

Nature in *Beowulf* : In its Relation to Man¹

Yoshiko Asaka

Introduction

There is a view that the descriptions of the natural world during the Old English period can be understood as ‘a powerful cipher’ through which poets of that period developed their themes.² The descriptions can be understood as a kind of literary art, which may not have any actual bearing on the ‘physical reality of the natural world’. Reviewing studies on the landscapes of Anglo-Saxon England and their poetic use, I will explore how the *Beowulf* poet described nature as a means of reflecting the mentality of the people of that age.³

The ‘innate nature’ of humanity is represented by the Old English word *gecynd*, which is often used as an equivalent to the Latin *natura* denoting ‘essence’, and *gecynd*, thus, can be considered as holding a clue to understand nature in *Beowulf*.⁴ William Langland, a fourteenth-century

¹ The paper is based on an oral presentation given at the 17th annual meeting of The Japanese Association for Studies in the History of the English Language, held at Kyoto University in October, 2007. My sincere thanks go to Hideki Watanabe for his valuable comments, and all the organizers and audience, who made my presentation possible.

² The quotation is from J. Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 206.

³ For example, Nicholas Howe, ‘Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England: Inherited, Invented, Imagined’, in J. Howe and M. Wolfe ed., *Inventing Medieval Landscapes* (University Press of Florida, 2002), pp. 91-112.

⁴ The definitions of the word ‘*gecynd*’ are found in dictionaries of Germanic language group. The following dictionaries are consulted: Joseph Bosworth and T. N. Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (1898); T. N. Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon*

poet who writes in a traditional English style, uses *kynde*, the Middle English form of *gecynd*, to denote the same meaning of ‘essence’. Both the poets are under the influence of St. Augustine, who uses Latin *natura* to denote ‘essence’, and also to denote human ‘nature’. Although the two poets lived almost six hundred years apart, they are both considered to have much in common in their use of the word meaning human ‘nature’. The meaning of *kynde* will also be clarified so that the connotation of *gecynd* can be better understood.

In *Beowulf*, nature is as hostile to man as to the extent of showing demonic antagonism. Menacing and terrifying nature descriptions center around the dwellings of Grendel and his mother. What does the *Beowulf* poet intend the nature description to symbolize? The following short essay delves into four possible interpretations concerning the description of nature in *Beowulf*, assuming that the poem was composed around the beginning of the eighth century in a Northumbrian royal house.⁵

I. Latin *natura* and Germanic *gecynd*

In Middle English, there seems to be two words denoting ‘nature’, *natura* and *kynde*, both of which are sometimes personified. Chaucer frequently uses Latin *natura*, while Langland uses Germanic *kynde*. The concept of *natura* had existed since the classical period, which culminated in the twelfth century philosophy of nature in France. This philosophy sees the universe as ‘*plenum formārum*’, in which every existence, even the evil one is needed for its perfection. Chaucer, much influenced by Latin and French culture, borrows the concept of *natura* from Alan de Lille and Jean de Meun, and uses *Natura*, in the form of a goddess, the

Dictionary Supplement (1921); Geir T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (1926); F. Holthausen, *Altenglisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (1963); Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 4th edn (1960); Georg Benecke, *Mittelhochdeutsches Wörterbuch* (1963); C. W. M. Grein, *Sprachschatz der Angelsächsischen Dichter*, rev. by F. Holthausen and J. J. Köhler (1974); *A Thesaurus of Old English* Vol. I, Vol. II, (King’s College, London, 1995).

⁵ Concerning the date of composition of *Beowulf*, B. Mitchell and F. C. Robinson estimated that it was composed c.680-800. B. Mitchell and F. C. Robinson ed., *Beowulf* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998). All the quotations from *Beowulf* are from this edition.

handmaiden of God, to represent the natural world. Signifying the ‘*plenitude essendi*’ or the ‘fullness of being’ she is responsible for the preservation of the species. In the idealized vision of the natural world depicted in the *Parliament of Fowls*, the natural and procreative love of the assembled birds is placed side by side with human love, accentuating the goodness of original Creation as compared with the mutable world of humanity.

Langland uses capitalized ‘Kynde’ quite frequently, as a synonym for ‘God’ the Creator, as is shown in the following passage: In answering the protagonist’s question of who Kynde is, Wit, equating Kynde with God, answers him: “Kynde •• Pat is þe grete God” (*Piers Plowman*, B.IX. 26-28).⁶ The *Middle English Dictionary* lists several definitions of *kynde* and among these are ‘God the Creator’ and ‘Creation’.⁷ In the vision of ‘Middle Earth’ in *Piers Plowman* (B.XI.326-67), the wonder of the natural world is described. Whereas the animals, with their natural instinct of procreation, are ideally described, human ‘kind’, male and female, is described as a destructive element in the otherwise peaceful animal kingdom. The use of *kynde* to describe man’s ‘nature’ in *Piers Plowman*, implies that the word carries a corrupt connotation. There is, thus, a difference between *Natura* of Alan de Lille and the *kynde* of man or human ‘nature’.

In *Beowulf*, *gecynd* (spelt as *gecynde* in the text) appears as an adjective several times, and it is used in the sense of ‘inherited’ and ‘inborn’, for example, to express the ‘inborn character’ of Wiglaf (*Beowulf*, l. 2696). Inborn (= *gecynd*) human ‘nature’ among Hroðgar’s people in the hall is well represented by their noisy merrymaking, fornication and pagan rituals. The people are loud and excited, having entertainment drinking mead, minstrels’ singing, and their lord’s treasure-giving until midnight. Among Heorot’s people is Unferð, who is

⁶ A. V. C. Schmidt ed., *Piers Plowman: A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C and Z Versions* (Longman, 1995).

⁷ There are divided opinions as to whether *Kynde* in *Piers Plowman* has both of these meanings. G. D. Economou says that *Kynde* in *Piers Plowman* means both ‘Creator’ and the ‘created world’, while A. V. C. Schmidt, Hugh White and Nicolette Zeeman say that *Kynde* denotes ‘Creator’.

a reminder of Cain in the Bible. Unferð, jealous of Beowulf's renowned bravery, insults him, and is then accused by Beowulf of having murdered his own kith and kin (ll. 586-89). The Danes' custom of offering a sacrifice to idols at pagan shrines is also described (ll. 175-79), and all of these elements suggest the monstrosity of Hrothgar's people. Grendel, his mother and the dragon are all symbols of the monstrosity, which is emphasized through the descriptions of the powerful natural force.

It is understood that St. Augustine's doctrine was very influential to the Anglo-Saxon writers, and the *Beowulf* poet was no exception. He must have been aware of Augustine's doctrine from the writings of Venerable Bede (673-735) of Northumbria. In St. Augustine's doctrine of creation, *natura* (= essence) cannot be detached from the physical reality of the created world. 'Every essence is from God, who is Himself the supreme essence.'⁸ The material world only exists through the perception of human beings. Every aspect of the material creation arises in the human mind, with its image being formed there. The physical world is a kind of projection of what is created in the human mind.⁹ According to etymological dictionaries, *gecynd*, cognate with *cynd* has the root *kun*, which can be traced back to the Indo-European *genə*-signifying 'to give birth, beget', and thus has relevance to St. Augustine's idea of 'essence' as the source of innate characteristics. The other important meaning of *gecynd* is 'groups linked by blood', specifically 'species', 'genus', 'race', 'offspring', 'family' and 'children'. As *Genesis* emphasizes 'species' and 'kind' after which God created the world, so *gecynd*, in this sense, has relevance to Creation.

II. A reflection of fallen humanity

There has been a view that the Anglo-Saxon poets used descriptions of the natural world as a means of representing humanity in the cosmos.¹⁰ If

⁸ For St. Augustine's philosophy of creation, I'm indebted to Cristopher J. O'Toole, *The Philosophy of Creation in the Writings of St. Augustine* (Kessinger Publishing, 1994), chap.1.

⁹ *De Trinitate*, Lib. VIII. Caput III. 4. S. McKenna trans. The Trinity (Washington: CUA Press, 1963).

¹⁰ The view is put forward by Jennifer Neville, chaps. 2-3.

so, how they grasped the 'inborn nature' of human beings is very important, to see if there is any relevance between the descriptions and the meaning of the texts. The place and the state of human 'kind' becomes significant for the clarification of the relationship between man and the rest of the creation—the animals, all vegetation and inanimate beings.

The 'innate nature' of human beings could have meant to the *Beowulf* author, the post-lapsarian 'fallen human nature' or 'monstrous humanity'.¹¹ While St. Augustine emphasizes the essential goodness of the whole creation: '*cum ominino natura nulla sit malum*' ('No nature is entirely evil'),¹² he also reiterates that 'human nature' became corrupt after the Fall. In the beginning, Augustine says, God created human beings in His image, and distinguished them from other creatures by endowing them with reason and intelligence, giving them a superior position to other creatures ('*qui [= Deus] rerum omnium copiam salutisque praestiterat*', *De civitate Dei*, Lib. XIV. Cap. XV) that are all created for their use. However, the transformation of 'human nature' caused by the Original Sin, which the first two committed, put humans against God's other Creation that remained good.¹³

illa [= qualitas peccatis a primis hominibus admissi] duorum primorum hominum praevaricatione mutata est, ut tantae corruptioni

The nature of the original sin has changed the first two human beings, through their collusion, into a so-called corrupt state¹⁴

¹¹ This view is the same as the exegetical interpretation of humanity, pointed out by D.W. Robertson and B. F. Huppé.

¹² Quotations from St. Augustine are from J. E. C. Welldon, ed., *Sancti Aurelii Augustini De civitate Dei contra paganos libri*, 2 vols. (London, 1924), Lib. XI. Caput XXII. Modern English translations are mine.

¹³ See for example, *De Civitate Dei*, Lib. XIV, Caput XII, where he writes about the corruption of human nature by the original sin. See Bernard F. Huppé, 'Nature in *Beowulf* and *Roland*', in *Approaches to Nature in the Middle Ages* (New York: Center for Medieval & Early Renaissance Studies, State University of New York, 1982), pp. 4-46. As to the domination of Augustinian ideology on Old English poetry, see B. F. Huppé, *Doctrine and Poetry: Augustine's Influence on Old English Poetry* (Albany, NY, 1959).

¹⁴ *De civitate Dei*, Lib. XIV. Caput XII.

Man is ‘fallen’, through the Fall, from his god-given natural self into original sin. The fallen ‘nature’ gives man an internal conflict, making man at war with ‘nature’ the Latin *natura*. The monsters, Grendel, his mother and the dragon appear to be symbolizing the corrupt force of man’s ‘nature’. The following description of Grendel’s dwelling, menacing and horrible, appears to symbolize such human ‘nature’

Hīe dȳgel lond
 Warigeað wulfhleoþu windige næssas
 Frēcne fengelād ðær fyrgenstrēam
 Under næssa genipu niþer gewīteð
 flōd under foldan. Nis þæt feor heonon
 mīlgemearces þæt se mere standeð;
 ofer þām hongiað hrinde bearwas,
 wudu wyrtum fæst wæter oferhelmað. (*Beowulf*, ll. 1357-1364)

Description of ‘hostile nature’, however, can also be utilized to show the mentality of man, who is alienated from the human circle he belongs to, trying unsuccessfully to return to its members.

III. A reflection of the mentality of exiles

The Anglo-Saxons, P. H. Blair says, are doomed to the fate of ‘exile’, that is, they are not only lost in an untamed natural world, but also are inhabitants outside of human society. The Anglo-Saxon tribes are, to begin with, migrating from the Continent, and this migration gives them a constant feeling of rootless wanderers. Their society is a patriarchal community, closely tied up by blood-relationship, distinguishing the people living within and without. In these societies of early settlers in Northumberland, huge halls functioned as centers of social bonding in their community, giving them a secure feeling.¹⁵ The *Beowulf* poet describes the king Hroðgar’s hall, Heorot, as ‘the center of feasting,

¹⁵ For the function of the hall, see for example, Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, ed. *Beowulf*, pp. 186-87; Fabienne L. Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest: Imaginary Geography and Sense of Space in Old English Literature* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), chap.3.

treasure-giving, story-telling and song'. The members in the hall, comprised of the king, his thegns, warriors and other retainers, are supposedly more or less blood-related kin, and this human circle functions as a kind of boundary, protecting the inhabitants and warding off unpleasant elements outside. The passage below describes the friendly atmosphere of the community:

fægere geþægon
medoful manig māgas þāra
swīðhicgende on sele þām hēan
Hrōðgār ond Hrōþulf. Heorot innan wæs
frēondum āfyllde; (*Beowulf*, ll. 1014-18)

Cohesiveness is especially needed for the inhabitants in the hall in order to fortify themselves against dangerous threats coming from both outside and from destructive forces within. The society excludes such elements as do not comply with their social codes, and excludes them from their human circle for spoiling its harmony. They are the excommunicated 'exiles', and they are doomed to experience the harshness of isolation, both from their blood kin, and from their past, and are doomed to have no future prospect of coming back to the warmth of blood kin. P. H. Blair says,

No fate was so harsh as that of the exile, the homeless wanderer, who faced the hardships of winter deprived of *the love of his kinsmen* and the cheerful warmth of home and hearth. And no exile, says the poet, is as hard to bear as that of the wandering cloud, having neither the memory of a home in the past, nor the prospect of a home to come. (emphasis added)¹⁶

A sense of 'exile' caused by the precarious state of 'man's present life on earth' is implied in the poem, by the use of the word *middangeard* (l.75, 504, 751, 1771), which means the 'sphere existing between heaven and hell'. Bede uses this precarious state of humans as a means of converting King Edwin's retainers to Christianity. He explains to them

¹⁶ Peter Hunter Blair, *Northumbria: in the Days of Bede* (1976; Facsimile reprint Llanerch Publishers, 1996), p. 15.

‘the present life on earth’ (*uita hominum praesens in terries*), by using a simile of a sparrow flying into a hall, where ‘the fire is burning on the hearth’ and then quickly flying out through the other door into the outside, where ‘the wintry storms of rain and snow are raging’.¹⁷ Bede says in the passage that the people of Northumbria could not survive severe weather conditions without the warmth of their blood kin. Bede uses the description of nature as a means to describe the insecure state of humanity, and the *Beowulf* poet also appears to use the same description to represent the general Anglo-Saxons’ feeling of ‘exile’.

IV. A reflection of the poet’s mentality depressed by his surrounding nature

The Anglo-Saxons are said to have been conscious of the fragility and helplessness of human existence in the face of nature’s power. The actual living conditions of the early settlers in Northumbria must be taken into consideration, in view of the immense influence that natural conditions can have on the mentality of human beings. Although the early Anglo-Saxons’ interaction with their surrounding nature might never be completely understood, the condition of their living has been reconstructed through archaeological evidence. Some idea of King Hroðgar’s hall is obtained from reconstructions of the Anglo-Saxon royal palaces.¹⁸ In Bede’s World at Jarrow, there is a miniature model of the royal villa at Yeavering, the supposed site where the missionary bishop Paulinus converted the followers of Edwin, king of the Northumbrians, to Christianity in 627. The model shows the second stage of the development of Yeavering, built during King Edwin’s reign (616-33). It includes a great hall together with a group of smaller halls, a wooden enclosure that was supposedly used as a cattle-corral, a pagan temple that was probably consecrated for Christian use, and a grandstand that was possibly used for assembly to preach to the local pagan population.

The interaction of the primitive Anglo-Saxons with their surrounding

¹⁷ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Judith McClure and Roger Collins (Oxford University Press, 1999), Bk II, chap.13.

¹⁸ For example, miniature models of reconstruction at the museums in Jarrow and Lindisfarne.

nature during their daily living, must have been far removed from the later ideal view of nature that Chaucer and Langland described in the fourteenth century. Unmastered and intractable, 'nature' for the *Beowulf* poet is as threatening as a terrifying assailant, just like the monster Grendel and his mother in the poem. It has been proven by archaeologists that a large rectangular building at Yeavering was a timber hall with a thatched roof. It is a massive rectangular ground-sill construction, built on a raised wooden platform made of planks, which 'would have carried the feasting tables at which heroic poems would be recited to the accompaniment of much eating and drinking'.¹⁹ The great hall of Heorot is considered to have some similarity to the massive timber hall supposed to have stood at Yeavering. It can be seen that even such a massive building, built for kings and noblemen, would have been vulnerable to the catastrophes of fire, or the intractable forces of nature such as rain, hail or storms.

The construction of the buildings is still basic, and they do not appear to provide the inhabitants with enough security for them to feel that they are protected and are completely safe. Archaeological evidence has shown that more than half the Anglo-Saxons died by the age of twenty-five, often infected with fatal diseases. They are still 'exiles' depressed both by life-threatening destructive forces, and by the damp and gloomy days in northern Europe.

Conclusion

The *Beowulf* poet intends the nature descriptions to symbolize four different human conditions: 1) fallen humanity, 2) the mentality of the exile who is alienated from human society, 3) the unstable status of a human being in the present life, and 4) depression caused by natural threats. The poet uses Grendel and his mother to symbolize all four conditions. The Germanic word *gecynd* suggests all four conditions: 1) the 'inborn or essential character' of fallen humanity, 2) the separation of

¹⁹ P. V. Addyman. 'The Anglo-Saxon house: a new review' *Anglo-Saxon England*, 1 (1972), pp. 273-308. The quotation is from Martin Welch, *Anglo-Saxon England* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1992), p. 53.

human kind into 'groups linked by blood', 3) the 'essential character' of humanity placed in this world, and 4) it denotes the whole Created world, with all its unknown potential and danger.