

<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/beowulf>

<http://www.wvnorton.com/college/english/nael9/section/volA/timeline.aspx>

## **BEOWULF ASSIGNMENT**

**BACKGROUND:** *Beowulf* borrows from two traditions: Germanic (for verse form, history, geography, folklore) and Romano-Christian (for diction, some symbolism, and religious allusions). The poem is probably of Anglican origins (Northumbrian or Mercian) and is dated approximately mid 8<sup>th</sup> century. It depicts the Anglo-Saxons before their penetration of England. Despite the Christian references, the characters in *Beowulf* would have been pagans. The one datable event in the poem is Hygelac's raid of the Frisians in 521. References to Offa may have served to flatter the real-life Mercian King Offa.

**GENRE:** *Beowulf* is an epic, but not in the sense of Classical epics such as *The Odyssey*. Rather, it is a heroic epic which emphasizes the heroic code of conduct (see key terms in Discussion Forum; prowess, boasting, courage, loyalty).

**STRUCTURE:** The poem can be seen as divided into two main parts, the first part recounting Beowulf's adventures at Hrothgar's court and the second part recounting his return home and subsequent tenure as King. It can also be seen as divided into three main parts according to Beowulf's battles against, respectively, Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon. The work also contains a number of digressions which comment upon or enhance the primary narrative. The main digressions are the Sigemund Lay (lines 874-897), the Finnsburgh fragment (lines 1068-1159), the Mod-Thryth episode (lines 1931-1962), and the account of Heatho-Bard Danish feud (lines 2020-2069).

### **Study Questions: *Beowulf***

As you read *Beowulf*, trace one of the following recurring elements. Be sure to note particular page numbers and mark passages of interest. Consider the contribution of the element to the whole. Your response should be at least 2-3 pages and should include direct quotes. Be prepared to share your response with the class when we meet on September 7.

1. References to Christianity. (These passages may seem curiously juxtaposed with pagan references. How do Christian allusions fit within the frame of *Beowulf*? Consider in detail several specific passages. Note also the role of Fate. How is it reconciled with Christianity? What attributes of the story seem incompatible with Christianity? Why?)
2. Topical details such as descriptions of gold, armour, adornments, battle gore, gifts, feasts, monsters, etc. (Such details were extremely important in Anglo-Saxon literature. For modern readers, they provide a glimpse of the "texture of life" experienced by Anglo-Saxons. What

values of Anglo-Saxon society do we glimpse through these details? To what type of audience do they seem directed?)

3. Heroic code of conduct. (Most agree that this is a "macho" poem. What values are expected of the heroic characters? To whom does their loyalty lie? How do they demonstrate loyalty? Consider *flyting* (battle boasting), *ofermod* (excessive pride), prowess, courage, etc.)

4. Women. (What conclusions can we draw about the role of women in Anglo-Saxon society? In what ways is their role powerful? In what ways are they merely military pawns? Explore the role of the woman as diplomat, peaceweaver, queen, mother, pawn, etc. Refer to several female characters in the text.)

5. Monsters and Magic. (Do the supernatural creatures in the text seem symbolic? If so, how? Does the author elicit sympathy for any of the monster-creatures? Consider especially Grendel and Grendel's mother. Also note other references to supernatural occurrences and magic.)

6. Elegiac elements. (Elegy is an important element in Anglo-Saxon literature. How does it figure in *Beowulf*? In what ways is the poem itself elegiac? Compare several elegiac passages to previous Old English poetry that we have examined this semester.)

7. Digressions and references to storytelling. (Why does the author include numerous digressions? How do they contribute to the account of the main hero, Beowulf? How do these digressions fit within the whole and contribute to theme? Consider, too, references to storytelling and oral tradition.)

8. Stylistic effects. (Consider Old English rhetorical and stylistic devices such as the use of kennings, juxtaposition of elements (light/dark, good/evil, etc.), episodic structure, and alliteration. Consider, too, Heaney's own poetic style. How does he modernize the poem? In what ways does he successfully reflect the original?)