

21L.315, Prizewinners
Prof. Mary Fuller
Lecture 1: Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf*

Contemporary poetry: how often do you get a book-length poem?
Why might we be less willing to read a longer poem, these days?
Is it harder to maintain a strong emotional reaction over a longer poem?
These were once told in oral tradition. Example: Byron's *Don Juan* – isn't really "deep", but fun storytelling.

In a translation, how do you talk about the author's agency? (How do we find Heaney in this *Beowulf*?)
Why did he pick this poem?

What does the poem sound like?

[audio clip of Heaney reading]

Noticed his pauses mid-line – he is preserving the Old English "sound" in a way that still sounds natural to us
Compared to modern way of looking at it (meter, number of syllables)
Here the syllables vary but it feels very natural, preserving number of stresses

[read Old English version of Lord's Prayer, which we can recognize]

[read an excerpt from 1910 translation of *Beowulf*]

The alliteration is strong and the translator uses weird language.
Why is this one harder to read? Heaney's is done with such grace, even as he uses the same kennings (bone-house, whale-road) but here it seems jarring.

Why does the poem begin this way (with genealogy)?
This whole genealogy can't defeat Grendel.
We see the mode of kingship changing over these generations – moving towards commerce and trading, security of building the hall
Notes say *Beowulf* was first set down by a Christian – lineage echoes Genesis?
Preserving kingship and culture
Building up to this hall which is then terrorized – is it what people should have been focusing on?

Looking ahead: even as the hall is built, we see the seeds of its destruction – a moment of instability and vulnerability
Why was Grendel banished? Evil cleared out of the world, pushed to the margins – almost pulls it back in

Maybe this is a later poem because here, Christianity is mature enough to talk about the pagan tradition, and almost celebrate it.

What is actually transmitted? Are you banished because you're evil, or do you become angry after banishment?
The same question arises in the king's line – apparently his lineage hasn't equipped him well enough

The hall isn't inherently evil, it's a center of art and culture, but at the same time it is vulnerable

What do you make of the circulation of objects throughout the poem? Nothing is being made in the present.

Swords and necklaces, etc., are magic or inherited

Danes are "untouched by pain and sorrow" – you want them to show prudence, build a more modest hall, sleep but keep a watchful eye

Avoiding extremes – are they too happy, too content?

Those who are favored by God go wrong because they see it as their entitlement.