

**ANGLO-SAXON BRITAIN
(410-1066): HEROIC
LITERATURE: A STUDY
OF BEOWULF**



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Description

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, including excerpts from a modern English translation of the Anglo-Saxon heroic epic *Beowulf*, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the story of *Beowulf's* adventures fighting in defense of others, how the epic poem fits into the overall story of Anglo-Saxon culture and why the poem continues to be studied over 1000 years after it first appeared in writing.

Subjects

English Literature
European History
World History

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

180 minutes

Tour Links

- [British Library](#)

Essential Questions

- What is the story of *Beowulf*?
- How does *Beowulf* fit into the overall culture of Anglo-Saxon Britain?
- Why is the book considered so important today, over 1000 years after it was first written?

Academic Summary

HWÆT, WE GAR-DENa in geardagum,
þeodcyninga þrym gefrunon,
hu ða æpelingas ellen fremedon!
oft Scyld Scefing sceapena þreatum,
monegum mægþum meodosetla ofteah,
egsode eorlas, syððanærest wearð
feasceaft funden; he þæs frofre gebad,
weox under wolcnum weorðmyndum þah,
oð þæt him æghwylc ymbsittendra
ofer hronrade hyran scolde,
gomban gyldan; þæt wæs god cyning!
Ðæm eafera wæs æfter cenned
geong in geardum, þone God sende
folce to frofre; fyrenðearfe ongeat,
þe hie ær drugon aldorlease
lange hwile; him þæs Liffrea,
wuldres Wealdend woroldare forgeaf,
Beowulf wæs breme --- blæd wide sprang---
Scyldes eafera Scedelandum in.
Swa sceal geong guma gode gewyrcean,
fromum feohgiftumon fæder bearme,

22-46

þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen
wilgesipas, þonne wig cume,
leode gelæsten; lofdædum sceal
in mægþa gehwære man geþeon.
Him ða Scyld gewat to gescæphwile
felahror feran on Frean wære;
hi hyne þa ætbæron to brimes faroðe,
swæse gesipas, swa he selfa bæd,
þendenwordum weold wine Scyldinga---
leof landfruma lange ahte.
Þær æt hyðe stod hringedstefna
isig ond utfus, æpelingesfær;
aledon þa leofne þeoden,
beaga bryttan on bearm scipes,
mærne be mæste. Þær wæs madma fela
of feorwegum frætwa gelæded;
ne hyrde ic cymlicor ceol gegyrwan
hildewæpnum ond heaðowædum,
billum ond byrnum; him on bearme læg
madma mænigo, þa him mid scoldon
on flodes æht feor gewitan.
Nalæs hi hine læssan lacum teodan,
þeodgestreonum, þon þa dydon,
þe hine æt frumsceafte forð onsendon
æne ofer yðe umborwesende.
Beowulf, Old English Translation
LO, praise of the prowess of people-kings

of spear-armed Danes, in days long sped,
we have heard, and what honor the athelings won!
Oft Scyld the Scefing from squadroned foes,
from many a tribe, the mead-bench tore,
awing the earls. Since erst he lay
friendless, a foundling, fate repaid him:
for he waxed under welkin, in wealth he throve,
till before him the folk, both far and near,
who house by the whale-path, heard his mandate,
gave him gifts: a good king he!
To him an heir was afterward born,
a son in his halls, whom heaven sent
to favor the folk, feeling their woe
that erst they had lacked an earl for leader
so long a while; the Lord endowed him,
the Wielder of Wonder, with world's renown.
Famed was this Beowulf: far flew the boast of him,
son of Scyld, in the Scandian lands.
So becomes it a youth to quit him well
with his father's friends, by fee and gift,
that to aid him, aged, in after days,
come warriors willing, should war draw nigh,
liegemen loyal: by lauded deeds
shall an earl have honor in every clan.
Forth he fared at the fated moment,
sturdy Scyld to the shelter of God.
Then they bore him over to ocean's billow,
loving clansmen, as late he charged them,
while wielded words the winsome Scyld,
the leader beloved who long had ruled...
In the roadstead rocked a ring-dight vessel,
ice-flecked, outbound, atheling's barge:
there laid they down their darling lord
on the breast of the boat, the breaker-of-rings,
by the mast the mighty one. Many a treasure
fetched from far was freighted with him.
No ship have I known so nobly dight
with weapons of war and weeds of battle,
with breastplate and blade: on his bosom lay
a heaped hoard that hence should go
far o'er the flood with him floating away.
No less these loaded the lordly gifts,
thanes' huge treasure, than those had done
who in former time forth had sent him
sole on the seas, a suckling child.
High o'er his head they hoist the standard,
a gold-wove banner; let billows take him,
gave him to ocean. Grave were their spirits,
mournful their mood. No man is able
to say in sooth, no son of the halls,
no hero 'neath heaven, -- who harbored that freight!

Beowulf, translated by Gummere (1910)

Beowulf...

The very name strikes fear into the hearts of students across the globe, not for its story, but rather for the difficulty of reading it in 11th and 12th grade English classes. To many students and teachers, Beowulf remains the epitome of 12 years of academic frustration, and yet the ancient Anglo-Saxon poem is still read in thousands of classes every year.

Beowulf is the conventional title given to an ancient poem of almost 3200 lines, written in Old English sometime between the 8th and 11th centuries CE. Set in Scandinavia, the epic tells the story of Beowulf, a prince from the land of the Geats (thought to be today's Gotland in the southern part of modern Sweden) and his adventures in the land of the Danes. The story begins with a tale of Grendel, a monster that has been terrorizing the Mead Hall of a Danish king called Hrothgar (traditionally believed to be an actual 6th century Danish lord).

Grendel, angered at the noise coming from Hrothgar's mead hall, attacks and devours many of the Danish warriors while they are sleeping. Eventually, the story of Grendel reaches the warrior prince Beowulf, who then leads a group of Geats to the land of Hrothgar to help the king. After a heroic struggle, Beowulf eventually kills the monster by tearing off his arm, and Grendel returns to his lair to die. Beowulf and his men then celebrate his victory over evil.

The following night, in retaliation for her son's death, Grendel's mother attacks the mead hall. Beowulf again comes to the rescue, fighting against the monster and eventually killing her as well. As a reward for his bravery and in appreciation for saving his kingdom, Hrothgar gives Beowulf an ancient weapon: the sword "Naegling." Years later, after Beowulf has become king of the Geats, he and his warriors have to fight an unnamed dragon. In that battle, Beowulf and one of his men kill the dragon, but in the process, Beowulf is mortally wounded. He dies and is buried with the dragon's treasure (with a curse being placed on the treasure to ensure no one will try to steal it).

The oldest hand-written copy of the poem survives in a single manuscript called the Nowell Codex, a collection of anonymous writings by Anglo-Saxon monks generally believed to have been penned sometime in the early 11th century (now found in the British Library in London). The codex contains a number of other writings in Old English in the same book. Most historians believe the Beowulf story is hundreds of years older than the codex, and that it was possibly passed down through oral tradition. The Nowell Codex was probably written by Christian scribes, men whose job during the medieval period was to copy older versions of books (there are connections between the story and Judeo-Christian stories, such as the mention in the poem that Grendel and his mother were both descendants of the Biblical Cain). The poem itself makes references to the connection between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavia, and it is possible that the story originally came as an oral tradition with the Angles or Saxons when they migrated from the continent to Britannia in the 5th or 6th century.

Over the last 1000 years, Beowulf has been studied extensively as a poem, a primary document and as a story. The best example of Anglo-Saxon literature, the tale is perhaps the best example of what is known as the heroic epic, an idea fundamental to Anglo-Saxon culture. It is also one of the only authentic pieces of Old English writing to survive to the modern age (although the original was almost destroyed in a fire in the 18th century).

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, including excerpts from a modern English translation of the Anglo-Saxon heroic epic Beowulf, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the story of Beowulf's adventures fighting in defense of others, how the epic poem fits into the overall story of Anglo-Saxon culture and why the poem continues to be studied over 1000 years after it first appeared in writing.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the basic story of Beowulf and what happens to the major characters throughout the course of the tale.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain why Beowulf is seen as a window into Anglo-Saxon literature and culture.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain why Beowulf is studied in most English classes today, approximately 1000 years after it first appeared in writing.

Procedures

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: How do we define a hero? Does he or she have to be perfect? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Brief overview of Beowulf and its place in Anglo-Saxon literature. (20 min)
- Video – In Search of Beowulf (60 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on Beowulf and its place in Anglo-Saxon literature and culture, taking notes as appropriate. (25 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles/photographs to each group.
- Suggestion: AP and Advanced students should read the entire poem over the course of several days (perhaps a week).
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: The story of Beowulf's adventures fighting in defense of others, how the epic poem fits into the overall story of Anglo-Saxon culture and why the poem continues to be studied over 1000 years after it first appeared in writing. (25 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail the story of Beowulf's adventures fighting in defense of others, how the epic poem fits into the overall story of Anglo-Saxon culture and why the poem continues to be studied over 1000 years after it first appeared in writing.

Extension

On tour: British Library in London

While on tour in Great Britain, students can visit the British Library in London, where they can see for themselves the original surviving copy of the Nowell Codex (containing the Beowulf story and other Anglo-Saxon writings). The British Library is the UK's national academic repository, containing thousands of manuscripts.

On tour: Bede's World in Jarrow, England

While on tour in Great Britain, students can visit Bede's World in Jarrow (about 25 minutes north of Durham), where they can learn about Bede and his place in Anglo-Saxon England. The site has replica buildings from the time period, a museum dedicated to Bede, a science gallery, a working farm (where the students can see the types of food Anglo-Saxons may have eaten), and an herb garden based on 9th century monastery gardens. Bede's World hosts school-age children from across the UK and the world, and can accommodate large groups as well. Special lectures on Saturday highlight various aspects of Bede's Anglo-Saxon world. Admission is very reasonable. Prices can be found on the Bede's World website (listed below in the Links section), and there are special rates for groups of 15 or more.

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/beowulf-oe.asp
Beowulf (primary source) – Old English translation from the Medieval Internet Sourcebook at Fordham University – for those who want a real challenge
- www.lone-star.net/literature/beowulf/
Beowulf (website) – a modern adaption into contemporary language by Dr. David Breeden, Center for Writers at the University of Southern MS
- www.sparknotes.com/lit/beowulf/
Sparknotes Beowulf Study Guide (website)
- www.theguardian.com/science/2012/oct/30/lyminge-kent-anglo-saxon-hall
Saxon find in Lyminge has historians partying like it's 599 (web article) – from The Guardian (UK) newspaper
- www.mainlesson.com/display.php?author=marshall&book=beowulf&story=_contents
Stories of Beowulf Told to the Children (website) – outstanding project by the Baldwin Project (UK), an organization that aims to bring old stories to modern children. This site has a great “retelling” of Beowulf in a language all students can understand and appreciate – highly recommended for students and teachers.
- web.utk.edu/~rliuzza/Beowulf/questions.htm
Beowulf: Twenty Questions for Discussion (worksheet) – from Roy Liuzza, Department of English, University of Tennessee at Knoxville
- www.pitt.edu/~dash/beowulf.html
Beowulf: A Summary in English Prose (website) – by DL Ashliman, retired English professor at the University of Pittsburgh
- www.history.org.uk/resources/primary_resource_3865_132.html
Anglo-Saxons: A brief history (website) – from the Historical Association (UK). Good overview of Anglo-Saxon history.
- readerswriters.edublogs.org/files/2008/03/beowulf-background-info.ppt
Background Info for Beowulf (PowerPoint)
- www.absasso.com/beowulf.ppt
Beowulf (PowerPoint)
- www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiBaSqO7n9U
Beowulf (“99 Luftballons” by Nena) – 3 minute video by the “History Teachers.” Tells the story of Beowulf set to a modern song. Great way to get students interested in the Old English epic.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=1C0sFXU0SL0
Michael Wood – In Search of Beowulf (video) – BBC video. 60-minute video by renown British historian Michael Wood may be long for many classes, but is well worth it. Wood traces the development of Anglo-Saxon literature and its links to modern British culture – highly recommended for both students and teachers.

Background Information

- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beowulf

- Beowulf – Wikipedia article
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nowell_Codex
Nowell Codex – Wikipedia article
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grendel
Grendel – Wikipedia article
- www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/the_united_kingdom/country_profile
On the Road: Britain (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel

Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-anglo-saxons
Anglo Saxons in Britain – An Overview
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-anglo-saxons-bede-history
Anglo Saxons in Britain – Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the Church and People

Key Terms

- Anglo-Saxon
- Beowulf
- Epic
- Heroic poetry
- Grendel
- Nowell Codex
- Scandinavia

