BEOWULF’S FUNERAL: ANALYSIS

This text is an extract from the epic poem “Beowulf”, a superb example of Anglo-Saxon literature.

The author is unknown and the text includes a section with lines 3136-3172.

Considering the title, the reader expects to read about Beowulf’s funeral. The idea that the composer wants to transmit to the reader is to celebrate the figure of Beowulf and his bellicose nature.

The first four lines recall Beowulf’s weapons, referring to his main feature: he was an exceptional, strong and a brave warrior. His importance in the Geat society is underlined by the large dimensions of the pyre. It is enormous and is recovered by the weapons he used in battle: “helmets”, “heavy war-shields and shining armour”(lines 3-4). The intent to use them to make the pyre respects consistently the will of Beowulf of being buried with the things that more characterized him during his life. The most frequent sound of the first quatrain is “s”: this creates silence, the way people must stay in front of the ritual of the funeral.

The narrator organises the funeral in the chronological order: at first, they put him in the middle of the pyre and then lighted a big fire: “they laid him in the middle of it”, “kindled the hugest of all the funeral fire”(lines 5-6) . During the ritual, the Geat people cried a lot “mourning”(line 6) and gathered together: this is connected to the high value of the Anglo-Saxon society of the importance of the community. Again, the adjectives “far-famed” and “beloved” suggest the respect that that people had for Beowulf.

From line 7 to line 12 flames are characterized as they are a character of the text: their force of destruction and their movements are presented. The alliteration of the sound “f” (line 8) underlines their brutality. They “roared” as humans do and “billowed darkly up”(line 9) : they are strong, instinctive, have no fear and control. They have the same characteristics of the hero of Beowulf: it is logical that the fire and Beowulf unify together to one entity. They are so powerful that they mask people’s feelings of sadness “drowned out their weeping”(line 10) , make wind calmer “wind died down” and destroy Beowulf’s body as well “wrought havon in the hot bone-house, burning it to the core” (line 11-12). Despite this, fire isn’t able to calm people’s hearts. They are “disconsolate” (line 12) and “wailed out for their lord’s decease”.

The scene continues with the appearance of a woman that has normal characteristics: she is suffering as the other and preys for the future. She is a good person and has the courage of reciting a litany to beg that nothing in the future would happen “a wild litany of nightmare and lament”. In fact, she imagines that, without the presence of Beowulf defeating his people, this could be invaded by enemies and fall in slavery and abasement. This is a sort of “protest” against the destiny that has accompanied Beowulf and his people’s lives. This is happening while the fire breaks up Beowulf’s body and his remains go to Heaven, towards the place all expect he’ll go. Heaven is the place of blessed, heroes, people that behave rightly.

Then, the Geat people begin to construct a tomb, a “mound on a headland”(line 21). That has to be high and imposing, as the pyre, to contain Beowulf’s remains and has to be easily seen by sailors “sailors could see from far away” (line 22). The Geat people are well-organized, able and, in ten days, have finished the work, as the text explains. They put all that has remained from the funeral inside this tomb and close it to preserve the remains. It is a memorial, a construction that has been built not to forget Beowulf’s figure and deeds. They also bury lots of precious objects: jewels, a treasure and necklaces that are taken by the ground. This is to make the place where Beowulf’s body remains richer and splendid, as they use to do for this kind of men (line 29).

The text concludes with twelve warriors that pass close to the tomb and as everybody would do, they stop themselves to contemplate the building. They are “distraught” (line 35) and chant some dirges. This is really important to preserve and remember the warrior that in the final is presented as a man but also as a king. Beowulf , for this young warriors, is the main example of good and brave fighter. Beowulf is the king of goodness against the evil. The main alliteration in the last quatrain is the sound “c” in line 34.

The rhythm of this extract is really slow: it means that the narrator wants to underline that this event has a long duration but also to represent the suffering of the Geat people. There aren’t many run-on-line that make the narration quicker.

There are two aspects that make this extract written by a Christian author. The first is the litany, which is a common Christian poetry. The second is the presence of the “Heaven” that is the maximum condition that a person could reach after his death.

It is important to say that Beowulf’s tomb has been collocated close to the sea, because Anglo-Saxons were good fishermen and respected the nature and the sea: it is said that there is a connection between the poem of Beowulf and the archaeological site of Sutton Hoo.

In conclusion, this extract wants to show how Anglo-Saxon’s society was organized: they considered the community and the solidarity between the different components the main value to respect.