

Beowulf Notes

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28 August 2015

1 About Beowulf

1.1 What is an Epic?

An epic is a long narrative poem focusing on a hero. Generally there is a flaw in the hero. Traditional, or primary epics, are the ones originally told and kept orally. Literary epics, by contrast, are written originally.

Interestingly enough, there is no true epic from the United States. This, however, is the viewpoint of purists. Many say we don't need an epic, since the cultures moving in had their own epics.

Since U.S. culture is different from European culture, however, there are a couple of works debatably classifiable as the American Epic:

- Huck Finn - very American literature, and while Huck is not superhuman, he is definitely American and reflects the time.
- The Leather Stocking Tales - About the colonists and their exploits. Quintessentially American as a result of its themes of colonization.
- Leaves of Grass - is a poem, with the nebulous "I" as the hero.

1.2 Notable Epics

- The Iliad
- The Odessey
- Paradise Lost
- The Epic of Gilgamesh
- Beowulf

1.3 Background on Beowulf

The hero Beowulf represents Anglo-Saxon ideals, as many epics focus on a superhuman hero focusing on the cultural ideals of the time. There was a Beowulf, and some of the events portrayed did truly happen.

This doesn't mean the epic is true.

The events portrayed happened in late 400s to early 500s, notably the burial of kings. This is the earliest point Beowulf could have been written. The latest it could have been was 835 AD, and the first known copy of it written has been dated to 1000 AD.