

# On Beowulf's Elegiac Mood: from the Perspective of Cognitive Poetics

Zhaoying Liu<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Hunan University, Changsha, 410082, China

\* Corresponding Author Email: liuzhaoying@hnu.edu.cn

**Abstract.** Beowulf is the longest narrative poem in ancient England and the most complete and outstanding epic in the early Middle Ages of Europe. It holds an important position in the history of British literature and even European literature. Beowulf mainly tells the great deeds of the hero Beowulf, who is half human and half divine, in subduing monsters and killing poisonous dragons. It has a mythological colour and can be regarded as a heroic mythological epic. It mainly praises Beowulf's heroic spirit, promotes Christian consciousness, and showcases England's unique cultural style during the Anglo-Saxon period. Most studies of Beowulf focus on Germanic culture, literary form, historical background, themes, and symbolic significance portrayed in the poem. By adopting theories in Cognitive Linguistics like prototype, iconicity, perspectives, metaphor, naming in cognitive poetics, this article peruses the elegiac language of Seamus Heaney's Beowulf, illustrating that Beowulf is an elegy of the deaths of heroes, the inconstant fate, the vicissitudes of the world and age, the collapse of tribal society, and ultimately—the elegiac world, and results in that Beowulf is more like an elegy than an epic.

**Keywords:** Beowulf; elegiac mood; cognitive poetics.

## 1. Introduction

The analysis of poetry has long been conducted in the fields of rhetoric and literature. Scholars have explored various aspects of poems, such as their structure, themes, and linguistic features. However, since the 1970s, there has been a cognitive shift in literary and linguistic research, leading to the emergence of cognitive poetics as a new approach to analyzing poetry.

The term "cognitive poetics" was first proposed by Reuven Tsur in 1983. It refers to applying cognitive theories and concepts to the literature study, particularly in understanding the cognitive processes involved in producing and receiving poetic texts. Cognitive poetics seeks to uncover the mental mechanisms and structures that underlie the creation and interpretation of poetry.

The recognition and value of cognitive poetics as a discipline have grown over the years. This can be seen from the publication of influential works such as *Introduction to Cognitive Poetics* by Stockwell in 2002 and the collection *Cognitive Stylistics* edited by Semino and Culpepper in the same year. These publications demonstrate the wide acceptance and recognition of cognitive poetics as a valuable approach to studying literature.

Beowulf tells the heroic deeds of the Scandinavian hero Beowulf and is considered the oldest and longest complete literary work of the Anglo-Saxon period discovered so far. It is also recognized as the earliest dialect epic in Europe. Alongside the French "Song of Roland" and the German "Song of Nieberrongen," Beowulf is regarded as one of the three major heroic epics in European literature.

Research on Beowulf, both domestically and internationally, has focused on various aspects, including Germanic culture, literary form, historical background, themes, and symbolic significance portrayed in the poem. Scholars consider Beowulf explores heroism, honour, courage, fate, and moral values.

Building upon the existing research on Beowulf, this study aims to employ iconicity and prototype theories from cognitive poetics to analyze the elegiac mood present in the poem. By examining the cognitive processes and mechanisms involved in creating and interpreting the elegiac mood in Beowulf, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of the poem and shed light on its emotional impact on readers.

Cognitive poetics has emerged as a valuable approach to analyzing poetry, and its application to the study of Beowulf provides new insights into the elegiac mood within the poem. By combining cognitive theories with the analysis of literary works, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of the cognitive processes underlying the creation and interpretation of poetry, enriching our appreciation of this ancient art form.

Seamus Heaney (1939-2013), a Nobel Prize for Literature laureate in 1995, was the greatest Irish poet after W.B. Yeats. His Beowulf, or "Heaneywulf", is arguably the best translation until now. His translation is more accessible to the modern reader. Heaney's Beowulf is of high poetic quality, a fact with which many critics would agree [1]. Therefore, this article peruses Heaney's Beowulf to analyze Beowulf's elegiac mood.

## 2. Synopsis of Beowulf

Beowulf is generally considered to have been created by an anonymous author in the 8th century and was transcribed by an anonymous monk around 1000 AD. The plot of Beowulf can be roughly divided into two parts: the first part (lines 1-1903) mainly relates to Beowulf, the black-haired warrior who leaves his home to support the Denmark king Hrothgar, whose kingdom is harrowed by a monster, Grendel by name, and returns in triumph after killing the monster and his vile mother;

The second part (lines 1904-3182) chiefly tells Beowulf that the grey-haired king goes bravely into the lair of a venomous dragon in order to protect his people, who are harassed by the demon, but he only dies in tragedy after fighting for several rounds. Apart from the main plot, this poem is embedded with many interpolations and themes of feuds and deaths.

## 3. Beowulf: An Epic or Elegy?

Beowulf is famous for its alliteration. A question arises in the alliterated form: Is Beowulf an epic or an elegy? When evaluating this work, critics tend to choose "epic" to define the nature of this poem. However, Beowulf is more like an elegy than an epic.

In Greek and Roman literature, 'elegy' denoted any poem written in elegiac meter. The term was also used to refer to the subject matter of change and loss frequently expressed in the elegiac verse form. In accordance with this latter usage, such as 'The Wanderer,' 'The Seafarer,' and other poems in Old English on the transience of all worldly things are even now called elegies [2]. Beowulf does not adopt the elegiac meter. However, it is an elegy based on its themes of change and loss, which are in accordance with other elegies in old English.

## 4. Analysis of Anti-Prototype Theory in Beowulf

In the realm of heroic narratives, Joseph Campbell's groundbreaking work distilled a universal pattern consisting of seventeen distinct stages found in Eastern and Western mythologies, shaping what he termed the "heroic journey" [3]. This concept was subsequently simplified into three acts and twelve stages by Christopher Vogler. This narrative structure, known as the "Heroic Journey," holds a profound empathetic power for audiences due to its roots in fairy tales, a cornerstone of the collective unconscious, perpetually influencing human intellectual and emotional growth [3].

The quintessential prototype within hero mythology is the "travel" prototype, encompassing five key stages: embarking on a perilous quest, encountering formidable trials, receiving mentorship, regaining strength, and accomplishing daunting tasks. In a partial alignment with this prototype, Beowulf unfolds a narrative that resonates with Shield Sheafson's trajectory. Shield, initially a foundling, carries the promise of future greatness [1]. This arc triggers a familiar pattern, a prototype etched in the minds of readers, a trajectory followed by countless heroes who ascend from obscurity to supremacy, embarking on the arduous "path to power" [1]. With such cognitive resonance, readers naturally anticipate Shield's eventual glory. However, Beowulf disrupts this cognitive template as Shield's life concludes, evoking a potent elegiac atmosphere.

The tragedy of Shield's story lies in his untimely demise, akin to a budding flower being abruptly cut down. This resonates deeply with readers, evoking sorrow for this benevolent king. However, his subjects and people bear the brunt of grief. Lines 15a-16a [1] underscore the anguish experienced by the people before Shield's arrival. His presence is a blessing to Denmark, and his departure leaves an irreplaceable void [1].

This phenomenon of deviating from the "Anti-Prototype" prototype finds the echoes in Beowulf's narrative. Cognitive Linguistics identifies the fundamental syntactic division of sentences into subjects and predicates, creating a logical sequence [3]. While not all tales encompass every function, their order remains consistent. The final functions involve a challenging task proposed to the hero, followed by its resolution, the hero's recognition, and culminating in marriage and ascending the throne [4].

However, lines 2690a-2693b depict the dragon's unexpected victory over the knight, defying the established cognitive pattern. Beowulf's demise at the dragon's claws is an unforeseen turn, giving rise to a profound elegiac sentiment.

Grieving the loss of a hero pervades the thematic fabric of Beowulf. The poem's first part opens with a lament for two Danish kings: Shield Sheafson's journey from destitute infancy to sovereign glory ends as he drifts into the sea, leaving Denmark in perpetual sorrow. Beow, his son, enjoys a revered kingship, and even though his death is unmentioned, his passing is evident from Hrothgar's ascension.

As Beowulf converses with the sentinel, he mourns his father. The queen's toast to Hrothgar alludes to his inevitable twilight demise. The old king's farewell to Beowulf carries a sense of finality, devoid of hope for a reunion. Amid victory celebrations, the king's attendants recount the tragic tale of Sigemund, a hero who conquers giants and dragons yet succumbs to sorrow.

In the second part, the cycle of death continues, claiming two Gothic kings, paralleling the tragedy of Beowulf himself. Not the archetypal hero of epic tales, Beowulf's complexities include the absence of loyalty and romantic love [5,6]. He grapples with the torment of a poisonous dragon in his twilight years.

Ultimately, the fire dragon symbolizes the culmination of the foretold deaths of kings, converging on Beowulf. In sum, Beowulf defies the archetypal hero prototype, resulting in an elegy of heroism's mortality.

## 5. Analysis of Iconicity in Beowulf

The recognition that significant meaning cannot occur without form-in-feeling and feeling-in-form is lacking in most cognitive linguistics today. Cognitive linguistics will never come of age until it can account for the human significance of the language utterance--and that can only occur when cognitive linguistics discover the principles that enable feeling (sensation, emotion) to motivate expression.

For the cognitive linguist, then, studying literary texts can help illuminate how human language is motivated by and expresses the forms of mind feeling. The mechanism by which these forms of feeling are symbolized in the language is iconicity.

### 5.1. Diagrammatic Iconicity: She, Bereft, and Blameless

Diagrammatic Iconicity includes both component and relational iconicity, emphasizing the iconicity phenomenon between language symbols and relationships between meaningful structures. It is mainly manifested in syntactic iconicity, which means that syntactic structures can directly reflect reality or conceptual structures in a certain aspect [7].

Consider the union of Dane Hildeberh with Finn, chieftain of the Jute tribe, which ignites a war between Jute and Denmark, culminating in the demise of Danish leader Hnæf. This blood-soaked union yields a profound loss, befalling Hildeberh's own kin and family, a lamentable outcome laden with inexorable fate.

Consequently, the Finn tribe bears the brunt of the conflict, ultimately succumbing to Danish commander Hengest's vengeful assault. The aftermath sees a peace treaty, permitting Hengest a winter respite in Jute, nurturing his thirst for revenge. This retribution ravages Finn's domain, his home transmuting into a charnel house, the halls drenched in crimson, as Finn and his loyalists meet their end, and the queen is seized.

A fragmented composition characterizes lines 1071b-1075b, employing diagrammatic iconicity to potent effect. Readers encounter "son and brother," followed by "lost" and "on the battlefield," intuitively unravelling the cause behind the son and brother's demise—a tragic saga of vendetta.

Nonetheless, it is pertinent to acknowledge that the original Old English version of Beowulf lacks such fragmentation. "Heaneywulf" departs from the source, potentially reflecting Heaney's belief that a faithful rendition in standard syntax might inadequately capture Hildeberh's elegiac tragedy, thereby necessitating a reinterpretation to evoke the elegy's poignant tones in the face of capricious destiny.

## 5.2. Quantity Iconicity—the Kindest King

Throughout the epic, the poet refrains from lavishing the highest accolades upon the kings depicted. A remarkable deviation occurs in lines 3180b-3182, where the poet employs four distinct superlative adjectives—most gracious, most fair-minded, kindest, and keenest—successively extolling Beowulf, culminating in the quintessentially Germanic term "lofgeornost." This deliberate choice, reserved exclusively for Beowulf, underscores the poet's intent and signifies the elegiac undertones accompanying the dissolution of tribal society.

## 6. Analysis of Perspective in Beowulf

In the opening lines of Beowulf, specifically lines 1a-1b, the term "So" is a modern rendering of the Old English word "Hwat." This linguistic choice made by the scop—an Anglo-Saxon poet—serves to capture the audience's attention. Ezra Pound's translation notably renders the word as "What!" while F. B. Gummere opts for "Lo!". Both translations convey the Beowulf-poet's astonishment as they grapple with a noble world that has already slipped into the annals of the past. The phrase "Days gone by" encapsulates the poet's perspective, resonating with nostalgia emanating from the Beowulf-poet. It is crucial to recognize that although the poem itself was composed around the 8th century and subsequently transcribed around 1000 AD, the events it narrates belong to the 6th century—entailing a temporal distance from the poet's own era.

Through a nuanced perspective analysis, it becomes evident that Beowulf is intentionally imbued with an overarching elegiac tone. This elegy mourns the irrevocable passage of a bygone era. The primary intention of the Beowulf-poet lies in creating a pervasive elegiac ambience. As the poet gazes into the past, surveying the history of monarchs and warriors steeped in ancient traditions, a prevailing theme emerges: all grandeur inevitably meets its end. The poet's lament for the cessation of the world's mutable fortunes becomes palpable. In the words of Tolkien (1963:73), "The poet shows his sorrow for the end of the vicissitudes of the world and age" [5]. Consequently, it can be posited that Beowulf functions as an elegy that eloquently conveys the capriciousness of time.

A secondary layer of this elegy, rooted in the fluctuations of the world and the passage of time, manifests in the poignant demise of the characters within the narrative. This thematic undercurrent is readily apparent in figures such as Hrothgar but is most pronounced in the character of Beowulf himself. While in his youth, Beowulf engaged in numerous battles, yet in his waning years, he hesitates to wield blade and spear against dragons, reminiscent of his valiant confrontation with Grendel in times past. The present-day Beowulf, no longer adorned by the vigour of youth, now assumes a more refined disposition [8].

The tension between past and present epochs reverberates across both poets and characters, pervading the poem's entirety. This tension encapsulates their collective sorrow for the inexorable march of time, effectively amplifying the elegiac tenor that suffuses Beowulf.

## 7. Analysis of Metaphors in Beowulf

Stanley B. Greenfield, an authority in the field of Old English, following Hirsch, calls elegy an "intrinsic" genre in Old English Literature [9]. In lines 515b-518b, 1128a-1130a and 1137b-1138a, winter appears eight times. Here are no spring, summer, or autumn, but winter appears eight times and can be used as a verb. Winter is a typical metaphor that means harshness, cruelty and despair. In Beowulf, it can be seen that the living conditions in the North are harsh, and life is fleeting, so people tend to think that life is not their own; it is rented out. It is a typical theme in Old English Literature. From the description, readers can experience a strong sense of the elegiac mood.

## 8. Analysis of Naming in Beowulf

The special senses of the ancient Germanic people towards monsters have gone far beyond their fear and infatuation with themselves, and readers fully feel that the pagan world is afraid of the changeable and harsh living environment.[10,11]

Understanding the enigma of Grendel's name becomes pivotal to fully grasping the nuanced, poetic context. Unravelling Grendel's character in Beowulf also holds profound implications for comprehending his maternal figure. However, avenues for resolving this quandary appear almost nonexistent. Methodologically, the viable approach lies in reestablishing the internal word boundaries of "Grendel" through historical sources, interpreting it as a compound term arising from the fusion of two lexical entities that thrived in the Old English era.

Intuitively, these two components seem to be "green" and "del," exhibiting a morphological resemblance to their Modern English counterparts "green" and "dale." The conjoined meaning of this compound appears to allude to a "green pool." Temporarily setting aside the semantic implications of this unique amalgamation, its structural form harmoniously adheres to the rhetorical norms characteristic of Old English poetry. This amalgamation of two independent roots metaphorically describes entities or individuals by means of their composite attributes. Examples include "goldwine", signifying "king", "ban-hus" ("bone house") representing "body," and "hronrade" ("whale way") denoting "ocean," all of which exemplify the ancient Germanic poetic device known as "kenning."

In the broader context of Germanic mythological tradition, associating "green" and "deep pool" with ancient Norse mythology evokes the three cosmic realms, the evergreen Yggdrasill symbolizing perpetual existence beyond life and death, alongside the profound wellsprings nestled beside the colossal tree's roots. The enigmatic layers within Grendel's designation are demystified by invoking this connection. Notably, within the extensive tapestry of ancient Norse mythology, the longest root of Yggdrasill closely parallels the thematic essence under consideration. This root traverses the upper tiers of the world before delving into the shadowed abyss of the underworld (Nasmond), where a malevolent spring, Hvergelmir, emits putrid effluents, forming a turbid expanse. Within its murky depths, Nidhogg, a winged black dragon, coils, surrounded by innumerable serpents relentlessly gnawing the roots of Yggdrasill, hastening its gradual decay. This sinister tableau invariably evokes parallels to the habitat of Grendel.

In summation, the intricate naming of Grendel in Beowulf serves as a portal to unravelling the tapestry of ancient Germanic perceptions, offering insights into their worldview and mythological underpinnings. Through a meticulous dissection of the compound's etymology and its resonance with Norse cosmology, the shroud of mystery enveloping Grendel's nature begins dissipating, shedding light on the intricate interplay between language, culture, and mythology in this epic poem.

## 9. Conclusion

Beowulf is not an epic. It breaks the prototypical heroes in epics, lamenting the deaths of heroes. The digressions in Beowulf illustrate that Beowulf-poet could not focus on the main plot due to the inconstant fate in Anglo-Saxons' real life. The poet and Beowulf's perspectives reflect a world that is not what it was and days of yore that have long gone by, lamenting on the vicissitudes of the world

and age. Beowulf's rise is the rise of the Great, and his fall would be an apocalypse of the Geat tribe. Beowulf is a dirge on the deaths of heroes, the inconstant fate, and the collapse of tribal society. It is an elegy. It is one of the most moving elegy that has ever been written.

This article uses Cognitive Linguistics to interpret Beowulf, an innovation in Beowulf's research. However, this study also has some limitations. This study only uses limited theories of Cognitive Linguistics, especially when it comes to Iconicity. In the future, more interpretations of Beowulf's research using other theories of Cognitive Linguistics, such as Quantity Iconicity, and Phonological Iconicity, are looked forward to seeing.

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