High School British Literature
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This course on British literature will give an overview of various forms of literature, including poetry, plays, novels, epics, etc., from the earliest manuscripts to contemporary authors of the twentieth century. Inasmuch as this course will span over 1500 years of writing, it will of necessity be an overview only, rather than focusing on any one period or author in British literature.

To simplify the structure of the course, it has been divided into six units of six weeks each. Each unit will cover a unique period in British history. The selected readings have been taken from among the most influential and popular authors of their time. Additional consideration of a Christian worldview was given whenever possible, and any questionable subject matter will be omitted or mentioned prior to the reading.

It is my hope that this course will enable you to develop critical thinking and analysis in regard to your reading, while it still being a pleasure. A variety of assessments will be used in order to maximize your understanding of the subject matter. These will include vocabulary words, discussion questions, writing assignments, and journaling. Two essays of five to ten pages are to be completed at the end of the third and sixth unit. Possible essay topics to choose from will be proposed at the end of each unit.

Weekly Course Assignments

1. Read the introduction to the lesson as well as any required background information and activities.
2. Read the assigned lines or chapters listed.
3. Complete assigned vocabulary word definitions (if applicable).
4. Answer discussion questions.
5. Journal about your reading, noting favorite quotes, any additional questions you have, or further vocabulary words.

Course Outline

Unit 1: Old English & Medieval (449–1485)

- Readings will include:
  - *Beowulf* by Unknown
  - *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by The Pearl Poet
  - *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer (selected readings)

Unit 2: English Renaissance (1485–1625)

- Readings will include:
  - *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare
  - KJV Bible (1 Samuel & selected readings)
Poetry selected from the works of William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Sir Philip Sidney, Sir Walter Raleigh, Edmund Spenser, John Donne, and George Herbert

Unit 3: 17th & 18th Centuries (1625–1798)

- Readings will include:
  - *Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan
  - *Paradise Lost* by John Milton
  - *Gulliver’s Travels* by Jonathan Swift (selected readings)
  - Poetry selected from the works of John Dryden, Alexander Pope, John Milton, Anne Killigrew, Samuel Johnson, and Richard Lovelace

Unit 4: Romantic Period (1798–1832)

- Readings will include:
  - *Pride & Prejudice* by Jane Austen
  - Charles Dickens
  - Poetry selected from the works of Byron and Blake

Unit 5: Victorian Period (1833–1901)

- Readings will include:
  - *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte
  - *North & South* by Elizabeth Gaskell
  - Poetry selected from the works of Tennyson, Browning, and Kipling

Unit 6: Modern & Postmodern (1901–Present)

- Readings will include:
  - *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis
  - *Animal Farm* by George Orwell
  - Poetry selected from the works of Yeats, Eliot;
  - WWI poetry (Brooke, Owen, Rosenberg—The Soldier, Dulce et Decorum Est—compare and contrast)

Required Resources

- Journal – this can be a notebook, binder with paper, or a Word document you can add to daily for the vocabulary words and the discussion questions. Use whichever format you are most comfortable with.
- Dictionary – this can be a print dictionary or an online one to look up the vocabulary words, but please ensure the online dictionary is reliable. Here are some suggestions:
  - Cambridge Dictionary
  - Merriam-Webster Online
  - The Free Dictionary
• KJV Bible – this translation was commissioned by King James I of England and published in 1611, which makes it particularly significant to this course on British literature. A hard copy or online version can be used as it is in the public domain.

  King James Bible Online
  Bible Gateway – KJV

• Concordance – Old English texts often had Biblical allusions, and as I tried to choose texts with a Christian worldview, a concordance will be helpful to search for topics and Bible verses alluded to in the readings. An online concordance such as the Blue Letter Bible is very useful.

Readings

Whenever possible, a link to the selected readings will be provided or a PDF will be included in the course materials (if they are in the public domain). As these are all well-known literary classics, they should also be available through your local library. When the selected reading has been translated from Old English (as in the case with all the readings in the first unit), many different translations are available by various authors. The translation I used to prepare the discussion questions and vocabulary will be noted. For the later units, please ensure that you have the unabridged versions of the novels if they are in print format.
Unit 1 – Old English & Medieval (449–1485)

In order to provide a foundation for the readings which we are going to be completing in the next six weeks, it is important to have a basic understanding of the culture in which they were written. World Book has a summary of the various periods of English (British) literature which should be reviewed. Prior to this unit, please read the introduction, as well as the sections on Old English Literature (500–1100) and Middle English Literature (1100–1485). The short history of the Anglo-Saxon people should be perused as well. World Book’s timeline feature has a section dedicated to English literature with several different time periods. The first one entitled English Literature: Beginnings to 1500, will give you a visual overview of the various authors and works during this era. All notable literature is mentioned, even those we are unable to cover during this course due to time constraints.

Week 1

The Beauty of Anglo-Saxon Poetry: A Prelude to Beowulf

Who says the Dark Ages were “dark”? In the world we sometimes think of as barbaric and violent, beauty was prized in visual ornamentation and literary elaboration. In this introduction to Anglo-Saxon literature, you will study the literature and literary techniques of the early Middle Ages, thus preparing you to read Beowulf with an appreciation for its artistry and beauty.

Guiding Questions

• What can we learn from the manuscripts and literature of the Anglo-Saxons?
• What are some formal elements of Anglo-Saxon poetry?

Learning Objectives

• Define and give examples of kennings, alliteration, and caesura in Beowulf
• Reflect on how literature and art were important aspects of Anglo-Saxon life
• Create your own definition of an epic hero and what qualities they possess
• Identify the importance of reputation and ancestors to the characters and story
• Recognize the role of culture on the story, such as the feuds, weapons, attitude toward life and death, etc.
• Reflect on the importance of loyalty to the culture and the code of honor that governed their day-to-day lives
Literary Terms

- Please define alliteration, kenning, and caesura in your own words in your vocabulary journal. These are typical elements of Anglo-Saxon literature.


**Alliteration**: A figure of speech in which consonants, especially at the beginning of words, or stressed syllables, are repeated. In (Old English) poetry, alliteration was a continual and essential part of the metrical scheme and until the late Middle Ages was often used thus. (Cuddon provides some classic examples, such as Coleridge’s description of the sacred river Alph in his poem, “Kubla Khan”: “Five miles meandering with a mazy motion.”)

**Caesura**: (Latin: “a cutting”) A break or pause in a line of poetry, dictated, usually, by the natural rhythm of the language. In [Old English] verse, the caesura was used . . . to indicate the half line.

**Kenning**: The term derives from the use of the Old Norse verb *kenna* “to know, recognize.” It is a device for introducing descriptive color or for suggesting associations without distracting attention from the essential statement.

  Cuddon offers the following instances of Old English kennings:
  a) *helmberend*—“helmet bearer” = “warrior”
  b) *beadoleoma*—“battle light” = “flashing sword”
  c) *swansrad*—“swan road” = “sea”

  Essentially, then, a kenning is a compact metaphor that functions as a name or epithet; it is also, in its more complex forms, a riddle in miniature.

Reading

Our first reading is the epic poem *Beowulf*. Please read this short introduction and overview of *Beowulf* (spoiler alert!) before beginning the assigned reading for this week.

Please note that I used the acclaimed Seamus Heaney translation of *Beowulf* for all the vocabulary and discussion questions, which, as it was published in 1999, is not in the public domain. However, the poetry and imagery of his translation are beautiful and respect the alliteration and kenning literary devices of the Old English. Used copies of his translation are available online at a reasonable cost, but please be aware that the Kindle version on Amazon is not the translation by Seamus Heaney, but rather by J. Lesslie Hall which is available for free on Project Gutenberg. World Book also has a translation available by Francis Barton Gummere.

If you choose to read Heaney’s New Verse Translation, please be aware that there is a twenty-three-page introduction that gives a plethora of information about *Beowulf* and his translation. By taking the time to read the introduction, you will have a better understanding of the poem and appreciation of the translation process and the literary devices used. Hall’s
translation also includes a preface, background to the story, list of abbreviations, glossary of proper names, as well as a list of words and phrases not in general use. Gummere does not have any introduction, but there are several pages of footnoted explanations at the end of the text.

Reading Assignment

Heaney – Introduction and Lines 1-835  
Hall – Preface and Part I-XIII  
Gummere – Prelude-Part XII

Vocabulary

- Scourge  
- Tholed  
- Torques  
- Renege  
- Anathema  
- Wassail  
- Bothies  
- Lays  
- Rearer  
- Wallstead  
- Riven  
- Thane  
- Mongering  
- Hawser  
- Stook  
- Formidable  
- Boltered  
- Whetted  
- Stalwart  
- Mead  
- Brook  
- Wallowing  
- Pinioned  
- Swathed  
- Mizzle  
- Bawn  
- Baleful  
- Keening  
- Harrowed

Discussion Questions

1. Find three examples of both alliteration and kenning in the text.
2. Why do you think there are so many lines dedicated to the ancestors of the Danes at the beginning of the text? Why was Shield’s standing as a warrior and king so lauded?
3. Hrothgar’s “mind turned to hall-building” (lines 67-68). Read 1 Kings 7:1-12 and compare and contrast the description of the mead-hall of Hrothgar to the palace of Solomon.
4. Grendel is said to be a descendant of Cain (line 106). Why is this significant to the story?
5. What was Grendel’s grievance with Heorot?
6. “Ring-Danes” (line 115) is a kenning, what is its meaning?
7. Describe the differences in Heorot before and after Grendel’s attacks.
8. In line 144, Grendel is said to rule “in defiance of right.” How does this also apply to Satan’s “rule on Earth”?
9. Look carefully at lines 156-159. How do these remind you of the pervading nature of sin?
10. What is the significance of the throne/treasure seat (lines 168-169)? Find a similar symbol in the Bible.
11. The Danes, in their affliction, turn to pagan gods for help (lines 170-180). When did Israel do likewise? Give examples.
12. What spurs Beowulf to come to the aid of Heorot?
13. The mead-hall in Heorot is said to lodge Majesty (line 310). What does the term Majesty mean to you? How does this description remind us of the Shekinah glory of the Lord? Find some Bible verses which speak of the glory of the Lord filling His house.

14. What was Beowulf known for? How does he present himself to the warriors and the king in Heorot?

15. Beowulf boasts long about his heroic exploits. What do you think this reveals about his character?

16. Beowulf’s father, Ecgtheow, swore an oath of allegiance to Hrothgar (line 472). Why? How does this event bond Beowulf to Hrothgar by loyalty as well?

17. What was Unferth’s greatest issue with Beowulf? What does the Bible tell us about envy and jealousy? How can we combat it in our own lives?

18. How is queen Wealhtheow described? What appears to be her role at the feast?

19. Why do you think Beowulf chose to renounce weapons to fight Grendel? Who did he want to glorify, himself or God?

20. Is Grendel a man or a beast? What descriptions of him lead you to this conclusion?

21. How was Grendel finally defeated by Beowulf? What is the significance of the arm of Grendel as a trophy?

22. Journal about your reading, noting favorite quotes, any additional questions you have, or further vocabulary words. Do you have any predictions as to what will happen next in the text (if applicable)? Consider how the reading has impacted you personally.