

# Beowulf

**Beowulf** is to England what Homer's *Iliad* (see page 67) and *Odyssey* are to ancient Greece: It is the first great work of the English national literature—the mythical and literary record of a formative stage of English civilization. It is also an epic of the heroic sources of English culture. As such, *Beowulf* uses a host of traditional **motifs**, or recurring elements, associated with heroic literature all over the world.

The epic tells of Beowulf (his name may mean "bear"), a Geat from Sweden who crosses the sea to Denmark in a quest to rescue King Hrothgar's people from the demonic monster Grendel. Like most early heroic literature, *Beowulf* is an oral epic. It was handed down, with changes and embellishments, from one minstrel to another. The stories of *Beowulf*, like those of all oral epics, are traditional, familiar to the audiences who crowded around the harpist-bards in the communal halls at night. They are the stories of dream and legend, archetypal tales of monsters and god-fashioned weapons, of descents to the underworld and fights with dragons, of the hero's quest and a community threatened by the powers of evil.

## The Sources of *Beowulf*

By the standards of Homer, whose epics run to nearly 15,000 lines, *Beowulf* is short—approximately 3,200 lines. It was composed in Old English, probably in Northumbria, in northeastern England, sometime between 700 and 750. The world it depicts, however, is much older, that of the early sixth century. Much of the poem's material is based on early folk legends—some Celtic, some Scandinavian. Since the scenery described is the coast of Northumbria, not Scandinavia, it has been assumed that the poet who wrote the version that has come down to us was Northumbrian. Given the Christian elements in the epic, it is thought that this poet may have been a monk.

The only manuscript of *Beowulf* we have dates from the year 1000 and is now in the British Museum in London. Burned and stained, it was discovered in the eighteenth century: Somehow it had survived Henry VIII's destruction of the monasteries two hundred years earlier.

The Translations of *Beowulf* Part One of the text you are about to read is from Burton Raffel's popular 1963 translation of the epic. Part Two is from the Irish poet Seamus Heaney's award-winning, bestselling translation of the work, published in 2000.

## People, Monsters, and Places

**Beowulf:** a Geat, son of Edgetho (Ecgtheow) and nephew of Higlac (Hygelac), king of the Geats.

**Grendel:** man-eating monster who lives at the bottom of a foul mere, or mountain lake. His name might be related to the Old Norse *grindill*, meaning "storm," or *grenja*, "bellow."

**Herot:** golden guest hall built by King Hrothgar, the Danish ruler. It was decorated with the antlers of stags; the name means "hart [stag] hall." Scholars think Herot might have

been built near Lejre on the coast of Zealand, in Denmark.

**Hrothgar:** king of the Danes, builder of Herot. He had once befriended Beowulf's father. His father was called Healfdane (which probably means "half Dane").

**Wiglaf:** a Geat warrior, one of Beowulf's select band and the only one to help him in his final fight.

## from *Beowulf*

### Make the Connection

#### Quickwrite

This is a story about a hero from the misty reaches of the British past, a hero who faces violence, horror, and even death to save a people in mortal danger. The epic's events took place many centuries ago, but this story still speaks to people today, perhaps because so many of us are in need of a rescuer, a hero. Take a moment to write about a contemporary hero, real or fictional, and the challenges he or she faces. Describe your hero, and then briefly analyze him or her using these questions:

- What sort of evil or oppression does your hero confront?
- Why does he or she confront evil? What's the motivation?
- For whom does your hero confront evil?
- What virtues does your hero represent?

### Literary Focus

#### The Epic Hero

Beowulf is ancient England's hero, but he is also an **archetype**, or perfect example, of an **epic hero**. In other times, in other cultures, the hero has taken the shape of King Arthur or Gilgamesh (see page 58), or Sundiata or Joan of Arc. In modern America the hero may be a real person, like Martin Luther King, Jr., or a fictional character, like Shane in the western novel of the same name. The hero archetype in *Beowulf* is the dragon slayer, representing a besieged community facing evil forces that lurk in the cold darkness. Grendel, the monster lurking in the depths of the lagoon, may represent all of those threatening forces.

Beowulf, like all epic heroes, possesses superior physical strength and supremely ethical standards. He embodies the highest ideals of Anglo-Saxon culture. 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 follow current events, particularly stories concerning people who have gained freedom after years of oppression, you will still see at work this impulse to glorify those people who have set them free. You might also see this impulse in the impressive monuments—and great tourist attractions—in Washington, D.C.

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 and Historical Terms.*

*from Beowulf*

*Part One, 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  
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  
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<sup>o</sup>  
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<sup>o</sup>

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<sup>o</sup> 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....

*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**

...Then Wulfgar went to the door and  
125 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  
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  
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  
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—  
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  
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  
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,  
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  
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**  
**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:  
Let us toast your victories, and talk of the future."

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.

## UNFERTH'S CHALLENGE

### 6

Unferth spoke, Ecglaf's son,  
Who sat at Hrothgar's feet, spoke harshly

235 And sharp (vexed<sup>o</sup> 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<sup>o</sup> 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, Edgeth’s great son:

“Ah! Unferth, my friend, your face

Is hot with ale, and your tongue has tried

- 265 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.

## 7

"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  
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  
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  
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  
And I, I already knew that all  
My purpose was this: to win the good will  
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!"

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  
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  
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:

"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  
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 GRENDL**

### **8**

Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty  
Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,  
Grendel came, hoping to kill  
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—  
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,  
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  
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  
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,  
Waiting to see his swift hard claws.  
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  
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  
—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;  
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.  
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  
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,  
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;  
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.  
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  
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  
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.

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,  
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  
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  
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  
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  
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  
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!)

*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 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!”



*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**

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  
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

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 Hrothgar'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  
Jerked for the last time, then lay still....

***In his novel Grendel (1971), the 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**

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 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 drunkest 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 mead-hall 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....

## **INFORMATIONAL TEXT**

### **Life in 999: A Grim Struggle**

**Howard G. Chua-Eoan**

**from *Time*, October 15, 1992**

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 *Beowulf*

### Reading Check

1. What do Hrothgar and his council do to try to save his guest-hall?
2. What prevents Beowulf's men from helping Beowulf in his battle with Grendel?
3. How do the Danes feel about Beowulf after his battle with Grendel?
4. What obstacle does Beowulf face in his confrontation with Grendel's mother? How does he overcome the obstacle?

### Thinking Critically

5. In what specific ways does Herot **contrast** with the place where Grendel lives?
6. **Images** are words that help us see something, and often hear it, smell it, taste it, and touch it as well. Identify images describing Grendel that associate him with death or darkness. How are these images supposed to make you feel about Grendel?
7. Why do you think it's important to Beowulf and to his image as an **epic hero** that he face Grendel without a weapon? What **symbolism** do you see in the uselessness of human-made weapons against Grendel?
8. What details describe Grendel's mother and her lair? What might Grendel and his mother represent for the Anglo-Saxons?
9. How does Gardner's depiction of Grendel differ from the epic's depiction of him? (See the **Connection** on page 39.) Did Gardner make you sympathize with Grendel? Explain.
10. The **Connection** on page 40, "Life in 999: A Grim Struggle," describes daily life in late Anglo-Saxon England. What details in this picture of daily life relate to what you've read so far in *Beowulf*? How does life in 999 compare with life today?

### Extending and Evaluating

11. Beowulf is the **archetype** of the dragon slayer, the hero who faces death in order to save a threatened community. Does Beowulf remind you of any heroes in real life, in fiction, or in the movies today? What characteristics do the heroes share?

**from Beowulf**

*Part Two, translated by Seamus Heaney*

*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 addressed each dear companion

one final time, those fighters in their helmets,

**resolute** and high-born: "I would rather not

use a weapon if I knew another way

670 to grapple with the dragon and make good my boast  
as I did against Grendel in days gone by.

But I shall be meeting molten venom

in the fire he breathes, so I go forth  
in mail-shirt and shield. I won't shift a foot  
675 when I meet the cave-guard: what occurs on the wall  
between the two of us will turn out as fate,  
overseer of men, decides. I am resolved.  
I scorn further words against this sky-borne foe.

“  
680 “Men at arms, remain here on the barrow, safe in your armour, to see which one of  
us  
is better in the end at bearing wounds  
in a deadly fray. This fight is not yours,  
nor is it up to any man except me  
to measure his strength against the monster  
685 or to prove his worth. I shall win the gold  
by my courage, or else mortal combat,  
doom of battle, will bear your lord away.”

Then he drew himself up beside his shield.  
The fabled warrior in his warshirt and helmet  
690 trusted in his own strength entirely  
and went under the crag. No coward path.  
Hard by the rock-face that hale veteran,  
a good man who had gone repeatedly  
into combat and danger and come through,  
695 saw a stone arch and a gushing stream  
that burst from the barrow, blazing and wafting  
a deadly heat. It would be hard to survive  
unscathed near the hoard, to hold firm  
against the dragon in those flaming depths.

700 Then he gave a shout. The lord of the Geats  
unburdened his breast and broke out  
in a storm of anger. Under grey stone

his voice challenged and resounded clearly.

Hate was ignited. The hoard-guard recognized  
705 a human voice, the time was over  
for peace and parleying.° Pouring forth  
in a hot battle-fume, the breath of the monster  
burst from the rock. There was a rumble under ground.  
Down there in the barrow, Beowulf the warrior  
710 lifted his shield: the outlandish thing  
writhed and convulsed and **vehemently**  
turned on the king, whose keen-edged sword,  
an heirloom inherited by ancient right,  
was already in his hand. Roused to a fury,  
715 each antagonist struck terror in the other.  
Unyielding, the lord of his people loomed  
by his tall shield, sure of his ground,  
while the serpent looped and unleashed itself.  
Swaddled in flames, it came gliding and flexing  
720 and racing towards its fate. Yet his shield defended  
the renowned leader's life and limb  
for a shorter time than he meant it to:  
that final day was the first time  
when Beowulf fought and fate denied him  
725 glory in battle. So the king of the Geats  
raised his hand and struck hard  
at the enamelled scales, but scarcely cut through:  
the blade flashed and slashed yet the blow  
was far less powerful than the hard-pressed king  
730 had need of at that moment. The mound-keeper  
went into a spasm and spouted deadly flames:  
when he felt the stroke, battle-fire  
billowed and spewed. Beowulf was foiled°

of a glorious victory. The glittering sword,  
735 **infallible** before that day,  
failed when he unsheathed it, as it never should have.  
For the son of Ecgtheow, it was no easy thing  
to have to give ground like that and go  
unwillingly to inhabit another home  
740 in a place beyond; so every man must yield  
the leasehold of his days.

It was not long  
until the fierce contenders clashed again.  
The hoard-guard took heart, inhaled and swelled up  
and got a new wind; he who had once ruled  
745 was **furled** in fire and had to face the worst.  
No help or backing was to be had then  
from his high-born comrades; that hand-picked troop  
broke ranks and ran for their lives  
to the safety of the wood. But within one heart  
750 sorrow welled up: in a man of worth  
the claims of kinship cannot be denied.

## 15

His name was Wiglaf, a son of Weohstan's,  
a well-regarded Shylfing warrior  
related to Aelfhere. When he saw his lord  
755 tormented by the heat of his scalding helmet,  
he remembered the bountiful gifts bestowed on him,  
how well he lived among the Waegmundings,  
the freehold<sup>o</sup> he inherited from his father before him.  
He could not hold back: one hand brandished  
760 the yellow-timbered shield, the other drew his sword—...  
Sad at heart, addressing his companions,



Wiglaf spoke wise and fluent words:

"I remember that time when mead was flowing,  
how we pledged loyalty to our lord in the hall,

765 promised our ring-giver we would be worth our price,  
make good the gift of the war-gear,  
those swords and helmets, as and when  
his need required it. He picked us out  
from the army deliberately, honoured us and judged us

770 fit for this action, made me these **lavish** gifts—  
and all because he considered us the best  
of his arms-bearing thanes.° And now, although  
he wanted this challenge to be one he'd face  
by himself alone—the shepherd of our land,

775 a man unequaled in the quest for glory  
and a name for daring—now the day has come  
when this lord we serve needs sound men  
to give him their support. Let us go to him,  
help our leader through the hot flame

780 and dread of the fire. As God is my witness,  
I would rather my body were robed in the same  
burning blaze as my gold-giver's body  
than go back home bearing arms.

That is unthinkable, unless we have first

785 slain the foe and defended the life  
of the prince of the Weather-Geats. I well know  
the things he has done for us deserve better.  
Should he alone be left exposed  
to fall in battle? We must bond together,

790 shield and helmet, mail-shirt and sword."

*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.*

...Wiglaf went quickly, keen to get back,  
 excited by the treasure; anxiety weighed  
 on his brave heart, he was hoping he would find  
 the leader of the Geats alive where he had left him  
 795 helpless, earlier, on the open ground.  
 So he came to the place, carrying the treasure,  
 and found his lord bleeding profusely,  
 his life at an end; again he began  
 to swab his body. The beginnings of an utterance  
 800 broke out from the king's breast-cage.  
 The old lord gazed sadly at the gold.  
 "To the everlasting Lord of All,  
 to the King of Glory, I give thanks  
 that I behold this treasure here in front of me,  
 805 that I have been thus allowed to leave my people  
 so well endowed on the day I die.  
 Now that I have bartered my last breath  
 to own this fortune, it is up to you  
 to look after their needs. I can hold out no longer.  
 810 Order my troop to construct a barrow  
 on a headland on the coast, after my pyre has cooled.  
 It will loom on the horizon at Hronesness  
 and be a reminder among my people—  
 so that in coming times crews under sail  
 815 will call it Beowulf's Barrow, as they steer  
 ships across the wide and shrouded waters."  
 Then the king in his great-heartedness unclasped  
 the collar of gold from his neck and gave it  
 to the young thane, telling him to use

820 it and the warshirt and the gilded helmet well.

“You are the last of us, the only one left of the Waegmundings. Fate swept us away,  
sent my whole brave high-born clan  
to their final doom. Now I must follow them.”

825 That was the warrior’s last word.  
He had no more to confide. The furious heat  
of the pyre would **assail** him. His soul fled from his breast  
to its destined place among the steadfast ones.

*Wiglaf berates the faithless warriors who did not go to the aid of their king. With sorrow the Geats 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

Then twelve warriors rode around the tomb,

830 chieftains’ sons, champions in battle,  
all of them distraught, chanting in dirges,  
mourning his loss as a man and a king.

They **extolled** his heroic nature and exploits  
and gave thanks for his greatness; which was the proper thing,

835 for a man should praise a prince whom he holds dear  
and cherish his memory when that moment comes  
when he has to be convoyed from his bodily home.

So the Geat people, his hearth companions,  
sorrowed for the lord who had been laid low.

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

**INFORMATIONAL TEXT**  
**The Fury of the Northmen**  
**Ellen Ashdown**

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!”

### **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.

### **from Beowulf**

#### **Reading Check**

1. Who comes to Beowulf’s aid in Beowulf’s final battle with the dragon? Why does he help Beowulf?
2. What sad scene concludes the epic?
3. What happens to the dragon’s hoard?

#### **Thinking Critically**

4. A hoarded treasure in Old English literature is usually a **symbol** of spiritual death or damnation. How does this fact add significance to Beowulf’s last fight with the

dragon?

5. What details does the poet use to describe the dragon? Keeping those details in mind, explain what the dragon might **symbolize** as Beowulf's final foe.
6. 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 it suggest about the future of the kingdom?
7. The epic closes on a somber, elegiac note—a note of mourning. What words or **images** contribute to this **tone**?
8. 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? Use specific examples from the poem to support your answer.
9. The **Connection** on page 49 describes the culture of the Vikings. How does this picture of Viking society relate to what you've read in *Beowulf*?

### Literary Criticism

**10. Philosophical approach.** Although the story of Beowulf is set in a pre-Christian era among a people who worshiped stern gods and saw little to hope for beyond the grave, many modern readers see definite strains of a Christian outlook. Review the selections from *Beowulf*. Which passages might reflect a specifically Anglo-Saxon philosophy of life? Which passages might reflect a Christian outlook?

### WRITING

#### Analyzing the Monster

In an **essay**, analyze the monster Grendel, focusing on the character's nature. Begin your **character analysis** of the monster with a sentence stating your general assessment of Grendel as a character. Then, support your assessment with details from the epic. Before you write, organize your details in a chart like the following one:

Character Name	Details from Epic
Actions	
Motives	
Words describing character	
People's responses	
Setting	
Does the character symbolize anything?	

#### Describe the Mom

In a brief **essay**, describe Grendel's mother. Base your description on the details you find in the text, and add details of your own. Tell what she looked like, how her voice sounded, how she smelled, how she walked. Describe her home. Describe what she ate and how she passed her time. Use as many sensory details as you can: You want your readers to feel they are meeting the monster face to face. How do you want your readers to feel about the monster? Do you want horror, or are you interested in making her somewhat sympathetic? The words you choose will make the difference.

**Use "Writing a Descriptive Essay," pages 96–103, for help with this assignment.**

## LISTENING AND SPEAKING

### Being a Bard

Choose any excerpt from the portions of *Beowulf* you have just read, and present a dramatic reading to your classmates as though you were an Anglo-Saxon bard. Choose a section that you feel has particular emotional intensity and suspense, and practice reading it several times before you deliver your reading to the class. Try to find various ways of involving your listeners in the act of storytelling: Vary the rate and pitch of your delivery, make dramatic pauses, and use gestures and even sound effects. For example, a guitar could be used to strike chords at dramatic moments.

### Vocabulary Development

#### Which Word?

resolute                      furlled      extolled  
vehemently                lavish  
infallible                  assail

Put your knowledge of the selection Vocabulary to work by answering the following questions with the correct word from the list above:

1. Which word is often used in reference to a flag?
2. Which word describes someone who is stubborn?
3. Which word describes how someone might argue about a subject he or she feels strongly about?
4. Which word is a synonym for *praised*?
5. Which word describes someone who cannot fail?
6. Which word describes someone who gives very generous gifts?
7. Which word is another way of saying *attack*?

### Literary Focus

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

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

**Alliteration.** Alliteration is the repetition of consonant 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 rhythmic 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. Notice the alliterative *g* and the four primary stresses in this Old English line from *Beowulf*:

Gód mid Géatum Gréndles daéda

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

The earliest and simplest kennings are compound words formed from 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 peoples' 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 challenge to the dragon (lines 688–734), and listen for the effects of the **alliteration**. What **kennings** can you identify?
2. Look back over lines 392–517. Locate at least two examples of kennings written as **hyphenated compounds**, two written as **prepositional phrases**, and two written as **possessives**. What does each kenning refer to?
3. Compile a list of modern-day kennings, such as *headhunter*.
4. Here is an additional passage from Burton Raffel's translation. How does it compare with the corresponding lines (763–772) in Seamus Heaney's translation (page 46)?

"I remember how we sat in the mead-hall, drinking  
And boasting of how brave we'd be when Beowulf  
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  
Our boasting words had some weight, believing

Our promises, trusting our swords. He took us  
For soldiers, for men.”

5. Now that you’ve read excerpts from two translations of *Beowulf*, think about the similarities and differences you see and hear between them. How does each translator use **figures of speech**, such as **kennings** and **alliteration**?

### from *Beowulf*

#### Anglo-Saxon Legacy: Words and Word Parts

**Words from Anglo-Saxon.** English has borrowed words from most of the world’s languages, but many words in our basic vocabulary come to us from Anglo-Saxon, or Old English. Simple, everyday words, such as the names of numbers (*an* for “one,” *twa* for “two,” *threo* for “three,” *feower* for “four”), words designating family relationships (*fæder* for “father,” *modor* for “mother,” *sunu* for “son,” *dohtor* for “daughter”), names for parts of the body (*heorte* for “heart,” *for* for “foot”) and common, everyday things and activities (*æppel* for “apple,” *hund* for “hound,” *wefan* for “weave”) are survivors of Old English words.

**Anglo-Saxon affixes.** Many English-language conventions can be traced back to Anglo-Saxon times. Both making nouns plural by adding *s* and creating the possessive of a noun by adding *’s* come to us from Old English. Old English has also given us the vowel changes in some irregular verbs like *sing*, *sang*, *sung* (*singan*, *sang*, *sungen*) and the regular endings for the past tense and past participles of regular verbs (as in *healed*, *has healed*). The word endings we use to create degrees of comparison with adjectives (as in *darker*, *darkest*) are also of Anglo-Saxon origin. Anglo-Saxon has also contributed many important word parts—prefixes and suffixes—to the English language. Some of these affixes just change the tense, person, or number of a word, such as a verb. Others change the entire meaning of a word, and often its part of speech.

Prefixes from Anglo-Saxon	Meanings	Examples
<i>a-</i>	in; on; of; up; to	ashore, aside
<i>be-</i>	around; about; treat as	behind, befriend
<i>for-</i>	away; off; from	forsake, forget
<i>mis-</i>	badly; not; wrongly	misspell, misfire
<i>over-</i>	above; excessive	overtake, oversee
<i>un-</i>	not; reverse of	untrue, unknown



## PRACTICE

List examples of modern English words that use each of the Anglo-Saxon prefixes and suffixes shown above.

Suffixes from Anglo-Saxon	Meanings	Examples
<i>-en</i>	made of; like	golden, molten
<i>-dom</i>	state; rank; condition	wisdom, kingdom
<i>-ful</i>	full of; marked by	wonderful, useful
<i>-hood</i>	state; condition	brotherhood, neighborhood
<i>-ish</i>	suggesting; like	selfish, childish
<i>-less</i>	lacking; without	hopeless, helpless
<i>-like</i>	like; similar	dreamlike, childlike
<i>-ly</i>	like; characteristic of	friendly, cowardly
<i>-ness</i>	quality; state	kindness, tenderness
<i>-some</i>	apt to; showing	handsome, tiresome
<i>-ward</i>	in the direction of	forward, skyward
<i>-y</i>	showing; suggesting	wavy, hilly, salty

## Epics: Stories on a Grand Scale by David Adams Leeming

You have just read an excerpt from the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*. In this Connecting to World Literature feature, you will read

excerpts from the following epics from around the world:

from **Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative**.

from the **Iliad** by **Homer**.

"I teach kings the history of their ancestors," declares the narrator of the African epic *Sundiata*, "for the world is old, but the future springs from the past." These same words could be applied to epics from all times and places, for an **epic**—a long narrative poem about the exploits of a national hero—is a bridge from the past to the future. Epics carry a culture's history, values, myths, legends, and traditions from one generation to the next.

### **The Epic Hero: An Eternal Archetype**

Whereas the old religious stories, or myths, tended to emphasize the deeds of the gods, epic poems emphasize the deeds of a special kind of human being related to the gods: the **epic hero**. From Gilgamesh to Achilles, epic heroes carry the images and supernatural energies of the gods within themselves. Yet these heroic figures are also, like all of us, subject to the joys and hardships of the human condition.

No matter what the differences may be between epics of different cultures or times, the epic hero remains constant. It is as if each hero wears the particular costume of his or her culture but is really the same figure underneath, facing the same kinds of challenges and ordeals. While the heroes of the Mesopotamian *Gilgamesh* epic, the Greek *Iliad*, and the Anglo-Saxon Pages 44–45 cover Literary Skills Understand the epic and the archetype of the epic hero in ancient and modern literature. Compare literary forms of major literary periods. *Beowulf* all clearly reflect the particular values of their cultures, we also find in them a single figure—the heroic **archetype**, or model—who is somehow familiar to people of all places and all times. This epic hero represents the universal human quest for knowledge and understanding.