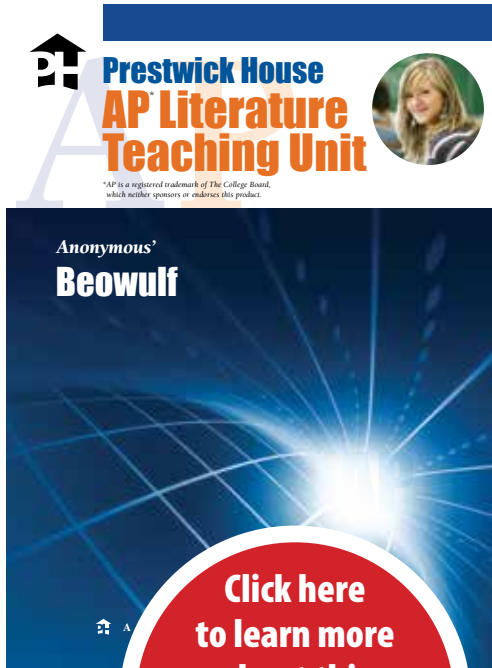




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Teaching Unit

Beowulf

by Anonymous

written by Eva Richardson



Prestwick House

Item No. 304369

Beowulf

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.

THE THEME OF CHRISTIANITY VS. PAGANISM

The *Beowulf* poem presents a fascinating mix of Christian values and pagan traditions. It is generally assumed that the *Beowulf* poet was a Christian, since the Christian conversion of England was virtually complete by the time the poem is believed to have been created. Still, many of the poem's characters embrace pagan heroic ideals. Hrothgar's kinsmen, for example,

Questions for Essay and Discussion

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 VI

1. The poet's identifying Hrothgar as "the crown of the Scyldings" is an example of what figurative device?

2. What is significant about (1) the request that Beowulf and his men leave their weapons and armor outside when they enter Heorot and (2) their willingness to do so.

3. What do we learn of Beowulf's ancestry, heritage, and previous connection to Hrothgar's court?

4. In what manner of combat does Beowulf boast that he will defeat Grendel?

5. What does Beowulf request should be done with his armor and weaponry in case he doesn't succeed in his battle against Grendel? What piece does he specifically mention? Why is this one special?

Chapter XII

1. What, apparently, is the source of Grendel's invincibility?

2. How does Beowulf defeat Grendel?

3. Thematically, why is the way Beowulf fights Grendel significant?

4. What does the end of the chapter suggest is as important as the Danes' being free from Grendel's tyranny?

Chapters XVII and XVIII

1. How does Chapter XVII begin? What language convention cues the reader to this?

2. What is a “lay,” as when the poet says, “The lay, that bardic ballad, was sung to its end”?

3. What role does hyperbole play in the poet’s telling of the Beowulf tale?

4. How do Wealhtheow’s speech and actions exemplify important aspects of the warrior code?

5. What implicit warning and potential foreshadowing does Wealhtheow’s speech contain? (Note that scholars of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian literature generally agree that Hrothulf was Hrothgar’s nephew and did rule Denmark as king after Hrothgar’s death.)

6. What problem does the second paragraph of Chapter XVIII present to the narrative? How can a reader rectify this problem?

7. On what notes of foreshadowing does Chapter XVIII end?

7. Who is most likely “Hæreth’s daughter”? Why do you think so?

8. Who are Frearwaru and Froda, and how do they figure into the narrative at this point?

9. Whom is Beowulf quoting in the paragraph that begins, “Can’t you, my comrade, recognize that sword...”? What is happening in this part of the narrative?

10. What is the name of the Geat who was devoured by Grendel on the night of Beowulf’s battle?

11. How does Beowulf’s account of his combat with Grendel differ from the account we were given earlier?

Chapters XXXVIII and XXXIX

1. What effect is created by the alliteration of the “w” sound at the beginning of Chapter XXXVIII?

2. Why does Beowulf react as he does to seeing the dragon’s treasure? What has treasure come to represent in this poem?

3. How does Beowulf reward Wiglaf for his loyalty and support? What is significant about the treasure he gives Wiglaf?

4. What is Wiglaf’s message to his kinsmen?
