Notes on Beowulf

1. Names. You don’t have to remember all the names here. But you must know the following names along with their importance and exploits: Beowulf, Hrothgar, Heorot, Grendel, Grendel’s mother, Brecca, Wiglaf, Unferth, Aeschere, Hygelac, Heardred, and Hygd.

2. Religious Context. A glance at the brief history of Britain shows a continual shift between Christian and pagan elements (pagan meaning “one who is not a Christian, Moslem, or Jew”). Originally pagan, of course, Britain shifted from predominantly pagan influences to predominantly Christian influences six times in a thousand years. As a result, we should not be surprised to see a strange mixture of Christian and pagan elements in this story. Though written by a probably Christian poet anywhere from the eighth century to the eleventh century, Beowulf concerns events happening in the sixth century in pagan lands. Clearly, then, this is a pagan story at heart, yet it has also just as clearly been affected by Christian influences at times.

Remember, too, that almost no one was educated, so Beowulf was transmitted orally for at least two hundred years before it was written down. Naturally, the tale took on the personality of the story teller (scop), so pagan story tellers stressed the pagan parts whereas Christian storytellers added and emphasized the Christian parts of the story.

“Didacticism” is the act of teaching or moralizing in a literary work. The narrator turns momentarily from telling the story to “preaching” a moral to his reader or listener. We see this many times in Beowulf (lines 183-188 for example). Be alert and mark these didactic passages every time you see them. Notice, for example, the Christian sentiments of Hrothgar in his sermon after Grendel’s mother’s death (lines 1758-1784). This sermon (“Do not give way to pride”) comes between Beowulf’s pagan comments about the importance of revenge (lines 1384-1389, for example) on one side, and the material rewards that Beowulf proudly accepts on the other side.

Another part of this religious/pagan conflict is in the use of fate (wyrd, pronounced “veert”). Throughout the story, notice that in every instance but one, wyrd is responsible for everything bad that happens to Beowulf; whenever he speaks of dying in battle, he attributes such death to wyrd. On the other hand, the good occurrences are usually referred to as “God’s will”; whenever Beowulf or Hrothgar speak of victories, they attribute them to God. Implicitly, this is didactic, for the Christian poet casts his own God in the best light possible, whereas the pagan concept of wyrd is made to seem like the villain.

3. Epic story. Review the characteristics of an epic. Take note how often Beowulf satisfies the epic criteria. For example, note the lack of real dialogue. Instead, the characters all speak in speeches to each other. Or the exaggerated heroic deeds of Beowulf.

In addition, look at the formal tone of the poem. Everything is told with great dignity and elegant language. Protocol is very important. In fact, the greetings, the farewells, and the banquets all have a very rigid formality about them. Obviously in the time of Beowulf, class differences were very important, and kings and their warriors were held in higher esteem than the regular folk. So their conduct was much grander. Think of Washington, DC, protocol today, and you’ll realize how similar the behavior in Beowulf is. For example, look at the greeting of the coast watcher who first greets Beowulf and his men, and then how he guides them to Heorot, but he cannot show them in; that duty falls to another person who “announces” their presence to Hrothgar. Only then may Beowulf and his men enter the hall, and then only when they leave their weapons behind. Or, look at Beowulf’s leave-taking of Hrothgar. He pledges alliance, offers to host a visit from Hrothgar’s son; Hrothgar praises Beowulf’s wisdom and predicts that he’ll be a great king, and ends by pledging his own alliance and friendship to Beowulf.

Finally, remember the oral tradition which developed Beowulf. That tradition also helps to account for some of the exaggeration of the story. As each scop would tell the story, over hundreds of years it got more and more elaborate and exaggerated. It was a story heard many times by the listeners, who no doubt marveled at these exploits as the story got bigger and bigger.

4. Law of primogeniture. At the historical time of Beowulf, the law of primogeniture (the king is succeeded by his first-born son) was not yet established. In fact the king himself could choose anyone to succeed him. For example, Hrothgar wishes at times that Beowulf were his own son, since his own sons
are apparently deficient in some way. Later, after Hygelac dies, his widow Hygd offers Beowulf the throne because she is afraid her son Heardred is still too young to safeguard the kingdom; Beowulf declines, but pledges that he will protect Heardred. Only after Heardred is killed by the Swedes does Beowulf agree to take the throne.

5. Theme of honor. One theme that stands out in Beowulf is that of honor and faith in one's lord. The primary symbols are in the characters of Unferth and Wiglaf. Unferth is a respected and loyal advisor to Hrothgar. Yet at the first banquet, he is the one who accuses Beowulf of lying about his exploits. Later, Unferth offers Beowulf his own sword, causing him to lose face because he is not courageous enough to face Grendel's mother himself. He symbolizes those serious character flaws that we humans are so often susceptible to.

Wiglaf, on the other hand, is steadfast and honorable. In the episode of Grendel's mother, Hrothgar and his men despair of Beowulf's survival, so they return to Heorot. Only Beowulf's men remain behind, thus showing some positive characteristics in human beings. Later, in the Dragon episode, Beowulf's own men desert him, but Wiglaf does not. Indeed, Wiglaf remains and helps Beowulf slay the dragon, thus proving his loyalty and courage. Wiglaf, then, represents those positive qualities that human beings are capable of when they are at their best. As his reward, Wiglaf inherits the throne from Beowulf.

6. Theme of service. The idea of "service" is very important to the story. Only in the last hundred years or so has the idea of "service" taken on the negative connotation of "servant" or even worse, "slave." But for the large part of the British heritage, "service" was a noble and honorable concept. A warrior who serves his king does so by choice, and his service is total, even unto death; in return, a good king provides for his warriors. The bond between king and warrior is a strong one because of this concept of service. It is a concept that we will see repeated elsewhere in this course, most notably in the character of the Earl of Kent and the Duke of Albany's servants in King Lear.