Beowulf is difficult for students to read on their own. Since the story of Beowulf was, long before an 8th century monk transcribed it into print, orally shared around the campfire by the scops who kept alive the culture’s history and legends, I divide the class into small groups. Each member takes a turn reading aloud the epic poem. Students are allowed to choose how much each member reads at a given time.

I divide the poem into three sections, easily divisible by the three fights which are the foci of the story. At the end of each section, I ask groups to pool their comprehension of the plot—“What’s going on?” and to consider some thematic implications. In this way, students actually read the poem, (rather than frustrating them by assigning it for homework), and the more heads that can construct a plot, the better all students seem to understand it.

Once the students read the poem, there is a wealth of themes to explore and a host of activities to engage higher level thinking. Some approaches involve:

1) Tolkien, a Beowulf scholar, used the poem as a basis for The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. Telling students this before reading the poem sets up a schemata. Ask them to look for similarities.
2) *Beowulf* as allegory

3) What goes into the making of a good role playing video game (see material, human and superhuman forces below)

4) Examine the poem as a treatise in heroism. Sapientia and Fortitudo.

5) Use *Beowulf* as a literary work that helps us examine what we mean by “style” in fiction.

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**Tolkien’s view:**

One theory is that the Beowulf poet was a Christian monk who, perhaps, wrote the poem down at a time when Christianity was making inroads into his previously pagan civilization. That is why, throughout the poem, there are elements of Christianity (*Beowulf* as a Christ figure, sacrificing himself for his people, and elements of paganism such as the dragon and fate as a determining factor. Along this line of thinking we have Grendel descended from Cain, the twelve disciples who follow Beowulf into the second fight but, like Christ’s disciples, abandon him at the critical moment. On the pagan side of the ledger, we have the concept of endoedoeg, (final day), the notion that fate is the overhanging cloud above us all. We die because it is our day to die.

Quick thoughts:
- The theme of Christianity is tinged with the despair of paganism: "that man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die."
- The Beowulf poet is concerned with the romantic past--heathen, noble and hopeless.
- The "wages of heroism is death." Tolkien
- In the final conflict Beowulf possesses what he does not possess fighting Grendel and grendel’s mother - wisdom—
- fame is fleeting --Beowulf is acutely aware of his mortality, and by extension his insignificance.
- The poem, according to Tolkien, is not a narrative--it is a balance of youth and age—first achievement and final death. The poem does not begin with young Beowulf and narrate his entire life. The fifty years he is king is barely discussed at all. The poem is a contrast between young Beowulf, physically strong and full of fortitude, and old Beowulf, physically weakened but relying more on sapientia.
- Tolkien contends that the poem is not an epic - -it is a heroic elegiac poem. The purpose of its historical allusions, which other critics say is the real meat of the work, is to give a sense of perspective of antiquity, "with a greater and yet darker antiquity behind...Great heroes should show themselves capable of dealing also with the ordinary things of life.' This is why there is brief mention of Beowulf's accomplishment as king.
- Tolkien disagrees with the disappointment other scholars have found in Beowulf. They seek history and find discrepancies: they expect narrative and find contrast, a lack of orderly time sequence. Tolkien thinks we should view the poem as a work of art - -not as history or epic. It was designed to extol heroism.

Beowulf and Allegory

Beowulf and Christian Allegory: An Interpretation of Unferth Morton W. Bloomfield

Mr. Maltese

True allegory is the personification of an abstract quality.
Beowulf is a Christian allegory. Nineteenth century romantic and nationalistic scholarship (particularly German) over-emphasized the pagan aspects of Beowulf.

Bloomfield contends that the Beowulf poet, a Christian, made Unferth (his name means mar-peace) symbolize discord (Unferth who murdered his brother, eventually seized the throne according to Scandinavian sources). Hence Wealhtheow's fears.

Unferth accuses Beowulf of foolishness in a swimming match with Breca years before—therefore, Beowulf cannot defeat Grendel. Beowulf accuses Unferth of drunkenness, reminds the assembly that Unferth failed to kill Grendel and that Unferth murdered his brother. Later Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's queen, reveals her fears about her children's ambition.

Unferth makes his final appearance when he presents Beowulf with his special sword, Hrunting, as a sign of reconciliation and submission—Unferth recognizes a superior being in Beowulf. Unferth, pagan Disco•dia, submits to the new religion sweeping the poet's country. Unferth is the opponent and the foil of the hero; he enhances his might; he is proof of his moderating faith and glory.

The pagan word “wyrd” from which we get the word “weird” means fate.

I refer to the Song of Roland (capacity for hyperbole); exaggeration in storytelling was the norm….sort of like modern day generals overestimating how many of the enemy their armies killed.

The attitude which prevailed in the middle ages was that this life did not matter. Since people rarely lived past 35, why spend a great deal of energy on success in this life, when we should all be focusing on preparing for eternity? This helps explain the dark ages and the relative lack of human progress. Who cares about spending a great deal of time building a better mouse trap when there was praying to be done? A person with arthritis was considered to be wise, because it takes a number of years to have arthritic knuckles—like the age of 40!
The Lord of the Rings and the elements of a role playing game.

*Beowulf* is comprised of 3 fights. There are three kinds of forces both in the poem and in most role playing games. In *Beowulf*, those forces are subdivided into Christian forces and pagan forces. Superhuman forces are exactly what they sound like—in the poem, they are God, evil, and fate. In games, the superhuman force is fate or luck or the roll of the dice. Human forces are, in the poem, Beowulf and his men. In gaming, it is the human player. Material forces are the things used by the human force or the goals of the human force: ships, horses, weapons, treasure.

With those forces in mind, consider the forces in Beowulf.

**Fight**

**Superhuman Forces**

**Human Forces**

**Material Forces**

**Comment**

Grendel

God, evil, wyrd
Approaches to Teaching Beowulf

Written by Administrator
Saturday, 11 December 2010 21:04 -

Beowulf alone

None—Beowulf fights for honor and uses his bare hands.

Beowulf trusts in God/fate and represents good in the fight against evil.

Grendel's mother

Grendel's mother, less God

Beowulf and fellow thanes but Beowulf fights alone.

Hrothgar promises Beowulf treasure to kill Grendel's mother and Beowulf uses a sword and dagger.

Beowulf fights for money and uses weapons. God is less apparent in this fight.

Dragon

Dragon

Beowulf is originally accompanied by 12 followers, but they abandon him save one.
Approaches to Teaching Beowulf

Written by Administrator
Saturday, 11 December 2010 21:04 -

Beowulf fights to keep treasure and protect his people. He wants the treasure made into a mound so

Virtually no God in this fight, and Beowulf is fighting to defend a nation of “Goblet stealers.”

One theme can be extracted by examining how the forces change throughout the three fights. Beowulf originally trusts in God, uses no material forces (Fortitudo), and fights for glory. In the second fight, there are fewer superhuman forces, more material forces, and more human forces. In the third fight, Beowulf relies more on wisdom (Sapientia), uses more material forces, fewer superhuman forces, and needs a followed to help him slay the dragon.

Notice also that there is more empathy for the monsters as the fights progress. Grendel’s motivation for attacking Hrothgar’s men is pure evil. In the second fight we understand Grendel’s mother’s avenging her son’s death. In the third fight, the dragon is simply doing his job, protecting the treasure, when one of Beowulf’s people steals a goblet from him.

Thoughts:

“Man should not trust in things of this world” for they (like Beowulf’s sword) will fail him.

All men die. The wages of heroism are death. Men should trust in God rather than in things, because the trust Beowulf places in weapons rather than in God fails him.

Ask students to choose a role playing game and to examine the superhuman, human, and material forces in them.

Fortitudo and Sapientia
Sapientia and Fortitudo as the Controlling Theme of Beowulf R.F. Kaske

Sapientia—wise

Fortitudo—brave; physical might and courage

Sapientia- -practical' cleverness, skill in words and works, knowledge of the past, ability to predict accurately, prudence, understanding, ability to choose and direct one's conduct rightly.

Beowulf acknowledges the power of God and Wyrd - -words as the means of judging sapientia and deeds are the means of judging fortitudo.

Two great sources of spiritual ruin are avarice and pride.

Grendel is a perversion of fortitudo, freed from the restraints of sapientia, directed by malitia (eagerness to commit sin).

Grendel's mother represents the ability of defeated violence to spawn further violence.

Dragon "represents the greatest of internal evils, the perversion of the mind and  malitia..”  The dragon is closer to allegory than any other figure in the poem.
Approaches to Teaching Beowulf

Written by Administrator
Saturday, 11 December 2010 21:04 -

Violence is a perversion of fortitudo

Malitia is perversion of sapientia

External violence - -internal Malitia - -two great poles of evil.

Killing the dragon has slain the growing evil among Beowulf's people - -goblet stealer default of Beowulf's followers in battle.

"In both Germanic and Christian terms the fact of death, of final physical defeat, is inevitable and relatively unimportant - -what is of desperate importance is having fought the good fight."

The dragon does not kill Beowulf - -Beowulf died fighting the dragon. He

He dies because he has reached his endogoe—his final day.

"above the imperfection, the mutability, and in any case the final impermanence of human sapientia and fortitudo - -and heightening its poignancy - -there towers the Sapientia andFortitudo of God, Perfect, unchanging, everlasting. In that contrast lies, at its deepest and most inclusive, the tragedy of Beowulf."

Beowulf may be a hero, but God has the most fortitudo and sapientia.

Ask students to examine legendary heroes. Achilles had great fortitude but little sapientia (wisdom). Odysseus was considered the greatest Greek hero because he had both.
Heroes who returned to their people and related their great deeds are not bragging. They are announcing by word (sapientia—courage of the word) their deeds.

Style of Beowulf

Examine the style of *Beowulf*, especially the kennings. Ask them to create skits in the style of Beowulf. Hopefully I will have posted my PowerPoint on style and *Beowulf* on the website.