

Why Buy *Beowulf*?

As the first semester of the 2011-12 school year draws to a close, I'm beyond pleased with the direction and progress of my Search for Human Potential courses. We've covered a lot of ground thus far, analyzing familiar topics (love, choice, enlightenment, and so on) from different perspectives while applying new philosophical and allegorical ideas along the way.

I feel that the *Search* in Search for Human Potential revolves around a number of factors. Rather than simply posing a question about our capabilities as individuals, I've encouraged students to think about the search in terms of *how* and *why* we try to improve ourselves. (Why does Siddhartha seek enlightenment? Why do human beings seek love and relationships? How do we go about defining ourselves?)

The final few weeks of the course will pose a new series of questions. This isn't to say our prior explorations of love, choice, independence, and related topics will go away; in fact, they'll be just as important to our upcoming work as they were to our earlier material. They form the foundation of the major concerns we'll explore next – heroism, purpose, tragedy, and human desire (whether it expresses itself in our yearning for transient “things,” in our hope for a better future, or in our drive for self-improvement).

Let's start with heroism. The question of what defines a “hero” fascinates me; I'm particularly interested in the ways various cultures display their values through these figures (although certain archetypal qualities cut across almost all heroic tales). While our first book's main character (Siddhartha) can be considered a hero of the mind, our main character in our final text quarter (*Beowulf*) is a hero of the body and the soul, a man of brawn and honor.

Beowulf itself is a classic tale of bravery and bravado. Long considered one of the landmark works in human history, the poem has been required reading for older students for years. Having read the piece during my senior year of high school, I had an advantage over some of my peers when I ended up revisiting it on *three* separate occasions during college!

Beowulf was originally written in Anglo-Saxon (Old English), and students must read a translation in order to understand the poem (as they did with Hilda Rosner's interpretation of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*). However, not all versions possess equal merit; there are three types of translations, and one kind – the overly literal, phrase-by-phrase translations of hard academics – is frankly terrible. For all but die-hard medieval-language enthusiasts, such works are joyless, agonizing affairs.

Arcadia High School once stocked a version of *Beowulf* that fell into the second category, one I call “acceptable.” Save for a single significant exception, all non-literal translations of *Beowulf* fall into this category. They cover the poem in its totality, and stay fairly true to the text. These versions are decently readable, and some students really connect with them; teachers used these translations to teach *Beowulf* for years.

This changed twelve years ago, when a Nobel Prize-winning Irish poet named Seamus Heaney decided to take a stab at translating the often-translated work. The result is the aforementioned “significant exception” to the “acceptable” category: it won the 2000 Whitbread Award (for “high literary merit...and the ability to convey the joy of reading to the largest possible audience”), and it

belongs in a category all its own. (Those of you keeping score at home will notice the three categories are “terrible,” “acceptable,” and “Heaney.”)

It is not as rigorously faithful to the text as the others; if I placed more value on teaching the poem “as it lies” rather than “as it was intended,” I would choose to teach the version that Arcadia once stocked.

However, Michael Near, one of my old professors at Occidental College, once explained the appeal of Heaney’s translation in a way that stuck with me. He pointed out that the new version is the only – and here I must emphasize *only* – translation that captures the vibrant, energetic, distinctly medieval spirit of the poem, and therefore appeals much more to a contemporary audience. It’s difficult to bring an ancient world to life in a way that connects with young readers, but Heaney’s work does so far better than any other translation. (The California Department of Education appears to agree with me: If you search for “Beowulf” in the state database of approved high-school literature, the only result that appears is Heaney’s version.)

I believe that no “literal” translation can touch Heaney’s, and my view is deeply rooted in my own experiences as a student (not so long ago, as it turns out). I read selections from a literal translation during my sophomore year of high school, and loathed them; that taste, however brief, left a sour impression all the same. As a result, I headed into the *Beowulf* unit of my senior English class with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. This only worsened during the initial stage of the poem, as the Old English Poet (the poem’s anonymous original author) takes his sweet time setting the stage for the rest of the work. I felt bored and frustrated, and was wholly prepared to hate the book; I harbored that feeling for the first ten pages.

You can imagine my surprise when I found myself unable to stop reading the poem less than a week later – during class, during lunch, even plucking it from the passenger seat to catch a verse each time I sat at one of my town’s nine stoplights on my way home. Everything from the tactile chain-mail on the text’s cover to Heaney’s descriptive writing ended up appealing to me; even the Old English text (placed side-by-side with the poet’s translation) suddenly seemed interesting.

My view changed because Heaney makes the poem come to *life*. It evokes a thrill within its readers, its lines alternating between bluntness and gleeful description. It captures the feeling of medieval battle, of loyalty to kings and lands, of communal living in a time when communal living was necessary for survival. Beowulf’s bravery is raw, arrogant, foolish...and seductive. The world he lives in seems fantastic, and not simply because a monster and dragon play significant roles in the story’s action; the society it describes is so rooted in high concepts of honor, courage, and communal need that it strikes one as fictional until one considers the historical context of the piece.

The story is simple but beautiful, at turns uplifting and tragic. There’s a wonderfully elegiac quality to Heaney’s final passages that no other translation captures; it’s incredible to watch as the poem moves from triumph to sadness, the poet exploring the question of what happens *after* a person reaches the high point of his existence. As the back cover says, “the poem is about encountering the monstrous, defeating it, and then having to live on in the exhausted aftermath.” (Those of you who are just beginning to contemplate how graduation will actually affect your lives will be able to relate.)

Heaney’s *Beowulf* successfully introduced the poem to an audience that would have rejected the earlier translations. Moreover, it forever changed my ability to read poetry, and remains a

significant influence whenever I dabble in the form. Without it, I may have never known one of the greatest works in our history – and I would have been far poorer for it. It was one of the first works that challenged my preconceptions successfully, and that prepared me for the rigors of college-level reading and analysis. When I re-read *Beowulf* in college, it felt like I was revisiting an old friend.

Thus I write you a long letter containing a simple request: I need your help in order to teach Heaney's translation. While it is on the state-approved reading list, the school's library does not stock the Heaney translation. In previous years, SFHP students purchased the book, annotating and highlighting their own copies as we went along; because the poem is so rich in imagery, I even recommend that students jot little illustrations next to the kennings in order to help keep the meanings straight (which many found especially helpful).

I have shopped around, and there are a variety of ways to find the book – both in libraries and in stores – as the recent movie spurred a surge in *Beowulf* publications. The list price of Heaney's dual-language text (which I prefer) is \$14. Some students may want the illustrated version, which retails for \$25; however, I'll be sharing the illustrations in class, and the dual-language version should be **more** than fine. Online shoppers will notice that Amazon.com sells the dual-text edition for \$11.16, with the illustrated edition available for \$16.47; if three kids team up to order their books at the same time, Amazon waives its shipping costs on orders of \$25 or more. If online shopping's not your thing, the Book Rack on Bonita and First has agreed to order as many copies as requested; I will be passing around a sheet during the test Monday to see which kids prefer to simply buy their copies from them.

I want to be clear on one point: I'm not an AP- or Honors-level teacher, and I will not force anyone to buy anything outside of class. However, I've had a great deal of success with this version in the past, and my students enjoyed themselves thoroughly during the unit; I'd like to keep replicating the experience. Any student who can't afford to buy the text should speak with me; while I don't have the personal funds available to spend \$1,000+ on copies for all 110 of my students, I am happy to assist those in need.

I firmly believe that readers will “get more” from the Heaney translation, and I cannot stress the poem's practical and intellectual value enough. *Beowulf* is required reading at many colleges and universities nationwide (particularly this version), and reading and analyzing it now helps me continue to give students opportunities to hone their skills in preparation for college-level responsibilities.

Because the poem is centuries old, some aspects of the story or writing can appear difficult or intimidating at first – particularly the language and more “technical” poetic aspects. The vast majority of students will be both challenged and engrossed by this masterful work, and analyzing it through the questioning / explorative perspective we often use will prove to be incredibly exhilarating. While it can be a difficult book, I sincerely believe that students rise to the level teachers set for them; I know my learners can handle this text, and am beyond eager to teach it to them.

Thanks for a wonderful fifteen weeks. I look forward to the remaining ones.

All the best,

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