

Essay 2: Literary Analysis

Requirements: 3-5 pages, typed-, double-spaced, Times New Roman, MLA format throughout.

Must include:

- Introduction with well-developed thesis;
- Well-developed body paragraphs that include quotes from the text and secondary sources, properly cited;
- Conclusion that demonstrates why your analysis is important;
- Works Cited page.

Assignment Directions: Develop an essay that responds thoroughly and thoughtfully to one of the prompts below or one you develop on your own (I must approve it). *You must incorporate 2 secondary sources into your analysis.*

1. What are some of the historical perspectives on *Beowulf*? In other words, how “accurate” is this representation of the the end of the Anglo-Saxon period? How have archeological finds supported the historical context (hint: Sutton Hoo)?
2. There are a multitude of vantage points or “lenses” in literary criticism through which you might look at *Beowulf*: feminists, eco-critical, post-modern, etc.). What do we learn about the poem when read in this way? What changes and what stays the same? Is it even fair to impose contemporary critical perspectives on classic works? Why or why not?
3. 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 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 the poem 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?
4. What kind of heroism is present in *Beowulf*? What defines an epic hero as opposed to a tragic hero? What traits does an epic hero possess? What are the strengths and limitations of Old English epic heroism and heroes? What examples do you have from the text that illustrate heroism?
5. What observations do you have about the mixture of Germanic story elements (e.g., blood, guts, gore, proud boasting, supernatural feats of heroism, an impersonal “fate” or “wyrd” that seems to control things) and its Christian elements? When is God mentioned, and why? To what extent is the Germanic heroism in conflict with what you may call the tale’s Christian heroism? What would Christian heroism consist of? To what extent is the tale successful, or not, with this mixture of Christian/Germanic elements?
6. Beowulf’s character--How does it change through the course of the story? Or does it change? What evidence from the book do you have that suggest an evolution of Beowulf’s character? How do you compare and contrast the Beowulf of the earlier years, with the Beowulf of the later years, when he is an old king himself? How do other characters evaluate his behavior, especially Wiglaf? What does Beowulf’s character say about good vs. bad kingship?
7. What role(s) do women play in an Old-English epic, and why? What prominent female characters stand out in this story? Why do the female characters have the traits they do, when do they appear

in the story, and what you can generalize about Old-English society about these references to female characters and their actions?

8. To what end are gifts given in this tale? What kinds of gifts are given, and why? What histories are attached to these gifts, and why is this history important? What political and social functions might giftgiving serve?
9. Why are swords given names in this story? Why give a personal name to an inanimate object? Why is this tradition important from the hero's perspective? From the audience's perspective? What happens to swords in this tale? What might this signify from a psychological or perspective?
10. The following is an example of a narrative "prolapse," an occurrence wherein the narrator decides to project his story into the future: "the hall stood tall, high and wide-gabled: it would wait for the fierce flames of vengeful fire; the time was not yet at hand for sword-hate between son-in-law and father-in-law to awaken after murderous rage." There are many other examples of this kind of narrative technique. What is the effect and/or purpose of such prolapses? Why does the storyteller choose to "spill the beans" instead of staying in the "historical present" of his story? What kind of mood do such prolapses create, when you process the story?
11. "At times," the poet says, "a scop [poet; pronounced "shope"] sang, clear-voiced in Heorot. There was joy of brave men, *no little company* of Danes and Weather-Geats This is an example of ironic understatement or "litotes" (pronounced "lye-toe-tees"), a common poetic and stylistic device in this poem. Check out other examples of litotes. What function do the litotes serve? Why say something using ironic understatement rather than saying what you really mean? As in the question above, what mood or ambience does the understatement create? What does the use of litotes tell you about the culture of the people that the poem celebrates?
12. This poem is full of words of wisdom, also called "sententia" or "gnomic phrases." See, for an example: "It is better for a man to avenge his friend than much mourn." What do many of these words of wisdom pertain to? What are the messages of these sententia? How do they relate to the story generally?
13. What does the speaker on the cliff near the end of the story have to say about feuds, feuding, and the future? In what ways are feuds (and the *wergild* paid when someone is killed) both a good and a bad system of justice?
14. 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?
15. What is *comitatus* and how is it illustrated throughout the text? What is important to the warriors in *Beowulf*? How does that change from the first battle to the last and what does the change signal about changes in society at the time?
16. Who/what is "good" in *Beowulf* and who/what is "evil"? How do you define such things (and would they have been defined at the time) and are these characteristics fixed or do they change throughout the poem?