

BEOWULF

Beowulf is the oldest English poem and at the same time the oldest preserved epic poem of the medieval literature. The great masterpiece of Anglo-Saxon literature, was orally passed from generation to generation by North European peoples. The highly artistic, action-filled narrative is replete with Christian theology entangled with pagan mythology, testifying to the great upheavals that occurred in northern civilizations as the poem took form during the early middle ages. Continuously, the principal narrative is interrupted by speeches, pronouncements, songs, chants, and remembrances of battles past - excellent mnemonic devices for transmitting oral history. The poem contains a valuable record of customs and values from a harsh and heroic time. It embodies the message: "Do your utmost. A good name, a glorified example, and fame after death are all you can win in this world. It is the courage to strive - not success which ultimately reveals and ennobles the true hero."

Long ago in Hrothgar's Danish kingdom lived a gruesome monster-giant named Grendel, who nightly roamed the countryside. Rising from his marshy home, he would stalk to the King's high hall, and there devour fifteen of Hrothgar's sleeping warriors. Then, before departing, the monster would seize fifteen more men with his huge arms and bear them back to his watery lair. For twelve years the slaughter continued. Word of this terror spread across the sea to the land of the Geats, ruled by Hygelac. Beowulf, Hygelac's principal advisor and warrior and a man of great strength and courage, heard the tale of Grendel's murderous attacks. Straightway, he set sail to free the Danes from the demon's depredations. In Denmark, a coast-watcher met the weary company of fifteen seafarers. Learning of Beowulf's intended mission, he permitted the Danes to pass.

To Hrothgar's high hall they marched. There the King spread a banquet feast in Beowulf's honor. After the feast, Hrothgar and his warriors went to their rest, leaving Beowulf and his men in the hall. Then came the fiendish Grendel, "with an unlovely light, like a hellish flame in his eyes." Dreaded monster furiously tore one sleeping warrior when Beowulf came and wrenched of Grendel's arm. Grendel fled back to his home, but on the next night his mother avenged him seizing one of Hrothgar's dearest counsellors. Asleep in a house at some distance from the hall, Beowulf did not learn of the she-monster's visit until the next morning. After vowing to rid the people of this second, even more wretched demon, Beowulf turned to comfort the King with his sage philosophy of life and death:

*Grieve not, wise warrior. It is better
to avenge one's friend than mourn too much.
Each of us must one day reach the end
Of worldly life, let him who can win
glory before he dies: that lives on
after him, when he lifeless lies.*

With Hrothgar led the Danes to the moor's edge where they found dead Aeschere. Beowulf prepared to descend to the home of the foe. The Danish warrior Unferth nobly offered the Geat his own blood-hardened sword - the finest in the kingdom - thus forfeiting a chance to win for himself immortal glory and fame.

After an immense struggle with vicious creatures in murky waters Beowulf came to the cave of Grendel's mother and began to do battle. In a horrendous fight Beowulf killed both Grendel and his mother plunging the blade into her heart.

Now the time had come for Beowulf to sail back to his Geat homeland. He was revered and rewarded with riches and high position. And after several years, Beowulf himself became King among the Geats for some fifty years.

One day, after Beowulf had reigned wisely and courageously for some fifty years, a servant, troubled by his lack of prestige in Beowulf's court, stumbled upon an ancient treasure. While its guardian dragon slept, he stole away a golden goblet which he presented to his King, hoping to gain favour. But the dragon, discovering that the goblet was missing, rose up in fury and began to ravage the Geat villages with fire. Beowulf was now an old man. Nevertheless, he determined to rid his kingdom of this scourge and to win the dragon's rich hoard for his people. The moment of confrontation came.

Beowulf advanced toward the dragon's cave, ordering his warriors to withdraw so that he alone might engage the beast in battle.

*... It is not your venture ...
to match your might with the fearful foe's,
to do this heroic deed. By daring
shall I gain the gold, or dire battle,
ending life, will take your lord away!*

Beowulf was too weak to resist the dragon's fiery attacks. Nobody was there to help him, only Wiglaf, a younger kinsman, stood by to defend his ruler. All others had fled. The dragon rushed and sank its terrible teeth into Beowulf's neck. But Wiglaf fearlessly smote the beast on its underside with his sword, and, with his war-kilife, Beowulf gave it the death blow.

Weak from loss of blood, the old hero was dying. As his last act, Beowulf gave loyal Wiglaf, the last of his family line, kingly jewels and armour. And so, with due ceremony and with magnificent funeral rites, the Geats mourned the passing of the dauntless Beowulf, who had crowned a heroic life with an equally heroic death.

With the difficult language and sometimes obscure references, **Paul F. Baum's** conclusion is that the poem may have been a collection of folklore and history, but intended for a small audience. The author did not sign and date the manuscript, and no records were kept of when the poem was written. The date of **Beowulf**, debated for almost a century, is a small question with large consequences. Does the poem provide us with an accurate if idealized view of early Germanic Culture? Or is it rather a creature of nostalgia and imagination, born of the desire of a later age to create for itself a glorious past? If we cannot decide when, between the fifth and the eleventh centuries, the poem was composed, we cannot distinguish what elements in **Beowulf** belong properly to the history of material culture, to the history of myth and legend, to political history, or to the development of the English literary imagination. The quickest and easiest assumption about the origins of the poem is that it was an oral poem that was eventually transcribed and has since been passed down in the form of the manuscript. In effect, there may have been so many authors spanned the six centuries that the authorship remains in question; the rewriting of **Beowulf** continues in the postmodern period. Seamus Heaney's poetic translation is the latest. One of the translators was also J. R. R. Tolkien.

F.A. Blackburn summarises the possible sources for the Christian elements of the poem in his essay *The Cristian Colouring in the Beowulf*: He numbered three options: The first is that the poem was composed by a Christian, who had heard the stories and used them as the material of the work. The next one is that the poem was composed by a Christian, who used old lays as his material. The last is that the poem was composed by a heathen, either from old stories or from old lays. Blackburn also classifies Christian elements which appear in Beowulf. These include references to Cain, Abel, and the flood. Grendel is equated to the race of Cain, and the dragon to be an incarnation of the devil. Again, these characterizations of the monstrous and evil were well known to the English. What is clear about the religious colouring of **Beowulf** is that while it is clearly Christian, there is little Christian doctrine. References are only to the Old Testament narratives and concepts easily refigured from their pagan equivalents. It seems that **Beowulf** tells of a period in the midst of religious change being neither entirely pagan, nor fully Christian or to be an attempt to integrate Germanic history into an old testament time frame.