

- *Please note that class discussion topics (heroes/monsters/villains, fate vs. free will, etc.) are also fair game for the Beowulf test. This summary of notes is intended as a STARTING PLACE for studying!*

Defining the Epic

- The **epic** is one of the earliest and most prevalent forms of literature
- **DEFINITION:** a **long narrative poem** that recounts the adventures of a legendary **hero** in pursuit of a **goal of national importance**. The hero's actions and accomplishments reflect the **values of his/her culture**.
- Elements of an Epic (what sets an epic apart from other kinds of literature)
 - **Epic Hero:** central figure, larger-than-life, noble or semi-divine, uses courage and skill, and virtue to fight evil
 - **Quest:** A long, dangerous journey or mission that serves as an opportunity to prove his/her heroism and win honor
 - **Divine Intervention:** Help from a god or supernatural force that takes interest in the quest
 - **Great Events:** Important events from the history or mythology of a nation or culture that provide the backdrop for the epic narrative
- Two Types of Epics:
 - **Folk Epic** – originally spoken or sung as entertainment; passed down orally from generation to generation. (Ex: *Beowulf*, *Gilgamesh*)
 - **Literary Epic** – Written by individual authors, drawing on the style and elements of the folk epic. (Ex: Homer's *The Odyssey*, Virgil's *The Aeneid*, Dante's *The Divine Comedy*)

Since the epic is usually a reflection of the values held by the culture that created it, we need to know a little about the culture that Beowulf is from.

The Anglo-Saxons

- History
 - The Celts inhabited what we now call the British isles (think Stonehenge, druids, knotwork art, etc.). Over hundreds of years, many Scandinavian and northern European tribes invaded (look at a map, and you'll see why this was so common – it was easy!) and contributed little bits of their cultures and languages. This is why **Old English is a purely Germanic language**.

- At one point, the Romans invaded and stayed for about 400 years. During this time, they built roads, bridges, etc. (we call this “infrastructure”) and kept the area relatively safe and free from further invasions. They had to leave, however, due to political problems at home.
- After the Romans left (and, importantly, left behind critical infrastructure and ideas about organization), the Anglo-Saxons dominated.
- Religion
 - Pagan
 - Did not believe in monotheism (a single god) or polytheism (many gods), but rather practiced a form of *animism* – the belief that everything in nature has a soul/spirit.
 - No belief in an afterlife
 - Nature, female power, etc. were important
- Lifestyle
 - Barbaric people who, as a means of survival, often had to fight off invaders
 - Community and loyalty were their most important cultural values, because there was no other way to be protected.
 - Very “earth-centered” life: no belief in afterlife, so the “here and now” was all that concerned them.

Beowulf

- **Authorship/History:**
 - Originally an oral story (see “folk epic” definition above)
 - Probably composed around 700-1000 AD
 - A Christian narrator tells of pagan times
 - This is evident in several allusions to “the Almighty”, Cain and Abel, Grendel not being able to know God’s love, etc.
 - Monks in monasteries were in charge of copying texts, and they may have added little bits of their own views.
- **Literary Terms:**
 - **Kenning** – a compound re-naming of a thing, place, or person. Usually two words, sometimes separated by “of” Examples
 - “she-witch” = Grendel’s mother
 - “whale road” = sea
 - “ring giver” = king
 - “breast cage” = chain mail shirt
 - **Alliteration** – The repetition of the same consonant sound in consecutive words. (ex: Wow, what a wonderful waterslide!)
 - **Consonance** – the repetition of a consonant sound anywhere in words close to each other in a piece of literature.
 - **Assonance** -- the repetition of the same vowel sound in non-rhyming words close to each other in a piece of literature

- **Foil** – a character that exists to provide contrast to another character
- **Elegy** – a poem that mourns the loss of someone or something (*Beowulf* has an elegiac tone in several parts – ex: Hrothgar explaining his people’s struggle against Grendel)
- **Other Terms:**
 - **Thane** – a loyal follower of a king (an early version of a medieval knight)
 - Mead hall – A-S community gathering place where people gathered at night for safety from the darkness/unknown; there they would eat, drink, and be merry.
 - **Scop** – (pronounced “shop” or “shope”) – an Anglo-Saxon bard (storyteller). This was a very important job, because the stories told passed on history and provided entertainment.
 - **Geats** – Beowulf’s tribe of origin
 - **Danes** – Hrothgar’s tribe that Beowulf saves
 - **Wyrd** – the A-S word for **fate** – this was an extremely important concept to them.
- **Setting:** Most of the action takes place in Herot, the mead hall in Hrothgar’s kingdom of the Danes. Some episodes take place in Grendel’s swampy lair nearby.
- **Characters:**
 - Beowulf – A Geat warrior who heard of the plight of the Danes at the hand of Grendel; goes to save them.
 - Hrothgar – Aging king of the Danes; feels bad that he can no longer protect his people.
 - Higlac – Does not actually appear in the story, but is mentioned a few times. He is Beowulf’s cousin AND lord (king of the Geats).
 - Edgetho – Beowulf’s father. Also does not appear in the story, BUT is mentioned as having been helped by Hrothgar many years ago. This gives Beowulf even more incentive to help Hrothgar.
 - Grendel – The monster who, at the beginning of the story, has been terrorizing Herot for 12 winters. He takes pleasure in killing/eating the Danes.
 - Grendel’s mother – Even worse than her son; Beowulf’s second battle.
 - The Dragon – Wrecks havoc on the Danes fifty years after Beowulf first came to their aid. He is angry that someone has taken a jeweled cup from his treasure hoard.
 - Wiglaf – Beowulf’s thane late in life; the only one who sticks by him during his third and final battle (the one against the dragon)
 - Unferth – Challenges Beowulf’s claims of greatness when he first arrives at Herot; Beowulf’s *foil*. He is intimidated by Beowulf because he himself has been too afraid to do anything about Grendel.
 - (Hrunting) – Not a person, but rather Beowulf’s sword

- **The Battles**

- Beowulf vs. Grendel
 - Beowulf says that he will NOT use weapons or wear chain mail because (1) Grendel does not use either of those, (2) Grendel fears no weapons, and (3) It's all up to fate anyway.
 - Grendel always attacks at night, so Beowulf pretends to go to sleep along with everyone else in Herot.
 - When Grendel appears and begins killing men, Beowulf allows him to grab him – and then he (Beowulf) attacks him (Grendel). This is a good strategy – it caught Grendel off guard AND allowed Beowulf to see exactly what he was up against.
 - The battle ends when Beowulf rips off Grendel's entire arm. The monster cowers back to his lair and dies.
 - Beowulf hangs Grendel's arm from the rafters of Herot as a sign to everyone that Grendel's reign of terror is over.

- Beowulf vs. Grendel's mother
 - Obviously, she is quite upset about Beowulf killing her son.
 - Beowulf swims down into her dark, watery lair to kill her so that she can not pick up where her son left off.
 - She is an extremely fierce fighter; although Beowulf tries to kill her with Hrunding, his sword, he is unsuccessful.
 - He wears his chain mail shirt this time, and it saves him.
 - He finds a magical sword on the wall of the cave, and uses it to cut off her head. (** divine intervention!)
 - He then finds Grendel's dead body and cuts off its head, too.

- Beowulf vs. the dragon
 - Fifty years later, Beowulf has enjoyed fame, fortune, and many decades of being the king
 - He decides to fight the angry dragon (see character description) for two reasons: (1) To remind everyone that he is brave and strong; to secure his legacy since he is near the end of his life. (2) To protect his people – after all, he is an epic hero and that is what they do.
 - This time around, he is more cautious and less showy.
 - He uses weapons and brings along some of his thanes to help if he gets in trouble. Unfortunately, once they see that he might lose the battle, all but one (Wiglaf) abandon him.
 - Beowulf does kill the dragon, but is mortally wounded in the process.
 - He requests that a monument be built for him near the sea, so that passing ships will remember his bravery and dedication to his people.