

Themes, Motifs & Symbols

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 hero's fame, it sees fame as a way of ensuring that an individual's memory will continue on after death. This is an understandable preoccupation in a world where death seems always to be knocking on one's 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

what kind of being Grendel actually is—he is described as a demon, fiend, spirit, and stranger (in the Middle Ages, the word *monster* was used to describe birth defects; Grendel is later referred to as “an unnatural birth” [1353]). In any case, he seems to be a horrific beast, a large and distorted creature of vaguely human shape. His supernatural monstrosity makes Beowulf’s conquest of him all the more impressive.

Many readers believe that each of the three monsters in the book has a symbolic or allegorical significance. The narrator seems to present Grendel as a representation of evil in the abstract. He can also, however, be interpreted as an evil force lurking within the Danish society itself. The theological implications of his descent from Cain support such an interpretation. The Old Testament relates how God punished Cain for his murder of his brother Abel by cursing him to wander. Grendel, too, is cursed and wanders, “haunting the marches, marauding round the heath / and the desolate fens” (103–104). The “marches” are the borders, and in Old English Grendel is called a “*mearc-stapa*,” or border-stepper (103). The poet’s culture finds the borders of society threatening, and Grendel is presented as an outsider who has penetrated the boundaries. Since Hrothgar, like Grendel, established himself by conquering his neighbors, some critics see the marauding Grendel as the embodiment of the society’s own sin come back to haunt it. The nature of his abode—a swampy, dark, womblike landscape—supports this interpretation. He seems to be an incarnation of evil created by the human conscience. Furthermore, it is important to note that Grendel and Beowulf forego weapons to engage in ferocious hand-to-hand combat. This clash is not a mere battle in a culture dominated by warfare but rather a more personal, primal conflict between equal, opposite forces.

The *Beowulf* poet’s description of the scop, or bard, who sings Beowulf’s praises after the defeat of Grendel shows that he clearly values good workmanship, both in objects and in poetry. The narrator emphasizes the craftsmanship of the bard’s “well-fashioned lines,” just as he tends to dwell on the skill with which weapons and armor are forged. The bard’s stories of Sigemund and Heremod reflect on the greatness of Beowulf by comparison and contrast, respectively. The Sigemund episode relates a familiar story from Norse mythology, which foreshadows Beowulf’s fight with the dragon in the third part of the epic. The king Heremod, who fails to fulfill the responsibilities of a lord to his people, represents Beowulf’s opposite. By comparing Beowulf to a king, the scop anticipates Beowulf’s destiny for the throne in Geatland.

Heremod also serves as a foil for Hrothgar. Hrothgar’s speech on the morning after the combat attributes Beowulf’s victory to God without detracting from Beowulf’s personal glory. He feels himself to be bound in a “new connection” with Beowulf in this great act of service. His appreciation and dedication to Beowulf are manifest in his promises that Beowulf will have the honors and rewards that are the appropriate recompenses for faithful service to a powerful lord. Unlike Heremod, Hrothgar represents the dutiful ruler in every way. Consequently, the Danes’ loyalty to Hrothgar doesn’t abate even when they are celebrating and revering Beowulf: “there was no laying of blame on their lord, / the noble Hrothgar; he was a good king” (861–862).

Lines 1008–1250

Summary

Hrothgar hosts a great banquet in honor of Beowulf. He bestows upon him weapons, armor, treasure, and eight of his finest horses. He then presents Beowulf’s men with rewards and compensates the Geats with gold for the Geatish warrior that Grendel killed.

After the gifts have been distributed, the king’s scop comes forward to sing the saga of Finn, which begins with the Danes losing a bloody battle to Finn, the king of the Frisians, a neighbor tribe to the Danes. The Danish leader, Hnaef, is killed in the combat. Recognizing their defeat, the Danes strike a truce with the Frisians and agree to live with them separately but under common rule and equal treatment. Hildeburh, a Danish princess who is married to Finn, is doubly grieved by the outcome of the battle: she orders that the corpses of her brother, the Danish leader Hnaef, and her son, a Frisian warrior, be burned on the same bier. The Danes, homesick and bitter, pass a long winter with the Frisians. When spring comes, they rise against their enemies. Finn is then defeated and slain, and his widow, Hildeburh, is returned to Denmark.

When the scop finishes recounting the saga, Wealhtheow enters, wearing a gold crown, and praises her children, Hrethric and Hrothmund. She says that when Hrothgar dies, she is certain that the children will be treated well by their older cousin, Hrothulf, until they come of age. She expresses her hope that Beowulf too


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the coast, where they grant a reward to the watchman who has guarded their ship. They then sail back to Geatland and return to the hall of Hygelac.

Analysis

Many readers have pondered the significance of Grendel and his mother—whether they are part of the same evil force or represent two separate ideas. Earlier, after Grendel's defeat, there are frequent suggestions, even amid the celebration, that the evil that Grendel represents has not been stamped out. These hints may lead the reader to suspect that Grendel himself is still alive—though Beowulf rips his arm off, we never actually see Grendel die, and Beowulf regrets letting him get away. That the remaining threat proves instead to be the monster's mother suggests, perhaps, that although an instance of evil has been eliminated with Grendel, the evil must still be eradicated at its source—Grendel's mother might be thought of as representing a more foundational or primordial evil than Grendel himself. On the other hand, there is less theological language attached to her malice than to Grendel's. She seems to be more unambiguously animalistic and less a symbol of pure evil than he is. For example, her attack on Heorot is even appropriate and honorable by the standards of the warrior culture, as it marks an attempt to avenge her son's death.

This second encounter prompts a change of scene in the poem, drawing the hero out of the safety of the mead-hall and into the dark, alien, suggestive world of his adversaries. The advantage of fighting on familiar terrain within the boundaries of human society—an advantage that Beowulf enjoys in his encounter against Grendel—is now lost. This time, Beowulf must struggle against a resistant natural environment in addition to a ferocious monster. The reader already has been prepared for Beowulf's superhuman swimming abilities by the earlier story of the contest with Breca. However, the mere, or lake, in which Grendel's mother lives is no ordinary body of water. It teems with blood and gore, as well as with unsavory creatures and decorations. It is an elemental world of water, fire, and blood, and one with an extremely unholy flavor to it.

Imagery of darkness and light is important in this underwater world. The darkness of the lair symbolizes evil, and it leads to Beowulf's general disorientation in this unfamiliar environment. The first glimmer of light that he sees signifies his arrival at the very heart and heart of this den of terror. Once he defeats Grendel's mother, her lair is illuminated more thoroughly: "A light appeared and the place brightened / the way the sky does when heaven's canopy / is shining clearly" (550-1, 572). Because light bears the implication of Christian holiness and salvation, with these words, the poet suggests that hell has been purged of its evil and sanctity restored. Additionally, it seems so that, at the time Beowulf gets back onto land, he has undergone a sort of rebirth, a transition from a brave but somewhat reckless warrior into a wise and steadfast leader. Indeed, the remainder of this section is dominated by elaborate formal oratory detailing the characteristics of successful participation in society. In particular, Beowulf receives earnest advice from Hrothgar, by now a father-figure, about how to comport himself both as a man and as a ruler.

Lines 1925–2210

Summary

Beowulf and his men return to the magnificent hall of King Hygelac and to Queen Hygd, who is beautiful and wise, though very young. The narrator tells the story of the legendary Queen Modthryth, who "perpetrated terrible wrongs" against her subjects, torturing and even killing many innocent people who she imagined were offending her. Modthryth's behavior improved, we are told, once she was married to the great king of the Angles, Offa.

Beowulf and his men approach the hall, where the Geats, who have heard that their hero has returned, are preparing for his arrival. Hygelac extends a formal greeting while Hygd pours mead for the warriors. Hygelac asks Beowulf how he fared in the land of Hrothgar, recalling that he had known that Beowulf's task would be a fearsome one and that he had advised Beowulf not to face such a dangerous foe.

Beowulf begins his tale by describing the courteous treatment that he received from Hrothgar and Wealhtheow. He then prophesies an unhappy outcome to the peace-weaving engagement of Freawaru, Hrothgar's daughter, to Ingeld the Heathobard. He predicts that the sight of the ancestral possessions of each worn by the kin of the other (the result of many years of warring and plundering) will cause memories of the deep and


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- **Narrator:** The person telling the story. The narrator may straightforwardly report what happens, convey the subjective opinions and perceptions of one or more characters, or provide commentary and opinion in his or her own voice.
- **Themes:** The main idea or message of the work—usually an abstract idea about people, society, or life in general. A work may have many themes, which may be in tension with one another.

Elements of Style

These are the *hows*—how the characters speak, how the story is constructed, and how language is used throughout the work.

- **Structure and organization:** How the parts of the work are assembled. Some novels are narrated in a linear, chronological fashion, while others skip around in time. Some plays follow a traditional three- or five-act structure, while others are a series of loosely connected scenes. Some authors deliberately leave gaps in their works, leaving readers to puzzle out the missing information. A work's structure and organization can tell you a lot about the kind of message it wants to convey.
- **Point of view:** The perspective from which a story is told. In *first-person point of view*, the narrator involves him or herself in the story. ("I went to the store"; "We watched in horror as the bird slammed into the window.") A first-person narrator is usually the protagonist of the work, but not always. In *third-person point of view*, the narrator does not participate in the story. A third-person narrator may closely follow a specific character, recounting that individual character's thoughts or experiences, or it may be what we call an *omniscient* narrator. Omniscient narrators see and know all; they can witness any event in any time or place and are privy to the inner thoughts and feelings of all characters. Remember that the narrator and the author are not the same thing!
- **Diction:** Word choice. Whether a character is silly, clinical language or flowery prose with lots of exclamation points can tell you a lot about his or her attitude and personality.
- **Syntax:** Word order and sentence construction. Syntax is a crucial part of establishing an author's narrative voice. Ernest Hemingway, for example, is known for writing in very short, straightforward sentences, while James Joyce characteristically wrote in long, incredibly complicated lines.
- **Tone:** The mood or feeling of the text. Diction and syntax often contribute to the tone of a work. A novel written in short, clipped sentences that use small, simple words might feel brusque, cold, or matter-of-fact.
- **Imagery:** Language that appeals to the senses, representing things that can be seen, smelled, heard, tasted, or touched.
- **Figurative language:** Language that is not meant to be interpreted literally. The most common types of figurative language are *metaphors* and *similes*, which compare two unlike things in order to suggest a similarity between them—for example, "All the world's a stage," or "The moon is like a ball of green cheese." (Metaphors say one thing *is* another thing; similes claim that one thing is *like* another thing.)

3. Construct a Thesis

When you've examined all the evidence you've collected and know how you want to answer the question, it's time to write your thesis statement. A *thesis* is a claim about a work of literature that needs to be supported by evidence and arguments. The thesis statement is the heart of the literary essay, and the bulk of your paper will be spent trying to prove this claim. A good thesis will be:

- **Arguable.** "*The Great Gatsby* describes New York society in the 1920s" isn't a thesis—it's a fact.

- **Provable through textual evidence.** “*Hamlet* is a confusing but ultimately very well-written play” is a weak thesis because it offers the writer’s personal opinion about the book. Yes, it’s arguable, but it’s not a claim that can be proved or supported with examples taken from the play itself.
- **Surprising.** “Both George and Lenny change a great deal in *Of Mice and Men*” is a weak thesis because it’s obvious. A really strong thesis will argue for a reading of the play that is not immediately apparent.
- **Specific.** “Dr. Frankenstein’s monster tells us a lot about the human condition” is *almost* a really great thesis statement, but it’s still too vague. What does the writer mean by “a lot”? *How* does the monster tell us so much about the human condition?

Good Thesis Statements

Question: In *Romeo and Juliet*, which is more powerful in shaping the lovers’ story: fate or foolishness?

Thesis: “Though Shakespeare defines Romeo and Juliet as ‘star-crossed lovers’ and images of stars and planets appear throughout the play, a closer examination of that celestial imagery reveals that the stars are merely witnesses to the characters’ foolish activities and not the causes themselves.”

Question: How does the bell jar function as a symbol in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*?

Thesis: “A bell jar is a bell-shaped glass that has three basic uses: to hold a specimen for observation, to contain gases, and to maintain a vacuum. The bell jar appears in each of these capacities in *The Bell Jar*, Plath’s semi-autobiographical novel, and each appearance marks a different stage in Esther’s mental breakdown.”

Question: Would Piggy in *The Lord of the Flies* make a good island leader if he were given the chance?

Thesis: “Though the intelligent, rational, and innovative Piggy has the mental characteristics of a good leader, he ultimately lacks the social skills necessary to be an effective one. Golding emphasizes this point by giving Piggy a foil in the charismatic Jack, whose magnetic personality allows him to capture and wield power effectively, if not always wisely.”

4. Develop and Organize Arguments

The reasons and examples that support your thesis will form the middle paragraphs of your essay. Since you can’t really write your thesis statement until you know how you’ll structure your argument, you’ll probably end up working on steps 3 and 4 at the same time.

There’s no single method of argumentation that will work in every context. One essay prompt might ask you to compare and contrast two characters, while another asks you to trace an image through a given work of literature. These questions require different kinds of answers and therefore different kinds of arguments. Below, we’ll discuss three common kinds of essay prompts and some strategies for constructing a solid, well-argued case.

Types of Literary Essays

- **Compare and contrast**

Compare and contrast the characters of Huck and Jim in THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN.

Chances are you’ve written this kind of essay before. In an academic literary context, you’ll organize your arguments the same way you would in any other class. You can either go *subject by subject* or *point by point*. In the former, you’ll discuss one character first and then the second. In the latter, you’ll choose several traits (attitude toward life, social status, images and metaphors associated with the character) and devote a paragraph to each. You may want to use a mix of these two approaches—for example, you may want to spend a paragraph a piece broadly sketching Huck’s and Jim’s personalities before transitioning into a paragraph or two that describes a few key points of comparison. This can be a highly effective strategy if you want to make a counterintuitive argument—that, despite seeming to be totally different, the two objects being compared are actually similar in a very important way (or vice versa). Remember that your essay should reveal something fresh or unexpected about the text, so think beyond the obvious parallels and differences.


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17. Where do Grendel and his mother live?
- A. In a palace
 - B. In a mead-hall
 - C. In a barrow
 - D. In a lake
18. What is a scop?
- A. A mead-hall
 - B. A poet
 - C. A god
 - D. A ship
19. Who guides Beowulf to the dragon's barrow?
- A. Wulfgar
 - B. The thief
 - C. The slave-girl
 - D. Hygd
20. Who gives Hygd three horses?
- A. Hygelac
 - B. Hrothgar
 - C. Beowulf
 - D. Finn
21. Which character is descended from Shield Sheafson?
- A. Beowulf
 - B. Wiglaf
 - C. Ecgtheow
 - D. Hrothgar
22. What is the name of Hrothgar's wife?
- A. Wealhtheow
 - B. Hygd
 - C. Modthryth
 - D. Grendel
23. How did the dragon's treasure get in the barrow?
- A. The dragon hauled it there with his teeth.
 - B. Hygelac had it buried there after he died.
 - C. The boat containing the body of Shield Sheafson landed there.
 - D. It was buried there by the last survivor of a forgotten race.
24. What is Hygelac wearing when he dies?
- A. His grandfather's armor
 - B. Wealhtheow's torque
 - C. An invisibility suit
 - D. A tutu


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25. From about when does the only existing *Beowulf* manuscript date?
- A. 700 A.D.
 - B. 1000 A.D.
 - C. 700 B.C.
 - D. 50 A.D.

ANSWER KEY

1: D; 2: B; 3: A; 4: C; 5: B; 6: D; 7: A; 8: C; 9: B; 10: D; 11: A; 12: C; 13: B; 14: D; 15: A; 16: C; 17: D; 18: B; 19: B; 20: C; 21: D; 22: A; 23: D; 24: B; 25: B

Suggestions for Further Reading

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