Background Info

Author Bio

Full Name: Anonymous
Date of Birth: unknown
Place of Birth: unknown
Date of Death: unknown

Brief Life Story: 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.

Key Facts

Full Title: Beowulf
Genre: Epic poem
Setting: Northern Europe, especially Denmark and Sweden, around the sixth century
Climax: Beowulf’s final fight with a dragon

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 hall, called Heorot, in which he and his loyal warriors can feast, drink, and boast, and listen to the tales of the scop, the Anglo-Saxon bards. But soon after Heorot is finished, the mirth 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. Hrothgar, once the son 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 Denmark, 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 Hrothgar, 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 advisor 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. Beowulf kills Grendel, but not before he himself is terribly wounded. Beowulf returns with the head of Grendel’s mother, 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 he is made king by the Geats.

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 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 – King of the Danes, the son of Healfdene, the brother of Heorogar, Hlaga, and the wife of Onela the Swede. He is also the father of Hrethel, Hrothmund, and Freawaru. Hrothgar is an excellent and successful king. He builds Heorot, a magnificent hall, and is very generous and wise.

Plot Summary

Protagonist: Beowulf the Great
Antagonists: Three monsters—Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and a dragon
Point of View: The unnamed speaker of the poem
Point of View: Third person

Historical and Literary Context

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.

Original Language: Old English, sometimes called Anglo-Saxon after the people who spoke it.

Literary Period: Medieval, Anglo-Saxon

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.

Related Historical Events: 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.

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.”

Beowulf’s final fight with a dragon

Beowulf returns to the Geats, now that Beowulf is dead. The Geats build a pyre to build him a funeral barrow that overlooks the sea. Wiglaf wounded. Beowulf kills the dragon, but not before he himself is terribly wounded.

After he dies, Beowulf tells Wiglaf to rule after him, and to build him a funeral barrow that overlooks the sea. Wiglaf chastes 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.

Ecgtheow – Beowulf’s father and the husband of King Hygelac’s sister Hrothgar gave him sanctuary after Ecgtheow, a Geatish warrior, killed a warrior of the Wyflings.

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

Wiglaf – The son of Weohstan the Scylding, and a relative of Beowulf, as well as his most loyal warrior. He rules the Geats after Beowulf dies.

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.

Scyld Sceafing – A foundling, he became the first king in the Danish royal line. He is the father of Beowulf, 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 Hrethel and Hrothmund. She is a good and generous queen.

Unferth – A Dane, the son of Ecglaef, and a follower of Hrothgar. Unferth is a jealous and boastful man without much courage to back it up, though he does become more generous after Beowulf defeats Grendel.

Hrethel – 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 Hrethel, leading to the burning of Heorot by the Heatho-Bards.

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

Themes

In LitCharts, each theme gets its own corresponding color, which you can use to track where the themes occur in the work. There are two ways to track themes:

- Refer to the color-coded bars next to each plot point throughout the Summary and Analysis sections.
- Use the ThemeTracker section to get a quick overview of where the themes appear throughout the entire work.

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. Preservation of a family or tribe within a hostile environment demands not only unity within the tribe, but also ends feuds related in stories told by the bards. 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 Geats people.

Good Warriors and 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.

Symbols

Symbols are shown in red text whenever they appear in the Plot Summary and 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. Herot, as the largest mead-hall in the world, symbolizes 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 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.

Aeschere – An old Danish warrior and Hrothgar’s counsellor. Aeschere is killed by Grendel’s mother.

Frewaru – 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.

Ecglaef – 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.

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 Sceafing 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 Christian who added the Christian elements. Suffice it to say that the resulting Beowulf is like a pagan story wrapped in Christianity. But Beowulf’s hero remains 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 to God’s favor. As you read Beowulf, keep on the lookout for the ways that Christianity and paganism interact in the poem.
Summary and Analysis

The color-coded bars in Summary and Analysis make it easy to track the themes through the work. Each color corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section. For instance, a bar of indicates that all five themes apply to that part of the summary.

1. Prologue (Lines 1–63)

Scyld Seafaring 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.”

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

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.

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

2. 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.

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

3. 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.

But the monster Grendel, a descendant 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 his 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.

4. 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-cliffs 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 Hælfadan 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. Hrothgar brings this request to Hrothgar.

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.

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 oxers in a fight, destroyed a family of giants, and vanquished water-monsters. Now he comes to fight Grendel.

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, is removed.

Grendel turns Heorot, the heart of Danish society, into a slaughterhouse. 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.

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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.

5. A Feast at Heorot (Lines 491–701)

The Geats and Danes feast in Heorot. But Unferth, the son of Ecgflæt, jealously taunts Beowulf. According to Unferth, as young men Beowulf and another Geat named Brecan had a swimming competition, and Brecan 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.

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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 undone man when his courage is firm.”

Beowulf adds that he killed nine sea-monsters in all. He says he 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 Hrothgar if Unferth were as brave as he claims to be.

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

6. Beowulf vs. Grendel (Lines 702–836)

Grendel approaches Hrothgar and tears open the doors. He grabs a sleeping Geat, Hondschoth, and eats him quickly. Grendel next reaches for Beowulf but Beowulf grabbing 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’s fierce cries and the sounds of their epic struggle wake the warriors. Hrothgar shakes with the force of their fight. The men grab their weapons to help, not knowing that a spell protects Grendel from all swords.

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 Hrothgar. Beowulf, the narrator says, has fulfilled his boasts.

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6. Beowulf vs. Grendel (Lines 702–836)

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.

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.

Beowulf’s boasting endorses him to the Danes. Wealththeow acts as a good queen, creating fellowship by sharing the mead-cup.

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.

After the song, Wealththeow, 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 Hrethic 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 Hrothulf leaves to go to sleep. Many of the warriors remain in the hall to sleep.

7. Celebration (Lines 837–1250)

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

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 people, and Beowulf was pulled to the bottom of the ocean by a sea monster, that he then fought and killed.

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 Hrothgar, 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.

The immense damage caused by Beowulf’s fight with Grendel is repaired, and a great feast held. Hrothgar 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.”

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.

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.

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.

8. 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.

Beowulf, who had slept in a private chamber that night, is brought to Hrothgar. Hrothgar tells him that Grendel grabbed Aescre, 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.

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

As a loyal lord, Hrothgar’s obligation to avenge Aescre’s death. So now Hrothgar seeks revenge, just as Grendel’s mother does.

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.
9. A Second Fight (Lines 1408–1639)

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.

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

Then Beowulf bids farewell to Hrothgar. He promises to support the Danes in times of trouble, and promises that Hrothgar’s son Heremod 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.

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.

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

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

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

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

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

Beowulf again shows generosity.

11. 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.

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 Olfa 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 Frithiof 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 marriage will end the feud. Some day in the future, he predicts, a young Heatho-Bard will see a Heatho-Bard

Beowulf’s comments about Hrothgar and Wealhtheow highlight Hygd’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 youthful debonairness links him to men like Scyld Sceing, who rose to be great warriors and kings from humble origins.

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 guided me.”

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.

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 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.

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

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 has to swim for “part of a day” before he reaches lake bottom. When he lands, Unferth again speaks with Beowulf, but this time he is generous instead of jealous, much to his credit as a man and warrior.

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

The怪物’s status as outcasts from society is symbolized by the desolation of their home.

Grendel’s mother’s “hall” is an underwater cave, again emphasizing her outcast status. Her “hall” is inaccessible to society.

When she lands, 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.

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.

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

The Geats, as Beowulf’s kinmen, show him greater loyalty.

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.

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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.

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

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

Like a good warrior, Beowulf shows loyalty to his king and his young queen, Hygd. The narrator describes the generosity and courtesy of Hrothgar and Wealhtheow.

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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.

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 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 swim from the dragon’s poison.

12. 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.

13. 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.

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.

14. 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 kinsmen.

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 visit 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.

15. 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 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.

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. It’s not enough. Unlike Beowulf’s earlier battles against Grendel and Grendel’s mother, in this battle he is injured, and his injury is fatal.

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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.

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.

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.

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 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.”

Beowulf’s funeral echoes Scyld Scefing’s. 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.
Scyld Scefing – rises from an orphan to found a Danish dynasty. The throne passes to Beowulf, Healfdene, Heorogar, and, then to Hrothgar.

Hrothgar rules well and prosperously. He builds Heorot.

Grendel attacks Heorot. Hrothgar and the Danes, without their mead-hall, despair for twelve years.

Beowulf hears of Grendel and sails to help Hrothgar and the Danes. Hrothgar says he knew and once helped Ecgtheow, Beowulf’s father. Hrothgar accepts Beowulf’s offer to fight Grendel.

At a feast, Unferth insults Beowulf. Beowulf boasts of his youthful swimming contest with Breca.

Beowulf fights Grendel without weapons and rips the monster’s arm from its socket. Grendel flees to the swamp to die.

At a feast in Heorot, Hrothgar says that Beowulf is like a son to him and rewards Beowulf with gifts. The scop sings of good kings, bad kings, and the Fight at Finnsburg.

Grendel’s mother attacks Heorot, takes Grendel’s arm, and kills Hrothgar’s counselor Aeschere. Unferth lends his sword Hrunting to Beowulf. Beowulf swims underwater for a day to reach Grendel’s mother’s lair at the bottom of a lake. The sword Hrunting breaks during Beowulf’s fight with Grendel’s mother, but Beowulf finds a giant’s sword and defeats Grendel’s mother with that weapon. Beowulf sees Grendel’s dead body, cuts off Grendel’s head (the blood melts the giant’s sword to the hilt), then swims to the surface.

Beowulf presents the hilt of the giant’s sword to Hrothgar and describes the battle with Grendel’s mother. Hrothgar celebrates and rewards Beowulf with more gifts. Beowulf invites Hrothgar’s son Hrethic to visit the Geats. Hrothgar says Beowulf would make a good king.

Beowulf returns home to the Geats and gives his treasure to his king, Hygelac. Hygelac rewards Beowulf with treasure and land.

Some time later, after King Hygelac and his son Heardred die in battle, Beowulf becomes king of the Geats. Beowulf rules the Geats well for fifty years. Then a thief steals a cup from a dragon’s treasure hoard. The dragon ravages the Geatish countryside.

Beowulf takes a band of eleven warriors and goes to fight the dragon. However, all his warriors but Wiglaf flee. Beowulf and Wiglaf kill the dragon, but Beowulf is mortally wounded.

Beowulf gives Wiglaf treasure and the throne, then dies. Wiglaf takes the throne, but predicts (correctly) that hard times are ahead for the Geats.

Beowulf is buried in a barrow on a cliff. The Geats build a huge mound over Beowulf’s barrow and mourn their dead king.