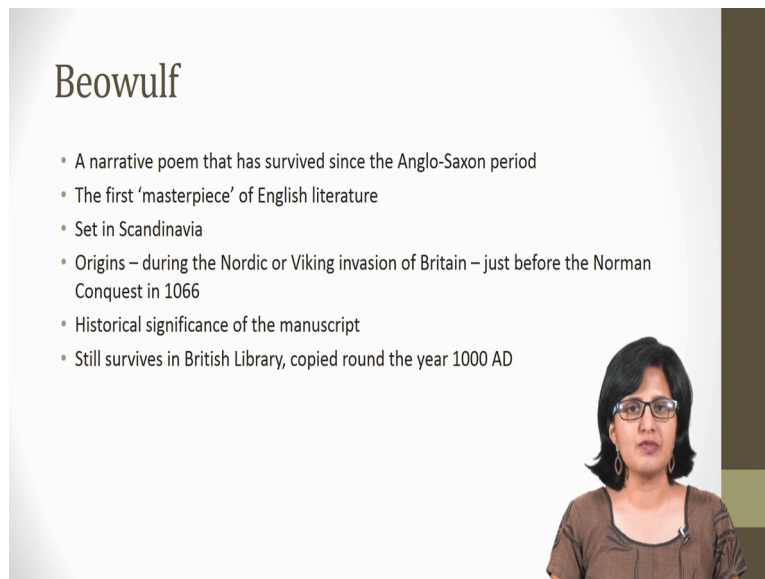


Introduction to World Literature
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Lecture 03
Beowulf - The Anglo Saxon Narrative Poem

Hello and welcome to today's session where we look at this Anglo Saxon narrative poem titled Beowulf.

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Beowulf

- A narrative poem that has survived since the Anglo-Saxon period
- The first 'masterpiece' of English literature
- Set in Scandinavia
- Origins – during the Nordic or Viking invasion of Britain – just before the Norman Conquest in 1066
- Historical significance of the manuscript
- Still survives in British Library, copied round the year 1000 AD

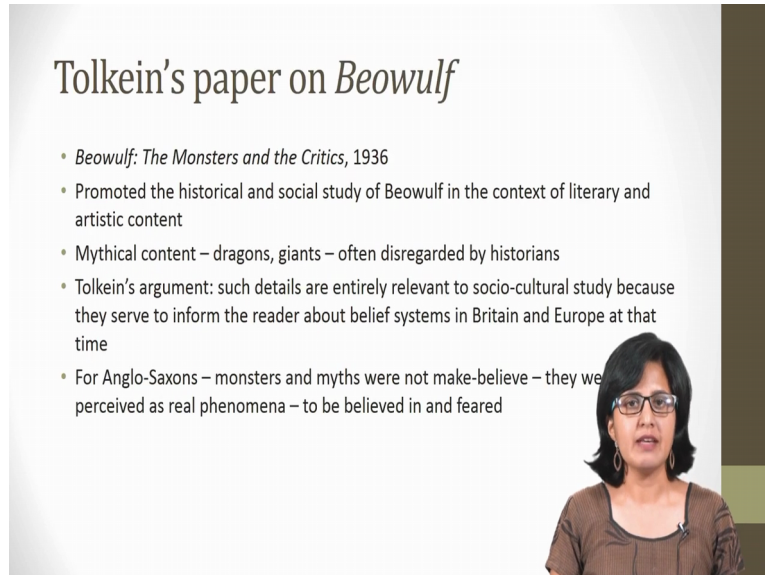
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Beowulf is a narrative poem that has survived since the Anglo Saxon period so it is very old and it also belongs to the old English period. This is considered as the first masterpiece of English literature but nevertheless this has been written in the old English script which has very little similarity with the current English script. And the poem is set in Scandinavia and the origins are tentatively during the Nordic or Viking invasion of Britain and this is just before the Norman Conquest which happens in 1066 AD.

And if you are familiar with the British history you would also know that this is a phenomenal year, this is an iconic year in British history, 1066 that is when the Anglo Saxon era is supposedly said to have begun. Beowulf, this narrative poem is now considered more significant in terms of its history. There is a historical significance attached to the manuscript and this manuscript is interestingly still survives in the British library and this was copied around the year 1000 AD.

And given the ways in which most other manuscripts have been lost or have got destroyed, it is rather surprising and very interesting that Beowulf's manuscript has survived till date.

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Tolkein's paper on *Beowulf*

- *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, 1936
- Promoted the historical and social study of Beowulf in the context of literary and artistic content
- Mythical content – dragons, giants – often disregarded by historians
- Tolkein's argument: such details are entirely relevant to socio-cultural study because they serve to inform the reader about belief systems in Britain and Europe at that time
- For Anglo-Saxons – monsters and myths were not make-believe – they were perceived as real phenomena – to be believed in and feared

The slide features a video inset of a woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a brown top, speaking. The background of the slide is light gray with a dark gray vertical bar on the right side.

The one event which provoked and triggered an interest in Beowulf in the 20th century was this amazing paper written by the master fantasy writer Tolkein and the paper was titled Beowulf – The Monsters and the Critics. Tolkein who was better framed as the author of the Lord of the Rings series, he tried to promote the historical and social study of Beowulf in the context of literary and (arti) artistic content.

And in this paper which was read out in a session in 1936, he also argued that the mythical content needs to be paid attention to because the other critics, the historians who have been studying Beowulf they had often disregarded the element of the myth, the presence of the dragons, the giants, the supernatural elements which were integral part of Beowulf. They were often disregarded by the historians and the critics.

And Tolkein's major argument was that such details are entirely relevant because they tell us about the socio cultural context of those period because they serve to inform the reader about the belief systems in Britain and Europe at that time.

And since those periods, those eras are very little documented and there is a very little archaeological evidence, Tolkein also suggest that one should consider looking at Beowulf not merely as an aesthetic text, not merely as a socio historical document but also as some kind of a document which will tell us about the belief systems of those periods. The ways in which people thought, people believed and people conceived of the world around them.

And it also interesting to note that for the Anglo Saxons the time during which this epic was written, it was conceived, it was composed, it was getting circulated, during that time monsters and myths were not make believe things for them. They were actually perceived as real phenomena and they were considered as things to be believed and feared and they were integral part of the belief system of those times of those world orders.

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Beowulf today

- An entertaining and engaging tale
- Evidence of the oral tradition
- The significance of imagination
- 2007 computer-animated film

"The readers of such modern imitations have to suspend their **disbelief** in order to enter such worlds of fantasy; the original audiences of *Beowulf* actually **believed** every word"

The slide also features a movie poster for the 2007 animated film *Beowulf* and a woman in the bottom right corner.

And in the contemporary when we look at Beowulf it is perhaps more than an entertaining and engaging tale for us. And of course this is one of those texts which also tell us about the evidence of the oral tradition and how it has survived across the many challenges of time and across these many centuries.

And it is also telling us about the significance of imagination which lives and outlives the times of the text and also how the way in which it travels across centuries. One significant evidence is the recent adaptation of Beowulf, a 2007 computer animated film. And needless to say it was a huge success as well. So in this context I would also like to draw your attention to the comment made by one of the critic historians.

The readers of such modern imitations have to suspend their disbelief in order to enter such worlds of fantasy. The original audiences of Beowulf which is the Anglo Saxon audience, they actually believed every word. And this is of most significant to ask when we try to engage with Beowulf in the contemporary.

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The slide is titled "Survival of the manuscript" in a large, dark font. Below the title is a list of five bullet points. In the bottom right corner of the slide, there is a small video inset showing a woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a brown top, speaking. The slide has a light gray background with a dark vertical bar on the right side.

Survival of the manuscript

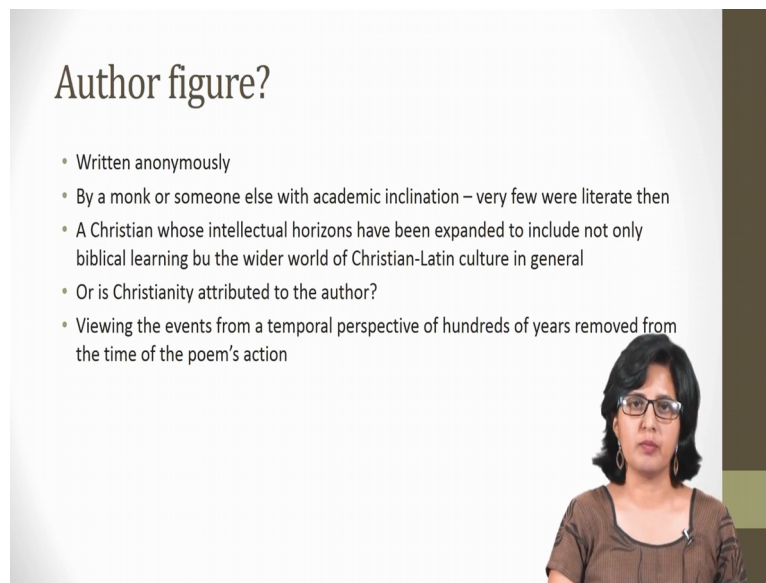
- The only one to survive the ravages of time – a significant artifact
 - Possible that many other tales were also written down
- Badly damaged by fire – "but somehow its cargo of words journeyed from the Dark Ages, through the Middle Ages and into the Modern Age"
- Nowell Codex – written in Old English – 10th and early 11th centuries
- The transition from early Medieval to the middle Medieval period

As noted in the beginning of this lecture the survival of the manuscript is something which amazes the historians and the archaeologists and it continues to amaze the ones who are not taking a serious study of this text Beowulf. And this is incidentally the only text to have survived the ravages of time and this is considered as a significant historical artefact today.

And it is possible that many other tales were also written down during that time but since we do not have any evidence either in terms of manuscript or in terms of other oral traditions which were handed down over ages. There is very little known about them and this manuscript, the manuscript of Beowulf, it was also badly damaged by fire. And as the historians noted, but somehow its cargo of words journeyed from the dark ages through the middle ages and into the modern age.

And this is the journey, the journey of survival of this manuscript. Beowulf was written in the Nowell Codex. It was written in Old English and this is said to have been composed during the 10th and early 11th century. And this is also a text which takes us through this transition from the early mediaeval towards the middle mediaeval period. So the historical significance we also note that it supersedes all the other qualities attached to this text.

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The slide is titled "Author figure?" in a large, dark font. Below the title is a bulleted list of five points. To the right of the text is a vertical bar with a gradient from light to dark. In the bottom right corner, there is a small video inset showing a woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a brown top, speaking.

- Written anonymously
- By a monk or someone else with academic inclination – very few were literate then
- A Christian whose intellectual horizons have been expanded to include not only biblical learning but the wider world of Christian-Latin culture in general
- Or is Christianity attributed to the author?
- Viewing the events from a temporal perspective of hundreds of years removed from the time of the poem's action

Who was the author of Beowulf? Needless to say this was written anonymously and that was the order of the day during those times. We do not find the name of the author or the authors. There is no way of knowing whether it was authored by a single figure or it was a collaborative collective effort. During those days there was not this tradition of putting down the name under any text and it could also have been an orally transmitted narrative poem.

And there is this wide conjecture that this was perhaps written by a monk or someone else with an academic inclination because very few were literate during those times and not many had access to a formal education. And there is this assumption that to be able to write such a refined kind of narrative perhaps the author figure or the author figures had access to some incredible kind of education as well.

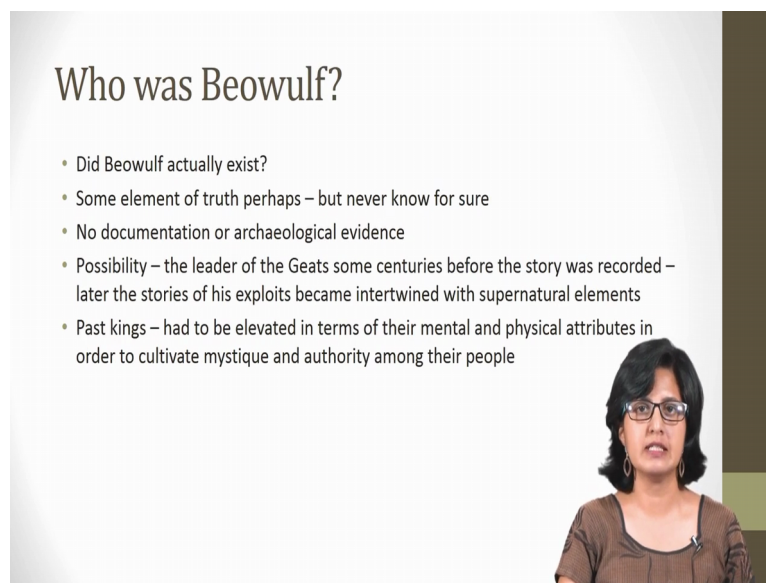
And some historians also believe that it was perhaps a Christian who converted from his pagan Anglo Saxon beliefs to Christianity. Maybe the author was such a figure and this Christian author, his intellectual horizons perhaps have been expanded to include not only biblical learning but the wider world of Christian Latin culture in general because we do see that background in this text getting manifested in very obvious ways. But there is also this contestation that the author perhaps was not a Christian at all.

Maybe Christianity was attributed to the author so that it fits in well with the history of the nation that it gets elevated to the level of the national epic, the earliest surviving masterpiece of English literature. So perhaps Christianity had to be attributed to this author figure in order

to give the text more legitimacy and more credibility. But as noted, there is no way of knowing these things for sure.

And the author figure whose presence is very evident in this text, he is viewing the events from a temporal perspective of hundreds of years removed from the time of poems action. So we are also given to understand that though this was written in the 10th and 11th centuries, maybe the action happened a few centuries back and most of them they agree upon 8th century as the century of consensus.

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The slide is titled "Who was Beowulf?" in a large, dark font. Below the title is a bulleted list of five points. In the bottom right corner of the slide, there is a small video inset showing a woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a brown top, speaking.


- Did Beowulf actually exist?
- Some element of truth perhaps – but never know for sure
- No documentation or archaeological evidence
- Possibility – the leader of the Geats some centuries before the story was recorded – later the stories of his exploits became intertwined with supernatural elements
- Past kings – had to be elevated in terms of their mental and physical attributes in order to cultivate mystique and authority among their people

Who was Beowulf? Beowulf is the protagonist. The narrative poem is also titled after a protagonist. One does not know whether Beowulf actually existed or not. There is some element of truth perhaps because there is a lot of historical element that we find in this poem but we never know for sure since there has not been any documentation or archaeological evidence to prove that such a character, such a historical leader, such a historical figure actually existed.

The possibility is that he must have been the leader of the Geats some centuries before the story was recorded. And later perhaps the stories of his exploits became intertwined with supernatural elements and this is something we noticed with most of the writings of the earlier times because the past kings, though they were bested with the authority and power they also had to be elevated in terms of their mental and physical attributes in order to cultivate some amount of mystique and authority among the people.

So always in the stories of heroes and the stories of kings we do find a supernatural element getting intertwined either into the personality or into the scheme of events.

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The poem

- A heroic tale – 3182 lines
- No title in the manuscript
- Strongly linked to the Germanic roots of the English nation – displays qualities of English before the language and literary tradition became intermingled with French, classical and other non-Germanic cultures
- Refined style and lofty theme
- The period: end of the 5th till early 6th century
- Descriptions about Danes, Swedes, Franks, Frisians and the Geatas
- Geatas – inhabited what is today Southern Sweden
- No mention of a single Englishman

This narrative poem can be best described as a heroic tale. It has 3182 lines. There is no title in the manuscript which has been discovered. Historians have attributed this title because they must have thought it is rather simple and straightforward to name the poem after the protagonist. This is one of the very few texts which show us the strong Germanic roots of the English nation. It also displays the qualities of English language and English literary tradition.

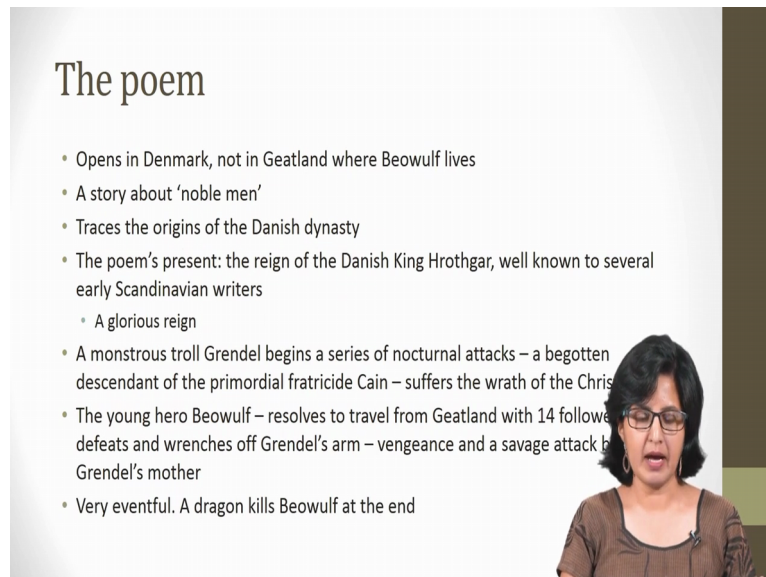
Before they became intermingled with French, the classical and other non Germanic cultures, if you are familiar with the background history of Britain as a nation, the way in which it emerged through these different invasions and how various influences had come to shape English literature and English culture and English language, you would perhaps be able to make better sense of the way in which the Germanic roots can be traced in this particular text.

This poem Beowulf has been considered spectacular in terms of its refined style and lofty theme and given that this first part of the old English tradition, old English literature, it is rather surprising that such a kind of nobility could have been imparted to a text of those times. And we also find very generous descriptions about the Danes, the Swedes, the Franks, the Frisians and also the Geats.

And Geats were the group of people who inhabited what is today Southern Sweden and at the same time we do not find a single mention of any Englishman. Perhaps this is because the

Anglo Saxon narrator was looking back at a period which included an assortment of tribes and assortment of invaders who were not really English. But of course the ancestors could be traced back and it is in that context that this text is seen as a significant historical artefact as well.

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The poem

- Opens in Denmark, not in Geatland where Beowulf lives
- A story about 'noble men'
- Traces the origins of the Danish dynasty
- The poem's present: the reign of the Danish King Hrothgar, well known to several early Scandinavian writers
 - A glorious reign
- A monstrous troll Grendel begins a series of nocturnal attacks – a begotten descendant of the primordial fratricide Cain – suffers the wrath of the Christians
- The young hero Beowulf – resolves to travel from Geatland with 14 followers, defeats and wrenches off Grendel's arm – vengeance and a savage attack by Grendel's mother
- Very eventful. A dragon kills Beowulf at the end

The poem opens in Denmark and not in Geatland where Beowulf lives. And at the outset itself the readers are being told that this is a story about nobleman. And it begins to trace the origins of the Danish dynasty and then it moves to the poem's present which is during the reign of the Danish King Hrothgar. And Hrothgar instantly was a figure well known to several earlier Scandinavian writers.

We find King Hrothgar being mentioned in different other text which also leads us to this assumption that Hrothgar was perhaps a real historical king who lived during those times and there is every reason to also assume that there is a lot of history which was part of this otherwise supernatural mythical narrative heroic tale.

So the poem talks about the Danish King Hrothgar's glorious reign and how he even erected a certain kind of a pedestal, a certain kind of a building for all his rectitude to assembly and to have a good time. It is in this such pleasant context that a monstrous troll Grendel intervenes. He begins with a series of nocturnal attacks, the king's retinue is constantly under threat, under attack and we are also given to understand from the poem that this monstrous troll Grendel is a begotten descendant of the primordial fratricide Cain and here we also find a number of biblical allusions.

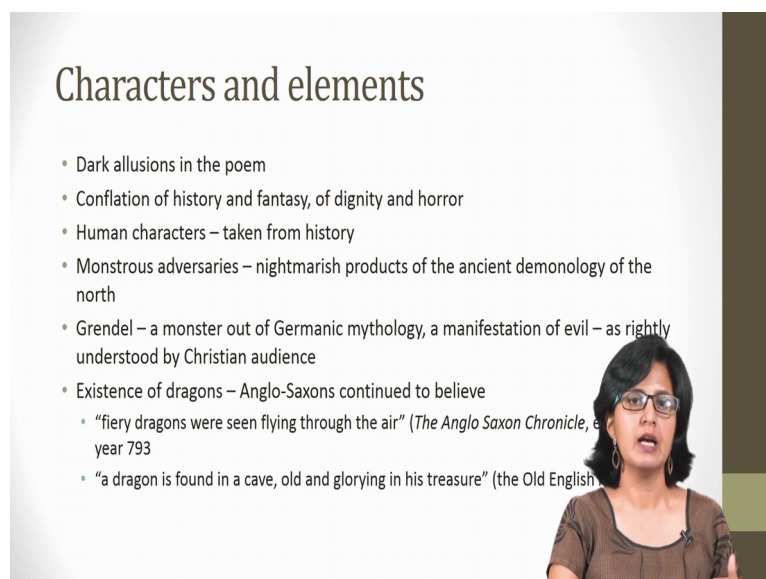
And we are also given to understand that Grendel suffers a wrath of the Christian God and though characters in the poem themselves are not familiar with Christianity we do find a Christian tropes becoming extremely significant and even dominant in certain places. So the young hero Beowulf decides to intervene. He resolves to travel from Geatland with 14 followers. He wanted to go to Denmark and then conquer and defeat this monster Grendel who has been causing such a great threat and agony to the king and his followers.

And he eventually succeeds in doing that. There are a lot of graphic details through which the poem takes us and Beowulf manages to defeat Grendel. He even wrenches off Grendel's arm but then there is also this series of events that follow. Beowulf gets to celebrate his victory with the king and the courtiers but he also has to face the vengeance, the wrath of Grendel's mother. We find Grendel's mother coming back with a savage attack.

This narrative poem is very eventful so I will spare you the many details which are part of the poem from this part onwards. And at the end through this series of battles after series of victories that Beowulf enjoys, a dragon kills Beowulf at the end.

So more than the story line what makes this poem enduring to us is the presence of this varied characters and elements which are quite unlike the old English period. And some of those traits even appear as very modern in terms of their conception, in terms of their representation and their manifestation within this poem.

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Characters and elements

- Dark allusions in the poem
- Conflation of history and fantasy, of dignity and horror
- Human characters – taken from history
- Monstrous adversaries – nightmarish products of the ancient demonology of the north
- Grendel – a monster out of Germanic mythology, a manifestation of evil – as rightly understood by Christian audience
- Existence of dragons – Anglo-Saxons continued to believe
 - “fiery dragons were seen flying through the air” (*The Anglo Saxon Chronicle*, year 793)
 - “a dragon is found in a cave, old and glorying in his treasure” (the Old English)

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We find dark allusions in the poem throughout. This could be attributed to both the biblical and pagan traditions. And we also find that there is a very fine conflation of history and

fantasy, of dignity and horror and which is why historians and literary critics feel that this is a very unusual kind of a narrative where we find this nobility of purpose and dignity of diction dominating the structure.

The most of the human characters, there is every good reason to assume that they were taken from history but the monstrous adversaries in the form of the dragons, in the form of these monstrous trolls like Grendel, they were all perhaps a nightmarish products of the ancient demonology of the north. And Grendel, the monstrous troll himself, that was perhaps a monster straight out of Germanic mythology and he was also considered as a manifestation of evil.

And he was rightly understood by the Christian audience as the evil personified. It also made this battle between the good and the evil very appropriate in the English context and as pointed out earlier it also made this text a very legitimate and a credible text to be presented at the outset of the emergence of the English nation. There is something very surprising about the existence of the dragons and how the poem deals with it. That is historical evidence to show that the Anglo Saxons continued to believe in the existence of dragons for a long time.

In fact in one of the entries, the entry for the year 793 in the Anglo Saxon chronicle it is documented there that, fiery dragons were seen flying through the air. Of course it was a figment of the imagination but the point to be understood is that they continued to believe in it and which is why it is important to see this poem not as an act of a suspension of belief but as an extension of the belief system of the people who lived and read during those times.

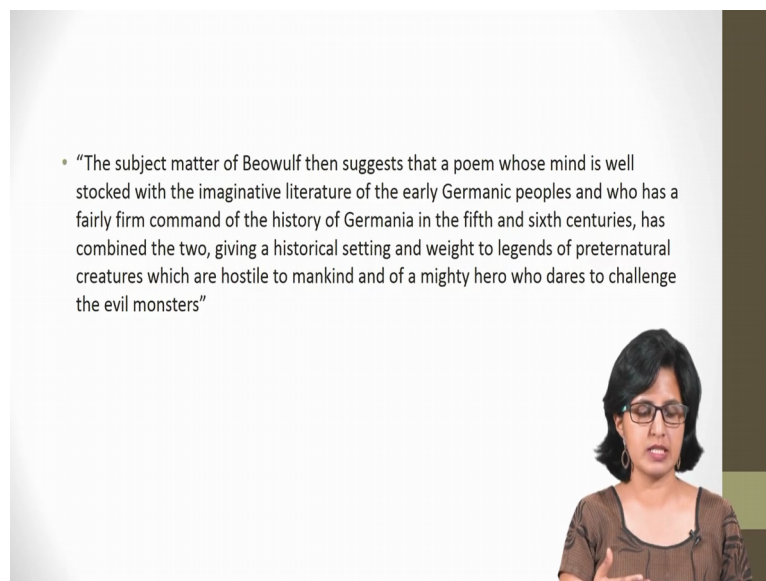
Also in the second part of the old English Maxims we find this mention of a dragon, a dragon is found in a cave, old and glorying in his treasure. So dragons were part of the everyday reality, the belief system of the Anglo Saxon.

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In this wonderfully crafted work, the Cambridge Companion to the old English Literature we find a very detailed, a well worked out essay by Fred C Robinson on Beowulf.

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And here he notes that the subject matter of Beowulf then suggest that a poem whose mind is well stocked with the imaginative literature of the early Germanic peoples and who has a fairly firm command of the history of Germania in the 5th and 6th centuries has combined the two, giving a historical setting and weight to legends of preternatural creatures which are hostile to mankind and of a mighty hero who dares to challenge the evil monsters.

And this is the way in which the poem has successfully managed to bring together these differing elements and in spite of that the loftiness, the refinement of the poem is very hard to miss as well. And one thing that has always captured the attention of the critics and the historians is the religious atmosphere of the poem, the background which the poem very certainly continues to invoke.

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The religious atmosphere

- An attempt to showcase how admirable and at times even exemplary the non-Christian ancestors could be
- At the same time careful not to appear to be encouraging to return to the dark ways of Germanic pagan ways
- Achieves a resolution of conflicting imperatives
- The poet's own faith – strongly Christian
- Alludes to biblical events – the Flood, the Last Judgement, Cain's slaying of Abel
- Characters in the poem – never allude to Christian lore – not yet available to references to pagan rites

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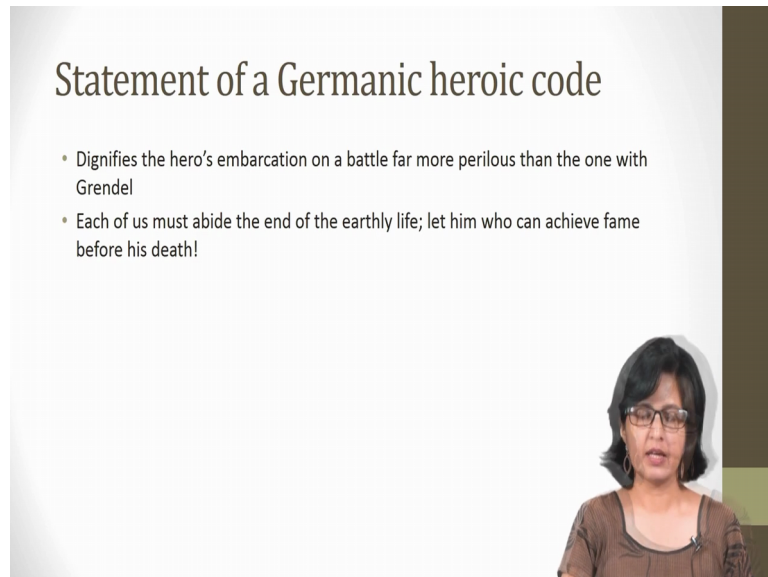
There is an attempt to showcase how admirable and at times even exemplary the non-Christian ancestors could be. And here this is done with a lot of caution. The poet, the narrator is also careful not to appear to be encouraging to return to the dark ways of Germanic pagan ways. So there is a fine balance which is being struck throughout this narrative. And the way in which the poet, the narrator, the way in which he has managed to achieve a resolution of conflicting imperatives is really impressive.

The poet's own faith we get to know through a reading of this poem that it is strongly Christian. Though there are historians and critics who have argued otherwise they also argued that maybe the later manuscript editors and the translators had very consciously injected this poem with predominant Christian elements. But nevertheless it is hard to miss the allusion to a number of biblical events such as the flood, the last judgement, Cain slaying of Abel.

And the characters in the poem at the same time they themselves never allude to any Christian law because the (Chris) information of Christianity, the belief system which was part of Christianity was not yet available to them. They were not yet part of it. So there are

references to pagan rites and there is also this over arching Christian theme and the illusion to the biblical events. Here we also find a fine statement of a Germanic heroic code.

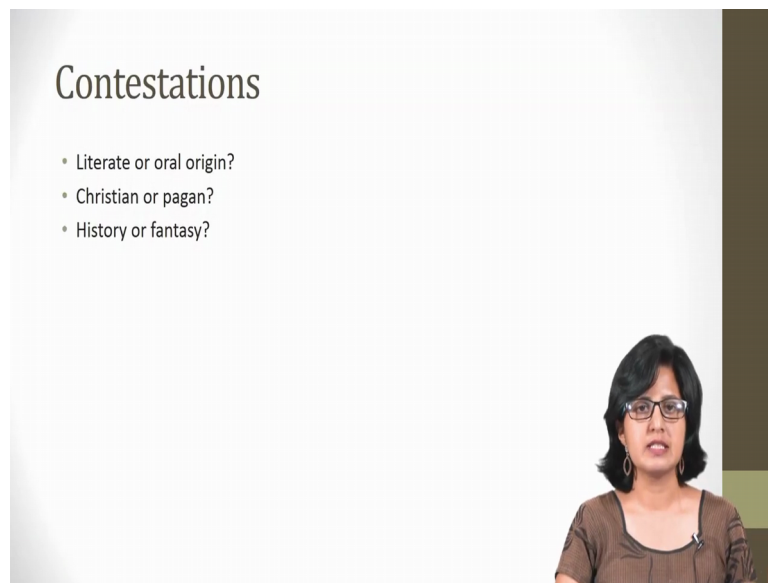
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Here we find that the presence of this code dignifies a hero's embarkation on a battle far more perilous than the one with Grendel. And this happens when Grendel's mother comes and then the fight with the dragon (())(20:40). And this is a rough translation of the section which also tells us about the Germanic heroic code. I read to you very briefly from this segment.

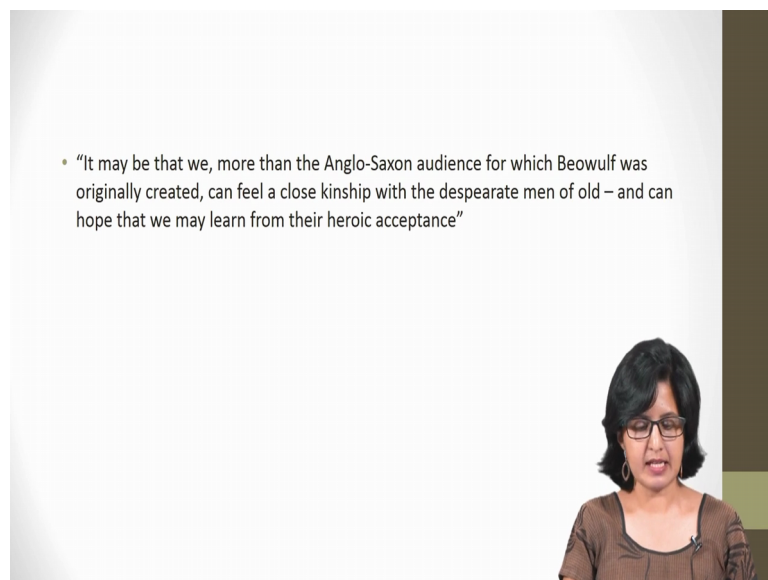
Each of his miss abides the end of early life, let his hook and achieve fame before his death. That is the best there is for a dead warrior. Arise lord of the realm, let us go swiftly to see the track of Grendel skin's women. I promised to you that she shall not escape to cover, neither into the Earth's embrace nor into the mountain torrent, nor into the ocean's depth, go where she will.

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There are a lot of contestations through which the poem continues to go through whether it was of literate or oral origin, whether it is from a Christian or a pagan system or whether it is mostly history or entirely elements of fantasy. But in spite of this, this narrative poem Beowulf, it continues to be of most significance for us in the contemporary for the very reason that Fred Robinson reminds us.

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It may be that we, more than the Anglo Saxon audience for which Beowulf was originally created, can feel a close kinship with the desperate men of old and can hope that we may learn from their heroic acceptance. I hope you will also find this observation very pertinent

and extremely important in our understanding of this narrative poem Beowulf. I thank you for your time and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.