

BEOWULF

Overview of the poem

Beowulf is the oldest poem in the English language. It is the most important specimen of Anglo-Saxon literature, and also the oldest surviving **epic** in the English language. It had been passed from mouth to mouth for hundreds of years before it was written down in the 10th century or at the end of the 9th century. The main stories in the poem are based on the folk legends of the primitive northern tribes. It is an Old English epic poem in the tradition of Germanic heroic legend consisting of **3,182** alliterative lines. It is one of the most important and most often translated works of Old English literature. Scholars call the anonymous author the "**Beowulf poet**". The poem survives in a single copy in the manuscript known as the **Nowell Codex**. It has no title in the original manuscript, but has become known by the name of the story's protagonist.

The story is about king Hrothgar, king of the Danes, who has built, near the sea, a mead-hall called Heorot. It is the most splendid hall in the world. Every night the king and his thanes gather there to feast and enjoy the songs of his gleemen. But later on misfortunes befall them. One night, after they have gone to sleep, a frightful monster called Grendel comes. He breaks into the hall, kills thirty of the sleeping warriors, carries off their bodies and devours them in his lair under the sea. The appalling visit speedily repeats, and fear and death reign in the great hall. The king's warriors fight at first, but flee when they find that no weapon can hurt the monster. The splendid mead-hall is left deserted and silent. For twelve winters Grendel's horrible raids continue, and joy is changed to mourning among the Danes.

Beowulf is the nephew of Hygelac, king of the Geats who live in Juteland, Denmark. He is a great hero, noted for his strength and bravery. When he hears that Hrothgar, the good friend of his uncle, is in great trouble, he determines to help the unhappy king. Then he crosses the sea with 14 soldiers to rid Hrothgar of the monster. When they get there, they are given a feast of welcome in the hall, and then they lie down in the hall for the night. At midnight, Grendel comes and kills one of Beowulf's soldiers. Beowulf has a hand-to-hand fight with him.

Finally he wrenches off one of the monster's arms. Then the monster flees to his den and dies. The next night, Grendel's mother descends upon the hall to avenge her son. She carries away the king's dearest friend. In the morning, Beowulf chases her into her lair and slays her with a sword wrought by the giants hanging on the wall. When he finds the corpse of Grendel, he cuts off his head and brings it back triumphantly. The Danes award him many treasures, and Beowulf returns to his uncle happily. He returns to Geatland, where he and his men are reunited with their king and queen, Hygelac and Hygd, to whom Beowulf recounts his adventures in Denmark. Beowulf then hands over most of his treasure to Hygelac, who, in turn, rewards him.

In time, Hygelac is killed in a war against the Svyflings, and, after Hygelac's son dies, Beowulf ascends to the throne of the Geats. He rules wisely for fifty years, bringing prosperity to Geatland. When Beowulf is an old man, however, a thief disturbs a barrow, or mound, where a great dragon lies guarding a horde of treasure. Enraged, the dragon emerges from the barrow and begins unleashing fiery destruction upon the Geats. Sensing his own death approaching, Beowulf goes to fight the dragon. With the aid of Wiglaf, he succeeds in killing the beast, but at a heavy cost. The dragon bites Beowulf in the neck, and its fiery venom kills him moments after their encounter. The Geats fear that their enemies will attack them now that Beowulf is dead. According to Beowulf's wishes, they burn their departed king's body on a huge funeral pyre and then bury him with a massive treasure in a barrow overlooking the sea.

-Writing Features of the Poem

-It is not a Christian but a **pagan** poem, despite the Christian flavour given to it by the monastery scribe who wrote it down. It is the product of an advanced pagan civilisation.

-The whole poem presents to us an all-round picture of the tribal society. The social conditions and customs can be clearly seen in the poem. It helps us a lot when we study the primitive society of Europe. So the poem has a great social significance.

-The use of strong stresses and the predominance of consonants are notable in the poetical lines. Each line is divided into **two halves**, and each half is made to have two heavy stresses.

-The use of **alliteration** is another notable feature of the poem. Three stressed syllables of each line are arranged in alliteration, which makes the whole line even more emphatic.

-A lot of **metaphors** and **Kennings** are used in the poem. For example, the sea is called “the whale-road” or “the swan-road”; the soldiers are called “shield-men”; the chieftains are called “treasure-keepers”; the human body is referred to as “the bone-house”; God is called “wonder-wielder”; the monster is referred to as “soul-destroyer”.

-Antagonism in Beowulf

Beowulf's antagonists are the three monsters: he literally combats them, and these three fights form the three major episodes of the poem. All three monsters are mysterious, and critics have disagreed about what they represent. Grendel represents the envy and resentment of defeated peoples, his mother represents the endless cycle of blood-vengeance, and the dragon represents greed for treasure. The three of them are considered as obstacles on the protagonist's path.

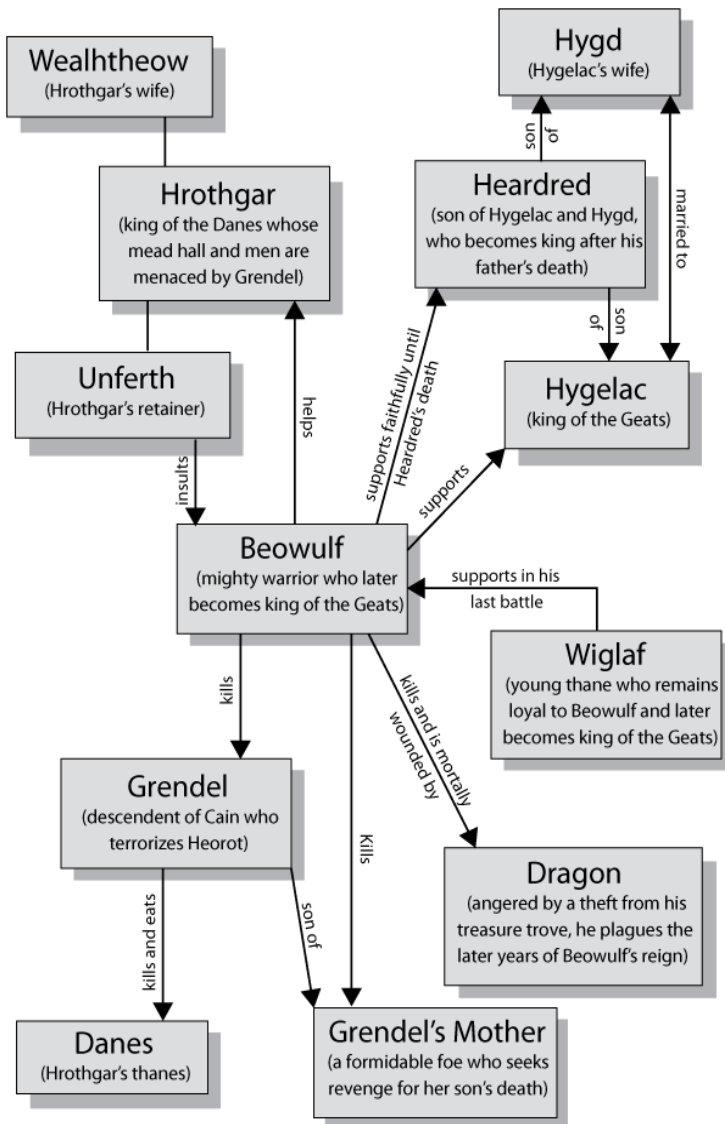
-Setting of the story

Beowulf is set in Scandinavia, sometime around the year 500 A.D, in the territories of two tribal groups, the Geats and the Scyldings (Danes), who really existed and really lived in those areas during the period of the poem. Many of the poem's figures, including Hrothgar, Hygelac and Wiglaf, may have been real people.

-Point of view:

Beowulf is told from a third-person omniscient point of view. The poem's narrator has access to the interior thoughts and feelings of all the characters, even the dragon. The narrator also comments on the action, usually to draw out moral implications.

Characters Map



Major themes

Loyalty, Heroism, Victory, community values, Collective Vs. Individual Identity, The clash between good and evil, Mortality, Audacity and courage, Travel and adventure, Jealousy, Treasure guarding, glory and fame, strength and challenge, revenge, ...etc

The story characters

Beowulf: The protagonist of the epic, Beowulf is a Geatish hero who fights the monster Grendel, Grendel's mother, and a fire-breathing dragon. Beowulf's boasts and encounters reveal him to be the strongest, ablest warrior around. In his youth, he personifies all of the best values of the heroic culture. In his old age, he proves a wise and effective ruler.

King Hrothgar: The king of the Danes. Hrothgar enjoys military success and prosperity until Grendel terrorizes his realm. A wise and aged ruler, Hrothgar represents a different kind of leadership from that exhibited by the youthful warrior Beowulf. He is a father figure to Beowulf and a model for the kind of king that Beowulf becomes. **Wealhtheow** is Hrothgar's wife, the gracious queen of the Danes.

Grendel: A demon descended from Cain, Grendel preys on Hrothgar's warriors in the king's mead-hall, Heorot. Because his ruthless and miserable existence is part of the retribution exacted by God for Cain's murder of Abel, Grendel fits solidly within the ethos of vengeance that governs the world of the poem.

-Grendel's Mother: An unnamed swamp-hag, Grendel's mother seems to possess fewer human qualities than Grendel, although her terrorization of Heorot is explained by her desire for vengeance—a human motivation.

-The Dragon: An ancient, powerful serpent, the dragon guards a horde of treasure in a hidden mound. Beowulf's fight with the dragon constitutes the third and final part of the epic.

-Unferth: A Danish warrior who is jealous of Beowulf, Unferth is unable or unwilling to fight Grendel, thus proving himself inferior to Beowulf.

-Wiglaf: A young kinsman and retainer of Beowulf who helps him in the fight against the dragon while all of the other warriors run away. **Wiglaf** adheres to the heroic code better than Beowulf's other retainers, thereby proving himself a suitable successor to Beowulf.

-Shield Sheafson: The legendary Danish king from whom Hrothgar is descended, Shield Sheafson is the mythical founder who inaugurates a long line of Danish rulers and embodies the Danish tribe's highest values of heroism and leadership. **Beow** is the second king listed in the genealogy of Danish rulers with which the poem begins. **Beow** is the son of Shield Sheafson and father of **Halfdane**.