



Beowulf, by Unknown

In A Nutshell

Written in Anglo-Saxon, or Old English, sometime between the 8th and 11th centuries, *Beowulf* is an epic poem that reflects the early medieval warrior culture of Europe. Although scholars still debate some of the particulars, essentially *Beowulf* is the oldest surviving significant piece of literature in English. However, it's not the very oldest surviving thing written in English – that, if you wondered, is probably "Caedmon's Hymn," although scholars like to argue about that, too. *Beowulf* is also not in any kind of English that the average, modern English-speaker could recognize or read, since Anglo-Saxon was the language spoken in Britain before the Norman Conquest in 1066 – that is, before the extensive influence of French on the language we speak today. Still, *Beowulf* has come to be recognized as the foundational epic of English and British culture, in much the same way that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are the foundational epics for ancient Greece.

Although it was written and recited in Britain, *Beowulf* is about characters in Scandinavia – Danish and Swedish warriors who battle fabulous monsters as well as each other. Why? Because the early Anglo-Saxons were the descendants of Germanic and Scandinavian tribes that invaded Britain beginning in the 5th century. As a result, there was a lot of shared cultural background between the Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians, and the Anglo-Saxons looked back to their relatives across the sea when they wanted to tell stories about their own past. So *Beowulf* isn't just a story told in one place (Britain) about another place (Scandinavia) – it's also told in one time about an earlier time. We know this because the culture in which the

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poem was recited, 8th to 11th-century Britain, had already been Christianized, but the Scandinavian culture that the poem describes is still pagan. Thus the poem is a way for the Anglo-Saxons to describe their own past – their ancestors who came from over the sea centuries before.

There are several different theories about the composition of *Beowulf*, but the "original" would probably have been part of the oral culture of Anglo-Saxon Britain, a long epic or a series of short tales recited by bards at feasts and other gatherings. At some point between the 8th and 11th centuries, the epic was written down in a manuscript called the Nowell Codex, but it remained unpublished until 1815. In modern publications, the poem has been given the title *Beowulf*, although in the original manuscript it is untitled.

Since its publication and translation two centuries ago, *Beowulf* has captured the attention of scholars and audiences alike, becoming a keystone of English literary studies as well as the basis of several popular film and TV adaptations. J.R.R. Tolkien, a professor of languages at Oxford in the early 20th century, was especially interested in *Beowulf*. In 1936 Tolkien gave a lecture entitled "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," which was highly influential in establishing the epic as an important part of literary history. Tolkien also used many elements from *Beowulf* as inspiration for his famous "Lord of the Rings" trilogy. But whether it is interpreted by critics or enjoyed as an adventure story, *Beowulf* has become one of the most important pieces of literature in English.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 What is it that makes Beowulf a true hero? How do Beowulf's deeds, words, and beliefs come together to create the "perfect" medieval warrior?
- 2 Why are boasting and storytelling so important in the medieval warrior culture of *Beowulf*? What function do they serve in the epic?
- 3 How much control do the characters in *Beowulf* have over their fates? Are skilled warriors any more likely to succeed than cowards? Who does the narrator remind us is calling all the shots?

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