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Title: Overview: *Beowulf*

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[An epic poem in Old English, set in Denmark and Gotland around 500 A.D.; probably composed in England in the 700s A.D. and set down in its final manuscript form around 1000 A.D.

An untried young warrior named Beowulf leads twelve companions to Denmark to help its king rid his land of a monster named Grendel. Beowulf succeeds, also defeating Grendel's mother, and returns home. Fifty years later, now a king in his own land, Beowulf faces a final, less successful battle against a dragon.]

The identity of *Beowulf*'s author is unknown. The writer was most likely an eighth century West Mercian or Northumbrian monk who might better be called an editor than an author, for many sections of the poem undoubtedly had a long career in oral tradition before receiving final form in Beowulf. Whatever its source, the final version was recorded in a unique manuscript around the year 1000 A.D. It is the work of a master craftsman who was very well read, conscious of his role as a poet, and extremely skilled at making events and characters stand symbolically for universal human concerns.

Events in History at the Time the Poem Takes Place

English or Danish

There is no recorded history of the earliest of the Old English people known as Anglo-Saxons. Much of what we know about these people is derived from the artifacts they left behind, from *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (a record of events in England in the first thousand years A.D.), and from the few literary works of their period that survive. Primary among these works is *Beowulf*, one of the earliest poems written in any form of English.

Beowulf is recognized as a hallmark of English literature. Yet its heroes and its setting are not English. The poem is set in two places: the first half takes place on a Danish island, and the second half takes place in Beowulf's homeland, which consists of two large islands off the

southeast coast of Sweden. The hero of the poem, the warrior Beowulf, is a member of a southern Gotland tribe known as the Geats (pronounced "yea-ots"). The warrior travels to rescue the Danish people, called Scyldings (pronounced "shildings"), who are being harassed by the monster Grendel.

The Early Anglo-Saxons

Why should the English compose and preserve a long poem about a foreign people? One reason is that the poem champions values that were also important to the early Anglo-Saxons of Britain: bravery, loyalty, and devotion to the community. It is difficult to convey just how challenging the lives of the earliest Anglo-Saxons were. Every day was a battle to survive. The Anglo-Saxons lived in huts and dressed in animal skins to protect themselves against the miserable, bone-chilling dampness of the weather. They eked out an existence by farming the land, hunting, and venturing forth on dangerous, turbulent seas to fish. When they weren't scraping together a skimpy existence, they were fighting neighboring tribes and clans. These tough conditions created strong ties within tribes and encouraged intense loyalty to clan leaders. The environment also contributed to the high esteem in which the inhabitants held individual bravery, a quality they honored above all others.

The history of early Britain is one of foreign domination. The Angles and Saxons from the lowlands of Europe took over the rule of England (Angle-land) between 450 and 550 A.D. Viking invaders from Denmark, Sweden, and Norway made their presence felt as well, constantly raiding England during the period in which the poem was written. These seafaring warriors, descendants of Beowulf's era, were the Vikings who roamed the world and explored North America two hundred years before Columbus.

Warrior Culture and Society

The raw essence of life among a warrior people is celebrated in *Beowulf*. Much of its narrative is concerned with the challenges of existence, the weaponry used, and the festive celebrations of this group. The poem also portrays a strong sense of fatalism, or acceptance of death. The warriors of the era accepted their mortality and fate in a way that seems casual to the modern reader. The concept of *wyrd* (the root of the modern word *weird*), or fate, was central to the world view of the Anglo-Saxons living between the eighth and the tenth centuries. A warrior's bravery hinged upon his acceptance of the inevitable fact that at some point his courage would require the ultimate price: his life. Beowulf recognizes and draws strength from this view of the world. The warrior's grim view of destiny is ultimately fulfilled in the tale when he dies battling the fierce dragon.

In a passage that sums up the warrior philosophy celebrated in the poem, Beowulf assures Hrothgar, his Danish host in the first half of the poem, of his intention to retaliate after Grendel's mother has murdered one of his warrior companions:

Sorrow not, wise warrior. It is better for a man to avenge his friend than much mourn. Each of us must await his end of the world's life. Let him who may get glory before death: that is best for the warrior after he is gone from life.

(Donaldson, *Beowulf*, p. 25)

Another key concept of the society pictured in Beowulf is the notion of wergeld, or "man price." This signifies the amount a man's life was worth if he was killed, either accidently or in battle. The price was determined by social class distinctions--the bravest and ablest were worth the most money. Wergeld functioned as a sort of ransom that had to be paid to the dead man's relatives by the killer in order to avoid their revenge. In theory, such a payment system would allow early English society to carry on without deteriorating into a morass of never-ending feuding. But, in fact, theirs was a feuding, war-torn society despite precautions such as the wergeld system.

The Poem in Focus

The Plot

The first part of *Beowulf* is set on an island off Denmark, where the Scylding (Danish) people live under the rule of Hrothgar, their king. Hrothgar has recently constructed a magnificent hall called Heorot. This hall is the site of frequent banquets and drinking celebrations that arouse the anger of Grendel, a local water-dwelling monster. Grendel lives outside the circle of human kindness and kinship: "the grim spirit ... called Grendel, known as a rover of borders, one who held the moors, fen and fastness" (*Beowulf*, p. 3). Perhaps this is one reason why the monster attacks the humans: he is envious of human society. Grendel terrorizes the local inhabitants, who live in fear, and word spreads of the monster's hold over the Scyldings.

The hero of the poem, Beowulf, hears of their plight in his distant homeland and sails to the Scyldings' island with twelve warrior companions. Upon arriving they are greeted by a soldier guarding the coast, and the first of a series of commentaries on the weaponry and bravery of Beowulf and his men takes place. One of Hrothgar's heralds asks of them: "Where do you bring those gold-covered shields from, gray mail-shirts and visored helmets, this multitude of battleshafts ... I have not seen strangers--so many men--more bold" (*Beowulf*, p. 7).

When he is introduced to Hrothgar, Beowulf demonstrates his boldness. He pledges to "scorn to bear sword or broad shield, yellow wood, to the battle, but with my grasp I shall grapple with the enemy and fight for life, foe against foe" (*Beowulf*, p. 8). After a night of celebrating and bragging, Beowulf's bravery is put to the test. He watches as his foe devours one of his sleeping company: "He [Grendel] suddenly seized a sleeping man, tore at him ravenously, bit into his bone-locks, drank the blood from his veins, swallowed huge morsels; quickly he had eaten all of the lifeless one, feet and hands" (*Beowulf*, p. 13). Beowulf does not flee in the face of this terror but instead wrestles with the monster. Though Grendel can use magic to protect himself from many weapons, it does no good against Beowulf's bare hands. The warrior defeats the monster, and Grendel slinks off to his hideaway, mortally wounded. Another round of celebration ensues.

Beowulf is acknowledged publicly for his great bravery and rewarded with treasures by the Scyldings. The courageous men settle in for a night's rest after their fighting, feasting, and drinking. The poet again celebrates the men's warlike nature: "[As they slept] they set at their heads their battle-shields, bright wood; there on the bench it was easy to see above each man his helmet that towered in battle, his ringed-mail shirt, his great spear-wood. It was their custom to

be always ready for war whether at home or in the field...: that was a good nation" (*Beowulf*, p. 23).

The celebration is cut short, however, by the appearance of Grendel's mother. Angered by her son's death, she takes up the fight against the warriors. Beowulf, who has been housed in private quarters, is unable to do battle with Grendel's mother, who takes a prisoner and retreats to her home. Beowulf ventures forth to seek out the monster in her watery home on the moor. He descends into the monster's lair and uses a magic sword to defeat her in battle. After severing the head of the dead monster, Beowulf brings it back to his band of warriors. Yet another celebration follows.

In the final section of the story, Beowulf returns to his homeland, having fully demonstrated his bravery and generosity toward the Scyldings. He tells his own king and people about his exploits and praises the hospitality and generosity of Hrothgar's band. Time passes and Beowulf becomes king of the Geats, ruling well and wisely for fifty years. Eventually, though, a long-dormant dragon grows angry when a goblet is stolen from its hoard of treasure, and the dragon terrorizes the countryside. The fire-breathing creature even destroys Beowulf's home and throne. This rouses the old warrior to action, and Beowulf begins his last campaign. He heads for the dragon's lair with a small group of warriors. All except the warrior Wiglaf flee before the encounter; in the end Beowulf engages the dragon single-handedly.

Beowulf is unable to do any harm to the fearsome dragon, and the old warrior is forced to take cover. Wiglaf ventures forth to help his king, and together Wiglaf and Beowulf conquer the dragon. Beowulf suffers serious wounds in the battle, however, and his end is near. As the dragon's poison works its way through his system, Beowulf instructs Wiglaf to go retrieve the dragon's treasure to comfort him in his dying. Wiglaf obeys and eases Beowulf into the next world, then takes over as leader of the Geats.

Construction of the Poem

One prominent feature of the poem is its repetitiveness. Before each battle Beowulf recounts his life and hands down his legend, much as the poem itself has been handed down through time. With each victory, the hero's exploits are immediately retold to an audience of revelers as they toast his bravery and success. The action and major events of the Beowulf story are, in fact, only a tiny portion of the text; the rest of the work consists of recaps of previous events and listings of personages, weapons, and treasures. The poem actually interweaves narration about real events from history with its fictional story. Exactly how these narrated parts are related to the main story remains uncertain. It is known, however, that the repetition in *Beowulf* is due at least partly to its origins as an oral poem. Typically, an oral poem was sung by a poet who would recreate it with each telling, using complicated rhythms to relate the full tale. The repetition of long descriptive passages acted as a kind of easily remembered chorus in between the passages that described new adventures.

All Old English poetry was based upon alliteration--the repetition of consonant sounds, usually at the beginning of neighboring words. In addition, Old English poetry featured a break, or caesura, in the middle of each line, and each line typically had four beats or stressed syllables.

Pauses at the caesura and at the end of each line, as well as the regular number of beats in each line, established the poem's rhythm. This rhythmic regularity helped the narrator to preserve the poem in memory and made it easier to hand down the poem in much the same form from generation to generation.

What Beowulf Teaches

One crucial feature of *Beowulf* is its use of characters and action to create a model for the construction of a nation. The two societies in the poem, the Danes and the Geats, can be viewed as examples of all human societies. The Danes are deficient in physical prowess, and Grendel represents what happens when the intellectual strength of a nation exceeds its might: the nation becomes prey to every voracious neighbor. It is significant that Grendel conquers the Danes with his hands, showing physical prowess. Meanwhile, the Geatish kingdom, unlike the kingdom of the Danes, has great military might but lacks intellectual and moral strength. The enemy of the mighty Geats is a dragon whose breath, which can be understood to represent words or intellect, is used to conquer them. According to this model, both excesses could result in the destruction of the kingdom. The poem implies that a kingdom, and each individual, must be strong enough to discourage others from attacking. At the same time, the kingdom and the individual must be wise enough to behave justly and honorably and to refrain from attacking others unless provoked.

The major focus in the story is on bravery in the battle of good versus evil; the hero is an ideal man, brave and dedicated to doing good for its own sake. It is significant that the hero's early exploits, as he establishes his reputation, are on behalf of a foreign kingdom. He seeks out Grendel to destroy evil wherever it exists, not merely to protect his own people or his own interests. He risks his life for a group of relative strangers, demonstrating a generous bravery, although the youthful Beowulf is surely seeking fame in his adventurous quest.

His bravery is rewarded. The king and queen of the Scyldings reward Beowulf generously in goods and praise for his services. The entire issue of riches and wealth is tied into a system of bravery and merit in the poem, and rulers are presented as deserving of their wealth and status. This compensation for courage and allegiance reflects the social structure of the time. Rulers and their subjects depended upon loyal and brave warriors to support and protect them, while the warriors relied on the rulers to provide for them.

Composition and Sources

Beowulf's history is a complicated and mysterious one. Information about who actually composed the poem or when it was written is scarce, although many believe that it was first written in Northumbria, Britain, in the late tenth century. The original text has two distinct styles of penmanship, suggesting not two authors but two copyists, also known as scribes--usually monks whose main occupation was to produce manuscripts.

The Old English in which the original *Beowulf* was written (or spoken or sung) is quite different from the English spoken today. This Old English featured short, monosyllabic Anglo-Saxon words that were essential to the rhythm of *Beowulf* and other works of the period.

Structural similarities suggest that the *Beowulf* poet was familiar with the Roman epic poem *Aeneid* by Virgil. Some scholars contend that the author of *Beowulf* used Virgil's poem as a model in composing his epic.

The sources of the fictional story in the *Beowulf* poem are the traditional folklore and legends of northern Europe, although Charles W. Kennedy notes in his introduction to *Beowulf* that the fact that the monster Grendel has a name is unusual in folklore. Specifically, the poem's narrative seems to derive from a common European folktale type called "The Bear's Son," in which the hero is the offspring of a bear's mating with a human. The elements of "Bear's Son" stories are remarkably similar to those of *Beowulf*: a hall built by an aged king is haunted by a spirit or monster; a young warrior fights with the spirit and wounds it, chasing it back to its lair; the hero goes underground to defeat the monster, encountering its relatives. The parallels are clear, and it is reasonably certain that this type of story constitutes the basis for the first part of *Beowulf*. The dragon story in the poem is also rooted in folk traditions, though no particular dragon story is an obvious model for the episode in *Beowulf*.

As for Beowulf himself, it is fairly certain that he is not a historical figure at all. Instead, he is a legendary being who combines many of the elements of the early Swedish and Geatish kings with superhuman strength to create a mythological figure. In this sense, he is similar to the legendary King Arthur of British lore. The *Beowulf* story in turn became a source for later tales, especially an Icelandic tale of the fourteenth century called *Grettissaga*. Tracing such tales to their *Beowulf* origins not only helps determine how ancient the *Beowulf* poem is but also shows how literature feeds upon itself to provide the material for new and original works.

Events in History at the Time the Poem Was Written

Viking Influence on England

From the eighth through the eleventh century, England was constantly raided by the Vikings. The *Beowulf* poem was composed during this age of Viking invasions. While many of these invaders limited their activities to coastal raids, others had a more lasting impact. In 866 the Viking leader Ivar the Boneless completely overran northern England. His forces moved inland and settled down in the region. These Vikings had a strong influence on the English society of the time, and a blending of northern European cultures took place. In 878 the Anglo-Saxon leader Alfred the Great defeated a force of Danes and concluded the Peace of Wedmore, a treaty that both recognized his authority over one region (Wessex) and acknowledged Danish control over a broad area to the east and north of the Thames River known as the Danelaw. Danish customs and laws became firmly embedded in the Danelaw, leaving a lasting imprint on English culture.

Poetry as Entertainment

Beowulf is the oldest surviving northern European epic, which is a poem that tells the story of a hero or heroes and recounts a people's history or traditions. The poem's classification as an epic puts it into a select body of literature, a small family of works in world literature that capture the

spirit of people at a given time in history. There was at first, though, a far less serious dimension to the poem; it provided entertainment.

The tale of Beowulf and his encounters with the monstrous Grendel and the horrible dragon was created in a world where poetry was sung for entertainment and people frequently celebrated their history. At the time of the poem's composition, the people of England practiced trades and operated small village businesses. In such communities, townspeople often gathered after work to listen to songs such as *Beowulf*. The performer at these gatherings was known as a *scop* (pronounced "shope"), a singer or maker of poems. In witnessing the scop's performance, the early residents of England celebrated the hero's qualities of bravery and loyalty and also relaxed after a hard day of work. *Beowulf* was appreciated for its entertainment value, though it was probably created with much more sophisticated purposes in mind: the development of a strong value system and a code for the construction of a balanced government.

Christianity and Culture

Beowulf seems to straddle two worlds: it bridges the violent warrior culture that it celebrates and the Christian culture that was, at the time of its composition, displacing the earlier era.

The introduction of Christianity to the British Isles took place in 597 when St. Augustine and a group of monks arrived in England by way of Ireland. Christianity was thriving in England in the early eighth century, the time of the poem's creation. By the late tenth century, the date of the *Beowulf* manuscript, Christianity was well established in England. Careful reading of the poem reveals what seem to be insertions of Christian phrases and sections among what were originally a number of nonreligious stories.

The poem draws most heavily on Old Testament elements. The following example, which introduces the reader to the monster Grendel, illustrates the curious mix of folk legend with biblical references: "The grim spirit was called Grendel ... Unhappy creature, he lived for a time in the home of the monsters' race, after God had condemned them as kin of Cain ... From him [Cain] sprang all bad breeds, trolls and elves and monsters--likewise the giants who for a long time strove with God" (*Beowulf*, p. 3). Trolls, monsters, and elves, while unfamiliar to modern Christian orthodoxy, can be traced back to Norse mythology. *Beowulf* features many such instances where the Christian religion is melded with old stories and legends. This blending shows how one value system--that of the warrior clan, led by brave, violent leaders--was being replaced by another--that of a people obedient to a benevolent higher power who rewards virtue, forgiveness, and honesty.

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