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Title: Overview: *Beowulf*

Traditional work, ( 8th Century )

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## Introduction

The Old English poem *Beowulf* follows its main character from heroic youth to heroic old age. Beowulf saves a neighboring people from the monster Grendel; eventually becomes the king of his own people; and dies defending them from a dragon. It is a great adventure story and a deeply philosophical one. Scholars differ over the poem's original purpose and audience, but *Beowulf* probably appealed to a wide audience and garnered a range of responses.

*Beowulf* survives in one manuscript, which is known as British Library Cotton Vitellius A. 15. At least one scholar believes the manuscript is the author's original, but most scholars believe it is the last in a succession of copies. *Beowulf* may have been written at any time between about 675 ce and the date of the manuscript, about 1000 ce.

No one knows where the manuscript was before it surfaced in the hands of Laurence Nowell in the sixteenth century. An edition of *Beowulf* was published by G. S. Thorkelin in 1815, but for over one hundred years, study focused on *Beowulf* not as poetry, but on what it could tell about the early Germanic tribes and language (philology).

J. R. R. Tolkien's "The Monsters and the Critics" redirected study to the poem as literature. The 1939 excavation of the Sutton Hoo ship burial in Suffolk, England, and Tolkien's own *Lord of the Rings*, influenced by his lifelong study of *Beowulf*, helped to interest general readers in the poem. Since then translations and adaptations of the poem have increased the poem's audience and recognition. Notably, Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney published a bestselling, easy-to-read modern English translation in 2001 that was reissued in 2007 with one hundred illustrations. This epic poem has influenced modern adventure fantasy and inspired at least two bestsellers, comic books, and even a *Beowulf/Star Trek Voyager* cross-over.

## Plot

### Narrative in *Beowulf*

The action of *Beowulf* is not straightforward. The narrator foreshadows actions that occur later. Characters talk about things that have already happened. Both narrator and characters recall

incidents and characters outside the poem's main narrative. These digressions (see Style section below) are connected thematically to the main action. Critics once saw the digressions as flaws. The poet, however, consciously used them to characterize human experience, stressing recurring patterns, and to represent the characters' attempts to understand their situation.

### **The Kings of the Danes and the Coming of Grendel**

Scyld was found by the Danes as a small boy in a boat washed ashore. The Danes at this time were without a leader and oppressed by their neighboring countries. Scyld grew to be a great warrior king and made the Danes a powerful nation. Dying, he ordered the Danes to send him back in a ship to the sea from which he came. They placed him in a ship surrounded by treasures and pushed it out to sea--and "no one knows who received that freight."

Scyld's son, Beowulf Scylding, becomes king in his turn. His son Healfdene takes the throne, and then Healfdene's son Hrothgar succeeds him. Hrothgar builds a great hall, Heorot, in which to entertain and reward his people. There are great festivities at its opening, but the music and laughter enraged Grendel, a human monster living underwater nearby. That night Grendel breaks into Heorot, slaughters and eats thirty of Hrothgar's men (the king's warriors would normally sleep in the hall). This happens again the next night. After that, "it was easy to find him who sought rest somewhere else."

Grendel haunts the hall by night for twelve years. The Danes despair of ridding themselves of him. They can neither defeat him nor come to terms with him.

### **Beowulf Comes to the Kingdom of Hrothgar**

Danish sailors bring news of Grendel to King Hygelac of the Geats whose nephew (also named Beowulf Scylding) has a growing reputation for strength and monster-killing. Beowulf, supported by the wisest men of his people, resolves to go to Hrothgar's aid and sets off by ship with fourteen companions. They land in Denmark and are met and questioned by a coast guard who, impressed with Beowulf, sends them to Heorot. Hrothgar receives them and accepts Beowulf's offer of help. Hrothgar knew Beowulf as a child and interprets Beowulf's arrival at his court as an act of gratitude. He had sheltered Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, when he was an exile and made peace for him with his powerful enemies.

Unferth, an official of the court, attempts to discredit Beowulf with the story of a swimming match Beowulf had as a boy with another boy, Breca. Beowulf exonerates himself with his version of the swimming match. Wealtheow, Hrothgar's queen, welcomes Beowulf. The young man tells her that he would lay down his life to defeat Grendel. She thanks God for his resolve.

### **Beowulf's Fight with Grendel**

Hrothgar gives Beowulf and his companions the duty of guarding Heorot that night. The young man decides to face Grendel without weapons since Grendel does not use them. He tells those around him that the outcome of the fight is in the hands of God. The Danes leave the hall, Beowulf and his companions bed down for the night. When darkness falls, Grendel comes

stalking across the empty moors. Intent on slaughter and food, he has no idea what is waiting for him in the hall. He bursts open the Heorot's heavy iron-bound doors with the touch of his hand and rushes in, grabs one of the sleeping Geats, eats him, greedily gulping down the blood, and then grabs Beowulf. Beowulf has had a moment to get oriented, however, and wrestles with Grendel. Surprised by Beowulf's strength Grendel tries to get away, but cannot. They struggle, Beowulf refusing to break his grip. Beowulf's companions try to wound Grendel, only to find he is impervious to their weapons. In the end, Grendel manages pull away from Beowulf, leaving his arm in the hero's grasp. He flees, bleeding, to his lair.

### **The Morning after the Battle**

With morning the Danes come from the surrounding countryside to see the huge arm, its nails like steel, and the bloody trail of the dying monster. Some of them follow the trail to the water's edge and come back singing Beowulf's praises. One of the king's men compares Beowulf to the great dragon-slayer, Sigemund. (In the legends on which *Nibelungenlied* is based, it is Sigemund's son Siegfried who is the dragon slayer.) Hrothgar thanks God that he has lived to see Grendel stopped. He publicly announces that he will now consider Beowulf his son. Beowulf tells the Hrothgar that he wishes the king might have seen the fight. He says that he had hoped to kill Grendel outright, but it was not God's will.

### **Celebrations in Honor of Beowulf's Victory**

There is a celebration in honor of Beowulf and his companions. Hrothgar gives him magnificent gifts, including a golden banner, sword, and armor. The other Geats are given rich gifts too. Hrothgar gives treasure for the man whom Grendel has eaten. (This probably represents his *wergyld*, literally "man-price," the payment made to a man's lord or his family by someone responsible for his death as an indemnity.) A lay, or short narrative poem, of a famous battle is sung as entertainment.

Wealtheow acknowledges Beowulf's great deed, but counsels her husband not to alienate his nephew Hrothulf by adopting Beowulf. She hopes aloud that Hrothulf will remember all she and the king did for him when he was young and will treat his young cousins, their sons, well. Wealtheow then gives Beowulf a magnificent golden necklace (worn at that time by both men and women). Wealtheow asks Beowulf to be a good friend to her sons. She ends by saying that in Heorot all the men are loyal to one another and do her will. The original Anglo-Saxon audience knew from existing legends and stories that Hrothulf would later kill his two cousins.

### **Grendel's Mother Comes for Vengeance and Beowulf Tracks Her to Her Lair**

The Geats are given new quarters for the night and Danish warriors sleep in the hall for the first time in many years. While the Danes are sleeping, Grendel's mother comes to avenge her son. She carries off Aeschere, Hrothgar's friend and counselor, a man who had always stood at his side in battle. Beowulf finds Hrothgar broken with grief over the loss of his friend. Hrothgar tells Beowulf what the Danes know about the monsters and the wilds where they live. Beowulf offers to track Grendel's mother to her underwater lair, remarking that it is better to perform noble deeds before death and better to avenge a friend than mourn him too much. Hrothgar, Beowulf,

and their men ride to the sea where they find Aeshere's head at the edge of the overhanging cliffs. Unferth, now deeply impressed by Beowulf's generous heroism, loans Beowulf his sword. Beowulf asks Hrothgar to take care of his companions and to send Hygelac the treasures he had been given for killing Grendel if he (Beowulf) dies.

### **Beowulf's Fight with Grendel's Mother**

Beowulf enters the water and is seized by Grendel's mother who drags him to her den, which is dry despite its underwater entrance. Unferth's sword is useless against this monstrous hag. Beowulf wrestles with her. The woman trips him and tries to stab him with her dagger, but the blade is turned by his chainmail (a mesh tunic of fine interlocked metal rings). He struggles away from her, grabs a great sword hanging on the wall, and strikes off her head. He sees the body of Grendel and cuts off his head too, the sword blade melting in his blood. Carrying Grendel's head and the sword's hilt, Beowulf swims back to the surface.

### **Beowulf Returns from the Fight in Triumph**

Meanwhile from the cliffs above, the waiting men see blood welling up to the surface of the water. Hrothgar and the Danes assume the worst and make their way sorrowfully back to the hall. Beowulf's companions linger, grieving and forlornly hoping for his return. Beowulf comes to the surface. He and his men return to the hall. He presents Grendel's head and the hilt of the ancient sword to Hrothgar. Beowulf recounts his underwater fight to the court, acknowledging the grace of God. Hrothgar praises Beowulf and counsels him to use his strength wisely. He warns him of the temptations of prosperity which lead to arrogance and avarice. Beowulf returns Unferth's sword. He thanks Hrothgar for his great kindness and promises him that if Hrothgar ever needs him, he shall come to his aid with a thousand warriors. Beowulf and his companions return to their ship, and Beowulf presents the kindly coast guard with a sword.

### **Beowulf's Return to His Uncle's Court**

Beowulf and his companions return home and go immediately to his uncle's hall. Hygelac's young queen, Hygd, is presiding with her husband. Hygelac welcomes his nephew back with great warmth. Beowulf narrates his adventures. In particular he talks about Hrothgar's daughter, Freawaru, who is engaged to Ingeld, a prince whose people are hereditary enemies of the Danes. Beowulf fears the marriage will not end the feud and that Ingeld will have to decide between his people and his young wife. This passage exactly predicts what happens in the Ingeld legend. Thus the epic's original listeners were likely moved by Beowulf's wisdom and prescience in predicting the strife that is to come. Beowulf presents Wealtheow's and Hrothgar's gifts to his uncle and aunt. In return Hygelac gives his nephew a princely estate and his grandfather's sword.

### **The Treasure and the Dragon**

Years pass. Beowulf's uncle and his uncle's son, Heardred, die in battle. Beowulf becomes king of the Geats and rules for fifty years. Then a dragon begins to threaten the land. The dragon has been sleeping on a treasure, deposited in a barrow above the sea centuries before by the last despairing survivor of a noble family. A desperate man stumbles upon the treasure and steals a

golden cup from it to regain his lord's favor. The dragon in revenge terrorizes the countryside, burning Beowulf's hall in the old king's absence. Beowulf decides to fight the dragon. He orders an iron shield made and assembles an escort of twelve warriors plus the thief, brought along as a guide. They arrive on the cliffs above the barrow. Beowulf, feeling his death is near, looks back over his life and recounts the tragic history of his family and people. He speaks affectionately of his grandfather and the old man's grief over the accidental death of his eldest son. He speaks bluntly of the warfare between the Geats and Swedes. He recalls his adventures in Denmark. He speaks of his loyalty to his uncle Hygelac. Finally he remembers his uncle's disastrous raid to the Rhine and his own part in it. He recalls defeating Daegrefn, champion of the Franks, in single combat before both armies by crushing him in a bear hug. Beowulf then announces that he intends to fight the dragon alone. He goes down the path to the treasure barrow and attacks the dragon, but cannot manage to kill it. One of his men, a young warrior Wiglaf, comes to his aid. Together they kill the dragon, but Beowulf is fatally wounded. He dies saying he has no fear in God's judgment of him and thanking God for allowing him to trade his old life for a great treasure for his people. He tells Wiglaf to take care of the Geats. Finally, he asks that they build a barrow for him on the cliffs where it will be seen and he remembered. The Geats build the barrow, place the treasure in it, and mourn their lost king as the kindest and most worthy of rulers.

## Characters

**Aeschere** : Aeschere is Hrothgar's counselor and friend, his "wing man" in battle. Grendel's mother murders him in revenge for the death of her son. Hrothgar is broken with grief when he learns of Aeschere's death.

**Beowulf** : Beowulf is the son of Hrethel's daughter and Ecgtheow. From the age of seven, he is raised by his maternal grandfather. He is first and foremost the hero who kills the monsters no one else can face, but he is more than a fighter. Beowulf is a strong man who thinks and feels. His deep affection for his grandfather Hrethel and uncle Hygelac lasts to the end of his long life. He is capable of discernment, sensitivity, and compassion. He is concerned about what Freawaru may face in her political marriage. He understands and sympathizes with Wealtheow in her concern for her sons. He, more than any other character, has a sense of God's hand in human affairs. He alone talks about an afterlife. His impulses are not merely courageous, they are generous. As a young man he comforts Hrothgar at Aeschere's death, saying that glorious deeds are the best thing for a man to take into death. Dying, he thanks God that he has been allowed to trade his old life for a treasure for his people and commits their welfare to Wiglaf.

Beowulf is not merely an incredibly strong man skilled in hand-to-hand combat; he is equally skilled with words. His defense against Unferth is a brilliant exercise in oration. His conversation with his uncle on his return home is a formal *relation*, the official report of an ambassador. When he looks backward on his life and times before his final fight, he produces the sort of historical memoir that was long the hallmark of the elder statesman. His choices may not have always been what people around him wanted, whether in his decision not to take the throne over his young cousin or in his decision to fight the dragon. His choices, however, are never without reasons with which the narrator and the audience can sympathize.

Except for monsters, Beowulf kills only two human beings: Daegrefn, the champion of the Franks, during his uncle's disastrous raid in the lands at the mouth of the Rhine, and Onela, who was responsible for his cousin Heardred's death. Except for an expedition against the Swedes, Beowulf does not engage in any war during his reign.

**Beowulf Scylding** : Beowulf Scylding is the son of Scyld, father of Healfdene, and grandfather of Hrothgar.

**Breca** : Breca is the boy who has a swimming match with Beowulf. Beowulf admits it is a foolish thing to do. They are separated by a storm at sea. Breca reaches shore in Finland. Beowulf comes ashore after killing nine sea monsters who try to eat him.

**Daegrefn** : Daegrefn is the champion of the Franks. Beowulf defeats him in single combat before the armies of the Geats and the Franks, crushing him in a bear hug.

**Eadgils** : Eadgils is the son of Othere and grandson of the Swedish king Ongetheow. He and his brother Eanmund rebel against their uncle, King Onela. They are sheltered by Heardred and the Geats. Beowulf, to avenge his cousin, supports Eadgils in taking the throne.

**Eanmund** : Son of Othere and grandson of the Swedish king Ongetheow, Eanmund and his brother Eadgils rebel against their uncle, King Onela. They are sheltered by Heardred and the Geats.

**Ecglaf** : Ecglaf is Unferth's father.

**Ecgtheow** : Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow married the unnamed daughter of Hrethel, king of the Geats. It is likely that Ecgtheow was related to the Swedish royal family, which would explain why the Swedish king, Onela, does not dispute Beowulf's control of the Geat kingdom after Beowulf's cousin Heardred dies in battle with the Swedes. Ecgtheow is involved in a feud so violent that only Hrothgar would shelter him. Hrothgar is able to settle the feud.

**Freawaru** : Hrothgar's daughter, Freawaru gets engaged to Ingeld in the hope that doing so ends the recurring war between the Danes and Ingeld's people, the Heathobards. Beowulf's prediction of what is likely to happen is uncannily like what the legends say did happen. The passage characterizes Beowulf as perceptive and sympathetic.

**Grendel** : Grendel is an immensely strong cannibal. Whatever Grendel and his mother may have been in the traditions behind the present poem, in *Beowulf* they are descendants of Cain, the eldest son of Adam and Eve, and the first murderer. Placing Grendel and his mother in a biblical context made them even easier for the original audience to accept. They live in the wilds, cut off from human society. Grendel's attack on the hall is motivated by his hatred of joy and light. The Danes cannot hope to come to terms with Grendel or his mother since they are completely outside and beyond human society and understanding.

**Haethcyn** : Second son of Hrethel, Haethcyn kills his older brother in an archery accident. Haethcyn himself is killed in the border warfare between the Geats and the Swedes. Hygelac, his

younger brother, leads the relief party that saves the remnants of the Geatish army at the battle of Ravenswood.

**Healfdene** : Healfdene is Beowulf Scylding's son and the father of Hrothgar.

**Heardred** : Heardred is the son of Hygelac and Hygd. Beowulf refuses to take the throne before him and acts as his guardian. Heardred is killed in the fighting that follows his intervention in a power struggle between two branches of the Swedish royal family.

**Heorogar** : Heorogar is Healfdene's second son.

**Herebeald** : Herebeald is Hrethel's eldest son who is killed by his younger brother Haethcyn in an archery accident.

**Heremod** : Heremod is a king of the Danes who reigns before Scyld. Despite his great promise, he grows cruel and avaricious, murdering his own supporters. Both Hrothgar and the retainer who first sings Beowulf's praises use him as an example of an evil leader.

**Hondscio** : Beowulf's companion Hondscio is eaten by Grendel.

**Hrethel** : Hrethel is Beowulf's maternal grandfather, Hrethel raises Beowulf from the age of seven. He dies of grief after his second son accidentally kills his eldest son. Fighting between the Geats and Swedes begins after Hrethel's death. Beowulf remembers his grandfather with great affection.

**Hrothgar** : Hrothgar is the great-grandson of Scyld and a successful warrior king. Hrothgar builds the greatest hall in the world and finds himself unable to defend it or his people from Grendel. Only once does his dignity and patient endurance break down, when he is faced with another monster and the death of his closest friend just when he thinks his hall and people are finally safe. Hrothgar recovers his composure and gives Beowulf a philosophy of life that, while austere and pessimistic, is fitted to the world in which they live. As hinted in the poem, he is killed by his son-in-law, Ingeld, and Heorot is burned.

**Hygd** : Wife of Hygelac, Hygd represents a perfect queen. She offers the throne to Beowulf after her husband's death because her son is too young. Interestingly, Hygd's name means "thought," and her husband's name means "thoughtless."

**Hygelac** : Hygelac is Hrethel's youngest son and the hero of the battle of Ravenswood. He dies on a raid that is initially successful, but ends with the annihilation of the Geatish forces.

**Ohtere** : Ohtere is the son of Ongentheow. His sons Eadgils and Eanmund unsuccessfully rebel against his brother Onela.

**Onela** : Onela is the king of the Swedes and son of Ongentheow. His nephews Eadgils and Eanmund rebel against him. They then seek refuge with Heardred and the Geats. Onela exacts vengeance on the Geats, killing Heardred, but he does not interfere when Beowulf takes the

throne. Beowulf helps Eadgils take the Swedish throne and kills Onela in vengeance for his cousin's death.

**Ongentheow** : Ongentheow is the king of the Swedes. He is killed at the battle of Ravenswood.

**Scyld** : Often called Scyld Scefing, Scyld is the first king of his line. In other ancient accounts, Scyld is said to have arrived alone in a boat as a small child. One tradition holds that he is the son of the biblical Noah and was born aboard the ark. Scyld appears in the genealogy of the West Saxon kings.

**Unferth** : Unferth is characterized as Hrothgar's "thyle," but modern scholars are not exactly sure what this word means. In glossaries from the Old English period, the word is defined by the Latin word *rhetor* or *orator*. Unferth may be the king's "press officer," a source of official information about the king and his policies, or he may be a scribe or court jester. He is initially envious of Beowulf's reputation and reception at court, but later Unferth offers his friendship to Beowulf.

**Wealtheow** : Wealtheow Is a princess of the house of the Helmings and the wife of Hrothgar. She has great dignity, political sense, and status among her husband's people. She addresses Hrothgar like a counselor.

**Wiglaf** : Wiglaf is the young warrior who comes to the aid of Beowulf when he fights the dragon. Wiglaf is a relative of Beowulf, probably on his father's side since his connections are Swedish. His father, Weohstan, fought on the Swedish side during their invasion of the Geats following Heardred's meddling in the internal feuds of the Swedish royal house.

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