

# Introduction to *Beowulf*

Hello Students!

In the MCA high school, we select books for you that have profoundly shaped the ideas and imaginations of great thinkers in the western tradition. We select books that lead readers toward what is true, good and beautiful. We select books that enable you to better enjoy and understand later works, literature which assumes you have an understanding of the great works which precede them. Hence, *Beowulf*.

Most of this packet includes information to make your reading of *Beowulf* more enjoyable and meaningful.

Feel free to contact me via email over the summer if you have any questions.

Happy reading!

Mr. Allen

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# Introduction to *Beowulf*

## READINGS

Please read only the editions listed here so that we are all reading the same text. To make sure you get the correct text, purchase using the listed ISBN Number. Pages Bookstore in Mount Airy has been given this information and may have the texts in stock. Shop local!

### Required

1. This packet.
2. *Beowulf*. ISBN: 978-0451530967. Translated by Burton Raffel.

### What you need to know before you read *Beowulf*

1. Who wrote *Beowulf*?+

No one knows. It could have been the work of a single author, or the work of multiple authors and editors over the course of decades or even centuries. It possibly contains ancient lyrical elements that were later written down as part of this epic.

2. When was it written?+

The oldest extant manuscript was acquired in 1572 by Laurence Nowell (ca. 1515-1571). The handwriting on this manuscript has been dated to about AD 1000, but, as the afterword in your text points out, the work was unknown to Chaucer and Shakespeare (142-143). Tolkien, the most famous among *Beowulf* scholars, believed the story dated from about AD 750. The epic mentions an historical figure named Chochilaicus who died in 516, hence the *terminus a quo* (earliest possible date) for the composition would be that year. The story is deeply shaped both by pre-Christian Germanic history and legend, but also by early Christian beliefs. Christianity did not have a dominant presence in Britannia until the mid 7th-century, so this must be considered when attempting to date the poem.

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## 3. Why was it written?

If *Beowulf* was written for a specific event or occasion, that knowledge has been lost to history. However, the work clearly celebrates traditional Anglo-Saxon virtues and interests, as well as religious and philosophical questions about fate, the providence of God, and human mortality. It also preserves tidbits of ancient Anglo-Saxon history and ancient traditions. At the very least, the poem commemorates legendary, religious and cultural traditions that were of great importance to an ancient audience.

## 4. What kind of historical and cultural knowledge is necessary for understanding the epic?

There are a number of key points that will help you. I am sure you can appreciate that each of these bulleted items are worthy of their own lengthy discussion!

- \* Non-Christian, non-Romanized Germanic tribes from Scandinavia and northern Europe invaded and/or migrated into Britannia beginning in the 6th century AD. These were the Angles, Saxons and Jutes. These peoples conquered, settled among and no doubt inter-married with the native Britons.+

- \* These Germanic tribes highly honored their military heroes. Their tribal organizations and identities meant that their loyalties were more tightly bound to family and oaths, rather than to the city-state (as in ancient Greece) or the nation-state (as in ancient Rome). In other words, they were bound together by language, customs and personal relationships, rather than by civic, geographical or political allegiances.

- \* Two relationships emerge as deeply important in the Anglo-Saxon literature. First, family loyalties were paramount, especially father-son, and brother-brother. Second, the “lord-thane” relationship is almost as important, and more frequently discussed in the literature. A “thane” was a high-ranking soldier and land-owner who had sworn “fealty” (utmost loyalty) to his lord or

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king. The land ownership was in some cases likely a condition or benefit of the fealty oath rather than a prerequisite. The thane was obligated to serve the king, especially in things martial, and the king was obligated to reward the thane for fulfilling his duty. The relationship between thanes and their lords as celebrated in the Anglo-Saxon literature has no modern parallel. If you imagine a combination of the kind of loyalty and bond a soldier has toward a respected commander, and the love, devotion and kinship a son has toward his beloved father, then you can begin to appreciate the lord-thane relationship.

\* Material wealth, especially gold and silver ornamented jewelry, and well-crafted and ornamented weaponry, emerge as highly valued in the literature. These are presented both as prized booty from military exploits as well as cherished gifts from lords to loyal thanes.

\* The “Hall” is presented as the center of Anglo-Saxon cultural life. Halls were large, wooden buildings in which governing councils were held, lord-thane fealty ceremonies conducted, celebrations commemorating military exploits were conducted, songs and tales recounted, feasting and drinking of mead abounded, and warriors competed against each other with rival tales of personal heroism. So, if you can imagine a mixture of the ancient Greek agora, the Roman forum and senate, King Arthur’s court, a military barracks and an English ale-house, then you have a pretty good sense of what an Anglo-Saxon Hall was probably like! The Hall was the center of cultural, political, military and social life for the Anglo-Saxons. It is not a coincidence or insignificant detail that Grendel directs his violence against Heorot, the Great Hall of Hrothgar.

\* Britain was largely converted to Christianity by the middle of the 7th century AD. By the middle of the 8th century AD, England was the leading Christian and scholarly center of Europe.+ *N.B.* If Tolkien was right about the date of the poem, it was written when England was the leading center of European scholarship, not long after the death of the Venerable Bede.

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\**Beowulf* contains both non-Christian and Christian perspectives. The poem wrestles with the power of fate (a pre- and non-Christian concept) and God's providence. It depicts a monster that was unknown to either the Mediterranean or Ancient Near Eastern imagination (the closest parallel in Homer is the Cyclops, but that is a stretch). Yet, this monster is right at home in the damp, icy, dark world of northern Europe. The poem describes the impersonal, uncompromising power of fate, but also the living, dynamic faith of a religion that began in Bethlehem and came to prominence in Rome and Constantinople. Expect to see both perspectives side by side, and even in tension with each other, throughout the poem.

5. In what language was *Beowulf* originally written?

*Beowulf* was written in Anglo-Saxon, also known as Old English. If you hear this language spoken (and I will give you that opportunity in the fall), it will sound more German than English. That is because it is. In fact, the English we speak is far more influenced by Old German than by Latin or Greek. Most of the Latin influence on English does not begin until AD 1066, and that via medieval French and the conquest of England by William the Conqueror. But all that is another story...

6. The book formats the story like it is a poem, but the lines do not rhyme. Why is that?

*Beowulf* is a long, narrative poem. However, Anglo-Saxon authors did not compose rhyming poetry. Instead, their style of poetry depended on two elements: alliteration and meter. Anglo-Saxon alliteration refers to the repetition of different sounds, both vowels and consonants.+

For a modern example, "Mary had a little lamb, little lamb, little lamb..." repeats (or alliterates) the consonant "L." If you sing "Mary had a little lamb..." and tap your foot with the beats, you have a sense of how meter works in poetry.

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Our translation attempts to transmit some of the original alliteration. Take a look at the first three lines of the poem on page 3:

“Hear me! We’ve heard of Danish heroes,  
Ancient kings and the glory they cut  
For themselves, swinging mighty swords!”

Can you detect the alliteration in each line? Notice how line 1 alliterates the “h” sound (hear, heard, heroes). Line 2 alliterates sounds related to “k” (ancient, kings, glory, cut). Line 3 alliterates the “s” sound (themselves, swinging, swords).

7. You have said that *Beowulf* contains historical elements, so is the epic a work of fiction or nonfiction?

These are modern categories that are not easily, or for that matter, appropriately applied to ancient works of literature. Ancient literature rarely, if ever, conveys truth in the quasi-factual mode that the genre “non-fiction” purports to do. Rather, ancients rightly (I think) understood that the truth can be told through a variety of means, including myth, historical reporting and legendary embellishment. It is not that you have to sort through all this to get to the truth. Rather, it is that truth is more than just what can be conveyed via the kind of sterile facticity moderns assume corresponds to what is “really” true.

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8. *Beowulf* is hard to read, especially with all of the strange place and people names. Why do we have to read it?

The British consider *Beowulf* to be their national epic, the first great work of literature composed on their soil and in the language which gives rise to the language of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Chesterton. It is one of the canonical works of the western tradition.

9. Can you recommend a good movie that will depict the story of *Beowulf*?

Unfortunately, no. There are a couple of cinematic versions, but they do not accurately represent the epic. If anything, the cinematic versions are misleading and will muddy your understanding of the work.

## MAIN CHARACTER

**Beowulf:** The main character of the epic, a Geat warrior of royal lineage who sails to Denmark to fight Grendel.

**Geatland and Geats:** Most likely the area and people of southern Sweden. Beowulf and the Scelfing line of royalty are Geats.

**King Hygelac:** Beowulf's uncle, king of Geatland

**Scyldings:** The Danish race of which Hrothgar and his kinsmen are members.

**King Hrothgar:** King of Danes, whose hall (Heorot) Grendel terrorizes.

**Grendel and his mother:** cannibalistic monsters with human-like appearance and super-human strength.

**Beo:** Ancestor of Hrothgar. He is an insignificant character in the poem mentioned at the beginning. I only include his name here to point out that this is not Beowulf, the hero of the epic.

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## THE PLOT

The epic is divided into two big stories. The first is about Beowulf and Grendel. The second is about Beowulf and a dragon. The first part is the most famous section of the epic.

### Part 1

Grendel attacks Heorot, the Hall of the Danish (Scylding) King Hrothgar. He kills and eats the warriors and puts an end to all the important ceremonies and social customs that typically take place in an Anglo-Saxon Hall.

Across the sea, in Geatland, Beowulf hears of the plight of Hrothgar. Because Hrothgar once helped Beowulf's father, the hero sails across the ocean to Denmark and offers to fight the monster. This scene is about more than repaying a debt. It is all wrapped up in Germanic heroics and bragging rights. Hrothgar agrees, and Beowulf defeats Grendel during a bloody night-time battle in the Hall. That's the good news. The bad news is that Grendel's defeat sends his mother into a violent rage.

The next night, Grendel's mother attacks the unsuspecting warriors in Heorot. Beowulf pursues her and fights the monster in her lair. Beowulf emerges the victor once again, and is rewarded richly by Hrothgar.

Beowulf returns to Geatland and receives a hero's welcome by his uncle, King Hygelac.

### Part 2 (begins with chapter 31)

After Hygelac's death, Beowulf becomes king of Geatland. A dragon, disturbed by a slave who has stolen a cup from the barrow it occupies, destroys Beowulf's castle. Beowulf insists on single combat with the dragon, but is mortally wounded by the monster. Only one of Beowulf's

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thanes, a warrior named Wiglaf, comes to his aid. Together they kill the dragon. Unfortunately, Beowulf soon dies from his injuries. His people lament, and a resident predicts that once the neighboring tribes learn of Beowulf's demise, they will attack and destroy his people.

**SEE NEXT PAGE FOR YOUR PROJECT ASSIGNMENT**

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## ASSIGNMENT

**Due:** First day of regular class in August (first regular class day after colloquium).

*N.B. No internet use for either option below. I expect to see a work that reflects your own creativity and insight, not someone else's.*

### Choose ONE of the following

**Option #1.** Write an essay in which you compare and contrast the world of Homer's epics with the world of *Beowulf*. You can focus either on the similarities and differences in their respective understandings of the hero, virtue, and honor. Or, you can focus on the similarities and differences between the cultural worlds of each epic.

Gradig 4X/100 pts

MLA format, 350-500 words (maximum 500 words). Times New Roman 12 pt, double-spaced.

Please print hard copy.

### (Honors) English II 10/100 pt scale Writing Rubric

10/100 Pt scale

10/100 The essay demonstrates a thoughtful and carefully considered response to the prompt, exhibits unusual insight or creativity, is error-free, and the student demonstrates mastery of the language and the content.

9/90 The essay demonstrates a thoughtful and carefully considered response to the prompt, the writing is largely error-free, and the student demonstrates a strong command of the language and the content.

8/80 The essay demonstrates a reasonable response to the prompt, the writing is largely error-free, and the student demonstrates an acceptable command of the language and content for (Honors) English II.

7/70 The essay suffers either from a cursory, incomplete or incorrect treatment of the subject matter, and/or the writing is improperly formatted, and/or the writing errors create a significant distraction from the content, or, the writing, even if mechanically correct, is too simplistic for (Honors) English II.

0 The essay is late, not submitted and/or the content or writing is so problematic or illegible as not to deserve any credit

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**Option #2.** Create an artifact that depicts a scene in *Beowulf*. This could be a drawing, a 3-D model, figurine, etc.

**Grading:** 4X /10 pts

10 pts The artifact is exceptionally well-done, demonstrates a commitment to high quality and the ability to produce superior work.

9 pts The artifact is well-done, demonstrates a commitment to high quality and the ability to produce superior work.

8 pts The artifact is well-done, demonstrates an ability to produce the minimum quality of work that is expected of an MCA 10th grade student.

7 pts The artifact does not demonstrate the level of effort, understanding, or quality that is expected of an MCA 10th grader.

0 pts Assignment not completed, or did not clearly answer the prompt, or late, or was of such poor or haphazard quality that it is not worthy of receiving any credit.

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