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**OLD, MEDIEVAL AND
RENAISSANCE LITERATURE**

*A PRACTICAL GUIDE WITH TESTS
(home and classroom workbook)*



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I. OLD POETRY

Beowulf

Suggested Essay Topics and Questions

1. What are the qualities of the epic hero? How is the heroic ideal represented in *Beowulf*, and how does it reinforce or conflict with other aspects of the society?
2. What Christian and pre-Christian (Germanic, Anglo-Saxon, or epic-heroic) elements can you identify? To what extent are God and Fate the same thing in the poem? To what extent are they in conflict? What about the representation of evil? What is the significance of Grendel belonging to the "race of Cain"? Is there a difference between the evil of Grendel and that of his Mother? How about the dragon at the end? Is Beowulf a savior figure? What motivates his heroism? To what extent is he altruistic, and in what might he appear egotistical?
3. What is the depiction of the relationship between thane and king? What does each owe the other? What is the significance of treasure in the poem? Note the emphasis on feasting, comradeship and song. Find examples of each. At the beginning of the poem, Beowulf is the thane of his Uncle, Hygelac; after killing Grendel, he is regarded as the foster "son" of Hrothgar. What is the importance of

kinship in Germanic society? What is a *wergild*? What is the significance of Wiglaf, the loyal but young and untested warrior in the last section of the poem?

4. What roles do women play in the poem? What seems to be their primary function? Note in particular the references to Wealtheow and to her daughter Freawaru. Is Grendel's mother a representative Germanic woman? Why or why not?

5. What is the effect of the last section, which takes place fifty years after the action of the first? What elements contribute to the unity of the poem? Consider, e.g., the two funerals (Shield's and Beowulf's) with which the poem begins and ends.

6. Does *Beowulf* seem to be more characteristic of *oral* or of *written* poetry?

7. What role does the mead-hall play in Anglo-Saxon warrior culture? What is the proper relationship between a lord and his warriors? What examples can you find throughout *Beowulf*?

8. What is the role of women in the heroic culture of *Beowulf*?

9. How does treasure function in *Beowulf*? How do the characters and the poet seem to feel about the element of gold, as it appears throughout the poem?

10. What role do the digressions play in *Beowulf*? What light do they shed on the main action?
11. Is Beowulf an ideal hero and king? Is there anything lacking in his character?
12. Would you say that the characters in *Beowulf* are as psychologically complex those in modern works of literature? Do they undergo any development as the poem progresses?

Quiz

1. Who is the father of Shield Sheafson?
 - a. Beowulf
 - b. Hrothgar
 - c. Grendel
 - d. Sheafson is an orphan
2. How does Hrothgar know of Beowulf?
 - a. Beowulf once proposed to his daughter
 - b. Hrothgar was friends with Beowulf's father
 - c. Beowulf had gained a widespread reputation after slaying a dragon
 - d. He read about him on the Internet
3. About how long is the dragon?
 - a. 50 feet
 - b. 20 feet
 - c. 100 feet
 - d. 200 feet

4. How long does Beowulf reign as king of the Geats?
 - a. 30 years
 - b. 40 years
 - c. 50 years
 - d. 60 years

5. What, according to Beowulf, is better than mourning a death?
 - a. Celebrating a birth
 - b. Avenging a death
 - c. Drinking one's sorrows away
 - d. Making peace with one's enemies

6. Who helps Beowulf against the dragon?
 - a. Wulfgar
 - b. Unferth
 - c. Hrothgar
 - d. Wiglaf

7. Who taunts Beowulf in Heorot?
 - a. Unferth
 - b. Hrothgar
 - c. Wiglaf
 - d. Wealhtheow

8. Who is Modthryth?
 - a. A Danish thane
 - b. King of the Swedes
 - c. A wicked queen of legend
 - d. A dragon

9. From whom is Grendel descended?
 - a. Satan
 - b. Cain
 - c. Judas
 - d. Ecgtheow

10. Who is queen of the Geats?
 - a. Wealhtheow
 - b. Modthryth
 - c. Unferth
 - d. Hygd

11. Whom does Grendel's mother abduct and decapitate?
 - a. Aeschere
 - b. Wulfgar
 - c. Hrothgar
 - d. Beowulf

12. How many Geats does Grendel kill?
 - a. Eleven
 - b. Eight
 - c. One
 - d. Four

13. What is Hrunting?
 - a. A mead-hall
 - b. A sword
 - c. A lake
 - d. A helmet

14. Where do the Geats place Beowulf's Barrow?
 - a. In Grendel's swamp

- b. In the dragon's lair
 - c. In the palace temple
 - d. On a cliff overlooking the sea
15. Who is Beowulf's father?
- a. Ecgtheow
 - b. Hrothgar
 - c. Wulfgar
 - d. Wealhtheow
16. What is wyrd?
- a. The Anglo-Saxon concept of "word," as in word of honor
 - b. The Anglo-Saxon term for "worm," as in dragon
 - c. The Anglo-Saxon concept of "fate"
 - d. The Anglo-Saxon word that expresses the culture's valuing of oratorical skill
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 coat

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.

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