Beowulf

Background Info

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 Scyldings. Grendel, a monster descended from Cain, 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 power and strength, kills Grendel. Grendel returns to the feast to die. His arm is hung up under the roof of Heorot.

Grendel is the son of Hrethel and the husband of Hygd, and a dragon with a terrible hunger for treasure. Heorot is 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.

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 prais ed 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 Aescere, 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 Aescere’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 hunting, 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 passage way 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 kinman 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 Wyflings.

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 Wealththeow 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 Wealththeow’s son. After Hygelac died, 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.

Brecan – 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.

Hondscioth – The Geat whom Grendel grabs and eats in Heorot before Beowulf fights the beast.
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 women 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 decisions and actions. How things change and raises questions about characters’ reasons and actions.

**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.

**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 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.

**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. Beowulf’s original role as a hero is reinforced by the Christ-like nature of his relationship with the Danes, his ability to save them from the threats they face, and the latter’s ability to see the former as a Christ-like figure. As you read Beowulf, keep on the lookout for the ways that Christianity and paganism interact in the poem.
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 blue indicates that all five themes apply to that part of the summary.

1. Prologue (Lines 1–63)

Scyld Seafaring 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.”

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

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.

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

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.

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

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.

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.

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 midnight. This situation continues for twelve years.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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. Hrothgar brings this request to Hrothgar.

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

Wulfgar invites the Geats to speak to Hrothgar. Beowulf greets Hrothgar, and says he has heard that because of Grendel, Hrothar 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.

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.”

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

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.

5. A Feast at Heorot (Lines 491–701)

The Geats and Danes feast in Heorot. But Unferth, the son of Ecgla, 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.

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

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.

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

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

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

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.

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.

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

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.
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 then fought and killed. Beowulf comments: “fate often saves an undermined man when his courage is firm.”

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

Hrothgar and the Danes are cheered by Beowulf’s resolve and daring. Wealththow, 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 struggle wake the warriors. All. He says has not heard that Grendel has not heard that a spell protects Grendel from the force of their fight. The men grab their weapons to help, not knowing that a spell protects Grendel from ranks. Men follow Beowulf’s lead, and fill the hall with the victory in all swords.

Beowulf is now free from threats. He proclaims that Beowulf is now a son to him, and rewards him with treasure, and return to their people with Hildeburh.

6. Beowulf vs. Grendel (Lines 702–836)

Grendel approaches Hrothgar and tears open the doors. He grabs a sleeping Geat, Hondschoth, 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. Hrethic 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.

Grendel, an outsider who is an upstart in 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.

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.

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.

The immense damage caused by Beowulf’s fight with Grendel is repaired, and a great feast held. Hrothgar 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, wears 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.

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The Danelaw, divided into twelve districts, each with a leader. The leaders are chosen by the Danes, and the king appoints them. The leaders are responsible for law and order, and are paid by the king. The leaders are also responsible for providing military service to the king.

After the song, Wealththow, 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 Hrethic 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 Hrothulf 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 Hrothgar. Hrothgar tells him that Grendel grabbed Aescre, 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.

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

As a loyal lord, it’s Hrothgar’s obligation to avenge Aescre’s death. So now Hrothgar seeks revenge, just as Grendel’s mother does. There is a new twist: the Danes are now victims, and continued, until one people 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.

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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.

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

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 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.

Beowulf strikes at Grendel’s mother with the borrowed sword Hunting, 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.

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.

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

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.

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.

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 guided me.”

Hrothgar examines the hilt of the sword Beowulf used to kill Grendel’s mother. In intricate craftsmanship, 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.

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 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.

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

Then Beowulf bids farewell to Hrothgar. He promises to support the Danes in times of trouble, and promises that Hrothgar’s son Hrethic 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.

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.

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

When Beowulf and the other Geats arrive home, the harbor guard greets them in great friendship and welcomes them home.

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 Olfró the Angles.

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

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 with the Futhyrca. The warriors go to Hrothgar’s hall, where Hrethic has been given a sword and a great treasure.

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

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

11. Beowulf at Home (Lines 1913–2199)

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

Repetition and contrast to Modthryth are used to highlight Hygd’s queenship.

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’s comments about Hrothgar and Wealhtheow highlight Hygd’s and Hygelac’s generosity and courtesy.

Beowulf’s story is like a boast: it increases his own fame as a warrior. But his kindly traits are visible in his loyalty to Hrothgar.

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.

Beowulf’s youthful devotey links him to men like Scyld Sceofung, 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.

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.

The dragon guards an underground barrow full of treasure, which is accessible only by 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 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.

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 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.

The treasure, which is useless. It is only as a means of creating bonds in society that treasure has value.

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.

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 rulehip of the kingdom, fearing that her son Heardred was too young and too rule. But Beowulf refused to take the throne, instead choosing to 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.

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, Haethcynn, and Hygelac. Beowulf then recounts how Haethcynn 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. Haethcynn took the throne when Hrethel died, and was killed in battle against the Swedes.

14. Beowulf and Wiglaf 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 his treasure as his final gift to his country. Beowulf describes the treasure as his final gift to his country, and pays off his king with more than a king as a warrior. Beowulf installs the treasure hoard, without a people to use and "pollish" it, is useless. It is only as a means of creating bonds in society that treasure has value.

The accidental killing of one of his 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 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 averting the son's death because he would then be killing his other son.

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As the ten Geatish warriors who ran away return, a grief-stricken Wiglaf attempts in vain to revive Beowulf. Beowulf 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."

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.

15. Wiglaf Speaks (Lines 2846–3109)

Wiglaf decimates the dragons 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.

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

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

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

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

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. The treasure hoard, without a people to use and "pollish" it, is useless. It is only as a means of creating bonds in society that treasure has value.

Wiglaf describes the treasure as his final gift to his country, and pays off his king with more than a king as a warrior. Beowulf installs the treasure hoard, without a people to use and "pollish" it, is useless. It is only as a means of creating bonds in society that treasure has value.

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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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 was his fate.”

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.”

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

Beowulf’s last gift to his people is burned. It is “useless,” suggesting his choice to fight the dragon doomed his people.

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

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.
Scyld Scefing – rises from an orphan to found a Danish dynasty.
- The throne passes to Beowulf, Healfdene, Heorogar, and, then to Hrothgar.

Hrothgar rules well and prosperously. He builds Heorot.
- Grendel attacks Heorot.
- Hrothgar and the Danes, without their mead-hall, despair for twelve years.

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.

At a feast, Unferth insults Beowulf.
- Beowulf boasts of his youthful swimming contest with Breca.

Beowulf fights Grendel without weapons and rips the monster’s arm from its socket. Grendel flees to the swamp to die.
- 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.

Grendel’s mother attacks Heorot, takes Grendel’s arm, and kills Hrothgar’s counselor Aeschere.
- 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.
- 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 Hrethic to visit the Geats. Hrothgar says Beowulf would make a good king.

Beowulf returns home to the Geats and gives his treasure to his king, Hygelac.
- Hygelac rewards Beowulf with treasure and land.

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.

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.

Beowulf gives Wiglaf treasure and the throne, then dies.
- Wiglaf takes the throne, but predicts (correctly) that hard times are ahead for the Geats.

Beowulf is buried in a barrow on a cliff. The Geats build a huge mound over Beowulf’s barrow and mourn their dead king.