A short plot synopsis of *Beowulf* – and a critical analysis

What happens in *Beowulf*, the jewel in the crown of Anglo-Saxon poetry? The title of the poem is probably the most famous thing about it – that, and the fact that a monster named Grendel features at some point. But because the specific details of the story are not widely known, numerous misconceptions about the poem abound. When was *Beowulf* written? This is a matter of some conjecture, with guesses ranging anywhere between the eighth century and the first half of the eleventh century. Critics can't even agree on what the first line of the poem means. In the following post, we offer a short summary of *Beowulf*, and an introduction to its main themes.

The poem continues to enjoy popularity, thanks to a bestselling translation by Seamus Heaney and a translation by J. R. R. Tolkien, which was only published in 2014. (If you're looking for the Heaney translation, it can be found here: *Beowulf: A New Translation*; the Tolkien translation is *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary, together with Sellic Spell*.) We're here to offer a brief overview of the plot of *Beowulf*, along with some interpretations of the poem. So, to begin, a brief synopsis.

Plot Summary

We'll start with a brief summary of *Beowulf* before proceeding to some textual analysis and critical reading. *Beowulf* is a classic 'overcoming the monster' story. Most people know that the poem documents the struggle of the title character in vanquishing a monster named Grendel. But what is less well known is that Beowulf has to slay not one big monster, but three: after he has taken care of Grendel, the dead monster's mother shows up, and she proves even more of a challenge for our hero (though ultimately Beowulf triumphs and wins the day). The poem then ends with Beowulf, now in his twilight years, slaying a third monster (this time, a dragon), although this encounter proves his undoing, as he is fatally wounded in the battle. The poem ends with his subsequent death and 'burial' at sea.

But the poem doesn't begin with Beowulf. It opens with an account of a Danish king named Hrothgar, who was the one responsible for building a great hall (named Heorot), a hall which is now being terrorised by the monstrous Grendel. Beowulf hears that Grendel is killing Hrothgar's men at

Heorot and so our hero departs from home to go and help rid Heorot of this monster. Beowulf is from a different kingdom – the nearby Geatland, in modern-day Sweden – so we have one of the classic tropes of adventure narratives, that of the hero leaving home to go and vanquish some foe in a foreign land. Think of Bilbo Baggins leaving the Shire, or Frodo for that matter, in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (and, indeed, we'll return to Tolkien shortly).

Beowulf and his men spend the night at Heorot and wait for Grendel to turn up. When the monster appears, Beowulf and his men attack the troll-like monster with their swords. But the monster – which is described as resembling a troll – cannot be killed with a blade, as Beowulf soon realizes. So he does what lesser men would fear to do: he wrestles the monster with his bare hands, eventually tearing off one of its arms. Grendel flees, eventually dying of his wound.

The next night, Grendel's mother – angered by the attack on her son – turns up to wreak vengeance, and once again Beowulf finds himself having to roll up his sleeves and engage in fierce combat, which this time takes place in the underwater lair of the monster deep beneath the surface of a lake. Although he has been given a strong sword (named Hrunting) by Unferth (a man

who had previously doubted Beowulf – the sword is given as a token of friendship), Beowulf finds this sword useless against Grendel's mother. (Immunity to swords evidently runs in the family.) But this time, hand-to-hand fighting, which had proved handy against Grendel, is equally useless. Beowulf only succeeds in vanquishing the monster when he grabs a magic sword from the pile of treasure lying in the monster's lair, and is able to behead the monster with the weapon. Traveling deeper into the monster's lair, Beowulf comes across the dying Grendel, and – armed with his new magic sword – decides to lop off the son's head as well, for good measure. Both monsters have now been slain, and Beowulf is a hero.

Following his victory over the two monsters, Beowulf then returns to the water's surface (at 'noon' – which, interestingly, when the poem was written, was actually three o'clock in the afternoon, or the ninth hour after dawn) before rejoining his men and journeying back to the hall for mead and rejoicing.

The poem then moves forward fifty years to Beowulf's last fight, his run-in with the dragon (which has been angered by the theft of some of its treasure – shades of *The Hobbit* once more?). This fight results in one last victory for our great hero, followed by his own death from the mortal would inflicted by

the poisoned horn of the beast (though presumably Beowulf was rather advanced in years by this point anyway). The poem ends with Beowulf's burial at sea, which is described in much detail – why this might be is discussed below. But this much constitutes a reasonably complete summary of the plot of *Beowulf*. So, what about the context for the poem?

Facts about *Beowulf*

Although it is celebrated nowadays as an important work of Anglo-Saxon – indeed, 'English' – literature, *Beowulf* was virtually unknown and forgotten about, amazingly, for nearly a thousand years. It was only rescued from obscurity in 1815, when an Icelandic-Danish scholar named Thorkelin printed an edition of the poem. And although it is seen as the starting-point of great English literature – at many universities, it is still the earliest literary text studied as part of the literary canon – it is very different from other medieval poetry, such as that by Chaucer or Langland, who were writing many centuries later. It is set in Denmark, has a Swedish hero, and – when read in the original Anglo-Saxon – seems almost more German than 'English'. This is, of course, because Anglo-Saxon (i.e. the language of the Angles and Saxons from north Germany) *was* Old English (the two terms are used

synonymously), and at the very latest the poem was written down some time in the early eleventh century, before 1066 and the Norman invasion, which would bring many French words into English and would pave the way for Middle English (or the English of the Middle Ages).

In ending with the tale of a dragon attempting to defend a mound of treasure, the poem prefigures not only the works of J. R. R. Tolkien (who, as well as being the author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, was also an influential Anglo-Saxon scholar who translated *Beowulf* and wrote an important article on it – of which more below) but also, more surprisingly, other poems like Lewis Carroll's nonsense masterpiece, 'Jabberwocky'. It also looks back to Greek and Roman epics like Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Indeed, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries many scholars endeavored to show that the author of *Beowulf* had been influenced by these classical works, but, in summary, the truth appears to be far more interesting.

Rather than directly drawing on the work of Homer and Virgil, the *Beowulf* poet simply seems to have hit upon the idea of using similar plot devices and character types. This suggests

that different cultures, in these old days of oral storytelling, utilized the same methods in very different works of literature, without having direct knowledge of each other. We can compare *Beowulf*, too, with the legend of King Arthur (which began to appear in written sources around the same time), specifically in terms of the magic sword which the hero of both stories uses in order to fulfill his quest. These aspects seem to be hard-wired within us and to be integral parts of human nature: for instance, ideas of bravery and of triumphing over an evil, superhuman force.

This plot, as our brief summary of *Beowulf* above suggests, shares many of the typical elements of heroic narratives. Although the analogy might seem a little crude, the mechanics of the plot are not so far removed from, say, a James Bond or Indiana Jones film, or a fast-paced fantasy novel or superhero comic strip. The hero takes it upon himself to save the kingdom at immense personal risk to himself. The foe he faces is no ordinary foe, and conventional weapons are powerless against it. Despite the odds being stacked against him, he manages to 'overcome the monster', to borrow [Christopher Booker's phrase for this type of narrative](#). But this action has consequences, and is in fact merely the prologue to a bigger conflict that must take place: that between

Beowulf and Grendel's mother. This is why it is odd that the story of the poem is generally thought of as 'Beowulf versus Grendel'. But this next conflict will prove even more difficult: as well as swords being useless, the strong sword (Hrunting) given to Beowulf by Unferth will also be powerless against Grendel's mother. But hand-to-hand combat – which was deployed successfully in the vanquishing of Grendel – is also of no use now. The odds continue to be stacked against our hero, the difficulties multiplying, the tension raised to an almost unbearable pitch. Can he still save the day, when everything he tries seems to be of no avail? Well, yes – though for a while the chances of Beowulf triumphing are looking less and less likely. The final encounter, with the dragon years later, will prove the most difficult of all – and although he is successful and overcomes the monster, he will pay the ultimate price: victory will come at the cost of his own life. This patterning of three – three monsters, each of which proves successively more of a challenge to the hero – is found in numerous adventure plots. To a greater or lesser extent, it can be seen in much modern fantasy fiction – such as that by Tolkien. One thing that the basic overarching story or plot summary of *Beowulf* makes clear is just how formative and archetypal it is, not just in heroic 'English' literature, but in fantasy literature, too.

Interpretations of *Beowulf*

Talking of Tolkien, it was his influential 1936 essay, 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', which was really responsible for a shift in the way that people read *Beowulf*. Rather than viewing it as a historical document, Tolkien urged, we should be reading and appreciating it as a work of poetry. Tolkien also argued that the poem is not an 'epic' but an *elegy*, ending as it does with the moving account of its hero's funeral. Tolkien also argues that Beowulf's death following his combat with the dragon represents a fitting and more 'elemental' end for the hero, who had successfully vanquished the monster Grendel and Grendel's mother (who, although not human, were nevertheless closer to man than a dragon). The story is about overcoming an evil foe, only to have to give way to death at the end: even heroes must accept that they will not live forever, even if their names will. 'Men must endure their going hence', as Shakespeare has it in *King Lear* (a line borrowed for C. S. Lewis's tombstone). But Beowulf's life has been a life well- lived because he stood up to evil and was victorious. And Grendel and his mother are 'evil' in the Christian sense of the word: the author of *Beowulf* tells us that they were spawned from Cain (the first murderer in the Bible) when he was cast out of Eden. Grendel and his mother, then, are similarly outcasts, something that has been rejected by

mainstream society and whose violence must be overcome. (For more on Tolkien, have a read of our [five fascinating facts about him](#).)

Beowulf's name, by the way, was long thought to mean 'bee-wolf, as in the two animals. The 'bee' theory appears unlikely, however – as does the idea that it is from the same root as our word 'bear', suggesting bearlike strength. No, it turns out that the first part of Beowulf's name is more probably related to a pre-Christian god named 'Beow'. Beowulf has an almost divine strength, but also something primal and temporal, but just as valuable: the courage of a wolf.