

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.

Oral Traditions

Since few people of the time could read or write, Anglo-Saxon literature was generally passed down in the oral tradition. Poet-singers called scopos 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.

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.

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.

Name Calling

As part of their stock in trade, Anglo-Saxon oral poets had a “word-choard” 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 Edgeth’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-hall, 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

An Allusion is an indirect 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.

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.

Blood Money

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.

Swords

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.

Glory in Riches

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.

The 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.

Elegies

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

- 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
 - Spring = birth, hope, resurrection

- Winter = death, hopelessness

Introduction to Beowulf from Shmoop

Hwaet wé Gár-Dena in géar-dagum
þéod-cyninga þrym gefrúnon

Um... what? Is that English?

Short answer: yep, that's English.

Long answer: that's very old English. In fact those lines (from *Beowulf*, written sometime between the 8th and 11th centuries) is the oldest existing poem written in English. It's written in Old English, the language spoken in Britain before the Norman Conquest in 1066—that is, before the extensive influence of French on the English we speak today.

Still, *Beowulf* has come to be recognized as the foundational epic of English and British culture, in much the same way that the Iliad is a foundational epic for ancient Greece.

Beowulf is a tough mix of Big Important Ideas that, like Old English language, might be unfamiliar to you at first. Want some examples? Your wish is our command:

- **Wyrd, or fate.** The idea is that your destiny is predetermined and you can't really change it. It's such a powerful force that sometimes in this poetry, it seems to be a stand-in for God.
- **The death price.** Beowulf is set during a time when warring tribes populated England and Scandinavia. Violence was a part of life, but it wasn't a free-for-all. If you killed somebody, their relatives might demand reparation (i.e., payback) in the form of wealth—or your life.
- **Christian and Pagan values, all mixed up.** The Anglo-Saxon poetry we have today was originally composed orally (spoken) during a time when the Anglo-Saxons were still pagan. But it was written down after they became Christian. So you'll see things like magical runic inscriptions sitting side-by-side with prayers to the Christian God—or that not-quite-but-sorta-godlike wyrd we mentioned earlier.
- **Lords and thanes.** The Big Kahuna of Germanic warrior culture is a lord. Together with his thanes, a group of men who pledge loyalty to him, he protects the people who inhabit his territory. He guarantees the loyalty of those men by richly rewarding them with the spoils of war. (We believe "booty" is the technical term.) Loyalty to your lord is one of the most important values of an Anglo-Saxon warrior.
- **Peace weavers.** Wondering how the women fit into this macho good ol' boy system? Simple: they're traded among feuding lords as peace guarantees. If you've been feuding with the lord down the block and are ready to make peace, you might give him your sister to seal the deal. She's the peace weaver. Sucks to be her, huh?

- **Stoicism.** Life as a Germanic warrior was tough, but you'd better just suck it up. Letting your emotions spill out messily all over the place was a huge no-no. To quote an Anglo-Saxon warrior dude: "The wise man is patient / not too hot-hearted, nor too quick-tongued" ("The Wanderer," ll. 66b – 67).
- **Words and deeds.** Closely related to stoicism is the importance of a warrior's words matching his deeds. Did you just boast that you're going to kill that monster? Then you'd better do it, pronto, or risk losing major face. It might be a good idea to think carefully before you speak.

But it's not all philosophizing about God and the price of death. Beowulf is an epic poem. That means it has the stuff that makes epic such a rollicking good time—heroes and monsters! swords! dragons!—while proudly displaying and reinforcing all of the values that were important in Anglo-Saxon culture—like keeping your promises, choosing your words wisely, and being loyal to your lord.

But it wouldn't be a classic work of literature if it followed all the rules. And that's why, while being an epic, it also questions a lot of the epic values: Is the death price a good system of justice? What are its pitfalls? What makes a good king? A hero? A monster?

Although it was written and recited in Britain, it is about characters in Scandinavia: Danish and Swedish warriors who battle fabulous monsters as well as each other. Why? Because the early Anglo-Saxons were the descendants of Germanic and Scandinavian tribes that invaded Britain beginning in the 5th Century. As a result, there was a lot of shared cultural background between the Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians, and the Anglo-Saxons looked back to their relatives across the sea when they wanted to tell stories about their own past.

And that trend continues even now. Much like the Anglo-Saxons used to look back at their forefather's history, people today use Beowulf to look back at Anglo-Saxon history.

Beowulf has captured the attention of scholars and audiences alike, becoming a keystone of English literary studies as well as the basis of several popular film and TV adaptations. J.R.R. Tolkien used many elements from Beowulf as inspiration for his famous Lord of the Rings trilogy.

And, whether it's interpreted by critics or enjoyed as an adventure story, it has become one of the most important pieces of literature in English.

Introduction to *Beowulf* from Sparknotes

Though it is often viewed both as the archetypal Anglo-Saxon literary work and as a cornerstone of modern literature, *Beowulf* has a peculiar history that complicates both its historical and its canonical position in English literature. By the time the story of *Beowulf* was composed by an unknown Anglo-Saxon poet around 700 A.D., much of its material had been in circulation in oral narrative for many years. The Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian peoples had invaded the island of Britain and settled there several hundred years earlier, bringing with them several closely related Germanic languages that would evolve into Old English. Elements of the *Beowulf* story—including its setting and characters—date back to the period before the migration. The action of the poem takes place around 500 A.D. Many of the characters in the poem—the Swedish and Danish royal family members, for example—correspond to actual historical figures. Originally pagan warriors, the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian invaders experienced a large-scale conversion to Christianity at the end of the sixth century. Though still an old pagan story, *Beowulf* thus came to be told by a Christian poet. The *Beowulf* poet is often at pains to attribute Christian thoughts and motives to his characters, who frequently behave in distinctly un-Christian ways. The *Beowulf* that we read today is therefore probably quite unlike the *Beowulf* with which the first Anglo-Saxon audiences were familiar. The element of religious tension is quite common in Christian Anglo-Saxon writings (*The Dream of the Rood*, for example), but the combination of a pagan story with a Christian narrator is fairly unusual. The plot of the poem concerns Scandinavian culture, but much of the poem's narrative intervention reveals that the poet's culture was somewhat different from that of his ancestors, and that of his characters as well.

The world that *Beowulf* depicts and the heroic code of honor that defines much of the story is a relic of pre-Anglo-Saxon culture. The story is set in Scandinavia, before the migration. Though it is a traditional story—part of a Germanic oral tradition—the poem as we have it is thought to be the work of a single poet. It was composed in England (not in Scandinavia) and is historical in its perspective, recording the values and culture of a bygone era. Many of those values, including the heroic code, were still operative to some degree in when the poem was written. These values had evolved to some extent in the intervening centuries and were continuing to change. In the Scandinavian world of the story, tiny tribes of people rally around strong kings, who protect their people from danger—especially from confrontations with other tribes. The warrior culture that results from this early feudal arrangement is extremely important, both to the story and to our understanding of Saxon civilization. Strong kings demand bravery and loyalty from their warriors, whom they repay with treasures won in war. Mead-halls such as Heorot in *Beowulf* were places where warriors would gather in the presence of their lord to drink, boast, tell stories, and receive gifts. Although these mead-halls offered sanctuary, the early Middle Ages were a dangerous time, and the paranoid sense of foreboding and doom that runs throughout *Beowulf* evidences the constant fear of invasion that plagued Scandinavian society.

Only a single manuscript of *Beowulf* survived the Anglo-Saxon era. For many centuries, the manuscript was all but forgotten, and, in the 1700s, it was nearly destroyed in a fire. It was not until the nineteenth century that widespread interest in the document emerged among scholars and

translators of Old English. For the first hundred years of Beowulf's prominence, interest in the poem was primarily historical—the text was viewed as a source of information about the Anglo-Saxon era. It was not until 1936, when the Oxford scholar J. R. R. Tolkien (who later wrote *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, works heavily influenced by Beowulf) published a groundbreaking paper entitled “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” that the manuscript gained recognition as a serious work of art.

Beowulf is now widely taught and is often presented as the first important work of English literature, creating the impression that Beowulf is in some way the source of the English canon. But because it was not widely read until the 1800s and not widely regarded as an important artwork until the 1900s, Beowulf has had little direct impact on the development of English poetry. In fact, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Pope, Shelley, Keats, and most other important English writers before the 1930s had little or no knowledge of the epic. It was not until the mid-to-late twentieth century that Beowulf began to influence writers, and, since then, it has had a marked impact on the work of many important novelists and poets, including W. H. Auden, Geoffrey Hill, Ted Hughes, and Seamus Heaney, the 1995 recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, whose recent translation of the epic is the edition used for this SparkNote.