

AP English Notes
September 30, 2004

Tomorrow we will have an in class essay on Beowulf. The time limit is 45 minutes. Please write in black ink and use the Essay X style with your thesis at the end of the first paragraph. This major paper will also count as a test grade. The question that you are to answer will appear on the screen when you enter the class on Friday, October 1. (If you are in a delay class, your facilitator will have a different question for you to answer.)

As Beowulf prepares to die from the “welling wound” in his neck, he recounts the deeds which he finds **honorable** in his life:

**For fifty years I’ve ruled this realm . . .
Kept well what was mine,
courted no quarrels.
Swore no false oaths . . .
Cannot lay to my charge the killing of kinsmen!” (Kennedy 1655-59)**

Weak from loss of blood and the poison in the dragon’s bite, the old hero is dying. Beowulf vocalizes his regret at never having a son of his flesh. (Some speculate he may have married Hygd (Hygelac’s widow). (Heardred was Hygelac’s son who probably ruled for a short time before dying in battle; thus, Beowulf became the ruler.)

At his death, Beowulf gives loyal Wiglaf the following:

**Then the great-hearted king unclasped from his throat
A collar of gold, and gave to his thane;
Gave the young hero his gold-decked helmet
His ring and his byrny, and wished him well. (Kennedy 1714-17)**

Beowulf rejoiced that he had succeeded in winning the treasure for his subjects, but mourned the fact that he must now leave them.

The ten thanes who hid in the forest now return after the danger has passed. (These men are marked as cowards and this will forever disgrace them.)

He longs to view the treasure of the dragon’s lair. Wiglaf brings forth the gold and jewels so that the king can look upon the wealth gained by the battle.

Beowulf requests that his ashes be buried in a mound on the headland. He also believes future sailors will look to the barrow as a guiding point leading them back to their homeland and out of the dangers of the sea. He believes after his death the sea going tribes will call the headland monument “Beowulf’s Barrow.” Thus, even without children he will be remembered in the scop’s tales and the burial mound.

The dragon was tumbled over the cliffs into the sea.

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The Geat troops honored their fallen lord with magnificent funeral rites. The body of their hero was burned on a pyre, according to pagan custom; then the precious hoard was taken from the dragon's lair and buried in the great mound or barrow (to be known as Beowulf's Barrow) covering the King's ashes. The tribes of Geats in bands of twelve warrior in an arm road round and round the burial mound. His tribe said that he was **"the kindest of worldly kings, / Mildest, most gentle, most eager for fame"** (Kennedy 1895-96).

And so, with due ceremony, the Geats mourned the passing of the dauntless Beowulf, who had crowned a heroic life with an equally heroic death.

Afterthought

Beowulf, the great masterpiece of Anglo-Saxon literature, was told and retold by scop and scald for generation by North European peoples. The epic poem is mingled with Christian theology and pagan mythology, testifying to the great changes that occurred in northern communities as the poem entered the middle ages. The basic poem is interrupted by speeches, pronouncements, songs, chants, and remembrances of battles of the past, which become a standard story telling device with morals for the warrior society.

This epic poem contains a record of customs and values from a harsh and heroic time. The message of these warriors continues: "Do your utmost. Do not dishonor yourself or your liege lord. A good name, a glorified example, and fame after death are all you can win in this world. It is the courage to strive - not success which reveals the true hero."

Students submitted their proposed research topics today.

If you plan to take the AP College Board for English Literature, please remember to see your guidance counselor and declare yourself a candidate for the AP English Literature and Composition Exam.