

Beowulf

A Reading A-Z Level Z1 Leveled Book
Word Count: 3,338

LEVELED BOOK • Z¹

Connections

Writing

The original *Beowulf* is an epic poem. Write a paragraph describing the elements of an epic poem.

Social Studies

Beowulf was originally written in Old English. Create a poster showing when and where Old English was spoken. Look up the Old English words for *king*, *dragon*, *boat*, and *fiend*, and include them in your poster.

Reading A-Z

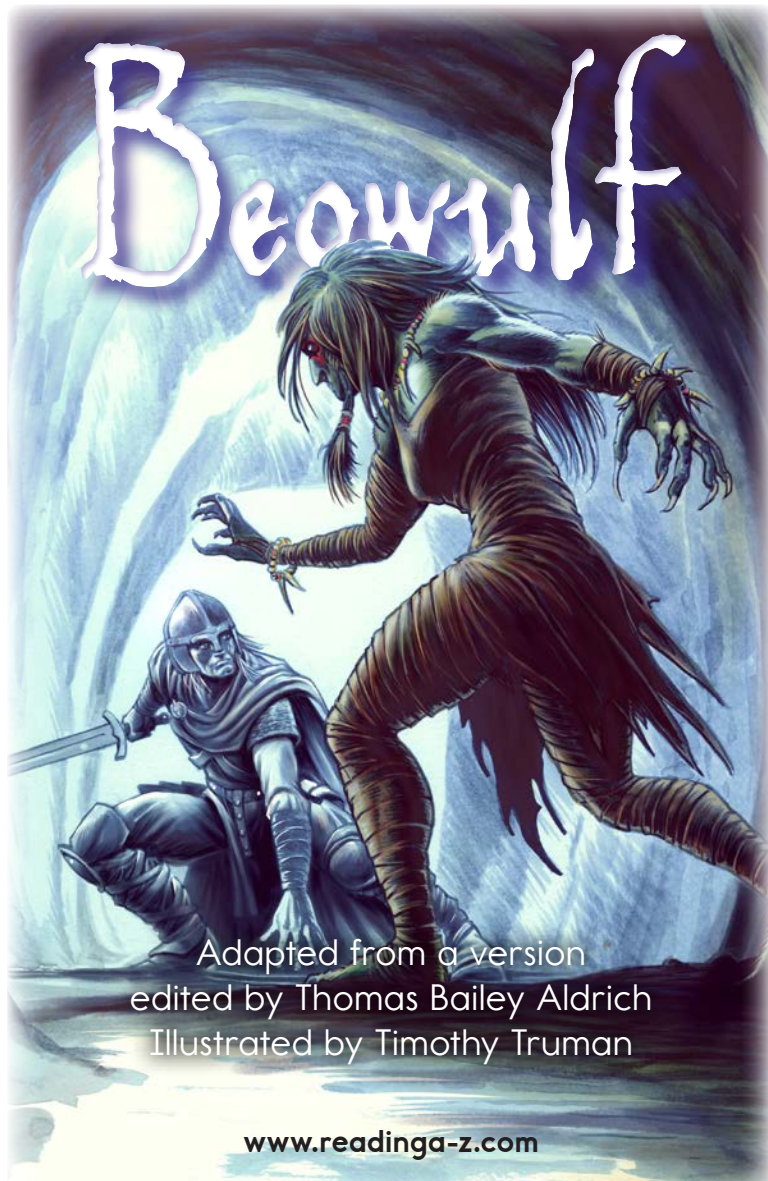
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Adapted from a version
edited by Thomas Bailey Aldrich
Illustrated by Timothy Truman

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Beowulf

**Multi
level
U•X•Z^o**



Focus Question

What is a hero?

Words to Know

bade	mead
buckler	moors
fate	perish
grappled	skald
hoarded	spoils
mail	thanes

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Correlation

LEVEL Z1

Fountas & Pinnell	W-X
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	60



Old King Hrothgar built for himself a great **mead**-hall called Heorot, covered with gold. It was bigger than any hall men had ever heard of, and there Hrothgar sat on his throne to share with men the good things God had given him. A band of brave **thanes** gathered round him, all living together in peace and joy.

But there came a wicked monster, Grendel, out of the **moors**. He stole across the fens in the thick darkness and touched the great iron bars of the door of the hall, which immediately sprang open. Then, Grendel spied the thanes sleeping after battle. With his steel fingernails, the hideous fiend seized thirty of them in their sleep. He gave yells of joy and sped as quick as lightning across the moors to reach his home with his prey.

When the remaining thanes awoke, they raised a great cry of sorrow, whilst the aged king himself sat speechless with grief. None could do battle with the monster. He was too strong, too horrible for anyone to conquer. For twelve long years, Grendel warred against Hrothgar; like a dark shadow of death, he prowled round about the hall and lay in wait for Hrothgar's men on the misty moors.

Now there lived in a far-off land a young warrior called Beowulf, who had the strength of thirty men. He heard of the wicked deeds of Grendel and the sorrow of the good king Hrothgar. So he made ready a strong ship and with fourteen friends set sail to visit Hrothgar, as he was in need of help. The good ship flew over the swelling ocean like a bird, till the voyagers saw shining white cliffs before them. Then they knew their journey was at an end; they made fast their ship, grasped their weapons, and set out for Heorot.

Now a guard on the coast spied them from a tower. He set off to the shore, riding on horseback. "Who are you," he cried, "bearing arms and openly landing here? I am bound to know from whence you come before you make a step forward." Beowulf made answer that they came as friends to rid Hrothgar of his wicked enemy Grendel, and at that the guard led them to the king's hall.

Beowulf's men marched along, following the stone-paved street to the hall, their armor shining in the sun and clanging as they went. They reached Heorot, where they set down their broad shields and made themselves known to the herald. Hrothgar speedily **bade** them welcome. They entered the great hall with measured tread, Beowulf leading the way. "Hail, O King!" he said. "To fight against Grendel have I come. Grant me this, that I may have this task alone, I and my little band of men. I know that the terrible monster despises weapons, and therefore I shall bear neither sword, nor shield, nor **buckler**. Hand to hand I will fight the foe, and death shall come to whomsoever God wills."

Hrothgar loved the youth for his noble words and bade him and his men sit down to the table and merrily share the feast. As they feasted, a **skald** sang with a clear voice. The queen, in cloth of gold, moved down the hall and handed the jeweled cup of mead to the king and all the warriors, old and young. At the right moment, with gracious words, she brought it to Beowulf. Full of pride and high purpose, the youth drank from the splendid cup and vowed that he would conquer the enemy or die.

When the sun sank in the west, all the guests arose. The king bade Beowulf guard the hall and watch for the foe. "Not a wish of yours shall be left unfulfilled, if you perform this mighty deed," he said.

Then Beowulf lay down to rest in the hall, putting off from him his coat of **mail**, helmet, and sword.

Through the dim night, Grendel came stealing. All slept in the darkness, all but one! The door sprang open at the first touch the monster gave it. He trod quickly over the paved floor of the hall; his eyes gleamed as he saw a troop of kinsmen lying together asleep. Grendel laughed as he reckoned on sucking the life out of each before day broke. He seized a sleeping warrior and in a moment had crunched his bones. Then he stretched out his hand to seize Beowulf on his bed. Quickly did Beowulf grip his arm; he stood up full length and **grappled** with him with all his might till his fingers cracked as though they would burst. Never had Grendel felt such a grip; he had a mind to go, but could not.



He roared, and the hall resounded with his yells as up and down he raged, with Beowulf holding him in a fast embrace. The benches were overturned, the timbers of the hall cracked, the beautiful hall all but wrecked. Beowulf's men had seized their weapons and thought to hack Grendel on every side, but no blade could touch him. Still Beowulf held him by the arm; the fiend's shoulder split apart, and he fled, wounded to death, leaving hand, arm, and shoulder in Beowulf's grasp. Over the moors, into the darkness, he sped as best he might, and to Beowulf was the victory.

Then, in the morning, many a warrior came from far and near. Riding in troops, they tracked the monster's path, where he had fled stricken to death. In a dismal pool he had yielded up his life.

Racing their horses over the green turf, they reached Heorot. The golden roof of the hall glittered in the sunlight. The king stood on the terrace. "I have had much woe," he said, "but this lad, through God's might, has done the deed that we, with all our wisdom, could not do. Now I will heartily love you, Beowulf, as if you were my son. You shall want for nothing in this world, and your fame shall live forever."

The hall was cleansed, the walls hung anew with cloth of gold, the whole place made fair and straight, for only the roof had been left altogether unhurt after the fight.

A merry feast was held. The king brought forth out of his treasures a banner, helmet, and mail coat. These he gave to Beowulf, bidding him enjoy them well; but more wonderful than all was a famous sword handed down to him through the ages. To each of Beowulf's men he gave rich gifts. The skald sang; the queen, beautiful and gracious, bore the cup to the king and Beowulf. To Beowulf she, too, gave gifts: mantle and bracelets and collar of gold. "Use these gifts," she said, "and prosper well! As far as the sea rolls, your name shall be known."

Great was the joy of all till evening came. Then the hall was cleared of benches and strewn with beds. Beowulf, like the king, had his own room that night to sleep in. The nobles lay down in the hall; at their heads they set their shields and placed ready their helmets and their mail coats. Each slept, ready in an instant to do battle for his lord.

So they sank to rest, little dreaming what deep sorrow was to fall on them.

Grendel the monster was dead, but Grendel's mother still lived. Furious at the death of her son, she crept to the great hall, made her way in, clutched an earl, the king's dearest friend, and crushed him in his sleep. Great was the uproar. The thanes leapt up, swords in hand; the troll-dam hurried to escape, wanting to get out with her life.

The aged king felt bitter grief when he heard that his dearest friend was slain. He sent for Beowulf.

"We have fresh grief this morning," said the sorrowing king. "My dearest friend and noblest thane is slain. Grendel you slew yourself, but another monster has come to avenge his death. I have heard the country folk say that there were two huge fiends to be seen stalking over the moors, one like a woman, as near as they could make out. The other had the form of a man but was huger far. It was he they called Grendel. These two haunt a fearful spot, a land of untrodden bogs and windy cliffs. A waterfall plunges into the blackness below, and twisted trees with gnarled roots overhang it. An unearthly fire is seen gleaming there night after night. None can tell the depth of the stream. You are our only help. Dare you enter this horrible haunt?"

Quick was Beowulf's answer: "Sorrow not, O King! Rouse yourself quickly, and let us track the monster. Each of us must look for death, and he who has the chance should do mighty deeds before it comes. I promise you Grendel's kin shall not escape me, if she hide in the depths of the earth or of the ocean."

The king sprang up gladly, and Beowulf and his friends set out. They passed stony banks and narrow gullies, the haunts of goblins.

Suddenly they saw a clump of gloomy trees overhanging a dreary pool. A shudder ran through them, for the pool was blood-red.

In the water were monstrous sea snakes. One of Beowulf's men took aim at a monster with his arrow and pierced him through, so that he swam no more.

Beowulf was making ready for the fight. He covered his body with armor lest the fiend should clutch him. On his head was a white helmet decorated with figures of boars worked in silver. No weapon could hurt it. His sword was a wonderful treasure with an edge of iron; it had never failed anyone who had needed it in battle.

“Be like a father to my men, if I **perish**,” said Beowulf to Hrothgar, “and send the rich gifts you have given me to my king. He will see that I had good fortune while life lasted. Either I will win fame, or death shall take me.”

He dashed away, plunging headlong into the pool. It took nearly the whole day before he spied the bottom, and while he was still on his way, Grendel’s mother met him. For a hundred years she had lived in those depths. She made a grab at him and caught him in her talons, but his coat of mail saved him from her loathsome fingers. Still she clutched him tight and bore him in her arms to the bottom of the lake; he had no power to use his weapons, though he had courage enough.

Then he saw that he was in a vast hall where there was no water, but a strange, unearthly glow of firelight. At once the fight began, but the sword would not bite—it failed its master in his need; for the first time its fame broke down. Away Beowulf threw it in anger, trusting to the strength of his hands.



He seized the monster by the shoulder and brought her down. Quickly she recovered and closed in on him; he staggered and fell, worn out. She pinned him and drew her knife to take his life, but his good mail coat turned the point. He stood up again, and then truly God helped him, for he saw among the armor on the wall an old sword of huge size, the handiwork of giants. He seized it and smote with all his might so that the troll-dam gave up her life.

His heart was full of gladness; light, calm and beautiful as that of the sun, filled the hall. He scanned the vast chamber and found Grendel lying there dead. He cut off his head as a trophy for King Hrothgar, whose men the fiend had killed and devoured.



Now the men who were seated on the banks of the pool watching with Hrothgar saw that the water was tinged with blood. Then the old men spoke together of the brave Beowulf, saying they feared they would never see him again. The day was waning fast, so they and the king went homeward. Beowulf's men stayed on, sick at heart, gazing at the pool. They longed, but did not expect, to see their lord and master.

Under the depths, Beowulf was making his way to them. The magic sword melted in his hand, like snow in sunshine; only the hilt remained, so venomous was the fiend that had been slain therewith. He brought nothing more with him than the hilt and Grendel's head. Up he rose through the waters. So he came to land, bravely swimming, bearing his **spoils**. His men saw him; they thanked God and ran to free him of his armor. They rejoiced to get sight of him, sound and whole.

Now they marched gladly to the town. It took four of them to carry Grendel's head. On they went, all fourteen, their captain glorious in their midst. They entered the great hall, startling the king and queen with the fearful sight of Grendel's head as they sat at meat.

Beowulf handed the magic hilt to Hrothgar, who saw that it was the work of giants of old. He spoke to Beowulf, while all held their peace, praised him for his courage, said that he would love him as his son, and bade him be a help to mankind. "Many, many treasures," he said, "must pass from me to you tomorrow, but now rest and feast."

Gladly, Beowulf sat down to the banquet, and well he liked the thought of rest.

When day dawned, he bade the king farewell with noble words, promising to help him in time of need. Hrothgar with tears and embraces let him go, giving him fresh gifts of **hoarded** jewels. He wept, for he loved Beowulf well and knew he would never see him anymore.

The guard of the coast saw the gallant warriors coming, bade them welcome, and led them to their ship. The wind whistled in the sails, and a pleasant humming sound was heard as the good ship sped on her way. So Beowulf returned home, having done mighty deeds and gained great honor.



In due time, Beowulf himself became king,
and well he governed the land for fifty years.
Then trouble came.

A slave, fleeing from his master's heavy hand,
stumbled by an evil chance into the den of a
dragon. There he saw a dazzling hoard of gold,
guarded by the dragon for three hundred winters.
The treasure tempted him, and he carried off
a tankard of gold to give to his master to make
peace with him.

The dragon had been sleeping. Now he awoke
and sniffed the scent of an enemy along the rock.
He hunted diligently over the ground; he wanted
to find the man who had done the mischief in
his sleep. In his rage, he found it hard to wait until
evening came, when he meant to avenge with fire
the loss of his treasure.

Presently the sun sank, and the dragon had his
will. He set forth, burning all the cheerful homes
of men: his rage was felt far and wide. Before
dawn, he shot back again to his dark home,
trusting in his barrow and in his craft to defend
himself.

Now Beowulf heard that his own home had
been burnt to the ground. It was a great grief to
him. His breast heaved with anger.

He meant to rid his country of this winged
plague and to fight it single-handedly. He would
have thought it shameful to seek the dragon
with a large band—he who, as a lad, had killed
Grendel and his kin. As he armed for the fray,
many thoughts filled his mind; he remembered
the days of his youth and manhood. “I fought
many wars in my youth,” he said, “and now that
I am aged and the keeper of my people, I will yet
again seek the enemy and do famously.”

He bade his men await him on the
mountainside. They were to see which of the
two would come alive out of the tussle.

There the aged king beheld where a rocky
archway stood, with a stream of fire gushing
from it; no one could stand there and not be
scorched. He gave a great shout, and the dragon
answered with a hot breath of flame. Beowulf,
with drawn sword, stood well up to his shield
when the burning dragon, curved and coiled,
came headlong upon him. The shield saved him
but little. He swung up the sword to smite the
horrible monster, but its edge did not bite. Sparks
flew around him on every side; he saw that the
end of his days had come.

His men crept away to the woods to save their lives. One, and one only, Wiglaf by name, sped through the smoke and flame to help his lord.

“My Lord Beowulf!” he cried. “With all your might defend your life. I will support you to the utmost.”

The dragon came on furiously; in a moment the flames consumed Wiglaf’s shield, but, nothing daunted, he stepped under the shelter of Beowulf’s as his own fell in ashes about him. The king remembered his strength of old, and he smote with his sword with such force that it stuck in the monster’s head, while splinters flew all around.



Now, for the third time, the dragon rushed upon him and seized him by the neck with his poisonous fangs. Wiglaf, with no thought for himself, rushed forward, though he was scorched with the flames, and smote the dragon lower down than Beowulf had done. His sword entered the dragon’s body, and from that moment the fire began to cease.

The king, recovering his senses, drew his knife and ended the monster’s life. So these two together destroyed the enemy of the people. To Beowulf, that was the greatest moment of his life, when he saw his work completed.

The wound that the dragon had given him began to burn and swell, for the poison had entered it. He knew that the tale of his days was told. Wiglaf, with tender care, unloosed his helmet and brought him water, Beowulf discoursing the while: “I have ruled this people fifty years, and no king has dared attack them. I have held my own with justice, and no friend has lost his life through me. Though I am sick with deadly wounds, I have comfort in this. Now go quickly, beloved Wiglaf. Show me the ancient wealth that I have won for my people, the gold and brilliant gems, that I may then contentedly give up my life.”

Quickly did Wiglaf enter the barrow at the bidding of his master. On every side, he saw gold and jewels and choice vases, helmets, and bracelets. Overhead hung a marvelous banner, all golden, gleaming with light. He filled his lap full of golden cups and platters, and also took the brilliant banner.

He hastened to return with his spoils, wondering, with pain, if he should find his king still alive. Wiglaf bore his treasures to him and laid them on the ground. "I thank God," said the dying king, "that I have been permitted to win this treasure for my people; now they will have all that they need. But I cannot be any longer here. Bid my men make a lofty mound on the headland overlooking the sea, and there place my ashes. In times to come, men shall call it Beowulf's Barrow, and it shall tower aloft to guide sailors over the stormy seas."

The brave king took from his neck his golden collar, took his helmet and his coronet, and gave them to his true thane, Wiglaf. "**Fate** has swept all my kinsmen away," said he, "and now I must follow them."

That was his last word as his soul departed from his bosom to join the company of the just.

Glossary

bade (<i>v.</i>)	the past tense of "bid"; to order or command; to express or say (p. 5)
buckler (<i>n.</i>)	a round, small shield (p. 5)
fate (<i>n.</i>)	an outcome or series of events in one's life that is beyond one's control (p. 19)
grappled (<i>v.</i>)	fought or wrestled hand-to-hand (p. 6)
hoarded (<i>adj.</i>)	collected in large amounts and kept secret or guarded (p. 14)
mail (<i>n.</i>)	armor made from metal plates or rings linked together (p. 6)
mead (<i>n.</i>)	a fermented drink made of honey, water, yeast, and malt (p. 3)
moors (<i>n.</i>)	areas of open land that cannot be used for farming; areas of land that are wet and covered in coarse grasses (p. 3)
perish (<i>v.</i>)	to die, especially in a sudden, violent, or unexpected way (p. 11)
skald (<i>n.</i>)	a poet in ancient Scandinavia who wrote and recited poems and stories about heroes (p. 5)
spoils (<i>n.</i>)	things taken by force or stolen; valuable things that are earned through hard work (p. 13)
thanes (<i>n.</i>)	followers of Anglo-Saxon lords in early British history (p. 3)