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Loss and Recompense: Responsibilities in *Beowulf*

**Abstract**
Examines “the importance of communal responsibilities, particularly dealing with matters of loss and recompense” in the supporting narrative material of the *Beowulf* poem. This theme provides “a key for understanding the relationship between the main events of the poem and the supporting sub-stories.”

**Additional Keywords**
Beowulf—Social and political aspects; Loss; Recompense; Responsibility
INTRODUCTION

Loss and recompense play important parts in much of Old English literature. The balance between the two is often central to the society presented by that literature. The balancing of losses depends largely upon the correct fulfillment of a person's responsibilities. In *Beowulf*, the interconnection of responsibilities weaves the three main episodes of the poem into one tapestry. Responsibilities to retainers, responsibilities to lord, responsibilities to kin — stretching even so far as responsibility to man-kind — are each in turn explored in the poem.

One of the main problems involved in a study of *Beowulf* is the apparent discontinuity between the main action of the work and the numerous sub-stories which dot the narration. The main argument of this article supports the contention that the two central elements of the poem, Beowulf's three adventures and the supporting narrative material, are interrelated. A close study of the supporting material reveals the relationship, even to the point of explaining why Beowulf is presented so completely as a monster-fighter. The key lies in examining the importance of communal responsibilities, particularly dealing with matters of loss and recompense.

I. LORD AND RETAINER

One of the most important elements of Anglo-Saxon life was a man's relationship to his lord and kin. The various aspects of these relationships are widely treated in Old English literature. Perhaps the most poignant expression of the loss of lord and kin occurs in *The Wanderer*. In that poem, the narrator grieves for his lost kin and his dead lord, and expresses the hope of finding some lord who will treat him with kindness.

In *Beowulf* the relationships of lord and retainer and kin supply supporting material to the story of the monster-fighting hero. Repeatedly, matters of loyalty to lord and responsibility to kin are the subjects of the sub-stories. From the opening scene to the closing funeral comments, the importance of the lord figures prominently in the poem.

In Anglo-Saxon society, the life of the exile was an undesired fate. Yet, even more undesirable, because more harmful to the community, was the fate of being leaderless. The “wine-dryhten” [*friendly lord*] was important for social stability.

The opening of *Beowulf*, with its description of Scyld Sceafing and his glorious descendants does more than just set the scene of Hrothgar's Heorot. It emphasizes the importance of the lord to his people from the very beginning of the poem. The opening lines describe how Scyld, alone, came to the Danes, and became their lord. In time, a son was born to him, “one God sende / folce to frofre” (13-14) ["whom God had sent / to comfort the people"]. Indeed, both father and son were sent as comfort to the Danes, a consolation — one could even say, a recompense. As the poet continues: “fyren earfe ongeat, / aet hie aer dragon aldorlease / lange hwile” (14-16) ["—well had He seen / the sinful distress they suffered earlier, leaderless for long"]. To be “aldorlease”, lordless, is presented from the beginning of the work as a grievous condition.

Much later in the poem, the lordless, kinless state is reemphasized. Just prior to Beowulf's fight with the dragon, the poet introduces a passage which has been called “The Lay of the Last Survivor.” Within this passage, the poet creates an emotional description of one who no longer has a community. He ends his days amidst the treasure his lord and kinsmen had gathered in their days of glory.

The Last Survivor was perhaps an older man, beyond the age of seeking a new lord. Unlike the narrator of *The Wanderer*, the Last Survivor stays with the inanimate remnants of his community. In doing so, he avoids presenting to the world the appearance of a man who has lost his lord, his ring-giver.

The fact that the lord is expected to bestow gifts on his followers is presented early in the poem.

Swa sceal geong guma  gode gewyrcan, fromum feohgifturn  on faeder bearme,
This passage emphasizes the necessity for a lord (or one who will be a lord) of accumulating treasure; not for the sake of owning treasure, but for the purpose of making gifts to retainers. As the last line of the passage points out, generosity insures prosperity.

Generosity alone, however, will not insure that a lord will gain reliable retainers. A lord of no reputation is not likely to collect strong warriors as followers. A victorious battle-lord will gain many retainers. The poet makes this point while setting the scene for the confrontation in Heorot. He describes Hrothgar as such a lord.

Because he is a successful war-lord, Hrothgar draws warriors to himself. As his court is still called “great” when Beowulf visits it, one can assume that even into his old age Hrothgar maintained the recommended liberality.

Yet, a reputation as a strong warrior coupled with open-handedness might not be enough to keep the bond of loyalty between retainer and lord. One of the descriptions of Heremod presents a picture of a lord who totally failed in his responsibilities: “Hine sorhwylmas / lemede tō lange; hē hīs lēodum wear, / eallum æþelingum tō aldorcærce” (904-906). [His black moods / had lasted too long; he brought to his people / a lifetime’s sorrow, and death to his nobles.] Heremod’s behavior is presented as a negative example of lord-retainer responsibilities. Rather than preventing loss to the people under his care, he created it. Indeed, later in the poem a fuller description of Heremod’s abuse of his privileges and responsibilities is given. Hrothgar gives praise to Beowulf as a help to his people, and then relates how Heremod brought loss to his own people.

Ne weart Heremod swā
eæforum Ecgwelæ, Ćr-Scyldingum;
ne gewēox hē him tō willan, ac tō wælfealle
ond tō đægswálum Deniga lēodum;
brēat bolgenmōd bōdgenēætas,
eælgestællan, opæt hē āna hwææft,
māre péoden mōndræamum frōm,
þēah þe hine mīhtig God mægenes wynnum,
eafeþum stēþte, ofer ealle men
forð gefremede. (1709-1718)

[Not so was Heremod to the sons of Ecgwela, the Honor-Scyldings; grew not to their joy, but killed Danish men in his own hall, bloodily. Swollen in heart, he cut down companions, raging at table, till exiled, alone, a famous prince, was sent from man’s joys, notoriously bad, though God had given him the joys of great strength, had set him, mighty, above all men.]

Heremod’s abuse of his retainers eventually caused him to be cast out of his community. From the height of being the lord of the Danes he fell to become one of the wanderers, an exile, a man “aldorlease”.

Heremod is not an isolated example, however. In a latter part of the poem, the poet briefly mentions the story of Modthrytho (or Thrytho), wife of Offa, as a contrast to the goodness of Hygd. Modthrytho would cause her father’s retainers to be put to death, for alleged abuses of her person. In doing this, she was both disrupting her father’s bond to his retainers and abusing her own privileges as a king’s daughter. Although we are told that she reformed her ways when she wed, the poet offers a condemnation of her earlier behavior:

Ne bið swylc cwēnlic þēaw
idesæ tō eðnanne, þēah þe þīnlicu sī,
þætte freðuwebbe fōres onsæce
æfter þigorærne leofne mannæ. (1940-1943)

[Not queenly customs in a lady, however beautiful—to take the lives of beloved men, a woman, peace-weaver, inventing false charges.]

As did Heremod, Modthrytho caused death and loss within her own community. This was not only unqueenly behavior, it was ungenerous.

The poem presents generosity as one of a lord’s more important virtues. The giving of gifts by the lord to his followers is so central to the society that one of the more frequent kennings for “lord” in the poetry is “ring-giver”. Much treasure is given in recognition of deeds of valor. Apparently, a virtuous king was able to recognize occasions where his liberality was to be exercised. When Beowulf first appears in Hrothgar’s court, Hrothgar divines the purpose of the visit and declares: “Ic þēm gōdan sceal / for his mōd ðrace mādnas bōdan” (384-385) [“I must offer this man / excellent treasures for his daring courage.”].

Before Beowulf has even lifted hand and sword in defense of Heorot, Hrothgar has recognized him as worthy of the king’s munificence. Following Beowulf’s battle with
Grendel, Hrothgar proves that a king's generosity need not be confined to mere rings of gold.

Now, my Beowulf, best of men, I will love you like a son, cherish you for life. Keep this new kinship deep in your heart. Nothing I own, of my worldly goods, would I keep from you. Often for less I have given treasures, honorable gifts to lesser warriors, poorer at battle. But now, by yourself, you have done such a deed that your fame is assured, will live forever.

This is, perhaps, the ultimate in generosity. In addition to declaring that he will withhold nothing of his material goods from Beowulf, he adds a bond of kinship: he will love and cherish the hero like a son. In a society where death came easily, the bonds of adopted kinship were often no less strong than those of blood kinship.

At least three times between this passage and Beowulf's return to his homeland Hrothgar is shown either bestowing gifts on Beowulf or promising him rewards of treasure.

These gifts are certainly the mark of liberality. They are over and above the gifts of finely grafted tools of the warrior's trade. Yet, the open-handed Hrothgar does not stop here. Before Beowulf goes to fight Grendel's mother, the Dane-lord promises further generosity:

"I will reward your feud with payments, most valued treasures, as I did before, old twisted gold, if you live to return."

A repetition of the negative example of Heremod emphasizes again the importance of this virtue of liberality: "Hwaefhere him on ferhþe greow / bræosthorð blœðræw; nallas beagas geaf / Denum æfter dôme” (1718-1720) [Despite good fortune his thought grew savage, / his heart blood-thirsty; never a ring / did he give, for glory, to the Danish men.]. It is obvious that Heremod's closed-fistedness was not the result of empty coffers: he had been favored by “mihtig God” and set over all men. One can safely assume that a suitable treasure went with this divine good-will.

The generosity of a lord was not, however, without its responsibilities. In a long passage just before he goes to fight Grendel's mother, Beowulf reminds Hrothgar of the responsibilities he has taken on in adopting the hero.

"Geþenc nû, se mára maga Healfdenes, snottra fengel, nú ic eom sêges fûs, goldwine gumena, hwæt wit geô spræcon, gif ic æt þearfe þîne scolde aldre linnan, þæt þu më á wære forðgewitenum on faeder stæle. Wes þu mundbora mínun magøpegnum, hondgesellum, gif mec hild nime; swylce þu á mæðmas, þe þu më saildest, Hröðgar lëofa, Higelæc onsend. Maeg þonne on þæm golde ongitan Gæta dryhten, gesçon sunu Hrudel, þonne hé on þæt sinc starað, þæt ic gumcystum göðne funde þega bryttan, bêac þonne mûste.” (1474-1487) ["Famed son of Healfdene, wisest of princes, remember all well, now that I am ready, gold-friend of warriors, what we spoke of before, that if I lose my life while at work in your cause, you will still be to me as a father always. Be shield and protector of my young men here, close battle-comrades, if this fight claims me; and also the treasures which you have given me, beloved Hrothgar, send back to Hygelac, lord of the Geats. He will understand when he sees such gold, the son of Hrethel will know full well that I had found a ring-giving lord of all manly virtues, rejoiced in his good while I was able."]
Recalling Hrothgar's promise to stand as a father to the Geat, Beowulf also reminds the Danish king that should the hero die in the conflict with Grendel's mother, Hrothgar becomes responsible for Beowulf's followers. If Beowulf dies, Hrothgar is obligated to the hero's companions, that they not be left "aldorlease". Beowulf also asks that the treasure Hrothgar has already given him be sent to Hylgelac, in order that the Geatish king might know that Beowulf did not die far removed from the favor of a generous lord. Perhaps the sentiment expressed by the final part of this passage could be stated thus: "Do not let my lord Hylgelac imagine that I died an exile's death, lordless and alone."

The responsibilities with which Beowulf charges Hrothgar deal with the nature of recompense. The protection he asks for his followers is a recompense for the loss of their lord. Having the treasures sent to Hylgelac redresses the Geatish king for the loss of his kinsman and retainer. The payment of wer-gyld is shown as part of a lord's responsibilities.

One form of repayment which plays a large part in the sub-stories of Beowulf belongs to the category of "an eye for an eye". However, here it might be phrases "a life for a life". This recompense receives small approval from the poet: "Ne waes þæt gewrixle til, / þæt hie on þa healfa bicgan scoldon / ðreonda ðeorman." (1304-1306) [No good lives of kinsmen and friends.

The poet recognizes that gold does little to alleviate the loss of a beloved companion. Yet, such a material recognition of the value of the lost one is better than ignoring the dead. The custom of wer-gyld is an acknowledgement of the individual's importance to the community. The death of a member of the community will not pass unnoticed. When Hrothgar honors Beowulf's followers, gold is given as recompense for the man Grendel killed.

Dé yá æghwylcum corla drighent
þara þe mid Béowulfe brilmáðe ðéah, on þære medubence mæþsum geseadel, yrfel æfe, ond þone æenne heht
golde forgyldan, þone þe Grendel ær
mæne æcwealde .... (1050-1055)

[Then, still more, to those on the mead-bench
who made the sea-journey, Beowulf's followers,
the lord of warriors gave each a treasure,
true old heirlooms, and ordered that gold
be paid for the man that Grendel killed
before in his sin ....]

Perhaps the most important example of offered recompense is the Finnsburg episode. This story is included because of the interesting problems of recompense involved in the incident. A brief recapitulation of the story sets the scene thus: In early winter, Finn, king of the Frisians, has provoked a battle with the Danes, his wife's kinsmen and countrymen, who are visiting in his hall. In the battle, many of the Danes are killed, as are many of the Frisians. Because winter is setting in, the surviving Danes cannot leave, and Finn cannot reenforce his depleted company of retainers.

Because the Danes cannot be removed without incurring greater loss in his own host, Finn is forced to offer some kind of recompense. The Danes must be included in the Frisian community for the duration of the winter. Therefore Finn attempts to make peace.

Fin Hengeste
elne unslitme ðærum benemde, 
þæt hie þa wéalæfe weotena dôme 
árum hóeleð, þæt ðær ænig mon
wordum ne worcum wäre ne bræce, 
þær huhr inwitsearo æfre gemænden, 
ðéah hie hira þæggyfan banan folgedon 
ðeodenléæ, þæ him swa gelyfæræd waes; 
gyf þonne Frysna hwylc frecnan spræce 
þæs morþorhætes myndgiend wäre, 
þonne hit sweordes ecg sèban scoldæ. (1096-1106)

[Earnestly Finn took oath before Hengest to hold in such honor, by his counselors' judgment, those sad survivors that no man should ever, by word or deed, break off the truce, nor plotting in malice give them any affront, though now they followed the lord who had killed their own ring-giver — without a leader, out of necessity; that if any Frisian, in provocation, should call to mind the murderous feud, the edge of the sword should settle it for good.]

In his oath, Finn promises to treat the Danes as he does his Frisians, declaring that no one will provoke the Danes, even though they are presently obliged to follow the king who killed their own lord.

Although this attempted recompense failed, the story in no way loses its force as an example of repayment. It occurs because the Danes had temporarily become a part of the Frisian community. In this situation, Finn could not afford to ignore the kin-loss and lord-loss which the Danes had suffered.

It is because community is so important in the giving of wer-gyld that the poet can state that the Danes will get no recompense from Grendel.

sibbe ne wolde
wið manna hwone megenes Deniga, 
feorhbealo feorran, fæa Yingian, 
ne þær ænig witena wénan þorfte 
beorhtre bête to banan folnum .... (154-155)

[He wanted no peace
with any of the men in the Danish host, to put off his killing, settle it by payment; none of the counselors had any great need to look for bright gifts from his reddened hands.]
Grendel has been presented as existing outside the community of the Danes, indeed, as being outside the community of mankind itself. Because he is such an extreme outsider, no one can or does expect the workings of wer-gyld to apply to the monster, Grendel.

Grendel’s mother presents a slightly different situation. Grendel is, one might say, her community. Therefore she seeks blood-payment for his death: “Ond his módor þá gyf / gífre ond galgmod gégán wolde / sorhfulne síð, susu déða wrecan” (1276-1278) [And now his mother, / still greedy for slaughter, wanted to visit, / make a grievous journey, avenge her son’s death.]. Her deed is an example of how the search for recompense crosses the line into vengeance. However, because she is a monster and therefore outside the community of mankind, no one truly believes she deserves to receive wer-gyld. Her deeds of horror are only slightly less than Grendel’s.

The responsibilities of a lord to his retainers have been shown to include generous gift-giving and, if necessary, the payment of wer-gyld. However, the responsibilities of the relationship do not all lie with the lord. The retainer is expected to give support to his lord and to remain loyal.

When Beowulf returns to the Geatish court, he praises Hrothgar’s generosity to Hygelac. He then offers his lord the treasures he has won from the Danish king.

"Swá se ðeodcyning þæawum lyde; nealles ic ðám lænum forloren hæfde, mægnes mēde, ac hē mē māðmas geaf, susu Healfdenes on mínne sylfes dōm; ðā ic ðe, beornyning, bringan wylle, ðæstum geýwân.” (2144-2149) 

["That nation’s king thus kept to good custom; indeed, I have hardly lost all that booty, reward for strength— the son of Healfdene gave me treasures at my own choice, which I wish, great king, to bring to you, to show my good will.”]

By this act, Beowulf proves his continuing loyalty to Hygelac. His reasons for it conclude the passage: “Gen is eall aet e / liss gealont; ic lya hafa / heofódma 抄 nefne, Hygelac, ec” (2149-2151) [“All my joys / still depend on you: I have few relatives, / and no chief kinsman except you, Hygelac.”]. Having no other kinsmen, Beowulf will exert himself to maintain his relationship with his lord.

The poet re-emphasizes Beowulf’s loyalty to his kinsman and lord. Hygelac, also, is shown to behave properly toward Beowulf. “Hygeláce wæs / nīða hear-dum nefa swýðe hold, / ond gehwæðer ðōrum hrōpra gemýdigi” (2169-2171) [With war-bold Hygelac / his nephew kept faith, his man ever loyal, / and each always worked for the other’s welfare.]. Hygelac and Beowulf continued to hold each other’s welfare in mind. Indeed, Beowulf, is shown to stand scrupulously by his responsibilities as a retainer.

Beowulf’s recognition of his responsibilities is strong.
hand-picked comrades, his troop stand round him with battle-courage: they fled to the wood to save their lives. Only one felt shame and sorrow. Nothing can ever hold back kinship in a right-thinking man.

Of the hand-picked company he took with him when he went to face the dragon, only one kept faith with Beowulf. The others ran to save their lives, while one ‘right thinking man’ remained. The poet thus dramatically points out that retainers are expected to stand by their lord through all strife.

Wiglaf, the single faithful companion, voices the responsibility of the retainer before he goes to Beowulf’s aid. He reminds his fellows of the gifts which Beowulf has given them. He then declares:

*Nú is sé dagumen, \( \text{þat úre mandryhten} \) mægenes behorfa, gōdra guðrina; wuttun gongan tó, helsan hilfruman, \( \text{þenden hyt sóy} \), gledegesa grim! \( (2646-2650) \)

[The time is at hand when our generous lord could use the strength of good soldiers. Let us go to him now, help our war-leader through this heat, fire-horror.]

With this speech he goes into the dragon-fire and gives aid to his lord. He is with Beowulf when he dies. It is eminently fitting that the one loyal retainer pass judgement over those who broke faith with their lord.

After announcing Beowulf’s death, Wiglaf condemns his companions for their crime. For it is a crime: they have irreparably harmed the community by failing to stand by their lord in his time of need.

“Wergendra tó lýt \( \text{þrong ymbe ðeoden, þa hyne só þrag becwóm. Nú sealc sincýego ond swyrðgifu, eall ðelwyn ðowrum cyne, lufen álicgaen; londrihtes mót ðære mægburge monna áeghwylc ídel hweorlan, sy ð CDN ðælingas feornan gefricgean ðiæm ðowerne, domleasan ðæð. ðæð bið sóla eorla gehwylcum ðonne edwíþ garment. (2882-2891) \)}

[‘Too few defenders pressed round the king when his worst time came. Now all treasure, giving and receiving, all home-joys, ownership, comfort, shall cease for your kin; deprived of their rights each man of your families will have to be exiled, once nobles afar hear of your flight, a deed of no glory. Death is better for any warrior than a shameful life!’]

By their failure, the faithless retainers have caused a loss to the community which cannot be repaid. The only recompense is punishment of those who failed in their responsibility. They and their kin are exiled, because those who will not stand by their lord in his need have no value to the community. Indeed, their fate is worse than the usual exile. Exiles who must wander because their lord and kin are no more can hope to find a place with another lord, but those who are cast out because they broke faith with their lord are not likely to find a hospitable home in exile. Once their names and deeds become known, no lord would feel inclined to accept as retainers men who have failed in their duty to their previous lord.

The relationship of lord and retainer can thus be seen as a mutually sustained balance. The life of either depends on the faithfulness of both. Should one or the other fail, a loss of some sort is bound to afflict the community, a loss that would need to be compensated by some means.

II. FEUDING

One result of the structure of the lord-retainer relationship and its accompanying institution of wer-gyld was the practice of feuding. When an outsider causes the death of a lord, the offer of material recompense is not always satisfactory to those who are now ‘aldorlease’. The mental states of those who suffered the loss determines whether wer-gyld will be accepted or vengeance sought. It is the seeking of vengeance which supplies the cause of most of the feuding recounted in Beowulf. The poet shows that once the contention has begun, it is very difficult to break the cycle of the blood-feud. Wer-gyld may be offered, and even accepted, but such payment may not end the search for vengeance.

Of all the characters in the poem, Beowulf himself is the least connected to any feuding. The closest (and virtually only) association of a feud to Beowulf occurs in his father’s history. When Beowulf visits the court of Hrothgar, the Danish king recalls the incident.

“Gælæg hín feader \( fæhôe \) mæste; wearp hí ðe Heátholafa tó handbonan mid Wilfingum; \( ðá híne Wedera cyan for herebrógan habban ne mihte. \) \( \text{Panon hí gesóhte Súð-Dena fólc ofer yða gewealc, Ær-Scyldinga ...} \) \( (459-464) \)

[‘Your father struck up a mighty feud, slayer of Heatholaf among the Wylfings, by his own hand. Then the treaty-folk could not harbor him for fear of war, and so he traveled to the land of South-Danes, over rolling waves to Honor-Scyldings.’]

Hrothgar goes on to tell how he paid the wer-gyld which settled Ecgtheow’s feud: “\( \text{Siðan þa fæhôe fæo ũingode; / sende ic Wylfingum ofer waeteres hrycg / ealde mædmas} \) \( (470-472) \)” [‘Later I settled the feud by payment; I sent to those Wylfings over the water’s ridge, fine old treasures’]. Apparently, Hrothgar’s payment of the blood-price brought a satisfactory conclusion to this feud,
as no mention occurs of any continuation of it.

However, such successful resolutions of feuds are in the extreme minority among the sub-stories of Beowulf. Even Hrothgar is destined for his failure. Beowulf recounts to Hygelac upon his return to the Geatish court Hrothgar's attempt at resolving the Danes' feud with Ingeld: Hrothgar will wed his daughter to Ingeld. Beowulf has no doubt that this attempted resolution will fail.

Hrothgar has tried to settle the feud by forging bonds of adopted kinship through marriage. Beowulf bases his certainty on a simple psychological fact: material objects often have a strong evocative effect on memory. Beowulf points out that Freawaru's Danish honor-guard is likely to carry Heathobard heirlooms into Ingeld's court: "... hafað þæs geworden wine Scyldinga, rícæs hyrde, ond þæt æt talð, ðæt he mid þy wife waelfæða ðæs dæl, saecca gesette. Oft seldan hwær æfter lêodhryre lýtne hwile bongær þúgeð, þýah sêo bryð duge!" (2026-2031)

["The Scylding king has brought this about the guard of his kingdom, accepts the opinion that with the young woman he'll settle his share of the killings and feud. But seldom anywhere, after a slaying, will the death-spear rest, even for a while, though the bride be good."]

Hildeburh loses both son and brother in the conflict, yet she receives no compensation. This is a common result of feuding. By carrying the contention beyond the bounds of recompense and into the realm of vengeance, the parties quickly bring the feud to the point where no wer-gyld would be able to alleviate the loss.

The ending of the feud between the Danes and the Frisians is particularly bloody. Hengest and his followers slay Finn and his people.

[The hall was decorated with the lives of the foe, a tapestry of blood, Finn slain too, the king with his troop, and the queen taken. The Scylding warriors bore to their ship every good heirloom they found in the house of the great king Finn, gold seals, gem brooches. Over the sea they carried the queen back to the Danes, brought her to her people.]

They take Hildeburh back to the Danes, as if this is the solution to her losses. In addition to losing her brother, she has lost both husband and son, and she had presumably been happy with them, for the poet in describing her in the earlier passage has said so: "ær heo ær mæste heold / worolde wynne" (1079-1080) [where she had known / her greatest joy].

Many of the feuding sub-stories in Beowulf deal with the type of feuding that sets kin against kin. The problem with these feuds is that they tend to involve other people eventually, to some community's loss. The tale of the rebellion Ohthere's sons stirred against their uncle Onela serves as an example of this problem. Besides rebelling and breaking their bonds of kinship and loyalty to lord, the brothers also involve outsiders in their conflict. They go to Heardred and seek the aid of the young Geatish king against Onela.

Hynweorðmægneas ofer sæo sōhtan, suna Ötheres; hæfdon hý forhealden helm Scyldinga, yðne sélæstan sæcyninga
The poem describes the building of Heorot and its glory, he mentions in passing the feud between Hrothgar and his son-in-law Ingeld which will eventually result in the destruction of the golden hall:

Sele hílfade
hēah ond horgēap; heawōylma bād,
lāðan līgēs; ne wæs hit lenge hā ēgēn,
þæt se ecghete āþumswēoran
æfter wealnīðe waecnan scoldē. (81-85)

[The hall towered high, cliff-like, horn-gabled, awaited the war-flames, malicious burning; it was not the time for the sharp-edged hate of his sworn son-in-law to rise against Hrothgar in murderous rage.]

Hrothgar in particular seems afflicted with problems of betrayed kinship. His son-in-law will rise against him. It is also implied that his nephew will abuse the bonds of kinship. This is accomplished in one short passage: “Þā cwēm Wealhþēo fēor / gān under gyldnum beage / þær þā gōdan twēgen / sēton suhtergēofor; þā gēt was hiera sī ætgaedere, / æþhwylc ēōrrum tīrþwe” (1162-1165) [Wealhthēow came forth, glistening in gold, to greet the good pair, uncle and nephew; their peace was still firm, to each true to the other.]. The simple phrase “Þā gēt” ["then still"] conveys a sense of the impending betrayal.

Yet, these are not the only examples of kin-slaying or kin-betrayal present at Hrothgar’s court. His leading warrior, who sits at his feet, is a kin-slayer. When Unferth taunts the visiting Geat about the contest with Breca, Beowulf responds by reminding the Dane of his deed.

“Breca nāfre gīt
æt heaðolācē, nē gehwær per incer,
swā deorlice dāg gefremede
fāgum sweordum — nō ic þæs fela gylpe —,
þēah ðū þīnum brōðrum tō banan wurde,
hēafomēgum; þæs þī in helle scealt
werhēo drēogan, þēah þīn wit duge.” (583-589)

["Never in the din and play of battle
did Breca or you show such courage
with shining blades —not to boast about it—
though you were a man-slayer, killed your brothers,
closest kinsmen, for which you must suffer
damnation in hell, clever though you are."]

Beowulf declares that Unferth will suffer damnation for this deed, a punishment for the evil of kin-slaying.

The loss to the community which a kin-slaying causes is no less than that of any other violent death. The difficulties which it causes in matters of recompense are what make it different. The person whose responsibility it is to gain recompense for the death is often the same person who caused the loss. It poses a severe emotional strain on the community.

A prime example of this problem is presented among the Geats. Of King Hrethel’s sons, the eldest, Herebeald, was accidentally killed by his brother.

Wæs ųām yldestan ungedēelflice
mēges dēdum morþorbēd strēd,
syððan hyne Hǣcynn of hornbogan,
hīs fēawīne flāne geswencet,
mistē mercelēs ond hīs mēg ofscēt,
brōðor ðīrne blōdīgan gāre. (2435-2440)

[For the eldest brother a death-bed was strewn,
undeservedly, by his kinsman’s error:
Hǣcynn shot him, his brother, his leader,
with an arrow from his bow curved and horn-tipped;
missed his mark and struck his brother,
one son’s blood on the other’s shaft.)

This sort of accident creates a grave problem for the community. It is not possible to gain suitable recompense:

“There was no way to pay for a death so wrong, / blinding the heart, yet still the prince / had lost his life, lay unavenged.”

The feud stories presented in *Beowulf* are generally unglamorized tales. The heroism of physical combat is given scant attention in these conflicts. Such heroism is reserved for Beowulf’s battles with monsters. Instead, the sub-stories which are concerned with feuding focus on the emotional states of the participants, and on the devastating results of the feuds.

Likewise, the tales of kin-slaying mentioned in *Beowulf* center not so much on the events themselves, but rather on the problems they create for the community. To slay one’s kin weakens one’s own community. In the end, it leads to one’s own detriment.

III. THE MONSTERS AND BEOWULF

The main events of *Beowulf* deal with monsters. The hero, Beowulf, has two confrontations with monsters in Denmark, and one in his homeland. A great deal could be said about the presence of such fantastical creatures in the work. Yet, if one made the effort to defend their presence, one could easily overlook the reason for their inclusion. For there is a reason, and it is not unconnected with the supporting material of the work. The best way to discover this reason is to examine what it is that the poet says about the monsters, particularly about Grendel and his mother.

As the poet sets the scene for the first conflict, he introduces the creature which will shortly bring such grief to the Danes. He names the “murderous spirit” Grendel, and continues:

Unblessed, unhappy, he dwelt for a time in the lair of the monsters after the Creator had outlawed, condemned them as kinsmen of Cain — for that murder God the Eternal took vengeance, when Cain killed Abel. No joy that kin-slaughter: the Lord drove him out, far from mankind, for that unclean killing.

This may be the traditional descent of monsters, that is, being the descendants of Cain. Yet, given the other matters presented in the poem, it is especially significant here. Cain was guilty of kin-slaughter, a deed which, as the poet shows elsewhere in the poem, creates serious problems and harm for the community. Because of this deed, the Almighty cast Cain out of the community of mankind. Cain and then his descendants become the ultimate outsiders, and as such are a serious threat to the community of mankind.

When the poet introduces Grendel’s mother, he adds a bit more to the perception of Cain’s descendants as outsiders. He has already described how Grendel could not abide the joy emanating from Hrothgar’s hall. In introducing Grendel’s mother, the poet implies that this may be a hereditary trait.

Cain fled from the joys of mankind. By choosing to flee from those things which make the life of mankind lightest, Cain and his descendants are, perforce, associated with that which makes the life of mankind darkest.

It is this association that engenders the connection of Cain with monsters:

All evil creatures have come to belong to Cain’s kin, the misbegotten beings who are inimical toward mankind.

One of the interesting things about the character of Beowulf is that he is presented almost totally as a monster-fighter. When he arrives at the Danish court, the credentials he offers are those of monster-fighting:

“... selfe ofersawon, ðā ic of searwum cwōm, fāh from fēondum, þār ic fīfe geband, yōde etona cyn, ond on yōsum slōg niceras nihtes ....” (419-422)

“... They saw themselves how I came from combat bloodied by enemies where I crushed down five,
killed a tribe of giants, and on the waves at night
slew water-beasts ...."

When Unferth taunts Beowulf, saying that the Geat lost
a swimming contest with Breca, the hero corrects the
Dane's misapprehension of the contest. Beowulf declares
that the contest was not so much between Beowulf and
Breca as it was the pair of them against the sea. He goes on
to describe the battle he fought with sea-monsters, alone.

"Swa mec gelome lægegetan
yrætedon pearle. Ic him þemode
dóuran swæorde, swa hit gedæfe was.
Næs hie ðære fylle gefæan hæfdon,
mānfordædan, þæt hie mæ ðegon,
symbel ymsæstan sægrunde nēah;
acon mærcenne mæcmum wunde
be þēlæfe uppe lægon,
sweordum æswefede, þæt syðan næ
ymb bronnte ford brimlœnde
læde ne letton." (559-569)

["Again and again the angry monsters
made fierce attacks. I served them well
with my noble blade, as was only fitting.
Small pleasure they had in such a sword-feast,
dark things in the sea that meant to eat me,
sit round their banquet on the deep sea-floor.
Instead, in the morning, they lay on the beach,
asleep from my sword, the tide-marks bloodied
from their deep gashes, and never again
did they trouble the passage of seafaring men
across the ocean."]

Even to the end of his life, Beowulf continued to view
himself as a monster-fighter. It is this attitude which causes
him to claim the right to fight the dragon; "Nis þæt eowere
sīð, nē gemet mannes, nefne mīn ānes, / þæt hē wīð
ālæcan eofðo dæle, / eorlscyple efm." (2532-2535) ["It
is not your business, / nor fitting for any, except me alone,
/ to test out his strength against this monster, / do a hero's
deed."]

As he is dying, Beowulf evaluates his life.
"Ic ðæs lēode hēold
fittig wintra; nās sē folcyning,
ymbesittendra ænig ðāra,
þæ mec gūðwīnum grētan dorste,
egesæn ðeon. Ic on eardē bād
mǣlgescæfta, hēold mīn tēla
ne sūhte sēaronīðas, nē mē swōr fēla
āða on unriht. Ic ðæs ealles mǣg
feorhbennum sēoc gefēan habban;
forðūm mē wītan ne ðēarf Waldend fīra
morðorbealo mǣga, þonne mīn sceacēð
lif of fīce." (2732-2743)

Described as the strongest man of the age, Beowulf is
an extraordinary hero. Of all his deeds, there is only one
direct reference to his fighting with, and killing, another
man. That man is Daeghrefn, who was directly responsible
for the death of Hygelac. By killing Daeghrefn in battle,
Beowulf is fulfilling his duty as a retainer. Unlike virtually
all other characters in the poem, Beowulf has no direct
connection with any feud.

"Ic ðæs lēode hēold
fittig wintra; nās sē folcyning,
yymbesittendra ænig ðāra,
þæ mec gūðwīnum grētan dorste,
egesæn ðeon. Ic on eardē bād
mǣlgescæfta, hēold mīn tēla
ne sūhte sēaronīðas, nē mē swōr fēla
āða on unriht. Ic ðæs ealles mǣg
feorhbennum sēoc gefēan habban;
forðūm mē wītan ne ðēarf Waldend fīra
morðorbealo mǣga, þonne mīn sceacēð
lif of fīce." (2732-2743)
make any onslaught, terror, oppression, upon Geatish men. At home I awaited what the years brought me, held my own well, sought no intrigue; not often I swore deceitful oaths! Sick with my death-wound I can take joy in all these things; the Ruler of men need not blame me for murder of kin, once life is gone, has left my body."

What makes this passage of particular interest is that his accomplishments are the opposite images of the sub-stories of the poem. The supporting material is full of incidents of unpeaceful reigns, wars, intrigues, broken oaths and kin-slaughter. This simple contrast suggests the poet's perception of Beowulf.

Beowulf is presented as an ideal, a model. He is shown to be a perfect retainer, fulfilling his responsibilities. He is not involved in any of the feuds, which the poet presents in a very unglamorized and unfavorable light. He is completely loyal to his kin. The closing of the poem emphasizes this picture of Beowulf as the ideal warrior-lord. The Geats are shown mourning his death.

Swā hit gedēfe bið, ðæt mon his winedryhten wordum herge, ferhōum frēoge, þonne hē forð scilc of ðīchaman lāded weorðan. Swā begnornodon Geata lēode hlāfordes hryre, heorðgeatētas; cwādon þæt hē wāre wyruldcyninga manna mildust ond monswīræst, lēodum līðost ond lēofgeornost. (3174-3182)

[So it is fitting that a man speak praise of his beloved lord, love him in spirit, when he must be led forth from his life, the body's home. Thus did the Weders mourn in words the fall of their lord, his hearth-companions. They said that he was, of the kings in this world, the kindest to his men, the most courteous man, the best to his people, most eager for fame.]

CONCLUSION
Throughout the poem, the treatments of loss and recompense provide a key for understanding the relationship between the main events of the poem and the supporting sub-stories. Beowulf shows in his subsidiary actions the ideal behavior of a retainer, in contrast to those retainers who fail in their duty and thus cause loss to their community. In the latter part of the poem, he is shown as an ideal lord, protecting his people from losses caused by wars and feuds, this also in contrast to the other lords described. Of the many lords told of in the poem, only Scyld compares with Beowulf in the matter of protecting his people from such losses. Even Hrothgar does not match Beowulf in this, for Hrothgar makes no move himself to remove the terror of Grendel from his people, while Beowulf immediately goes out to deal with the dragon. Furthermore, where Beowulf succeeds in keeping his reign unaffected by the losses caused by feuds, Hrothgar does not.

The monsters in Beowulf are presented as existing outside the community of mankind. Their descent from Cain, a kin-slayer, insures their alien state. They represent the extreme threat to the community of mankind. Beowulf, as the ideal hero, is precisely the warrior to deal with these creatures. Yet, because he is the ideal hero, monsters are the only truly suitable opponents for him. To pit such an ideal against another man would involve him in all the unfavorable things associated with feuds. Were Beowulf to fight another man, he would create a loss to some community which would necessarily need a recompense. This is why Beowulf is a monster-fighter: as such a pre-eminent hero, his responsibility is to all mankind. His natural enemies are monsters, who have no community and who threaten mankind.

There is one further connection between the sub-stories and the main events. The monsters are shown as creatures outside the community of men. To be outsiders, cast out from the community, is the fate of retainers who fail in their duties (as Beowulf's companions do when he goes to fight the dragon), and of lords who fail in their responsibilities (as Heremod does). Beowulf's faithless followers and Heremod are cast out because they have caused irremediable harm to their community. Their deeds can easily be compared to the evil of kin-slaughter, the crime which caused Cain to be cast out from his community. It is not far-fetched to assume that the poet intended such a connection between the monsters and those who cause loss to the community.

Notes
1. The term "sub-stories" is used throughout this article rather than the traditional "digressions". The term "digressions" was found to be unhelpful during the study of the poem, in that the material usually tagged with this word does not, in fact, digress or lead away from the central matter of the poem.
3. The extreme difference in focus between the Finnsburg Fragment and the story as presented in Beowulf should make this obvious. The Fragment deals with a heroic battle; the story in Beowulf deals with the thoughts and feelings of the survivors.