The Anglo-Saxon Period
(449-1066)

English 10, Mrs. DiSalvo
The Anglo-Saxon Period (449-1066)

- Migration of people from present day Germany to present day England
- The Anglo-Saxon Period was filled with constant fighting
- Most Anglo-Saxons were Pagans who believed in many gods until the middle of the 5th Century when they were Christianized
The Anglo-Saxon Period (449-1066)

- People Living on the British Isles
  - Picts – Pre-Celtic
  - Britons – Celtic
  - Gaels – Celtic

- Roman armies conquered the Britons
  - Romans introduced cities, stone roads, written scholarship, and Christianity.
  - Romans abandoned Britain
The Anglo-Saxon Period (449-1066)

- Britian invaded by Germanic peoples
  - Arthurian Legends arose trying to combat the invasion
  - Germanic tribes organized themselves into a confederation, the Heptarchy

- Anglo-Saxon culture changed over time
  - Seafarers practiced pagan religions
  - Became farmers who practiced Christianity

- Growth of Christianity
  - Patrick converted Ireland, and they (the converted) colonized Scotland
  - Augustine established a monastery at Canterbury
  - Christianity spread to all of Britain by 690
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- The Danish Invasions
  - Danes or Vikings attacked England, but Alfred the Great defeated them and forced them to accept Christianity.
- The **Battle of Hastings** took place in 1066
  - Two people claimed to be king of England
  - William the Conqueror won, beginning the Medieval Period

*The Battle of Hastings*
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.
- Listen to an excerpt from the Prologue of *Beowulf*, read in “Old English”
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 special traits of particular people or things
- **Kennings**: a descriptive phrase or compound word that substitutes for one word
  - For example, Grendel = “sin-stained demon” in *Beowulf*
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
Characteristics of an Epic

- 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 treats universal themes (good vs. evil, life and death, etc.)
- What are some examples of 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.
