

BEOWULF

Hrothgar (hrôth'gär'), king of the Danes, has built a wonderful mead hall called Herot (hër'ət), where his subjects congregate and make merry. As this selection opens, a fierce and powerful monster named Grendel invades the mead hall, bringing death and destruction.

GRENDDEL

A powerful monster, living down
In the darkness, growled in pain, impatient **A**
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:

A OLD ENGLISH POETRY

Reread lines 1–2 aloud. Notice the use of **alliteration** with the repetition of the letters *p* and *d*. What **mood**, or feeling, does the alliteration convey?

ANALYZE VISUALS

Examine the composition, or arrangement of shapes, in this photograph. How does the angle of the photo contribute to its impact?

- 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. **B**
- 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
 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 **C**
 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.

17 **moors** (mōōrz): broad, open regions with patches of bog.

19 **spawned**: given birth to.

21 **Cain**: the eldest son of Adam and Eve. According to the Bible (Genesis 4), he murdered his younger brother Abel.

B EPIC

Note the description in lines 23–29 of supernatural creatures that are “again and again defeated.” What **universal theme** might these lines suggest?

lair (lār) *n.* the den or resting place of a wild animal

C EPIC

What is the **tone** of lines 44–49? What words and details convey this tone?

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 **D**
 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
 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 Devil'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!

D OLD ENGLISH POETRY

What does the **kenning** "hell-forged hands" in line 64 suggest about Grendel?

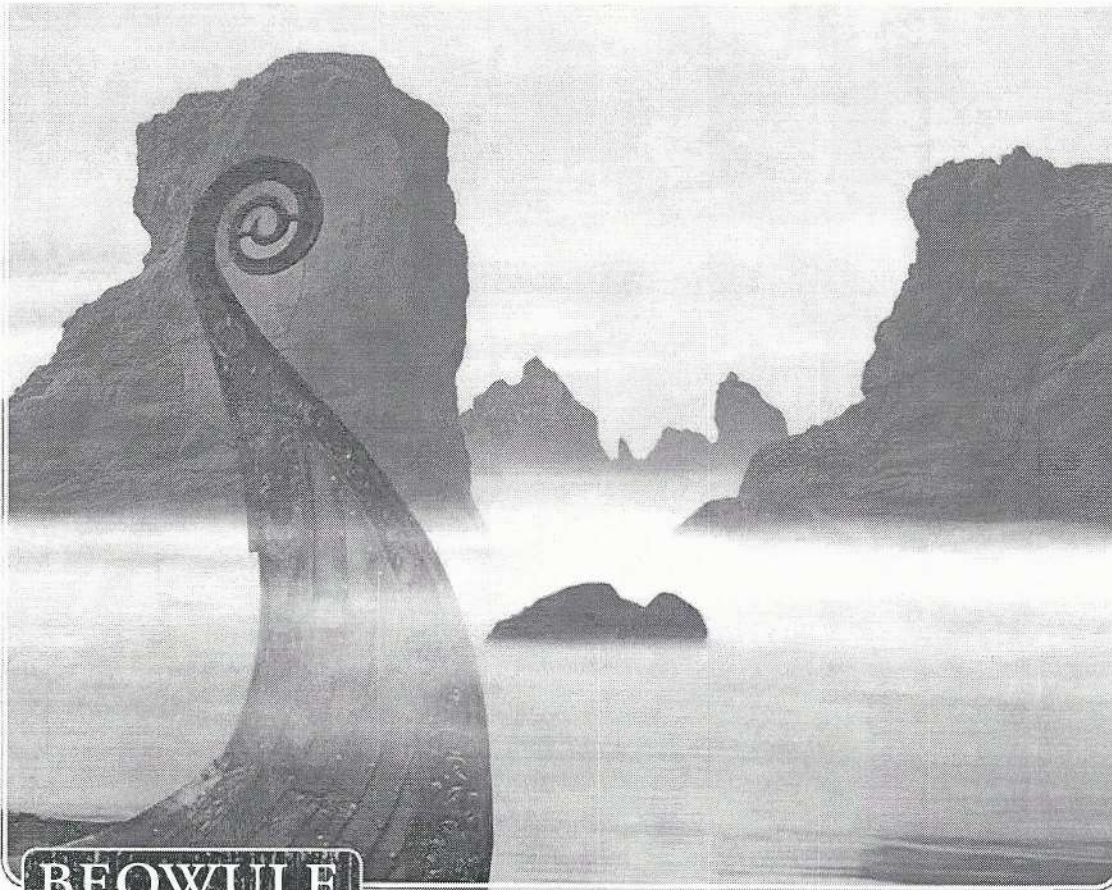
73 reparation: something done to make amends for loss or suffering. In Germanic society, someone who killed another person was generally expected to make a payment to the victim's family as a way of restoring peace.

84 The reference to God shows the influence of Christianity on the Beowulf Poet.

91 heathen (hē'thæn): pagan; non-Christian. Though the Beowulf Poet was a Christian, he recognized that the characters in the poem lived before the Germanic tribes were converted to Christianity, when they still worshiped "the old stone gods."

affliction (ə-flɪk'shən) *n.* a force that oppresses or causes suffering

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BEOWULF

The Oseberg Ship (850), Viking, Viking Ship Museum, Bygdøy, Norway. © Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York.

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 **E**
 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;

104 Healfdane's son: Hrothgar.

109–110 Higlac's follower: a warrior loyal to Higlac (hīg'läk'), king of the Geats (and Beowulf's uncle).

E **EPIC**
 Reread lines 109–116, in which Beowulf is first introduced. What traits of an epic hero does he appear to possess?

He knew the sea, would point the prow
Straight to that distant Danish shore. . . .

Beowulf and his men sail over the sea to the land of the Danes to offer help to Hrothgar. They are escorted by a Danish guard to Herot, where Wulfgar, one of Hrothgar's soldiers, tells the king of their arrival. Hrothgar knows of Beowulf and is ready to welcome the young prince and his men.

- 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
140 Gleaming with a smith's high art, he greeted
The Danes' great lord:
"Hail, Hrothgar!
Higlac is my cousin 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

139 **mail shirt**: flexible body armor made of metal links or overlapping metal scales.

140 **smith's high art**: the skilled craft of a blacksmith (a person who fashions objects from iron).

142 **cousin**: here, a general term for a relative. Beowulf is actually Higlac's nephew.

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- 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: 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
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!"
- 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

EPIC

Notice that in lines 153–159, Beowulf boasts about past victories that required superhuman strength and courage. Why might the people of Beowulf's time have valued such **traits**?

purge (pûrj) v. to cleanse or rid of something undesirable

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

172–174 Beowulf insists on fighting Grendel without weapons.

gorge (gôrj) v. to stuff with food; glut

185 **shrouds**: cloths in which dead bodies are wrapped.

188 **Hrethel** (hrêth'el): a former king of the Geats—Higlac's father and Beowulf's grandfather.

189 **Wayland**: a famous blacksmith and magician.

193 **Edgetho** (êj'thō): Beowulf's father.

194 **Wulfing**: a member of another Germanic tribe.

- 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 **G**
 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:
 Let us toast your victories, and talk of the future." **H**
- 225 Then Hrothgar's men gave places to the Geats,
 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. . . .

G OLD ENGLISH POETRY

Observe that as Hrothgar begins to speak about Grendel in lines 207–210, the **mood** becomes bleak and despairing. What repeated sounds does the poet use to suggest this mood?

H EPIC

Note that Hrothgar delivers a long speech to Beowulf in lines 190–224. What values are reflected in the speech?