

Beowulf

Reading Guide

Second Assignment: pp 45-89; lines 661-1250

Folk Epic or Literary Epic? Some characteristics of a literary epic:

1. Theme is announced in first line; in *Beowulf*, it is the first three lines of the poem.
2. The classic epic begins *in medias res*.
3. Digressions: we have several: “The Lay of Sigemund,” “The Lay of Finn,” and “The Father’s Lament,” to point out a few.
4. The epic should give the reader a sense of the culture or civilization it springs from.
5. Long lists or catalogs—we have these with the gifts Beowulf receives and then transfers to his liege lord, Hygelac.
6. Epic similes—yes, particularly within “The Father’s Lament.”

JRR Tolkien dismisses the folk label—says the epic is a well-constructed literary achievement.

Why is the fight between Beowulf and Grendel a hand-to-hand conflict?

Read how the Danes rejoice after the departure of the bloody, wounded Grendel (lines 852-873; 853-875). Any notable phrases?

1. At this point the scop inserts “The Lay of Sigemund.” To what purpose?
2. Are there any parallels between Sigemund and Beowulf?
3. What are the comments about leadership?

The reference to Heremond will be picked up later.

4. Any hints at future baleful events?

Inserting this “lay” or poem is a trick worthy of postmodern fiction’s use of intertextuality, meaning a reference or parallel to another work...what seems to have been invented was previously here...

As you can see, a major purpose of the Scop is a didactic one. So what lessons is he hoping his warrior audience will pick up?

There are several instances where there are these cautions, forewarnings, and some in the audience, knowing the whole story, would appreciate these cautions now being heard for the first time by the younger warriors. See lines 1018-1019.

We have another “interruption,” where the Scop digresses, by inserting another poem, “The Lay of Finn,” a story of betrayal and revenge. Again, lessons to those hearing both the larger epic and this insert.

5. What are the lessons? What are the “rules” as you are coming to understand them, of this society?

(Historian Gregory of Tours, writing in 6th century—he died 594—notes a raid in Friesland by a Hengst/Higelac. Evidently, he was some sort of chieftain and as events in the epic point to actual historical events, we could surmise that the poem could have been composed after this raid.)

6. Why the reference to Unferth’s past—not the first allusion—before Wealtheow, the queen, begins the feast after Heorot has been cleansed? Why is she making an appeal to her husband?
7. What is the significance of her walking to where her sons are sitting, with Beowulf seated between the two young boys? What is your impression of women in this society? Wealtheow makes a second public appeal to Beowulf after he has been presented with the torque and chain mail from Hrothgar’s armory. What do you conclude about the transfer of power in this society?