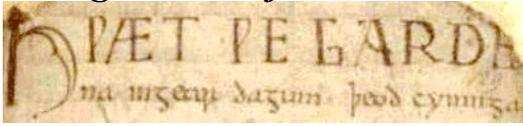


Background Information on Beowulf

Name: _____



Period: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Read the following selection and answer the questions at the right:

BEOWULF -- AN ANGLO-SAXON EPIC

Belief in a hero has always been an important article in the social and political faith of the Germanic peoples, whether they were Christian or not. The fact that such a hero could be related to the figure of Christ no doubt attracted the sympathy of many a cleric toward heroic legends. Almost certainly the one who first cast the epic Beowulf legend into coherent and artistic form and wrote it down in the language we now call Old English was a Christian cleric who was evidently Norse in his sympathies and interests, if not in his nationality. This unknown author, who flourished probably in the first half of the eighth century, is known as the Beowulf Poet.

It is generally supposed that *Beowulf* was a heroic Scandinavian epic legend, a story of the type the *scop* chanted to the warriors assembled in the great hall. The only surviving full-length heroic epic in Old English, *Beowulf* tells of Scandinavian kings and heroes. Its presence in Anglo-Saxon England can be explained simply by saying that the Viking Danes brought the legend to England, or that it may derive from classical sources. However, legendry of this type is common to all Germanic nations. The probabilities are strong that there were extant on the Continent a large number of epics comparable in length and scope to *Beowulf* which have unfortunately been lost, either because they were not lucky enough to survive the destructiveness of time or because no one ever wrote them down.

In *Beowulf* a truly non-Christian story of monsters and mighty sea beasts and fire dragons is blended, although rather incongruously, with serious thoughts about the dispensations of a wise God, the necessity for praying to a Christian deity, the fate that will befall the evil, and the reward that is promised to the righteous. Through the story stalks the impressive and noble figure of Beowulf, in whom pagan fatalism mingles strangely with Christian qualities.

The Beowulf Poet possessed a sense of drama, an ear for music, and the power to create effective word-pictures. There is no end rhyme, but by regularly dividing each line into two parts and by extensive use of alliteration, the poet achieved a rhythmic, musical effect. Most striking is his use of *kennings*, poetic synonyms that are often metaphorical compounds. They were probably drawn from a large stock of formula-phrases characteristic of Anglo-Saxon verse. Thus the king is the "ring-giver," the rough sea is the "whale-road," the smooth sea is the "swan-road," the boat is the "wave-rider," the dragon is the "shadow-walker," and the ocean is "the mingling of the waves."

1. Beowulf is the only surviving _____

2. It tells the story of _____,
and reflects life as lived in 7th or 8th century England.

3. The unknown author is called, simply, _____

4. Although he did not *compose* the story, he is most certainly the one who _____

5. What was his occupation? _____

6. How did this Scandinavian story come to be part of English literature? _____

7. Why is *Beowulf* the only surviving epic? _____

8. Why is *Beowulf* a mixture of *myth* and *history*, of *pagan* and *Christian* elements?

9. The person who would have chanted such stories as *Beowulf* at feasts was the _____.

Define *epic*:



THE EPIC

Beowulf is an **epic** --a long **narrative** poem presented in an elevated style, relating the heroic deeds of noble or semidivine personages. Like other traditional or folk epics (for example, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*), *Beowulf* originated in traditional tales or legends dating back to a remote past and handed down orally by generations of bards or singers. At some point, a literary artist put all the materials together in written form.

Literary epics developed later and were modeled on the traditional epics.

Certain features are associated with the epic. The characters are of noble birth, or they are supernatural beings from the past. If for any reason a person of lower estate is introduced, the person's name is never mentioned. The action is on an immense scale and involves the fate of a whole people or even the entire human race. Gods or supernatural creatures come to the aid of one side or another.

Certain devices also recur. The author usually announces his theme at the opening and calls on the muses to help him in his task of narration. The

poem usually begins at a critical point in the action. The style is noble and majestic; the characters speak ceremoniously in long set speeches. Literary inventories -- listings and descriptions of characters or objects -- often form part of the descriptive passages.

Such features and devices became so predictable that there developed a kind of anti-epic, a literary form known as **mock epic**. The mock epic uses all the epic elements in wrong or bizarre ways in order to make them seem ridiculous.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EPIC: List the features and literary devices commonly found in epic poetry --

1. The main characters have heroic or superhuman qualities, are of _____ birth, or they are _____.
2. The action is _____.
3. Gods or _____.
4. The author usually _____.
5. The poem usually begins _____ (*This is called* _____.)
6. The style is _____.
7. The characters speak _____ in _____.
8. Literary inventories -- _____ often _____.

Other Famous Traditional or Folk Epics from Around the World	
Title	Origin

Introduction:

The story of *Beowulf* begins in the land of the Danes during the reign of King Hrothgar. The King had built a great hall called Heorot, where the earls feasted and listened to hero tales chanted by the *scop*. Then one night Grendel, a monster of human shape but superhuman size, appeared and slew thirty men. For twelve years he haunted the land, killing and devouring, while Heorot stood deserted and men lived in terror.

In southern Sweden the warrior Beowulf, who was the nephew of King Hygelac, ruler of the Geats, heard of Grendel's ravages. With fourteen companions he sailed Denmark to fight the monster. After a great feast in Heorot, Beowulf and his men lay down in the hall to await Grendel's approach. Beowulf boasted he would overcome Grendel without weapons. Then, while all slept, Grendel appeared.

