

CC1 – Group A – Section 1

Unit A: Old English Heroic Poetry, Old English Prose and Chaucer

One question of 10 marks | One Question of 5 Marks | Objective | Tutorial | Internal

Shorten answer depending on marks | Prefer 10 Marks Questions from this Unit in end-Semester Exam

BEOWULF AS AN EPIC

Epic refers to a long narrative poem, composed in an elevated style, dealing with the trials and achievements of a great hero or heroes. Epic celebrates virtues of national, military, religious, cultural, political, or historical significance. An apparent supervision of the storyline of *Beowulf* reveals its association with these characteristics instead of its several digressive elements and imperfect narrative style. Beowulf, son of Egtheow, sails to Denmark with a band of warriors and rids the Danish king Hrothgar of a terrible mere-monster called Grendel. The mother of Grendel, seeking vengeance for the death of her son, meets the same fate. Beowulf, fittingly feasted and rewarded, returns to his native land. He becomes king of the Geates and after a prosperous reign of some forty years slays a dragon which had ravaged his land, but in the fight he himself receives a mortal wound. The poem concludes with the funeral ceremonies in honour of the dead hero.

In manner *Beowulf* is truly epic, dignified and elaborate with richness and vividness of details, simplicity and directness of ideas. Beowulf, like an epical hero, shares a community of interests with his people. Hrothgar, and Hygelac are all brave chiefs. Even the queens too are characterised with no less appreciation. In general, characterisation in *Beowulf* is broad, bold and follows traditional epical style. Beowulf has his love of glory, iron-resolution, fearlessness, loyalty and unshaken dutifulness. He has been described as “the king of the world, of men the mildest, to his people the most kindly and gentle and most eager for praise”.

The language of *Beowulf* too has an epical grandeur with its concrete phrases and expressions, picturesque compounds (kenning) and rhythmic language. ‘The ship’, for example, is “the foamy-necked floater” or, Grendel’s mother has been described as “the sea wolf of the depths”. Like all other ancient epic poems in *Beowulf* too we find short vigorous speeches and impressive descriptions of the scenes of terror. Alongside the detailed descriptions of festivities, court life and manners are also widely present. *Beowulf* reflects the ideals of the Heroic Age. These ideals are indicated through, the grave courtesy with which men of rank are received and dismissed, the generosity of rulers and the loyalty of retainers, and also through the interest in genealogies and pride in a noble heredity.

E.M.W. Tillyard notes that *Beowulf* lacks “touches of ordinary feeling” that give the “true epic amplitude”. Stopford Brooke too argues that *Beowulf* can be considered as a “narrative poem” instead of an epic. The subject of *Beowulf* has not the weight or dignity of an epic poem, nor the mighty fates round which an epic should revolve. Digressions and general reflections in the form of speeches interrupt the story. Furthermore, different parts of a story are sometimes told in different places, or the same incident is related several times from different points of view.

Beowulf also differs from the traditional pattern classic epics of ancient Greece—the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—which were composed some 1,500 years before and set the standard for the epic tradition. *Beowulf* does not open with an invocation to a Muse (like the epic written by Milton or Homer) and it does not start *in medias res* (‘in the middle of things’). Additionally, supernatural elements, which actively take part in helping or hindering heroes (like in Homer, Tasso or Virgil’s epics), are also not present in *Beowulf*. It was the Christian editors who introduce God when Beowulf needs divine help. *Beowulf* cannot even be called a national epic as for neither of its characters nor events belongs to Anglo-Saxon England.

However, contemporary critics would certainly admit that the ancient poet of *Beowulf* has succeeded in creating, at least partially, an epic. Critics are still in confusion and contradiction to accept *Beowulf* as a true epic or to give it the status of classical epic. But, even considering the various defects of *Beowulf* we can definitely say that altogether, *Beowulf* stands in comparison with the classical epic better than is commonly admitted. [669 Words]