

Beowulf and society essay



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The earliest known manuscript of Beowulf is thought to have been written in the

tenth century, however, the poem had most likely been told as an oral tradition

for centuries before that. In fact, the poem's events date back to the sixth century. However, because there is only one manuscript of Beowulf still in tact

very little is known about the poem or its author. The poem does, however, give

us great insight into the culture of the people who composed and told this epic

tale. Because the poem was performed orally mainly between the eighth and tenth

centuries, but dealt with subject matter of centuries earlier, it is difficult

to decipher and separate the cultural context involved in the poem from one century to the next. The poem was probably unrecognizable from its original

state after two hundred years of oral tradition that would have changed its

content drastically. The storyline of the poem, the battles and significant

events, probably maintained most of their identity while the cultural context

took on another form more suited to the current culture of the people. By the time it was written, in 1000, the poem was probably most representative of the

tenth century culture yet it still managed to tell a story similar to the

original version. Beowulf, then, gives us a significant insight into the

cultural views of the tenth century Anglo-Saxons including their political,

social and moral views. The individualistic society was just beginning to

replace the tribal system in which no individual had been seen as more important

to the success of the tribe than any other. The individuality that Beowulf

displayed helped establish new rules in society. Beyond this, Beowulf gives

us

an even greater insight into middle ages society. Woven throughout almost every

aspect of their culture and the poem are very strict moral codes and values.

Loyalty, honesty, family ties, courage and even Christianity play a major role

in this epic poem. In each of the stories told throughout the poem elements of

these values are openly displayed. All three of Beowulf's battles demonstrate

qualities deemed virtuous and essential to the people of the middle ages.

Beowulf, a godfearing, heroic warrior, first faces a monster that represents all

things evil. The monster is a descendant of Cain, a bloodthirsty avenger of man

and an outcast. Beowulf confronts this evil figure without any fear and without

the aid of any manmade weapons of war. The strength of the wickedness is outmatched by the goodness and purity Beowulf. Only because Beowulf displayed no

fear and used no weapon was he able to destroy this wicked force of destruction.

The hero, Beowulf, is glorified more for his virtue than for his strength in defeating the monster. For those who displayed no virtue, despite their valor, the consequence was quite different. Ecgtheow's son, who displayed no bravery,

for example, “ had been despised for a long while, for the Geats saw no spark

of bravery in him” (75). The true hero of the middle ages managed to maintain

a balance between his personal glory and maintaining the good of his people. As

we see in later stories of this period, like the Arthur stories, this is a very delicate balance. Beowulf became a folklore hero because he maintained this balance well. He displayed personal heroism while at the same time keeping his

priorities towards the safety of his people. Beowulf's first attack on the monster Grendel displayed many qualities that were significant in a hero of that

time. First of all, Beowulf was not called upon to save the Danes from Grendel.

Instead, he came on his own accord, out of duty and principle. He took responsibility upon himself in a situation that required none. The individualistic society did not require that a person remain part of the tribe, but rather encouraged them to seek adventure while doing good. Beowulf recognized his physical strengths and he utilized them for personal gain and glory and the good of the nation. Beowulf's second battle with Grendel's mother is quite similar to the first. However, because Beowulf brought along a

sword as protection he is seemingly less pure and as he attempts to use the sword it fails him. He is nearly beaten by the monsters mother until he wields the famous old sword of the giants which had magical power to save him.

While he is not as heroic in his second battle, Beowulf still displays many of the virtues essential for heroism and even survival. He was required to use ingenuity rather than strength in his battle and was required to go through an

extremely difficult process in order to get to the monsters lair, almost like an initiation. However, he came out of the whole ordeal wiser and greatly rewarded. This first two battles also, surprisingly, represented what may have

been an influence of Christian values on the culture. While the Christianity is not quite the same as we would expect in a more modern setting, it was just beginning to gain some influence in Europe at the time of this story. This was a

period of a conversion of the paganistic beliefs into something that more closely resembled Christianity. Many of the principles and ideals of the two

were combined to create a more familiar understanding view of Christianity for

the predominantly pagan population. The Christianity in the story is more closely tied in with Moses Old Testament teachings of revenge and equality

than Christs teachings of peace, love and forgiveness. Grendels mother

attempts to avenge the death of her son while at the same time Beowulf is

attempting to avenge the death of all those slain by Grendel. The conflict

between good and evil is also a very Christian theme that runs throughout the

poem. There is a consistant attack of wickedness that can only be overcome by

purity and goodness. Beowulf is almost a Christ figure, not to the extent that he is Christ like, merely that he overcomes, literally kills, wickedness.

Grendel, on the other hand, “ shoulders Gods anger” (45). Whether the poem is mainly pagan or Christian is up for debate, but both had influence on the story as it was finally written. The religious views in Beowulf were obviously a very important aspect of the story and to the people who were undergoing a very

significant change in their views of religion. The action provides us with a

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slight understanding of the qualities respected in middle ages society.

However,

the vast majority of the text deals with nonaction that gives us perhaps more information about how the society worked. Because this story was originally passed on as an oral tradition each part of the poem is extremely significant because it had to be memorized. This adds significance to the genealogy, long

speeches and highly descriptive nature of ceremonial events in the text which

must have required hours of memorization. These all give a very detailed account

of the non warrior side of life that was also very important. The length of these separate passages indicate what was significant to these people. The action is sparsely distributed throughout the text to apply the principles presented to us throughout the length of the poem. For example, in an important

exchange with the king, Beowulf presented "...a standard bearing the image of

a boar, together with a helmet towering in battle, a gray corslet, and a noble

sword;" (74). This description allows us a glimpse into the importance of gift giving and of the importance of these gifts. Beowulf continues his speech to the

king by stating " Hrothgar, the wise king, gave me these trappings and purposely asked me to tell you their history" (74). The detail that is spent on describing the gifts and their history is significant in understanding the culture of these people. This particular passage displays the importance of rituals and rights that individuals were required to undergo. The songs of the scop recited at Hrothgars court also display the importance of using poetry to glorify their heroes and remember their history. Since very little was actually written, poetry was one of the only methods they had to preserve their

history. In this history they kept significance was placed on an entirely different set of principles dealing with the importance of rituals and significant heroic events. Beowulf's final battle is perhaps his most significant. He had learned much since the time of his youth and he approached

this battle with greater wisdom. This is the final test of his life and the last

challenge that he must endure. Beowulf is different at the time of this battle, however. His other battles had been fought while he was still very young and full of life. In his third battle he was an old man who had spent much of his life serving his country. However, his usefulness for his people was dwindling as old age began to overtake him. This battle demonstrated the final and greatest sacrifice he could make. It was a battle that he surely knew would take

his life, but one he deemed worthy. Despite his incredible physical strength and

courage Beowulf was unable to win the battle within himself. Like everyone that

ever lived, Beowulf grew old, weak and tired. No matter how hard he tried he was

unable to escape death and he knew that it would not be long in coming for him.

He went into battle facing not only the dragon but also the destiny of his own death. His death, rather than being a sign of weakness, becomes his final act of

glory. Beowulf, amazingly, continues to be studied and read extensively all over

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the world even today, one thousand years after it was composed. Its study of social conflict and heroism is what has made it become a timeless classic.

The

issues it deals with not only pertained to life in the middle ages, but also

with issues that never die. It contains all of the elements of a modern

Hollywood film. The most important aspect of the poem, though, is the

insight it

gives us into middle age life. This poem most likely began as a tribute to a

noble war hero, but it has become one of the greatest epics of all time.