

Honors British Literature
Ms. Brophy

SUMMER READING FOR 2010-2011: *Beowulf*

Beowulf: A New Verse Translation (Bilingual Edition); trans. Seamus Heaney
Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company
ISBN: 978-0393320978

This book is available at any major bookseller including Barnes & Noble or online at bn.com or amazon.com.

Excerpts from the *Publisher's Weekly* review:

When the great monster Grendel comes to Denmark and dashes its warriors' hopes, installing himself in their great hall and eating alive the valiant lords, the hero Beowulf arrives from over the ocean to wrestle the beast. He saves the Danes, who sing of his triumphs, but soon the monster's mother turns up to take him hostage: having killed her, our hero goes home to the land of the Geats, acquires the kingship, and fights to the death an enormous dragon. That's the plot of this narrative poem, composed more than a millennium ago in the Germanic language that gave birth (eventually) to our version of English.

The poem includes battles, aggressive boasts, glorious funerals, frightening creatures and a much-studied alliterative meter. Nobel laureate Heaney has brought forth a finely wrought modern English version, one which retains, even recommends, the archaic strengths of its warrior world, where "The Spear-Danes in days gone by / and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness." Well-known digressions (a detailed dirge, the tale-within-a-tale of Hengest, "homesick and helpless" in ancient Friesland) find their ways into Heaney's English, which holds to the spirit (not always the letter) of the *en face* Anglo-Saxon, fusing swift story and seamless description, numinous adjectives and earthy nouns: in one swift scene of difficult swimming, "Shoulder to shoulder, we struggled on / for five nights, until the long flow / and pitch of the waves, the perishing cold drove us apart. The deep boiled up / and its wallowing sent the sea-brutes wild."

THE ASSIGNMENT:

Before you begin reading the translation of *Beowulf*, I strongly recommend that you read the front matter Introduction (at least the first section – "*Beowulf*: The Poem") and the front matter "A Note on Names." Also, the back matter section "Family Trees" will help you sort out who's who.

- 1) As you read, keep a running list of vocabulary words (words that are unfamiliar to you, even if you are able to determine their meanings in context). You are not required to write out definitions for these words, but this list of words is part of your assignment.
- 2) Also, as you read, try to construct a relative timeline (without specific dates) for the events narrated and alluded to in the poem. Include the reigns of the Danish kings (Heremod, Shield [Scyld], etc.), the Swedish-Geatish wars, the life and death of the hero Beowulf, the destruction of Heorot, and any other events which seem relevant to your understanding of the story.
- 3) Answer the Questions for Discussion, below.

Bring the book and the completed assignment with you to the first class meeting. Enrollment in Honors British Literature is contingent on successful completion of all parts of this assignment by Friday, August 27.

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Beowulf: Questions for Discussion

NOTE: You can find the answers to some of these questions by a careful reading of the poem, while you easily could write lengthy responses to other questions and still not reach any certain conclusions. The questions are meant to check your basic knowledge of the poem's story and characters, and to provoke discussion of some of its deeper implications and problems.

I do not believe there can be a single answer to the longer questions; I hope you will find it interesting to think about these questions and their many possibilities without looking for an easy "right" answer.

- 1) Who is Shield [Scyld]? Where does he come from? Where does he go? What does he do? Why does the poem begin here, rather than with Hrothgar and Grendel?
- 2) What is Grendel's lineage? What do the characters in the poem know about Grendel? How is this different from what we the audience know?
- 3) Trace the history of the hall Heorot – why was it built, what happened within its walls, how and by whom was it destroyed?
- 4) Who is Unferth, and why is he so hostile to Beowulf? Why is he allowed to speak that way?
- 5) What do the poets within Beowulf sing about? To whom do they sing their songs? What is the purpose of their performances?
- 6) Why is the focus of the story on Beowulf as a hero rather than as a king? What is the difference?
- 7) Where does the dragon come from? Why does he attack the Geats? Is the dragon a greater or lesser threat than Grendel? Why does Beowulf go to fight him?
- 8) Who are the Swedes and Frisians? Why are we given so much detailed information about the history of their quarrels with the Geats?
- 9) Trace the history of the Dragon's hoard from its first to its last burial. How is this treasure different from other treasures in the poem?
- 10) When Beowulf dies, does he go to Heaven?

- 11) What are some of the differences vs. similarities (or continuities) between the poet's world and that of the characters in the poem? How does the poet create a distance between the characters and himself – and how does he express their own sense of a distant past?
- 12) Is Beowulf an epic? What sort of social order produces "epic" poetry? What values does the poem promote, and how does it promote them?
- 13) Look at the religious references in the poem: what are the names for God? What Biblical events are mentioned, and who mentions them? What specifically pagan practices (sacrifice, burial, augury, etc.) are described? How do the characters see their relationship to God (or the gods)?
- 14) Does the heroic code expressed in Beowulf conflict with a Christian sensibility?

- 15) What is the status of gold and gift-giving in the poem? Who gives gifts, who receives them, and why? Are the modern concepts of wealth, payment, monetary worth and greed appropriate for the world of Beowulf?
- 16) Wealhtheow, Hygd, Hildeburh, Grendel's mother – what do the female characters in Beowulf do? How do they do it? Do they offer alternative perspectives on the heroic world (so seemingly centered around male action) of the poem?
- 17) Every culture makes distinctions between what is inside the social order and what is outside, between the human and the non-human (a category which can include animals, plants, natural processes, monsters and the miraculous). Cultures organize themselves to exclude these “outside” things; social organization also works to control certain violent human tendencies inside the culture (anger, lust, fear, greed, etc.). How does the social world depicted in the poem do this? That is, what does it exclude, and why? What is its attitude towards the “outside” of culture? How does it control the forces that threaten social stability within the hall?

Adapted from Roy M. Liuzza; University of Tennessee, Knoxville