

Character traits in Beowulf

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The different characters in *Beowulf* represent characteristics in Anglo-Saxon culture, both desired and not desired. From the envied heroic status of Beowulf himself, to the undesired status of the cowardly thanes who abandoned him to die alone during a fierce battle, the ideals of Anglo Saxon characteristics are well presented in the epic poem *Beowulf*.

Beowulf is the representation of a heroic figure demonstrating acts of prowess and superiority. With his supernatural capability to literally dis-arm his opponent Grendel, he is an early image of a modern day superhero. Beowulf is strong, courageous, and willing to die for the people he rules; the very image of the perfect man in Anglo-Saxony.

The monstrous Grendel, his fear inspiring mother, and the fierce dragon are representations of supernatural evil that the Anglo-Saxons feared. While they do not represent human character traits in Anglo-Saxony, they are the typical antagonists of any story, and vital to the story's plot. Without them, what unearthly evils would the courageous warrior hero fight?

The terrified thanes, who ran in fear from the dragon, depict the faint hearted who were considered unworthy of being in the clan. To abandon one's leader was considered a cowardly offence in Anglo-Saxon times. Wiglaf makes this well known to the cowardly thanes, and says that they have shamed their family names for all eternity.

Wiglaf himself represents chivalric loyalty when he alone stays to fight the dragon with Beowulf. He assists his ruler in vanquishing the monstrous beast, and is not critically injured in the process. His heroic act will no doubt earn him praise in the kingdom Beowulf formerly ruled.

Not only do the characters represent things in the story *Beowulf*, but places do as well. The mead hall of Herot that King Hrothgar builds represents joy and happiness, as the mead hall was the place of entertainment in Anglo-Saxon times. It is large, grand, and spacious. The world has never seen such a marvelous mead hall. Hrothgar intends for it to be a place of joy, and it is. At least, it is until Grendel terrorizes it in his burning hatred for joy and happiness. Herot is not the only place that represents something. The lair of Grendel and his mother depicted an environment of doom and misery. It is a swampy marsh, full of filth and contaminants. It is not a pleasant place, and the finding of the head of one of the king's favorite thanes makes the place even more scary and dismal.

The characters and places in *Beowulf* represent a wide variety of things, from pleasant to miserable, and from honorable to shameful. *Beowulf* provides a detailed picture of Anglo-Saxon lifestyle, and what they revered as honorable and disgraceful. While dragons that breathe both fire and poisonous gas, and monsters descended from Cain, the slayer of Able in the Bible, were not really fought by the Anglo-Saxons, numerous wars against other tribes of perfectly normal people were fought, and the militaristic positions are the same in the story as they were in real life.