

Lesson 4

The Concept of the Hero

Objectives

- To expand the concept of the hero and to explore symbolic implications of the heroic contest
- To examine critical opinion relating to the *Beowulf* theme
- To explore the concepts of the quest and the monster in the epic
- To identify modern Beowulfs and Grendels

Notes to the Teacher

The concept of the hero is one which has developed in myth and legend, from Gilgamesh of Mesopotamia through the Greek, Germanic, and French epics to the modern day. This concept comes out of epic poetry, in which historical, geographical, and spiritual elements are incorporated to make the adventure significant enough to carry moral truth.

Beowulf takes place in the final hours of the huge, lonely, Anglo-Saxon pagan world. The hero must overcome the monster Grendel, who is man or beast or both. In this context, Beowulf plays out all the characteristics of the typical epic hero. He comes to rid the countryside of evil against all odds. He represents both himself, as one who seeks immortality through fame and the tribal group. He may die, but the group will be saved; his honor is preserved, and that honor strengthens the people. Because of these qualities and others, he naturally draws followers.

The stature of the hero is frequently measured by the formidable qualities of his adversary. Beowulf's foes are a combination of monstrous repulsiveness and almost invincible preternatural power. Animal and spirit, they can be seen as humanity depraved and allied with evil, or in the poet's Christian perception, as descendants from Cain and the Serpent, archetypes of temptation and testing that prove people's mettle or expose their weakness. The hero is still found in literature and film today; the end of the unit asks students to consider the themes of *Beowulf* as well as the poem's surprisingly modern applications.

Procedure

1. Introduce a discussion of Beowulf's foes by discussing students' perceptions of what makes a monster.

Suggested Responses:

cruel, alien, uses magic for evil purposes, dwells in strange places, unnaturally strong, bestial, unbeatable, no guilt/no values/no morals, humanoid, alone and apart, cannot communicate

2. Distribute **Handout 7**, and have students complete it and share responses (*cruel: merciless killings; alienated: prowls misty moors*).
3. As a culmination of the discussion, have students write a general statement about the challenge these formidable foes represent to Beowulf.
4. Distribute **Handout 8**, and have students complete and discuss it.

Suggested Responses:

- *inspire others to follow him—leadership*
- *gain Hrothgar's trust—sincerity*
- *face the unknown Grendel—courage*
- *fight hand-to-hand combat—warrior*
- *fight without a weapon—strength, bravery*
- *go to serpent-ridden waters—fearlessness*
- *to take no trophies—modesty*
- *face the dragon—honor*
- *slay the dragon despite danger to self—self-sacrifice*
- *hand authority to Wiglaf—concern for the group*

5. Distribute **Handout 9**, which presents five critical opinions of *Beowulf*. Have volunteers read the opinions aloud, and allow time for clarification of questions. After students have gathered supportive evidence, have them discuss insights into the epic.

Suggested Response for Statement 1:

Opinion

epic = pagan
nature = hostile
death = uncontrollable
fate picks victims
man never reconciled
Beowulf ends a failure

Evidence

belief in fate
description of environment
scenes of the ravaging
quotes with Wyrd
contest with dragon
final speech

6. Distribute **Handout 10**, which asks students to think about modern equivalents of Beowulf and Grendel. Have students pair up to complete the handout and then have each pair relate its favorite response to the class. After students have presented their responses, have them discuss the ways in which Beowulf treats the theme of good vs. evil—i.e., as a clear-cut battle, with no shades of gray.

Suggested Responses:

Grendels—*racism, imperialism, hunger, criminals, terrorists, military aggressors (such as Saddam Hussein), disease*

Beowulfs—*Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, UNICEF, the police, the FBI, the United Nations, doctors*

Optional Activities

1. Assign one of the following options:
 - a. Write about the battles from Grendel's, his mother's, or the dragon's point of view. Treat the story as a melodrama (a sensational development of plot for emotional effect without motivation) or a mock epic (a trivial subject treated with great importance).
 - b. Write a story that follows the heroic pattern but whose characters are animals or imaginary creatures, such as gnomes, dwarves, or hobbits. Illustrate it.
 - c. Create an original monster in either written or artistic form.
 - d. Compare a hero who has influenced your life with Beowulf. What was this hero's effect on you? How did he or she rescue you (either literally or figuratively)? Was this rescue like the way Beowulf rescues the Danes? Did your hero have a sidekick, like Beowulf had Wiglaf?
 - e. Write personal reflections about one of the following:
 - The Grendel in Me
 - The Beowulf in Me
 - The Challenges in My Life
 - The Day I Was a Hero
2. Have students read *Grendel* by John Gardner and compare perceptions of Grendel as protagonist and as antagonist. What does Gardner stress about Grendel and his problems? In what ways is the monster very much like human characters you have found in other books?
3. Have students read and report about one of the following epic heroes in prose, poetry, or summary.
 - Gilgamesh
 - Thor
 - El Cid
 - Roland (Orlando)

Meet the Monsters

Directions: Find specific examples showing that Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon possess qualities often associated with monsters.

Quality	Evidence
1. cruel	
2. alien	
3. uses magic	
4. strange dwelling/home	
5. unnatural strength	
6. beast-like	
7. values/morality	
8. alone, alienated	

Meet the Hero

Directions: In order to conquer evil monsters, Beowulf must meet many challenges. Describe them, and list personal qualities he needs to overcome these challenges.

Challenge	Quality
1. journey far from home over rough, unknown seas	willing to take risks, optimistic, sense of adventure
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	
9.	
10.	

Critical Views of *Beowulf*

Directions: Scholars and critical readers have various opinions about the themes of *Beowulf*. Choose one statement with which you agree or disagree and support your opinion with quotations, episodes, and examples from the text of the epic.

1. *Beowulf* is steeped in a pagan tradition that shows nature as hostile and forces of death as uncontrollable. Blind fate picks random victims; people are never brought in harmony with the world. *Beowulf* ends a failure.
2. *Beowulf* presents an ideal of loyalty. The failure to live up to this ideal on the part of some thanes points up the extraordinary faithfulness of *Beowulf*.
3. *Beowulf* is a blending of Christian traditions with a folk story that praises loyalty, courage, and faith in the face of extreme danger and even death. It presents a model of a human being willing to die to deliver others from terrifying evil forces.
4. *Beowulf* is the story of a dual ordeal: an external battle with vicious opponents and an internal battle with human tendencies of pride, greed, cowardice, betrayal, and self-concern.
5. *Beowulf* is the universal story of life's journey from adolescence to adulthood to old age. The hero grows in wisdom about self and about the world through the pain and triumph of personal experience

***Beowulf* in the Twentieth Century**

Directions: Although *Beowulf* is an Old English epic, some of the ideas and values found in it are still prominent in our lives. Think of five modern Grendels: different problems that have faced the world today. Then think of the Beowulfs upon which the world relies (or on which it has relied) to fight them. For example, during World War II, the Axis powers were very much like Grendel, while the Allies were the equivalent of Beowulf. Consider such military conflicts, as well as more abstract ones. Be prepared to present your best Grendel/Beowulf pair to the class.

Grendels	Beowulfs
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.