

DARK' MATTERS IN FRAMING AXIOLOGICAL PATTERNS: FROM PIE TO OLD ENGLISH

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*This article offers an axiological and etymological investigation of the conceptualization of “dark” in Old English literary monuments. This study argues that the concept serves as a fundamental, life-defining pillar of Old English worldview, rooted in Proto-Indo-European (PIE) etymons. The analysis is grounded in three primary PIE roots: *reg^wos- (darkness as a spatial location), *temh- (darkness as a state of stasis or petrification), and *dher- (darkness as qualitative impurity). These roots provide the semantic framework for the subsequent analysis of heroic, elegiac, and homiletic texts.*

In the heroic epic Beowulf, darkness is analyzed as a tangible, monstrous threat where, the “dark” frame is synonymous with active malice and social disintegration, embodied by the sceadugenga (shadow-stalker) who encroaches upon the sunlit hall. The study then examines the internalization of darkness in The Battle of Maldon and The Seafarer. In these works, the “dark” frame is manifested through hostile terrain and visual darkness where environmental suffering becomes a precursor to spiritual trial.

*The final stage of the study focuses on the homilies of Ælfric of Eynsham. The author reveals a radical reshaping of the axiological axis: from a horizontal heroic frontier to a strict Christian verticality. Ælfric's texts display a lexical asymmetry – where “light” lexemes dominate while “dark” ones are fragmented into notions of paganism, sorcery, and the demonic – fully moralizing the qualitative “impurity” of the PIE root *dher-.*

The article concludes that in the homiletic tradition, darkness is no longer merely an environmental condition but an internal state of ontological degradation. The study proves that the “dark” frame, though lexically sporadic in some contexts, remains the silent axis upon which the transition from heroic to Christian morality was constructed.

Key words: axiology, vertical axiological hierarchy, homiletic prose, Old English, lexeme “dark”, semantic convergence.

Калитюк Лілія. Темрява як аксіологічна вісь: трансформаційний шлях від праїндоевропейських витоків до давньоанглійської мови

Стаття присвячена комплексному аксіологічному та етимологічному дослідженню концептуалізації поняття «темний / темрява» у давньо-англійській мові. У дослідженні обґрунтовано, що цей концепт є фундаментальним для побудови ціннісних систем у діяхронній перспективі (від PIE до давньо-англійського періоду).

*У розвідці виокремлено основні праїндоевропейські корені: *reg^wos- (темрява як просторова локація), *temh- (темрява як стан заціпеніння або втрати орієнтації) та *dher- (темрява як якісна «нечистота» або «замутненість»). У творі «Беовульф» темрява розглядається як матеріальна загроза, яка походить від потворного чудовиська. У поемах «Битва під Малдоном» та «Мореплавець» темрява маніфестується через несприятливий ландшафт, який приносить фізичні страждання. У гоміліях Ельфріка Ейншемського виявлено радикальну перебудову аксіологічної осі: від горизонтального вектора героїчної епохи до жорсткої християнської вертикалі. Хоча тексти Ельфріка демонструють вертикальну асиметрію з переважанням лексем на позначення «світла», його дихотомічний елемент на позначення «темряви» набуває фрагментованого характеру з семантичним перенесенням ціннісних заборон на язичництво, чаклунство, демонізм. Корінь *dher- отримує семантичну зміну від якісної нечистоти до моральних характеристик. У статті зроблено висновок, що в гомілетичній традиції темрява перестає бути лише особливістю ландшафту, набуваючи семантичних контурів внутрішнього стану і деградації душі. Досліджувана одиниця, попри спорадичність вживання, залишається прихованою віссю, на якій вибудовувався аксіологічний формат носіїв давньоанглійської мови.*

Ключові слова: аксіологія, вертикальна аксіологічна ієрархія, гомілетична проза, давньоанглійська мова, семантична конвергенція, темрява.

Declaration of Generative AI in the Writing Process. The results in this research are the product of the author's independent investigation. During the preparation of this work, the author employed the generative AI tool *Gemini* for the following purposes:

1. **Stylistic and grammatical refinement:** to ensure clarity, academic tone and grammatical precision of the author's original analysis.

2. **Bibliographic formatting:** to organize and format the lists of references in accordance with the DSTU 8302:2015 and APA 7th Edition standards as required by the journal.

The author takes full responsibility for the intellectual content, the interpretation of the Old English texts, and the final conclusions of the article.

Introduction. Any society functions along axiological lines that shape the collective understanding of plausible versus undesirable behaviour. These axiological patterns can be enduring or ephemeral. If LIGHT functions as a latent conceptual substrate for universal human concepts, DARK serves as its essential axiological counterweight. In the Indo-European worldview, and specifically within the Old English linguistic landscape, “dark” is not a mere void, a passive absence of illumination; it is a dense,

value-laden category that frames the boundaries of moral and social existence. This paper explores how the “dark” frame was utilized to define the “other” – from the physical shadows of the Germanic wilderness to the spiritual abyss in Ælfric’s homilies. The structural integrity of this counterweight is rooted in a complex network of Proto-Indo-European (PIE) lexemes, primarily centered around the concept of qualitative degradation.

Materials and methods. This study explores the conceptualization of “dark” as a fundamental axiological antipode to “light”. To address the diachronic and generic complexity of the concept, the **research corpus** was specifically designed to reflect the transition from the Germanic heroic code to the Christian ethical system. The selection of *Beowulf*, *The Battle of Maldon*, and *The Seafarer* provides a representative sample of secular axiological patterns, while the homiletic works of Ælfric serve as the primary source for identifying the Christian verticalization of the “dark” frame. Specifically, *Beowulf* reflects the remnants of the Germanic pagan worldview; *The Seafarer* and *The Battle of Maldon* depict existential and physical struggle against elemental forces and adversaries respectively. The inclusion of Ælfric’s homilies is intentional, as they represent the pinnacle of late Old English prose where the transition from physical to moral didactic semantics is most vividly expressed.

To ensure **methodological** rigor, the study employs distributional analysis and conceptual mapping. Moving beyond purely formal etymology, the research applies cognitive-axiological reconstruction. To avoid “associative extrapolation,” the analysis of indirect markers (e.g. mist, fen, raven imagery) is strictly limited to their function as frame-elements that co-occur with explicit markers of darkness. The axiological status of “dark / darkness” frame is established through the systemic analysis of lexical combinability. Specifically, the research identifies a significant correlation between “dark” lexemes and pejorative semantic markers (e.g., associations with moral evil, existential threat, or ontological undesirability). In this context, we observe a semantic convergence of physical attributes (absence of light) with abstract categories (sinfulness, fear, malevolence).

The evolutionary trajectory of the “dark” / “darkness” frame is structured around a semantic cluster: physical opacity, secrecy, concealment, physical and cognitive blindness, active threat, and concealed evil. While the concept of “darkness” is not included in the stable core of the Swadesh list, its high textual density and metaphorical ramifications attest to its primary role in shaping societal priorities and world-modelling systems during the period under study.

Rather than providing a comprehensive statistical count across the entire Old English corpus, this study identifies a discursive trend. The lexical asymmetry noted in the analysis reflects the specific conceptual priorities of the selected monuments, where “light” and “dark” function as non-equivalent axiological poles. Within the Indo-European framework, “light” is directly correlated with celestial phenomena, manifested in radiance

and the cyclical transitions of the sun and the moon (cf. the shared etymology of “moon” and “month”). Ancestral Indo-European societies synchronized their existence with the cycles of illumination – a fact substantiated by abundant etymological data [1, p. 83; 2, p. 328]. Consequently, *light* was institutionalized as a symbol of knowledge and divine presence.

In the analysed homiletic texts, “light” lexemes (*leoht*, *beorht*) predominantly occur in contexts of divine presence and spiritual clarity, while “dark” lexemes (*deorc*, *swært*) are consistently collocated with transcendental threats (hell, sin, demons). To ensure methodological accuracy and avoid speculative reconstruction, the etymological trajectories were verified using *V.Orel’s Handbook of Germanic Etymology (2003)* alongside with *Bosworth-Toller Dictionary (1898 / 2014)*. This allows for a systematic tracing of the semantic evolution from Proto-Germanic (PGmc) forms to Old English (OE).

The conceptualization of “darkness” was not unitary, but was split into several semantic clusters based on the specific axiological nuances: 1) spatial location (PGmc **erþaz* > OE *earþ* / *eorþe*); 2) cognitive condition (PGmc **dwalmaz* > OE *dwolema*); 3) moral / ethical quality (PGmc **merkwas* > OE *mirce*); 4) perceptual quality (PGmc **swartaz* > OE *swært*; PGmc **þuskaz* > OE *dox*, *dosc*); 5) gradual transition (PGmc **skimōjanan* > OE **skimjan*); 6) occlusion / protection (PGmc **xulistran* > OE *heolstor*); 7) liminality (PGmc **unhtwō* > OE *uht*). While the etymological origins of the OE *deorc* remain somewhat opaque, the shift from PGmc **derkaz* [2, p. 71] confirms a transition from physical opacity to the axiological “dark”. Furthermore, the semantic split of PGmc **skimōjanan* into self-excluding meanings – OE *skimjan* (“to grow dark”) vs *skimerjan* (“to shine, to glisten”) [3, p. 340; 4] – illustrates the inherent semantic instability at the boundaries of the frame. This leads to the identification of three primary conceptual precursors: **reg^wos-* (darkness of the underworld, murk), **temh-* (dense darkness / stasis, petrification), and **dher-* (muddy, dim). The methodology involves a comparative analysis of these roots as they transition from physical descriptors to drastic cultural reorientation to moral imperatives in the Old English period (specifically the 10th century):

1) **reg^wos-* / **h₁reg^w-es-* / **reqwes* / **reqwaz* (Darkness as Location): semantically connected with the sunset and the underworld, evening. This root views darkness as a spatial borderline between the living and the world of shadows. In Old English it transforms into the conceptual “outer darkness”;

2) **temh-* / **tōmh_x-es-* (Darkness as Condition): denoting a disorienting, dense / all darkness, its axiological potential lies in representing a state of un-wisdom or the petrification of the mind;

3) **dher-* / **dhongru-* (Darkness as Quality): signifying the gradual disappearance of light or “feculence”, this root provides the most direct link to the “impurity, putridity” of sin found in later didactic texts [2, p. 328–330; 3; 4].

Discussion. With the advancement of Christianity, the Anglo-Saxon society witnessed the period

of abandoning the time-honoured values of heroic, martial virtues (described in “*Beowulf*”, “*The Battle of Maldon*”) and implementing new axiological patterns. In “*Beowulf*” (lines 159–163), the convergence of the mentioned PIE conceptual hues is palpable. The author of “*Beowulf*” utilizes *deorc* (from PIE **dher-*) to define the quality of the *deapscua* (death-shadow), *sinniht* (perpetual night) to establish the spatial location of the monster’s domain (reflecting the PIE root **reg-os-*), and *mistige* (misty) to evoke the cognitive disorientation (aligned with PIE **temh-*) that characterizes the moors. Thus, the darkness in the heroic age is presented as a multi-dimensional threat – spatial, qualitative, and cognitive – that actively “haunts” (*seomade*) the fringes of civilization:

*Atol æglæca ehtende wæs, | deorc deapscua, duguþe
and geogoþe, | seomade and syrede. sinnihte heold |
mistige moras. Men ne cunnon hwyder helrunan
hwyrfum scriþað* [5, lines 159–163] (All were endangered; young and old | were hunted down by that dark death-shadow | who lurked and swooped in the long nights | on the misty moors; nobody knows | where these raiders from hell roam on their errands).

While Proto-Indo-European societies synchronized their productive lives with light, the heroic poetry of *Beowulf* reveals the trauma of the nocturnal disruption. The term *niht-bealwa mæst* (greatest night evils) [5, line 193] serves as a linguistic monument to this trauma. Here, darkness is no longer a passive background but a catalyst for *nydwraçu* (dire distress). Consequently, the axiological frame of *dark* absorbs the qualities of active malice and social disintegration, as the night becomes the domain of the grim and the hateful, opposing the stability of the sunlit hall:

*laþ and longsum, þe on ða leode becom, | nydwraçu
niþgrim nihtbealwa mæst* [5, lines 192–193] (... loathsome and lingering, [it] came upon the people, a cruel distress, the greatest of night-evils).

In this context, darkness is a location populated by enemies and God-cursed monsters – most notably *sceadugenga* (shadow-stalker) [5, line 703], whose movements “under the clouds” signify a predatory encroachment upon the human world:

*Da com of more under misthleoþum |
Grendel gongan, Godes yrre bæc* [5, lines 710–711].
(Then from the moor, under the mist-slopes, | Grendel came stalking; he bore God’s anger).

Interestingly, the lexeme *deorc* is absent from “*The Battle of Maldon*”, suggesting a distinct shift in axiological strategy. While “*Beowulf*” employs physical darkness to define the monstrous and external, *Maldon* internalizes the “*dark*” frame. Here, the antipode of light is manifested through *ofermod* (axiological blindness or unwisdom) and the looming presence of *wann* (dark / pallid) carrion birds. This absence suggests that the conceptualization of “*dark*” was not unitary during the Old English period; instead, the axiological line of darkness shifts toward alternative modes of expressing “non-light”.

In Germanic poetry, this concept is concealed within the imagery of ravens (always associated with pallor and gloom) and eagles, birds traditionally accompanying

battlefields in search of prey. The reconstruction of the “*dark*” frame through indirect markers (e.g., mist, fen, raven imagery) is conducted through the lens of metonymic extension. These elements function not as synonyms for darkness, but as peripheral frame-elements that consistently trigger the same axiological response – hostility and ontological danger – thereby reinforcing the central “*dark*” pole of the vertical hierarchy. Consequently, darkness in *The Battle of Maldon* is not an environmental condition but a qualitative decay of the heroic situation, represented by the ellipticized *wann* (a reflex of the PIE root denoting paleness or emptiness):

*hremmas wundon,
earn æses georn; was on eorþan cyrm* [6, lines 106–107].

(Ravens circled, the eagle eager for carrion; there was uproar on earth).

The “*muddy*” landscape of the fens (reflecting PIE root **dher-*) becomes the staging ground for betrayal and defeat; thus, the darkness is positioned above the warriors, rather than around them. The indirect reference to lack of light is further utilized in the mention of the *fenne* (mud, marsh). Darkness is manifested through the hostile terrain: the Vikings seek permission to wade through waters perceived as dirty or impure in contrast to the clean, firm land held by the English: ...*ofer þonne fenne* ... [6, line 105] (over the fen / marsh).

In the elegiac context of *The Seafarer*, the conceptualization of “*dark*” shifts from an external monster to an omnipresent atmospheric condition that tests the endurance of the soul. Here, the lexeme *nihtscua* (night-shadow) echoes the *deapscua* (death-shadow) of *Beowulf*, yet its function is distinct. It does not herald a physical predator but introduces a state of existential stasis. This aligns with the PIE root **temh* (darkness as petrification or disorientation). The darkness darkens (*nap* from *nippan*), while the frost binds the earth (*bond*). The passage illustrates a convergence of darkness and physical petrification:

*Nap nihtscua, norþan sniwde, hrim hrusan bond,
hægl feol on eorþan, corna caldast.* [7, lines 31–33]
(the night-shadow darkened, it snowed from the north, frost bound the earth, hail fell on the ground, the coldest of grains).

In the elegiac tradition, darkness is not an enemy to be fought with a sword, but a state of being that tests the endurance of the soul, effectively functioning as a precursor to the spiritual “*darkness of the world*”, found in Ælfric’s homilies.

However, despite strong logical expectations of finding a distinctly pronounced *dark* :: *light* opposition in Ælfric’s work, attesting this duality in “full bloom” proves futile. While “*light*” lexemes are abundantly present in the homilies in question, the explicit “*dark*” concept remains sporadic. Instead, it yields to other related notions – such as *devil*, *hell*, *witchcraft*, and *paganism* – which function as the correlates and direct oppositions to radiance, and divine illumination. Interestingly, in Ælfric’s homilies, “*fire*” serves both the divine and demonic domains: it appears as the celestial chariots

that deliver souls to heaven and as the parching, eternal fire of hell. This suggests that the “dark” frame is not merely an absence of light, shifting the axiological focus from visual darkness to sensory. In Ælfric, the “dark” frame undergoes a process of semantic fragmentation: it is no longer a singular void but is redistributed across demonic lexicon. Darkness / dirt becomes a property of devil (*fulum deoflum* (foul devils)) [8, VII. line 340], witches (*fulan wiccan* (foul witches)) [8, XVII. line 124] and hell (*sweartan helle* (the dark hell)) [8, IV. line 275], rather than a standalone environmental quality. One of the few instances where the *light :: dark* opposition reaches its materialization in Ælfric’s homilies is found in *The Passion of St. Julian*. In this statement, Ælfric synchronizes the visual (light / dark), the biological (life / death) and the moral (truth / falsehood) domains. The darkness is described here as *blindum* (blind), suggesting the connection with the semantic domain covered by PIE **temh* and the concept of un-wisdom:

Unrihtlic us bið, þæt we eft gecyrron fram þysum beorhtan leohte to blindum þystrum, fram life to deaþe, fram soþe to leasunga [8, IV. lines 218–220] (it will be wrong for us if we again should turn from this bright light to blind darkness, from life to death, from truth to falsehood).

This passage demonstrates that, while “dark” lexemes may be sporadic, they are still deployed at critical moments to define the boundary between the divine realm and the state of sin.

Conclusions. The progression from the monstrous darkness of *Beowulf* to the “dirty” and hostile terrain of *The Battle of Maldon*, and further to the environmental suffering in *The Seafarer* establishes the foundational framework for the Old English homiletic tradition. In the works of Ælfric, the night shadow (*nihtscua*) and the “binding frost” transcend their role as mere physical trials; they become definitive metaphors for fiendish forces, as the darkness of the night is reclaimed as the domain of the demonic. The soul is thus perceived as bound by sin and obscured by the absence of divine grace.

While non-Christian sources employ darkness as a multifaceted concept – drawing on both physical

and celestial hallmarks to define its hues – Ælfric radically reshapes the axiological axis. He imposes a strict verticality for the light / dark dichotomy: the good, benign, and divine are oriented upward toward the light, whereas “dark and low” becomes a fragmented domain. This lower realm is characterized by numerous horizontal vectors that embrace sin, paganism, sorcery, and hell, behind which the concept of darkness is distantly looming. By dismantling pagan deities and reclassifying them as fiendish entities, Ælfric equates “foul heathenism” with the devil himself. Consequently, the qualitative “impurity” inherent in the PIE **dher-* is moralized. Darkness is no longer merely a feature of the moor or the sea; it is an internal state of ontological degradation. A lexeme for “dark” is a life-defining notion on which Anglo-Saxons have built their values.

Directions for further research. This investigation opens several avenues for further scholarly development.

First, a comparative axiological potential of the “dark” lexeme(s) across various Old Germanic (Gothic, Old High German, Old Saxon, and Old Norse) languages would highlight the unique nuances and shared cultural heritage of these communities. Such an analysis could reveal how different Germanic communities adapted the PIE substrate to their specific environmental and religious contexts.

Second, a broader diachronic study into the evolution of the “dark-light” axiological axis across diverse Indo-European cultures – from Indo-Iranian to Celtic – could offer profound insights into the ontological priorities and life-defining values of these ancient societies.

Third, as a by-the-way remark, the axiological potential of “water” in a diachronic perspective warrants closer academic attention. In OE non-homiletic texts – such as “*Beowulf*”, “*Seafarer*”, “*The Battle of Maldon*” – water is predominantly conceptualized as a hostile, chaotic element, implying existential peril rather than a source of purity or chastity. Conversely, in religious discourse, “water” undergoes a radical shift, acquiring a positive connotation as a medium of sacramental purification. In this context, it is reimagined as a path to Christian initiation and ritualistic washing away of sins, marking a transition from the abyss to divine grace. This nascent observation still awaits comprehensive exploration by future researchers.

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