

## It's Time to Debate!

### Topic: How much do the Christian additions matter in *Beowulf*?

Below, you will find three different critical opinions on this topic. Everyone will be assigned one of the three readings to defend. You will have time to work with your group on gathering textual evidence and structuring your argument. Then you will debate with the other groups. Everyone should be prepared to participate.

#### J.R.R. Tolkien – *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*

- Central Argument:
  - Beowulf is essentially a pre-Christian poem. It was written down, after centuries of survival as an oral story, by a Christian who was looking back on a pre-Christian past with admiration.
- Main Points:
  - The poem is about the values of a pre-Christian culture. A good leader is one who destroys outside threats and demands respect from everyone.
  - Anglo-Saxons lived to fight and fought to live. In such a society, thanes would capture treasure and bring it to their king, who would then divide it among his thanes. This is why a good king is called a ring-giver.
  - Immortality in this society means earning a reputation that survives. Scops tell tales of Beowulf, and that is a good sign for him.
  - The monsters Beowulf fights – a troll, a sea-witch, and a dragon – come from Germanic mythology. They are associated with cold and darkness, and reflect the really hostile places that these people had lived in for centuries.
  - The third monster, the dragon, is a negation of the values of a good king. A good king is a treasure-giver, but the dragon is a treasure-hoarder.
  - The dragon kills Beowulf, which replicates the pattern in all northern mythology. In the last great battle, men lose to the monster and are destroyed. In the entire arc of northern mythology, there are no ultimate victories. There are only glorious and inglorious losses. Beowulf is a hero because he knows this and fights anyway. The point of the ending is not that Beowulf is killed by the dragon, but that he takes the dragon with him. He holds off the ultimate destruction of his people for one more day.

#### John McGalliard and Lee Patterson – *Norton Anthology of World Literature* Editors

- Central Argument:
  - Beowulf is a reflection of the futility of tribal warfare.
- Main Points:

- Paradoxically, in a world like this the only way to put off violence is with more violence.
- The monsters are not symbols of a hostile universe, but of a social sickness that pervades the culture. You can kill an individual monster, but the violence will go on.
- In a world in which fighting and revenge are the only values you have, everything is futile. The hero understands this futility.

### **John Niles – Beowulf: The Poem and Its Traditions**

- Central Argument:
  - The Christian elements are central to the poem
- Main Points:
  - Both the poet and characters inside the poem refer to judgment day, heaven, and hell
  - Grendel is associated with Cain. Beowulf's fight with Grendel becomes a good vs. evil battle.
  - When Hrothgar praises Beowulf, he thanks God for sending him.
  - The poem's focus is on the importance of community. The majority of the poem describes feasts and other social gatherings, not the battles. The three fights make up about 500 of the 3200-line poem.
  - The ceremonial opening shows how community gets established.
    - Readers meet a good king who gets a fitting burial (this section was cut from our excerpt).
  - The ending shows how a community falls apart.
    - The Geats will be defeated because they failed to support Beowulf in his final battle. Wiglaf points this out in a stinging rebuke at the end of the poem.