

Beowulf

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High

The Origin of the English Language

- English is thought to be derived from an early language, called Proto-Indo-European, considered to be the source of most of the languages of Europe, as well as languages in the Middle East and Northern India. From this original language (which does not exist today), the major languages of Europe are said to have developed.
- The Old English of Beowulf comes from the Germanic branch of Indo-European. Indo-European → Germanic → West Germanic → Low German → English.
- The particular dialect of Beowulf was West Saxon.
- The speakers who wrote the poem were Anglo-Saxons, tribal people originally from Germany, where the language and stories originated.
- The Anglo-Saxon period in England lasted from 449-1066 CE. (The Norman Conquest).
- Following the Norman Conquest, English began to transform again, from Old English to Middle English, as French words and phrasing became part of the language.

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!

Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum,
þeodcyninga, þrym gefrunon,
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.
Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum,



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The Manuscript

- There is one manuscript in which Beowulf has survived to the present day. It was nearly destroyed in a fire in 1731, and it wasn't until 1845 that efforts were made to preserve the text.
- The manuscript dates to about 1000 CE, but the exact date is unknown, Most scholars assume the poem was written in the 800s, describing vaguely historical events from the period between 450-600 CE.
- Was originally dismissed as a piece of valuable literature. Most critics said the work had no literary merit, and studied it for its historical value. J.R.R. Tolkien reversed this view with his influential lecture in 1936, "The Monster and Its Critics".

¹ http://home.vicnet.net.au/~umbidas/9%20The%20Indo-European%20language%20group_files/image003.jpg

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Themes of the Poem

- While the text was written by a Christian monk, it certainly endorses pagan themes of the ancient Norse. Scholars today still debate whether or not the Christian elements of the poem are authentic or added. Some believe the elements were added, while others contend that the language and imagery of the poem are so infused with Christian elements that the text must reflect the complex religious views of a people in transition.
 - Christian Elements
 - The inclusion of God or Christ as the object of praise/worship. 53 times in the entire poem
 - Biblical allusions
 - The Flood
 - The concept of Grendel as the descendant of Cain. The poet argues that Grendel was, like all monsters, descended from the cursed son of Adam and Eve.
 - Norse Elements
 - Dual Role of Protection-Norse Society was based on loose political relationships. A powerful warrior (a thane) would lead a group of warriors and their families. This relationship was often hereditary, but loose. A weak thane could easily lose his warriors.
 - Warrior Culture. The final goal for every warrior was to be defeated in battle. Death by old age was not preferred, as only warriors who were killed in battle were accepted in **Valhalla**, the warrior heaven in Norse mythology.
 - **Wyrd** is the Germanic god of fate, or destiny. In original German myth, Fate was three sisters, named Wilbet, Worbet and Ainbet. As the Christian faith increasingly influenced the Germanic peoples, Wyrd was increasingly seen as one entity, associated with God. Derived originally from the Anglo-Saxon verb, *weorþan*
 - Practically, belief in Wyrd implied a rejection of individual control of one's destiny.
 - Similar to the concept of predestination.
 - Condemnation of Pride. While truthfully recounting one's deeds, as Beowulf does, is acceptable, being full of pride is condemned. Hrothgar comments about the prideful, "the world turns at his will; he does not know better."
 - Pride is unfavorably compared with **lof**, a nearly untranslatable word which means the praise and esteem of one's countrymen and contemporaries. Fame is the most permanent thing in the world, the only thing that survives and ensures immortality.

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Literary Techniques

- **Kennings** are compound poetic phrases substituted for the usual name of a person or thing. The term kenning comes from the Old Norse phrase *kenna eitt við*, "to express a thing in terms of another", and is commonly found in the epics of Old English and Norse literature.
 - Kennings often rely on mythological stories for added meaning.
 - Kennings can be combined for even more effective meaning. Poets were not limited to two words, but could string a series of effective descriptors together.
 - Examples
 - Whale-road (Ocean)
 - slaughter-dew (blood)
 - spear-din (battle)
 - slaughter dew worm dance (bloody battle to the death)
- Beowulf is an example of an **epic poem**. In broad terms, an epic poem is a retelling of the life and deeds of a heroic or mythological figure.
 - The Iliad, Odyssey, Gilgamesh, Ramayana, and The Nibelungenlied are examples of epic poems.
 - Epic poems are written in high style, using uncommon/popular forms
 - Epic poems are always about individuals who are historically/culturally significant.
 - Epic poems tend to follow the conventions of the **epic hero cycle**.
- The **Epic Hero Cycle**³ is a reasonably predictable series of events that happen to heroes across cultures in poems of this nature. Specifically, the general requirements of the epic hero cycle are:
 - **A charge**, from a god or someone else to take on a quest/mission
 - **A test**, to determine one's worthiness to complete the task
 - **A mentor**, to guide the seeker in his/her quest.
 - **Helpers** (animal, human, or mystical) to assist in the quest
 - **A Main Antagonist**, often supernatural
 - **A Magical/Unreal World** visited by the hero that others are not able to enter
 - **An Escape from the Quest**, where the hero questions his commitment
 - **A Resurrection**, where the hero seems to return from death or a death-like state
 - **And a Restoration**, where a character is restored to a rightful place.

³ (Excerpted and simplified from Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces)