

Literature Resources from Gale "[Overview: "Beowulf"](#)." *Poetry for Students*. Ed. Elizabeth Thomason. Vol. 11. Detroit: Gale Group, 2001. *Literature Resources from Gale*. Gale. Cape Cod Regional Technical High School. 6 Jan. 2011 <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/start.do?p=LitRG&u=mclin_s_ccreg>.

Title: Overview: "Beowulf"

Poem, 1950

American Poet (1921 -)

Other Names Used: Wilbur, Richard Purdy;

Source: *Poetry for Students*. Ed. Elizabeth Thomason. Vol. 11. Detroit: Gale Group, 2001. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Work overview

Introduction

"**Beowulf**" appeared in Richard Wilbur's second volume of poetry, *Ceremony and Other Poems* (1950), the book that established him as one of the preeminent American poets of his generation. In this poem, Wilbur retells part of an Old English epic, or long narrative poem, also called "Beowulf." He describes the hero of the ancient poem from a mid-twentieth century point of view.

The epic "Beowulf" was written between the mid-seventh and the late tenth centuries a.d. It tells the story of a Scandinavian hero, Beowulf, who comes to save a kingdom from a monster named Grendel who attacks the castle each night. The hero fights and kills the monster; soon Grendel's mother appears, and Beowulf must defeat her as well. The Danes give Beowulf many gifts in thanks, and he returns home, where he is king of the Geats for fifty years. He eventually dies in a battle against a dragon.

Wilbur shows Beowulf as a melancholy hero. He bravely promises to fight the monster, but he also is aware that being a hero can be a lonely job. Despite his courageous deeds, he is isolated from other people, who cannot really understand him. Even the Danes, whom he saves, are remote from him. While the epic poem celebrates the heroic ideal, Wilbur's poem reveals the hero as a human being living in a less than perfect world.

Wilbur is often seen as a poet of affirmation, one who has a bright and witty view of the world. "**Beowulf**," then, is somewhat different from the poet's other work in its tone and subject matter, though it is similar in its formal structure and musical rhythm. The power of this poem may come from Wilbur's exploration of a dark side of existence, in spite of his natural inclination to celebrate the details that make life worthwhile.

Plot

Stanza 1:

The poem opens with a description of the country that Beowulf has come to save. The speaker of the poem seems to be an unseen narrator who is describing this scene from the hero's point of view. There is something too perfect about the natural world; the land is like artificial scenery on a stage. The flowers and the grass seem to have human characteristics; they appear "attentive," or overly polite, and "garrulous," or too talkative. The lake is so still that the reflection of a bird remains after the bird has flown away. The road, built during the days of the now-fallen Roman Empire, seems untraveled. These images of the physical world have an unreal quality, creating a sense of mystery about this country.

Stanza 2:

Here the speaker introduces the people of the country. Like their land, they are strange, though they are hospitable to Beowulf. The king says that he had known Beowulf's father. Offering thanks for his help, the queen serves the hero mead, a wine made from honey, in a cup decorated with jewels. These details are similar to ones that appear in the original epic poem.

The other people have a "vagueness," which may mean that they don't think very clearly, or that they cannot be clearly seen, like shadows. They live in fear of "daily harm," which refers to the nightly attacks by the monster Grendel. This fear causes the people to repeat themselves when they speak. The strangeness of the residents adds to the atmosphere of mystery about this country.

Stanza 3:

At the beginning of this stanza, the "childish country" appears to refer to the childlike nature of the people. However, the "child / Grown monstrous" describes Grendel, who is a giant monster but also the child of a monster. Since he attacks the castle each night, the people are always afraid. In addition, because Grendel eats those he kills, people fear that he will "own them to the bone." Beowulf determines that he will fight the monster alone, so that others will not risk death.

The poet may have more than one meaning here. The people spend their days afraid of what will happen when night comes. Grendel, according to the Old English poem, lives in the wilderness outside the borders of the kingdom. Wilbur may be implying that the people's "dream of fright" is fear of the unknown. The hero, however, is willing to confront the mystery symbolized by the monster.

Stanza 4:

Wilbur condenses much of the action from the original poem in this stanza. In lines 19-20, he describes how the Danes go off to bed, leaving Beowulf alone to face the monster. The hall is "echoed" because it is a large, high-ceilinged room in the castle. When a crowd is feasting and celebrating there, the noise is very loud. When the hall is empty, it may echo with the slightest sound. Beowulf is a lonely figure standing in this great hall by himself, waiting for the monster. In addition, according to the epic poem, the sounds of human happiness in this hall first attract Grendel's anger, causing him to come and kill those in the castle.

Lines 21-22 describe the fight between Beowulf and Grendel. The fierce battle shakes the beams supporting the roof. Beowulf is so strong he defeats Grendel without using weapons; instead, he pulls the monster's arm completely off his body. The "child"--Grendel--leaves, groaning and dying.

When the fight is over, the Danes find Beowulf in an exhausted sleep. His head is "sealed" because he does not wake up for a long time, and no one knows what he is thinking or feeling. In the original poem, Beowulf fights not only Grendel, but Grendel's mother, who comes to avenge her child's death. Then the hero falls into a deep sleep.

Stanza 5:

The speaker returns to a description of the landscape. However, the country is apparently changed by the monster's death. It is still "overmuch like scenery," as in the first stanza, but now it is not friendly. The lark is free of the lake, but its song is silent. The day passes too quickly and the night offers no welcome. Line 30 echoes line 7, describing the people as strange. Here, though, they are cold instead of warm. It may be that now that they feel safe, they do not care about the hero as much as before.

The country seems to have lost its childishness when its child monster dies. In the first stanza, the land seemed too new, like the road "paved too shiningly" in line 5. In this fifth stanza, the day is "swiftly old." The people may have lost their innocence. While they had their monster, they could blame all their problems on an outside element. Now they have to look inside themselves to find out why the lark's song is not heard, or why the flowers are wrong.

However, since the speaker seems to be describing the adventure from Beowulf's point of view, this change in the land and its inhabitants may come from the hero's own feelings. Perhaps he is so tired from the battle that the country seems unfriendly. Perhaps he believes his effort was so great that the people cannot truly appreciate what he has gone through. Or, he may feel that since his task is over, he is no longer welcome and should leave.

Stanza 6:

The people are not unappreciative, as this stanza shows. They shower Beowulf with valuable presents as a reward for his rescue of their kingdom. All of these gifts are needed by a warrior--a horse, armor, and weapons. The speaker hints that by giving Beowulf these things, the people are encouraging him to fight other battles, to "do again what he has done." This may imply that the hero would prefer to rest after his great deed, but cannot because everyone expects him to do more great deeds. He may also have these expectations of himself.

Beowulf takes his presents and sails home. He is lonely despite his victory, because he has no son to leave his treasure to. The hero believes in the tradition of children carrying on the name of the father and honoring his accomplishments after his death. Beowulf may weep because he fears no one will remember him after he dies, since he has no son.

Stanza 7:

In this stanza the speaker most reveals Beowulf's isolation from the world. He becomes king of the Geats, but when he dies he has no family members left. He is famous for his brave deeds, and he is mourned, but his is a lonely death. He is buried at the edge of the sea, which is an in-between place, suitable for someone who lived outside the mainstream of the community. Although some of his followers ride around his barrow, or burial mound, and sing at his funeral, they do not fully understand him. Wilbur may be saying that a hero--or anyone who does great deeds--is never completely understood by the people around him.

Source Citation

"Overview: 'Beowulf'." *Poetry for Students*. Ed. Elizabeth Thomason. Vol. 11. Detroit: Gale Group, 2001. *Literature Resources from Gale*. Web. 6 Jan. 2011.

Document URL

http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?&id=GALE%7CH1430005508&v=2.1&u=milin_s_ccreg&it=r&p=LitRG&sw=w

Gale Document Number: GALE|H1430005508

Copyright and Terms of Use: <http://www.gale.com/epcopyright>