

**AP English Notes**  
**17 September 2004**

**The focus of our study is**

**What is the hero and honor in Beowulf's society?**

**Please keep this in mind as we study this Old English epic poem.**

**Brief summary of ideas from the net.**

Beowulf is an epic poem, meant to be recited orally by a scop, and though its language is English, the poem makes mention of Englishmen only twice or thrice. This is because the poem must have been written at a time when English and Scandinavian events were of mutual interest to an English audience. The hero of the poem, Beowulf, is a Geat, and modern scholarship holds that this tribe lived in what is now southern Sweden.

The poem, is however, not a historical account of the past. It is about the common heroic past of the Germanic race seen through the nostalgic eyes of the poet. The poem, however, reveals the social, kinship, and behavioral characteristics that were common to the Germanic people. The closest account of the Germanic races is given by Tacitus (Roman historian) in his *Germania*, written at the end of the first century. According to Tacitus, Germans were a warrior race, fierce and cruel, setting all their store in victory, and thus valuing courage above all virtues. Wars were encouraged as a means of obtaining objects they valued such as horses, armor, and jewelry. Feuds were often concluded by paying a tribute (wergild) to re-establish honor, and even murder could be paid for in money and goods.

However, Tacitus' account was written much before Beowulf was composed, and about six hundred years before England became Christian. Beowulf thus represents that indeterminate time when pagan customs and values vied with Christian conversion, which had not entirely taken place. Primarily, however, the poem is concerned not with issues in theology, but with the inevitable fact of mortality, made tragic by the fact that in the death of the poem's hero, Beowulf, the protector of the Geats, the poem looks forward into the destruction of the entire Geatish race at the hands of the Swedes.

Even though the title of the poem is Beowulf, it could be argued that the poem is concerned not so much with the single exploits of a hero, but with the question of kingship: how a hero becomes king, and the relations in which the office of kingship stands to mortality. Therefore, what is the relationship between Beowulf and Hrothgar. What do you make of the tension that is created in the first half of the poem between an aged, unable king and the valiant hero, and how does this tension inform the second half of the poem, where Beowulf himself becomes king?

As mentioned, a primary concern of the poet is with the aspect of mortality: the inevitability of death is in fact a theme that informs that entire poem. Yet death caused due to warfare poses immense problems as it causes kingdoms to be hurled into chaotic warfare to avenge the death of a kin. (These warriors feared what they called "a straw death"; meaning a death in a bed. These warriors preferred death on a battle field.) One of the ways in which this chaos is stemmed is through the practice of wergild that entails a payment to the kin of the dead warrior to re-establish honor without shedding blood. (CampusNut)

**Facts concerning Beowulf**

**Author:** Unknown scop

Recorded by a Christian in England

**Type of Literature:** Originally an oral story handed down by generations

An epic with characteristics of an elegy. An epic is a long poem telling a story about a hero and

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his exploits. An elegy is a poem extolling or lamenting a dead person (or dead persons).

**Setting:** Denmark and Sweden in the Dark Ages, between 500 A.D. and 700 A.D.

**Date and Place of Composition:** (1) Date: probably sometime between 700 A.D. and 900 A.D.; (2) place: probably Northumbria, an important Anglo-Saxon kingdom between Scotland on the north and the Humber River on the south. Northumbria was home to monks who excelled in learning and literature.

**Transmission of the Story:** *Beowulf* was first transmitted orally for one to three centuries, then written down in about 1000 A.D. by two English scribes. Their manuscript, considered one of the great heirlooms of world literature, is now preserved in the British Library (sometimes incorrectly identified as the British Museum). The scribes' manuscript was earlier held in the library of Sir Robert Cotton (1571-1631).

**The following are slides shown on air:**

**Divisions of English Literature**

Old English Literature  
450-1100  
    Beowulf  
Middle English Literature  
1100-1500  
    Canterbury Tales  
Modern English Literature  
1500- Present

**Themes of Beowulf**

War or Aggression  
Chief Virtue -- Courage  
Secondary Virtue -- Generosity  
Moralizing Strain--  
"Young men strive for good"  
God:  
    Odin or Yahweh

**Invaders of the England**

Cave Dwellers –original inhabitants  
    Iberians  
    Celts  
    Romans  
    Ruled 400 years  
        Angles, Saxons, and Jutes (invited to protect the possessions of the Romans)  
        Angles, Saxons, and Jutes liked the climate and came back to set up colonies.  
        These invaders brought the story of *Beowulf* to the England.  
    Defeated Celts to the Highlands of Wales  
        Legend of King Arthur

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**Lineage of Spear Danes / Ring Danes**

Scyld  
Beowulf (not our hero)  
Healfdene  
Hrothgar--Wealtheow

Hrethric Hrothmund Frewaru + Ingeld the Heathabard

“Scyld, Son of Scaef (Shaf)

Sea Burial Described

Hrothgar (Scyld’s Descendant)

“To Hrothgar was granted glory in war” (Kennedy 38)

Band Grew Mighty

“high-built hall . . . a mightier mead hall than man had known” (Kennedy 42-43)

Hall of the Hart (Heorot)

Stag is a Germanic symbol of kingship

“His pledge and promise to deal out gifts / Rings at the banquet” (Kennedy 54-55).

“Then an evil spirit who dwelt in darkness

Endured it ill that he heard each day . . . revelry” (Kennedy 58-59).