

Beowulf Themes

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Here we take a deeper look at the major themes of the Old English epic "*Beowulf*".

Heroic Code

The heroic code is central to *Beowulf*, emphasizing the expected behaviors of warriors and rulers. Warriors were bound to be courageous, loyal, and willing to sacrifice their lives for their ruler or cause. In return, rulers were expected to reward their warriors generously and govern wisely. This code governs the actions of Beowulf, who embodies courage and loyalty by risking his life to protect others and serving his leaders faithfully. Similarly, Hrothgar's generosity in rewarding Beowulf highlights his adherence to the code.

Good versus Evil

The struggle between good and evil is a key theme in the poem. Beowulf and Hrothgar represent good. They act selflessly and with honor, while Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon symbolize evil, driven by hatred, greed, and destruction. Beowulf's battles against these monsters showcase his superhuman strength and courage as he fights not for personal gain but for the safety of others. These conflicts have a near-biblical quality, portraying the triumph of good over evil.

Loyalty

Loyalty is one of the most important values in *Beowulf*. Loyalty is demonstrated repeatedly through the actions of the characters. Beowulf remains loyal to King Hrothgar, partly because of the bond between Hrothgar and Beowulf's father. He also shows loyalty to King Hygelac by sharing his rewards and serving faithfully until Hygelac's death. Even when offered the throne, Beowulf honors the rightful heir, Heardred, and serves him loyally until Heardred's death, after which Beowulf takes the throne. This loyalty reflects the deep bonds between warriors and their leaders.

Death and Defeat

The inevitability of death is a powerful theme in the poem. While heroes like Beowulf can achieve greatness and leave behind legacies, death eventually claims everyone. The poem portrays death as an inescapable force, even for the strongest warriors. Beowulf himself accepts this reality. He meets his death in battle against the dragon. His belief in avenging loved ones rather than mourning them reflects the heroic mindset of the time. Despite his death, Beowulf's legacy is secured through a hero's funeral and the respect of his people.

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