Beowulf: Literary Analysis

*Beowulf* is an Anglo-Saxon epic about a young Swedish warrior and the three great monsters he faces. Although told orally for a long time, *Beowulf* was recorded in Old English sometime between 700 and 1000 CE. Through the use of alliteration and symbolism, the legend of *Beowulf* characterizes Anglo-Saxon principles of loyalty, bravery, and good lordship. In its Old English form it used caesuras and alliterations in the same way modern English poetry uses meter and rhyme- to make the poem flow. *Beowulf* was originally in dactylic hexameter like most epic poetry, including *Homer* and *The Iliad*. Dactylic hexameter has 6 meters (often syllables) where the third meter alliterates with the first or second meter but never the fourth. This complicated formula allowed bards to create rhythm in their epics.

Beowulf faces three monsters in his journeys: Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and the dragon. His first foe, Grendel, has been terrorizing the king of the Danes, Hrothgar’s, hall for 12 years. Each night Grendel comes to the hall, Heorot, to eat young thanes who sleep there. However, when Grendel attempts to take visiting Beowulf, asleep in Heorot, Beowulf rips off his shoulder and arm with his famous strength and thus Grendel dies. Grendel’s mother, now seeking revenge, comes and kills Hrothgar’s most trusted advisor. For this Beowulf and his thanes hunt her down. Upon finding her cave in a swamp, he attempts to kill her with a famously unbeatable blade. When the blade fails, Beowulf is forced to grab a blade from her treasure hoard. This sword succeeds in beheading her, but it melts upon contact with her blood. Beowulf returns a hero to Sweden. Later in life, now ruling the Geats, Beowulf’s land is threatened by a dragon who has been enraged by a thief stealing from his hoard. Beowulf dies fighting the dragon and saving his kingdom.

Much of *Beowulf* exemplifies the prominent Anglo-Saxon ideals of loyalty. Comitatus, the loyalty code between a lord and his thanes, was the difference between life and death for many Anglo-Saxons. Constantly at war or feuding, it was of the utmost importance a lord could rely on his warriors. Beowulf’s men were behind him through it all- until his greatest defeat- the dragon. It is significant to note that the quest the nearly invincible Beowulf is killed on is the one he faces alone. In fact, young Wiglaf is the only warrior to follow him into battle. In chapter 34, Wiglaf says to his fellow warriors:

“I remember the time, when mead we took,  
What promise we made to this prince of ours  
In the banquet-hall, to our breaker-of-rings,  
For great of combat to give him requital,  
For hard-sword and helmet, if hap should bring  
Stress of this sort! Himself who chose use  
From all of his army to aid him now…  
...though hero-work  
Our leader hoped unhelped and alone  
To finish for us.”
For this loyalty, Beowulf grants Wiglaf his kingdom as he lies dying. Afterward, Wiglaf, now lord, rebukes the thanes for their disloyalty:

“All clansman within your kin
Shall lose and leave, when your lords highborn
Hear afar of that flight of yours,
A nameless deed. Yea death is better
For liegeman all than a life of shame.”

Thanes, however, were not blindly loyal. Anglo-Saxon lords were heroic and brave, leading the charge into battle, and winning allegiance through feats of heroism. In a world where thanes heavily relied on their lord, generosity and benevolence were importan noble characteristics. In chapter 32, Beowulf speaks of his uncle, the king before him, praising his hospitality in taking young Beowulf in:

“Through store of struggles I strove in youth,
mighty feuds; I mind them all.
I was seven years old when the sovran of rings,
friend-of-his-folk, from my father took me,
had me, and held me, Hrethel the king,
with food and fee, faithful in kinship.
Ne’er, while I lived there, he loathlier found me,
bairn in the burg, than his birthright sons”

The most successful lords were the ones whose generosity and bravery inspired the utmost loyalty in their men. This loyalty enabled them to not only fight in battle, but also to command respect and obedience. In return for this, lords housed, fed, and paid their warriors.

*Beowulf* also, indirectly, addresses the Anglo-Saxon idea of Wyrd. Wyrd is both the inevitable and divine, a strange idea that encompasses fate, death, life, divinity, and destiny. An early example of Wyrd is a bard’s story told in Heorot which foreshadows Beowulf’s fight with the dragon.2 The bard says:

“Of Sigemund grew,
when he passed from life, no little praise;
for the doughty-in-combat a dragon killed
that herded the hoard: under hoary rock
the atheling dared the deed alone”

Additionally, the epic of *Beowulf* opens with the funeral of Shield Sheafson which resembles the funeral of Beowulf, with which the story ends. These parallels emphasize the Anglo-Saxon ideas

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1 Citation [3]
2 Sparknotes
3 Citation [4]
of continuity, that all things are just a retelling of past events. Indeed, Beowulf foresees his own death is near in chapter 32:

“Wyrd is full nigh
Stood ready to greet the gray-haired man,
To seize his soul-hoard, sunder apart
Life and body. Not long would be
The warrior’s spirit enwound in flesh”

Here, Wyrd is seen as the inevitable, or fate. But often Wyrd is treated as a sort of God, as in chapter 33, “one fight shall end our war by the wall // as Wyrd allots, all mankind’s master.” What may seem like conflicting ideas of Wyrd was probably one all-encompassing entity to the Anglo-Saxons. Their idea of divinity and destiny were very entangled- a reflection of Anglo-Saxon culture itself, which was a combination of Catholic missionizing, Celtic tradition, and Roman past.

*Beowulf* was an oral legend in Britain during the Middle Ages told in mead-halls and before kings. By looking at the moral of the story, we can understand that loyalty and generosity were important themes of this war-ridden time period. The character Beowulf was used to personify these ideals and his story became both an example of the rewards of abiding by them and the consequences of shirking them. *Beowulf*, however, is not just a story, it was used to encourage good behavior, of both lords and warriors, by providing a relatable role model.

**Citation:**