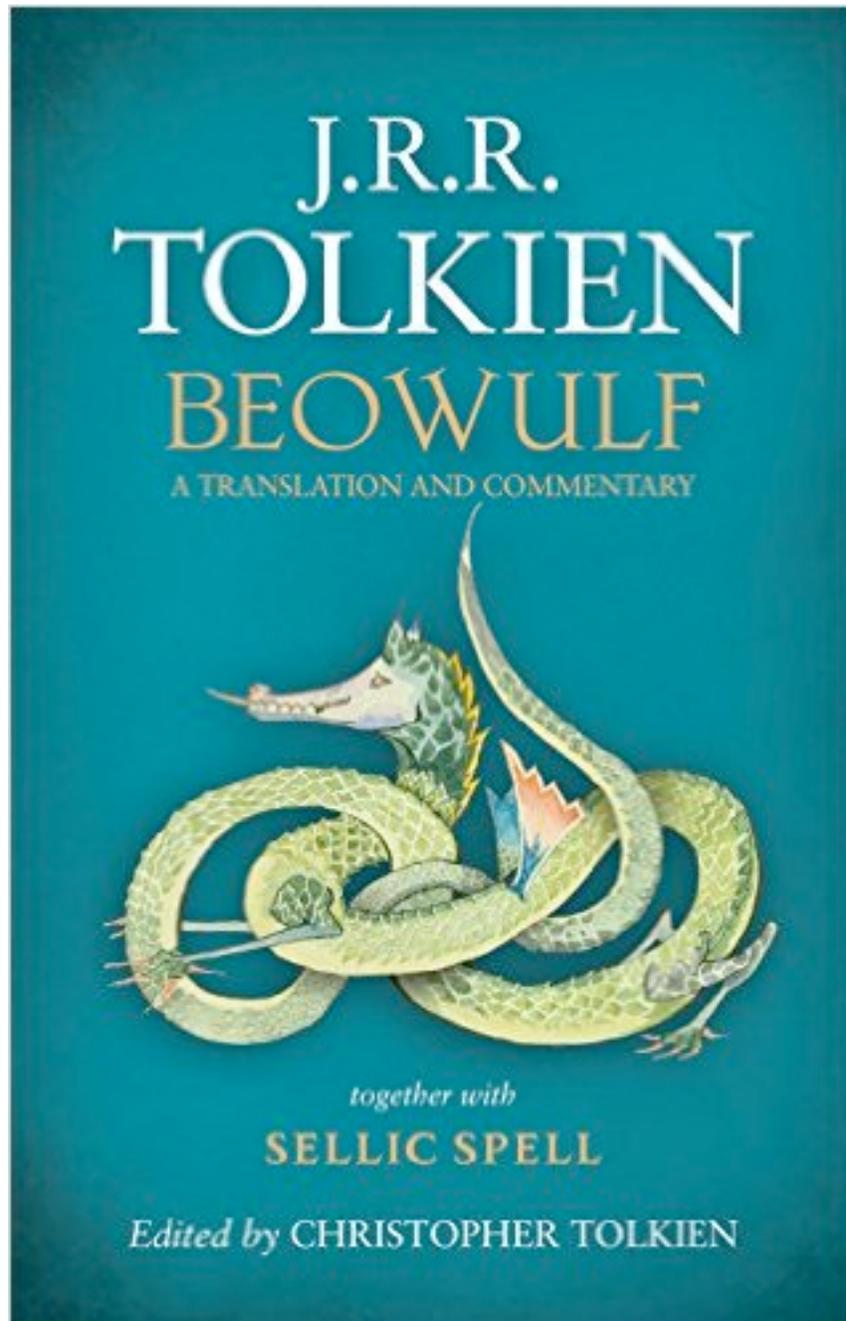


Curriculum Guide and Questions for J. R. R. Tolkien's
Sellic Spell and *The Lay of Beowulf*



Sellic Spell

Find the passage in *Beowulf* where the expression “sellic spell” occurs (*Beowulf* l. 2109; line 1769 in Tolkien’s translation). What is the context? Who does it refer to? How can you translate it? How does it apply to Tolkien’s own tale?

Read Tolkien’s essay *On Fairy Stories*. What does he argue about magic? Does he take magic seriously in *Sellic Spell*?

What is a folk tale? Is it different from a fairy tale? How so? Is *Sellic Spell* a fairy tale? A folk tale? Both or neither?

Does Tolkien give people with positions (kings, queens, etc.) names? How is this like (or not) *The Hobbit*? What effect does it have?

Look at page 369. Note the queen’s statement: “Fate oft spareth him that fears her not.” Is there a line in *Beowulf* that echoes it? Who says it there? Why does Tolkien have the queen say it here?

On page 377, Tolkien writes that Beowulf splits the “hide” of Grindle’s Mother. On page 379 she is called Grendel’s “dam”. Look that word up. What does the use of these words suggest, as opposed to skin or mother?

Find a child. Read *Sellic Spell* aloud to that child. What do you discover in that telling? What is the child’s impression of the story?

Does Tolkien fill in holes in the *Beowulf* story? If so, which holes?

Discuss Beowulf/Beewolf’s ability or lack thereof to use weapons.

Why is Tolkien fascinated with the light in Grendel’s eyes throughout *Sellic Spell*?

Is *Sellic Spell* an adaptation of *Beowulf*? Or an interpretation? Or something else altogether?

Compare the voice of the narrator in *Sellic Spell* and in *Beowulf*. Which is more authoritative? Which more intrusive? What effect does that have?

Discuss the use of gloves in *Sellic Spell*. Where does a glove appear in *Beowulf*?

What magical items cause action in *Sellic Spell*? Does Beewolf use them in the same way as Ashwood and Handshoe use them?

What is the relationship between Beewolf and Unfriend? How is similar or different than the one between Beowulf and Unferth?

On page 373, Beewolf says that Grendel’s “den” must be “cleansed”. What does the word “den” suggest? What place had to be cleansed in *Beowulf* and why?

Read Beowulf's speech at the bottom of 381 and top of 382. He says, referring to Unferth, "I have a mind to teach him the tying of knots." This moment of humor is typical of Germanic and Norse understatement. Can you find other moments like that in *Sellic Spell* or in *Beowulf*?

On page 384, Tolkien refers to Beowulf's "knights." He also uses that word in his translation of *Beowulf*. How does that affect the text—using "knights" instead of "warriors"?

Is there a moral to *Sellic Spell*? If so what? Is there a moral to *Beowulf*? If so, what? Are they the same morals?

Read Tolkien's Old English version of *Sellic Spell* pages 407-414. Try to translate it. Do you come up with the same translation as Tolkien himself?

The Lay of Beowulf

I. Beowulf and Grendel

Christopher Tolkien believes his father sang *Beowulf and Grendel* to him in bed when he was 7 or 8. Try singing it aloud. Does it lend itself to music? Why?

Discuss the structure of the poem. Does it rhyme? Does it repeat lines? What effect does this have?

Note on page 418 that Grendel speaks. How does this alter your perception of Grendel from that in *Beowulf*?

Is this an appropriate song for a 7 or 8 year old?

Compose music to accompany the words in these two poems.

II. Beowulf and the Monsters

Recite the entire poem (if a group, each person take a stanza). What is the structure of the poem? Does the repetition help affect the meaning?

How is Grendel's Mother described? Is she more monster-like or human? How?

On page 424, Grendel's Mother speaks. What affect does this have on your understanding of her character? What does she say?

Grendel's Mother curses Beowulf on page 424. Read the last stanza on 425 carefully. Does her curse come true? Discuss how the last stanza compacts the entire fate of Heorot and the dragon episode in just a few words.