

“THERE WAS A BRAVE KING!”
—Beowulf, lines 11–12

Unit 1—Lesson 1

Beowulf

INTRODUCTION

Imagine living in the Early Middle Ages, let’s say about 1000 years ago in the year A.D. 1000. You live in a small community which includes five or ten families. Each family has its own small cottage and storage buildings. All of these cottages and outbuildings are within an enclosure formed by a wooden fence with a deep ditch running around the outside of it. There is only one gateway through this fence and across the ditch. The largest structure within the enclosure is a kind of communal building called a *longhouse*. A lot of time is spent in the longhouse. The cooking is done here as well as many of the jobs in this community (carding, spinning, and weaving wool; making and repairing tools; etc.) The community keeps small herds of sheep, goats, cattle, and/or pigs. Farming is done in the fields which surround the enclosure. The members of this community are self-sufficient and isolated. They rarely travel, and when they do they don’t go very far—maybe just to the nearest village on market day. Even less frequently than members of this community go to other communities and see other people do they get visitors themselves.

Imagine the thrill of seeing a new face. These mysterious men, these travelers, do not have homes of their own. They do not live permanently in isolated communities. Their way of life is completely different than that of the members of our little community. They aren’t farmers, so how do they make a living? They sell a special product, something valuable enough that members of these communities would share what little food they had and would give what few gifts they were able to part with in order to receive it. These travelers sell news; they are able to tell these isolated communities what is happening in the wider world. Some of this news is true, some is a bit more fanciful. In addition to

“Each of us will come to the end of his life on earth; he who can earn it should fight for the glory of his name; fame after death is the noblest of goals.”—Beowulf, lines 1386–1389

current events, these travelers have something else to sell: stories. These are the stories of heroes and legends. These stories are like our modern films, television shows, plays, and concerts all rolled into one. These stories take the form of long poems which these travelers recite entirely from memory, accompanying themselves on a small harp.

Beowulf, the poem you are about to read, began as just such a legend performed in just such a community. Who originally composed this version of the story, when or where, no one can really say. What we can say is that it did not start as a written poem. Throughout the Middle Ages, most Europeans were illiterate. They could neither read nor write, but that didn't mean they were ignorant. They were able to do all they needed to do without having to write it down. And think of these traveling poets. Poems like the *Beowulf* you are about to read, which in its current form is 3182 lines long, would have been one of 20 or more poems of similar length the traveling performers would have known. And they had the power to compose new poems, either using legendary material or current great events. There were stories of Arthur or other heroes, Alfred the Great and other kings, which would have been created as well. These people—the traveling poets and the members of the communities—knew words, they appreciated words and word-play, they loved poems and stories, they simply did not write these words down or read them from the page.

So how do we have this poem? Eventually it was written down. Most scholars believe the poem was written down around the year A.D. 1000 in England. How and why that happened is also a mystery. Monks and priests were just about the only people who knew how to read and write. In fact, they offered their services to the royal and aristocratic courts so that necessary business could be done and records could be kept. As we have said, though, the *Beowulf* poet would not have been literate. Did a traveling poet become a monk, learn to read and write, and then write down his own composition? Or did a monk or priest, hearing this tale told in the home of the aristocrat he was working for, induce the traveling poet to recite it for him again slowly so he could transcribe it? We just don't know.

And as you'll read in the introduction to the book, there is even more reason to wonder at the fact that we have this poem than the strange meeting between the illiterate poet and the literate scribe. There is only one known original copy of this poem in the entire world. Consider that for a minute. Think of any other book—there must be thousands, in some cases millions of copies held in libraries, schools, and people's homes. But there is only one *Beowulf*. Whether or not there were ever more copies we cannot know. The book was held in a monastic library (possibly the same one where it was originally written down), but when King Henry VIII of England founded the Anglican Church he destroyed the Catholic monasteries and often burnt their libraries. How many copies of *Beowulf* were lost at this time? How many other poems like this one—of which there might have been only one copy, or perhaps two or three or a dozen—were lost in those fires? We will never know. But having survived Henry VIII, this poem faced other dangers; chief among them was another fire (in the library of Robert Cotton (1571–1631) which formed the basis for the British Library) and the depredations of time.

This is a beautiful poem, full of wonderful language, exciting adventures, and fascinating information about the period of time 1000 years ago and more. We have to feel incredibly lucky that this poem has survived all those dangers and that we can still read and enjoy it. At the same time, though, we must also feel sad that an unknown number of similar poem are lost to us, either because they were never written down or because they were destroyed some time during that 1000 years or so since they were recited, sung, in those little Early Medieval communities.

WHILE YOU READ

Here are some questions to keep in the back of your mind while reading *Beowulf*.

- What traits are valued most by Beowulf’s society? What traits are most to be avoided?
- How does the foreshadowing in this poem affect the mood?
- What kind of society does Beowulf live in?
- How Christian is this story?



LESSON PREVIEW

One way to increase tension or develop character is to use foreshadowing, giving hints beforehand of what will happen in the future. We will examine how this is used in this poem.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

INTRODUCTION

1. How many original medieval copies of *Beowulf* survived into modern times?
2. Is this poem about common people or about royalty and aristocracy?
3. Going along with this, what seems to be the most important job a person can have, according to the poet?
4. When and where is the story set?
5. When and where was the story composed?
6. In what language was this poem composed?
7. Does this poem contain Christian imagery and sentiments?
8. Was the author a Christian?

PROLOGUE–CHAPTER 1

1. The author of the poem asserts that his audience is already familiar with the stories about the kings of what country?
2. Who is the first great king of that country mentioned by the poet?
3. How does that king arrive in the country?
4. Who is that king's son?
5. Was this king successful? How do we know?
6. Describe the ceremony that takes place when that king dies.
7. Name the members of Hrothgar's family and their relationship to him.
8. Was Hrothgar a successful king?
9. What building did King Hrothgar have built as a symbol of his greatness?
10. What do lines 82 through 85 mean?
11. Who is lurking outside Hrothgar's hall, hating the people inside?
12. What is the subject of the song which seems to make the lurker so mad?
13. Who is this lurker descended from?

CHAPTERS 2–3

1. What does Grendel do in his first attack on Herot?
2. Does Grendel attack the next night as well?
3. What was the response of King Hrothgar's followers?
4. How long does the fear of Grendel keep Herot empty?
5. What extreme measure do some of Hrothgar's men go to in order to find some power to defeat Grendel?
6. Do these measures lead to anything good? What does the poet suggest is the outcome of such measures?

Unit 1—Lesson 1: *Beowulf*

7. Who is the strongest of the Geats, the people ruled by King Higlac?
8. What does this hero choose to do when he hears Hrothgar's problems?
9. How many people travel with the hero?
10. What kind of greeting do the hero and his companions receive when they arrive?

CHAPTERS 4–5

1. What is Beowulf's basic response to the watchman?
2. Does this response seem to impress the watchman?
3. Who is Beowulf's father? Does he assume that people would have heard of his father?
4. What decoration does the poet mention being on the helmets of Beowulf and his men?
5. Where does the watchman lead Beowulf?
6. What do Beowulf and his followers do when they arrive at Herot?
7. Who confronts them in the king's hall?
8. Does he seem impressed with Beowulf and his men?

CHAPTERS 6–9

1. How well does King Hrothgar know Beowulf?
2. How is Beowulf related to his king, King Higlac of the Geats?
3. Name a couple of the great deeds Beowulf brags about to Hrothgar.
4. How does Beowulf plan to fight Grendel?
5. What story does Hrothgar tell about a favor he did for Beowulf's father, Edgeth?
6. What sort of entertainment do Beowulf and his followers enjoy along with Hrothgar and his men at the feast welcoming Beowulf to Denmark?
7. Which one of Hrothgar's men, apparently jealous of Beowulf, points out an incident when Beowulf seems to have some out second best?
8. What does this person say about that contest?
9. What story does Beowulf tell in response to this taunting?
10. What does Beowulf have to say about Unferth's skills?
11. Who brings mead to the all of the warriors in Hrothgar's hall?
12. What gift does Hrothgar give Beowulf when the sun goes down on his first day in Denmark, a gift never given to any other visitor?

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CHAPTERS 10–12

1. What is the last thing Beowulf does before lying down to await Grendel?
2. Does this action seem to calm his followers?
3. What sight surprises and pleases Grendel when he arrives at Herot?
4. Do any of Beowulf's followers perish during Grendel's attack?
5. How does Beowulf attack Grendel?
6. Do Beowulf's followers attempt to help him during his battle with Grendel? Why aren't they able to do that?
7. How does Beowulf kill Grendel?
8. Where does Grendel die?
9. Where is Beowulf's battle trophy placed?

CHAPTERS 13–18

1. What are the three main things the soldiers do on their way back from tracking Grendel to the edge of the lake in which he had his lair?
2. The soldiers sing of Siegmund. What are three of his great deeds mentioned here?
3. Whose name is mentioned as a sign that absolutely everyone could now see how great Beowulf is and how worthy he is of the title "hero"?
4. Why is Hrothgar's nephew, Hrothulf, mentioned specifically during the celebration of Beowulf's achievement? Why does the poet mention that no one was plotting anything and there was no treachery at that moment in anyone's hearts?
5. What are the gifts Hrothgar gives Beowulf as a reward for his victory?
6. What are the basic facts of the story about Finn and Hnaf which is told at the celebration of Beowulf's victory?
7. Why does the poet again specifically mention that Hrothulf is not treacherous and that everyone trusts Unferth even though he has killed some members of his family right after the story of Finn and Hnaf is told?
8. We have already seen a "boat burial" (in the case of Shild, the first great Danish king), and in the story of Finn and Hnaf, there is another ancient funeral procedure. What was it?
9. When the Geats and the Danes go to bed after the feast in Beowulf's honor, does the poet indicate that all of their problems are ended and behind them?

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CHAPTERS 19–21

1. Who attacks Herot this time?
2. Who does this creature kill?
3. In addition to the person the creature killed, what else does that creature carry away with them?
4. Why doesn't Beowulf confront the creature when it arrives, defeating it before this attack is made?
5. How does Hrothgar know about the relationship between this creature and Grendel?
6. What example does Hrothgar give to describe how evil Grendel's home lake is?
7. What does Beowulf say is a better response to the loss of a friend than mourning?
8. What does Beowulf say is the best goal for someone's life?
9. What does Beowulf promise Hrothgar he will do?
10. What creature does Beowulf kill when the men arrive at the lake where Grendel's lair lies?
11. One of the warriors who traveled to the monsters' lair loans Beowulf something. Who makes the loan and what is it?

CHAPTERS 22–23

1. What does Beowulf ask Hrothgar just before he goes off to attack Grendel's mother?
2. What does Beowulf give Unferth?
3. How long does it take Beowulf to get to the bottom of the lake?
4. Why doesn't Beowulf attack Grendel's mother with his sword immediately?
5. Where does Grendel's mother take Beowulf when she discovers she can't kill him immediately?
6. What two items of Beowulf's armor and weaponry fail him in this fight and how?
7. Is Beowulf able to defeat Grendel's mother the same way he defeated Grendel, with his bare hands?
8. What weapon does Beowulf find in Grendel's lair? Is it effective in his battle with Grendel's mother?
9. Does Beowulf do anything further to Grendel himself?
10. What happens to the weapon Beowulf picked up in Grendel's lair?
11. Do the Danes, Hrothgar's followers, have confidence in Beowulf? What do they do to express their feelings?
12. What does Beowulf bring back to the surface of the lake and later carry to Herot?

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CHAPTERS 24–27

1. What does Hrothgar learn concerning the ultimate fate of the giants from the sword hilt Beowulf brought back from Grendel's lair?
2. What kind of an example as a ruler does Hrothgar suggest the former king, Hermod, was?
3. What are the key errors rulers might make which Hrothgar warns Beowulf about?
4. What is the ultimate punishment which Hrothgar mentions for people who do not live a good life?
5. What permanent present does Unferth give to Beowulf as the Geats prepare to leave?
6. What offer does Beowulf make to Hrothgar which Hrothgar says is surprisingly wise and generous for such a young warrior as Beowulf is?
7. What opinion does Hrothgar have of Beowulf as a future king?
8. Who is Higlac's wife? Who is she compared to? What is said about that other woman?

CHAPTERS 28–31

1. Is Higlac happy to see Beowulf's return?
2. What member of Hrothgar's family do we hear about for the first time while Beowulf is telling his story to Higlac?
3. Who is Hrothgar's daughter betrothed to? (In other words, who is she going to marry?)
4. What is Beowulf's basic point concerning truces between groups of people which are secured by marriages? Have we already seen another example of this conclusion?
5. What are the basic facts to the story Beowulf invents concerning the future marriage of Hrothgar's daughter?
6. What does Beowulf do with the treasure Hrothgar and Welthow gave him?
7. What does Beowulf receive from Higlac as a reward for his victory and his faithfulness to his own king?
8. Who are the next two kings after Higlac?
9. How many years pass before Beowulf next faces a monster?
10. What are the circumstances which lead up to this new monster attack?

CHAPTERS 32–33

1. What brought the thief to the dragon's lair? Did he steal the jeweled cup because of greed or need?
2. How did the treasures come to be hidden in the tower to begin with?
3. What does the thief do with his cup he stole?
4. What is the dragon's main form of attack?

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5. Does the dragon's attack affect Beowulf or his property personally? How?
6. Who does Beowulf blame first when he is told of the dragon's attack?
7. What story are we told of Higlac's death?
8. How does Herdred, Higlac's son, die? What is the story?
9. Could Beowulf have become king even earlier than he did?

CHAPTERS 34–35

1. What reward does Onela receive for leaving Beowulf alive and in control of Geatland?
2. Is Beowulf fated to defeat the dragon and remain alive?
3. How do Beowulf and the Geats find out where the dragon is hiding?
4. How did Higlac, the youngest of three sons, come to the throne? What happened to his elder brothers?
5. Is Beowulf afraid to fight the dragon? Is he ashamed to wear armor or carry a weapon into his battle with the dragon?
6. What is the first sign that the battle is turning against Beowulf?
7. How well does Beowulf's sword work against the dragon?
8. Do Beowulf's men rush to his aid as the dragon gains the advantage in the battle?

CHAPTERS 36–37

1. Who is the only one of Beowulf's followers to join the battle and try to help Beowulf?
2. What does this person say about the social system of the warriors that work with the lord? Why are they obliged to fight for their leader?
3. What happens to part of this warrior's armor?
4. What does Beowulf use to make one more attack on the dragon, and what happens to that weapon?
5. What attack does the dragon make on Beowulf?
6. What does Beowulf's lone helper do in response to this attack? Who gets in the last blow against the dragon?
7. Does Beowulf seem satisfied with his life and his reign?
8. What does Beowulf want to see before he dies?

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CHAPTERS 38–43

1. Whom does Beowulf thank for the victory and for the dragon's treasure?
2. Is Beowulf satisfied with the treasure as a fitting trade for his life?
3. Who does Beowulf name as the next leader of the Geats? What does Beowulf give as a symbol of his desire to pass on the leadership?
4. When the dragon is dead, Beowulf's men return. What does Wiglaf have to say to them?
5. What do we learn from the herald's announcement of the results of the battle with the dragon about the safety and security of Geatland now that Beowulf is dead?
6. What story do we hear about the king of the Swedes and two earlier kings of the Geats from this same herald?
7. What does the herald suggest should be done with the whole treasure Beowulf lost his life for?
8. What does Wiglaf say about whether Beowulf's people wanted him to fight the dragon? What does Beowulf base his ultimate decision about the dragon on?
9. What is done with Beowulf's dead body?
10. What structure is built to mark Beowulf's passing?
11. In addition to actually disposing of Beowulf's body and constructing a lasting tribute to Beowulf, what three rites are mentioned specifically as part of his funeral?
12. What is done with the dragon's treasure?

AFTERWORD

1. Does Robert P. Creed, the author of this "Afterword," seem more impressed with Burton Raffel (the translator of the poem) for sticking very closely to the original Old English or for being able to convert the Old English well into Modern English?
2. What other sources of oral epic poetry does the author mention?
3. What two elements (or poetic devices) does Creed suggest are necessary for composing oral (spoken as opposed to written) epic poetry?
4. A certain archaeological site in Great Britain has often been used as a comparison with *Beowulf* (as well as a way of proving that some of the extravagant descriptions of burial practices were not exaggerations). What is the name of that site?
5. What geographical evidence does Creed suggest proves that there were once Geats living in southern Sweden, even if Beowulf himself is merely a legend?
6. What incident in *Beowulf* is confirmed by being mentioned in Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks* as well as in the works of a couple of other nearly contemporary historians?
7. What about the Christianity in the poem? Could the historical Beowulf, if there was one, have been a Christian?
8. Are the Christian elements in the poem simply added to an original pagan poem or are they more integral?

LITERARY LESSON: FORESHADOWING

Introduction

Think about every story you have ever read or heard. The purpose of these stories is usually to see the characters (hopefully ones we like and/or can identify with in some way) triumph. Authors present their characters with problems, hardships, and struggles which they must face and overcome. That victory comes in a variety of forms; the characters might learn a valuable lesson which makes them better people, they might defeat some enemy in battle, they might discover the identity of the murderer or traitor, or they might decide that sacrificing themselves for others is the right thing to do.

Our expectations for the stories we read are generally positive. This comes from experience with all of the other stories we know. It doesn't always work out, but we don't expect the main characters to die right at the beginning of the story. Some bad things will certainly happen, but we assume that the story will generally end happily. That expectation affects how we view the conflicts the characters face. We may not know how they are going to solve their problems, but we expect them to do so. Somehow those nine people will destroy the enemy's ultimate weapon and save the world. Somehow that dog will survive all of the abuse and find a way to be happy again. Somehow the boy and the escaped slave will find a place to be safe. The situations may look pretty rough, maybe impossible, but we have that expectation that some way will be found to make things work out right. We might worry about these characters, but it is not worrying that they will fail; it is more the worry over how bad it will get, and how much the characters will be hurt, before they ultimately succeed.

But things don't always work out. Our mood would be much different if we knew the efforts the characters are taking are in vain. No celebration the characters enjoy could really be happy for the readers if we knew that something bad was about to happen to them. Foreshadowing is a hint of the future which reflects on the present.

Foreshadowing in *Beowulf*

DIRECT FORESHADOWING

We first meet Beowulf when he decides to aid the king of Denmark, Hrothgar, who is suffering the attacks of a monster named Grendel. Beowulf is described as being stronger and greater than anyone in the world (lines 195–6). And it is here that we get a kind of foreshadowing for Beowulf's adventure. The wise men among the Geats, Beowulf's people, are described as not regretting Beowulf's departure on this dangerous monster-fighting adventure because omens are good (lines 201–204). If we can trust this information to be an actual example of foreshadowing, then we can feel confident for Beowulf. But perhaps this isn't foreshadowing. Perhaps this is an opportunity for the author to show us that the ancient religion followed by the Geats was illegitimate by giving us an example of a time when their rites did not work out.

Much clearer examples of foreshadowing are the indications of the different outcomes of the battle between Beowulf and Grendel which the combatants will experience. True to the omens the wise men among the Geats interpreted, but apparently not expected by Beowulf's companions, the hero's fate is foreshadowed as being much brighter than that of the monster.

But God's dread loom
Was woven with defeat for the monster, good fortune
For the Geats; help against Grendel was with them
And through the might of a single man
They would win. 700

The signs given to us by the author just prior to the attack by Grendel's mother are far less upbeat. While the author is describing the celebration over the defeat of Grendel, he also indicates that danger lurks.

The soldiers ate
And drank like kings. The savage fate
Decreed for them hung dark and unknown, what would follow
After nightfall, when Hrothgar withdrew from the hall, 1235
Sought his bed and left his soldiers
To theirs. Herot would house a host
Of men, that night, as it had been meant to do.
They stacked away the benches, spread out
Blankets and pillows. But those beer-drinking sleepers 1240
Lay down with death beside their beds.

Death is foreshadowed for some of the Geats, but we don't know how many. And we don't know whether Beowulf is going to be victorious this time.

Beowulf, of course, is the main character in this book, and we should expect the author to focus our attention on the dangers faced by Beowulf. Foreshadowing is one of the ways the author draws our attention to Beowulf and keeps us concerned about what will happen to him. But foreshadowing is not limited to Beowulf.

We are given many hints concerning the future of King Hrothgar and his great hall, Herot. A "great hall" would be similar to the longhouses we mentioned in the introduction to this poem. Herot would have been the central building of a community of warriors. It would have held the court functions of King Hrothgar as well as being the gathering place for the community, where the warriors came to eat, drink, receive gold rings (armbands and necklaces) from the king as payment for their deeds as his soldiers, tell stories, boast, and sleep. It was the kitchen, dining room, throne room, barracks, and bar all rolled into one. Fewer than 15 lines after King Hrothgar first has the idea to build a great and glorious hall to reflect his own greatness, "that most beautiful of dwellings" (line 77), we learn that disaster lies in its future.

That towering place, gabled and huge,
Stood waiting for time to pass, for war
To begin, for flames to leap as high
As the feud that would light them, and for Herot to burn. 85

So here is a stark contrast. Within moments of describing the glory of the hall we find that it will be destroyed.

INDIRECT FORESHADOWING

Another instance when this kind of contrast was used to make the foreshadowed information more grim occurred during the celebrations after Beowulf had killed the monster, Grendel. And what a celebration that was.

No victory was celebrated better,
By more or by better men and their king.
A mighty host, and famous, they lined
The benches, rejoicing; 1014

But that joy wouldn't last forever.

the king and Hrothulf,
His nephew, toasted each other, raised mead-cups 1015
High under Herot's great roof, their speech
Courteous and warm. King and people
Were one; none of the Danes was plotting
Then, no treachery hid in their smiles.

This is a curious thing to say. No one was plotting then. No treachery hid in their smiles at that time. The implication must be that the plotting and the treachery will come. A little further on we are given another implied comparison.

And then the queen, Welthow, wearing her bright crown,
Appeared among them, came to Hrothgar and Hrothulf, his nephew,
Seated peacefully together, their friendship and Hrothulf's good faith still
unbroken. 1165
And Unferth sat at Hrothgar's feet; everyone trusted him,
Believed in his courage, although he'd spilled his relatives' blood.

And finally, in Welthow's speech to her husband, King Hrothgar, and his nephew, Hrothulf, we get some indication of the tragedy to come, though again it is delivered in an offhand, essentially backwards, way. She mentions to Hrothgar that death comes to all, but that he doesn't have to worry about his children and heirs.

“But your sons will be safe, 1180
Sheltered in Hrothulf’s gracious protection,
If fate takes their father while Hrothulf is alive;
I know your nephew’s kindness, I know
He’ll repay in kind the goodness you have shown him,
Support your two young sons as you 1185
And I sustained him in his own early days,
His father dead and he but a boy.”

FORESHADOWING BY COMPARISON

So far we have looked at two types of foreshadowing. In the first type, the author lets us know what will happen in a very straightforward way. The second type was more obscure. “No one was treacherous then.” “Everyone still trusted him at that time.” “I’m sure he won’t murder my children after all we have done for him in the past.” There is also another kind of foreshadowing used in this poem: foreshadowing by comparison.

After Beowulf defeats Grendel, there is a great celebration in Herot. King Hrothgar and his people had been menaced and murdered for years until Beowulf finally freed them from fear. This celebration contains the best of everything. Great presents are given to Beowulf as rewards for his deeds. The queen herself serves beer (“a foaming cup” line 1192) to the assembled nobles. And the court poet is on hand to sing a story. This is the same sort of traveling poet we described earlier, except this one has gotten himself a permanent post. He knows the stories, the lengthy alliterative poems recounting the great deeds of the heroes of the past. He is also on hand to make up new poems about new great deeds. (This is done a bit later in the poem to celebrate Beowulf’s success.) The story he tells on this occasion is only summarized by the author, and we can assume that the audience of Beowulf would know the details of the story of Finn. Just as we would not have to tell the whole story of “Red Riding Hood” or “Snow White,” the author doesn’t have to tell a detailed version of this story.

This story is significant. Finn, a Frisian (modern-day Belgium), married the sister of Hnaf, a Dane like Hrothgar and his men. We can assume that this marriage was meant to ensure peace between Finn and Hnaf. However, Finn treacherously attacks Hnaf and kills about half of his men. However, in the fight about half of Finn’s men are also killed. There is a kind of stalemate; the remainder of Hnaf’s men, now led by Hengest, stay the winter in the same great hall as Finn and the rest of his men. Finn becomes trusting, but Hengest is just waiting for his chance. When the spring comes, and Hengest is able to sail home, he attacks Finn, killing him and his men. Hengest then takes Finn’s wife (their own kinswoman) back with them to Denmark.

This is the story of an extended family destroyed by treachery. Finn did not live up to the obligations of society. He married the sister of another leader, Hnaf, and then did not live in peace with his wife’s brother as he was expected to do. We have already seen some hints that some treachery lies in the future for King Hrothgar, his nephew Hrothulf, and the Danish

kingdom. Here the author is using a comparison between the story of Finn and Hnaf and the story of Hrothgar and Hrothulf to foreshadow the sort of treachery, and the sort of tragic end, these characters face.

Conclusion: Fatalism and Foreshadowing

The Anglo-Saxons were a fatalistic group of people. This is a typical worldview among “heroic” societies: Societies built around local chieftains who surround themselves with groups of warriors whom they pay with food, strong drink, and the spoils of conflict. The religion of the Anglo-Saxons, which they shared with other groups (notably the Vikings), foresaw an end to the world, but not a happy one. The reign of the gods would end in battle, and the world would end in fire and ruin. Successful warriors would have had their time in a kind of heaven, a great hall where they would feast and fight without dying, but that would not be everlasting. They too would take part in the battle and the end of the world and would be defeated along with their gods. There are numerous examples throughout the poem of the glories of this world coming to an end. Herot, King Hrothgar’s great hall, the greatest ever built, would end in fire. The people who amassed the treasure which was ultimately claimed by the dragon died one by one until the last of their number finally hid that treasure and died himself. That treasure could not stop the inevitable process which led to their demise. And that treasure was not destined to survive its rediscovery either. The discovery led to massive damage caused by the dragon, and the treasure was simply reburied with Beowulf, still not doing anyone any good. And Beowulf’s kingdom is also doomed, as we learn from the final example of foreshadowing in the book. A mourner at Beowulf’s funeral, an elderly lady

. . . groaned
A song of misery, of ultimate sadness
And days of mourning, of fear and sorrow
To come, slaughter and terror and captivity. 3154

Without the strength of Beowulf, the kingdom of the Geats is doomed to be overrun and destroyed. All kingdoms will share this same fate. The poem as a whole, therefore, and all of the incidents it contains, is a kind of foreshadowing by comparison for our world, at least as far as the Anglo-Saxons were concerned. As Hrothgar’s and Hnaf’s and Finn’s and Beowulf’s kingdoms go (and all the other kingdoms mentioned in this poem), so will go our own world.

Since all men die, all kingdoms fall, all treasures are lost and useless, there is only one thing worth fighting for, according to Beowulf anyway. As he tells King Hrothgar, a sentiment which is echoed by other characters in this poem, the only worthwhile pursuit is glory. The one thing in Beowulf’s world which lasted longer than people, kingdoms, and treasures was fame. That is why the poets were so valued. It was the poets, keeping the old stories alive, which preserved those things which Beowulf and so many others in his world prized above all other things: their fame, their glorious deeds, and their names. In that sense, Beowulf has succeeded where many others have failed. We do still know his name and his deeds. He is still famous.

WRITING EXERCISES

1. There are examples of foreshadowing in *Beowulf* which were not mentioned specifically in this lesson. Choose one and analyze it. What sort of foreshadowing is it? How does it work as foreshadowing?
2. Write a short story, no longer than five pages, which includes at least one examples of foreshadowing (indicate the foreshadowing by underlining it).
3. Have you ever experienced foreshadowing in your own life or have you heard about someone you know experiencing it? This could be a time when you saw something which seemed to be a sign of events to come or perhaps someone said something to you which turned out to be an accurate description of the outcome of some action. Describe the situation and explain how it is an example of foreshadowing.
4. Of course, foreshadowing is not limited to *Beowulf*. Analyze an example of foreshadowing from some other work you have read. Describe the situation and explain how it is an example of foreshadowing.