“Often when one man follows his own will many are hurt.”

These words, spoken by the fictitious Wiglaf as he reflected upon the death of Beowulf, are worth heeding on their own merit. However, taken alone as some proverbial pronouncement, they will likely fall upon deaf ears. Fortunately this wisdom is woven into the story of how Beowulf provoked a dragon, eschewed the use of his army, and ultimately met his doom in the fiery chomp of the fiend. It is the vehicle of story which contextualizes the wisdom of Wiglaf. It is the vehicle of story that mightily ignites our moral imagination, creating in us a moral compass to guide our actions.

Young adults who read *Beowulf* intuitively realize through the story that one should not engage evil alone. They vicariously experience the folly of Beowulf as well as the faithfulness of Wiglaf, who refuses to allow the hero to fight the evil alone:

“As God is my witness, I would rather my body were robed in the same burning blaze as my gold-giver’s body than go back home bearing arms.

That is unthinkable, unless we have first slain the foe and defended the life of the prince of the Weather-Geats. Should he alone be left exposed to fall in battle? We must bond together, shield and helmet, mail-shirt and sword.”

Does it not stir your heart? Do you not feel a passion welling inside you to join the fight against evil? Could you possibly abandon the hero causing him to die alone? This is the power of story; this is one of the reasons why we read *Beowulf*.

However, before one can be impassioned to fight evil, one must first have formulated a conception of what constitutes evil and determined his/her moral response to it. This is the crux of the story’s ability to impact the moral imagination. Through the story we are not only told that Grendel is an evil being, but we also experience his atrocities.

“So times were pleasant for the people there until finally one, a fiend out of hell, began to work his evil in the world. Grendel was the name of this grim demon. He had dwelt for time in misery among the banished monsters, Cain’s clan, whom the Creator had outlawed and condemned as outcasts. For the killing of Abel the Eternal Lord had exacted a price: Cain got no good from
committing that murder because the Almighty made him anathema and out of the curse of his exile there sprang ogres and elves and evil phantoms and the giants too who strove with God time and again until He gave them their reward.”

Grendel is one of these descendent of Cain; he is an incarnated facet of the consequence of Cain’s rejection of God through the action of killing his kin. Grendel is presented as evil by nature and if his actions, the murderous munching of dozens of Danes, were not enough to validate his evil, then surely his motivation would be. His august attacks against the unsuspecting Danes arise from his disdain for their joyous praise to their Creator. Yes, the Grinch is certainly based upon Grendel, but it is not simply the “noise, noise, noise of the whos in whoville” that sets Grendel into a rage; it is the praise of a God inaccessible to him that enrages the monster. So what is the response to the malevolent actions of a misanthropic anathema? You kill him; thus Beowulf does. On one level the story teaches a simple syllogism: evil should be destroyed; Grendel is evil, therefore Grendel should be destroyed.

This syllogism is rejected by a modern sensibility that refutes the proposition that Grendel, or anyone for that matter, can be labeled “evil.” Consider John Gardiner’s novel Grendel, in which he presents the title character as a victim of communal exclusion. Grendel is not a monster to be slain; he is a project to be rehabilitated or at worst left to his own devices. There is something insidious in such a proposition. The medieval sensibility, on the other hand, embraces this dichotomous worldview, whose seeming simplicity belies brilliance.

Grendel is evil in the classic “monster under your bed” manifestation. He is the external evil that one faces merely because such evil exists in a fallen world. We all harbor such fears in some form: bears, spiders, snakes…pick your poison. Beowulf conquers his fear through his confidence in both his own strength and that of his omnipotent God. He defeats this external evil because that evil exists and he being a bearer of the image of God is set in opposition to it. Our hero then must defeat Grendel’s nameless, thus universalized, mother. She is described as the hell-bride who comes and takes but one man at a time. Is this an individual choice presented on some level? Could it be that a hero must choose to submit to the community which is expressed as the heavenly bride or chose independence and isolation in the hell bride? Beowulf seeks to protect the community by hunting down and destroying the mother of evil. To do so he plunges perilously into the dangerous depths of water. Could this water signify baptism? Finally, in his old age, Beowulf must face the ultimate expression of evil: the dragon. The Old English word for dragon is “wyrm” or worm, which is understood to be “snake.” Yes, that snake. All dragons are evil because they are in the image of Satan and thus symbolically represent him.

Thus by reading Beowulf our children, and ourselves too, have our moral imaginations formed to recognize that evil exists and that evil should be destroyed. Many are fighting dragons in their myriad manifestations; will you flee the flames or, like Wiglaf, come to the aid of those valiant heroes?

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1 A little pun here: Beowulf is bee (beo) hunter (wulf) which roughly indicates that he is “bear”