Teaching Anonymous's

Beowulf

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

by

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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**.

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!

Activity One

Examining Beowulf as an Archetypal Character

1. Copy and distribute the three handouts: (1) *Beowulf*: Archetypal Activity One: Information Sheet, (2) *Beowulf:* Archetypal Activity One: Graphic, and (3) *Beowulf:* Archetypal Activity One: Charting Beowulf's Hero Quest.

2. Divide the class into pairs or small groups. Assign one group to review each of the following chapters: III, V, IX, X, and XIV.

3. For each chapter, ask group members to review and take detailed notes on the character of Beowulf. Each group should pay particular attention to references to qualities of the archetypal HERO within the context of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Each group should present relevant information about Beowulf as it relates to the archetypal HERO to the class.

4. Have each group complete the handout: Beowulf *Archetypal Activity One: Graphic*.

5. Have each group report its findings to the class.

6. Use the following questions to generate a classroom discussion:

    • What is the connection between bravery and the archetypal hero?

    • To what extent are selflessness and selfishness both aspects of the archetypal hero?

    • How can the relationship between Beowulf and his warriors be characterized?

    • What is the relationship between heroism and sacrifice for Beowulf?

    • How are weapons and armory emblems of the hero?

    • Why does Beowulf order his warriors to disarm before going before the king of the Danes, Hrothgar?

    • Why does Beowulf tell the story of his fight with the sea monsters?

    • How does Beowulf gain respect from Hrothgar's men?

    • What is the significance of rewards when it comes to establishing Beowulf as an archetypal hero?

    • How does the poem indicate that Beowulf has become a hero within the history of the Danish and Geatish people? What is the role of the bard?

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 One

Examining the Text for Clues to the Anglo-Saxon Period in European History

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *Beowulf:* New Historicism Activity One Fact Sheet and Textual Evidence of Anglo-Saxon Culture in *Beowulf*.

2. Have students (independently, in pairs, or in small groups) study the Fact Sheet and note illustrations of the information on the Textual Evidence sheet.

3. Reconvene the class and discuss:

    • What can readers infer about Germanic tribes from their reading of the *Beowulf* poem?

    • What aspect of Anglo-Saxon history and culture is the focus of the *Beowulf* poem?

    • Considering that, from the Anglo-Saxon view, the Vikings were invaders, what view of the Viking tribes does the poem present?

    • What does the ending of the narrative—the prediction of the disintegration of the Geatish homeland and kingdom following Beowulf's death—reveal about the stability of Viking society? What might the (presumably British) *Beowulf* poet be suggesting for England?

    • How does the poem describe the interaction between different Germanic tribes? How does the *Beowulf* poet evaluate the cooperation and conflicts between different tribes?

    • How does the poem deal with (or illustrate) the interplay of paganism and Christianity? What elements seem to be largely pagan? What elements are clearly Christian?

    • What might the *Beowulf* poet's intentions be for not setting the poem in England but rather describing the Geats and the Danes in their Scandinavian homelands? What facts about the Viking tribes does the *Beowulf* poet want to convey to his British audience?

    • What part does the *Beowulf* poem play in the creation of the history of Britain? What is the significance of the *Beowulf* poem for modern British literary scholars?

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.