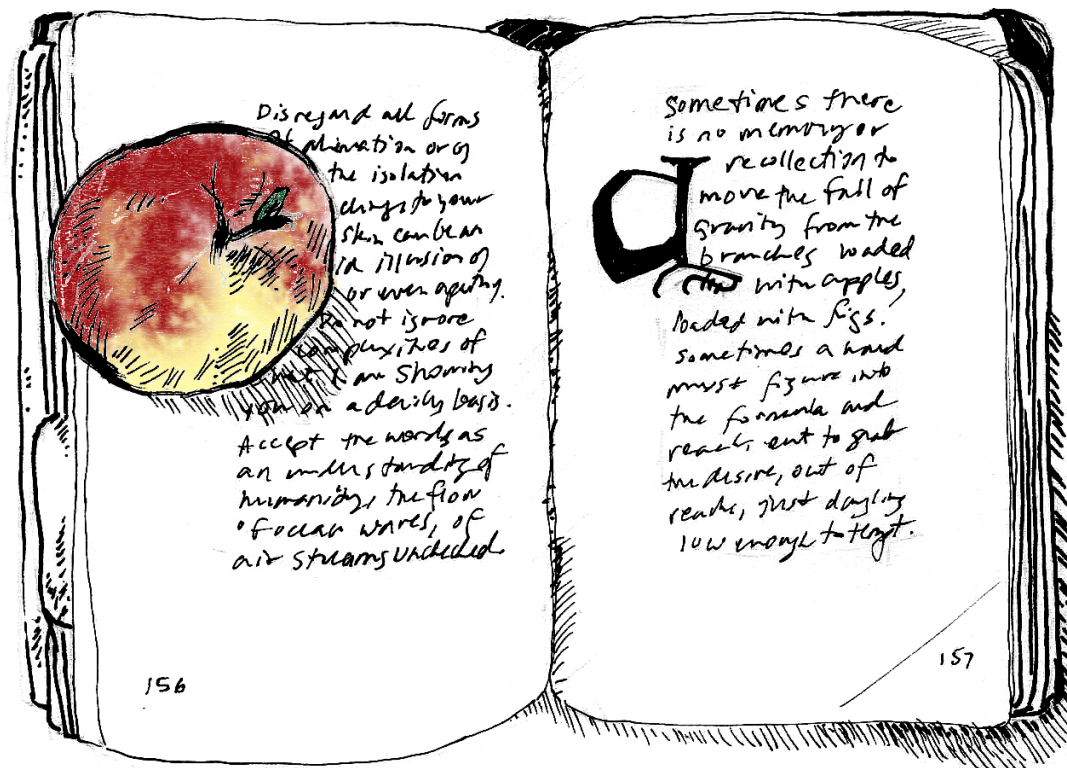


Beowulf-part 1



Beowulf

Important Characters

- Beowulf, title character, a member of the Geat tribe
- Breca, a good friend of Beowulf; in their youth they challenged each other to test bravery and skills
- Ecgtheow, Beowulf's father; through epithets his name is mentioned frequently; not a direct player in the story line
- Grendel, the monster whom Beowulf must defeat, a descendant of Cain
- Heorot, the mead hall of fabulous construction
- Hrothgar, elderly king of the Danes; great-grandson of Scyld Scefing
- Hrunting, name for Unferth's sword
- Hygelac, Beowulf's uncle and lord of the Geats
- Nailing (Nægling), Beowulf's sword
- Scyld Scerfing, first ruler of the Danes; his name means 'shield' or 'protector'

Beowulf

- Unferth, spokesman of the court, uncouth, a rude, challenging personality
- Wealtheow, queen of the Danes, respectful wife of Hrothgar
- Wiglaf, nephew to Beowulf; he is the last companion to stand with Beowulf against the dragon
- Grendel's Mother, unnamed character, a secondary challenge for Beowulf

Setting:

- Scandinavia
- traditionally the events are viewed as happening during the historical period of the latter half of the Fifth Century, up to the mid-Sixth Century

Beowulf

The story of *Beowulf* was first recorded in England by cleric scribes.

However, strong opinions vary on the actual date of the poem's conception

- ideas range from the Eighth to Eleventh Centuries
- it is an anonymous work which fits the early Anglo-Saxon culture promoted by the Old English scop-poets
- traditional it is believed to be conceived by an Anglo-Saxon scop poet, a performer still maintaining his Germanic heritage and culture; he would in turn train an apprentice who would memorize the text and later perform and train his own apprentice
- another critical opinion states that the poem consists of multiple scraps of materials, three separate stories brought together under a common hero's name by a clerical scribe

Beowulf

- another theory proposes a monk familiar with many Anglo-Saxon folktales, created the entire piece to celebrate the past history— with this concept, what is being suggested is that the story did not have an oral tradition but rather began as an original written concept from the very beginning

So, depending on your views of the composition, the overall intentions of the poem change.

What results:

- the pagan elements are specific cultural beliefs of the creator (oral)
—*or*—
- the pagan elements are merely literary devices to embellish the text (literate)

Beowulf

The Theme

Besides presenting the universal concept of good versus evil,

Beowulf presents an unique angle to the epic theme

- a hero of absolute good sacrifices himself in order to promote his moral code and create a greater sense of safety for humanity
- the audience is provided three different examples of how his moral code is challenged and how he prevails in each section
- the audience is likewise presented secondary background stories of how other men and women succeeded or failed with similar conflicts

Beowulf

Keep in mind, at the root of this story is established a warrior-society.

- order is maintained through force and militaristic actions
- special emphasis is placed more on heroic deeds of central characters and less on a system of diplomacy and logical analysis
- The character of Hrothgar appears in numerous other Nordic as well as Anglo-Saxon epics and poems; the audience would be familiar with his full history and know of further tragedies, conflicts which will occur for himself and his family

Beowulf

- Furthermore, in *Beowulf*, King Hrothgar is shown with his thanes who collectively represent a flawed established order; as representations of strength these men *should* be maintaining a strong structure for their society, *however*:
 - > the continued presence of the monster Grendel is a force who terrorizes Hrothgar's mead hall for “twelve long winters” (l 146) and cannot be resolved by the Danes themselves
 - > Hrothgar's advisors sometimes make “unholy sacrifices” to Hell (l 175)
 - > Unferth's revealed past history represents further weaknesses in the group (l 587-589)
- Beowulf, an outside resource from Geats lineage, enters the scene to repair the problem; he *is* after all the subject of the epic, the protagonist

Grendel

Grendel is shown as the monster-antagonist.

- described as “an enemy from hell / [...] this cruel spirit” (ll 100-101)
- he lives in marshes and wetlands which exist near the mead hall, Heorot
- he is a decedent of Cain, the first murderer from the Old Testament;
this is a plot device to show sympathy should not lie with Grendel;
he personifies a pure evil, without retribution
- as evidence, he cannot approach Hrothgar’s throne due to the presumed notion Hrothgar, the king, is protected by God, even if his thanes are not;
Grendel’s violence is limited in a sense to men who get too rowdy in their drunkenness at night
- he moves about in darkness; commits his crimes under darkness;
he attacks his enemies as they are sleeping, like a coward

Grendel

Notice Grendel is *fated* to commit crimes based on his heritage.

Grendel, as a character, is a good example of a combination of pagan and Christian elements.

- As a descendant of Cain, Grendel's bloodline is cursed as one of the fallen
- When we read more of Grendel's background we discover from Cain:
“came down all kinds misbegotten / —orges and elves and evil shades— /
as also the Giants, who joined in long / wars with God. He gave them their
reward” (ll 110-113). Obvious pagan creatures are mixed into the biblical
story from the Old Testament.
- More subtle, but important to note, pick up on the fact that Grendel's actions
are predestined, controlled by a pagan, Nordic notion of *wyrd*. (The Catholic
tradition is *slightly* similar, however, what differs in the element of free will
within the non-pagan beliefs. This story predates the idea of Predestination.)

Grendel

Notice how Grendel represents chaos; on the other hand, the mead hall, Heorot, represents order, structure.

- the construction of the mead hall is an architectural feat in itself, “a house greater / than men on earth ever heard of” (ll 68-69); it is *by appearance* a well-crafted building of solid form— however, *in reality*, as seen by Hrothgar’s flaws, hidden situations exist
- in the opening scenes before Grendel first attacks, it is relayed how a scop-poet sang a story from the Old Testament (l 90-97)— in this action, the Danes are portrayed as a people who follow a religious order, a moral code from Biblical teachings; it also prepares you for the entrance of Grendel; he dislikes religious order; he emerges on the scene from marshes and darkness, from out of chaotic nature itself

wergild

Within the warrior-society a value is heavily placed on one's kinship, identity, and personal heritage.

- A responsibility lies with maintaining the appearance of a successful family through past histories within the bloodline.
- Furthermore, if a family member is killed, the surviving members have the duty to act revenge on the transgressor *or*
- demand a *wergild*, a payment to replace the loss of the relative.
- In line 157, *Longman* notes that the phrase “man-price” indicates the concept of *wergild* as a means of illustrating how uncivilized Grendel is; he refuses to pay for his crimes of murder against the Danish men and thus limits him to being inhuman, heathen, or non-Christian.
- The crimes of his ancestor are inherited traits in his being.

Beowulf

To contrast against the Grendel example, and continuing to explain the concept of wergild, the story clarifies why Hrothgar is persuaded to accept the offer from Beowulf in the first place.

- Hrothgar himself relates how Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, once needed assistance to end a feud between himself and the Wulfing clan.
- Hrothgar values Beowulf's offer because it shows a son's gratitude for the past actions of the king.
- Family honor is highly valued throughout the story.