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Beowulf

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by

Eva Richardson

Prestwick House

General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *Beowulf*

*B*EOWULF IS AN OLD ENGLISH POEM written by an anonymous poet. It is largely considered to be a milestone in the development of English literature and the most significant old English poem in existence. *Beowulf* was composed in the tradition of **Germanic oral poetry** and contains elements of the **epic**.

The *Beowulf* poem is a hallmark of **old English (Anglo-Saxon) poetry**. Virtually all Old English poems are composed in the tradition of **Germanic oral poetry**. Poems in this tradition were not originally written down. Instead, they were transmitted orally from poet/speaker to audience. The poem's plot takes place during the early days of the Germanic migration, recounting the history of two tribes, the Danes and the Geats, and detailing victories won against military foes as well as monsters that threatened the stability of the Scandinavian homeland. It incorporates numerous references to the **heroic code** of Germanic warrior societies.

The heroic code dictates that the relationships between kinsmen be founded on loyalty and respect. It is a warrior's—or thane's—most important obligation to remain loyal to his lord and serve him without reservation. Within the system of the heroic code, treasure functions as a sign of mutual obligation: If a warrior performs a valuable service for his lord, he is richly rewarded. The heroic code emphasizes courage and honor, but it also includes vengeance as an integral component of a warrior society. The only way to end the cycle of violence is through the payment of "blood gold"—the giving of treasure to end the feud between warring parties.

The *Beowulf* poem contains elements of the **epic**. Epic poetry generally deals with a serious subject and incorporates the adventures of a resilient hero who fights to defend the values of his culture. It often includes a battle between good and evil forces, cataloguing of weaponry, and supernatural intervention.

Another significant element of **Germanic poetry** is the use of **alliteration** (the frequent repetition of the beginning sounds of words). The **kenning** is yet another device characteristic of **old English poetry**. Words like "sea-realm" or "sword-carrier" help the reader create a visual image of the items or ideas being described.

Predominant **themes** in *Beowulf* include the clash between **Christianity and Paganism** and the prevalence of the **Germanic Heroic Code**.

Chapter XXXIX

Wiglaf is devastated to see his master dying, but he understands that the sacrifice was necessary in order to defeat the terrible dragon. When Wiglaf returns to his fellow warriors, he criticizes them for abandoning their leader in the face of danger.

Chapter XL

Wiglaf gives orders to announce the outcome of the battle between Beowulf and the dragon. He then proceeds to tell his kinsmen that, following Beowulf's death, war is inevitable. Wiglaf predicts that the Geats will be attacked as soon as news of Beowulf's death reaches the other tribes.

Chapter XLI

Wiglaf continues to address his Geatish kinsmen. He explains that a feud between the Geats and other warrior tribes will resume once Beowulf's death becomes known. Wiglaf also tells his fellow warriors about the immense riches hidden in the dragon's cave, revealing that the treasure was protected by an enchantment, and only a man chosen by God could retrieve the valuables.

Chapter XLII

Wiglaf recounts the last moments of Beowulf's life for his fellow warriors. He orders a Viking funeral for the dead king. On a barge loaded with treasure, Beowulf is put to rest.

Chapter XLIII

The Geats lament the death of their beloved leader. They send his funeral barge into the ocean, and the flames rise to heaven. The hero's passing is mourned through many celebrations and rituals. ■

Mythological/Archetypal Approach Applied to *Beowulf*

Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all very closely interrelated. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who read texts with the mythological/archetypal approach are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." He believed that human beings were born innately knowing certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology (long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe). Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.) Every culture has a creation story, a life after death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When reading a work looking for archetypes or myths, critics look for very general recurring themes, characters, and situations. In modern times, the same types of archetypes are used in film, which is why it has been so easy for filmmakers to take a work like Jane Austen's *Emma* and adapt it into the typical Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to know the characters in a work with little or no explanation. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!

Beowulf: Archetypal Activity One

Information Sheet

There are certain steps or stages into which the Quest can be divided:

The Call: Typically, the Hero is challenged to embark on the Quest or is called to it by a god or god-figure. Usually there is a sense of destiny associated with the call to the Quest—this is the Hero's purpose; it will be his or her defining moment.

The Decision: The Hero makes an intentional decision to accept the challenge or call and pursue his (or her) destiny. There is usually a sense that this decision is irrevocable—the ship sails, the bridge burns, the home planet is destroyed, etc. At this point, the Hero must go forward; there is no turning back.

The Preparation: This is a period during which the Hero learns what he or she needs to know in order to complete the Quest. He or she develops the skills, builds the strength, gathers the tools and other materials, and collects the allies he or she will need to succeed. Often the Hero will meet a MENTOR, an older, wiser individual who has the knowledge and skills the Hero needs. This MENTOR may or may not be supernatural.

The Obstacles: This is the quest itself, the journey to the place where the treasure is hidden or the captive is imprisoned. It is long trip. It is a dangerous trip. Many of the Hero's allies (met during the Preparation) will desert him or her, be rendered incapable of continuing, or die. The Hero will lose many, if not all, of the tools and weapons collected during the Preparation and will have to continue the Quest alone.

Some of the Obstacles encountered might be in the form of persons:

- the TEMPTER/TEMPTRESS or SEDUCER/SEDUCTRESS, who is able to offer the Hero something he or she deeply desires (often a hidden or secret desire) so that the Hero is (almost) willing to abandon the quest

- the SHADOW, an evil figure who actually mirrors those things the Hero most fears or dislikes about himself/herself

Some of the Obstacles encountered might be geographical:

- difficult terrain
- remote locations
- seemingly insurmountable mountains, oceans, rivers, etc.

Activity Two

Examining Beowulf's Motivations

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *Beowulf:* Archetypal Activity Two.

2. Divide the class into three groups or a number of groups divisible by three.

3. Assign each group (or allow each to choose) one of the following:

    • Beowulf's personality and reputation
    • Beowulf's past deeds
    • Beowulf's aspirations

4. Have students examine chapters III, V, VI, and VIII and note relevant information on their handouts. Remind them that much of the information will have to be inferred, but that they should include information from the text that is the basis for their inference.

5. Reconvene the class and have each group report its findings.

6. As a class, discuss the following questions:

    • What aspects of the mythological hero are exemplified through Beowulf's motivations for leaving his home?

    • How does Beowulf's decision to travel to the Danish king affect his reputation in his homeland? His reputation among his warrior friends?

    • How do Beowulf's motivations represent general truths about the human condition?

    • What does Beowulf seek/hope to achieve by fighting Grendel? What does he hope to achieve for Hrothgar and his people? For himself? For the Geats?

    • What is the significance of treasure with regard to Beowulf's motivations? Is Beowulf interested in riches?

    • How does the fight with Grendel fit into Beowulf's life story and his past heroic deeds?

    • How do Beowulf's motivations lead him to an archetypal quest?

New Historicism Applied to *Beowulf*

Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as that culture really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the "truth" of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the "truth" is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the "losers" of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another culture is often lost to history because it is the powerful that have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict "traditional" (i.e., the winner's) history, there is no way to really know the ironclad truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it "reflects." To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the south during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of and change certain elements of that culture.

Activity Two

Examining Evidence of "Christianizing" A Pagan Poem

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: (1) New Historicist Activities Two and Three: The *Beowulf* Manuscript and (2) *Beowulf:* New Historicism Activity Two Graphic.

2. If you have not already done so, copy and distribute the handout: *Beowulf:* New Historicism Activity One Fact Sheet.

3. As there are 43 short "chapters" in the Prestwick House Touchstone edition of *Beowulf*, you may either assign one, two, or three chapters to each student, or you may divide the class into pairs or small groups and assign each group a number of chapters to examine.

NOTE: If you are using an edition of Beowulf other than the Prestwick House Touchstone edition, divide the text into workable sections and assign sections to your students (either individually, in pairs, or in small groups) so that the entire poem is covered.

4. Have each student or group examine its assigned section(s) of the text and note *all* references that provide a clue to the cultural background of the poem, the poet, and perhaps the scribe who eventually wrote the poem down.

5. Have students provide information requested in the *Graphic*. For example, any reference to biblical characters or events would be included in the "Christian" column, while any reference to Norse mythology or Viking values or customs would be included in the "Pagan" column.

6. Have students answer the questions on the *Graphic* handout.

7. Reconvene the class and have each student or group report its findings to the class.

8. As a class, discuss the discovered similarities and contradictions. (Note: Students do not need to agree or come to consensus, but should listen to and consider all proposed ideas.)

9. As a class, discuss whether the evidence of one culture seems to outweigh evidence of the other.

10. Also discuss whether references to one culture seem to be more intrinsic while references to another seem to be added on.

NOTE: Again, students do not need to agree or come to consensus, but should listen to and consider all proposed ideas. As scholars themselves do not agree upon the extent to which Beowulf is a pre-Christian or Christian poem, certainly your students do not need to feel they are being asked to settle the question. But it is important that they examine the issue.

Formalism Applied to *Beowulf*

Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is regarded by many as a stuffy, rigid, and inaccessible means to read literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is, however, an approach that is concerned primarily with form and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not dependent on the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called "New Critics," and their approach to literature became a standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work to understand what the work was about. The Formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form means something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.

Activity One

Examining the Occurrence and Contribution of Kennings in the Work

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *Beowulf:* Formalism Activity One Chart and *Beowulf:* Formalism Activity One Sheet.

2. As there are 43 short "chapters" in the Prestwick House Touchstone edition of *Beowulf*, you may either assign one, two, or three chapters to each student, or you may divide the class into pairs or small groups and assign each group a number of chapters to examine.

NOTE: If you are using an edition of Beowulf other than the Prestwick House Touchstone edition, divide the text into workable sections and assign sections to your students (either individually, in pairs, or in small groups) so that the entire poem is covered.

3. Have each student or group examine its assigned section(s) of the text and note *all* kennings found in that segment.

4. Have them provide the requested information on the handout: list the kenning, state to whom or what the kenning refers, and describe the trait or quality that the kenning is suggesting.

   For example: In a few places, the door to Heorot is called the "wall-mouth" or the "house-mouth." Both of these suggest that Heorot—as the center of life in the community, the place of gathering and revelry, and the venue in which the king bestows treasure on his supporters—is a living thing. When Grendel destroys life at Heorot, he threatens the very life of the community.

5. After students have examined their portion(s) of text, have them tally their results, providing the information requested on *Formalism Activity One Sheet 2*.

6. Reconvene the class and have each student or group report its findings to the class.

7. As a class, revise the tally and answer the questions on *Formalist Activity One Sheet 2.*

8. As a class, discuss both the effect and the apparent purpose of the kenning.

Discussion Questions

1. What evidence of the poem's origination in the oral tradition remains in the written text? What impact do remnants of the oral tradition have on the overall effect of the poem?

2. Is the text biased in any way? What evidence of bias is there in the text? What does this bias favor? What does this bias cast in a negative light?

3. What repetitions in word choice and structure can you detect in the poem? What do these contribute to the meaning or impact of the poem?

Essays or Writing Assignments

1. The kenning is arguably the most common literary device of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Write a well-reasoned essay in which your analyze the Beowulf-poet's use of the kenning and its contribution to the overall effect of the poem.

2. Write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the narrative and dramatic effects of alliteration in this work.

3. Write a well-reasoned essay in which you analyze the presence of the bard or scop in the poem. What effect, structure, or aid in comprehension do the bard's narrative intrusions contribute?