

Lesson 4: Beowulf – Pagan Story, Christian Poem

Review

Augustine – the silent word, free will vs. free will
Patrick of Ireland – the Spirit and the book, neither Irish nor Roman Catholic
Three Eras of Church History – Patristic, Medieval, Modern
Three Persons in the Middle Ages – Pope, King, Mohammed

The Indo-European Family of Languages

Handout Metzger's language chart:

What are English's nearest siblings?

What are English's cousins and second cousins? (Give examples of Germanic vs. Latin-based words.)

What are English's most distant relatives? (Those in India have Caucasian facial features, but with dark skin).

Show a map of Europe/Asia and trace where the tribes went.

Show a map of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms along with a map of modern England.

Do you see what happened to Patrick's people?

Do you see where the Anglo-Saxon roots are hidden in modern names?

Beowulf, an Anglo-Saxon Epic

One manuscript – almost destroyed by fire in the 18th century

Primary vs. Secondary Epic (C. S. Lewis) – the Scandinavian warrior-hero (cf. Isaiah vs. Job)

Are dragons really dinosaurs (cf. Job 40-41)? A T-rex? A basilosaurus-like serpent? Son of Cain?!

Strange Language? The letter “thorn” and lines 1035—38 (p. 68, translation on p. 69).

Two Worlds

Beyond the differences in the two cultures of England and Scandinavia, two worlds overlap in this poem:

1. The old world of paganism (the time of the story)
2. The new world of Christianity (the time of the writer)

The two worlds are different:

“They vowed offerings to idols” but that was “their way” (p. 13), versus knowing God (p. 15).

Idea: *wyrd* (“weird”) – like fate, but speaks of God's sovereignty (pp. 71, 193; cf. *Credenda/Agenda*).

Sum: He has collected legends and made one story, but he has added commentary that has an OT perspective.

What is the significance of this Old Testament perspective?

At first glance, the poem seems anticlimactic—the early boasts and defeat of “monsters” vs. the sad ending.
Seamus Heaney: The “dragon” is deep and within and more ominous—the real foe, defeated in death.

Pattern: The typical “glory” drama (cf. *Odyssey*) still lasts but is tempered in the end by sober reality.

Content is pagan, but the form is Christian—a pattern I recognized through Heaney's comments:

I Samuel and II Samuel – it is one thing for David to overcome Goliath, another to overcome guilt

Movie *Up* – Mr. Fredrickson starts out pursuing his dream *no matter what*, but finds a murderer!

Written from a Christian perspective, the film starts with a typical narrative but ends differently.

Beowulf – the hero meets his match in the 50-foot dragon (a symbol of death), the *wyrm* (serpent).

Like *Ecclesiastes*, the theme seems to be the vanity of life due to sin and death:

The hopeful reconciliations introduced at the end are undermined by the blood feud.

The accumulated gold—everywhere in the book—is packed on a ship or buried.

Even the best ruler dies (pp. 149, 159)—a fate that applies to “anyone” (p. 67; cf. pp. 165-66).

Therefore, the gospel is only hinted (e.g. p. 15 – “after death...”), but the form propels us to search for Christ.

If so, *Beowulf* shows us how reframing pagan stories may redeem them for the gospel (cf. *Duke*).

The Form of Anglo-Saxon Poetry

1. Each line has two halves. Each half has two accented syllables (hard beats).
2. Instead of rhyme the two halves are connected by *alliteration* = syllables start with the same sound:
beat one or two matches with beat three (improperly, beat four is allowed – see p. xxix)

Examples: (1) In the dawn of day King David attacked.
(2) A weird one arrived with a word from the wise.
(3) The child on his bike hit a bump and then flipped.