Beowulf – Class Notes

In Dark Age Scandinavia, a great hero named Beowulf travelled across the sea in order to fight a monstrous creature, which had been terrorizing the people of Denmark. Having defeated it, Beowulf then battled with his mother in her underwater lair and 50 years later, Beowulf engaged in a duel with a fire- breathing dragon. Beowulf came out victorious but suffered fatal wounds.

Beowulf is one of the earliest literary works of English literature written down in Anglo-Saxon by an anonymous scribe. It sheds light on the heroic culture of the warrior people of Europe.

The poem starts with a history of the spear Danes in ancient days and the glory of their kings. The poem assumes that listeners know about this history - the poem is set in the 5th or 6th century in Denmark and the surrounding Germanic lands.

Some figures mentioned in the poem have historical record attached to them, but Beowulf seems to be a made-up hero. Beowulf is most likely a legendary figure inserted to the history to demonstrate the ethos of the warrior culture.

The only manuscript that we have of *Beowulf* dates back to the 11th century thought the poem could have been composed earlier (around 8th century). Most likely, this poem had moved through time, and this is why it is difficult to assign a specific date to its composition.

The poem is an extremely important cultural artifact and a highly creative poem.
The manuscript is now stored in the British Library.

Many people ask questions about this heroic poem that is preserved in a Christian context. One theory about this text is that it is a Christian poem writing with celebration of (and melancholy about) a pagan past.

Outline of the story:
Looking at the plot, the reader can divide the epic into a 3-part structure or 3 episodes.
Beowulf vs. Grendel (who is misshapen and large)
Beowulf vs. Grendel's mother (who seeks revenge for her son's death)

50 years later
Beowulf vs. Dragon (that is fire-breathing, flying-through-the-air, serpent-like creature)

Our attention usually revolves around the epic hero, Beowulf, but later readings shed light on the monsters (particularly Grendel) and on the women in the text (Hrothgar's wife, Wealhtheow, and Grendel's mother)

Some of the **themes** in the text can be grouped in a set of three:

- Memory – commemoration, history, ways to preserve history, remembrance…

- Glory – warrior past of men of superlative courage and brilliance, attempts to gain glory/ fame before death…

Beowulf, for example, is "keenest to win fame" (line 3182).

- Futility – pervasive sense of loss, every man dies and all comes to an end, when something good happens, readers know that they are going to get bad later, patterns of destruction…

Beowulf is a unique kind of hero – strong, wise in thought, and a clever speaker of thoughts. Beowulf knows how to speak well.

"**They** [Beowulf's men] said that of all the kings upon earth
He was the man most gracious and fair minded…"

Here, we see how the speaker or the voice in the poem is trying to distance himself from what he thinks of Beowulf. Throughout the poem, there is praise of Beowulf but it is careful praise.

Monsters, in the early middle ages, are seen as other worldly or alternative beings (creatures that live on the edges of society) that exist to teach people about wonders or warn them off wonders. The three monsters represent different encounters of death to Beowulf. The poem investigates death and the monsters' ways of exploring this concept.

Beowulf does not have a linear plot line. There are flashes forward and flashes backward in order to show:

- Destruction after glory
- Meaning and value are transferred through time
- Objects carry meaning and exchange of tales is important

The plot is interesting in a sense that it tells one what is going to happen (no suspense, sorry!)

We are told 900 lines before the end of the poem that Beowulf is going to die!

One is advised to listen to the poem, and not only read it. One should appreciate the description and language and not only the plot.

Important lines to examine:

Line numbers that show:

Christian vs Pagan

Christian judgment of paganism: 175-185;

"The hope of heathens" – heathens do not call themselves as such which shows that there is a Christian writer

Hrothgar's Christian sermon or homily: 1724-60
Mix of Christian and pagan: 1735-50 (archer-devil)
Christ figure: Wiglaf bathes Beowulf's wounds: 2720-3

Blood feuds

Peaceful resolution: 459-72, 1855-61
Endless feuding: 2369, 2425-89, 2946
Futility of feud-healing marriages: 2032-69

Exchange

- Wordum wrixlan (**word exchange**) – retelling of legends to reinforce Beowulf's bravery 883-914
- **Gift-giving** (Hrothgar) – recompense for bravery: 384-5, promise of compensation: 1380-2
- **Thanes'/retainers' defence of their lord**: 794-99, 1242-50
- **Vengeance** – Grendel's mother kills Aeschere: 1330-40; Beowulf vows vengeance: 1384-96

Horrors of war
Finnsburh episode 1069; 2246-69; 2444-62

Mead-hall

Celebratory revelry and gift-giving: 1009-23, 1049-54

Medieval custom
Necessary burial of the dead (Aeschere): 2119-30

Beowulf
Beowulf's warrior pride: 407-55
Beowulf' battle with Grendel's mother: 1518-90
Beowulf's noble character: 2177-83

Kennings
ring-giver/*beaggyfan,* whale-road/*hronrade* (10), gift-stool/*gifstol* (*throne* 168), swan's-road/*swanrade* (200), word-hoard/*wordhord* 258), battle-seat/*hildesetl* (saddle 1039), gem-skills/*searogimma* (1156), wave-cup/*yða ful* (1209), sail-road/*seglrade* (1429), wave-roamer/*waegbora* (1440), bone-case/*bancofan* (1445), sea-cloth/*merehraegle* (1905), wave-floater/*wegfloten* (1907), world-candle/*Woruldcandel* (1966) heaven's-gem/*heofones gim* (moon 2072), bone-house/*banhus* (2508, 3147)

Women

Women are rarely prominent in *Beowulf*, and it was once customary to observe t hat the one woman to whom some space is devoted spends her time ferrying mead to men, being a hostess rather than an active participant. However, closer study reveals that Wealhtheow's role is less domestic and passive than public and influential. She advises and exhorts her husband Hrothgar and in effect, like him, represents the Danes. For example as she proffers the cup of welcome to Beowulf she thanks God 'with prudent words that her will' – no doubt Hrothgar shares it, but she expresses it as hers – 'had come to pass/and she had found a man to trust' to remove the scourge of Grendel. After the hero, partly fired by her words (630), has done the deed, she salutes him and seeks to bind him to protect her sons. In addition, she gives Beowulf not only mead and good words but 'braided gold' and armour – apparently ladies, like lords, can act as 'gold-givers'. Possibly recipients would regard such gifts as coming ultimately from the impressive hoard of the husband, but Queen Hygd too (1929–31) is commended as a good giver on her own account. Even the role of passing the cup, Alexandra Hennessey Olsen concludes in an account of studies of women in the poem, 'is an active one, more suggestive of a person who serves communion than a servant'. Studies of the position of Anglo-Saxon women have given further credence to the idea that a female character might show considerable independence. As Wealhtheow attempts to build a pattern of reciprocity and mutual dependence among Beowulf and the Danish royal family she performs

the function in which the wicked Queen Modthrytho long failed, that of 'peace-weaver'. Beowulf in his account to the Geatish court calls Wealhtheow, indeed, the pledge or 'covenant of peace' (2017). Modthrytho refused her public role, letting only her husband gaze upon her beauty with impunity; she killed to avenge perceived insults, acting on a personal imperative where Wealhtheow wants Grendel dead for the public good; she gave the 'death-collar' not the 'collar of ancient stones' (1208). In her subsequent marriage to Offa, however, she presumably took on the same role as Wealhtheow and as Hygd, giver of 'magnificent treasures', with whom she is explicitly contrasted. But peace-weavers – even if well-trained at serving the 'ceremonial cup' (2021) – cannot always succeed, as Beowulf predicts will be the case with Freowaru (2024 f.) who, like Hildeburh,can do nothing to prevent the fatal feuding of her people and her adoptive people. Arguably the woman who laments for Beowulf at the end of the poem foresees 'a field of corpses and men with spears/harvesting the survivors' (3155–6) because, in the pagan world at least, this is always what will happen in the end despite all the efforts of the peace-weavers. More emphatically contrasted with the good queens is Grendel's Mother who, as Jane Chance puts it in *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* , 'substitutes war-making for . . . peace-weaving'. Where Hildeburh mourns, and Wealhtheow works to ensure her children's future by firm but tactful words, the monster rips off Æschere's head to avenge her son's death. (The horror is increased by the fact that, like her son, she cannot or does not speak. As soon

as Mary Shelley's monster starts to tell his story his redeeming features become inescapably apparent and he can no longer seem a figure of horror only – unlike the grimly silent or linguistically limited creatures in some cinematic versions of *Frankenstein*. Grendel's mother, kin to Cain, has few redeeming features except l oyalty to her son.) The contrast with other women is emphasised by the fact that the monster enters just after passages about the Frisian and Geatish queens. She is, as Chance says, a 'parodic inversion' of the ideal Anglo-Saxon queen and mother; during the fight with Beowulf (1519–69) the poet 'exploits the basic resemblance between sexual intercourse and battle' to emphasise this inversion.

Narrative in Beowulf

The action of *Beowulf* is not straightforward. The narrator foreshadows actions th at occur later. Characters talk about things that have already happened. Both narrator and characters recall incidents and characters outside the poem's main narrative. These digressions are connected thematically to the main action. Critics once saw the digressions as flaws. The poet, however, consciously used them to characterize human experience, stressing recurring patterns, and to represent the characters' attempts to understand their situation.

Fortitude and Wisdom For the narrator and characters, wisdom and fortitude represent an ideal to which every man aspires and which every society needs. Physical bravery was most appreciated when accompanied by understanding and discernment. This discernment was both practical and supported by a larger spiritual under- standing of God and the human condition. This is the point of Hrothgar's "sermon" in lines 1700 to 1782. The Danish coast guard, for example, (lines 229–300) demonstrates these qualities in his respectful treatment of Beowulf and his men. Beowulf is a fearless master of hand-to-hand combat. He is discerning 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, by contrast, 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, and human memory reaching across time and space. Glory in *Beowulf* is usually connected with heroism in battle or with generosity. Treasure is the outward manifestation of glory. Men are eager to receive gifts of fine weapons, armor, and jewelry, much as modern athletes measure their own success by

comparing their salaries relative to those of other athletes. In the epic, treasure advertises a warrior's worth and a people's strength.