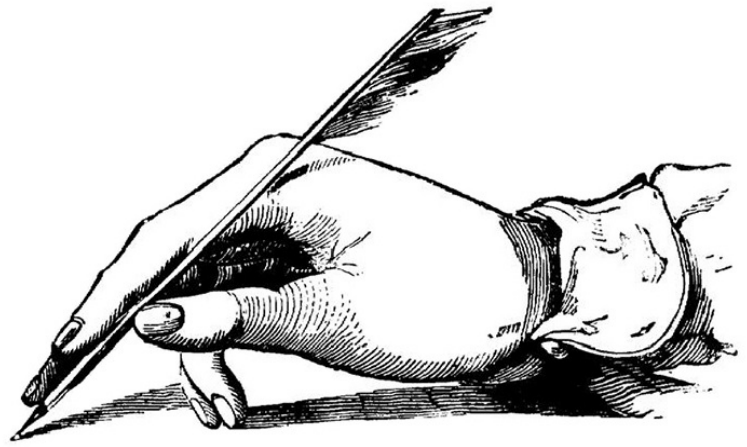


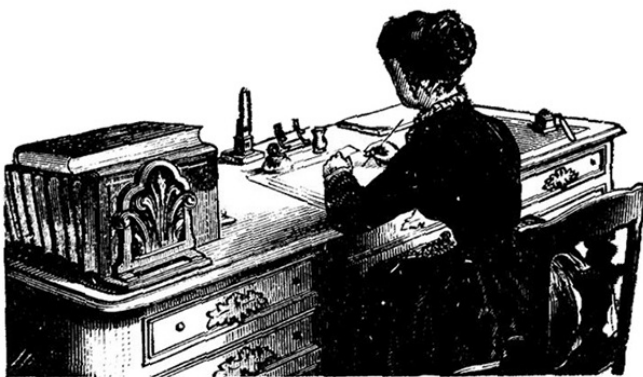
A
CRASH COURSE
IN
POETRY



THE ROMANTIC POETS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY WERE PARTICULARLY KEEN ON BALLADS.

POETRY 101

FROM SHAKESPEARE AND RUPI KAUR TO IAMBIC PENTAMETER AND BLANK VERSE, EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT POETRY



SOME TIPS FOR CREATING AN ORIGINAL POEM:
WRITE HONESTLY. BE SPECIFIC. USE CONCRETE
IMAGES. TELL A STORY.

A FOOT IS A UNIT OF RHYTHM.
STRUNG TOGETHER IN A PATTERN,
FEET FORM A METER.



SUSAN DALZELL

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POETRY 101

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BLANK VERSE, EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT POETRY

SUSAN DALZELL

Adams Media
New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

DEDICATION

For Wil and Liam

INTRODUCTION

Poetry is among the most complex art forms evolved by the human race. It uses words in unique ways to create emotional responses, sometimes using those words in vastly different ways than we do in ordinary speech. It's also one of the oldest art forms; no one really knows when the first poem was composed—just that it was thousands of years ago.

Maybe you've read poetry your whole life; maybe you're coming to it for the first time; maybe you just want to learn something about it; or maybe you have an urge to start scribbling verses yourself. No matter which of these applies to you, you'll find something of value in this book.

Poetry 101 doesn't make any assumptions about what you know or what you may have been taught back in the day. Instead you will find help in exploring what poetry can mean in your own life. You'll learn or review the basic terms and vocabulary of poetry. You'll get an overview of the history of poetry and the cultures from which poets have emerged. You'll learn the life stories of some of the greatest poets in the English language and why those poets' works are so highly regarded. You'll learn more about the topics poets have been drawn to write about and compare and contrast how different poets approach similar themes. You'll look at works by the poets of ancient Greece, the European Middle Ages, Victorian England, and onward to the Internet-fueled poets of today.

Sometimes poetry is formal, following strict rules of language and form. Sometimes it's wild and loose; you know this if you've ever attended a poetry reading. Poetry can express love and hate and joy and grief and anger and confusion and humor. Sometimes it is easy to understand—"Eeny meeny miny mo, catch a tiger by the toe"—but sometimes it's so dense and tricky you can read it three, four, five, sixty times and still struggle to interpret its meaning. That's another way in which *Poetry 101* can give you a hand. Whether you choose to read this book cover to cover or to dive in and out of its many sections, it will help you form a working definition of poetry that makes sense to you. Hopefully, reading this book will encourage you to seek out poems themselves. Read them. Memorize them. Speak them out loud. Share them with your friends, companions, or children. Find poems that speak to you and savor them. Maybe even try writing some verses yourself.

Doing any of these things will increase your enjoyment of this art form. No matter your poetry background or how you hope to use poetry in the future, *Poetry 101* has you covered. Now let's delve into the history and theory of poetry!

HOW TO READ A POEM

Push Through the Fear

Whether we want to admit it or not, it can be scary—or at least daunting—to face a page on which a few words have been arranged into something called a poem. We know where we stand with sentences and paragraphs, but everything can feel a bit wobbly when words are shaped into other, less familiar, forms and patterns. It seems hard to know where to start. In the next section, we'll take a closer look at the techniques of meter and rhythm. For now, here are a few ideas to help in your approach to a new poem.

USE YOUR VOICE

With few exceptions, poems are meant to be spoken. The human voice breathes both life and meaning into the words. A poem that is difficult to understand on paper may start to make a lot more sense once you read it out loud. Sentences that appear disjointed, thanks to breaks on the page, may piece together smoothly when heard by your ear.

Play with the speed that you speak: does slowing down or speeding up help you hear the rhymes more easily? Maybe you can't hear any rhymes, but reciting a string of words that all start with the same letter sounds good. Do you find yourself falling into a rhythm as you speak, emphasizing certain words or syllables? Does the poem sound better if you pause at the end of each line, or carry on until you reach the end of a sentence?

READ CLOSELY

Don't skip stuff. Read the poem from beginning to end, even if it's slow going. Take your time and don't rush. Poetry can be dense, with layers of

meaning that may not be revealed on a first read.

Read with a pencil in hand. (Or a pen, if you're brave.) Writing your thoughts down really helps you engage with the poem. Underline words. Circle them. Jot down questions in the margin. Put an asterisk next to a line you really like or a question mark next to one that makes no sense. Mark where the sentences finish.

Factors to Consider

- *The Title.* Start with the poem's title. Some titles give an accurate preview of the poem's subject but others possess a less obvious meaning. Keep the title in mind as you read through the poem.
- *The Poet's Name.* If you recognize his or her name, take a second to think about what you know about him or her. Did you like his other poems? Does she write in a formal or informal style?
- *The Poem's Appearance.* Observe how the poem looks on the page. Are there many breaks? Does the poet use a lot of white space or do the words crash into one another?
- *Context.* A poem isn't written in a vacuum. While some poems hold clear meanings on their own, others gain more power when applying external factors. Was the poem written during wartime? Was the poet a member of a minority group? Did he or she write in secret? Or for a large audience?
- *The Speaker.* Who is the speaker? Even if the poem is written in first person, the speaker isn't necessarily the poet. Many poets use a persona—an imaginary identity—to write. Can you imagine the speaker in real life?
- *Tone.* What is the attitude of the poem? Is it lighthearted and humorous? Does it drip with sarcasm? Or angst?
- *Patterns and Symbols.* Look for patterns. Are there sounds, words, or lines that repeat? Does the poem circle back on itself at any point? Are there repeating motifs or symbols?
- *Vocabulary.* If you encounter a word you don't recognize, don't move on. Remember: every single word counts in a poem. Take a moment to look up the word's definition. If it has several potential meanings, consider which one fits best within the poem's context.

One way to understand a poem's meaning is to strip it down to the essentials. If the language is flowery, take away the adjectives. If there are metaphors or figurative language, translate the phrases into plain language.

Paraphrase the poem to reveal a basic plot or point. Then use that as a framework to build the poem back into shape again, adding layers of language until it returns to the form in which the poet presented it. A paraphrased poem, after all, is not a poem. Read it again, and you may find that parts of the poem now spring to life in ways they didn't on your initial read.

Memorizing Poetry

Want to really get to know a poem? Memorize it. If that sounds old-fashioned, it is. For centuries, schoolchildren have memorized poems by Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Edgar Allan Poe, to name a few popular choices. Memorizing a poem creates intimacy between the words and you, an understanding that drills deeper into your mind than simply reading the words. Even better, it means you carry the poem with you wherever you go.

STANZA, METER, AND FORM

The Scaffolding Holding Poems Together

Quite often, the beauty in a poem is the result of careful scaffolding put in place by the poet. The thoughts may be original, but most poets use tried-and-true poetry tools and techniques to create a compelling poem. A skilled poet takes a familiar form, say a sonnet, and transforms it into a breathtakingly original piece of art. Even Modern poetry uses many hidden and not-so-hidden poetic devices to cast a spell on readers.

STANZA

Stanzas are to poetry what paragraphs are to prose. Essentially, a stanza is a grouping of lines. Typically, a poem is composed of multiple stanzas. They might all have the same number of lines, but that won't necessarily be the case.

Common Stanza Types

Couplet: Two lines of verse grouped together, usually rhyming.

Terza rima: Three lines of verse grouped together, with an interlocking rhyme pattern of *aba*, *bcb*, *cdc*, *ded*, and so forth. The poem concludes with a two-line stanza that rhymes with the middle line of the second-to-last stanza. It's an Italian form first used in English by Geoffrey Chaucer.

Quatrains: Four lines of verse grouped together. The rhyme pattern can vary, but often follows a pattern of *aaaa*, *aabb*, *abab*. Sometimes *quatrain* refers to a poem with only four lines.

Cinquains: (pronounced *sing-KEYN*) Five lines of verse grouped together. Rhyme patterns vary.

Adelaide Crapsey

Adelaide Crapsey (1878–1914) is an American poet credited with inventing the cinquain poem, a twenty-two syllable, five-line poem. She died of tuberculosis in 1914 when she was only thirty-six years old. Her first book of poetry, *Verse*, was published a year later and included twenty-eight cinquains. *Verse* sold very well in the 1920s and 1930s and again later in the century and inspired many other poets, including Carl Sandburg.

METER, RHYTHM, AND FEET

Meter and rhythm, rhythm and meter—the two are intricately linked in poetry. Think of it this way: rhythm is the stressed and unstressed syllables that happen when we speak and meter is the pattern created by those syllables. Let’s break it down one more level: a foot is a unit of rhythm. String the feet together in a pattern and you form a meter.

There are five basic kinds of feet:

1. Iamb (Unaccented-Accented)
2. Trochee (Accented-Unaccented)
3. Spondee (Accented-Accented)
4. Anapest (Unaccented-Unaccented-Accented)
5. Dactyl (Accented-Unaccented-Unaccented)

To form a poem, we need to make it a little more complicated. As we know, poems are composed of lines. Meter can be identified by the number of feet per line. Take iambs, for example. An iambic dimeter poem has two iambs per line; an iambic trimeter poem has three iambs per line; and so forth.

The most recognizable meter is iambic pentameter, which has five iambs per line. Poets love to write in iambic pentameter. Shakespeare used iambic pentameter when he wrote in verse for his plays and almost exclusively for his sonnets:

“Shall I / compare / thee to / a sum / mer’s day?
Thou art / more love / ly and / more tem / per ate.”

—“Sonnet 18,” William Shakespeare

For another example, let's look at the rarer trochaic meters. American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow famously used a trochaic tetrameter—four trochee feet per line—in 1855 for his epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha*:

“By the / shore of / Git che / Gu mee,
By the / shi ning / Big-Sea -Wat er,
At the / door way / of his / wig wam,
In the / pleas ant / sum mer / morn ing,
Hi a / wath a / stood and / wait ed.”

—*The Song of Hiawatha*, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Although a poem may be identified as using a certain meter, poets often play with the meter within a poem. A poem following only the strictest of rhythms gets boring fast. While a poet would struggle to use a spondaic meter for an entire poem, dropping in an occasional spondee foot helps to add emphasis and variety. To familiarize yourself with the mechanics of a poem, try scanning it.

How to Scan a Poem

- Read the poem out loud. Listen carefully to which syllables you naturally emphasize.
- Mark above the stressed syllables with an accent.
- Mark above the unstressed syllables with a breve. (It looks like a tiny squashed u.)
- Break the syllables into feet, using slashes between the words or between the syllables within a word, if necessary. Identify the feet (iamb, trochee, spondee, anapest, or dactyl).
- Count the number of feet per line (1 = monometer, 2 = dimeter, 3 = trimeter, 4 = tetrameter, 5 = pentameter, 6 = hexameter, 7 = heptameter or septenary, 8 = octameter).
- Combine the foot with the (average) number per line and you've identified the poem's meter. For example, a poem that scans with five unstressed/stressed iamb feet per line is written in iambic pentameter.
- Learning to scan can be difficult. Take your time and be patient. If you aren't discovering a pattern, try saying the poem out loud again and listen for whether some accents are heavier than others.

POETIC FORMS

Poems come in many shapes, sizes, and styles. They can be brief: a haiku is only three lines, traditionally following a five-seven-five syllable format. Limericks convey humor in just five lines, following a rhyme pattern of *aabba*. Poems also can be incredibly lengthy: ballads sometimes stretch into hundreds of lines. Poetic forms may be defined by appearance: concrete poems (also called pattern or shape poems) are written so they form the shape of an object on the page—a concrete poem about a Christmas tree looks like a Christmas tree. Other forms rely on a strict format: a pantoum consists of four-line stanzas where the second and fourth lines of each stanza are repeated as the first and third lines of the next stanza.

Throughout this book, as we look at specific poets, topics, and historical periods, we'll define and examine poetic forms. Some poets are closely associated with a form they favor. Some topics, especially love and death, are interpreted again and again using the same forms, such as sonnets and elegies. Historically, the popularity of certain genres of poetry has ebbed and flowed when public tastes changed. Lists naming specific poetry forms can stretch into the fifties, but it's important to note that poetic forms are limited only by the creativity of poets. Forms are always evolving as poets adapt language to suit their purposes.

ANCIENT GREEKS AND ROMANS

Finding Our Poetic Roots

The Greeks and Romans may have been great warriors, but they were also great poets. Their poetry has stood the test of time, providing structure, themes, and plots that continue to resonate today.

THE GREEKS

The earliest written Greek poems date back to the eighth century B.C.E., but scholars believe the Greeks were composing and reciting poetry via an oral tradition for centuries before then. Even once they invented an alphabet and began recording their poems for posterity, the Greeks continued to enjoy their poems primarily as performance pieces. Poets recited poems accompanied by the lyre, sometimes alongside dancers, before audiences both big and small.

Epic Poetry

Historians credit the Greeks with inventing the epic poem, a genre that serves as a cornerstone of Western literature. An epic poem tells a long, grand, and detailed history of a people and their culture, featuring a hero and his adventures. Epic poems originally were shared orally and could be adapted by the poet to suit the situation or audience. Epic poetry is written in dactylic hexameter, meaning each line has six metrical feet. The first five can be either a dactyl (Accented-Unaccented-Unaccented) or a spondee (Accented-Accented) and the final foot is always a spondee. This meter is well suited to speech and has just enough built-in rhythmic flexibility to make a long recitation less tedious.

Sometime between the twelfth and eighth centuries B.C.E., a Greek poet named Homer composed the epic poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*,

considered the oldest complete works of Western literature. Not much is known about Homer—so little, in fact, that some theorists think works credited to him may have been composed by several poets. Texts often refer to him as blind, based on an assumption that he based the blind minstrel character of Demodokos, in *The Odyssey*, on himself. *The Iliad* takes place during the final year of the Trojan War while the Greeks were laying siege to Troy, and features the hero and warrior Achilles. (The poem takes its name from Ilium, the Greek name for Troy.) *The Odyssey* takes place after the Trojan War, and relates the hero Odysseus’s epic ten-year journey to return to his kingdom. Homer used language rich with simile and metaphor and adopted dactylic hexameter, setting a precedent for epic poetry followed today. For centuries, writers have told and retold the stories within these two poems. We continue to be fascinated by their characters and plots.

Common Characteristics of Epic Poems

- Opens with the poet asking a muse for help
 - Written in dactylic hexameter
 - Tells a historic tale that takes place over many years
 - Central hero possesses superhuman powers, including great courage
 - Supernatural or divine powers intervene and meddle with humans
 - Long length comparable to that of a novel
-

Historians believe Hesiod, a Greek poet and farmer, lived a few years after Homer. Hesiod’s poems were didactic, meaning they were intended to teach a lesson. Like Homer, he composed using dactylic hexameter. Three of his complete works have survived: *The Shield of Heracles*, *Works and Days*, and *Theogony*. *Works and Days*, written about 700 B.C.E., is an epic poem told from a farmer’s point of view and includes myths, legends, and moral teachings on the value of hard work. Hesiod used an authorial “I” as narrator, a first in European literature. In *Theogony*, Hesiod tells the stories of the Greek gods, from the creation of the world onward, and their epic interactions. Hesiod was retelling and synthesizing mythic stories from throughout Greece, but his versions became the most popular.

Lyric Poetry

Lyric poetry emerged in Greece by the seventh century B.C.E. Greek tastes shifted away from the lengthy heroic tales of the epic poets to briefer, more personal, lyric poems. Lyrics are the kind of poem recited by poets at weddings. Lyric poets experimented with the form, trying new meters and rhyming patterns. The term *lyric* is derived from *lyre*, which provides a clue to the form's musical roots. Lyric poems in Greece were sung and expressed emotion, not unlike today's pop songs.

Sappho is the most famous of the lyric poets and is one of the few female poets of the ancient era whose work is still remembered. Born on the island of Lesbos sometime within 630–610 B.C.E., most likely to a wealthy family, she was well known in her own time. The ancient Library of Alexandria collected and housed nine volumes of her poetry, but all were lost when the library later burned down. Much of her reputation is based on quotations by others. Sappho's only surviving complete poem is the twenty-eight-line "Hymn to Aphrodite," although portions of a few others have survived. She wrote concisely and clearly in an Aeolic Greek dialect, but with passion, about love, infatuation, and romantic desire for both males and females. Although historically often characterized as a lesbian—the term *sapphic* refers to female homosexuality—her personal sexuality is unknown.

Sapphic Meter

Attributed first to Sappho, this meter consists of three lines of eleven syllables and a final line of five syllables. The four-line stanzas can be repeated any number of times.

Contemporaries of the Greek poet Pindar, who was born in the sixth century B.C.E. and died in the fifth century B.C.E., considered him one of the greatest lyric poets of his time. About 25 percent of his complete poems survived antiquity and most are epinicion—choral victory odes that honor winners in war or athletics. An aristocrat himself, Pindar received commissions to write poems for special occasions for much of his nearly fifty-year career, including odes for the Olympics. His poems praised the gods, retold myths, and provided moral guidance on the dangers of excessive pride. He experimented throughout his career with meter and rarely repeated a style. His work contains many references well known to his contemporary audiences, but for modern readers their obscurity makes his poems difficult to read and interpret.

THE ROMANS

Roman poetry, written in Latin, borrowed much in form and style from the Greeks. Although the forms are familiar, the Romans produced their own crop of talented and prolific lyric, epic, and elegiac poets who produced work that stands in quality shoulder-to-shoulder with that of their Greek counterparts. The work of many of these poets, including Virgil and Ovid, continues to be revered today.

Virgil, born Publius Vergilius Maro in 70 B.C.E., is one of the greatest ancient Roman poets. He wrote pastoral and didactic poems, but he is best known for his epic poem, *The Aeneid*, commissioned by Emperor Augustus to glorify Rome. Virgil modeled it after Homer's epic poems, telling the story of Aeneas, a hero of the Trojan war whose descendants founded Rome. *The Aeneid*, due to the language's beauty and Virgil's skills as a storyteller, was widely considered a literary masterpiece from the point of its publication, shortly after Virgil's death.

Ovid, Horace, and Catullus join Virgil in status as revered Latin-language poets. Ovid, born in 43 B.C.E., composed *Metamorphoses*, an epic poem in Greek style that begins with creation and tells the stories of Greek and Roman gods on through to the deification of Julius Caesar. Horace was a Roman poet, born in 65 B.C.E., known both for his lyric *Odes*, which celebrate friendship and love, and for *Ars Poetica*, a poem written as a letter to a Roman senator and his son providing advice to young poets. Catullus, born around 84 B.C.E., was an innovative lyric poet, credited with developing several literary techniques including alliteration, the repetition of initial consonant sounds in adjacent words. Many of his poems expressed love for a married woman called Lesbia.

THE ANGLO-SAXONS

How the English Became the English

The Roman Empire extended far beyond Italy. At its peak, Roman troops had helped expand Roman rule to northern Africa, much of the Middle East, and most of what we now consider Europe. Julius Caesar had tried to expand the empire to include Britain, but his attempts in 55 and 54 B.C.E. were thwarted by strong resistance and a revolt in Gaul, which caused him to withdraw. In 43 C.E., under the direction of Emperor Claudius, the Romans successfully invaded Britain. They would spend the next forty years pushing deeper into the isles, defeating the Britons and Caledonians as far north as the Moray Firth in 84 C.E. at the Battle of Mons Graupius. But over the next several centuries, as the Roman Empire faced threats on all its borders, troop numbers in Britain were reduced. By the middle of the fourth century, Britain also faced many attacks from tribal groups, including the native Picts and Scots from the north and Germanic tribes from Angeln and Saxony. Roman soldiers struggled to meet the threats. By 410 C.E., Rome had determined that Britain was no longer a priority. They severed their claim to Britain, and recalled all Romans left in Britain back to Rome. It was too little, too late for Rome: that same year Rome itself was sacked by the Visigoths.

With the Romans gone, Britain was in a state of change. The invading tribes, including Germanic Angles and Saxons and Danish Jutes and Frisians, began settling in large numbers and putting down roots of their own in what are now England and Wales. The new residents spoke different languages and were largely illiterate: Roman ways were quickly forgotten. The Anglo-Saxon period began, lasting from 410 until William the Conqueror invaded in 1066.

ANGLO-SAXON POETRY

The new era brought a new language—Old English—emerging as a synthesis of the West Germanic dialects and Latin, spread by missionaries

after the arrival of St. Augustine in 597. The missionaries also spread the use of Roman letters for a written language. With literacy came literature. The oldest surviving text of Old English literature is a poem written by the seventh-century poet Caedmon, who is often called the “father of English poetry.” Sometime between 658 and 680, Caedmon composed a nine-line poem titled “Caedmon’s Hymn.” In the poem, Caedmon—a shepherd who later became a monk—praises God as the creator of man. The names of very few other Anglo-Saxon poets are known and only four—Caedmon, Cynewulf, Bede, and King Alfred—have work that can still be read today.

Scop

An Anglo-Saxon poet was called a scop (pronounced *shop*). He recited memorized poetry while playing a harp or a lyre. Some scops were affiliated with royal or noble courts and others may have traveled, performing in village halls.

Scholars believe poetry as an oral tradition was widespread among the Anglo-Saxons. The sophistication and shared style of the written poems that have survived indicate a rich tradition that would have developed only through the contributions of many poets. Roughly 400 of the surviving Anglo-Saxon manuscripts were written in Old English. For poetry, the four major codices, or books, are: the Junius Manuscript, an illustrated compilation of biblical narratives; the Exeter Book, an anthology stored at Exeter Cathedral since the eleventh century; the Vercelli Book, which includes poetry and prose; and the Nowell Codex, which contains the only copy of the poem *Beowulf*, as well as other prose and poetry. The poems generally are either religious poems or epic poems about a hero, but there are also elegy poems of mourning and even riddle poems.

ANGLO-SAXON POETIC STYLE

Alliteration and Stress: Anglo-Saxon poems were composed primarily for recitation. To make them easier to memorize, they tended to be highly rhythmic and used a form of alliteration, rather than meter and rhyme, to achieve that rhythm. (Alliteration repeats the initial consonant sound of a word.) In Anglo-Saxon poetry, a line has four stressed syllables with a

pause, called a caesura, in the middle. The alliteration always carries across the pause, with the first stressed syllable after the pause alliterating with one or both stressed syllables in the first half of the line. The resulting poetry when recited can sound almost like a chant, harsher in tone than Greek and Latin poetry.

Kenning: Instead of metaphors or similes, Old English poems used kennings. A kenning is a description of a noun using a two-word phrase, such as battle-sweat for blood or slaughter-storm for battle. Kennings were also frequently used in Old Norse poetry.

BEOWULF

Beowulf is the best known of the surviving Anglo-Saxon poems. An anonymous poet first wrote *Beowulf*, an epic poem, by around 800. The surviving manuscript, however, was written closer to the eleventh century. *Beowulf* tells a bloody and violent story in 3,200 lines. The sixth-century hero, Beowulf, battles against three monsters. The first, Grendel, has kept the castle of the Danish king Hrothgar under siege for twelve years. Beowulf rips off Grendel's arm, and the creature bleeds to death. Next, Beowulf battles Grendel's mother and slays her with a magic sword. Finally, fifty years later, when Beowulf is the king of the Geats, he must defend his own people from a dragon. This battle is his last: both he and the dragon die.

Beowulf is based on an older Scandinavian tale passed down orally. Although its roots are in pagan stories, it includes many Christian themes inserted by the poet. The plot is supplemented by digressions on other historical events, creating a rich, complex narrative. Although the poem is widely studied today, and is often credited as the first major work in the canon of English literature, it was kept in obscurity until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when it was rediscovered by critics and writers.

“LO, praise of the prowess of people-kings
of spear-armed Danes, in days long sped,
we have heard, and what honor the athelings won!”

—*Beowulf* (Francis B. Gummere translation), Anonymous
