

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Beowulf

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Beowulf

Introduction

Beowulf is the oldest British epic known today, as well as the longest surviving poem. Written in old English, the poem's author is unknown, although the story's quality indicates that he was an experienced storyteller. Several of the Germanic characters are known to have lived during the eighth century, suggesting that *Beowulf* was composed during that time. The original manuscript, which was damaged in a fire in 1731, is located in the British Library in London.

Although originating in England, the poem deals with various Scandinavian tribes, particularly the Danes and the Geats. *Beowulf* is an accumulation of fact and fiction. No record suggests that Beowulf was an actual person, but his uncle, Hygelac, is mentioned in the chronicles of Gregory of Tours, a French historian. Many of the stories and folktales incorporated in *Beowulf*, such as the discord between Finn and Hengest, were gathered from Germanic invaders of England. Monsters similar to Grendel and his mother also appear in several Scandinavian legends; Christian elements, such as the monsters' relation to Cain, are added to create unique versions of the tales.

Beowulf

Objectives

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

1. discuss the author's writing style, including his use of the following:
 - foreshadowing
 - alliteration
 - kenning
2. explain the elements that make *Beowulf* an epic poem.
3. identify characteristics of Germanic culture as depicted in *Beowulf*, including the commonality of feuds, the importance of weapons, and the attitudes towards life, death, and material possessions.
4. discuss the relevance of women's roles in Germanic culture.
5. identify the relevance of the interjected anecdotes with the main story.
6. identify and discuss the following themes in the poem and cite incidents in the novel for support:
 - goodness will triumph over evil
 - the difference in values between the young and old
 - the importance of ancestral identity and reputation
 - the importance of loyalty
7. cite examples of pagan and Christian values in *Beowulf*.
8. explain the symbolic significance of the following:
 - Grendel and his mother
 - the mead-hall
 - the golden necklace
9. identify the characteristics that make Beowulf an epic hero.
10. discuss the conflict between spiritual and material values in *Beowulf*.
11. recognize the values of the Germanic heroic code, and explain how those values differ between a warrior and a king.

Beowulf

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Discuss what is learned about 8th century Germanic culture through reading *Beowulf*.
2. Compare and contrast Beowulf's first battles with his last battle.
3. Cite examples of how the story is didactic.
4. Find examples of various literary elements:
 - foreshadowing
 - Dues ex Machina
 - alliteration
 - kenning
5. Discuss the roles of women in Germanic culture and whether those roles exist today.
6. Explain how feuds were an integral part of society in *Beowulf*, and how these feuds resemble some of the conflicts between nations today.
7. How is *Beowulf* an epic, or a long narrative poem on a great or serious subject?
8. Relate instances from the poem that portray Beowulf as an epic hero.
9. Discuss how the anecdotes that are interspersed throughout the poem relate, whether directly or indirectly, to the main storyline.
10. Prove that the following are themes in *Beowulf*:
 - goodness will triumph over evil
 - the difference in values between the young and old
 - the importance of ancestral identity and reputation
 - the importance of loyalty
11. How are pagan and Christian values successfully combined in the story?
12. Explain the symbolic significance of the following:
 - Grendel and his mother
 - the mead-hall
 - the golden necklace

Chapter III

Vocabulary

assuage – to relieve

fain – happily; “because it was desired”

fare – to go, journey; to move

foe – an enemy, adversary

gainsaid – contradicted; spoke against; contrary to

Geats – a seafaring tribe from the south of Sweden who appear to have been conquered during the early Middle Ages

haven – a safe place; a calm harbor where ships can anchor

headlands – points of land that project into a body of water

marauding – raiding

seethe – to be in a state of agitation

sentinel – a sentry, guard

wave-traveler – a ship

whence – where

1. Who is Beowulf’s king?

2. Why do Beowulf and a group of Geats travel to Hrothgar’s kingdom?

3. Why are the Geats noteworthy to the Danish sentry?

Chapter XI

Vocabulary

clamor – a loud continuous noise

crag – large boulders

din – a loud and lingering noise (especially one comprised of various sounds)

gilded – to cover with a thin layer of gold

ire – hateful anger

sate – to satisfy

1. How is Grendel's death or defeat foreshadowed?

2. Why is the word "destiny" capitalized?

3. How does Grendel react when he encounters Beowulf, who grabs the monster's arm?

4. Find an example of alliteration in this chapter.

Chapter XVIII

Vocabulary

bolsters – firm pillows
cuirass – a breastplate

- 1. What is particularly special about the collar that Wealtheow gives to Beowulf? What does the collar symbolize?

- 2. What do the warriors do before they go to sleep? Does the narrator approve of this habit?
