BEOWULF

Terms and Characteristics
Warrior Code

- Anglo-Saxon warrior code stressed reciprocal loyalty between a lord or king and his followers as well as a deep sense of community.

- By acquiring fame a warrior could stave off his wyrd, or fate, at least temporarily and achieve a kind of immortality.
Pagan or Christian?

- After settling in England, the Anglo-Saxons accepted Christianity and a more peaceful, agricultural way of life. The anonymous author of Beowulf was a Christian Anglo-Saxon, but his tale is set in pre-Christian times among his pagan forebears.
Since few people of the time could read or write, Anglo-Saxon literature was generally passed down in the oral tradition. Poet-singers called *scops* recited their poems in a chanting voice, often accompanied by the music of a harp. Their hero tales in verse were more than just entertainment at nightly gatherings. They were a means of preserving tribal history and praising the deeds of heroes, winning those heroes the fame that was so vital to Germanic warriors in the face of implacable fate.
Alliteration

- Alliteration – In addition to pleasing the ear, repeated sounds make poetry easier to remember and recite. Though Old English poetry does not employ end rhyme, it is often called alliterative verse because it makes such frequent use of alliteration, the repetition of sounds at the start of nearby words. Typically, in each line of Old English poetry, a different sound is alliterated. Modern translators attempt to duplicate this effect to varying degrees.
As part of their stock in trade, Anglo-Saxon oral poets had a “word-hoard” of set phrases that they could employ to fill out a line. They made frequent use of **epithets**, identifying expressions alongside or in place of the names of people, places, or objects that came up often in a poem. For instance, Beowulf is often called Edgetho’s son or Higlac’s follower. Related to these epithets but more imaginative are the frequent kennings, metaphoric compound words in place of simple nouns. For example, Anglo-Saxon poets often called the sea “the whale-road” and the sun “heaven’s candle.”
Mead-ing House

- Herot, the mead-hal, was intended by Hrothgar to serve as the chief community gathering place for the Danes. Mead is a sweet alcoholic beverage made from fermented honey. The name Herot is Old English for “hart” or “stag” (male deer), an animal often associated with royal authority.
Allusion

The Christian poet who composed *Beowulf* identifies Grendel with Cain. According to the Bible (Gen. 4:1-24), Cain, the world’s first murderer, was guilty of the heinous crime of fratricide, or killing his own brother; not only he but his descendants were cursed.

An Allusion is an indirect or inexplicit reference by one text to another text, to a historical occurrence, or to myths, and legends. A direct allusion refers to a historical, mythic, or legendary person, place or activity by name.
Germanic leaders were bound to avenge the death of a faithful follower unless compensatory payment, called *wergild*, was paid. The killing of close relatives was deemed particularly heinous, however, and the practice of paying *wergild* was banned in such cases.
Among the early Germanic tribes, high-quality swords were greatly prized and handed down from father to son. These ancestral weapons were so important that they were often given names, like Unferth’s sword Hrunting.
The early Germanic warrior code placed much importance on amassing a treasure, or hoard of riches, as a way of acquiring fame and thus temporarily defeating one’s wyrd. Such riches were often acquired on seagoing raids and looting expeditions, but they might also be given as rewards.
Ring-giver

- In Germanic ceremonies in which a follower swore allegiance to his lord or king in return for that lord or king’s protection, the lord or king typically bestowed a golden ring on the follower to symbolize the bond. Beowulf, now king of the Geats, has become their ring-giver.
Many Old English lyrics are classified as **elegies**, poems that mourn a death or another great loss. Elegies and portions of longer poems that function as elegies are called **elegiac verse**. Beowulf contains several illustrations of Anglo-Saxon elegiac verse.
Archetypes

“In literature and art an archetype is a character, an event, a story or an image that recurs in different works, in different cultures and in different periods of time.”

“An example of an archetype occurs in the story of ‘The Flood’. Many different cultures have similar stories about the reasons for and the results of a flood.”
Archetypal Characters

Examples:

- Heroes (generally the “good guy”)
- Anti Hero (generally the “villain”)
- Chosen ones (Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Luke Skywalker, Frodo, etc.)
- Lovable rogues (Jack Sparrow, Han Solo, etc.)
- Mentors (Experienced advisors; Obi Wan/Yoda, Mr. Miyagi, etc.)
- Damsels in distress
- Evil geniuses
- Backstabbers
Archetypal Objects/Symbols

- Water: Symbol of life, cleansing, and rebirth
- Light/Darkness: Hope and renewal vs. unknown and despair
- Magic weapons (meant for the hero)
- Seasons
  - Example: Spring = birth, hope, resurrection
Archetypal Situations/Events

- Creation
- Floods
- Tasks (do something)
- Quests (find something)
- Loss of innocence
- Initiations
The End