Anglo-Saxon Literature and The Epic

• Stories were told **orally in poem or song form** (most people could not read or write)
• Stories provided **moral instruction**
• Anglo-Saxons spoke “**Old English**”
• **Epic Poetry** was one of the most common genres of literature during the period
• **Beowulf** was the most famous story to come out of the Anglo-Saxon era

**Characteristics of Anglo-Saxon Literature**

• Anglo-Saxon poetry used several devices, including:
  
  **Metaphors**: a comparison without “like” or “as”
  **Similes**: a comparison using “like” or “as”
  **Alliteration**: repetition of the initial consonant sound in a line of poetry
  **Caesura**: a pause in a line of poetry
Kenning: a descriptive phrase or compound word that substitutes a noun

Repetition

• Stories were often filled with violence and gore
• Most stories were about heroic warriors prevailing in battle
• Characters were driven by fate and their courage was tested

The Epic

• Epic poems were a very common form of Anglo-Saxon Literature
• An epic is a long, narrative poem that celebrates a hero’s deeds
• Epics were told in the tradition of oral storytelling (many people could not read or write)
• Characteristics of oral storytelling
Stock epithets: adjectives that point out our special traits of particular people or things
Kennings: a descriptive phrase or compound word that substitutes for one word
Example- Grendel = “sin-stained demon” is used in place of Grendel’s name

Characteristics of an Epic

• The hero of an epic is called the epic hero
• The hero is usually a male of noble birth/high position and is historical or legendary
• The hero’s character traits reflect the ideals of his society and his actions (often
courageous and superhuman) reflect the values of his society

- The hero’s actions often determine the fate of a nation of people
- The setting usually covers more than one nation
- The poet uses formal diction (word choice) and serious tone
- Major characters often deliver long, formal speeches
- The plot is complicated by supernatural beings/events and usually involves a long, dangerous journey through foreign lands
- The poem reflects timeless values (courage, honor, etc.)
- The poem covers universal themes (good vs. evil, life and death, etc.)
- Present day epics: *Lord of the Rings* & *Star Wars*
Beowulf

- *Beowulf* is an epic
- The poem begins *In Media Res*, or “in the middle” of the action, common for epic poetry of the Anglo-Saxon era
- Beowulf is the epic hero in the story; he travels great distances to prove his strength and has super-human powers
- The events described in the story take place in the late 5th Century
- In the story, Hrothgar, king of the Danes, and his people are terrorized by the monster Grendel. Beowulf, a hero of the Geats, comes to Hrothgar’s aid, fighting Grendel and Grendel’s mother.
Anglo-Saxon Details

*Although the Anglo-Saxons fought among themselves, they had a great deal in common.*

- They used a common language
- They shared a heroic ideal
- They had a set of traditional heroes.
- They were loyal to their leaders and tribe.
- They held a belief of fierce personal valor.
- They admired men of outstanding courage.
- Persons of rank were received with grave courtesy.
- Rulers were generous to those who were loyal
- They had a democratic habit of mind.
- They were hardy and brave
- They had a passion for fine ornaments.
Literature and the Arts began to evolve during this period.

Anglo-Saxon poetry was an oral tradition.

Caedmon was considered the first English religious poet.

An Anglo-Saxon poet was called a scop.

He was the memory and historian of the tribe.

The two most important traditions of Anglo-Saxon poetry were the heroic and the elegiac tradition.

“The Seafarer” is a good example of an elegiac poem.

The most important single poem from the Anglo-Saxon period is the epic *Beowulf*