

The Theme of Father/Son Relationships in Beowulf & The Song of Roland  
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 The representation of father-son type relationships in early Medieval literary works is a key theme early authors used to give their works more depth and meaning. Two works that use the theme of father-son relationships are Beowulf and The Song of Roland. In Beowulf, the relationship between Hrothgar and Beowulf is one in which there is no actual blood father-son tie, but the two characters take on all the characteristics of a real father son relationship. Hrothgar, although Beowulf's senior, has to rely on this new warrior who comes to Heorot to help him rid his kingdom of a great danger which he can not get rid of by himself, and Hrothgar treats him as if he were his own son. In The Song of Roland, Charles' relationship with his nephew Roland also takes on the characteristics of a father-son type relationship. In this work, although Charles is the better warrior than Roland, he relies on Roland to watch the rear guard of his army and Roland loses his life while serving his King. The significance of these inter-generational relationships will be looked at in this paper, as well as what the authors through the guise of these father-son relationships were trying to say about various different aspects of life during their time. In Beowulf, the function of the relationship between Hrothgar and Beowulf helps to further the plot in several ways. Whenever there is a reliance on family in any literary work, it gives any story more meaning and significance. When Beowulf first arrives in Hrothgar's hall, we get a sense of the old and incapable state Hrothgar is in "old and gray-haired among the guard of earls" (Beowulf, pg. 62) is how he is first described. When hearing who Beowulf's father is he states in a joyous tone "I knew him when he was a child!..Well does the son now pay this call on a proven ally!" (Beowulf, pg. 62-63) Immediately there is a fond relationship here which will develop even further. When Beowulf claims that he is in Heorot to cleanse the people of the monster named Grendel who is plaguing them, Hrothgar is very grateful and he states "So it is to fight in our defence, my friend Beowulf, and as an act of kindness that you have come to us here!" (Beowulf, pg. 65) We see here that Hrothgar is indeed grateful to have the services of so brave a warrior. When Beowulf slays Grendel, the pride that the old Hrothgar feels towards Beowulf can almost be equated to the pride a father will feel towards his son when he accomplishes a great deed. He even claims Beowulf as his son when he holds up the slain Grendel's hand and states "Beowulf, I now take you to my bosom as a son, O best of men, and cherish you in my heart. Hold yourself well in this new relation!" (Beowulf, pg. 80) This claiming of Beowulf as his son and his later bestowing to him gifts customary to their society shows how strong their bond is. After the slaying of Grendel's mother, the relationship grows even stronger, and Hrothgar from this point on will be ever grateful to his new son who saved his kingdom from so great a peril. In The Song of Roland, the relationship that exists between Charles and Roland is just as significant as in Beowulf, but is somewhat different. Roland is recognized as a prized knight and the King's nephew before he is assigned to the rearguard, (as can be seen as through the protests of the thought of him going to negotiate with the treacherous Saracens) but not until after Roland's betrayal and death is he esteemed so high in Charles' mind and all the others involved. When hearing of the betrayal Roland states "Where are you, fair nephew? .....God!" , Says the King, "how bitter my reproach, that I was absent when they struck the first blow" (The Song of Roland, sect. 177) in utter desperation. When later Charles finds out Roland has definitely been slain by the Paynims, while lying down to sleep he thinks of his nephew who he thought of as a son. "Charles lies awake and weeps for Roland's plight... The King is weary, for grief weighs on his eyes; " (The Song of Roland, sect. 184) The deep pain in Charles' heart is different than in Beowulf, because Charles is in mourning, while Hrothgar was joyous, and while Hrothgar could be proud of his son Beowulf, Charles feels as if he has let his son down by letting this whole situation happen when he trusted the evil Ganelon. He then goes on with a new vigor to destroy those who killed Roland and the Franks, and the resulting battle can be seen as a revenge mission for Charles, which further helps to give the story more depth. Although the result of the two father-son relationships is different in some of the respects that are stated above, both relationships are essential in establishing the plot of the two works and giving the reader a sense of all the intricate forces that were at work in the two societies. The person who wields the power in the two stories also varies in each work. In Beowulf, Hrothgar is seen as old and unable to challenge the forces of evil that have befallen his kingdom, and Beowulf is seen as the young powerful warrior who will bring a new energy to the fight against evil. Beowulf's arrival marks a time when the son is taking over from the father the responsibilities of a great threat, and further help to give the character of Beowulf more stature and prestige. In The Song of Roland the situation is almost the complete opposite. In this work, Charles will be the one who ultimately triumphs over the evil, and therefore it is essential to build his stature up. Although Roland is regarded as a great warrior, Charles is seen as the Christian conqueror of the enemies of Christ. In Charles' case, his old age is to his advantage, and his long white beard and hair are stressed by the author to help paint him as very old. The fight scene between Baligant and Charles further goes to shed light on the experience, leadership and general legend of the old King Charles. So who has the power in a father-son type relationship clearly depends on the individual work itself. Whoever the main and essential character is of the particular work is going to be granted the superior power and prestige. The strong father-son relationship in Beowulf is a way of stressing how the people of the time felt. The comitatus of the Scandinavian kingdoms of the time Beowulf was written emphasized family and clan above all else, and by having the Hrothgar-Beowulf relationship act out in a certain way, you can get a great sense of what the comitatus system was like. The political and economic ideas of the time are also commented on through this relationship. The gift giving of Hrothgar and Beowulf in turn for deeds done shows what the essence of the comitatus was, how services were rewarded and great deeds

applauded. The entire relationship between Hrothgar and Beowulf is the prime example of the comitatus, and the author was clearly trying to stress that when writing Beowulf. The author of The Song of Roland also clearly had the idea also of commenting on the society of the time by using the father-son relationship as a model. Roland's complete faith to his lord and King Charles gives the impression of how all loyal subjects should be to their lord. When deciding if they should trust the Saracens and talk with them Roland warns "Nevermore trust Marsile!" (The Song of Roland, sect. 14) Later on we see the paternal instincts and wisdom of Charles when Roland and other members of the twelve offers to speak to the Saracen Marsile. Roland states "That shall you not!" (The Song of Roland, sect. 18), showing how much he valued his closest warriors, almost like it was as a family, again showing how the feudal system was a two way relationship. Roland's willingness to face anything that his King wishes also goes to comment on the social characteristics of the day and what was expected from the code of chivalry. The final revenge theory is also something that is interesting to look at. Charles' sadness and anger at the death of Roland sparks his energy, and makes him take the war up as a revenge for Roland and the others. The emphasis on revenging Roland is also representational of Medieval society, and how if a family member was killed it was expected that a fellow family member would revenge them. The father-son relationships portrayed here clearly help give an emphasis on the values of the society in which the two writers are writing in. The significance of the father-son relationship in these two works are essential in both works development.

Just as one could argue the good-evil, or Christian-pagan conflicts are essential to them both, the father-son relationship is just as important. Through the relationship we can get a window on the past that lets us see the societies that are written about, we can get a sense of their social, political, and economic customs. Clearly both authors use this great technique to give their stories more depth and meaning, and by doing so Beowulf and The Song of Roland are not only considered great literary works of their respective periods because of the stories they tell, but also because of the valuable information they give the reader on the society in which they take place.

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Thomas Lazzaro professor fisher literary patterns european development paper representation father type relationships early medieval literary works theme early authors used give their works more depth meaning works that theme father relationships beowulf song roland beowulf relationship between hrothgar which there actual blood characters take characteristics real relationship hrothgar although senior rely this warrior comes heort help kingdom great danger which himself hrothgar treats were song roland charles relationship with nephew also takes characteristics type this work although charles better warrior than relies watch rear guard army loses life while serving king significance these inter generational will looked this paper well what authors through guise these were trying about various different aspects life during their time function between helps further plot several ways whenever there reliance family literary work gives story more meaning significance when first arrives hrothgar's hall sense incapable state "gray haired among guard earls" first described when hearing states joyous tone "knew when child well does call proven ally immediately there fond here which will develop even further claims that heort cleanse people monster named Grendel plaguing them very grateful states fight defence friend kindness that have come here here indeed grateful have services brave warrior slays Grendel pride feels towards almost equated pride will feel towards accomplishes great deed even claims holds slain Grendel hand states take bosom best cherish heart hold yourself well relation claiming later bestowing gifts customary their society shows strong bond after slaying mother grows even stronger from point ever grateful saved kingdom from great peril exists between Charles just significant somewhat different recognized prized knight king nephew before assigned rearguard seen through protests thought going negotiate with treacherous Saracens until after betrayal death esteemed high mind others involved hearing betrayal where fair nephew says king bitter reproach absent they struck first blow sect utter desperation later finds definitely been slain pagans while lying down sleep thinks thought lies awake weeps plight weary grief weighs eyes sect deep pain heart different than because mourning while joyous could proud feels down letting whole situation happen trusted evil Ganelon then goes with vigor destroy those killed Franks resulting battle seen revenge mission further helps give story more depth although result some respects stated above both essential establishing plot giving reader sense intricate forces were work societies person wields power stories also varies each seen unable challenge forces evil have befallen kingdom young powerful bringing energy fight against evil arrival marks time taking over from responsibilities threat help give character stature prestige situation almost complete opposite ultimately triumphs over therefore essential build stature regarded Christian conqueror enemies Christ case advantage long white beard hair stressed author help paint very fight scene Balin goes shed light experience leadership general legend power type clearly depends individual itself whoever main essential character particular going granted superior power prestige strong stressing people time felt comitatus Scandinavian kingdom's written emphasized family clan above else having certain sense what comitatus system like political economic ideas also commented through gift giving turn deeds done shows what essence comitatus services rewarded deeds applauded entire prime example author clearly trying stress writing author clearly idea commenting society using model complete faith lord gives impression loyal subjects should lord deciding they should trust Saracens talk them warns nevermore trust Marsile sect later paternal instincts wisdom other members twelve offers speak Saracen Marsile shall showing much valued closest warriors almost like family again showing feudal system willingness face anything wishes goes comment social characteristics expected code chivalry final revenge theory something interesting look sadness anger death sparks energy makes take revenge others emphasis revenging representational medieval society member killed expected fellow member would them portrayed emphasis values writers writing significance these both development just could argue good Christian pagan conflicts both just import

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