Beowulf Study Guide

Beowulf by Gareth Hinds

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Contents

Introduction

The Old English poem *Beowulf* follows Beowulf from heroic youth to heroic old age. He saves a neighboring people from a monster, Grendel, eventually becomes the king of his own people, and dies defending them from a dragon. It is a great adventure story, and a deeply philosophical one. Scholars differ over the poem's original purpose and audience, but *Beowulf* probably appealed to a wide audience and garnered a range of responses.

Beowulf survives in one manuscript, which is known as British Library Cotton Vitelhus A. 15. At least one scholar believes the manuscript is the author's original, but most scholars believe it is the last in a succession of copies. *Beowulf* may have been written at any time between circa 675 A.D. and the date of the manuscript, circa 1000 A.D.

No one knows where the manuscript was before it surfaced in the hands of a man named Laurence Nowell in the sixteenth century. An edition of *Beowulf was* published by G. S. Thorkelin in 1815, but for over 100 years study focused on *Beowulf* 'not as poetry, but on what it revealed about the early Germanic tribes and language (philology).

J. R. R. Tolkein's "The Monsters and the Critics" moved study on to the poem as literature. The excavation of the Sutton Hoo ship burial and Tolkein's own popular *Lord of the Rings,* influenced by his lifelong study of *Beowulf,* helped to interest general readers in the poem. Since then translations and adaptations of the poem have increased the poem's audience and recognition. It has influenced modern adventure fantasy and inspired at least two best-sellers, comic books, and even a *BeowulflStar Trek Voyager* cross-over.

In 1939, an important archaeological discovery was made which contributed to the twentieth-century understanding of *Beowulf.* The remains of a ship burial were uncovered at Sutton Hoo, an estate on the estuary of the Deben river in Suffolk, England. Some of the objects in the grave included a sword, shield, and helmet, a harp, and Prankish coins which date approximately to 650-70 A.D.— the presumed date of the action of the epic.

Author Biography

There is no indication of who wrote *Beowulf;* scholars have suggested at least two possible candidates, but neither of these identifications has been generally accepted.

Many dates and places have been suggested for the composition of *Beowulf.* Most of the theories suffer from wishful thinking: scholars connect it to a favorite time and place. It is no use, however, to show where and when it *might* have been written. It must be shown that it could not have been written anywhere else at any other time in order for a theory to be conclusive. Early critics often stressed the antiquity of the poet's material and attempted to break the poem down into a number of older "lays" (see Style section below). Northumbria during the lifetime of the scholar Bede has often been suggested because it was culturally advanced and Bede was the greatest Anglo-Saxon scholar. The kingdom of Mercia during the reign of Offa the Great (756-798) has been suggested, partially because the poet included 31 lines praising Offa's ancestor, also named Offa. Recently a late date has become popular. Kevin Kiernan believes that the existing manuscript may be the author's own copy. This would mean the poem was written very close to 1000 A.D. An early date for Beowulf (675-700) is now usually connected with East Anglia. It has been suggested that the East Anglian royal family considered themselves descended from Wiglaf, who comes to Beowulf's aid during the dragon fight.

The main argument for this early date, however, is based on archaeology. The poem's descriptions of magnificent burials reflect practices of the late sixth and seventh centuries, but this does not mean that the poem was written then. A person witnessing such a burial might describe it accurately fifty years later to a child, who might then repeat the description another fifty years later to the person who would then write it down a century after it happened. Some scholars assume that the poem, celebrating the ancestors of the Vikings, could not have been written after their raids on England began. Others suggest that a mixed Viking Anglo Saxon area or even the reign of the Danish Canute (King of England when the manuscript was written) would have been the most obvious time and place It has also been suggested that the poem might have been written to gain the allegiance of Vikings settled in England to the family of Alfred, since they claimed Scyld as an ancestor. On the other hand, Alfred's family may have added Scyld to their family tree because he and his family were so famous through an already existing *Beowulf.*

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Plot Summary

Narrative in Beowulf

The action of *Beowulf* is not straightforward. The narrator foreshadows actions that will occur later, talking about events that are yet to come. Characters talk about things that have already happened in the poem. Both narrator and characters recall incidents and characters outside the poem's main narrative. These "digressions" (see Style section below) are connected thematically to the main action. Critics once saw the digressions as flaws. The poet, however, was consciously using them to characterize human experience, stressing recurring patterns, and to represent the characters' attempts to understand their situation (see Themes section below).

The Kings of the Danes and the Coming of Grendel

Scyld was found by the Danes as a small boy in a boat washed ashore. The Danes at this time were without a leader and oppressed by neighboring countries. Scyld grew to be a great warrior king and made the Danes a powerful nation. Dying, he ordered the Danes to send him back in a ship to the sea from which he came. They placed him in a ship surrounded by treasures and pushed it out to sea - and "no one knows who received that freight." Scyld's son, Beowulf Scylding, becomes king in his turn. Next, his son Healfdene takes the throne, and then Healfdene's son, Hrothgar, succeeds him. Hrothgar builds a great hall, Heorot, to entertain and reward his people. There are festivities at its opening, but the music and laughter enrage Grendel, a human monster living underwater nearby. That night Grendel breaks into Heorot, slaughters and eats thirty of Hrothgar's men (the Mng's warriors would normally sleep in the hall). This happens again the next night. After that, "it was easy to find him who sought rest somewhere else."

Grendel haunts the hall by night for twelve years. The Danes despair of ridding themselves of him. They can neither defeat him nor come to terms with him.

Beowulf Comes to the Kingdom of Hrothgar

Danish sailors bring news of Grendel to King Hygelac of the Geats whose nephew (also named Beowulf, like King Hrothgar's father Beowulf Scylding) has a growing reputation for strength and monster-killing. Beowulf, supported by the wisest of his people, resolves to go to Hrothgar's aid and sets off by ship with fourteen companions. They land in Denmark and are met and questioned by a coast guard who, impressed with Beowulf, sends them to Heorot. Hrothgar receives them and accepts Beowulf's offer of help. Hrothgar knew Beowulf as a child, and interprets Beowulf's arrival to his court as an act of gratitude. He had sheltered Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, when he was an exile and made peace for him with his powerful enemies.

Unferth, an official of the court, attempts to discredit Beowulf with the story of a swimming match Beowulf had as a boy with another boy, Breca. Beowulf exonerates himself with his version of the swimming match. Wealtheow, Hrothgar's queen, welcomes Beowulf. The young man tells her that he would lay down his life to defeat Grendel. She thanks God for his resolve.

Beowulf's Fight with Grendel

Hrothgar gives Beowulf and his companions the duty of guarding Heorot that night. The young man decides to face Grendel without weapons since Grendel does not use them. He tells those around him that the outcome of the fight is in the hands of God. The Danes leave the hall, Beowulf and his companions bed down for the night. When darkness falls, Grendel comes stalking across the empty moors. Intent on slaughter and food, he has no idea what is waiting for him in the hall. He bursts open Heorot's heavy iron-bound doors with the touch of his hand and rushes in, grabs one of the sleeping Geats, eats him, greedily gulping down the blood, and then grabs Beowulf. Beowulf has had a moment to orient himself, however, and wrestles with Grendel. Grendel is taken aback by his strength and tries to get away, but cannot. They struggle, Beowulf refusing to break his grip. Beowulf's companions try to wound Grendel, only to find he is impervious to their weapons. In the end, Grendel manages to pull away from Beowulf, leaving his arm in the hero's grasp. He flees, bleeding, to his lair.

The Morning after the Battle

With morning the Danes come to see the huge arm, its nails like steel, and the bloody trail of the dying monster. Some of them follow the trail to the water's edge and come back singing Beowulf praises. One of the king's men compares Beowulf to the great dragon-slayer Sigemund. (In the legends on which the epic the *Nibelungenlied* is based, it is Sigemond's son, Siegfried, who is the dragon-slayer.) Hrothgar thanks God that he has lived to see Grendel stopped. He publicly announces that he will now consider Beowulf his son. Beowulf tells Hrothgar that he wishes the king had seen the fight. He says that he had hoped to kill Grendel outright, but it was not God's will.

Celebrations in Honor of Beowulf's Victory

There is a celebration in honor of Beowulf and his companions. Hrothgar gives him magnificent gifts including a golden banner, sword, and armor. The other Geats are given rich gifts too. Hrothgar gives treasure for the man whom Grendel had eaten. (This probably represents his *wergild* or "wergyld," literally "man-price," the payment made to a man's lord or his family by someone responsible for his death as an indemnity.) A lay, or short narrative poem, of a famous battle is sung as entertainment.

Wealtheow acknowledges Beowulf's great deed, but counsels her husband not to alienate his nephew Hrothulf by adopting Beowulf. She hopes aloud that Hrothulf will remember all she and the king did for him when he was young, and will treat his young

cousins, their sons, well. Wealtheow then gives Beowulf a magnificent golden necklace (worn at that time by both men and women). Wealtheow asks Beowulf to be a good friend to her sons. She ends by saying that in Heorot all the men are loyal to one another and do her will. The original Anglo-Saxon audience knew from existing legends and stories that Hrothulf would later kill his two cousins.

Grendel's Mother Comes for Vengeance and Beowulf Tracks Her to her Lair

The Geats are given new quarters for the night and Danish warriors sleep in the great hall for the first time in many years. While the Danes are sleeping, Grendel's mother comes to avenge her son. She carries off Aeschere, Hrothgar's friend and counselor, a man who had always stood at his side in battle. Beowulf finds Hrothgar broken with grief over the loss of his friend. Hrothgar tells Beowulf everything that the Danes know about the monsters and the wilds where they live. Beowulf offers to track Grendel's mother to her underwater lair, remarking that it is better to perform noble deeds before death, and better to avenge a friend than mourn him too much. Hrothgar, Beowulf and their men ride to the sea where they find Aeshere's head at the edge of the overhanging cliffs. Unferth, now deeply impressed by Beowulf's generous heroism, loans Beowulf his sword. Beowulf asks Hrothgar to take care of his companions and to send Hygelac the treasures he had been given for killing Grendel if he (Beowulf) dies.

Beowulf's Fight with Grendel's Mother

Beowulf enters the water and is seized by Grendel's mother, who drags him to her den, which is dry despite its underwater entrance. Unferth's sword is useless against this monstrous hag. Beowulf wrestles with her. The woman trips him and tries to stab him with her dagger, but the blade is turned away by his chainmail (a mesh tunic of fine interlocked metal rings). He struggles away from her, grabs a great sword hanging on the wall, and strikes off her head. He sees the body of Grendel and cuts off his head too, the sword blade melting in his blood. Carrying Grendel's head and the sword's hilt, Beowulf swims back to the surface.

Beowulf Returns from the Fight in Triumph

Meanwhile, from the cliffs above, the waiting men see blood welling up to the surface of the water. Hrothgar and the Danes assume the worst and make their way sorrowfully back to the hall. Beowulf's companions linger, grieving and forlornly hoping for his return. Beowulf comes to the surface. He and his men return to the hall. He presents Grendel's head and the hilt of the ancient sword to Hrothgar. Beowulf recounts his underwater fight to the court, acknowledging the grace of God. Hrothgar praises Beowulf and counsels him to use his strength wisely. He warns him of the temptations of prosperity which lead to arrogance and avarice. Beowulf returns Unferth's sword. He thanks Hrothgar for his great kindness and promises him that if Hrothgar ever needs

him, he shall come to his aid with a thousand warriors. Beowulf and his companions return to their ship, and Beowulf presents the kindly coast guard with a sword

Beowulf's Return to his Uncle's Court

Beowulf and his companions return home and go immediately to his uncle's hall. Hygelac's young queen, Hygd, is presiding with her husband. Hygelac welcomes his nephew back with great warmth. Beowulf narrates his adventures. In particular he talks about Hrothgar's daughter, Freawaru, who is engaged to Ingeld, a prince whose people are hereditary enemies of the Danes. Beowulf fears the marriage will not end the feud, and that Ingeld will have to decide between his people and his young wife. This was a moving passage for the original audience, since this is exactly what happens in the Ingeld legend. Thus the epic's original listeners are moved by Beowulf's wisdom and prescience in predicting the strife that is to come. Beowulf presents Wealtheow's and Hrothgar's gifts to his uncle and aunt. In return Hygelac gives his nephew a princely estate and his grandfather's sword.

The Treasure and the Dragon

Years pass. Beowulf's uncle and his uncle's son, Heardred, die in battle. Beowulf becomes king of the Geats, and rules well for fifty years. Then a dragon begins to threaten the land. The dragon had been sleeping on a treasure, deposited in a barrow above the sea centuries before by the last despairing survivor of a noble family. A desperate man stumbles upon the treasure and steals a golden cup from it to regain his lord's favor. The dragon, in revenge, terrorizes the countryside, burning Beowulf's hall in the old king's absence. Beowulf decides to fight the dragon. He orders an iron shield made and assembles an escort of twelve warriors plus the thief, brought along as a guide. They arrive on the cliffs above the barrow. Beowulf, feeling his death near, looks back over his life and recounts the tragic history of his family and people. He speaks affectionately of his grandfather and the old man's grief of the Franks, during his uncle's disastrous raid to the lands at the mouth of the Rhine, and Onela, who was responsible for his cousin Heardred's death. Except for an expedition against the Swedes, Beowulf does not engage in any wars during his reign.

Characters

Beowulf Scylding

Son of Scyld, father of Healfdene, grandfather of Hrothgar.

Breca

A boy who has a swimming match with Beowulf. Beowulf admits it was a foolish thing to do. They are separated by a storm at sea. Breca reaches shore in Finland. Beowulf comes ashore after killing nine sea monsters who tried to eat him.

Daegrefn

The champion of the Franks. Beowulf defeats him in single combat before the armies of the Geats and the Franks, crushing him in a bear hug.

Dragon

As late as the sixteenth century, writers assumed that dragons still existed in out-of-the-way places. The dragon in this epic is only an animal-unlike many other dragons in northern legends, it does not speak. Traditionally dragons lived in caves or burial mounds, guarding treasure which they had either found or somehow accumulated. An Anglo-Saxon would probably expect Fort Knox to have a real dragon problem.

Eadgils

Son of Othere, grandson of the Swedish king Ongetheow. He and his brother Eanmund rebelled against then* uncle King Onela. They were sheltered by Heardred and the Geats. Beowulf, to avenge his cousin, supports him in a successful attempt to take the throne.

Eanmund

Son of Othere, grandson of the Swedish king Ongedieow. He and his brother Eadgils rebelled against their uncle King Onela. They were sheltered by Heardred and the Geats.

Ecglaf

Unferth's father.

Ecgtheow

Beowulf's father, married to the unnamed daughter of Hrethel, king of the Geats. It is likely that Ecgtheow was related to the Swedish royal family. This would explain why the Swedish king, Onela, does not dispute Beowulf's control of the Geat kingdom after Beowulf's cousin Heardred dies in battle with the Swedes. Ecgtheow was involved in a feud so violent that only Hrothgar would shelter him. Hrothgar was able to settle the feud.

Freawaru

Hrothgar's daughter, engaged to Ingeld in the hope that this would end the recurring war between the Danes and Ingeld's people, the Heathobards. Beowulf's prediction of what is likely to happen is uncannily like what the legends say did happen. The passage characterizes Beowulf as perceptive and sympathetic.

Grendel

With characters like Hannibal Lector and Eugene Victor Toombs appearing in popular novels, movies, and television series, readers are less likely to dismiss a story whose hero has to defend his society against an immensely strong cannibal like Grendel. Whatever Grendel and his mother may have been in the traditions behind the present poem, in *Beowulf* they are descendants of Cain, the eldest son of Adam and Eve, and the first murderer. Placing Grendel and his mother in a biblical context made them even easier for the original audience to accept. They live in the wilds, cut off from human society. Grendel's attack on the hall is motivated by his hatred for joy and light. The Danes cannot hope to come to terms with Grendel or his mother since they are completely outside of normal human society.

Haethcyn

Second son of Hrethel, he accidentally kills his older brother in an archery accident. Haethcyn is killed in the border warfare between the Geats and the Swedes. Hygelac, his younger brother, leads the relief party which saves the remnants of the Geatish army at the battle of Ravenswood.

Halga Til

Halga the good, Hrothgar's younger brother, father of Hrothulf. He is only a name in the story, as this character does not appear or take part in the action.

Healfdene

Beowulf Scylding's son, the father of Hrothgar.

Heardred

The son of Hygelac and Hygd. Beowulf refuses to take the throne before him and acts as his guardian. Heardred is killed in the fighting which follows his intervention in a power struggle between two branches of the Swedish royal family.

Heorogar

Healfdene's second son.

Herebeald

Hrethel's eldest son, killed by his younger brother Haethcyn in an archery accident.

Heremod

A king of the Danes who reigns before Scyld. Despite his great promise he grows cruel and avaricious, murdering his own supporters. Both Hrothgar and the retainer who first sings Beowulf's praises use him as an example of an evil leader.

Hondscio

Beowulf's companion. He is eaten by Grendel.

Hrethel

Beowulf's maternal grandfather, Hrethel raises Beowulf from the age of seven. He dies of grief after his second son accidentally kills his eldest son. Fighting between the Geats and Swedes begins after Hrethel's death. Beowulf remembers his grandfather with great affection.

Hrothgar

Great-grandson of Scyld, Hrothgar is a successful warrior king. He has built the greatest hall in the world and finds himself unable to defend it or his people from Grendel. Only once does his dignity and patient endurance break down, when he is faced with another monster and the death of his closest friend just when he thought his hall and people

were finally safe. Hrothgar recovers his composure and gives Beowulf a philosophy of life that, while austere and pessimistic, is fitted to the world in which they live. As hinted in the poem, he will be killed by his son-in-law, Ingeld, and Heorot will be burned.

Hygd

Wife of Hygelac, represented as a perfect queen. She offers the throne to Beowulf after her husband's death because her son is too young. It is interesting to note that while Hygd's name means "thought", her husband's means "thoughtless."

Hygelac

Hrethel's youngest son, hero of the battle of Ravenswood. He dies on a raid that is initially successful, but ends with the annihilation of the Geatish forces.

Oktere

Son of Ongentheow. His sons Eadgils and Eanmund unsuccessfully rebel against his brother Onela

Onela

King of the Swedes, son of Ongentheow. His nephews Eadgils and Eanmund unsuccessfully rebel against him.They then seek refuge with Heardred and the Geats. Onela exacts vengeance on the Geats, killing Heardred, but he does not interfere when Beowulf takes the throne. Beowulf helps Eadgils take the Swedish throne and kills Onela in vengeance for his cousin's death.

Ongentheow

King of the Swedes, killed at the battle of Ravenswood.

Scyld

Often called Scyld Scefing, the first king of his line. In other ancient accounts, Scyld is said to have arrived alone in a boat as a small child. One tradition holds that he is the son of the biblical Noah, and was born aboard the ark. Scyld appears in the genealogy of the West Saxon kings.

Unferth

Unferth is characterized as Hrothgar's "thyle," but modern scholars are not exactly sure what this means. In glossaries from the Old English period, the word is defined by the Latin word *rhetor* or *orator.* Unferth may be the king's "press officer," a source of official information about the king and his policies, or he may be a scribe or a sort of jester. He is initially envious of Beowulf's reception at court and his reputation, but later offers him his friendship.

Wealtheow

A princess of the house of the Helmings and the wife of Hrothgar. She is a woman of great dignity, political sense, and status among her husband's people. She addresses Hrothgar like a counselor.

Wiglaf

A young warrior who comes to Beowulf's aid when he fights the dragon. He is a relative of Beowulf, probably on his father's side since his connections are Swedish. His father, Weohstan, fought on the Swedish side during their invasion of the Geats following Heardred's meddling in the internal feuds of the Swedish royal house.

Themes

Fortitude and Wisdom

For narrator and characters, wisdom and fortitude represent an ideal to which every man aspires and every society needs. Physical bravery was most' appreciated when accompanied by understanding and discernment. This discernment was not merely practical, it was supported by a larger spiritual understanding of God and the human condition. This is the point of Hrothgar's "sermon" in lines 1700-82.

The Danish coast guard, for example, (lines 229-300) respects and demonstrates these qualities in his treatment of Beowulf and his men. Beowulf is a fearless master of hand-to-hand combat. He demonstrates discernment in his understanding and treatment of men and women and in his sense of God, Even if his decision to fight the dragon is questionable, the narrator underlines the reasonableness of its basis. Beowulf's uncle Hygelac, on the other hand, while having great courage, lacks wisdom and falls victim to his own folly and the greater military resources of the Franks.

Glory and Treasure

The characters in *Beowulf,* and its original audience, wanted glory, the immortality of good fame, to remain alive in human memory across time and space. Glory in *Beowulf* is usually connected with heroism in battle or with generosity. Treasure was the outward manifestation of glory. Men were anxious to receive gifts of fine weapons, armor, and jewelery - and, much as today's athletes look on their salaries relative to those of other athletes, warriors compared their gifts with those given to others. Such visible wealth advertised a warrior's worth and a people's strength.

Devout Christians, however, would have tried to seek the glory which God gave to those who did his will, the imperishable treasure laid up in the heaven of the Gospels. They would seek to do their duty, and more than their duty, purely for the love of God and neighbor rather than for earthly fame. Earthly treasure was to be used to do good, not as a display.

The narrator's and the characters' view of glory is a point of contention among critics. Some commentators think that *lofgeornost,* "most desirous of praise," the poem's last word, which is applied to Beowulf, as well as Beowulf's own words to Hrothgar "Let him who can, gain good repute before death - that it is the finest thing afterwards for the lifeless man" (lines 1384-89) reflect badly on Beowulf. It may not be so simple.

In the last lines of the poem (3180-82) the qualities for which Beowulf's people praise him are not a warrior's, but those of a kindly friend. He is, they say, "of all the kings of the world, the gentlest of men, the kindest and gentlest to his people, the most eager for glory." Because of the qualities the Geats link with Beowulf's eagerness for glory and fame, some readers believe that *lofgeornost* is specifically divine and not human.

Wyrd (fate) and Providence

In lines 1055-58 the narrator says Grendel would have killed more men If he could "except God in his wisdom and the man's (Beowulf's) courageous spirit had withstood that wyrd and him. The lord ruled all the human race as he still does."

Both the narrator and individual characters talk about both God's providence and a concept the Anglo-Saxons called *wyrd.* Providence is the will of God moving in the affairs of men. It means that there is a plan and meaning behind what happens. It does not mean that men are coerced by God. Their wills are their own, but the ability to carry out their intentions is given by God.

Wyrd is usually translated as "fate." Many critics have assumed that it means a blind force which predetermines the outcome of everything. There are one or two places in the poem where this may be its meaning. In others it is a word for "death". In most cases *wyrd* appears to mean the normal or expected pattern of cause and effect.

Loyalty, Vengeance, and Feud

Loyalty is one of the greatest virtues in the world depicted in *Beowulf.* It is the glue holding Anglo-Saxon Society together, but it brought with it the darker duties of vengeance and feud.

Today injustice and victimization are often presented as lesser evils than "taking the law into your own hands," but in Anglo-Saxon society order was maintained by just that, the concept that all free men had a duty to see justice done. It was a duty to punish the murderer of family, friends, lord, or servant. One deposed West Saxon king was killed by a swineherd in retribution for the king's murder of his lord. It was possible to accept one's guilt and pay compensation, the *wergild,* or "man-price." The guilty person's family or lord had a duty to see that it was paid. Christians were encouraged to offer and accept these fines, but no one was forced to. In some circumstances it was considered dishonorable to accept - if the killing was generally considered justified, for example.

Feuds were often the result of tit-for-tat vengeance. The feud is a constant unspoken theme in *Beowulf* since Anglo-Saxons understood conflict generally in terms of the feud. In *Beowulf* Grendel is said to be feuding with God and with the Danes. To stress Grendel's alienation from human society the poet writes that the Danes could not expect a "wergild" from him (lines 154- 58). When Grendel is killed, his mother comes to avenge his death. Hrethel, Beowulf's grandfather, grieves bitterly because he cannot seek vengeance for his eldest son's accidental death. The presentation of the wars between the Geats and Swedes stress elements which recall the feud, particularly the killing of kings.

Evil and the Monsters

The monsters in *Beowulf* are thought by some to represent the evil of human suffering caused by natural disasters. This is not an entirely adequate explanation. Grendel and his mother are essentially human even if they are monstrous. Although it does not excuse them, each monster's predatory activities are motivated first by human actions. Grendel's envy is aroused by the sounds of human joy. The dragon is only following its nature when it enters the open barrow and nests on the hidden treasure. The dragon is disturbed by a thief who was himself driven by necessity.

Hrothgar locates evil within man himself. In lines 1700-82 he sums up all that can go wrong when a warrior forgets that God is the source of everything that he has and is. Beginning with the example of Heremod, a Danish king turned tyrant, Hrothgar asks the young Beowulf to remember the source of his strength and to be wary of the greed and hunger for power that destroys the generosity that binds society together. Finally he begs him to recall that good fortune and life itself are transitory; sickness, the sea, the sword, or old age will eventually take his strength and life. Beowulf takes Hrothgar's word to heart. He refuses to accept the kingship of his people until there is no other choice. He dies thanking God that he was able to win a treasure that will be of use to his people.

Style

Narrative Voice

Beowulf has an omniscient ("all-knowing") narrator. The narrative voice comments on the character's actions, and knows and is able to report on what they think. The narrator is aware of things□ for example, the curse on the dragon's treasure (lines 3066-75)□that are not known to the epic's characters. Beowulf shares this omniscient narration with other epics, such as the *Iliad,* the *Odyssey,* and the *Aeneid,* but remains subtly different. The narrator of *Beowulf* makes an explicit connection with the audience, acknowledging a shared background of cultural knowledge, in the opening lines of the poem: *"We* have heard of the thriving of the throne of Denmark" (emphasis added). The narrator's voice is also intimately connected with those of the characters. Both use narratives in the same way, to point a moral or to project future events.

Characterization

The poet used several methods to create character. The narrator describes characters. The poet uses direct speech, a popular method in Germanic poetry to develop character. Characters define each other, as when the coast guard (lines 237-57) or Wulfgar (lines 336-70) speak of their impressions of Beowulf and his men. More striking is the poet's careful development of characters through their own speeches. The voices of the individual characters are just that, the voices of individuals. Beowulf's speeches could not be confused with Hrothgar's.

Alliterative Verse

Old English poetry is different from that of most English verse written since the Norman Conquest. It is based on a pattern of stressed syllables linked by alliteration (the repetition of identical initial consonant sounds or any vowel sounds appearing close together) across a line of verse divided by a distinct pause in the middle.

Old English Verse follows these basic rules:

1. The basic unit is the half line. Each half line has two stressed syllables and up to six unstressed syllables.

2. In a full line the two half lines are divided by a pause (called a caesura). They are joined by alliteration, the repetition of the initial consonants or vowels of stressed syllables, as:

Anna angry, Arthur bold

Two or three (never all four) stressed syllables alliterate with one another. They may be the first and/or the second and the third. The third stressed syllable must alliterate. The fourth stressed syllable does not.

Episodes and Digressions

One of the most characteristic features *of Beowulf* is the use of shorter narratives embedded in the main action of the poem. They are not part of the main narrative, but they can be part of its past or present. These narratives can be divided into two types, episodes and digressions. An episode is a narrative which is complete in itself, but merged one way or another into the main narrative. An example is the Finnsburg Tale (lines 1063-1159), which is sung during the celebration after Beowulf kills Grendel's mother. A digression is much shorter, allusive rather than entire and complete, and it breaks the flow of the main narrative. Episodes and digressions often illustrate good or bad conduct or suggest to the audience a particular way of looking at the main action.

From Lay to Epic

Except for *Beowulf,* existing secular narrative poetry in Old English, like "The Battle of Maldon," "The Battle of Brunnanburh," and the "Finnsburg Fragment" are all lays, or fairly short narratives telling the story of one event. Only the "Waldhere Fragment" (sixty-three remaining lines) may have been part of a poem as long as *Beowulf.* The lay seems to have been the usual native narrative poem. Longer, more complex epic structure appears to have come into existence with the introduction of Christian Latin culture, whose educational system included the *Aeneid* as a school text for study. For this reason, nineteenth-century scholars assumed that *Beowulf was* made up of earlier lays. Scholars now accept that *Beowulf* 'is not a patchwork of older material stitched together, but an original composition using completely recast older material from a variety of sources.

Formulaic Style

Many scholars have attempted to demonstrate that *Beowulf* was composed orally. Whether the poet wrote or spoke, the Beowulf poet did use a traditional stock of words and patterns of composition used by all Anglo-Saxon poets and recognized and appreciated by their audiences.

The poetic formula used can be broken down into 3 parts:

1) Epithets and short modifying formulas

2) Sentence formulas

3) Formulaic elaboration of themes

1. One kind of epithet, the kenning, is a kind of condensed or boiled-down metaphor: *isern-scur* ("iron shower") for a flight of arrows; *hildegicelum* ("battle-icicle") for sword. Another kind of epithet is a literal description similarly reduced to its essentials: *hildebord* ("battle board," a shield). The difference between a kenning and a normal noun compound can be seen by comparing *hilde-mece* ("battle sword") with *hilde-leoma* ("battle light"). There are many different compounds for warriors, weapons and relationships in a heroic culture. By varying the first word of the compound, the poet could make different alliterative patterns. Thus *hilde* can be varied with *beado, guth, wael.* The words formed do not necessarily mean exactly the same thing. *Hilde* means battle, but *wael* means specifically "slaughter." '

2. Sentence formulas provided summaries and transitions. Many are short, half-lines: "I recall all that," line 2427. There are also sentence patterns, for instance those beginning "not at all" or "not only" which then go on to "but," "after," "until," "then." These are often used for ironic understatement, another characteristic of Anglo-Saxon verse. For example: ' *'Not at all* did the personal retainers, the children of princes stand about him in valour, *but* they ran to the woods" (lines 2596-9). Sentence formulas were developed to allow quick shifts of action and to carry the parallels and contrasts which are characteristic of Old English style.

3. Certain themes were addressed through the use of specific words, images, and symbolic objects. These words and ideas had an understood meaning among Anglo-Saxons. Using such words invoked their understood meaning, so that the themes they referred to need not be further elaborated by the poet. A good example is the group of words and images used to develop battle descriptions: the "beasts of battle," the wolf, the raven and the eagle, who, it was understood, traditionally fed on the bodies of those slain.

Historical Context

Introduction

The historical Hygelac died circa 521. The Beowulf manuscript was written about 1000 A.D. In the intervening centuries there was both change and continuity in every area of Anglo-Saxon life. Because we cannot date *Beowulf* with certainty, we cannot draw specific parallels. We do not know if the society the poet described is the one he or she knew firsthand and projected into the past from his or her present, or if it was a poetic reconstruction, pieced together from memories, older Anglo-Saxon and Latin poetry.

The Origins of the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms

The Germanic peoples arrived in Britain over a period of perhaps a century and a half. They did not always arrive in tribal or family groups. They do not seem to have brought their kings with them. Only the Mercian royal family claimed to be descended from a continental king. Certainly groups based on kinship or on loyalty to a military leader - whether one of their own or a Roman-Britain - began to coalesce into proto-kingdoms. The wars between the Geats and the Swedes in *Beowulf* may represent remembered incidents on the continent. At the same time the wars may represent the continual struggle among the kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England.

These areas absorbed one another and Romano-British areas until at the time of the Viking invasions (circa 800) there were three major kingdoms: Mercia, Northumbria, and Wessex, and two smaller ones, Kent and East Angha. When Alfred had fought the Vikings to a standstill circa 890, Wessex alone was left. Through all these centuries government, society, and culture were changing and developing.

Loyalty and Society

Throughout this period, however, some things remained constant. One is the personal loyalty which held society together. The mutual loyalty within the kindred and within the war band was at the heart of Anglo-Saxon social organization. Institutions were centered on individuals. A noble, even a royal household was held together by loyalty to a lord who was generous and worthy of respect. Within this relationship the *beotword'* was important. It was not a boast, as we understand it, but a formal statement of intention.

Learning, Literature and Craftsmanship

Life in Anglo-Saxon England had few of the comforts which we take for granted, but it was not without achievement and personal satisfaction. Anglo-Saxon society appreciated craftsmanship and was open to new ideas and technologies. Within a

century of the arrival of Roman and Irish missionaries among them, the Anglo-Saxons had mastered the manufacture of parchment, paint and ink, glass and masonry. By the eighth century they had several kinds of watermills with relatively elaborate wooden machinery, monumental sculpture, and the potter's wheel. By the eighth century Anglo-Saxons were producing literature in Latin and carrying Christianity to related tribes on mainland Europe. The love of craftsmanship, learning, and literature survived the greatest hardships. When the educational base was nearly wiped out by the Viking raids in the ninth century, Alfred of Wessex, in the middle of his straggles to defend his kingdom, set about reestablishing schools and encouraging scholarship. He encouraged translators, even translating texts himself, so that those who did not know Latin could still have access to "the books most necessary for men to know."

The Germanic immigrants from the continent who became the Anglo-Saxons brought a writing system - runes - with them from the continent. Runes were used for short Inscriptions, occasionally magical, usually merely a statement of who made or who owned an object. Their literature and history were preserved orally using an elaborate poetic technique and vocabulary. Even after the introduction of Latin learning, this poetry held its own and began to be written using the Latin alphabet. Nevertheless, literature was still heard rather than read, even when the text was a written one. The difficulties of book production meant that multiple copies of anything except the most basic religious books were a luxury even in monasteries. Whether literate or illiterate, men and women would rely on hearing books read aloud. Even when reading privately people read aloud. This made them conscious of the rhythm of poetry and even prose.

Beside their love of literature, the Anglo-Saxons had a passion for music. Small harps, called lyres, are even found in warriors graves, and in *Beowulf* at least one warrior is also a poet-singer. Songs and chants were popular among the Anglo-Saxons, and some of the earliest manuscripts of chant still in existence are from Anglo-Saxon England. There are even mentions of large organs in the tenth century.

The Hall

Halls like Hrothgar's mead-hall or drinking hall Heorot, if not so magnificent, were the normal homes of wealthier land-owners. A great deal like the old fashioned wooden barns still seen in parts of the United States, they had great central open fires and beamed roofs. The walls were hung with woven and embroidered hangings. By the tenth century some halls had an upper floor. Some had smaller attached rooms or halls to give the women of the family some privacy.

Women in Anglo-Saxon Society

The hall was in many ways a men's club, but the owner's wife and her eldest daughter would extend hospitably to guests and retainers, offering them a drink from a special cup. The word "Wassail," an early English toast that later came to be applied to a hot

alcoholic brewed drink, derives from *Waes thu hael,* "Be you healthy," which was said as a drink was handed to a guest.

Women were active in dairying and textile production. Wool and linen were spun by hand and woven on upright frames. English woolen cloth and fine embroidery were already prized on the continent by the end of the eighth century. Women, particularly from ruling families, could have considerable power, influence, and education.

Weapons

Every Anglo-Saxon man and woman carried a plain practical knife for work and eating. Men who could be called up for military service would be equipped with a spear and shield. Warriors and nobles would also own a sword. Swords were very expensive, worth as much as the price of a small farm, and armor even more so. They were important possessions often handed down from father to son. To bury them with a man was a great mark of honor and a display of wealth and status.

Critical Overview

If the *Beowulf* manuscript is not the author's autograph (the author's own handwriting), as claimed by Kevin Kiernan, then the first critical appreciation we have of the poem is the manuscript itself. Someone thought enough to copy it down or to have it copied on good vellum by two fairly good scribes - incurring a sizable expense for the year 1000. Another indication of early popularity may be in its apparent influence on another Old English poem, *Andreas,* which survives in a manuscript kept at Exeter Cathedral in Devon since the mid-eleventh century. After that there is no sign of the poem for well over five hundred years.

Laurence Nowell acquired the eleventh-century manuscript in the 1560s and wrote his name and date on the top of the first page. The manuscript eventually appeared in the library of a family named Cotton, but it does not appear in either of the library's two catalogs (1628-29 and 1696). In 1704, Humfrey Wanley, however, recorded it in his published catalog of manuscripts containing Old English. A century later Sharon Turner published illustrative citations and very inaccurate translations. The effective re-discovery of the poem was the work of an Icelander, G. S. Thorkelin, and a Dane, N. S. F. Grundtvig. Thorkelin had a transcription of the poem made and made a second himself. He published his edition in 1815. Grudtvig worked on and published an edition of the poem between 1815 and 186J. Perhaps the greatest single scholar of the poem, Grudtvig proposed many of the now accepted restorations of the text (emendations) and proved that Beowulf's uncle Hygelac was in fact a historical figure. For Grundtvig the poem's greatness lay in its sense of moral purpose. He approached the poem as a unified work of literature in its own terms, anticipating the major topics of modern *Beowulf* criticism.

After Grudtvig, scholars concentrated on clearing up problems of the poem's language and allusions. Others mined the poem as a historical and social document in the hopes of proving their often politically inspired theories about ancient Germanic life. Still others attempted to identify still older poems (lays) within it or to discover a nature myth or allegory in its action. By the opening years of the twentieth century, *Beowulf* was a synonym for undergraduate literary boredom. In 1915, novelist D. H. Lawrence used it in *The Rainbow* as a symbol of aridity and meaninglessness in education. Robert Graves, just back from front-line battle in World War I in 1919, disagreed: *"Beowulf* and *Judith* [another Old English poem] seemed good poems to me. Beowulf lying wrapped in a blanket among his platoon of drunken thanes . . . - all this was closer to most of us at the time than the ... eighteenth century."

It was another returned soldier, J. R. R. Tolkien, who, in writing *"Beowulf:* The Monsters and the Critics," made it impossible to treat the poem simply as a resource for the study of language or anthropology. Some thirty years earlier, W. Ken-had complained that the monsters cheapened the poem. Tolkien insisted that the evil which the monsters represented was a central part of a profound commentary on the human condition. Many critics agree that Tolkien redirected readers of *Beowulf* from what the poem is not to what it is. His powers as a writer, not only in his lecture but also in his use of *Beowulf*

in *The Lord of the Rings,* mean that *Beowulf* came to be accepted not only as literature, but as great literature.

Criticism in the 1930s was dominated by discussions of lyric poetry. Tolkien's elegiac reading of *Beowulf,* although not entirely convincing in its details, was popular among critics, and re-focused critical attention away from the problems of narrative momentum and on to the poem's humanity. Although F. Klaeber had established the poem's essential Christianity over twenty years before, critical tendencies were also now sympathetic to Tolkien's identification of a Christian reading beneath the surface action. The horrors of war, too, had made monstrous and unreasoning evil at the heart of the human situation a compelling subject.

Klaeber saw Beowulf as a real, even Christ-like, hero. Tolkien, like many writers and film makers of the middle of the century, was uncomfortable with "traditional" heroes. Eric Stanley, John Leyerle, and others developed a vision of the man Beowulf flawed by his desire for praise or treasure or even being born before the arrival of Christianity. Leyerle and Halverson, and even more thoroughly Berger and Leicester, tend to relocate the flaw from the character to his society. In its most developed form, this view says that the heroism the characters see as necessary for personal worth and social solidarity are destructive of both. These studies are often selective in their presentation, out of touch with historical reality and full of special pleading. In them Beowulf is, as the saying goes, "damned if he does and damned if he doesn't." Kemp Malone and others rebutted at least the more extreme of these arguments.

Many recent readers have struggled with the assumption that since Beowulf is not Christian the poet must have assumed that he was damned. This does not seem to fit with what actually goes on in the poem. Some critics have flirted with the idea of a slightly heretical or at least theologically confused poet. For much the same reason, Margaret Goldsmith proposed an allegorical reading of the poem. More recently, beginning with a collection of articles edited by Colin Chase in 1981, *Beowulf* criticism has been re-focused on the manuscript itself and the question of dating. In the last fifty years hundreds of articles and books have been written on *Beowulf,* of them perhaps die most influential have been Adnen Bonjour's 1950 *The Digressions in Beowulf,* E. B. Irving's two books *A Reading of Beowulf (1968)* and *Rereading Beowulf* '(1989); and John Nile's *Beowulf: The Poem and its Tradition* (1984).

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

Critical Essay #1

In the following essay, Conrad O'Briain discusses the epic elements of and analyzes the Anglo-Saxon epic techniques the Beowulf poet used in the poem. She also compares the character of Beowulf with other epic heroes and reviews several of the themes of the work, including the role of God and providence and the futile, transitory nature of human existence.

Michael Alexander, a translator of *Beowulf,* begins his entry on the epic in *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* with Milton's "great argument" and "answerable style," that is, an important theme and a style to match, to define epic. He continues, "classically trained critics, expecting art to see life steadily and see it whole, look for an idealized realism and debar folklore and romance elements." Paraphrasing and then quoting the critic Northrup Frye, Alexander accepts that "these stories recapitulate the life of the individual and the race. The note of epic is its objectivity:" 'It is hardly possible to overestimate the importance for western literature of the *Iliad's* demonstration that the fall of an enemy, no less than of a friend or leader, is tragic and not comic."' According to this definition, *Beowulf* somehow combines the elements which define the epic with other elements which seem to come from the world of "Jack the Giant Killer" and "Three Billy Goats Gruff."

Beowulf is, indeed, on one level a very simple story told with great elaboration, A man of great strength, courage, and generosity fights three monsters, two when he is a young man, the third in his old age. Other more complicated human events precede these, others intervene, others will follow, but those more realistic events are all essentially background. To some earlier critics as to W. P. Ken-in *Epic and Romance,* the choice of a folktale main narrative was a serious fault. Monsters lacked the dignity to carry the "great argument" with "answerable style."

But *Beowulf* is a true epic in its breadth of interests and sympathies, even though it is centered on the career of one man killing three monsters. The action and the characters of this apparently simple story have the strength to embody the experience and ideals of the original audience. The monsters participate in evil and disorder as no human, even Heremod, could, but the evil that originates purely within the human heart is not overlooked. Transforming both the fairy tale monsters and the sordid power politics of the background is the objective recognition of human struggle for understanding and order. This is the hallmark of human experience seen through the lens of epic technique. In *Beowulf* the narrator and characters use human experience to understand the human condition and to find the noblest way to live their lives.

In part *Beowulf's* epic inclusiveness comes from the narrator's often short observations, which place the poem in a larger, transcendent context. The narrator periodically reminds the reader of the over-arching providence of God as in lines 1056-58: "except that God in his wisdom and the man's courageous spirit withstood him. The Lord God ruled over all men, as he now yet does." In part die epic breadth comes from the characters, particularly Beowulf and Hrothgar. It is Beowulf's generosity of spirit and

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imaginative sympathy for individuals, which introduce characters like the old man mourning his executed son or the young girl Freawaru facing a political marriage. It is that same generosity of spirit and sympathy which allows him to speak objectively of die "sin and crime on both sides" in the war between the Geats and Swedes {lines 2472-73). Hrothgar, the old king of the Danes, a man who has known triumph and disaster, looks back across his long life and reaches into the workings of the human heart and out into the realities of time and circumstances to understand human sorrow and evil.

The inclusiveness of *Beowulf* reaches backwards and forwards in time. The short narratives embedded in the main narrative (digressions), reflect on the main action as Adrien Bonjour demonstrated in the *Digressions in "Beowulf."* They also create a sense of continuity and universality in the situations the characters face. Character by character, incident by incident, they create the society and the universe in which the great tests of the monsters are set. They define the limits of the heroic heart and heroic society, the ideals which characters like Hrothgar and Beowulf fulfill and in some ways transcend. In these narratives, as in the poem, as Alexander writes in his translation's introduction, the operations of cause and consequence, however mysterious to the characters, whether deriving from natural forces or human will, are inescapable.

Beowulf is a carefully designed poem. A heroic king comes from the sea and is given back to the sea in death. Generations later another heroic king is buried on the cliffs overlooking the sea. Between them vengeance and feud, despair and generosity weave their way through the human life. Every idea, every theme is examined from one angle after another, with all the techniques available to the poet from an Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition rich in irony and understatement. Treasure is the lifeblood of heroic society, fame made tangible, but the poet links it with death and despair. Love of kin motivates Beowulf throughout his life, but in the society around him families destroy themselves. Song and generosity wake a monster. Just when safety seems assured the best and truest friend and counselor dies.

The fineness of the poet's application of technique make the poem a sustained high point in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Although these techniques are specifically Anglo-Saxon, they can be broadly paralleled in all western epics. The poem uses an elaborate vocabulary dictated, at least in part, by the alliteration and stress patterns of Old English verse. This vocabulary, although largely that of everyday speech or prose, includes words which are rarely used outside of poetry. It is quite possible the poet has even coined words for *Beowulf.* The poet presents the material in carefully structured sentences and equally structured verse paragraphs. This structure, with its emphasis on defining things by what they are not, and by understatement, produces pointed juxtapositions of characters, themes and action. It clarifies cause and effect. It produces clear and swift narrative movement. It can be a potent source of irony.

Alexander in the introduction to his translation, draws the reader's attention to the use of constant basic values in *Beowulf.* Sunlight is good, cold is bad. The words do not refer to symbols but to reality. Alexander's observations are a good introduction to the poet's use of description. The poem gains immediacy from simplicity and universality, qualities it shares with the Homeric epic. The poet always seems to find the best and fewest

words to make objects real to us. Landscapes resonate with atmosphere: grey, cold and threatening as in the

description of the wild lands which Grendel haunts (lines 1357-76 and 1408-23), or full of light and life, like the landscape of the creation song (lines 90-98). Sometimes space is defined by the quality of movement through it, like the landscape through which the Danish retainers ride back after tracking Grendel's last bloodstained retreat or Beowulf's two sea voyages (lines 210-24 and 1903-12).

The poem's characters, particularly Beowulf himself, are molded by the needs and aspirations of the poet and audience's society. This is true to some extent of all literature, but particularly of the epic. Beowulf, however, is different from other northern heroes and from the heroes of Greek and Roman epics. He is radically different, not just from Heremod, but from Ing and Scyld and Sigemund. He is unlike Achilles, unlike Odysseus, except in his love of family. He is a hero driven not by personal glory but by affection and duty. He seems largely untouched by the darker emotions which dog Aeneas and betray him into fury at the end of the *Aeneid.* Only the doomed Hector of Homer's *Iliad* seems to be a hero of the same clay. Personal glory is not without meaning to Beowulf. He tells Hrothgar that the best thing men can do is to lay up fame before death (hnesl386-89). He happily accepts treasure and just as happily passes it on to others. Nevertheless, duty and sympathy and generosity are his primary motivations. Despite his great strength, he is a man with limitations, in each of his fights he is seriously challenged and clearly sees himself as relying on the help of God.

Beginning with J. R. R. Tolkien's "The Monsters and the Critics," many critics have stressed a sense of futility in *Beowulf.* This reading arose partially from factors within the poem and partially from factors external to it. These critics had lived through two world wars. Many of them had served as soldiers and known violent, often pointless, death, often the death of friends. They did not cease to admire heroism, but they balanced it against what they knew of war's futility. *Beowulf is* not a pacifist's poem, but these critics have made readers more aware of the problems and fragility of its warrior society and standards. Beowulf and the rest of the characters are never allowed the luxury of assuming that any victory earns more than a respite. The poem is full of a deep sense of the fragility of human institutions and of human hopes. Good men and women can do their best, their fame is assured, but not necessarily their works. The whole action of the poem happens within historical patterns where families and kingdoms rise and fall.

This sense of the transitory nature of human life is part of the critical re-evaluation of the implications of the poem's Christianity. J. D. A. Ogilvy and Donald Baker have suggested that Beowulf's death is like a saint's death, and the parallels, particularly with that of Bede's death are closer than even they suggest. Other critics have explored similar implications in Beowulf's burial. The real tragedy of the poem may lie not in Beowulf's own death, which transcends the tragic through his faith in God, but in his people's despair which leads to the re-burial of the treasure. He gives his life to save them from the dragon, but he cannot save them from themselves. The Geats, even

Wiglaf, refuse more than his dying wish, they refuse to accept Beowulf's view of them, a people worthy of the real treasure of an old king's life.

Source: Helen Conrad O'Briain, for *Epics for Students,* Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In the excerpt that follows, Clark discusses the world of Beowulf *as it is presented by the poem's narrator. Clark explains that the society of the Danes is first shown to be a prosperous and successful one, until Grendel's attacks, after which it becomes paralyzed for twelve years. By contrast, demonstrates Clark, the Geatish society is one of action, and Beowulf, as a member of that society coming to aid the Danes seems to be surrounded by "an aura of good luck and good intentions." In the book's "Afterword," Clark discusses briefly the Sutton Hoo ship burial discovery, and predicts the avenues by which new criticism will likely approach the poem.*

Critical Essay #3

The poem imposes many delays on its central story and includes many explorations not directly related to its main business, but despite an indirect movement and moments of leisure, *Beowulf* creates a powerful impression of a great action moving irresistibly forward, advancing not steadily but abruptly in sudden lurches and turns toward a fearful event. Brief summaries of the "basic story" of *Beowulf* conceal its rich variety of forms and matter; the poem captures a vast historical scope, includes a variety of genres or modes of composition, and reveals a constant interplay of tones. The prologue separates the poem's audience from the story - long ago in another country - then presents the audience with a gratifying account of heroic success, of heroism leading to national success, of the hero as founder of a great dynasty. At the height of Scyld's brilliant career, a kingdom won, an overlordship established, and an heir engendered, the narrator proposes as a universal truth the rule that in every nation the successful aspirant to honor must do praiseworthy deeds. On these words, the narrator announces Scyld's death at the fated time, the prologue closes with his people's grief for the great king's passing.

Scyld earned the narrator's accolade - ... that was a good king! (11) - early in the prologue which ends with the universal truth of mortality and an unanswerable question. Scyld returns to the mystery from which he came after his richly laden funeral ship is launched on the unknowable deep. Still, the succession of fortunate generations of Scyld's line contrasts the mystery and the blunt fact of death with an unfolding story of dynastic prosperity extending for generations until the crowning of the Scyldings' success with the building of Heorot. Mortality presses in on the line of Scyld Scefing and the first celebration at Heorot awakens a monster who seems to embody or to represent the force of chaos and old night. That scene, dramatically reversing the stately tone of the poem's prologue, begins with the monster's anger at the sound of joy in Heorot, then traces that joy to the poet's song celebrating the creation of the world, then leaves the Danish ruling elite living in those joys until the monster, Grendel, begins his raids.

Grendel's first raid turns all the successes of the triumphant line of the Scyldings into horror, pain, and humiliation. After Grendel's second raid, the night after his first, the narrator notices that:

Then it was easy to find the man who got himself a more distant resting place, a bed in a private dwelling, when the hall-thegn's hatred was manifested to him, plainly declared by a sure sign, whoever escaped that enemy kept himself farther away and safer (138-43)

Six full lines remorselessly detail the humiliation of noble warriors among the Danes who, in the face of certain death there, give up sleeping in the royal hall, a kind of mens' lodge, and seek out a more domestic safety. The Danes become double victims, of Grendel's wrath and of the poem's irony; the monster diminishes their manly status; the poem makes that diminishment public and thus real. The audience is drawn toward Grendel, it accepts a certain complicity in calamity to savor the poem's detached irony

at the cost of Danish manliness. Warrior societies in many cultures segregate men and women; apparently the all-male fellowship of such lodges contributes to the aggressive spirit a warring society requires. Grendel's interruption of the regular practice unmans the Danish warrior class, calls their heroic status into question, and damages the means of sustaining their traditional calling and their honor.

As the poem moves from the Danes to the Geats, a series of contrasts in the character and tone of the narrative become apparent. The Danish scene represents a whole society in paralysis, the Geatish a man in action. The Danes meet frequently, consider deeply, risk their immortal souls searching for supernatural help, and lament their losses in an agony of helplessness. Immediately following the report of Grendel's first and second raids, the narrator adds that this calamity persisted for twelve years; that the lord of the Scyldings suffered great sorrows; that songs sadly revealed to the world that Grendel waged cruel war against Hrothgar for many years. The narrator (or those songs) reports that Grendel intended never to make a truce with the Danes. The narrator sums up: Grendel performed "many crimes ... cruel humiliations," many powerful men among the Danes often considered what should be done, and Hrothgar's sorrows burned continually in his heart.

In the Danish setting some forty lines report the unending succession of humiliations and sorrow heaped upon the hapless people and above all their king, but restated among the Geats, the long story of passive suffering and helplessness amounts only to a clause. The Danish complaint ends with Hrothgar's sorrow and inaction:

the wise man was unable to ward off that misery; that distress, that cruel and violent, hateful and long-drawn-out onslaught, that cruel distress, which had fallen upon the people, was too severe.

The scene abruptly moves to the Geats, where the strongest man living on earth, Hygelac's retainer, hears of "Grendles daeda" (195), Grendel's deeds. The strong man at once commands that a ship be readied and announces his intention to visit the famous king of the Danes who has need of men. Between the hero's command, his announcement, and his selection of his companions for the exploit, the Geatish councillors consult the omens and approve his plans even as he leads his picked company to the sea and the ready ship.

The pagan and superstitious practice of consulting omens evokes no negative comment in the poem, though Anglo-Saxon sermons strongly condemned such time-honored observances. From Beowulf's first introduction into the poem to the moment Grendel realizes his impending doom, all signs agree that the hero's victory is certain. The alacrity of the hero's decision, preparations, and setting out bespeaks a self-confidence that seems itself a token of victory. The voyage is swift and easy, which requires strong winds from the right quarter and confirms the favorable omens. The supernatural sign vouchsafed the Geatish councillors and the disposition of nature agree in pointing toward Beowulf's success. The wisdom of the Danes concurs: the coast guard who challenges Beowulf and the Geats at the Danish shore seems to respond to an aura of good luck and good intentions manifested in Beowulf's appearance when he breaks off

his formal challenge to observe that one of the seafarers seems a man of unique qualities and exceptional status and to wish: "may his look, his matchless appearance, never belie him". Given the Danes' dearest wish of the past twelve years, the coast guard must see a resolve to destroy Grendel and the tokens of success in the foreigner at the Danish coast.

Critical Essay #4

In the coming decades, *Beowulf* scholarship will almost surely be deeply influenced by the findings of archaeological research and especially by the excavation at Sutton Hoo. Students of the poem have hardly digested the importance of the original Sutton Hoo excavation of 1939, definitively published in a massive study by Rupert Bruce-Mitford and others (1975-83). Already the new excavations at Sutton Hoo have offered some surprises. While archaeologists extend our knowledge of the material culture of the Anglo-Saxon world, lexicographers are doing the same for the word-hoard of the Anglo-Saxons. *The Dictionary of Old English* project at the University of Toronto has already produced a microfiche concordance of the corpus of Anglo-Saxon texts, an immensely valuable tool for the study of *Beowulf.* The project has published the letters C and D in microfiche and at some point in the twenty-first century we will have a better dictionary of the Old English or Anglo-Saxon language than most of us dreamed possible when the late Angus Cameron began the work.

The study of the poem itself will surely develop in some directions already partially mapped out. The poem's psychological and social realism has already become a topic of critical inquiry that will continue to prosper in an age that can accept or even value mixtures of realism and fantasy. A renewed effort to reconstruct the poem's social and cultural milieu seems likely: reader-response criticism and the new historicism alike will demand a vigorous inquiry into the poem's origins and attempt to discover what the poem meant to its earliest audiences and what the place of poetry was in the Anglo-Saxon world. The poem's idea of the basic social institutions needs a deeper reading against what we know of those institutions in the Anglo-Saxon age. The questions of the poem's date and place of origin will burn strongly for some decades to come. We are likely to find too many rather than too few answers, and the profusion of seemingly contradictory solutions may strengthen the case for the poem's oral transmission and for its susceptibility to at least some reworking even after being committed to parchment.

The post-structuralist new criticisms and formalist approaches to narrative texts will try (and have tried already) their strength with *Beowulf,* The possibility of a deconstructive reading of *Beowulf* may fill some philologists with horror, but such a reading may be illuminating. The concentration of the newer critical schools on narrative will almost surely benefit the study of the greatest poem in English before the *Canterbury Tales.*

Source: George Clark, "The Heroic Age, Ideal, and Challenge," and "Afterword," in *Beowulf,* Twayne Publishers, 1990, pp. 51-54,143^4

Critical Essay #5

In the following excerpt, Bradley discusses the controversy over the dating of Beowulf *and comments on its oral tradition. Bradley notes that the early criticism of Beowulf focused on the work as a source of information regarding early Germanic culture rather than as a poem.*

The date of the poem remains an unsettled problem. A *written* version of it preceding the uniquely surviving MS may safely be postulated, and beyond doubt is the likelihood that a form of the poem was in circulation among poets of the *oral* tradition for some centuries before the known MS version was made. Indeed, the principal motifs of the poem's plot are motifs of widespread folklore, and parts of the story, and the figures of Beowulf and of the monsters, have analogies elsewhere in the ancient literature of North-West Europe. But the story as it survives embodies, unless we have misunderstood it, a strikingly sophisticated and deliberately structured philosophical statement which is surely the construct of one creative mind presiding in literary manner over the traditional material.

Concern with locating the elements of this traditional material in the context of early Germanic culture has characterized the preliminary stages of *Beowulf* criticism; but it is the location of that artistically and didactically sovereign mind in a plausible intellectual and social milieu within the evolving culture of the Anglo-Saxons to which much *Beowulf* scholarship continues to address itself. Though it is conventional to regard the poem as early - first, because of the obvious antiquity of some of the traditional content, then because the relatively clear landmarks of the age of Bede, or of Offa's Mercia, or of Redwald of East Anglia and the Sutton Hoo ship-burial inevitably tempt scholars to take all other bearings from them - the early dating has always had its strenuous opponents. It must indeed be acknowledged that the arguments insisting on a seventh- or eighth-century date remain, after all the discussion, barely more absolute and compelling than arguments placing the poem after the start of the Danish invasions, in the ninth or tenth century, or even as late as the likely date of the unique MS itself, which paleographers place about the year 1000. It is well to bear in mind what the very nature of the oral mode of transmission of poetry makes probable: that the broad narrative of *Beowulf had* served many generations as a vehicle for their current values and tastes long before a version was composed in writing, and that however ancient in origin the narrative may be, however antique some of the elements surviving from earlier stages, the particular re-telling recorded in the Cotton MS may have been shaped to articulate philosophical and literary purposes much more 'modern' than the world of ship-funerals and dragon-tales preserved in its plot. What we can most confidently say of the poem as we have it is that it represents a literary judgment of the late tenth or early eleventh century.

Over generations of critical attention, *Beowulf* has proved its stature as a literary classic - as a major monument to an historic culture and as a visionary statement of issues of abiding relevance to people living in community at any time. The literary appreciation of the poem benefited little from nineteenth-century scholars who quarried it for Germanic antiquities, or subjected it to drastic editorial restoration in quest of a prototype text, or

used it as grist to the mills of anti-clericalism, of nationalism, and of the cult of Aryanism. It fared little better when early twentieth-century critics tested it by standards of classical literary structure and taste, and found it wanting. But what scholars of that period derided as the chimera of a 'literary' *Beowulf* has since been claimed by many to be a substantial reality - though even if there is wide agreement that the surviving version is the creative work of a single poet, and is therefore amenable on that basis to literary critical analysis and judgment, the poem continues to speak differently to different readers. One may do worse than look back for guidance to the pioneering assessment of the Dane, N. F. S. Grundtvig - largely ignored, particularly by English scholars, in his day - who published a Danish translation and a study of the poem in 1820, not long after the first printed edition of the whole text had been made, in 1815, by the Icelander, G. J. Thorkelin, on behalf of his Danish patron.

The language of the poem, Grundtvig says, is of the finest, compared with any other example of the rich corpus of early Germanic poetry. Though the poem's structure, he thought, was not so beautifully coherent as that of Greek epic poetry (but later critics have drawn attention to the differently conceived, but nonetheless distinctive structural principles of *Beowulf,* to the symmetries, parallels and contrasts, large and small, of theme, imagery and diction), the English poem had in his view far more to say. He found it a poem whose liveliness and entertaining qualities enhanced its high ethical integrity. He evidently understood it to speak from deep poetic insight about humanity, not merely about men and women. He identified in it a fundamental religious tone, and saw that the poet desired to represent his hero's struggles as being part of the cosmic contest between good and evil which is a characterizing element in the Christian view of history. He recognized that the monsters represented the powers of darkness staving against the light with which God penetrated the primordial darkness; and he understood the stakes to be the survival and thriving of human community, through which mankind had best hope of realizing the Godward-aspiring part of its flawed human nature. He acknowledged the somber view taken by the poet, who chose no refuge in literary escapism, but compelled his audience to contemplate the sacrifice when heroes lay down their life for their friends. But Grundtvig found final optimism in the poem, an optimism determined not by literary convention but by Christian philosophy: that though the powers of darkness are potent to kill mankind's worthiest champions, God will not let such champions bear witness in vain. In Grundtvig's view, Beowulf *succeeds* in saving the dying life of the community.

Thus, Grundtvig's reading implies, sacrifice of oneself for the life of civilized community, imperfect though it may be, is not an act of vain and self-deluding heroics, but a responsibility which the strong and the gifted may not repudiate, and which is in itself a victory against anarchy and elemental evil; such is the poet's understanding of the testimony of history, and he endorses his view by appeal to divine authority. We may cite St Augustine in his support: 'It is wrong to deny that the aims of human civilization are good, for this is the highest end that mankind of itself can achieve. For, however lowly the goods of the earth, the aim, such as it is, is peace.' {*CG,* Bk.XV, ch.4, pp.419-20).

Such a reading gives full credit to the secular heroic material of the plot, which the poet has evidently drawn from Germanic tradition. But it does not see these elements as bringing with them the heathen implications which no doubt many of them had when first they were coined. They are rather exploited so as to express in terms challengingly meaningful to an audience nurtured on secular heroic narrative poetry the larger philosophy of Christianity - at least as it related to questions of heroic altruism in defense of the common good, and of the virtues of (Christian) civilization, specifically defined in the poem as awareness of the source of good and of happiness, sanctity of familial bonds and the brotherhood of nations, mutuality of respect between ruler and ruled, communality, order, harmony, beauty, peace, the innocent pursuit of happiness, generosity, magnanimity and wisdom.

The prescriptions and warnings of this highly ethical work speak relevantly to any period of AS history one chooses to consider; and they remain a preoccupation of significant literature through the whole English literary tradition.

Source: S A. J. Bradley, *"Beowulf,"* in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry,* translated and edited by S. A. J. Bradley, David Campbell Publishers Ltd, 1982, pp 408-11

Adaptations

After being the preserve of specialists for the first 150 years after its rediscovery, *Beowulf* began to catch the attention of general readers after the second world war. This is partially the result of the popularity of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings.* Partially it is the result of a shift in attitudes concerning the bizarre and the marvelous. For whatever reasons, late twentieth-century audiences are willing to take seriously stories which pivot on human responses to monsters. *Beowulf's* monsters may be terrestrial, but they are essentially the terrors of modern science fiction, and of horror stories even closer to daily life. Many of the fears that *Beowulf* expressed and sublimated for its original audience are those which are similarly expressed and sublimated by the television series *X-Files* or the movie *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* or even *Independence Day.* We may even note that in the *X-Files,* the character Fox Mulder, like Beowulf, draws much of his motivation from his love of his family, a family which has grown to include his partner Dana Scully, just as Beowulf's grew to include Hrothgar, Many of the ideals which we find in *Beowulf and* other Old English and Old Norse heroic poetry have made then-way into the fictional development of Klingon culture in the various *Star Trek* television series and movies.

Star Trek Voyager used a holodeck setting of *Beowulf as a* plot line in the first-season episode "Heroes and Demons."

John Gardiner adapted *Beowulf* as a novel, *Grendel,* published by Knopf in 1972.

Beowulf was adapted as a feature-length animated film, *Grendel, Grendel, Grendel* by independent Australian director and producer Alexander Stitt in 1981. The film is narrated by Peter Ustinov as the voice of Grendel.

In 1982 Kenneth Pickering and Christopher Segal adapted *Beowulf as* a rock musical. The book and music were published as *Beowulf: A Rock Musical,* London: Samuel French, Inc., 1982.

Topics for Further Study

Research the finds of the Sutton Hoo Burial excavated in 1939 and compare the burial and the treasures found to the burials and treasures in *Beowulf.*

Investigate the recent research done on the development of kingship in the seventh and eighth centuries and compare the findings to the presentation of kingship in *Beowulf.*

Read J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings,* particularly the chapters dealing with the Riders of Rohan. How is Beowulf reflected in the work?

Investigate the new Beowulf manuscript project and report on the scientific tests which are used to investigate manuscripts, including infra-red photography and chemical analysis. Information on the project is available on the world wide web at http://www.edu/~kiernan/BL/kportico.htral.

Beowulf's a poem almost exclusively concerned with the upper end of society. Investigate the economic basis of migration-age tribes or early medieval kingdoms.

The society which created *Beowulf* accepted the importance of the desire to be remembered. Investigate how modern psychology views this need.

Metal-working was an important Anglo-Saxon craft. Although they could not achieve the high temperatures used in steel-making until the later middle ages, they had developed techniques to make small quantities of usable steel. Investigate these techniques and the physical properties of iron which make them possible.

Compare and Contrast

Anglo-Saxon period: The pre-electrical world was a world of darkness. People got up and went to bed with the sun. Artificial lighting consisted of firelight and candles or small lamps burning whale or olive oil, or rushes dipped in animal fat. On a clear night in Anglo-Saxon England the sky would have been powdered with stars.

Late twentieth century: Today earth's great urban centers can light up the night. Airplane travelers can see the lights of towns, cities, and interstates. Relatively few stars can be seen

Anglo-Saxon period: The population of Britain in the early Middle Ages was probably under three million people. Land was still being reclaimed for farming, difficult in a country where most of the native trees will readily regrow from stumps. In Anglo-Saxon England wolves still roamed the countryside. The edges of forests were important for game, wood, and food for foraging semi-domesticated animals. Wetlands were important for fish, waterfowl and basketry materials, such as alder, willow, and rushes.

Late twentieth century: Today the population of Britain is over fifty-seven million. Most people live in cities. There is a constant struggle to save woodlands, wetlands, and areas of traditional agriculture.

Anglo-Saxon period: Most Anglo-Saxons lived in largely self-sufficient communities. People grew what they ate, made what they needed, built their homes out of local materials, and traded for goods made locally. Local or traveling smiths made up knives and tools to order. Salt and millstones and luxury goods, like wine, spices, and silk, would be bought at fairs. Items such as swords, and gold and silver jewelery, were less the objects of commerce than of socially meaningful gift exchange.

Late twentieth century: Modern consumers buy nearly everything they use in daily life. Very few subsistence cultures are left. Even food is often bought already prepared. Many, if not most, consumer goods originate hundreds or thousands of miles from where they are sold and used.

Anglo-Saxon period: Most Anglo-Saxons died before the age of forty. Some people lived into their sixties and seventies, but the average age of death for those who lived passed infancy was probably between diirty-five and thirty-eight. Medicine was primitive. Herbal remedies had limited effectiveness. There was no clear idea of how diseases were contracted or how they could be prevented. There were few ways of deadening pain. Many common ailments were fatal because of ineffective treatments. Blood-poisoning and death in childbirth were both frequent.

Late twentieth century: Today people in industrialized nations can expect to live into their seventies and even beyond. Most of the illnesses and conditions which killed Anglo-Saxons are no longer a threat to people with access to basic modern medicine. Improved hygiene, abundant clean water supplies, the ability to preserve food safely,

and greater knowledge about the causes and prevention of communicable illnesses have all contributed to longer and healthier lives.

What Do I Read Next?

The anonymous Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon* was composed close to the time the *Beowulf* manuscript was being transcribed. It recounts the death in 991 A.D of Byrhtnoth, ealdorman (governor) of Essex, and his men while fighting the Vikings. It is filled with the heroic commonplaces of Germanic literature: the courageous and still active old war leader who makes one miscalculation, but dies shoulder to shoulder with his men, the retainers who die one by one standing by their dead lord. Modern readers will see in it formulas of another kind, the voices and characters of the men in the ranks, the career soldier as well as the civilian volunteer. *Maldon* and its characters could easily be transposed to a Hollywood platoon or bomber crew movie.

The anonymous Irish epic *Tain Bo Cualgne (The Cattle Raid of Cooley),* available in a translation by Thomas Kinsella (1969), is unusual in that it is composed in prose with inset short verses. Like *Beowulf* it is difficult to date, the language of the oldest version is probably eighth century although some passages of inset verse may be older. The focus of the story fluctuates between two characters, Queen Maeve of Connacht, who begins the war, and the Ulster hero Cuchulainn. During the period in which the *Tain* and *Beowulf* were written, England and Ireland enjoyed close cultural relations.

Felix's *Life of Guthlac,* translated by Bertram Colgrave (1956), was written in Latin sometime after 714 and before 749 A.D. Guthlac (circa 674-714 A.D.) was an adventurous young Anglo-Saxon nobleman. After successfully leading a war band, he was moved in his early twenties

by "the miserable deaths of kings of his race" to enter a monastery. There he read of the heroism of the "desert fathers," the monks who had gone into the wilderness to be alone with God, and decided that he would attempt to be such a spiritual warrior. He became a hermit in the East Anglian fens, living in an old burial mound, which he held against the onslaughts of demons. Although he was a hermit he was often visited by people seeking spiritual comfort. As well as being a constant friend to his fellow humans, animals trusted him implicitly.

John Gardner's *Grendel,* published in 1972, is an imaginative retelling of *Beowulf* from Grendel's point of view. *Grendel* made the *New York Times* best-seller list.

Tom Holt's "Who's Afraid of Beowulf" (1989) is a fantasy comedy which mixes satire, heroic virtues, and computers. The hero, whose generosity of spirit seems to be based on one strain of critical analysis of Beowulf's character, leads his loyal band and a young woman archaeologist from Long Island to save a world which is superficially utterly alien from his own, yet essentially unchanged.

In the three books of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55), J. R. R. Tolkein's reading and teaching of *Beowulf* shaped the characters, action and society of his famous fantasy. The influence of *Beowulf* is strongest or most obvious in the "Riders of Rohan" who play

a large part in Book 2, *The Two Towers,* and Book 3, *The Return of the King.* Their society and culture is clearly based on the Anglo-Saxon heroic ideal.

Further Study

Alexander, Michael. "Introduction," in *"Beowulf: A Verse Translation,* Penguin Books, 1973.

Alexander offers a detailed introduction to the poem, discussiong the history of the manuscript, the epic tradition, and the characters and plot of the poem.

Alexander, Michael "Epic," in *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms,* edited by Roger Fowler, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987, pp. 73-75.

Alexander provides a short, clear introduction to the western epic with brief, well-integrated extracts from important critical texts

Backhouse, Janet, D. H Turner, and Webster, Leslie. *The Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon Art: 966-1066,* British Museum, 1984

Provides marvelous illustrations of Anglo-Saxon art, fine and applied, covering the period in which the *Beowulf* manuscript was written

Basset, Steven, ed *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms,* Leicester University Press, 1989.

Provides a discussion of the political and social circumstances which may be reflected in *Beowulf*

Benson, L D. "The Originality of *Beowulf,"* in *The Interpretation of Narrative: Theory and Practice, Harvard Studies in English,* Vol. 1, edited by in W Bloomfield, Harvard University Press, 1970, pp. 1-43.

An excellent discussion of the originality of the poem and its the characters.

Bessmger, Jess B and Robert F. Yeager. *Approaches to Teaching "Beowulf,"* Modern Language Association, 1984

Essentially a teacher's guide Includes an excellent bibliography and list of derivative works which may be of use to students

Bonjour, Adrien *The Digressions in "Beowulf,"* Medium Aevum Monographs 5, Basil Blackwell, 1950

Bonjour studies the workings and implications of the "digressions," the short narratives and allusions which are embedded in the main narrative.

Boyle, Leonard "The Nowell Codex and the Poem of *Beowulf,"* in *The Dating of "Beowulf,"* edited by Colin Chase, University of Toronto Press, 1981, pp. 23-32. An

excellent short study of the *Beowulf manuscript.* It challenges Kevin Kiernan's theory that the manuscript is the author's copy.

Bradley, S. S. J., trans. *Anglo-Saxon Poetry,* Everyman Books, 1992.

A good prose translation of the poem with a short and useful beginners' introduction.

Brown, Michelle. *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts,* British Library, 1991.

A good beginners' introduction to the process of making a manuscript It covers the materials used in a manuscript, how the writing was done, how a page and a text were laid out, and finally discusses individual manuscripts made by Anglo-Saxons

Chambers, R. W.' *'Beowulf:" An Introduction to the Study of the Poem,* 3rd Supplement by C. L Wrenn, Cambridge University Press, 1963.

Chambers' book remains one of the most valuable studies of the poem's background. It is a scholarly book, but user-friendly, clearly and even entertainingly written Chase, Colin, ed. *The Dating of "Beowulf,"* University of Toronto Press, 1981.

This collection of essays restarted the controversy over the dating of *Beowulf* and redirected interest back to the manuscript of the poem.

Clark, George *Beowulf,* Twayne Publishers, 1990 A first-class beginners' introduction to the poem. There are chapters on the history of *Beowulf*criticism, the other legends embedded in the poem, the ethics of heroism, the monsters and kingship

Curtius, Ernest *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages,* translated by Willard R Trask, University of Princeton Press, 1973

A study of the ways medieval writers absorbed and used the heritage of Greece and Rome in their writing. It stresses the importance of this process to the formation of the western mind. It pays particular attention to the idea and presentation of the hero.

Engelhardt, George J *"Beowulf* A Study of Dilation," *PMLA,* Vol 70,1955, pp 269-82

Very technical, but an excellent discussion of how the poet organized and developed his material Evans, Angela *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial,* British Museum, 1994

A richly illustrated introduction to the splendid Anglo-Saxon ship burial first excavated in 1939 The objects uncovered and the burial itself have been an important factor in *Beowulf* studies since the poem was quoted by the inquest which sat in 1939 to decide the treasure's legal ownership

Garmonsway, G N, Jacqueline Simpson, and Hilda Ellis Davidson *"Beowulf and its Analogue,* E P Dutton and Co, Inc, 1971.

This is a collection of translations of northern tales similar to the poem and to the oldest forms of the stories and characters which are alluded to or used in *Beowulf* However, the chapter on archaeology is now out of date

Goldsmith, Margaret *The Mode and Meaning of "Beowulf,"* Athlone Press, 1975.

The high-water mark of allegorical interpretations of the poem, Goldsmith's book studies the biblical and theological texts which may have influenced the poet of *Beowulf* leading to the poem's identification as an allegory

Irvmg, E B *A Reading of "Beowulf,"* Yale University Press, 1968

A sober, close reading of the poem of great insight.

Written without pretensions and enviable clarity, there is something in Irving for every reader of the poem from beginner to professional scholar Jack, George. *"Beowulf"; A Student Edition,* Clarendon Press, 1994.

One of the best introductory texts in Old English. There are very full marginal vocabularies and equally extensive footnotes on the text Jack provides an excellent introduction to the poem and its criticism. The bibliography is particularly good

Kerr, W. *Epic and Romance Essays on Medieval Literature,* 2nd edition, Eversley Series, London and New York, 1908

One of the classic discussions of *Beowulf.* J R R Tolkien's "Beowulf The Monster's and the Critics" is in many ways specifically an answer to Kerr

Kiernan, Kevin S "The Eleventh Century Origin of *Beowulf* and the *Beowulf* Manuscript," in *The Dating of "Beowulf,"* edited by Colin Chase, University of Toronto Press, 1981, pp 9-22.

Kiernan argues that the *Beowulf* manuscript in the British library is the author's own working copy.

Kirby, D P. *The Earliest English Kings,* Unwin Hyman, 1991. A study of the development of kingship and kingdoms among the Anglo-Saxons Kirby offers insights into the circumstances which formed the poet's and his audience's view of the political world

Klaeber, Friedrich *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg,* 3rd edition, D. C Heath and Co, 1950 Still the standard edition of the poem, Klaeber's introductory material is still useful nearly fifty years after the last edition was published

Leyerle, John. "Beowulf the Hero and King," in *Medium Aevum,* Vol 34,1965, pp. 89-102.

Leyerle argues that Beowulf fails to understand that the responsibilities of kingship must override the personal desire for glory and that Beowulf destroys himself and his people by insisting on fighting the dragon.

Malone, Kemp. "Beowulf the Headstrong," *Anglo-Saxon England,* Vol. 1,1972, pp. 139-45

Malone argues that Beowulf, in facing the dragon, takes the only realistic course available to him Malone forcefully explains that the modern distinction between king and hero would be incomprehensible to the poem's original audience

Nicholson, Lewis E *An Anthology of "Beowulf" Criticism,* University of Notre Dame Press, 1963.

One of the most cited critical anthologies, this volume includes Tolkien's "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics."

Niles, John D. *"Beowulf: The Poem and its Tradition,* University of Harvard Press, 1983.

A detailed discussion of all aspects of the poem. Niles believes that *Beowulf is* an essentially "middle brow" work of the tenth century Ogilvy.J. D A and Donald C Baker. *Reading "Beowulf,"* University of Oklahoma Press, 1984.

Another excellent beginners' introduction to the poem There are chapters on *Beowulf and* other Germanic poetry, its date and authorship, versification and style and modern interpretation and criticism, as well as a detailed synopsis of the story.

Robinson, Fred C. "History, Religion, Culture. The Background Necessary for Teaching *Beowulf,"* in *Approaches to Teaching "Beowulf,"* by Jess B. Bessinger and Robert F Yeager, Modern Language Association, 1984, pp. 107-22; reprinted in his *The Tomb of Beowulf and Other Essays on Old English,* Blackwell Publishers, 1993, pp 36-51.

Another overview of the poem, concentrating on the culture in which the poem is set.

"An Introduction to *Beowulf,"* in his *The Tomb of Beowulf and Other Essays on Old English,* Blackwell Publishers, 1993, pp. 52-67; reprinted from *"Beowulf": A Verse Translation with Treasures of the Ancient North,* by Marijane Osborn, 1983, pp. xi-xix.

A brief introduction to the poem by a noted scholar. Most of the articles in this collection are meant for specialist students of Old English literature, but they are written in a clear and unassuming style that makes Beowulf scholarship accessible to the general reader.

Short, Douglas D *"Beowulf" Scholarship: An Annotated Bibliography,* Garland, 1980,538 p.

The annotations make this bibliography indispensable to the beginner. The bibliography also includes useful indices. Tolkien, J R. R. "The Monsters and the Critics," in *Publications of the British Academy,* Vol 22,1936, pp. 245-95. The granddaddy of

modern *Beowulf* criticism, this is essential reading. It is reprinted in both the Nicholson and Tuso anthologies listed here Tuso, Joseph F. *Beowulf,* W. W Norton and Co., 1975 This book from the Norton series of Critical Editions includes the Donaldson translation and a good selection of criticism through the late 1960s There is very little overlap with the Nicholson collection

Whitelock, Dorothy *The Audience of "Beowulf,"* Clarendon Press, 1951.

A classic study of what the original audience of the poem might have been like in their culture, tastes, and expectations

Whitelock, Dorothy *The Beginnings of English Society, The Pelican History of England 2,* Penguin Books, 1968. An introduction to Anglo-Saxon society and institutions enlivened with anecdotes and historical examples.

Wilson, David M *Anglo-Saxon Art from the Seventh Century to the Norman Conquest,* Thames and Hudson, 1984. Lavishly illustrated, this is an excellent introduction to what sort of mental pictures the descriptions in *Beowulf* must have conjured up to its Anglo-Saxon audiences

Wilson, David M. *The Anglo-Saxons,* Penguin Books, 1971. One reviewer called this the best introduction to Anglo-Saxon archaeology ever written. It has served students for well over twenty-five years. The line illustrations are very useful

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Introduction

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The purpose of Epics for Students (EfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, EfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of EfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of EfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in EfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by EfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an ☐at-a-glance☐ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

EfS includes ☐The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,☐ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Epics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the EfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the EfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Epics for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Epics for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from EfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Epics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from EfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Epics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of EfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Epics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of EfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Epics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Epics for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535