

## Before You Read

FROM **BEOWULF**

### Make the Connection

#### The Dragon Slayer

This is a story about a hero from the misty reaches of the English past, a hero who faces violence, horror, and even death to save a people in mortal danger. The epic's events take place many centuries ago, but this story still speaks to people today—perhaps because there are so many people in need of a rescuer, a hero. Beowulf is ancient England's hero. In other times, in other cultures, the hero takes the shape of King Arthur, or Gilgamesh, or Sunda-ata, or Joan of Arc. In twentieth-century America, the hero may be a real person, like Martin Luther King, Jr., or a fictional character like Shane in the Western novel. This hero-type is the dragon slayer, representing a besieged community facing evil forces that lurk in the cold darkness. And Grendel, the monster lurking in the depths of the lagoon, may represent all those threatening forces.

### Quickwrite

Take notes on several contemporary fictional heroes from novels, films, or even comics or television. Pick one of them, and briefly analyze him or her using these questions:

- What sort of evil or oppression does he confront?
- Why does she do it? What's her motivation?
- For whom does he do it?

- What virtues does she represent?

Now discuss some of the heroes you and your classmates chose. Do they all seem to qualify as hero-types, or do some of them fall short in one way or another?

### Elements of Literature

#### The Epic Hero

Beowulf, like all epic heroes, has superior physical strength and is supremely ethical. In his quest, he must defeat monsters that embody dark, destructive powers. At the end of the quest, he is glorified by the people he has saved. If you watch current events, particularly about people emerging from years of oppression, you will see this impulse toward glorification still at work. You might also see such glorification in the impressive monuments that are great tourist attractions in Washington, D.C.

Sutton Hoo helmet (7th century). Sutton Hoo ship treasure, Suffolk, England. British Museum, London.

The epic hero is the central figure in a long narrative that reflects the values and heroic ideals of a particular society. An epic is a quest story on a grand scale.

For more on the Epic, see the Handbook of Literary Terms.



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# from Beowulf

translated by Burton Raffel

## The Monster Grendel

1

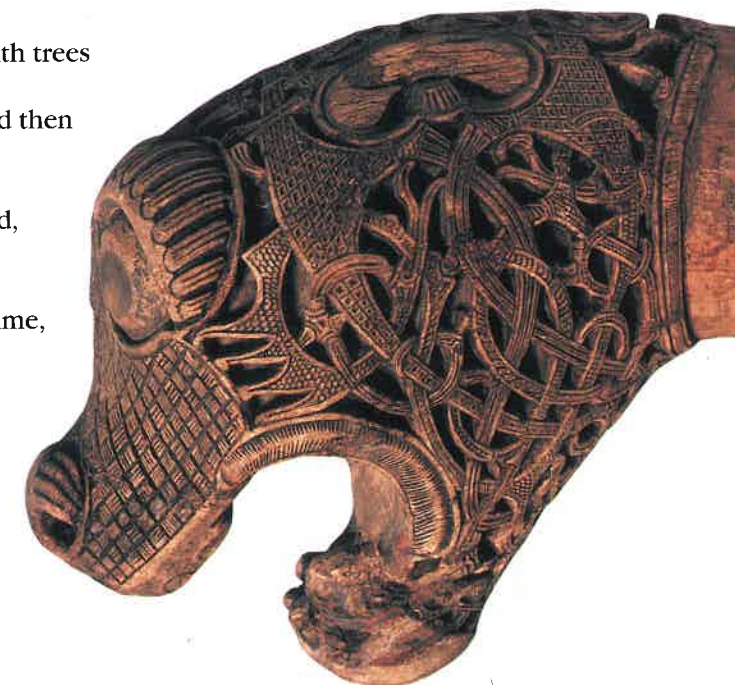
... A powerful monster, living down  
In the darkness, growled in pain, impatient  
As day after day the music rang  
Loud in that hall,° the harp's rejoicing  
5 Call and the poet's clear songs, sung  
Of the ancient beginnings of us all, recalling  
The Almighty making the earth, shaping  
These beautiful plains marked off by oceans,  
Then proudly setting the sun and moon  
10 To glow across the land and light it;  
The corners of the earth were made lovely with trees  
And leaves, made quick with life, with each  
Of the nations who now move on its face. And then  
As now warriors sang of their pleasure:  
15 So Hrothgar's men lived happy in his hall  
Till the monster stirred, that demon, that fiend,  
Grendel, who haunted the moors, the wild  
Marshes, and made his home in a hell  
Not hell but earth. He was spawned in that slime,  
20 Conceived by a pair of those monsters born  
Of Cain, murderous creatures banished  
By God, punished forever for the crime  
Of Abel's death. The Almighty drove  
Those demons out, and their exile was bitter,  
25 Shut away from men; they split  
Into a thousand forms of evil—spirits  
And fiends, goblins, monsters, giants,  
A brood forever opposing the Lord's  
Will, and again and again defeated.

2

30 Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel  
Went up to Herot, wondering what the warriors  
Would do in that hall when their drinking was done.  
He found them sprawled in sleep, suspecting  
Nothing, their dreams undisturbed. The monster's  
35 Thoughts were as quick as his greed or his claws:  
He slipped through the door and there in the silence

Lines have been renumbered and do not correspond with the New American Library edition.

4. **hall:** guest-hall or mead-hall. (Mead is a fermented drink made from honey, water, yeast, and malt.) The hall was a central gathering place where Anglo-Saxon warriors could feast, listen to a bard's stories, and sleep in safety.



Animal head from Viking ship (c. 800). University Museum of National Antiquities, Oslo, Norway. Photo by Eirik Irgens Johnsen.

weygild = "man  
prowd"



Snatched up thirty men, smashed them  
Unknowing in their beds, and ran out with their bodies,  
The blood dripping behind him, back  
40 To his lair, delighted with his night's slaughter.

At daybreak, with the sun's first light, they saw  
How well he had worked, and in that gray morning  
Broke their long feast with tears and laments  
For the dead. Hrothgar, their lord, sat joyless

45 In Herot, a mighty prince mourning  
The fate of his lost friends and companions,  
Knowing by its tracks that some demon had torn  
His followers apart. He wept, fearing  
The beginning might not be the end. And that night

50 Grendel came again, so set  
On murder that no crime could ever be enough,  
No savage assault quench his lust  
For evil. Then each warrior tried  
To escape him, searched for rest in different  
55 Beds, as far from Herot as they could find,  
Seeing how Grendel hunted when they slept.  
Distance was safety; the only survivors  
Were those who fled him. Hate had triumphed.

So Grendel ruled, fought with the righteous,

60 One against many, and won; so Herot  
Stood empty, and stayed deserted for years,  
Twelve winters of grief for Hrothgar, king  
Of the Danes, sorrow heaped at his door  
By hell-forged hands. His misery leaped

65 The seas, was told and sung in all  
Men's ears: how Grendel's hatred began,  
How the monster relished his savage war  
On the Danes, keeping the bloody feud  
Alive, seeking no peace, offering

70 No truce, accepting no settlement, no price  
In gold or land, and paying the living  
For one crime only with another. No one  
Waited for reparation from his plundering claws:  
That shadow of death hunted in the darkness,

75 Stalked Hrothgar's warriors, old  
And young, lying in waiting, hidden  
In mist, invisibly following them from the edge  
Of the marsh, always there, unseen.

So mankind's enemy continued his crimes,  
80 Killing as often as he could, coming  
Alone, bloodthirsty and horrible. Though he lived

#### WORDS TO OWN

**laments** (lə·ments') *n. pl.*: cries of grief.

**reparation** (rep'ə·rā'shən) *n.*: payment to compensate for wrongdoing.



Dragonhead from a Viking  
horse collar (detail) (10th  
century). Denmark.  
National Museum, Copenhagen.

In Herot, when the night hid him, he never  
Dared to touch king Hrothgar's glorious  
Throne, protected by God—God,  
85 Whose love Grendel could not know. But Hrothgar's  
Heart was bent. The best and most noble  
Of his council debated remedies, sat  
In secret sessions, talking of terror  
And wondering what the bravest of warriors could do.  
90 And sometimes they sacrificed to the old stone gods,  
Made heathen vows, hoping for Hell's  
Support, the Dévil's guidance in driving  
Their affliction off. That was their way,  
And the heathen's only hope, Hell  
95 Always in their hearts, knowing neither God  
Nor His passing as He walks through our world, the Lord  
Of Heaven and earth; their ears could not hear  
His praise nor know His glory. Let them  
Beware, those who are thrust into danger,  
100 Clutched at by trouble, yet can carry no solace  
In their hearts, cannot hope to be better! Hail  
To those who will rise to God, drop off  
Their dead bodies, and seek our Father's peace!

#### 3

So the living sorrow of Healfdane's son°  
105 Simmered, bitter and fresh, and no wisdom  
Or strength could break it: That agony hung  
On king and people alike, harsh  
And unending, violent and cruel, and evil.

→ In his far-off home Beowulf, Higlac's  
110 Follower° and the strongest of the Geats—greater  
→ And stronger than anyone anywhere in this world—  
Heard how Grendel filled nights with horror  
And quickly commanded a boat fitted out,  
Proclaiming that he'd go to that famous king,

115 Would sail across the sea to Hrothgar,  
Now when help was needed. None  
Of the wise ones regretted his going, much  
As he was loved by the Geats: The omens were good,  
And they urged the adventure on. So Beowulf  
120 Chose the mightiest men he could find,  
The bravest and best of the Geats, fourteen  
In all, and led them down to their boat;  
He knew the sea, would point the prow°  
Straight to that distant Danish shore. . . .

104. **Healfdane's son:** Hrothgar.

110. **Higlac's follower:** Higlac is  
Beowulf's uncle and feudal lord.

123. **prow** (prou): front part of a  
boat.

#### WORDS TO OWN

**solace** (säl'is) *n.*: peace.





Invasion of Danes under Hinguar (Ingvar) and Hubba. From *Life, Passion, and Miracles of St. Edmund* (c. 1130). England.

The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

*Beowulf arrives in Denmark and is directed to Herot, the mead-hall of King Hrothgar. The king sends Wulfgar, one of his thanes (or feudal lords), to greet the visitors.*

### The Arrival of the Hero

4

125 . . . Then Wulfgar went to the door and addressed  
The waiting seafarers with soldier's words:  
"My lord, the great king of the Danes, commands me  
To tell you that he knows of your noble birth  
And that having come to him from over the open

130 Sea you have come bravely and are welcome.  
Now go to him as you are, in your armor and helmets,  
But leave your battle-shields here, and your spears,  
Let them lie waiting for the promises your words  
May make."

Beowulf arose, with his men

135 Around him, ordering a few to remain  
With their weapons, leading the others quickly  
Along under Herot's steep roof into Hrothgar's  
Presence. Standing on that prince's own hearth,  
Helmeted, the silvery metal of his mail shirt<sup>o</sup>  
140 Gleaming with a smith's<sup>o</sup> high art, he greeted  
The Danes' great lord:

"Hail, Hrothgar!

Higlac is my cousin<sup>o</sup> and my king; the days  
Of my youth have been filled with glory. Now Grendel's  
Name has echoed in our land: Sailors  
145 Have brought us stories of Herot, the best  
Of all mead-halls, deserted and useless when the moon  
Hangs in skies the sun had lit,  
Light and life fleeing together.  
My people have said, the wisest, most knowing  
150 And best of them, that my duty was to go to the Danes'  
Great king. They have seen my strength for themselves,  
Have watched me rise from the darkness of war,  
Dripping with my enemies' blood. I drove  
Five great giants into chains, chased  
155 All of that race from the earth. I swam  
In the blackness of night, hunting monsters  
Out of the ocean, and killing them one  
By one; death was my errand and the fate  
They had earned. Now Grendel and I are called  
160 Together, and I've come. Grant me, then, —  
Lord and protector of this noble place,  
A single request! I have come so far,  
Oh shelterer of warriors and your people's loved friend,  
That this one favor you should not refuse me—  
165 That I, alone and with the help of my men,  
May purge all evil from this hall. I have heard,  
Too, that the monster's scorn of men  
Is so great that he needs no weapons and fears none.  
Nor will I. My lord Higlac  
170 Might think less of me if I let my sword  
Go where my feet were afraid to, if I hid  
Behind some broad linden shield:<sup>o</sup> My hands  
Alone shall fight for me, struggle for life  
Against the monster. God must decide  
175 Who will be given to death's cold grip.  
Grendel's plan, I think, will be

139. **mail shirt:** armored garment made of interlocking metal rings.  
140. **smith's:** metalworker's.

142. **cousin:** any relative.

172. **linden shield:** shield made from wood of the linden tree.



What it has been before, to invade this hall  
 And gorge his belly with our bodies. If he can,  
 If he can. And I think, if my time will have come,  
 180 There'll be nothing to mourn over, no corpse to prepare  
 For its grave: Grendel will carry our bloody  
 Flesh to the moors, crunch on our bones,  
 And smear torn scraps of our skin on the walls  
 Of his den. No, I expect no Danes  
 185 Will fret about sewing our shrouds,° if he wins.  
 And if death does take me, send the hammered  
 Mail of my armor to Higlac, return  
 The inheritance I had from Hrethel,° and he  
 From Wayland.° Fate will unwind as it must!"

5

190 Hrothgar replied, protector of the Danes:  
 "Beowulf, you've come to us in friendship, and because  
 Of the reception your father found at our court.  
 Edgetho had begun a bitter feud;  
 Killing Hathlaf, a Wulfing warrior.°  
 195 Your father's countrymen were afraid of war,  
 If he returned to his home, and they turned him away.  
 Then he traveled across the curving waves  
 To the land of the Danes. I was new to the throne,  
 Then, a young man ruling this wide  
 200 Kingdom and its golden city: Hergar,  
 My older brother, a far better man  
 Than I, had died and dying made me,  
 Second among Healfdane's sons, first  
 In this nation. I bought the end of Edgetho's  
 205 Quarrel, sent ancient treasures through the ocean's  
 Furrows to the Wulfings; your father swore  
 He'd keep that peace. My tongue grows heavy,  
 And my heart, when I try to tell you what Grendel  
 Has brought us, the damage he's done, here  
 210 In this hall. You see for yourself how much smaller  
 Our ranks have become, and can guess what we've lost  
 To his terror. Surely the Lord Almighty  
 Could stop his madness, smother his lust!  
 How many times have my men, glowing  
 215 With courage drawn from too many cups  
 Of ale, sworn to stay after dark  
 And stem that horror with a sweep of their swords.  
 And then, in the morning, this mead-hall glittering  
 With new light would be drenched with blood, the benches  
 220 Stained red, the floors, all wet from that fiend's  
 Savage assault—and my soldiers would be fewer  
 Still, death taking more and more.  
 But to table, Beowulf, a banquet in your honor:

185. **shrouds:** cloths used to wrap a body for burial.

188. **Hrethel:** Beowulf's grandfather, former king of the Geats.

189. **Wayland:** a smith celebrated for his skill in making swords and mail shirts.

194. **Wulfing warrior:** The Wulfings were a Germanic tribe. Hrothgar's queen might have been a Wulfing.

225 "Let us toast your victories, and talk of the future."  
 Then Hrothgar's men gave places to the Geats, *6050d:45*  
 Yielded benches to the brave visitors,  
 And led them to the feast. The keeper of the mead  
 Came carrying out the carved flasks,  
 And poured that bright sweetness. A poet  
 230 Sang, from time to time, in a clear  
 Pure voice. Danes and visiting Geats  
 Celebrated as one, drank and rejoiced.

Unferth's Challenge

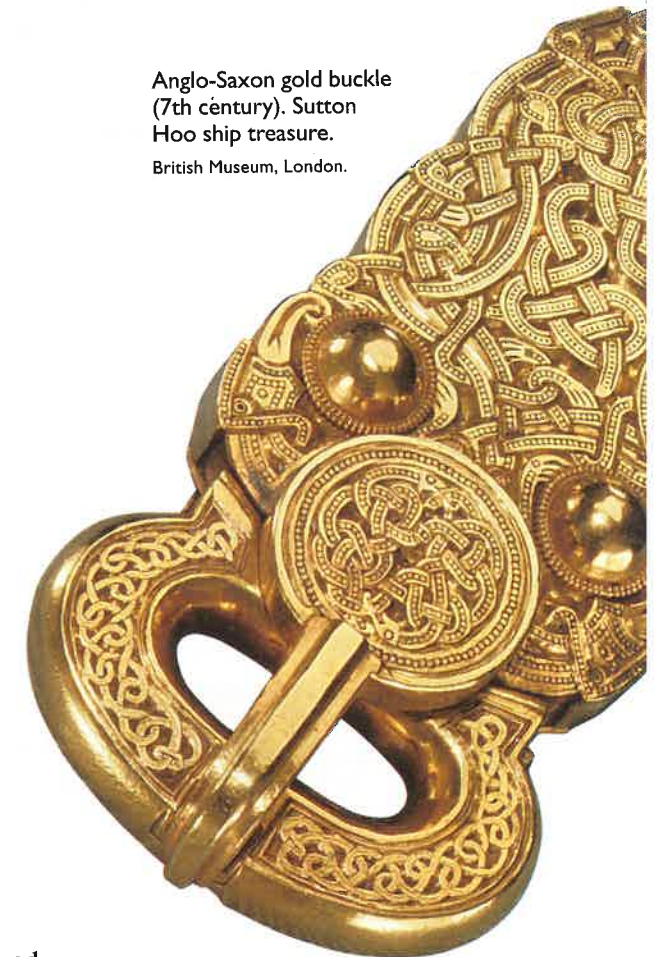
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Unferth spoke, Ecglaf's son,  
 Who sat at Hrothgar's feet, spoke harshly  
 235 And sharp (vexed by Beowulf's adventure,  
 By their visitor's courage, and angry that anyone  
 In Denmark or anywhere on earth had ever  
 Acquired glory and fame greater  
 Than his own):  
 "You're Beowulf, are you—the same  
 240 Boastful fool who fought a swimming  
 Match with Brecca, both of you daring  
 And young and proud, exploring the deepest  
 Seas, risking your lives for no reason  
 But the danger? All older and wiser heads warned you  
 245 Not to, but no one could check such pride.  
 With Brecca at your side you swam along  
 The sea-paths, your swift-moving hands pulling you  
 Over the ocean's face. Then winter  
 Churned through the water, the waves ran you  
 250 As they willed, and you struggled seven long nights  
 To survive. And at the end victory was his,  
 Not yours. The sea carried him close  
 To his home, to southern Norway, near  
 The land of the Brondings, where he ruled and was loved,  
 255 Where his treasure was piled and his strength protected  
 His towns and his people. He'd promised to outswim you:  
 Bonstan's son° made that boast ring true.  
 You've been lucky in your battles, Beowulf, but I think  
 Your luck may change if you challenge Grendel,  
 260 Staying a whole night through in this hall,  
 Waiting where that fiercest of demons can find you."  
 Beowulf answered, Edgetho's great son:  
 "Ah! Unferth, my friend, your face

WORDS TO OWN

vexed (vekst) *adj.*: highly annoyed.

Anglo-Saxon gold buckle (7th century). Sutton Hoo ship treasure. British Museum, London.



257. **Bonstan's son:** Brecca.



## LITERATURE AND HISTORY

### The Fury of the Northmen

When the fearsome Vikings began raiding England at the end of the eighth century, the church added a new prayer: "God, deliver us from the fury of the Northmen." Were these Scandinavian warriors—descended from the peoples of *Beowulf*—really such berserk destroyers? The fiercest ones were, indicated by the word *berserk* itself. In Old Norse, a *berserkr* was a "frenzied Norse warrior," so wild and fearless even his comrades kept clear.

**Bear or bare?** *Berserkr* literally means either "bear shirt" or "bare shirt," suggesting that these warriors wore bearskins or perhaps fought "bare"—without armor. Some say the berserkers were religious madmen, followers of Odin, god of death and war. Some say they ate mind-altering plants. Both may be true, because the berserker entered battle in a kind of fit, biting his shield, taunting death, and, like *Beowulf*, "If weapons were useless he'd use / His hands. . . . So fame / Comes to the men who mean to win it / And care about nothing else!" (lines 609–612).

**Dragons from the sea.** The Viking Age spanned the ninth through eleventh centuries, the European continent, and the Atlantic Ocean. Pushed by overpopulation, Vikings from Sweden, Norway, and Denmark struck out for new land. They

were farmers at home, but they were a warrior culture too, and they devastated England with nightmarish hit-and-run attacks. Even the name "Viking" comes from a telling phrase: For the Scandinavians, *to go a-viking* meant "to fight as a warrior or pirate."

The Vikings' extraordinary seafaring and shipbuilding skills, honed in their watery land of fiords, or narrow ocean inlets, gave them the advantage of making surprise attacks. The unique Viking warships were long (up to ninety-five feet, manned by thirty rowers), light and swift (to go farther on their provisions), and steady (built with a keel). Shallow-drafted, these dragon-prowed ships could be pulled onto a river shore, swiftly disgorging warriors wielding swords.

**Unafraid of the unknown.** But though the Vikings conquered peoples as far away as Spain and Russia (*Rus* was the Slavic word for Swedes), their motive was pure *wanderlust* as much as *bloodlust*. Expert in navigating by sun, stars, landmarks, and bird flights, the Vikings settled Iceland and Greenland and even explored North America—five hundred years before Columbus. That's why the United States once named a spacecraft *Viking*: to honor the human spirit that dared uncharted seas in the ninth century, and dares uncharted Mars in the twentieth.

Universitetets Oldsaksamling, Oslo.

265 Is hot with ale, and your tongue has tried  
To tell us about Brecca's doings. But the truth  
Is simple: No man swims in the sea  
As I can, no strength is a match for mine.  
As boys, Brecca and I had boasted—  
We were both too young to know better—that we'd risk  
270 Our lives far out at sea, and so  
We did. Each of us carried a naked  
Sword, prepared for whales or the swift  
Sharp teeth and beaks of needlefish.  
He could never leave me behind, swim faster  
275 Across the waves than I could, and I  
Had chosen to remain close to his side.  
I remained near him for five long nights,

Until a flood swept us apart;  
The frozen sea surged around me,  
280 It grew dark, the wind turned bitter, blowing  
From the north, and the waves were savage. Creatures  
Who sleep deep in the sea were stirred  
Into life—and the iron hammered links  
Of my mail shirt, these shining bits of metal  
285 Woven across my breast, saved me  
From death. A monster seized me, drew me  
Swiftly toward the bottom, swimming with its claws  
Tight in my flesh. But fate let me  
Find its heart with my sword, hack myself  
290 Free; I fought that beast's last battle,  
Left it floating lifeless in the sea.



“Other monsters crowded around me,  
Continually attacking. I treated them politely,  
Offering the edge of my razor-sharp sword.  
295 But the feast, I think, did not please them, filled  
Their evil bellies with no banquet-rich food,  
Thrashing there at the bottom of the sea;  
By morning they’d decided to sleep on the shore,  
Lying on their backs, their blood spilled out  
300 On the sand. Afterwards, sailors could cross  
That sea-road and feel no fear; nothing  
Would stop their passing. Then God’s bright beacon  
Appeared in the east, the water lay still,  
And at last I could see the land, wind-swept  
305 Cliff-walls at the edge of the coast. Fate saves  
The living when they drive away death by themselves!  
Lucky or not, nine was the number  
Of sea-huge monsters I killed. What man,  
Anywhere under Heaven’s high arch, has fought  
310 In such darkness, endured more misery, or been harder  
Pressed? Yet I survived the sea, smashed  
The monsters’ hot jaws, swam home from my journey.  
The swift-flowing waters swept me along  
And I landed on Finnish soil. I’ve heard  
315 No tales of you, Unferth, telling  
Of such clashing terror, such contests in the night!  
Brecca’s battles were never so bold;  
Neither he nor you can match me—and I mean  
No boast, have announced no more than I know  
320 To be true. And there’s more: You murdered your brothers,  
Your own close kin. Words and bright wit  
Won’t help your soul; you’ll suffer hell’s fires,  
Unferth, forever tormented. Ecglaf’s  
Proud son, if your hands were as hard, your heart  
325 As fierce as you think it, no fool would dare  
To raid your hall, ruin Herot  
And oppress its prince, as Grendel has done.  
But he’s learned that terror is his alone,  
Discovered he can come for your people with no fear  
330 Of reprisal; he’s found no fighting, here,  
But only food, only delight.  
He murders as he likes, with no mercy, gorges  
And feasts on your flesh, and expects no trouble,  
No quarrel from the quiet Danes. Now  
335 The Geats will show him courage, soon

#### WORDS TO OWN

**reprisal** (ri·pri’zəl) *n.*: punishment in return for an injury.

Two drinking horns (7th century).  
Sutton Hoo ship treasure.  
© British Museum, London.

He can test his strength in battle. And when the sun  
Comes up again, opening another  
Bright day from the south, anyone in Denmark  
May enter this hall: That evil will be gone!”  
340 Hrothgar, gray-haired and brave, sat happily  
Listening, the famous ring-giver sure,  
At last, that Grendel could be killed; he believed  
In Beowulf’s bold strength and the firmness of his spirit.  
There was the sound of laughter, and the cheerful clanking  
345 Of cups, and pleasant words. Then Welthow,  
Hrothgar’s gold-ringed queen, greeted  
The warriors; a noble woman who knew  
What was right, she raised a flowing cup  
To Hrothgar first, holding it high  
350 For the lord of the Danes to drink, wishing him  
Joy in that feast. The famous king  
Drank with pleasure and blessed their banquet.  
Then Welthow went from warrior to warrior,  
Pouring a portion from the jeweled cup  
355 For each, till the bracelet-wearing queen  
Had carried the mead-cup among them and it was Beowulf’s  
Turn to be served. She saluted the Geats’  
Great prince, thanked God for answering her prayers,  
For allowing her hands the happy duty  
360 Of offering mead to a hero who would help  
Her afflicted people. He drank what she poured,  
Edgeth’s brave son, then assured the Danish  
Queen that his heart was firm and his hands  
Ready:  
“When we crossed the sea, my comrades  
365 And I, I already knew that all  
My purpose was this: to win the good will *Loqality*  
Of your people or die in battle, pressed  
In Grendel’s fierce grip. Let me live in greatness  
And courage, or here in this hall welcome  
My death!”  
370 Welthow was pleased with his words,  
His bright-tongued boasts; she carried them back  
To her lord, walked nobly across to his side.  
The feast went on, laughter and music  
And the brave words of warriors celebrating  
375 Their delight. Then Hrothgar rose, Healfdane’s  
Son, heavy with sleep; as soon  
As the sun had gone, he knew that Grendel  
Would come to Herot, would visit that hall  
When night had covered the earth with its net  
380 And the shapes of darkness moved black and silent  
Through the world. Hrothgar’s warriors rose with him.  
He went to Beowulf, embraced the Geats’  
Brave prince, wished him well, and hoped



That Herot would be his to command. And then  
He declared:

385 "No one strange to this land  
Has ever been granted what I've given you,  
No one in all the years of my rule.  
Make this best of all mead-halls yours, and then  
Keep it free of evil, fight  
390 With glory in your heart! Purge Herot  
And your ship will sail home with its treasure-holds full."

*The feast ends. Beowulf and his men take the place of  
Hrothgar's followers and lie down to sleep in Herot.  
Beowulf, however, is wakeful, eager to meet his enemy.*

### The Battle with Grendel

#### 8

Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty  
Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,  
Grendel came, hoping to kill  
395 Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot.  
He moved quickly through the cloudy night,  
Up from his swampland, sliding silently  
Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited Hrothgar's  
Home before, knew the way—  
400 But never, before nor after that night,  
Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception  
So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless,  
Straight to the door, then snapped it open,  
Tore its iron fasteners with a touch,  
405 And rushed angrily over the threshold.  
He strode quickly across the inlaid  
Floor, snarling and fierce: His eyes  
Gleamed in the darkness, burned with a gruesome  
Light. Then he stopped, seeing the hall  
410 Crowded with sleeping warriors, stuffed  
With rows of young soldiers resting together.  
And his heart laughed, he relished the sight,  
Intended to tear the life from those bodies  
By morning; the monster's mind was hot  
415 With the thought of food and the feasting his belly  
→ Would soon know. But fate, that night, intended  
Grendel to gnaw the broken bones  
Of his last human supper. Human  
→ Eyes were watching his evil steps,  
420 Waiting to see his swift hard claws.

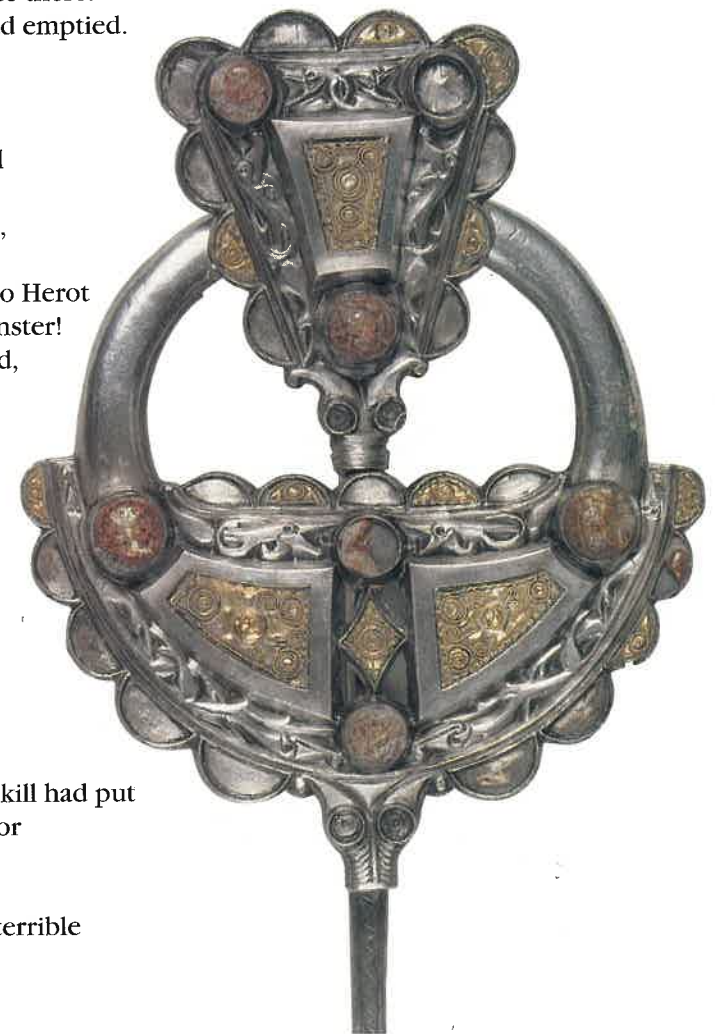


Bronze plaque showing a  
warrior killing a monster.

Statens Historiska Museer, Stockholm.

Grendel snatched at the first Geat  
He came to, ripped him apart, cut  
His body to bits with powerful jaws,  
Drank the blood from his veins, and bolted  
425 Him down, hands and feet; death  
And Grendel's great teeth came together,  
Snapping life shut. Then he stepped to another  
Still body, clutched at Beowulf with his claws,  
Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful sleeper  
430 —And was instantly seized himself, claws  
Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm.  
That shepherd of evil, guardian of crime,  
Knew at once that nowhere on earth  
Had he met a man whose hands were harder;  
435 His mind was flooded with fear—but nothing  
Could take his talons and himself from that tight  
Hard grip. Grendel's one thought was to run  
From Beowulf, flee back to his marsh and hide there:  
This was a different Herot than the hall he had emptied.  
440 But Higlac's follower remembered his final  
Boast and, standing erect, stopped  
The monster's flight, fastened those claws  
In his fists till they cracked, clutched Grendel  
Closer. The infamous killer fought  
445 For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,  
Desiring nothing but escape; his claws  
Had been caught, he was trapped. That trip to Herot  
Was a miserable journey for the writhing monster!  
The high hall rang, its roof boards swayed,  
450 And Danes shook with terror. Down  
The aisles the battle swept, angry  
And wild. Herot trembled, wonderfully  
Built to withstand the blows, the struggling  
Great bodies beating at its beautiful walls;  
455 Shaped and fastened with iron, inside  
And out, artfully worked, the building  
Stood firm. Its benches rattled, fell  
To the floor, gold-covered boards grating  
As Grendel and Beowulf battled across them.  
460 Hrothgar's wise men had fashioned Herot  
To stand forever; only fire,  
They had planned, could shatter what such skill had put  
Together, swallow in hot flames such splendor  
Of ivory and iron and wood. Suddenly  
465 The sounds changed, the Danes started  
In new terror, cowering in their beds as the terrible  
Screams of the Almighty's enemy sang  
In the darkness, the horrible shrieks of pain  
And defeat, the tears torn out of Grendel's

Silver and gold brooch with amber  
ornaments (9th century). Roscrea,  
County Tipperary.  
National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.





470 Taut throat, hell's captive caught in the arms  
Of him who of all the men on earth  
Was the strongest.

9

That mighty protector of men  
Meant to hold the monster till its life  
Leaped out, knowing the fiend was no use  
475 To anyone in Denmark. All of Beowulf's  
Band had jumped from their beds, ancestral  
Swords raised and ready, determined  
To protect their prince if they could. Their courage  
Was great but all wasted: They could hack at Grendel  
480 From every side, trying to open  
A path for his evil soul, but their points  
Could not hurt him, the sharpest and hardest iron  
Could not scratch at his skin, for that sin-stained demon  
Had bewitched, all men's weapons, laid spells  
485 That blunted every mortal man's blade.  
And yet his time had come, his days  
Were over, his death near; down  
To hell he would go, swept groaning and helpless  
To the waiting hands of still worse fiends.  
490 Now he discovered—once the afflictor  
Of men, tormentor of their days—what it meant  
To feud with Almighty God: Grendel  
Saw that his strength was deserting him, his claws  
Bound fast, Higlac's brave follower tearing at  
495 His hands. The monster's hatred rose higher,  
But his power had gone. He twisted in pain,  
And the bleeding sinews deep in his shoulder  
Snapped, muscle and bone split  
And broke. The battle was over, Beowulf  
500 Had been granted new glory: Grendel escaped,  
But wounded as he was could flee to his den,  
His miserable hole at the bottom of the marsh,  
Only to die, to wait for the end  
Of all his days. And after that bloody  
505 Combat the Danes laughed with delight.  
He who had come to them from across the sea,  
Bold and strong-minded, had driven affliction  
Off, purged Herot clean. He was happy,  
Now, with that night's fierce work; the Danes  
510 Had been served as he'd boasted he'd serve them; Beowulf,

Eagle shield ornament (7th century).  
Sutton Hoo ship treasure.  
British Museum, London.



WORDS TO OWN

taut (tôt) adj.: stretched tight.  
sinews (sin'yōōz) n. pl.: tendons or connective tissues.

A prince of the Geats, had killed Grendel,  
Ended the grief, the sorrow, the suffering  
Forced on Hrothgar's helpless people  
By a bloodthirsty fiend. No Dane doubted  
515 The victory, for the proof, hanging high  
From the rafters where Beowulf had hung it, was the monster's  
Arm, claw and shoulder and all.

10

And then, in the morning, crowds surrounded  
Herot, warriors coming to that hall  
520 From faraway lands, princes and leaders  
Of men hurrying to behold the monster's  
Great staggering tracks. They gaped with no sense  
Of sorrow, felt no regret for his suffering,  
Went tracing his bloody footprints, his beaten  
525 And lonely flight, to the edge of the lake  
Where he'd dragged his corpselike way, doomed  
And already weary of his vanishing life.  
The water was bloody, steaming and boiling  
In horrible pounding waves, heat  
530 Sucked from his magic veins; but the swirling  
Surf had covered his death, hidden  
Deep in murky darkness his miserable  
End, as hell opened to receive him.  
Then old and young rejoiced, turned back  
535 From that happy pilgrimage, mounted their hard-hooved  
Horses, high-spirited stallions, and rode them  
Slowly toward Herot again, retelling  
Beowulf's bravery as they jogged along.  
And over and over they swore that nowhere  
540 On earth or under the spreading sky  
Or between the seas, neither south nor north,  
Was there a warrior worthier to rule over men.  
(But no one meant Beowulf's praise to belittle  
Hrothgar, their kind and gracious king!) . . .



Detail of picture stone from Larbro,  
Gotland, Sweden.

*Grendel's monstrous mother, in grief for her son, next attacks Herot, and in her dripping claws she carries off one man—Hrothgar's closest friend. The monster also carries off Grendel's arm, which Beowulf had hung high from the rafters. Beowulf is awakened and called for again. In one of*

WORDS TO OWN

murky (mɜrk'ē) adj.: shadowy.  
pilgrimage (pil'grim·ij) n.: journey made to a place of religious or historical interest.



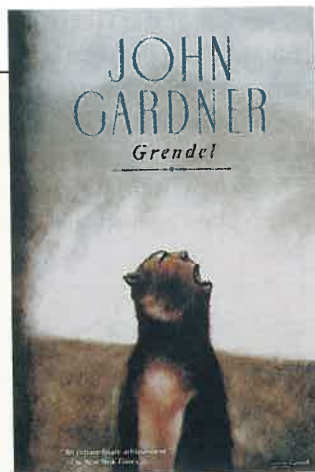
In his novel *Grendel* (1971), the contemporary American writer John Gardner (1933–1982) retells part of *Beowulf* from the point of view of the monster. In this excerpt, Grendel tells his own version of one of his raids on Hrothgar’s hall.

from *Grendel*  
John Gardner

I sigh, sink into the silence, and cross it like wind. Behind my back, at the world’s end, my pale slightly glowing fat mother sleeps on, old, sick at heart, in our dingy underground room. Life-bloated, baffled, long-suffering hag. Guilty, she imagines, of some unremembered, perhaps ancestral crime. (She must have some human in her.) Not that she thinks. Not that she dissects and ponders the dusty mechanical bits of her miserable life’s curse. She clutches at me in her sleep as if to crush me. I break away. “Why are we here?” I used to ask her. “Why do we stand this putrid, stinking hole?” She trembles at my words. Her fat lips shake. “Don’t ask!” her wiggling claws implore. (She never

speaks.) “Don’t ask!” It must be some terrible secret, I used to think. I’d give her a crafty squint. She’ll tell me, in time, I thought. But she told me nothing. I waited on. That was before the old dragon, calm as winter, unveiled the truth. He was not a friend.

And so I come through trees and towns to the lights of Hrothgar’s meadhall. I am no stranger here. A respected guest. Eleven years now and going on twelve I have come up this clean-mown central hill, dark shadow out of the woods below, and have knocked politely on the high oak door, bursting its hinges and sending the shock of my greeting inward like a cold blast out of a cave. “Grendel!” they



Courtesy of Alfred A. Knopf.

squeak, and I smile like exploding spring. The old Shaper, a man I cannot help but admire, goes out the back window with his harp at a single bound, though blind as a bat. The drunk-est of Hrothgar’s thanes come reeling and clanking down from their wall-hung beds, all shouting their meady, outrageous boasts, their heavy swords aswirl like eagles’ wings. “Woe, woe, woe!” cries Hrothgar, hoary with winters, peeking in, wide-eyed, from his bedroom in back. His wife, looking in behind him, makes a scene. The thanes in the meadhall blow out the lights and cover the wide stone fireplace with shields. I laugh, crumple over; I can’t help myself. In the darkness, I alone see clear as day. While they squeal and screech and bump into each other, I silently sack up my dead and withdraw to the woods. I eat and laugh and eat until I can barely walk, my chest-hair matted with dribbled blood, and then the roosters on the hill crow, and dawn comes over the roofs of the houses, and all at once I am filled with gloom again.

“This is some punishment sent us,” I hear them bawling from the hill.

My head aches. Morning nails my eyes.

“Some god is angry,” I hear a woman keen.

“The people of Scyld and Herogar and Hrothgar are mired in sin!”

My belly rumbles, sick on their sour meat. I crawl through bloodstained leaves to the eaves of the forest, and there peak out. The dogs fall silent at the edge of my spell, and where the king’s hall surmounts the town, the blind old Shaper, harp clutched tight to his fragile chest, stares futilely down, straight at me. Otherwise nothing. Pigs root dully at the posts of a wooden fence. A rumple-horned ox lies chewing in dew and shade. A few men, lean, wearing animal skins, look up at the gables of the king’s hall, or at the vultures circling casually beyond. Hrothgar says nothing, hoarfrost-bearded, his features cracked and crazed. Inside, I hear the people praying—whimpering, whining, mumbling, pleading—to their numerous sticks and stones. He doesn’t go in. The king has lofty theories of his own.

“Theories,” I whisper to the bloodstained ground. So the dragon once spoke. (“They’d map out roads through Hell with their crackpot theories!” I recall his laugh.)

Then the groaning and praying stop, and on the side of the hill the dirge-slow shoveling begins. . . .

*the most famous verses in the epic, the old king describes where Grendel and his mother live.*

11

545 . . . “They live in secret places, windy  
Cliffs, wolf-dens where water pours  
From the rocks, then runs underground, where mist  
Steams like black clouds, and the groves of trees  
Growing out over their lake are all covered  
550 With frozen spray, and wind down snakelike  
Roots that reach as far as the water  
And help keep it dark. At night that lake  
Burns like a torch. No one knows its bottom,  
No wisdom reaches such depths. A deer,

555 Hunted through the woods by packs of hounds,  
A stag with great horns, though driven through the forest  
From faraway places, prefers to die  
On those shores, refuses to save its life  
In that water. It isn’t far, nor is it  
560 A pleasant spot! When the wind stirs  
And storms, waves splash toward the sky,  
As dark as the air, as black as the rain  
That the heavens weep. Our only help,  
Again, lies with you. Grendel’s mother  
565 Is hidden in her terrible home, in a place  
You’ve not seen. Seek it, if you dare! Save us,  
Once more, and again twisted gold,  
Heaped-up ancient treasure, will reward you  
For the battle you win!”

Gundestrup cauldron.  
National Museum, Copenhagen.





## MAKING MEANINGS

### First Thoughts

1. What **images** came to your mind as you read this part of the epic? Which image was most vivid?

### Shaping Interpretations

2. In what specific ways does Herot **contrast** with the place where Grendel lives?

3. In lines 3–13, the poet describes the bard's songs in Hrothgar's hall. How does the content of the songs **contrast** with Grendel and his world?

### Reading Check

- Why does Herot remain empty for twelve years?
- Why doesn't Grendel touch King Hrothgar's throne?
- What do Hrothgar and his council do to try to save his guest-hall?
- How is Beowulf taunted by the jealous Unferth? How does Beowulf reply?
- Describe what happens to Grendel when he raids Herot and finds Beowulf in charge.

- What significance can you see in the fact that Grendel attacks at night? What **images** describing Grendel might associate him with death or darkness?
- Why do you think Grendel hates Herot? What **symbolic** meaning might underlie the confrontation between Grendel and Hrothgar?
- Consider the tale-within-a-tale about Beowulf's swimming match with Brecca. What does this story contribute to your understanding of Beowulf's heroic **character** and of his powers?
- Why do you think it's important to Beowulf and to his image as an **epic hero** that he meet Grendel without a weapon? What **symbolism** do you see in the uselessness of human weapons against Grendel?
- What do you think of John Gardner's depiction of Grendel in the *Connections* on page 36? Do you feel any sympathy for Grendel? Why or why not?

### Connecting with the Text

9. Review the notes you made before you read this part of *Beowulf*. Does Beowulf remind you of any heroes from history, current events, books, television, or movies? Who? What similarities do you notice among them? Just as important, how are they different?



Sigurd kills the dragon. Detail of carved portal of Hylestad stave church (12th century).

# A Collaboration Across 1,200 Years

D.J.R. BRUCKNER

European noblemen of a thousand years ago had much more exciting and intelligent entertainment than anything to be found now. Anyone who doubts that need only look in on Benjamin Bagby's astonishing performance of the first quarter of the epic poem *Beowulf*—in Anglo-Saxon, no less—tonight at the Stanley H. Kaplan Penthouse at Lincoln Center. . . .

From the moment he strode onstage on Sunday for the opening night, silencing the audience with that famous first word, "Hwaet!" ("Pay attention!"), until hell swallowed the "pagan soul" of the monster Grendel eighty minutes later, Mr. Bagby came as close to holding hundreds of people in a spell as ever a man has. As the epic's warriors argued, boasted, fought, or fell into the monster's maw, there were bursts of laughter, mutters, and sighs, and when Mr. Bagby's voice stopped at the end, as abruptly as it had



Benjamin Bagby reciting the story of *Beowulf* in Anglo-Saxon.

©Stephanie Berger. All rights reserved.

begun, there was an audible rippling gasp before a thunderclap of applause from cheering people who called him back again and again, unwilling to let him go.

Mr. Bagby—a Midwesterner who fell in love with *Beowulf* at twelve . . .—accompanies himself on a six-string lyre modeled on one found in a seventh-century tomb near Stuttgart. This surprisingly facile instrument underscores the meter of the epic verses and is counterpoint to Mr. Bagby's

voice as he recites, chants, and occasionally sings the lines.

. . . A translation is handed out to the audience, but after a while one notices people are following it less and just letting the sound of this strange and beautiful language wash over them. Perhaps not so strange, after all—enough phrases begin to penetrate the understanding that one finally knows deep down that, yes, this is where English came from.

—*The New York Times*, July 22, 1997

*Carrying the sword Hrunting, Beowulf goes to the lake where Grendel's mother has her underwater lair. Then, fully armed, he dives to the depths of this watery hell.*

### The Monster's Mother

12

570 . . . He leaped into the lake, would not wait for anyone's  
Answer; the heaving water covered him  
Over. For hours he sank through the waves;  
At last he saw the mud of the bottom.  
And all at once the greedy she-wolf  
575 Who'd ruled those waters for half a hundred  
Years discovered him, saw that a creature



From above had come to explore the bottom  
 Of her wet world. She welcomed him in her claws,  
 Clutched at him savagely but could not harm him,  
 580 Tried to work her fingers through the tight  
 Ring-woven mail on his breast, but tore  
 And scratched in vain. Then she carried him, armor  
 And sword and all, to her home; he struggled  
 To free his weapon, and failed. The fight  
 585 Brought other monsters swimming to see  
 Her catch, a host of sea beasts who beat at  
 His mail shirt, stabbing with tusks and teeth  
 As they followed along. Then he realized, suddenly,  
 That she'd brought him into someone's battle-hall,  
 590 And there the water's heat could not hurt him,  
 Nor anything in the lake attack him through  
 The building's high-arching roof. A brilliant  
 Light burned all around him, the lake  
 Itself like a fiery flame.

Then he saw  
 595 The mighty water witch, and swung his sword,  
 His ring-marked blade, straight at her head;  
 The iron sang its fierce song,  
 Sang Beowulf's strength. But her guest  
 Discovered that no sword could slice her evil  
 600 Skin, that Hrunting could not hurt her, was useless  
 Now when he needed it. They wrestled, she ripped  
 And tore and clawed at him, bit holes in his helmet,  
 And that too failed him; for the first time in years  
 Of being worn to war it would earn no glory;  
 605 It was the last time anyone would wear it. But Beowulf  
 Longed only for fame, leaped back  
 Into battle. He tossed his sword aside,  
 Angry; the steel-edged blade lay where *Drawn*  
 He'd dropped it. If weapons were useless he'd use  
 610 His hands, the strength in his fingers. So fame  
 Comes to the men who mean to win it  
 And care about nothing else! He raised  
 His arms and seized her by the shoulder; anger  
 Doubled his strength, he threw her to the floor.  
 615 She fell, Grendel's fierce mother, and the Geats'  
 Proud prince was ready to leap on her. But she rose  
 At once and repaid him with her clutching claws,  
 Wildly tearing at him. He was weary, that best  
 And strongest of soldiers; his feet stumbled  
 620 And in an instant she had him down, held helpless.  
 Squatting with her weight on his stomach, she drew  
 A dagger, brown with dried blood and prepared  
 To avenge her only son. But he was stretched  
 On his back, and her stabbing blade was blunted



Battersea shield.  
 © British Museum, London.

625 By the woven mail shirt he wore on his chest.  
 The hammered links held; the point  
 Could not touch him. He'd have traveled to the bottom of the earth,  
 Edgeth's son, and died there, if that shining  
 Woven metal had not helped—and Holy  
 630 God, who sent him victory, gave judgment  
 For truth and right, Ruler of the Heavens,  
 Once Beowulf was back on his feet and fighting.

13

Then he saw, hanging on the wall, a heavy  
 Sword, hammered by giants, strong  
 635 And blessed with their magic, the best of all weapons  
 But so massive that no ordinary man could lift  
 Its carved and decorated length. He drew it  
 From its scabbard, broke the chain on its hilt,<sup>o</sup>  
 And then, savage, now, angry  
 640 And desperate, lifted it high over his head  
 And struck with all the strength he had left,  
 Caught her in the neck and cut it through,  
 Broke bones and all. Her body fell  
 To the floor, lifeless, the sword was wet  
 645 With her blood, and Beowulf rejoiced at the sight.  
 The brilliant light shone, suddenly,  
 As though burning in that hall, and as bright as Heaven's  
 Own candle, lit in the sky. He looked  
 At her home, then following along the wall  
 650 Went walking, his hands tight on the sword,  
 His heart still angry. He was hunting another  
 Dead monster, and took his weapon with him  
 For final revenge against Grendel's vicious  
 Attacks, his nighttime raids, over  
 655 And over, coming to Herot when Hrōthgar's  
 Men slept, killing them in their beds,  
 Eating some on the spot, fifteen  
 Or more, and running to his loathsome moor  
 With another such sickening meal waiting  
 660 In his pouch. But Beowulf repaid him for those visits,  
 Found him lying dead in his corner,  
 Armless, exactly as that fierce fighter  
 Had sent him out from Herot, then struck off  
 His head with a single swift blow. The body  
 665 Jerked for the last time, then lay still. . . .

638. scabbard . . . hilt: A scabbard is a case that holds the blade of a sword; a hilt is a sword's handle.

WORDS TO OWN

loathsome (lōth'səm) adj.: disgusting.



Beowulf carries Grendel's head to King Hrothgar and then returns gift-laden to the land of the Geats, where he succeeds to the throne. After fifty winters pass, Beowulf, now an old man, faces his final task: He must fight a dragon who, angry because a thief has stolen a jeweled cup from the dragon's hoard of gold, is laying waste to the Geats' land. Beowulf and eleven warriors are guided to the dragon's lair by the thief who stole the cup. For Beowulf, the price of this last victory will be great.

### The Final Battle

14

... Then he said farewell to his followers,  
Each in his turn, for the last time:

"I'd use no sword, no weapon, if this beast  
Could be killed without it, crushed to death

670 Like Grendel, gripped in my hands and torn  
Limb from limb. But his breath will be burning  
Hot, poison will pour from his tongue.

I feel no shame, with shield and sword

And armor, against this monster: When he comes to me

675 I mean to stand, not run from his shooting  
Flames, stand till fate decides

Which of us wins. My heart is firm,

My hands calm: I need no hot

Words. Wait for me close by, my friends.

680 We shall see, soon, who will survive

This bloody battle, stand when the fighting

Is done. No one else could do

What I mean to, here, no man but me

Could hope to defeat this monster. No one

685 could try. And this dragon's treasure, his gold

And everything hidden in that tower, will be mine

Or war will sweep me to a bitter death!"

Then Beowulf rose, still brave, still strong,

And with his shield at his side, and a mail shirt on his breast,

690 Strode calmly, confidently, toward the tower, under

The rocky cliffs: No coward could have walked there!

And then he who'd endured dozens of desperate

Battles, who'd stood boldly while swords and shields

Clashed, the best of kings, saw

695 Huge stone arches and felt the heat

Of the dragon's breath, flooding down

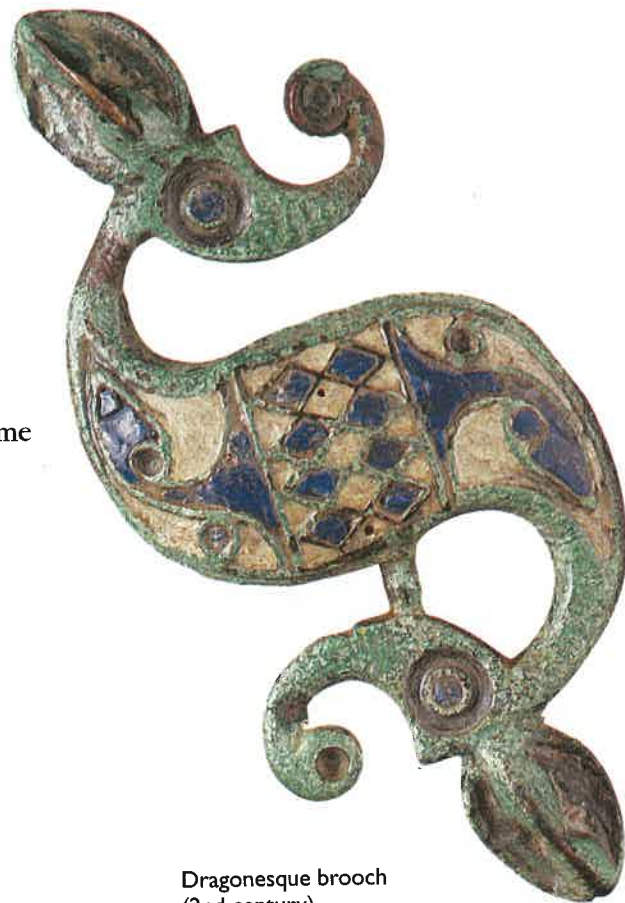
Through the hidden entrance, too hot for anyone

To stand, a streaming current of fire

And smoke that blocked all passage. And the Geats'

700 Lord and leader, angry, lowered

His sword and roared out a battle cry,



Dragonesque brooch  
(2nd century).  
Romano-British.  
© British Museum, London.

A call so loud and clear that it reached through  
The hoary° rock, hung in the dragon's  
Ear. The beast rose, angry,

705 Knowing a man had come—and then nothing  
But war could have followed. Its breath came first,  
A steaming cloud pouring from the stone,  
Then the earth itself shook. Beowulf  
Swung his shield into place, held it

710 In front of him, facing the entrance. The dragon  
Coiled and uncoiled, its heart urging it  
Into battle. Beowulf's ancient sword  
Was waiting, unsheathed, his sharp and gleaming  
Blade. The beast came closer; both of them

715 Were ready, each set on slaughter. The Geats'  
Great prince stood firm, unmoving, prepared  
Behind his high shield, waiting in his shining  
Armor. The monster came quickly toward him,  
Pouring out fire and smoke, hurrying

720 To its fate. Flames beat at the iron  
Shield, and for a time it held, protected  
Beowulf as he'd planned; then it began to melt,  
And for the first time in his life that famous prince  
Fought with fate against him, with glory

725 Denied him. He knew it, but he raised his sword  
And struck at the dragon's scaly hide.  
The ancient blade broke, bit into  
The monster's skin, drew blood, but cracked  
And failed him before it went deep enough, helped him

730 Less than he needed. The dragon leaped  
With pain, thrashed and beat at him, spouting  
Murderous flames, spreading them everywhere.  
And the Geats' ring-giver did not boast of glorious  
Victories in other wars: His weapon

735 Had failed him, deserted him, now when he needed it  
Most, that excellent sword. Edgeth's  
Famous son stared at death,  
Unwilling to leave this world, to exchange it  
For a dwelling in some distant place—a journey

740 Into darkness that all men must make, as death  
Ends their few brief hours on earth.

Quickly, the dragon came at him, encouraged  
As Beowulf fell back; its breath flared,  
And he suffered, wrapped around in swirling  
745 Flames—a king, before, but now

A beaten warrior. None of his comrades  
Came to him, helped him, his brave and noble  
Followers; they ran for their lives, fled  
Deep in a wood. And only one of them

750 Remained, stood there, miserable, remembering,  
As a good man must, what kinship should mean!

703. hoary (hōr'ē): ancient.



Viking sword handles, embellished  
with Viking Age motifs.  
Statens Historiska Museer, Stockholm.





Detail of three-ringed gold collar (6th century).  
Statens Historiska Museer, Stockholm.

His name was Wiglaf, he was Wexstan's son  
 And a good soldier; his family had been Swedish,  
 Once. Watching Beowulf, he could see  
 755 How his king was suffering, burning. Remembering  
 Everything his lord and cousin had given him,  
 Armor and gold and the great estates *Generosity*  
 Wexstan's family enjoyed, Wiglaf's  
 Mind was made up; he raised his yellow *Beowulf's*  
 760 Shield and drew his sword. . . .  
 And Wiglaf, his heart heavy, uttered  
 The kind of words his comrades deserved:  
 "I remember how we sat in the mead-hall, drinking  
 And boasting of how brave we'd be when Beowulf  
 765 Needed us, he who gave us these swords  
 And armor: All of us swore to repay him,  
 When the time came, kindness for kindness  
 —With our lives, if he needed them. He allowed us to join him,  
 Chose us from all his great army, thinking  
 770 Our boasting words had some weight, believing  
 Our promises, trusting our swords. He took us  
 For soldiers, for men. He meant to kill  
 This monster himself, our mighty king,  
 Fight this battle alone and unaided,  
 775 As in the days when his strength and daring dazzled  
 Men's eyes. But those days are over and gone  
 And now our lord must lean on younger  
 Arms. And we must go to him, while angry  
 Flames burn at his flesh, help  
 780 Our glorious king! By almighty God,  
 I'd rather burn myself than see  
 Flames swirling around my lord.  
 And who are we to carry home  
 Our shields before we've slain his enemy  
 785 And ours, to run back to our homes with Beowulf  
 So hard-pressed here? I swear that nothing  
 He ever did deserved an end  
 Like this, dying miserably and alone,  
 Butchered by this savage beast: We swore  
 790 That these swords and armor were each for us all!" . . .

Together, Beowulf and the young Wiglaf kill the dragon, but the old king is fatally wounded. Beowulf, thinking of his people, asks to see the monster's treasure. Wiglaf enters the dragon's cave and finds a priceless hoard of jewels and gold.

. . . Then Wiglaf went back, anxious *Friendship*  
 To return while Beowulf was alive, to bring him  
 Treasure they'd won together. He ran,  
 Hoping his wounded king, weak  
 795 And dying, had not left the world too soon.  
 Then he brought their treasure to Beowulf, and found  
 His famous king bloody, gasping  
 For breath. But Wiglaf sprinkled water *Generosity*  
 Over his lord, until the words  
 800 Deep in his breast broke through and were heard.  
 Beholding the treasure he spoke, haltingly:  
 "For this, this gold, these jewels, I thank  
 Our Father in Heaven, Ruler of the Earth—  
 For all of this, that His grace has given me,  
 805 Allowed me to bring to my people while breath  
 Still came to my lips. I sold my life  
 For this treasure, and I sold it well. Take *Friendship*  
 What I leave, Wiglaf, lead my people,  
 Help them; my time is gone. Have  
 810 The brave Geats build me a tomb,  
 When the funeral flames have burned me, and build it  
 Here, at the water's edge, high  
 On this spit of land, so sailors can see  
 This tower, and remember my name, and call it  
 815 Beowulf's tower, and boats in the darkness  
 And mist, crossing the sea, will know it."  
 Then that brave king gave the golden  
 Necklace from around his throat to Wiglaf,  
 Gave him his gold-covered helmet, and his rings,  
 820 And his mail shirt, and ordered him to use them well:  
 "You're the last of all our far-flung family.  
 Fate has swept our race away,  
 Taken warriors in their strength and led them  
 To the death that was waiting. And now I follow them."  
 825 The old man's mouth was silent, spoke  
 No more, had said as much as it could;  
 He would sleep in the fire, soon. His soul  
 Left his flesh, flew to glory.

Gilded bronze and ivory casket.  
National Museum, Copenhagen.





Wiglaf berates the faithless warriors who did not go to the aid of their king. With sorrow, the Geats then cremate the corpse of their greatest king. They place his ashes, along with all of the dragon's treasure, in a huge burial tower by the sea, where it can be seen by voyagers.

17

- ... And then twelve of the bravest Geats  
830 Rode their horses around the tower,  
Telling their sorrow, telling stories  
Of their dead king and his greatness, his glory,  
Praising him for heroic deeds, for a life  
As noble as his name. So should all men  
835 Raise up words for their lords, warm  
With love, when their shield and protector leaves  
His body behind, sends his soul  
On high. And so Beowulf's followers  
Rode, mourning their beloved leader,  
840 Crying that no better king had ever  
Lived, no prince so mild, no man  
So open to his people, so deserving of praise. |

Loyalty  
Friendship



Gold boat (probably 1st century) found at Brough, County Londonderry, Ireland.

National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.

## Life in 999: A Grim Struggle

HOWARD G. CHUA-EOAN

Today's world is measured in light-years and Mach speed and sheathed in silicon and alloy. In the world of 999, on the eve of the first millennium, time moved at the speed of an oxcart or, more often, of a sturdy pair of legs, and the West was built largely on wood. Europe was a collection of untamed forests, countless mile upon mile of trees and brush and brier, dark and inhospitable. Medieval chroniclers used the word *desert* to describe their arboreal world, a place on the cusp of civilization where werewolves and bogeymen still lunged out of the shadows and bandits and marauders maintained their lairs.

Yet the forests, deep and dangerous as they were, also defined existence. Wood kindled forges and kept alive the hearths of the mud-and-thatch huts of the serfs. Peasants fattened their hogs on forest acorns (pork was crucial to basic subsistence in the cold of winter), and wild berries helped supplement the meager diet. In a world without sugar, honey from forest swarms provided the only sweetness for food or drink. The pleasures of the serfs were few and simple: earthy lovemaking and occasional dances and fests.

Feudal lords ruled over western Europe, taking their share of the harvests of primitive agriculture and making the forests their private hunting grounds. Poaching was not simply theft (usually punishable by imprisonment) but a sin against the social order. Without the indulgence of the

nobility, the peasants could not even acquire salt, the indispensable ingredient for preserving meat and flavoring a culinary culture that possessed few spices. Though a true money economy did not exist, salt could be bought with poorly circulated coin, which the lord hoarded in his castle and dispensed to the poor only as alms.

It was in the lord's castle too that peasants and their flocks sought refuge from wolf packs and barbarian invaders. In 999, however, castles, like most other buildings in Europe, were made of timber, far from the granite bastions that litter today's imagined Middle Ages. The peasants, meanwhile, were relegated to their simple huts, where everyone—including the animals—slept around the hearth. Straw was scattered on the floors to collect scraps as well as human and animal waste. Housecleaning consisted of sweeping out the straw.

Illness and disease remained in constant residence. Tuberculosis was endemic, and so were scabrous skin diseases of every kind: abscesses, cankers, scrofula, tumors, eczema, and erysipelas. In a throwback to biblical times, lepers constituted a class of pariahs living on the outskirts of villages and cities. Constant famine, rotten flour, and vitamin deficiencies afflicted huge segments of society with blindness, goiter, paralysis, and bone malformations that created hunchbacks and cripples. A man was lucky to survive 30, and 50 was a ripe old age. Most women, many of them succumbing to the ravages of childbirth,

lived less than 30 years. There was no time for what is now considered childhood; children of every class had to grow up immediately and be useful as soon as possible. Emperors were leading armies in their teens; John XI became Pope at the age of 21.

While the general population was growing faster than it had in the previous five centuries, there was still a shortage of people to cultivate the fields, clear the woodlands, and work the mills. Local taxes were levied on youths who did not marry upon coming of age. Abortion was considered homicide, and a woman who terminated a pregnancy was expelled from the church.

The nobility spent its waking hours battling foes to preserve its prerogatives, the clergy chanting prayers for the salvation of souls, the serfs laboring to feed and clothe everyone. Night, lit only by burning logs or the rare taper, was always filled with danger and terror. The seasons came and went, punctuated chiefly by the occurrence of plentiful church holidays. The calendar year began at different times for different regions; only later would Europe settle on the Feast of Christ's Circumcision, January 1, as the year's beginning.

Thus there was little panic, not even much interest, as the millennium approached in the final months of 999. For what terrors could the apocalypse hold for a continent that was already shrouded in darkness? Rather Europe—illiterate, diseased, and hungry—seemed grimly resigned to desperation and impoverishment. It was one of the planet's most unpromising corners, the Third World of its age.

—from *Time*



## Student TO Student

### Beowulf Shrinklet

Hrothgar and Grendel could not get along; the populace thought the killing was wrong.

Beowulf, the hero from o'er the sea, from monster or dragon he would not flee.

"If treasure I wanteth," the hero thought, "then I will journey to the great Herot."

Grendel died at the end of the battle. His mother enraged (and all but little)

wanted revenge for her beloved son, but the great bold hero ended her fun.

For proof he carried the head and the sword,

and traveled back with troops for a reward.

The great Beowulf returned to his home, over the oceans on seaweed and foam.

His conscience lived happily as the king. He died at the hands of another thing.

—Calen Wood  
Bakersfield High School  
Bakersfield, California

## MAKING MEANINGS

### First Thoughts

1. Beowulf's story is an ancient one, more than one thousand years old. Did its age make it entirely alien to you, or did you find that it deals with issues or themes that seem relevant in our modern society as well? If so, what are they?

### Reading Check

- a. Describe how Beowulf manages to kill Grendel's mother.
- b. Who comes to Beowulf's aid in his final battle with the dragon? Why does he help Beowulf?
- c. What sad scene concludes the epic?
- d. What happens to the dragon's hoard?

### Shaping Interpretations

2. A hoarded treasure in Old English literature usually **symbolizes** spiritual death or damnation. How does this fact add significance to Beowulf's last fight with the dragon?
3. What details describe the dragon? Keeping those details in mind, explain what the dragon might **symbolize** as Beowulf's final foe.
4. Beowulf battles Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon. What do these battles have in common, and what do they suggest Beowulf and his enemies might represent for the Anglo-Saxons?
5. Given what you know about the structure of Anglo-Saxon society, explain what is especially ominous about the behavior of Beowulf's men during the final battle. What does this suggest about the future of the kingdom?
6. The epic closes on a somber, elegiac note—a note of mourning. What words or **images** contribute to this **tone**?
7. Epic poetry usually embodies the attitudes and ideals of an entire culture. What values of Anglo-Saxon society does *Beowulf* reveal? What universal **themes** does it also reveal?

### Extending the Text

8. How would we tell a hero story today? What would the **setting** be, what would the **enemy** be, and what **values** would the hero embody?
9. The **Connections** on page 47, "Life in 999: A Grim Struggle," describes daily life in late Anglo-Saxon England. How does this picture of daily life relate to what you've read in *Beowulf*—and to how you live today?
10. In the last episode of the epic, the leader's followers mourn his passing and praise his life. What qualities do we look for in leaders today—are they the same qualities Beowulf's people loved him for?

### Challenging the Text

11. What do you think of the way women are portrayed in (or absent from) *Beowulf*?

## ELEMENTS OF LITERATURE

### Alliteration and Kennings: Taking the Burden off the Bard

The **Connections** on page 39 shows that the oral tradition is still alive and still a powerful way of communicating from poet to audience.

The Anglo-Saxon oral poet was assisted by two poetic devices, alliteration and the kenning.

**Alliteration.** Alliteration is the repetition of sounds in words close to one another. Anglo-Saxon poetry is often called alliterative poetry. Instead of rhyme unifying the poem, the verse line is divided into two halves separated by a rhythmical pause, or **caesura**. In the first half of the line before the caesura, two words alliterate; in the second half, one word alliterates with the two from the first half. Many lines, however, have only two alliterative words, one in each half of the poetic line. Notice the alliterative *g* and the four primary stresses in this Old English line from *Beowulf*:

God mid Geatum Gréndles daeda

**Kennings.** The kenning, a specialized metaphor made of compound words, is a staple of Anglo-Saxon literature that still finds a place in our language today. *Gas guzzler* and *headhunter* are two modern-day kennings you are likely to have heard.

The earliest and simplest kennings are compound words formed of two common nouns: "sky-candle" for *sun*, "battle-dew" for *blood*, and "whale-road" for *sea*. Later, kennings grew more elaborate, and compound adjectives joined the compound nouns. A ship became a "foamy-throated ship," then a "foamy-throated sea-stallion," and finally a "foamy-throated stallion of the whale-road." Once a kenning was coined, it was used by the singer-poets over and over again.

In their original languages, kennings are almost always written as simple compounds, with no hyphens or spaces between the words. In translation, however, kennings are often written as hyphenated compounds ("sky-candle," "foamy-throated"), as prepositional phrases ("wolf of wounds"), or as possessives ("the sword's tree").

**The work of kennings.** Scholars believe that kennings filled three needs: (1) Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon poetry depended heavily on alliteration, but neither language had a large vocabulary. Poets created the alliterative words they needed by combining existing words. (2) Because the poetry was oral and had to be memorized, bards valued ready-made phrases. Such phrases made finished poetry easier to remember, and they gave bards time to think ahead when they were composing new poetry on the spot during a feast or ceremony. (3) The increasingly complex structure of the kennings must have satisfied the early Norse and Anglo-Saxon people's taste for elaboration.

**Analyzing the text.** As you examine these poetic devices, be sure to listen to the way they sound.

1. Read aloud the account of Beowulf's death (lines 791–828), and listen for the effects of the alliteration. Where are **vowels**, rather than consonants, repeated?
2. Look back over lines 233–391 from *Beowulf*. Locate at least two examples of kennings written as **hyphenated compounds**, two examples of kennings written as **prepositional phrases**, and two examples of kennings written as **possessives**. What does each kenning refer to?
3. Compile a list of modern-day kennings, such as *headhunter*.
4. Translators differ dramatically in how they rephrase the Old English to handle alliteration and the kennings. Here is a passage from a translation done many years before the Raffel translation. How does it compare with the corresponding lines (392–398) in Raffel's translation? Which translation sounds more modern? Which do you prefer to listen to?

Now Grendel came, from his crags of mist  
Across the moor; he was curst of God.  
The murderous prowler meant to surprise  
In the high-built hall his human prey.  
He stalked neath the clouds, till steep before him  
The house of revelry rose in his path,  
The gold-hall of heroes, the gaily adorned.  
—translated by J. Duncan Spaeth