



Heroes in Oral Epics

Achilles & Beowulf

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Achilles and Beowulf present similar and contrasting heroic definitions, which are shaped by their respective cultures.



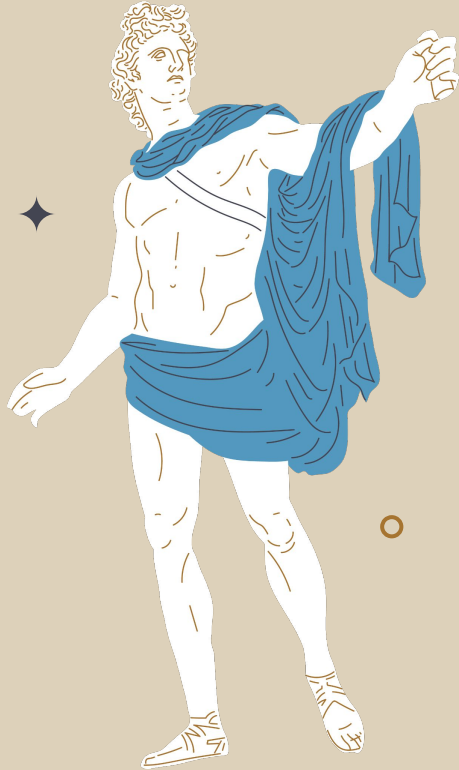
Achilles

As a Greek figure, Achilles is focused on individual glory (*kleos*), and establishing an honorable and memorable name.



Beowulf

An Anglo-Saxon epic hero, Beowulf is the product of his cultural ideals: loyalty, service, and glory among his people.



01

Contextualizing Beowulf



Epic History and Plot Overview



Beowulf: History and Poetic Tradition


The story of Beowulf is believed to have been composed/transmitted orally between many poets before being immortalized through written materials.

Its manuscript is dated between 975 and 1025 AD, which does not have a known author.

Beowulf was composed during the Anglo-Saxon Period (a.k.a. Dark Ages). It reflects the time's marked discussion of Paganism and Christianity.

Despite being "Old English," Beowulf is set in 5th and 6th century Pagan Scandinavia, specifically present-day Denmark and Sweden.

Beowulf's influence is seen within knight stories, modern Viking sagas, and tales such as Lord of the Rings.





A (Brief) Plot Overview

Part One

Heorot's noise angers a nearby monster, Grendel → Grendel terrorizes Heorot for 12 years.

Beowulf, prince of the Geats, offers to protect Heorot from Grendel. Eventually, he kills him.


Grendel's mother comes to avenge her son's death; Beowulf fights and kills her as well.

Part Two

Beowulf succeeds kingship of Geatland following King Hygelac and his son's death.

A fire-breathing dragon is angered by a treasure robbery, and ravages Geatland.

Beowulf (aging) fights and kills the dragon, knowing he will likely die.



02

The Hero Genre

Definition and Influence on the genre by Beowulf
and the Iliad



Defining the Hero: Greeks & The Iliad

In Ancient Greece, to be considered a “hero” was to establish the following:

Kleos (Klé - os): *good report, fame, glory* (Wiktionary)

Achilles defines heroism through the achievement of glory, individual excellence, and generally self-serving personal ideals; fighting **for himself**

*“My silver-footed goddess mother Thetis
says that there are two ways my death may come. If I stay here and fight, besieging Troy,
my chance of ever going home is lost,
but I shall have a name that lasts forever.
Or if I go home to my own dear country,
I lose my glory but I gain long life.
Death cannot run so fast to overtake me.”* (Iliad 9.410) Wilson translation

Influence: modern war epics, concept of the tragic hero

Tragic Hero: the central character of a play, film, etc. depicted as a noble figure who experiences a tragic downfall

Defining the Hero: Anglo-Saxons & Beowulf

Generally, Anglo-Saxon heroes were defined by their loyalty, humility, and intelligence, but also willingness to quest for glory and remain brave in battle.

Mǣrþu: Greatness, honour, glory, fame

"Again he was stalwart, not slow of zeal, mindful of glory..." (Beowulf 1529) Liuzza Translation

Stalwart: marked by outstanding strength and vigor of body, mind, or spirit (Merriam-Webster)

*"One may, indeed, say, if he acts in truth
and right for the people, remembers all,
old guardian of his homeland, that this earl was
born a better man! My Friend Beowulf, your glory is exalted throughout the world, over every people;
[...] You shall become a comfort everlasting to your own people, and a help to heroes."* (Beowulf 1703)

Throughout the text, Beowulf demonstrates a desire for the common good of his people, and emphasizes the importance of remaining mindful and righteous.



03



Glory: A Comparison

Achilles' Quest for Vengeance

Achilles seeks out glory, but primarily for personal vengeance and self-serving ideation

- Achilles decides not to fight in the war after Agamemnon takes his war prize
- He only rejoins the war after Hector kills Patroclus, to avenge his friend

"... just so, Lord Agamemnon enraged me. But that happened in the past. So let it go, though I am still upset.

I must control the feelings in my chest, and go to look for Hector, who destroyed the one I loved the most, my head, my life. Thereafter, I will welcome death, whenever Zeus and the other deathless gods may wish to bring it." (Iliad 18.110) Wilson Translation

Beowulf: For the People

Beowulf seeks out glory, but primarily for the general well-being and benefit or protection of his community. He desires to spread this even after his potential death.

- Beowulf is fighting Grendel due to his attack on the people's' mead hall of Heorot
- He proceeds to fight Grendel's mother and the fire-breathing dragon due to their terrorizing commoners and his city, even if it means giving his life.

*"Be a protector to my band of men,
my boon-companions, if battle should take me, and send on to Hygelac, beloved Hrothgar,
the gifts of treasure which you have given me." (Beowulf 1480) Liuzza Translation*

"I shall win honor and fame, or death will take me!" (Beowulf 1491)