**Themes**

*Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.*

**The Importance of Establishing Identity**

As Beowulf is essentially a record of heroic deeds, the concept of identity—of which the two principal components are ancestral heritage and individual reputation—is clearly central to the poem. The opening passages introduce the reader to a world in which every male figure is known as his father’s son. Characters in the poem are unable to talk about their identity or even introduce themselves without referring to family lineage. This concern with family history is so prominent because of the poem’s emphasis on kinship bonds. Characters take pride in ancestors who have acted valiantly, and they attempt to live up to the same standards as those ancestors.

While heritage may provide models for behavior and help to establish identity—as with the line of Danish kings discussed early on—a good reputation is the key to solidifying and augmenting one’s identity. For example, Shield Sheafson, the legendary originator of the Danish royal line, was orphaned; because he was in a sense fatherless, valiant deeds were the only means by which he could construct an identity for himself. While Beowulf’s pagan warrior culture seems not to have a concept of the afterlife, it sees fame as a way of ensuring that an individual’s memory will continue on after death—an understandable preoccupation in a world where death seems always to be knocking at the door.

**Tensions Between the Heroic Code and Other Value Systems**

Much of Beowulf is devoted to articulating and illustrating the Germanic heroic code, which values strength, courage, and loyalty in warriors; hospitality, generosity, and political skill in kings; ceremoniousness in women; and good reputation in all people. Traditional and much respected, this code is vital to warrior societies as a means of understanding their relationships to the world and the menaces lurking beyond their boundaries. All of the characters’ moral judgments stem from the code’s mandates. Thus individual actions can be seen only as either conforming to or violating the code.

The poem highlights the code’s points of tension by recounting situations that expose its internal contradictions in values. The poem contains several stories that concern divided loyalties, situations for which the code offers no practical guidance about how to act. For example, the poet relates that the Danish Hildeburh marries the Frisian king. When, in the war between the Danes and the Frisians, both her Danish brother and her Frisian son are killed, Hildeburh is left doubly grieved. The code is also often in tension with the values of medieval Christianity. While the code maintains that honor is gained during life through deeds, Christianity asserts that glory lies in the afterlife. Similarly, while the warrior culture dictates that it is always better to retaliate than to mourn, Christian doctrine advocates a peaceful, forgiving attitude toward one’s enemies. Throughout the poem, the poet strains to accommodate these two sets of values. Though he is Christian, he cannot (and does not seem to want to) deny the fundamental pagan values of the story.

**The Difference Between a Good Warrior and a Good King**

Over the course of the poem, Beowulf matures from a valiant combatant into a wise leader. His transition demonstrates that a differing set of values accompanies each of his two roles. The difference between these two sets of values manifests itself early on in the outlooks of Beowulf and King Hrothgar. Whereas the youthful Beowulf, having nothing to lose, desires personal glory, the aged Hrothgar, having much to lose, seeks protection for his people. Though these two outlooks are somewhat oppositional, each character acts as society dictates he should given his particular role in society.

While the values of the warrior become clear through Beowulf’s example throughout the poem, only in the poem’s more didactic moments are the responsibilities of a king to his people discussed. The heroic code requires that a king reward the loyal service of his warriors with gifts and praise. It also holds that he must provide them with protection and the sanctuary of a lavish mead-hall. Hrothgar’s speeches, in particular, emphasize the value of creating stability in a precarious and chaotic world. He also speaks at length about the king’s role in diplomacy, both with his own warriors and with other tribes.

Beowulf’s own tenure as king elaborates on many of the same points. His transition from warrior to king, and, in particular, his final battle with the dragon, rehash the dichotomy between the duties of a heroic warrior and those of a heroic king. In the eyes of several of the Geats, Beowulf’s bold encounter with the dragon is morally ambiguous because it dooms them to a kingless state in which they remain vulnerable to attack by their enemies. Yet Beowulf also demonstrates the sort of restraint proper to kings when, earlier in his life, he refrains from usurping Hygelac’s throne, choosing instead to uphold the line of succession by supporting the appointment of Hygelac’s son. But since all of these pagan kings were great warriors in their youth, the tension between these two important roles seems inevitable and ultimately irreconcilable.

**Motifs**

*Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.*

**Monsters**

In Christian medieval culture, *monster*was the word that referred to birth defects, which were always understood as an ominous sign from God—a sign of transgression or of bad things to come. In keeping with this idea, the monsters that Beowulf must fight in this Old English poem shape the poem’s plot and seem to represent an inhuman or alien presence in society that must be exorcised for the society’s safety. They are all outsiders, existing beyond the boundaries of human realms. Grendel’s and his mother’s encroachment upon human society—they wreak havoc in Heorot—forces Beowulf to kill the two beasts for order to be restored.

To many readers, the three monsters that Beowulf slays all seem to have a symbolic or allegorical meaning. For instance, since Grendel is descended from the biblical figure Cain, who slew his own brother, Grendel often has been understood to represent the evil in Scandinavian society of marauding and killing others. A traditional figure of medieval folklore and a common Christian symbol of sin, the dragon may represent an external malice that must be conquered to prove a hero’s goodness. Because Beowulf’s encounter with the dragon ends in mutual destruction, the dragon may also be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the inevitable encounter with death itself.

**The Oral Tradition**

Intimately connected to the theme of the importance of establishing one’s identity is the oral tradition, which preserves the lessons and lineages of the past, and helps to spread reputations. Indeed, in a culture that has little interaction with writing, only the spoken word can allow individuals to learn about others and make their own stories known. This emphasis on oral communication explains the prevalence of bards’ tales (such as the Heorot scop’s relating of the Finnsburg episode) and warriors’ boastings (such as Beowulf’s telling of the Breca story). From a broader perspective, Beowulf itself contributes to the tradition of oral celebration of cultural heroes. Like Homer’s *Iliad*and *Odyssey,*Beowulf was passed on orally over many generations before being written down.

**The Mead-Hall**

The poem contains two examples of mead-halls: Hrothgar’s great hall of Heorot, in Denmark, and Hygelac’s hall in Geatland. Both function as important cultural institutions that provide light and warmth, food and drink, and singing and revelry. Historically, the mead-hall represented a safe haven for warriors returning from battle, a small zone of refuge within a dangerous and precarious external world that continuously offered the threat of attack by neighboring peoples. The mead-hall was also a place of community, where traditions were preserved, loyalty was rewarded, and, perhaps most important, stories were told and reputations were spread.

**Symbols**

*Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts. Because ritual behaviors and tokens of loyalty are so central to pagan Germanic culture, most of the objects mentioned in Beowulf have symbolic status not just for the readers but also for the characters in the poem.*

**The Golden Torque**

The collar or necklace that Wealhtheow gives Beowulf is a symbol of the bond of loyalty between her people and Beowulf—and, by extension, the Geats. Its status as a symbolic object is renewed when we learn that Hygelac died in battle wearing it, furthering the ideas of kinship and continuity.

**The Banquet**

The great banquet at Heorot after the defeat of Grendel represents the restoration of order and harmony to the Danish people. The preparation involves the rebuilding of the damaged mead-hall, which, in conjunction with the banquet itself, symbolizes the rebirth of the community. The speeches and giving of gifts, essential components of this society’s interactions, contribute as well to the sense of wholeness renewed.