Beowulf Lecture Notes

**Lineage of the Danes**

- Shield Sheafson
  - Foundling - orphan
  - A good king
- Beow
- Half-dane
- Hrothgar - current king
- Hrethic and Hrothmund

**Wergild**

- **Wergild**: payment for a death; literally means man payment
  - When someone is killed, the family of the dead individual can demand retribution for the death
  - The king sets a price for the family and the murderer must either pay the price or face death
- Beowulf’s father, Ecgtheow, killed Heatholaf a Wulfing
  - The Geats outcast Ecgtheow rather than pay the wergild
  - Hrothgar ended the feud by paying the blood price
- Grendel has killed men but does not pay the wergild
  - Grendel’s mother takes up Grendel’s feud after his death
- Beowulf claims it is better to get revenge than to grieve: “Do not grieve. It is always better to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning” (1210)

**Warrior’s Uniform**

- Mail shirts, shields, spears, cheek hinges, helmets, javelins
- Webbed links
- Swords are owned by highest members of society
- Helmets and chain mail is also very rare

**Poet**

- Christian poet talking about pagan people
- Poet draws upon the historical which is heathen, noble, and hopeless though poetic
- Poet shows “pietas which treasures the memory of man’s struggles in the dark past, man fallen and not yet saved” (120)

**Christian Reference Over Pagan Reference**

- Beowulf is a story written by a Christian author about pagan people
  - The author respects Anglo-Saxon culture and is not condescending
  - Regrets that they were not Christian
    - Hrothgar appeals to the gods to get rid of Grendel
    - Author assumed they didn’t know God
- Christian God extremely visible in the text despite the pagan setting:
  - “a comfort sent by God” (1180); “the Lord of Life, the glorious Almighty, made this man renowned” (1180); the dead go into “the Lord’s keeping” (1180); Kings give goods by God: “God give goods” (1181); Beowulf’s men thanked God; Watchman mentioned God protecting; Hrothgar believes God guided Beowulf here; God sent angel to guard Hrothgar
  - **Interpolation**: insert words in a book or other text
    - Perhaps a later scribe had added those words in
- Men of the past served God’s purpose even if they were not Christian
- Anglo-Saxon culture valued old things including swords, families, etc
  - Christianity was a new religion not an old religion
New religion was difficult for people who respected antiquity

**Burial Practices**

- **Typical Practices**
  - **Cremation Pyre**
    - Body set on a pyre or in a boat; set on fire
    - Body surrounded by gold from the hoard and war-gear
  - **Grieving**
    - Grieving comrades at burial; often ride around burial site
    - Women lament and sing songs: keens, dirges
  - **Burial Markers**
    - Barrows created as a reminder to people
    - Put in prominent places

- **Herotheism:** worship of a mortal who has been deified or turned into a god
  - Worship of the dead usually happened at the tomb
  - Pagan gods often explain as deified heroes or kings

- **Shield Sheafson buried in a boat**
  - “Far-fetched treasures were piled upon him, and precious gold” (1180)
  - Ship sent out to sea

**Beowulf - Hygelac’s Thane**

- Hygelac’s nephew
  - Hygelac is king of the Geats
  - Traveled to Denmark with 14 companions
- Beowulf considered the “mightiest man on earth” (1184)
  - Awesome strength
  - Already known: “battled and bound five beasts, raided a troll-nest, and in the sea slaughtered sea brutes” (1108)
  - Beowulf had a swimming competition, which turned into a battle with nine sea monsters
  - People recognize his virtues just by looking at him: “he is truly noble” (1185)
- Wrestles monsters
  - Rips Grendel’s arm off

**Heorot**

- Description
  - Timbered hall
  - Highly decorated
  - Lots of gold
- Symbolizes civilization, society, relationships between people
  - The place of joy and security
  - Drinking of mead, singers, music
- The hall was nearly destroyed in the match between Grendel and Beowulf

**Kings: Giver of Gifts**

- King is the Ring-Giver
  - Gives gifts of rings, armor, weapons, land, and political authority
  - Hrothgar described as “the grey-haired treasure giver” (1192)
- Thane is the warrior
  - Pledges loyalty to the king in battle and as councilors
Valued loyalty within a fighting band; bonds between warriors and the hero

The king’s role is to dispense what he has
✦ Gives out rings, torques, weapons, armor, land, etc
✦ Hrothgar gives Beowulf gifts for his deeds: “for his heroism I will recompose him with a rich treasure” (1188)
✦ Generosity is a sign of a good king: “a young prince must be prudent like that, giving freely while his father lives so that afterward in age when fighting starts steadfast companions will stand by him and hold the line “ (1180)
✦ Bad things happen to kings who keep their gold
✦ Kings should act for benefit of society rather than fighting for personal glory like heroes

Treasure
✦ Treasure ties society together
✦ Creates kinship but can also cause strife
✦ Societies gain and loss of treasure

Purpose of Violence
✦ Justifiable versus unjustifiable aggression
✦ The warrior who brings peace and defeats or violence for the sake of his society rather than personal gain is good
✦ Kings who hold power and keep peace are admired even if force is sometimes required

Songs/Bards
✦ Bards sing at meals and bring cheer; a form of entertainment
✦ Transmission of stories and culture
✦ Grendel’s deeds sung in song- how Beowulf learns of him
✦ Beowulf’s defeat of Grendel sung in song
   • Start of this poem?

Women as Peace Weaver
✦ “a queen should weave pace” (1221)
✦ Peace-maker through marriage and offspring and by cup-passing in the hall
✦ Women are the bond of kinship in marriage
   • By bearing children, a women creates blood ties between people
   • Freawaru’s wedding
   • Meant to bring peace between two nations
✦ Passing a cup in a hall strengthens the societal and familial bonds between the lord and the retainer, the king and the thane
   • Sharing food and drink a symbol of relationship
   • Weaves invisible web between individuals in the hall
   • Wealththeow passes around the cup, binding men together
   • Speech of peace and joy reinforce duty to one another
✦ In Beowulf, the women stands for peace by only appearing after Grendel has been defeated

The Monsters
✦ Beowulf seems wholly focused on killing monsters
✦ Grendel
   • A demon, a fiend of hell, a descendent of Cain’s clan
   • Grendel is an outsider; he’s not a part of the Danish society: “it harrowed him to hear the din of the loud banquet” (1182)
The outlaw or wanderer was the worst situation in Anglo-Saxon, Germanic society:
- Doesn’t attack till a hall is built
- First attack killed 30 men
- Grendel doesn’t pay wergild- another sign he is not part of society

Beowulf wrestles with Grendel:
- Beowulf chooses not to fight with a weapon because Grendel doesn’t fight with a weapon
- Turns out Grendel cannot be destroyed by weapons
- Beowulf rips of Grendel’s arm; he escapes from Hereot and bleeds out

Grendel is a mock of the hall-retainer, the thane

Grendel’s Mother:
- “monstrous hell bride” (1202)
- Attacked and took one man
  - Aeschere- one of the kings advisors
  - Also took Grendel’s hand
- Grendel’s Mother is a mock of the peace-weaving woman
- Inverts the traditional Germanic roles played by women: both monstrous and masculine
  - Her home is described as a battle-hall
  - Masculine pronouns used to refer to her in original language
  - She is monstrous because she acts like a warrior or lord, a masculine role

Grendel’s Mother’s Perversions:
- Her actions are framed by descriptions of other proper women
- Mothers must passively accept the loss of loved one’s including sons
- Women are supposed to mourn with songs
  - Hildeburh mourns the loss of her peace-pledge
  - Wealththeow tries to forestall future loss by weaving peace between her sons and their cousin
  - Grendel’s Mother tries to get revenge for the loss of her son
    - Revenge would be justified if she were a male;
    - This act makes her more monstrous
    - Desires revenge rather than peace
  - Protects her battle hall from Beowulf like the dragon does
- Rude reception of Beowulf is a mock of the treasure giving ceremony of a hall

Beowulf wrestles with her and then kills her by cutting off her head

The Dragon:
- The most heroic figure, Sigurd, is praised for overcoming a dragon
- Dragon is a real dragon but also seems to personify the traits of greed or malice
  - Allegory?
- Dragon is a mock of the king and treasure giver

The Theme of Defeat:
- The paradox of inevitable defeat is the major theme
  - A world where warriors fought with the hostile world which all leads to an end
  - Hostility of gods, heroes and monsters where “the creed of unyielding will holds” (Tolkien 117)
  - The monsters were the foes of gods and men; however, eventually the monsters would win

Beowulf’s tragedy is that he is man and destined to die (Pagan and Christian idea)
- “the wages of heroism is death” (Tolkien 122)

Comparison’s to other Epic Poems:
- Cyclops similar to Grendel
- Inhumane Greek gods to humane Norse gods
Norse gods fight alongside men and are doomed to die
Cain compared to jotnar and alfar

Fate

The Norns: female god who determine the destiny of gods and men

- Said to be three females, an elder, a middle, and a young, who wove together mankind’s fate
- Wyrd: an individual’s fate or personal destiny
  - The idea that everything is interconnected as if woven together
  - A lot of weaving imagery and terminology
  - Compare to the Greek Fates, who cut the string of men’s lives

References to fate

- “fate goes ever as fate must” (1189)
- “fate sweeps [my guards] away into Grendel’s clutches” (1190)
- “often, for undaunted courage, fate saves the men it has not already marked” (1192)
- Heldebuch’s son and brother were “foredoomed” (1202)
- Hygelac killed by fate
- Grendel’s mothers attack fate
- “Yet his shield defended the renowned leader’s life and limb for a shorter time than he meant it to: that final day was the first time when Beowulf fought and fate denied him glory in battle” (1235)
- Beowulf “knew his days in the world had been lived out o the end—his allotted time was drawing to a close, death was very near” (1238)

God sometimes replaces the idea of fate

- “but the Lord was weaving a victory on His war-loom”
- “So may a man not marked by fate easily escape exile and woe by the Grace of God” (1229)

Fame and Glory

- Respect ultimately gained through martial prowess
- Beowulf already has a reputation when he comes to fight Grendel
- Beowulf chooses to fight Grendel without weapons because this will bring him and Hygelac more fame
  - It would be cowardly to fight Grendel with weapons if Grendel wasn’t fighting with them as well
- Beowulf is “inspired again by the thought of glory” (1237)
- Heroes fight for personal glory while kings act for benefit of society
  - Beowulf kills the dragon and brings himself glory but also afflicts his people
- Beowulf’s body is entombed in a barrow on the edge of the ocean so that everyone can see it as they sail past

Discussion Questions:

- Is Beowulf an Epic, a lay, or an elegy?
- Is Beowulf a good king?

Style Time

Kennings
- Mead-benches
- Hall-troops
- Whale-road
- Ring-whorled
- Ice-clad
- Ring-giver
- Far-fetched
✦ Battle-tackle
✦ Hall-building
✦ Mead-hall
✦ Throne-room
✦ Blood-lust
✦ God-cursed
✦ Hall-watchers
✦ Weather-eye
✦ Death-price
✦ Death-shadow
✦ Swan-road
✦ War-gear
✦ Sea-lanes
✦ Word-hoard
✦ Corpse-maker
✦ Coast-guard
✦ Wound-slurry
✦ Treasure-hoard
✦ Hoard-guardian