**Beowulf: The Trajectory of the Hero’s Life**

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"Let us by all means esteem the old heroes: men caught in the chains of circumstance or of their own character. But Beowulf...plays a larger part than is recognized in helping us to esteem them."

("Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics, 114")

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**Language and Literature in England**

- **Settlements**
  - Celtic expansion and settlement: c. 600 BC-400 CE
  - Saxon Settlements: 5th-6th centuries CE

- **Religion**
  - Pagan Celts: 7th centuries BC-c. 400 CE
  - Christianization began in 4th c. for Celts and in 6th c. for Saxons

- **Literary Sources**
  - Ireland: oral tradition through 6th-century CE (MSS date from 6th-7th; the most important from the 12th).
  - Wales: oral tales through 9th-10th centuries (MSS date from 12th and later).

- **Languages**
  - Celtic (Irish, Welsh, Scots, Cornish, Manx, Breton): 10th-11th)
  - Irish (Goidelic/Gaelic): Old Irish before 900 CE; Middle Irish through 17th.
  - Welsh (Brythonic/British): Old Welsh 800-1100 CE; Middle Welsh 1100-1400.

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**Beowulf: Plot and Stories**

The Interlace as Narrative Device

- **Prologue**
  - Shield’s funeral (treasure cast away)

- **Monster**
  - Grendel
  - Grendel’s Mother

- **Interlude**
  - Homecoming

- **Monster**
  - Dragon

- **Epilogue**
  - Beowulf’s funeral (treasure buried)

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- **Stories inserted**
  - Sigemund (dragon-slayer)
  - Finn (failed peace-weaving, but the episode praises the Shieldings)
  - Harormod (exemplar of a lack of kingly generosity)
  - Mithryth (arrogant queen)
  - Ingeld (queen of foreign war)
  - Herbrand (knight)
  - Throth (grief)
  - Heathel (feast)

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The stories are also a counterpoint to Beowulf’s own story—note that they all emphasize failures.

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**Monsters (Lat.: monstrum, a portent or sign)**

From the Oxford English Dictionary (OED):

- Something extraordinary or unnatural; a prodigy, a marvel.
- An animal or plant deviating in one or more of its parts from the normal type.
- ...the word usually suggests the additional notion of great size and ferocity, being specifically associated with the ‘monsters’ victoriously encountered by various mythical heroes.
- A person of inhuman and horrible cruelty or wickedness; a monstrous example of wickedness, or some particular vice.

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**There was a very high level of literacy among the Saxons**

- Augustine the missionary, c. 597
- Alfred, c. 847-99
- The Heiðland, the Old Saxon Gospel story
- Bede 673-735; Charlemagne 742-814; Alcuin of York 804 (established Charlemagne’s court school for nobles)
- The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, late 9th c.-1155
- The Exeter Book, c. 940 (most of the major short poems); the Vercelli Book (10th c.), “The Dream of the Rood” (8th c. Ruthwell Cross)
- The Battle of Maldon: MS c. 1000; nearly lost in 1731 fire
- **Beowulf, 7th-10th?** (MS c. 1000)
### Beowulf’s monsters are not demons

- Tolkien suggests that a linking of Cain with eotenas (giants) and ylife (elves—not positive characters in Anglo-Saxon literature) was a brilliant stroke of narrative strategy:

- “At this point the new Scripture and old tradition touched and ignited.” (Tolkien, *Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics* 122)

### Beowulf is not an exploration of heroic failure.

- “The author of Beowulf showed forth the permanent value of that pietas which treasures the memory of man’s struggles in the dark past, man fallen and not yet saved…”

- “We have the great pagan [Virgil] on the threshold of the change of the world and the great (if lesser) Christian just over the threshold of the great change in this time and place…” (Tolkien 120)

### Beowulf for Young Readers

**Kid Beowulf** (graphic novel) by Alexis E. Fajardo

[Image of Kid Beowulf graphic novel]