

*PinkMonkey*<sup>®</sup> Literature Notes on . . .

# ***BEOWULF***

By

**ANONYMOUS**



*Edited by Diane Sauder*

***PinkMonkey.com, Inc. Copyright © 1997-1999, All Rights Reserved***

## **BEOWULF**

### **KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS**

#### **SETTING**

The main theatrical backdrop of *Beowulf* is Denmark, especially in the regal court of King Hrothgar. The poem begins and ends in Geatland, to the south of Lake Vattern in present-day Sweden. During the poem, Beowulf crosses the sea from Geatland to Denmark. Specific settings are quite varied: Heorot Hall, where Danish banquets are held; the lair of Grendel's mother in a murky lake that boils with blood; the cave of the dragon, which is filled with treasure; and the elaborate funeral pyre built for Beowulf.

#### **CHARACTERS**

##### **Major Characters**

*Beowulf* - Ecgtheow's son, who is strong in mind and body. He is a true hero and a superman. He backs up his extraordinary feats with a powerful sense of social responsibility and morality. He is also engaging and humane.

*Hrothgar* - the king of the Danes, the son of Healfdene, and the brother of Heorogar. A very just man, he never goes back on his promises and always praises brave and capable heroes. He wishes to make peace with the Heathobards.

*Wiglaf* - a young and brave Geat who is part of Beowulf's retinue. He helps Beowulf slay the dragon when the rest of the men run away. He also conveys Beowulf's last message to his people.

*Unferth* - the son of Ecglaaf. He taunts Beowulf early in the poem, but later he lends his sword. He is also responsible for slaying his brother.

*Grendel* - the dreaded monster who threatens Hrothgar's kingdom. Beowulf succeeds in killing him.

*Grendel's Mother* - the troll wife of Cain. She is a hag who dwells in a cave at the bottom of a large swampy pond.

*The Dragon* - a monster that ravages Beowulf's Kingdom. Beowulf kills him but loses his own life.

##### **Minor Characters**

*Scyld Scefing* - the founder of Hrothgar's mighty Danish royal house and the son of Scaef.

*Beowulf, the Dane (usually called Beow)* - the son of Scyld who becomes a Danish King. He is a different person from the titular hero of the poem.

*Healfdene* - the son of Beowulf the Dane. He is the father of Hrothgar, Heorogar, and Halga.

*Hrethric* - Hrothgar's son and the elder brother of Hrothmund. He is killed when Hrothulf usurps the Danish throne after Hrothgar's death.

*Wealtheow* - the wife of King Hrothgar. She is a gracious hostess and is the mother of Hrethric and Hrothmund.

*Aeschere* - the favorite counselor and retainer of Hrothgar. Grendel's mother kills him.

*Freawaru* - Hrothgar's daughter. She was married to Ingeld in order to end the feud between the Danes and the Heathobards.

*Ecgtheow* - Beowulf's father, who is a Geat. He is married to King Hrethel's only daughter. When he slays a man, he escapes to Denmark, and Hrothgar pays his blood money.

*Heardred* - a Geat King who is the son of Hygelac. Beowulf counsels with him and avenges his murder by killing the Swedish king Onela.

*Hrethel* - Hygelac's father and Beowulf's grandfather. He dies of grief after Haethcyn kills his own brother.

*Hygd* - the mother of Heardred. Beowulf gives her the necklace that had been given to him by Wealtheow.

*Onela* - Ongentheow's son. He is slain by Beowulf .

## SWORDS

*There is a mention of two swords.*

*Hrunting* - Unferth lends this sword to Beowulf before he goes to slay Grendel's mother.

*Naegling* - Beowulf's sword that fails him when he is fighting against the dragon.

## REFERENCES

*There are many references to Biblical and historical characters in the play.*

## CONFLICT

The conflict between Beowulf and the monsters is really a battle of good vs. evil. Beowulf, as the superhero, rises above fighting temporal human foes to do cosmic battle with the representatives of evil.

**Protagonist:** The protagonist is Beowulf, a symbol of goodness. He is a superhero with a strong body, intelligent mind, and extraordinary skills. He is a champion for everything that is right. During the poem, he slays monsters and dragons that stand for evil and ugliness.

**Antagonist:** Beowulf's antagonist is the series of monsters that he must fight and overcome, such as Grendel and the Dragon. Together these monsters represent evil and ugliness.

**Climax:** The plot really unfolds in a series of three climaxes. The first occurs when the brave Beowulf goes to the land of the Danes, where he fights Grendel and pulls his arm from his socket in a fierce, bloody battle; Grendel flees from Heorot Hall and soon dies. Beowulf must then fight Grendel's mother, who seeks revenge for her son's death. In another bloody battle, Beowulf cuts off her head. The third climatic moment occurs in Beowulf's battle with a fiery dragon. As the dragon attacks Wiglaf, the only one in Beowulf's retinue that does not run away, Beowulf strikes the dragon and eventually kills it; but during the fight, the monster succeeds in sinking his fangs into Beowulf's neck, delivering a fatal wound to the protagonist of the poem.

**Outcome:** The poem ends as a comedy. Even though Beowulf is killed by the dragon at the end of the poem, he has succeeded in overcoming the forces of evil and ugliness.

### **PLOT (Synopsis)**

*Beowulf* is a long poem with no break in its narrative. It is also a masterful poem that weaves superhuman, almost magical powers around its heroic protagonist, Beowulf. As the symbol of both strength and goodness, he does quite extraordinary feats, but always with a powerful sense of social responsibility and morality.

Hrothgar, an old man and the King of the Danes, is anxious and worried. He has enjoyed many years of prosperity and joy, but the good times have come to a halt. Grendel, a gigantic bear-like monster, has attacked the King in his own hall and killed thirty of Hrothgar's thanes. Grendel's attack came out of jealousy and without warning; and he continues to inflict violence on the Danish world. It is rumored that Grendel is a descendant of Cain, a character from the Old Testament who committed the first murder by killing his own brother out of jealousy.

Beowulf, the nephew of King Hygelac of Geatland, is known as a great and brave man. He earned his reputation by swimming for seven days on the open sea and by using a sword to fight off sharks. When he hears about the attacks of the bloodthirsty Grendel, he sets sail for Danish shores in order to help Hrothgar master the monster. Beowulf plans to use his famous handgrip, which supposedly has the strength of thirty men, to conquer Grendel. Hrothgar has heard about Beowulf's feats and is well acquainted with his lineage. As the King of the Danes, Hrothgar had once protected Ecgtheow, Beowulf's father, in a time of exile.

When Beowulf arrives, Hrothgar invites him to his famous wine hall to join in a celebration. Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's gracious and noble queen, greets the men upon their arrival. Beowulf assures her that he will kill Grendel and bring peace back to the kingdom. The hall is filled with merriment and resounds with noise and laughter. Unferth, however, taunts Beowulf about a swimming defeat. Beowulf defends himself and explains that the swimming match was lost because he was attacked by a pack of monsters and also because he had saved Breca's life.

When the King and Queen retire for the night, Beowulf lies down and falls asleep. Grendel barges in, snatches one of Beowulf's thanes, and tears him apart. The monster then turns on Beowulf, starting a terrible battle. Grendel, realizing that he has never met such a tough adversary, tries to escape; but before he can get away, Beowulf wrenches his arm from the socket. Grendel howls in pain as he departs. The men try to follow Grendel, but find no trace of him.

Hrothgar is joyous over Beowulf's defeat of Grendel. He promises to cherish him forever as a son. After the interior of the Heorot is rebuilt, redecorated, and furnished, Hrothgar holds a great feast in Beowulf's

honor. He presents him with a golden war banner, a helmet, a mailshirt (armor), a sword studded with jewels, and eight horses with golden bridles. Hrothgar also gives Beowulf his own war saddle, studded with gems.

In the midst of the celebration, Grendel's mother attacks the hall, seeking revenge for her son. She kills Aeschere, Hrothgar's favorite retainer, snatches Grendel's hand, and runs away. Hrothgar appeals to Beowulf for help. He rushes out, following Grendel's mother to the fearful lake where she resides. Unferth lends him his sword, which is called Hrunting. A terrible battle ensues between Grendel's mother and Beowulf. He succeeds in cutting off her head. Hrothgar is again overjoyed about Beowulf's victory. After much feasting and many rewards, Beowulf departs for home.

Years pass. Hygelac dies and so does his son. Beowulf becomes the King of Geatland. For fifty winters, he rules in peace and harmony. Then a slave robs a slumbering dragon, which grows enraged and plagues the land. Beowulf goes out to fight the marauding dragon. His sword, Naegling, fails him, but he still puts up a courageous battle. With Wiglaf's help, he manages to slay the terrible enemy; however, in the battle, Beowulf is mortally wounded. A huge funeral pyre is built for him and his ashes are honored for ten days.

## **THEMES**

### **Major Theme**

The major theme of the narrative poem is the triumph of goodness over evil. Beowulf, the epic hero of the tale, stands for all that is good, brave and proper, while the monsters stand for evil. During the course of the poem, Beowulf manages to fatally wound Grendel, kill Grendel's mother and slay the dragon. Unfortunately, Beowulf is also killed by the dragon, but not before he has conquered the evil monsters.

### **Minor Theme**

The minor theme of the poem centers on loyalty. Beowulf stands apart from other men because of his extraordinary loyalty to his king or lord. He rushes to help Hrothgar each time he needs him, conquering Grendel and his mother. Beowulf has no ulterior motives, for he has no desire for the Danish throne; he simply wants to help Hrothgar and do what is right. Unfortunately, Beowulf's men do not possess the same degree of loyalty towards him. When he is in danger, his men often flee, as seen at the dragon's lair. Because of their lack of loyalty, they are damned and castigated. Loyalty was one of the most important qualities a man could possess in Beowulf's time, and its presence in a person elevated him from ordinary to heroic.

## **MOOD**

The mood of the entire saga is triumphant, as Beowulf goes about conquering evil. The action is always exciting, positive, and upbeat. Even when Beowulf is wounded and dies, the mood remains triumphant, for he has overcome evil, slaying the dragon.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

### **ANONYMOUS**

The author of the poem is not known. From the narrative, it can be inferred that he was a warm, humane, skilled and sophisticated storyteller who had a clear grasp of fundamental human values. Although the

poem he tells is simple and straightforward, it is filled with in-depth nuances that capture the essence of human goodness.

## LITERARY INFORMATION

*Beowulf* is written in the oral tradition where a story is verbally told. In written form, it follows traditional Anglo Saxon poetry, which has four stress lines. It is also filled with allusions, events, and individuals, evidently familiar to the poet and his audience. Beowulf, the protagonist, is surrounded by dozens of historical characters. Beowulf talks about Scyld, who is the founder of the Danish nation.

The author of *Beowulf* seems to have been influenced by both folk tales and Germanic literature. Beowulf's battle with Grendel is similar to the battle against a monster portrayed in "The Three Stolen Princesses," a well-known folk tale of the time. In other Germanic literature of the period, there are lots of dragons, much like the one in the poem about Beowulf.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The exact date of the writing of *Beowulf* is unknown. The only existing copy of the poem was dated AD 1000; therefore, it had to have been written early than that date. It also could not have been composed before AD 521, because of its reference to the death of Hygelac. Since several of the Germanic characters alluded to in the poem are from the eighth century, it is often assumed that *Beowulf* was written in the eighth century.

## SUMMARIES AND NOTES

*The poem is written as a single, complete narrative, without any sub-divisions. The ones imposed below are given by the writer of the guide to help with the understanding of the whole of Beowulf.*

## INTRODUCTION: DANISH HISTORY

The poem begins with an explanation of the fame of Danish kings long gone and the daring feats of heroes past. Scyld Scaefing, found as an abandoned baby, grew up to be a great leader of men who terrified his foes. By the grace of heaven, he was victorious over all his enemies. Winning praise and honor from all the tribes, they appointed him their leader and agreed to obey him. Scyld had a son who was named Beow. Like his father he was liked and admired, soon becoming famous throughout Norse lands.

When Scyld died, his followers grieved and mourned for him. His close companions carried him down to the sea. According to Norse custom, he was put in a ship, along with lavish weapons and ornaments which would supposedly be useful for his journey into the unknown. After his father's death, Beow of Denmark became the king, ruling for many years. His fame spread far and wide. His son, Healfdene, came to the throne after Beow's death. Healfdene had four children; his sons were named Herogar, Hrothgar, and Halga. His daughter became the queen of Onela, the Swedish king.

### Notes

The poet of *Beowulf* is obviously interested in history and has fitted his fairy tale figure of Beowulf into a precise historical context. The poem begins by identifying the actual lineage of the Danish royal house. The Danes, a Norse tribe, rescued a baby abandoned on a ship that was filled with immense treasure. He was named Scyld Scaefing and became an excellent and glorious king and the founder of the Danish royal

house. In his old age, he finally had a son, whom he named Beow. Beow, in turn, had a son named Healfdene. He had a daughter and four sons, including Hrothgar. Although Hrothgar was not the eldest child of Healfdene, he became the King of the Danes due to his brave feats as a warrior. Hrothgar becomes one of the main characters of *Beowulf*.

In a like manner, Beowulf is supposedly descended from Geat royalty. His father, Ecgtheow, is married to King Hrethel's only daughter; therefore, Beowulf's mother is a royal Geat princess, and Beowulf is the King Hrethel's grandson. At the time of the poem, Hrethel's son, Hygelac, has ascended to the Geat throne; Beowulf is his nephew. Familiar to royal settings, Beowulf is perfectly at ease when he visits Hrothgar's court.

The poem begins in Geatland, Beowulf's home. It is a part of present-day Sweden and is located south of Lake Vattern. At the end of the poem, Beowulf will return to Geatland; but most of the action takes place in Denmark, on the principal island of Zealand where Hrothgar lives.

### **GRENDL DISTURBS THE DANISH PEACE**

Healfdene's son, Hrothgar, won great honor in battle, as well as at home. As a result, he became King of the Danes even though he was not the eldest son. Hrothgar built a large feasting hall that was used for celebrations and the distribution of gifts. It became the heart of King Hrothgar's kingdom and was called Heorot Hall. The hall was huge, lofty, and gabled, braced inside and out with hammered iron bands. It was lavishly furnished and decorated, with benches inlaid with gold. There were horns and tapestries hanging on the walls. Later in the poem, when Beowulf and his band of Geats arrived at the court of Hrothgar, they were asked to leave their ashen spears outside Heorot and were then led into the hall to meet the King, who was inside the hall surrounded by his Thanes. Therefore, Heorot served as a social hub and a reception room, as well as being a place of celebration and merriment.

A jealous monster, named Grendel, lived in the area surrounding Heorot. He descended from the lineage of Cain, the man in the Old Testament who committed the first murder by killing his own brother out of jealousy and under the cover of darkness. Grendel resented all the happiness and celebration that occurred in the great hall. As a result, he decided to attack the Heorot. When he found a band of warriors asleep in the hall, he seized thirty of the thanes and led them towards his lair.

At dawn, Hrothgar discovered the tragedy. He saw Grendel's footsteps and realized that he had lost his attendants to this miserable monster. Although sad and enraged, he felt helpless against the evil Grendel. As a result, Grendel attacked the hall again. This time the assault and murders were more gruesome. Still there was no retaliation. Then for twelve long years, Grendel continued to attack the Danes, casting sorrow and doom on the people. His evil crimes were afflicted on young and old alike. Although Hrothgar was crushed to see Heorot abused, he still felt powerless against Grendel. His men had repeatedly begged for help from the gods and offered appropriate sacrifices to them; but no help came. In fact, it seemed like the gods had forsaken the Danes.

#### Notes

Grendel, an evil monster, attacks Heorot out of jealousy, for he hates to see people feasting and happy when he is not included. The poet links the imaginary Grendel to the lineage of Cain and imbues him with the same trait of jealousy. Like the Biblical Cain, Grendel murders without hesitation; as a result, he seems

to have also fallen from God's favor. In contrast, it is hinted that Hrothgar is protected from Grendel because of his belief in God, while his warriors are killed by Grendel because of their idolatry. Here and in other places in the poem, there is a clear religious undercurrent.

Hrothgar is greatly saddened by the attack on Heorot by Grendel. However, he feels he is too old to seek revenge. Because there is no retaliation, Grendel strikes again and again, growing more gruesome with each attack. For twelve long years, Grendel rules the land of the Danes with his evil.

## **BEOWULF TO THE RESCUE**

The terrible news of Grendel's cruel treatment of Hrothgar and the Danes reaches Geatland. Hygelac, the King of the Geats, tells his nephew, Beowulf, about Hrothgar's troubles. Beowulf, supposedly the strongest man alive, announces that he will go and help Hrothgar. After choosing fourteen brave thanes to accompany him on the journey, Beowulf sets sail. After many days, they successfully reach the land of the Danes and thank God for their safe passage.

From a cliff top, a Danish watchman spies the Geats as they arrive. When Beowulf and his men troop down the gangway, he sees that they are armed and grows frightened. Galloping on his horse and brandishing his sword, he challenges the Geats by asking, "Warriors, who are you? Why are you armed and why has your ship come here? I have been a coastguard for many years and . . . never have I seen warriors carrying their shields so openly. I have never set eyes on a more noble man than your leader. But before you set one foot further on Danish Land, I would like to know why you are here and who you are."

Beowulf tells the watchman, "We are Geats, companions of Hygelac. My father Ecgtheow was famed far and wide. We would like to meet your lord, Hrothgar, Healfdene's son, with most honorable intentions. We have come on an errand to him to end his ordeals by Grendel." The coastguard responds, "I can see your intentions are good. I will command my companions to guard your ship from foes and we will proceed".

Once the ship is securely anchored and closely guarded, the Thanes, led by Beowulf, proceed to the heavily adorned hall, known as Heorot. When they approach the hall, the coast guard takes his leave; he does not dare to enter the hall, but he wishes Beowulf good luck and asks the gods to guard him in his enterprise against Grendel. Beowulf's warriors, dressed in gleaming chain mail and corselets, proceed to the hall. Once inside, they turn their shield to the wall and sit on a bench.

Wufgar, a Danish warrior, asks the Geats of their ancestry. Beowulf introduces himself and explains that they come from Hygelac and wish to speak to Hrothgar. The wise Wufgar responds, "I will ask the lord of the Danes about your request and bring back an answer." Wufgar then departs to rush to Hrothgar with the news.

Hrothgar, now old and grizzled, is surrounded by Thanes. When Wufgar tells him about Beowulf, he begs his leader to see the Geats. Hrothgar explains that he has known Beowulf as a boy, as well as his illustrious father, Ecgtheow. He accepts the Geats as loyal friends. Hrothgar explains that he has heard that Beowulf is extremely strong, having the strength of thirty men in his grip. As a result, the Danish leader is hopeful that Beowulf will be able to overcome Grendel. Hrothgar promises to reward the Geat with great treasure if he succeeds. He ends by saying, "Tell them they are most welcome". Wufgar rushes back to the Geats. He tells Beowulf that Hrothgar welcomes them.



## Notes

Beowulf, the nephew of King Hygelac of Geatland, takes on an almost superhuman hue from the moment of his introduction in the poem. When he hears about Hrothgar's troubles, he immediately responds by wanting to go to his aid. From this point forward, the poem will evolve around this noble hero.

Beowulf's reputation is already well established. He is believed to be the strongest man alive, having the strength of thirty men in his grip; in his battles, he seldom uses weapons, preferring to fight his enemies with his own strength. To satisfy a bet, Beowulf, with his companion Breca, swam for seven days on an open sea and used a sword to ward off whales and sharks. Such extraordinary feats, however, are backed by Beowulf's powerful sense of social responsibility and morality. He comes to the land of the Danes out of a sense of adventure; but he also wants to fight Grendel in order to avenge Hrothgar and save the Danes.

Beowulf, like Scyld Scefing, has had a very uncertain beginning. When he was a boy, his father kills Heatholaf of the Wylfings, starting a great feud. Ecgtheow is forced into exile, leaving his son Beowulf behind. Ecgtheow flees to Hrothgar's court. The Danish King has mercy on him and grants Ecgtheow wergild, which is considered blood money paid to settle feuds. By the time his father returns, Beowulf has become his own person. That is why he can so quickly make up his mind to go to the land of the Danes and offer his assistance against Grendel.

Taking fourteen loyal Thanes with him, Beowulf sets sail. The journey takes many days. When they arrive, they arm themselves and depart the ship. An attentive watchmen spies them. Concerned about their armor and weapons, he stops them and questions them. Beowulf explains that they are Geats who have come to help the Danes fight Grendel. Trusting Beowulf's explanation, the coast guard leads the Geats towards Hrothgar. When they are close to Heorot, he points the way and departs.

At Heorot, the Geats are greeted by Wufgar, who takes Beowulf's request to Hrothgar. The King tells Wufgar that the Geats are welcome and should be brought into the great hall of Heorot. Hrothgar is now an old and grizzled man, who acknowledges that he needs help in overcoming Grendel. If Beowulf is successful, he will reward the Geat with treasure.

## **BEOWULF MEETS HROTHGAR**

Beowulf follows Wufgar to meet Hrothgar. After greeting the King, Beowulf gives some of his credentials. He explains that he has just returned from slaying five monsters that were giants. He also tells of killing monsters from the depths of the oceans. Beowulf then tells of his desire to avenge Hrothgar by killing Grendel and cleansing the Heorot. He states, "I hear he spurns the use of weapon. I will grapple with him, and he whom death takes off must resign him self to the judgment of God. If battle claims me, you will not have to cover my body. But I ask you send my wat of mail to Hygelac."

After telling Beowulf about how he had helped his father, Hrothgar talks about Grendel's bloody destruction of his land. He welcomes Beowulf's help against this horrid monster. He then invites him to sit with him at their feast in Heorot Hall and tell them all about his exploits. Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's queen, welcomes Beowulf and offers him a drink. During the feast, Unferth taunts Beowulf, saying that Breca has defeated him in their swim in the open ocean. Beowulf shuts him up by explaining how he had saved Breca's life by overcoming monsters. He then promises to prove his strength in his battle with Grendel.

## Notes

On his arrival at Heorot, Beowulf proudly tells Hrothgar about his credentials and confidently informs the King that he has come to his aid and will battle Grendel. But like a true hero, he does not claim that Grendel will be defeated. Instead, Beowulf leaves the outcome of the battle to God. He even instructs Hrothgar to return his armor to Hygelac, the King of the Geats, if he is killed by the monster.

In Anglo-Saxon tradition, it is Beowulf's duty to help the Danish King; and Hrothgar accepts Beowulf's timely arrival as a repayment by a son of favors earlier bestowed on his father. He is, however, appreciative of Beowulf and honors him at the feast held in Heorot Hall. Unferth, however, taunts Beowulf during the feast by claiming that Breca had outdone him in the swimming wager. The taunting of a hero is a common feature of epics, especially before a battle. In this case, the taunting causes Beowulf to explain how he saved Breca's life and to win Unferth as an ally. Later, during the battle with Grendel's mother, Unferth lends his sword, the Hrunting, to Beowulf.

Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's queen, is seen for the first time in this section. At the feast, she greets Beowulf warmly. Later in the poem, she will emerge as an influential queen, a protective mother, a sound supervisor of domestic activities, and a cautious advisor to Hrothgar.

**BEOWULF OVERCOMES GRENDEL**

Hrothgar and his queen bid their farewells to Beowulf and the others and retired for the night. After everyone departs from Heorot, the Geats fall asleep. Grendel, both angry and hungry, enters the hall. He grabs a sleeping warrior and devours him. Enraged by Grendel's action, Beowulf grabs and pulls the monster's outstretched arm. The two of them fight fiercely until Beowulf's great strength gets the better of Grendel. The monster tries to flee, but as he departs, Beowulf grabs his arm. Using his vice-like grip, he pulls Grendel's arm from his socket. The monster, howling with pain, runs out of Heorot towards the murky lake where he lives. The Geats try to follow him, but cannot track down the monster.

On their way back to the great hall, Beowulf's men start singing about their leader's exploits. They compare him to Sigemund, who killed a dragon but fell into the power of fiends. Upon their return, an overjoyed Hrothgar gives thanks to God for the victory over Grendel and promises to reward Beowulf with more 'earthly riches' than any man has seen. Beowulf gives God all the credit for his accomplishment.

Beowulf displays Grendel's arm like a trophy. In the morning men from far and wide come to see the monster's arm. Later in the day, a great celebration feast is held in Beowulf's honor. Hrothgar presents to him Healfdene's sword, a battle banner woven with gold, a helmet and corselet adorned richly with gold, horses, and weapons. As the feasting and merriment continues, Wealhtheow presents a cup to Beowulf and personally thanks him and asks him to be a mentor and role model for her two sons. She also gives him two armlets, corselet rings, and a collar.

## Notes

When Grendel enters the hall after the men have fallen asleep, Beowulf is enraged. He grabs the monster's arm, and a fierce fight ensues. Beowulf's strength and stamina is too much for Grendel and he tries to escape. Beowulf catches him and literally pulls his arm off. The monster, howling in pain, quickly flees. The Geats are unable to catch up to him, but everyone assumes that Grendel has been permanently overcome.

There is a lot of excitement about the conquering of the monster, and Beowulf proudly displays the severed arm. Now that twelve long years of torment from Grendel have finally come to an end, Hrothgar expresses his appreciation to Beowulf by giving him various gifts. He also tells the Geat, "I will love you in my heart like a son . . . from this day on." The practical queen steps in to tell her emotional husband that it is right to give Beowulf rewards, but she warns the King against adopting the Geat. She tells him that he must "leave this land and the Danish people to your own descendants when the day comes for you to die." It is clear that she wants her own sons to inherit the Danish kingdom. But she also expresses her appreciation to Beowulf by presenting him with gifts and asking him to serve as a mentor to her sons.

## **BEOWULF BATTLES GRENDEL'S MOTHER**

After the feasting, everyone goes to sleep for the night. Grendel's mother, however, is rapidly approaching Heorot to gain revenge for her son. She rushes into the hall, taking the sleeping men by surprise. In her anger, she viciously grabs Aeschere, who is Hrothgar's favorite retainer. She also grabs her son's arm and then rushes out with her prisoner.

Hrothgar is awakened. When he finds that his favorite Thane has been seized, he is again miserable and begs Beowulf for help. When the Geat agrees to do his best, Hrothgar tells him that Grendel's mother stays in a murky lake and explains how to find it. Beowulf takes a few men and goes after Grendel's mother. Along the trail, they find the severed head of Aeschere. When they arrive at Grendel's lake, the water is boiling with blood and filled with serpents, dragons, and demons.

Beowulf blows the horn of battle. A demon attacks the warrior and is instantly killed by him. Beowulf jumps into the lake, and Unferth hands him his sword, called Hrunting. Grendel's mother emerges and tries to grab Beowulf; however, she cannot scratch through his armor. Beowulf tries to strike her with Unferth's sword, but it will not cut through her thick hide; in the end, he finally manages to sever her head. After she has been killed, Beowulf sees Grendel's corpse and cuts off his head as well. He then takes the treasure hidden in the monsters' lair.

At Heorot, everyone anxiously waits for Beowulf's return. When they see him coming, they are overjoyed. Beowulf enters and lays down the treasure he has seized at Hrothgar's feet. The King praises Beowulf's bravery and rewards him with gold. Beowulf promises Hrothgar that he will come to his aid whenever he needs him in the future and that his sons will be treated with honor whenever they visit the Geatish court. Hrothgar thanks Beowulf for returning peace to the Land of the Danes and promises a lasting alliance between the Danes and the Geats. After returning the Hrunting to Unferth, Beowulf sets off for Geatland with his men.

### Notes

When Grendel's mother seeks vengeance against the Danes for the death of her son, Beowulf again comes to the aid of Hrothgar. After she storms the hall, takes Aeschere prisoner and flees, Beowulf agrees to pursue her. With a few of his trusted men, he goes to the lake where she resides. It is the perfect setting for this evil monster, for the lake is filled with boiling blood and horrible creatures. Beowulf, however, does not hesitate. He blows his battle horn and jumps in the lake to find Grendel's mother. Unferth, now Beowulf's loyal ally, lends the warrior his famous sword for the battle.

Although Grendel's mother puts up a good fight, Beowulf finally succeeds in severing her head. He then finds the corpse of her son and her hidden treasure. Next "Beowulf emerges triumphant and swims ashore, carrying the hilt of the giant sword and Grendel's huge head." Whatever the warrior does, he does with

style, and this vivid image of triumph is truly fitting for Beowulf, now a super hero. In fact, his heroic feats are so impressive that one of the thanes composes a song about Beowulf, comparing him to Sigemund, a great warrior of ancient times who slew a dragon and gained rich treasure.

When the Danish King sees Beowulf returning in triumph, Hrothgar praises the hero, rewards him with gold, and calls for a huge celebration. The scop, whose job is to tell about history, is called to entertain the crowd. As the harp is struck, the scop begins to sing about "the fight at Finnsburg, a tale of vengeance." Hildeburh was a Danish princess, married to Finn, a Frisian from Finnsburg. He and his men attacked and killed the Danish King Hnaef. A fierce battle raged for five days. When Hildeburh's son was killed in the fighting, a truce was called, and Hongest, Hnaef's brother, became the new Danish King. The peace, however, did not last for long. The following spring, Hongest was murdered. In retaliation, the Danes captured Hildeburh and seized Finn's treasure. After finishing the Finnsburg tale, the scop sings about Beowulf's victory, indicating he will also be remembered in Danish history for his great deeds.

After receiving his rewards, Beowulf is ready to return to Geatland; Hrothgar gives his blessing to the hero and promises that the Danes and Geats will live in peace. Before he departs, Beowulf promises to come to the King's aid in the future if he is ever needed.

## **HOME IN GEATLAND**

Before departing Geatland for Danish lands, Beowulf was not universally accepted as a brave hero. Upon his return, however, he tells Hygelac about his victories in the land of the Danes and about the many gifts bestowed on him for his bravery. Hygelac also rewards Beowulf with several gifts. Before long, everyone in Geatland has heard about his victories over the Danish monsters, and they celebrate Beowulf as a true hero.

When both Hygelac and his son die, the Geat kingdom passes to Beowulf. He rules wisely and harmoniously for fifty years and enjoys peace. Then a slave, escaping from his master's wrath, goes into a dragon's cave and steals the dragon's precious cup. The dragon is enraged at the theft; in retaliation he starts killing people and burning down buildings with his breath of fire. Despite his advancing age, Beowulf decides he must battle the dragon, convinced that he can slay the monster.

Taking the thief and a band of his own men, Beowulf goes to the dragon's cave and prepares for combat with the monster. He sadly bids farewell to his men, fearing his end may be at hand, and remembers the time when he had come to the Geatish court to live with his grandfather. Beowulf then challenges the dragon, striking at it with his ancestral sword, which is blunted by the monster's hard hide. The dragon breathes fire at Beowulf, causing him to fall down. Upon seeing their master on the ground, all of Beowulf's thanes run away except for Wiglaf, who tries to attract the dragon's attention away from his master and to himself. The dragon will not be distracted; it sinks its fangs into Beowulf's neck.

Although he is in great pain, Beowulf picks up a sharp knife and strikes the dragon again, inflicting a deadly wound. But Beowulf is also mortally wounded. Before he dies, he tells Wiglaf to rummage through the dragon's cave to find the treasure; he then asks Wiglaf to bring all the gold to him before he dies. Wiglaf does exactly as he is told. When he returns with the dragon's treasure, he sprinkles some water on Beowulf to revive him. Beowulf rewards Wiglaf with his golden collar and golden helmet, which signifies that he will become the leader of the Geats. To mark his grave and to serve as a reminder of his courage, Beowulf also commands Wiglaf to build a fine barrow in his honor, overlooking the sea. After these instructions are given, Beowulf dies.

All the thanes who ran away in Beowulf's time of trouble return to mourn his death. Wiglaf reminds them that "for every warrior, death is better than disgrace". He then condemns them as cowards and states that they are destined to become landless exiles. Wiglaf next follows Beowulf's instructions; he builds a large funeral pyre and makes a barrow, filled with lots of ornaments, in memory of the great warrior. Twelve of Beowulf's brave men ride around the barrow mourning and chanting elegies about their dead leader. Wiglaf himself mourns the cowardliness of the Geats; he feels certain that the Swedes will hear about their weakness and attack them. As the poem ends, Wiglaf wonders if Geat will ever be safe again without Beowulf.

## Notes

Beowulf, richly rewarded by the Danes, returns in triumph to Geatland, where Hygelac greets the warrior warmly and thanks God for his safe return. He also gives Beowulf many gifts as a reward for his bravery, including Hrethel's battlesword, his own beloved hall, and seven thousand "hides of land." Beowulf gives the King an account of his battle with Grendel and his mother. He also reports the proposed marriage of Freawaru, Hrothgar's daughter, to Ingeld of the Heathobards; the marriage has been planned in an attempt to end the long bitter battle between the Danes and the Heathobards. Beowulf feels that the marriage will not end the strife and that there will be more problems between the two in the future.

Many years pass. After the death of both Hygelac and his son, Heardred, the kingdom passes to Beowulf since he was Hygelac's nephew and last remaining heir. For fifty years Beowulf rules wisely and peacefully. Bad luck, however, falls on his kingdom when one of the Geat slaves, in order to escape from his master's ire, enters the dragon's lair and steals a cup from him that he had guarded for years; the dragon is enraged over the loss of the cup. Although the thief himself escapes the dragon's wrath, the rest of Geatland suffers the consequences of his actions. As a just ruler, Beowulf decides he must fight the dragon, even though a poet predicts that both Beowulf and the dragon will die. Despite his advancing age, Beowulf feels certain he can slay the dragon. He makes the thief lead him to the dragon's lair.

On the way to do battle with the monster, Beowulf seems to have a premonition that his death is near. He warns the Geats that if he is killed, the Swedes are sure to attack Geatland. Before fighting the dragon, he reminisces about how he, at the age of seven, went to live with King Hrethel, his grandfather. He also remembers how Hrethel's son, Haethcyn, accidentally shot his own brother. As a result, Hrethel died of a broken heart.

At the dragon's cave, Beowulf prepares to do battle; he readies Naegling, his ancestral sword. He charges the monster, but the sword cannot penetrate the dragon. As a result, the dragon breathes fire at Beowulf, causing him to fall to the ground; the dragon then sinks his fangs into Beowulf's neck. Greatly frightened, all of Beowulf's men run away except Wiglaf, who tries unsuccessfully to distract the dragon. Beowulf, however, manages to kill the dragon with his knife, but soon dies of his fatal wound. Wiglaf fulfills the last wishes of his master, making a huge funeral pyre and barrow to honor Beowulf.

Nowhere in the poem is the sense of ritual and decorum more pronounced than in the final preparations for Beowulf's funeral. The Geats prepare a pyre for the old king and surround it with helmets, shields, and shining armor; into the barrow they place rings and brooches to honor the memory of their brave lord. Then twelve men ride around the barrow, mourning the loss of a great king and warrior.

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### CHARACTERS

#### *Beowulf*

Beowulf is the protagonist and main character of the poem. Characterized as a man with extraordinary strength and skills, Beowulf proves himself, during the course of the poem, to be powerful, virtuous, and courageous. He does not hesitate to rush to the help of the neighboring Danes in order to fight a monster that is plaguing them, proving that he is generous as well as brave.

Beowulf is a nobleman in Geat society. Both his grandfather and his uncle serve as King of Geatland. Despite his heritage and courage, Beowulf has never been recognized as a hero amongst the Geatish people. Although he has not received the recognition he probably deserves, Beowulf continues to do what he believes is right. As a result, when he hears how the Danes are being plagued by a monster, he volunteers to go and help his neighbors in their time of trouble. Filled with self-confidence, Beowulf believes he can slay Grendel.

Beowulf's sense of loyalty is fierce whether it is directed at the Geat King or at Hrothgar. When Hrothgar asks Beowulf to fight Grendel, the brave warrior does not hesitate. His only request is that if he is killed by the monster, his armor should be returned to Hygelac, for he is loyal to the King of Geatland. Once Grendel has been wounded and chased away, Beowulf agrees to fight Grendel's mother, who wants vengeance for her son's death. When he succeeds in killing her, he severs her head and the head of the dead Grendel to show as a symbol of his success and bravery.

Beowulf is also a just man. After he ascends to the throne, he rules with kindness and wisdom. Harmony and prosperity characterize his long reign as a king. Even though his courage is not tested for a long time, it does not diminish, even with old age. When Geatland is challenged by an irate dragon, Beowulf goes off to fight it, confident that he will be able to slay the monster in spite of foreboding prophecies. Even though he knows he may be killed, Beowulf rises to the challenge like a hero. Although he is mortally wounded by the dragon, he continues to fight until the monster is dead.

During the course of the poem, Beowulf matures from a youth into a wise, old man. He always behaves in accordance with what is expected of him at a particular age. As a young man, he is a bit wild and reckless, who swims for seven days in the open sea to satisfy a foolish wager. Beowulf later admits that it was his false pride that made him accept the bet. In the land of the Danes, he still displays a bit of pride, as he severs the head of the dead Grendel and carries it back to Heorot as a trophy. In his old age, however, Beowulf seeks peace for his country rather glory for himself. It is no wonder that he was a beloved king and becomes an epic hero.

#### *Hrothgar*

The son of Healfdare, Hrothgar reigns as the wise and noble King of the Danes. Caring, generous, and religious, he wants to do what is right for his subjects. He built a famous hall, the Heorot, for feasting and distributing his wealth with his noble retainers. He also tries to maintain peace in his kingdom. In fact, he arranges the marriage of his daughter to Ingeld in an effort to cease hostilities with his neighbors.

Although he is old and grizzled by the start of the poem, Hrothgar is still proud and brave; however, because of his old age, he knows he cannot battle Grendel, the horrible monster that is plaguing his land.

During his reign of terror on the Danish people, Grendel never attacks Hrothgar, because of his firm belief in God. But Hrothgar, a truthful man, believes that Grendel's attacks on his loyal subjects were probably a punishment from God for his pride in his power and wealth.

When Beowulf arrives to lend his aid to the Danes, the King welcomes him and accepts his assistance, without shame. He justifies the Geat's help by remembering that he had helped Beowulf's father in the past by paying blood money to solve a feud for him. When Beowulf succeeds in killing both Grendel and his mother, Hrothgar does not hesitate to praise him and reward him richly.

In many ways, Beowulf and Hrothgar are very similar characters – noble, brave, generous, just, and pure. In fact, Hrothgar as a king is a foreshadowing of what Beowulf will become in his later life.

### ***Wiglaf***

Wiglaf, one of Beowulf's brave young men, proves his loyalty to his master during the poem. When Beowulf is knocked down to the ground by the dragon, all of the thanes flee in fear, except for Wiglaf. Not only does he stand by his leader, he is willing to sacrifice his own life in an attempt to save Beowulf from the dragon. He tries to attract the monster's attention away from Beowulf and towards himself. When Beowulf sees his trusted thane fighting the dragon with him, he feels encouraged. He picks himself up and slays the dragon. Like Hrothgar and Beowulf, Wiglaf proves himself to be good, virtuous, loyal, and brave.

Before Beowulf dies from the mortal wound inflicted by the dragon, he gives Wiglaf some specific instructions about finding the dragon's gold and building a large funeral pyre and rich barrow to honor him after his death. When the time comes, Wiglaf carefully carries out his leaders' instructions. When the cowardly thanes reappear, Wiglaf chastises them severely, saying that death is preferable to cowardice. He adds that cowardice among the Geats has become a national weakness and serves as an invitation for hostile enemies to attack. Wiglaf's prophecies prove true. When he inherits the kingship of a weakened Geatland, Wiglaf knows that he will soon have to fight the much stronger Swedes, who will take advantage of the Geatish cowardice.

### ***The Monsters***

The monsters are the symbols of evil in the poem and are sharply contrasted against the virtues of the good characters, such as Beowulf and Wiglaf, making them appear even better. Since Beowulf is able to slay them all (Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon), he is made to seem like a super hero.

Grendel is the first monster that appears in the poem and becomes the symbol of "fallen mankind." He is a mammoth, repulsive, violent, and gruesome looking creature with a human shape. But his strength and appearance make him seem almost satanic. He is a descendant of Cain, who committed the first murder in the Bible when he killed his brother Abel. Like Cain, Grendel has been cursed and permanently denied God's presence. Jealous of Hrothgar's popularity and happiness, he inflicts years of terror on the Danes and becomes the curse that brings Beowulf to the king's palace.

As he approaches the Heorot on the night that Beowulf is waiting for him, Grendel has no idea of what lies ahead. He assumes that the cowardly Danes will simply shrink away in fear of him once more. But Beowulf, the strongest man alive, is in the Heorot. Like Grendel, Beowulf is not armed. The two of them will fight it out on their own resources. Grendel, however, is unable to put up much of a fight against the strength of Beowulf. Realizing that he is losing, he tries to escape. Enraged by the monster's cowardice,

Beowulf grabs him by his arm and pulls it out of its socket. Although Grendel does not die in Heorot Hall, his death is clearly foreshadowed. In fact, when Beowulf fights Grendel's mother, he sees the corpse of Grendel and cuts off his head to show as a "trophy".

Grendel's mother is appropriately called the "troll woman" and the "she monster;" there is a deadly and eerie aura about her. Although she is old, she is very sly and devious. She is enraged that Beowulf has caused the death of her son and seeks revenge. She sneaks into the Heorot, grabs the missing arm of her son, and snatches one of the king's favorite retainers. She then flees back to her murky lake, hoping to fight the enemy on her own turf. When Hrothgar begs Beowulf to follow her, the brave Geat obliges. He arrives at her dwelling, a lake boiling with blood. Beowulf does not hesitate but jumps in to find Grendel's mother. He soon severs her head.

The dragon is more dangerous and violent than Grendel and his mother. A horrible, fire-breathing beast, he is filled with greed, malice, and ire; he is truly a symbol of evil and a representative of Satan. When a Geat dares to steal from him, he strikes out in revenge. Beowulf, still filled with self-confidence in spite of his advancing age, does out to slay the horrible dragon. In the fight, Beowulf is fatally wounded by the monster, but he is able to slay the dragon before he dies.

### **PLOT (STRUCTURE)**

*Beowulf* is an epic, narrative poem that tells the story of a superhuman hero. The verse is held together by the constant presence of Beowulf, the protagonist of the tale and the chief symbol of strength and goodness in the poem. He swims for seven days in the open sea, battles monsters from the deep, fights and overcomes Grendel and his mother, and slays the dragon.

The plot of the narrative poem is a simple one, revolving around Beowulf, the symbol of good, fighting against a series of monsters, the symbol of evil. At the beginning of the poem, Beowulf is introduced and the conflict is established. The Danes have been plagued for many years by the terror inflicted by an evil monster named Grendel. When Beowulf hears about the sad plight of Hrothgar and his citizens, he determines that he will go to the land of the Danes to free them from the monster. The rising action begins with Beowulf's departure for Hrothgar's kingdom and continues through most of the poem, as he fights Grendel and Grendel's mother. The final climatic moment occurs when Beowulf fights the dragon. At first unable to drive his sword into the dragon's tough hide, Beowulf is knocked to the ground and fatally wounded by the evil monster when it drives its fangs into his neck. It seems that all will be lost, especially since all of his men flee except for Wiglaf. The noble Beowulf, however, picks himself up and slays the dragon, overcoming evil. The falling action occurs as Beowulf gives his final instructions to Wiglaf before he dies. In the conclusion, a funeral pyre is built, Beowulf is properly mourned, and Wiglaf assumes leadership of the Geats.

Besides the unity of plot and character, *Beowulf* is unified by theme, allusions, and imagery. Although it is a complex narrative poem, it is held together by its references to historical legends and events. There are also frequent religious allusions, such as the reference to the story of Cain and Abel. Most importantly, there is a constant reminder in the poem that true heroes, like Beowulf, are virtuous, noble, brave, loyal, kind, and generous.

Although the poem is unified by the constant presence of Beowulf in the poem, it is not tightly unified by time and place. The poem spans many years, from the time that Beowulf is a young man until his death in old age. Also the poem is set in the land of both the Danes and the Geats. In spite of the spread in time and place, *Beowulf* is a wonderfully written and unified poem. It is recognized as the greatest surviving



Anglo Saxon poem and the best poetry of the first one thousand years of literature. It is also the only complete epic poem in any pre-conquest Germanic language.

## THEMES

### *The Theme of Good vs. Evil:*

The entire poem centers on the fight of good, represented by Beowulf, versus evil, represented by Grendel, his mother, and the dragon. In the theme there is a clear religious overtone, with the forces of good aligned with God, Christ and salvation, while the forces of evil are aligned with Satan. Beowulf becomes almost a crusader, fighting to rid the world of Satan's influence. The satanic strain, seen in the monsters, is a timeless foe that attacks mankind and leaves behind a path of destruction and doom; it has been in existence since the fall of man.

Christian allegorists see the greedy, malicious, and evil monsters as symbols of Satan and eternal damnation. Beowulf is the means of salvation. By slaying the monsters, he is delivering mankind. The poem, therefore, emphasizes the need of a savior to protect mankind from the powers of evil. In truth, during the time the poem was created, many Danes had turned away from God and were practicing ritualism and pagan idol worship. According to the poet, Hrothgar is still devoted to God; as a result, he is not harmed by Grendel, who fears his staunch belief in God. In a similar manner, Beowulf's strength seems to be a gift from God and it is through God's power that he overcomes God's foe. The poem is the tale of the triumph of good over evil.

### *Theme of Loyalty:*

Like in all epic tales, *Beowulf* emphasizes the importance of loyalty. Beowulf is fiercely loyal, as seen in his allegiance to his king Hygelac, to his host Hrothgar, to his own faithful men, such as Wiglaf, or to his Geatish citizens. Although he could have easily seized the throne from Hygelac or Hrothgar, he is much too loyal to wage a battle against a friend. Nowhere does the reader find Beowulf acting contrary to the ideal of loyalty. As a Nordic-Germanic warrior, he believes in avenging the death of a friend or kin; and as a just king, he believes in loyalty to his subjects and protecting his people harm.

The other good characters in the poem also prove their loyalty. Hrothgar was loyal to Beowulf's father in the past and will now be loyal to Beowulf, promising friendship between the Geats and the Danes throughout his rule. Wiglaf also proves himself to be a loyal thane as he stays to help Beowulf when all the others flee; he is even willing to sacrifice himself to save his master, as seen when he tries to attract the dragon's attention to himself and away from Beowulf. When the other cowards return, Wiglaf chastises them for their lack of loyalty to Beowulf. In the end, loyalty is rewarded. Before Beowulf dies, he passes the throne of Geatland to Wiglaf, his loyal servant and friend.

## STYLE

The style of the narrative poem is a very straightforward. It is told in the oral tradition with a chronological order and an emphasis on four stress lines. The poem is also filled with images, allusion, and symbols, which enrich the poem's meaning and majesty. It also uses repetition of words, phrases, and ideas to emphasize a particular point or create a special effect or image. Over all, the poem is told in a warm, humane way by a poet who clearly honors fundamental human values.

## QUESTIONS

1. Fully describe the character of Beowulf.
2. Compare and contrast Beowulf and Hrothgar.
3. How is the main theme of good vs. evil developed in the poem?
4. Even though Beowulf dies in the end, why does the poem end as a comedy?
5. Compare and contrast the three monsters in the poem.
6. Compare and contrast the two settings in the poem.
7. Explain all the reasons that Beowulf goes to the land of the Danes to help Hrothgar.
8. Who is Wiglaf and why is he important to the plot of the poem?
9. Explain the Christian symbolism and allusions in the poem.
10. How is the theme of loyalty developed in the poem.
11. How is the poem unified into a whole?
12. Describe the stylistic elements found in *Beowulf*.

## COMMENT ON THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

The study of literature is not like the study of math or science, or even history. While those disciplines are based largely upon fact, the study of literature is based upon interpretation and analysis. There are no clear-cut answers in literature, outside of the factual information about an author's life and the basic information about setting and characterization in a piece of literature. The rest is a highly subjective reading of what an author has written; each person brings a different set of values and a different background to the reading. As a result, no two people see the piece of literature in exactly the same light, and few critics agree on everything about a book or an author. In this set of PinkMonkey® Literature Notes for a well-known piece of literature, we at PinkMonkey.com have tried to give an objective literary analysis based upon the information actually found in the novel, book, or play. In the end, however, it is an individual interpretation, but one that we feel can be readily supported by the information that is presented in the guide. In your course of literature study, you or your professor/teacher may come up with a different interpretation of the mood or the theme or the conflict. Your interpretation, if it can be logically supported with information contained within the piece of literature, is just as correct as ours. So is the interpretation of your teacher or professor.

Literature is simply not a black or white situation; instead, there are many gray areas that are open to varying analyses. Your task is to come up with your own analysis that you can logically defend. Hopefully, these PinkMonkey® Literature Notes will help you to accomplish that goal.