

BEOWULF

Journal Assignments

Journal 1: Retell the events in **Sections 1-5** from the coast guard's point of view. Consider how he feels about the importance of his job, the desperate situation in his country, and the arrival of these fearsome foreign warriors.

Journal 2: Consider the events in **Sections 5-7** from Beowulf's point of view. Write a diary entry giving his reasons for coming, his first impressions of Heorot, and his reaction to Hrothgar's greeting

Journal 3: Write a brag for Beowulf, based on the information in **Sections 8-10**. Use first person, "I" narrative format. Include information about his background, his other great battles, etc. Remember that a brag uses strongly rhythmic, exaggerated speech. (See example of Mike Fink's brag at http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk/folk-song-lyrics/Mike_Fink.htm).

Journal 4: Write a complete description of Grendel, using details given in **Sections 11-13** and adding others from your own imagination. Be sure to include alliteration and kennings in your description.

Journal 5: Write a paragraph describing Heorot as it is pictured in **Sections 14-15**. Use your own words.

Journal 6: Summarize the events told in "The Lay of the Finn," **Sections 16-17**.

Journal 7: Sections 18-20 focus on the celebration at Heorot. Write a stream-of-consciousness narrative from Wealhtheow's point of view. You should include her impression of everything to this point, her hopes for the future, her reactions to Beowulf's first battle, her response to the celebration, and so on.

Journal 8: Retell the events in **Sections 21-25** from Unferth's point of view. Consider his background, his original jealousy of Beowulf, his own fears, and his change in attitude.

Journal 9: Sections 26-31 are almost a summary of Beowulf's journey. Rewrite them as a formal report to Hygelac, using formal language, like a soldier reporting to his commander. Obviously, you would stick to the facts, avoiding figurative language and exaggeration.

Journal 10: Retell the events in **Sections 32-35** in the form of a film script. Include specific camera and lighting directions, as well as dialogue. Try to capture the atmosphere of the scene.

Journal 11: Imagine that you are Wiglaf telling his children about the events in **Sections 36-39**, years later. Use informal narrative style. Try to imagine how he would describe to his children his own part in this episode.

Journal 12: Summarize the message given in **Sections 40-41**, explaining why the herald speaks of past and future events, as well as of the present.

Journal 13: Assume that you are one of the knights who attended Beowulf's funeral, described in **Sections 42-43**. Write a letter home, giving your family all the factual detail, but also including your personal feelings at the scene.

Journal 14: The tale of Beowulf is told, yet for his memory to live on, a poet must be found who can tell us his story and make us understand its meaning. Be that poet. You may use ballad format, another regular poetic form, or free verse.

Journal 15: Everything old is new again and we're not so different from the ancient scop who sought to mourn their losses and to immortalize their heroes. Drawing upon the elegiac and/or the heroic tradition, write an original poem to a relevant current event. You might choose the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building bombing (April 19, 1995), The May 3 Tornado (1999), or the many tragedies of September 11, 2001. You may use whatever form seems most appropriate - traditional or free verse, but try to capture the appropriate tone.

Useful websites - Let the images inspire your own imagery.

Oklahoma City National Memorial

<https://oklahomacitynationalmemorial.org>

September 11 Digital Archive

<http://911digitalarchive.org>

Formula Poems

<http://mseffie.com/handouts/formulapoems.html>

Writing a Period Ballad

<http://www.elizabethancostume.net/drea/ballads/>

BEOWULF

Seminar Topics

You will be assigned to a seminar group to discuss one of the following topics. To prepare, you should be sure that you understand your topic thoroughly. Then, you should return to *Beowulf* and look for specific scenes and lines which will serve as evidence. This informal discussion will be amongst your group members, but the class will be your audience and will have an opportunity to ask questions.

1. One critic has commented: “*Beowulf* is at least in part a study of kingship – of the attributes of a good king, of the difficulties he faces and how he overcomes them, of the problems of succession that arise upon his death.” Discuss the validity of this statement, making references to the text to support your view.
2. *Beowulf* contains characteristics associated with folklore or fairy tales -- lurid and sensational events, man-eating monsters. Why, with these elements, has the poem appealed to sophisticated audiences for more than twelve hundred years? Are there counterparts to *Beowulf* in modern entertainment media?
3. The scholar J. R. R. Tolkien has suggested that the theme of *Beowulf* deals with “man alien in a hostile world, engaged in a struggle which he cannot win . . .” Do you agree with this? In what way does modern “alienation” differ from the alienation depicted in *Beowulf*? In what way is it similar?
4. Persons considered to possess heroic qualities reflect the values and morals of their society. Compare the Anglo-Saxon hero with a person whom you consider to be a hero in our society. React to the statement about morals and values in your discussion.
5. What are your reasons for believing that such monstrous creatures as Grendel and men of superhuman strength like *Beowulf* did or did not exist? If they never lived, why did people of this early era compose stories about such characters? (Consider Greek mythology and the Bible.) Do people of today subscribe to any superstitious beliefs which find their way into modern stories, novels, plays, movies, and poetry? Give examples.



Creative Assignments: A Baker's Dozen

1. Write a poem titled "The Beowulf in Me" or "The Grendel in Me." (Or perhaps write about your duality.) Be specific.
2. Choose a specific scene from *Beowulf* to illustrate, paying particular attention to specific details given in your selected passage. Include the passage on your poster.
3. Write an original episode for *Beowulf*. Create some new foe for him to fight. Try to follow the Anglo-Saxon style.
4. Design a poster to advertize a movie based on *Beowulf*. Be sure to include everything normally found on a movie poster.
5. Retell the events in *Beowulf* as a children's story, including illustrations and binding the finished project in booklet form. Be especially careful about word choice.
6. Write a resumé for *Beowulf*. Include name, origin, height, weight, experience, skills, position applied for, etc. Avoid anachronisms.
7. Research medieval foods on the Internet and/or the library and re-enact the feast at Heorot. Include invitations, decorations, recipes, and food!
8. A trend in film today is to modernize old stories. (Example: the movie *O* is a modernization of Shakespeare's play *Othello* portraying the Othello character as the school's black star basketball player, dating a white girl. The Iago character, the coach's son, is jealous and seeks to destroy the Othello character). How would you envision a modern-day or futuristic Beowulf? Think about what modern-day or futuristic counterparts each major character might have and what roles they would play. Sketch out a storyboard or write a proposal for the movie. Think about what costumes, sets, and special effects might be needed. Write a treatment proposal or film/video tape part of the movie.
9. Create a newspaper outlining the major events in *Beowulf*. Write articles and include appropriate pictures (hand or computer-drawn, cut from magazines or newspapers, or found on the Internet). In addition to major articles, include typical newspaper features like editorials, obituaries, advertisements, and comics.
10. Compile a scrapbook based on *Beowulf*. Write captions explaining each item included, which should be items that the characters might have saved or which somehow identify the characters. Suggested items include pictures, personal articles, and other physical objects. A twist on this idea is to create a Beowulf time capsule.
11. Create a collage of images and/or quotations from *Beowulf* that somehow demonstrate the book's theme or message. Include an explanation for each image and/or quotation that appears on the collage. Tell why it was included and its significance to the book.
12. Interpret a scene from *Beowulf*, dressing as the characters and performing the scene for the class. Some suggested scenes include Grendel's first attack (27-29), the battle between Beowulf and Grendel (46-48), the attack of Grendel's mother (63-64), Beowulf's battle with Grendel's mother (70-71), the battle with the dragon (102-109), or Beowulf's funeral (119-120).
13. Create a found poem from words that appear in the text. The poem should somehow demonstrate a theme from *Beowulf*. Remember to cite the original lines.

BEOWULF

Critical Analysis: Supporting a Thesis

Scholars and critics have come to various conclusions about the themes and meanings of *Beowulf*. Choose one statement with which you agree or disagree and write an essay supporting your stand with quotes, episodes, and examples from the text of *Beowulf*.

A. *Beowulf* is steeped in a pagan tradition that depicts nature as hostile and forces of death as uncontrollable. Blind fate picks random victims; man is never reconciled with the world. *Beowulf* ends a failure.

B. *Beowulf* presents an ideal of loyalty to a thane, the comitatus bond. The failure to live up to this ideal on the part of some thanes points up the extraordinary faithfulness of *Beowulf*.

C. *Beowulf* is a blending of Christian traditions with a folk story that extols virtues of loyalty, courage, and faith in the face of extreme dangers and even death. It presents a model of man willing to die to deliver his fellow men from terrifying evil forces.

D. *Beowulf* is the story of a dual ordeal: an external battle with vicious opponents and an internal battle with human tendencies of pride, greed, cowardice, betrayal, and self-concern.

E. *Beowulf* is the universal story of man's journey from adolescence to adulthood to old age and the growth in wisdom about self and the world gained through the pain and triumph of experience.

A Method Of Getting Started

ESSAY A:

1. Underline key words in the essay question.

2. Find examples in the text.

pagan tradition

“sometimes they sacrificed to the old stone gods, made heathen vows.”
(175-6)

nature hostile

“a little-known country, wolf slopes, windswept headlands” (1053)

fate picks victims

“seized 30 warriors” (96)
“death comes faster than you think, no one can flee it” (1767-8)

Until the Dragon Comes

The unknown scop who wrote *Beowulf* sang of heroes, calling his hearers to the heroic life, but holding out no false hopes. All must go down in defeat at last: Wyrð will have its way. And though no man can win his final battle with metaphysical death itself, *Beowulf* shows us how to transcend the human condition by the willing battle with our own worst fears. Personified in three monstrous enemies, *Beowulf* faces physical, moral, and metaphysical Evil.

Grendel, a descendant of Cain, personifies an especially frightening image of physical Evil. Living "in a hell not hell but earth," he is never actually described, thus becoming the unknown, the thing in the dark all men fear (ll. 103-4). Grendel is the worst of two natures, half human, half beast, a lonely misfit, vicious and vengeful, cruel and cannibalistic. Moral choice has no bearing; the threat is a purely physical one; a man must fight Grendel in self-defense. Evil is omnipresent, stalking men, "invisibly following them from the edge of the marsh, always there, unseen" (ll. 161-2). Evil is also insatiable, and for Grendel "no crime could ever be enough" (l. 136). As the embodiment of Good, *Beowulf* must fight the Evil that seeks him out, one-on-one, armed with only his bare hands. He defeats Grendel by simply holding on, by standing firm. It is Grendel who pulls away from *Beowulf's* mighty embrace and thus destroys himself.

But Evil is never permanently defeated. Grendel's mother, attacking Heorot the next night, personifies a moral Evil. Wergeld and the Mosaic code of "an eye for an eye" represent human concepts of moral vengeance, and she behaves honorably by these standards. Taking only one victim, she flees the hall "to save her life" (l. 1292). In a perverse parody of the first battle, *Beowulf* now pursues her, bursting into her home, and she welcomes him in an embrace (l. 1501). *Beowulf* doubts his capacities and his men almost give up on him. *Beowulf* must turn to the monster's own weapon, a magic sword which dissolves in Grendel's blood, surely some sign of sin. This is an ignoble battle, and even though *Beowulf* is ultimately victorious, Grendel's mother has moral justification on her side by *Beowulf's* own standards. Having faced his own mortality and bearing the wounds to prove it, *Beowulf* has been initiated into adulthood and a world of complex moral choices.

As an old and honored king in his own country, *Beowulf* faces the ultimate test of his courage when he faces the dragon, a monster at once less horrible (not being humanoid) and more fearsome. The dragon, an image of the ultimate metaphysical evil, death itself, is a threat that is both physical and moral. Its physical strength is compounded by its control of flame and flight. Morally, it is an Evil men have aroused because of thievery. Though innocent of the theft, *Beowulf* must defend his people, even though his heart is heavy with "knowledge of old age" (ll. 2420-1). This third encounter is high tragedy, for *Beowulf* is no longer a naive adolescent, confident in the power of his arms, but an old man who knows this battle will be his last. Facing certain death, alone, with no heirs to carry on his name, *Beowulf* slays his opponent and he dies, but in dying he offers us a model to follow in the last struggle each man must face -- the unavoidable reality of his own death.

Though *Beowulf* dies, we persist in believing he has not really lost his greatest battle. The monsters are all dead. In each of these battles, *Beowulf* has faced death to deliver his fellow men from terrifying forces. These three battles present a moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death, rising and setting. This is the human condition, and a man can but die on his death-day.