

Student name (redacted)

Mrs. Spivey

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### Religious Duality

"On the conversion of the European tribes to Christianity the ancient pagan worship was by no means incontinently abandoned." This quote by Lewis Spence, Scottish author and journalist, states how people did not give up their old system of beliefs for a new one. For example the Anglo-Saxons did not easily give up their pagan belief system when they learned about Christianity, but rather they combined the religions. As in most societies, the Anglo-Saxons and the people of early Medieval England incorporated their beliefs into their literature. Through their literature, one infers they trusted in God and believed in the Bible, yet still clung to old practices in believing in fate and supernatural creatures and events. The poems and stories reveal a conflicted society who needed to but refused to choose one religion over the other as evidenced in their literature revealing a common struggle for man. Christian/Pagan Dualism in Anglo-Saxon and Medieval English literature reveals a timeless conflict within man to serve God, yet also cling to the ways of the world.

In the classic Anglo-Saxon poem, *The Seafarer*, the conflict between believing the motivating force in life is fate or God's will reveals itself. According to the Anglo-Saxon's pagan beliefs, fate governs the way things occur and man should fear it;

however, in their newfound Christianity, it states that God's will governs all and men should fear God. In *The Seafarer*, the author's statements about fate clearly suggest most if not all of the society agreed with his way of thinking with regard to it. For example he states, "But there isn't a man on earth so proud / ...That he feels no fear as the sails unfurl / Wondering what Fate has willed and will do" (*Seafarer* 39, 42-43). His personification of fate by making it a proper noun with a planned purpose and plan reveal the faith he has in fate, and his declaration that any man would think likewise divulge how others also looked to fate as an answer for the way things happen in life. Contrastingly, the author declares how he trusts in God and his plan. For instance he writes, "We all fear God. He turns the earth" (103). Then he continues expanding on the idea of God's supreme rule and how all men must fear God. These two ideas of fate and God's will contrast. They cannot coexist, and people must choose one or the other. The Anglo-Saxons did not choose between the two, but rather held onto both out of stubbornness. Since both cannot be true, yet some people say they believe in both, relates to how the Anglo-Saxons believed in both fate and God. This idea demonstrates the stubbornness of man's heart to not fully trust in God and to rely on his own power and knowledge instead.

Furthermore, in the legendary epic of *Beowulf*, discussion of pagan and biblical themes arise and appear to coexist despite the fact that they cannot. Battles between good and evil occur at a constant rate, a pagan theme, and the accounts of creation and Old Testament stories occur, a Christian them. The pagan themes center on the actions of the Epic's hero, Beowulf. Beowulf hears of an evil creature named Grendel who terrorizes the people of Herot, so he resolves to travel there to defeat this evil monster and restore peace to the people. When the battle between the two ensues, Beowulf ends up the

victor, but soon finds another source of evil nearby (*Beowulf* 104-449). This continual string of battles between good and evil forces is commonplace in pagan culture.

Moreover, the several evil creatures in the form of monsters and dragons also come from pagan society. On the Christian side, the tale recounts the story of Cain and Able, but once again, pagan society creeps in and twists the story to explain how Grendel and the other evil creatures came into existence. "...[Grendel] was spawned in that slime.../ Conceived by a pair of those monsters born / Of Cain, murderous creatures banished / By God.../...they split / Into a thousand forms of evil" (19, 20, 21, 22, 25, 26). As revealed through the story of *Beowulf*, the Anglo-Saxons took their newfound Christian faith and conformed it to assist their pagan traditions. As shown through this epic, whether feeling good comes by encouragement or affirmation to what one desires to believe, man chooses to believe what he wants rather than submitting to God and what He says is right.

In addition, Medieval English people continued the tendency to combine faiths as evidenced in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Again, a creature appears that contains supernatural aspects that come from pagan tradition, but a new kind of hero arises that possesses morals and values that stem from Christian tradition. A knight takes scene in this epic, but he has a green hue and contains unnatural characteristics. In the scene where the Green Knight enters the story, he challenges the Knights of the Round Table to a game where one knight will strike him that night and in a year and a day the knight would travel to the Green Knight's home and the Green Knight would deliver a blow to the knight. Sir Gawain takes up this challenge and strikes the Green Knight so hard, his head comes off, but the Green Knight grabs his head puts it back on his body and rides off (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 11-209). This strange occurrence centers around

traditional pagan ideas of supernatural occurrences. This however twists to blend Christian beliefs later in the story. Before Gawain meets the Knight, he stays in a castle and accepts a green girdle that will protect him from the knight. The Green Knight discovers what Gawain did however, and leads Gawain to confess his actions acknowledging them as sin; the Knight forgives him (449-484). This idea of confession of sin and finding forgiveness comes from Christian ideals, which shows the people who wrote and read this were familiar with them. Again, people would not leave the ways of the world behind by denying the idea and giving up of incorporating of monsters and interaction with the spirit world into their tales. Although they still held to pagan ideals, the people of Medieval England appeared to have learned and embraced Christian practices.

Once more, *Morte d' Arthur*, a piece of Medieval English literature, reveals the English people still clung to pagan tradition while they continued their practice of Christianity. A pagan supernatural event occurs in *Morte d' Arthur*, but the narrator claims Jesus could be responsible for the event. King Arthur's exit from the world toward the end of the story involves a series of events resembling pagan culture. Arthur, who has a fatal wound, commands Sir Bedivere to throw his sword into the water. When Bedivere eventually does, a hand reaches up from the water and grabs the sword then a small barge containing mourning ladies appears. Arthur tells Bedivere to place him on it, and the barge then sails off into the distance, supposedly taking Arthur to Avalon (Malory). This strange occurrence demonstrates how the people of England continued to have faith in pagan beliefs. As the story ends, the narrator mentions the Christian belief in Jesus as an explanation of what actually could have happened to King Arthur.

"...Some men say...that King Arthur is not dead, but carried by the will of our Lord [Jesus] into another place" (Malory). This mention of Jesus shows that these people trusted in the Lord. Their faith in the Lord intermingled with their fascination and belief in sorcery demonstrates how the people of that day were not willing to give up their false religion, but rather add it to their new faith in order to make everyone content. Once again, the English society combined paganism with Christianity to offer to themselves a comfortable explanation of the world.

Through reading Anglo-Saxon and Medieval literature, people realize the internal struggle to acknowledge and trust in God, but to also follow the ways of the world. In Anglo-Saxon epics such as *The Seafarer* and *Beowulf*, people observe the intermingling of the people's old polytheistic beliefs with their new Christian faith. Pieces of English Medieval literature bring to light that as time went by people continued to hold fast to some traditional pagan ways, such as the interest in monsters, yet more so lived out Christian morals and possessed stronger acknowledgement toward God. In all cases, the people of England struggled to overcome the temptations to conform to the ways of the world, and in turn did not live up to their full potential in Christ. In the Bible it states how God does not want His followers to behave like the rest of the world: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:2). This verse clearly relays the fact that in order for God to use a person, one must let go of their former ways, and although difficult, it will be rewarding. Through reading the literature of the past and realizing the struggle

Christians faced, people must take heed to not mimic their behavior in the way they live their lives in today's world.

## Works Cited

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