

BEOWULF

DEAR EDUCATOR:

On November 16, the epic story *Beowulf* comes to life in theaters everywhere. With its cutting-edge special effects and star-powered cast, the film presents an excellent opportunity for you to introduce your students to a literary classic. This study guide, brought to you by Young Minds Inspired (YMI), in partnership with Paramount Pictures and Shangri-La Entertainment, is designed to help your students explore the background, characters, and themes of this timeless story now told onscreen.

Set in the legendary Age of Heroes, *Beowulf* is the tale of a warrior who sails to Northern Denmark to save King Hrothgar and his people from the darkness brought upon them by the ferocious demon Grendel. But when Beowulf slays Grendel, it provokes the vengeful fury of the beast's mother, and as the struggle between man and beast continues, a web of loyalties and betrayals is revealed.

This free educational program for high school and college students can help you draw students into an epic that has been passed down for centuries through oral storytelling, written verse, and now film. Please share these materials with other teachers, and return the enclosed reply card. Although the materials are copyrighted, you may make copies for educational purposes. We welcome your comments and suggestions.

Sincerely,
Dr. Dominic Kinsley
Editor in Chief

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

- To familiarize students with the main characters and story of *Beowulf*.
- To explore the concept of heroism in *Beowulf* and modern society.
- To analyze the characteristics and role of monsters in *Beowulf* and popular culture.

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

This program aligns with National Standards in English for grades 9-12 (for details see www.ymiteacher.com/beowulfstandards.pdf).

HOW TO USE THIS PROGRAM

Display the wall poster to introduce the program and generate student interest. Review, photocopy, and distribute a set of the reproducible activity sheets to each student.

ACTIVITY ONE

EPIC LIVES

This activity focuses on the characters in the film *Beowulf*, helping students understand their relationships and motivations. As a class, read and discuss the character profiles on the activity sheet, then have students research one character using online or library resources to create a more in-depth profile. After viewing *Beowulf* in the theater, have students compare their profiles to how the character was portrayed in the film.

College Extension: Like many epics, *Beowulf* is rooted in family dynamics, relationships, and rivalries. Have students explore this side of the story by comparing *Beowulf* to some of its cousins in the epic tradition: *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, *Morte D'Arthur*, etc. Continue this class discussion after seeing *Beowulf* in the theater.

ACTIVITY TWO

THE AGE OF HEROES

This activity examines the theme of heroism in *Beowulf*. As a class, review the chart outlining the concept of heroism in Beowulf's time, then have students fill in the second half of the chart with their own definition of what it means to be a hero. Compare and explore the basis of students' ideas about heroism in a class discussion. Continue this discussion after students have seen *Beowulf* in the theater.

College Extension: In the ancient world of *Beowulf*, heroism was defined primarily by feats of war. Have students explore this violent strand in the character of epic heroes like Beowulf and consider how the portrayal of such heroes helped societies integrate this dangerous current into civilized life. After seeing *Beowulf* in the theater, have students reflect on how this 21st century portrayal of a warrior hero serves the same purpose for today's society.

ACTIVITY THREE

MONSTERS: A CASE STUDY

This activity takes *Beowulf* as a starting place for students to explore society's view of monsters throughout history. As a class, have students brainstorm a list of monsters, real and fictional. Using the analysis of Grendel on the activity sheet as a model, have students conduct a case study about a monster of their choice. Then have students present their case studies and rate the monsters on a scale of 1-10 (1 being the least horrific and 10 being the most terrifying).

College Extension: While usually terrifying, monsters can also be comical, especially when deployed in the service of satire, like Gargantua and the giants in *Gulliver's Travels*. Working from this perspective, challenge students to examine the comic potential in monsters like Grendel and experiment with this subtext of the epic tradition by creating their own mock-heroic parodies.

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BEOWULF

EPIC LIVES

The new film *Beowulf*, coming to theaters this November, retells an ancient tale of loyalty, horror, heroism, and betrayal. Based on the oldest epic poem in English, written more than one thousand years ago, the film brings to life the legend of Beowulf, a celebrated Scandinavian warrior and king. True to the epic tradition, *Beowulf* is full of larger-than-life characters and takes a number of unexpected twists and turns.

Prepare to enter the world of *Beowulf* by tracing the relationships among the characters who live this story. Use the profiles below to create a web-chart showing Beowulf's connection to the other characters in his story. Then select one character and create an in-depth portrait of his or her chief traits, motives, and loyalties, using online or library resources. After you have seen *Beowulf* in the theater, compare your portrait with the character's portrayal in the film.



BEOWULF

Ray Winstone

Son of Edgethrow, a renowned warrior from Geatland, Beowulf journeys to Northern Denmark to defeat the infamous monster Grendel. Beowulf's reputation for bravery and fierce fighting precedes him, and King Hrothgar embraces him as the son he never had.



HROTHGAR

Anthony Hopkins

King of Denmark, Hrothgar is an elderly, boastful, and lecherous man (not considered faults in his day) who loves his people and shares his wealth among them. Yet he carries the burden of a childless marriage—and a secret curse.



WEALTHOW

Robin Wright Penn

Hrothgar's Queen, she and Beowulf are drawn to one another when he arrives, but her passion cools as events unfold. She is a woman betrayed by the men in her life.



WIGLAF

Brendan Gleeson

Wiglaf, Beowulf's faithful countryman, adviser, and closest friend, bears witness to Beowulf's victories and refuses to see any of his flaws.



UNFERTH

John Malkovich

As Hrothgar's royal adviser, Unferth disguises his distaste for the King. When Beowulf arrives, Unferth regards him first with jealousy, then gratitude, followed by suspicion.



GRENDL

Crispin Glover

Half man, half monster, Grendel is a fearsome but pitiful creature with the supernatural strength to destroy the bravest of men.



GRENDL'S MOTHER

Angelina Jolie

Nameless, this seductive creature has the power to lure men, tempting them with promises of wealth, power, and fame.



THE DRAGON

Greg Ellis

Portrayed as a delicate, golden young man whose anger and hatred transform him into a terrifying, fire-wielding monster, the dragon proves Beowulf's most implacable foe.

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Paramount Pictures

BEOWULF

THE AGE OF HEROES

The new film *Beowulf*, coming to theaters in November, takes place during The Age of Heroes, a time of ferocious monsters and fierce warriors. Heroes toasted victory in the mead hall, named for the drink that fueled their courage, and pledged loyalty to their king, believing that death in battle was the only honorable way to die. Life has changed over the centuries that separate us from this heroic age, yet heroes remain as important as ever in the modern world.



How does our concept of heroism compare to the heroic ideal embodied in Beowulf? The chart below provides an outline of Beowulf's heroic characteristics. Complete the chart by describing the parallel characteristics of a modern hero, real or fictitious. Then share your view of the modern hero in a class discussion. How does our view of what makes a hero differ from that of the heroic age? Which traits of a hero have remained consistent across the centuries? Continue this discussion after you have seen *Beowulf* in the theater, focusing on how the film makes its ancient hero still seem heroic in our eyes.

	HEROISM IN THE AGE OF HEROES	HEROISM IN OUR TIMES
Hero	Beowulf	
Physical Attributes	Strong and agile	
Intellect	Clever	
Responsibilities	Beholden to king and fellow countrymen; required to share spoils of battle; expected to return favors and honor oaths (blood debt)	
Motivation	Recognition and reward; loyalty to king and countrymen	
Personal Relationships	Primarily companions in battle	
Ethics	Honor oaths	
Fears and Disappointments	A dishonorable death, lack of an heir	
Recognition	Immortality through song and story, wealth, women	
Other Characteristics	Young, male	

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MONSTERS: A CASE STUDY

Since time immemorial, monsters have captivated and horrified humankind.

The new film *Beowulf*, coming to theaters this November, tells of a monster who terrified an Anglo-Saxon kingdom in the 8th century. Has society's view of monsters changed all that much over the last 1,200 years?

As a class, brainstorm a list of all the monsters you know of, real and fictional, who have rampaged through the ages—the Cyclops who threatened Ulysses, the dragons who scorched knights in medieval times, the science fiction monsters we imagine today. Then select one monster to study in depth, using online resources, and record your findings in the spaces provided. Use this case study of Grendel, the monster in *Beowulf*, as a model for your analysis. Then, after you have seen the film, compare this modern portrayal of an ancient monster to other monsters you know.



MONSTERS OVER THE AGES

Name	Grendel	
Origin	son of King Hrothgar and a succubus, a woman mostly human in appearance but with demonic characteristics	
Home	a dark cave littered with bleached bones and rotting carcasses with a black pool teeming with moray eels	
Appearance	large, hairless, misshapen body covered with scars, scabs, and open sores; eyes flecked with gold; exposed eardrum membranes; retractable claws; nearly impenetrable skin	
Special Powers	extraordinary strength, speed, and agility; ability to vault across great distances	
Weaknesses	loud noises, especially the sounds of celebration coming from Hrothgar's palace, cause him excruciating pain and drive him into a fury; not intelligent; emotionally sensitive	
Motivation	wants to stop the noise of Hrothgar's celebration; enjoys tormenting his victims	
Friends/Family	loving mother, "pet" moray eels	
Why Feared	dismembers and devours heroes in their sleep	
Fate	loses his arm in a clash with Beowulf and runs back to his cave to die	

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