Beowulf

Though it is often viewed both as the Anglo-Saxon literary work and as a cornerstone of modern literature, *Beowulf* has a peculiar history that complicates both its historical and its canonical position in English literature. By the time the story of *Beowulf* was composed by an unknown Anglo-Saxon poet around 700 A.D., much of its material had been in circulation in oral narrative for many years. The Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian peoples had invaded the island of Britain and settled there several hundred years earlier, bringing with them several closely related Germanic languages that would evolve into Old English. Elements of the *Beowulf* story—including its setting and characters—date back to the period before the migration. The action of the poem takes place around 500 A.D. Many of the characters in the poem—the Swedish and Danish royal family members, for example—correspond to actual historical figures. Originally pagan warriors, the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian invaders experienced a large-scale conversion to Christianity at the end of the sixth century. Though still an old pagan story, *Beowulf* thus came to be told by a Christian poet. The *Beowulf* poet is often at pains to attribute Christian thoughts and motives to his characters, who frequently behave in distinctly un-Christian ways.

The world that *Beowulf* depicts and the heroic code of honor that defines much of the story is a representation of pre–Anglo-Saxon culture. The story is set in Scandinavia, before the migration (to England). In the Scandinavian world of the story, tiny tribes of people rally around strong kings, who protect their people from danger—especially from confrontations with other tribes. The warrior culture that results from this early feudal arrangement is extremely important, both to the story and to our understanding of Saxon civilization. Strong kings demand bravery and loyalty from their warriors, whom they repay with treasures won in war. Mead-halls such as Heorot in *Beowulf* were places where warriors would gather in the presence of their lord to drink, boast, tell stories, and receive gifts. Although these mead-halls offered sanctuary, the early Middle Ages were a dangerous time, and the paranoid sense of foreboding and doom that runs throughout *Beowulf* evidences the constant fear of invasion that plagued Scandinavian society.

Only a single manuscript of *Beowulf* survived the Anglo-Saxon era. For many centuries, the manuscript was all but forgotten, and, in the 1700s, it was nearly destroyed in a fire. It was not until the nineteenth century that widespread interest in the document emerged among scholars and translators of Old English. For the first hundred years of *Beowulf*’s prominence, interest in the poem was primarily historical—the text was viewed as a source of information about the Anglo-Saxon era. It was not until 1936, when the Oxford scholar J. R. R. Tolkien (who later wrote *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings,* works heavily influenced by *Beowulf*) published a groundbreaking paper entitled “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics” that the manuscript gained recognition as a serious work of art.

**Old English Poetry**

*Beowulf* is often referred to as the first important work of literature in English, even though it was written in Old English, an ancient form of the language that slowly evolved into the English now spoken. Compared to modern English, Old English is heavily Germanic, with little influence from Latin or French. As English history developed, after the French Normans conquered the Anglo-Saxons in 1066, Old English was gradually broadened by offerings from those languages. Thus modern English is derived from a number of sources. As a result, its vocabulary is rich with synonyms. The word *kingly,* for instance, descends from the Anglo-Saxon word *cyning,* meaning “king,” while the synonym *royal* comes from a French word and the synonym*regal* from a Latin word.

Because Anglo-Saxon poetry existed in oral tradition long before it was written down, the verse form contains complicated rules for alliteration designed to help scops, or poets, remember the many thousands of lines they were required to know by heart. Each of the two halves of an Anglo-Saxon line contains two stressed syllables, and an alliterative pattern *must* be carried over across the caesura. Any of the stressed syllables may alliterate *except* the last syllable; so the first and second syllables may alliterate with the third together, or the first and third may alliterate alone, or the second and third may alliterate alone. For instance:

Lade ne letton. Leoht eastan com.

*Lade, letton, leoht,* and *eastan* are the four stressed words.

In addition to these rules, Old English poetry often features a distinctive set of rhetorical devices. The most common of these is the *kenning,* used throughout *Beowulf*. A kenning is a short metaphorical description of a thing used in place of the thing’s name; thus a ship might be called a “sea-rider,” or a king a “ring-giver.” Some translations employ kennings almost as frequently as they appear in the original. Others moderate the use of kennings in deference to a modern sensibility. But the Old English version of the epic is full of them, and they are perhaps the most important rhetorical device present in Old English poetry.

**Plot Overview**

King Hrothgar of Denmark, a descendant of the great king Shield Sheafson, enjoys a prosperous and successful reign. He builds a great mead-hall, called Heorot, where his warriors can gather to drink, receive gifts from their lord, and listen to stories sung by the scops, or bards. But the jubilant noise from Heorot angers Grendel, a horrible demon who lives in the swamplands of Hrothgar’s kingdom. Grendel terrorizes the Danes every night, killing them and defeating their efforts to fight back. The Danes suffer many years of fear, danger, and death at the hands of Grendel. Eventually, however, a young Geatish warrior named Beowulf hears of Hrothgar’s plight. Inspired by the challenge, Beowulf sails to Denmark with a small company of men, determined to defeat Grendel.

Hrothgar, who had once done a great favor for Beowulf’s father Ecgtheow, accepts Beowulf’s offer to fight Grendel and holds a feast in the hero’s honor. During the feast, an envious Dane named Unferth taunts Beowulf and accuses him of being unworthy of his reputation. Beowulf responds with a boastful description of some of his past accomplishments. His confidence cheers the Danish warriors, and the feast lasts merrily into the night. At last, however, Grendel arrives. Beowulf fights him unarmed, proving himself stronger than the demon, who is terrified. As Grendel struggles to escape, Beowulf tears the monster’s arm off. Mortally wounded, Grendel slinks back into the swamp to die. The severed arm is hung high in the mead-hall as a trophy of victory.

Overjoyed, Hrothgar showers Beowulf with gifts and treasure at a feast in his honor. Songs are sung in praise of Beowulf, and the celebration lasts late into the night. But another threat is approaching. Grendel’s mother, a swamp-hag who lives in a desolate lake, comes to Heorot seeking revenge for her son’s death. She murders Aeschere, one of Hrothgar’s most trusted advisers, before slinking away. To avenge Aeschere’s death, the company travels to the murky swamp, where Beowulf dives into the water and fights Grendel’s mother in her underwater lair. He kills her with a sword forged for a giant, then, finding Grendel’s corpse, decapitates it and brings the head as a prize to Hrothgar. The Danish countryside is now purged of its treacherous monsters.

The Danes are again overjoyed, and Beowulf’s fame spreads across the kingdom. Beowulf departs after a sorrowful goodbye to Hrothgar, who has treated him like a son. He returns to Geatland, where he and his men are reunited with their king and queen, Hygelac and Hygd, to whom Beowulf recounts his adventures in Denmark. Beowulf then hands over most of his treasure to Hygelac, who, in turn, rewards him.

In time, Hygelac is killed in a war against the Shylfings, and, after Hygelac’s son dies, Beowulf ascends to the throne of the Geats. He rules wisely for fifty years, bringing prosperity to Geatland. When Beowulf is an old man, however, a thief disturbs a barrow, or mound, where a great dragon lies guarding a horde of treasure. Enraged, the dragon emerges from the barrow and begins unleashing fiery destruction upon the Geats. Sensing his own death approaching, Beowulf goes to fight the dragon. With the aid of Wiglaf, he succeeds in killing the beast, but at a heavy cost. The dragon bites Beowulf in the neck, and its fiery venom kills him moments after their encounter. The Geats fear that their enemies will attack them now that Beowulf is dead. According to Beowulf’s wishes, they burn their departed king’s body on a huge funeral pyre and then bury him with a massive treasure in a barrow overlooking the sea.

**Principal Characters**

**Beowulf** -  The protagonist of the epic, Beowulf is a Geatish hero who fights the monster Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and a fire-breathing dragon. Beowulf’s boasts and encounters reveal him to be the strongest, ablest warrior around. In his youth, he personifies all of the best values of the heroic culture. In his old age, he proves a wise and effective ruler.

Beowulf exemplifies the traits of the perfect hero. The poem explores his heroism in two separate phases—youth and age—and through three separate and increasingly difficult conflicts—with Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and the dragon. Although we can view these three encounters as expressions of the heroic code, there is perhaps a clearer division between Beowulf’s youthful heroism as an unfettered warrior and his mature heroism as a reliable king. These two phases of his life, separated by fifty years, correspond to two different models of virtue, and much of the moral reflection in the story centers on differentiating these two models and on showing how Beowulf makes the transition from one to the other. In his youth, Beowulf is a great warrior, characterized predominantly by his feats of strength and courage, including his fabled swimming match against Breca. He also perfectly embodies the manners and values dictated by the Germanic heroic code, including loyalty, courtesy, and pride. His defeat of Grendel and Grendel’s mother validates his reputation for bravery and establishes him fully as a hero. In first part of the poem, Beowulf matures little, as he possesses heroic qualities in abundance from the start. Having purged Denmark of its plagues and established himself as a hero, however, he is ready to enter into a new phase of his life. Hrothgar, who becomes a mentor and father figure to the young warrior, begins to deliver advice about how to act as a wise ruler. Though Beowulf does not become king for many years, his exemplary career as a warrior has served in part to prepare him for his ascension to the throne.

The second part of the story, set in Geatland, skips over the middle of Beowulf’s career and focuses on the very end of his life. Through a series of retrospectives, however, we recover much of what happens during this gap and therefore are able to see how Beowulf comports himself as both a warrior and a king. The period following Hygelac’s death is an important transitional moment for Beowulf. Instead of rushing for the throne himself, as Hrothulf does in Denmark, he supports Hygelac’s son, the rightful heir. With this gesture of loyalty and respect for the throne, he proves himself worthy of kingship.

In the final episode—the encounter with the dragon—the poet reflects further on how the responsibilities of a king, who must act for the good of the people and not just for his own glory, differ from those of the heroic warrior. In light of these meditations, Beowulf’s moral status becomes somewhat ambiguous at the poem’s end. Though he is deservedly celebrated as a great hero and leader, his last courageous fight is also somewhat rash. The poem suggests that, by sacrificing himself, Beowulf unnecessarily leaves his people without a king, exposing them to danger from other tribes. To understand Beowulf’s death strictly as a personal failure, however, is to neglect the overwhelming emphasis given to fate in this last portion of the poem. The conflict with the dragon has an aura of inevitability about it. Rather than a conscious choice, the battle can also be interpreted as a matter in which Beowulf has very little choice or free will at all. Additionally, it is hard to blame him for acting according to the dictates of his warrior culture.

**Grendel**

Likely the poem’s most memorable creation, Grendel is one of the three monsters that Beowulf battles. His nature is ambiguous. Though he has many animal attributes and a grotesque, monstrous appearance, he seems to be guided by vaguely human emotions and impulses, and he shows more of an interior life than one might expect. Exiled to the swamplands outside the boundaries of human society, Grendel is an outcast who seems long to be reinstated. The poet hints that behind Grendel’s aggression against the Danes lies loneliness and jealousy. By lineage, Grendel is a member of “Cain’s clan, whom the creator had outlawed / and condemned as outcasts.” (106–107). He is thus descended from a figure who epitomizes resentment and malice. While the poet somewhat sympathetically suggests that Grendel’s deep bitterness about being excluded from the revelry in the mead-hall owes, in part, to his accursed status, he also points out that Grendel is “[m]alignant by nature” and that he has “never show[n] remorse” (137).

**Hrothgar**

Hrothgar, the aged ruler of the Danes who accepts Beowulf’s help in the first part of the story, aids Beowulf’s development into maturity. Hrothgar is a relatively static character, a force of stability in the social realm. Although he is as solidly rooted in the heroic code as Beowulf is, his old age and his experience with both good and ill fortune have caused him to develop a more reflective attitude toward heroism than Beowulf possesses. He is aware of both the privileges and the dangers of power, and he warns his young protégé not to give in to pride and always to remember that blessings may turn to grief. Hrothgar’s meditations on heroism and leadership, which take into account a hero’s entire life span rather than just his valiant youth, reveal the contrast between youth and old age that forms the turning point in Beowulf’s own development.

**Unferth**

Unferth’s challenge to Beowulf’s honor differentiates him from Beowulf and helps to reveal some of the subtleties of the heroic code that the warriors must follow. Unferth is presented as a lesser man, a foil for the near-perfect Beowulf. (A foil is a character whose traits contrast with and thereby accentuate those of another character.) The bitterness of Unferth’s chiding of Beowulf about his swimming match with Breca clearly reflects his jealousy of the attention that Beowulf receives. It probably also stems from his shame at being unable to protect Heorot himself—he is clearly not the sort of great warrior whom legend will remember. While boasting is a proper and acceptable form of self-assertion, Unferth’s harsh words show that it ought not to be bitter or disparaging of others. Rather than heroism, Unferth’s blustering reveals pride and resentment. Later, Unferth’s gift of his sword for Beowulf’s fight against Grendel’s mother heals Unferth’s breach of hospitality, but it does little to improve his heroic status. Unlike Beowulf, Unferth is clearly afraid to fight the monster himself.

**Wiglaf**

Wiglaf, one of Beowulf’s kinsmen and thanes, is the only warrior brave enough to help the hero in his fight against the dragon. Wiglaf conforms perfectly to the heroic code in that he is willing to die attempting to defeat the opponent and, more importantly, to save his lord. In this regard, Wiglaf appears as a reflection of the young Beowulf in the first part of the story—a warrior who is strong, fearless, valiant, and loyal. He embodies Beowulf’s statement from the early scenes of the poem that it is always better to act than to grieve. Wiglaf thus represents the next generation of heroism and the future of the kingdom. His bravery and solid bearing provide the single glint of optimism in the final part of the story, which, for the most part, is dominated by a tone of despair at what the future holds.

**Themes**

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

**The Importance of Establishing Identity**

As Beowulf is essentially a record of heroic deeds, the concept of identity—of which the two principal components are ancestral heritage and individual reputation—is clearly central to the poem. The opening passages introduce the reader to a world in which every male figure is known as his father’s son. Characters in the poem are unable to talk about their identity or even introduce themselves without referring to family lineage. This concern with family history is so prominent because of the poem’s emphasis on kinship bonds. Characters take pride in ancestors who have acted valiantly, and they attempt to live up to the same standards as those ancestors.

While heritage may provide models for behavior and help to establish identity—as with the line of Danish kings discussed early on—a good reputation is the key to solidifying and augmenting one’s identity. For example, Shield Sheafson, the legendary originator of the Danish royal line, was orphaned; because he was in a sense fatherless, valiant deeds were the only means by which he could construct an identity for himself. While Beowulf’s pagan warrior culture seems not to have a concept of the afterlife, it sees fame as a way of ensuring that an individual’s memory will continue on after death—an understandable preoccupation in a world where death seems always to be knocking at the door.

**Tensions between the Heroic Code and Other Value Systems**

Much of Beowulf is devoted to articulating and illustrating the Germanic heroic code, which values strength, courage, and loyalty in warriors; hospitality, generosity, and political skill in kings; ceremoniousness in women; and good reputation in all people. Traditional and much respected, this code is vital to warrior societies as a means of understanding their relationships to the world and the menaces lurking beyond their boundaries. All of the characters’ moral judgments stem from the code’s mandates. Thus individual actions can be seen only as either conforming to or violating the code.

The poem highlights the code’s points of tension by recounting situations that expose its internal contradictions in values. The poem contains several stories that concern divided loyalties, situations for which the code offers no practical guidance about how to act. For example, the poet relates that the Danish Hildeburh marries the Frisian king. When, in the war between the Danes and the Frisians, both her Danish brother and her Frisian son are killed, Hildeburh is left doubly grieved. The code is also often in tension with the values of medieval Christianity. While the code maintains that honor is gained during life through deeds, Christianity asserts that glory lies in the afterlife. Similarly, while the warrior culture dictates that it is always better to retaliate than to mourn, Christian doctrine advocates a peaceful, forgiving attitude toward one’s enemies. Throughout the poem, the poet strains to accommodate these two sets of values. Though he is Christian, he cannot (and does not seem to want to) deny the fundamental pagan values of the story.

**The Difference between a Good Warrior and a Good King**

Over the course of the poem, Beowulf matures from a valiant combatant into a wise leader. His transition demonstrates that a differing set of values accompanies each of his two roles. The difference between these two sets of values manifests itself early on in the outlooks of Beowulf and King Hrothgar. Whereas the youthful Beowulf, having nothing to lose, desires personal glory, the aged Hrothgar, having much to lose, seeks protection for his people. Though these two outlooks are somewhat oppositional, each character acts as society dictates he should given his particular role in society.

While the values of the warrior become clear through Beowulf’s example throughout the poem, only in the poem’s more didactic moments are the responsibilities of a king to his people discussed. The heroic code requires that a king reward the loyal service of his warriors with gifts and praise. It also holds that he must provide them with protection and the sanctuary of a lavish mead-hall. Hrothgar’s speeches, in particular, emphasize the value of creating stability in a precarious and chaotic world. He also speaks at length about the king’s role in diplomacy, both with his own warriors and with other tribes.

Beowulf’s own tenure as king elaborates on many of the same points. His transition from warrior to king, and, in particular, his final battle with the dragon, rehash the dichotomy between the duties of a heroic warrior and those of a heroic king. In the eyes of several of the Geats, Beowulf’s bold encounter with the dragon is morally ambiguous because it dooms them to a kingless state in which they remain vulnerable to attack by their enemies. Yet Beowulf also demonstrates the sort of restraint proper to kings when, earlier in his life, he refrains from usurping Hygelac’s throne, choosing instead to uphold the line of succession by supporting the appointment of Hygelac’s son. But since all of these pagan kings were great warriors in their youth, the tension between these two important roles seems inevitable and ultimately irreconcilable.

**Motifs**

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.

**Monsters**

the monsters that Beowulf must fight in this Old English poem shape the poem’s plot and seem to represent an inhuman or alien presence in society that must be exorcised for the society’s safety. They are all outsiders, existing beyond the boundaries of human realms. Grendel’s and his mother’s encroachment upon human society—they wreak havoc in Heorot—forces Beowulf to kill the two beasts for order to be restored.

To many readers, the three monsters that Beowulf slays all seem to have a symbolic or allegorical meaning. For instance, since Grendel is descended from the biblical figure Cain, who slew his own brother, Grendel often has been understood to represent the evil in Scandinavian society of marauding and killing others. A traditional figure of medieval folklore and a common Christian symbol of sin, the dragon may represent an external malice that must be conquered to prove a hero’s goodness. Because Beowulf’s encounter with the dragon ends in mutual destruction, the dragon may also be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the inevitable encounter with death itself.

**The Oral Tradition**

Intimately connected to the theme of the importance of establishing one’s identity is the oral tradition, which preserves the lessons and lineages of the past, and helps to spread reputations. Indeed, in a culture that has little interaction with writing, only the spoken word can allow individuals to learn about others and make their own stories known. This emphasis on oral communication explains the prevalence of bards’ tales (such as the Heorot scop’s relating of the Finnsburg episode) and warriors’ boastings (such as Beowulf’s telling of the Breca story). From a broader perspective, Beowulf itself contributes to the tradition of oral celebration of cultural heroes. Like Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey,* Beowulf was passed on orally over many generations before being written down.

**The Mead-Hall**

The poem contains two examples of mead-halls: Hrothgar’s great hall of Heorot, in Denmark, and Hygelac’s hall in Geatland. Both function as important cultural institutions that provide light and warmth, food and drink, and singing and revelry. Historically, the mead-hall represented a safe haven for warriors returning from battle, a small zone of refuge within a dangerous and precarious external world that continuously offered the threat of attack by neighboring peoples. The mead-hall was also a place of community, where traditions were preserved, loyalty was rewarded, and, perhaps most important, stories were told and reputations were spread.

**Symbols**

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts. Because ritual behaviors and tokens of loyalty are so central to pagan Germanic culture, most of the objects mentioned in Beowulf have symbolic status not just for the readers but also for the characters in the poem.

**The Golden Torque**

The collar or necklace that Wealhtheow gives Beowulf is a symbol of the bond of loyalty between her people and Beowulf—and, by extension, the Geats. Its status as a symbolic object is renewed when we learn that Hygelac died in battle wearing it, furthering the ideas of kinship and continuity.

**The Banquet**

The great banquet at Heorot after the defeat of Grendel represents the restoration of order and harmony to the Danish people. The preparation involves the rebuilding of the damaged mead-hall, which, in conjunction with the banquet itself, symbolizes the rebirth of the community. The speeches and giving of gifts, essential components of this society’s interactions, contribute as well to the sense of wholeness renewed.