

Beowulf

Beowulf is the longest and the most famous Anglo-Saxon poem. It was composed in Sweden and Denmark. From there the invading Vikings brought it over Britain. The epic of Beowulf was written down in Old English in the 10th century.

The story is the following:

Beowulf with some valiant Goths comes to the help of Hrothgar, king of the Danes whose place at Heorot is wasted by the nightly attacks of Grendel, a giant ogre. Every night Grendel emerges from his lair in the marshes beneath the cliffs in order to seize and devour one of the king's companions. In a terrible hand-to-hand struggle Beowulf tears off an arm of the monster, who is mortally wounded and flees to his den, where upon all is joy in victory and deliverance.

But Grendel's mother avenges his son. She renews the attacks on Heorot, and Beowulf resolves to go forth to fight her in her home. Diving after her into the waters of a sinister lake, he meets her in combat in the cave in which he duels beneath the water. When he is all but worsted he seizes a magic sword which hangs on the wall and plunges it in the body of the fearful beast, and then, when the Danes believe that he has already fallen a victim to his daring he returns to Heorot in triumph, bearing Grendel's gigantic head.

He becomes king of the Goths and reigns over them gloriously for 50 years. But some jewels are stolen from an ancient treasure guarded by a dragon, who sets out in fury, devastates the king's realm, burning with his flaming and pentitential breath all that lies in his path. Beowulf slays the dragon and saves his people but he is himself mortally wounded during the encounter by the monster's venomous teeth and he dies nobly consoled by the thought that he has sacrificed himself for his subjects and that he is giving back to them the incomparable treasure which has been in the dragon's keeping. He has however been forsaken during the fight by all his warriors but one and great evils are prophesied for the Goths bereft of their king.

Beowulf embodies men's desire to fight evil, dragons, to overcome monsters. He survives his struggle with Grendel, the monster who hates mankind and kills people for pleasure, the symbol

of physical evil. He also overcomes moral evil, embodied by dragon's mother. Beowulf victory over her, the source of physical evil, is more difficult.

The dragon is the most terrifying evil, the last one – death. He is the ultimate evil man must face. Beowulf defeats the dragon but dies himself, to show that metaphysical evil can be opposed but very rarely overcome.

The poem is written in vers (about 3200 lines) but the sound patterns are also very important. Alliteration, repeating and playing on the same letter, is a very old device in English vers. In Old English poetry, alliteration was a continual and essential part of the metrical scheme until the late Middle Ages.

Assonance, sometimes called "vocalic rhyme" is the repetition of similar vowel sounds, usually close together.

The poem has a theme that is often found in Northern Sagas: fighting evil. Beowulf is in every point a hero, a symbol of man's eternal fight to overcome evil forces.