

Beowulf

A Reading A-Z Level X Leveled Book
Word Count: 2,585

LEVELED BOOK • X

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

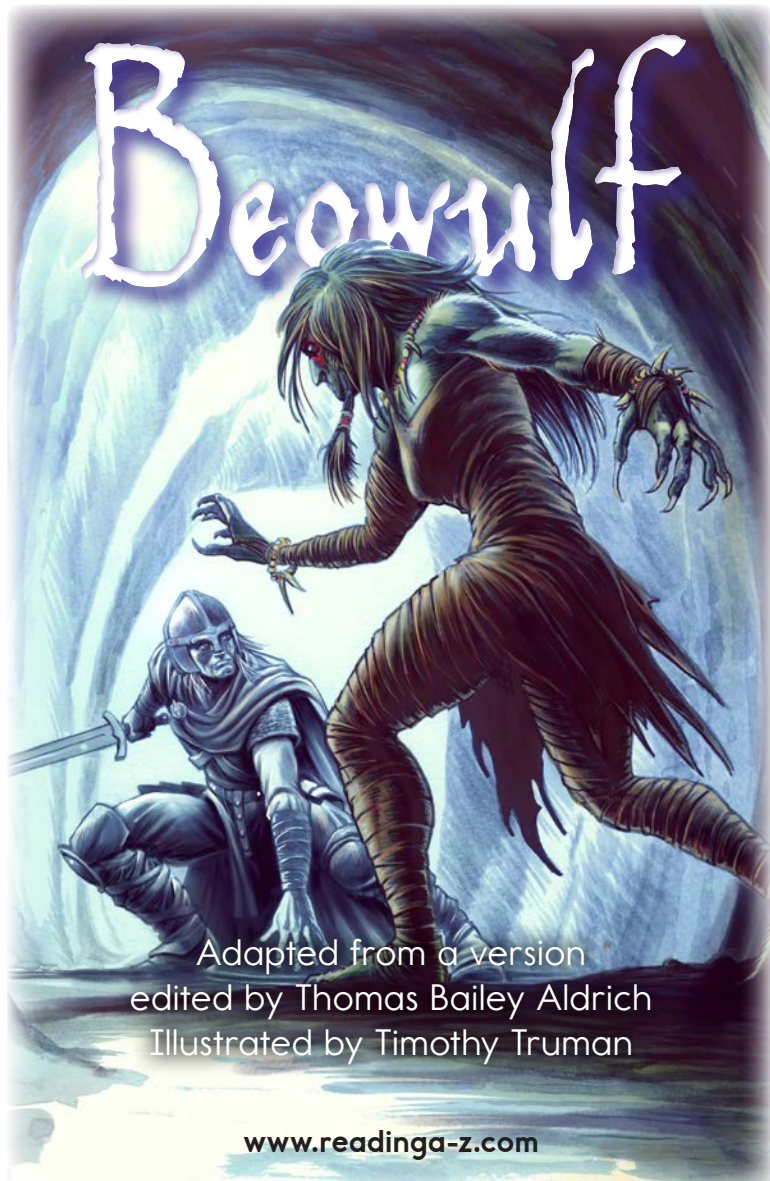
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Adapted from a version
edited by Thomas Bailey Aldrich
Illustrated by Timothy Truman

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Beowulf

**Multi
level
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Focus Question

What is a hero?

Words to Know

buckler	hoard
coronet	mail
earl	mead
fate	moors
fiend	perish
hilt	spoils

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Correlation

LEVEL X

Fountas & Pinnell	S
Reading Recovery	40
DRA	40

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

But there came a wicked monster, Grendel, out of the **moors**. He snuck across the fens in the thick darkness and entered the hall. There, Grendel saw the warriors sleeping after battle. The hideous **fiend** seized thirty of them in their sleep. He gave yells of joy and sped across the moors as quick as lightning to reach his home with his prey.



When the remaining warriors awoke, they raised a great cry of sorrow, while the old king himself sat speechless with grief. None could do battle with the monster, for he was too strong. 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 had a strong ship made ready and with fourteen friends set sail to visit Hrothgar, as he was in need of help. They took a ship across the swelling ocean until they saw shining white cliffs before them. They made fast their ship and set out for the golden hall.

A guard on the coast saw them from a tower and set off riding to the shore, armed with a huge spear.

"Who are you," he cried, "bearing weapons and openly landing here? I must know where you come from before you make a step forward." Beowulf answered 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.

When they reached the golden hall, King Hrothgar welcomed them. "Hail, O King!" said Beowulf. "To fight against Grendel have I come. I know that the terrible monster does not use weapons, and therefore I shall use neither sword, nor shield, nor **buckler**; hand to hand I will fight the foe, and death shall come to whomever God wills."

Hrothgar loved the youth for his noble words and invited Beowulf and his men to sit, that they might merrily share the feast. The queen, in cloth of gold, brought a jeweled cup of **mead** to the king and 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 commanded Beowulf to 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. All slept in the darkness, all but one! The door sprang open at the first touch the monster gave it. His eyes gleamed as he saw a troop of kinsmen lying together asleep. 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. Beowulf quickly grabbed his arm; he wrestled with him using 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, as up and down he raged, with Beowulf holding him fast. The benches were overturned, the timbers of the hall cracked, the beautiful hall all but wrecked. Beowulf's men seized their weapons 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, leaving Beowulf the victor.

In the morning, 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. A merry feast was held. The king gave a banner, helmet, and mail coat to Beowulf, 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 queen also gave gifts to Beowulf: mantle and bracelets and collar of gold.

Great was the joy of all till evening came. Beowulf, like the king, had his own room that night to sleep in. The warriors 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 and made her way in. She grabbed an **earl**, the king's dearest friend, and crushed him in his sleep. The warriors leapt up, swords in hand, but Grendel's mother escaped.

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 is dead. Another monster has come to avenge Grendel's death. She lives in a fearful spot, a land of 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. You are our only help. Dare you enter this horrible haunt?"

Beowulf answered quickly: "Sorrow not, O King! Rouse yourself, 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.

Beowulf made himself ready for the fight. He covered his body with armor. 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. Either I will win fame, or death shall take me.”

He plunged headfirst into the pool. It took nearly the whole day before he spied the bottom. Grendel’s mother, the troll-dam, met him. For a hundred years she had lived in those depths. She made a grab at him and caught him, but his coat of mail saved him from her horrible fingers. Still she clutched him tight and took him 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. Beowulf threw it away 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 saw among the armor on the wall an old sword of huge size, the handiwork of giants. He seized it and swung it with all his might so that the troll-dam gave up her life.

Beowulf searched the vast chamber and found Grendel lying there dead. He cut off his head as a trophy for King Hrothgar.

Now those 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 fading 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, so venomous was the blood of the fiend it had slain. 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. 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 praised Beowulf for his courage and said that he would love him as his son. "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 said farewell to the king with noble words, promising to help him in time of need.



The guard of the coast saw the gallant warriors coming, welcomed them, 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 his master's heavy hand, stumbled by an evil chance into the den of a dragon. He carried off a golden cup that was part of the dragon's treasure **hoard**.

The dragon had been sleeping; now he awoke. At once, he noticed the cup was missing. He could smell the scent of the man who had stolen his treasure.

When the sun sank, 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.

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 the dragon 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.

He ordered his men to wait for him on the mountainside. They were to see which of the two would come alive out of the fight.

Beowulf went to the entrance of the dragon's den. He gave a great shout, and the dragon answered with a hot breath of flame. Beowulf, with sword drawn, raised his shield when the burning dragon came headlong upon him. The shield barely saved him. He swung up the sword to strike 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, ran through the smoke and flame to help his lord.

The dragon came on in fury; in a moment the flames destroyed Wiglaf's shield, but 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 swung 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 struck 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 gently unloosed his helmet and brought him water. Beowulf said, "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 happily give up my life."

Wiglaf quickly entered the dragon's den 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 brought the treasures to Beowulf 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. Tell my men to raise a tall 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, removed his helmet and his **coronet**, and gave them to his true warrior, 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 chest to join the company of the just.



Glossary

buckler (<i>n.</i>)	a round, small shield (p. 4)
coronet (<i>n.</i>)	a simple or small crown (p. 15)
earl (<i>n.</i>)	a nobleman of medium rank (p. 7)
fate (<i>n.</i>)	an outcome or series of events in one's life that is beyond one's control (p. 15)
fiend (<i>n.</i>)	an evil person, spirit, or monster (p. 3)
hilt (<i>n.</i>)	the handle of a sword, dagger, or other weapon (p. 10)
hoard (<i>n.</i>)	a large amount of treasure or other valuables that are hidden or guarded (p. 12)
mail (<i>n.</i>)	armor made from metal plates or rings linked together (p. 5)
mead (<i>n.</i>)	a fermented drink made of honey, water, yeast, and malt (p. 5)
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. 9)
spoils (<i>n.</i>)	things taken by force or stolen; valuable things that are earned through hard work (p. 11)