

## Beowulf: The Trajectory of the Hero's Life

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## J. R. R. Tolkien and *Beowulf*

"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)

## Language and Literature in England

Settlements	Celtic expansion and settlement: c. 600 BC-400 CE Saxon Settlements : 5th-6th centuries CE
Religion	Pagan Celtic: 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 13th? 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.

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

- Augustine the missionary, c. 597 ;
- Alfred, c. 847-99;
- *The Heliand*, 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: Plot and Stories The Interlace as Narrative Device

	Prologue	Monster	Monster	Interlude	Monster	Epilogue
Plot	Shield's funeral (treasure cast away)	Grendel	Grendel's Mother	Homecoming	Dragon	Beowulf's funeral (treasure buried)
Stories inserted		Sigemund (dragon-slayer)  Finn (failed peace-weaving, but the episode praises the Shieldings)	Heremod (exemplum of a lack of kingly generosity)	Modhryth (arrogant queen)  Ingeld/Freawaru (failed peace-weaving)  Hrothgar's line fails.	Hygelac (death during foreign war)  Heardred (feud)  Hrethel (grief)  Haethcyn (feud)	Swedes (old feuds resurface after Beowulf's death)

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

## 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).

### *Beowulf's* monsters are not demons

- Tolkien suggests that a linking of Cain with *eotenas* (giants) and *ylfie* (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



### Alexis E. Fajardo, *Kid Beowulf* (graphic novel)

