



Beowulf

Lesson for Beowulf

with Dr. Junius Johnson

Outline:

In this lectures on Beowulf, Dr. Junius Johnson presents themes and interesting passages that a classical educator may like to bring into their classroom.

- Read or play a recording of the beginning of the poem in Anglo-Saxon so the students have the ability to imagine something of the world of the poem. Ask: “What are your impressions of Vikings?”
- Hyphenated words in the English text (whale-road) is a kenning, which takes the two nouns and combine them to form a new composite word picture.
- What made a good king is to be a terror to your enemies such that they are forced to pay tribute to you.
- A major theme is the futility of the blood feud.
 - The blood feud can only be stopped by divine intervention.
 - Blood feud will destroy your people. You can make connections to this theme in other parts of your curriculum.
 - The song of Creation reminds Grendel of the destruction of his own house. He begins a blood feud.
- Beowulf decides to come and help Hrothgar out. Eloquence and song (harp playing) are part of what is demanded of a Viking. Beowulf is a full and complete hero.
- “What makes for a good king?” This is a good question to set before your students.
- Hrothgar is King of Denmark, and this makes a nice connection to Hamlet, another King of Denmark (which may also be in your syllabus).
- What a king should do is stay at home and defend his homeland, riding in the front of battle.
- The biggest tension is that this is a society that has been introduced Christianity, but is insufficiently converted yet. It is attempt by the author to meet the culture where they are and educate them out into Christian ways. The true prince is the shield of his people.
- A man who starts well can go bad and be in trouble. He lets down his guard. He forgets he is just a mortal man. Do not give way to pride.
- Beowulf is a great warrior and nobody wants to battle with him, but he doesn’t do it by smashing everybody else, but by offering a good defense.
 - Beowulf is the source of The Hobbit.
 - Beowulf starts to think of himself and of his own glory first in his encounter with the dragon. Beowulf wants to fight the dragon. He kills the dragon, but then he dies. This is like Norse mythology.



- Beowulf's people were led off into exile and slaughter when their shield was gone.
- The good king is the shield of his people. There is no room for the blood feud. There is no room for selfish heroism.
- Beowulf is a dire warning about what happens when you lose sight of what really matters.