

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Beowulf

by Anonymous

written by Eva Richardson

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. outline and analyze the traditions of the Anglo-Saxon heroic code.
2. describe the practices of Germanic warrior societies.
3. explore the principles of Anglo-Saxon poetry.
4. discuss the poem as it demonstrates the oral tradition in Old English poetry.
5. study the relationship between Beowulf and his kinsmen.
6. study the relationship between Beowulf and Hrothgar.
7. analyze the significance of treasure in Germanic warrior societies.
8. discuss the significance of paganism versus Christianity within the poem.
9. trace the significance of names and family relationships within the poem and within Anglo-Saxon society.
10. examine the language of *Beowulf* and significant figurative devices common to Anglo-Saxon society.
11. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
12. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
13. offer a close reading of *Beowulf* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

Background Information

THE ANGLO-SAXON PERIOD:

The Anglo-Saxon period is a significant part of the early Middle Ages in Europe. Between the first and the fifth centuries CE, England, then known as Britannia, was a frontier province of the Roman Empire. The Britons, who spoke the Celtic language, rather quickly assimilated themselves to Roman Civilization, even adopting Christianity in the fourth century, following the conversion of Emperor Constantine, who made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Around 450 CE, however, Roman military units were forced to leave Britain to defend Rome itself from the invasions of the Goths, leaving the island susceptible to attacks by seafaring tribes. Three Germanic tribes—the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes—migrated from the Northern European mainland and invaded England, occupying virtually every region within the British Isles. Since the Anglo-Saxon invaders were pagans, Christianity quickly faded as a predominant religion. In 597, however, Pope Gregory sent a Benedictine monk, later known as St. Augustine of Canterbury, to England to convert the population. Christianity again became the reigning religion among the British. In the ninth century, other seafaring Germanic tribes, including the Danes, threatened to invade Britain. They were eventually repelled when Alfred, King of the West Saxons, who united the Southern British tribes for the first time in defense of their homeland.

THE HISTORY OF THE *BEOWULF* MANUSCRIPT:

Beowulf is widely considered to be the most significant Old English poem in existence. It was likely composed in the eighth century CE, although the exact date of the poem's composition is still a point of contention among literary scholars. The name of the author of the *Beowulf* poem is unknown, in part due to the fact that the poem was transmitted orally for decades before being written down. The earliest manuscript of *Beowulf* known to scholars was written in an Anglo-Saxon dialect during the tenth century. Unfortunately, the *Beowulf* manuscript was severely damaged in a fire in 1731, before any handwritten duplicates of the text had been produced. Consequently, the poem contains a series of sections that are no longer legible. The *Beowulf* poem was composed in the tradition of ancient **Germanic oral poetry**, describing the heroic deeds and fantastic victories of its protagonist, Beowulf. 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 who threatened the stability of the Scandinavian homeland.

Discussion Topics/Questions

1. What is the significance of treasure in Germanic warrior societies?
2. What attitudes toward honor and valor in battle are displayed by the characters in the poem?
3. What is the correlation between treasure and loyalty within the context of the poem?
3. What effect do instances of figurative language such as metaphor, simile, alliteration, etc., have on the reader?
4. How do the *Beowulf* poet's style, tone, and word choice help reinforce his attitude toward Germanic warrior societies and their principles?
5. How does the poem juxtapose pagan and Christian beliefs?
6. What is the importance of believing in a Christian God according to *Beowulf*? According to the *Beowulf* poet?
7. What significance do names hold within the society of the poem?
8. What is the *Beowulf* poet's attitude toward paganism and pagan rituals?
9. To what extent is *Beowulf* a typical Germanic warrior hero? What sets him apart from other heroes?
10. How does the oral tradition of Anglo-Saxon poetry impact the narrative within the poem? How does the poem honor and replicate the oral tradition?

Chapter I

1. What is the function of Heorot?

2. Why is Grendel appalled by the activities going on in Heorot?

3. Who or what is Grendel? Why does he live isolated in the marshes?

4. What evidence of Christianity is there in this largely pagan poem?

5. How does the poem blend Christian and pagan myth?

Chapter V

1. What motif is emphasized by the herald's reaction to the arrival of the Geats?

2. What practice engrained in the heroic code is illustrated by the term "giver of rings"?

3. In this chapter is the first time we learn the name of the leader of the Geats. What is it?

Chapter X

1. What does Beowulf's decision to fight without weapons reveal about his character?

2. What is suggested by the final paragraph of this chapter?

3. What thought troubles Beowulf's men as they fall asleep in the hall?

Chapters XIV and XV

1. What is the first thing Hrothgar does upon seeing Grendel's severed arm? Why is this significant?

2. In what condition is Heorot? Why?

3. What is implied by the introduction of Hrothulf?

4. What is further foreshadowed by the poet's noting that, at this celebration, "Heorot was now filled with friends; no Scylding folk had yet attempted treachery"?

5. List the gifts that Hrothgar gives to Beowulf.

Chapters XXIV, XXV, and XXVI

1. How does Beowulf explain his victory when he returns to Heorot?

2. What scene is etched around the sword hilt that Beowulf presents to Hrothgar?

3. What is the point of the story of Heremond that Hrothgar tells Beowulf?

4. What is the name of the “overweening pride” against which Hrothgar warns Beowulf?

5. What noble deed indicates Beowulf’s sincere respect for the Danes?

6. On what note do Beowulf and his men take their leave of Hrothgar and the Danes?

Chapters XXXIV and XXXV

1. Who is the thirteenth man who accompanies Beowulf and his warriors to the dragons' lair?

2. What is Beowulf's mood as he goes into battle with the dragon?

3. Why does Beowulf, once again, provide narrative about the deaths of Hygelac's brothers and the war between the Geats and the Swedes?

4. Why does Beowulf apologize for carrying weapons against the dragon?

5. What figurative and rhetorical devices predominate in the description of Beowulf's battle with the dragon? What effect do they create?
