**Beowulf**  
**Standards Focus: The Epic Poem and Epic Hero**

*Beowulf* exemplifies the epic poem and epic hero that is typically presented in this genre. While the poem stands as a key example of a medieval epic, the tradition of epic poetry began in ancient times and continues through modern literature.

The word epic derives from the ancient Greek *epos* meaning “word, story, poem”. An epic poem indicates a long narrative poem typically involving a great adventure by the main character. It also incorporates most, if not all, of the following characteristics:

- Begins *in medias res* - “in the middle of the action” - without providing much setting or background information, as in the ancient Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*.
- States a theme and invokes a muse at the beginning of the narrative.
- Vast setting in which the epic hero travels across a great distance, as seen in Homer’s *Odyssey* written between the 8th and 6th centuries BCE.
- The hero performs feats significant to his culture or nation, as seen in Longfellow’s *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855).
- Poet tells the story objectively, not from first person.
- Supernatural forces, such as gods or demons, show an interest in and sometimes intervene in the poem’s activities. This is especially seen in Homer’s *Iliad* (8th-6th c. BCE) in which Greek gods and goddesses intervene in the Trojan War.
- Includes a list or lists of warriors, armies, etc.
- Poet repeats key phrases throughout the poem.

Throughout an epic poem the main character, the epic hero, shoulders the burden of saving his country or civilization by performing a series of tasks. The hero usually holds a position of historical or legendary significance in his country and sometimes reappears in his culture’s legends, as in the case of King Arthur who is memorialized in Blackmore’s *Prince Arthur* (1695) and *King Arthur* (1697). In addition to facing trials while on his epic journey, the hero frequently begins his life by overcoming an obstacle or odd circumstance at his birth. To succeed in his journey, the hero must perform solo deeds requiring superhuman courage and frequently exemplifies traits and morals valued by his society. The epic hero is typically a male who is sometimes tempted by females who seek to interfere with his journey, as exemplified by Grendel’s mother in *Beowulf*. An exception to this would be Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1596) in which a queen, modeled on England’s Elizabeth I sends her knights throughout the country to perform good deeds in her name. At the conclusion of an epic poem, the hero usually completes his task and returns home as a hero and leader of his people.

While some epic poems can be attributed to specific authors, *Beowulf* is considered a folk epic since its authorship is unknown. From Old English/ Anglo-Saxon origins,
it was composed between the mid-seventh and end of the tenth centuries. While it is considered a foundational work of English poetry, the hero, Beowulf, travels from his home in Geatland to actually perform his deeds in the land of the Danes, present-day Denmark. Even though Beowulf is regularly read in English and British literature classes, it is predominantly read in translation due to the changes which have occurred between Anglo-Saxon and modern-day English. Only one original manuscript, which resides in the British Library, remains of the epic poem.

Comprehension Check: The Epic Poem and Epic Hero

Directions: After reading the article on The Epic Poem and Epic Hero, answer the following questions in complete sentences on a separate piece of paper.

1. List four epic poems, their authors, and when they were written.

2. Describe five characteristics of the epic hero.

3. Show how Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queene differs from typical epic poems.

4. Infer how epic poems contrast with traditional poetry.

5. Design the outline of an epic poem. Use either a historic character or someone from your culture (or another culture) as your hero. Include whose story it would tell, the setting, and the events of the poem. For an added challenge, write out your new epic poem and share it with your teacher.
**Beowulf**

**Historical Context: Anglo-Saxons, Norse Mythology, and Kennings**

The epic poem, *Beowulf*, stems from the Anglo-Saxon tradition, which was influenced by Norse mythology.

**The Anglo-Saxons**

The term “Anglo-Saxon” generally refers to the people who came to Britain from the regions surrounding the North Sea, including present-day Denmark and the northern coasts of Germany, Netherlands, and France. While these people intermittently invaded Britain in the early 1st century CE, they remained in the region after 449 CE. At this point, the Saxons from Saxony and the Angles from Denmark controlled Britain until the 11th century when it was invaded by the Normans. The term “Anglo-Saxon” was first officially used by Alfred the Great in the 890s when he declared himself King of the Anglo-Saxons to show that he ruled over all of the English people. In addition to the early English people, Anglo-Saxon also refers to the language spoken by these people.

**Norse Mythology**

Since the Anglo-Saxon people immigrated to Britain from the Norse regions, it logically follows that *Beowulf* would leave Britain to perform his tasks in Scandinavia. Norse mythology relates the legends of its tribes while memorializing the clans’ founders in myths. Many of these heroes actually resurface in several forms. The hero *Beowulf* also appears under the name Bödvar Bjarki.

Norse mythology encompasses nine worlds—the worlds of average human experience, elves, black elves, Norse gods, fire, giants, those who die from age or sickness, those who fight against the gods, and the netherworld. Each of these worlds is connected by Yggdrasil, a giant tree with Asgard at its top. In Norse mythology, Asgard plays a similar role to that of Mount Olympus in Greek mythology. According to Norse legends, Odin, the main God, resides in Valhalla in Asgard which can also be reached by a rainbow bridge guarded by Heimdall, a god who can see and hear for 1000 miles. As good usually balances evil in mythology, Nidhogg, a ferocious serpent or dragon, chews at the world tree’s roots and shieldmaidens act as warrior heroines who try to impede each hero’s journey.

**Kennings**

Replete in the Norse which influenced the *Beowulf* poet and in the Anglo-Saxon language in which he wrote, kennings present a particular challenge to the modern-day English reader and translator. Strongly associated with the Old Norse, Icelandic, and Anglo-Saxon languages, kennings are compressed metaphors found in poetry. They appear as hyphenated, compound words that employ figurative language in place of one-word concrete nouns. When discussing his translation of the kennings of the original *Beowulf* poet, Seamus Heaney remarks,
“The appositional nature of the Old English syntax, for example, is somewhat slighted here, as is the *Beowulf* poet’s resourcefulness with synonyms and (to a lesser extent) his genius for compound-making, kennings, and all sorts of variation. Usually – as at line 1209, where I render *yow ful* as “frothing wave-vat,” and line 1523, where *beado-lēoma* becomes “battle-torch” – I try to match the poet’s analogy-seeking habit at its most original; and I use all the common coinages for the lord of the nation, variously referred to as “ring-giver,” “treasure-giver,” “his people’s shield” or “shepherd” or “helmet.”

Throughout *Beowulf*, the reader can see the influence of Anglo-Saxon and Norse literature and language.

**Comprehension Check: Anglo-Saxons, Norse Mythology, and Kennings**

**Directions:** After reading the article about Anglo-Saxons, Norse Mythology, and Kennings answer the following questions using complete sentences on a separate piece of paper.

1. Tell how the Anglo-Saxon people came to Britain.

2. Describe one reason that the *Beowulf* poet has his hero travel from Britain to Scandinavia.

3. Show two similarities between Norse and ancient Greek mythology.

4. Analyze why kennings make Anglo-Saxon difficult to read and translate.

5. Work with a partner to compose two to three English-language kennings to describe a battle, as well as two to three kennings to describe a feeling such as love.