

Beowulf: Historical Context

Middle schoolers might be surprised to discover that their teachers find it as daunting to teach certain texts as they do to read them. For me, the thought of teaching *Beowulf* to 8th graders is as frightening as doing hand-to-hand combat with Grendel himself. Visions of indignant teens crying, “I don’t get it!” dance in my head.

My students would need some historical context before reading *Beowulf*. But what information, and how much of it, should I share? Blau and Rosenblatt offer practical answers to these questions. Both believe that teachers must stop being authoritative disseminators of information and trust their students to make meaning of a text. Rosenblatt believes that students will connect with texts organically through activating prior knowledge and experiences. However, she cautions us against mnemonic irrelevance whereby “personal experience leads to interpretation that is unsupported by the text” (77). Blau posits that teachers can avoid this problem by supplying relevant but “limited preparatory reading” (87).

According to Rosenblatt, students bring their own moral code to reading (89). In order to allow students to activate their moral codes and get in touch with the historical significance of family genealogy/loyalty ideas evident in *Beowulf*, I will pose these anticipation guide questions in a pre-reading exercise:

- When you introduce yourself to people, do you always reveal your last name and the identity of your parents?
- How do you feel about royal families/birthright leadership?
- Have you/would you ever put yourself in harm’s way to help somebody else? Why or why not? Would your decision be influenced by whether the person is a relative/a friend/a stranger? Explain.
- If you help somebody, do you feel that person owes you something in return? If somebody helps you, do you owe him or her something?

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 7:32 AM

Comment [1]: Yikes! I’m sorry that I made you think of this . . .

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Comment [2]: I had difficulty teaching this poem in high school, but I think it had less to do with the difficulty of the reading than the cultural/historical differences.

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Comment [3]: I love this term.

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 7:34 AM

Comment [4]: Yes, but what would this be for a distant poem like *Beowulf*?

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 7:35 AM

Comment [5]: This is so great. I’m going to use this.

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 7:36 AM

Comment [6]: Would they have strong opinions about this?

- If a parent causes conflict or incurs debt, should the child be responsible?

I will project the cover artwork from 4 children's book versions of *Beowulf* and ask students to make predictions about the story based upon the images. My goal in using the anticipation guide and cover artwork would be to help students toward developing their own understanding that lineage, family loyalty, pride in name, and identity are extremely important ideas in *Beowulf*. Students will not simply be handed "a fund of ready-made, sharply crystallized ideas" (Rosenblatt 95) to regurgitate to me. These exercises will give students enough support to avoid mnemonic irrelevance, and to formulate personal but reasonable readings.

Blau asserts that students should be given some limited background information. To that end, I will present the article, "William of Malmesbury: Genealogy of the Royal Family of Wessex", paying specific attention to the second paragraph, "Aethelwulf was the...born in the Ark" (*Beowulf* 93). We will discuss the fact that we know nothing of these men, except who fathered each one. Therein lies their entire identity.

Blau reminds us that teachers' apparent ease in reading challenging texts can be intimidating to students. He urges teachers to recognize what actually enables us to read challenging work so that we might provide instruction to replicate our knowledge for our students (88). The Malmesbury essay is a challenging one in that it is essentially a list presented within a thick block of print. I will model for my students what I did in order to clarify the essay for myself. In a "think-aloud" (Daniels 80) I will break the paragraph apart into a family tree in order to "go visual" with this information and make it more accessible. This provides an opportunity for me to model good metacognitive reading strategies and to show that sometimes, in order to get through a text myself, I must pull it apart, and manipulate it physically to make it easier to understand.

Once we have discussed the importance of identity, genealogy and parentage in *Beowulf*, we will be ready to delve into the work. Middle School students tend to have fierce loyalties to friends and family and strong opinions about what is just in relationships. With this social schema activated, and with this connection to the mores of the historical context of *Beowulf*, students should be ready to take on the

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Comment [7]: Which four are you referring to?

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Comment [8]: Good, explicit, word.

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 8:37 AM

Comment [9]: Would you address the fact that they link themselves back to Noah?

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 3:04 PM

Comment [10]: Good point.

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 3:05 PM

Comment [11]: You mean, apparent to the students, right?

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 3:05 PM

Comment [12]: This is great because it can be applied to many other kinds of reading.

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 3:06 PM

Comment [13]: As in fair?

reading. I believe in reading for a purpose, so the purpose we will set is reading to identify importance of lineage, family loyalty, and identity.

We will focus on the three following sets of lines:

Lines 1-85: (Familial male lineage of the leaders of the Danes is established.) I will do an interactive read aloud and provide a family tree sheet that students can fill in as I read and we stop to discuss. After the reading, students will collaborate with peers to compare their family trees. They will consult the text to correct any discrepancies. I will have the template on the Smartboard so that, during share out, we can complete the family tree to make sure everybody has the accurate information. Students will refer to and work with this family tree throughout the reading by taking notes on character relationships, motivations, conflicts, and alliances. It will serve as an ongoing reminder of the importance of family genealogy and loyalty.

Lines 456- 472: (Hrothgar recalls that he once helped Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow. Now Beowulf defends Hrothgar and his people from Grendel.) We revisit our anticipation guide question of whether a child should feel obligated to repay the debt of a parent. We will discuss Beowulf's motivation for doing this deed for his father, in spite of the fact that his father has died and he could be killed himself. What does this tell us about the importance of the father-son bond/relationship in this time period? What does this tell us about the mores surrounding family connections in this time period? Would students keep or change their original answer after considering the danger Beowulf faces in confronting Grendel.

Lines 2367-2390: (Beowulf refuses to take the throne from Hygelac's son, even though it is offered to him. Instead he supports Hygelac's much less competent son during his reign.) Students will complete a journal assignment from Beowulf's point of view. In *Beowulf* we are simply told that he refused the throne, but we do not know whether he struggled with the decision, or whether he felt so deeply bound to the idea of family loyalty that he didn't even consider taking the throne. Students can try to grasp the mores of the time and determine whether he (or they) would make the same decision today. Again, a consideration of Beowulf's decision will reinforce the historical context we have discussed throughout the unit.

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Comment [14]: Do you mean reading Beowulf?

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 3:08 PM

Comment [15]: A family tree template?

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 3:08 PM

Comment [16]: What a great way to establish this lineage focus!

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 3:10 PM

Comment [17]: This is a fantastic guiding question.

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 3:10 PM

Comment [18]: ?

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 3:10 PM

Comment [19]: You read this carefully, didn't you?

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 3:11 PM

Comment [20]: Would this be kept in a physical notebook?

We will have an ongoing conversation about how characters continually identify themselves as “son of...” or “kinsman of...” This serves as a constant reminder that it is family loyalty that motivates characters to act or not act, to take risks or chances, and to forge alliances with other characters.

Students will complete a culminating project of creating a photo/memory album for one of the characters in *Beowulf*. This would be a meaningful way for students to creatively represent a character’s life, interpersonal connections, and experiences within its historical context. Students would caption each picture in the first person, discussing the events, people, and feelings surrounding each of the pictures included.

All of a sudden, the thought of teaching *Beowulf* to 8th graders does not seem so daunting. Students gain a “way in” through the lens of historical context (genealogy, kinship, family loyalty) and this allows them to bring themselves into the reading, enjoy the literature, and ultimately feel like successful readers of a challenging text. Having pre-reading activities, discussions, writing exercises, and post-reading projects will help students read, process, and feel connected to *Beowulf*.

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 3:11 PM

Comment [21]: This might be a useful point to introduce the appositional structure of the poem.

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 3:12 PM

Comment [22]: Is that all it is?

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 3:12 PM

Comment [23]: I would love to read more about this, but the length of the paper prohibits it.

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 3:13 PM

Comment [24]: The character’s?

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 3:13 PM

Comment [25]: Or after further contemplation?

Alexander Mueller 7/31/12 3:13 PM

Comment [26]: This would be a great accomplishment.

Works Cited

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- To say that I'm impressed by this approach to historical context would be an understatement. Historical context is elusive for this poem and I greatly appreciate how you break down William's text to its core focus on genealogy. While the battles often play center stage in most readings of the poem, I'm delighted to see that your strategy centers on the familial relationships. I think this might help students to gain greater insight into the character's and their motivations than any battle scene does.

I guess my main question would be this: could you realistically do such an approach with your students given the time it would take and other pressing curricular demands? Sometime I hope we can discuss this because I fear that most teachers are forced to "cover" texts like *Beowulf* rather than asking students to engage with them in such an intimate way. I greatly prefer your approach, but I don't know (honestly, because I'm not in your position) if this technique is doable.

Great work.

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