

What kind of text is *Beowulf*?

Beowulf is an **epic poem** written by an unnamed poet sometime between the seventh and tenth centuries. Beowulf is a warrior who fights supernatural dangers for a foreign king to bring glory and honor to his lineage. The poem was once told orally as a form of entertainment in the mead halls of Anglo-Saxon England, similar to our modern tradition of telling ghost stories by a campfire, and tells the story of his ancestors' heroes.

Eventually, an unknown individual wrote down the story to preserve for future generations, along with other oral narratives such as [“The Wanderer.”](#)

The manuscript that contains *Beowulf* passed through many hands before coming to its final home in the British Library, where it is on display (see figure one). As a result, the story has undergone several alterations since its original transcription. Monks supposedly tampered with the text sometime in between its creation and the fourteenth century and are likely the source of some of the references to God and denunciations of paganism. The manuscript caught fire sometime in the eighteenth century, and parts of the narrative were lost—the translation we read in class is the final result of these alterations.



Fig. 1: the original manuscript of *Beowulf*, located in the British Library.

Historical Context: People and Language

Beowulf takes place during the earliest recorded period of British history: the invasion of the Germanic tribes. Around the fifth century, three Germanic tribes—the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes—invaded the British mainland. They brought with them their own pagan religion, which gradually transitioned to Christianity, and their own language, which we refer to as Old English.

Old English is often confused with early modern English, which is the vernacular Shakespeare wrote in; however, these two iterations of the English language are extremely different. Here is the introduction to *Beowulf* in the original old English. [Follow along with this reading by a medieval scholar.](#)

Beowulf: Introduction

Hwæt. We Gardena in geardagum,
 þeodcyninga, þrym gefrunon,
 hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.
Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum,
monegum mægþum, meodosetla ofteah,
 egsode eorlas. Syððan ærest wearð
 feascraft funden, he þæs frofre gebad,
weox under wolcnum, weorðmyndum þah,
oðþæt him æghwylc þara ymbsittendra
 ofer hronrade hyran scolde,
 gomban gyldan. þæt wæs god cyning.
 leode gelæsten; lofdædum sceal
 in mægþa gehwære man geþeon.

To compare, here is the “To Be or Not to Be” soliloquy from Act Three, Scene One of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. [Follow along with this reading from the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 2018 production of the play.](#)

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die—to sleep,
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks

Beowulf: Introduction

That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub:
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause—there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.

See the difference? Early modern English more closely resembles our modern English language. Although Old English looks completely foreign to us, it isn't untranslatable. Can you identify any of the words from the following passage? Use Peardeck (code TBD) to submit your response.

ðæm eafera wæs æfter cenned,
geong in geardum, þone god sende
folce to frofre; fyrenðearfe ongeat
þe hie ær drugon aldorlease
lange hwile. Him þæs liffrea,
wuldres wealdend, woroldare forgeaf;
Beowulf wæs breme blæd wide sprang,
Scyldes eafera Scedelandum in.
Swa sceal geong guma gode gewyrcean,
fromum feohgiftum on fæder bearme,
þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen
wilgesipas, þonne wig cume,

leode gelæsten; lofdædum sceal
in mægpa gehwære man geþeon.

Literary Devices

Below is a list of literary devices found throughout *Beowulf* with examples from the text. While some of the literary devices of the poem are still in frequent use today, others are unique to Anglo-Saxon Literature.

- **kenning**- a two-word phrase used to describe another object or person metaphorically.
 - Example: “sea road” for ocean, “ring-giver” for Hrothgar
- **ubi sunt**- a feeling of mourning for times gone by, especially regarding the death or loss of friends and family.
 - In lines 1124-28 of *Beowulf*, a Thane tells a story where the characters experience ubi sunt: “*Their great days were gone. / Warriors scattered to homes and forts/ all over Friesland, fewer now, feeling/ loss of friends.*”
- **alliteration**- the repetition of two neighboring consonant sounds, typically in the beginning of the word or syllable.
 - In line 324, the poet, the poet describes Beowulf’s guard as being clad in “**g**rim war-**g**raith and **g**ear.”

The rest of the reading guides will be separated by the three **agons**, or struggles, that Beowulf faces: Grendel, Grendel’s Mother, and the Dragon.

Happy reading!