

Beowulf

Summary

Translated By Burton Raffel

Jack Crane

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 scop, 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, accepting 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.

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Character List

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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.

King Hrothgar - The King of the Danes, the son of Healfdene, the brother of Heorogar and Halga, and the brother-in-law of Onela the Swede. He is also the father of young sons Hrethric, Hrothmund, and Freawaru. Hrothgar is an excellent and successful king. He builds Heorot, a magnificent hall, and builds love and loyalty through his generosity and wisdom. However, though once a great warrior, he can no longer defend his people from Grendel, and his sons also are too young to take up leadership of the Danes. Though a good king, Hrothgar's position – too old to protect his people, but without heirs ready to take his place – represents a potential threat to the Danes and all other Scandinavian tribes: the lack of a king. Hrothgar and the Dane's situation therefore foreshadows the actual threat that will face the Geats after Beowulf battles the dragon at the end of the narrative.

Grendel - A man-eating monster descended from the Biblical Cain. Grendel is described as a "walker in darkness," who is "wearing God's anger" and "lacking in joy" because he has inherited the curse the Biblical Cain received as a result of his murder of his brother Abel. While Grendel's psychology is not explored in detail in Beowulf, there is a sense that he attacks the Danes because his own enforced isolation has made him hate those who are able to enjoy society and companionship. As Heorot is a symbol of such society and companionship, being the place where the Danes congregate to eat, drink, tell stories, build fellowship among each other, and share in the generosity of their king, Grendel's attack on Heorot is thus symbolic as an attack on the idea of society itself. The novelist John Gardner wrote a book called Grendel that explores these ideas about Grendel more fully, and tells of the events of Beowulf from Grendel's point of view.

Dragon - A fire-breathing dragon who discovered a lost tribe's treasure and moved into the barrow housing the gold. The dragon is exceedingly greedy – marking a stark contrast to good kings, who create loyalty and love among their people and warriors through generosity. After a thief steals from the dragon's horde, the dragon goes on a rampage and terrorizes the Geats. Beowulf, the king of the Geats, fights the dragon. Beowulf ultimately kills the dragon, but at the cost of his own life. The threat posed by the dragon therefore represents a kind of tension in the

question of what makes a good king. Was Beowulf right to act as a warrior and kill the dragon and protect his people, even if that action resulted in Beowulf's death, since the loss of their king is likely to result in the destruction of the Geats? Or was Beowulf too rash, and should he have waited for a hero just as Hrothgar did when Grendel attacked the Danes?