

James H. Buckingham

Death is Personally Impersonal: The Wyrd Fates of Grendel and Beowulf in Part I of *Beowulf*

The entirety of *Beowulf* conveys what is considered a 'heroic' code, as to how one anticipates and/or confronts Death or Fate, as noted in the Prologue: "Then Shield departed them at the shaped-while (time) of *Destiny* (26)." This is summed up in the sagas as well, listen to Stanza 13 from "Skirnir's Journey" in the Poetic *Edda*:

"The better choices are rather than to sob is the fight,
for whom is eager to fare (journey) to the fight.
Age for me was shaped for one day
and my life was laid out beyond the past."

Skirnir is saying that Fate is predestined.

So, when Grendel "took away the unrest of thirty thanes (122-3)" in Heorot and committed more of the same "about one night afterwards (135)," he has two wins in a row. And this continues on "Of two left after ten Winters (147)." He is chalking up wins and no losses. For Grendel is the personification of "the Dark Shadow of Death (160)."

The Score for Grendel = 1 + 1 + 12 = 14+ Wins, 0 Losses

It is the terror at Heorot that brings Beowulf and his thanes (total of 30, 15 seats) to Heorot, where he will fight for his life and only "then will I believe in the Lord's Doom (440-1)." For "if Death takes me (447)," that is Grendel, because "he will bear off my blood-red corpse, will think to taste it, eating it, a wet-walker, without a care (448-9)." But "Fate ever goes, as she should (455)!"

The Score:	Grendel	Beowulf
	W=14+ L= 0	W=0 L=0

Yet Hrothgar recounts for Beowulf how "Wyrd, she swept them away (477)." His thanes were swept towards Grendel. As Grendel is again associated with "Death (488)," this adds to his "Win" tally:

	Grendel	Beowulf
	W=15+ L= 0	W=0 L=0

Yet, Beowulf in recalling his younger feats says, "however, Fate granted me a warp, a twist (555)," because "Wyrd often saves the unfated (unfated) Earl, when his strength prevails (572-3)." Beowulf too has chalked up a win, confidently boasting to fight or face "my day of Death (637)."

	Grendel	Beowulf
	W=15+ L= 0	W=1 L=0

And Death is what Grendel is: "the Whirlpool of Death (695)." He takes others "to the Shadowsbeyond (707)," the Place of Death. This sets up the Watchman, Beowulf, to await "his Battle-Fate (709)." Same score.

In the final match, the Narrator says, "Wyrd was always against the Giant (734)," just before Grendel strikes again, "Sleep with n

end, warrior (741)."

Grendel
W=16+ L= 0

Later, the Narrator gives a foreshadow line for Grendel: "with the one qualm (Death) to come, to leave the quick (the living) (792 And not many lines after, a partial win and loss happens: "For Beowulf was granted a battle-glory by Fate" (818-9).

Grendel	Beowulf
W=16+ L=1/2	W=1 1/2 L=0

Thus Grendel "died for the death-fey . . . laid down his life (850-1)," And chalks up a full loss. And one loss is all you get.

Grendel	Beowulf
W=16+ L=1	W=2 L=0

And even in times of triumph, a foreshadow looms heavy on Beowulf's warp, as told in the Sigemund song: "Where he . . . the ki of Hygelac . . . with friends and more fated; waded into the fire of need by himself (913-5)."

Grendel	Beowulf
W=16+ L=1	W=2 L=?

Death is very personal and very impersonal at the same time. In some regards, it is a game of chance you might say. Life is not about the end, rather it is all about what you do with your life and that is not nihilistic. Maybe Skirnir had it right after all: "The bet choices are rather than to sob is the fight."

Even Hrothgar gets it right as he addresses Grendel's hanging, right arm sarcastically:

"*Lungre ge, lime- !*

And hang around, linger for the limb-game (929)!"

Life's a game of chance, like the p rune shows. Throw the dice-cup!

James the Howard Buckingham is a writer, poet, word-lover, etymologist, translator, scholar and a retired high school English teacher. Graduated summa cum laude from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee with a B.A. in English (Creative Writing and Literary Studies), with later teacher certifications in Secondary English and Speech. Over 17 years, he taught 25 different English courses to a total of 1,830 students. A translator of passages of Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Invitation of a Beheading* (Russian), 1/3rd of Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* novella (Spanish), a short story of Ilse Aichinger's "Das Plakat" (German) and many Old Norse passages. Buckingham's Old English translation of *Beowulf: The Song of the North*, *The Canterbury Codex* (Grendel) is groundbreaking.