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THE ORIGINS

(700 BC-AD 900)

THE MIDDLE AGES

(1066-1485)



Beowulf (7/8th centuries)

The epic hero



▲ *Beowulf* (2007) directed by R. Zemeckis.

Beowulf is the king of Geats's nephew and the protagonist in *Beowulf*, the first great epic poem in English. Beowulf can be seen as the first epic hero in English literature, endowed with the qualities that are typical of this kind of hero.

Not only does he show great courage, loyalty, generosity and strength, but he is also a person who puts the good of his people before his own needs. Therefore he is able to save and change the destiny of a whole nation or group of people with his brave deeds (which are called 'wonders' in the text you are going to read).

We must not forget that *Beowulf* is set in the period when the Anglo-Saxons had conquered Britain, a time when people were constantly at war, and the greatest qualities a man could possess were courage and decision.

Beowulf shows no fear of death and constantly risks his life fighting terrible monsters to protect the Danes and the Geats to ensure their survival.

Being mortal, the epic hero Beowulf is destined to die at the end of the poem but not before battling with a dragon. By now he is, of course, much older but he is endowed with an almost supernatural strength which does not leave him until the dragon has been successfully eliminated and peace is restored once again to his kingdom.

Beowulf

TEXT 1

This extract, from the prelude, introduces Beowulf.

The Wielder of Wonder¹

To him [the King] an heir was afterwards born,

A son in halls, whom heaven sent

To favor folks, feeling their woe²

That erst³ they had lacked an earl⁴ for leader

So long a while; the Lord endowed⁵ him,

The Wielder of Wonder, with world's renown.

Famed was this Beowulf; far flew the boast of him⁶,

Son of Scyld (Beowulf) in the Scandian⁷ lands.

[...] By lauded deeds⁸

Shall an earl have honor in every clan.

Forth he fared⁹ at the fated moment,

Sturdy Scyld¹⁰ to the shelter¹¹ of God.

1. **the wielder of wonder:** colui che opera miracoli.
2. **woe:** dolore, sofferenza.
3. **erst:** prima.
4. **they...earl:** mancava loro un conte (nobile).
5. **endowed:** lo dotò.
6. **far...him:** la sua fama si sparse lontano.
7. **Scandian:** scandinavi.
8. **lauded deeds:** imprese lodate.
9. **forth he fared:** andò lontano.
10. **sturdy scyld:** scudo robusto.
11. **shelter:** rifugio.



OVER TO YOU

1 Find and underline in the text the following typical heroic features.

1. He is predestined to carry out great deeds.
2. He is famous.
3. He is a leader.
4. He is capable of great acts.
5. He is a figure of high social status.

Now write the line number near each of them.

TEXT 2

In this extract Beowulf himself speaks about his deeds.

Me thus¹ often the evil monsters

Thronging threatened². With thrust of my sword³,
The darling, I dealt them due return⁴!

Nowise had they bliss from their booty then⁵

To devour their victim, vengeful⁶ creatures,
seated to banquet at bottom of sea;

but at break of day, by my brand sore hurt⁷,

on the edge⁸ of ocean up they lay,

put to sleep by the sword. And since, by them

on the fathomless sea-ways sailor-folk⁹

are never molested.

1. **thus:** così.
2. **thronging threatened:** mi minacciavano raggruppandosi intorno a me.
3. **with...sword:** con l'impeto della mia spada.
4. **I...return:** gli ho dato ciò che meritavano.
5. **Nowise...then:** in nessun modo hanno potuto approfittare del loro bottino.
6. **vengeful:** vendicative.
7. **by...hurt:** feriti dalla mia spada.
8. **edge:** bordo.
9. **fathomless sea-ways sailor-folk:** i marinai che viaggiano per il mare profondo.



OVER TO YOU

1 Complete the following summary using the words below.

evil kill • hero • sea • human • beings

Beowulf fights monsters which live in the (1) and eat (2). They represent the (3) of the world, which contrasts with the good represented by the (4). He manages to (5) them.

2 What makes Beowulf's speech that of a hero? Choose one or more of the following.

- He is arrogant.
- He is proud and boasts.
- He is bloodthirsty. He is brave.

3 Beowulf doesn't fight for his own personal glory but to defend his people. Can you find any examples of this in the text?

Thomas Malory

Le Morte Darthur (1485)

The wandering hero Launcelot

The English version of the Arthurian legend comes quite late with Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* from the late 15th century. Inspired by Chrétien de Troye's poem, Malory gives more importance to the knights of the Round Table and maintains both the theme of the Holy Grail and the love triangle between Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot. But by breaking away from the French poem Malory creates a new tale which describes the fall of Arthur's court.

In Malory's version Launcelot is an important character and can be defined as one of the most outstanding heroes of this romance.

Like Beowulf he is brave and invincible when fighting, like Beowulf he faces and defeats terrible monsters, like Beowulf he helps people, usually beautiful, noble women in danger, as you will read in the passage below.

But here the similarities end, as Launcelot also possesses characteristics that Beowulf does not have. He is hypocritical, fighting bravely for his king while at the same time betraying him by having an affair with the king's wife Guinevere. This puts him in conflict with the king, and also with another knight, Sir Gawain.

Furthermore, while Beowulf is a king with a permanent abode, Lancelot can be defined as a 'questioning or wandering hero'. Like other knights of the Round Table, he wanders about the land seeking the Holy Grail. He has a completely different spiritual dimension which comes from the influence of Christianity.

What hasn't changed since Anglo-Saxon times is the representation of evil. In Malory's text, just as in previous centuries, the enemy is represented by a dragon, which continues to symbolise the forces of evil, against which the hero has to fight.

Le Morte Darthur

TEXT 1

Sir Lancelot comes to a town 'full of people'.

All the people, men and women, cried at one: 'Welcome, Sir Lancelot du Lake, the flower of all knighthood¹, for by thee all we shall be holpen² out of danger.'

'What mean ye' said Sir Launcelot, 'that ye cry so upon me?'

'Ah, fair knight', said they all, 'here is within the tower a dolorous lady that hath been here in pains many winters and days, for ever she boileth in scalding water⁴; and but late', said all the people, 'Sir Gawain⁵ was here and he might not help her, and so left her in pain.'

'May I', said Sir Launcelot, 'leave her in pain as well as Gawain did.'

'Nay⁶', said the people, 'we know will that it is Sir Launcelot that shall deliver her''.

'Well' said Launcelot, 'then shew me what I shall do.'

Then they brought Sir Launcelot into the tower.

- all knighthood:** tutti i cavalieri.
- by...holpen:** tutti saranno aiutati (holpen: helped) by thee (you).
- that...me:** che (ye: you) gridi così contro di me?
- for...water:** perché è tormentata costantemente.
- Sir Gawain:** a knight of the Round Table.
- nay:** no.
- shall deliver her:** la salverà.

TEXT 2

Here Launcelot meets the lady who takes him into a chapel where he has to fight against a dragon.

So when they came there and gave thankings to God all the people, both learned and lewd⁸, gave thankings unto God and him, and said: 'Sir knight, since ye have delivered this lady, ye shall deliver us from a serpent there is here in a tomb.'

Then Sir Launcelot took his shield⁹ and said: 'Bring me thither¹⁰, and what I may do unto the pleasure of God and you I will do.' [...]

So then Sir Launcelot lift up the tomb, and there came out an horrible and a fiendly¹¹ dragon, spitting fire out of his mouth. Then Sir Launcelot drew his sword and fought with the dragon long, and at the last with great pain Sir Launcelot slew¹² that dragon.

- both learned and lewd:** sia colti che ignoranti.
- shield:** scudo.
- thither:** in quel posto.
- fiendly:** cattivo.
- slew:** uccise.



◀ A medieval knight fights a dragon to save his lady.

OVER TO YOU

1 What is a typical situation that a hero may find himself in? Complete the following.

He must help a noble by fighting a

2 Which of these 'heroic' qualities does Launcelot show in this passage?

- | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> humility | <input type="checkbox"/> faith in God | <input type="checkbox"/> pride | <input type="checkbox"/> loyalty |
| <input type="checkbox"/> courage | <input type="checkbox"/> chivalry | <input type="checkbox"/> strength | <input type="checkbox"/> piety |

3 Lancelot is quite a famous hero. What do you know about him?

4 Can you name any other heroes that possess these qualities?

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. an innocence and purity of purpose | 3. great intuition |
| 2. a strong sense of honour | 4. defence of the weak, etc. |

5 Imagine you want to 'create' a hero. Would you endow him with the traditional characteristics, the ones that have been quoted here, or with other features? Would you make him a 'perfect' hero, or give him some negative characteristics as well to make him more human?