

Beowulf: Twenty-One Questions for Discussion

(ten shorter and eleven longer)

NOTE: There are no answers posted for these questions. You can find the answers to some questions by a careful reading of the poem, while you could easily write a book on others and still not reach any certain conclusions. The questions are meant to check your basic knowledge of the poem's story and characters, and to provoke discussion of some of its deeper implications and problems. I do not believe there should be a single answer to the longer questions; I hope readers will find it interesting to think about these questions and their many possibilities without looking for an easy "right" answer.

1. Who is Scyld? Where does he come from? Where does he go? What does he do? Why does the poem begin here, rather than with Hrothgar and Grendel?
2. What is Grendel's lineage? What do the characters in the poem know about Grendel? How is this different from what the audience knows?
3. Trace the history of the hall Heorot – why was it built, what happened within its walls, how and by whom was it destroyed?
4. Who is Unferth, and why is he so hostile to Beowulf? Why is he allowed to speak that way?
5. What do the poets within *Beowulf* sing about? To whom do they sing their songs? What is the

- purpose of their performances?
6. Why is the focus of the story on Beowulf as a hero rather than as a king? What is the difference?
 7. Where does the dragon come from? Why does he attack the Geats? Is the dragon a greater or lesser threat than Grendel? Why does Beowulf go to fight him?
 8. Who are the Swedes and Frisians? Why are we given so much detailed information about the history of their quarrels with the Geats?
 9. Trace the history of the Dragon's hoard from its first to its last burial. How is this treasure different from other treasures in the poem?
 10. When Beowulf dies, does he go to Heaven?
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11. What are some differences between the poet's world and the world of the characters in the poem? What are the continuities or similarities between these worlds? Is there irony in our vision of this past age? How does the poet create a distance between the characters and himself – and how does he express their own sense of a distant past?
 12. Is *Beowulf* an epic? What sort of social order produces “epic” poetry? What values does the poem promote, and how does it promote them? What sorts of conflicts with or resistances to the ideology of epic can be expressed? What sorts are found within the poem itself?
 13. Look at the religious references in the poem: what are the names for God? What biblical events are mentioned, and who mentions them? What specifically pagan practices (sacrifice, burial,

augury, etc.) are described? How do the characters see their relationship to God (or the gods)? Why would a Christian author write a poem about a pagan hero?

14. Does the heroic code expressed in *Beowulf* conflict with a Christian sensibility?
15. Try to construct a relative timeline (without specific dates) for the events narrated and alluded to in the poem. Include the reigns of the Danish kings (Heremod, Scyld, etc.), the Swedish-Geatish wars, the life and death of the hero Beowulf, the destruction of Heorot, and any other events which seem relevant to your understanding of the story. Which plots are told in a straightforward narrative, and which are not? Why are there so many digressions and allusions? Discuss the relation between the plot (what happens) and the story (what order things are told in) in *Beowulf*.
16. What is the status of gold and gift-giving in the poem? Who gives gifts, who receives them, and why? Are the modern concepts of wealth, payment, monetary worth and greed appropriate for the world of Beowulf?
17. The manuscript text of *Beowulf* is divided into forty-three numbered sections (plus an unnumbered prologue); most critics, however, view the structure of the poem as either two-part (Young Beowulf / Old Beowulf) or three-part (Grendel / Grendel's Mother / The Dragon). What grounds do critics have for these arguments? what are some of the ways the poem suggests its structure? what signals does the reader find to indicate endings and beginnings of sections and larger units?

18. Wealhtheow, Hygd, Hildeburh, Grendel's mother – what do the female characters in *Beowulf* do? How do they do it? do they offer alternatives perspectives on the heroic world (so seemingly centered around male action) of the poem?
19. Why are there so many stories-within-the-story in the poem? What is the relation between these so-called “digressions” and the main narrative in *Beowulf*?
20. This is a question about how abstract structures are made into narratives. Every culture makes distinctions between what is inside the social order and what is outside, between the human and the non-human (a category which can include animals, plants, natural processes, monsters and the miraculous). Cultures organize themselves to contain or exclude these “outside” things; social organization also works to control certain violent human tendencies inside the culture (anger, lust, fear, greed, etc.). How does the social world depicted in *Beowulf* do this? That is, what does it exclude, and why? What is its attitude towards the “outside” of culture? How does it control the forces that threaten social stability within the hall?
21. In between every story and its audience stands a narrator who tells the story; the narrator has certain attitudes, opinions, interests and objectives which direct the audience's understanding of the story. This is one of the most basic, and yet most complex, facts of literature. Some narrators are intrusive – think *Huckleberry Finn* – while others are discreet and practically invisible. Describe the relationship between the narrator and the story, and between the narrator and the audience, in *Beowulf*.