The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology Study Guide

The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology by Kevin Crossley-Holland

BOOKRAGS

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Heroic Poems

Heroic Poems Summary

The anthology starts out with fragments from five heroic poems. These poems deal with details of battle and tribal loyalty, and they give a good idea of the bloody and war-like values of the Anglo-Saxons. They reveal the importance of bravely serving one's lord.

"Deor" presents a series of characters, giving a short and concise description of how these characters feel about their lot in life. The poet or narrating persona identifies himself as Deor and sadly tells how he once had a good job and lands, but how they have now been taken away from him. Thus he sympathizes with historical characters who lost something great.

There are fragments from four other heroic poems and these all give details of battles, as well as the reactions of the people before and after the battles. In "The Finnesburh Fragment," Guthere fights against Prince Sigeferth and Guthere's men fight very bravely, many of them giving their lives. In two fragments from "Waldere," a woman urges a warrior to fight bravely and a warrior named Waldere talks about how God and his armor will surely protect him, giving him no reason to fear his enemy.

The fragment describing the battle of Maldon is the longest of these, with line after line chronicling an exciting confrontation between the earl Byrhtnoth and an invading horde of Viking pirates. Obviously Viking pirates are not going home without a bloody fight but these ones graciously offer to go home without shedding blood if Byrhtnoth's people will pay them a tribute of treasure. This provides the perfect opening for Byrhtnoth to explain to them just how brave he and his soldiers really are. Unfortunately, one of Byrhtnoth's men Godric is a coward and when he sees that Byrhtnoth has been mortally wounded by the pirates, he jumps on Byrhtnoth's horse and flees to the woods. Several of his kinsmen follow. Byrhtnoth continues pulling spears out of his own flesh in order to lob them at his enemies, but eventually it is too much for him and he dies. When his men see that he is dead, most of them vow their loyalty and rush into battle, determined to avenge their lord by dying bravely.

The fragment describing the battle of Brunanburh has a similar feel to "The Battle of Maldon," except that the theme is a bit reversed. Rather than cowardly retainers fleeing when their earl is slain in battle, "The Battle of Brunanburh" scoffs at King Constantine, who leaves a battle in order to enjoy the safety and comfort of his own castle. The narrator calls Constantine a coward, especially compared to the many soldiers who fight bravely for him.

Heroic Poems Analysis

"Deor" has a different feel from the other poems, which primarily present battle details, focusing on valor in fighting. Each short stanza ends with a refrain, which remains the

same throughout. The refrain can be thought of as meaning that all things pass away, just like the characters in these stories. Another way to sum up the refrain, and theme of the poem, could be, "This too shall pass."

The other four fragments of poems could almost be read together as one long poem, because they are so similar in subject matter, theme, and presentation. Mostly they stress what has been called the Germanic Heroic Code, which values the bond between a lord and his knights or retainers, bonds of kinship, moral and physical courage, and blood feuds, which typically have to be continued for as long as possible for honor. The narrator of "The Battle of Maldon" heaps contempt upon Godric and the other cowards, for fleeing a battle when they should be avenging the death of their leader. This is different from another heroic military idea, that an army is basically defeated once their leader is killed. These soldiers are more concerned with fighting and dying valiantly, than with whether their army wins or loses the battle.

Laws, and The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

Laws, and The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle Summary

The "Laws" section has excerpts from three known examples of written laws. The "Laws of Wihtred" are decrees of Wihtred, King of Kent, which he has made into law with the consent of the Church. Most of these laws are technicalities having to do with members of the clergy interacting with the rest of society, and there are also a lot of details concerning proper relations between masters and servants or slaves. The short piece on "Trial by Ordeal" offers less moral direction but is certainly a stimulating read. If an accused person asks for it, they can plunge their hand into boiling water to determine their guilt or innocence, instead of appealing to a jury or judge. The accused is then bandaged and after three days, if the wound is healing and not infected, the person is judged to be innocent. The third piece is a letter from King Canute to his new subjects, the people of England. Canute assures his people that he will take good care of them, and continue to uphold the laws of King Edgar, which have been the law of the land. Canute spends much of his letter reminding the people of how he has saved them in the recent war from the invaders, and urging them to give thanks to God for this victory, financed with Canute's money.

"The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" has various entries, each one describing the major events of a specific year. The entries presented in this section skip around a lot, from 449 A.D. to 1066 A.D. "Vertigern's Invitation" describes fighting for land among the English, the Picts, and the Germans, explaining which ethnic groups have descended from them. "Cynewulf and Cyneheard" tells the story of King Cynewulf, who is slaughtered, along with a group of his men-at-arms, when he is ambushed by his rival Cyneheard. Cyneheard interrupts the king when he is visiting his mistress, who screams until all of the king's men have avenged his death with their own deaths. A short section called "Fiery Dragons in Northumbria" tells of all manner of frightening signs in the sky including dragons as recently as 793 A.D. In the same paragraph, the writer mentions a famine as well as the pillage and slaughter of a church by heathen invaders.

In the piece titled "Ashdown and Other Engagements," King Ethelred and his brother Alfred fight valiantly against the Danes, and when Ethelred dies, Alfred becomes king in his place. Alfred's story is continued in "King Alfred and Guthrum," in which Alfred is so victorious over his enemies, that he convinces his enemies to be baptized as Christians. In "Stamford Bridge and Hastings," a comet appears for a week, an omen letting everyone know that some great event is coming up. This turns out to be a fierce battle between King Harold and William the Bastard, who is invading. That really is his name, and refers to his parentage, not his personality. William manages to defeat King Harold and many of his new subjects refuse to submit to William. William goes on a murderous rampage and finally forces those people to submit. The narrator explains that this is God's punishment to the people for sinning.

Laws, and The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle Analysis

The "Laws" excerpts make it obvious how powerful and pervasive the Christian Church is in medieval England. Although each excerpt has a different theme, each one takes most of its moral authority from Christianity. It is clear that the priests occupy a very important role in their society, implying that the priests especially need to uphold certain moral standards. The laws all demonstrate at least some level of luxury, but it is clear that violence and death are never far from these people's realities, whether in battle with invaders, flogging as punishment, or self-inflicted burns. Canute's references to his money, juxtaposed with admonitions to give thanks to God, provide a glimpse of the role that religion can take when the foundations of government give a lot of authority to religious officials.

"The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" also reflects the bloody tradition of invasion, battle, and conquering, not to mention slaughter and pillaging. However, it is important to remember that this only reflects a few scattered years, which may have punctuated decades of relative peace. In fact, the years which were the most turbulent are the ones most likely to be referenced, since they would stand out in people's minds. A strong belief in God is evident throughout the chronicle, even when the narrator is relating things like dragon sightings, showing that folk beliefs of pre-Christian Europe had not yet disappeared among the people of Britain.

Elegies, and Exploration

Elegies, and Exploration Summary

The "Elegies" section consists of six poems or fragments of poems, in which a speaker mournfully compares their own situation with the sad destiny of all human efforts, which lead to death and decay. "The Wanderer" tells the story of a retainer who has suddenly been exiled and sentimentally extols the glories of getting to serve his lord. The wanderer hopes against hope that somewhere he can find another lord to serve but for now, he is keenly aware of the icy waters surrounding him. He points out that all people die and their glories pass away. This poem is quite similar to "The Seafarer," which is about a man who feels compelled by some force to continually go on journeys across the ocean. The seafarer does not explain why he must wander but he imagines all the pleasures of a stable life. He declares that his only comfort in the winter seas is the song of the birds flying around his ship.

"The Wife's Lament" has a female narrator and she gives just enough details to give a general idea what has happened to her. The wife still loves her husband, but cannot believe that all this time, he has been plotting some sort of treachery. Now he is far away, and the wife is being punished for what her husband has done. She is forced to wait under an oak tree in an earthen cave, while she wonders what will become of her and her husband. "The Husband's Message" has a corresponding story, involving a secret letter sent from a husband to his wife. The husband is in a foreign country far from home, but he has done well and is wealthy. He urges his wife to come to him soon. "Wulf" is another poem about romantic love, but this time, the story is told by an unfaithful wife, wishing that Wulf, her lover, would come save her. The wife is worried about her own safety and more so about the safety of Wulf and their unborn child. "Ruin" has a different feel from the other poems, because it does not focus on the romantic love or personal deprivations of one person, but rather looks at an entire society. The narrator examines crumbling ruins and realizes that a great civilization must have built them, but now it has all passed away.

The section called "Exploration" contains two accounts in which someone describes certain territories to King Alfred, who was mentioned earlier in "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle." The first account is "Ohthere's Voyage to the White Sea," and it tells of how Ohthere, who lives in northern Norway, decides to see what is north of him to find out how far his country extends. Ohthere comes in contact with Lapps, Permians, and Finns, some of whom are friendly, while Ohthere avoids others lest they attack him. The main type of wealth that he finds in the area is to be found in walrus hunting and whaling, and they use the animals' tusks and skins for various purposes. In "Wulfstan's Visit to Estonia," Wulfstan takes over where Ohthere left off, describing the land of Estonia. According to Wulfstan, Estonia is a huge country and every city is ruled by its own king. It is a land literally flowing with milk and honey, leading to the popularity of mead, which is made from honey. Wulfstan tells of an amusing funeral custom in Estonia, whereby the dead man's belongings are divided into six piles of ascending

value. These are placed at distances to the dead man's house in keeping with the value of the pile. There is a horse race that follows and each man can keep whatever pile he gets to first.

Elegies, and Exploration Analysis

The poems in the "Elegies" section show that although many cultural norms change drastically, and expository details may be missing, the emotional imagery of the human psyche can transcend such specific limitations, so that the despair in the poems can still be felt by a modern reader. The narrators often use weather to symbolize the way they feel inside in a way which still makes perfect sense. "The Wife's Lament" and "Wulf" are the only English-language poems from this era to have a female narrator and they point to the helplessness that many medieval women felt about their lack of control over their own lives. It is easy for modern readers to identify with the romantic angst of the romantic love poems while the wanderer's longing for a lord to serve is a little more foreign.

The section about exploration relies upon a major difference between the modern world and the medieval world. Each person might see only a small piece of land with their own eyes and so people had to rely on the descriptions of others who had explored farther. A traveler was a truly novel source of entertainment because they had seen more of the world than most people.

Epic: Beowulf

Epic: Beowulf Summary

"Beowulf" is an epic poem about Beowulf, king of the Geats. The first part of the poem takes place when Beowulf is a young and unproven warrior, while the later portion describes Beowulf's last battle, when he has been king for a long time. The story starts out by describing the plight of Hrothgar, king of the Danes. Hrothgar resides in Heorot, the most splendid hall in all the land, with his many retainers. One night they are visited by a horrible monster from the deep. This monster is a descendant of the Biblical character Cain. This monster's name is Grendel, and Grendel forces his way in to Heorot while all the men are passed out from drinking. Grendel makes off with thirty men, leaving a trail of blood. After eating these men, Grendel continues to ravage the countryside, often visiting Heorot, until there are very few men left who are willing to stay and support Hrothgar. He continues his path of devastation until twelve years later when Beowulf arrives with a company of men, and offers his allegiance to Hrothgar. In the kingdom of the Geats, young Beowulf has heard about the foul creature, and intends to slay it for Hrothgar.

Hrothgar happily receives Beowulf and his men. A warrior named Unferth has heard of Beowulf, and jeeringly asks if he is the same man to challenge Breca to a swimming contest. Unferth insists that Breca won the contest and laughs at Beowulf, saying that he is just a braggart. Beowulf defends himself, saying that Unferth has got the story wrong, because Beowulf is the stronger swimmer. Since Beowulf has heard that Grendel does not use weapons or armor, he intends to fight him singlehandedly, with no weapons. All the men lie down to sleep, although Beowulf only pretends to sleep. Soon enough, Grendel shows up and is delighted, planning to have a big supper. Grendel devours an entire man in a few seconds, which gives Beowulf a chance to observe how the monster moves and fights. When Grendel approaches Beowulf to eat him, Beowulf surprises him by grabbing his hand. Beowulf has an incredibly strong grip, and refuses to let go, breaking the bones in Grendel's hand. As they plummet around the room, struggling, Beowulf slowly but surely rips Grendel's entire arm and shoulder off. As soon as his arm is severed, Grendel flees, knowing that he will die from his wound.

Afterward, the men are all amazed at Beowulf's superhuman strength, even though he has already boasted of slaying many sea-monsters. In celebration, they nail Grendel's arm to the wall as a trophy, and begin a feast with much drinking of mead. Grendel's fingernails appear to be made of iron and sharp as knives. It turns out that it is good that Beowulf chose to fight Grendel without weapons, because Grendel is under a magic spell that makes him immune to all man-made weapons. Hrothgar rewards Beowulf with many valuable family heirlooms, including the sword of Hrothgar's grandfather. Unfortunately, the men are premature in their celebration, for Grendel's mother is a creature almost identical to Grendel, and she wants to avenge what has been done to her son. Grendel's mother sneaks into Heorot that night and kills a sleeping man, taking

back Grendel's arm. The men mourn when they see that one of their best warriors has been slaughtered.

Beowulf sets out to go to the lake where Grendel's mother makes her home. It is a terrifying place and the dark water is filled with nasty sea-monsters. Beowulf wears full armor and carries a mighty sword that has never failed in battle, lent to him by the same young man who earlier disbelieved Beowulf's boasts. Even though the water churns with hot blood, Beowulf dives in fearlessly, leaving a group of men on the shore to wait. It takes Beowulf an entire day of swimming to even be able to see the bottom, and soon he is attacked from all sides by the sea-monsters. He has trouble fighting them off in the water, but soon he finds himself in the underwater home of Grendel and his mother, and in the air Beowulf can move again. Seeing Grendel's mother, Beowulf stabs with his borrowed sword, but her blood is so poisonous that it dissolves the blade, so that only the hilt is left. Beowulf tosses the hilt to the side, and grapples with her. He happens to see a huge sword, forged by giants, hanging on the wall, and he grabs it. This sword can prevail against the monster, and he lops off her head with it. Then he sees the dying form of Grendel, and cuts off Grendel's head too.

Beowulf swims to the surface, with the giant's sword and Grendel's head as trophies and proof that he has succeeded. Only his own men wait for him, because Hrothgar's men have given up hope of ever seeing Beowulf again. Beowulf presents the head and sword to Hrothgar, and Hrothgar gives him even more treasures as a reward. Hrothgar's queen thanks Beowulf for his contribution, but also asks him to go on his way when he is done, so that her own sons can inherit Hrothgar's kingdom. Beowulf and his men return to their own country, laden with wonderful gifts from Hrothgar. Beowulf's kinsmen, the Geats, are impressed, now that he has proven himself to be such a great warrior.

The later part of the poem takes place after Beowulf has become king of the Geats, and ruled over them for fifty years. The poet explains that an ancient race of people, possibly giants, hoard all their gold and treasure for many years, until there is only the one king left living. This king dies with his wealth hidden in a man-made cave, and the only one to find the treasure after many years is a fire-breathing dragon. The dragon watches over his treasure for three hundred years, until one day an escaped slave happens to stumble upon the cave. The desperate slave steals a jeweled goblet, terrified of waking the sleeping dragon. It does not take the dragon long to realize that a human has stolen something from the hoard, and the dragon wants revenge. The dragon burns up substantial portions of Beowulf's domain, including his own hall and throne. The people of the countryside are terrorized. Before long, the story, and the goblet, make it back to Beowulf, who knows he must do something about it.

Beowulf would prefer to fight the dragon empty-handed, but he has heard of its fiery breath, so he commissions a shield made entirely of iron, so it cannot burn up. Beowulf once again wants to fight alone, but he brings a group of fighters, along with the slave as a guide, to the dragon's lair. Beowulf shouts a challenge, and instantly the dragon answers with a jet of flame. All but one of Beowulf's men run for their lives to the woods, where they hide. Only Wiglaf stays, although he is terrified. Wiglaf sees that the dragon is too much for Beowulf to fight alone, so he rushes in among the smoke and flames to

help his king. Beowulf's sword gets stuck in the dragon's skull, and the dragon bites him around the neck. Wiglaf takes advantage of the distraction and plunges his sword into the dragon's belly, all the way up to the hilt. As the beast falls from this wound, Beowulf manages to pull out a dagger and stab it, and it dies. Sadly, Beowulf is also dying of his wounds.

Beowulf asks Wiglaf to show him some of the treasure, since it will cost him his life. Wiglaf scrambles into the cave, and comes out with all the priceless treasure he can carry. He shows this to Beowulf, who asks Wiglaf to succeed him as king, since Beowulf has no son. At this point, the other warriors slink back, ashamed of their cowardice when their leader needed them the most. Wiglaf chastises them and then tells them to burn the excavated treasure along with Beowulf. After they have cremated him, they bury the rest of the dragon's treasure with his ashes, because it is cursed, and can not be owned by any living man. The Geats mourn not only their kindest and bravest leader, but also mourn for the days to come, when their enemies will surely try to invade the kingdom, now that Beowulf can no longer protect them.

Epic: Beowulf Analysis

"Beowulf" is one of the oldest existing pieces of English literature, and one of the most popular. Even after a thousand years, the battles portrayed are still exciting and stirring. To really understand "Beowulf" would require a good deal of study of the surrounding culture, and since here it is presented as part of an anthology, there is not sufficient space to thoroughly analyze it. There is a wealth of such material available to anyone wanting to learn more about "Beowulf." Even without an in-depth study, some cultural values clearly emerge. It is obvious that the poet highly values bravery in battle, loyalty toward one's kinsmen, and service toward one's lord. Another prominent theme, which can be found in many examples of Anglo-Saxon literature, is that everything passes away, and everyone is fated to die some day. The poet offers rich details, as well as establishing who the characters are, by mentioning their relationships to various historical persons, such as the Ohthere of Norway, who was also mentioned in the "Explorations" section. These references to real people are somewhat strange next to descriptions of dragons, or tales of a man holding his breath for a full day. Although most listeners to the poem probably knew that these were exaggerations, people in medieval times did not have as large a frame of reference, and so these details might sound no more preposterous than a description of an elephant.

After Beowulf kills Grendel, a bard sings a song to entertain the others. The bard tells the story of Sigemund, a dragon-slayer who dies in the song. This is foreshadowing the manner in which Beowulf will die. There are many references in the later section, indicating that both Beowulf and the dragon will die in their fight, but this is a pointed reference to Beowulf's fate, many years before it comes to pass. The bard even takes pains to point out reasons why Beowulf is a more righteous and worthy man than other dragon-slayers, even though at that point in the epic, Beowulf is still not yet a dragon-slayer.

King Hrothgar pays a certain amount of gold called "wergild," to the family of the man eaten by Grendel, which was a custom to recompense them for their loss. This could be seen as similar to a modern life insurance settlement, except that it was usually paid by the killer of the man, or whoever was held responsible for his death. In this way, blood feuds could sometimes by ended with money, rather than continuing an endless cycle of retributive bloodshed. This problem is also discussed later with regards to royal marriage, when intended to stop a blood feud, can only prevent killing until the in-laws get a chance to dredge up old grudges.

The Kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God Summary

The section titled "The Kingdom of God" contains several historical church documents detailing some of the spread of Christianity into what is now Great Britain. The first piece, "King Edwin's Council," starts right after the missionary Paulinus has introduced the Gospel of Christianity to Edwin, the king of Northumbria. Before this point, Edwin's people are still practicing the pagan religions of their forefathers, worshiping a pantheon of gods, mostly related to the Norse gods. Edwin is intrigued by Christianity and he holds a council of his closest advisors so that he can find out what they think about the issue. Coifi, Edwin's pagan High Priest, points out to Edwin that if their gods were able to make any difference, surely they would have taken better care of Coifi himself, since he is their foremost devotee. Another councilor compares the experience of life to the flight of a sparrow through a building during a storm, with the time before and after life being represented by the storm. This man says that any religion which offers information about what is going on outside of the building, must be superior to their current lack of knowledge. Inspired by the hope offered by Christianity, Coifi volunteers to start things off by desecrating and burning all of the existing temples in the land.

The next piece, called "Caedmon's Vision," describes the calling of Caedmon, a great poet and orator. Caedmon is an ordinary cowherd, who is shy and awkward any time someone wants him to speak publicly and would rather leave a party than perform. One night, Caedmon is sleeping in the stable, when a divine messenger comes to him in a dream, and asks him to sing a song about the creation of the world. What Caedmon sings is such beautiful poetry, that in the morning he writes it down and adds verses. The monks are astonished when they hear Caedmon's beautiful poetry, and they discover that he has a divine talent for changing text into poetry, but only for inspiring Christian literature. Caedmon becomes a monk and continues writing poetry until the day he dies, having been warned in a premonition when the end would come for him.

"Cuthbert's Death and Disinterment" is divided into several parts, and is a portion of a longer history of Cuthbert, the patron saint of Northumbria. Cuthbert is spending time at the monastery in Lindisfarne, and he tells his friends that he will not return to them until he is dead. Cuthbert selects Wahlstod, a monk who is afflicted with severe diarrhea, to attend him as he is dying. Wahlstod is miraculously cured of his diarrhea. Some time after Cuthbert's death, a priest decides to harvest some soil. Water that was used to wash Cuthbert's corpse has been poured on this soil previoulsy. The priest makes an ointment out of the soil, and feeds some of it to a demon-possessed boy who heals quickly. Many years after Cuthbert's death, the priests decide to move his bones to a better location and they are shocked to discover that his body is perfectly preserved and supple, with even the clothes in perfect condition.

The story of Cuthbert, and many others, is written down by the scholar and historian Bede, who is a contemporary of Cuthbert's. The final piece in this section is called

"Bede on Himself," and it is Bede's personal history, written down shortly before his death. Bede starts out by describing his birth on the monastery grounds, and how he enters training to become a monk at the age of seven. He has spent all of his fifty-nine years in the service of God, mostly by writing down translations of Christian scriptures, as well as providing commentary and interpretation. Bede then gives a list of many of the books that he has written.

The Kingdom of God Analysis

These texts provide two contrasting pictures of the role of Christianity in Great Britain and especially Northumbria. The first text, "King Edwin's Council," is different from all the others, because it describes a time when the religious fate of the region was still up in the air, and could just have easily reverted back to the old religions of the common people. The other texts all take place in a time where the Christian Church has a firm and vital place in Anglo-Saxon society. It is an ordinary thing to dedicate a young child to the priesthood and have him spend the rest of his life in a monastery. The behavior of Coifi, King Edwin's pagan High Priest, shows that either Coifi is a man of convictions, who is willing to sacrifice everything for whatever he believes is right, or that he is a man who understands the politics of kings. Coifi may realize that the religious conversion of a nation can be a turbulent and bloody affair, and he may want to make it obvious that he is on the winning side, so that there will be no need to execute the High Priest who has been supervising the worship of the wrong gods. Whether he is motivated by spiritual or practical reasons, Coifi is very lucky to get out of a situation like this alive.

The story of Cuthbert's death contains some details that stand out next to the typical and edifying spiritual fare. Many Christian writers throughout history would omit stories about chronic diarrhea, wanting instead to emphasize the transcendent and holy nature of Christian living. They consider the physical body to be more base and sinful than the spirit. Bede does not have such qualms, which could stem from the fact that he wrote the story so close to the time when it happened. Hence there is more of an impetus to be accurate. It could also be that Bede, raised in the atmosphere of a monastery, feels comfortable discussing such things, having grown up surrounded by other brothers, and living alongside them. Among many other books, Bede mentions that he wrote seven books of commentary on the Song of Songs, which is the only book of the Bible which is basically just about sex and romance. Since Song of Songs, also known as the Song of Solomon, is only a few pages long itself, it seems interesting that a man who spends his entire life in a monastery would have so much to say about it. This shows that Bede chooses to chronicle not just the holy and flowery aspects of his life, but creates a rich and varied body of work.

Greetings in Christ, and Christian Poems

Greetings in Christ, and Christian Poems Summary

The clergymen of medieval Britain correspond with a lot with letters and many of these letters still survive today. Some of these letters directly concern some of the authors of the above-mentioned writings. The first letter presented is "From Pope Gregory I to Candidus," and in this letter, the Pope addresses Candidus, a priest being sent to take care of financial matters in far-off Gaul. Gregory suggests that Candidus use the funds he obtains to buy clothes for those Christians who cannot afford them and to buy slaves of English origin, who can be trained in the ways of the Church. Gregory supposes that such English boys will make good missionaries to the English people, who at the time were still called Angles. The second letter, "From Boniface to Fulrad, Abbot of St. Denis," once again stresses the details of trying to provide material needs for missionaries at the frontier of Christian territory. Bishop Boniface asks Abbot Fulrad to send greetings on his behalf to King Pippin of the Franks. Boniface informs Pippin through Fulrad that he, Boniface, is dying, and urges the king to appoint Bishop Lul to replace him in caring for Boniface's congregation, especially since many frontier missionaries cannot afford clothes. The letter "From Cuthbert, Abbot of Wearmouth, to Lul," is addressed to this same Lul, but the emphasis has shifted from the poverty of the missionaries to the use of more luxurious gifts. Cuthbert thanks Lul for a warm bedspread, which Cuthbert has instead decided to use as an altar cloth. This does not mean that Cuthbert does not complain about the nasty weather in the cold winter. He does sends gifts of handmade and precious books. Cuthbert begs Lul to send him a glass-maker or a harpist to improve their church and worship.

The letter "From Alcuin to Ethelred, King of Northumbria" has less of a focus on missions, and instead focuses on returning to a former state of righteousness. The deacon Alcuin addresses King Ethelred and bemoans how St. Cuthbert's church has recently been attacked and destroyed by invading pagans, and the holy treasures taken as loot. Alcuin cites a recent story about a church roof that seems to rain blood and interprets this as a miracle, warning them that their doom will soon come in the form of invaders from the north. Alcuin warns Ethelred that the people's recent behavior is wicked and that soon they will bring God's wrath upon themselves, if they do not pray for forgiveness and help the poor. The next letter included is "From Charlemagne to Offa, King of Mercia." In this letter, Charlemagne, a very important king, addresses Offa, a relatively minor king, and suggests that they should both grant immunity to pilgrims and merchants traveling between their regions. Offa has recently asked Charlemagne for a certain set of black stones, which Charlemagne readily agrees to, but he asks that Offa start sending his people longer cloaks than he recently has. Charlemagne also exhorts Offa to continue praying for everyone. The final letter in the section is "From Radbrod, Prior of St. Samson's at Dol, to King Aethelstan," and like the others, it describes various presents that are being sent along with it. Prior Radbrod writes from

France to King Aethelstan, and since he knows that the king likes to collect holy relics, Radbrod sends quite a few to him, mostly the bones of various saints. Radbrod also asks, of course, that the king send him some gifts.

In the next section, there are several poems and fragments of poems presented in order to highlight the new poetic style, started by Caedmon. There is "Caedmon's Hymn," which is the first piece created directly after Caedmon's vision. Caedmon cries out that everyone must praise God, who has made the entire earth. After this short verse are three passages of lyrics to be recited during Advent services, in the month before Christmas. The first passage admires the architecture of the church building and compares God to a great architect. The second passage cries out from the point of view of a person in exile, who believes that God will soon make things better, because he has the power to make the Virgin Mary pregnant. After this passage is the seventh passage, which is a dialogue between the Virgin Mary and Joseph, who are discussing their feelings about Mary's pregnancy. Joseph is hurt that Mary has gotten pregnant and Mary wishes he would trust her, since she is still a virgin.

"The Dream of the Rood" is a poem which also draws upon the Germanic storytelling tradition. It begins with the poet telling the audience that he had a dream of a beautiful, jeweled Cross. The dreamer notices that the Cross is bleeding and the Cross begins to speak. The Cross tells how unhappy it is when it is cut down as a tree and turned into an instrument of death. In the Cross's story, Jesus climbs onto the Cross and encourages the soldiers to kill him. The Cross is in just as much pain as he is. The Cross is torn by the desire to comfort Jesus and the need to allow the crucifixion to take place. Afterward, the Cross learns that it has been exalted over all other trees, and it is granted powers of healing. The dreamer prays to the Cross, and looks forward eagerly to Heaven. After this poem, there is a short stanza called "Durham," which describes the splendor of the city of Durham, and lists various holy men who are buried there. The final poem is a five-line verse that the scholar Bede spoke just as he was dying. It encourages each person to spend their last moments contemplating whether they will go to Heaven or Hell.

Greetings in Christ, and Christian Poems Analysis

It is interesting to observe the mingling of spiritual and financial matters in many of these church letters. Although the attitude is usually that Christians should not place too much value in the material world, but should instead focus on righteousness, and in storing up treasure in Heaven, these priests seem quite concerned with clothing, precious stones, beautiful altar cloths, and books. This is especially noticeable in Cuthbert's complaint about the cold, even while he acknowledges that Lul sent him a gift to protect him from the cold, which he is not using for warmth (This is not the same Cuthbert whose body did not decay after death.) It is also apparent in Charlemagne's comment that he would be happy to share with Offa whatever he needs, as long as Offa starts sending better-quality cloaks as a return gift. In these letters, one can see how practical needs vie with spiritual needs for priority in the Christian Church in this period. It also shows that, although there was certainly a common goal in advancing the cause

of Christianity, and the Christians believed in sharing material goods, there was still an incentive to buy and sell as well as to make a reasonable deal in order to use resources most effectively.

The relics are any physical reminders of the life of a saint or other holy person, such as clothing, possessions, or body parts. Saints' bones are often considered to be the most powerful relics, along with any objects associated with Jesus's death, such as a piece of his cross or his crown of thorns. Relics are usually believed to have miraculous powers to heal or change people's lives, and many believers went on pilgrimages to visit sacred shrines with relics. Relics, whether real or counterfeit, are a significant source of revenue for any church so lucky as to house them.

The Germanic peoples, including the Anglo-Saxons, have a richly poetic tradition of heroic storytelling, as shown in examples like "Beowulf." The new Christian style of poetry incorporates the Germanic storytelling style, with its emphasis on loyalty toward one's lord, fortitude shown through stalwart self-sacrifice, and conquering warriors, with the ideals of Christianity, often telling Christian stories in the style of epic heroic poems. This emphasis makes it easier to reach the Anglo-Saxons, who respond readily to the familiar storytelling style and theme. However, interpretations of Christ as a medieval lord, with the Cross being one of his retainers, and where Christ seeks out danger, much like Beowulf diving into the lake, are far removed from the origins of Christianity. The section of "Advent Lyrics" featuring the dialogue between Mary and Joseph is the first known example of this type of dramatic dialogue in English to tell a story.

"The Dream of the Rood" uses the literary technique of prosopopeia, which occurs when an inanimate object speaks as though it were sentient. The Cross seems to have its own desires and dreams, and a will of its own. A well-known example of prosopopeia would be the song "I'm a Little Teapot." "Bede's Death Song" may have been composed by Bede himself, as a summary of his prolific literary career. It may simply have been a well-known proverb that he happened to recite just before death. It implies that it is righteousness and not learning that earns a person a place in Heaven.

Example and Exhortation

Example and Exhortation Summary

This section contains several writings which are intended to encourage Christians to learn and read as well as some of the earliest biographies in English. The first piece has excerpts "From the Life of King Alfred." It is a fond memoir of a beloved king, the same one mentioned earlier in "The Battle of Ashdown." As a child, young Alfred is a perfect angel and demonstrates an eager love of learning from a young age. At the Battle of Ashdown, Alfred waits until God prompts him to go into battle, while his brother King Aethelstan prays in a tent. Alfred's army slaughters the pagans with God's help. Alfred goes on to be a pious, wise, and mighty king, and serves England well. He studies throughout his life, and encourages literacy throughout England, even while suffering from a mysterious disease. One of the projects Alfred does is the translation of Pope Gregory's book, "Pastoral Care," into English. He sends copies to bishops throughout the kingdom. The second piece of writing selected is the preface that Alfred writes to Bishop Waerferth to accompany this book. In the preface, Alfred complains about the decline of education in England for the last hundred years or so. He wants many books translated into English, and also wants children to be able to learn to speak Latin.

The next piece is a school lesson called "Colloquy," translated from the original Latin, which is designed to teach the children of commoners how to speak Latin. There is a series of scripts between the Teacher and pupils of various occupations, and the Teacher asks the students questions about their jobs.

The final piece in this section is called "The Passion of St. Edmund," and it is the action-packed story of King Edmund of England, a good and devout man. An army of Danes, led by Ivar, invades England, murdering and abusing men, women, and children. Ivar sends word to King Edmund that if he wants to live, he can come pay tribute to Ivar, and submit to him as a lesser king. Edmund answers that he would rather die, especially since his own people are being slaughtered. Having no army, Edmund is easily captured, especially because he declines to use weapons, wanting to emulate Christ. Ivar ties up Edmund and has him shot with so many arrows that he looks like a hedgehog, but Edmund just keeps calling on the name of Christ. Finally, Ivar beheads Edmund, and hides his head under a forest bush, so he can not be buried in one place. When the people search the woods for the head, they find a wolf guarding it. They return the head to the body and bury Edmund, with the wolf following them as though it were tame. Years later, his body is dug up, and all of his wounds have healed, and he has not decayed. There are many miracles associated with Edmund's body, including a night when three thieves try to break in and rob the chapel. The men are found frozen in place in the morning, with their tools still in their hands. Years later, the bishop feels guilty about having them executed. Some people try to look at Edmund's body over the years, to see if it has decayed or not, but they usually drop dead for their lack of faith.

Example and Exhortation Analysis

"From the Life of King Alfred" is significant as the earliest secular biography written in English. It mentions God and Christianity, but Alfred is a layman or non-clerical character. In translating some of his books into vernacular English, Alfred had to come up with his own rules for writing, because up to that point, the only written English prose can be found in short business notation without any conversational flow. Thus, Alfred is innovative not just in his idea to translate many works into the tongue spoken by most common people, but he also creates a written language in a way.

The "Colloquy" section reveals both the diverse roles in medieval society but also popular attitudes toward these roles. The scripts states that each man should do whatever job he has and not try to do something else, because God has appointed him in that position. This viewpoint assumes that most people will not have any choice as to what life path they take, since it is decided by their parents when they are a small child. This list of jobs also shows how serious Alfred is about educating his kingdom since many of the jobs do not require or use reading in any way.

I Saw a Strange Creature . . .

I Saw a Strange Creature . . . Summary

Riddles are a popular form of entertainment for medieval people. These are not usually the kind with a question and a punchline, but instead they are poems which metaphorically represent some object or concept. This section contains thirty-one riddles from the "Exeter Book." Most of the riddles are told from a first-person viewpoint, and several of them sound as though they could describe an object or could be about sex. There are one or two longer riddles, which encompass all of Creation, as well as several describing weather phenomena. Many of the riddles have a religious theme, referring to Bible characters or the Bible itself. Most of the riddles do not have one definite answer, which is a lot of the fun in reading them. Many of the riddles begin with, "I saw a strange creature," as a way of introducing the subject of the riddle, while the reader must guess what the creature is.

I Saw a Strange Creature . . . Analysis

It is a surprising coincidence that such an interesting example of colloquial entertainment has survived, considering that not many church libraries would consider such a book to be worth protecting. In fact, the "Exeter Book" appears to have been damaged by fire as well as used as a plate, cutting board, serving dish, and beer coaster. The condition of this book, and the way it has suffered the ravages of everyday life, seem appropriate considering that the subject matter revolves around everyday and common objects. Many of these riddles employ prosopopeia, just like "The Dream of the Rood."

Charters, Tracts, and Wills

Charters, Tracts, and Wills Summary

This section contains several legal documents which give a glimpse into the way land was transferred, how marriages were carried out, and other important transactions. The first document is "A Grant of Land at Crediton," written by King Aethelheard. Aethelheard is granting a tract of land to Bishop Forthhere for the building of a monastery. Aethelheard goes into painstaking detail describing the borders of the land, mentioning individual trees and fields by name. After delineating the exact property line, the king goes on to stipulate that the monastery will not have to worry about taxes or someone seizing their land. The next document is "An Estate Memorandum: Duties and Perquisites." This gives a colorful picture of the many roles working together on a medieval estate, from the thane or retainer to craftsmen and farmers, to slaves. The writer mentions what are the typical requirements for these different jobs, and what the workers usually get in return, although the writer often points out that rules vary from estate to estate.

"A Marriage Agreement" is a contract of marriage, which suggests a time when women are allowed to accept or reject a suitor. Marriage is often used as a way to create family alliances. Godwine is the groom who is going to marry the unnamed daughter of Brihtric. The contract lists the bride-price, consisting of gold, land, livestock, and slaves. Many priests and town officials are listed as witnesses, just like in the "Grant of Land at Crediton," and a final note mentions that Brihtric himself is keeping one copy of the bridal contract. Slaves are also the subject of the next document, "A Manumission." This document officially frees a group of slaves, owned by a woman named Geatfleda. Geatfleda has acquired some of the slaves by buying them during a famine, in order to save their lives from starvation. The others she has begged from their owner so that she can now free them, because she is a righteous woman.

The final document in this section is "The Will of King Alfred," created by the same Alfred mentioned in several stories, who has such a passion for education. Alfred explains how he and his brother, King Ethelred, both worry about what will happen to their children after their deaths. When facing an enemy, the two agree to share their inheritance, and make sure that all of their children are provided for. Although it does not seem feasible to divide up the kingdom, Ethelred keeps his word to Alfred, leaving him the kingdom after Ethelred dies. Alfred leaves land and money to his two sons and three daughters, as well as to various kinsmen, ealdormen, and his nephews. Alfred stipulates that he wants to make sure that his grandfather's lands stay in the male side of the family, although he does not care about land which has already been obtained through women. Alfred mentions that he has previously made a will, which is no longer valid, so he has burned every copy that he can find.

Charters, Tracts, and Wills Analysis

The "Estate Memorandum" is an interesting read, because it shows one aspect of medieval life from many different points of view. On the one hand, it seems that the people living on an estate together depend greatly on one another in order to have any variety of food or possessions. On the other hand, the food quotas listed in this document describe a very spartan existence to a modern reader. It should not be too surprising that sometimes, people get so hungry that they sell themselves and their families into slavery, so that their master will feed them. It is a testament to Geatfleda's generosity that she takes care of these people and frees them when times get better. Keep in mind, that in such times, slavery is not usually considered the evil arrangement that it is thought of today, and was not usually related to race.

Charms and Remedies, and Allegory

Charms and Remedies, and Allegory Summary

In medieval England, medical treatment involved a mixture of pagan folklore, Christian symbolism, and herbal science. People also used incantations to try to change the world around them. This section begins with a charm to prevent or heal a wen, which is a type of cyst on the scalp. Next there is a sort of prayer to keep the speaker's cattle from being stolen, pleading for the safety of the cattle, and asking for the downfall of anyone who might rob him. The third charm in this section is a magic spell to ward off a swarm of bees while chanting and throwing dirt at them.

After the charms are several selections from "Bald's Leechbook," an ancient medical text. These are complicated recipes for remedies for a number of illnesses, and the remedies range from possibly helpful to preposterous and downright dangerous suggestions. There are suggestions for dealing with shingles, impotence, too much sex drive, bloody wounds, hair loss, too much hair, liver disease, headache, women's chatter, elves, goblins, and women who have had sex with the Devil. There are recommendations for the appropriate times for blood-letting, as well as directions for treating wounds accidentally inflicted by cutting too deep when blood-letting. Some treatments seem like complicated witchcraft, but also heavily involve Christian clergy and rites. There is even a suggestion to rub horse dung into an open wound. The stones found in the gizzard of a swallow are seen as especially powerful, and capable of healing most conditions, as well as useful for warding off any mythical creatures.

The "Allegory" section highlights three examples of the popular literary trend of the poem about an allegorical animal. The first selection contains two portions of the poem "The Phoenix," which celebrates the Christian idea of a cleansing of sin, and returning to life after death. The first portion describes the beautiful plateau, which is basically paradise, where the Phoenix resides. The second portion tells how, at noon, he build his nest out of every type of plant, and at nightfall, he bursts into flame, burning up the nest with himself. After the ashes cool, there is a baby bird left, which quickly grows into an adult Phoenix.

The other two allegories are part of a set of three. One is a heavy-handed poem about "The Panther," who is the most generous, meek, and friendly of all animals, and hates only the dragon. The Panther's coat contains every bright and vivid color imaginable, and after sleeping for three nights, he emerges from his cave and roars the sweetest song in the world. His breath is so unbelievably fragrant that animals and people come from far and wide just to smell him. It seems that perhaps the author of this poem does not really know what a panther is. The final allegory is a poem about "The Whale," who is the evil villain of the ocean. The Whale pretends to be an island, then waits until sailors have climbed "ashore" and made camp, and then the Whale dives to the depths, drowning the men. Not only that, but he also eats by opening his huge jaws and

breathing out a sweet smell, which tempts all the fish. The fish swim into his mouth, enticed by the fragrance, and then he cruelly snaps his jaws shut.

Charms and Remedies, and Allegory Analysis

The charms and remedies presented here seem like such a strange hodgepodge collection of superstition, medicine, and more than one religion. This reflects how England was invaded by the Anglo-Saxons and later converted to Christianity. Although many of these incantations refer to Christ, there are certainly elements of earth-focused pagan religions, left over from before they were introduced to Christianity. Part of the reason there is such a strange mixture in "Bald's Leechbook" is because the book likely had many authors, being almost a medical anthology itself. As people collected stories of different remedies, they would write them down, even though they came from many different sources. Most modern people are aware of the archaic medical practice of blood-letting or leeching. A physician might place leeches on the body of a patient, and have the leeches suck out the blood, or the physician could just cut a hole in the skin and bleed the patient. This was seen as helping the patient by allowing the sick blood to leave the body, but it actually made them much sicker by depleting the blood supply and exposing the patient to infection. Another popular idea was that disease was caused by breathing poisonous or infected air, especially in the late summer. Although this idea is now known to be false, it does make more sense than blood-letting, since many disease-causing agents are airborne, as are mosquitoes and other biting insects.

An allegory is a fictional work in which the main characters and elements clearly symbolize certain things. Sometimes the storyteller explains the meaning of the allegory, while other times, the symbolism is obvious enough that the reader can guess. "The Phoenix" does not state exactly what it represents, but the Phoenix has always been an ancient symbol of destruction and rebirth. The other two allegories are more explicit, explaining the meaning to the reader. "The Panther" represents Jesus Christ, who sleeps for three nights under the earth, before emerging alive on the third day. The sweet breath of the Panther is the Gospel being preached to all people. It is easy to guess that "The Whale" represents the Devil, who tricks men and traps them with sin. Sometimes men might settle in for the night, until Satan suddenly pulls them down to Hell. His sweet Whale-breath is seductive, fooling the fish, who also represent people, into swimming right into his jaws. This poem causes the reader to contemplate what medieval England must have smelled like if whales were thought of as having delightful-smelling mouths.

Sermon, and Destiny

Sermon, and Destiny Summary

The "Sermon" section contains "The Sermon of the Wolf to the English," an inflammatory sermon by Bishop Wulfstan, warning the English people that they had better repent of their sinful ways, or times will get even worse. Wulfstan tells his congregation that they are all sinners, and that they have brought the current bad times upon themselves by their actions. Wulfstan lists some of the sinful activities which seem to be everywhere, such as betraying one's lord, betraying family members and selling them into slavery, lying, perjury, and deception. Other sins include buying sex slaves and abusing them, committing incest, paying off Vikings or acting like Vikings, despising the Church, and worst of all, acting like holiness and righteousness are stupid, so that people sin just to go along with the crowd. Wulfstan points out that even the pagans are more devout with their religion than the English Christians. Wulfstan cites the many terrible problems besetting England, including famine, disease, taxes, slavery, poverty, Viking invasion, anarchy, depression, and the decline of the Church. He warns the people that if they do not change their ways soon, times will get even worse, and mentions the example of the Britons as a people who were wiped out by God as punishment for their sins.

The final section in this anthology examines medieval ideas about destiny, with a poem entitled, "The Fortunes of Men." The poet describes happy parents taking care of their new baby, and points out that they have no idea what will happen in the baby's life. The poet goes on to list a variety of ways in which the baby might die young, whether hanging on a gallows, or falling from a tree, or fighting in a war, or drunkenly picking a fight in a bar. The poet suggests that some might be blind or crippled, and might choose to be happy or curse God, depending on their attitude. One lucky man lives a pious life, and lives to old age. After such a negative beginning, the poet still provides hope, describing different talents that might be exhibited by the babies. They might be excellent hunters, skilled musicians, entertaining poets, dangerous swordsmen, intelligent scribes, lucky gamblers, strong wrestlers, or creators of fine jewelry for a king. Rather than focusing on the danger lurking in the world, and the fact that all people die, the poet dwells on the boundless potential of each soul. The poet happily ends by praising God for his understanding of fate and destiny, and for mapping out a life path for every man.

Sermon, and Destiny Analysis

"The Wolf" is the pen name of Bishop Wulfstan. This seems appropriate, considering the frightening, wrathful nature of his famous sermon, like a dangerous wolf. His sermon may seem drastic, but considering the political atmosphere of the time, it made sense. Because of repeated invasions by the Vikings, as well as several years of bad weather, England is in a state of anarchy and poverty, and the English have little to be proud of

as well as little hope for the future. It is interesting to see how much this sermon has in common with the hellfire-and-brimstone sermons of many centuries later, such as Jonathan Edwards's sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

Both the sermon and the poem about destiny offer varied details about everyday life in medieval England, whether by listing grievances, or by discussing possible life-paths. Fate is a popular idea in Germanic mythology and so entrenched in the common consciousness, that it was incorporated into English Christianity. Rather than seeing Fate or Destiny as a rival to God, or as something controlling God, it is seen instead as the path of God's will, a divine plan for each person's life. Ideas like this, of each person being born to a preordained Fate, make sense in the context of king, lords, and retainers, since most people had to follow the path chosen for them by their parents or by the circumstances of their birth. In today's society, where a person might have a life that is very different from that of their parents, people might not believe so strongly in Fate. On the other hand, some might see Fate as intervening and allowing them to live a life that is outstanding rather than ordinary.

Characters

Beowulf, King of the Geatsappears in Epic: Beowulf

Beowulf is one of the best-known fictional characters in English literature, remaining well-known throughout the ages. Beowulf is the ultimate Germanic hero, with his loyalty and respect toward the king, his unstinting bravery, and his immense fortitude and strength. He could be compared to Superman. Beowulf has superhuman strength and the ability to hold his breath for an entire day. A brash young man, he brags about his prowess in battle, as a matter of personal honor, and he is willing to go to great lengths to back up his boasts. Beowulf is capable of wielding weapons forged by giants, and he is not afraid to fight monsters, even when he knows that he is likely to die. Not only that, but he insists on fighting them with no help from others, and he prefers to do it barehanded. Later in his life, Beowulf becomes King of the Geats, and he is loved by his people as a kind, loving, and wise ruler. He puts the protection of his people before his own safety, and decides to fight the dragon, although he is a very old man by this point. Beowulf is not afraid of death, but feels that it is important that he die honorably like a warrior. When Beowulf slays the dragon, he also receives a fatal bite to the neck. He asks to look upon the dragon's treasure, since that is the cause of the fight.

King Alfred of Englandappears in The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Exploration, Example and Exhortat

Alfred is one of England's most beloved kings. He is the youngest of three sons, but from an early age, demonstrates that he is the most noble, handsome, kind, and intelligent of his brothers. Although he cannot not read until he is twelve years old, Alfred loves learning from an early age, and continues studying, translating, and writing throughout his life, even when he has kingly duties. As king, he works to reform education in England, encouraging schools to teach Latin to children of commoners, and translating Latin texts into English, so that people can use them. In the process, Alfred has to create a system for writing such prose in the vernacular English, because up to that point it has primarily been a spoken language, only written down for poetry or business notations. Before he becomes king, Alfred serves and fights alongside his brother King Ethelred. The two agree to take care of each other's children in the future. Alfred fights valiantly, and it is apparent that he and Ethelred are not competitive about the throne or about the wealth associated with it. Alfred staunchly defends the kingdom against Viking invaders and is a devout Christian, championing the cause of the Church. Alfred has two sons and three daughters.

Ohthere of Norwayappears in Exploration, Beowulf

Ohthere is a man of Norway, who decides that he wants to find out what lies to the north. He describes encounters with the people there and how they hunt walrus and whales.

Hrothgar, King of the Danesappears in Beowulf

Hrothgar is the king of the Danes, and lives in a wonderful hall called Heorot. Hrothgar has trouble keeping his retainers when Grendel is ravaging the countryside.

Grendelappears in Beowulf

Grendel is a hideous monster, descended from the Biblical character Cain. Grendel kills and eats many people, before Beowulf tears off his arm.

Caedmonappears in The Kingdom of God, Christian Poems

Caedmon is a humble and shy cowherd, who is inspired one night by a vision, and wakes up reciting a beautiful poem. He is one of the first to apply the Germanic poetry style to Christian ideas.

St. Cuthbertappears in The Kingdom of God, Greetings in Christ

Cuthbert is the patron saint of Northumbria. He is revered as a very holy monk, and miraculously heals people before and after his death.

Bishop Wulframappears in Sermon

Bishop Wulfram is the Archbishop of York, and writes many sermons, criticizing the sinful activities he sees around him. His pen name is "The Wolf."

Bedeappears in The Kingdom of God, Christian Poems

Bede, like Alfred, is both a character and an author of this anthology. Bede is a monk who writes many biblical commentaries, as well as lovely poems throughout his life. He spends most of his life in a monastery.

Grendel's Motherappears in Beowulf

Grendel's mother is a hideous monster like Grendel, and when she sees what Beowulf has done to her son, she shows up to get revenge. Beowulf has to follow her to her underwater home, which is guarded by sea-monsters.

Saint Edmundappears in Example and Exhortation

King Edmund is faced with a choice of paying off the Viking invaders or dying along with his people. Edmund chooses to die like a Christian martyr, calling on the name of Christ as his body is filled with arrows. After he is beheaded, a wolf miraculously watches over his head until his followers can find it and bury it with his body.

Objects/Places

The Cross of Christappears in Christian Poems

In "The Dream of the Rood," the Cross of Christ is seen as a self-aware entity, who hates that it must allow its Lord to be crucified upon it. Later, the Cross is exalted and gains powers of healing.

The Germanic Heroic Codeappears in Heroic Poems, Beowulf

The Germanic Heroic Code emphasized values of physical and moral fortitude, loyalty toward one's kin and lord, and defending a family's honor through the blood feud. This code is exemplified in many ancient writings.

Heorotappears in Beowulf

Heorot is the magnificent hall occupied by King Hrothgar. The spendor of Heorot is marred by Grendel's attacks.

Viking Invasionsappears in Many Sections

Britain is just a short distance from continental Europe, and so it is easy for the seafaring Vikings to invade often, destroying, and plundering England. Often they would save time by offering to go away if the king would pay them enough money.

Estoniaappears in Exploration

Wulfstan travels to Estonia, and reports that there are many cities with kings. Both mead and honey are very popular there. He also tells how the Estonians race their horses to determine who will inherit a dead man's property.

Bald's Leechbookappears in Charms and Remedies

Bald's Leechbook is an old medical textbook from the medieval era, originally owned by someone named Bald. The Leechbook combines science, witchcraft, and folklore, suggesting that it is written by many authors contributing at different times.

Northumbriaappears in The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, The Kingdom of God, Greetings in

Northumbria is a former kingdom of the Angles, in what is now England and Scotland. There are reports of dragons being seen there in the middle ages, but these are probably not true.

Christianityappears in Most Sections

When the Anglo-Saxons first arrive in England, they practice European pagan religions, until Christianity is introduced by Augustine, and King Edwin decides that the nation should convert to Christianity. In the writings in this book, there is a mixture of references to both religions.

Ashdownappears in The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Example and Exhortation

In the Battle of Ashdown, or "Ash's Hill," Alfred and his brother, King Ethelred, defeat the Danish army. This is a significant victory and they believe that God grants it to them miraculously because of the king's prayers.

The Battle of Maldonappears in Heroic Poems

At the battle of Maldon, King Byrhtnoth tries to protect the English from Offa and his advancing horde of Vikings. After the king's death, his retainers renew the fight for his honor.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicleappears in The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is a yearly record of the major events for that year. It includes information about military engagements, deaths, signs in the heavens, and weather, among other things.

Themes

The Integration of Christianity into Anglo-Saxon Society

The Anglo-Saxons are descended from the Germanic peoples, and when they come to the British Isles, they bring with them pagan and polytheistic religions. This creates a pantheon of gods similar to the old Norse gods, where Woden or Odin is viewed as the leader of the gods. When Augustine brings Christianity to England in 597 A.D., thousands of people convert and are baptized, but they do not entirely let go of their old religious traditions. When Christianity comes to Northumbria, King Edwin discusses the matter with his counselors, who all urge him to convert the nation. The radical nature of this change can be seen in the behavior of the pagan High Priest, who is the first to urge conversion on the king. "Here it was that the High Priest, inspired by the true God, desecrated and destroyed the altars that he himself had dedicated." (Section 5: The Kingdom of God, 19. King Edwin's Council, p. 160)

Since the English were fond of their old gods, they found ways to incorporate the most important elements of their religions and culture, into this new Christianity. The Pope in fact urges Christian missionaries to allow the English to interpret Bible stories in the context of the English culture, knowing that the stories will then be more touching and believable to the English. One example of the way in which Christianity isinterpreted as a Germanic folk tale is the poem "The Dream of the Rood," which portrays Christ as a heroic warrior, resting after battle, but planning to rise and avenge his own death. Some lines sound as though they could have come from Beowulf, such as:

"They laid Him down, limb-weary; they stood at the corpse's head,

They beheld there the Lord of Heaven; and there he rested for a while,

worn-out after battle."

(Section 6: Christian Poems, 31. The Dream of the Rood, p. 202)

The Cross is portrayed as a sentient retainer to its Lord or thane, and the English readily identify with the Cross, which is torn by its loyalty to its Lord. The majority of entries in this anthology refer to Christianity in some way, and several, such as the charms and remedies, are quite obvious in their use of witchcraft and call upon on pagan gods. This indicates that most people enjoy their religious heritage, and do not necessarily see it as incompatible with Christianity. In fact, this ambivalence is considered a major problem by their preachers such as Archbishop Wulfstan who warn that they could be punished for such heresy.

The Germanic Heroic Code

The Anglo-Saxons highly esteem what Kevin Crossley-Holland, the editor of this anthology, calls the Germanic Heroic Code. There are several key virtues in this code, including the sacred relationship between a lord and his retainers, loyalty toward one's kinsmen, physical courage, moral fortitude, and maintaining honor through the blood feud. This code is exemplified in the heroic poems, and the heroic epic poem "Beowulf." Hints of its influence can also be found in some Christian writings of the era. For example, in the poem "The Battle of Maldon," King Byrhtnoth is fighting in the name of Christ against the heathen army, and yet the focus is more on who is the bravest fighter in the battle, than on the religion they are fighting for. Their almost suicidal desire to show courage can be seen in the passage:

"Thus the brave men stood firm in battle,

each sought eagerly to be the first in

with his spear, winning the life and weapons

of a doomed warrior; . . ."

(Section 1: Heroic Poems, 4. The Battle of Maldon, p. 14)

The soldiers are desperate to show their courage, because their lord, Byrhtnoth, has just died in battle, and they want to avenge his death, even if they die too. This shows how important the bond between a lord and his retainers was. This relationship seemed to occupy the same place in the medieval consciousness, that today is occupied by ideas about romantic love.

In later centuries, the English people's morale is low after enduring many bad harvests and Viking invasions. The Archbishop Wulfram, in his sermon to the English people, warns them of God's wrath which will come upon them for their sins. Among other wicked practices, he points out that, "It is the greatest betrayal in all the world that a man should betray his lord to death or drive him into exile while he lives; and both have happened in this land." (Section 11: Sermon, 49. The Sermon of the Wolf to the English, p. 296.)

The blood feud is a tradition whereby the family and friends of a person who is murdered would go and kill the person who committed the crime. While this could possibly lead to escalating slaughter, this is sometimes abated by the used of a "wergild," which is a large quantity of money or wealth, assumed to have the same value as the person who is killed. The wergild is referred to in several different passages in the anthology. Beowulf prefers going after blood in his feuds, but he respects the tradition. In "Beowulf," a wergild is paid to the family of a retainer slain by Grendel, because the king takes care of his people.

Life in Medieval Times

Much of the poetry in this anthology is quite beautiful or moving, but it is the prose that gives a glimpse of what life was like in medieval England. Contracts show what the role of marriage was in their society, and what was the status of slaves, as well as describing the English countryside as seen through the eyes of someone who only travels on foot. In "An Estate Memorandum: Duties and Perquisites," from the section of "Charters, Tracts and Wills," the writer details all different kinds of jobs around an estate, describing food allotments, work schedules, and comments on how strictly such regulations are enforced. This shows how an estate is like a small commune, with each person depending on the people around them for resources. Of course, a major difference is that the lord or thane had power over the estate workers, especially the slaves. In the "Colloquy" in the section on "Example and Exhortation," a ploughman tells his teacher, "It is indeed great drudgery, because I am not free." (Section 7: Example and Exhortation, 36. A Colloquy, p. 221.)

Still, slavery is seen as recognizably better than starving to death, as evidenced in "A Manumission" in the section on legal documents. In this record, a Christian woman has bought a group of people as slaves, in order to save them from starvation during a famine. Now that the famine is over, she frees her slaves.

The everyday demeanor of the common people comes through in the section of riddles, and in the charms and remedies. These writings are filled with everyday objects, with jokes about food, drink, and sex. It is easy to imagine that these examples are just a few of thousands which must have been shared around a fire, as an entertaining way to pass the evening. The disease and poverty with which people had to live is pointed to in the "Charm Against a Wen," which says,

"Wizen like filth on the wall!

Waste away like water in the pail!"

(Section 10: Charms and Remedies, 44. Charm Against a Wen, p. 270)

A wen is a little scalp cyst, and the magic spell to get rid of it makes direct reference to filth and stagnant water. With so much poverty, disease, bad weather, and Viking invasions, it becomes clear that life in medieval England could be a brutal and frightening experience. This can be part of the reason that the people seem to cling to any religion available, whether it is Christianity or simple witchcraft.

Style

Point of View

Although this anthology has many authors, the writings have been selected and compiled by Kevin Crossley-Holland, the editor. At the beginning of each section, Crossley-Holland addresses the reader, introducing the pieces he has chosen and explaining their literary significance. This is quite helpful, since he helps the modern reader understand the medieval point of view through their stories. In sections concerning heroic poems, Crossley-Holland points out how the poetic imagery can still be moving to a reader today. He gives historical background on the many letters, legal documents, and chronicles, helping keep straight many historical figures and their roles. Since Crossley-Holland is British, he tends to assume that the reader has certain prior knowledge about English history and geography, which can be a bit overwhelming at times for a non-British reader, but this is not a significant obstacle.

Crossley-Holland takes pains to help the reader understand the medieval point of view, with their beliefs in fate, loyalty, duty to kinsmen and lord, and the value of an entertaining riddle. One important aspect of this attitude is the idea that a person's path in life was set from their moment of birth, and that the only thing they could change was whether they lived righteously or wickedly. There is very little class mobility, and usually only catastrophic events can change a person's status drastically. Since people can do little outside their established role, they look forward to enjoying treasure in Heaven, which makes poverty more bearable.

Setting

This anthology has writings from a variety of sources, produced over hundreds of years, so the settings are quite varied. There are real places, like Northumbria, a kingdom which factors prominently in many of the stories, and Estonia, which is explored as an incredibly far-off, wild country to the north. Letters between kings and priests testify to the cold winters suffered by Christian missionaries in Europe, and there are reports of droughts for several years, leaving people hungry and without adequate clothing.

Some settings seem to straddle the line between real and imaginary places, such as Heorot, the hall of King Hrothgar. The story of Beowulf cannot possibly be true in its entirety, yet the story makes reference to real historical people like Ohthere of Norway. There are also confusing accounts of comets and dragons seen over Northumbria, showing that the people are frightened of strange natural phenomena and believe that monsters roamed the land.

In several pieces of allegory or poetry, the poet describes an entirely imaginary setting, such as the realm where the jeweled Cross is bleeding in "The Dream of the Rood." The

most memorable and moving fantasy setting is described in great detail in "The Phoenix." The Phoenix's plain is so far removed from everyday life that:

"In summer and winter alike, orchards

are laden with fruit: the fluttering leaves

will not wither, fire will not scathe them,

until a change afflicts the world entire . . ."

(Section 10: Allegory, 46. The Pheonix, p. 284.)

In keeping with certain Christian themes, the spiritual realm is seen as more important and more delightful than the physical world, however tempting it may be.

Language and Meaning

Throughout the time that the writings in this anthology are created, the English language is still developing, just as it still is today. Old English develops from Germanic languages, and is certainly influenced by the proximity of continental Europe, and the many invasions this invited. Latin is the language of the educated people, since it is spoken in the Church and all over Europe. Although most of these writings are technically written in English in the first place, it is not the same language we speak today, and in fact is scarcely recognizable, let alone understandable. Fortunately, Kevin Crossley-Holland has translated these into modern English, preserving the literary nuances when he can. He tries to reproduce the use of rhyme scheme, metaphor, and alliteration that is popular in some of the oldest poetry. One popular poetic form that he refers to is the kenning, which is a very short riddle, embedded in the text as a metaphor. Saying "the whale's path" instead of "the ocean" is an example of a kenning.

A major historical character, who shows up in many of the writings, is King Alfred who loves learning. Alfred is disappointed at the decline of education in England, and starts a campaign to teach Latin to common schoolchildren. To this end, he has textbooks made in Latin that contain scripts for peasant children and teachers. Alfred also writes down many Christian writings in English, which is groundbreaking because he has to create the English prose format. Up to this point, English has been a language of poetry, conversation, and business notation. However Alfred starts writing down history and Christian ideas. The format of Christian poetry is also greatly enriched by the poetry of Caedmon, who is divinely inspired, and who applies the Germanic poetic format to Christian principles.

Structure

"The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology" contains fifty pieces of literature from the medieval era that are presented in sixteen sections. Each section has a few pages of

introduction, in which the editor and translator, Kevin Crossley-Holland, explains to the reader what this style of writing is, and how it fits into the whole of English literature. He also points out important historical details and describes the literary forms, sometimes including excerpts in the original language to point out a rhyme scheme. Most sections have several examples, although some like "Beowulf," "Sermon," and "Destiny," rely on just one example to represent that literary format.

After a short Introduction to the anthology, Crossley-Holland starts out with five heroic poems, showing the English poetic tradition, as well as discussing the Germanic Heroic Code. He goes on to provide several records of laws being passed, followed by "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," a yearly record detailing major events from each year. These two sections give an impression of the legal situation in England in the middle ages. The role of the exile or traveler is examined in six poetic elegies, as well as two accounts of exploration of the country to the far north. The longest section is "Beowulf," which is one of the oldest epic poems in the English language. Beowulf's story, which portrays him as brave, strong, and righteous, begins with an earlier part in which young Beowulf defeats two monsters. The latter part of the poem tells the story of Beowulf's death fighting a dragon in order to protect his people.

Next, the anthology starts to focus primarily on the spread of Christianity throughout England. Four writings in "The Kingdom of God" and six letters in "Greetings in Christ" show the struggle to win people over to Christ, while trying to deal with the pressures of everyday life. "Christian Poems" and "Example and Exhortation" provide five poems and four examples of prose which are designed to encourage Christians in their faith. A different side of everyday life emerges in thirty-one riddles, a collection of legal records, and examples of folk remedies and magic spells. Finally, Crossley-Holland closes with three allegorical poems to inspire Christians, a sermon, and a poem describing how God plans the life of each person.

Quotes

"Can you hear, pirate, what these people say?
They will pay you a tribute of whistling spears, of deadly darts and proven swords,
Weapons to pay you, pierce, slit
and slay you in the storm of battle."
(Section 1: Heroic Poems, 4. The Battle of Maldon, pg. 12.)

When the wind is asleep and the weather set fair
and the flawless jewel of heaven glows in its holiness,
when the clouds have dispersed and the mighty deeps
lie calm . . .
(Section 10: Allegory, 46. The Pheonix, pg. 284.)

"Now that our prince
is slain, . . .
we must all incite one another
to fight, for as long as we can . . ."
(Section 1: Heroic Poems, 4. The Battle of Maldon, pg. 17.)

Since I did not spare my money as long as hostility was threatening you, I have now with God's help put an end to it with my money.
(Section 2: Laws, 8. Canute's Letter to the People of England, pg. 30.)

May the end be good when God wills!
(Section 2: The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 9. Stamford Bridge and Hastings, pg. 43.)

"Here possessions are fleeting, here friends are fleeting,
here man is fleeting, here kinsman is fleeting,
the whole world becomes a wilderness."
(Section 3: Elegies, 10. The Wanderer, pg. 52.)

"How that time has passed away,
darkened under the shadow of night as if it had never been."
(Section 3: Elegies, 10. The Wanderer, pg. 52.)

. . . the gold a man amasses while still alive
on earth is no use at all to his soul,
full of sins, in the face of God's wrath.
(Section 3: Elegies, 11. The Seafarer, pg. 55.)

Grief goes side by side with those
who suffer longing for a loved one.
(Section 3: Elegies, 12. The Wife's Lament, pg. 57.)

Men easily savage what was never secure,
our song together.
(Section 3: Elegies, 14. Wulf, pg. 59.)

. . . a man who wins renown
will always prosper among any people.
(Section 4: Epic, 18. Beowulf, pg. 74.)

. . . the dark death-shadow
lurked in ambush; he prowled the misty moors
at the dead of night; men do not know
where such hell-whisperers shrithe in their wanderings.
(Section 4: Epic, 18. Beowulf, pg. 78.)

Whoever lives long
on earth, endures the unrest of these times,
will be involved in much good and evil.
(Section 4: Epic, 18. Beowulf, pg. 100.)

The terror she caused,
compared to her son, equaled the terror
an Amazon inspires as opposed to a man . . .
(Section 4: Epic, 18. Beowulf, pg. 106.)

"The days on earth for every one of us
are numbered; he who may should win renown
before his death; that is a warrior's
best memorial when he has departed from this world."
(Section 4: Epic, 18. Beowulf, pg. 108.)

"I fought many battles
when I was young; yet I will fight again,
the old guardian of my people, and achieve
a mighty exploit if the evil dragon dares
confront me, dares come out of the earth-cave!"
(Section 4: Epic, 18. Beowulf, pg. 137.)

Now in the name of Christ I pray, that what you have begun with a good beginning, you may complete with a good end; . . .
(Section 6: Greetings in Christ, 24. From Boniface to Fulrad, Abbot of St. Denis, pg. 182.)

Foxes pillage the chosen vine, the heritage of the Lord has been given to a people not his own; and where there was the praise of God, are now the games of the Gentiles; the holy festivity has been turned to mourning.
(Section 6: Greetings in Christ, 26. From Alcuin to Ethelred, King of Northumbria, pg. 186.)

The princes' superfluity is poverty for the people.
(Section 6: Greetings in Christ, 26. From Alcuin to Ethelred, King of Northumbria, pg. 187.)

Against a woman's chatter: eat a radish at night, while fasting; that day the chatter cannot harm you.
(Section 10: Charms and Remedies, 45. Bald's Leechbook, pg. 276.)

Like a most productive bee, travelling far and wide over the marshes in its quest, he eagerly and unceasingly collected many various flowers of Holy Scripture, with which he densely stored the cells of his mind.
(Section 7: Example and Exhortation, 34. From the Life of King Alfred, pg. 217.)

Only God
know how the years will use the growing child.
(Section 11: Destiny, 50. The Fortunes of Men, pg. 304.)

"O thou bishop, these wretched countrymen are shamefully ill-treated, and I would rather fall in battle, provided that my people may enjoy their native land."
(Section 7: Example and Exhortation, 37. The Passion of St. Edmund, pg. 229,)

Topics for Discussion

What is your favorite writing from this anthology? Why?

What are some examples of the integration of Christianity with European pagan religions? Why are they combined?

Several sections provide a peek at everyday medieval life. What does this tell us about how people lived their lives? What is the most striking difference?

Give some examples of poetic symbolism from the anthology. What do the symbols represent? Do you find this symbolism to be appropriate?

What role did riddles play in medieval society? Write a riddle of your own and see if people can guess what it is.

What effect does the repeated Viking invasions have on England? How did the Angles deal with these invasions?

Give some examples of how the Germanic Heroic Code shows up in some of the writings. Do you agree with this code? Why or why not?

"Bald's Leechbook" contains many folk remedies for ailments. What are some folk remedies you know of? Have you tried them? Did they work?