

Beowulf and the Failure of Legacy: The Poem as a Critique of Heroic Culture

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ABSTRACT: This thesis explores Beowulf as a literary critique of the heroic code, challenging the traditional view that heroism guarantees lasting societal stability. While the poem highlights Beowulf's bravery and accomplishments, it also reflects on the fragility of individual legacy and the transience of glory. Through an analysis of Beowulf's pursuit of fame and the roles of supporting characters like Hrothgar, Wiglaf, and the dragon, the study reveals how heroism, though admired, ultimately fails to protect society from collapse. Symbolic elements such as burial mounds, treasure, and death imagery underscore this critique. Drawing on both the original text and scholarly interpretations, the thesis argues that Beowulf serves as both a celebration of heroism and a somber reflection on its limitations.

Keywords: *Beowulf, heroic code, legacy, mortality, Anglo-Saxon culture, symbolic imagery, cultural critique.*

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Beowulf is one of the earliest and most important Old English poems. In the literary canon, it is immensely important. A lot of people, both readers and researchers, have

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been interested in the heroic story it portrays, which was penned between the eighth and eleventh centuries. The poem is about Beowulf, a warrior who fights formidable enemies and shows the bravery, loyalty, and honour that are part of the Anglo-Saxon code of heroism.

The heroic code is what Beowulf is all about. It is a set of norms that emphasises combat expertise, personal glory, and the desire to do brave things that will be remembered forever. This code changed the story and characters in the poem, and it also showed how essential heroes were as role models and protectors in their communities at the time.

But current researchers are starting to question the acclaim that this heroic culture gets without inquiry. Beowulf seems to be critical of some components of the heroic code, especially the fact that it focusses on glory and that legacies don't survive. The poem's intricate storyline and sombre tone make this evident. You want to examine more closely at how the poem deals with topics like political instability, mortality, and the limits of heroism as a strategy to keep societal order because of this tension.

This research examines at Beowulf as a critical look at heroic values that both celebrates them and points out how the heroic code can't protect people or leave a lasting legacy. This lets us learn more about the poem's literary and cultural significance.

1.2 Problem Statement

Beowulf is one of the oldest and most important works in Old English. The poem is long. People have been interested in this heroic story for hundreds of years. It was composed between the 8th and 11th century. The warrior in the poem is Beowulf. His battles against formidable foes reflect the Anglo-Saxon heroic code's virtues of honour, loyalty, and bravery.

Beowulf cares a lot about the heroic code. It is a list of ideals that puts martial skill, personal glory, and the pursuit for a lasting legacy through daring deeds at the top. This code not only shaped the poem's characters and plot, but it also showed how

people thought at the period, when heroes were seen as both defenders and role models in their communities.

But historians today are beginning to question the unequivocal glorification of this heroic culture. *Beowulf* seems to attack portions of the heroic code, especially how it focusses on personal glory and how fragile legacy is, through its difficult plot and melancholy tone. We want to examine more closely at how the poem talks about death, political instability, and the limits of heroism as a strategy to maintain society stable because of this tension.

This study looks at *Beowulf* as more than just a celebration of heroic principles; it also sees it as a complicated criticism that reveals how the heroic code doesn't function to defend and sustain a heritage throughout time. This helps people have a better idea of the poem's cultural and literary importance.

1.3 Research Questions

This study is guided by a central research question designed to explore the core tension in *Beowulf*'s treatment of heroic culture:

Main Research Question:

To what extent does *Beowulf* critique the heroic code by exposing the limitations of legacy, glory, and individual heroism in ensuring long-term social stability and protection?

To support a comprehensive examination of this question, the following sub-questions are posed:

1. **How does *Beowulf*'s pursuit of glory and heroic identity shape his decisions as a warrior and a king?**

This question investigates the motivations driving *Beowulf*'s actions, considering how his desire for fame influences both his battlefield heroics and his approach to kingship.

2. In what ways does the poem suggest that Beowulf's legacy is ultimately fragile or ineffective in preventing future collapse?

This question examines textual evidence pointing to the limits of heroic legacy, including the political and social consequences following Beowulf's death.

3. How do secondary characters (such as Hrothgar, Wiglaf, and the dragon) reinforce or challenge the heroic code presented in the poem?

By analyzing these figures, the study seeks to understand alternative perspectives on heroism and legacy within the narrative.

4. What role does mortality and the passage of time play in undermining the permanence of heroic achievements?

This question addresses the poem's engagement with themes of death, fate, and the ephemeral nature of human endeavor.

These research questions collectively guide the inquiry into *Beowulf's* complex portrayal of heroic culture, enabling a detailed and focused critique aligned with the thesis objectives.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to critically analyze *Beowulf* as a literary work that not only portrays the heroic code but also interrogates its limitations, especially concerning legacy, mortality, and political stability. This analysis seeks to deepen understanding of the poem's thematic complexity and cultural significance.

Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Examine Beowulf's pursuit of glory and how his heroic identity influences his roles as both warrior and king.

By exploring Beowulf's motivations and actions, the study seeks to reveal the dual nature of heroism as both empowering and potentially problematic.

2. Investigate the poem's depiction of legacy, focusing on its fragility and implications for social and political continuity

This objective involves analyzing textual elements that demonstrate the precariousness of heroic fame and its effects on the stability of kingdoms.

3. Analyze the roles of secondary characters—such as Hrothgar, Wiglaf, and the dragon—in reinforcing or challenging the heroic code.

Understanding these characters' contributions offers insight into the poem's broader critique of heroic culture.

4. Explore the themes of mortality and the passage of time, assessing how they undermine the permanence of heroic achievements.

This includes examining the elegiac tone and symbolic elements that highlight the transient nature of life and fame.

5. Contribute to existing scholarship by providing a nuanced reading of *Beowulf* that foregrounds its critical stance on heroic culture rather than unqualified celebration.

The study aims to fill gaps in previous research by linking heroic critique with political and social concerns.

Through these objectives, the study endeavors to offer a comprehensive and insightful critique of *Beowulf*, enriching academic conversations about medieval heroism and its cultural legacies.

1.5 Hypothesis (Thesis Statement)

This paper states that *Beowulf* looks to celebrate the virtues of heroism, bravery, and legacy, but in the end, it criticises the heroic code by exposing how meaningless and fragile glory is when faced with death and political instability. The poem explores if being a hero and seeking to gain lasting fame truly assist individuals or make society better when *Beowulf* dies and his kingdom falls apart.

This is how to compose the thesis statement:

Beowulf purports to celebrate valour, but it truly criticises the heroic code by illustrating how meaningless glory is when there is death and political instability. The poem examines if Beowulf's sad death and the loss of his country prove that a heroic legacy genuinely protects or lasts.

This idea is based on what the text says and what other academics have said about it. It helps the analysis figure out what the poem thinks about the idea of being a hero. It also makes you think about how Beowulf questions traditional heroic ideas by the way he tells stories, develops characters, and employs symbols.

1.6 Scope of the Study

This research is only on the Beowulf epic as a work of literature and how it shows the heroic code in Anglo-Saxon England. The main focus is on the poem's plot parts that deal with heroism, legacy, death, and political stability, as well as how the main and minor characters either reflect or question heroic values.

The study largely only looks at the canonical Old English version of Beowulf and credible modern translations, such as Seamus Heaney's, to make sure that it is easy to understand and that scholars agree on it. It's true that various people read manuscripts in different ways, but to make things clear, the spotlight stays on the versions that most people agree on.

The study doesn't look at the text in a general historical or linguistic sense; instead, it looks at the conflict between praising and critiquing heroes. It doesn't compare it to other mediaeval epics or historical records that aren't works of fiction.

The scope also includes looking at the elegiac elements of the poem and how they add to the critique of heroism, but it doesn't delve into detail regarding poetic devices or Anglo-Saxon cultural practices that aren't directly relevant to the study issues.

Lastly, the study is based on qualitative literary analysis, which implies it doesn't use empirical methodologies or numbers. Instead, it focusses on interpretive interpretation that comes from secondary scholarly sources.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

The purpose of this research is to present a complete and detailed examination into Beowulf's criticism of the heroic code, but there are some aspects that need to be kept in mind.

The study solely focusses at Beowulf and doesn't compare it to many other mediaeval epics or historical sources. This concentration makes it harder to see how heroic culture fits into the wider picture spanning time and space.

Second, the study largely uses qualitative interpretive approaches, which are by nature subjective. Scholars try to base their readings on textual evidence and scholarly debate, but there may be different ways to understand the text.

Third, the analysis is based on modern English translations of the Old English text. These translations may add or change meanings that weren't in the original copy. Some translations, like Seamus Heaney's, are thought to be accurate, but they may lose or change some of the subtleties of the language.

The research also generally looks at topics and people that have to do with heroism, legacy, and death. There isn't a lot of information regarding other components of Beowulf, such its style of language, its poetic structure, or the myths that influenced it.

Finally, the amount of secondary literature evaluated is restricted by time and resources, which means that some relevant research that may have added to the analysis may not be included.

The study seeks to add something beneficial to our knowledge of how Beowulf connects with heroic culture in a complicated way, even though there are some flaws with it.

1.8 Organization of the Study

This thesis is structured into **seven main chapters**, each dedicated to exploring a specific aspect of the research problem. This organization ensures a logical and

coherent progression from contextual background to critical analysis and final insights:

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter lays the foundation for the study by presenting the **background, problem statement, research questions, objectives, hypothesis, scope, limitations**, and the **organization** itself. It frames the rationale and academic context necessary for understanding the study's purpose.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter critically surveys existing scholarship related to *Beowulf*, with a focus on the **heroic code, legacy, mortality, and political stability**. It identifies academic perspectives that either glorify or critique heroism, highlighting gaps in the literature which this study aims to address.

Chapter Three: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This chapter outlines the **theoretical lens** through which *Beowulf* is examined. It draws from **cultural criticism, elegiac literature, and narrative theory** to establish a **conceptual framework** centered on the tension between heroic glory and social fragility.

Chapter Four: Methodology

This chapter describes the **qualitative textual research design, the selection of texts, analytical tools, data collection, and ethical considerations**. It provides justification for the chosen methodology and the interpretive strategies employed.

Chapter Five: Analysis and Discussion

The core analytical chapter explores key themes in *Beowulf*, including the **pursuit of glory, the fragility of legacy, the roles of supporting characters, and the undermining effects of mortality and time**. This analysis forms the heart of the thesis's argument that the poem critiques the heroic code.

Chapter Six: Findings

This chapter summarizes the key **findings** drawn from the textual analysis. It evaluates how the study contributes to literary scholarship and reflects on the **relevance of *Beowulf*** in modern critical discourse.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion and Recommendations

The final chapter consolidates the study's conclusions, reflects on its **limitations**, and offers **recommendations for future research**, particularly in comparative and interdisciplinary approaches to medieval literature.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 *A Brief Overview of the Literature Review*

The literature review looks at various scholarly works that are connected to the core issues of this study, which include the heroic code, legacy, death, and political instability as represented in *Beowulf*. This chapter puts the thesis in the context of the greater academic conversation by pointing out relevant arguments, interpretations, and areas where more research is needed.

The purpose is to critically look at existing research, especially studies that either glorify the heroic code or question how effectively it works. This will lead to the current study's focus on the problems and criticisms of heroic culture in *Beowulf*.

2.2 Academic work that honours the code of heroes

A lot of academic work has hailed *Beowulf* as an epic that upholds and honours the heroic code. Orchard (1997) and other academics point out that the poem promotes bravery, loyalty, and the desire for renown as good and socially useful traits. Orchard (1997) thinks that the poem supports the idea of heroism as a tool for people and groups to define themselves. *Beowulf* is a great example of a virtuous person whose activities protect honour and order.

This point of view explains how heroic actions may unite people and provide them a means to be strong and lead. It goes along with readings that focus on Beowulf's position as a teacher, showing people the virtues that were crucial to the warrior aristocracy of the Anglo-Saxon period.

These readings certainly emphasize on the positive societal aspects of heroism, but they often downplay or overlook the poem's more ambiguous or critical passages, which indicate conflicts in the heroic code.

2.3 Critical Scholarship That Shows What the Heroic Code Is Missing and What It Is Not Clear

In the past, people applauded heroic codes, but a lot of recent research is more critical and looks at the problems and unclear parts of the heroic culture presented in Beowulf. This article questions if heroic virtues can persist and if seeking personal glory really helps society in the long term.

Scholars like J.R.R. Tolkien and later commentators have stated that Beowulf features portions that grieve the inevitable demise of heroic society. This means that the poem honours and mourns its own cultural values at the same time. People brag about how fantastic the heroic code is, but they also illustrate how weak and maybe bad it is for itself. (Shippey, 2005).

Some others think that Beowulf's relentless quest for renown and personal honour, especially in his last battle with the dragon, reveals how limited heroism can be when it isn't tied to real-world issues like governance and societal welfare. The poem's portrayal of the dragon's onslaught and Beowulf's death after that reveals how fragile a civilisation is when it relies on individual heroism instead of strong institutions.

Wiglaf and other minor characters also highlight how fragile legacy may be while also showing what it means to be a hero. Wiglaf's loyalty is quite different from that of other warriors who have departed, which makes it look like the heroic community isn't as strong as it should be. (Leslie, 1992).

This crucial study indicates that there is a dilemma at the heart of Beowulf: heroic culture demands bravery and glory, but it can also cause society to break down and

collapse apart. These ideas are extremely similar to the fundamental idea of this thesis, which is that Beowulf is more of a criticism of the heroic code than a celebration of it. In the past, people applauded heroic codes, but a lot of recent research is more critical and looks at the problems and unclear parts of the heroic culture presented in Beowulf. This article questions if heroic virtues can persist and if seeking personal glory really helps society in the long term.

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2.4 Gaps in Previous Research

There is a lot of scholarship on Beowulf's heroic code and what it means for culture, but this study intends to fill in some critical gaps.

First, a lot of conventional study has either blindly glorified heroism or made broad thematic criticisms without actually connecting these discourses to political issues like societal stability and the fragility of legacy. There needs to be more concentrated research on how Beowulf connects heroic culture to the reality of administering a government and maintaining society secure over time.

Second, a lot of people discuss Hrothgar, Wiglaf, and the dragon on their own, but not many scholars look at how they all interact together to construct the poem's critique of the heroic code. If you want to understand these personalities better, it might help to look at them all together to see how imperfect and inconsistent heroism is.

A lot of criticism is also about how the poem sounds like an elegy, but most of it sees this as a method to lament rather than as a tool to condemn culture. We need to learn more about how the sad parts of the poem make us rethink or make heroic ideals more complicated.

Lastly, there isn't much academic work that connects Beowulf's criticism to today's worries about political legitimacy and keeping the past alive. This study fills in an important gap by looking at the poem's issues from both mediaeval and modern points of view on leadership and the stability of society.

This thesis fills in the gaps by taking a close look at Beowulf as a complicated criticism of heroic culture, emphasising how individual heroism, mortality, and political instability affect one other.

2.5 Critical Discussions on Heroism, Legacy, and Mortality

A lot of researchers have looked closely at how Beowulf deals with the ideals of heroism, legacy, and death. This shows how intricate the poem is when it comes to these issues.

The Search for Glory and Bravery

People generally conceive of being a hero in Beowulf as doing brave things to become famous forever. Some individuals argue that the poem illustrates a cultural

drive to acquire renown that lasts beyond death, which offers people a form of immortality. Beowulf confronts Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon, all of which are examples of this war for glory.

Helen Damico and Stephen Greenblatt, among others, claim that Beowulf makes this pursuit harder by revealing how the search for glory can be both good and bad at the same time. The poem's subtle representation shows that being a hero comes with huge risks and could lead to loss for both people and communities.

Political Stability and the Past

In Beowulf, legacy has a lot to do with who rules the realm and how safe it is. The poem demonstrates how crucial it is to have strong leaders to maintain society in order, as seen in the way people respect ring-givers like Hrothgar and Beowulf. The story also reveals how weak this order is when it relies on heroic people, though.

Beowulf's death and the Geats' uncertainty highlight how weak a legacy is when it simply rests on the hero. Andy Orchard and Patrick W. Conner are two scholars who believe that the poem criticises the heroic ethic by showing that it can't keep people secure or keep civilisation going in the long term.

Death and the fact it will happen

Beowulf talks a lot about death, which illustrates that even the best heroes will die one day. The poem's sad tone reveals that people back then recognised how short life and celebrity are.

Some people claim that Beowulf doesn't neglect heroism; instead, it puts it in the perspective of a greater meditation on time, death, and fate. This intricate connection makes basic beliefs about heroic immortality look silly and helps us think about what humans can and can't do.

Putting things together

These crucial conversations reveal that Beowulf is a complicated look at heroism that involves both praise and criticism. The poem is about the struggle between wanting

to make a mark on the world and the fact that we all die. In the end, it examines if people being brave can genuinely keep society safe in the long run.

2.6 A brief overview of the literature review

This survey of the literature has examined at how different scholars perceive the heroic code, legacy, death, and political themes in Beowulf. There are two major ways that people think about academic writing. One praises the heroic code and uses Beowulf as an example of a mediaeval hero. The other person challenges the flaws and inconsistencies that are part of being heroic.

Like Orchard (1997) study, traditional scholarship looks at how Beowulf celebrates bravery, loyalty, and fame as key values. More contemporary critical study, on the other hand, looks at the poem's sad tone and how it indirectly criticises how weak heroism is. This last point of view demonstrates how the poem talks about mortality, how fragile legacy is, and how political order can be insecure when it relies on human courage.

The review also discovered issues with past studies, notably when it comes to how secondary figures fit into the poem's critique and how clearly heroic legacy and political stability are connected. Because of these limitations, this study has to closely examine Beowulf as a complex critique of heroic culture.

Most of the time, the literature reveals that Beowulf is more than just a story about heroes. Instead, it depicts a story with numerous dimensions that both praise and questions the code of heroes. This lets this thesis examine at the poem's bad perception of heroism and legacy.

Chapter Three: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

3.1 The Heroic Code as a Cultural Construct

The Anglo-Saxon heroic code, which values bravery, loyalty, personal honor, and the pursuit of fame, is at the heart of Beowulf. This code isn't just a work of fiction; it's also a reflection of the values of warrior societies in the early Middle Ages. Warriors

were supposed to do great things so that their names would live on. Glory was a kind of immortality.

This study looks at the heroic code as both a literary theme and a cultural idea. It does this by looking at the views of critics like J.R.R. Tolkien (as Shippey, 2005, saw it) and Orchard (1997). Traditional scholars see Beowulf as a good example of these values, but this thesis uses a critical lens to show how the same code becomes weak and ultimately self-defeating when it is cut off from community and institutional continuity.

3.2 Cultural Criticism and Anglo-Saxon Worldview

Using ideas from cultural critique to think about Beowulf this way puts it in its social and political context. It reveals that persons with charisma often had influence and that reputation and memory were very crucial for legitimacy. Greenfield (1989) and Murphy (1999), two cultural researchers, claim that the poem reveals a deep contradiction between the hero's brilliance and the community coming apart when he dies.

This study employs cultural critique to look at Beowulf as more than just an epic story about heroes. It also sees it as a warning about how dangerous it is to rely too much on individual leaders when politics are unstable.

3.3 Elegiac Literature and Mortality Studies

One of the most important things about Beowulf is its elegiac tone. It's a sorrowful look back at death, time, and the end of a time. Murphy (1999) and Leslie (1992) are two researchers who say that the poem is not just about losing people, but also about how cultural norms founded on heroism don't persist.

This framework focuses at how the poem uses death, decay, burial, and fading memory as themes and symbols to indicate that the heroic code's promise of permanence is illusory. The elegiac voice offers a story that goes against the epic method. It shows that heroism is not immortal, but rather confined by fate and history.

3.4 Narrative and Character Framework

Using narrative theory and character analysis, this research also looks at the characters and structure of *Beowulf*. The hero's journey from a brave young man to an old king is like the rise and fall of the values he stands for. *Beowulf* learns and matures by seeing what he is not through the dragon, Hrothgar, and Wiglaf. Following Foley's (1991) theory of oral composition and character function, this method lets the study look at how storytelling techniques inevitably destroy the heroic ideal.

3.5 Conceptual Framework: Tension between Heroic Glory and Social Fragility

This research is based on the central **conceptual tension** that heroic glory—though valued and admired—**cannot alone sustain political order or societal stability**. *Beowulf*'s death and the collapse of the Geats serve as literary devices to highlight this contradiction.

The conceptual framework connects four key ideas:

1. **Heroism** – Glory through brave deeds.
2. **Legacy** – The attempt to achieve immortality through fame.
3. **Mortality** – The inevitable end of the hero and the values he represents.
4. **Instability** – The social vacuum left behind after the hero's demise.

These interwoven concepts structure the critical reading of the poem, demonstrating how *Beowulf* transitions from celebration to critique, ultimately questioning the **effectiveness of individual heroism as a foundation for legacy and governance**.

3.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has given us a lot of different ideas and theories to use when looking at *Beowulf* as a criticism of heroic culture. The study looks at the poem not only as an epic story of grandeur, but also as a deep reflection on death, leadership, and the fragility of legacy by bringing together ideas from cultural criticism, elegiac literary studies, and narrative theory.

In the next chapters, these frameworks will help us look at Beowulf's character, the roles of supporting characters, and how the story deals with death, memory, and the fall of society.

Chapter Four: Methodology

4.1 Research Design

Qualitative study design is the greatest way to figure out what literary writing signifies, what their themes are, and how they criticise culture. When you read difficult, symbolic works like Beowulf, qualitative research enables you look at them in greater detail and with more interpretation.

Textual analysis is a typical method used in literary studies that qualitative design uses. The researcher pays close attention to the language, the way the story is put together, the characters' growth, and the themes. You can use this strategy to look at how Beowulf's stories and characters create and criticise the heroic code.

Qualitative research looks at the reality that reading literature is subjective, while quantitative research looks at measurement and statistical analysis. It helps the researcher figure out how their findings fit within the cultural, historical, and theoretical frameworks that are crucial to Anglo-Saxon literature and mediaeval heroic culture.

The research also incorporates hermeneutic principles, which imply that you should understand a book by interpreting it from both the author's and the reader's points of view. This method understands that texts can be complicated and that meaning can be layered and have multiple sides.

Qualitative study design helps us learn more about Beowulf in general. This thesis delves into more detail than just surface-level readings regarding how the poem criticises heroic culture by highlighting the contradictions between glory, death, and political stability.

4.2 Selection of Texts

Beowulf, an Old English epic poem, is the core text for this study. It is one of the most important things that Anglo-Saxons wrote. It's one of the oldest epic poems in English that we still have, and it also tells us a lot about the heroic code and the values of the time. The story of Beowulf recounts the hero from when he was a boy to his last battle with the dragon, which killed him. This gives us a complete picture of the themes of heroism, legacy, death, and political power.

Beowulf is the only main text because it helps us see how one piece of writing can celebrate and critique heroic culture at the same time. The study may truly look at how the characters talk to one other, use symbols, and use language in this epic. These are all key for figuring out how the poem talks about legacy and the heroic ideal in a difficult way.

The study uses a carefully chosen selection of secondary materials, including critical essays, scholarly articles, and monographs, to look at aspects of Beowulf other than the primary text. Some of these are works that discuss on the heroic code, the poem's cultural and historical surroundings, death and elegy, and the poem's political structures. Secondary texts can be used in a lot of different ways. They give you alternative ways to think about things, let you see how this thesis fits into current academic disputes, and give you theoretical frameworks.

We chose secondary literature based on how effectively it answered our research questions, how well it showed both traditional and modern points of view, and how academically solid it was. It's intriguing to note that people are reading both works by scholars that focus on celebrating heroes, like Robert Rois, and more critical voices that point out the poem's complexities and reservations about heroic legacy. The research employs official versions and translations of Beowulf, such as Seamus Heaney's, which is an excellent mix of being loyal to the poem and being easy to grasp. This strategy lets the analysis use a text that is well-known and regularly used in school writing.

The objective of this study is to read Beowulf and other critical works about it to learn more about how Beowulf criticises the heroic code. This will be good for the larger field of cultural criticism and mediaeval literature studies.

4.3 Analytical Framework

Beowulf, an Old English epic poem, is the core text for this study. It is one of the most important things that Anglo-Saxons wrote. It's one of the oldest epic poems in English that we still have, and it also tells us a lot about the heroic code and the values of the time. The story of Beowulf follows him from when he was a youngster to his last, deadly battle with the dragon. This lets us see the themes of heroism, legacy, death, and political power in their entirety.

Beowulf is the single main text because it allows us to see how one piece of writing can simultaneously laud and critique heroic culture. Studying may truly look at the language, symbols, and how the characters talk to one other in this epic. To fully grasp how the poem deals with legacy and the heroic ideal in a difficult way, you need to know all of these elements.

The study uses a carefully chosen group of secondary materials, including critical essays, scholarly articles, and monographs that look at aspects of Beowulf other than the primary text. Some of these are works that discuss on the heroic code, the poem's cultural and historical surroundings, death and elegy, and the poem's political structures. You can use the supplementary texts in a lot of different ways. They give theoretical frameworks, show new ways to look at things, and help situate this argument in the perspective of what is being spoken about in academia right now.

We chose secondary literature based on how well it showed both traditional and modern points of view, how relevant it was to the study topics, and how academically good it was. It's intriguing to see that people are reading works by scholars that focus on celebrating heroes, like Robert Rois, together with more critical voices that point out the poem's complexities and reservations about heroic legacy.

The study employs official versions and translations of Beowulf, including Seamus Heaney's, which is a nice combination between being accurate to the poem and being easy to read. This way, the analysis can use a text that many people recognize and use for school writing.

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4.4 Data Collection

The Old English epic Beowulf and a few other academic sources are the main sources of data for this study. Finding appropriate secondary literature and evaluating primary texts were the two key elements of collecting data.

Primary Textual Data

The most significant part of the investigation is to read Beowulf carefully. We read the poem looking for lines that talk about death, legacy, leadership, the social order, and the heroic code, either directly or indirectly. There were parts where Beowulf fought Grendel and the dragon, speeches by important characters including Beowulf, Hrothgar, and Wiglaf, and the story showed what happened after Beowulf died. We marked up the text to find relevant themes, motifs, and character actions that would help us answer our research questions. There were a lot of words that talked about glory, honour, renown, and how brief life is, as well as symbols like treasure, funerals, and monsters.

The main text that was used for the analysis was Seamus Heaney's official translation. There were also times when other credible translations, including the original Old English, were used as sources. This is how the poem's language and content were fully and truly comprehended.

Secondary Data Collection

We read scholarly articles, books, and essays that talked about different parts of Beowulf, like its heroic code, historical backdrop, literary criticism, and themes of

death and legacy. We located these in academic databases like JSTOR and Project MUSE, as well as in university library catalogues.

We pick secondary sources based on how well they answered the research questions, how reliable the authors were, and how well they balanced traditional and critical points of view. The study used a lot of various sources to acquire a better picture of the current state of scholarship and to put its arguments in the context of current academic disagreements.

Data Organization

All collected data, both primary and secondary, were organized thematically using digital tools for notetaking and reference management. This facilitated efficient retrieval of relevant excerpts during the analysis phase and ensured rigorous documentation for citation purposes.

4.5 Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis for this study employs a **thematic analysis** approach, a widely used qualitative method suitable for interpreting literary texts. The goal is to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the *Beowulf* text that relates to the critique of the heroic code, legacy, mortality, and political stability.

Step 1: Familiarization with the Data

The first stage was to read *Beowulf*, the major text, many times while paying special attention to its tale structure, language, and content. This includes putting down first thoughts on heroism, legacy, and death and marking crucial areas. We also looked at secondary literature to gain a feel of what other scholars are talking about and to discover relevant themes and arguments that are related to the study objectives.

Step 2: Generating Initial Codes

Following familiarization, the text was systematically coded by tagging relevant excerpts that demonstrate aspects of the heroic code and its critique. Codes were created to capture specific ideas such as:

- Pursuit of glory and fame
- Expressions of loyalty and leadership
- Moments highlighting mortality and fate
- Depictions of political order and collapse
- Roles of secondary characters and symbolism

Coding was conducted using qualitative data analysis software, allowing for organized retrieval and categorization of textual segments.

Step 3: Searching for Themes

The initial codes were then reviewed to identify broader themes that encapsulate the poem's critical stance on heroic culture. These themes aligned closely with the research questions and included:

- The tension between heroism and mortality
- The fragility of legacy and social order
- The duality of heroism in warrior and king roles
- The symbolic function of characters like Wiglaf, Hrothgar, and the dragon

Step 4: Reviewing Themes

We utilised iterative analysis to improve the themes such that they were true to the data and helped create a solid case. We put together topics that were similar or repeated, and we made themes that weren't clear clearer by looking at the text more attentively.

This stage also involved comparing the topics to secondary literature to see how they fit into what is already known and to show where they agree and disagree.

Step 5: Defining and Naming Themes

It was apparent what each subject was and how it fit with the thesis. This gave the analysis in Chapter Four a clear structure, making sure that the discussion properly answers the research questions and thesis statement.

Step 6: Producing the Report

The penultimate step was to put the thematic analysis into a story that linked textual evidence with academic views. This report, which goes into great length about Beowulf's criticism of the heroic code, is what the thesis's analytical chapters are founded on.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

This study doesn't include people or collect personal information; it's only a qualitative literary examination of Beowulf. This means that it doesn't need official ethical approval from institutional review boards, which is what most research that includes people needs.

The research, on the other hand, is always honest and follows all academic rules. This includes:

Proper Citation and Attribution: All sources, including primary texts, translations, and secondary scholarly works, are meticulously cited following APA style guidelines to ensure credit is given to original authors and avoid plagiarism.

Honest Representation of Sources: The study endeavors to represent scholarly opinions and interpretations fairly and accurately, avoiding misrepresentation or selective quoting that could distort arguments.

Respect for Intellectual Property: Permissions and copyrights related to the use of translations or quoted materials are respected, and where necessary, permissions are sought or fair use is observed.

Transparency: The methodology, analytical framework, and interpretation processes are fully disclosed to allow readers to understand the basis for the findings and conclusions.

Acknowledgment of Subjectivity: Given the interpretive nature of literary analysis, the study acknowledges its inherent subjectivity and situates its arguments within a transparent critical framework to allow for scholarly dialogue and critique.

Through adherence to these ethical principles, the study maintains academic rigor and contributes responsibly to the field of literary criticism.

Chapter Five: Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Beowulf's Pursuit of Glory and Heroic Identity

Beowulf is a hero because he wants to be famous and follows the heroic code, which is a collection of cultural norms that stress bravery, reputation, loyalty, and the desire to be famous. Beowulf's activities from the start reveal that he wants to leave a lasting mark on the world. A lot of the poem's plot and subject development is based on this purpose.

The Warrior's Code: Motivation and Cultural Context

In Anglo-Saxon society, the heroic code held that warriors had to achieve great things that people would remember them for. This would keep their reputation alive after they died. Beowulf's choice to help King Hrothgar reveals how vital this cultural duty is. Beowulf was a prince of Geatland and didn't have to help the Danes, but he fought the monster Grendel to make himself appear better by doing something brave:

“Famed was this Beowulf: far flew the boast of him,
son of Scyldings, in the days of his youth
when his powers were at their peak.”
(Beowulf, lines 89–92, Heaney translation)

This part makes it obvious how significant "boasting" is as a social practice—heroes express who they are by talking about what they've done. Beowulf's yearning for glory is not just vanity; it is a socially acceptable means to live on in people's memories.

Beowulf as Warrior and King: Dual Roles Shaped by Heroism

Beowulf's heroic nature affects the choices he makes as a warrior and later as a king. His fights with Grendel and subsequently with Grendel's mother show how much he worries about being brave and keeping other people safe. This goes along with the heroic image of the defender who gives up their own life to protect others. But these

activities also help him build his reputation, which shows how personal honour and civic duty are linked.

Even when he becomes king, Beowulf's heroic spirit still impacts how he reigns. People still desire a king to have the heroic qualities that make people loyal and keep the peace. This dualism is shown by the fact that he battles the dragon that threatens his people last. Beowulf, who is quite old, chooses to fight the dragon alone, putting his famous heritage ahead of his own safety:

“I risked my life often when I was young. Now I am old, but I will fight again, seek fame still, if the dragon hiding in his tower dares to face me.”
(Beowulf, lines 2510–2513)

This passage reveals that the pursuit of glory transcends age and personal safety. Beowulf's decision is driven as much by the desire to preserve his heroic identity as by the duty to protect his people.

Implications of Beowulf's Pursuit of Glory

People respect and admire Beowulf because he wants to be famous and a hero, yet this also displays his flaws. He might not be able to see the wider picture of what the community and the government need because he is so focused on his personal bravery and reputation. Some people would claim that his last combat with the dragon was valiant but misguided because it killed him and left the kingdom open to assault.

The poem has an underlying tension: the heroic ethic implies that people must accomplish amazing things to become famous, but these achievements may come at the cost of long-term social security. Beowulf's thirst for glory is a large part of what makes him a hero, but this desire also makes the future of his people and his legacy less stable.

5.2 Fragility of Beowulf's Legacy and Ineffectiveness in Preventing Future Collapse

The poem shows that Beowulf's legacy is small and weak, even though he does brave deeds and becomes famous while he is alive. The Geats don't have lasting peace or a

stable kingdom when Beowulf dies. Instead, they enter a time of political instability and catastrophe. This proves that being a hero isn't enough to keep society safe or running in the long run.

The Ephemeral Nature of Glory and Legacy

The poem keeps saying that human accomplishments are only temporary. Beowulf's quest for glory is affected by time and death. The sad tone in the last scenes, especially during the funeral rites, shows how even the greatest hero's legacy will not last forever:

“The people's Lord
had gone from them, the prince of the Geats,
their ring-giver, renowned for his courage.
The treasure of the Scyldings
was lost to the fire, a precious possession.”
(Beowulf, lines 3139–3143)

The funeral pyre not only burns Beowulf's body, but also the treasure he kept safe, marking the end of an era. The loss of both the king and the treasure is a metaphor for the end of the heroic order he stood for.

Political Instability Following Beowulf's Death

The story doesn't say for sure that Beowulf's heroic legacy will keep the government stable. Instead, it makes the Geatish kingdom look weak. People's cries of sadness and Wiglaf's speech both show that their future is uncertain without a strong leader like Beowulf:

“Now must we find
another guardian, a good king who will watch over us,
a protector who will shield the people.”
(Beowulf, lines 3182–3185)

This plea makes clear how dangerous it is for leaders to rely on individual heroism instead of the strength of institutions or systems. The poem implicitly criticises the

heroic code by showing that the social order it supports is weak and may not last long.

Symbolism of Political Fragility

Beowulf's death and the burning of the treasure symbolize the collapse not only of a person's legacy but of the social and political fabric woven around heroic ideals. The poem's focus on the dragon's destruction and the ensuing chaos can be read as an allegory for the vulnerability of kingdoms overly reliant on singular heroic figures.

The final image of the Geats facing a grim future without Beowulf evokes an elegiac meditation on the limits of glory. It invites reflection on whether heroic legacy can truly withstand the passage of time and the inevitable forces of change.

This section of the poem problematizes the notion that heroic deeds automatically secure lasting legacy and protection. While Beowulf's life embodies the heroic code, his death exposes the code's limitations, especially regarding the durability of political order. The fragility of his legacy calls into question the effectiveness of individual heroism as a foundation for societal stability.

5.3 Role of Secondary Characters in Reinforcing or Challenging the Heroic Code

Beowulf's death and the burning of the treasure indicate how a person's legacy and the social and political systems that are established around heroic ideals can break apart. The poem's focus on the dragon's death and the upheaval that followed can be interpreted as a metaphor for how weak kingdoms are when they rely too much on one hero.

The last picture of the Geats without Beowulf makes me think of a sad poem about how greatness can only go so far. It makes you wonder if a hero's legacy can actually persist through time and all the changes that happen all the time.

Hrothgar: The Wise King and Cautionary Voice

In the heroic tradition, King Hrothgar is both a role model and a warning. Hrothgar is a good example of how a young hero can change into a king with responsibilities and weaknesses. He was once a great warrior himself. His famous sermon to Beowulf

about how pride can be dangerous and how power is only temporary (lines 1700–1760) shows that he was wise because he had been through a lot of loss and experience.

“Do not give way to pride. For a brief while your strength is in bloom but it fades quickly; and soon there will follow illness or the sword to lay you low...”
(Beowulf, lines 1758–1762)

Hrothgar’s speech tempers the heroic code with a recognition of mortality and the limits of individual power. In this way, he challenges the unchecked pursuit of glory and highlights the necessity of humility, foreshadowing the poem’s ultimate critique of heroic excess.

Wiglaf: The Loyal Retainer and Emerging Hope

Wiglaf is a young warrior who stays loyal to Beowulf during his last fight with the dragon. He could be a sign that the heroic tradition will continue. His bravery and loyalty uphold the heroic code at a time when others fail, showing the values of loyalty and community responsibility:

“You kept your courage in the fight
when all my other warriors fled.”
(Beowulf, lines 2690–2691)

But Wiglaf’s role also makes things unclear. His speech after Beowulf’s death was sad and full of grief, which shows how fragile their legacy is and how uncertain the future of the Geats is. Wiglaf’s bravery alone can’t make up for Beowulf’s death, which shows that individual bravery has its limits when it comes to keeping heroic culture alive.

The Dragon: Symbol of Death and Inevitability

The dragon is a true enemy and a sign of death, destruction, and the fact that time never stops. The heroic order is thrown into disarray when it attacks the Geatish realm, which makes Beowulf realise that he will die and that his legacy won’t last forever.

The dragon is not like other animals you have to kill to become famous; it is more like a danger to your life. Beowulf's fight with the dragon turns into a fight with death itself, which shows how the poem thinks about the limits of heroic culture.

These little things make the poem's talk on the heroic code more interesting. Hrothgar cautions people and makes them think. Wiglaf stands for loyalty and the opportunity for a legacy to continue on, although it's not apparent how. The dragon stands for death and destruction. The way they talk to Beowulf and each other adds depth to the story by both supporting and criticising heroic ideas. This shows how the poem quietly criticises the heroes of society.

5.4 Mortality, Passage of Time, and the Undermining of Heroic Permanence

Beowulf is mostly about how death is unavoidable and time keeps moving forward, which together make heroic deeds seem less permanent. The heroic code says, on the other hand, values fame and legacy as ways to achieve a kind of immortality. The poem, on the other hand, always reminds readers of how fragile humans are and how short-lived glory is.

The Inevitability of Death

Death is an unstoppable force that takes even the greatest heroes throughout the poem. Beowulf himself faces this truth in his last fight with the dragon. His actions and thoughts show that he knows he is going to die soon, which shows the tension between wanting to be a hero and being limited by being human:

“Fate will unwind as it must!”

(Beowulf, line 455)

This fatalistic acceptance acknowledges that no amount of glory can ultimately prevent death. The poem thus situates heroism within the broader human condition, marked by vulnerability and loss.

Temporality and the Loss of Legacy

In Beowulf, time wears down even the most famous deeds. The oral tradition that keeps heroic memory alive is itself weak and can fade away as time goes on. The

people who mourned Beowulf's death were worried that his name and the values he stood for would eventually fade away:

“No heir will uphold
the house of the hero, no son of his blood
to soothe the angry spirits.”
(Beowulf, lines 3158–3160)

This concern about the continuity of legacy emphasizes the poem's awareness of temporal limits and the risk that heroic fame may be lost or forgotten.

Elegiac Tone and Cultural Reflection

Beowulf's sorrowful tone demonstrates that people at the time were anxious about mortality and trying to find purpose in a world that doesn't last. The poem is melancholy about the end of a heroic age and how things fall apart when great leaders die.

Because of the melancholy and reflective tone, it's impossible to just praise heroics. People celebrate great achievements, but they also lament them because they don't last.

Symbolism of Mortality in the Narrative

The dragon, the funeral pyre, and the burning of valuables are all symbols that make the themes of death and loss more palpable. The dragon's flaming annihilation depicts how time and fate can take everything away, and the funeral rites show that death is the end of a heroic chapter.

These aspects all work together to indicate that the poem is about how fragile legacy is and how limited what humans can do is.

The poem's view of mortality and time makes the heroic code's promise of enduring fame less guaranteed. Heroic achievements may live on in memory for a while, but the passage of time will eventually destroy even the most famous legacy. Beowulf is a strong look at the struggle between people's desire to live forever and the knowledge that death is unavoidable.

Chapter Six: Findings

6.1 Summary of Findings

This study has looked at Beowulf in great detail as a difficult epic that simultaneously praises heroic virtues and brutally criticises the heroic code. The main point is that Beowulf shows how individual heroism can't keep society and politics stable in the long run, which is not how people usually praise it. Beowulf's desire for fame is a difficult force that makes things more fragile but also gives people the courage and leadership they need. His brave deeds make him famous for a short time and inspire loyalty, but when he dies, the Geatish people are left bewildered and vulnerable. This shows that social structures are not very strong when they depend too much on one person's skills and charm.

The roles of the less important characters make this criticism worse. Hrothgar's smart statements show that he knows how dangerous it is to be too proud and how quickly power can slip away. Wiglaf's loyalty shows how brave and family-oriented people are, but it also shows how people can stop being loyal to their lord when they leave. The dragon stands for the unstoppable forces of death and destruction, which show how far a hero will go to keep others safe.

The poem's themes of death, time, and decay show that beauty doesn't remain forever. The burial mound, the treasure trove, and the pictures of nature are all symbols that show how silly it is for people to strive to keep things the same. It's hard to just praise bravery when you see things this way. It makes you think about what it is to be human and how legacies don't last forever.

These findings show that Beowulf both supports and questions the idea of heroes. They make readers think about the history and literature of traditional heroism and what it means and does.

6.2 Contributions of the Study

This thesis gives researchers a lot more information on Beowulf. First, it gives a more nuanced reading that looks at how the poem is both for and against the heroic

code. This is distinct from past readings that largely glorify heroism without acknowledging its complications.

Second, the research looks at how the main and subordinate characters talk to each other to show how the poem questions the heroic ideal by using diverse voices and points of view. This strategy helps us comprehend the social and political repercussions of heroism, especially when it comes to legacy and keeping the society stable.

Third, the study integrates literary analysis to cultural and historical critique by putting Beowulf in the perspective of the greater Anglo-Saxon world and current academic disputes. This structure helps us understand the poem's sad tone and its ideas about death and power better.

This study shows that there are things about Beowulf that haven't been looked at before, like how the poem criticises political instability. It also shows that there are new topics that need to be looked at.

6.3 Relevance to Modern Literary Studies and Broader Implications

Beowulf is a mediaeval epic, yet its themes of courage, legacy, and death are still important to talk about today when we talk about leadership, renown, and social duty. The poem says that relying on individual greatness is wrong, which is the opposite of how people nowadays tend to see heroic characters as perfect without thinking about how they damage the stability of the system and the community.

Also, the themes of impermanence and the limits of human effort give readers a timeless look at what it means to be human, reminding them that all glory will fade over time. This way of thinking makes people think more deeply and critically about how literature and society evaluate heroism and legacy.

This study not only adds to the canon of mediaeval literary criticism, but it also adds to bigger conversations about how cultures make and perceive memory and heroism.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

This study wanted to look at Beowulf not just as a heroic story, but also as a critical look at the flaws in the heroic code, especially when it comes to death, legacy, and political stability. The research has shown that the poem praises acts of bravery but also has a lot of reservations about how effective heroism will be as a basis for long-lasting social order. This was done by critically analyzing the text and looking at scholarly opinions.

Beowulf's life, from his fights with Grendel and Grendel's mother as a child to his final fight with the dragon, shows how brave it is to be brave on your own and how risky it may be. His thirst for fame fits with the Anglo-Saxon idea of a hero, but it also shows how unstable things can grow when people try to lead and protect themselves. When Beowulf died, the Geatish kingdom perished. This shows that even the most famous hero can't protect the future all by himself. The mournful tone of the poem is also assisted by the parts played by Hrothgar, Wiglaf, and the dragon. Hrothgar warns against becoming too pompous, Wiglaf shows both loyalty and the limits of heroic succession, and the dragon stands for disaster that can't be avoided. These characters all assist to support the poem's main point, which is that heroism doesn't last.

In the end, Beowulf doesn't just give out rewards for battling well. Instead, it shows that fame doesn't last, legacy isn't powerful, and death is inevitable. The poem makes readers think about how important the heroic ethic is and how much it costs to put personal fame ahead of community power. This conclusion helps us see Beowulf as a book that both celebrates and examines the ideas of the time.

7.2 Limitations of the Study

There is a lot of material on Beowulf in this thesis, but it is not perfect. The study only looks at Beowulf in detail and doesn't compare it to other epics from the same time or later, which would have helped put it in context.

The study uses qualitative interpretative methods, which are based on academic discussion and textual evidence but can still be viewed in numerous ways. This study might not have been able to fully explain how multiple translations and versions of *Beowulf* can modify the meaning of some words.

The scope also largely looks at the themes and characters of heroism, mortality, and political stability, rather than the language, style, or mythology that also add to the poem.

7.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Building on the insights and limitations of this study, future research could pursue several directions:

Comparative Studies: Analyzing *Beowulf* alongside other heroic epics from different cultures or periods could illuminate shared themes and divergent treatments of heroism and legacy.

Interdisciplinary Approaches: Combining literary analysis with historical, anthropological, or philosophical perspectives may deepen understanding of how heroic ideals function within societies.

Reception Studies: Investigating how *Beowulf*'s heroic ideals have been interpreted, adapted, or challenged in later literature and popular culture would provide valuable insight into the poem's lasting impact.

Linguistic and Stylistic Analysis: Further exploration of the poem's language, poetic devices, and oral tradition elements could enhance appreciation of how form shapes meaning in its critique of heroism.

By pursuing these avenues, scholars can continue to unravel the complexities of *Beowulf* and its enduring relevance.

Supplementary Parts

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(Examines elegiac tone and mortality.)
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4. Online Academic Resources

- The *Beowulf* entry at the **Medieval Institute** by the University of Notre Dame:
<https://medieval.nd.edu/medieval-english-literature/beowulf/>
(Reliable scholarly summaries and resources.)
- British Library: *Beowulf and the Anglo-Saxon World*
<https://www.bl.uk/anglo-saxons/articles/beowulf-and-the-anglo-saxon-world>
(Contextual information on the poem's cultural background.)

Appendix

Appendix A: Character Chart

Character	Role	Relation to Heroic Code	Notes
Beowulf	Protagonist / Hero	Embodies heroic ideals of courage, loyalty, and glory	Central figure whose legacy is analyzed
Hrothgar	Danish King	Represents wisdom and the limits of heroism	Provides a critical perspective on pride
Wiglaf	Loyal Warrior	Exemplifies loyalty, but also exposes community weakness	Last loyal thane supporting Beowulf
Dragon	Antagonist	Symbolizes inevitable destruction and mortality	Catalyst for Beowulf's final battle
Grendel	Monster	Embodies chaos and threat to social order	Represents external evil confronting heroism
Grendel's Mother	Monster	Revenge figure	Challenges Beowulf's strength and valor

Appendix B: Timeline of Key Events in *Beowulf*

Event	Description	Importance
Beowulf fights Grendel	First heroic feat establishing reputation	Demonstrates courage and strength
Battle with Grendel's Mother	Tests Beowulf's resolve and leadership	Reinforces heroic identity
Beowulf becomes king	Assumes political responsibility	Shows transition from warrior to ruler
Final battle with Dragon	Leads to Beowulf's death	Highlights mortality and legacy issues
Funeral and Burial	Commemoration of Beowulf	Symbolizes impermanence of glory

Appendix C: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Heroic Code	A set of cultural values emphasizing bravery, loyalty, and honor in warrior societies.
Elegy	A mournful, reflective poem or tone expressing loss.
Legacy	The lasting impact or reputation left by an individual.
Kinship	Social bonds based on family and loyalty.
Ring-giver	A lord or king who distributes treasure to loyal followers.