

STUDY GUIDES

The **Chicago Humanities Festival** is committed to creating and fostering interest in the humanities. To this end, the Festival provides study guides to help teachers to bring the humanities into the classroom. Every year, the CHF brings an amazing array of authors, thinkers, and artists to Chicago. We hope you will seize the opportunity to bring the excitement of their works and knowledge to your students.

The *Beowulf* lesson plan on the following pages was prepared for the 2000 Chicago Humanities Festival: *Now!*

Education programs of the Chicago Humanities Festival are underwritten by the Lloyd A. Fry Foundation, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The Elizabeth Morse Charitable Trust, and the Polk Bros. Foundation. Additional support is provided by Kraft Foods North America, Inc., part of the Philip Morris Family of Companies.

This document was created by CHF staff.

This document and other educational materials are electronically archived as PDF files at:
<http://www.chfestival.org/education.cfm?Action=EdLessons>.



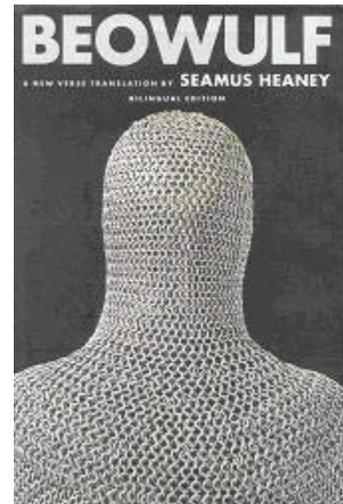
500 North Dearborn Street
suite 1028
Chicago, IL 60610
tel 312.661.1028
fax 312.661.1018
web www.chfestival.org

Beowulf Lesson Plan

This lesson plan introduces students to the epic poem *Beowulf*, the oldest living poem of English literature. The poem survives in a single manuscript dating back at least to the tenth century, though perhaps even as far back as 650 AD. An epic, *Beowulf* was originally created in the tradition of bardic storytelling: the scop (creator) would celebrate the feats of the legendary hero Beowulf through song and word, often accompanied by a lyre (a six-string instrument). In written form, it comes to us in Old English, the English language from the fifth century until about 1150. In studying *Beowulf*, students will enter into a world no doubt strange but timeless. For *Beowulf* is both the story of a Scandinavian hero who saves the Danes from seemingly invincible monsters and a complex Christian/pagan lament about duty, glory, loss and transience.

READING LIST

Heaney, Seamus, translator. *Beowulf*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.



SUBJECT AREAS

Literature: Epic Poetry
Literature: British
History: Medieval European
Language: Old English

GRADE LEVELS

9-12

SKILLS

Literary Interpretation and Analysis
Historical Interpretation
Historical Research
Critical Thinking
Creative Writing

Study Goals

- To explore and question the themes and imagery that *Beowulf* raises, and to evaluate their meaning in the text.
- To understand and appreciate the Old English language and literary tradition through the story of *Beowulf*.
- To examine the cultural and historical context of *Beowulf*.
- To compare and contrast the social conditions expressed in *Beowulf* to those of life today.

Classroom Strategies

1. After the students have read *Beowulf*, read selected passages of the text aloud, followed with a discussion. Focus on the overarching themes found throughout *Beowulf*: the tension between hero and villain, good and evil, warrior and citizen, and war and peace. Have the students discuss the dichotomy of values in the hero Beowulf: the contrast between the pagan values and Christian values embodied in the warrior, especially those of pride and humility. Beowulf is boastful, yet he also has wisdom and humility. He is reminded that pride will bring destruction, yet it is that very pride and boastfulness that help make Beowulf a heroic warrior capable of achieving the greatest of deeds. How does Beowulf manage to accommodate these contradictory values? Conclude this discussion by having the students discuss the relevance of this epic poem to contemporary life. Have they ever, in their own lives, had to reconcile pride and humility?
2. Grendel, and Grendel's mother, are described as descendents of the biblical Cain. Why are they characterized in this way? Have the students place themselves in the position of Grendel: can they imagine why Grendel behaves the way he does? Have them write a mock epic of *Beowulf* from the point of view of one of the monsters. They can choose Grendel, his mother, or the dragon. Encourage them to add dialogue, scenes, and even other characters to enhance their creativity. After the assignment is written, have them share it with the class. If you wish, read passages from John Gardner's *Grendel* for ideas.
3. Have students explore a particular aspect of Anglo-Saxon culture (dress, religion, language, art, family life, etc.). Have them write a journal entry about daily life as if they were living in the time of *Beowulf*. The journals should reflect both a sense of imagination and conjecture about Anglo-Saxon life as well as some researched ideas. According to the text, what was Anglo-Saxon daily life like? What kind of clothing was worn? What were the customs and beliefs? What was the role of women like in the society described in the poem? How are women treated? Do they play a role in the war?
4. Who is the author of *Beowulf*? Have the students create a biography of who they imagine the author of *Beowulf* to be. Who was he/she? What was his/her

role in society at the time? Have the students consider and write about why the author never signed his/her name to the document.

5. *Beowulf* is a poem intended to be spoken. To enjoy the text in its original spoken word format and to develop public speaking skills, have students develop a scene based on the text. In small groups students should choose a scene and adapt it to act out, with or without the use of costumes, scenery and other props. Encourage students to memorize the Old English lines, if they wish, focusing on pronunciation and helping them learn Old English words. Have them pay special attention to the use of kenning, or extreme personification. For example, rather than use the term "ocean," the poem would use "swan-road," rather than "water-churning boat," "foamy-necked floater." Have the students create their own kennings.

Internet Resources

There are several good resources on the web for *Beowulf* and the history of the medieval Europe.

- **Beowulf in Hypertext**

<http://phobos.spaceports.com/~beowulf/>

The site not only provides the text, in translation on-line, but also the poem in the original Old English; the site also has sections on the history of the original manuscript, the characters in *Beowulf*, and links to other relevant sites.

- **Angelcynn**

<http://www.angelcynn.org.uk/>

Angelcynn has information about Anglo-Saxon customs, dress, and history, as well as a section on the historical background of *Beowulf*.

- **Beowulf: A Student's Bibliography**

<http://www.georgetown.edu/irvinemj/english016/biblio/beobib.htm>

The site offers a fairly comprehensive bibliography of secondary sources.

- **Electronic Beowulf**

<http://www.uky.edu/ArtsSciences/English/Beowulf/eBeowulf/guide.htm>

There is information concerning the preservation of the original manuscript, as well as a images associated with the text.

Chicago Academic Standards & Frameworks: English Language Arts

1. READ WITH UNDERSTANDING AND FLUENCY

GRADES 9 & 10

Construct and extend meaning from text by synthesizing the content and ideas from literary works dealing with a specific issue or subject written by a single author.

Analyze and evaluate literary texts and support the analysis with references to the text, other works or authors or personal knowledge. Evaluate the effect of the author's word choice and poetic style.

GRADES 11 & 12

Analyze patterns, motifs, stylistic commonalities, themes and/or perspectives on key issues from literary works. Use a variety of sources to defend supportable conclusions about the text's issues, themes, worth, reliability, outcomes, characters, and information. Evaluate the author's assertions, advancing judgments about significant works of fiction and nonfiction and supporting those judgments through textual reference and references to other works.

2. UNDERSTAND EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT MEANING IN LITERATURE REPRESENTING INDIVIDUAL, COMMUNITY, NATIONAL AND WORLD HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES.

GRADES 9 & 10

Analyze the author's style and literary form and their effects upon the reader. Analyze the components of the epic form and compare to other genres; evaluate author's viewpoint, tone, figurative language, etc. Illustrate how form, content, purpose, and major themes of literary works reflect the cultures, literary periods, and ideas that shaped them. Make assertions about the perspective of the author, the era in which he/she lived, literary traditions, distinguishing elements of the author's language, and cultural and social norms.

GRADES 11 & 12

Analyze the relationships between form and content in a variety of texts representative of various cultures, societies, eras, and ideas, making connections within and across texts. Analyze and appraise recurring patterns and universal themes in fiction and nonfiction literature representing various cultures, perspectives, and historical periods. Understand and appreciate cultural variations in literary works, and trace universal themes in a text including the search for identity, search for balance and conflict patterns such as man vs. nature, and illusion vs. reality.

3. WRITE TO COMMUNICATE FOR A VARIETY OF PURPOSES.

GRADES 9 & 10

Use standard English grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation in writing assignments. Write with focus and clarity, using outlines.

GRADES 11 & 12

Produce documents and other written works that adhere to Standard English conventions. In writing assignments use varied sentence types; revise, edit and proofread manuscripts looking for run-on sentences, incorrect grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Write with focus, clarity, coherence, organization, cohesion, depth and accuracy, demonstrating variety and precision in expression of thought. Produce descriptive, narrative, expository, persuasive, creative, technical

writings that convey a clear and original perspective appropriate to purpose, audience, and format requirements.

4. LISTEN AND SPEAK EFFECTIVELY IN A VARIETY OF SITUATIONS.

GRADES 9,10, 11 & 12

Listen and respond critically to oral presentations. Communicate orally using Standard English in a manner appropriate for the audience, purpose, and context. Deliver clear, organized formal oral individual and group presentations in a coherent manner matching message, vocabulary and tone to audience and purpose.

5. USE THE LANGUAGE ARTS FOR INQUIRY AND RESEARCH TO ACQUIRE, ORGANIZE, ANALYZE, EVALUATE AND COMMUNICATE INFORMATION.

GRADES 9 & 10

Conduct research on questions and issues using various personal, reference, media, and electronic information sources to prepare comprehensive presentations.

GRADES 11 & 12

Engage in research to elicit information and evidence from various references, media and electronic and personal information sources in defense of a thesis statement and to prepare comprehensive research documents.