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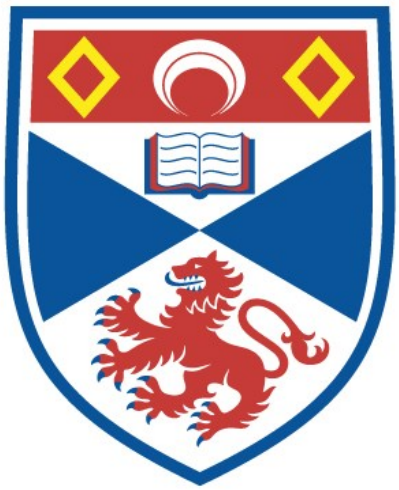

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HEROISM IN *BEOWULF*:

THE SWORD OF CAIN

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A B S T R A C T

The thesis surveys the role of swords in *Beowulf*. The sword is the supreme weapon of warriors in the poem. A distinctive characteristic of the sword, unlike other weapons and armour, is its frequent personification: exceptional swords are called by their own personal names, almost as if they were agents. The fact that Hrunting and Nægling fail to help Beowulf in battle is a further reason to examine the role of swords. Every occasion in which a sword appears in *Beowulf* has been examined and categorised, according to its function. The chief functions of the sword are the sword-as-treasure, the sword-as-gift, the sword as battle weapon, and the kin-killing sword. The two former are symbolic functions of the sword-motif, in which they represent honour and heroic deeds as well as their value in the world. The practical functions of the sword in battle are presented in the latter two roles, which emphasise rather the negative side of the sword in the poem: the instrument and token of revenge, and the wicked use of the sword in kin-killing. The kin-killing theme is displayed throughout the poem in many family feuds. The practical function of the sword in battle links it to the kin-killing theme, especially after the repeated mention of Cain early in the poem. Beowulf himself declares his opposition to the murder of relatives; the thesis links this comment with the fact that Hrunting and Nægling do not support him in battle. This survey of swords in the poem, in relation to the kin-killing theme, allows one to look at the nature of Beowulf's own heroism in a better-informed way.

D E C L A R A T I O N S

I, Naoko Shirai, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately thirty thousand words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

I was admitted as a candidate for the degree of M. Litt. in October, 1988; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St. Andrews between October 1988 and June 1990.

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A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

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T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

Introduction

The initial reason why I chose to examine the role of the sword in *Beowulf* was the failure of both the famous swords, Hrunting and Nægling, to support Beowulf in his hour of need. There are other reasons for studying the part played by swords in the poem. Both practically and symbolically the sword is the most important weapon for these warriors, and is an essential and a representative part of the heroic world. Unlike other war-gear -- spear, shield, helmet and corselet -- what is to be distinctive about the sword is its frequent personification in Germanic heroic poetry. Exceptional swords are dignified with their own personal names. But commonly there are poetic names for swords: in *Beowulf*, for instance, we can find many different appellations for swords, such as "friend in battle" and "light in battle," which explicitly show the special place held by swords in the poem.

These features of swords urged me to attempt an examination of the sword-motif from the functional and symbolic points of view. Though some scholars mention the significance of the theme in *Beowulf*, most of their comments are not based on a thorough examination of all the swords which appear in the poem. Culbert does not satisfactorily explain the functions of the swords, when he concludes that the failures of Nægling and Hrunting are devised merely to increase the dramatic effect from a narrative point of view.[1] Brady has made an excellent survey of the corpus of appellations of war-gear in *Beowulf*. It does not, however, focus on the circumstances in which swords are used, but is limited to

establishing detailed definitions of each appellation from the linguistic point of view.[2] Horowitz applies a plausible Augustinian interpretation to the poem, rather like Huppé's, viewing the theme of the sword as ultimately malignant. But she neither remarks on the poet's acceptance and praise of swords, which appear several times in the presentation of swords to bestow honour, nor does she offer an examination of every sword in the poem.[3] Kaske, Köberl, Nicholson, Puhvel and Viswanathan concentrate on discussing an individual sword, and do not provide a general and wider perspective on the theme of swords in the poem as a whole.[4]

As a thorough examination is called for, I have, as carefully as possible, scanned every occasion in the poem where a sword is worthy of comment. It is demonstrated in the main text that most of the swords in *Beowulf* are involved in the typical circumstances which distinguish heroic behaviour: the feud, the chain of vengeance, the obligation to one's lord, and honour in battle. There are so many varieties in the functions of the sword that it is not appropriate simply to gather them under the umbrella of malignant significance. I show that the varieties of the sword-function are sometimes linked together. The swords, for instance, which appear in the narratives of feuds among relatives, gain a thematic significance as they come to be associated with the kin-killing theme which emerges and dominates in the poem.

The fact, then, that the functions of the swords in *Beowulf* have not been satisfactorily explained in the past, has led me to bring forward and discuss any occasions where a sword appears in a context in which it need not have been mentioned. I am confident that this thesis not only gives a reliable account of the various functions of the sword in *Beowulf* but that this survey provides a

good vantage-point for assessing the nature of Beowulf's own heroism.

NOTES

[1] Taylor Culbert, "The Narrative Functions of Beowulf's Swords," *JEGP*, 59 (1960), 13-20.

[2] Caroline Brady, "'Weapons' in *Beowulf*," *Anglo-Saxon England*, 8 (1979), 79-141.

[3] Sylvia Horowitz, "The Sword Imagery in *Beowulf*," *DAI*, (1978) 2248A. Bernard Huppé, *The Hero in the Earthly City* (Binghamton: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1984).

[4] R. E. Kaske, "Weohstan's Sword," *MLN*, 75 (1960), 465-68. Johann Köberl, "The Magic Sword in *Beowulf*," *Neophilologus*, 71 (1987), 120-28. Lewis Nicholson, "Hunlafing and the Point of the Sword," *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* edited by Nicholson (Notre Dame: Notre Dame press, 1975), pp.50-61. Martin Puhvel, "The Deicidal Otherworld Weapon in Celtic and Germanic Mythic Tradition," *Folklore*, 83 (1972), 210-19. S. Viswanathan, "On the Melting of the Sword," *PQ*, 58 (1979), 360-63.

Chapter One: The Swords of the Heroes

Part I: Chief Functions of the Sword in *Beowulf*

An examination of arms and armour promises to illuminate the range of their functions and significance in Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry; they are the vital equipment of warrior-heroes. Brady emphasises in her article entitled 'Weapons in *Beowulf*' that "I am dealing with the category of weapons as the most representative inanimate objects of the heroic society of the Heroic Age."[1] Of all arms and armour, defensive and offensive, the sword demands to be discussed in any consideration of the varieties of heroism in *Beowulf*. The anthropomorphic treatment of swords, and various metonyms for swords, support the idea that the sword is personified to take a special part for a warrior and appreciated for its value and usefulness in battle. However, both naturally and by design, there are several different functions of sword shown in the poem, from being a valuable treasure to being seen as an ill-omened weapon bringing further trouble to countries and peoples. The *Beowulf* poet also displays many different situations in the stories involving a sword: Weohstan's sword is represented as a victorious weapon to be bestowed on his son, while the ancestral Heathobard sword is regarded as a treasure but also as a token to awaken the old feud. The poet shows the part played by swords in the heroic customs of loyalty, treasure-giving and fighting. The poem as a whole can further be seen to question the basis of what made a hero in the old Germanic world. The following survey shows that it will be useful to

consider the functions of swords in *Beowulf* in order to examine the various lights in which the poem presents the heroic ethos.

It is necessary first to look at how swords function and are evaluated in the poem. In looking at the possible functions of the swords used in *Beowulf*, an initial survey falls into the four main uses of the sword: as a battle-weapon, as a treasure, as an ancestral gift by a lord, and as the weapon of kin-killing.

To begin with, it is very simple and natural to find examples of the sword as a battle-weapon. Some appellations of swords are "battle-sword" (*guð-bill*), "battle-sharp" (*beadu-scearpe*), "friend in battle" (*guð-wine*), "weapon of victory" (*sige-wæpen*), "battle-light" (*hilde-leoma*); the repetition of such metonyms clearly makes the place of the sword distinctive from other war-gear, and associates the motif of the sword with the prime concept of battle "valour," "fame" and even "bloodshed."[2] This is the essential and most universal use of the sword. As a battle-weapon, its use against antagonists can be classified into two situations in the poem. Some battle-swords are used to kill monsters, especially dragons. For instance Beowulf kills sea-monsters with a sword, while Sigemund slays a dragon. On the other hand, other swords are represented as weapons to slay enemies out of vengeance or obligation to one's lord or kinsman. To take an example, it is accounted that Hygelac avenges Hæthcyn with a sword (ll.2484-85). The sword is also seen as a means to repay one's lord for his favour. Beowulf mentions his obligation of fighting in battles for his lord Hygelac:

> Ic him þa maðmas, þe he me sealde,
> geald æt guðe, swa me gifeðe wæs,
> leohtan sweorde; he me lond forgeaf,
> eard, eðel-wyn. (ll.2490-93a)[3]
>
> In that fray fortune granted that I might repay Hygelac with my bright sword for the treasures he had given me; he

had bestowed land on me, a domain to enjoy and leave to my heirs. (p.66)[4]

These lines tell us of a general outline of the heroic obligation, and of that Beowulf can repay his lord by fighting for him with a sword, and he can handle it in battles. Leaving the significance of this fact for later discussion, it must be clear now that swords in battle are used for killing monsters, primarily for general fighting in battle, and especially to fulfil the obligation to repay one's lord for his bestowal of treasures.

Secondly, the sword is frequently regarded as itself a treasure. The giant-sword which slays Grendel's mother has been found in her hoard: *Geseah ða on searwum sige-eadig bil, / eald-sweord eotenisc ecgum þyhtig, / wigena weorð-mynd* (ll.1557-59a), "Then he saw, among other weapons, a broadsword blessed with the luck of victory, an ancient sword of the ogres' making, doughty of edge, a thing of glory to fighting men" (p.42). Moreover the fact that it glitters as if it were the candle of heaven, that is, the sun, evidently suggests divine approval just after Beowulf has slain Grendel's mother *Lixte se leoma, leoht inne stod, / efne swa of hefene hadre scineð / rodores cande* (ll.1570-72a), "A flash blazed out; light sprang up in that place, just as when the sun, the sky candle, shines in its radiance from heaven" (p.43). Its wavy patterned blade (*broden-mæl*) is destroyed by Grendel's blood (l.1616a). These descriptions of the sword like the sun, the carved blade, emphasise its quality as treasure. On the other hand, the gifts for Beowulf, as a reward for killing Grendel, include a sword among the other battle-equipments. The four treasures given by Hrothgar are all decorated with gold (*feower madmas / golde gegyrede*) (ll.1027b-28a). This phrase also focuses on the value of the sword in this context rather than its use

as a battle-weapon, for it is designated as "treasure-sword" (*maðþum-sweord*) in line 1023a.

A third aspect of the sword is its use as a gift or a reward for the brave deeds, which assures us of its close association with honour and glory. Bestowal of a precious sword from a lord stands for preeminent honour, glory and favour promised by the lord. We should clearly see it as a most significant gift, when we read the account of Hygelac's reward:

> þæt he on Biowulfes bearm alegde,
> ond him gesealde seofan þusendo,
> bold ond brego-stol. (ll.2194-96a)
>
> This he (Hygelac) laid in Beowulf's lap, and gave him seven thousand hides of land, a hall, and a princely throne. (pp.58-59)

This passage suggests that the sword is the ceremonial symbol of authority, so that it is no exaggeration to say that the sword is a key to the values of Germanic heroic society.

Along with the honorific use of the sword, the sword has a value as an inheritance from the old days. Such appellations of sword as "ancient thing which is left" (*eald-laf*) and "ancient treasure" (*eald-gestreon*), make clear that a sword is appreciated for its antiquity, and who has owned or made it. It is very often that the lineage of a noble person is described in Anglo-Saxon literature. Bestowal from one's lord of ancestral treasures is a double honour for a warrior. For example, Beowulf was given both Hrethel's armour and sword, and also Healfdene's sword, which had belonged to the Scylding dynasty. Likewise the histories of reputable swords, such as Hrunting and Wiglaf's sword in *Beowulf*, frequently mention heroic deeds of their previous owners. For instance the *Beowulf* poet describes the history of Wiglaf's sword: that it belonged to Eadmund at first. Subsequently Wiglaf's father, Weohstan, slew Eadmund for

Onela, the Swedish King, and was given the sword as a reward. Eadmund is the son of Ohthere, the elder brother of Onela, so that this sword is associated with kin-killing, although Weohstan's part in this is accidental and honourable. It descended, then, from Weohstan to Wiglaf. This account also shows the history of the war between the Swedes and the Geats. Describing the feud suggests to the audience that Wiglaf's brave and noble blood-line is admitted through the inheritance of the sword. It means that the sword is also a sign of a hero's quality. So that it seems to be reasonable to conclude that an ancient and reputable sword is one of the qualifications of a hero. As a historical fact, Athelstan the Atheling declared in his will that "And to my brother Edmund I grant the sword which belonged to King Offa," on which Whitelock comments that this sword must have been handed down for over two hundred years.[5] This is also evidence that the value of a sword corresponds to the degree of the giver's reliance on the receiver.

Last, there is the special use of the sword as the weapon of kin-killing explicitly associated by the poet with the sword of Cain. In the poem, it is said that Cain slew Abel with a sword:

> siþðan Cain wearð
> to ecg-banan angan breþer,
> fæderen-mæge; (ll.1261b-63a)
>
> . . . ever since Cain slew his only brother, his father's son, with the sword's edge. (p.35)

Cain is described as "the slayer with the sword" (*ecg-bana*), which indicates a malignant use of the sword.[6] Then, Hrunting, Unferth's sword, is presumably the weapon he has used in slaying his kindred (l.587), although no explicit statement is given in the poem. And Wiglaf's sword is the token of killing Onela's nephew, although his slayer, Weohstan, has no particular relation to Eadmund. The case of

Nægling, which also seems to be associated with the kin-killing theme, is discussed below.

The use of the sword against monsters and enemies is obviously approved by the poet. He also emphasises the quality of the sword as a treasure, valued for its antiquity and its status as a heirloom of ancient nobles. Bestowing a sword is also a significant motif in *Beowulf* as the approval for a heroic deed. Nevertheless, what cannot be neglected is the poet's repeated mentions of the wicked use of sword ever since Cain slew his brother with one. Many feuds and fratricidal killings involving or even caused by a sword are presented in the latter part of *Beowulf*. These various views of a range of such incidents involving swords reveal the poet's wide overview of the Germanic heroic world, and an equally wide range of attitudes of respect and acceptance and also of criticism influenced by Christianity. His treatment of the sword-motif brings out the varieties of human heroism. The heroic qualities of Beowulf are sometimes the same as those of others, but often show significant differences. An examination in the next part, of the range of functions of swords used by other characters, plainly helps to set off the heroic characteristics particular to Beowulf against the background of standard ideas of Germanic heroism.

NOTES

1 Brady, p.80.

2 Concerning the compounds referring to weapon in *Beowulf*, Brady remarks that "I suggest that it (creating compounds of weapon) was to increase the dignity and stateliness of the language in certain contexts and to enrich the sonority and resonance," *op.cit.*, p.137.

[3] All citations of the text are derived from *Beowulf* edited by C. L. Wrenn, rev. W. F. Bolton (Exeter: Univ. of Exeter, 1988).

[4] All translations are drawn from *Beowulf*, translated by G. N. Garmonsway (London: Dent, 1980).

[5] Dorothy Whitelock, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Wills* (Cambridge: C. U. P., 1930), p.59. See also p.171.

[6] *Ecg* denotes not only a sword but also a battle-knife (ll.1546a & 2772b) so that it cannot be claimed that the word precisely designates a "sword." However, the word *ecg-bana* is possibly to be contrasted with *hand-bana*, and it is clear that this passage specifies the use of weapon such as a sword (or a battle-knife) instead of the bare hands.

Part II: The Value of the Sword

In this part and the next, this thesis presents several examples of the standard idea of Germanic heroism according to the four categories of sword-function described in the last part. It is essential to make this discussion of the sword-function clear and relatively comprehensive, in order to compare the situations of stock and standard characters of heroic society with Beowulf who shows features particular to himself. This part therefore presents an examination of the symbolism of sword-function in relation to personages other than Beowulf. The active use of swords in fights will be discussed in the next part.

Some swords in *Beowulf* are symbolically represented as involving their owners in a different situation. For instance, the sword given to the boat-guard by Beowulf is regarded as a conveyor not only of the value but also of honour to the receiver. The taking of Ongentheow's sword by Eofor reveals that booty from the slain is not disgraceful but rather standard practice. The Heathobard sword shows us several symbolic aspects of the sword, but it is initially the sign for the outbreak of an old feud. These examinations of the sword-function of each sword is necessary in order to establish the standard behaviour in a heroic society.

The first mention of a sword appears in the funeral of Scyld, the founder of the royal house of the Danes, in which the swords are one of the decorations of the funerary ship among the other arms.[1] In the passage below, the arms are simply represented as ornament without any reference to their holders' description and their

historical value:

> Þær wæs madma fela
> of feor-wegum, frætwa, geläded.
> Ne hyrde ic cymlicor ceol gegyrwan
> hilde-wæpnum ond heaðo-wædum,
> billum ond byrnum; him on bearme læg
> madma mænigo, þa him mid scoldon
> on flodes æht feor gewitan. (ll.36b-42)
>
> Many treasures and rich adornments from distant lands were brought there. Never have I heard of any craft more handsomely furnished with weapons of war and raiments of battle, with swords and corselets; in its hold there lay a great number of treasures which were to go with him, far out into the sea's domain. (p.4)

These epithets like "battle-weapon" (*hilde-wæpen*), "war-dress, armour" (*heaðo-wæd*), and also "sword" (*bill*) and "corselet" (*byrne*) certainly remind us of the primary function of the sword in battle. However, these are not a reminder of the past battles but eternal and honorific arms and armour, as they would seem, for Valhalla, the hall of the noble dead. The weapons and armour are not depicted as practical battle-equipment but as part of the *madma fela* and *frætwa* which were brought into the ship. That is, we should regard these weapons and armour as treasures. This passage is followed by the comment that the wealth of the funeral was the greatest which men had ever seen. The swords and corselets are offered up to depart with Scyld, as possessions for the king's honour in the next world.

It is important to remark on that the sword-as-treasure sometimes represents the transience of the world. The motif of sword, therefore, is not always a metonym of perfect authority or a symbol of stable power but sometimes connotes the finite existence of everything in the world, however valuable. To take an example, after Beowulf and Wiglaf have together killed the dragon, Wiglaf has to endure the death of Beowulf and is ordered to bring out some of the

dragon's hoard. Beside its dead body, there now lie treasure-swords, along with goblets, cups and plates. Remarkable among the things hidden in the hoard with other treasures are the rusty swords described in the following lines:

> Him big stodan bunan ond orcas,
> discas lagon ond dyre swyrd,
> omige, þurhetone, swa hie wið eorðan fæðm
> þusend wintra þær eardodon. (ll.3047-50)
>
> Beside him stood goblets and bowls; dishes lay there, and costly swords, rusty and eaten away, as if they had rested there in earth's bosom for a thousand years. (p.80)

This is a description of swords which seem neither in perfect condition nor of practical value because they are rusty (*omige, þurhetone*) though they still could theoretically be regarded as very precious through having been kept for a long time. These swords are not what has been passed on by ancestors; their long existence in the world has made them into treasure, and as such, worth seeking. Following this passage, it is mentioned that the secrecy of the hoard has been kept by God against anyone except one whom He admits to be worthy of the treasure. This hoard of the gold of the men of yore (*eacen-cræftig, iu-monna gold*) (ll.3051b-52a) including the swords and the other treasures has also been bound with spells. These circumstances make it clear that access to the treasure depends on God's permission. The fact that Beowulf is able to obtain the treasure may suggest that he deserves it and also that is permitted by God, though this has to be balanced against his death and the transience of the gold which is again emphasised at Beowulf's funeral.

To come to our second category, the sword-as-gift has several significant aspects in its figurative treatment in this poem. It can represent the honour and valour of the receiver.[2] The sword which

is given by Beowulf to the boat-guard presents a suitable example to show how the sword makes this warrior worthier than others; likewise the many gifts bestowed on Beowulf prove him as more respected than others.[3] The following description of a sword emphasises not only its value but also the fact that the boat-guard deserves the value of the sword which was passed on from Beowulf as a reward for his duty:

> He þæm bat-wearde bunden golde
> swurd gesealde, þæt he syðþan wæs
> on meodu-bence maþme þy weorþra,
> yrfe-lafe. (ll.1900-03a)
>
> Beowulf gave a gold-bound sword to the man who had guarded their boat, so that henceforth he was held in greater honour on the mead-bench because of that treasure and heirloom. (p.51)

Here is the sword depicted as a treasure (*bunden golde, maþme*) and as a heirloom (*yrfe-lafe*) at the same time. It should be remarked that the warrior can obtain a higher honour "because of" this sword. Thus the descriptions of how a gift, a sword in this case, is bestowed on a person become a criterion to estimate the heroic quality of the warrior. In the example above, the fact that the boat-guard receives the honour along with the sword from Beowulf means that the sword is regarded as a token and a concrete symbol of the relation between the giver and the receiver. Bestowal is one of the most important obligations for a lord and a sword is usually an honourable gift. Here we can conclude that the sword is used as a token of valour and honour of a warrior.

Another function of the sword's value is shown in booty, which occurs in the conflict between the Geats and the Swedes. Ongentheow, the king of the Swedes, invades the land of the Geats but later he is driven back by the counterattack of Hygelac. Ongentheow then comes to be slain by Eofor, the subject of Hygelac.

Here is an important description of the sword which has belonged to Ongentheow, in which it is now taken by Eofor as booty, after he killed him:

> Þenden reafode rinc oðerne,
> nam on Ongenðio iren-byrnan,
> heard swyrd hilted ond his helm somod;
> hares hyrste Higelace bær.
> He *þam* frætwum feng ond him fægre gehet
> leana *mid* leodum, ond gelæste swa; (ll.2985-90)
>
> Meanwhile, one warrior stripped the other; Eofor took from Ongentheow his steely corselet, his hard hilted sword, and his helm as well. He brought the grey-haired man's costly trappings to Hygelac, who accepted the rich adornments and courteously promised to reward him among his own people, and fulfilled this promise. (p.78)

This is the popular prize taken by the slayer, to be presented to his own king. Eofor took "steely corselet" (*iren-byrne*), "hard hilted sword" (*heard swyrd hilted*), "helm" (*helm*) and "trappings" (*hyrste*) from Ongentheow. It seems that this booty is regarded as evidence that Ongentheow is indeed dead. Certainly it seems to have been standard practice for the victor to take the sword and armour of the slain.[4] In these lines it is also seen that the mail-shirt, the sword, the helmet and the trappings are regarded as treasures. The winner of the battle has a right to take the possession of the defeated and present all or some of the booty to his king to be rewarded. Hygelac is given these ornamented weapons (*frætwe*), then makes a vow to reward Eofor for his loyalty. Eofor is even given the daughter of king Hygelac later on. The exchange of the treasure between the lord and the subject seems to be a frequent motif in the poem. Therefore, it is not disgraceful to take booty from the slain in the poem, and indeed is a standard custom.

Let us now turn to the function of a sword inherited from one's ancestor. Such swords seem to maintain their value and increase it through long use by brave warriors and long chains of inheritance.

It is the natural order that a father hands his sword to his son, as seen when we pay attention to the histories of Wiglaf's sword and the Heathobard sword. The former is an example of the sword passed on in due course, while the latter is that of the interrupted inheritance of the sword to son. If the father is a brave and respected warrior, the sword aquires the same honour as its owner has. Inheriting the sword also means that the father passes on to his son honour and a valuable treasure of the family together. Once the link of inheritance between the father and the son is broken, for example if the father has been slain by another, the sword belongs to the father's slayer as booty. The slayer bears the sword instead of the son and heir.

The story of the Heathobard sword, as forecast by Beowulf, presents several of the functions of a sword. It denotes a firm link of inheritance between father and son, but it is also the occasion of the reopening of the old feud, now that the link is once broken. First, this sword is depicted as a special treasure for the Heathobards among the other swords like this:

> On him gladiað gomelra lafe,
> heard ond hring-mæl Heaðabear[*d*]na gestreon,
> þenden hie ðam wæpnum wealdan moston,
> oððæt hie forlæddan to ðam lind-plegan
> swæse gesiðas ond hyra sylfra feorh. (ll.2036-40)
>
> On these Danes there glitter heirlooms from the men of old, hard ring-patterned blades which had been the treasures of the Heathobeards for as long as they could wield those weapons, until amid the shield-play they brought destruction on their cherished companions and on their own lives. (pp.54-55)[5]

It is a tragic irony that the revival of the old feud occurs at the very moment of the wedding procession of the king and the queen. The treasure of the Heathobards is explicitly used to introduce the memory of the massacre. However, the words *gladiað gomelra lafe,*

hring-mæl and *Heaðabear[d]na gestreon* make it clear that the swords are first introduced as honorific treasures.[6]

There follows another instance of the sword-as-heirloom. The treasure is taken by a Danish warrior who killed the father of a young Heathobard. Sporting the stolen treasure is a reasonable cause to begin the battle again, so that--in Beowulf's prophecy--the old warrior persuades the young one to remember the old feud, to revenge the death of his father, and to regain the sword which should originally have belonged to him.[7] He insists that the natural course of inheritance and the justified right for the heir to inherit have been interrupted:

> Meaht ðu, min wine, mece gecnawan,
> þone þin fæder to gefeohte bær
> under here-griman hindeman siðe,
> dyre iren, þær hyne Dene slogon,
> weoldon wæl-stowe, syððan Wiðergyld læg,
> æfter hæleþa hryre, hwate Scyldungas?
> Nu her þara banena byre nat-hwylces
> frætwum hremig on flet gæð,
> morðres gylpeð ond þone maðþum byreð,
> þone þe ðu mid rihte rædan sceoldest! (ll.2047-56)
>
> My friend, can you recognize that blade, that precious steel which your father in his vizored helm bore into battle on his last expedition? There the Danes, the keen Scyldings, slew him and remained masters on the field of slaughter, when Withergyld lay dead after the fall of heroes. Now the son of some man among those slayers, exulting in rich adornments, treads the hall floor, boasts of that murder, and bears the treasure which you by rights should possess. (p.55)

The justified right of inheritance of the sword is the constant emphasis of his speech. The *Mece* or *iren* is identified by him as the sword which the father of the young warrior bore to his final battle (*hindeman siðe*). He reminds the son that the valuable sword had belonged to his father until the Danes slew him at the battle. The most notable point in his speech seems that the link of inheritance of the sword has been broken by the murder. This is the cause of

vengeance for the murder and of the repossession of booty; the old warrior emphasises that "you should possess it by right."

The last aspect of the theme of sword-as-heirloom is the connotation of the sword as a "weapon of revenge," which emerges from the speech of the old warrior as above. There are relatively many kennings for the sword-as-treasure used in this particular passage. For instance, the phrases *þone maðþum byreð* and *frætwum hremig* can be thought to point out the value of the sword rather than the significance of inheritance.[8] However, the context of the last part of the speech sheds more light on the incident, in that the treasure has been taken by "murder" according to the phrases *þara banena byre nat-hwylces* and *morðres gylpeð*. Therefore the sword is presented as a potent reminder of the murder of the relative, the violent interrupting of the natural course of inheritance and as itself an anticipation of the consequent vengeance. In short, the superficial feature of the Heathobard sword as a treasure which is clear from its several metonyms, as an inheritance from the ancestors, is followed by a further and over-riding connotation of murder and vengeance. This is also relevant to the next discussion concerning the sword in battle.

It is necessary to remark also on Beowulf's comment on this imagined event. As the result of the old warrior's persuasion, the vengeance takes place. Beowulf says thus:

> þæt se fæmnan þegn fore fæder dædum
> æfter billes bite blod-fag swefeð,
> ealdres scyldig; him se oðer þonan
> losað lifigende, con him land geare (ll.2059-62)
>
> when a retainer of that lady must sleep stained with blood from a sword's slash, his life forfeit for his father's deeds; the other escapes from there alive, for he knows the land well. (p.55)

As usual in the riddling style of *Beowulf*, there is no clear

explanation of who killed whom; however it seems to be clear enough that the young Dane who bears the sword is slain by the young Heathobard whose father has been murdered, from the fact that the old warrior talks to a particular young warrior just before this passage and that *se oðer* may suggest a particular man who had been mentioned beforehand.[9] It is remarkable that the young Dane is slain by a sword blow because of "his father's deeds." This reveals that the young warrior inherits, along with his father's sword which has been taken from the dead Heathobard together with his honour in battle, the risk of vengeance as well. The vengeance is prompted by the precious sword. In this part of the story the sword-as-heirloom gives an ill-omen to reopen the old feud. Beowulf grimly predicts that it will be thought that there is a preeminent right for the young Heathobard to take revenge; for his "personal" justification completely overrides the truce between two peoples. Their oath is broken by both sides *þonne bioð abrocene on ba healfe / að-sweorð eorla* (ll.2063-64a), "Then the sworn oaths of earls will be broken by both sides" (p.55). This probably means that both countries go into battle at the same time.[10] Beowulf remarks drily that he hardly considers that the friendship and the peace are firm between two peoples. For a temporary peace between two countries is often broken by personal obligation out of vengeance. This leads us to the idea that the sword can have an ill-omened and destructive aspect in Beowulf's mind. Beowulf assumes that an old feud is never extinguished as long as the parties' hatred lasts, a hatred to be satisfied only by revenge with swords.

Introducing the story of the Heathobard sword in Beowulf's speculative prophecy, the poem shows another of the links between the many feuds surrounding the Geats in the latter part. Here the

sword can also be regarded as the fateful sign throughout the poem of the reopening of a feud in a state of peace. It is important that this story of "the sword of feud" is recited by Beowulf himself. He prophesies the breaking of the truce, though here he uses the motif of "spear" instead of sword: *Oft seldan hwær / æfter leod-hryre lytle hwile / bon-gar bugeð, þeah seo bryd duge!* (ll.2029b-31), "Yet how often the slaying spear will scarcely lie idle after a prince's fall, even for a little while, noble though the bride may be!" (p.54). Klaeber comments that the word *æfter* is a temporal preposition verging on the sense of "in consequence of, on account of."[11] Beowulf's implication is clear that the feud can never end between the two countries, but only rest when the next lord's death is avenged. This story further reveals that the firm responsibility and obligation to avenge a lord's death cannot be restrained by any attempt such as this wedding. The Heathobard sword is a general symbol of vengeance and a promise of endless revenge.

Such symbolic functions of the swords illustrate usual heroic notions of the sword. It should be repeated here that the present survey is offered as a basis for discussing the situations where Beowulf handles swords, and especially the failure of Hrunting and Nægling to support him in his need. We have seen how prominently the sword is used in *Beowulf* in various contexts, and that the poet, or Beowulf himself, sometimes makes a comment emphasising the importance of a sword as a reminder of the obligation of vengeance for a lord's death. The next part compares the other personages with Beowulf in their practical use of swords.

NOTES

[1] *Sweord* (l.2252b) is probably another example of the treasure-sword judging from its context, although this could, otherwise, denote simply a battle-weapon.

[2] There are two more instances as gift such as: *heard sweord* (l.2638a) and *swyrd-gifu* (l.2884b). Hrothgar's gift of a sword is discussed in Chapter Two, Part One.

[3] Hrothgar's gift for Beowulf clearly confirms his valour and honour in the battle against Grendel.

[4] Not only the war-gear of Ongentheow but other armour is also taken by the slayers, as when Dayraven attempts to bring Hygelac's breast-armour to his lord (ll.2503-04), and the Frisians take booty from the Geats (ll.1212-13a). Even Beowulf seems to take Dayraven's sword.

[5] I adopt the word "Heathobard" in my text instead of Garmonsway's translation, "Heathobeard."

[6] The swords are the decoration of the guests at the wedding and a symbol of the victory and honour of overcoming the Heathobards. See the note in Bolton's *Beowulf*, p.174. According to the reference to *gestreon* "treasure" and *hring-mæl* "ring-patterned" (l.2037) as well as *gomelra lafe* "ancient heirlooms" in line 2036b, it is possible that *beah* (l.2041b) also corresponds to the same swords.

[7] This motif of treasure taken away repeats the motif of the Dragon's stolen treasure though here it is not a sword but a goblet. Taking treasure invokes vengeance.

[8] The word *frætwe* seems to be usually used with in the plural form. Contextually it refers to the sword which the young Dane bears, and also is used as a metonym of a sword like *maðþum*.

[9] We cannot be sure that Withergyld is the father of the young Heathobard. Identification of the father has not so much significance here. The etymology of the name *Wiðergyld* "requital" in the meaning of "vengeance" supports the atmosphere of an everlasting feud which can hardly be reconciled.

[10] Bolton seems to consider that it was actually Ingeld who renewed the old feud (p.72); however, it is said in this poem that oaths are broken by both sides. This then would be the cause which urges Ingeld to avenge his father Froda by assailing Heorot later. The mention of his extinguished love for Hrothgar's daughter (ll.2064b-66) is consistent with a subsequent attack on Heorot against his father-in-law.

[10] F. Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf* (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1950), p.295.

Part III: Swords in Battle

This chapter examines the sword-fights of characters other than Beowulf, permitting us to see differences and similarities between Beowulf's heroism and that of the other characters. The last part examined the symbolic use of swords; this part looks at the various uses of swords in battle, providing a context for an eventual comparison with the situations of Hrunting and Nægling. It is remarkable that nobody else but Beowulf fails to use a sword effectively at his need. The phenomenon that a sword shatters in battle is peculiar to Beowulf. For example, Weohstan's sword, which belonged to Eanmund, successfully supports Wiglaf in the battle against the dragon in spite of the fact that it had been indirectly involved kin-killing. It is also significant that the poem features some characters who live by swords and fighting, with tragic consequences, which can also be compared with Beowulf's final battle. Here the sword becomes a blood-thirsty weapon and a clear metaphor of the chain of revenge.[1] Thus the circumstances involving swords other than Hrunting and Nægling develop a relevant background for comparison.

The Sigemund digression shows the most celebrated of monster-slayers, presumably so that he may be compared with Beowulf, in view of their similarity as dragon-slayers. In contrast with Nægling, the sword of Sigemund is successful in killing giants and a dragon:

> hæfdon eal-fela eotena cynnes
> sweordum gesæged. Sigemunde gesprong
> æfter deað-dæge dom unlytel,

syþðan wiges heard wyrm acwealde,
hordes hyrde. . . . . .
. . . . . .
hwæþre him gesælde, ðæt þæt swurd þurhwod
wrætlicne wyrm, þæt hit on wealle ætstod,
dryhtlic iren; draca morðre swealt. (ll.883-892)

very many of the ogres' race had they (Sigemund and his nephew Fitela) laid low with their swords. No little renown sprang up for Sigemund after the day of his death, for, hardy in fighting, he had slain a serpent, guardian of a treasure-hoard. . . . Yet such was his fortune that his sword pierced the wondrous snake so well that the lordly steel stuck fast in the rock; the dragon perished by this murderous blow. (p.25)

The Sigemund's sword is said to have been used in slaying "the kin of giants" (*eotena cynnes*) and later a dragon. He won honour after he had slain the dragon. This account of Sigemund shows a resemblance to the monster-and-dragon-slaying of Beowulf, who is also successful in killing Grendel and his mother, who are the kin of giants, and a dragon. He also obtains fame and glory after death along with a great deal of treasure, just as in Sigemund's story. However, there is a outstanding distinction between the two heroes in their luck with swords. It is said of Sigemund that "yet such was his fortune that his sword pierced the wondrous snake so well that the lordly steel stuck fast in the rock: the dragon perished by this murderous blow." Sigemund's *dryhtlic* sword perfectly supports him in his hour of need. On the other hand, at the battle against the dragon, Beowulf strikes the dragon's head with his sword and yet *hyt on heafolan stod* (l.2679b) "it stuck in the head." The difference does not mean that Beowulf is unable to use a sword, for he is able enough to use it on other occasions. It seems to show that Nægling which shatters in the dragon's head is not ordained to help its owner, either by accident or for some reason. However, this is to be discussed later in this thesis. As to Sigemund's sword, its particular origin or history is not mentioned, but it perfectly accomplishes its

duty to Sigemund as contrasted with Nægling.[2] There is an account of Sigemund's sword in Norse legend. Klaeber suggests that Sigemund receives a wondrous sword from the great god Odin.[3] If this is true, the sword may have the capacity to kill the dragon and his enemies because of its supernatural power passed on from Odin.[4] If Sigemund is to be associated with Sigmund in *Völsunga saga*, there is an interesting coincidence that Sigmund's sword, Gram, shatters at the last battle. It is said that Gram was given to Sigmund, and also broken, by Odin himself. However, the difference between Nægling and Gram is that the latter is then remade to be passed on to his son, Sigurd.[5] This recreation of the sword suggests the supernatural quality of Gram, while Nægling merely shows its fragility by shattering. Such a mysterious power of the sword reminds us of the giant-sword found by Beowulf in the hoard of Grendel's mother. Both these swords, Gram and the giant-sword, may have a similar supernatural characteristic in that they are not to be defeated. And yet the fact that the giant-sword is eventually melted by the hot blood of Grendel still suggests the imperfection of the sword, while the Sigemund story in *Beowulf* tells that it is the dragon which melts rather than his sword: *wyrm hat gemealt* (l.897b), "the serpent, all fiery, melted away" (p.25).

Wiglaf is the other monster-slayer mentioned in *Beowulf*. Wiglaf's sword has an important role in this poem if we remember Beowulf's abomination of the murder of kinsmen. The sword has much more of a history than Nægling. In the following description of the sword, what is emphasised is Weohstan's bravery and loyalty to his lord Onela in slaying his nephew and taking booty from him:

> gomel swyrd geteah,
> Þæt wæs mid eldum Eanmundes laf,
> suna Ohtere[*s*]. Þam æt sæcce wearð,

wr*æ*ccan wine-leasum, Weohstan bana
meces ecgum, ond his magum *æ*tb*æ*r
brun-fagne helm, hringde byrnan,
eald-sweord etonisc. Þ*æ*t him Onela forgeaf,
his g*æ*delinges guð-gew*æ*du,
fyrd-searo fuslic; no ymbe ða f*æ*hðe spr*æ*c,
þeah ðe he his broðor bearn abredwade. (ll.2610b-2619)

> . . . and he (Wiglaf) drew an ancient sword. That sword was known to men as the heirloom of Eanmund the son of Ohthere, whom Weohstan had slain in battle with the edge of his blade, when he was a friendless exile, carrying home to his own kinsfolk the gleaming burnished helm, the corselet of rings, the ancient sword made by ogres. All this armour ready for use Onela gave to him, though it had been the war-garb of a man of his own blood; nor did Onela take up the blood-feud, though it had been his brother's son that Weohstan slew. (p.69)

It is clear that Wiglaf's father, Weohstan, slew Eanmund, one of Onela's nephews. Onela is the king of the Swedes whom Weohstan serves. It is said of this sword: *þ*æ*t w*æ*s mid eldum Eanmundes laf* "that sword was known to men as the heirloom of Eanmund"; it is also *gomel swyrd* "ancient sword" or *eald-sweord etonisc* "the ancient sword made by ogres."[6] These descriptions show that Wiglaf's sword is regarded as a very old and valuable heirloom, taken by his father from Eanmund.[7]

It is helpful to explain the relation between the peoples of the Geats and the Swedes as well as between the individuals concerned in order to understand who has responsibility for the murder of his relatives and who has carried out his obligations. Since the Geats had started the war against the Swedes, Onela's father, Ongentheow killed H*æ*thcyn, Hygelac's brother. The Geats' responsibility for this conflict is manifestly suggested thus: *þa for onmedlan *æ*rest gesohton / Geata leode Guð-Scilfingas* (ll.2926-27), "when the Geatish people in their arrogance had first attacked the warlike Scylfings" (p.77). Eofor avenged his lord H*æ*thcyn in slaying Ongentheow. Onela, Ongentheow's son, succeeded to the Swedish throne after Ohthere,

his elder brother, had died, and his nephews had revolted against him.[8] The nephews then escaped from their native country to the Geats asking for refuge and reinforcement to defeat Onela. In this battle between the uncle and the nephews, Weohstan slew Eanmund, one of the nephews, on behalf of Onela as a loyal subject. It is, of course, clear that there is neither kinship nor obligation between Weohstan, who is a Waymunding and not a Geat, and Eanmund. It is not Weohstan, but Onela, who must be directly blamed for the murder of a relative according to the following ironic comment: *no ymbe ða fæhðe spræc, / þeah ðe he his broðor bearn abredwade* "nor did Onela take up the blood-feud, though it had been his brother's son." As victors usually do, Weohstan carries away the sword, the helmet and the corselet of Eanmund to Onela, who gives the booty back to Weohstan as a gift.

Though this homicide and taking booty are, no doubt, considered by warriors to be honourable and customary in killing enemies, the phrase *no ymbe ða fæhðe spræc, / þeah ðe he his broðor bearn abredwade* highlights the infamous deed of Onela. For Onela could be called "the slayer of Eanmund" just as Hygelac was called "the slayer of Ongentheow" even if he was not the actual slayer (L1968a). It is obvious that Onela commited the killing of kinsman through the sword of Weohstan.[9] The heirloom of Eanmund, therefore, taken as booty from the prince, is a reminder of the killing which should be avoided. It is a kin-killing token which Wiglaf inherits from his father. This indicates that an 'accidentally' wicked previous use of his sword does not affect Wiglaf's heroic performance.[10] Many swords in Germanic legend which work successfully even directly against kin, do not break later on.[11] In Wiglaf's case, his sword has not been used by Weohstan or himself against their own kin, and

this can be a reason why it effectively supports Wiglaf in the final battle of Beowulf. The inheritance of the sword brings about an expectation that Wiglaf will be as brave a warrior as his father from the passage: *He frætwe geheold fela missera, / bill ond byrnan, oððæt his byre mihte / eorlscipe efnan swa his ær-fæder* (ll.2620-2622), "For many seasons Weohstan kept these rich adornments, sword and corselet, until his son was able to accomplish heroic deeds as his father before him had done" (p.69). Here the sword seems to be a treasure, for the word *frætwe* refers to the sword and the corselet. In addition, it comes to be explicit from *eorlscipe efnan swa his ær-fæder* that Weohstan's deeds here should be interpreted as "noble deeds." Such a description of the sword manifestly shows the poet's concern for Weohstan's heroic deed rather than its kin-killing aspect. Horowitz omits this important fact and says that all swords are regarded as a bad weapon.[12] It is natural to relate such a brave deed to the audience but Onela's emphasised silence about his murder of his nephew draws attention to the question of whether such killing is acceptable throughout the poem when is associated with other examples of kin-killing such as those by Unferth or by Hæthcyn.

Though Wiglaf's sword is a reminder of the wicked murder its usefulness is justified by the situation where it is used in saving his lord and kinsman.[13] When he attempts to support Beowulf in killing the dragon, his sword is sufficient to harm the dragon, unlike Nægling. It does not break, but pierces the lower part of the dragon's body thus:

> Ne hedde he þæs heafolan, ac sio hand gebarn
> modiges mannes, þær he his mæges healp
> þæt he þone nið-gæst nioðor hwene sloh,
> secg on searwum, þæt ðæt sweord gedeaf,
> fah ond fæted, þæt ðæt fyr ongon

sweðrian syððan. (ll.2697-2702a)

> He took no heed of the head, though the hand of this brave man in his armour was burnt as he helped his kinsman by striking rather lower down at the spiteful creature, so that his gleaming gold-plated sword plunged in so well that from that time the fire began to die down. (p.71)

As soon as Nægling proves useless, Beowulf's situation is desperate. Wiglaf is not only brave enough to ignore the dragon's fury, but he also attempts to "avenge" his lord who has been fatally harmed by the dragon (ll.2688-93). He is able to "plunge" his gleaming sword into the dragon's belly as is clear from *ðæt sweord gedeaf, / fah ond fæted.* There are several comparisons between Wiglaf's sword and Nægling. The reliability of Wiglaf's sword is mentioned in lines 2628b-29a that *ne his mæges laf / gewac æt wige* "nor did his father's heirloom give way in the fray." This is clearly a critical comment on Nægling's fragility. It is also remarkable that Wiglaf's sword is represented as *fah ond fæted* "shining and gold-plated", while Nægling is *gomol ond græg-mæl* "ancient and grey-coloured." Both swords are considered to be old. However, these two contrary descriptions seem by design to suggest also the difference between Beowulf's old age and the youthfulness of Wiglaf.[14] As the meaning of Wiglaf's name is "the one who has been left after the battle," it is probably true that there is a contrast between Beowulf who is to die soon and Wiglaf who is to live long. It should not be neglected that Wiglaf's hand is burnt by the dragon's fire. This may imply that he has no extraordinary power in his hand as contrasted with Beowulf. His success springs from the dedicated duty and desire to help his lord and kinsman, as is emphasised by the final approving comment on Wiglaf after the others have escaped from the fight against the dragon: *Sibb æfre ne mæg / wiht onwendan þam ðe wel þenceð* (ll.2600b-01), "nothing can ever set aside the bonds of kinship, for a

man who thinks rightly" (p.69).

Thus Wiglaf's sword, in contrast, highlights the uselessness of Nægling, and its own success in piercing the dragon in order to save Wiglaf's lord and kinsman. The discrepancy between Nægling and Wiglaf's sword may correspond to a difference between the old hero who is going to die and the young one who will live.

We may now compare the monster-killing swords of *Beowulf* with several examples of swords embodying traditional heroism in this poem. The sword which Hunlafing placed on the lap of Hengest clearly denotes the obligation to vengeance in its ceremonious form:[15]

> Ða wæs winter scacen,
> fæger foldan bearm; fundode wrecca,
> gist of geardum; he to gyrn-wræce
> swiðor þohte þonne to sæ-lade,
> gif he torn-gemot þurhteon mihte,
> þæt he eotena bearn inne gemunde.
> Swa he ne forwyrnde worold-rædenne,
> þonne him Hunlafing hilde-leoman,
> billa selest, on bearm dyde,
> þæs wæron mid eotenum ecge cuðe. (ll.1136b-1145)
>
> Then winter had slipped away, and the bosom of earth was fair. The exile, the stranger, longed to be gone from those courts; yet he thought even more of avenging his wrongs that of crossing the sea, and whether he might contrive some vengeful meeting, since in his heart he remembered the men of the Jutes. Thus he did not reject what the whole world would counsel, when Hunlafing placed a flashing battle-blade, finest of broadswords, upon his lap; its edges were well known among Jutes. (pp.31-32)

Although Hengest had once been obliged to accept the truce with Finn, the king of the Frisians, he by no means forgets the death of his lord, Hnæf, king of the Danes. That he intends to avenge the death of Hnæf becomes explicit from the sequence of the words (*gyrn-wræce*) "vengeance for injury," (*torn-gemot*) "hostile encounter" and (*worold-rædenne*) "worldly arrangement, i.e. vengeance."[16] Therefore the sword, which is depicted as (*hilde-leoman*) "a flashing battle-blade" and (*billa selest*) "finest of

broad swords," (*þæs wæron mid eotenum ecge cuðe*) "whose edges were well known among Jutes," is used to indicate that the *worold-rædenne* "the universally acknowledged duty of vengeance" has to be accomplished.[17] This sword is presented as a formal token symbolising the traditional Germanic method of settling a feud.

Along with the swords described above, there are two more examples of swords as instrumental metaphors of the pursuit of vengeance. As to the death of Hæthcyn who is slain by Ongentheow (ll.2924-25), Hygelac is represented as avenging his brother Hæthcyn with his sword thus: *Hæðcynne wearð, / Geata dryhtne, guð onsæge. / Þa ic on morgne gefrægn mæg ðerne / billes ecgum on bonan stælan* (ll.2482b-85), "This attack proved fatal for Hæthcyn, lord of the Geats. I have heard how on the morrow, . . . as kinsman he revenged himself on his kinsman's slayer with the edge of the sword" (p.66). This is obviously because Hygelac has a particular obligation to avenge his brother. The sword of vengeance acquires a special righteousness in killing the slayer. It is actually Eofor who slew Ongentheow with a sword just after his brother Wulf was nearly slain by Ongentheow (ll.2961-81).[18] This action simultaneously becomes the vengeance for Eofor's lord Hæthcyn. Therefore this part of the poem, concerning the battle between the Geats and the Swedes, basically consists of a sequence of vengeance. It clearly emphasises the righteousness of revenge even if the action becomes the cause of a new war among the nations. Especially just after the account of Hygelac's revenge against Ongentheow (ll.2484-85), Beowulf himself recounts his righteous vengeance for Hygelac by killing of Dayraven. However, to consider the larger fateful context, what emerges is the everlasting war between the Frisians and the Geats, and also between the Swedes and the Geats. The remarkable respect in these battles

is that both wars have been started by the Geats' side. Furthermore, the ferociousness of such a feud is emphasised thus:

> Wæs sio swat-swaðu Sw[e]ona ond Geata,
> wæl-ræs weora wide gesyne,
> hu ða folc mid him fæhðe towehton (ll.2946-48)
>
> Far and wide one could see a trail of blood shed by Swedes and Geats, a token of how the two peoples had stirred their feud to the pitch of deadly onslaught. (p.77)

The poet underlines the horror of the everlasting feud between two countries by using the special compound *swat-swaðu*, "trail of blood shed." It is clear that Hygelac himself began the battle against the Frisians because of his (*wlenco*) "pride" (ll.1205b-14a), and that the Geats started also the feud against the Swedes because of their (*onmedlan*) "arrogance" (ll.2923b-27). Regarding the battle against the Swedes, the rise of the feud has probably been caused by Hæthcyn. So that the aggressiveness of Ongentheow (ll.2928-41a) is seen from the Geats' point of view, in truth, he has a reason to be aggressive because his wife, and his son Onela, have been captured. On the other hand, Hygelac himself clearly has to have some responsibility for beginning the feud between the Frisians and the Geats. He is consequently deprived of his life by Dayraven, a Frisian warrior. These circumstances lead us to understanding clearly the irresistible repetition of vengeance among the three nations in which the Geats are the aggressors. We have seen that the action of vengeance sometimes happens to become the cause of another battle in the round of repeated revenge, and that the chain of vengeance is often embodied by the motif of the sword.

It is also instructive to consider some examples of the uselessness of swords in order to realise the limits of their power. In the battle against Grendel, Beowulf's warriors' swords are unable to harm him because he has used a magic spell to remove the power

from them as recounted in the following lines:[19]

> Þone syn-scaðan
> ænig ofer eorþan irenna cyst,
> guþ-billa nan gretan nolde,
> ac he sige-wæpnum forsworen hæfde,
> ecga gehwylcre. (ll.801b-805a)

this wicked ravager was one whom no sword on earth, not the choicest of steel blades, could touch; he had cast a spell to blunt the edges of all victorious weapons. (p.23)

This passage tells us firm that Grendel seems to be invulnerable to swords, then that the uselessness of the swords is caused by Grendel's magic spell. Other swords sometimes show their uselessness against invincible armour.[20] For instance, Beowulf's helmet, which he wears in the battle against Grendel's mother, has never been harmed since a weapon-smith created it a long time ago thus: *þæt hine syðþan no / brond ne beado-mecas bitan ne meahton* (ll.1453b-1454), "so that henceforth no blade or battle-sword could bite upon it" (p.39). This is a minor example of the weakness of swords and the mysterious strength of the helmet. And Hrethel's mail-shirt is also invulnerable to swords, as we shall see later.

There are also more negative images of swords. As described above, even the action of vengeance carried out by the sword may be followed by another conflict. Here is an example of the use of sword as a blood-thirsty weapon.[21] Such an use is probably a rhetorical device to bring about a tragic atmosphere as seen in the description of the murder of Hygelac:

> No þæt læsest wæs
> hond-ge*mota*, þær mon Hygelac sloh,
> syððan Geata cyning guðe ræsum,
> frea-wine folca Fres-londum on,
> Hreðles eafora hiora-dryncum swealt,
> bille gebeaten. (ll.2354b-2359a)

Not the least of those hand-to-hand encounters was that in which Hygelac was slain, when in the shock of the fray the offspring of Hrethel and king of the Geats, a kindly lord to his people, died in Friesland by the thirsty sword that

drank his blood, and was beaten down by its blade. (p.63)

The epithet qualifying the sword, (*hiora-dryncum*) "battle-thirsty" shows its cruel use in battle and a kind of compassion toward Hygelac. However, the fact that this conflict has been caused by his *wlenco*, as mentioned above, suggests that for the Frisians, this battle is a defensive action against Hygelac, the invader, although it becomes the reason for Beowulf's vengeance for his lord. In view of Hygelac's aggressive intention beginning the war, the assault by the Frisians and Hygelac's death in the battle seem to be not unmerited. He plays such a role in the poem as those who live by the sword may die by it.

On the other hand, the sword which slays Heardred, the son of Hygelac, gives an example of undeserved death by the sword. Heardred had no responsibility for the outbreak of war, but he is killed because he has protected the Swedish princes, Eanmund and Eadgils, who have been forced into exile by their uncle Onela. By that time Onela has succeeded to the kingship of the Swedes. Here is the account of the conflict between the uncle and the nephews:

> hæfdon hy forhealden helm Scylfinga,
> þone selestan sæ-cyninga,
> þara ðe in Swio-rice sinc brytnade,
> mærne þeoden. Him þæt to mearce wearð;
> he þær [*f*]or feorme feorh-wunde hleat,
> sweordes swengum, sunu Hygelaces; (ll.2381-2386)
>
> they had rebelled against Onela, the helm of the Scylfings, a renowned prince and the noblest of the sea-kings who distributed riches in the kingdom of Sweden. It was this that set a term to Heardred's life, for it was the lot of Hygelac's son to receive a deadly wound by strokes of the sword in return for this hospitality. (p.63)

It is the fate of Heardred, to die by the sword as a reward for his (*feorme*) "hospitality." The sword here is a means to express the cruelty of fate. Thus, it may sometimes bring a misfortune to one who has never been involved in the feud.

The roles of the swords which appear in the account of Ongentheow's assault against the Geats are especially shown savage. When the Geats first began the fight against the Swedes, Onela and Ongentheow's wife were captured. Ongentheow intended an immediate counterattack to free his wife and his son. It is fair for Ongentheow to assail the Geats. Yet the description by a herald sent from Wiglaf of his savage threats against the Geatish survivors makes him out as the aggressor:

> Besæt ða sin-herge sweorda lafe
> wundum werge; wean oft gehet
> earmre teohhe ondlonge niht,
> cwæð he on mergenne meces ecgum
> getan wolde, sum' on galg-treowu[*m*]
> [*fuglum*] to gamene. (ll.2936-2941a)

> With his great army he then besieged those whom swords had left alive, though wearied by wounds; all night long he vowed again and again to bring disaster on that unhappy band, saying that on the morrow he would spill the blood of some of them with the blade's edge, and hang others on the gallows tree as sport for the birds. (p.77)

Ongentheow's ferocity is clearly part of Geat legend--for though he has a right to assail them to rescue his relatives, his vengefulness is ugly and extreme. In this passage, the symbol of the sword is used as the blood-thirsty weapon as shown in the phrases like *besæt . . . sweorda lafe / wundum werge* "he besieged those whom swords had left alive though wearied by wounds" and *meces ecgum / getan wolde* "he would spill the blood with the blade's edge." Not only the motif of the sword but also the gallows tree and the birds of prey suggest his savage and bloody nature.[22]

The examples described above indicate that the swords of the subordinate characters nomally prove themselves useful in battle, no matter what reputation they are supposed to bear. Sigemund's sword completely destroyed the dragon and did not melt. Wiglaf's sword is perfectly reliable in the extreme need in the help of his lord,

although it has been involved indirectly in a kin-killing. Ongentheow and other warriors are deeply involved in the chain of revenge played by the sword. These are typical instances of the Germanic heroism of the poem. It is noteworthy, however, that there is a critical attitude to the sword as a blood-thirsty weapon, judging from the messenger's presentation of the battle scene between the Danes and Ongentheow. The consequences of the round of revenge played by those personages lead us to contemplate not merely the transience of life but rather the self-destruction of the heroic world. This presents a new aspect to Beowulf's heroism, an awareness of a crisis in the heroic ethos. The awareness, then, reflects a radical element of Beowulf's heroism: he is completely involved in the heroic world but he shows an enlightened awareness of the limitations of traditional heroism. The next chapter presents examinations both of traditional heroism and of the distinctive character of Beowulf, sometimes comparing him with the subordinate personages in the poem.

NOTES

[1] A contrary example of this, as a defensive use of the sword, is in Hrothgar's declaration that he has protected his nation with his "sword" against the other countries (L1772a).

[2] Nægling appears in *Þiðriks Saga* with other famous swords, Mimming and Ekkisax. See H. R. E. Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962), p.159.

[3] Klaeber, p.162.

[4] The original legend of Sigemund is quite ambiguous. Talbot follows the historical identification of Sigemund as a Batavian, a branch of the Germanic people in "Sigemund the Dragon-Slayer," *Folklore* 94, No. 2 (1983), 153-62.. The supernatural power of this god-given sword may not be accepted unless the close connection with Norse

legend is established.

[5] William Morris, trans., *Volsunga Saga* (London: Walter Scott Publishing, n.d.). See Chapters 3, 11 and 12.

[6] There are other appellations of Wiglaf's sword such as: *bill* (L.2621a), *mæges laf* "what the kinsman has left" (L.2628b), *sweord . . . fah ond fæted* "gleaming gold-plated sword" (ll.2700b-01a), *sweorde* (L.2880b).

[7] There is clearly a distinction of Eanmund's sword from the *meces ecgum* (L.2614a), which has originally belonged to Weohstan and is used in slaying Eanmund.

[8] R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf* (Cambridge: C. U. P., 1959), p.412.

[9] This sword is not the heirloom of Eanmund but Weohstan's own sword (L.2614a).

[10] This point could work against my view of Nægling's failure. For if Nægling was Dayraven's sword, its use in the killing of Hygelac, like Weohstan's use of Eanmund's sword, is innocent, and it is only "accidentally" wicked for its subsequent user, Beowulf. There is, however, undoubtedly something unlucky about using a sword which has been involved in killing an uncle.

[11] For instance, Gram, the sword of Sigurd in *Völsunga Saga*, is used in fratricide. For Regin persuades Sigurd to slay his brother Fafnir. See Morris, Chapter 18.

[12] Horowitz, p.104.

[13] *Sweord* (L.2659b) is also regarded as a sword of loyalty. For Wiglaf here declares that the sword, the helmet, the armour and the coat of mail should be shared, which means he should fight through obligation to Beowulf. Then, his sword is truly successful in helping his lord.

[14] Davidson comments on the word *græg-mæl* that this "Germanic word refers less to colour than to a metallic, silvery gleam, like the pale light of dawn or hoar-frost." *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962), p.124.

[15] Though I do not follow her view, it should be noted that Brady regards *Hunlafing* as a sword-name through the lack of historical evidence that it was a personal name. pp.96-100.

[16] Some editors emend *worold-rædenne* to *worod-rædende* "ruler of a host"; however, the sequence of the words referring to vengeance here, and also the action such of placing the sword on Hengest's lap indicate that *worold-rædenne* has an association with an important decision which can be presumed from the dignified ceremony of the sword. Therefore it may be better to consider, without any emendations, that it refers to "what the world naturally requires," that is "vengeance."

[17] *Sweord-bealo* "death by the sword" (L.1147a) refers to the sword

which actually avenges Hnæf's death on Finn. After revenge has been achieved, the Danes take away the treasure of the Frisians along with the queen who is Hnæf's sister. The action of looting and releasing the relative after the battles is also noteworthy. It shows the importance of relationship and the normality of looting.

18 Here the words *ecgum sweorda* (L2961b), *brad[n]e mece* (L2978a), *eald-sweord eotonisc* (L2979a) refer to Eofor's sword which is used for vengeance. Wulf's sword, *wæpne* (L2965b), had been used in the fight against Ongentheow.

19 Other useless swords are the following: *sweord* (L437a), *gryrum ecga* "the terrors of the edges" (L483b) and *ealde lafe* "the ancient heirloom" (L795b) referring to the useless swords in the battle against Grendel; the *iren ær-god* "the pre-eminent iron" cannot harm Grendel's hand (L989a); *billa brogan* "the terrors of the swords" (L583a) and *fagum sweordum* "the blood-stained swords" (L586a) directly refer to the glory gained by the swords in battle, but they sound ironically in view of the cowardice of Unferth and other heroes in Hrothgar's hall.

20 *Fela laf[e]* "what the files have left" (L1032a) and *brond, beado-mecas* "battle-swords" (L1454a), are unable to damage the helmet which Beowulf is given as a reward. *Sweord* (L1286a) of *heard-ecg* "hard-edge" (L1288b) fails to cut the helmet of Grendel's mother. *Bite irena* "the bite of the iron" (L2259b) cannot break Beowulf's coat of mail.

21 Examples of a sword seen as a blood-thirsty weapon are: *billes bite* (L2060a), *sweorda lafe* (L2936b), *meces ecgum* (L2939b).

22 The image of cruelty also appears in line 1763a *ecg* and line 1765a *gripe meces* which is represented as what divests human beings of their lives as well as fire and flood etc. *Iren* in line 1848a also refers to the battle where Hygelac is to be slain. The other examples denoting "battle" are: *sweord-bealo* (L1147a), *ecga gelacum* (L1168a), *hilde-meceas* (L2202b), *sweordes swengum* (L2386a), *billes ecgum* (2485a), *sweord* (L2659b) and *ecgum sweorda* (L2961b). Blood (*blod*) is often emphasised: in Heorot (L486b), in the mere (L1422a), in Ongentheow's grey-haired head (L2974a). Blood shed in battle (*heaðo-swat*) should also be mentioned here.

Chapter Two: Beowulf and the Swords

Part I: Bestowal of Swords

This chapter provides a thorough examination of every sword connected with Beowulf. In contrast with the Part Two of Chapter One, this part considers the symbolic uses of Beowulf's swords. The bestowal of a sword indicates heroic quality, and the worthiness of the receiver above other warriors. In this examination, we will find Beowulf's preeminent rank in the hierarchy of the courts both of Hygelac and Hrothgar. The bestowal of sword on Beowulf has no hint of imminent war, unlike the sword placed on the lap of Hengest. Beowulf is characteristically involved in war only out of obligation to his lords. And Beowulf willingly offers Hygelac the reward which he had gained from Hrothgar, showing his lack of eagerness for gold, and rather suggesting that he regards gold and treasure primarily as a proof of loyalty and bravery.

At first, apart from the narrower question, it is necessary to discuss briefly what kind of hero Beowulf is through the function of the sword-as-gift. There is a significant account of Beowulf's heroic status when a sword is given to him by Hygelac. It is the sword which has belonged to Hrethel, Hygelac's father, which Hygelac gives Beowulf as a gift and performs a ceremony to bestow land and its ownership, along with this sword, upon him as a reward for his services to Hrothgar:

> Het ða eorla hleo in gefetian,
> heaðo-rof cyning, Hreðles lafe,
> golde gegyrede; næs mid Geatum ða

sinc-maðþum selra on sweordes had;
þæt he on Biowulfes bearm alegde,
ond him gesealde seofan þusendo,
bold ond brego-stol. (ll.2190-2196a)

Then Hygelac, the shield of earls, the king famous in combat, bade them fetch in the gold-trimmed heirloom of Hrethel; among the Geats there was no finer treasure in the shape of a sword. This he laid in Beowulf's lap, and gave him seven thousand hides of land, a hall, and a princely throne. (pp.58-59)

The account of this sword makes it clear, for it is the heirloom of king Hrethel, *Hreðles lafe*, that it is the best among the swords which belong to the Geats *næs mid Geatum ða / sinc-maðþum selra on sweordes had* "among the Geats there was no finer treasure in the shape of sword." Hygelac places this sword on Beowulf's lap and bestows on him land and its ownership. The use of a sword in this ceremony contrasts with the similar use when Hengest decides to go into battle against Finn. The sword signals the outbreak of the war in that situation, while the sword given to Beowulf is regarded as a reward for the accomplishment of his expedition to fight against Grendel and his mother. Therefore the bestowal of Hrethel's sword on Beowulf represents the legitimate achievement of peace in the world, and that there is no sign of feud and no hint of the outbreak of war.

The bestowal of Hrethel's heirloom has great importance to assess the status of Beowulf in the hierarchy of the Geats. It seems to be a usual course to bestow treasure from father to son, such as Wiglaf's sword. According to this custom, it is natural to pass it from Hrethel on to Hygelac and from Hygelac on to his son Heardred, although he might not have been born at that time. This means that Beowulf is regarded as of the same rank as Hygelac and Hygelac's heir. Before this, Beowulf has already inherited Hrethel's armour:

Onsend Higelace, gif mec hild nime,

beadu-scruda betst, þæt mine breost wereð,
hrægla selest; þæt is Hrædlan laf,
Welandes geweorc. (ll.452-455a)

send to Hygelac this peerless battle-raiment, this most excellent of corselets that protects my breast. It is a heirloom from Hrethel, and the handiwork of Weland. (p.14)

It seems that Hrethel had bestowed the armour not on Hygelac but on Beowulf, his grandson. This means that Hrethel or his direct heir regarded Beowulf as equal to Hygelac and his other sons. To mention this armour further, it has a magic power to protect Beowulf perfectly from any assault. This armour had been made by the legendary weapon-smith Weland, which may be the reason why it is powerful enough to defend Beowulf from the blow by Grendel's mother (ll.1547b-1549).[1] The complete protection afforded by the armour is contrasted with the unpredictable effectiveness of swords in battle. The fact that Beowulf's last act is to bestow Weland's armour upon Wiglaf, his nephew, after the last battle, telling him to defend the Geats, proves the significance of this armour for Beowulf. It is clear that this armour has never betrayed Beowulf in protecting himself. This larger reliance of Beowulf on the armour rather than on a sword suggests that protection rather than aggression is his role, and highlights his defensive character throughout the poem.

Beowulf is also given treasure by Hrothgar as a reward for killing Grendel. The treasure consists of a sword, a standard, a helmet and armour, which are attended by Hrothgar's eight horses:

Forgeaf þa Beowulfe brand Healfdenes
segen gyldenne sigores to leane,
hroden hilde-cumbor, helm ond byrnan;
mære maðþum-sweord manige gesawon
beforan beorn beran. (ll.1020-1024a)[2]

Then, in reward for victory, the son of Healfdene bestowed on Beowulf a gilded and adorned standard to be his emblem in battle, a helm and a corselet; also there was a renowned sword of great worth, which many saw carried before the hero. (p.28)

Mere maðþum-sweord indicates that this sword may also be a "famous" precious sword among the Danes, just as the sword given by Hygelac is among the Geats. This treasure is given to Hygelac by Beowulf when he returns to his country. Though it is not a sword but regal armour which is emphasised in the following account, Hrothgar's gift of a very precious set of armour to Beowulf shows how high is his estimation of Beowulf's deeds:

> Me ðis hilde-sceorp Hroðgar sealde,
> snotra fengel; sume worde het,
> þæt ic his ærest ðe est gesægde:
> cwæð þæt hyt hæfde Hiorogar cyning,
> leod Scyldunga, lange hwile.
> No ðy ær suna sinum syllan wolde,
> hwatum Heorowearde, þeah he him hold wære,
> breost-gewædu. Bruc ealles well! (ll.2155-2162)
>
> Hrothgar, the far-sighted ruler, gave me this garb of battle, and in one speech he bade me first tell you whose legacy this is. He said that King Heorogar, prince of the Scyldings, had owned it a long while; yet even so, Hrothgar did not wish to give this mail which had clothed his breast to his son, the bold Heoroweard, although he was loyal to him. Have joy in the use of it all! (p.58)

This armour is a legacy of King Heorogar, Hrothgar's elder brother, who did not bestow it on his own son, Heoroweard, against the natural due course but perhaps because of his youth. As with Hrethel's mailshirt, it is not mentioned to whom this armour was given by Heorogar, but it seems that Hrothgar has owned it and bestows it on Beowulf. Loyalty and sonship seem not to be sufficient to receive such a precious legacy. On the contrary, a proof or expectation of bravery or heroic deeds is required. For Heoroweard could not be given the armour, though he was loyal to his father. Consequently, Beowulf receives one of the most precious treasures among the Danes, along with the most precious sword among the Geats. This fact suggests that he is to be regarded as the most important retainer both in Hrothgar's court and in Hygelac's.

However, there is a notable account of Beowulf's adolescence in Hygelac's court. He has not been thought of as brave, on the contrary, the Geats were assured he was *æðeling unfrom*, not a courageous warrior (l.2188a). *Bealdode* is a remarkable word in *swa bealdode bearn Ecgðeowes, / guma guðum cuð, godum dædum, / dreah æfter dome* (ll.2177-2179a), "Thus Ecgtheow's son, a man well known for his combats and noble deeds, 'gave proof of his boldness' and acted as honour bade" (p.58). This account suggests that Beowulf may have had to prove his bravery because of the misinterpretation of his youth. Now follows the scene in which Beowulf is given the most precious sword of the Geats, proving the reformation of this misprised youth. In view of this, Beowulf's eagerness for brave deeds may not be pride but in the necessity of gaining the fame and honour which have not been his in youth. This is confirmed by the fact that he does not keep any of the treasures which are given to him as a reward for his deed, or rather that he willingly and lovingly presents them to Hygelac and his queen. Beowulf presents all of his reward from Hrothgar (l.1020-24a) to Hygelac (l.2152), and the necklace of Brosingas (*Brosinga mene*) given by Wealhtheow, to Hygd, the queen of the Geats.[3]

As another evidence of Beowulf's lack of greed, he does not take away any treasure but only the hilt of the giant-sword and Grendel's head from the hall of Grendel's mother although he saw the other treasures there. In view of this behaviour, it is not likely that Beowulf will be too eager for treasure and gold in the battle against the dragon. It is true that he himself confesses that he is going to lose his life because of seeking the treasure: *Nu ic on maðma hord mine bebohte / frode feorh-lege, fremmað gena / leoda þearfe!* (ll.2799-2801a), "Now that I have paid for this treasure hoard with my

full span of life, you must yourself still supply the needs of my people" (p.74). Thus, Beowulf typically obtains a treasure for bestowing it later upon his people (*minum leodum*) (l.2797b), just as did to his lord Hygelac (ll.2148-49a). Treasure or gold seems to be a "proof" of his loyalty as described in the lines:

> Mæg þonne on þæm golde ongitan Geata dryhten,
> geseon sunu Hrædles, þonne he on þæt sinc staraþ,
> þæt ic gum-cystum godne funde
> beaga bryttan, breac þonne moste (ll.1484-87)
>
> "Then when he gazes on that wealth, the lord of the Geats, Hrethel's son, may see and understand by this gold that I had found a bestower of rings who was noble in bounty, and had joy of it while I could" (p.40).

Therefore, bestowing gifts and treasure seems to be a customary proof of a lord's generosity, and likewise receiving them is a token of a warrior's loyalty to his own lord.

This examination of Beowulf's symbolic swords generally emphasises his traditional heroic side. The bestowal of swords on Beowulf by Hygelac and Hrothgar is a proclamation of his supreme status as champion in their courts. This honorific function of the sword is easily found in several situations in *Beowulf* such as his bestowal a sword on the boat-guard. Against the assumption of regarding the aged Beowulf as a hero too eager for gold, his willingness to present the bestowed reward to his lord Hygelac manifestly weakens such an idea and rather persuades us to presume that he pursues gold in order to obtain a proof of honour and certainly out of duty to his lord and his nation. As the function of the sword-as-gift shows, with the discussion of the treasure-giving, Beowulf is certainly involved in the heroic custom. The tradition involves him also in the chains of revenge linking the Geats to other peoples. His actions in war, however, are largely limited to avenging

his lord or destroying monsters for his people out of defensive motives, while the other personages put their swords to aggressive uses. The next part examines the distinctive functions of Hrunting and Nægling, which prove their fragility in Beowulf's hour of need. In comparison with the heroes who live by the sword, Beowulf is not represented as dependent on the sword.

NOTES

[1] The armour (*beado-hræ̆gl*) mentioned in line 552a cannot be identified with Weland's armour, for it is not clear if Beowulf had already inherited it at this time of his youth. However, even so, this armour also perfectly protects Beowulf's life from the attacks of the sea-monsters.

[2] This gift is presented by Beowulf to Hygelac later. It too is described as *maðþum-sweord*, "treasure-sword" (L1023a) and *guð-sweord geatolic*, "adorned battle-sword" (L2154a).

[3] It has to be mentioned here that not all of the horses are given to Hygelac and Hygd by Beowulf. It is written that four of them are bestowed upon Hygelac (L2163b) and three of them are given to Hygd (L2174b). This suggests that Beowulf keeps one of them, Hrothgar's steed in line 1037b, because he has been given eight horses (L1035b). However, it is wrong to overinterpret numbers in oral poetry.

Part II: Betrayal of Swords

Symbolically, as described in the last part, the bestowal of a sword suggests the highest estimation of Beowulf's social rank and his honour in the courts of Hygelac and Hrothgar. This part looks for a reason why Hrunting and Nægling are represented as unreliable through an examination of the function of Beowulf's swords in battle. In view of the examinations in the previous chapter, it must be noted that no subordinate character fails in using his sword. This phenomenon is peculiar to Beowulf alone in the poem. We must not forget that there can be several different explanations for it. It may, for example, be a mysterious phenomenon, without a reason, or because Beowulf cannot properly handle a sword for he is a bear-like hero. This thesis, however, presents another possiblity to the enigma of the vulnerability of Hrunting and Nægling.

We now come to the core of this thesis, the enigma of the failure of Beowulf's swords in battle. The reason for this characteristic, which is peculiar to Beowulf, will be approached by examining the swords in question. It seems to be too easy to ascribe this phenomenon to peculiar vulnerability such as other heroes sometimes have.[1] This might be argued if Beowulf could not use any sword at all whenever he tried to kill his enemies with it. However, Beowulf is represented in the poem as being failed by his sword only at his hour of extreme need. Moreover, the swords which betray Beowulf's expectation in battle, Hrunting and Nægling, are both reputable in killing enemies and seem to have been trusted by Beowulf until, when his life is threatened, they let him down. The situation where

Beowulf's swords fail in killing monsters seems to establish a significant meaning in the poem because of its peculiarity to Beowulf. Klaeber observes that this phenomenon can be frequently seen in old Germanic literature, citing Saxo Grammaticus and *Volsunga Saga*.[2] For instance, he extracts an example from Saxo Grammaticus:

> His father also told him to decide with supreme care on a blade which he could safely use. A number were offered, but as soon as Uffi grasped the hilt and drove it each sword was crushed to splinters. There was not one, however hard-tempered, that did not shatter into many fragments with the first blow.[3]

This passage explains the uselessness of the swords by the mighty strength of Uffi's arm. There is a similarity between Uffi and Beowulf in that they both have a powerful force in their hands. However, in this passage, Uffi tests each sword before he uses it in actual battle. This does not mean that Uffi breaks the swords in battle but simply shows that all swords are too fragile to be handled by him.[4] Furthermore, it is not only swords but also armour which is broken by Uffi because of his extraordinarily huge body. So the point of this passage is to relate Uffi's unusual strength and the size of his body rather than to signify the uselessness of the swords. This factor does not appear in Beowulf's case because the worthlessness of the swords is revealed only twice and at crises. Another difference from Uffi is obvious in that Beowulf does not break a sword in the battle against the sea-monsters (ll.553b-58). Indeed this occasional vulnerability of Beowulf in using swords seems to be a characteristic particular to him.

It remains a problem, however, why the swords of Beowulf become useless or shatter into pieces in his need. Is this because of the excessive weight of his blows, or are there other reasons to explain this phenomenon plausibly? It must be admitted again that

this enigma can be regarded as simply inscrutable or as a motif inherited from Germanic legend, as Klaeber suggests. It could also be because Grendel's mother, like Grendel, might have enjoyed a magic spell to make any sword useless, or the dragon has been protected with hard skin. It may be because Beowulf is regarded as a "bear-like" hero, so that his blows are too powerful for those swords. Or the failure could be a reminder that all humans must die, as Beowulf himself says: *se lic-homa læne gedreoseð, fæge gefealleð* (ll.1754-55a), "this fleeting body must crumble away and fall, marked out for death" (p.47). If these suppositions are acceptable, this poem could be just a different version of analogues in Germanic legends. What is attempted in this thesis is to investigate the meaning of these unavailing swords from a different line of reasoning, namely that this enigma is intentionally devised to reveal the unreliability of swords which have killed kindred.

The poem is not always logically consistent and contains different accounts of a single event; as in the two versions of the fight against Grendel and in the comments made on the accursed hoard.[5] However, the poet himself tries to explain the enigma of unavailing swords, thus:

> wæs sio hond to strong,
> se ðe meca gehwane, mine gefræge,
> swenge ofersohte, þonne he to sæcce bær
> wæpen wundum heard; næs him wihte ðe sel. (ll.2684b-2687)
>
> The hand was too strong, which overtaxed each sword, I heard, by his blow, when he carried a weapon hardened by wounds to battle; in no way was it the better for him thereby.[6]

This seems sufficiently reasonable for us to accept it. However, this statement does not allow for the fact that Beowulf sometimes uses his sword without any problem. If his grip is always too strong to use a sword, not only the hard sword but also any kind of sword would

no doubt shatter into pieces. But the failure in battle with a sword happens only twice, so that *wæpen wundum heard* must properly refer to Nægling and Hrunting in particular. The point which the poet tries to explain here is either the extraordinary strength of Beowulf's blow or the untrustworthiness of certain very strong swords, or both. The possible answers to this problem are either that his strength is literally too great to use even the strongest swords and the poet did not care that this was inconsistent with other battles in the poem; or that it is not his strength of arm but his sword which has something wrong with it, something which is tested to destruction by Beowulf's blows. The latter presumption, the treachery of the sword, is preferable if there is irony to be perceived in the application of *wundum heard.* Instead of the popular emendation *wundrum*, Bolton retains the MS. reading *wundum* commenting correctly enough that "It would seem that a Germanic sword gained in strength from blood and wounds making association with *ahyrded heaðo-swate* 'hardened by the blood of battle' (1460a)."[7] The fact that the only swords Hrunting and Nægling prove useless in battle for Beowulf identifies *wæpen wundum heard* as these particular swords. The fragility of Hrunting and Nægling contradicts the literal meaning of *wundum heard*, and further emphasises their betrayal of the positive expectation introduced by the phrase. This is an irony at the expectation that swords are hardened through many battles. Their betrayal is affirmed by the last line in the citation above, which turns out to mean that Beowulf could be unlucky to have used the swords in battle. There is another example of this kind of irony supporting this discussion. *Guð-wine* "friend in battle," which refers to Hrunting in line 1810a, seems a metonym of a sword. This also sounds ironically after

Hrunting has proved itself by no means a "friend in battle" for Beowulf. Therefore, it is plausible to take the words *wundum heard* in an ironical sense, for we have the fact that both *wundum heard* and *guð-wine* highlight the failure of those swords in battle, the outcome of which proves contrary to their literal senses. This phenomenon perhaps suggests that the *Beowulf* poet might use these appellations "intentionally" in this context to show an ironical attitude toward these swords, Hrunting and Nægling in particular. Garmonsway translates "failed," but the anthropomorphic "betrayed" would be equally good for named swords. This could, of course, simply be magic, or a folktale motif without particular reason. However, if this is so, there would be no meaning in showing us these ironical situations, the contradiction between those swords' failures in battle and their appellations referring to the helpfulness in battle. The poet seems to draw our attention to this contradiction, judging from the emphasis on their "unexpected" failures. It is necessary, then, to discuss every sword and its circumstance where used by Beowulf to destroy his enemies in order to confirm that such a betrayal is unique to Hrunting and Nægling.

At the beginning, let us take an example of a sword which helps Beowulf to kill sea-monsters. This battle shows that Beowulf can use a sword in killing his enemies, a nameless and simply ordinary sword:

> 'Me to grunde teah
> fah feond-scaða, fæste hæfde
> grim on grape; hwæþre me gyfeþe wearð,
> þæt ic aglæcan orde geræhte,
> hilde-bille; heaþo-ræs fornam
> mihtig mere-deor þurh mine hand.' (ll.553b-558)
>
> "One fell and murderous foe dragged me down to the bottom of the sea, and the grim creature held me fast in its grip. Yet my fortune granted that I might plunge the point of my battle-sword into the monster; the shock of combat carried off that mighty sea-beast by my hand." (p.17)

From the phrase *orde gerǽhte*, it is clear that Beowulf can manage to hit the monster with the sword (*hilde-bille*).[8] It should be noticed that the storm of the battle *heaþo-rǽs*, possibly meaning strokes of the sword, destroys the powerful sea-monster "through my hand" (*þurh mine hand*). It suggests the metonym of the hand possessing strength in place of the sword. The description of the assault of the sea-monster shows another example of the metonymy that the elemental force in restraining or destroying enemies is ascribed to the grip of hands rather than weapons. The sea-monster drags him to the bottom of the sea, into its own territory, holding him firmly in his grip (*fǽste hǽfde / grim on grape*). This reminds us of the battle between Grendel and Beowulf where they both fight with their hands only, and also Beowulf's mention of his reliance on his hand while he struggles with Grendel's mother:

> strenge getruwode,
> mund-gripe mægenes. Swa sceal man don,
> þonne he æt guðe gegan þenceð
> longsumne lof; na ymb his lif cearað. (ll.1533b-36)
>
> he put his trust in his strength and the force of his hand-grip. Thus should a man act when he means to win long-lasting renown in the fray, and should never be concerned for his life. (pp.41-42)

It is remarkable that he does not find the giant-sword for killing Grendel's mother until he puts his trust in his strength instead of in Hrunting. One could say that he relies on his strength and the strength of his sword arm rather than on the sword itself. And the swimming competition itself is another example to emphasise the extraordinary strength of Beowulf's arms. However, it cannot be neglected or denied that he is in practice able to use a sword successfully.

To discuss the situations where Beowulf's swords fail, although we have just seen that he can conquer with the sword, the battle

against Grendel's mother shows that the sword Hrunting does not work. Hrunting is given to Beowulf by Unferth, who seems to be inferior to Beowulf although he is still accounted a great warrior in Heorot (ll.1166b-1168a). Considering the character of Unferth, which may be connected with Hrunting's uselessness in battle, we cannot overlook his murder of the kinsmen *þeah ðu þinum broðrum to banan wurde, / heafod-mægum; þæs þu in helle scealt / werhðo dreogan, þeah þin wit duge* (ll.587-589), "although indeed you were the slayer of your brothers, your closest kin. For that you shall suffer damnation in Hell, clever as you are!" (p.18). This kind of murder may not seem so shameful as to debar Unferth from being regarded as a respectable warrior in Heorot, but it is utterly despised by Beowulf, saying Unferth will be damned for this sinful deed. When he is dying after the battle against the dragon, he is grateful never to have commited the murder of kinsmen:

> Ic ðæs ealles mæg,
> feorh-bennum seoc, gefean habban;
> forðam me witan ne ðearf Waldend fira
> morðor-bealo maga, ðonne min sceaceð
> lif of lice. (ll.2739b-2743a)
>
> I can rejoice in all this, though I am stricken with deadly hurt, for when my life slips from my body the Ruler of men will have no cause to accuse me of the murderous slaughter of any kinsmen. (p.72)

He proud that he is guiltless of the murder of kinsmen (*morðor-bealo maga*). He expects that God will allow him to have joys (*gefean*) because of his innocence of this kind of murder. This establishes the fact that he regards the murder of kinsmen is as wrong and even as a "sin." In these lines it is explicit that he has assumed an determination to avoid kin-killing and has been successful in the attempt. Kin-killing may be less wrong than the betrayal of a lord, but, Beowulf's dying prayer emphasises that it must be avoided.

Thus the fact that Unferth passes Hrunting to Beowulf and the sword proves useless may be connected to the unrighteousness of this particular kind of murder. Hrunting's failure may mean that Beowulf exposes the unworthy quality of a sword which has been the instrument of fratricide. It seems that only Beowulf's hand proves Hrunting worthless, for the famous sword has often been used in brave deeds:

> Næs þæt þonne mætost mægen-fultuma,
> þæt him on ðearfe lah ðyle Hroðgares;
> wæs þæm hæft-mece Hrunting nama;
> þæt wæs an foran eald-gestreona;
> ecg wæs iren, ater-tanum fah,
> ahyrded heaðo-swate; næfre hit æt hilde ne swac
> manna ængum, þara þe hit mid mundum bewand,
> se ðe gryre-siðas gegan dorste,
> folc-stede fara. Næs þæt forma sið
> þæt hit ellen-weorc æfnan scolde. (ll.1455-1464)
>
> Not least among his powerful aids was that which Unferth, Hrothgar's spokesman, lent him in his time of need--a hilted sword, the name of which was Hrunting. It was peerless among ancient treasures; the edge was of steel, gleaming with twigs of venom, hardened by blood shed in combats; never in battle had it failed any man who grasped it in his hand as he dared set out on dread adventures or go to where armies gathered. This was not the first time that it must accomplish a deed of valour. (p.40)

There are many honorific descriptions of Hrunting in these lines such as: *næs . . . mætost mægen-fultuma* "not the least of the powerful help," *foran eald-gestreona* "peerless among ancient treasures," *ater-tanum fah* "gleaming with twigs of venom," *ahyrded heaðo-swate* "hardened by blood shed in combats."[9] It is also specifically said that it had never betrayed (*swac*) anyone who grasped it with hands and that it was not the first time that it had done a courageous deed. From these descriptions, Hrunting is certainly one of the most reliable of swords. And Beowulf is the first to find it useless in battle. He chivalrously understates the uselessness of Hrunting in lines 1659-60 *Ne meahte ic æt hilde mid Hruntinge / wiht gewyrcan,*

þeah þæt wæpen duge "Nor in this battle could I achieve anything with Hrunting, fine though that weapon may be."

As to Hrunting's failure, the poet emphasises its "betrayal" of Beowulf. This supports the idea that Hrunting's infamy is found by Beowulf. The following lines clearly show this aspect:

> Ða se gist onfand,
> þæt se beado-leoma bitan nolde,
> aldre sceþðan, ac seo ecg geswac
> ðeodne æt þearfe; ðolode ær fela
> hond-gemota, helm oft gescær,
> fæges fyrd-hræg1; ða wæs forma sið
> deorum madme, þæt his dom alæg. (ll.1522b-1528)[10]
>
> But the newcomer then found that the flashing battle-blade would not bite, nor harm her life, for the edge failed the prince in his need. It had endured many hand-to-hand encounters, and often it had sheared through some helmet or some doomed man's battle-garb; it was the first time for this precious treasure that its honour failed. (p.41)

Hrunting betrays Beowulf's expectation: *ac seo ecg geswac / ðeodne æt þearfe* "for the edge failed the prince in his need." This reveals its anthropomorphic part in the fight.Hrunting. *Ða wæs forma sið / deorum madme, þæt his dom alæg* "it was the first time for this precious treasure that its honour failed" means that it is with Beowulf that the excellent reputation of the sword is lost--as had previously with its owner. In short, Beowulf proves that Hrunting is not a strong sword but has an infamy in its history, namely the murder of kinsmen. In Beowulf's speech, the poet uses the appellation of a sword as a "friend in battle" (*guð-wine*), referring to Hrunting (l.1810a). This sounds ironically, for Hrunting had not been Beowulf's "friend in battle."

Difficulty has arisen for Beowulf before the betrayal of Hrunting, in that Grendel's mother has a righteous reason to avenge her son's death in this battle. Although Grendel invades Heorot out of his jealousy (ll.86-89a), not for any good reason, Grendel's mother is

often depicted as "she tries to avenge her son."[11] Vengeance seems to be acceptable to Anglo-Saxon poets, if it is to be carried out to avenge the death of one's lord or kinsman. Accordingly, Grendel's mother has a more justified reason to assault Heorot than Grendel has. This may explain why Grendel's mother nearly overcomes Beowulf at the first stage of the battle. Like Grendel she does not use any sword but grabs Beowulf. Only when his life seems to be at her mercy does she try to stab him with a seax, a battle knife (ll.1545-1546a). The fact that the strength of her grip is powerful enough to take away Beowulf into the bottom of the water (ll.1540-1547a) corresponds to Grendel, who also relies on his hand and cannot handle a sword in battle.

The giant-sword which is used to kill Grendel's mother has now to be mentioned. Beowulf manages to handle this sword despite its size too large for other men to carry it. The sword is found by Beowulf in Grendel's mother's hoard just after he was nearly stabbed by her, and it is also useful in killing her:

> þæt hire wiþ halse heard grapode,
> ban-hringas bræc; bil eal ðurhwod
> fægne flæsc-homan; heo on flet gecrong,
> sweord wæs swatig, secg weorce gefeh. (ll.1566-1569)
>
> He struck so wrathfully that the sword took her hard on the neck and broke the rings of bone; the broadsword passed straight through her death-doomed flesh. She fell to the floor. The sword was gory; the warrior rejoiced at his work. (pp.42-43)

This passage shows that Beowulf is perfectly successful in handling this gigantic sword. The descriptions of killing, *hire wiþ halse. . . grapode* "took her on the neck," *ðurhwod fægne flæsc-homan* "straight through her death-doomed flesh" emphasise the power of the sword over the monster. Then follows a remarkable phrase: *Næs seo ecg fracod hilde-rince*, "this sword was not useless to the warrior"

(ll.1575b-76a). This refers back to Hrunting which has proved worthless to Beowulf just before the giant-sword is given to him. This leads to the question why the giant sword is useful where Hrunting is not. Hrunting is a wicked sword for it has been used in murdering kinsmen as discussed above, while this giant-sword is found by Beowulf, and is ordained to be so by God (ll.1554b-56). Another reason why the giant-sword defeats the monster may be that Hrunting is common but that this sword has magic power. However, there is no evidence that the sword has been specially produced to destroy monsters, on the contrary, the descriptions of the sword are relatively similar to those of other swords such as, *hring-mæl, ecgum þyhtig, eald-sweord eotenisc.*[12] *Hring-mæl* is used in the description of Hrunting (l.1521b), and even the mysterious glitter of the sword in lines 1570-72a continues the resemblance to Hrunting which is called a *beado-leoma* (l.1523a). *Ecgum þyhtig* has a similar sense to *ecgum dyhttig* (l.1287a) and *heard-ecg* (l.1288b), which refer to the useless Hrunting. These characteristics are common to many swords in the poem. The only differences of this sword from others are its extraordinarily large size and the fact that it is supposed to be given by God. This sword is described as *eald-sweord eotenisc* (l.1558a), which is also used in the descriptions of Wiglaf's sword *eald-sweord etonisc* (l.2616a) and Eofor's sword *eald-sweord eotonisc* (l.2979a). It is very notable that they are all successful in killing their enemies. However, this cannot be the sole reason of invincibility in a sword because the helmet of Ongentheow is also mentioned as *entiscne helm*, which is torn by Eofor's sword (l.2979b). The meaning of the word *eotenisc* or *entisc* is ambiguous, being able to have several senses such as "belonged to giants," "made by giants," "used against giants" or "of gigantic size." This word could

probably connote that the exotic characteristic of such swords, as being decorated with wavy patterns, and also their large size. It perhaps indicates their special antiquity and value, like the other frequently-used word (*laf*) "what is left," for the word "giants" refers to a very ancient period.[13]

Then, if there is no clear evidence to conclude that this sword has been specially made or holds a magic power to destroy monsters, the most plausible reason why this sword succeeds is a Christian one, that God allows Beowulf to have this sword as a help. This reason is offered by Beowulf's own testimony: *ac me geuðe ylda Waldend / þæt ic on wage geseah wlitig hangian / eald-sweord eacen--oftost wisode / winigea leasum* (ll.1661-64a), "but the Ruler of Men granted that I might see hanging, fair on the wall, an ancient sword of more than human size--how often has He guided the friendless!" (p.45). It seems to be adequate to explain that the giant-sword is useful in killing Grendel's mother in a way contradicted by the later comment on the fragility of Beowulf's swords; but subsequently the sword melts away. Concerning the interpretation of this melting sword, Viswanathan remarks that "The giant-sword . . . became for him (Beowulf) a divinely ordained sword of justice. . . . The blade vanishes once the mission is fulfilled, and this phenomenon, beside being miraculous and dramatic, suggests that the warrior-hero's vocation, for which he is predestined by God, is at last finished."[14] This interpretation seems not to be conclusive in insisting that the purpose in the sword's vanishing could be because the "mission" is fulfilled. For there is not enough evidence that the sword is sent by God to accomplish a "mission" in killing Grendel's mother, on the contrary, what happens exactly is that Beowulf "found" (*geseah*) the sword by God's help.[15] Then, does the melting

of the sword just accidentally happen? It is, of course, very likely that this is one of fabulous elements in the poem. Nevertheless, there seems to be another possible interpretation of the melting sword: the melting has nothing to do with the God's purpose, it simply indicates an imperfection of the sword in withstanding the hot blood of the monsters:

> Þa þæt sweord ongan
> æfter heaþo-swate hilde-gicelum,
> wig-bil wanian. Þæt wæs wundra sum,
> þæt hit eal gemealt ise gelicost,
> ðonne forstes bend Fæder onlæteð,
> onwindeð wæl-rapas, se geweald hafað
> sæla ond mæla; þæt is soð Metod.
> . . . . . .
> . . . . . wæs þæt blod to þæs hat,
> ættren ellor-gæst, se þær inne swealt. (ll.1605b-1617)[16]
>
> Then, because of the blood shed in that combat, the sword, that fighting blade, began to dwindle away into deadly icicles; it was a marvel of marvels how it all melted away, just as ice does when the Father who has power over times and seasons loosens the bonds of frost and unbinds the fetters of the pool--such is true Providence! . . . so hot was that blood, and so venomous the being of the otherworld who had perished there. (p.43-44)

The sword is reduced to *hilde-gicelum* "icicles of battle" by *heaþo-swate* "the blood of battle." Brady says that "Obviously *-gicel* is a metaphor, a conscious transfer--based on resemblance--from the primary referent, 'splinters' of ice melting when spring comes, to another, 'splinters of frosty steel,' with which it is not essentially, even for the moment, identical, the two referents standing in different referential and semantic ranges."[17] This use of the compound supports the idea that icicles which melt in spring resemble the "icicles of battle," the giant-sword as it melts. This suggests that the giant sword is unable to withstand the blood of the monsters which is "so hot and venomous." The symbolically fragile image of the melting sword like "ice" comes to point out the fragility or transience of the sword. The passage *wæs þæt blod to*

þæs hat, / ættren ellor-gæst, se þær inne swealt shows the power of the monsters' blood over the giant-sword. Thus the situation where the giant-sword prevailed over Grendel's mother is overturned, and the blood of Cain's kin now destroys the sword. Thus the sword and the monsters destroy each other. When we compare the battle between Sigemund and the dragon, it is the dragon which is melted away by its own heat (L897b). Something seems to be required to explain why the giant-sword is melted by the hot and poisonous blood of the monsters.[18]

A possible explanation is related to *eoten* "giant." Though it can be concluded that *eotenisc-sweord* is to be given almost the same meaning as "ancient sword" or "gigantic sword," *giganta geweorc* (L1562b) indicates that the giant-sword has been made by giants. Giants are accounted the descendants of Cain:

> Þanon untydras ealle onwocon,
> eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas,
> swylce gigantas, þa wið Gode wunnon
> lange þrage; he him ðæs lean forgeald. (ll.111-14)
>
> From him (Cain) sprang all unholy broods, ogres and elves and the walking dead, and those giants, too, who for long ages waged war upon God--He paid them their due reward for that! (p.6)

On the other hand Grendel and his mother are also of the same kin of Cain (ll.106-114). Therefore Grendel's mother is destroyed and Grendel is decapitated by the very sword which their own kin has produced. Puhvel assumes that the motif of the sword which harms the owner may well assert itself independently here, rather than as an echo of the motif of the slaying of a giant or other kind of ogre with his own sword which occurs in a number of Icelandic sagas.[19] If the treatment of this melting sword is independent from myth, there may be something significant in it. The fact that the sword melts like ice suggests that the sword successful in killing the

monster is meant to be contaminated (*ættren* indicates this meaning), possibly with the blood of the owner or of the same kin to him, melting away as if it "died" (*swealt*). The important point to be remarked is that the destruction of the monsters and the giant-sword are caused by Beowulf. The giant-sword has not been contaminated by the blood of its owners until Beowulf uses it in slaying Grendel's mother and in cutting off Grendel's head. Though it is easy to ascribe this phenomenon simply to a magic effect of the monstrous blood, it can be said that Beowulf brings about this destruction. It is clear that Beowulf defends the land of the Danes, slaying monsters out of duty, and that he incidentally destroys the giant-sword. Thus Beowulf can be regarded as having destroyed both the fratricidal monsters and their sword, for Grendel and his mother are the descendants of Cain, the original fratricide. The giant-sword can be also represented as a wicked sword which has betrayed its owner.

The hilt (the slayer) and the Grendel's head (the slain) presented to Hrothgar by Beowulf have another significance in the poem. There is an inscription carved on the hilt telling of the destruction of the giant-kin:[20]

> On ðæm wæs or writen
> fyrn-gewinnes, syðþan flod ofsloh,
> gifen geotende, giganta cyn;
> frecne geferdon; þæt wæs fremde þeod
> ecean Dryhtne; him þæs ende-lean
> þurh wæteres wylm Waldend sealde. (ll.1688b-1693)
>
> There was engraved upon it the origin of that ancient strife after which the flood and the gushing ocean had struck down the giant race--they had brought that peril upon themselves. Theirs was a nation estranged from the Eternal Lord, and therefore the Ruler gave them their final reward by surging water. (p.46)

From this passage, it is virtually clear that this flood is biblical. This is the most plausible interpretation, considering the prominence of Cain in *Beowulf*.[21] It is not easy to identify the precise

derivation of this description, and yet it is worth noting the emphasis on the destruction of the giants. *Fyrn-gewinnes* refers to an unidentified "ancient strife" between God and giants (probably from Genesis), in which God destroyed them by flood. The phrase *þæt wæs fremde þeod ecean Dryhtne* seems to suggest that the period of the giants had already perished for good. Then, it is possible to speculate that this description may not only suggest the familiar biblical story but also figuratively tells the destruction of the giants' period which is associated with the pagan period before Christianity was introduced. Therefore, the description of the hilt which shows the destruction of the giants corresponds to a second destruction of giants, of the giant sword and of Grendel, which indicates the limited existence of everything in this world, in spite of how they have formerly been prosperous and dominant. Thence, an anxiety for the transience of the world emerges in Hrothgar's mind and urges him to give gnomic advice to Beowulf in the following lines.

The melting sword is not directly related to the kin-killing theme as is Hrunting, but, it certainly shows us an example of worldly transience, and in particular the destruction of the giants, and the giants in *Beowulf* are the descendants of the first murderer, Cain.

We must now turn to Nægling, and a more complicated discussion. It is not clear where Nægling comes from and to whom it has belonged before Beowulf obtains it. We must try to identify Nægling before discussing the meaning of its shattering in the battle against the dragon.

The word *Nægling* appears only in line 2680b, and it is hard to identify it for certain with any previously described sword. There seem to be two possibilities, stemming from the interpretations of the battle against Dayraven:

Symle ic him on feðan beforan wolde,
ana on orde, ond swa to aldre sceall
sæcce fremman, þenden þis sweord þolað,
þæt mec ær ond sið oft gelæste,
syððan ic for dugeðum Dæghrefne wearð
to hand-bonan, Huga cempan.
Nalles he ða frætwe Fres-cyning[e],
breost-weorðunge bringan moste,
ac in campe gecrong cumbles hyrde,
æþeling on elne; ne wæs ecg bona,
ac him hilde-grap heortan wylmas,
ban-hus gebræc. Nu sceall billes ecg,
hond ond heard sweord ymb hord wigan. (ll.2497-2509)

I would always go before him in the marching host, alone in the van, and thus, while life lasts, I shall do battle, as long as this sword endures. It has often done me good service, early and late, ever since I slew Dæghrefn, the champion of the Franks, with my own hand before the flower of the host. Never was he able to bring to the Frisian king the rich jewel which had adorned Hygelac's breast, for the standard-bearer fell slain in the contest, a high-born man in all his valour. Nor did the sword's edge slay him, but my hostile grasp crushed the beating of his heart and the frame work of his bones. Now the edge of this blade, this hand and this hard sword, must fight for the hoard. (p.66-67)

In the passage preceding this, Beowulf recalls his brave deeds in the past and many conflicts against other countries to strengthen himself, before he sets forth to do battle with the dragon. The last sentence *Nu sceall billes ecg, / hond ond heard sweord ymb hord wigan* proclaims that Beowulf intends to bear to the battle against the dragon the sword, *þis sweord* (l.2499b), which he has used since the fight against Dayraven. It is certainly possible, then, to regard this sword as Nægling. The problem is that it could have had at least three possible owners: Dayraven, Hygelac, or less likely, Beowulf himself. This problem is hard to solve, and has to be discussed with the other materials related with this sword, such as *mære maðþum-sweord* (l.1023a) and *incge-lafe* (l.2577a). Davidson explains that the sword which was given to Hygelac by Beowulf (l.1023a) returns to Beowulf, assuming the ambiguous word *incge-lafe* to be *Incges laf* "heirloom of Ing," the Danish ancestor: "We know that a

Danish sword, described as 'a famous treasure-sword' (L1023a), was indeed presented to Beowulf by Hrothgar as a reward for his great service, and it is conceivable that this was Nægling. We are told that Beowulf handed it along with the other gifts to his lord, King Hygelac, but it could have returned to his possession later, after or before Hygelac's death."[22] This assumption explains relatively well the meaning of the ambiguous word *incge-lafe* and gives an acceptable interpretation how Beowulf obtains the sword before or after the battle aginst Dayraven. However, this route of inheritance can most easily be conceived if Hygelac brought this Danish sword to the battle. There is no such a description of the sword, and in addition, there is no mention of the history of this sword in line 1023a.

When we consider that the acquisition of reputable armour and weapons, discussed in the previous chapter, is common to recount the history of the gift and its reputation, especially if it had belonged to the founder of the Danish country. Hrethel's armour which has been given to Beowulf is identified with its former holder and its legendary maker (ll.452-455). Furthermore, Hygelac bestows on Beowulf the sword which belonged to Hrethel (ll.2190-2196a). In both these instances the ancestral holders of the royal family are mentioned explicitly. It is noteworthy that Beowulf explains the history of the armour which has been given by Hrothgar when he presents it to Hygelac (ll.2155-2162). There is no account concerning the sword there even if it is presented along with other treasures. Beowulf's comment, *sume worde het, / þæt ic his ærest ðe est gesægde* (ll.2156b-2157), "in one speech he (Hrothgar) bade me first tell you whose legacy this is" (p.58) reveals that it seems to be necessary to tell the significant holders in the past, if the legacy has belonged to

members of royal family, in particular. Though the possibility of the linguistic interpretation that *incge-lafe* suggests Ing's legacy still remains, it is perhaps harder to argue that the sword given by Hrothgar to Beowulf may be the legacy of Ing because of this lack of explanation at its bestowal, though it may be that Beowulf did explain whose legacy this was, but that this ancestry was too well known to the poet to have to repeat it. In any case the emendation of the word *incge* cannot be regarded as necessary.

The only description of the history of Nægling is the passage cited above, and it essentially tells that Beowulf obtains the sword at the killing of Dayraven. Brady poses that "Frankish despoilers took the byrnie and the torque--but what happened to Hygelac's sword?" and remarks that "To be sure, Chambers, Klaeber, Wrenn, von Schaubert and others take Nægling to be Dæghrefn's sword which Beowulf took as due booty. This could be; but none of these scholars has proposed a satisfying interpretation of *incge-laf*."[23] But it is quite plausible to assume that *incge-laf* is simply one of the many appellations of sword such as *fela-laf* (L1032a) or *homera laf* (L2829b), and no reason to assume that *incge* indicates a personal name. However, it is not easy here to offer any convincing interpretation of this word. Apart from the ambiguity of *incge-laf*, it is perhaps unnecessary to point out the absence of a specific mention of a sword in this passage. Hygelac's sword may be unworthy of remark. Remembering the scene when Beowulf asks Hrothgar to send his armour, Hrethel's legacy, without any comment on the sword which he is not going to use (ll.452-455), the situation may be almost the same as this, suggesting that only Hygelac's armour is supposed to be valuable to the Geats. Then, there is perhaps no particular meaning in the absence of Hygelac's sword.

But we can conclude that the passage cannot be taken to prove that Beowulf obtains Hygelac's sword by slaying Dayraven.

It seems to be clear that Dayraven is the slayer of Hygelac from the preceding passages which almost consistently tell of the various vengeances among the Geats. For instance, there are accounts of the death of Hrethel who could not avenge his son because the other son was the slayer (ll.2460-67); and of Hæthcyn, who had been slain by Ongentheow although his brother Hygelac avenged him (ll.2479-89). Hygelac's death in the battle against the Frisians is shown us in lines 1205b-11, so that it is natural to think that Beowulf may avenge his lord's death through slaying Dayraven, the most probable slayer of Hygelac. It seems more likely that Beowulf took Dayraven's sword as due booty than that he kept Hygelac's unmentioned sword. For it is normal to take valuable weapons and armour from the slain, just as Dayraven tried to take Hygelac's armour after slaying him. There are more evidences for this kind of booty, for example Weohstan brought to Onela Eanmund's helmet, armour and sword after killing him (ll.2610b-16a), and a Danish warrior slew and deprived a Heathobard warrior of his sword (ll.2047-52). In these cases it seems to be a due course to bring booty to one's lord, and subsequently to receive it from the lord. Davidson offers a question to this interpretation that "in this case we are faced with the difficulty which has puzzled Klaeber and others, namely, why the sword is mentioned at all when Beowulf expressly says that he did not fight Dæghrefn with the sword but killed him with his hands."[24] There is a possible answer to this question that this passage concerning the slaying of Dayraven is given to let us understand that Dayraven slew Hygelac with his own sword, and that Beowulf took that sword from Dayraven by slaying him. In which case the sword Beowulf took

from Dayraven may have been used to slay Hygelac, Beowulf's lord and uncle, and Beowulf comes to use it after killing Dayraven. This passage further tells of the power of Beowulf's hands over Dayraven's sword, Nægling, which had been used in killing Hygelac, and used again in battle against Beowulf. This victory of hand over sword seems consistent with the extraordinary strength of Beowulf's blows which happened to make Nægling shatter (ll.2684-87).

If, then, we can provisionally accept Nægling as Dayraven's sword, there still remains a problem why Nægling happens to shatter. There are many possibilities in the interpretations of this enigma. First, in due course in heroic poetry, the hero must die in the end, it is may be that the armoured part of the dragon is too hard for Nægling, and its temper too fragile. However, the following passage will give an objection to this:

> Hond up abræd
> Geata dryhten, gryre-fahne sloh
> incge-lafe, þæt sio ecg gewac,
> brun on bane, bat unswiðor
> þonne his ðiod-cynning þearfe hæfde,
> bysigum gebæded. Þa wæs beorges weard
> æfter heaðu-swenge on hreoum mode,
> wearp wæl-fyre, wide sprungon
> hilde-leoman. Hreð-sigora ne gealp
> gold-wine Geata; guð-bill geswac,
> nacod æt niðe, swa hyt no sceolde,
> iren ær-god. (ll.2575b-86a)
>
> The lord of the Geats swung his arm up, and with his sword, a mighty heirloom, he dealt a stroke at that dread creature gleaming with many hues, but its burnished edge gave way on meeting the bone, and it bit less strongly than the king required of it in his hour of need, when hard pressed by his troubles. After this fierce stroke, the guardian of the barrow grew savage in mood, and breathed out slaughtering fire; the flashing light of battle sprang up far and wide. The gold-giving friends of the Geats could not boast of triumphant victory, since the naked war-blade had failed in the combat as it should not have done, being steel of proven worth. (p.68)

Iren ær-god "preeminent iron," and *sweord . . . gomele lafe, ecgum ungleaw* (ll.2562b-64a), "sword . . , ancient legacy, with very keen

edges," seem to show that it might be more expected to kill a dragon than would the battle knife, for the dagger which works successfully against the dragon is also described as *biter ond beadu-scearp* "bitter and sharp in battle" (L2704a) and *ecg wæs iren* "edge was iron" (L2778a).[25] Contrary to the expectation that it would prove worthy in battle, as seen in the last few lines above, Nægling fails in supporting Beowulf. The betrayal of Nægling is emphasised in this context.

Secondly, another quite different reason which may be appropriate is given by the etymology of Beowulf's name. Klaeber shows many possibilities of the etymology of "Beowulf," but one of them is eminently plausible, "bee-wolf" in the sense of "bear," which successfully explains the enigma of the extraordinary force of Beowulf's hands. It seems likely that Beowulf tends to break his swords because his hands and arms are too strong for them, like those of a bear. This interpretation gives an answer to the problem why his swords come to shatter. It could be so, although it is noteworthy that elsewhere he can sometimes use a sword without any difficulty. This inconsistency raises a slight suspicion against this solution, but this magic reason may be still acceptable, that he cannot control the power in his blows when he holds a strong sword as we are told in lines 2684b-87.

There is third possible interpretation, that the sword has been dipped in the blood of Hygelac, Beowulf's dearest lord and uncle. Of course, Beowulf never commited the murder of the kinsman; but the sword which he holds at the final battle may be the weapon which slew his lord. It is perfectly all right in the heroic age for heroes other than Beowulf to use such a sword. However, since Beowulf took it from the slayer of Hygelac, there may accidentally remain

unrighteousness for him to use such a kin-and-lord-killing sword. It is remarkable that following both descriptions of Nægling's failure in battle emphasise the way it has betrayed Beowulf's expectation:

> guð-bill geswac,
> nacod æt niðe, swa hyt no sceolde,
> iren ær-god. (ll.2584b-2586a)
>
> since the naked war-blade had failed in the combat as it should not have done, being steel of proven worth. (p.68)

Swa hyt no sceolde, / iren ær-god reveals that Nægling was a hard steel of proven worth so that it should not have failed to kill the dragon. The other passage also shows the deception of Nægling: *þæt sio ecg gewac, / brun on bane, bat unswiðor / þonne his ðiod-cyning þearfe hæfde, / bysigum gebæded* (ll.2577b-80a), "but its burnished edge gave way on meeting the bone, and it bit less strongly than the king required of it in his hour of need, when hard pressed by his troubles" (p.68). These factors stress that the trust in Nægling's usefulness in battle proves treacherous and in vain. Nevertheless, the fact is given that Nægling has proved worthy to the previous holders including Beowulf. For instance it is clearly expressed that Dayraven was a great warrior among the Frisians in the passage that *ac in campe gecrong cumbles hyrde, / æþeling on elne* (ll.2505-06a), "for the standard-bearer fell slain in the contest, a high-born man in all his valour" (p.66). Beowulf too seems to have trusted Nægling's ability in battle in his boast that *ond swa to aldre sceall / sæcce fremman, þenden þis sweord þolað, / þæt mec ær ond siþ oft gelæste* (ll.2498b-2500), "and thus, while life lasts, I shall do battle, as long as this sword endures. It has often done me good service, early and late" (p.66). This oath ironically comes to be accomplished in Nægling's shattering by Beowulf. When Nægling shatters, Beowulf dies. The overcoming power of his hands is shown in the very

moment of Nægling's shattering:

> Þa gen guð-cyning
> mærða gemunde, mægen-strengo sloh
> hilde-bille, þæt hyt on heafolan stod
> niþe genyded; Nægling forbærst,
> geswac æt sæcce sweord Biowulfes,
> gomol ond græg-mæl. Him þæt gifeðe ne wæs,
> þæt him irenna ecge mihton
> helpan æt hilde; (ll.2677b-84a)[26]

> Then once again the warrior king set his mind upon glory, and in his mighty strength he dealt such a stroke with his warlike sword that it stuck fast in the head, driven deep by his violence. Nægling broke in two; Beowulf's ancient sword with its grey glinting blade had failed him in combat. It had not been granted him that steely edges might help him in battle. (p.71)

Niþe genyded expresses the violent strength with which Beowulf hit the dragon in its head. At this supreme crisis Nægling shatters. This phenomenon reveals the weakness of Nægling compared with Beowulf's blows and the dragon's head. It is possible that Nægling accidentally has something infamous in its history which may be a reason why it shatters. The assumption that the sword has been used in slaying Hygelac explains its failure in battle. It is awkward for this thesis that Nægling has never shattered since Beowulf obtained the sword at the battle against Dayraven. This cannot be explained, but the significant point at the battle against the dragon is that Nægling, which Beowulf has relied on for its usefulness, betrays him. This perhaps further suggests the generally critical view in the poem towards the permanence of achievements gained by heroic deeds and the finite nature of human heroism.

The fact that Beowulf can sometimes use his sword weakens the plausibility of such factors as magic or fate to explain his vulnerability in using swords.[27] On the contrary, it reinforces the argument that only Hrunting and Nægling contain something unrighteous in themselves. They are regarded as wondrous swords,

dignified with their own names. They are supposed to be good friends to Beowulf in battle, but completely fail to support him in his need. The vulnerability of these swords happens rather accidentally, as when Hrunting, the kin-killing sword, is handled by Beowulf, when the giant sword is covered with its owner's blood, and when Beowulf brings Nægling to the final battle, which was not a kin-killing sword for Dayraven but has been to Beowulf since he took it from Dayraven. Because of their personification Hrunting and Nægling can be regarded as treacherous swords. Beowulf's revulsion against kin-killing, as is clearly mentioned in his dying boast, is incompatible with their kin-killing histories, and demolishes their reputations in battle to nothing. It is necessary, then, to examine the frequency and significance of kin-killing incidents in the poem in order to reinforce the theme of revulsion against kin-killing in the poem. The next part considers every incident involving kin-killing and feuds among relatives.

NOTES

1 Ogilvy & Baker, in *Reading "Beowulf"* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1983), comment on Beowulf's lucklessness in using sword as "This looks like something out of a myth or a folktale--a special condition under which the hero must operate, like Antaeus's need to touch the earth or the vulnerability of Achilles's heel" (p.90). However, this does not make complete sense because he is sometimes able to use a sword.

2 Klaeber, pp.218-219. He explains this enigma according to Germanic legends where swords sometimes break by heroes' hands in his edition.

3 Peter Fisher, trans., *Saxo Grammaticus* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1979), vol. I, p.108.

4 Klaeber's other citation from *Volsunga Saga* concerning the frailty of sword also suggests the trial of ability of swords in making them,

to test if they are strong enough. See Morris, Chapter 15.

[5] The fight against Grendel is first described in lines 710-836, whose second version is reconstructed of a further description as seen in lines 2069-2100. The first account of the accursed hoard in lines 3047-57 is remade into a new description in lines 3069-75.

[6] Only this translation is not derived from Garmonsway's but my original because of a crucial interpretation of *wundum heard*.

[7] Bolton, p.197. *Wundrum* is supported by Klaeber, Dobbie, Sedgefield and Chambers. *Wundum* is prefered by Bolton and Swanton.

[8] This sword which is useful at the battle against the sea-monsters is also mentioned in the following lines: *swurd nacod* (L539a), *deoran sweorde* (L561a), *sweordum* (L567a), *sweorde* (L574b). It is clearly recognised from this sequence of the word *sweord* that this weapon is not *seax* "battle-knife" but *sweord* "sword."

[9] Here are the other descriptions of Hrunting: *wunden-mæl wrættum gebunden* "sword with curved ornaments bound with decorations" (L1531), *stið ond styl-ecg* "hard and steel-edged" (L1533a).

[10] In the preceding passage of this, Hrunting is depicted as *hilde-bille* "battle-sword" (L1520a), *hring-mæl* "what is ornamented with coiling patterns" (L1521b). The other epithets of Hrunting are: *sweord* (L1808b), *leoflic iren* "noble iron" (L1809a), *wig-cræftigne* "mighty in war" (L1811a) and *meces ecge* (L1812a).

[11] Her vengeance is repeatedly mentioned in the following lines: *wrecend* "avenger" (L1256b), *sunu deoð wrecan* "to avenge her son's death" (L1278b), *wolde hire bearn wrecan* "she meant to avenge her son" (L1546b).

[12] The other descriptions of this sword are: *sige-eadig bil* "sword blessed with victory," *eald-sweord eotenisc* "ancient sword made by giants," *ecgum þyhtig* "with firm edges," *wigena weorð-mynd* "honour of warriors," *wæpna cyst* "the best of weapons," *god ond geatolic* "powerful and adorned," *giganta geweorc* "work of giants," *fetel-hilt* "sword with a ring-hilt," *hring-mæl* "sword with a ring ornament" (ll.1557-64). *Wæpen heard* "hard weapon" (ll.1573b-74a), *heoro-sweng heardne* "strong sword-stroke" (L1590a), *wlitig. . . eald-sweord eacen* "beautiful ancient sword of more than human size" (ll.1662b-63a), *hilde-bil* "battle-sword," *brogden-mæl* "with wavy pattern" (ll.1666b-67a), *gylden hilt* "golden hilt," *enta ær-geweorc* "ancient work of giants," *wundor-smiþa geweorc* "work of a skilful smith" (ll.1677-81a).

[13] Klaeber mentions that "in conformity with the pedigree imposed upon the Grendel race, the good sword of tradition is converted into a *giganta geweorc*." p.187.

[14] Viswanathan, pp.360-61.

[15] Klaeber confesses concerning lines 1555-56 which show this phenomenon again that "This is unsatisfactory because God's help

consists in nothing else than showing Beowulf the marvelous sword after he had got on his feet again (The latter fact, though very important, is stated in a subordinate clause)." p.187.

16 *þa hilt* (L1614b) and *sweord* (1615b) correspond to this giant sword.

17 Brady, p.103.

18 The rest of the appellations of the giant sword are: *wæpne; þæt hilt; hylt* (L1687b), *ealde lafe* (L1688a), *scennum sciran goldes* "foils of shining gold" (L1694), *þæt sweord* (L1696b), *irena cyst* (L1697a), *wreoþen-hilt ond wyrm-fah* "hilt of twisting patterns and gleaming serpent forms" (L1698a) and *eacnum ecgum* "mighty edges (L2140a).

19 Puhvel, p.219.

20 Davidson discusses the problem of the hilt's description of the giants' fall; she objects to the idea that the description is pictorial or even a runic inscription because no hilt of such a kind has been found from the Anglo-Saxon or Viking period. p.137. However, it is not to be expected that one would find a similar motif in the restricted numbers of excavated objects.

21 Davidson remarks that "Klaeber and others have assumed that the reference is to the wicked destroyed in the Biblical Flood, and that the giants are those referred to in Genesis vi.4. Such a subject, however, is a very peculiar one to be selected. As far as I know, it was never chosen to be illustrated in early manuscripts or on stone carvings, and it does not appear as a recognized subject of Christian illustration." Despite no archaeological evidence, the association with Cain and his descendants is clear.

22 Davidson, p.143.

23 Brady, p.107.

24 Davidson, pp.143-4.

25 This battle-knife is described as: *wæll-seaxe* (L2703b), *ecg* (L2772b), *bill* (L2777b), *irrenna ecga* (L2828), *hearde; heaðo-scearde* "notched in battle"; *homela laf* (L2829) and *ecge* (L2876a).

26 The other appellations of Nægling are: *sweord* (L2518b), *wæpen* (L2519a), *sweord* (L2562b), *gomele lafe* (L2563b), *ecgum ungleaw* (L2564a) and *sweorde* (L2904b).

27 Besides Hrunting and Nægling, Beowulf uses other swords. He bears a sword before the fight against Grendel: *hyrsted sweord* "adorned sword" (L672b), *irena cyst* (L673a) and *sweorde* (L679a). This sword may correspond to the sword which Beowulf wishes to bestow on Unferth in exchange for Hrunting: *ealde lafe* (L1488b), *wrætlic wæy-sweord* "wondrous wavy-patterned sword" (L1489a) and *heard-ecg* (L1490a).

Part III: The Fratricidal Sword

Chapter 2 Part II dwelt on the kin-killing history of Hrunting and Nægling, in a poem which includes many references to kin-killing theme. I shall now examine the significance of the frequent mention of the killing of kindred in this poem, and the irresistible obligations of the heroic code. The kin-killing sword is first introduced in the biblical story of Cain, which is invoked early in the poem. Cain, the ancestor of Grendel and his mother, committed the murder of his brother Abel, described in the poem thus: *siþðan Cain wearð / to ecg-banan angan breþer, / fæderen-mæge* (ll.1261b-1263a), "ever since Cain slew his only brother, his father's son, with the sword's edge" (p.35). The adoptation of the word *ecg-banan* here is extremely noteworthy, for there is no mention of a sword or an "edge" in the Bible in the account of Abel's murder. For instance, Cain's fratricide is described in the verse *Genesis* thus: *He þa unræden / folmum gefremede, freomæg ofsloh, / broðor sinne, and his blod ageat, / Cain Abeles* "Then he committed a crime with his hands, slew his noble kinsman, his own brother, and Cain shed the blood of Abel."[1] On the other hand, the prose *Genesis* from the *Old English Pentateuch* tells that *Þa hi ut agane wæron, ða yrsode Caine wiþ his broðor Abel, ofsloh hine* "when they were in the field, then Cain got angry with his brother Abel, struck him down."[2] "Hand" is, of course, often used metaphorically in referring to instrument or weapon as in *The Wanderer* (l.4), and *ofslean* probably involves the use of a weapon.[3] Nevertheless, it is remarkable that *ecg-bana* rather than *hand-bana* is adopted, a word which appears only once, here in *Beowulf*.

Ecg-bana can be translated "the slayer with the sword," although *ecg* precisely means "edge" of any kind of weapon. There is no evidence to designate it either a sword or a simple knife (*seax*) which is sometimes used in the poem. However, it can at least be distinguished from a spear which is often referred to by *ord* "point." Notwithstanding the inconclusiveness of the description of the weapon used by Cain, it is clear, from the introducing of the word *ecg* into the poem's description of Cain's murder of his relative, that the use of a weapon, quite likely a sword, is more specific than the original account in the Bible. This addition superficially seems to make no particular difference to the poem; however, the slight change obtains a significance if Cain's murder is associated not only with the origin of monsters but with other human murders of kindred. Namely, it is a persuasive assumption that a warrior who kills his relatives by his sword is regarded as morally of the same kin as Cain. This is the most shameful sin, the murder of one's kinsman. In Genesis it is said that Cain committed the sin out of envy, for the first time in the history of human beings. The sword which was used to slay Abel should have also been regarded as the most wicked among any kind of weapon.

However, this kind of murder does not seem so extraordinary in the Anglo-Saxon period. Concerning the contradiction between Germanic heroism and Christian morality, Whitelock remarks that the pursuit of vengeance could overcome the loyalty and obligation to a lord, urging even the kinsmen of the lord to kill him:

> When the English were converted to Christianity, it was unavoidable that there should be a clash between Christian and pre-Christian ethics in this matter of vengeance. It may be this that lies behind an incident reported by Bede, in which King Sigeberht of Essex was killed by two of his heathen kinsmen because they were angered by his habit of forgiving his enemies the wrong done to him. They may

have felt that by this leniency he was failing in his duty to protect his kindred.[4]

Being against one's lord and kinsman was the worst crime at this period, and yet it arose here out of resentment that the lord was lacking in proper vengefulness. This example shows the homicide of lord and "kinsman." There were many laws to prevent the betrayal of a king, such as King Alfred's law: *Gif hwa ymb cyninges feorh sierwe, ðurh hine oððe ðurh wreccena feormunge oððe his manna, sie he his feores scyldig 7 ealles þæs ðe he age* "If any one plots against the life of the king, either on his own account, or by harbouring outlaws, or men belonging to [the king] himself, he shall forfeit his life and all he possesses."[5] However, there seems to be no specific law against fratricide, suggesting that socially the murder of kinsmen was less dangerous than treachery against lords.

In view of the biblical and historical backgrounds, Unferth's fratricide comes to have significance in the poem as Beowulf shows clear revulsion against that crime (ll.587-89). Another passage tells of the poet's aversion to this crime in the scene of presentation of Hrothgar's gift to Hygelac:

> Swa sceal mæg don,
> nealles inwit-net oðrum bregdon
> dyrnum cræfte, deað *renian*
> hond-gesteallan. Hygelace wæs,
> niða heardum, nefa swyðe hold
> ond gehwæðer oðrum hroþra gemyndig. (ll.2166b-71)
>
> Thus should a kinsman act; never should he weave webs of malice against the other in hidden cunning, nor devise the death of his close companion. Hygelac's nephew, so hardy in combat, was very loyal to him, and each of them bore in mind what would benefit the other. (p.58)

Inwit-net oðrum bregdon / dyrnum cræfte and *deað renian / hond-gesteallan* makes us to think of the frequent occurence of fratricide in the Germanic tradition. This passage sounds to warn

the people who hear it to ponder over this traditional practice and persuades them to a more ethical and humane outlook. To take more examples of fratricide from *Beowulf*, it becomes clearer that the figure of Cain stands behind any fratricidal incident in the poem.

To begin with, there is Beowulf's significant remark upon the deed of Unferth when he challenges Beowulf's reputation regarding the swimming competition with Breca. Beowulf points out that Unferth has committed fratricide and that he therefore cannot be able to boast himself as a good hero. Beowulf describes the dishonourable action of Unferth thus:

> þeah ðu þinum broðrum to banan wurde,
> heafod-mægum; þæs þu in *helle* scealt
> werhðo dreogan, þeah þin *wit duge* (ll.587-589)
>
> "although indeed you were the slayer of your brothers, your closest kin. For that you shall suffer damnation in Hell, clever as you are!" (p.18)

In this passage, it is clearly claimed that Unferth committed the murder of his brothers; a claim he does not refute. *Heafod-mægum* "close relatives" implies that his murder was the most shameful, like the murder of Cain. Beowulf's curse on him tells the audience that this kind of murder deserves *werhðo* "damnation." It means that Unferth must be punished by God because of the murder of his brothers. Now Unferth is later to be represented as a hero respected in Heorot:

> Swylce þær Unferþ þyle
> æt fotum sæt frean Scyldinga; gehwylc hiora
> his ferhþe treowde,
> þæt he hæfde mod micel, þeah þe he his magum
> nære
> ar-fæst æt ecga gelacum. (ll.1165b-68a)
>
> There too sat Unferth the spokesman, at the feet of the Scyldings' lord; all of them relied on his bold spirit, believing that he had great courage, although in the play of sword blades he had shown no mercy to his kinsmen. (p.32)

Here Unferth's "bold spirit" (*ferhþe treowde*), and "great courage"

(*mod micel*) are trusted by the Danes although he was not merciful (*ar-fæst*) towards his kinsmen in "the play of edges" (*æt ecga gelacum*). This passage pointedly suggests the folly of the Danes, and that Unferth committed the murders of his brothers probably in battle, with Hrunting. This is in significant contrast with Beowulf, who never committed the murder of his kinsmen (ll.2741-43a). Further, Unferth can be compared with Cain, as he likewise uses the sword to slay his brothers.

Even Hrothgar, who is considered to be a generous good king, is involved in an insoluble feud against his son-in-law Ingeld who is engaged to Freawaru, Hrothgar's daughter. The occasion of the feud between the father and the son-in-law has already been discussed, and it will be enough only to mention the prediction of the reawakened feud which is placed at very the beginning of the poem:

> ne wæs hit lenge þa gen,
> þæt se ecg-hete aþum-swerian
> æfter wæl-niðe wæcnan scolde. (ll.83b-85)
>
> Not yet, however, was that time at hand when the sword's edge would prove what hatred had arisen between the king and his son-in-law, the result of murderous slaughter. (p.5)

This, of course, does not say that Hrothgar and Ingeld actually slay each other. However, it is obvious that "hatred involving the sword" (*ecg-hete*) arises between the two kinsmen because of their hostility (*wæl-niðe*). This *ecg-hete* will destroy even the great hall of the Geats, Heorot, by hostile flame (*laðan liges*) (l.83a).[6] The feud between two kinsmen eventually destroys them and this *ecg-hete* will drive both countries to destruction. Thus the hatred of kinsmen will cause the destruction of the prosperity which is symbolised by the hall, Heorot. Hrothgar is also to be involved in another feud, with his nephew, Hrothulf. It is said that Hrothulf committed treachery

against Hrothgar (ll.1014b-19 and 1162b-65a). This feud between the uncle and the nephew is not given in detail in this poem. However, according to the Scandinavian literature, Hrothulf is depicted as slaying his cousin, Hrethric with his sword.[7] It is possible to presume that the audience were familiar with this story, but even if they had not been so, the theme of kin-killing feuds among these kinsmen is manifestly recognisable from this context. And the description of these feuds shows a very clear ethical implication that this situation should have been avoided or that the kinsmen should not have confronted each other. Such passages lead to a critical attitude towards the heroic warrior ethos traditionally respected among the Anglo-Saxons, and to an awareness of its tragic potential.

Towards the end of this discussion, it is necessary to mention another example of fratricide though the weapon used is not a sword but an arrow. Hæthcyn chances to kill his brother with an arrow, a killing of the kinsman which occurs in the Geatish royal family:

> Wæs þam yldestan ungedefelice
> mæges dædum morþor-bed stred,
> syððan hyne Hæðcyn of horn-bogan,
> his frea-wine flane geswencte,
> miste mercelses ond his mæg ofscet,
> broðor oðerne, blodigan gare. (ll.2435-2440)
>
> For the eldest a bed of slaughter was prepared--and not as might befit him, but through his own kinsman's deed, when Hæthcyn struck him with an arrow from his horn-inlaid bow, striking down his kindly lord; he missed his mark and shot his kinsman dead, brother slaying brother with a bloody shaft. (p.65)

Broðor oðerne, blodigan gare recalls Cain's fratricide, though this death is caused by an arrow instead of a sword. This tragic action makes the king suffer and die because he could neither persecute his son, the slayer, nor avenge his another son, the slain (ll.2462b-67).

In conclusion, fratricide, in the wider sense of the killing of

relatives, seems an especially unavoidable crime in a heroic society where a warrior was bound in obligation to his lord, requiring absolute loyalty to him rather than to kin. Although there are several examples of fratricide in *Beowulf*, they all seem to be presented as warnings to the audience under the generic heading of the sin of Cain, introduced as ancestral to any kin-killing incident in this poem. For instance, Unferth, who has committed the murder of his brothers is accounted a brave warrior by those in Hrothgar's hall, but he is insulted by Beowulf because of this kind of murder, and Beowulf is clearly to be seen as right. Again, the feud between Hrothgar and Ingeld, his son-in-law, is to bring about the destruction of Heorot, the greatest of halls. Here the fratricidal motif is presented as the cause of the fall of a nation and people. And Hrothgar's sons are to be betrayed by his nephew Hrothulf. We are encouraged to feel aversion to all such killings, even those traditionally regarded as involving bravery.

Most of the conflicts occurring in *Beowulf* focus on the obligation to vengeance for one's lord, and many of the stories involve kin-killing. Since primogeniture was not absolute, fighting for the throne was a constant danger. However, the association of fratricide with Cain's murder of Abel with a sword leads to self-destructive outcomes in this poem. The destruction of the ancestrally fratricidal race of giants is an example of the wrath of God. Some of the characters in *Beowulf*, such as Unferth, Hrothulf and Onela who kill their kindred seem thereby to be of the same kin as the giants and monsters. However, Beowulf, who has kept away from fratricide and knows its tragic consequence, can obtain everlasting fame, even after his death. This is in part because he is innocent of this kind of killing, and he is surely right to be proud of this. Beowulf's

innocence of fratricide conspicuously distinguishes him from some of the other heroes in the poem. It is part of his generally non-aggressive behaviour.

The examinations of the motif of the sword in these two chapters have presented its significant function in the poem set in heroic society, and the link of the sword with the theme of kin-killing, both symbolically and in practice. We are now ready to make a further approach to the question of Beowulf's betrayal by swords, the central point of this thesis. The next chapter addresses two further aspects of this question, the association of the motif of the hand with that of the sword, and the etymological approach to the name Beowulf.

NOTES

1 George P. Krapp, ed., *The Junius Manuscript* in *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, Vol. I (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1969), p.32 (ll.982-85a).

2 S. J. Crawford, ed., *The Heptateuch* (London: EETS, 1922), OS 160, p.92. This citation is derived from MS. British Museum, Cotton, Claudius B.iv. MS. Cambridge University Library, I i. 1.33 shows that *Hwæt þa Cain aras togeanes his broðor Abele þa ða hi on æcere wæron, hine ofsloh*, p.92. See also p.95 and p.22 (ll.145-46).

3 T. P. Dunning and A. J. Bliss, eds., *The Wanderer* (London: Methuen, 1978), p.105.

4 Dorothy Whitelock, *The Beginnings of English Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), p.42.

5 F. L. Attenborough, ed., *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1922), pp.64-65.

6 *Ecg-hete* appears again in line 1738a, in the digression of Heremod.

7 Garmonsway, pp.155-206.

Chapter Three: Hand and Sword

Part I: The Hand as the Source of Strength

In considering the failure of Beowulf's swords, it becomes clear that not the swords themselves but the hand is the source of Beowulf's strength. His hand is a touchstone which exposes the flaw in the reputation of Hrunting and Nægling, although accidentally. It is necessary, then, to look at the symbolic use of the hand and its metonymic function in this poem. Anglo-Saxon verse is distinctive in its enormous numbers of metonyms. A simple example of it occurs in *The Wanderer* line 4, where a solitary man, the hero of the poem, is described as stirring the cold sea with his "hands." Here, hands are not literally meant, but rather the action of rowing to move a boat. This metonymic form of diction can be considered as a fundamental and consistent poetic device. In *Beowulf* the hero is represented to have an extraordinarily great strength in his hands and arms. An examination of the relevant metonyms will highlight the distinctive location of Beowulf's strength in his hands and his arms.

Beowulf is successful in slaying his enemies with his hands. He uses his hands to kill Grendel, and avenges Hygelac in crushing Dayraven to death by a strong hug. The descriptions of these events seem to show a similarity to that special strength of the hands of Grendel and of his mother. But while the monsters cannot use weapons, Beowulf can use a sword, but chooses to use his hands instead of a sword. Finlay compares the unarmed state of Beowulf against Grendel with the similar parts of *Egils saga* and *Bjarnar*

saga, concluding that "this somewhat primitive heroic device plays a minimal part in *Beowulf*. Whereas Egill and Bjorn are without weapons by accident, Beowulf's volition in setting them aside is emphasized."[1] She points out that the significance of the unarmed state stands in Beowulf's intention to show his valour through avoiding the use of a sword. This is probably correct, for Beowulf himself declares three times (twice against Grendel, once against dragon) that he would prefer to leave his sword aside if he is able to fight against Grendel or the dragon with his hands only. Before the battle against Grendel (ll.433-41), Beowulf shows valour in choosing to fight on equal terms with him, in consideration of the fact that Grendel does not carry a weapon. He despises (*forhicge*) bearing not only sword but also shield, which is unnecessary when Grendel does not use a sword. *Ac ic mid grape sceal fon wiþ feonde* (ll.438b-39a), "with my own bare hands I will grapple with this fiend" (p.14) indicates his capability and confidence in battle without a sword. At the battle against Grendel, Beowulf is literally unarmed, for the lines 671-74 reveal that he has already stripped off his armour, sword and helmet to wait the coming of Grendel. This is expressed in the following passage:

> 'No ic me an here-wæsmun hnagran talige
> guþ-geweorca þonne Grendel hine;
> forþan ic hine sweorde swebban nelle,
> aldre beneotan, þeah ic eal mæge.
> Nat he þara goda, þæt he me ongean slea,
> rand geheawe, þeah ðe he rof sie
> niþ-geweorca: ac wit on niht sculon
> secge ofersittan, gif he gesecean dear
> wig ofer wæpen: . . . .' (ll.677-85a)

> 'I think no less well of myself for my vigour in war, proved by deeds done in the fray, than Grendel does of himself; and so it is not with the sword that I shall lay him low and deprive him of life, although I very well might. He knows nothing of the advantage of striking back at me or hacking at my buckler, however famous he may be for his spiteful deeds, so tonight we will both dispense with the sword, if

he dare seek a fight without weapons . . . .' (p.20)

It is notable that Beowulf's decision not to use his sword is ascribed to his reliance on his strength of arm, which explicitly shows his "bear-like" character. The ethical reason why he lets himself fight without a weapon is, however, the noble desire to fight on equal terms.

In relation to Beowulf's unarmed state against Grendel, Finlay comments as following on the custom for Norwegian kings in Icelandic sagas of leaving off their coat of mail: "within the body of legendary history which was drawn upon by writers of the Icelandic sagas of Norwegian kings, there was a customary use of the motif of a king, when about to undertake battle, casting aside his coat of mail as a gesture of defiance which testifies to his status as a warrior fit to lead other men."[2] However, in *Beowulf*, only the occasion where Beowulf makes ready for the battle against Grendel, corresponds at all to the phenomenon which Finlay suggests. For on other occasions, both in the battles against Grendel's mother and the dragon, he takes a sword and wears his precious armour as protection. The avoidance of weapons by Beowulf could be related to the tradition that the heroes in Germanic legend try to show their valour without using weapons or armour, as Finlay describes. However, it seems not to be a priority for Beowulf to abandon his weapon, still less his armour, except in the battle against Grendel. For he never hesitates to fight with his sword in a defensive action. He also relies on his coat of mail as protection and it is able to save his life at anytime (ll.550-53 & 1547-53a) except against the dragon, who attacks his neck. This fact does not suggest that it may be so significant for Beowulf to fight without armour or weapon but focuses on the point that his grip itself is more powerful than Grendel's.

This makes him unlike any other character.

The superhuman strength in his arms is described as being given by God:

> Þær him aglæca ætgræpe wearð;
> hwæþre he gemunde mægenes strenge,
> gim-fæste gife, ðe him God sealde,
> ond him to An-waldan are gelyfde,
> frofre ond fultum; ðy he þone feond ofercwom,
> gehnægde helle-gast. (ll.1269-74a)
>
> The monster had tried to get to grips with him there; but the other bore in mind the strength of his might, that ample gift God had given him, and put his trust in the One Ruler for help, for comfort and support, and by these means overcame the fiend, and laid low the creature from Hell. (p.35)

As written clearly here, the strength of his grip is a gift from God and he trusts in Him for help and support. From this passage the power of his hands is not obviously regarded as a beastly might like that of Grendel and of his mother, but force given by God for fighting against those monsters. This may also be related to the fact that any sword is supposed to be useless against Grendel, being deprived of its power by the magic spell. It is therefore possible to say that the ability of the hand is a metonym of physical capacity of human beings and a reliable source of power for Beowulf rather than any indication that the use of swords is unsuitable for Beowulf. Several of the connotations of the hand detailed in the following discussion support this idea.

First, the hand wields the sword, and the word "hand" used alone is to be understood as a metonym of this power.[3] In the following example, the metonymic extension of the meaning of hand is clear:

> 'Me to grunde teah
> fah feond-scaða, fæste hæfde
> grim on grape; hwæþre me gyfeþe wearð,
> þæt ic aglæcan orde geræhte,
> hilde-bille; heaþo-ræs fornam

mihtig mere-deor þurh mine hand.' (ll.553b-58)

'One fell and murderous foe dragged me down to the bottom of the sea, and the grim creature held me fast in its grip. Yet my fortune granted that I might plunge the point of my battle-sword into the monster; the shock of combat carried off that mighty sea-beast by my hand.' (p.17)

Concerning the power of grip of these sea-monsters, the phrases *me to grunde teah* and *fæste hæfde grim on grape* show them grasping Beowulf in their grips. (Compare the strange description of Grendel's glove, where the monster tries to put Beowulf into the glove (ll.2085b-91a), an action designed to possess his life.) It is chiefly remarkable at the climax here that the sword is understood as subsumed in Beowulf's hand: the monster died *þurh mine hand.*

Other clear examples of metonymy which are part of the diction peculiar to heroic poetry, which still no doubt indicate the almost personal control of hand over sword, for example *hond sweng ne ofteah* "the hand never denied the stroke" (l.1520b), and *hond gemunde fæhðo genoge, feorh-sweng ne ofteah* "the hand (of Eofor) remembering the great toll of bloody deeds, did not check its deadly stroke" (ll.2488b-89). Of course one could say that the hand's control over sword sounds quite natural and poetic enough, so that it is unnecessary to emphasise the particular role of the hand here in such contexts. It could be so. Nevertheless, once we know the unreliability of swords in battle for Beowulf, such diction conveys the distinctive meaning of the ability of hand over sword, and prepares us for the extraordinary ability of Beowulf's hands to find out the worth of a sword in battle.

Secondly, like everything else in heroic times, armour is hand-made, and the idea of protection emerges from the skilful process of producing armour. If it is well made by hand, it is supposed to be not only valuable but also protective for the body,

judging by the following citation:

> scolde here-byrne hondum gebroden,
> sid ond searo-fah, sund cunnian,
> seo ðe ban-cofan beorgan cuþe,
> þæt him hilde-grap hreþre ne mihte,
> eorres inwit-feng aldre gesceþðan;(ll.1443-47)
>
> His hand-woven war-corselet, broad and gleaming with subtle work, would have to explore the depths; it was so well able to protect his bone-framed chest that no hostile grasp or malicious clutch of any wrathful foe might harm the life in his breast. (p.39)

It is obvious that this hand-woven war-corselet is able to protect Beowulf from the grasp of his enemies. The association of the hand with skill, develops its semantic field to include protection. The other factors, *leoðo-syrcan* "interlocked coat of mail" (ll.1505a & 1890a), *brogdne beadu-sercean* "interlocked battle corselet" (l.2755), *searwum gesæled* "armour tied up fast" (l.2764a) are particular epithets of armour which suggest that not only its decoration but also its practical value as protection is appreciated.[4] It can be stated that the interlace or the rings themselves which are frequently suggested in the description of war-gear and weapons, may reveal that dense patterning creates magic force to protect, as in the building and repairing of Heorot or in the damscening on sword-blades.

As we have seen above, it is hard to exclude metonymic senses of hand, for it can mean human capacity and physical strength in general, including individual capability to possess and wield something, and also to make something. The killing of Dayraven gives us an interesting metonymic motif of the hand as righteous vengeance in action. This is Beowulf's own personal vengeance for his lord and kinsman, Hygelac:

> syððan ic for dugeðum Dæghrefne wearð
> to hand-bonan, Huga cempan.
> . . . . . .

. . . . . ne wæs ecg bona,
ac him hilde-grap heortan wylmas,
ban-hus gebræc. (ll.2501-08a)

ever since I slew Dæghrefn, the champion of the Franks, with my own hand before the flower of the host. . . . Nor did the sword's edge slay him, but my hostile grasp crushed the beating of his heart and the framework of his bones. (p.66)

In this boast, Beowulf might appear too aggressive, judging by the formidable description of his crushing of a human body. However, considering the situation justifies vengeance, this expression might suggest Beowulf's great anger in avenging his lord's death in the power of his hug.

Beowulf's vengeful anger is evident in the violent scenes of killing Grendel also:

wæs gehwæþer oðrum
lifigende lað. Lic-sar gebad
atol æglæca; him on eaxle wearð
syn-dolh sweotol; seonowe onsprungon,
burston ban-locan. (ll.814b-18a)

Each would be foe to the other as long as he lived. The fearsome monster felt agony in his own body; on his shoulder a vast gash appeared, plain to see; the sinews were tearing apart, the muscles that bound the bones were splitting. (p.23)

Beowulf feels an obligation to pay back his father's debt to Hrothgar so that this battle is righteous for him. On the other hand, Grendel has assailed Heorot merely in order to devour some of the Danish warriors. We are evidently to think that Beowulf fights against the monster in order to repay Hrothgar's favour to his father and save Denmark. Thus Beowulf's aggression and anger in his battle against Grendel is justified.

The image of hand as a symbol of human strength is frequently used in the descriptions of Beowulf's and Grendel's fighting. It is said of Beowulf that he has a power of thirty men in his grip (ll.379b-80). Grendel is also depicted as takes away thirty men from

Heorot (ll.122b-23a). This seems to be a resemblance between them, especially the fact that the source of strength belongs not only to their grips but also to their arms.[5] And yet Grendel's strength of hand is sometimes ascribed to its nails or fingers which seem to be like weapons:

> Foran æghwylc wæs,
> steda nægla gehwylc style gelicost,
> hæþenes hand-sporu, hilde-rinces
> egl unheoru. (ll.984b-87a)
>
> The bed of each nail was just like steel from in front; each claw on the hand of that heathen warrior was a hideous spike. (p.27)

This passage shows that Grendel is supposed to have his force in his grip, especially in his demonic and bestial nails to tear apart human beings.[6] In considering Grendel's strength of grip, we can note that the other monsters in *Beowulf* are also represented as having strength in their grips in battle. The sea-monsters drag down Beowulf in their grip to the bottom of the sea (ll.553b-55a).[7] Grendel's mother also takes him in her grip to her dwelling and his armour protects himself from her sharp fingers (ll.1501-05).[8] But the dragon's (*biteran banum*), venomous teeth (rather than its arms), grip his neck (l.2692a).

Thus, the strength of grasp symbolises the whole capacity of a creature's strength. Fighting against the strength of monsters' grips, Beowulf is given by God an extraordinary strength in his hands. It is Beowulf's hands which deliver him from Grendel and his mother. Being deprived of his arm, which seems to be a source of power, Grendel is ordained to die. In the battle against Grendel's mother, though it is not Beowulf's hands but the giant-sword which is successful in slaying her, the critical point comes when Beowulf decides to trust the power of his grip which is supposed to be given

by God:

> Wearp ða wunden-mæl wrættum gebunden
> yrre oretta, þæt hit on eorðan læg,
> stið ond styl-ecg; strenge getruwode,
> mund-gripe mægenes. Swa sceal man don,
> þonne he æt guðe gegan þenceð
> longsumne lof; na ymb his lif cearað. (ll.1531-36)
>
> The wrathful champion cast aside the sword with curving patterns, all bound round with fine work, so that it lay upon the ground, tough and steely edged; he put his trust in his strength and the force of his hand-grip. Thus should a man act when he means to win long-lasting renown in the fray, and should never be concerned for his life. (pp.41-42)

Strenge getruwode, mund-gripe mægenes indicates that Beowulf would be successful in battle if he threw away the sword and used his hands; if he relies on his valour of spirit, instead of on Hrunting. From this passage, it is also clearly suggested that personal strength rather than the sword is more worthy of Beowulf's trust in the poem. It is noteworthy that he does not find the giant-sword until he regains his reliance on his own strength. And with this self-reliant personal strength, the strength of his hands, he is able to use the giant-sword (ll.1572b-75a). Such actions are regarded with favour by the poet and by God.

This examination has placed it beyond doubt that Beowulf ultimately relies on the strength of his hands rather than on his swords. Hand as a metonymic term indicates human strength and capability against the lives of enemies, and also protective power against the attacks from outside. The extraordinary power in Beowulf's arms reminds us of the brutal strength of Grendel, and the hero might be regarded as aggressive in the ferocious way that he slays Grendel and Dayraven with his arms. But any consideration of the circumstances will justify Beowulf in protecting the Danes against Grendel, and in avenging his beloved lord's death on Dayraven. He

is not from the objective and rational point of view an aggressor. We should now seek to explain why Beowulf's hands and arms have such destructive effects on Hrunting and Nægling, unlike those of the other subordinate characters. This is discussed in the next part in the association with the etymology of his name.

NOTES

[1] Alison Finlay, "The Warrior Christ and the Unarmed Hero," *Medieval English Religious Literature*, edited by Kratzmann (Cambridge: Brewer, 1986), p.24.

[2] Finlay, p.28.

[3] Here are the examples of metonyms of hand as possessing treasures: *gylden hilt . . . on hand gyfen* (ll.1677-78), "the golden hilt was given into the hand of the aged warrior (p.45); *gefeng / hæðnum horde hond* (ll.2215b-16), "his hand gripped a large flagon" (p.59) (This part of folio has been so damaged that the meaning is not clear); *þurh ðæs meldan hond* (l.2405b), "from the finder's hand" (p.64)); and *Ic . . . gefeng / micle mid mundum . . . hord-gestreona* (ll.3090b-92a), "I hastily caught up in my arms a great and mighty burden of hoarded riches" (p.81).

[4] There are other factors which indicate manual artistic skill: *haten Heort . . . folmum gefrætwod* "ordered to adorn Heorot with hand" (ll.991-92a) and *segn . . . hond-wundra mæst, gelocen leoðo-cræftum* "banner, the finest and most wondrous thing that hands had ever woven" (ll.2767b-69a). And yet, except l.992a, most of the other examples are of treasures or war-gear made to survive a long period of time.

[5] The strength of Beowulf's arm is mentioned in lines 510b-14, 2359b-62. Lines 833b-36 show that the strength of Grendel's grip belongs to his arm. On the number thirty, Beowulf swims home with 30 men's mail-courts under his arm (ll.2361-62).

[6] The mention of Grendel's hands or nails appear in lines 721b-22, 739-45 (the hand to tear off the body of a human being), 760b, 764b-65a, 927b, 983b-84a, 1303a, 2085-92 (this magic glove may also suggest the superhuman strength of Grendel's hands) and 2099a.

[7] The other examples are in lines 578-79a and 635b-36a.

[8] Although Grendel's mother is able to use a dagger (l.1545b), her primary force belongs to her grip, as in lines 1541-42, 2127b-28, 2137. Her dagger is reffered to as: *brad, brun-ecg* (l.1546a) and as

having *ord ond* [*wiþ*] *ecge* (L1549a).

Part II: The Name Beowulf

The significance of Beowulf's name has often been discussed and needs to be explained, since some of the names in Anglo-Saxon poetry are clues to the nature of a character. Some heroes in the poem have names related to their way of fighting in battle, though this does not apply to the historical characters. The heroic behaviour of Beowulf is paralleled in folktale, but it does not befall the heroes of the analogues that their swords fail to work.[1] It is possible that the poet seeks to establish a symbolic meaning of the name Beowulf in the poem, as in all probability it means a bear-like hero. This part of the discussion therefore seeks to account for why the hero possesses this name and subsequently how the name has an effect throughout the poem, in emphasising the extraordinary strength in his hands.

It is plausible to consider that this poem retains the fundamental elements from the original tales, such as Beowulf's apparently "bear-like" character in battle. The crushing of Dayraven to death in a bear-like hug has been already discussed. It is further likely that the name Beowulf itself has also been derived from the original legends when we consider his way of fighting and the special strength of his arms. For other names such as Wiglaf "the one left after battle", Wulf "wolf," Eofor "boar," Ecgtheow "the servant of the sword" and Dayraven "day-raven (carrion-eater)," which are likewise supposed to be symbolic and unhistorical, are associated with the brave fighting in battle. Battle-names such as these seem to follow Germanic stereotypes.

The etymology of the name Unferth is controversial. However, it is also likely to be a stereotyped Germanic name connected with fighting-behaviour. Fulk discusses this point, in his article though he tries to define Unferth is a historical figure:

> If Unferth's name is symbolic (un-peace), it is the only human one in the poem that is blatantly so. It could indeed justly be called allegorical, since it is not a genuine Germanic name, and so has *only* symbolic singificance. This is not true of any other human name in *Beowulf*, even if, for instance, one allows names like *Wulf* and *Eofor* to be unhistorical, and to have been chosen for their stereotypical nature.[2]

It is certainly possible, then, to consider that the name Beowulf derived from a Germanic stereotype, not from a historical genealogy but from Germanic legend or habit of thought. It is notable that Beowulf's name does not seem to be related to those of the Geatish dynasty whose personal names usually begin with H. There are several interpretations regarding the origin of his name. Klaeber collects several possibilities in his edition, that 1) ON. *Bjólfr* = "bee-wolf"; 2) ON. *Bjólfr* from *bær, býr* = "farm (yard)"; 3) a substitution of *Beadu-wulf* = "battle-wolf"; 4) connected with *beawan* from Goth. *(us-)baugjan* = "sweep": *Beowulf* = "sweeping-wolf"; 5) *Beow, Beaw* = ON. *Biár* belonging to OE. *beow* = "grain, barley" and OS. *beo(w), beuwod* = "harvest."[3] Klaeber regards "bee-wolf" as an eminently plausible etymology, taking the word, however, to denote a 'bear' (the ravager of bees, and the plunderer of the hive).[4] Chambers also supports this etymology saying:

> "Bear" is an excellent name for a hero of story. The O.E. *beorn*, "warrior, hero, prince" seems originally to have meant simply "bear." The bear, says Grimm, "is regarded, in the belief of the Old Norse, Slavonic, Finnish and Lapp peoples, as an exalted and holy being, endowed with human understanding and the strength of twelve men. . . . "Bee-hunter" is then a satisfactory explanation of *Beowulf*: while the alternative explanations are none of them satisfactory.[5]

It is obvious that from the point of view of a warrior culture the most distinctive characteristic of a "bear" is its size, ferocity and great strength. In addition, the strength of its hands and arms is extraordinarily stronger than a human being's. We can easily see an essential similarity in the strength of arm and of hugging-power between a bear and Beowulf, whose superhuman strength is said to equal that of thirty men in the poem. A bear is also a noble, fierce and enduring beast.

The superior ability of Beowulf's arms, is demonstrated in the swimming match (ll.513-15a) and his carrying of thirty men's war-gear across the sea (ll.2361-62). This suits perfectly with this etymology of his name, indicating that his peculiar strength is consistent with the typical nature of a bear, the eminently plausible meaning of his name. Accordingly, his superhuman strength would not then be associated with the similar feature in the monsters, Grendel and his mother, but rather be related to etymology of his name, since the bear is honoured as being a holy creature in Germanic legend. This is also backed up by the point that his strength has been gifted by God, which further suggests the close connection between his name and his nature. The possibility then arises that if Beowulf's nature depends on his name, his failure in using Hrunting and Nægling may primitively be related to a bear-like inability to handle weapons.

In considering this, it should be remembered that there seems to be no similar sword-motif in analogues of Beowulf's story, whereas in the poem Beowulf is explicitly betrayed by certain swords at his extreme need. Summarising the comparison between the treatment of the motifs of hand and of sword which has been argued above, a conspicuous discrepancy between them becomes clearer as we see the

sword is not reliable in battle but that the source of strength for Beowulf lies in his hands. Furthermore, Beowulf's hands, in particular, may have an ability to demonstrate the true human value of swords and whether they are reliable or not. And the fate of a sword varies according to its history. For instance, the sword shatters if it has been used in a disgraceful manner in the past. In short, the hand of Beowulf is represented as revealing the infamy of a sword that has been used to kill kinsmen of its present owner or of an earlier owner. Therefore, the fact that Beowulf has been given a superhuman strength in his grip by God may support the role of Beowulf as a "touchstone" to the swords in the poem. This "touchstone" characteristic of Beowulf is relevant to his original nature, for it is fully consonant with the etymology of his name.

The name Beowulf is not historical but may derive from Germanic folktale. The name has a symbolic meaning to emphasise the special strength of Beowulf's hands. The bear was regarded as a noble, sacred and powerful creature by Germanic races; and *beorn*, the common term for a warrior, derives from it. It seems to be a most suitable name ~~to~~ for this hero, in so far as the strength of his hands has been given to him by God. This symbolic motif of hand, as a righteous means of justice, supports the idea that his hands can be a powerful touchstone to the value of Hrunting and Nægling, revealing them as valueless because of their kin-killing associations. The meaning of the name Beowulf provides both a practical and a moral explanation of why his hands should prevail over swords, in that they are both physically and morally too strong for the instrument of human vengeance in the poem.

NOTES

[1] Garmonsway shows possible analogues, pp.91-112. See also R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf*: An Introduction.

[2] R. D. Fulk, "Unferth and His Name," *Modern Philology* 85(2) (1987), p.127.

[3] Klaeber, p.xxviii.

[4] Klaeber, p.xxv.

[5] Chambers, p.366.

Conclusion

It is important for this thesis to remark the variety of functions of the sword in *Beowulf.* The sword is prominent in the pageant of heroic society, not in one single but in several traditional uses: such as the bestowal of gifts from lord to retainer, the winning of war-gear from an enemy slain in battle, or the ceremony of placing the sword on one's lord's knees in token of the obligation of vengeance.[1] These situations represent the background of the world which Beowulf belongs to. It is necessary to emphasise again that all these phenomena cannot, as a whole, be categorised in a single definition of the sword, such as its malignancy. The examination conducted in this thesis shows the variety of its possible functions, not only the negative aspects of the sword-motif but also its honorific role in the heroic world, as seen in the custom of bestowing the sword in public.

Despite such diverse functions of the sword in the poem, we cannot help realising that the end of the poem puts the sword in a negative light, as the means of causing the destruction of heroic peoples and perhaps the end of their world. The sword has an honourable function in the heroic tradition, when used to avenge the death of a lord. But the destructive effects of this are emphasised after the scene of Beowulf's imagined version of the wedding of Freawaru and Ingeld, in which the sword of the Heathobards reawakens the feud among the peoples who were about to become allies. This shows a perversion of the honourable function of the sword into a provocation to involve warriors in battle or vengeance.

The sword is made into an instrument of tragic consequence for heroic society, and its eventual decline.

As the poem goes beyond the half-way point, the tragic profile introduced by the sword-motif is sharpened. We see heroic worlds destroyed by water, fire and sword. Annihilation by water is clearly indicated by the inscription on the hilt of the giant-sword. It tells the audience of the Flood, the wrath of God upon the giants who warred against Him, and upon the majority of mankind. The hilt is a reminder of this destruction in ancient times, simultaneously suggesting a limited span for the warlike heroic world in the future. At the funeral of Hnæf, fire instead of water is employed to show another end of a world:

> Guð-rinc astah;
> wand to wolcnum wæl-fyra mæst,
> hlynode for hlawe; hafelan multon,
> ben-geato burston, ðonne blod ætspranc,
> lað-bite lices. Lig ealle forswealg,
> gæsta gifrost, þara ðe þær guð fornam
> bega folces; wæs hira blæd scacen. (ll.1118b-24)
>
> The warrior was raised aloft. The huge fire for the slain went twisting up towards the clouds, and roared in front of the burial mound. Heads melted away; yawning wounds and deadly gashes on the corpse burst open as blood gushed out. Fire, that most ravenous creature, swallowed up all the men of both peoples whom the battle there had carried off; their breath of life had fled. (p.31)

Here the fire, the most ravenous of creatures, destroys the corpses of Hnæf and his nephew all together. Despite their kinship they fought against each other, but fire devours both sides, devastating everything and prospering nothing. Feuds between related families end at last in vain, even though the obligation of vengeance is irresistible and according to custom. The poem has opened with a prophecy that Heorot itself is to be burnt down, which is also caused by *ecg-hete*, a feud between relatives pursued with swords. This leads us to the fatalistic reflection that the heroic world, though

prosperous, is eventually to be destroyed by the chain of revenge among kindreds of mankind.

As we contemplate the destruction of peoples by fire, water and sword toward the end of the poem, the actions of Beowulf reveal the significance of his role as protector of the heroic world. It is noteworthy that Grendel and his mother are finally associated with water as a destroyer of the world, and the dragon with fire, just as the world is destroyed by water in the Old Testament and by fire in New Testament prophecy. All three monsters are depicted as destructive toward human beings, while Beowulf is seen as the protector of the heroic world in slaying these monsters. Dragon-slaying and monster-killing is a symbolic restoration of a corrupted heroic society, for the monsters embody the envy in Cain's original fratricide. The defensive character of Beowulf is clearly expressed by the word *eoten-weard*, "guardian against monsters" (1665). He protects the Danes against Grendel and his mother, and the Geats against the dragon and also their predatory human neighbours. But Beowulf can also be regarded as protecting the order of the heroic society from unacceptable traditions such as vengeance, feud and kin-killing, which are represented in the characters not only of the monsters but also of Unferth and Hrothulf, Ingeld and Heremod. They seem to belong with the devastators of the heroic world, causing many feuds and murders. The punishment of the Geats by the sword for Hygelac's own aggression is about to follow Beowulf's death at the end of the poem.

Beowulf manages to hold up the decline of the heroic world, and yet this world is to go to its destruction after his death, judging by the messenger's speech telling of the old feuds among the Geats, the Franks, the Frisians, the Swedes and the Danes. He comments thus

on the indispensibility of Beowulf's protection:

> Þæt ys sio fæhðo ond se feondscipe,
> wæl-nið wera, ðæs ðe ic [*wen*] hafo,
> Þe us seceað to Sweona leoda,
> syððan hie gefricgeað frean userne
> ealdor-leasne, þone ðe ær geheold
> wið hettendum hord ond rice
> æfter hæleða hryre, hwate Scildingas,
> folc-red fremede oððe furður gen
> eorlscipe efnde. (ll.2999-3007a)
>
> This, then, is the feud and enmity and murderous hate between men, because of which I expect that the Swedish people will come to attack us when they hear that our lord has lost his life--our lord, who guarded his hoarded wealth and his kingdom, against those who hated him, and after the fall of heroes guarded the bold shield-warriors, achieving much good for his people, and accomplishing yet further heroic deeds. (p.79)

According to this prophecy, which the poet confirms as true, Beowulf has protected his people against his enemies after the fall of the heroes (Hrethel and his sons and grandson), but after his death, the Geats will again face the feuds with the Swedes and the Franks, which will lead to their destruction.

It is clear, as discussed above, that Beowulf shows his strong protection of the heroic world of the North against the destructive invasion from the outer world, first by Grendel, then his mother and finally the dragon. The point of focus for this discussion has been that Beowulf also protects the heroic world from a moral decline into kin-killing among human beings, which the monsters originally embody as the descendants of Cain. This theme reinforces my opinion that Hrunting and Nægling are proved worthless by Beowulf because of their kin-killing histories. Beowulf, as a protector of heroic world, seems to have an ability to bring out the infamous pasts of these swords, which have been covered with the blood of kinsmen, and expose the vanity of such swords even though they have been respected and trusted by other warriors. The fact that it

is only Beowulf who proves them useless in battle seems to be connected with the extraordinary strength of his hands, which is a gift from God. This strength becomes a touchstone to expose the ever-to-be-avoided murder of kin, even if he himself seems never to have been aware of this. By this token, he is represented as a hero exposing the moral unacceptability of the Germanic custom of unrestrained vengeance and the disorder of a society where vengeance, feud and kin-killing are repeated everlastingly. He is a hero defending the world, yet he comes to experience the limitations and eventual vanity of the heroic ethos when, at two critical moments, he is betrayed by swords which have killed kindred.

NOTES

[1] The obligation of vengeance, which seems to be a custom, is also demonstrated by the followers of king Cynewulf in the account in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and by most of Bryhtnoth's followers at Maldon.

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