

Beowulf

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

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."

Plot Summary

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

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

Grendel returns to the fens to die. His arm is hung as a trophy under the roof of Heorot.

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

There is another celebration in Heorot with more gifts and promises of friendship. Hrothgar says he feels like Beowulf is his son, and weeps at Beowulf's departure. Beowulf and his men return to the land of the Geats, where his uncle the king, **Hygelac**, and Hygelac's queen **Hygd**, greet Beowulf, accept-

ing the treasure Beowulf gives them, and in turn rewarding Beowulf with a sword, praise, and land. Hygelac is eventually killed by the Swedes; his son **Heardred**, though young, takes the throne with Beowulf's support. At Heardred's death, Beowulf takes the throne of the Geats, and rules in great prosperity and fame for fifty years.

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

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

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, Halga, and the wife of Onela the Swede. He is also the father of **Hrethric**, **Hrothmund**, and **Freawaru**. Hrothgar is an excellent and successful king. He builds Heorot, a magnificent hall, and is very generous and wise.

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 Wylfings.

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

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

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

Heardred – **Hygelac** and **Wealhtheow'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.

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

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

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

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

Unferth – A Dane, the son of **Ecglaf**, 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.

Hrethric – **Hrothgar's** son and heir.

Hrothmund – Another son of **Hrothgar's**.

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

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

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

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

Ecglaf – **Unferth's** father.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sigmund – A legendary warrior who killed a dragon.

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

Grendel – A man-eating monster descended from the Biblical **Cain**. Grendel is a "walker in darkness," who is "wearing God's anger," and "lacking in joy."

Grendel's Mother – A female version of **Grendel**, she is also descended from Cain.

Dragon – A fire-breathing dragon who discovered a lost tribe's treasure and moved into the barrow. After the dragon terrorizes the Geats, **Beowulf** fights the dragon.

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 in *Beowulf*. Preservation of a family or tribe within a hostile environment demands not only unity within the tribe, but the willingness to defend and protect the tribe from outsiders. The necessity of tribal and family self-defense created a set of formal rules of vengeance between individuals and feuding between tribes.

Good Warriors and Good Kings

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

The differences between good kings and good warriors arise from the different roles that kings and warriors play in society.

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

Fame, Pride, and Shame

The warriors of *Beowulf* seek fame through feats of strength, bravery in the face of danger, an utter disdain for death, as well as by *boasting* about their feats of strength, bravery, and disdain for death. The quest for fame is of the utmost importance to a warrior trying to establish himself in the world.

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

Repetition and Change

Beowulf is full of repetitions: the story begins and ends with funerals of kings; **Beowulf** must fight **Grendel** and **Grendel's Mother**; the tale of **Sigmund** foreshadows **Beowulf's** battle with the dragon; the feuds related in stories told by the bards

echo the feuds of **Beowulf's** own time. These repetitions emphasize the continuity of the world and show that events are in many ways just variations of previous events, proceeding in endless procession like the seasons of the year.

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

Christianity and Paganism

Because of its complicated origin, *Beowulf* has elements of both pagan Germanic culture and Christianity. The story of *Beowulf* probably originated as an oral tradition sometime in the 7th century. But the only surviving manuscript of *Beowulf* was written in the 11th century by Christian scribes, who either inserted the Christian overtones to the story, or were working from a manuscript set down by previous Christian who added the Christian elements. Suffice it to say that the resulting *Beowulf* is like a pagan story wrapped in Christianity. This results in some strange inconsistencies. For instance, the narrator of the poem describes **Hrothgar** at one point as a pagan who does not know of the true God, and yet all the characters, including **Hrothgar**, constantly thank God for their good fortune. In addition, the pagan concept of fate becomes rather hopelessly confused with God's will, so that sometimes **Beowulf** (and the narrator) seems to believe he can affect fate through his courage, while at others either **Beowulf** or the narrator attributes his success solely to God's favor. As you read *Beowulf*, keep on the lookout for the ways that Christianity and paganism interact in the poem.

Symbols

Symbols 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. Heorot, as the largest mead-hall in the world, symbolized the might and power of the Spear-Danes under Hrothgar.

Gold, Treasure, and Gifts

In *Beowulf*, gold, treasure, and gifts are less important for their economic value than their social value. In fact, gold can be

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

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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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.

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



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

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



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.

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



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

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



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.

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



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

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

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



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.

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



5. A Feast at Heorot (Lines 491–701)

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

7. Celebration (Lines 837–1250)

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

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

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

Whether Beowulf's amazing tale is true or not, his prowess as a booster 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 endears him to the Danes. Wealhtheow 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.

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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.

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

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

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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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)

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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



10. New Celebration (Lines 1640–1912)

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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

Beowulf again shows generosity.



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.

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



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

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



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

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



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

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

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



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

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



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

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



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.

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



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**.

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



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



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.

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



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.

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



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**.

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



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.

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



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

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



Beowulf 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**.

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



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.

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



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."

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



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



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

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



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 kinsman.

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.



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.

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.



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

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."

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



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.

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.



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.

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.



16. Beowulf's Funeral (Lines 3110–3182)

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

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



Beowulf 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.

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



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

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



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



Important Quotes

Lines 101-108 Quotes

Till the monster stirred, that demon, that fiend
Grendel who haunted the moors, the wild
Marshes, and made his home in a hell.
Not hell but hell on earth.
He was spawned in that slime
Of Cain, murderous creatures banished
By God, punished forever for the crime
Of Abel's death.

Lines 151-160 Quotes

The monster relished his savage war
On the Danes, keeping the bloody feud
Alive, seeking no peace, offering
No truce, accepting no settlement, no price
In gold or land, and paying the living
For one crime only with another. No one
Waited for reparation from his plundering claws:
That shadow of death hunted in the darkness,
Stalked Hrothgar's warriors.

Lines 533-534 Quotes

But the truth
Is simple: no man swims in the sea
As I can, no strength is a match for mine

Lines 677-687 Quotes

Grendel is no braver, no stronger
Than I am! I could kill him with my sword; I shall not,
Easy as it would be. This fiend is a bold
And famous fighter, but his claws and teeth...
Beating at my sword blade, would be helpless. I will meet him
With my hands empty—unless his heart
Fails him, seeing a soldier waiting
Weaponless, unafraid. Let God in His wisdom
Extend His hand where He wills, reward
Whom he chooses!

Lines 1258-1263 Quotes

She'd brooded on her loss, misery had brewed
In her heart, that female horror, Grendel's
Mother, living in the murky cold lake
Assigned her since Cain had killed his only
Brother, slain his father's son
With an angry sword.

Lines 1841-1852 Quotes

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

Lines 2165-2169 Quotes

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

Lines 2524-2529 Quotes

When he comes to me
I mean to stand, not run from his shooting
Flames, stand till fate decides
Which of us wins. My heart is firm,
My hands calm: I need no hot
Words.

Lines 2638-2743 Quotes

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

Lines 3159-3163 Quotes

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

ThemeTracker™

The LitCharts ThemeTracker is a mini-version of the entire LitChart. The ThemeTracker provides a quick timeline-style rundown of all the important plot points and allows you to track the themes throughout the work at a glance.

Themes	Lines	
	1 – 63	– Scyld Scefing rises from an orphan to found a Danish dynasty. – The throne passes to Beow, Healfdene, Heorogar , and, then to Hrothgar .
	64 – 85	– Hrothgar rules well and prosperously. He builds Heorot .
	86 – 193	– Grendel attacks Heorot . – Hrothgar and the Danes, without their mead-hall, despair for twelve years.
	194 – 490	– 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 .
	491 – 701	– At a feast, Unferth insults Beowulf . – Beowulf boasts of his youthful swimming contest with Breca .
	702 – 836	– Beowulf fights Grendel without weapons and rips the monster's arm from its socket. Grendel flees to the swamp to die.
	837 – 1250	– 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.
	1251 – 1407	– Grendel's mother attacks Heorot , takes Grendel's arm, and kills Hrothgar's counselor Aeschere .
	1408 – 1639	– 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. .
	1640 – 1912	– 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 Hrethric to visit the Geats. Hrothgar says Beowulf would make a good king.
	1913 – 2199	– Beowulf returns home to the Geats and gives his treasure to his king, Hygelac . – Hygelac rewards Beowulf with treasure and land.
	2200 – 2323	– 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.
	2324 – 2710	– 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.
	2711 – 2845	– Beowulf gives Wiglaf treasure and the throne, then dies.
	2846 – 3109	– Wiglaf takes the throne, but predicts (correctly) that hard times are ahead for the Geats.
	3110 – 3182	– Beowulf is buried in a barrow on a cliff. The Geats build a huge mound over Beowulf's barrow and mourn their dead king.

Theme Key

- Family and Tribe
- Good Warriors and Good Kings
- Fame, Pride, and Shame
- Repetition and Change
- Christianity and Paganism