

Beowulf



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANONYMOUS

Beowulf was probably created by a *scop*, a professional Anglo-Saxon poet. Much like bards, *scops* created poems to preserve the myths and histories of their people. These poems would be performed from memory at feasts or other public gatherings as part of an oral story-telling tradition. Sometime in the eleventh century, two scribes preserved *Beowulf* in writing, creating the single manuscript of *Beowulf* we have today. The original poem and the poet were pagan, but the scribes were Christian and added Christian details to the poem: the poem now calls God the ultimate judge and ruler and even refers to events in the Old Testament.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The story told in *Beowulf* occurs around 500 A.D., and many of the characters in the story can be directly related to real historical figures. It is known that the historic Hygelac, for instance, died around 521 A.D. More generally, *Beowulf* emerges from the Germanic/Scandinavian culture that flourished in Northern Europe during the last centuries of the Roman Empire and after.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Beowulf shares characteristics with many Old English epic poems. All contain heroic boasting, verbal taunting, and a hero with a troubled youth. In modern literature, J. R. R. Tolkien was a Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University, and an authority on *Beowulf*: His novels [The Hobbit](#) and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy are steeped in the mythology and culture in which *Beowulf* is set. In addition, Tolkien borrowed the episode of the thief stealing a cup from the dragon in *Beowulf* and used it in [The Hobbit](#). The novelist John Gardner also is indebted to *Beowulf*. In the novel [Grendel](#), he tells the story of Grendel and Grendel's mother from the monsters' points of view.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Beowulf*
- **When Published:** *Beowulf* exists in a single damaged manuscript in the British Library. The manuscript was probably written in England in the early eleventh century, though the poem itself was probably first written down in the eighth century, and was passed on orally before that.
- **Literary Period:** Medieval; Anglo-Saxon
- **Genre:** Epic poem

- **Setting:** Northern Europe, especially Denmark and Sweden, around the sixth century
- **Climax:** Beowulf's final fight with a dragon
- **Point of View:** The unnamed speaker of the poem

EXTRA CREDIT

Old English Style. *Beowulf* is the longest poem written in Old English. Old English poetry uses alliterative meter, meaning that the stressed words in a line begin with the same sound. A line of Old English poetry has two halves, with a brief pause, called a caesura, in the middle of the line. The two halves of a line are linked by the alliteration (repetition of an initial consonant); at least three words in a line alliterate. Old English poetry also uses *kennings*, compressed metaphors like "heaven's candle" for the sun, or "whale's road" for the sea, or calling a woman married in an effort to gain peace a "peace weaver."



PLOT SUMMARY

Hrothgar is the King of the Danes in southern Denmark. Through success in battle he has become rich and mighty. As a symbol of his power and prosperity he builds a magnificent mead-hall, called **Heorot**, in which he and his loyal warriors can feast, drink, boast, and listen to the tales of the *scops*, the Anglo-Saxon bards. But soon after Heorot is finished, the mirth of the men and the music of the scop anger Grendel, a monster descended from Cain. Grendel raids the hall, snatching men and eating them, then returns to his home in the marsh. He repeats his nightly raids until no one dares sleep in the hall. Heorot, once the symbol of the Scyldings' greatness, is now a place of shame and terror. This continues for twelve years, until Beowulf, a young warrior of the Geats in southern Sweden, hears about Grendel and, determined to fight the monster, sails to Hrothgar's lands with fifteen companions.

Hrothgar, who knew Beowulf's father Ecgtheow, accepts Beowulf's offer to fight Grendel and gives him a feast, though Beowulf and Unferth, a warrior loyal to Hrothgar, exchange insults. That night, the warriors sleep in Heorot, with Beowulf keeping watch. Grendel arrives and consumes one of the warriors, then reaches for Beowulf. Beowulf, famous for his powerful grip, which is as strong as the grip of thirty men, struggles with Grendel, tearing off the monster's shoulder and arm. Grendel returns to the fens to die. His arm is hung as a trophy under the roof of Heorot.

Hrothgar gives a second feast to celebrate Beowulf's victory. At the feast, Hrothgar generously rewards Beowulf with treasure. The *scop* sings again, and Beowulf is praised until nightfall. That night, Grendel's mother comes to the hall from

her home in the bottom of a lake, seeking revenge for the death of her son. She grabs Aeschere, a favorite warrior and adviser of Hrothgar's, and consumes him, then returns home. In the morning, the warriors follow her tracks to her lake, where they see Aeschere's head. Beowulf enters the lake, and swims for hours before reaching her cave at the bottom. He fights with Grendel's mother, but the sword Hrunting, which Unferth lent to Beowulf in a sign of fellowship, fails for the first time. From the treasure hoard in the cave Beowulf seizes a sword forged long ago by giants and kills Grendel's mother. He sees Grendel's body, and removes the head, and takes it and the hilt of the giant's sword (the blade melted on contact with the monster's blood) back to Hrothgar.

There is another celebration in Heorot with more gifts and promises of friendship. Hrothgar says he feels like Beowulf is his son, and weeps at Beowulf's departure. Beowulf and his men return to the land of the Geats, where his uncle the king, Hygelac, and Hygelac's queen Hygd, greet Beowulf, accepting the treasure Beowulf gives them, and in turn rewarding Beowulf with a sword, praise, and land. Hygelac is eventually killed by the Swedes; his son Heardred, though young, takes the throne with Beowulf's support. At Heardred's death, Beowulf takes the throne of the Geats, and rules in great prosperity and fame for fifty years.

In Beowulf's old age, a thief finds a passageway into an old barrow. Inside, a dragon guards a treasure trove left there long ago by the last survivor of an extinct people. The thief steals a cup, but the dragon discovers the theft and burns the land, including Beowulf's mead-hall. Beowulf, knowing his death is near, decides to fight the dragon. Accompanied by his kinsman Wiglaf, ten warriors, and the thief, Beowulf sets out to confront the dragon. But when Beowulf and the dragon fight, all of Beowulf's men flee except Wiglaf. With Wiglaf's help Beowulf kills the dragon, but not before he himself is terribly wounded.

Before he dies, Beowulf tells Wiglaf to rule after him, and to build him a funeral barrow that overlooks the sea. Wiglaf chastises the men for abandoning their lord. A messenger sent to tell the Geats of Beowulf's death also warns of hard times for the Geats, now that Beowulf is dead. The Geats build a pyre and cremate Beowulf, then construct a barrow overlooking the sea, burying the dragon's cursed treasure with him.

of thirty men in his grasp, and rather remarkable swimming ability. In addition to his great warrior skills, Beowulf eventually becomes a strong, powerful, and generous king.

Hrothgar – The King of the Danes, the son of Healfdene, the brother of Heorogar and Halga, and the brother-in-law of Onela the Swede. He is also the father of young sons Hrethric, Hrothmund, and Freawaru. Hrothgar is an excellent and successful king. He builds Heorot, a magnificent hall, and builds love and loyalty through his generosity and wisdom. However, though once a great warrior, he can no longer defend his people from Grendel, and his sons also are too young to take up leadership of the Danes. Though a good king, Hrothgar's position – too old to protect his people, but without heirs ready to take his place – represents a potential threat to the Danes and all other Scandinavian tribes: the lack of a king. Hrothgar and the Dane's situation therefore foreshadows the actual threat that will face the Geats after Beowulf battles the dragon at the end of the narrative.

Wiglaf – The son of Weohstan the Scylfing, and a relative of Beowulf, as well as his most loyal warrior. In the battle against the dragon, he proves to be the only Geatish warrior with courage even moderately equivalent to Beowulf's. In a way, his valor only serves to underscore just how weak in general and dependent on Beowulf the other Geats have become. Wiglaf rules the Geats after Beowulf dies from wounds suffered in the battle against the dragon, but the narrator makes it clear that Wiglaf cannot match Beowulf as a king and that the Geats will face hard times.

Unferth – A Dane, the son of Ecglaf, and a follower of Hrothgar. Unferth is presented as contrast to Beowulf, providing a glimpse of a poor warrior in contrast to Beowulf's good warrior. Unferth is boastful, just as Beowulf is, but unlike Beowulf Unferth lacks the moral courage to back up his boasts (and unlike Beowulf Unferth never does anything to stand against Grendel). Further, Unferth appears to be jealous of Beowulf and never responds to Beowulf's taunt that Unferth once killed his own brother, which could signal either Unferth's incompetence or some sort of moral failing. Unferth does become more generous after Beowulf defeats Grendel, and lends Beowulf his family sword to fight Grendel's mother.

Grendel – A man-eating monster descended from the Biblical Cain. Grendel is described as a "walker in darkness," who is "wearing God's anger" and "lacking in joy" because he has inherited the curse the Biblical Cain received as a result of his murder of his brother Abel. While Grendel's psychology is not explored in detail in *Beowulf*, there is a sense that he attacks the Danes because his own enforced isolation has made him hate those who are able to enjoy society and companionship. As Heorot is a symbol of such society and companionship, being the place where the Danes congregate to eat, drink, tell stories, build fellowship among each other, and share in the generosity of their king, Grendel's attack on Heorot is thus symbolic as an



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Beowulf – The hero of *Beowulf*, Beowulf is a Geatish warrior loyal to his king, Hygelac. Beowulf's father was the warrior Ecgtheow, and his mother is a sister of Hygelac. Despite his noble lineage, Beowulf was a bit of a juvenile delinquent, and little was expected of him. But he soon proved his doubters wrong and grew up to be a great warrior. He has the strength

attack on the idea of society itself. The novelist John Gardner wrote a book called *Grendel* that explores these ideas about Grendel more fully, and tells of the events of *Beowulf* from Grendel's point of view.

Dragon – A fire-breathing dragon who discovered a lost tribe's treasure and moved into the barrow housing the gold. The dragon is exceedingly greedy – marking a stark contrast to good kings, who create loyalty and love among their people and warriors through generosity. After a thief steals from the dragon's horde, the dragon goes on a rampage and terrorizes the Geats. Beowulf, the king of the Geats, fights the dragon. Beowulf ultimately kills the dragon, but at the cost of his own life. The threat posed by the dragon therefore represents a kind of tension in the question of what makes a good king. Was Beowulf right to act as a warrior and kill the dragon and protect his people, even if that action resulted in Beowulf's death, since the loss of their king is likely to result in the destruction of the Geats? Or was Beowulf too rash, and should he have waited for a hero just as Hrothgar did when Grendel attacked the Danes?

MINOR CHARACTERS

Ecgtheow – Beowulf's father and the husband of King Hygelac's sister. Hrothgar once gave him sanctuary after Ecgtheow, a Geatish warrior, killed a warrior of the Wylfings. This history makes Beowulf loyal to Hrothgar.

Hygelac – The king of the Geats, son of Hrethel, husband of Hygd, father of Heardred, and Beowulf's uncle. He is a good and generous king.

Hygd – The wife of Hygelac and the queen of the Geats. Like Wealhtheow of the Danes, Hygd is a good and generous queen.

Hrethel – Hygelac's father, and one-time king of the Geats. His life was made bitter when one of his sons (Haethcyn) accidentally killed the other (Herebeald).

Heardred – Hygelac and Hygd's son. After Hygelac dies, Beowulf supports Heardred as boy-king of the Geats even though Beowulf could have taken the throne himself.

Breca – A Geat who competed with Beowulf in a swimming contest as a youth.

Wulfgar – Hrothgar's herald. Technically he is a Wendel and not a Dane, but he serves Hrothgar the Danish king.

Hondscioh – The Geat whom Grendel grabs and eats in Heorot before Beowulf fights the beast.

Scyld Scefing – A foundling, he became the first king in the Danish royal line. He is the father of Beow, and the great-grandfather of Hrothgar.

Healfdane – Hrothgar's father, and the king of the Danes.

Wealhtheow – The wife of King Hrothgar and queen of the Danes, the mother of Hrethric and Hrothmund. She is a good and generous queen.

Hrethric – Hrothgar's son and heir.

Hrothmund – Another son of Hrothgar's.

Hrothulf – The nephew of Hrothgar, the son of Hrothgar's brother. After Hrothgar's death, Hrothulf betrays his cousin Hrethric, leading to the burning of Heorot by the Heatho-Bards.

Beow – Sometimes called Beowulf I or Beowulf the Dane, he ruled the Danes after his father Scyld Scefing. He is not the hero of *Beowulf*.

Aeschere – An old Danish warrior and Hrothgar's counselor. Aeschere is killed by Grendel's mother.

Freawaru – The daughter of Hrothgar, and the future wife of Ingeld, the prince of the Heatho-Bards. Her marriage is an unsuccessful attempt to create peace between the feuding Danes and the Heatho-Bards..

Ecglaf – Unferth's father.

Heremod – An example of a bad king. An early Danish king, he was once great but was moved by pride to suppress and kill his own people.

Modthryth – An example of a bad queen. In her youth she caused people to be killed merely for looking at her. She is said to have improved, becoming generous, after her marriage to the king of the Angles.

Finn – In the story of the Fight at Finnsburg, Finn is a Frisian king who marries the Danish princess Hildeburh, but then battles and kills Hildeburh's brother, Hnaef.

Hildeburh – In the story of the Fight at Finnsburg, the wife of the Frisian King Finn and sister of the Danish King Hnaef. When these two kings fight, she's caught in the middle, and both her brother and son are killed.

Hnaef – The king of the Danes in the story of the Fight at Finnsburg. Hildeburh is his sister.

Hengest – The Dane who becomes king after Hnaef is killed fighting the Frisians in the Fight at Finnsburg.

Sigemund – A legendary warrior who killed a dragon.

Cain – The Old Testament of the Bible, in the Book of Genesis, tells the story of how Cain killed his brother Abel. Cain was marked by God, so others would know him and cast him out of society. The giants, Grendel and Grendel's Mother, are descended from Cain.

Grendel's Mother – A female version of Grendel, she is also descended from Cain. Grendel's mother attacks the Danes in revenge for the death of her son, but is also eventually killed by Beowulf.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes

occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



FAMILY AND TRIBE

In *Beowulf* (and in the medieval Germanic culture that produced *Beowulf*), family and tribal allegiances determine one's identity. Characters are constantly identified as the son, wife, or daughter of a particular man, and as members of this or that tribe. Men or beings without tribes—such as Grendel and Heremod—are described as lonely and joyless. Without a community or family, these men are incomplete. All of the cultural institutions described in *Beowulf*, from the giving of gold and gifts to the emphasis placed on loyalty above any personal desire, exist to preserve and strengthen the family and tribe.

The importance placed on family and tribe in medieval Germanic culture also leads to the incredible number of inter-tribal feuds in *Beowulf*. Preservation of a family or tribe within a hostile environment demands not only unity within the tribe, but the willingness to defend and protect the tribe from outsiders. The necessity of tribal and family self-defense created a set of formal rules of vengeance between individuals and feuding between tribes.



GOOD WARRIORS AND GOOD KINGS

The narrator of *Beowulf* emphasizes the importance of both good warriors and good kings. But as the story of *Beowulf* unfolds, it becomes clear that while good kings and warriors share some similar traits, such as courage, loyalty, selflessness, and might in battle, the values of a good warrior and a good king do *not* overlap in other fundamental ways.

The differences between good kings and good warriors arise from the different roles that kings and warriors play in society. As a protector and nurturer, the king must put the good of the people above his own desire for fame and glory. A good king is generous with gifts and gold, provides a haven in which his people can eat and drink and socialize, is powerful and fearless in defending his land and people, and yet does not seek unnecessary conflict that might lead to death for either his people or himself. A good warrior, in contrast, supports his people through the pursuit of personal fame, whether on the battlefield, in feats of strength, or by purposely seeking out conflict, just as Beowulf does in coming to Hrothgar's aid and fighting Grendel.



FAME, PRIDE, AND SHAME

The warriors of *Beowulf* seek fame through feats of strength, bravery in the face of danger, an utter disdain for death, as well as by *boasting* about their

feats of strength, bravery, and disdain for death. The quest for fame is of the utmost importance to a warrior trying to establish himself in the world.

Yet the quest for fame can lead to harm in two very different ways. First, a quest for fame can easily succumb to pride. Both pride and fame involve a desire to be great, but while fame involves becoming great in order to bring strength and power to one's people, pride involves a desire to be great no matter what. Put another way, fame in *Beowulf* is associated with generosity and community while pride is associated with greed and selfishness. Second, a man who seeks fame can also bring shame to himself (and therefore his family) if his courage fails him. And shame, in *Beowulf*, is not mere embarrassment. It's a kind of curse that broadcasts to the world that you, your family, and your people lack the courage, will, or might to protect yourselves. When Wiglaf rebukes Beowulf's men for fleeing in the face of the dragon, he does not merely say that they have shamed themselves. Rather, he implies that their shame is bound to bring ruin down the entire Geatish people.



REPETITION AND CHANGE

Beowulf is full of repetitions: the story begins and ends with funerals of kings; Beowulf must fight Grendel and Grendel's Mother; the tale of

Sigemund foreshadows Beowulf's battle with the dragon; the feuds related in stories told by the bards echo the feuds of Beowulf's own time. These repetitions emphasize the continuity of the world and show that events are in many ways just variations of previous events, proceeding in endless procession like the seasons of the year.

But repetition also serves a seemingly opposite purpose: it emphasizes change and difference. Precisely because various events described in *Beowulf* are so similar, the differences in those similar events become highlighted. For instance, Beowulf opens and closes with the funeral of two different kings, Scyld Scefing and Beowulf. But while Scyld's death comes of old age and founds a dynasty through succession to a son, Beowulf's funeral comes in battle and ends a dynasty because he has no son. Should Beowulf therefore *not* have fought the dragon, and instead remained to protect this people? Through the contrasts of seemingly similar events, *Beowulf* highlights how things change and raises questions about characters' decisions and actions.



CHRISTIANITY AND PAGANISM

Because of its complicated origin, *Beowulf* has elements of both pagan Germanic culture and Christianity. The story of *Beowulf* probably

originated as an oral tradition sometime in the 7th century. But the only surviving manuscript of *Beowulf* was written in the 11th century by Christian scribes, who either inserted the

Christian overtones to the story, or were working from a manuscript set down by previous Christians who added the Christian elements. Suffice it to say that the resulting *Beowulf* is like a pagan story wrapped in Christianity. This results in some strange inconsistencies. For instance, the narrator of the poem describes Hrothgar at one point as a pagan who does not know of the true God, and yet all the characters, including Hrothgar, constantly thank God for their good fortune. In addition, the pagan concept of fate becomes rather hopelessly confused with God's will, so that sometimes Beowulf (and the narrator) seems to believe he can affect fate through his courage, while at others either Beowulf or the narrator attributes his success solely to God's favor. As you read *Beowulf*, keep on the lookout for the ways that Christianity and paganism interact in the poem.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



HEOROT AND MEAD-HALLS

The mead-hall is the symbol of a society: it is in this central place that the people gather to feast, socialize, and listen to the *scop* (bard) perform and thereby preserve the history of the people. Heorot, as the largest mead-hall in the world, symbolized the might and power of the Spear-Danes under Hrothgar.



GOLD, TREASURE, AND GIFTS

In *Beowulf*, gold, treasure, and gifts are less important for their economic value than their social value. In fact, gold can be seen as a symbol of social interaction: a lord rewards loyalty with gold, and in doing so inspires further loyalty. The transfer of the gold is also a kind of physical embodiment of the lord's duty to nurture his people. Gold can also act as a symbol of regret or a desire for peace: one way of avoiding a feud is to pay the *wergild*, the man-price, by compensating the family of the injured person with gold, to avoid more violent vengeance.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Signet Classics edition of *Beowulf* published in 2008.

Grendel Attacks (Lines 86–193) Quotes

“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 hell on earth.
He was spawned in that slime
Of Cain, murderous creatures banished
By God, punished forever for the crime
Of Abel's death.”

Related Characters: Grendel

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 101-108

Explanation and Analysis

After the speaker of the poem describes Heorot, the hall of the king Hrothgar, he moves to the darkness outside of the grand hall, where the fiendish creature Grendel lurks. Grendel is meant to be the opposite of a warrior; his "home" is "hell on earth," and he is alone, instead of enmeshed in a greater community. Grendel is described as a supernatural monster, instead of a human, but Grendel also supposedly descends from the Biblical sinner Cain -- a man who revealed the malice inherent in each human character. This contradiction between Grendel's supernatural and human natures introduces the way that paganism and Christianity conflict and overlap in this narrative. In general *Beowulf* appears to be a pagan story with an often conflicting layer of Christianity added on later.

On another level, the idea that Grendel is a monster because of his ancestor also seems extremely unfair, though this fits in with the values of much of the ancient world. Grendel is a victim of fate--he cannot change his nature, because he was born (and divinely cursed) with it.

“The monster relished his savage war
On the Danes, keeping the bloody feud
Alive, seeking no peace, offering
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,
Stalked Hrothgar's warriors.”

Related Characters: Grendel, Hrothgar

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 152-160

Explanation and Analysis

Grendel repeatedly enters Heorot and kills many warriors under the cover of night--and without following the essential Anglo-Saxon principles of martial combat. Unlike humans, Grendel is unaffected by the potential of peace negotiations; he is not civilized by language, and follows "no truce, accepting no settlement, no price / In gold or land." Indeed, Grendel wages a war ("his savage war") on his own, instead of engaging in an exchange with others. It is this isolation which makes Grendel such a horrific figure. Warriors can be forgiven -- and, indeed, lauded -- for killing their enemies in battle, but a monster is unforgivable because he does so without participating in a greater context.

A Feast at Heorot (Lines 491–701) Quotes

☞☞ But the truth

Is simple: no man swims in the sea

As I can, no strength is a match for mine

Related Characters: Beowulf (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 532-534

Explanation and Analysis

After Unferth claims that Breca has defeated Beowulf in a swimming match at sea, Beowulf defends his performance in this previous encounter, in order to defend his general honor. As he does so, Beowulf also reveals his impressive ability to boast and succeed in verbal fights -- an ability as valued in this Anglo-Saxon society as fighting itself. An Anglo-Saxon warrior must be able to interpret and describe events ("the truth") in particular ways that emphasize his accomplishments and honor ("strength"), as Beowulf does here in response to Unferth's challenges. Even before Beowulf fights Grendel, the audience begins to see that Beowulf is an especially talented warrior, who fits in well with the conventions of Anglo-Saxon society.

☞☞ Grendel is no braver, no stronger

Than I am! I could kill him with my sword; I shall not,

Easy as it would be. This fiend is a bold

And famous fighter, but his claws and teeth...

Beating at my sword blade, would be helpless. I will meet him

With my hands empty-unless his heart

Fails him, seeing a soldier waiting

Weaponless, unafraid. Let God in His wisdom

Extend His hand where He wills, reward

Whom he chooses!

Related Characters: Beowulf (speaker), Grendel

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 677-687

Explanation and Analysis

After detailing his past successes, such as his accomplishment of defeating Breca during their swimming match, Beowulf continues his speeches by predicting his imminent victory against Grendel. Here, Beowulf engages in the sometimes difficult process of proclaiming his superior nature without boasting excessively and displaying pride. He avoids this appearance of pride by alluding to the Christian God, asking Him to help whom He will and "reward / Whom he chooses." Beowulf implicitly suggests that his future success would partially derive from God's intervention, which implies that Beowulf's past victories might also be a product of the divine will. At the same time, Beowulf is also claiming that his *own* strength and courage are so great that he doesn't even need a sword to defeat Grendel.

Grendel's Mother (Lines 1251–1407) Quotes

☞☞ She'd brooded on her loss, misery had brewed

In her heart, that female horror, Grendel's

Mother, living in the murky cold lake

Assigned her since Cain had killed his only

Brother, slain his father's son

With an angry sword.

Related Characters: Grendel's Mother

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 1258-1263

Explanation and Analysis

After Beowulf kills Grendel, the audience learns that Grendel's Mother is a living, monstrous being whose home

is inside a "murky cold lake," a fittingly grotesque lair. She seems to be slightly more human than Grendel at first; she, perhaps rightfully, seeks vengeance for her son's murder. Yet, she is "female," and women in Anglo-Saxon society were supposed to be "peace-weavers," not warriors. Grendel's martial impulse makes her a "female horror," a perversion and opposite of Anglo-Saxon femininity. Like her son, though, Grendel's Mother is also associated with Biblical malice; her home was "assigned her since Cain had killed his only / Brother." She is both a pagan monster and an antagonist made to fit vaguely into the Christian tradition.

New Celebration (Lines 1640–1912) Quotes

☛☛ All-knowing God
Must have sent you such words; nothing so wise
From a warrior so young has ever reached
These ancient ears...If your lord,
Hrethel's son, is slain by a spear,
Or falls sick and dies...I say that the Geats
Could do no better, find no man better
Suited to be king, keeper of warriors
and their treasure, than you..., beloved Beowulf.

Related Characters: Hrothgar (speaker), Hrethel, Beowulf

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 1841-1854

Explanation and Analysis

Hrothgar praises Beowulf after the hero defeats Grendel and Grendel's mother and before he becomes king of his own land. Here Hrothgar references Beowulf's wisdom -- a kingly trait, which suggests that Beowulf might function well as a mediator between a people and God. Hrothgar then more directly advocates for Beowulf to become king of his own land, that of the Geats. With this praise, Hrothgar begins to foster diplomatic relations between his kingdom and Beowulf's. Hrothgar has many roles in his relationship to Beowulf; he adopts fatherly roles, he generously rewards Beowulf as one of his own warriors, and here he suggests that Beowulf is somewhat of an equal to himself.

Beowulf at Home (Lines 1913–2199) Quotes

☛☛ Beowulf had brought his king
Horses and treasure—as a man must,
Not weaving nets of malice for his comrades,
Preparing their death in the dark, with secret,
Cunning tricks.

Related Characters: Beowulf

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 2165-2169

Explanation and Analysis

When Beowulf returns to his home, he acts as a warrior "must." He details the personal successes he experienced in his travels, by describing his combat with Grendel and Grendel's mother. He also gives "horses and treasure" to his king, Hygelac, allowing his community and homeland to participate in the individual victories which he successfully summarized. Beowulf enters into the reciprocal relationship common between good kings and warriors; Hygelac and Hygd, his king and queen, will in turn generously reward Beowulf for this behavior.

As the narrator relates these events, he also presents an alternative possibility: Beowulf could theoretically engage in "cunning tricks," which threaten instead of support the lives of those around him. Yet, if he did so, Beowulf could have no fame for his individual actions; it is important that a warrior frame his individual deeds in the context of his community. Anglo-Saxon society then becomes a repetitive series of exchanges which occur between various warriors and the king with remarkable similarities.

Facing the Dragon (Lines 2324–2710) Quotes

☛☛ When he comes to me
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.

Related Characters: Beowulf (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 2524-2529

Explanation and Analysis

When Beowulf speaks before his appearance with the dragon, he does not need to engage in quite as much boasting as he did before he met with Grendel. Instead of dwelling much on prior victories, Beowulf focus on the impending battle with calm declarations of fatalism instead of the "hot / Words" that reveal excess pride.

When Beowulf makes these proclamations, he seems to re-adopt the role of warrior; he will "stand" and fight, as he did when he was younger, before he became a king and grew older. During Beowulf's actual engagement with the dragon, we will see whether a king can truly function as a warrior, or whether these two societal roles are incompatible with each other.

he seems to imply that this virtue might be more significant than his martial prowess.

Beowulf and Wiglaf (Lines 2711–2845) Quotes

☛☛ My days
Have gone by as fate willed,...
As I knew how, swearing no unholy oaths,
Seeking no lying wars. I can leave
This life happy; I can die, here,
Knowing the Lord of all life has never
Watched me wash my sword in blood
Born of my own family.

Related Characters: Beowulf (speaker)

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 2735-2743

Explanation and Analysis

Beowulf's boasting before he faces the dragon turns out to be mostly in vain; the dragon does indeed defeat the elderly Beowulf, the man who has already transformed from warrior into king. Yet Beowulf does not die with shame. He attributes all events of his life (and perhaps even his death) to the favor of fate and of the Christian God ("the Lord of all life"). Although Beowulf does ultimately fall in battle (while killing his enemy), his reputation is not besmirched by any vices other than weakness and age; no "unholy oaths," "lying wars," or familial violence can be attributed to Beowulf. Beowulf displayed Christian virtue throughout his life, and

Beowulf's Funeral (Lines 3110–3182) Quotes

☛☛ For ten long days they made his monument,
Sealed his ashes in walls as straight
And high as wise and willing hands could raise them...
And the treasures they'd taken were left there too,...
Ground back in the earth.

Related Characters: Beowulf

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 3159-3167

Explanation and Analysis

The narrative ends, as it begins, with a kingly funeral. This funeral also suggests the ultimate futility of martial combat because it causes the "treasures they'd taken" and won through force to be "ground back in the earth," where they cannot contribute to the people who should benefit from them. Here, Beowulf's last existence on earth is surrounded by the society which lauded him while he was alive; the broader community directed Beowulf's actions during life, and it now directly determines the fate of Beowulf even after his death. Beowulf's "monument" is not merely a display in honor of Beowulf's martial prowess and kingly wisdom--it also ends the story with Beowulf physically enveloped in the works of others' hands. He has been the leader whose life was not his own. Now, that is visually apparent at the last.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE (LINES 1–63)

Scyld Scefing is the first of the great kings of the Spear-Danes. From humble beginnings as a foundling discovered at sea, he rises to great power and is honored and paid tribute by many. The narrator says of him: "That was a good king."

Through Scyld, the poem establishes strength and loyalty as traits of a good king. The orphan Scyld parallels Beowulf, who was an unimpressive child.



Scyld has a son Beow, who accomplishes many glorious deeds and wins the loyalty of his fellow men through his great generosity.

Beow is a warrior who finds fame. Generosity makes him a good king.



When Scyld dies, he is laid to rest in a ship filled with **treasure** and set out to sea. In this way, the narrator notes, his life ends just as it began.

The similarity emphasizes Scyld's rise from humble beginnings to be king.



Beow rules the Spear-Danes prosperously and well for many years. When Beow dies, his son Healfdane became king. Healfdane, in turn, is followed on the throne by Hrothgar, the second of Healfdane's four children.

Scyld founds a dynasty, passing a stable throne to his son. Warlike deeds won him fame, but Scyld was a great king because he died in peace.



HROTHGAR'S EARLY REIGN (LINES 64–85)

Hrothgar is successful in battle, and gains followers and **treasure**. He constructs **Heorot**, the most magnificent mead-hall ever built, and a good place to feast, listen to the singing of the bards, and give gifts of gold to his followers.

Hrothgar's excellent kingly qualities are symbolized in Heorot, a place for his people to eat, socialize, and hear their history sung by bards.



However, the narrator mentions that in the future **Heorot** will burn because of a feud between son-in-law and father-in-law.

When the unity of the Danes is destroyed, Heorot is also destroyed.



GRENDEL ATTACKS (LINES 86–193)

The Danes celebrate the completion of **Heorot** with a feast, at which Hrothgar's bard sings about the creation of the Earth.

As a mead-hall, Heorot, like the Earth, is a source of life for its people.



But the monster Grendel, a descendent of Cain and therefore an outcast from society, hears the singing from his home in the swamp. These sounds of community and merriment fill him with anger.

That night, Grendel visits **Heorot** as the Danes are sleeping. Grendel seizes thirty warriors and carries them to his den to kill and eat them. The next night Grendel repeats his raid. After that, the Danes abandon Heorot to Grendel after nightfall. This situation continues for twelve years.

The narrator notes that unlike men, Grendel has no desire to end the feud, or to pay **compensation** for those he kills and thus make peace with their families. Hrothgar can neither make peace with Grendel, nor destroy him.

In despair, Hrothgar and the Danes prayed to their heathen gods. The narrator pities them, since they did not know of the true "Lord God" and were therefore praying to demons to save them from a monster.

BEOWULF ARRIVES (LINES 194–490)

Beowulf, a noble warrior in the prime of his life and the nephew of Hygelac, the king of the Geats, hears about Grendel. With fourteen loyal men, Beowulf sails to the land of the Danes.

When the Geats arrive in the land of the Danes, a watchman at the sea-cliff challenges them. He asks where they're from, what their lineage is, and why they have come. From Beowulf's stature alone the watchman can tell his is a mighty warrior.

Beowulf says the warriors with him are Geats, loyal warriors of king Hygelac. Without giving his name, Beowulf identifies himself as the son of Ecgtheow, a man Hrothgar the son of Healfdene knows. Beowulf says the Geats, having heard of Grendel's attacks, offer help. The watchman lets them pass.

At **Heorot**, Hrothgar's herald, Wulfgar, asks the Geats who they are. Beowulf identifies himself by name as well as by his service to Hygelac, and asks to speak to Hrothgar. Wulfgar brings this request to Hrothgar.

Grendel, a monster with no tribe or people, hates any reminder that others do have these necessities.



Grendel turns Heorot, the heart of Danish society, into a slaughterhouse. Grendel the outcast has, symbolically, made the Danes outcasts. The defeat shames the Danes.



Because Grendel is a being outside of society, there is no way for Danes to deal with him.



Here the narrator says that the Danes of the time were not Christians. However, the characters speeches later in the text seem to contradict this statement.



Beowulf sails to help the Spear-Danes because he's a warrior and seeks to do great deeds and win fame.



Note that the watchman doesn't ask who they are, but for their lineage (tribe and family). Family, in this culture, is the measure of a man.



The connection between Ecgtheow and Hrothgar likely helps bring Beowulf to Heorot. Beowulf is returning Hrothgar's generosity to his father. Generosity wins loyalty.



This is the first time Beowulf identifies himself by name. Up until this point he had named only his tribe and his father.



Hrothgar corroborates that he knew Ecgtheow, and adds that he knew Beowulf as a boy. Hrothgar mentions that Beowulf's grasp is supposedly equal to that of thirty men, and concludes that God must have sent this warrior to help the Danes.

Though a pagan, Hrothgar here credits God for bringing Beowulf. The scribes' attempt to make the poem Christian isn't always clean.



Wulfgar invites the Geats to speak to Hrothgar. Beowulf greets Hrothgar, and says he has heard that because of Grendel, **Heorot** stands empty and useless after nightfall. Beowulf boasts of the great deeds of his past, saying he bound five others in a fight, destroyed a family of giants, and vanquished water-monsters. Now he comes to fight Grendel.

Through boasting, a warrior emphasizes his daring and skill to win fame. A good boast shows intelligence and quick wit, though it won't reflect well on the boaster if he can't back up his words with deeds.



Because Grendel does not use weapons, Beowulf says that he will fight Grendel with his bare hands and if he loses, they won't have to bury him because Grendel will carry his body away to eat it. He asks only that his mail shirt, the work of Weland the Smith, be returned to Hygelac. Beowulf concludes with the statement "Fate will go as it must."

Giving up weapons shows how little Beowulf fears death in his quest for fame and great deeds. Also note his reference to fate, a pagan idea.



Hrothgar responds, saying that Ecgtheow, Beowulf's father, sought sanctuary with Hrothgar after Ecgtheow killed Heatholaf of the Wylfings. Hrothgar purchased peace from the Wylfings with **treasure**, and Ecgtheow swore an oath of loyalty to Hrothgar.

Loyalty is passed down from father to son. Note also how treasure functions as a diplomatic tool.



Hrothgar accepts Beowulf's offer, though he adds that he has often heard his men boast while drinking that they would meet Grendel with their swords in **Heorot**, only to find the hall awash in their blood the next morning.

Here Hrothgar describes bad warriors. The implication is that they not only die, but die in shame for failing to live up to their boasts.



A FEAST AT HEOROT (LINES 491–701)

The Geats and Danes feast in **Heorot**. But Unferth, the son of Ecglaf, jealously taunts Beowulf. According to Unferth, as young men Beowulf and another Geat named Breca had a swimming competition, and Breca won. Unferth says he now expects Beowulf to fail to fulfill his boasts regarding Grendel.

The feast cements the loyalty between Geats and Danes. But Unferth, seemingly jealous and wishing to increase his own fame, tries to shame Beowulf.



Beowulf replies that Unferth is drunk, and tells his version of the story: as youths, he and Breca did have a contest in the sea, but he, Beowulf, won. For five nights, the two youths swam in their armor holding up their swords. But eventually the tide separated them. Beowulf was pulled to the bottom of the ocean by a sea monster, that he then fought and killed. Beowulf comments: "fate often saves an doomed man when his courage is firm."

Whether Beowulf's amazing tale is true or not, his prowess as a boaster can't be questioned. Beowulf's comment about the relationship between courage and fate implies that if a man does not fear death he can win fate's favor and therefore is actually less likely to die.



Beowulf adds that he killed nine sea-monsters in all. He says has not heard that Unferth has done so much, though he has heard that Unferth killed his own brother. Beowulf says that Grendel would never have overcome **Heorot** if Unferth were as brave as he claims to be.

Killing a brother is perhaps the worst crime one can commit (and the crime that made Grendel's ancestor Cain an outcast). Unferth's lack of response implies the charge is true.



Hrothgar and the Danes are cheered by Beowulf's resolve and daring. Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's queen, offers Beowulf a goblet of mead, then offers it to the other warriors in turn.

Beowulf's boasting endears him to the Danes. Wealhtheow acts as a good queen, creating fellowship by sharing the mead-cup.



At nightfall, the Danes leave the hall to Beowulf and his men. Beowulf again promises to fight Grendel with his bare hands. He says, "may God, the holy Lord, assign glory to the side that seems best to him," and lies down to wait.

Beowulf reaffirms his courage and lack of fear of death. He also prays to God, but seems to see God and fate as the same thing.



BEOWULF VS. GRENDEL (LINES 702–836)

Grendel approaches **Heorot** and tears open the doors. He grabs a sleeping Geat, Hondscioh, and eats him quickly. Grendel next reaches for Beowulf but Beowulf grabs Grendel's arm with a grip stronger than any Grendel has felt before. Grendel becomes frightened, but Beowulf's hold is too strong for Grendel to escape.

Grendel, an outsider who spurns society, and Beowulf, an outsider who joins the Danes in fellowship, battle. Beowulf makes good on his boast that he will fight Grendel single-handed.



Grendel's fierce cries and the sounds of their epic struggle wake the warriors. **Heorot** shakes with the force of their fight. The men grab their weapons to help, not knowing that a spell protects Grendel from all swords.

Fate (or God) does reward Beowulf's courage: if he had used a sword rather than his bare hands he wouldn't have been able to harm Grendel.



Finally, Beowulf rips Grendel's arm and shoulder from its socket, and the monster, mortally wounded, flees to the swamp to die. Beowulf mounts Grendel's arm as a trophy on the wall of **Heorot**. Beowulf, the narrator says, has fulfilled his boasts.

Beowulf proves himself as a warrior by fulfilling his boast. Mounting Grendel's arm in Heorot, the heart of Danish society, symbolizes society's victory over the outcast.



CELEBRATION (LINES 837–1250)

In the morning, the Danes celebrate Beowulf's victory in **Heorot**. Men follow Grendel's tracks to the lake where Grendel died. The water boils with his blood. They return to Heorot and fill the hall with the sound of their celebration.

With the death of Grendel, Heorot again becomes a symbol of Danish unity, a place of celebration, joy, and gifts.



Hrothgar's scop sings. He compares Beowulf to Sigemund, a famous warrior who killed a dragon and took its treasure, and contrasts Beowulf to Heremod, a once great Danish king who turned selfish and vicious, becoming powerful by killing his own people. Ultimately, Heremod was chased from his tribe and killed by his enemies.

Sigemund and Heremod were both great warriors, but Heremod as king succumbed to pride, ruled harshly, and lost his people. The differences between these two similar warriors highlight the traits of a good king.



Hrothgar thanks both God and Beowulf for the defeat of Grendel. He proclaims that Beowulf is now like a son to him, and rewards him with **treasure**. Hrothgar adds that it is "through the Lord's might" that Beowulf was able to defeat Grendel. Beowulf wishes he could have kept Grendel inside of **Heorot**, but says that "the Lord did not wish it." The narrator describes Grendel's arm, noting again that it can't be damaged by iron weapons and that each finger has a steel-like talon at its end. The narrator comments that Beowulf has disproved Unferth's claim of weakness.

Hrothgar's comment that Beowulf is a son to him is more than just an expression of kindness. Hrothgar is also building stronger diplomatic ties with the greatest warrior in the world by claiming him as family. For his part, Beowulf is now free from any stain that Unferth's comments might have left on him.



The immense damage caused by Beowulf's fight with Grendel is repaired, and a great feast held. **Heorot** is filled with friends and family, including Hrothgar and his nephew Hrothulf. But the narrator comments that "the Scyldings [Danes] had not yet known betrayal."

Now that Heorot is once more the heart of Danish society, the narrator hints that the society will once again be ripped apart, this time by humans.



At the feast, Hrothgar gives Beowulf gifts ranging from **gold** to horses to weapons. He also gives gifts to Beowulf's men, and pays the Geats for their companion whom Grendel killed.

Gold and gifts are not just payment, they're also public acknowledgement of valor and create bonds of loyalty.



The scop sings of the Fight at Finnsburg. Finn, a Frisian king, weds a Danish princess, Hildeburh. Her brother, Hnaef, the King of the Danes, visits, but the visit results in a battle that kills both Hnaef and Hildeburh's son. Finn then tries to establish peace between the Frisians and Danes. He promises Hengest, the new Danish leader, that their peoples will live in equality under Finn's leadership and that no one will ever remind the Danes that they serve their lord's killer. He also gives the Danes wergild to make up for the loss of their leader..

Hildeburh's predicament emphasizes the contradictions in the rules of personal and tribal honor. These forces overwhelm diplomacy, tearing society apart. The story suggests that the tensions inherent in Germanic society will always undermine diplomacy and peace.



The Danes, stranded by winter in the Frisian land, agree. They burn Hnaef and Hildeburh's son's bodies together. The Danes spend the winter with Finn and the Frisians, but secretly spend the time planning revenge. When spring comes, the Danes attack, killing Finn. The Danes then take the Frisian's treasure, and return to their people with Hildeburh.

The Fight at Finnsburg story also establishes an ominous tone that foreshadows Grendel's Mother's attack. Even attempts to make peace can lead to war.



After the song, *Wealhtheow*, Hrothgar's queen, offers the gold mead cup to Hrothgar and tells him to be generous to Beowulf and the other Geats. She then turns to her nephew Hrothulf and her sons Hrethric and Hrothmund, who are sitting next to Beowulf. She reminds her nephew that Hrothgar took him in when he was a child, and says she knows Hrothulf will repay her sons well. Finally, she offers the golden cup to Beowulf, and gives him a magnificent **gifts**: a gold necklace, arm bands made of twisted gold, and a mail shirt. She praises Beowulf, then urges him to be kind to her son. The feast continues until Hrothgar leaves to go to sleep. Many of the warriors remain in the hall to sleep.

Wealhtheow, a good queen, is trying to cement the bond between Hrothgar and Beowulf, and extend it into the next generation. But her comments to Hrothulf about the unity of the Danes are ironic, in part because they follow the Finnsburg story, which shows how quickly peace can be destroyed, but also because the narrator has already revealed that Heorot, the heart of the Danish society, will burn after one member of the royal family (Hrothulf) betrays another (Hrethic).



GRENDEL'S MOTHER (LINES 1251-1407)

Though Grendel is dead, Grendel's mother still lives, and wants revenge for the death of her son. She enters **Heorot** and seizes a man, waking the other warriors. Frightened, she takes Grendel's arm from its place under the roof, and flees.

Grendel's mother acts as a relative should, seeking revenge. This second attack on Heorot shows the men's pride and overconfidence.



Beowulf, who had slept in a private chamber that night, is brought to **Heorot**. Hrothgar tells him that Grendel grabbed Aeschere, Hrothgar's adviser and companion in battle. Hrothgar adds that he has heard of two huge creatures walking on the moors and wastelands. One of these creatures looked like a woman, the other looked like a man. These two monsters dwell in the dark, in a lake so deep it seems bottomless. Hrothgar says he must depend on Beowulf a second time, and offers him **treasure** to kill Grendel's mother and end the feud.

As a loyal lord, it's Hrothgar's obligation to avenge Aeschere's death. So now Hrothgar seeks revenge, just as Grendel's mother does. This is how feuds are born, and continued, until one people is thoroughly beaten by another.



Beowulf tells Hrothgar: "It is better for a man to avenge his friend than to mourn too much." He adds that death comes to everyone, and then suggests that they follow Grendel's mother back to her lair immediately.

Note the contrast between the king, Hrothgar, thinking of his people, and Beowulf, the warrior, thinking of battle and great deeds.



A SECOND FIGHT (LINES 1408-1639)

Grendel's mother's lake is in a dark, rocky area. On the cliff overlooking the water they find Aeschere's head. The water below, filled with serpents, boils with blood. Sea monsters rest on the shore.

The monsters' status as outcasts from society is symbolized by the desolation of their home.



Beowulf, completely without fear of death, puts on his armor and grasps his weapons. Unferth lends Beowulf Hrunting, a sword that has never failed and has been passed down in Unferth's family.

Unferth again speaks with Beowulf, but this time he is generous instead of jealous, much to his credit as a man and warrior.



Beowulf asks Hrothgar to protect his Geat companions and send the **treasure** he's won to Hygelac, should he fail to return from the fight with Grendel's mother. He then gives his own sword to Unferth, and plunges into the water.

Beowulf shows loyalty to his king, a sign of a good warrior, and to his men, a sign of a good king.



Beowulf has to swim for "part of a day" before he reaches lake bottom. When he lands, Grendel's mother grabs and squeezes him, but his armor protects him. She carries him to her "hall," a cave protected from the water.

Grendel's Mother's "hall" is an underwater cave, again emphasizing her outcast status. Her "hall" is inaccessible to society.



Beowulf strikes at Grendel's mother with the borrowed sword Hrunting, but the blade has no effect and actually breaks. Unfazed, Beowulf grabs the monster by her hair and pulls her to the floor, attempting to defeat her with his bare hands. She meets him blow for blow.

Like Grendel, Grendel's mother is immune to normal weapons. Beowulf again shows courage and is rewarded for it by fighting with his bare hands, as monsters do.



Grendel's mother stabs Beowulf with a knife, but his mail shirt blocks the blow. Beowulf then notices, lying among the armor on the cave floor, an old sword made by giants so large few could use it. He grabs the sword and strikes Grendel's mother, slicing through her neck. She falls to the floor, dead. The cave blazes with light.

Beowulf's courage seems to influence fate by leading to his discovery of the giant sword. The sudden burst of light at Grendel's Mother's death may be a sign from God, but it's left unexplained.



In a corner, Beowulf sees Grendel's lifeless body. Still in fury at Grendel's awful deeds, he cuts off Grendel's head.

Just as Grendel's mother took Aeschere's head, Beowulf takes Grendel's.



Hrothgar and the other Danes, who have been waiting on the shore, see blood bubble to the surface of the lake. They think that Beowulf has been defeated and leave the lake in great misery. But Beowulf's Geats remain behind.

The Geats, as Beowulf's kinsmen, show him greater loyalty.



Back in the underwater cave, Grendel's blood melts the giant sword until only the hilt remains. Beowulf swims back to the surface with the sword hilt and Grendel's head. When he surfaces, the Geats are joyful. Four of them carry Grendel's head on their spears, and they return to **Heorot**.

Beowulf takes the sword and head because they confirm his victory and therefore ensure his fame. Beowulf must be a powerful warrior: it takes four men just to carry Grendel's head!



NEW CELEBRATION (LINES 1640–1912)

At **Heorot**, Beowulf presents the **head and sword hilt** to Hrothgar. He describes his fight with Grendel's mother, saying that "the fight would have been over at the start if God had not guarded me."

Like a good warrior, Beowulf gives his treasures to his king. Once again God is substituted for fate.



Hrothgar examines the hilt of the sword Beowulf used to kill Grendel's mother. In intricate workmanship, the story of Noah's flood, the flood that destroyed the race of giants, and the name of the sword's first owner are engraved on the hilt.

The hilt tells the story of the giants who are destroyed by the flood; the giants, like Grendel and his mother, are descendents of Cain.



Hrothgar tells Beowulf that he will **reward** him for his courage as he promised, and compares Beowulf's wisdom and generosity favorably to Heremod, who turned on his own people out of greed and became "joyless." He warns Beowulf to learn from Heremod's example. Hrothgar then warns of the danger of pride, which, like a bitter arrow, can infiltrate the heart of the strongest warrior.

Hrothgar mentions Heremod to warn Beowulf that pride can turn a great warrior into a bad king. The word "joyless" was used earlier to describe Grendel. Heremod, like Grendel, was cast out. Joy exists only for those in society.



Hrothgar says that ruled for fifty years, protected his people and had no adversaries. But that joy was followed by grief with the arrival of Grendel. He again thanks God that the strife is over. Night falls, and the men go to rest.

Hrothgar's experience emphasizes that nothing is permanent in this life, that change is inevitable. Joy is followed by grief, and then joy returns.



In the morning Beowulf returns the sword Hrunting to Unferth, and thanks him for the loan even though the sword failed.

Does the failure of the sword indicate a failure in Unferth?



Then Beowulf bids farewell to Hrothgar. He promises to support the Danes in times of trouble, and promises that Hrothgar's son Hrethric will be welcomed among the Geats. Hrothgar is impressed by Beowulf's generosity and wisdom and says that if something should happen to Hygelac's son, Beowulf would make a good king.

Beowulf shows generosity, loyalty, and, by inviting Hrethric to Geatland, diplomatic skill. Hrothgar believes (correctly, as it turns out) that these traits indicate Beowulf will make a good king.



Hrothgar gives Beowulf twelve more **gifts**, and begins to weep with the knowledge that he will not see Beowulf again. Beowulf, meanwhile, proudly surveys the treasure he has won.

Though Beowulf has the makings of a good king, he is still more of a warrior at this time.



At the coast, the Geats greet and **reward** the watchman for guarding their ship, and sail toward the hall of Hygelac.

Beowulf again shows generosity.



BEOWULF AT HOME (LINES 1913–2199)

When Beowulf and the other Geats arrive home, the harbor guard greets them in great friendship and welcomes them home.

Compare this welcome to the wary challenge from the Danish watchman.



The warriors go to Hygelac's hall, to appear before the king and his young queen, Hygd. The narrator states that Hygd is a good queen, generous with **gifts**, in contrast to another queen, Modthryth. When Modthryth was young, if anyone but her lord looked into her eyes she would order the person killed. She became a generous queen, though, after she was given in marriage to Offa I of the Angles.

Beowulf and his men are invited to speak to Hygelac. Hygd offers them mead, and Beowulf describes the generosity and courtesy of Hrothgar and Wealhtheow.

Beowulf mentions, also, that Hrothgar is going to marry his daughter, Freawaru, to Ingeld, the son of Froda of the Heatho-Bards, in hopes of ending a feud between the two clans. Beowulf doesn't think the marriage will end the feud. Some day in the future, he predicts, a young Heatho-Bard will see a Heatho-Bard swords being worn by Danes who won it in battle, and the old feud will erupt again.

Beowulf next relates his fight with Grendel, detailing both the ferocity of the monster and the **treasure** he received from Hrothgar, and then describes the fight with Grendel's mother.

After finishing his story, Beowulf turns over most of his **treasure** of armor, weapons, gold, and horses to Hygelac and Hygd. In addition he gives Wealhtheow's golden necklace to Hygd. The narrator describes the mutual generosity and loyalty between Hygelac and Beowulf as the proper way for kinsmen to treat each other.

The narrator notes that in his younger days Beowulf was scorned and not seen as a courageous warrior, but that Beowulf has changed and become a man of great deeds.

In order to acknowledge and reward Beowulf's loyalty and bravery, Hygelac gives Beowulf numerous **gifts**, including a magnificent sword that belonged to Hygelac's father Hrethel. Hygelac also gives Beowulf land, a hall, and a throne.

Repetition and contrast to Modthryth are used to highlight Hygd's queenly generosity.



Beowulf's comments about Hrothgar and Wealhtheow highlight Hygelac's and Hygd's similar generosity and courtesy.



Beowulf's prediction is accurate. The situation with Freawaru mirrors that in the Fight at Finnsburg. In both cases a woman is married to an enemy to end a feud, but the feud erupts again. Perhaps a criticism of over-reliance on diplomacy?



Beowulf's story is like a boast; it increases his own fame as a warrior. But his kingly traits are visible in his loyalty to Hrothgar.



Beowulf is the ideal warrior. He gives all of the treasures he won through his great deeds and offering them to his king without asking anything in return.



Beowulf's youthful delinquency links him to men like Scyld Scefing, who rose to be great warriors and kings from humble origins.



Though Beowulf asked for nothing from Hygelac, because Hygelac is a good king he rewards Beowulf's deeds.



THE DRAGON (LINES 2200–2323)

Time passes, and Hygelac dies in battle with the Franks. His son Heardred rules after Hygelac, but he is also soon killed in battle. The throne comes to Beowulf, who rules as a great, wise, and prosperous king for fifty years. But then Beowulf's reign is disrupted by the appearance of a dragon.

The dragon guards an underground barrow full of **treasure**, which is accessible only by a secret passage. One day a slave, fleeing a beating, finds his way to the passage and sees the dragon. Despite his terror the man steals a cup from the treasure.

The narrator explains that this particular barrow was the **treasure** of a lost tribe. Long ago the last living man of the tribe placed his peoples' treasure in the barrow, since it was of no use to him.

The dragon discovered the **treasure** sometime later, and guarded it in peace for the three hundred years. But when the dragon wakes and notices the slave's footprints and the missing cup, it is filled with fury and bursts into the air to hunt for the man who stole the cup. Though the dragon fails to find the thief, it takes vengeance by ravaging the countryside at night. The dragon burns the land and buildings, including Beowulf's own mead-hall.

FACING THE DRAGON (LINES 2324–2710)

Beowulf thinks that he must have offended God in some way to be attacked by the dragon. He decides to fight the beast. He orders that a special shield be made for him, one made entirely of iron instead of wood. He chooses not to raise an army to fight the dragon, believing that he is equal to the task since he has overcome so many dangers in his life, including defeating Grendel.

The narrator recounts one of Beowulf's feats: in the battle at which Hygelac was slain, Beowulf swam back to the land of the Geats carrying the armor of thirty men on his back. In Geatland, Hygd offered Beowulf **treasure** and rulership of the kingdom, fearing that her son Heardred was too young to rule. But Beowulf refused to take the throne, instead choosing to loyally serve and advise King Heardred. After Heardred was killed in a feud with the Swedes, Beowulf took the throne and exacted revenge on the Swedes.

Nothing is permanent. Time always wins. Beowulf, like Hrothgar, rules well for fifty years. But then trouble strikes, changing his situation when he's an old man.



The dragon is the opposite of a good king, hoarding treasure instead of rewarding loyalty and building a society.



Without a generous king to give the treasure and loyal warriors to earn it, the treasure is "useless."



As a monster that represents the opposite of a generous king and therefore is a destroyer rather than creator of society, it should come as no surprise that the dragon would burn Beowulf's mead-hall.



Beowulf decides to fight the dragon just as he once fought Grendel. But then he was a warrior. Now he's a king who is responsible for his people. It can be argued that Beowulf's decision, while courageous, is inappropriate for a king.



Beowulf exhibits not only courage, but extraordinary loyalty when he refuses to take the throne from his cousin. Again, he is an example of the way family members should behave. But that selfless devotion to his people contrasts with his prideful decision to fight the dragon.



Along with eleven Geatish warriors and the man who stole the cup, Beowulf marches off to face the dragon. By the dragon's barrow, Beowulf, ready for death, speaks to his men. He tells them of his youth in the court: his father left him with King Hrethel when he was seven, and Hrethel treated him as much like a son as he did his own true sons Herebeald, Haethcyn, and Hygelac. Beowulf then recounts how Haethcyn accidentally killed his brother Herebeald, embittering the rest of Hrethel's life because he was unable to avenge the death of his son because to do so would mean murdering his other son. Haethcyn took the throne when Hrethel died, and was killed in battle against the Swedes.

Beowulf tells also how he repaid Hygelac's gifts of **treasure** and land with loyal service, not only leading Hygelac's warriors into battle, but also killing the Frankish king who killed Hygelac in battle. Now, Beowulf says, he shall fight once more: against the dragon.

Since the dragon breathes fire Beowulf decides to use his sword, shield, and armor. He orders his followers to wait for him at the barrow.

Beowulf enters the barrow and shouts to wake the dragon. It attacks, breathing flame. Beowulf's shield protects him, but not for long enough. The narrator says that "for the first time, fate did not make Beowulf the winner in battle." Beowulf's sword fails when he strikes. The dragon blasts him with "death-fire."

Instead of helping him, ten of Beowulf's warriors flee. Only Wiglaf of the Waegmundings has courage enough to help Beowulf. He berates his comrades for deserting their lord who gave them so much treasure, and goes to help his king.

The dragon charges Beowulf and Wiglaf. Their shields are burned and their armor offers them little protection. Beowulf strikes the dragon's head with his sword, driving it in to the bone, but the sword, Naegling, breaks and the dragon bites Beowulf in the neck. As Beowulf staggers, Wiglaf stabs the dragon in the stomach, and gets his hand burned in the process. Beowulf then takes the chance to pull a knife he wears on his mail shirt and stab the dragon. Together, Beowulf and Wiglaf kill the dragon. But the bite in Beowulf's neck begins to burn and swell from the dragon's poison.

The accidental killing of one son by another is a double tragedy for Hrethel, and a variation of what happened to Hildeburh in The Fight at Finnsburg, when her brother and son fought against each other and were both killed. Hrethel loses a son, but can't behave in the way that society says he must by avenging the son's death because he would then be killing his other son.



Beowulf recounts his deeds as a warrior, and then says he'll fight the dragon. Even he seems to imply that fighting the dragon is the act of a warrior, not a king.



Against Grendel, Beowulf trusted his hands and his fate. Not this time.



Does fate fail Beowulf because, by using a sword and shield, he did not fully trust fate to protect him?



The warriors don't just betray Beowulf, their king, by deserting. They also betray themselves and their people.



Beowulf, a king, is overmatched when he's alone against the dragon. It's only when the king is joined by his warrior that he has a chance against the beast. Yet it is not enough. Unlike Beowulf's earlier battles against Grendel and Grendel's mother, in this battle he is injured, and his injury is fatal.



BEOWULF AND WIGLAF (LINES 2711–2845)

Beowulf sits near the wall of the cave as Wiglaf washes his wound. Beowulf tells Wiglaf that he knows he is dying and that he wishes he had a son to leave his armor to, an heir to follow after him. He takes stock of his life: he ruled for fifty years, no enemy dared confront him, he never sought feuds, and never made improper oaths, or killed kinsman.

Beowulf asks Wiglaf to bring him the **treasure** so that he can die knowing that he won it. Wiglaf enters the barrow, and sees the fabulous gold and jewels, rich cups, arm rings, helmets "with none to polish them," all lying in heaps.

Wiglaf gathers some of the **treasure** and returns to Beowulf, who thanks God that he could win such treasures for his people before he dies. He tells Wiglaf to look after the Geats when he is gone. Beowulf then asks that a barrow be built on a cliff overlooking the sea that sea travelers will later call Beowulf's barrow. He gives Wiglaf the gold necklace he wears and his armor, and dies.

In his last moments, Beowulf focuses more on his good qualities as a king than as a warrior. Yet one responsibility of a king is a stable succession. Since he had no son, it was foolish for Beowulf to risk his life.



The treasure hoard, without a people to use and "polish" it, is useless. It is only as a means of creating bonds in society that treasure has value.



Beowulf describes the treasure as his final gift to his people, and passes on his kingship to Wiglaf, who is clearly the most deserving and competent of the Geats. Beowulf also takes pains to protect his fame even in death through the creation of his barrow.



WIGLAF SPEAKS (LINES 2846–3109)

As the ten Geatish warriors who ran away return, a grief-stricken Wiglaf attempts in vain to revive Beowulf. Wiglaf reprimands the warriors, calling them disloyal oath-breakers and unworthy of Beowulf's generosity. He predicts that now that Beowulf is gone and their shame becomes well-known, foreign nobles will come and seize their land. Wiglaf says "Death is better for a man than a life of blame."

Wiglaf sends a messenger to tell the Geats of Beowulf's death. The messenger proclaims Beowulf's death to the people, and foresees a bleak future for the Geats. He recounts the Geats' old feuds with the Frisians, Franks, and Swedes, and predicts that without Beowulf to protect them, those feuds will erupt again into war. The narrator notes that the messenger's predictions, for the most part, come true.

Roused by the messenger, the Geats gather to view the body of their dead king. It has been laid down next to the corpse of the dragon and the ancient **treasure**. The golden hoard, which the narrator notes was once richly decorated, is now eaten by rust. The narrator adds that the treasure had been cursed with a spell that ensured that no man would touch it unless God grants it.

Warriors who are disloyal become outcasts, as do their families. Their shame will follow them forever. It will also embolden their enemies, who will take it as a sign of weakness, dooming all the Geats to years of warfare.



It is obvious to all the Geats that without Beowulf they are a people in dire trouble. This just furthers the sense that Beowulf's decision to fight the dragon was the decision of a proud warrior, not the decision of a good king.



The treasure is decayed from its time away from society. Though the reference to God suggests Beowulf was chosen to win the treasure, its poor condition indicates that Beowulf's last gift to his people was not worth it.



BEOWULF'S FUNERAL (LINES 3110–3182)

Wiglaf speaks: he laments that no one was able to persuade Beowulf from attacking the dragon. Yet he also says that Beowulf followed his destiny, and won the **gold** as was his fate. Wiglaf then orders that wood be gathered for the funeral pyre. He and seven other thanes enter the dragon's barrow and remove the rest of the treasure, then push the dragon over the cliff into the sea. The gold is piled on a cart to be taken to Beowulf's barrow.

Beowulf is laid on the pyre, and the fire is lit. The sound of flames mix with the weeping and cries of women frightened of the dark days that lie ahead for the Geats without their king.

Over Beowulf's remains the Geats build a huge mound, visible from the sea. In the mound they place **treasure** from the dragon's hoard "where it lies still, as useless to men as it was before."

Then twelve warriors circle the barrow, expressing their sorrow at Beowulf's death and praising him as a great king, "the mildest of men, and the kindest and gentlest to his people, most eager for fame."

Wiglaf's comment that Beowulf was fated to gain the treasure seems to imply Beowulf's killing of the dragon is a triumph. But Wiglaf's lament that they couldn't stop Beowulf from fighting the dragon implies that Beowulf's fate was to make a bad decision as a king.



Beowulf's funeral echoes Scyld Scefings. But Scyld founded the Danish dynasty, while Beowulf leaves the Geats in peril.



Beowulf's last gift to his people is buried. It is "useless," suggesting his choice to fight the dragon doomed his people.



Beowulf is remembered by his people not for his feats in battle, but for his kingly qualities. His fame is assured.





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