

Sisam, Kenneth, The Structure of Beowulf (Oxford at the Clarendon Press) 1965

Survey of General Interpretations

p. 17 Several influential attempts have been made to find a theme that runs through Beowulf and brings all its parts into greater coherence.

More than a century ago, Müllenhoff proposed a mythological interpretation. The monsters represent the hostile North Sea; Beowulf represents a helpful divinity who fought off successive assaults of the sea on the low-lying coasts in the Spring (Grendel's Mother is the deep sea); his peaceful reign corresponds to the summer calm; by fighting against the Dragon he repulses the storms of autumn; with winter he dies.¹ Long thought, outstanding scholarship, and an imagination well above the mechanical went to the making of this hypothesis; yet now it is generally discredited, together with most of the nature myths that were once received so readily.

Fashions in scholarship have their interests. Two conditions contributed to the vogue of the mythological school. Its exponents had a choice of large, sometimes vague conceptions - the seasons; sun and moon; night and day; sea and land, &c. - with which to operate.

¹ Beowulf, Berlin, 1889, pp. 1-12, where his views, first published in 1848, are finally summarized.

p. 18 And there was a disposition among leading scholars, as well as among less informed readers, to accept a certain kind of explanation: over this range of ideas the critical faculty was inactive. Müllenhoff was not uncritical. For more than forty years he worked over Beowulf and related texts, probing and questioning. He would have regarded as uncritical many of the assumptions that are now deeply entrenched in Beowulf studies. But he took it for granted that there was a myth to be found, and did not press the simple question: Why should these monsters represent the North Sea?

The mythological school went beyond natural phenomena. For stories of human affairs they turned to abstractions, often arranged in pairs that may be called 'comprehensive opposites': love and strife, youth and age, &c.