictitious individuals continues to share a small part of archaic cultures and civilizations with the modern world.

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