

SNHU

Analytical Essay of Beowulf

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Introduction

The ancient poem of *Beowulf* has been an influential part of literature, guiding even modern writers in the structure and storytelling of heroic tales. The poem was originally written roughly between 650 CE – 1000 CE (Heaney ix). Besides the themes of belief, mythology, heroism, and kinship, the epic story incorporates topics such as stoicism, grief, and struggle. At its core, *Beowulf* is about standing up to and overcoming opposition but also dealing with the aftermath of confrontation. In addition to reflecting the oral narrative traditions of its age, the poem provides valuable insight into the cultural and social structures of the period.

Character Gender, Roles, and Nationality

There is a stark difference in the gender of characters in *Beowulf*, with 89% male but only 11% female. Most of the eight female characters mentioned in the story are not active characters, with the exceptions of Grendel's mother, Queen Wealhtheow (of the Danes), and Queen Hygd (of the Geats). Grendel's mother is described as a "monstrous hell-bride" but "grief-racked" at the loss of her son (Heaney 89). Both Queen Wealhtheow and Queen Hygd are praised for their hospitality, generosity, and graceful natures (Heaney 41-43, 131-135). However, no female characters speak in the story, and the poem only offers insight into Grendel's mother's thoughts and motivations. Other than Grendel's mother, no female characters are described as warriors.

Of the 66 male characters, 32 (or approximately 48%) are active characters. The poem centers on male figures, such as Beowulf (the Geatish warrior), King Hrothgar (of the Danes), Grendel, and King Hygelac (of the Geats). Additionally, characters such as Unferth (Hrothgar's spokesman), Aeschere (Hrothgar's advisor), Heardred (Hygelac's son), Wulfgar (Danish herald), and the dragon play roles in shaping the action.

In the narrative, honor is shown to kings and queens and especially those who are perceived as noble, just, kind, and generous. While Beowulf is a nephew to King Hygelac, he does not attempt to contest the throne and only ascends after his cousin (then King Heardred) is killed in battle. Social class has a hierarchical structure in the story, as was common at that point in history.

Overall, most characters mentioned in the story are Danish (39%), Geatish (26%), and Swedish (7%). “Geatish” is an ancient term for an area of Sweden, but the terms are not interchangeable. Although the story is set among Scandinavian societies and draws on a wider Germanic cultural tradition, the poem itself is generally believed to be of Anglo-Saxon origin and shaped by early medieval English perspectives (Heaney ix).

Close Reading and Visualization Interpretation

The following tables detail the major elements in the poem with their significance. Interpretations of the digital visualizations from the Annotated Visualization project are included after each table.

Table 1. Timeline of the prologue in *Beowulf*.

Major Element	Significance
Opening genealogy	Creates background lineage and emphasizes the story’s focus on legacy and kingship.
The founding of Heorot by Danish King Hrothgar	Establishes community and hints at vulnerability.
Grendel’s attacks on Heorot and the Danes	Introduces Grendel as an outcast and Biblical connection (“Cain’s descendent”). Reinforces the Danes communal trauma from the repeated attacks, and the weight of leadership for King Hrothgar.

The cover of Heaney’s book presents an image of a warrior’s chain-mailed head, as viewed from behind. With the dark background, the design draws the reader’s focus to the faceless warrior. The image may be inspired by the entrance of Beowulf in Heorot, before he introduces himself in King Hrothgar’s hall:

And standing on the hearth
in webbed links that the smith had woven,
the fine-forged mesh of his gleaming mail-shirt,
resolute in his helmet, Beowulf spoke...
(Heaney 29)

For a character like Beowulf, violence would have been considered commonplace from a young age. Archeological evidence suggests that during the Viking Age (750-1050 CE), children

in Scandinavian societies were usually considered to be adults by the ages of 12-16 and may have participated in warfare (Raffield et al 815). Ancient texts also encourage strategic board games and competitive physical activities as early martial training for children. Not only in Old Norse but also Old English texts promote a proficiency in activities such as swimming as being a sign of masculinity (Raffield et al 824).

When Unferth argues with Beowulf about his swimming race against Breca, Unferth is not only challenging Beowulf's honor but his sense of masculinity and strength. This would have been highly offensive to Beowulf. Throughout the story, there is a clear cultural expectation for male warriors to be strong and competitive.

Table 2. Timeline of Beowulf's deeds in Denmark.

Major Element	Significance
Beowulf and his warriors sail from Geatland and arrive in Denmark	Beowulf's self-description promotes themes of self-identity and the importance of reputation. Speech rituals highlight social expectations. Beowulf makes an oath to fight Grendel without sword or shield, trusting in God's protection and his own strength.
Unferth challenges and Beowulf responds	Verbal battle uncovers envy, reveals the societal expectations of truth, and high value of honor.
The battle with Grendel	Beowulf fights Grendel hand-to-hand, promoting the theme of physical strength. Grendel's arm becomes a trophy.
Celebrations in Heorot	King Hrothgar praises Beowulf, both in his capabilities as a warrior and his kingly attributes. Heroic songs and tales are presented, showing the value of heroic actions. Gifts are given to the warriors, emphasizing the importance of kinship and reciprocity.
Grendel's mother attacks and Beowulf follows her to her lair to battle	Grendel's mother seeks revenge, kills Aeschere (close counsellor to King Hrothgar), and takes back Grendel's arm. Unferth offers Beowulf his sword. The sword breaks during the fight, symbolic of man-made items limitations. Beowulf uses a nearby giant sword to behead Grendel's mother and then Grendel's corpse – symbolically showing divine intervention in the former, and the cost of violence in the latter.

Sutton Hoo Helmet and Ngram Word Graph

The digital visualization from the Annotated Visualization of a helmet connects to the warrior image, as a symbol of protection and stoicism. According to Wade (7), intentionally removing armor can be a sign of “battle trance” and specifically the “berserk state”, where a warrior removes their armor to demonstrate bravery and invoke invulnerability. Wade (1) defines the “battle trance” as “instinctive defensive and offensive behaviors for close combat, involves socially transgressive processes like becoming-intense and becoming-animal that produce non-ordinary psychophysical states useful in fighting”. The berserk state is marked by “fearlessness, supernatural strength, and invulnerability” (Wade 7). Beowulf appears to partly use this philosophy when he insists on fighting Grendel without weapons.

Additionally, this also has a connection to the digital visualization from the Annotated Visualization of the word Ngram, which offers a comparison of the words “berserk”, “battle trance” “combat”, and “discipline”. While words like “combat” and “discipline” are more common terms, “berserk” and “battle trance” refer to certain psychological states.

Beowulf’s Travel, King’s Hall Longhouse, and Swedish Swords

The digital visualizations from the Annotated Visualization include a map of Beowulf’s travel to Heorot, images of the King’s Hall Viking longhouse reconstruction, and images of Swedish archeological swords. The map emphasizes not only a possible route of travel, but also that the Geats were a seafaring people. The Viking longhouse reconstruction helps to understand the grandeur of Heorot, as well as the Geat’s hall.

The Swedish archeological sword images help the reader imagine the appearance of the swords in Beowulf’s time. In *Beowulf*, swords are mentioned in tales told by characters, and

associated with the heroes who wield them. Beowulf uses two named swords in the poem: Hrunting, lent to him by Unferth before the fight with Grendel’s mother, and Nægling, his sword that he wields in his final battle against the dragon (Heaney 101, 181). Both blades ultimately break during battle. After Beowulf used the giant (and seemingly divinely placed) sword in battle against Grendel’s mother and Grendel’s corpse, the blade melted (Heaney 111). Beowulf presented the remaining hilt and Grendel’s head to King Hrothgar, as evidence that the Danes could rest assured that no further harm would come to them.

Table 3. Timeline of Beowulf’s return to Geatland.

Major Element	Significance
Successful return to Heorot	King Hrothgar gives a speech, warning about the dangers of pride and power, and the fragility of life. Beowulf humbly accepts Hrothgar’s advice. Gifts are again given and a feast is held.
Beowulf and his warriors return to Geatland, and Beowulf becomes king	Beowulf recounts the battles to King Hygelac and offers gifts to the king and Queen Hygd. But the events in Denmark changed the Geats’ opinion of Beowulf, making him well-respected instead of being seen as weak like heretofore. King Hygelac gave Beowulf a valuable sword (from his grandfather) and generous amount of land. After King Hygelac and his son King Heardred both fell in battle, the kingship passed to Beowulf who ruled for 50 years, highlighting the burden of leadership.

Table 4. Timeline of Beowulf's final years.

Major Element	Significance
Beowulf's final battle with a dragon	The dragon's hoard and the thief symbolize neglected history and the futility of materialism. Beowulf's last boast shows a mature balance between heroism and reality. Wiglaf is the only one of the company to remain loyal. Beowulf's sword breaks during the battle, symbolic of failing strength.
Beowulf's death and funeral	After the dragon's final mortal attack, Beowulf reflects on his life. He thanks God for the dragon's treasure which will benefit his people, and directs Wiglaf in making his burial preparations. A Geat woman's lament foretells of future invasion and the collapse of society. The final lines summarize the people's sorrow over losing their beloved king.

Throughout the story, there are depictions of trauma-like symptoms or post-traumatic responses experienced by the characters. Birmes et al. (22–26) studied ancient texts descriptions of trauma and found that “trauma-related psychological and somatic symptoms” fall into acute reactions or post-traumatic and long-term responses. Acute reactions happen in situations of mass violence, disasters, or combat and include panic, terror, stupor, and dissociation (Birmes et al. 22-26). Post-traumatic and long-term responses include such as re-experiences, numbing, hyperarousal, and dissociative symptoms (Birmes et al. 24-26).

Beowulf has multiple examples of acute reactions or post-traumatic and long-term responses, including:

- Grendel's attacks are mass violence, causing acute reactions (communal trauma) for the Danes.
- King Hrothgar's emotional state shows survivor's grief, a post-traumatic response.
- Beowulf's recounting of previous battles highlights traumatic retelling, a post-traumatic response.
- When facing his last battle with the dragon, Beowulf pauses to recount his life, previous battles, and laments the loss of those he knew before. Even during the battle, he has a flashback to the death of his uncle, King Hygelac (Heaney 159-161). These are also symptoms of post-traumatic or long-term responses.

Burial Mounds

While peering over the cliff towards the dragon's lair, Beowulf has forebodings of the battle and results:

The veteran king sat down on the cliff-top.

He wished good luck to the Geats who had shared

his hearth and his gold. He was sad at heart,

unsettled yet ready, sensing his death.

(Heaney 163)

This first mention of Beowulf sitting down in the poem offers physicality to his crushed mood. He also begins to lament days past and previous sorrows. Thomson (487) points out that this combination of “sitting down; rejecting the company of others; telling sad stories; being overwhelmed by inner sorrow; and contemplating, even wishing for, death—recur in early medieval English literature as a model for what it looks like when someone...is depressed.”

The loss of Beowulf affects his people in a similar way to other ancient Scandinavian texts, where weeping is described as the outward signal of people’s grief. This is not only true for the female characters, but also the male characters. As Mills (484) pointed out, medieval Scandinavian literature offers examples of how the death of warriors or kings affects their comrades “...and in none of these accounts is the weeping derided as shameful or effeminate.”

After Beowulf fights the dragon:

The whole troop rose in tears, then took their way
to the uncanny scene under Earnaness.

There on the sand, where his soul had left him,
they found him at rest, their ring-giver

from days gone by. The great man
had breathed his last. Beowulf the king

had indeed met with a marvellous death.

(Heaney 203-205)

The digital visualization from the Annotated Visualization includes an image of ancient burial mounds in Sweden. Beowulf’s funeral pyre and burial barrow (or mound) scenes highlight

communal grief, loss of a respected leader, and the ending of an era. After constructing Beowulf's burial mound, his warriors and all his people lament his loss:

So the Geat people, his hearth companions,
sorrowed for the lord who had been laid low.
They said that of all the kings upon the earth
he was the man most gracious and fair-minded,
kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.

(Heaney 213)

Conclusion

Beowulf is a deeply layered literary text, shaped by history, culture, societal expectations, gender, and the emotional weight of violence. Its epic tapestry continues to be impactful to modern audiences, offering insight into how individuals and communities deal with trauma. The poem's exploration of loss and resilience remains remarkably applicable, reminding readers that the struggles depicted are timeless.

Works Cited

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