

Unit 1

Beowulf

Beowulf, written in the Old English sometime before the 10th century AD, describes the adventures of a great Scandinavian warrior of the sixth century. *Beowulf* is the oldest surviving epic in British literature, and the first major poem in a European vernacular language.

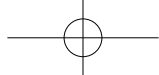
Background Knowledge: The Anglo-Saxon Period (450–1066)

1 Roman Conquest

The early inhabitants in the island were Britons, a tribe of Celts. From the Britons the island got its name—Britain, the land of Britons. The Celts were primitive people living in tribal society, knowing how to make swords and grow crops. Their religious ceremonies were May Day and the cult of mistletoe, which have become part of the national tradition of the English people.

The Celts suffered repetitive invasions by foreign forces. In 55 BC, Julius Caesar¹, the Roman conqueror, led his legions to England. There were frequent conflicts between the native Celts and the Roman invaders. The Celts remained free and wild in Scotland, Wales and Ireland. The Roman occupation lasted for three and a half centuries. They built temples, roads, walls, and military camps, and they also built many walled towns and made them the sites of military settlement. This explains the reason why there are towns today in Britain ending in “-chester” or “-caster”. In AD 410, the Romans withdrew

¹ Julius Caesar (100–44 BC): Roman statesman and a general of genius. He is the author of *De Bello Gallico*, from which we get most of our knowledge of the Roman Britain.



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their legions from the island. The Roman Conquest witnessed the foundation of London, but the Conquest left little influence on its national life, and the people continued to speak Celtic.

2 Anglo-Saxon Conquest

In the first half of the fifth century, the island of Britain was invaded by three Germanic tribes: the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, usually known as Anglo-Saxons. They originally occupied parts of the coast of modern Denmark and Germany on both sides of the Elbe. The old Saxon word “angul” means a hook, and the name Saxon is from “seax”, a short sword. They lived a life related to fishing, and they were brave fighters. This is the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon period in British history (449-1100).

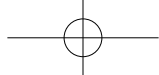
The Anglo-Saxons were the ancestors of the present English people. They killed many Celts and drove the rest into Wales, Scotland and Ireland, and settled down themselves. The Jutes occupied Kent, the southeastern part of the island. The Saxons took the southern part and established small kingdoms as Wessex, Essex and Sussex. The Angles spread over the east midland and built the kingdom of the East Angles.

The Celts resisted bravely. In the struggle against the invaders, there appeared a legendary figure, the Celtic King Arthur. King Arthur was a Romanised Celt, and a general and brave fighter. At Camelot in Somersetshire, the legendary capital of his kingdom, he gathered around him the bravest of his followers, who were known as the Knights of the Round Table. King Arthur and his knights fought bravely for the kingdom against the Anglo-Saxon invaders, and left rich materials for endless English romances.

The Anglo-Saxons also fought among themselves, and seven kingdoms were established at the end of the sixth century. In the process of fighting against other invaders later, these small kingdoms were combined into a united kingdom named England, that is, the land of Angles. The three tribes had mixed into a whole people called English.

Language spoken by them is now called the Old English, which is the foundation of English language and literature. Its usage covers a period of approximately 700 years—from the Anglo-Saxon migrations that created England in the fifth century to some time after the Norman invasion of 1066.

With the settlement of Anglo-Saxons in Britain, the history of English literature began.



3 Religion and Literature

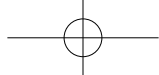
An important event in the period is the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity. The Angles and Saxons, before they came to England, believed in the old mythology of Northern Europe. The Northern mythology has left its mark upon the English language. For example, there is a convincing evidence that the days of the week in English are named after the Northern gods. In AD 597, Pope Gregory sent St. Augustine as a missionary to King Ethelbert of Kent, and the Anglo-Saxon conversion to Christianity began.

About the same time missionaries from Ireland began to preach Christianity in the north. Monasteries were built all over the country from the seventh century. The Anglo-Saxons gradually accepted Christianity. This changed their outlook, and enabled them to read the Scriptures and the classical writings of the ancient Greek. Although at a time only monks could read and write, the earliest English books were written down. Heathen mythology was replaced by Christian religion.

As for the change of social structure, the Anglo-Saxon period witnessed a transition from tribal society to feudalism. In that age of frequent wars, they admired greatly the wisdom and courage of their war leaders. Their kings were essentially warriors, whose duty was mainly to protect the tribe from being attacked. The ideal of kingly behaviour was enormously important. It is possibly that this chief spiritual force and the admiration for the great deeds of the kings shaped their earliest history and literature, and helped in the formation of epic as the first important literary genre.

In the development of the Anglo-Saxon literature, three figures were worthy of being mentioned. The first one was Caedmon, who lived in the seventh century and turned the stories of the Bible into verse form. He used *Paraphrase* as the title of the work. The legend goes like this: Caedmon knew nothing about how to sing at first, and one night he heard the voice from God: “Caedmon, sing me something.” Caedmon answered honestly that he could not sing. Then God told him, “Sing me the Creation.” And all of a sudden Caedmon got the magic power to sing, and was remembered as the first Anglo-Saxon poet.

Another important figure was Venerable Bede (672-735), a monk and the author of *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in Latin. The book covers the whole length of early English history from the invasion by Julius Caesar to the year 731, four years before Bede’s death. The book earned the author the title of the “Father of English History”. We know the story of



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Caedmon from this book, which is full of strange religious stories and miracles.

The third figure was King Alfred the Great of Wessex (849-899), who is remembered not only as a king to unite the forces of the Anglo-Saxon kings and defeat the Danes, but also as the guiding spirit of his kingdom. During his reign, many Latin books were translated into West Saxon dialect. He himself is said to translate Bede's *History*. He launched *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which began with the story of Caesar's conquest and annually recorded important events until 1154.

Among all the achievements of literary legacy, the chief survivor of Old English literature is *Beowulf*.

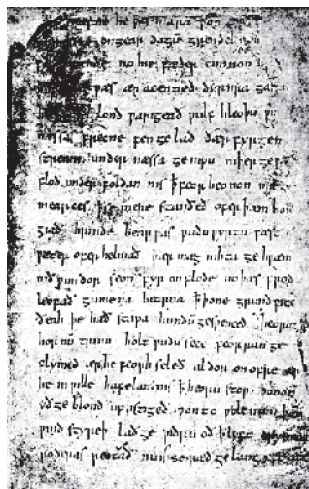
Beowulf

Beowulf exists in only one manuscript. The poem is untitled in the manuscript, but has been known as *Beowulf* since the early 19th century. As the single major surviving work of Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry, the poem has become "England's national epic".

Beowulf consists of 3,182 lines, depicting a vivid picture of an early Germanic society, of its public life, its customs, rituals and cultural activities. A rich fabric of fact and fancy, the poem demonstrates its charm in the description of a world of legends, fantasies and primitive beauty. It also recaptures the values, beliefs, and longings of the Anglo-Saxon people before they came to England, and presents a mixture of ideas of paganism and Christianity. Much of the material of the poem is legendary and paralleled in other Germanic historical-mythological literature in Norse, Old English, and German.

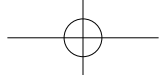
Plot Summary

In the poem, Beowulf, a hero of a Germanic tribe, battles three antagonists: Grendel, who is destroying Heorot and its inhabitants in Denmark; Grendel's mother, who wants to take the revenge for the killing of her son by Beowulf; and later in life, a dragon.



The first page of the *Beowulf* manuscript

This copy survived both the wholesale destruction of religious artifacts during the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII and a disastrous fire.



Unit 1 Beowulf

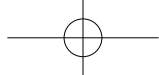
The first two fights occur in his youth. In the land of the Danes during the reign of King Hrothgar, who builds a splendid hall and gives it the name Heorot. One night while the Danes are feasting, Grendel, a giant monster of human shape, enraged at the sound of merry-making, suddenly appears and kills 30 warriors. For the next 12 years the monster haunts the place until no one dares to enter the grand hall. When Beowulf, nephew to King Hygelac of the Geats, hears of this, he sails with his warriors to Heorot to offer his help. He persuades the Danes to feast with him in the hall. After they fall asleep, the monster bursts in the door, seizes a warrior and devours him. Beowulf disdains to use a sword against the monster and grapples with him. After a fierce combat, Beowulf tears away one arm and a shoulder off the monster who flees to die. The next night Hrothgar rewards the hero with rich gifts and a banquet in Heorot. Then Grendel's mother comes to avenge her son, and carries away the king's dearest friend. Beowulf follows Grendel's mother to her sea dwelling and kills her with a sword found hanging in the cave.

Beowulf's fight with a dragon happens 50 years later, when Beowulf has been king of the Geats for a long time. A runaway slave steals some hidden treasure guarded by a dragon for 300 years in a cave. The dragon is enraged and ravages the land with his fiery breath. Beowulf sets out with 12 companions. Ordering his men waiting outside, he alone seeks the dragon in the cave and fights bravely against it. Both Beowulf and the dragon are mortally wounded. The dying Beowulf gives his last orders about his funeral, and is glad to learn that he gains new treasure for his people. His people throw the dragon into the sea and build a large bonfire on a headland, stretching far into the sea to burn Beowulf's body. Then they lay all the treasure with Beowulf's ashes and bury them together under a tremendous mound. The mound, according to Beowulf's will, may serve as a beacon for seafarers who sail along the coast. The poem ends with praises of the great deeds of the hero, who was "the most gracious, the kindest to his people, the keenest for fame".

The two halves of the poem are distinguished in many ways: youth, then age; Denmark, then Geatland; the hall, then the barrow; diverse, then focused.

Artistic Features

Beowulf represents the highest achievement of the Old English. The most distinct feature of the epic is the extensive use of **alliteration**, that is, certain accented words in a line begin with the same consonant sound. Its poetic vocabulary includes sets of metrical compounds that vary according to alliterative needs. It also makes extensive use of elided metaphors.



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Besides, a figurative language called “kenning” is largely applied to add beauty to ordinary objects, and the device is typical of much of classic poetry in the Old English, which is heavily formulaic. A **kenning** is a poetic compound, made up of two or more nouns standing for another noun. For example, “the rough sea” is the “whale-road”, “the smooth sea” is “swan’s road”, the “boat” is the “wave-rider”, the “dragon” is the “shadow-walker”, the “ocean” is “the mingling of the waves”, the “body” is the “bone house”, the “king” is the “ring-giver”, and “helmet bearer” stands for “warrior”, the “world candle” for the “sun”. The name Beowulf itself is a kenning, “bee-wolf”, that is, “bear”. In the text selected below, “the jaws of the hall” refers to “the door”, “the house of bone” to “the body”.

Understatements can also be found to give an impression of reserve and at times a tinge of ironical humour, which is often regarded as a characteristic of the English language. Such phrases as “not troublesome” for “welcome”, “need not praise” for “a right to condemn” are examples of understatements.

Beowulf’s Fight with Grendel

Down off the moorlands’ misting fells¹ came
 Grendel stalking²; God’s brand was on him³.
 The spoiler⁴ meant to snatch away
 from the high hall some of human race.
 He came on under the clouds, clearly saw at last 5
 the gold-hall of men, the mead-drinking place⁵
 nailed with gold plates. That was not the first visit
 he had paid to the hall of Hrothgar the Dane:
 he never before and never after
 harder luck nor hall-guards found.⁶ 10

Walking to the hall came this warlike creature

1 fells: crags.

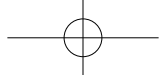
2 stalk: stride haughtily.

3 God’s brand was on him: with God’s wrath laden. brand: a mark of infamy.

4 spoiler: here refers to Grendel, who is to spoil and seize.

5 the mead-drinking place: the gold-hall. mead: wine made of honey and water.

6 he never before and never after harder luck nor hall-guards found: never had he before met and nor would he meet with such bad luck and powerful warriors.



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condemned to agony. The door gave way¹,
 toughened with iron, at the touch of those hands.
 Rage-inflamed, wreckage-bent, he ripped open
 the jaws of the hall². Hastening on, 15
 the foe then stepped onto the unstained floor,
 angrily advanced: out of his eyes stood
 an unlovely light like that of fire.

He saw then in the hall a host of young soldiers,
 a company of kinsmen caught away in sleep, 20
 a whole warrior-band. In his heart he laughed then,
 horrible monster, his hopes swelling
 to a gluttonous meal.³ He meant to wrench⁴
 the life from each body that lay in the place
 before night was done. It was not to be; 25
 he was no longer to feast on the flesh of mankind
 after that night.

Narrowly the powerful
 kinsman of Hygelac kept watch how the ravager
 set to work with his sudden catches; 30
 nor did the monster mean to hang back.
 As a first step he set his hands on
 a sleeping soldier, savagely tore at him,
 gnashed at his bone-joints, bolted huge gobbets,
 sucked at his veins,⁵ and had soon eaten 35
 all of the dead man, even down to his
 hands and feet.

Forward he stepped,
 stretched out his hands to seize the warrior
 calmly at rest there, reached out for him with his 40
 unfriendly fingers: but the faster man

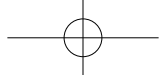
1 gave way: opened.

2 the jaws of the hall: the door.

3 his hopes swelling to a gluttonous meal: a lusty banquet waited his will. swelling: growing.

4 wrench: tear apart by violence.

5 As a first step... sucked at his veins: A description of the series of cruel actions when the monster tore the man fiercely asunder, ate the small bone-joints, swallowed hastily large pieces of flesh, and drank blood in streams.



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forestalling¹, sat up, sent back his arm.
 The upholder of evils at once knew
 he had not met, on middle earth's
 extremest acres, with any man 45
 of harder hand-grip²: his heart panicked.
 He was quit of the place no more quickly for that³.

Eager to be away, he ailed for his darkness⁴
 and the company of devils; the dealings he had there
 were like nothing he had come across in his lifetime⁵. 50
 Then Hygelac's brave kinsman called to mind
 that evening's utterance⁶, upright he stood,
 fastened his hold till fingers were bursting.⁷
 The monster strained away: the man stepped closer.
 The monster's desire was for darkness between them, 55
 direction regardless, to get out and run
 for his fen-bordered lair; he felt his grip's strength
 crushed by his enemy. It was an ill journey
 the rough marauder had made to Heorot.

The crash⁸ in the banqueting-hall came the Danes, 60
 the men of the guard that remained in the building,
 with the taste of death. The deepening rage
 of the claimants to Heorot⁹ caused it to resound.

1 the faster man forestalling: Beowulf took action first to prevent Grendel from further attacking.

2 The upholder...harder hand-grip: Grendel realised that he had never met before a man with heavier hand-grip.

3 quit of the place no more quickly for that: none the sooner escaped!

4 he ailed for his darkness: he suffered and was eager to be back to his dark den.

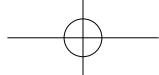
5 the dealings he had there were like nothing he had come across in his lifetime: the doings now were what he had never done before, that is, he had never behaved in such an awkward way.

6 that evening's utterance: his boast at evening.

7 fastened his hold till fingers were bursting: grasped firmly his foe till the foe's fingers cracked.

8 crash: noise.

9 The deepening rage of the claimants to Heorot: both Grendel and Beowulf claimed themselves as the guardians of the hall, and both of them were angry.



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It was indeed wonderful that the wine-supper-hall
withstood the wrestling pair¹, that the world's palace 65
fell not to the ground. But it was girt firmly,
both inside and out, by iron braces
of skilled manufacture. Many a figured
gold-worked wine-bench, as we heard it,
started from the floor at the struggles of that pair. 70
The men of the Danes had not imagined that
any of mankind by what method soever
might undo that intricate, antlered hall,
sunder it by strength—unless it were swallowed up in
the embraces of fire.² 75

Beowulf's Funeral

The Geat race then reared up for him
a funeral pyre³. It was not a petty mound,
but shining mail-coats and shields of war
and helmets hung upon it, as he had desired.
Then the heroes, lamenting, laid out in the middle 5
their great chief, their cherished lord.
On top of the mound the men then kindled
the biggest of funeral-fires. Black wood-smoke
arose from the blaze, and the roaring of flames
mingled with weeping. The winds lay still 10
as the heat at the fire's heart consumed
the house of bone. And in heavy mood
they uttered their sorrow at the slaughter of their lord.

A woman of the Geats in grief sang out
the lament for his death. Loudly she sang, 15

1 the wrestling pair: Grendel and Beowulf in the strain of struggle.

2 The whole sentence means that Danes had never thought that any man in any manner might break down by strength the complicatedly built hall adorned with horns unless it was destroyed by fire.

3 reared up for him a funeral pyre: piled up wood for the ceremonial burning of his dead body.



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her hair bound up, the burden of her fear
that evil days were destined her¹—
troops cut down, terror of armies,
bondage, humiliation. Heaven swallowed the smoke.

Then the Storm-Geat nation constructed for him 20
a stronghold on the headland, so high and broad
that seafarers might see it from afar.

The beacon to that battle-reckless man
they made in ten days. What remained from the fire
they cast a wall around, of workmanship 25
as fine as their wisest men could frame for it.

They placed in the tomb both the torques² and the jewels,
all the magnificence³ that the men had earlier
taken from the hoard in hostile mood.
They left the earl's⁴ wealth in the earth's keeping, 30
the gold in the dirt. It dwells there yet,
of no more use to men that in ages before.

Then the warriors rode around the barrow,
twelve of them in all, athelings'⁵ sons. 35
They recited a dirge⁶ to declare their grief,
spoke of the man, mourned their King.

They praised his manhood and the prowess of his hands,
they raised his name; it is right a man
should be lavish in honouring his lord and friend,
should love him in his heart when the leading-forth 40
from the house of flesh befalls him at last.

1 Pay attention to the state of the woman in grief, who demonstrated the early image of an epic singer or a poet inspired.

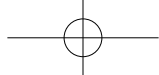
2 torque: an ornamental band of twisted metal worn round the neck or arms by ancient Gauls.

3 all the magnificence: all the wealth.

4 the earl: Beowulf.

5 athelings: noble families, esp. princes.

6 dirge: a sombre song expressing mourning or grief as appropriate for performance at a funeral.



This was the manner of the mourning of the men of the Geats,
sharers in the feast, at the fall of their lord;
they said that he was of all the world's kings
the gentlest of men, and the most gracious, 45
the kindest to his people, the keenest for fame.

Critical Points

1 Religious Interpretation: Mixture of Christianity and Paganism

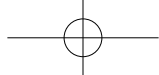
The poem is a retelling of orally transmitted legends for a Christian audience. One distinctive theme of the epic is that Christian details are placed in the story alongside traditional accounts of ancient Germanic religious practices.

On the one hand, since the poem is about the life of the Anglo-Saxons before they came to England, it is not surprising that it carries many non-Christian elements. On the other hand, the conversion of the Germanic settlers in England had largely been completed for several centuries before the poem was written, and a Christian tradition is clearly reflected in the poem.

The critical points concerning the epic are, therefore, how the paganism and Christian factors mix together in the narration of the poem, and to what extent that Christian morality finds its influence upon the explanation of the heroic deeds.

2 Social and Cultural Interpretations: Warrior Society, Ancient Hero and Fate

First of all, the poem reveals the relationship in a warrior society that binds together the warrior and his lord. Their relationship is based on mutual trust and respect rather than on subordination. When a warrior vows loyalty to his lord, he becomes not so much his servant as his voluntary companion. In return, the lord is expected to take affectionate care of his thanes and to reward them richly for their valour. This is the historical context *Beowulf* depicts of a Germanic warrior society.



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Beowulf, the protagonist, is also a perfect representative of the ancient hero: the embodiment of loyalty, duty, and courage. When Grendel and the dragon are threats to the security of the land, it is the duty of the king and his companions to put down the evil.

Moreover, ancient people believe this is a world governed by fate and destiny. The belief that fate controls him is a central factor in all of Beowulf's actions. In undertaking to slay Grendel, and later Grendel's mother, Beowulf is testing his relationship with unknowable destiny.

Courage is the instrument by which the hero realises himself, and is the quality that can perhaps influence fate against its natural tendency to doom a hero.

3 Epic: Definition and Characteristics

Epic is a long verse narrative on a serious subject, told in a formal and elevated style, and centred on a heroic or quasi-divine figure whose actions determine the fate of a tribe, a nation, or the human race. *Illiad* and *Odyssey* of the ancient Greece, *Beowulf* of the Old English and *Paradise Lost* by John Milton are among the great epics of the world.

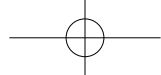
The origin of epic is the oral poetic tradition in preliterate societies. In these traditions, poetry is transmitted to the audience from performer to performer by purely oral means.

The structure of an epic is that it usually opens by stating the theme or subject matter of the epic. The poet prays to the Muses to provide him with divine inspiration to tell the story of a great hero. Then the narrative starts in the middle of the story, usually with the hero at his lowest point, and flashbacks show earlier portions of the story.

The specific characteristics of an epic are as follow: The hero is of imposing stature, of national or international importance, and of great historical or legendary significance. The setting is vast, covering many nations, the world or the universe. The action consists of deeds of great valour or requiring superhuman courage. Supernatural forces—gods, angels, demons—interest themselves in the action. A style of sustained elevation is used. The poet retains a measure of objectivity, and the use of the epic simile and repetition is common.

Questions

- 1 Heroism is one of the major themes in the poem. Which qualities make Beowulf an epic hero? How do you identify a hero?



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- 2 Christian elements and paganism are somewhat mixed in the poem. Read through the poem and find examples of both.

Class Activities

Group Contest:

Step 1 Group division

Divide the class of equal size with seven students per group. One group focuses on the discussion of “Beowulf’s fight with Grendel”; the other, “Beowulf’s funeral”.

Step 2 Role assignment and group discussion

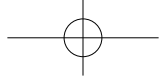
Assign different roles among the group members. Each group respectively needs a discussion leader, a summariser, a line pointer, a connection maker, a vocabulary highlighter, an illustrator, and an investigator.

Role descriptions: The discussion leader begins the discussion, keeps the discussion moving with questions, and makes sure the group members are aware of their role assignments. The summariser sums up and clarifies the important points of the assigned passage. The line pointer notes interesting lines for discussion, and explains why he or she chooses these lines. The connection maker links the passage with real life. For example, in this case, you may want to tell about your understanding of a hero’s deeds, which has similarities to the character in the epic. The vocabulary highlighter (the only one who is allowed to use a dictionary during the discussion) notes important words for discussion, and defines each chosen word. The role of an illustrator here is to visually represent something related to the fight or funeral, and to explain the visual representations. The investigator does research on one topic from “study questions and essay topics” to deepen the understanding of the discussion.

(Note: It is strongly recommended that the roles rotate in later class discussions so that each student will have equal opportunity to experience each role.)

Step 3 Group presentation

All the members of each group will give a presentation together, explaining their roles and their findings.



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QUOTATIONS

Heroism is the divine relation which, in all times, unites a great man to other men.

—Thomas Carlyle

A hero is a man who is afraid to run away.

—English Proverb