

ACTIVITY: *Beowulf* in our contemporary society: heroes and masculinity, villains and the 'Other'

This activity consists of two tasks to be submitted to Aula Virtual and to be carried out individually or by a group of three students maximum.

Task 1: Once you have read all the instructions in this activity, compile a bibliography of 20 items related to the topic you have chosen by consulting the MLA International Bibliography from our library's catalogue] (20 minutes)

Submission: three days, onto Task "Beowulf bibliography". File name: "Surname1 Surname2 Surname3 - Beowulf Bibliography"

Task 2: Answer one of the following questions (max. one page): Submission: ten days.

2.a: How does the poem appeal to notions of heroism and masculine identity in our culture? How does the poem resonate with contemporary anxieties about a hero (do we still need a hero)?

2.b: Does the treatment of the antagonists Grendel and Grendel's mother in *Beowulf* support or contest contemporary situations in which the Other is demonized? Does the representation of the 'Others' in audiovisual adaptations of *Beowulf* contribute to discourses of demonization of the Other in current events?

A few tips: Avoid generalizations and easy comparison of general appreciations by paying attention to details, especially linguistic or stylistic details. Confirm and support your ideas with evidence from the text itself.

Introduction:

- This activity tries to make *Beowulf* relevant to you in your own culture and invites you to consider the poems' treatment of several topics and issues that have resonance in contemporary situations.

- One of the premises for this activity is that literary works are cultural constructs that participate in the circulation of ideas in a society since they represent in one way or another the social beliefs of specific groups regarding their identities and interests and governing the group's attitude and behaviour towards an issue or area of life. In the representation of these ideologies, literary works as a whole or characters or actions in a work may support or challenge (or both) certain systems of social beliefs.
- Western notions of manhood prioritize ideals of respectability, courage, self-reliance, individual autonomy, physical strength, active and risk-taking attitudes; and configure men in the roles of the self-made man, the breadwinner, the adventurer, the lonely hunter and also the rebel. These values are embodied in many contemporary fictions (films, novels, ads) with an idealized action hero, while others represent a more problematic view.
- The concept of the Other refers to that being that is different or alien to the dominant identity in a community (social group, tribe, nation, state). The Other is usually marginalized, and sometimes perceived as a threat. In this situation, the Other is misrepresented by the dominant group in order to defend its privileged position. This misrepresentation often uses images of the Other as a 'demon' in order to construct a simplistic opposition between 'us' as 'good' and 'them' as 'evil'. This conceptual framework seeks to pass as natural, normal, virtuous and superior the attitudes, motivations and actions of the dominant group and hide the contradictions and flaws of its interests and policies.

2.a Steps and Guiding Questions:

– How is Beowulf constructed as a hero?

Take note of how he is described, of his own words and actions, his motivations and concerns.

-- Pay attention to lines 433-440, 1490-91, 1501-71, 2428-2433,

-- Beowulf's speech at 2510. Considering that he is a king, is his determination to fight the dragon justified?

Read the following abstract of the article by Douglas Holt and Craig Thompson, "Man-of-Action heroes: How the American Ideology of Manhood Structures Men's Consumption" *HBS Marketing Research Paper* 03-04 (2003)

The compensatory consumption thesis states that men who experience anxieties in living up to American ideals of manhood in their everyday lives as workers and husbands use consumption as a means to escape these pressures. Masculine consumption, in this view, is a form of rebellion against society's expectations. This thesis of compensatory rebellious consumption has become conventional wisdom in the men's studies literature as well as in popular culture. We question the basic premises of the thesis by asking: What masculine ideals do men strive for? And how do they use consumption to forge identifications with these ideals? First, we use textual analysis and a synthesis of historical studies to develop a discourse model of what we call American Manhood - the ideology of manhood in the United States. We demonstrate that rebellion is not

an escape from ideology, but, rather, an essential component. Respectability and rebellion are dialectically entwined cultural models that together form the foundations of manhood in America. The pinnacle of American manhood is the man-of-action hero who deftly combines the strengths of respectability and rebellion. Then, using field interviews, we show that men creatively appropriate all three aspects of this manhood ideology in their consumption. Rather than daily respectability and weekend rebellions, men create themselves as men-of-action characters in ways that pervade their lives as consumers and workers. The contributions of our analysis are three-fold. We develop an alternative framework that directly challenges the compensatory consumption thesis. Second, we advance prior studies addressing consumers' idiographic tailoring of cultural meanings by demonstrating how these personalizing processes are socially structured. Third, we further understanding of the role of drama in consumption by showing how dramatic consumption is organized by ideology and self-orchestrated by consumers.

How do you think *Beowulf* as read or adapted into film or videogames fits in this theory? What 21st-century works of fiction (literary, audiovisual) reflect similar views, ideologies as in *Beowulf*?

2.b Steps and Guiding Questions:

– Starting from the assumption that Grendel and Grendel's are the 'Others' in the fictional universe of *Beowulf*, how are these characters are presented in the poem?

Take note of the language used in descriptions (physical appearance) and narration of actions. Consider who makes the description and for whom. Consider the characters' motivations.

-- For Grendel: pay attention to lines 86-114, 702-727, 750-61

-- For Grendel's mother: pay attention to lines 1255-78, 1279-95, 1379, her fight with Beowulf 1383-1430, 2118-20;

In 1259, Grendel's mother is referred to as "ides": Search in the electronic text other uses of "ides" ("woman")

If you have time, compare the modern translation you have used with another modern translation (links available in Medieval Literature Web Page).

– Are Grendel and Grendel's mother demonized? And if so, explain how.

– How are these characters presented in the following audiovisuals?

Animated Epics: Beowulf (BBC, S4C et al., 1998) (26:41)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKjcoFZmKuA&t=231s>

[Grendel appears in 1:20- 1:50 ; 2:18 - 3:56 ; fight 9:30- 10:30]

How different these visualizations are from your own imagined Grendel?

[Grendel's Mother appears in 11:45 - 12:30 ; in the lair 14:20 - 16:00]

Clash of the Gods: Beowulf (History Channel, 2009): (45:01)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i1PxBY8GQ6c>

[Grendel in 00:40-1:50 ; 4:06-5:43 ; 8:15- 9:33 ; 11:26 - 12:05 ; 13:05- 13:30]

[Grendel's mother in 19:50 - 21:56 , 24:00- ; 25:30 - 27:07]

- Think of contemporary situations in which the Other is demonized, and compare them with *Beowulf*

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