Teaching Beowulf *through Cultural Studies: Heroism and Adaptation across Historical Conjunctures*

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ABSTRACT: This article examines *Beowulf* through the lens of Cultural Studies, arguing that the figure of the hero offers a productive entry point for exploring how texts articulate relationships between language, culture, and power across different historical conjunctures. Beginning with the Old English poem, the analysis reconstructs the heroic ideal and the value systems encoded in the epic, focusing on its negotiation of *wyrd* and Christian providence, its emphasis on communal bonds and the politics of the hall, and its depiction of monstrosity at the margins of human society. The discussion then traces how this heroic pattern is reworked in later appropriations, from Victorian efforts to establish *Beowulf* as a national epic to Reagan-era science-fiction rewrites to early twenty-first-century film adaptations such as Sturla Gunnarsson's *Beowulf and Grendel* (2005) and Robert Zemeckis's *Beowulf* (2007), which variously humanise Grendel, question martial heroism, and stage the decline of the protagonist. On this theoretical basis, the article presents a teaching-learning unit for Italian upper secondary schools that combines socio-constructivist approaches with the conceptual tools of Cultural Studies. The unit invites students to read *Beowulf* and its adaptations as culturally situated representations of heroism, community, and otherness instead of as isolated 'heritage' texts. Conceived as an example rather than a prescriptive template, it offers a methodological model that teacher candidates in *Concorsi* and *Percorsi abilitanti* can adapt in designing their own units and illustrates how *Beowulf* supports the development of literary, cultural, and digital competences in contemporary classrooms.

THE IDEA OF THE HERO: FROM ANCIENT EPIC TO POPULAR CULTURE

Over a millennium ago, an anonymous Anglo-Saxon poet—or perhaps several—composed the long poem now known as *Beowulf*. Set in a legendary Scandinavia of the fifth century but committed to writing several centuries later, probably between 685 and 800 in Northumbria or Mercia, the poem survives in a single manuscript, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV (Williamson 22). Like much Old English poetry, *Beowulf* emerged from a vibrant oral tradition before being transmitted into writing, preserving in its verses the memory of a warrior culture shaped by heroism, loyalty, and fate. The narrative unfolds through three epic combats that mark the stages of a hero's life: from youthful daring in the battles against Grendel and his mother, through mature kingship burdened by the responsibilities of rule, to sacrificial death in the fight against the dragon.

Beowulf celebrated events already remote for its earliest audience, beginning with the funeral of the historical figure of Scyld Scefing, founder of the Danish dynasty around 400 CE (Coronato 41). It evokes a world governed by war, wealth, violence, and the mystery of the elements, where the supreme power was *wyrd*, destiny (Sanesi 9). Yet, as J.R.R. Tolkien first noted, the poem is also imbued with Christian sensibility, being composed at a time of transition, when a pagan Germanic-Scandinavian society structured around heroic honour was giving way to a Christianised one (Heaney 10).

What is most remarkable is that this ancient poem continues to fascinate readers and audiences today. In an age of digital media and mass entertainment, few early medieval texts have enjoyed such a persistent and varied afterlife. Modern audiences who cannot read a line of Old English still encounter *Beowulf* through multiple retellings and adaptations: John Gardner's *Grendel*, Neil Gaiman's parodies and film scripts, the operatic *Grendel*, Benjamin Bagby's performances on the reconstructed Sutton Hoo lyre, and countless cinematic, musical, and comic reinterpretations. The poem has appeared in *Star Trek Voyager*, in rock music, and even in newspaper editorials where Grendel becomes a metaphor for political voracity (Osborn 341-372).

The reason for *Beowulf*'s lasting appeal lies in the elasticity of its central figure. In the poem, Beowulf embodies the archetypal hero—brave, loyal, generous, and self-sacrificing. He is not presented as flawless, but he is powerful and influential, endowed with the traits that his cultural context deemed essential to heroism: exceptional strength and courage, unwavering devotion to lord and duty, and a strong sense of fairness. Crucially, he does not succumb to greed, the sin most likely to generate social fracture within his world, and his declared aim is the pursuit of *lof* and *dōm*, praise and lasting glory (Risden 5-6). In this sense, the poem frames Beowulf's encounters with the three monsters not just as feats of individual prowess but as ordeals whose

consequences are chiefly social and political, for the poet is invested in a "practical politics of civilization", in which virtue consists in actions that sustain communal bonds, and vice lies in those that disrupt human brotherhood (Kroll 117).

In this worldview, the hero's identity is inseparable from his role within a fragile community. The narrative places primary value on human interdependence: an individual's good depends on the goodwill of others, and a tribe's survival and level of civilization rest on its ability to coexist harmoniously with neighbouring peoples (Kroll 119). Beowulf thus emerges as an archetypal hero in that he embodies, in his own person, "the struggles and trials of his people" (Fisher 171-172). The poem's narrative economy reinforces this conception. Beowulf's fifty-year reign following his victory over Grendel's mother is largely omitted, while the poet devotes attention to a series of structurally parallel trials—each comprising a call to adventure, preparation, combat, and aftermath—that test the hero "as an individual, as a tribal or culture hero, and as the demigod or universal hero" who attempts to bridge "the gulf between the actions of life and its meaning" in a hostile environment (Fisher 172-173). In combining the roles of warrior, protector, and guardian, Beowulf is as much a fighter as a stabilising force for the communities he serves (Fisher 173).

This article contends that the category of the hero offers a fruitful entry point for teaching *Beowulf* through the critical paradigms of Cultural Studies, so that both the poem and its later reworkings can be examined as arenas in which cultural values, identities, and power relations are negotiated. Rather than treating the hero as a stable or universal figure, Cultural Studies foregrounds the historical processes through which heroic status is constructed and contested across different contexts and media. Cultural analysis attends to the codes, discourses, and assumptions that organise texts: who appears within them, whose voices are heard, how narratives are framed, which recurring terms and images are mobilised, and which broader social and linguistic conditions they presuppose (Davis 56). Applied to *Beowulf*, this approach raises questions about who counts as a hero, how heroism is named and symbolically marked, and which systems of values are naturalised or unsettled in the Old English poem and its modern adaptations.

Although 'hero' does not appear among the entries in Raymond Williams's *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, the term nonetheless proves analytically useful here. Treated as a provisional keyword, it allows a shift from a purely thematic interest in exemplary individuals towards an investigation of the discursive, social, and institutional frameworks through which such figures acquire meaning in specific historical conjunctures. Thinking with 'hero' also provides a bridge between literary analysis and pedagogy, foregrounding how heroes are represented in texts as well as how those representations are taken up in the classroom to reproduce or challenge particular normative and ethical frameworks.

As Stuart Hall argues, Cultural Studies is best understood as a discursive formation: "a cluster (or *formation*) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society" (6). In other words, Cultural Studies is constituted by recognisable ways of speaking about cultural objects, bringing them into focus

through key concepts such as representation, identity, and power; these shared 'language' and concerns condition what can be seen and taught about texts in many institutional settings, including the school classroom. From this perspective, *Beowulf* itself does not change; rather, what changes is the way it is presented to learners. In a traditional historical-literary curriculum, the poem is introduced as the first masterpiece of English literature and a testimony to Anglo-Saxon civilisation, with attention paid to formal features (e.g., epic structure, *kenningar*, alliteration), manuscript transmission, and canon formation. Within a Cultural Studies orientation, by contrast, *Beowulf* becomes a lens through which to examine how cultures construct heroism, community, and otherness, and how those constructions are reshaped in contemporary adaptations across media. Engaging with the poem through this alternative "formation" (Hall 6) invites students to develop a critical awareness of language, ideology, and identity in both the Anglo-Saxon world and the present.

The decision to focus, in the following teaching unit, on the Old English epic as well as on two contemporary cinematic adaptations—Sturla Gunnarsson's *Beowulf and Grendel* (2005) and Robert Zemeckis's *Beowulf* (2007)—serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it responds to the Cultural Studies imperative to analyse popular cultural forms alongside canonical texts as part of the same field of social practice; on the other, it enables a contextually sensitive investigation of how different moments and media refashion the heroic figure and the value systems encoded in the poem. This approach therefore departs from Matthew Arnold's hierarchical conception of culture in *Culture and Anarchy* as "the best [that] has been thought and said in the world" (6), which would elevate *Beowulf* as a monument of 'high' literature while relegating later popular appropriations to a secondary status. Instead, it aligns the discussion with a Cultural Studies perspective that regards the Anglo-Saxon poem and contemporary films alike as culturally significant, conjuncturally embedded articulations of heroism, identity, and power.

To describe these texts as 'conjuncturally embedded' is to follow Lawrence Grossberg's account of Cultural Studies as a project of conjunctural analysis: a mode of inquiry that is "embedded, descriptive, and historically and contextually specific", dealing with how particular formations of meaning and value temporarily cohere at given moments (qtd. in Barker and Jane 4). Read conjuncturally, *Beowulf* and its later reworkings cease to appear as timeless expressions of a universal heroic pattern but register as products of distinct historical moments in which configurations of power, identity, and belief are expressed through specific signifying practices (Barker and Jane 9). The task, then, is to reconstruct the value systems encoded in the Old English text and to trace how those systems are reaccentuated in subsequent appropriations.

In the Old English *Beowulf*, the hero is the eponymous warrior who arrives in Hrothgar's land, preceded by his fame and honoured by the blood of giants and sea monsters slain in battle (Coronato 40-41). Consistent with the logic of a feuding society, Beowulf is described as *ēacen*—extraordinary and excessive—possessing strength thirty times that of an ordinary man; yet he is also cunning and capable of prophecy, his wisdom a craft-like skill that enables him to emerge victorious from battle (Koch xv-xvii). At the same time, the Christian sensibility that informs the poem turns it into a

meditation on the human condition and the transience to which even heroes are subject, so that Germanic ideals of loyalty and vengeance are refracted by those of Christian judgement and grace (Koch l-liii; Wilson Tietjen 164-169).

Both *wyrd* and the Christian God governed this world. If fate irrevocably fixes the circumstances of death, human action prior to that moment is imagined as falling under divine scrutiny and as the basis for honour and favour (Wilson Tietjen 164-165). Accordingly, even though Beowulf exemplifies Christian virtues such as mildness and humility, his worthiness of God's favour rests above all on his exceptional strength and courage. Virtue remains tied to the fulfilment of heroic ideals of personal prowess and to the pursuit of earthly *lof*—the fame that survives the individual and offers a tenuous compensation for mortality; what ultimately renders death endurable, the poem suggests, is the expectation that one's deeds will persist in the memory of the living (Wilson Tietjen 168-169).

Many protagonists of modern novels, films and works are not precisely the 'canonical' heroes we can think of.
Here is a list of anti-heroes in contemporary English-speaking culture. Can you add other anti-heroes to this list?
*The Joker (*2019), *Venom* (2018), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2014); *Maleficent* (2014), *Cruella* (2021), *Loki* (2021), Walter White in *Breaking Bad* (2008), and Gru in *Despicable Me* (2010).

Based on Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Pantheon Books, 1949), we can derive some characteristics of the hero. Try to find the traits of the anti-hero while filling in the following graph:

The Hero…	The Anti-hero…
- Responds to the call to adventure - Crosses a threshold - Possesses courage and commitment - Undergoes trials and tests - Experiences (either symbolic or real) death and rebirth - Gains a boon or revelation - Is often aided by mentors or (supernatural) helpers - Reconciles opposites, restores or renews order - Serves collective destiny rather than personal desire - Becomes a symbol rather than merely a person	

Now work on the following questions:
- Is the anti-hero so different from the hero?
- Do we sympathise more with a heroic character or an anti-heroic character? Why? What can this imply in the way we behave?

- Focus on one of the anti-heroes mentioned before. For example, Walter White exemplifies a contemporary rearticulation of cultural values in which individual success, autonomy, and self-realization are prioritized and privileged over collective ethical responsibility. Thus *Breaking Bad* frames moral transgression as an intelligible, if not excusable, response to precarity while empathizing with power-seeking (male) individuals so long as their actions are narratively justified. Can we draw a connection between this shift of perspective in current representations and the ways in which certain cultural values are being rearticulated today?

The poem ends with Beowulf's funeral and the lament of a woman aware that the kingdom now stands exposed to external threats. This passage also alludes to two conceptions of the soul—the migrating, magical spirit and the Christian *sāwol*—thereby further denoting the fusion of Germanic and Christian values (Koch l-liii). Before facing the dragon, Beowulf is both the warrior seeking eternal glory and the man gripped by doubt:

> The wise man believed he had bitterly provoked
> the Wielder, the Eternal Lord, over the old law.
> His breast welled within with darksome thoughts,
> and these were hardly customary to him. (ll. 2329-2332)

From the nineteenth century onwards, this heroic pattern has been repeatedly revised to serve new cultural and political agendas. The popularisation of *Beowulf* in the Victorian era, building on Sharon Turner's 1805 critical account and John Mitchell Kemble's 1837 full English translation, is bound up with Romantic nationalism and the search for an exclusively English national epic. Translations and retellings from this period often present the "Anglo-Saxons" as "our ancestors" and, in some cases, deploy the poem as a didactic tool to legitimise Britain's imperial ambitions or to buttress ideologies of racial and cultural superiority, as exemplified by Henrietta Elizabeth Marshall's narratives for children (Killilea 285-286, 289).

A comparable dynamic can be detected in late twentieth-century prose reworkings. For instance, *The Legacy of Heorot* (1987), co-authored by Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle, and Steven Barnes, relocates the story to the colonisation of a distant planet, where human settlers confront indigenous 'grendels'. Written in the context of the Reagan era and shaped by the authors' conservative political orientations, the novel has often been read as endorsing an imperialist, militaristic, and macho ethos characteristic of its historical moment (Killilea 286-287), even though its intermittent adoption of the monsters' perspective simultaneously complicates this ideological framing, introducing moral tensions that undermine a triumphalist narrative of human expansion (Livingston and Sutton 6).

Like their source text, rewritings of *Beowulf* are situated within "a time and a place, a society and a culture" and never exist in a vacuum (Hutcheon 142). As Stewart Brookes observes in relation to cinema, *Beowulf* has been used as "a springboard to explore

contemporary sensibilities", with filmmakers adapting the poem through the tropes and formulae of genres such as horror, action, and science fiction to make it resonate with modern audiences (Brookes 81-82). *Beowulf and Grendel* is strongly indebted to Gardner's *Grendel* in its effort to humanise the monster: Grendel is endowed with emotional interiority, his violence is contextualised through trauma, and Hrothgar's actions are reimagined as morally compromised. In doing so, the film destabilises conventional alignments between martial prowess and ethical heroism, inviting viewers to reassess who is recognised as 'human' (Brookes 86-87). By contrast, Zemeckis's *Beowulf* pursues a different strategy. Besides blending spectacular visual effects with elements drawn from epic, action, horror, and fantasy, the film puts forward a markedly conservative moral framework. Its emphasis on inherited guilt, sexual transgression, and the burdens of fame recasts Beowulf as a flawed hero whose liaison with Grendel's mother corrupts his kingship and the future of his people, while sidelining many of the poem's original value structures such as *comitatus* and the tension between *wyrd* and providence (Forni 46, 48, 50-51). In parallel, the film stages a parable of heroic decline that culminates in Beowulf's explicit rejection of heroic exceptionalism: acknowledging failure, he seeks atonement by mirroring Grendel's death and asks to be remembered not as a hero or king, but as a fallible man (Brookes 90-91).

In the teaching-learning unit outlined below, some of these articulations of *Beowulf*—as archetypal hero and protector in the Old English poem, and as ambivalent or declining hero in contemporary film—are placed in dialogue so that students can map how distinct historical conjunctures reconfigure relationships between heroism, community, and otherness, and conceptualise adaptation as a culturally situated process rather than a solely aesthetic one.

Moreover, the choice of *Beowulf* as the focus of the proposed unit is motivated by curricular considerations. In most Italian *licei*, the third year marks students' formal introduction to English Literature and Culture, and *Beowulf* is typically the first literary text they encounter. A brief survey of widely adopted anthologies confirms its canonical status: Zanichelli's *Performer Heritage* and *Compact Performer. Shaping Ideas* include excerpts from Beowulf's voyage to Heorot, the battle with Grendel, and the hero's funeral (Spiazzi *et al.* 50-56; 25-26); Rizzoli's *LitHUB Compact* presents the fight with the progeny of Cain and the closing funeral scene (Bruschi *et al.* 34-39); and Pearson's *Amazing Minds* likewise features the final *fitt* of the poem (Spicci *et al.* 42-45).

Nevertheless, for teachers who do not plan to include *Beowulf* in their syllabi, the activities proposed in the unit are intended to be transferable. The keyword 'hero' offers a vantage point from which to approach similarly multifaceted figures across literary history: Satan in *Paradise Lost*, trapped within his own ego yet compellingly modern in his defiance; the conflicted and self-conscious Byronic hero of the Romantic imagination; and the soldiers of the First World War—celebrated in patriotic discourse but humanised in the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: THE TEACHING-LEARNING UNIT PLAN

The teaching-learning unit presented in this article is proposed for Italian upper secondary schools and for teacher candidates engaged in *Concorsi* and *Percorsi abilitanti*, both of which require the planning of structured didactic units. In line with current ministerial regulations, candidates are expected to demonstrate not only disciplinary competence, but also the ability to design coherent learning paths, select appropriate methodologies, and reflect critically on pedagogical choices.

The unit responds to these expectations by providing a concrete example of how literary study can be integrated with cultural analysis, not as a prescriptive model but as a flexible framework that candidates may adapt to different contexts, class profiles, or textual corpora. It is anchored in careful micro-planning that considers both the educational needs of the class group and the constraints of the school context. Pedagogical strategies, timeframes, organisational patterns, and resources are chosen to foster inclusive participation and the progressive development of disciplinary and transferable competences. While it is structured around clearly defined objectives, activities, and assessment opportunities, the unit is also designed to remain adaptable, allowing teachers to adjust their plans in response to classroom dynamics.

CLASS PROFILE

The lessons described below are designed for a notional third-year class in a *liceo delle scienze umane* in a mid-sized town, consisting of twenty-four students, three of whom present special educational needs. These include a student with compensated dyslexia, one experiencing economic disadvantage, and one diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Albeit fictional, the class reflects a composite profile based on three real groups of learners with whom the activities proposed in this unit have been implemented.

DURATION

The teaching-learning unit is scheduled for the month of November and unfolds over five hours, with an additional hour devoted to the summative assessment (Fig. 1). Each lesson lasts fifty-five minutes, a portion of which, at the beginning and end of the session, is allocated to routine classroom procedures such as roll call, preparation of materials and digital equipment (e.g., switching on the Interactive Whiteboard [IWB]), and the assignment or review of homework.

LESSON	FOCUS	MAIN LEARNING OBJECTIVES	CORE ACTIVITIES
1	*Introducing* Beowulf	Activate prior knowledge of epic poetry; understand historical and cultural context; acquire key vocabulary	Warm-up discussion; presentation on Cotton MS Vitellius A XV; vocabulary and word-formation exercises; plot overview; homework: short oral presentation on a contemporary epic artefact
2	*The Heroic Ideal and the Moral Universe of* Beowulf	Identify core values of Anglo-Saxon community; explore the coexistence of pagan and Christian values	Homework presentations; brainstorming on "What is a hero?" (Mentimeter/IWB); contextual input; close reading; guided discussion on heroism and morality
3	*Heroism and the Monstrous Other:* Beowulf *and Grendel*	Analyse the contrastive construction of hero and monster through language and imagery	Guided reading of selected passages; group activity; synthesis discussion; short reflective writing
4	*The End of the Hero:* Beowulf's *Death and Funeral*	Interpret the symbolic significance of Beowulf's death; recognise the elegiac closure of the heroic world	Rapid-fire recap; contextualisation of the final episode; reading of *fitt* XLIII; discussion on the funeral scene; homework: collaborative mind map
5	Beowulf *in Film*	Compare literary and filmic representations of heroism; evaluate how the heroic model is reconfigured	Sharing of mind maps; guided viewing and discussion of film clips (*Beowulf*; *Beowulf and Grendel*); comparative analysis; homework
6	*Assessment and Reflection*	Consolidate linguistic, interpretive, and cultural competences; demonstrate critical understanding and creativity	Choice among three assessment modes: (1) individual oral speech on a contemporary hero; (2) group AI-mediated creative writing; (3) individual AI dialogue on the poem

Table 1 The six phases of the teaching-learning unit

GENERAL AND SPECIFIC AIMS

The proposed teaching-learning unit is designed in coherence with the *Indicazioni nazionali per i licei*, particularly those for the *liceo delle scienze umane*, as it promotes the development of critical reading, interpretive competence, and reflective use of language through the study of literary and audiovisual texts. In line with the CEFR, the unit also aims to strengthen students' ability to use English for interaction, interpretation, and mediation through guided discussion, comparative analysis, and short reflective writing tasks. The use of digital resources supports comprehension and metacognitive awareness, while fostering a responsible engagement with digital tools.

General Aims

- To promote critical engagement with literary and audiovisual texts as culturally and historically situated artefacts, enabling students to recognise how representations of heroism, otherness, and community reflect and negotiate social values and power relations.
- To develop students' ability to interpret and compare texts across different media and historical contexts, raising awareness of how narrative forms, genres, and modes of representation influence meaning-making.

Specific Aims

- To analyse the construction of heroism and monstrosity in selected passages from *Beowulf*, identifying linguistic, narrative, and symbolic strategies through which the poem defines social order, exclusion, and communal values.
- To compare the Old English poem with contemporary film adaptations (*Beowulf and Grendel* and *Beowulf*), pondering how changes in medium, genre, and cultural context reshape the representation of the hero and the ethical frameworks underlying the narrative.
- To express informed interpretations in English through oral discussion, short written texts, and visual-conceptual tools, using textual evidence and key interpretive concepts to articulate critical judgements about cultural representations.

PREREQUISITES

To participate effectively in the activities proposed in this unit, students are expected to possess a set of basic content-related, linguistic, and transferable prerequisites. At the level of subject knowledge, learners should have a preliminary understanding of the Anglo-Saxon period, including its historical and social organisation, key cultural features relevant to *Beowulf*, and the main characteristics of Old English literature, such as its roots in orality, the role of the *scop*, and the later transition to manuscript culture following Christianisation.

From a linguistic point of view, students are expected to have reached at least a B1+ level of proficiency according to the CEFR. They should demonstrate familiarity with word-formation processes (e.g., settle → settlement → settlers; loyal → loyalty) as well as competence in keyword sentence transformation exercises to support comprehension and reworking of textual materials in English.

As for transferable competences and attitudes, students should demonstrate a disposition towards cooperative learning, an emerging ability to take notes efficiently, and a willingness to participate actively in pair and group activities.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The unit plan is grounded in a socio-constructivist approach to learning, which places the learner at the centre of the educational process and conceives the teacher as a facilitator of learning rather than a transmitter of knowledge. The teacher's task is to design and guide learning experiences that enable students to build understanding through active participation, collaboration, and reflection. Successful facilitation requires careful and responsive planning for each class, ensuring that learners are progressively supported towards autonomy.

Students are encouraged to take an active role by engaging with tasks that require initiative and critical thinking. The teacher, in turn, acts as a coach, modelling strategies and behaviours, accompanying students through guided practice, and offering structured opportunities for reflection and self-assessment.

Within this framework, digital technologies are envisioned as aids that enhance teaching and learning, not as replacements for the teacher's role. Their use is underpinned by pedagogical intentionality: technology serves to expand access to knowledge, diversify learning pathways, and stimulate creativity, yet it always remains subordinate to human mediation and ethical awareness. The teacher is thus indispensable as the architect and mediator of meaningful learning experiences, capable of critically integrating technological resources into a coherent educational design (Caon 7-11).

With regard to didactic strategies, the unit places particular emphasis on introducing elements of novelty to sustain students' interest and motivation across the sequence of lessons and within individual sessions. The use of varied stimuli and formats helps to maintain cognitive curiosity and counteract repetitive or passive learning behaviours (Garrettson *et al.* 65-66). At the same time, the unit retains certain recurring patterns that provide continuity and a sense of routine, such as opening each lesson with homework correction or a brief recap activity based on short, focused questions reviewing the previous session.

Variety is further pursued through the organisation of classroom interaction, which alternates between teacher-led whole-class activities, pair work, and small-group work involving three to four students. These groups are deliberately heterogeneous in terms of linguistic proficiency and learning styles, so as to foster peer support, reciprocal scaffolding, and exposure to diverse perspectives (see Ghanbari and Abdolrezapour).

TOOLS AND MATERIALS

The unit makes use of a range of teaching and learning aids intended to promote active, inclusive, and technologically integrated learning. Whenever available, lessons are conducted with the support of an IWB, which enables the display and annotation of digital textbook materials and the collective organisation of vocabulary and ideas emerging during classroom interaction. The possibility of saving and sharing materials

also enhances accessibility, allowing students who are absent or who require additional support to revisit content asynchronously.

Where an IWB is unavailable, lessons rely on the print textbook or its digital version accessed through the publisher's platform on students' tablets or Chromebooks. In accordance with ministerial guidelines, smartphones are used only for specific, pre-planned activities aligned with a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) approach and when their pedagogical value is clearly justified.

Summative assessment tasks involving AI-assisted activities may be carried out either in the school's IT laboratory or at home, without requiring specialised equipment. To ensure digital equity, all technological tools employed are open-source, freemium, or already available to students, thus avoiding economic or infrastructural barriers to participation (Trevisan 156-162).

LESSON 1—INTRODUCING *BEOWULF*

The opening lesson combines direct instruction, guided discussion, and interactive tasks to maintain students' attention and activate prior knowledge. The lesson begins with a brief whole-class discussion in which students recall key features of the epic genre, drawing on texts such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, studied in the first two years of high school. Building on research on prior knowledge activation (cf. Ausubel), this activity helps students make conceptual links between classical and Anglo-Saxon epic traditions and prepares the schemata needed to approach *Beowulf*.

The teacher then uses the IWB to project images of Cotton MS Vitellius A XV, now held at the British Library, and gives information on its provenance, dating, and historical significance. Students are told that *Beowulf* was composed in Old English and survives in a single manuscript, so that the poem can be viewed not only as a literary work but also as a cultural artefact that exemplifies the transition from orality to writing in medieval England.

Since this lesson forms part of the broader syllabus of *English Language and Civilization*, attention is given to language development. Key vocabulary related to both the literary and material dimensions of the text—such as 'setting', 'character', 'monastery', 'scribe', 'collection', 'archive', and 'preservation'—is introduced and consolidated. To further the idea that meaning can be expressed through different lexical forms, short word-formation exercises may be proposed, possibly supported by AI-based tools, as illustrated in the following example:

> The monks were responsible for the careful _____ of ancient texts. (preserve)
> The scribe's careful _____ shows great skill and accuracy. (write)
> The manuscript was damaged in a fire, but modern technology has allowed its partial _____. (recover)[1]

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[1] This word-formation exercise was generated through a prompt I engineered for an AI text-generation tool (ChatGPT). The prompt specified the system's role (teaching material designer), target level (B1+), topic (medieval manuscripts and *Beowulf*), number of items, and relevant lexical fields (history,

Activities of this kind help learners move beyond reliance on recalling the 'exact word'—a tendency that often results in hesitation or silence—and instead develop strategies of paraphrasing and reformulation.

A plot overview follows the initial contextual explanation. The teacher recounts the main narrative episodes, drawing attention to recurring patterns that contribute to the poem's epic quality, such as scenes of combat, funerals, banquets, and the performance of poetry in the hall. To strengthen this understanding and extend it beyond the text, a short oral presentation is assigned for the following lesson. Each student selects a contemporary cultural artefact (for example, a television series, film, novel, song, or video game) that displays features of epic narrative and delivers a three-minute presentation justifying the choice. The activity encourages recognition of the persistence of epic structures and themes in modern cultural production.

The final segment of the lesson focuses on the poetic language of *Beowulf*, specifically its use of alliteration and *kenningar*. After a concise explanation of these stylistic devices, the teacher introduces an interactive activity in which students infer the meanings of common *kenningar* such as 'whale-road' (sea), 'sky-candle' (sun), or 'battle-sweat' (blood). This activity provides a moment of playfulness within the lesson while remaining closely connected to the unit's linguistic and literary objectives. By lowering affective barriers, it favours engagement and comprehension, in line with Stephen Krashen's affective filter hypothesis (4-5). Teachers who wish to extend or further gamify this activity may draw on external resources, such as materials available through the CLPE website or activities like *Kenning Poems–NET* (https://iugonzlive.blob.core.windows.net/content/086cd1a0-658c-485b-abf1-0997bf b0e293). The session concludes with a brief recap of the main points and a reminder that the oral presentation constitutes the homework assignment for the next meeting.

LESSON 2—THE HERO AND THE VALUES OF *BEOWULF*

This lesson deepens students' understanding of *Beowulf* by analysing how the poem represents the hero and encodes a specific moral and cultural universe. It moves from students' everyday images of heroism to a historically situated view of the Anglo-Saxon heroic code, using close reading of key passages in a reliable modern English translation.

After the preliminary organisational moments (roll call, preparation of materials, etc.), the lesson opens with the oral presentations assigned at the end of the previous session. Two or three students deliver their two-to-three-minute contribution on a contemporary cultural artefact that displays epic features (e.g., a film, series, or graphic novel). The activity operates as a recall task and as a means of reinforcing conceptual understanding through analogy and transfer, highlighting continuities and differences between contemporary hero figures and *Beowulf*'s world.

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literature, preservation, manuscript terminology). The output was subsequently reviewed and, where necessary, revised for accuracy and suitability.

Following the oral presentations, the teacher sets up a brainstorming activity to elicit learners' existing representations of heroism, intended as the dominant words and images through which current culture talks about 'heroes'. When technological resources permit, the activity may be conducted with a survey application such as Mentimeter, a Student Response System (SRS) that allows students to submit words anonymously via their smartphones. The aggregated results are displayed in the form of a word cloud on the IWB, visually highlighting the most frequent items. The immediacy and collaborative nature of this digital tool ensure the representation of every student's contribution, including those who might otherwise participate less actively (Moorhouse and Kohnke 201-202).

Fig. 1 Cirrus visualisation (Voyant Tools) of students' lexical associations with the concept of 'hero'

Should technological or policy constraints make the use of smartphones impracticable, the same brainstorming can be implemented in low-tech form. The teacher may conduct the discussion orally with the entire class or adopt a Think-Pair-Share structure: first, students think individually about words or phrases they associate with the notion of 'hero'; then, they compare ideas with a partner; and, finally, pairs share their contributions, which the teacher records on the IWB to create a collectively generated lexical map.

Once the brainstorming is complete, the teacher comments on the most frequent or striking concepts that have emerged—such as bravery, protection, or justice—drawing attention to the emphasis on moral integrity and social responsibility alongside physical strength. Building on these observations, the class is invited to consider that these are not timeless qualities but part of a particular cultural discourse on heroism. This reflection leads into a historical re-contextualisation of the concept: the teacher

recalls that Anglo-Saxon society was organised around loyalty to the lord, courage in battle, and honour in death, and that the Christianisation of the text introduced notions of faith, humility, and divine justice. Students are asked to keep in mind this coexistence of the pagan heroic code and an emerging Christian ethos of kingship—the "good Christian king" as protector, giver, and moral exemplar, in the poem in part embodied by Hrothgar (Reynolds 35).

The class then proceeds to the close reading of a short passage from *Beowulf*—ll. 189-228, describing the hero's voyage to Heorot. Since not all classes may have access to a printed anthology, the teacher can project the text from a reliable online source such as Ophelia Eryn Hostetter's modern English translation, available through the Rutgers University Old English Poetry Project (https://oldenglishpoetry.camden.rutgers.edu/beowulf/).[2] The excerpt is displayed on the IWB so that all students can follow collectively while the teacher reads the passage aloud, modelling pronunciation, rhythm, and intonation.

The initial phase of the activity focuses on comprehension and stylistic awareness. The teacher guides students through a line-by-line reading, clarifying meaning and noting recurring stylistic devices such as alliteration, formulaic phrasing, and *kenningar* (for instance, "swan-road" or "surge-wood" [ll. 200, 208]). Students identify these features in the text and discuss their expressive effect.

At this stage, the objective is to familiarise learners with the language of epic and to show how sound, repetition, and imagery construct Beowulf's heroic profile before he even speaks at Hrothgar's court. The teacher draws attention to narrative details such as the orderly preparation of the ship, and the cooperation among companions as they "shoved out, […] the wood tightly bound", and the vessel moved "over the wavy sea, hurried by the wind", symbolically anticipating Beowulf's courage, leadership, and readiness for adventure as well as the importance of fellowship on the "swan-road" (ll. 215-217, 200).

A guided discussion follows, centred on *Beowulf*'s representation of heroism and community in the passage. Students work in small, heterogeneous groups to interpret both the actions and the values implicit in the scene. The teacher provides open-ended prompts derived from the class reading, such as:

1. Which specific words and images suggest Beowulf's leadership and courage during the voyage? How do they reflect the expectations of his society?
2. How does the depiction of the sailors working together at sea contribute to our understanding of loyalty and community in the Anglo-Saxon world?
3. Do you notice any hints of religious or spiritual meaning in the way the voyage is described?

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[2] Unless otherwise specified, all English quotations from *Beowulf* in this article derive from Hostetter's translation. Where copyright conditions permit, Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*, available in Italian translation by Massimo Bacigalupo (Fazi Editore, with facing-page Old English text), may be used. For an Italian version that more closely reproduces the poem's division into hemistichs, see instead Ludovica Koch's edition.

4. If you were to describe a 'hero' in today's world, which of these traits would still apply? Which would no longer seem relevant?

Each group records its ideas, either on the IWB or on a shared digital document,[3] and then reports back to the class. The teacher synthesises the contributions, stressing how the voyage scene encapsulates the coexistence of two moral frameworks: the pagan heroic code, founded on honour, kinship, and the search for fame, and the Christian ethic of service, humility, and divine purpose. In closing, the teacher foregrounds the Cultural Studies perspective by suggesting that this passage shows *Beowulf* as "conjuncturally embedded" in a specific historical world, and that later lessons will compare this configuration of heroism and community with others.

LESSON 3—HEROISM AND THE MONSTROUS OTHER: BEOWULF AND GRENDEL

Lesson 3 turns to the confrontation between Beowulf and Grendel to explore how the poem constructs heroism through contrast with the monstrous Other. After the usual preliminary routines, the teacher briefly recalls the key points of the previous session by eliciting them from students: the qualities associated with the Anglo-Saxon hero, the centrality of courage, loyalty, and *lof*, and the coexistence of pagan and Christian elements within the poem's moral universe. This recap establishes continuity and introduces the day's focus on alterity, understood as the representation of the Other as at once necessary to and threatening for the social order.

The lesson then moves to a close reading of selected passages depicting Grendel and the first fight: initially the description of Heorot's happiness and Grendel's envy and hatred (ll. 86-114; 159-169), followed by the account of his night raid and man-eating violence (ll. 728-745a), and finally the combat with Beowulf (ll. 745b-836). These extracts are projected on the IWB and read aloud, with the teacher pausing to clarify key lexical items and to invite students to visualise the sequence of events: the joy and music of the hall, Grendel's torment as he listens from the darkness, his attacks on sleeping warriors, and the climactic hand-to-hand struggle. Particular emphasis is placed on the contrastive characterisation of the two figures: Beowulf, the renowned warrior who crosses the sea to protect the Danes, and Grendel, defined through imagery of darkness, exile, and cannibalistic appetite ("fiend from hell", "enemy of mankind", "swallowing him up in gluttonous gobbets" [ll. 101, 164, 744]).

At this stage, the teacher highlights how the poem associates Grendel's monstrosity with exclusion and isolation. In Rutgers translation, he is described as a "lonely opponent" and "unhappy creature" who "dwelt in darkness", suffering as he hears the harp and the *scop* celebrating God and creation in Heorot while he remains outside (ll. 100, 105, 87). His violence is directed not at temples but at the mead-hall itself, the place where men gather to "celebrate human brotherhood" (Kroll 121) and

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[3] Alternatively, the shared document may be created outside the physical classroom by taking advantage of digital tools such as Padlet or Linoit.

"lodg[e] in their delights / blissfully" (ll. 99-100). This observation enables the teacher to underscore that Beowulf's heroism is defined above all through his role as a protector of that fragile community—"his brothers' keeper" (Kroll 119, 121)—rather than just as a pious warrior, and to invite students to consider what aspects of social order Grendel's presence threatens.

Building on this initial reading, the teacher asks students to examine more closely the language used for each character. Working in small groups, learners compile a two-column chart entitled "Beowulf and Grendel: The Language of Heroism and Monstrosity". In one column they collect adjectives, phrases, and images associated with Beowulf (protector of the hall, "strongest of power among mankind" [ll. 196-197], saviour of the Danes); in the other they gather those applied to Grendel (outcast, "notorious border-strider", "enemy of mankind", man-eater who "snatched up thirty thanes" and devours a warrior "in gluttonous gobbets" [ll. 103, 164, 122, 744]). To facilitate expression in English, the teacher provides a list of comparative structures (e.g., "Whereas Beowulf is…, Grendel is…", "This contrast suggests that…", "The poet seems to associate… with…"), and circulates during group work to nudge students to link textual details with interpretive hypotheses about the values encoded in the excerpts.

During the subsequent whole-class discussion, some of these hypotheses are made explicit by referring to critical perspectives. Michael Livingston and John William Sutton's observation that many versions of the story present Beowulf as the hero *par excellence*, embodying what is "best in his culture", and Grendel as the "lonely outcast who dwells in the wilderness", the antithesis of the fellowship of the mead-hall, can be introduced to name a pattern that students will likely have already noticed (Livingston and Sutton 3). The teacher may also remark that Grendel's severed arm, displayed in Heorot after the fight, functions as a highly visible warning to anyone tempted to challenge the dominant values upheld by Beowulf and Hrothgar's court (Livingston and Sutton 3). Once this heroic/monstrous opposition has been clarified, the teacher complicates it by directing attention to the poem's insistence on Grendel's lineage from Cain in the ring-framed comment on the monsters' ancestry ("since the Shaper had condemned him / as the kin of Cain" [ll. 106-107]).

In simplified form, students are reminded that the poet twice interrupts the narrative to reflect on the monsters' ancestry, tracing it back to the first fratricide and the original human parents, which implies Grendel's humanity even as it marks him as accursed, suggesting a form of proximity rather than absolute otherness. As critics have noted, Grendel's status is ambiguous: neither fully human nor entirely inhuman, he occupies a liminal position that is central to the poem's construction of monstrosity (Parks 8, 10). Reference to the description of Grendel as *mearcstapa*, rendered in Rutgers translation as "notorious border-strider" who "held the moors, the swampy stronghold, the lair of water-monsters" [ll. 106-107], and to Jeffrey Helterman's reading of the term as "boundary-walkers" embodying forces of chaos pressing on the ordered space of creation, further reinforces this image of the monster as a figure located at the edges of the human world (Helterman 6).

In the closing phase of the lesson, students are invited to write a 150-word reflective paragraph responding to the following question: "In these scenes, how does the poem use Grendel to define what counts as 'heroic'? In your answer, refer both to what Beowulf protects and to what Grendel threatens". Students are encouraged to incorporate one interpretive idea discussed in class—for example, Beowulf as a protector of communal bonds, Grendel as a boundary figure, or the significance of his Cainite ancestry. As such, the lesson moves beyond a mere opposition between hero and monster, leading learners to recognise how the poem uses Grendel to articulate a particular vision of community, order, and exclusion—one that later adaptations will reproduce, question, or subvert.

LESSON 4—THE END OF THE HERO: BEOWULF'S DEATH AND FUNERAL

This lesson concludes the textual study of *Beowulf* by examining its final section (*fitt* XLIII), which narrates the hero's death and funeral. The aim is to develop students' understanding of how the poem brings the heroic cycle to a close and represents the passing of an entire world—the end of a value system centred on loyalty, courage, and the defence of the community. The session combines oral review, guided reading, and collaborative conceptual mapping.

After the usual organisational routines, the lesson opens with a short recap activity designed to reactivate prior learning. The teacher conducts a round of rapid-fire questions, stimulating immediate responses to ensure pace and engagement (e.g., "What does Grendel represent symbolically in the poem?"), and then invites two or three students to share their homework reflections from the previous session on the contrast between Beowulf and Grendel. This reminds the class that hero and monster are interdependent figures and prepares the shift from Beowulf as victorious defender of the hall to Beowulf as ageing king facing the limits of his strength.

The focus of the lesson is then introduced: the conclusion of *Beowulf* and the death of the hero. Students are reminded that the final conflict with the fire-breathing dragon takes place approximately fifty years after Beowulf's arrival at Heorot and that, in the intervening period, he has become an exemplary king—one who brings order from the centre, exercises authority with benevolence, and appears almost invested with an aura of divinity (Helterman 5). Thanks to this contextualisation, students can read the final *fitt* not simply as another monster-fight, but as a meditation on kingship, sacrifice, and legacy. In facing the dragon, Beowulf is both a warrior seeking *lof* and a ruler who risks his life to protect his people and restore a disturbed balance.

The class then proceeds to the guided reading of ll. 3137-end, projected on the IWB. The teacher supports comprehension by clarifying vocabulary and the elegiac imagery. It might be explained that the dragon is presented as the guardian of the barrow and its hoard, which Beowulf hopes to secure for his people; by challenging it, the old king offers himself as a sacrificial figure, prepared to atone for the misfortunes that have befallen his community (Fisher 180). The following structured discussion focuses on the funeral scene that closes the poem, with particular attention to the

female mourner whose desperate lament encapsulates the sense of loss and foreboding that accompanies Beowulf's passing. Discussion prompts may include: "What emotions dominate this final scene, and how are they conveyed through imagery?", "How does the woman's lament contrast with the heroic tone of Beowulf's earlier battles?", "What fears about the future are voiced at the moment of the hero's burial?". Students can compare Beowulf's funeral with the ship-burial of Scyld Scefing at the poem's opening, thus seeing how the narrative ending encourages a parallel between two exemplary rulers whose deaths frame the story and symbolically mark the rise and fall of a heroic world (Helterman 5).

In the final phase of the lesson, students begin a collaborative task geared to consolidating their newly-acquired knowledge. Working in small groups, they co-create a mind map centred on the notion of heroism in *Beowulf*, tracing its development from youthful physical prowess and the pursuit of *lof* to mature responsibility, sacrificial leadership, and awareness of mortality. They are asked to include key elements from the poem ending: Beowulf's self-offering for his people, the ritual celebration of his worth by his retainers, and the narrator's affirmation that it is fitting to honour a man in this way as life departs from his body, recalling him as "the most mild-mannered, courteous and gracious of worldly kings" and, above all, *lofgeornost*—"the most eager for praise" (Garde 341). The mind map may be sketched on paper in class and subsequently re-elaborated at home using digital tools such as Genially or Mermaid, allowing students to organise quotations, images, and interpretative insights into a visual synthesis that prepares the transition to the next section of the unit, where *Beowulf*'s heroic model will be compared with its reconfigurations in modern adaptations.[4]

LESSON 5—*BEOWULF* IN CONTEMPORARY FILMS

This lesson considers two twenty-first-century cinematic adaptations of the Old English poem, *Beowulf and Grendel* (2005) and *Beowulf* (2007). Its aim is to show students how different historical conjunctures reconfigure Beowulf's heroism and his relationship with the 'monster', and how filmic language reshapes the poem's values. The session uses short clips, guided viewing, and comparative discussion.

Following the preliminary routines, the teacher recalls the end of the poem discussed in Lesson 4. The focus then shifts to Zemeckis's *Beowulf*. After a short contextual introduction—covering the year of release, the use of animated performance-capture technology, and the idea that this version presents a flawed king burdened by a hidden sexual pact and its consequences—the teacher plays the YouTube clip in which Beowulf, now an ageing king, prepares to face the dragon and speaks his last words to Wealtheow: "Keep a memory of me. Not as a king, or a hero. But

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[4] For schools with limited digital resources, the mind map can be created in analogue format on paper or on the IWB. On the limits, however, of the analogue format see Marzano *et al.*, especially pp. 27-28.

as a man…fallible and flawed." The clip is available at: https://www.youtube.com/shorts/xlPmqQqcES8. Before viewing, students are given two focus questions: "What image of Beowulf as a man and as a hero emerges here?" and "How do these final words compare with the ending of the poem?". After watching the clip twice, the teacher elicits initial reactions and invites students to identify key phrases ("I was weak… I am sorry", "I have always loved you my queen", "not as a king or a hero… but as a man, fallible and flawed"), encouraging them to note the emphasis on guilt, emotional vulnerability, and human fallibility. In accessible terms, the teacher may then summarise Kathleen Forni's argument that the film combines spectacular violence with a conservative moral framework centred on "the sins of the fathers", sexual transgression, and the burdens of fame, so that Beowulf's private liaison with Grendel's mother contaminates both his kingship and the next generation (Forni 46, 48). Lastly, Stewart Brookes's observation that the film stages a parable of heroic decline, culminating in an explicit rejection of heroic exceptionalism, can be paraphrased to help students appreciate how sharply this ending diverges from the poem's closing praise of Beowulf as *lofgeornost* (Brookes 90-91).

The class then considers *Beowulf and Grendel*. This production is contextualised as an Icelandic-Canadian adaptation released in 2005 and loosely based on the Old English poem, which foregrounds Grendel's perspective. By humanising the monster, this version explicitly questions traditional models of heroic violence. A short sequence from the feature available on YouTube (https://youtu.be/dxvBgwGVtvM?si=YpRr-IxwAPvZTzUu) is then screened, either highlighting Grendel's suffering and emotional interiority or presenting the confrontation in which Beowulf realises that Grendel can speak. During the viewing, students focus on Grendel's body language and facial expressions as well as on the reactions of the human characters.

In the ensuing discussion, students try to explain how the film complicates the boundary between hero and monster. The teacher directs attention to the ways in which Grendel's suffering, speech, and emotional expressiveness elicit empathy, blurring the distinction between humanity and monstrosity that structures the Old English poem. Critical readings can be used selectively to name this effect: the film has been described as intertwining manhood and monstrosity, presenting Grendel not as an abstract embodiment of evil but as a visibly vulnerable being whose pain is foregrounded (Livingston and Sutton 11; Brookes 86). In accessible terms, the teacher may also point out that Gunnarsson's adaptation significantly alters the poem conclusion; by omitting both the dragon and Beowulf's death, and by ending instead with Beowulf burying Grendel, erecting a stone memorial, and sparing Grendel's son, the film reverses the final emphasis of the epic, which now revolves around reconciliation and restraint (Brookes 87).

A guided comparative discussion follows, drawing together the poem and the two films. The teacher may pose questions such as: "In the Old English poem, whose death and funeral occupy the final scene? In *Beowulf and Grendel*, whose burial do we see, and what does Beowulf do?"; "In Zemeckis's film, what does Beowulf ask Wealtheow to remember, and how does this compare with the poet's final praise of him?"; "How do these endings change our sense of what it means to be a hero?".

Through discussion, students should recognise that *Beowulf and Grendel* shifts emotional weight towards the monster, portraying Grendel as a wronged avenger whose rage and pain appear "more human" than Beowulf's earlier cold efficiency, whereas Zemeckis's *Beowulf* preserves the visual spectacle of the hero while subjecting him to a narrative of moral compromise and belated self-knowledge, contributing to a broader contemporary tendency to the anti-heroic (Brookes 81-82, 87, 90-91; Risden 5-7). Differences in tone and narrative emphasis can also be ascribed to the fact that the Hollywood film operates as a genre hybrid—combining elements of epic, action, horror, and fantasy to appeal to a wide audience (Forni 50-51).

To close the lesson, students complete a short written task as homework, in which they respond to a comparative prompt such as: "Choose one scene from the poem (for example Beowulf's funeral) and one clip from the films. Explain how each text constructs Beowulf's heroism and his relationship to monsters or to his community. Do you think the films reinforce or question the heroic model of the Old English poem?". Students are invited to integrate one critical idea—for instance, the humanisation of Grendel, the "sins of the fathers" motif, or the notion of heroic decline—into their response (Livingston and Sutton 11; Forni 46; Brookes 87, 90-91). Hence, Lesson 5 returns to the unit's central concern: how different conjunctures imagine, celebrate, or dismantle heroic identity.

LESSON 6—ASSESSMENT AND REFLECTION

The sixth and final hour of the unit is devoted to assessment and meta-cognitive reflection. Three possible activities are proposed, so that teachers may select or adapt the one that best suits their class profile, institutional requirements, and specific learning objectives. Each activity corresponds to a different assessment mode and purpose: (1) an individual oral performance, (2) a collaborative AI-mediated task, and (3) an individual AI-supported writing exercise.

In the second and third activities, AI is conceived as a tool for fostering critical and reflective thinking, not as a shortcut to task completion. AI in education is a double-edged sword: it can enhance learning but also risk undermining students' analytical autonomy if uncritically employed (Wu 9). The purpose of education nonetheless remains to teach learners how and why to think, not mechanically what to reproduce, and in a Cultural Studies-oriented classroom this includes learning to interrogate representations of heroism, power and otherness in literary texts through digital tools as well. Therefore, in the activities below, ChatGPT and the alike function as a form of scaffolding, assisting learners as they develop higher-order thinking skills—analysis, synthesis, and evaluation—identified in Bloom's taxonomy (Chang *et al.* 270-272).

These are transferable competences that underlie autonomous lifelong learning. For this reason, the activities proposed here privilege AI-supported writing over more image-focused uses of generative technology. In *LitHUB. Materiali e strumenti per l'insegnante*, for instance, teachers are invited to use AI art-generating tools such as Canva, Adobe Firefly or Leonardo AI to create an image of a fight between Grendel and

another famous monster, providing detailed physical descriptions of both (Chini *et al.* 251). Such an activity certainly makes students practise descriptive language and visual imagination—especially since Grendel's appearance is only vaguely outlined in the poem—but the present unit takes a different direction, favouring tasks that place interpretive and argumentative writing at the centre.

Option 1—"Contemporary Heroes and the Values They Represent"

Students prepare at home a brief individual oral speech (no longer than three minutes) on a contemporary hero, either fictional (e.g., a film, comic, or literary character) or real (a historical or public figure). The purpose of the activity is to analyse the values associated with that hero and to identify what they reveal about present-day conceptions of courage, morality, and leadership. Students conclude their speech with a comparison between the chosen hero and Beowulf, reflecting on how each figure embodies the values of a specific cultural moment and on how heroic ideals have evolved from the Anglo-Saxon world to contemporary culture.

　　The speech is delivered as the opening segment of the scheduled oral test. This choice is informed by Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, which underscores the influence of emotional factors such as anxiety and self-confidence on language production (Krashen 4-5). Beginning the assessment with a prepared task allows students to approach the oral test with reduced anxiety and greater perceived control, thereby supporting more fluent and accurate communication.

　　Suggested assessment criteria, unless the school—and specifically the Department of English within it—has already devised formal rubrics for oral testing, are: clarity of argumentation, with ideas logically organised and supported by relevant examples; fluency and pronunciation; and respect for the task: that is, adherence to the time limit, focus on the topic, and inclusion of a comparison with *Beowulf*.

　　Before communicating the mark to each student, the teacher offers formative feedback immediately after each presentation, addressed to the whole class. This feedback concerns both the student's linguistic performance and their content comprehension, so that all learners can benefit from the comments.

Option 2—"An Epic Scene in the Style of Beowulf*"*

In this AI-assisted activity, students work in heterogeneous groups of three or four to compose a short passage of an imagined epic poem, written in the style of *Beowulf*. The aim is to reproduce the stylistic and thematic features of Old English heroic poetry— such as alliteration, *kenningar*, formulaic epithets, and elevated diction—while inventing an original episode typical of the epic tradition (for instance, a duel, a voyage, or a funeral). The hero, setting, and event are of the students' own invention, but they have to think about which values their hero embodies and what kind of community he or she protects or threatens, in continuity with the questions explored in the unit.

　　Groups interact with an AI chatbot (e.g., ChatGPT) to co-create their text. They begin with a precise prompt, for example: "Compose a twenty-line passage in the style

of *Beowulf*, describing the funeral of a warrior. Use *kenningar*, alliteration, and an elevated tone". Students then refine and edit the AI's responses through successive prompts, corrections, and rewritings, demonstrating awareness of poetic form and meaning, and consciously echoing or reworking scenes studied in class. The teacher supervises the process, emphasising that the AI is a collaborative tool—a scaffold for learning, not a substitute for authorship. Finally, each group submits: the final poetic passage (approximately 20-25 lines); a record of their conversation with the AI; and a short commentary (100-150 words) explaining their stylistic choices, how they interacted with the AI to achieve the final result, and which values or aspects of heroism they chose to foreground or transform.

Suggested assessment criteria are: relevance to the task; creativity and collaboration, considering originality of concept and balanced group participation; and critical reflection, relating to the clarity of the accompanying commentary and its connection to the themes discussed in the unit.

Option 3—"Interpreting Beowulf *through Conversation"*

This individual activity requires students to engage in a critical conversation with an AI chatbot on *Beowulf* and its adaptations. Each student begins from a broad, teacher-provided question—for instance: "What does *Beowulf* teach us about the values and fears of the Anglo-Saxon world?" or "In what ways does *Beowulf* differ from modern ideas of heroism, including those presented in the films *Beowulf and Grendel* (2005) and *Beowulf* (2007)?"

The purpose of the task is twofold: first, to consolidate students' knowledge of the poem's content, context and themes, and of its cinematic adaptations; second, to develop their critical digital literacy—that is, the ability to assess, question, and refine AI-generated information rather than accept it uncritically.

Students interact with the chatbot over several iterations, continually refining and 'engineering' their prompts to elicit more accurate and textually grounded responses. Throughout the exchange, they are expected to demonstrate awareness of the poem's key episodes, stylistic features, and cultural meanings, as well as of the main differences introduced by the films (for example, the humanisation of Grendel), using the conversation to demonstrate and articulate their own understanding.

At the end of the activity, each student shares their conversation using the platform's "Share" function. The teacher then selects one or two dialogues for whole-class analysis, modelling step-by-step strategies for questioning and refining AI responses and guiding students to explain what makes these strategies effective.

Suggested assessment criteria are: content accuracy; critical engagement, evidenced by questioning, correcting, or elaborating on AI-generated content; and prompt engineering, demonstrated in the ability to formulate precise and contextually appropriate prompts.

This task transforms AI interaction into an exercise in reasoning, interpretation, and metacognition. By teaching students to challenge and refine automated discourse,

it cultivates transferable skills of close reading, argumentation, and reflective thinking that underpin the study of *Beowulf* and its adaptations.

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