



Beowulf

Study Guide by Course Hero



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👁 Book Basics

AUTHOR

Unknown

YEARS COMPOSED

c. 700–750 CE

GENRE

Adventure

PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATOR

Beowulf is told from a third-person omniscient perspective as

the narrator shows glimpses of many characters' feelings and viewpoints.

TENSE

Beowulf is told primarily in the past tense.

ABOUT THE TITLE

Beowulf is named after its heroic protagonist, Beowulf, as a way of further honoring his achievements and moral character.

🕒 In Context

Beowulf is the oldest existing Old English poem. While the story and its historical elements arguably take place between the end of the 5th and the beginning of the 8th century, it was most likely put into its current written form centuries later. The historical and cultural elements within the poem—such as the description of the king's burial ceremony and the construction of the majestic hall, Heorot, by King Hrothgar—have helped scholars narrow the time frame and the location for the setting. The mix of pagan traditions interspersed with Christian values contributes to the poem's mystique but is often up for debate among scholars as to its exact time and date. In 2013, however, archaeologists claimed to have found the ruins of Heorot, located in Lejre, Denmark, about 20 miles west of Copenhagen, and dating to the 6th century.

The poem was most likely written down by two monks in England; handwriting analysis of the single medieval manuscript dated it to the early 11th century. The manuscript now resides in the British Museum and is one of the most—if not *the* most—translated texts in history, translated hundreds of times in both narrative and poetic form. The story transcends time and place and is as relevant today as it was in the Middle Ages. Its original audiences most likely heard of Beowulf's heroism, loyalty, and honor in a fire-lit room as the

poet chanted to the accompaniment of a harp and drums. Today theaters are filled with larger-than-life characters much like Beowulf, whose heroic acts and noble deeds are projected onto a huge screen for all to see. Many of these characters and themes could easily be traced to the original Scandinavian tales presented in *Beowulf*. Outside the worlds of entertainment and academic study, the themes of *Beowulf* still apply in everyday life. People apply the heroic code in their lives when they seek to gain the respect and trust of others and to honor those whom they respect. The theme of good versus evil still plays out daily on a personal and international level, as reported in the various news media, and loyalty can be seen in the relationships among friends and family, as well as students' feelings about their school, fans' devotion to an athletic team, and citizens' love of their country.

Author Biography

What is known about the author of *Beowulf* has been derived from studying the time period in which it was written and the storytelling methods and poetic form of the piece. It is believed to have been composed between 700–750 CE as a story to be told orally and was written down centuries later. The poet was gifted in the art of storytelling and alliteration. Alliteration is the repetition of sounds within a text that creates a rhythmic quality to the work. In *Beowulf*, the poet repeats the beginning sound of words throughout the text, setting up a rhythm that begs for the poem to be performed and chanted and suggests that it stemmed from the tradition of oral storytelling.

Characters

Beowulf

Beowulf is strongly driven by his sense of loyalty, but he also has a desire for fame. This desire is less focused on personal notoriety and more on nationalism and bringing pride and strength to his family (the Geats royals). He defeats three monsters: Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon. Beowulf has all the qualities of a good leader: he is kind, generous, and diplomatic as a king, and he keeps the country in relative peace for 50 years.

King Hrothgar

Hrothgar is king of the Danes and saved Beowulf's father from certain death, thus earning the loyalty of Beowulf. He builds Heorot Hall. His pride for the lavish hall may or may not have contributed to the evil that invades in the form of Grendel. Grendel kills many of his men, eventually leading King Hrothgar to accept Beowulf's help to defeat the beast. Hrothgar is indebted to Beowulf, and they become like father and son.

Grendel

Grendel is the beast that—annoyed by the noise and partying that goes on in Heorot Hall—terrorizes all who gather at the hall, leading to the hall's desertion for 12 years. Grendel is called many names: the "terror-monger," "hell-serf," and "captain of evil." He is a descendant of the murderous Biblical character, Cain. His arm is ripped off by Beowulf and he is eventually beheaded.

Wealhtheow

Queen Wealhtheow was married to Hrothgar to maintain peace between his kingdom and that of her parents. She is a gracious hostess who praises Beowulf and asks him to advise her sons. She counsels Hrothgar that he should adopt Beowulf if he wishes, but that his nephew Hrothulf should be named heir to the throne.

Dragon

The dragon is another evil, fire-breathing creature obsessed with gold. He has taken ownership of a hoard of gold placed in a barrow by the lone survivor of a group of people. The dragon awakens to find a gold goblet missing and wreaks havoc over King Beowulf's land in search of the gold and the person who stole it. The dragon is hunted down and killed by Beowulf—but not before he fatally wounds the hero.

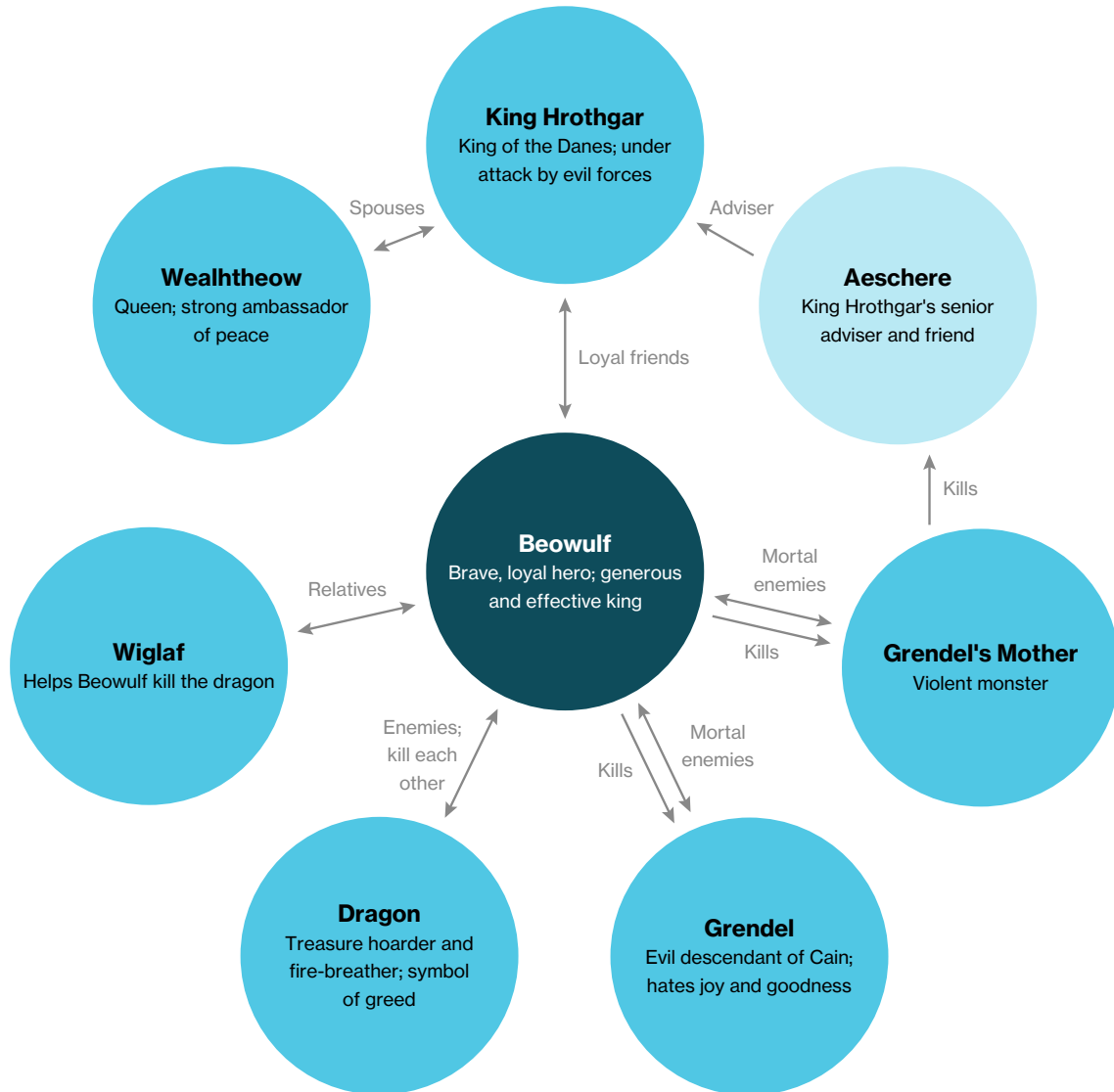
Grendel's Mother

Grendel's mother doesn't actively seek out humans until Grendel is killed. She then takes revenge by killing one of Hrothgar's chief elders and retrieves her son's arm before heading back to her hall under a bloody, boiling swamp. Beowulf dives down to find her and kills her with a magical sword.

Wiglaf

Wiglaf is a trusted companion and a cousin of Beowulf. He helps Beowulf defeat the dragon when the rest of Beowulf's men run and hide. In his final moments, Beowulf gives Wiglaf his battle armor. The poem ends before we know Wiglaf's future, but because Beowulf has not proclaimed an heir and Wiglaf perceives the warriors as weak, he predicts wars, slavery, and doom for the Geats.

Character Map



- Main character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Full Character List

Character	Description
Beowulf	Beowulf is the poem's brave hero.
King Hrothgar	King Hrothgar is the ruler of the Danes and Beowulf's loyal friend.
Grendel	Grendel is the evil beast that terrorizes King Hrothgar's men, and whom Beowulf kills.
Wealhtheow	Wealhtheow is King Hrothgar's queen and an ambassador of peace.
Dragon	The dragon is an evil, fire-breathing creature that fatally wounds Beowulf before his own death.
Grendel's Mother	Grendel's mother is a beast that seeks to avenge her son's death and is killed by Beowulf.
Wiglaf	Wiglaf is Beowulf's cousin and companion who helps him defeat the dragon.
Aeschere	Aeschere is Hrothgar's adviser; he is killed by Grendel's mother.
Beow	Beow is Hrothgar's grandfather.
Breca	Breca is Beowulf's childhood friend.
Ecgtheow	Ecgtheow is Beowulf's father.
Finn	Finn is the king of the Frisians.
Halfdane	Halfdane is Hrothgar's father.
Heardred	Heardred is the son of Hygelac and Hygd.
Hildeburh	Hildeburh is King Finn's queen.
Hnaef	Hnaef is a Danish ruler; brother of Hildeburh; killed by King Finn.

Hrethric	Hrethric is Hrothgar's oldest son and heir until his cousin steals the crown.
Hrothulf	Hrothulf is Hrothgar's nephew who Wealhtheow suggests should inherit the crown.
Hrothmund	Hrothmund is Hrothgar's second son.
Hygd	Hygd is Beowulf's aunt; queen of the Geats.
Hygelac	Hygelac is Beowulf's uncle and mentor; king of the Geats.
King Heremod	King Heremod is an ancient king who eventually betrayed his subjects.
King Hrethel	King Hrethel is the previous king of the Geats; Beowulf's great-uncle and foster father.
King Onela	King Onela is a nobleman who seized the Swedish throne; killed by Beowulf.
King Ongentheow	King Ongentheow is the Swedish king killed by Eofor; one of Hygelac's thanes.
Queen Modthryth	Queen Modthryth is a cruel queen whose behavior sets her up as a foil to Queen Hygd.
Shield Sheafson	Shield Sheafson is Hrothgar's great-grandfather, and the founder of his tribe.
Sigemund	Sigemund is an ancient warrior and dragon-slayer.
Unferth	Unferth is one of Hrothgar's men whose spite for Beowulf grows into admiration.



Plot Summary

With loyalty and heroism in mind, Beowulf comes to the rescue of the Danes and King Hrothgar. They have suffered at the hands of an evil monster, Grendel, who has pillaged their kingdom for more than 12 years and killed many men.

Beowulf, nephew to the king of the Geats, sails across the seas to try to defeat the beast. Once he has convinced Hrothgar and Unferth of his many feats, they allow Beowulf to defend the hall from the monster. Because of his code of honor, Beowulf lays down his armor and sword so that he is Grendel's equal and has no unfair advantage. Upon Grendel's arrival a great battle ensues, and Beowulf—with his mighty strength—tears Grendel's arm from his body.

Mortally injured, Grendel retreats home to die. Prepared to avenge her son's death, Grendel's mother arrives the next day and kills one of Hrothgar's elders. Beowulf follows her down into her swampy home and attempts to fight her, but his sword doesn't make a scratch on the horrible beast. He grabs a magical sword hanging on her wall and wields a deadly blow.

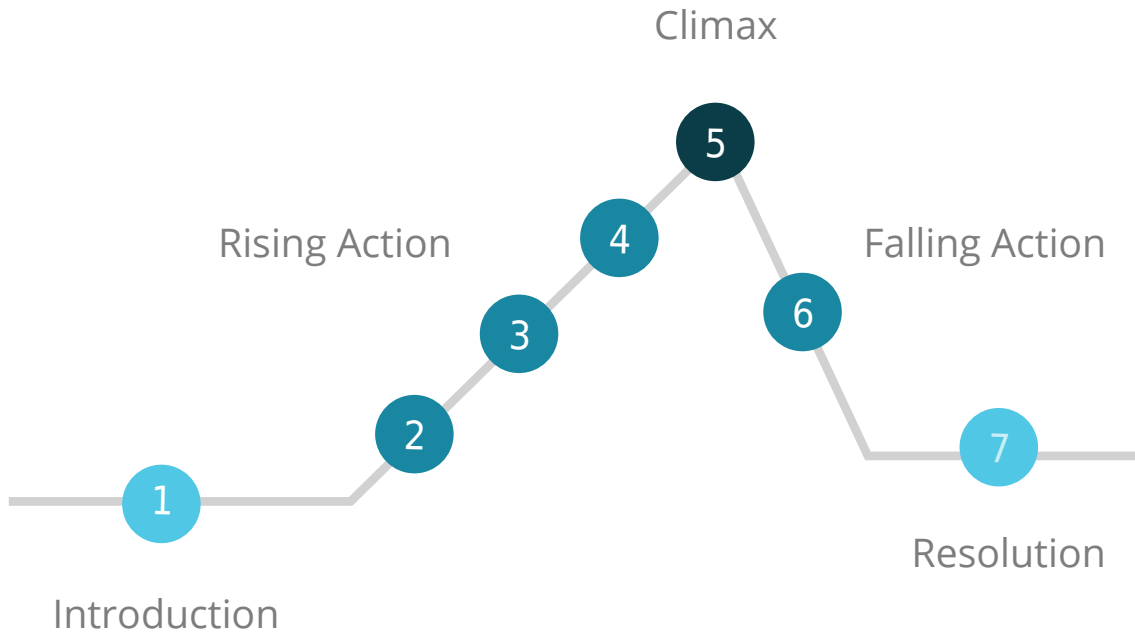
Then, he spots Grendel's corpse and severs his head. Grendel's poisonous blood melts and destroys the sword down to its hilt. Beowulf comes to the surface and presents Grendel's head and the hilt to Hrothgar. A grand celebration in Beowulf's honor ensues.

Beowulf then returns to the Geats, where he is proclaimed a hero. Eventually, Beowulf becomes a great king of the Geats. But, as with Hrothgar, all good things must come to an end. Fifty years into his reign, a great dragon is disturbed. A man happens upon the beast's lair and steals some of the treasure the dragon has been hoarding for years. The dragon seeks his revenge and wreaks havoc in Beowulf's kingdom. Beowulf knows that it will be difficult to defeat the beast, but he has the best armor and swords. With his loyal warriors, he sets out to defeat the dragon. Beowulf orders his men to stay back while he battles the dragon alone. The warriors agree and, upon seeing the dragon, all of his warriors run from his side—except a young thane called Wiglaf. Although Beowulf fights heroically, he is fatally wounded. Before Beowulf dies, Wiglaf presents him with some of the riches from the dragon's hoard.

The story ends much like it starts: with a death and an elaborate burial. Beowulf is laid to rest with a mountain of treasure to mark his heroic life. Sadly, at his death Beowulf

finally shows some fallibility and dies without naming an heir—a kingdom without an heir is at great risk of pillaging, death, and enslavement.

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. Grendel terrorizes Heorot for 12 years.

Rising Action

2. Beowulf arrives to fight the monster.
3. Beowulf kills Grendel.
4. Grendel's mother arrives to avenge his death.

Climax

5. Beowulf kills Grendel's mother.

Falling Action

6. As king, Beowulf fights, kills the dragon.

Resolution

7. Beowulf dies from his injuries.

Timeline of Events

12 years later

Beowulf arrives at Heorot.

The following night

Grendel's mother attacks Hrothgar's men, hoping to avenge her son's death.

Some years later

Hygelac is killed in battle. Beowulf is named king.

Some weeks later

Beowulf kills the dragon but is mortally wounded.

c. 500 CE

Grendel terrorizes Hrothgar's men at Heorot.

That night

Grendel attacks the Danes; Beowulf kills Grendel.

The following day

Beowulf tracks and kills Grendel's mother.

50 years later

The dragon burns villages to avenge the theft of his goblet.

Later that day

Beowulf dies.

🔍 Section Summaries

Beowulf is written in numbered lines. In this guide, the lines have been divided into sections covering different episodes in the plot for the purpose of summary and analysis.

Lines 1–63 (A Royal Lineage)

Summary

Beowulf starts with a legendary tale of a Danish king and his heroic deeds, and sets the tone for the entire tale. It goes on to describe the elaborate funeral of Shield Sheafson, Hrothgar's ancestor and a great and beloved king who was a fierce warrior: "scourge of many tribes ... terror of the hall-troops." The poem continues with a description of how the leadership is passed down from generation to generation until Hrothgar becomes king.

Analysis

Beowulf begins by providing the noble ancestry of King Hrothgar. He is a descendant of great warrior kings who have done heroic deeds and are exalted in life and in death. This description of lineage, as well as a detailed account of the burial of Hrothgar's ancestor, Shield Sheafson, helps demonstrate his noble and worthy ancestry. Likewise, it provides justification for Beowulf's loyalty and his desire to help a great king defeat an evil force that soon enters the kingdom. In addition, it introduces and describes a main theme within the poem: the heroic code. The description of Shield Sheafson presents a foundation of the ethics, deeds, and accomplishments that make up that code.

Lines 64–193 (Terror at King Hrothgar's Hall)

Summary

King Hrothgar grows powerful and has many loyal subjects. Hrothgar has been shown favor because of his leadership and to reward that accomplishment, he commissions a lavish "mead-hall," which he calls Heorot ("Hall of the Hart") to symbolize his wealth and success as a leader. Soon, however, the house of Hrothgar is threatened and attacked repeatedly by an evil force named Grendel, an outcast described as a "demon." Grendel becomes enraged by the loud banquets and noisy poets who proclaim the goodness of God. He storms the castle, takes 30 of Hrothgar's men to his lair, and returns them "butchered." Grendel continues his murderous rampage for "twelve winters." King Hrothgar, distressed and helpless, turns to his trusted advisers for help; they recommend a shrine and offering to the heathen gods.

Analysis

The building of Heorot Hall is important because all great kings must have a hall in which to take refuge after long bouts of war. It is where the king hosts gatherings for his thanes and warriors, and is a sign of security, prosperity, and community. The banquets Hrothgar hosts strengthen one of the poem's themes, that of hospitality. Heorot also demonstrates Hrothgar's power and his pride.

As all great stories have a conflict, the continuous prosperity causes audiences to wonder when "the fall" will happen. Sure enough, the story darkens when Grendel enters the picture. Grendel, a huge and violent creature, symbolizes evil and poses a great threat to Hrothgar and his kingdom. Hrothgar is powerless against Grendel, and all his warriors desert Heorot Hall for fear they will become his next victims.

The pagan rituals suggested by Hrothgar's advisers signify the conflict between two different religious beliefs. The poet indicates Hrothgar doesn't know yet about the Lord Almighty, which gives cause to wonder if that is a theme of the poem—perhaps Hrothgar's pagan practices are leading him into trouble, not away from it.

Lines 194–661 (Beowulf in Heorot)

Summary

Beowulf, a powerful, confident, handsome warrior motivated by loyalty and obligation to aid Hrothgar, enters the story. Loaded with battle gear, Beowulf and his men board a ship and sail to the Danish coast. The guardians of the coast are alarmed by the arrival of elaborately armed men, but Beowulf explains the mission. Impressed by Beowulf, the guards lead the men to Heorot Hall. Beowulf has to again state his cause and remind Hrothgar of the friendship that he and Beowulf's father shared.

Likewise, Beowulf presents many of his accomplishments: he fought numerous beasts, raided a nest of trolls, and even took on several sea monsters. Beowulf declares that he plans to defeat Grendel, and that he will do it without weapons to bring greater honor to the Geats.

Hrothgar makes a speech regarding Beowulf's father and then bares his soul about the murders and embarrassment caused to his kingdom at the hands of Grendel. Hrothgar's courtier, Unferth, becomes jealous of the praise heaped on Beowulf and begins to make a speech to discredit him. Beowulf not only defends himself but also rebukes Unferth for his less than moral actions and lack of courage. Hrothgar's queen, Wealhtheow, sings Beowulf's praises and thanks him for coming to their aid.

Analysis

This segment establishes the relationship between Hrothgar and Beowulf. There is a bond of loyalty between Hrothgar and Beowulf's deceased father, Ecgtheow, which has passed on to the next generation.

Years ago Ecgtheow became involved in a feud with the Wulfing tribe because he killed Heatholaf, one of their members, and could not afford to pay the *wergild* (penalty) imposed. Hrothgar saved Ecgtheow by paying the fine on his behalf. Beowulf now seeks to repay the debt by defeating Grendel. The culture of the time was very much driven by the heroic code. This code demanded loyalty and also required

revenge to be exacted when called for. If a good deed benefited someone, that person was indebted to the person who helped. If someone was wronged, he would take revenge on the other person, no matter how many generations it took until revenge was obtained.

Beowulf makes a number of grand speeches. The hero's conceit doesn't detract from his valiant deeds or stature as it might today; in fact, the people present, especially the queen, are even more impressed by Beowulf. It was expected that the hero warrior would tell of his great deeds to evoke confidence in the people he is defending. While he is boastful, he also demonstrates that he accepts his human frailty by announcing what should be done with his body should he be killed by Grendel.

Unferth's jealous tirade and the back and forth name-calling was actually expected and helps to build an even grander view of the hero. Beowulf does appear to take the insults somewhat personally, but after he debunks Unferth's claims, the goodwill between the Danes and Geats is restored.

Lines 662–851 (The Battle)

Summary

After the boasting and festivities are over, Beowulf lays down his weapons and prepares to meet the enemy. Meanwhile, as the men sleep, Grendel plans his murderous rampage. Grendel breaks into Heorot Hall, where Beowulf waits and watches.

Before Beowulf can attack, Grendel claims another victim, one of Beowulf's fellow warriors. Grendel then reaches for Beowulf, and a great battle ensues that is so violent and loud, people outside of the hall are awakened and frightened. Beowulf's warriors try their swords, but Grendel has magic against weapons. Grendel has met his match in Beowulf and tries to retreat, but not before Beowulf fatally injures him by tearing his arm from his body.

Wounded and close to death, Grendel returns to his home under the "fen-banks" (swampy mounds) where he succumbs to his injury.

Analysis

Beowulf's superhero status reaches new heights in the telling of this battle. Because the audience gains insight into Grendel's astonishment, fear, and instinct to retreat, we have an even greater appreciation for Beowulf's superhuman power. The battle is epic—and plays off good versus evil and biblical themes in which a savior, Beowulf, sends Grendel (Cain's descendant) to hell.

Lines 852–1250 (The Celebration)

Summary

A celebration ensues after Beowulf's grand defeat of Grendel. A minstrel sings Beowulf's praises and tells the tale of Sigemund, the dragon-slayer—also a hero for the ages—and an evil ruler named King Heremod.

Hrothgar expresses his thanks and adopts Beowulf into his heart. The king also expresses that his appreciation is so great that he can't imagine what would be a good enough gift to bestow on Beowulf. Of course, Beowulf, being the hero he is, tells Hrothgar that killing Grendel was something he did without hope of any reward. Beowulf is presented with many gifts, including an arm-ring, a necklace, an ancient and valuable sword, a banner, a helmet, and horses. Wealhtheow makes a grand speech and acts as ambassador for her nephew Hrothulf to be the next heir to the throne.

Analysis

At the celebration the king's poet performs many songs and tales for the guests. These entertainments might serve as foreshadowing and as warnings to Beowulf and to the audience. They demonstrate the power and the pitfalls that come with fame.

In one of the poet's stories, which is based on historical fact, a Danish princess named Hildeburh marries Frisian King Finn in hopes of mending a feud between the Danes and Frisians. The feud isn't squelched, however, and the Danes attack. In the

end, Hildeburh's son and brother are killed in Finn's hall. Many Danes are killed and their bodies burned to honor the dead. It is a sad tale that shares the culture and difficult political battles waged during those times.

Hrothgar is indebted to Beowulf for helping restore his kingdom to safety and order. The gifts bestowed upon Beowulf show the greatness of the deed, a hero's reward, and the ruler's generosity. The ceremony and the stories serve as a historical recording of the times and traditions of the Scandinavian people. This section also enlightens audiences about the role of women in the Danish courts and exemplifies their part in politics and ambassadorship. As Anglo-Saxon tribes were often at war with one another, the daughters of each ruler were frequently married off to leaders in rival tribes. Their roles were those of peace-weavers. It was assumed that their presence in the rival royal household would lessen the tension between the two factions and establish peace. In addition, the queen in each realm served as hostess at social functions to ensure that appropriate civil protocol (behavior) was observed to honor the king and guests. Her graciousness also furthers the theme of hospitality.

Lines 1251–1904 (Danger Returns)

Summary

After the long and ceremonial evening, Hrothgar and Beowulf leave Heorot Hall for a night's rest. Unfortunately, the battle isn't over: To avenge her son's death, Grendel's mother attacks stealthily and quietly, killing Aeschere, one of Hrothgar's closest advisers.

Beowulf is summoned and grandly proclaims the heroic code before leaving to hunt down the murderer. Unferth also gives Beowulf his sword. Beowulf prepares for battle and dives into the poisonous mere to finish the job he started. As he swims down to her cave, Grendel's mother spots him and pulls him into a great hall beneath the swamp. They battle; Beowulf swings his sword, but it has no effect.

Beowulf then sees a mighty sword meant for a giant on the wall. He tears it from the wall and strikes, beheading Grendel's mother. Danes and Geat men watch from above and see blood

boil violently in the bog and again assume that Beowulf has met his match. The Danes leave, but the Geats await some sign from their hero.

Beowulf sees Grendel's body lying below and removes the beast's head in retaliation for all the men Grendel murdered. The blade of the sword melts away as it touches Grendel's poisonous blood, bringing an end to the danger that has haunted Heorot Hall.

Beowulf returns to Heorot Hall with the hilt of the sword and Grendel's head as trophies. Hrothgar is presented with the trophies, and in return Hrothgar gives more gifts and fatherly advice to his champion. Hrothgar declares Beowulf's worthiness to be king in his own land, and contrasts Beowulf to the evil Danish King Heremod. Another feast ensues, and then Beowulf and his men set sail for home.

Analysis

By cultural norms, Grendel's mother has every right to seek revenge for her son's death. Feuds were common and expected when someone was killed. Many times the feuds would last for generations.

Women were also included in the feuds, although they weren't often the ones taking retribution. Because Grendel didn't play by the rules, we can assume Hrothgar and Beowulf didn't consider it fair for her to take revenge. Likewise, Grendel and his mother were descendants of Cain, so they weren't given the same regard as other citizens.

When Unferth generously offers Beowulf his sword to use in the combat, this leads the audience to believe Unferth no longer holds a grudge and respects Beowulf's strength and courage. Beowulf dives into the bubbling mere that is symbolic of Hell.

Unexpectedly, Grendel's dwelling is much like a hall aboveground showing that sometimes there isn't as great a difference between Heaven and Hell as one would expect. Beowulf swings at Grendel's mother with the sword Unferth gave him, but it is ineffective. He finds a supernatural sword that takes her head clean off.

The magical sword was meant to be used for good and to destroy evil; with its job complete, the blade melts. Considering them fitting tribute for the difficult trials his kingdom has

endured, Beowulf brings the magical sword's hilt and the head of the monstrous Grendel to King Hrothgar. In relation to Grendel and his mother, these trophies illustrate the theme of death and defeat. Hrothgar is nearly overcome by the gift of the sword and the knowledge that Grendel and his mother can no longer terrorize his people. He speaks of Beowulf's heroism and growing fame, and warns that fame and power can turn a leader's head and cause him to become evil. As Hrothgar reflects on the fate of King Heremod, he passes on his wisdom to Beowulf. It is evident Hrothgar feels greatly indebted to Beowulf and doesn't want him to suffer the same fate as many kings and heroes who succumb to a fall. There are many biblical parables and references in Hrothgar's speech to Beowulf, again confirming that Christianity had made its way to the Danes and the Geats. Hrothgar finds Beowulf to be like a son and would have likely been inclined to name him as heir to his kingdom.

Lines 1905–2199 (The Homecoming)

Summary

Beowulf and his men sail home and arrive at the stronghold of King Hygelac of the Geats. His queen, Hygd, is introduced, and by way of demonstrating her goodness, the poet tells a tale of an evil queen named Modthryth. Beowulf is welcomed and shares his adventures. He also tells of the Danes' history with the Heathobards and describes his sense of foreboding toward a marriage that—while intended to put an end to the feud—will likely end badly. Beowulf continues to tell about the battle with Grendel's mother, then presents the treasures he earned to Hygelac and gives Queen Hygd the priceless torque (necklace) given to him by Wealhtheow. Hygelac then presents Beowulf with a great sword and many tracts of land.

Analysis

When Beowulf is welcomed home, his arrival affords him the opportunity to bring news about the Danes and other events. He downplays his accomplishments a bit. Beowulf does express his loyalty to Hrothgar, but also makes sure to express his loyalty to his homeland. Beowulf's speech could give the

impression that Hrothgar may have actually proposed that Beowulf become his heir. Beowulf is true to the heroic code and gives all of his treasures to his king and his men because to not do so would have been a sign of disloyalty.

Lines 2200–2509 (Beowulf's Ascension to King)

Summary

The poet moves forward rapidly in this section and describes Hygelac's demise in conflict against the Shylfings. Hygelac and Beowulf went to take on a Germanic tribe called the Franks. They were great goldsmiths and had a lot of gold and jewels, which often made them targets for raids. The king of the Franks found out about the Geats' attack and sent an army to retrieve all that the Geats took. Beowulf survived, but many—including Hygelac—did not. Beowulf's time to rule comes, and he does so for 50 years before the waking of the dragon.

A runaway slave enters the dragon's barrow, which is filled with an "ancient cache" of treasure. The man flees with a golden goblet. The dragon searches high and low around the mound and sees no man. Eventually, the dragon can take it no longer and sets forth to avenge the theft.

He burns land and villages and causes mayhem all across Beowulf's kingdom and then heads back to his hoard by daybreak. Beowulf knows he must challenge the dragon and save his people from this monster. A great battle shield is made, but Beowulf doesn't prepare a large army because he is certain that he will be able to handle this beast like he has all the others.

Beowulf then flashes back to the battle that claimed his king's life and caused Beowulf to narrowly escape across the sea. Beowulf goes on to explain that when he managed to make it back home, Hygd (Hygelac's queen) had wanted him to be king, but Beowulf would not agree to be named ruler over Hygelac's son, Heardred. Eventually, King Heardred is accused of being a part of a Swedish feud and is killed, leaving Beowulf to ascend as king. He was a good king and helped end the feuding. He also avenged Heardred's death by killing King Onela, who had seized the Swedish throne.

After Beowulf's rise to power is told, Beowulf selects 11 men to join him, and they find the thief who had stolen the goblet, whom they force to guide them to the dragon's lair. At the cliff-top opening to the barrow, Beowulf wishes his men good luck with a sad sense of foreboding. Beowulf again speaks of times past and tells of an heir killed accidentally by his brother. Hrethel, the king at the time, was devastated, and there was no way to avenge the death. The king dies and wars erupt between the Geats and the Swedes. The Swedish king, Ongentheow, is eventually killed by Eofor, one of Hygelac's thanes. Beowulf then reminisces about his time fighting loyally for Hygelac's kingdom and being richly rewarded.

Analysis

The tale about Hygelac's demise foreshadows the events that will transpire as Beowulf faces the dragon. It is a battle with a great deal of risk and very little reward, especially when the outcome leads to death. The story of Beowulf's rise to power again serves to prove his loyalty. Beowulf rejects Queen Hygd's idea and instead backs Heardred as king. When Heardred is killed by Onela, Beowulf even avenges his death, again proving his loyalty and sense of honor, all characteristics of a hero and great king. These deaths further build the theme of death and defeat.

The tale then turns to the lone survivor who buries his people's treasure. He is saddened that no one will use the items and reminds the audience that fighting and war have brought an end to his people. The biggest mistake the lone man makes is that he builds a great burial chamber with all the gold and treasure but forgets to shut the door. A treasure-seeking dragon makes quick work of finding the ancient treasure.

The dragon's symbolism of greed is highlighted, as the beast—discovering that a single goblet is missing amid the countless stacks of riches—becomes enraged and overcompensates in his revenge by destroying entire villages, including Beowulf's hall. Fired up by the heroic code, Beowulf is at first quite confident in his own strength, even though he is 75 years old.

Some foreshadowing of his present frailty is shown. Instead of electing to fight the creature bare-handed, as he had done with Grendel, he calls for a metal shield to be made. However, he then gathers only 11 men to go with him. When Beowulf and his men get to the cliff top, Beowulf's confidence wavers as he

appears to sense his own demise. He talks about Hygelac's tragic rise to the throne and then tells a haunting tale of a father watching helplessly while his son is hanged in the gallows. This adds to the mournful tone of this section of the poem. Beowulf remembers Hrothgar's wisdom in telling him that a reversal of fate isn't impossible and Beowulf questions what he might have done to offend God and fate.

Lines 2510–2891 (Beowulf's Final Battle)

Summary

Beowulf again tells of his victories and sings the praises of the warriors that he has taken with him. He tells the men to let him have this one last fight. Beowulf bravely enters the barrow and calls out to the dragon. The dragon shoots flames and runs to the entrance of the barrow. When the dragon exits the barrow, Beowulf tries his sword on the creature but with little success. All but one of Beowulf's handpicked warriors flee at the sight of the dragon.

Though burned and tired, Beowulf, continues to battle the beast. Wiglaf, in his first battle next to his king, gets by the flames to join Beowulf behind his shield. Wiglaf uses his ancestral sword to injure the dragon. It is Beowulf who, inspired by Wiglaf's reminder of Beowulf's fame and deeds, delivers the final blow with a knife in the dragon's abdomen, but not before the dragon fatally bites Beowulf's neck with his sharp fangs.

Beowulf lies dying while Wiglaf brings him water, and after Beowulf's request, enters the barrow and retrieves some of the treasure for Beowulf to behold. Beowulf is pleased he is able to leave a treasure for his people, and gives Wiglaf his battle gear while saying his final goodbye. Wiglaf is overcome with grief and lectures the soldiers who abandoned their king. He also predicts that once the news of their retreat and weakness reaches others, the enemy will attack.

Analysis

Previously, Beowulf seemed confident in his abilities to slay the dragon, but he has a change of heart. He is no less

courageous, but he seems like much more of a realist—or perhaps has a supernatural foreboding. Again, Beowulf recounts his grand deeds, to reassure himself that his life has been one of courage and honor. Although death and defeat may be near, the speech motivates him for battle, and he tells his warriors to let him face the dragon alone.

Wiglaf's refusal to abandon Beowulf shows his loyalty in much the same way he described Beowulf's loyalty to Hrothgar.

Beowulf's gift of his armor to Wiglaf is a significant act. Handing down armor was very meaningful, as shown throughout *Beowulf*, which leads one to believe that Beowulf would entrust Wiglaf with the crown. However, because he has not made this a formal appointment, it is unlikely that Wiglaf will be made king. Beowulf succeeds in death much like he did in life. He built his reputation as a loyal and brave hero and dies in much the same way. He is even pleased at the end that he could leave his people with a treasure.

Lines 2892–3182 (Beowulf's Funeral)

Summary

A messenger is told to report all that has happened and informs the people that Beowulf is indeed dead. The messenger goes on to tell of the wars he foresees with the Franks and the Frisians who had been kind only because of a bond with Beowulf. He also speaks of the Swedes avenging the killing of King Ongentheow at Ravenswood. The messenger retells the story of Ravenswood: Ongentheow had cornered a Geatish force; Hygelac came to the rescue and forced Ongentheow to withdraw and fight for his life; he was eventually killed by Eofor of the Geats; the Geats won the battle, and the messenger predicts that King Ongentheow's people will seek revenge now that Beowulf is dead. The men go to the cliff and find the bodies of Beowulf and the dragon.

Wiglaf tells of Beowulf's courageous fight, but he also questions his lord's decision. Then Wiglaf gives orders to build a funeral pyre; afterward, Wiglaf takes seven thanes into the hoard to remove the treasure and bury it in a tall memorial in Beowulf's honor. He ponders Beowulf's fate. The poet recounts the grief of the people as a woman sings of sadness

and doom at Beowulf's funeral.

Analysis

Wiglaf is very comfortable leading, but even he is dismayed by what Beowulf's death might mean for the Geats. He sends a messenger to tell the people of Beowulf's death, and the messenger predicts the chaos that will ensue because Beowulf is dead and has left no heir. Equally morbid, he ends his message with creatures taking the bodies of Geats who will be killed because of the upheaval in their kingdom.

The forebodings further the impression that Beowulf was a mighty king who made friends with the right people and was so powerful that no enemies would dare attack. Beowulf's men lament as they look upon his body and build a grand pyre covered with battle armor and helmets. They reflect on his kindness and gentleness as king. Beowulf's death and the death of the dragon further enforce the theme of death and defeat.

There is a lot of talk about the gold, and the conclusion is that the treasure should be burned with Beowulf because it bears the burden of killing their king. In the end, Beowulf sought fame, but it was from a place of loyalty, honor, and responsibility. Beowulf, like any man, was human and made mistakes (like taking on the dragon without an heir in place). Nonetheless he was undoubtedly a true hero.

“” Quotes

*"He was spawned in that slime/of
Cain, murderous creatures
banished/by God."*

— Narrator , Lines 64–193 (Terror at King Hrothgar's Hall)

These lines establish Grendel as an evil character descended from Cain, who because of jealousy, killed his brother Abel.

"I drove/five great giants into

*chains. ... I swam/in the blackness
of night, hunting monsters."*

— Beowulf , Lines 194–661 (Beowulf in Heorot)

In this monologue, Beowulf establishes himself as a fearless warrior to be respected and honored—worthy of taking on the symbol of evil (Grendel).

*"If death does take me, send ... my
armor to Hygelac. ... Fate will
unwind as it must!"*

— Beowulf , Lines 194–661 (Beowulf in Heorot)

Before fighting Grendel, Beowulf acknowledges fate's master plan in the battle between good and evil. He also honors generosity over greed by ordering his wealth sent back to his uncle.

*"[Grendel] discovered himself/In a
handgrip harder than anything/He
had encountered in any man. ... He
could not escape./He was
desperate to flee to his den and
hide."*

— Narrator , Lines 662–851 (The Battle)

This establishes Beowulf's strength; as noted several times in the poem, he is as strong as 30 men. This part of the encounter between Beowulf and Grendel is also the tipping point in the struggle between good and evil. It is the first time that Grendel (evil) realizes he may not prevail over Beowulf (good). Grendel is fearful now for the first, and only, time in his life.

*"The cup was carried to him ... /...
and a wealth of [gold]/graciously
bestowed."*

— Narrator , Lines 852–1250 (The Celebration)

These lines reflect on both Beowulf and King Hrothgar. Through the gifts of gold, Hrothgar not only honors Beowulf and rewards his bravery, but he also demonstrates his own generosity—as dictated by the heroic code.

*"It is always better/to avenge dear
ones than to indulge in mourning."*

— Beowulf , Lines 1251–1904 (Danger Returns)

This statement, spoken after Grendel's mother kills Aeschere, again speaks to Beowulf's understanding of the heroic code—that it is always crucial to act in a courageous manner. In this case, that means exacting vengeance.

*"After many trials/he was destined
to face the end of his days/... as
was the dragon."*

— Narrator , Lines 2510–2891 (Beowulf's Final Battle)

Here the poet foreshadows the outcome of Beowulf's final battle. After the many conflicts Beowulf easily won in his youth, now in old age he feels vulnerable. Although he intends to slay the dragon without assistance, he realizes he may not survive the encounter. He puts his life on the line to save his people from the dragon; the dragon fights to defend his treasure. When the combatants mortally wound each other, each dies protecting what he values most.

*"Defend your life now/with the
whole of your strength. I shall*

stand by you."

— Wiglaf , Lines 2510–2891 (Beowulf's Final Battle)

Here Wiglaf refers to the heroic code, calling upon Beowulf to be courageous and honorable to the last. He declares that he also will act in accordance with the code in standing by Beowulf and assisting in the fight against the dragon.

*"I give thanks to God/for all this
gold and treasure that I see before
me/and for the opportunity to give
it/to my countrymen on this, my
last day./I have traded my life for
this treasure/so be sure to use it
for the good of our country."*

— Beowulf , Lines 2892–3182 (Beowulf's Funeral)

Beowulf has just given his life to take the dragon's treasure. Through his action he has valiantly defeated evil and greed. By giving the treasure to his people, he is also fulfilling the heroic code's demands for a generous ruler. However, in this moment, he questions whether wealth was worth the loss of his life.

*"They said that of all the kings
upon the earth/he was the man
most gracious and fair-
minded,/kindest to his people and
keenest to win fame."*

— Narrator , Lines 2892–3182 (Beowulf's Funeral)

In this tribute after Beowulf's death, the Geats honor Beowulf as a great king, listing the characteristics of a great leader, such as courage, strength, generosity, and the capability to govern wisely. These characteristics, again, reflect those

promoted in the heroic code.

Symbols

Grendel

Grendel symbolizes evil and jealousy. He is a descendant of Cain, the biblical character who jealously murdered his brother Abel—a crime for which his descendants (including Grendel) were banished. Grendel lives with his mother in a bloody swamp—the harrowing setting for their banishment—where he jealously fumes about the "din of the loud banquet" in Heorot Hall each night. He feasts on Danish warriors, proving his strength over the celebrated "heroes." When Beowulf defeats Grendel, it is a classic literary example of good triumphing over evil.

Dragon

The dragon symbolizes greed. He hoards gold and treasures in his lair, which represents the opposite of the Anglo-Saxons' accepted practice. As demonstrated in *Beowulf*, gold is to be used by the ring-givers (kings) to reward the deeds of heroes, particularly successful warriors returning from conquest. The dragon, having seized the treasure left behind by the Last Survivor, does nothing with the gold, simply hoarding the riches instead. (The Last Survivor could himself be seen as a hoarder; he collected the treasures of his dead civilization and put them to no use.) Another example of the dragon's greed is demonstrated after a runaway slave steals a single golden goblet from his lair. Searching for the thief, the dragon burns Beowulf's home and whole villages in his kingdom—all in vengeance over the theft of a single cup.

Heorot Hall

Heorot Hall is a symbol not only of happiness and pride, but also of distress. The great hall is Hrothgar's legacy, built to honor great warriors and their accomplishments. It is meant to be a refuge where members of the court and the realm's warriors can gather to feast and celebrate. That Grendel has held Heorot Hall under attack for 12 years represents a case of situational irony: the people's safe haven has undergone a "reversal from bliss to grief."

Themes

Heroic Code

This theme, found in *Beowulf* and other Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, and Greek tales, is made up of a set of rules governing honorable behavior primarily for warriors and rulers. To conform to the heroic code, warriors were expected to be courageous, loyal, and strong. Their loyalty to their ruler was never in question; in fact, they would be willing to sacrifice everything, including their lives, in order to protect those to whom they were loyal. Rulers were expected to display great generosity in rewarding those who served them. They were also expected to be capable of governing wisely.

Good versus Evil

Beowulf and Hrothgar are the two main representatives of good in the poem, while Grendel, his mother, and the dragon embody the concept of evil. Where Grendel, his mother, and the dragon battle only because of their hatred and greed, Beowulf goes into conflict on behalf of others and, when given rewards, shares them rather than retaining the riches for himself. Beowulf's victory over the three monsters is described as almost biblical battles of superhuman strength and courage against evil incarnate.

Loyalty

Loyalty was a guiding force during the period in which *Beowulf* was written and is evident within the poem. The theme of loyalty appears multiple times in Beowulf's actions. The loyalty is passed on from generation to generation as seen by Beowulf's loyalty to King Hrothgar. He was loyal to Hrothgar for several reasons: Hrothgar was his king and had saved his father's life, and Beowulf honored the longtime loyalty shared by his father and King Hrothgar. Beowulf displayed loyalty to King Hygelac of Geatland, giving him much of the reward that King Hrothgar had bestowed on Beowulf and serving Hygelac steadfastly until the king's death. When offered the crown upon Hygelac's death, Beowulf instead declared that Prince Heardred should be king—and then served the young king loyally. Only at the death of King Heardred did Beowulf accept the crown, and then ruled Geatland for 50 years.

Death and Defeat

Although people may live heroic lives and win many battles, death eventually defeats everyone, along with the various works they leave behind. The keeper of rings, sad that his civilization has passed away, hides his people's splendid treasures for safekeeping and the dragon guards the riches for hundreds of years. Yet death claims them both, and Wiglaf finds that much of the treasure also has perished, fallen victim to tarnish and rust. The strength and courage called for in the heroic code help warriors fight against death. As Beowulf tells Hrothgar, who laments the death of his friend Aeschere, "It is always better/to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning." In the end, Beowulf meets his defeat and death, slain by the dragon's poisonous bite—delivered in the same conflict in which he killed the dragon. The sting of death is lessened for Beowulf by the knowledge that he will be given a funeral worthy of a hero.

Hospitality

For rulers such as King Hrothgar and King Hygelac, a significant part of the heroic code relates to generosity and hospitality. Visiting nobility and warriors returning from conflict expect to be hosted at grand banquets in the king's mead hall. The 12 years of terror that Grendel brought to Heorot Hall took the lives of many of Hrothgar's subjects and also disrupted the governing of the kingdom. Without the use of his hall, Hrothgar could not offer the hospitality expected. There's little wonder, therefore, that the feasts held to celebrate Beowulf's arrival and his victories over Grendel and Grendel's mother show such an outpouring of generous hospitality.

Glossary

alacrity: (*n*) a joyful willingness to complete a task

barrow: (*n*) a mound of rocks or dirt placed on top of a burial chamber

bawn: (*n*) a protective wall surrounding Heorot Hall

bewail: (*v*) to express regret, grief, or disappointment

fen: (*n*) bog, swamp, or other low wet area

girdle: (*v*) to go around the body like a belt

graih: (*n*) equipment needed for battle

harrow: (*v*) to distress or torment; in wartime, to pillage or plunder

hasp: (*n*) device used to fasten a door or lid

heath: (*n*) an area of land that is left natural, usually not suitable for farming or cultivation, covered in vegetation

howe: (*n*) synonym for barrow; a mound of rocks or dirt placed on top of a burial chamber

manacle: (*v*) bind at the hands or feet by some kind of shackles

mead: (*n*) an alcoholic beverage created with honey and water

as well as other ingredients like hops, fruit, and spices

mere: (n) a lake, pond, or narrow inlet of the sea

pyre: (n) a large pile of burnable materials used in a funeral ceremony to burn bodies

rampart: (n) a wall-like barrier that provides protection for a castle or fort

scourge: (n) a whip used to administer punishment

thane: (n) a man in high position with the king; often someone who was granted land by the king

thole: (v) to tolerate or endure

torque: (n) a metal collar or neck chain worn in ancient times

venerable: (adj) worthy of respect because of age, position, character, or deeds

Suggested Reading

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