



## Early Literature Part I – Syllabus

**Course Description:** An excerpt-based class, students are introduced to the epic through early historical literature including *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (circa 2100 BC), Homer's *The Iliad* (8th Century BC), *Beowulf* (circa 1000 AD), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (circa 1400), *The Faerie Queene* (1590), and *Paradise Lost* (1667). All texts are included as part of the class; no materials are required for purchase.

**Prerequisite:** *Essay Basics* or equivalent experience writing five-paragraph essays.

### Course Outline:

**Week One:** What Is an Epic?

- Overview of the Epic
- Characteristics of the Epic

**Week Two:** *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

- Historical Context
- The Human Experience

**Week Three:** Homer's *The Iliad*

- The Homeric Question
- Homeric Epitaphs
- Getting to Know Greek Gods/Goddesses

**Week Four:** *Beowulf*

- Old English & Translations
- Anglo-Saxon Poetry & Riddles

**Week Five:** *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

- The Characters in King Arthur's Court
- Bob & Wheel Rhyme
- More About the Medieval Era

**Week Six:** *The Faerie Queene*

- The Renaissance
- Finding the Allegory
- The Spenserian Stanza

**Week Seven:** *Paradise Lost*

- An Unusual Epic
- Who Is the Hero?

**Week Eight:** *Paradise Lost* (cont.) and Final Response

- Tracing Character Development
- My Life is Like an Epic

**Grading Information:** All assignments will be graded using *The Growing Writer Rubric* and averaged to receive a final course grade.



## Early Literature Part I

### Lesson Four: *Beowulf*

#### SAMPLE LESSON

Little is known about the first inhabitants of Britain. What archaeologists have pieced together is that these people built long ships and giant earth mounds. In addition, these early inhabitants are likely responsible for Stonehenge, a mysterious, circular stone structure located in Wiltshire, England.

In the late 300s BC, the Celts—tribes originating from Germany and the Netherlands—invaded and conquered Britain. Celtic warriors were known for chain mail, long swords, and helmets shaped like beasts. The Celtic tribes inhabited this region for several centuries to come.

In 58 BC, Julius Caesar began the Gallic Wars, which ultimately resulted in Britain being conquered by the Romans and thus coming under Roman rule for 400 years. With the Roman Empire came Roman roads, spread across Britain; Christianity and Latin; and the establishments of city sites.

In the late 300s, various mainland tribes—the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes—began invading Britain, plundering the remains of the Roman Empire. These wild tribes brought with them their gods (including Odin, Frigg, Thor, Loki, Tyr, and Balder), burning churches and killing priests. According to medieval histories and romances, King Arthur—a legendary British leader—may have played a significant role in resisting the invaders. (This is important to note, because we will meet King Arthur in next week's text as well!) Eventually, the invaders and the invaded mingled, creating a people group known as the Anglo-Saxons. The land previously known as Britannia now became known as Ang-land.

The Anglo-Saxon people enjoyed gathering to listen to stories and songs. Like many societies before, the Anglo-Saxons particularly favored stories of brave warriors and their heroic adventures. At the time, only monks were capable of reading and writing, which limited the written record of most of these stories and songs. However, if the monks heard a particularly entertaining tale, they wrote it down, though altering the story by replacing pagan entities with Christian elements.

Although the language of the early British church was Latin, citizens (most of whom were uneducated) spoke Anglo-Saxon or what is known as Old English. *Beowulf*, written down in Old English likely sometime between 700 and 1000 AD, is one of the earliest writings in the English language. This tale tells the story of Beowulf and is the earliest heroic poem found in Northern England.

Our understanding of *Beowulf* comes from a single manuscript, unfortunately damaged by a fire in the early eighteenth century. Portions of the poem were transcribed from the original manuscript before the fire. To prevent further damage, the surviving portions of the manuscript were encased in frames in the nineteenth century, thus limiting the ability to view what remained of the original text. Since then, many efforts have been made to collect and digitize all images of the manuscript and the transcripts made prior to the fire. (1)

Even if you are not familiar with the story of *Beowulf*, you are probably familiar with the name J.R.R. Tolkien. Prior to being an author, Tolkien was a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford. He championed *Beowulf* as an important work of literature and discussed the text's merits in his lecture called “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics.” (2) Tolkien saw *Beowulf* as a true hero epic and helped renew modern-day interest in the tale. In addition, Tolkien's novels—*The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*—both drew inspiration from the Old-English epic.

## **A SUMMARY –**

This epic poem begins with a history of Danish kings, beginning with King Shild and leading up to the current reign of Shild's great grandson, King Hrothgar—a well-loved and successful leader. Hrothgar builds a hall in which to house his vast armies, and the men gather in celebration of various victories.

Grendel, a human-shaped monster who dwells nearby at the bottom of a swamp, is irritated by the noise of the celebration. He makes his way to the hall one night, killing thirty of Hrothgar's warriors. Sadly, this incident causes the Danish people to live in fear of Grendel's fury for the next twelve years. Nothing seems suitable to appease the angry monster.

Hearing about Hrothgar's trouble, Beowulf—prince of the Geats—sets sail from Sweden with an army of fourteen men. Upon meeting Hrothgar, Beowulf boasts of his prior heroics. In return, Hrothgar promises great rewards if Beowulf can defeat Grendel.

That very night, Beowulf wrestles the great monster bare-handed. Although Grendel escapes—though missing an arm—and slinks back to the swamp, he dies shortly thereafter. The Geats and the Danes celebrate, and Beowulf is rewarded for his success, having brought peace to Hrothgar's kingdom.

Unbeknownst, Grendel's mother also lives in the swamp. Seeking revenge for her son's death, Grendel's mother goes to Hrothgar's hall, seizing the king's chief advisor, Esher. Beowulf heads for the lake to search for the swampy dwelling place and battle the second monster. Eventually, Beowulf prevails in the battle, having found a magical sword with which he kills Grendel's mother.

Much celebration ensues; then Beowulf and his men sail home.

In the second half of the poem, Beowulf has been the king of the Geats for fifty years. A thief steals a jeweled cup from a sleeping dragon, who wakes full of fury and revenge. Flying through the night, the dragon burns down houses as well as Beowulf's great hall and throne. Though aged, Beowulf is still quite courageous and vows to defeat the dragon. A battle ensues. Beowulf's strength falters, and the dragon breathes fire, engulfing Beowulf and injuring him. One companion of the battle, Wiglaf rushes into the flames to rescue his king. Wiglaf stabs the dragon, and Beowulf cuts the dragon in half with his knife.

Sadly, Beowulf is near death. Wiglaf takes the king to the dragon's storehouse, where much treasure has been amassed. Soon, Beowulf dies. In keeping with the King's request, Wiglaf ensures that a special tower is constructed as the tomb. Beowulf is buried there alongside dragon treasure.

## ANGLO-SAXON POETRY –

Although Old English poetry, such as *Beowulf*, did not rhyme, it was constructed using a strong rhythm which made it easy to sing or chant. In addition, several specific techniques were used, making Anglo-Saxon poetry particularly unique.

**Alliteration** is the repetition of beginning consonant sounds. For example, “Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel // Went up to Herot, wondering what the warriors // Would do in that hall when their drinking was done.” (here, we see alliteration of the letters 'd' and 'w'.)

**Caesura** is a pause that divides lines; an interruption or a break in the line. (In some poems, a caesura divides a line into two, leaving the same number of accented syllables on either side of the break; however, for the purpose of this lesson, we are going to refer to the caesura only as a pause.)

**Kenning** is a compound word or phrase in Old English or Old Norse poetry used as a descriptive metaphor. For example, “mankind's enemy” is used to refer to the monster Grendel; “whale-road” refers to the sea; “battle-sweat” refers to blood; and “sky-candle” refers to the sun.

## ANGLO-SAXON RIDDLES –

Another unique element of *Beowulf* and the Anglo-Saxon culture is the riddle. In fact, Anglo-Saxon warriors often passed time by inventing complex riddles for one another. We see this same idea in J.R.R. Tolkien's work when, for example, Bilbo Baggins and Gollum battle each other through riddles. Study some of the examples below:

Riddle from *Beowulf*:

I am all on my own    wounded by iron weapons  
and scarred by swords – I often see battle.  
I am tired of fighting – I do not expect to be allowed  
to retire from warfare    Before I am completely done for.  
At the wall of the city,    I am knocked about  
And bitten again and again – Hard edged things  
made by the blacksmith's hammer    attack me.  
Each time I wait    for something worse.  
I have never been able    to find a doctor  
who could make me better – or give me medicine.  
Instead the sword gashes    grow bigger day and night.

(Answer: a shield)

Riddle from *The Hobbit*:

It cannot be seen, cannot be felt,  
Cannot be heard, cannot be smelt.  
It lies behind stars and under hills,  
And empty holes it fills.  
It comes first and follows after,  
Ends life, kills laughter

(Answer: darkness)

Another Riddle from *The Hobbit*:

What has roots as nobody sees  
Is taller than trees  
Up, up it goes  
And yet never grows?

(Answer: a mountain)

## FINAL NOTES –

As with many old texts, known translations vary widely. *Beowulf* is no exception. Although the main characters and plot points of the story remain the same, students of *Beowulf* will be hard-pressed to find two identical or even closely similar translations of the epic. For this reason, our lesson this week will focus on two elements—first, Old English and the process of translation; and second, important features of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Rather than studying a longer excerpt from the text using a single translation, we will be looking at smaller sections of the text across a variety of translations.

If you do wish to read some longer portions of the tale, you can find numerous excerpts online. If you wish to read *Beowulf* in its entirety, we recommend the following:

- *Beowulf*, translation by Frances Gummere: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/981/981-h/981-h.htm>
- *Beowulf*, bilingual translation by Seamus Heaney: [https://www.amazon.com/Beowulf-New-Verse-Translation-Bilingual/dp/0393320979/ref=pd\\_lpo\\_2?pd\\_rd\\_i=0393320979&psc=1](https://www.amazon.com/Beowulf-New-Verse-Translation-Bilingual/dp/0393320979/ref=pd_lpo_2?pd_rd_i=0393320979&psc=1)

You can also listen to Heaney read his translation using the following links:

- Part I: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AaBotrCztMo>
- Part II: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zsxxg5P-DnY>

**Assignment 4A:** An understanding of *Beowulf* begins with the acknowledgment of the Old English language. Perhaps you thought of Old English as a Shakespearean language, but this idea could not be further from the truth. Complete both parts of this assignment to gain an appreciation for the origins of *Beowulf*.

- **STEP ONE:** Listen to the section “Grendel's Approach,” read in Old English using the link below. You should follow along with the sound clip using the attached document, titled “Old English.”
  - Sound Clip: <https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/2084/0507/files/beowulf.wav?16003864862261343060>

- **STEP TWO:** After studying the attached document entitled “Old English”, use complete sentences to answer the following questions. Be specific and use examples from the texts.
  1. Are there any ways in which Old English is similar to modern English?
  2. In what ways is Old English quite different from modern English?
  3. In the written version, can you see any Old English words that are the same as or extremely close to the modern word?
  4. What is your opinion of how Old English sounds?

**Assignment 4B:** Read and compare the four translations of *Beowulf*, from the scene in which the hero cuts off Grendel's arm. These are attached in the document titled “Translations.” Then, answer the following questions using complete sentences. Be specific and use evidence from the texts!

1. What are the major differences among these translations? What are the major similarities?
2. Which translation do you think is the easiest to understand? The most interesting? The most exciting? The most appealing? Why? Explain your answers.
3. Have you found any Anglo-Saxon devices (alliteration, caesuras, kennings) in any of these translations? What are they? Be specific!
4. Do any of the translators struggle to incorporate these literary devices in his/her translation? Why do you think this is?
5. Heatt's translation is written in prose, rather than in the original poetic structure. How do you feel a prose translation differs from a poetic one? Are there any advantages or disadvantages to a prose translation?
6. What can you learn from this experience about the process of translation?

**Assignment 4C:** Write your own Anglo-Saxon riddle! For the subject of your poem, choose an inanimate object to personify. Your poem should be five to ten lines long and demonstrate use of alliteration and caesura (break your lines in the middle, where a natural pause might occur).

**Don't send the answer! I want to guess!**

**Assignment 4D:** Let's have a little more fun! Describe yourself like Beowulf. Use the following example and template as a guide. (3)

**Example –**

Beowulf of Geatland  
Son of Ecgtheow  
Strong, defiant, proud  
Slayer of Grendel  
Eater of flesh and drinker of mead  
Who never shrinks from a challenge  
But always deflects and defeats any obstacle  
Believer in force and fate  
Vexed by old age and dragon fire  
Feared by all who live outside God's law  
Ruler of Geatland

**Template –**

(insert first name) of (insert a location)  
Son or daughter of . . .  
(insert three adjectives describing yourself)  
Slayer of . . .  
Eater of . . . (insert substance) and drinker of . . . (insert substance)  
Who never . . . (insert a verb)  
But always . . . (insert a verb)  
Believer in . . .  
Vexed by . . .  
Feared by . . .  
Ruler of . . .

**Sources –**

1. "Electronic Beowulf: Index & Guide." *University of Kentucky*, British Library, <https://ebeowulf.uky.edu/#>.
2. Tolkien, J.R.R. *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*. 25 November 1936, Sir Israel Gollancz Lecture, <https://jenniferjsnow.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/11790039-jrr-tolkien-beowulf-the-monsters-and-the-critics.pdf>.
3. Hamby, Zachary. "Beowulf, Old English, and Anglo-Saxon Culture." *Creative English Teacher*, 2017, <https://creativeenglishteacher.com/pages/beowulf-old-english-and-anglo-saxon-culture>.