

# Beowulf character



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

“ I am Beowulf. I’ve come to kill your monster,” the protagonist declares upon his arrival to Herot, but what about his sidekick Wiglaf? Wiglaf is not even mentioned in the epic poem until the final battle. Set and likely composed sometime during the sixth century, Beowulf is the cornerstone of modern literature and was first recorded on paper sometime in the eighth century. An archetypal story of good versus evil, Beowulf continues to enthrall audiences 1, 500 years after its conception.

A recent version directed by Robert Zemeckis, and starring some of today’s most well respected actors, was produced in 2007. Zemeckis changes many of the poem’s characters to increase appeal to modern audiences. Wiglaf, the archetypal warrior and companion, remains virtually unchanged but enjoys a weightier role. Wiglaf is the archetypal warrior and companion. A Geat soldier under Beowulf’s command, his defining moment occurs when he refuses to leave Beowulf’s side during the final conflict. Unlike his brethren, he will not abandon his leader.

Furthermore, and to no avail, he tries to inspire his fellow soldiers to charge the dragon, because his leader alone is no match for his competitor.

Together, Wiglaf and Beowulf are able to slay the dragon. They are archetypal warriors. Wiglaf remembers he “‘ swore to repay [Beowulf]...with our lives, if he needed them. ’” (711-713). Wiglaf understands that to gain status within a patriarchal society, he must be selfless, quick thinking, and brave. Both characters loyally fight for their leader: Wiglaf for Beowulf, and Beowulf for his king.

That is where their similarities end, however. While Beowulf is the archetypal hero, Wiglaf is the archetypal companion, which is evidenced when Beowulf is mortally wounded, and Wiglaf is “anxious to return while Beowulf was alive...Hoping his wounded king, weak/And dying, had not left the world too soon” (794-798). Following their triumph, Wiglaf does not simply plunder the dragon’s treasure and leave; no, he remains to comfort Beowulf in his final moments. This companion aspect of Wiglaf’s character is even more predominant in the film version of the epic.

Wiglaf reprises his position as the archetypal warrior and companion in the 2007 version of Beowulf, but director Robert Zemeckis expands his role in the film. Zemeckis’ Wiglaf is at Beowulf’s side, as one of the 14 greatest Geat warriors, from the film’s inception. He accompanies Beowulf to Denmark to slay the infamous Grendel. When Beowulf is crowned King of Herot, Wiglaf remains his “right-hand-man”, someone in whom to confide and from whom to seek advice. Because he is beside Beowulf for the duration of the film, Wiglaf ages alongside him.

When facing the dragon, Wiglaf is not the “brave young warrior” described in the poem, but a sage and distinguished figure (769). He does accompany Beowulf to the dragon’s cave, but does not enter with him. Furthermore, no other soldiers are present, and thus, there is no need for an inspirational speech about charging into battle. In a final distinction, the dragon flies from the cave to attack Herot, where Beowulf defeats the loathsome monster without his sidekick’s help! Wiglaf as warrior is secondary to Wiglaf as companion in the film.

Loyal and unselfish, his role is to provide friendship and support to a character who is much stronger and who carries more authority. The “ best friend” role, common in today’s films, holds great appeal. The “ best friend” is the quirky character who is easily identifiable because of his/her imperfections and close relationship to the protagonist. Perhaps members of the modern audience are drawn to these characters because they feel they can relate to them. Flawed, the “ best friend” is a character who exhibits depth.

When Beowulf was composed, the characters served as exemplars of virtue (i. e. courage, hope, loyalty, piety). Exaggerated versions of significant figures, they represented ideal human beings who played their societal roles perfectly. In the original version, before his last battle, Beowulf states, “I’ve never known fear, as a youth I fought / In endless battles. I am old, now, / but I will fight again, seek fame still” (607-609). In other words, Beowulf claims to be the same brave, attention-seeking, would-be hero in old age that he was in youth. He is both static and flat.

This is partly due to the fact that epics during the Anglo Saxon period were meant not only to entertain but to educate. The epics, passed on through the oral tradition, were a form of indoctrination and edification. When first composed, Wiglaf’s role as the archetypal warrior was emphasized over his role as the archetypal companion, which reflects cultural values. The audience, at that time, was living in a poorly educated, violent, turbulent society. Fifteen hundred years later, in the 2007 film version, the opposite is true; Wiglaf’s role as companion is stressed over his role as warrior.

The artistic change represents cultural change. Modern society is educated, relatively nonviolent, democratic, and independent. Two images come to mind when considering the character of Wiglaf: (1) A weathered warrior, face creased with worry, and (2) a taut-skinned, exuberant soldier, yielding golden shield and sword. The latter image is the original, but the former resonates with today's audience. The epic has been and will continue to be reinvented for centuries. An unknown poet composed Beowulf in the sixth century.

Shakespeare reinvented Romeo and Juliet in the seventeenth century. George Lukas created Star Wars in the 1970s. J. K. Rowling penned Harry Potter in the 1990s. Archetypal stories and conflicts will maintain their appeal and symbolic value as long as audiences continue to ponder purging the world of evil, continue to relish and lament the rites of passage, and continue to contemplate man's pilgrimage into the unknown. Archetypal characters, remaining unchanged at the core, will continue to reflect the values of the period and the people during which they are employed.