

Beowulf: An Epic Poem

Introduction

The story of the hero Beowulf (written as an epic poem) is the only surviving complete poem from Anglo-Saxon times. It is over 3000 lines long and was written in Old English by an Anglo-Saxon poet (minstrel) or 'scop' (pronounced 'shop'). The tale tells of the life and adventures of one of the princes of Sweden, Beowulf, who spends his time fighting monsters (Grendel and his mother in particular) across Denmark, Norway and Sweden (Scandinavia).



The Poem

The poem is set in three parts and opens with Grendel terrorising the people of Denmark. In the nearby country of Sweden, the prince of the Geats (a kingdom in southern Sweden), Beowulf, hears of the monster and takes his warriors (thanes) with him and sets sail to help the King (Hrothgar) and his people.

Beowulf fights the monster in unarmed combat and after a long battle, he eventually wins by ripping off its arm. The Danish people are overjoyed and celebrate in the King's hall with Beowulf, but Grendel's mother has plans of her own.

She takes revenge on Hrothgar by attacking the King's hall, killing the King's best friend (Aeschere) and taking his body away, along with the arm of her dead son. Beowulf follows her to her underwater lair and fights another long and exhausting battle. At last, he grabs a magical sword from her and kills her too. Beowulf and his warriors set sail for home in Sweden.



50 years later, Beowulf is now king of the Geats and his own kingdom is being threatened by a fierce dragon. Once more, Beowulf takes his warriors and sets off to fight. The battle is fierce and all of the soldiers except one (Wiglaf) flee. Beowulf is fatally wounded, but still manages to cut the beast in half with his sword.

A translation of part of the poem

Grendel the Murderer

{Grendel attacks the sleeping heroes}

When the sun was sunken, he set out to visit
The lofty hall-building, how the Ring-Danes had used it
For beds and benches when the banquet was over.
Then he found there reposing many a noble
Asleep after supper; sorrow the heroes,
Misery knew not. The monster of evil
Greedy and cruel tarried but little.

{Grendel drags off thirty of them, and devours them}

Fell and frantic, and forced from their slumbers
Thirty of thanemen; thence he departed
Leaping and laughing, his lair to return to,
With surfeit of slaughter sallying homeward.
In the dusk of the dawning, as the day was just breaking,
Was Grendel's prowess revealed to the warriors.



When was the poem composed and written down?

In Anglo-Saxon times, poems and stories were told by a travelling minstrel or scop as most people could not read or write. The poem must have been passed down through the generations, being modified by each storyteller, until the existing copy was written down by two scribes somewhere in Anglo-Saxon England over 1000 years ago.

1. Which country and group of people was Beowulf prince of?

2. Do you think ancient Scandinavian countries had only one king or many rulers? Find evidence from the text to support your answer.

3. In the text, what are the sub-headings for? How does this help the reader?

4. Look at the poem in the text box; what are the unusual shaped brackets {} for? Where might you have seen them before?

5. Look at the poem in the text box. Can you find and record words which tell you when the monster arrived at the King's hall to begin his attack and when he returned to his lair (home)?

6. Using clues from the text, what do you think the words 'reposing' and 'tarried' and 'surfeit' mean?

7. Why does each new line of the poem begin with a capital letter?

8. If the poem was not written down for many years after it was made up, how do you think minstrels remembered it? How do you think ancient people communicated with each other if there were no phones, newspapers or television?

9. How can historians tell how old something is by looking at the words? Hint – think about the vocabulary that is written down.

10. How do historians know there were two people who wrote the poem?

11. Can you find six present tense verbs under the heading 'The poem' and record them in a table. Can you change them to past tense and record them too? Think about how you will set your table out.

12. Some scholars believe Beowulf was an ancient day 'superhero'? Can you explain why they might think that?

Extension task:

Do you think neighbouring countries should help each other out in battle, like Beowulf did for his Danish friends? What could happen if they did not want to? Explain your opinion.
