

from Beowulf

Part Two, translated by Seamus Heaney

Beowulf carries Grendel's head to King Hrothgar and then returns gift-laden to the land of the Geats, where he succeeds to the throne. After fifty winters pass, Beowulf, now an old man, faces his final task: He must fight a dragon who, angry because a thief has stolen a jeweled cup from the dragon's hoard of gold, is laying waste to the Geats' land. Beowulf and eleven warriors are guided to the dragon's lair by the thief who stole the cup. For Beowulf the price of this last victory will be great.



Shoulder clasp (7th century), from the Sutton Hoo ship treasure, Suffolk, England. British Museum, London/ Photograph © Michael Holford.

THE FINAL BATTLE

7

275 Then he addressed each dear companion
one final time, those fighters in their helmets,
resolute and high-born: "I would rather not
use a weapon if I knew another way
to grapple with the dragon and make good my boast
280 as I did against Grendel in days gone by.
But I shall be meeting molten venom
in the fire he breathes, so I go forth
in mail-shirt and shield. I won't shift a foot
when I meet the cave-guard: what occurs on the wall
285 between the two of us will turn out as fate,
overseer of men, decides. I am resolved.
I scorn further words against this sky-borne foe.

"Men at arms, remain here on the barrow,^o
safe in your armour, to see which one of us
290 is better in the end at bearing wounds
in a deadly fray. This fight is not yours,
nor is it up to any man except me

275–287. Throughout *Beowulf*, there are many references to the pagan notion of fate (see line 285) as an impersonal force that predetermines the outcome of events in a person's life. This concept, known as *wyrd*, was central to Anglo-Saxon beliefs.

? How is this older *Beowulf* different from the *Beowulf* who slew Grendel and his mother?

288. *barrow* *n.*: a hill.

Vocabulary

resolute (rez'ə • lōōt') *adj.*: determined.



Viking sword handles, embellished with Viking Age motifs. Statens Historiska Museer, Stockholm.

295 to measure his strength against the monster
or to prove his worth. I shall win the gold
by my courage, or else mortal combat,
doom of battle, will bear your lord away."

Then he drew himself up beside his shield.
The fabled warrior in his warshirt and helmet
300 trusted in his own strength entirely
and went under the crag. No coward path.
Hard by the rock-face that hale^o veteran,
a good man who had gone repeatedly
into combat and danger and come through,
saw a stone arch and a gushing stream
305 that burst from the barrow, blazing and wafting
a deadly heat. It would be hard to survive
unscathed near the hoard, to hold firm
against the dragon in those flaming depths.
Then he gave a shout. The lord of the Geats
310 unburdened his breast and broke out
in a storm of anger. Under grey stone
his voice challenged and resounded clearly.
Hate was ignited. The hoard-guard recognized
a human voice, the time was over
315 for peace and parleying.^o Pouring forth
in a hot battle-fume, the breath of the monster
burst from the rock. There was a rumble under ground.
Down there in the barrow, Beowulf the warrior
lifted his shield: the outlandish thing
320 writhed and convulsed and vehemently

Vocabulary

vehemently (vē'ə • mənt • lē) *adv.*: violently.

? **288–296.** How do Beowulf's acceptance of fate show his deep sense of responsibility to his people?

301. **hale** *adj.*: healthy, energetic.

315. **parleying** *v.* use discussing.

turned on the king, whose keen-edged sword,
 an heirloom inherited by ancient right,
 was already in his hand. Roused to a fury,
 each antagonist struck terror in the other.
 325 Unyielding, the lord of his people loomed
 by his tall shield, sure of his ground,
 while the serpent looped and unleashed itself.
 Swaddled in flames, it came gliding and flexing
 and racing towards its fate. Yet his shield defended
 330 the renowned leader's life and limb
 for a shorter time than he meant it to:
 that final day was the first time
 when Beowulf fought and fate denied him
 glory in battle. So the king of the Geats
 335 raised his hand and struck hard
 at the enamelled scales, but scarcely cut through:
 the blade flashed and slashed yet the blow
 was far less powerful than the hard-pressed king
 had need of at that moment. The mound-keeper
 340 went into a spasm and spouted deadly flames:
 when he felt the stroke, battle-fire
 billowed and spewed. Beowulf was foiled^o
 of a glorious victory. The glittering sword,
 infallible before that day,
 345 failed when he unsheathed it, as it never should have.
 For the son of Ecgtheow, it was no easy thing
 to have to give ground like that and go
 unwillingly to inhabit another home
 in a place beyond; so every man must yield
 the leasehold of his days.

350 It was not long
 until the fierce contenders clashed again.
 The hoard-guard took heart, inhaled and swelled up
 and got a new wind; he who had once ruled
 was furlled in fire and had to face the worst.
 355 No help or backing was to be had then
 from his high-born comrades; that hand-picked troop
 broke ranks and ran for their lives
 to the safety of the wood. But within one heart
 sorrow welled up: in a man of worth
 360 the claims of kinship cannot be denied.

Vocabulary

infallible (in·fal'ə·bəl) *adj.*: unable to fail or be wrong.
furlled (furl'd) *v.*: rolled up.

318–329. The image of a lone hero standing up to a fire-breathing dragon or other giant monster is one of the most **archetypal** images in Western heroic literature.

? How does the dragon compare with Grendel and Grendel's mother?

? **329–350.** In lines 329–345, what goes wrong during Beowulf's battle with the dragon? In lines 346–350, what are you led to believe about Beowulf's ultimate fate?

342. foiled *v.*: prevented from.

? **355–358.** How do Beowulf's men react to the sight of the dragon gaining victory over Beowulf?

8

365 His name was Wiglaf, a son of Weohstan's,
 a well-regarded Shyfling warrior
 related to Aelfhere. When he saw his lord
 tormented by the heat of his scalding helmet,
 he remembered the bountiful gifts bestowed on him,
 how well he lived among the Waegmundings,
 the freehold^o he inherited from his father before him.
 He could not hold back: one hand brandished
 the yellow-timbered shield, the other drew his sword— . . .

370 Sad at heart, addressing his companions,
 Wiglaf spoke wise and fluent words:
 "I remember that time when mead was flowing,
 how we pledged loyalty to our lord in the hall,
 promised our ring-giver we would be worth our price,
 375 make good the gift of the war-gear,
 those swords and helmets, as and when
 his need required it. He picked us out
 from the army deliberately, honoured us and judged us
 fit for this action, made me these lavish gifts—
 380 and all because he considered us the best
 of his arms-bearing thanes.^o And now, although
 he wanted this challenge to be one he'd face
 by himself alone—the shepherd of our land,
 a man unequaled in the quest for glory
 385 and a name for daring—now the day has come
 when this lord we serve needs sound men
 to give him their support. Let us go to him,
 help our leader through the hot flame
 and dread of the fire. As God is my witness,
 390 I would rather my body were robbed in the same
 burning blaze as my gold-giver's body
 than go back home bearing arms.
 That is unthinkable, unless we have first
 slain the foe and defended the life
 395 of the prince of the Weather-Geats. I well know
 the things he has done for us deserve better.
 Should he alone be left exposed
 to fall in battle? We must bond together,
 shield and helmet, mail-shirt and sword."

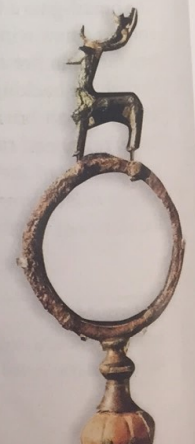
367. freehold *n.*: estate.

? **370–399.** What arguments does Wiglaf use to convince the men that they must fight with Beowulf?

381. thanes *n. pl.*: in Anglo-Saxon England, group of men who held land of the king in exchange for military service.

Bronze stag atop ceremonial scepter (detail) (7th century), from the Sutton Hoo ship treasure, Suffolk, England.

© British Museum, London.



Vocabulary

lavish (lav'ish) *adj.*: extravagant.

...I shall stand by you."

2670

After those words, a wildness rose
in the dragon again and drove it to attack,
heaving up fire, hunting for enemies,
the humans it loathed. Flames lapped the shield,
charred it to the boss, and the body armour
on the young warrior was useless to him.
But Wiglaf did well under the wide rim
Beowulf shared with him once his own had shattered
in sparks and ashes.

*The dragon attacks
again*

2680

Inspired again
by the thought of glory, the war-king threw
his whole strength behind a sword-stroke
and connected with the skull. And Naegling snapped.
Beowulf's ancient iron-grey sword
let him down in the fight. It was never his fortune
to be helped in combat by the cutting edge
of weapons made of iron. When he wielded a sword,
no matter how blooded and hard-edged the blade
his hand was too strong, the stroke he dealt
(I have heard) would ruin it. He could reap no advantage.

Another setback

2690

Then the bane of that people, the fire-breathing dragon,
was mad to attack for a third time.
When a chance came, he caught the hero
in a rush of flame and clamped sharp fangs
into his neck. Beowulf's body
ran wet with his life-blood: it came welling out.

*The dragon's third
onslaught. He drains
blood*

Next thing, they say, the noble son of Weohstan
saw the king in danger at his side
and displayed his inborn bravery and strength.

*Wiglaf gets past
flames and strike*

He left the head alone, but his fighting hand
was burned when he came to his kinsman's aid.
He lunged at the enemy lower down
so that his decorated sword sank into its belly
and the flames grew weaker.

Once again the king
gathered his strength and drew a stabbing knife
he carried on his belt, sharpened for battle.
He stuck it deep into the dragon's flank.
Beowulf dealt it a deadly wound.
They had killed the enemy, courage quelled his life;
that pair of kinsmen, partners in nobility,
had destroyed the foe. So every man should act,
be at hand when needed; but now, for the king,
this would be the last of his many labours
and triumphs in the world.

*Beowulf delivers the
fatal wound*

10

Then the wound
dealt by the ground-burner earlier began
to scald and swell; Beowulf discovered
deadly poison suppurating inside him,
surges of nausea, and so, in his wisdom,
the prince realized his state and struggled
towards a seat on the rampart. He steadied his gaze
on those gigantic stones, saw how the earthwork
was braced with arches built over columns.
And now that thane unequalled for goodness
with his own hands washed his lord's wounds,
swabbed the weary prince with water,
bathed him clean, unbuckled his helmet.

2720

Beowulf spoke: in spite of his wounds,
mortal wounds, he still spoke
for he well knew his days in the world

*Beowulf senses that
he is near death*

had been lived out to the end: his allotted time was drawing to a close, death was very near.

“Now is the time when I would have wanted to bestow this armour on my own son, had it been my fortune to have fathered an heir and live on in his flesh. For fifty years I ruled this nation. No king of any neighbouring clan would dare face me with troops, none had the power to intimidate me. I took what came, cared for and stood by things in my keeping, never fomented quarrels, never swore to a lie. All this consoles me, doomed as I am and sickening for death; because of my right ways, the Ruler of mankind need never blame me when the breath leaves my body for murder of kinsmen. Go now quickly, dearest Wiglaf, under the grey stone where the dragon is laid out, lost to his treasure; hurry to feast your eyes on the hoard. Away you go: I want to examine that ancient gold, gaze my fill on those garnered jewels; my going will be easier for having seen the treasure, a less troubled letting-go of the life and lordship I have long maintained.”

He thinks about his life

He bids Wiglaf to inspect the treasure and return a portion of it

Wiglaf enters

Together Beowulf and the young Wiglaf kill the dragon, but the old king is fatally wounded. Beowulf, thinking of his people, asks to see the monster's treasure. Wiglaf enters the dragon's cave and finds a priceless hoard of jewels and gold.

9

400 . . . Wiglaf went quickly, keen to get back, excited by the treasure; anxiety weighed on his brave heart, he was hoping he would find the leader of the Geats alive where he had left him helpless, earlier, on the open ground.
405 So he came to the place, carrying the treasure, and found his lord bleeding profusely, his life at an end; again he began to swab his body. The beginnings of an utterance broke out from the king's breast-cage.
410 The old lord gazed sadly at the gold.

“To the everlasting Lord of All, to the King of Glory, I give thanks that I behold this treasure here in front of me, that I have been thus allowed to leave my people so well endowed on the day I die.
415 Now that I have bartered my last breath to own this fortune, it is up to you to look after their needs. I can hold out no longer. Order my troop to construct a barrow on a headland on the coast, after my pyre has cooled. It will loom on the horizon at Hronesness and be a reminder among my people— so that in coming times crews under sail will call it Beowulf's Barrow, as they steer ships across the wide and shrouded waters.”
425

Then the king in his great-heartedness unclasped the collar of gold from his neck and gave it to the young thane, telling him to use it and the warshirt and the gilded helmet well.

430 “You are the last of us, the only one left of the Waegmundings. Fate swept us away,



Fragment of an Anglo-Saxon silver knife mount with runic inscriptions (late 8th century).
C. M. Dixon.

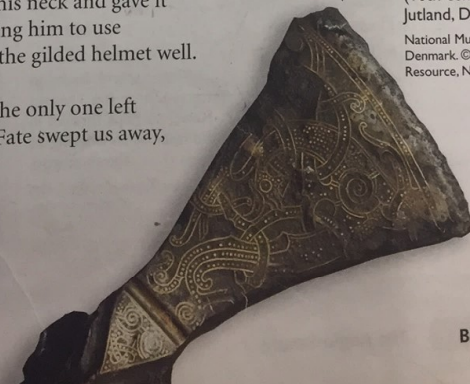
411–418. The ultimate purpose of the **epic hero** is to leave something of lasting value to his culture.

? What has Beowulf left to his people?

? 419–425. What are Beowulf's final wishes?

The great ax, with depiction of bird-animal (10th century), from Jutland, Denmark.

National Museum of Copenhagen, Denmark. © Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York.



sent my whole brave high-born clan
to their final doom. Now I must follow them.”
That was the warrior’s last word.

435 He had no more to confide. The furious heat
of the pyre would assail him. His soul fled from his breast
to its destined place among the steadfast ones.

Wiglaf berates the faithless warriors who did not go to the aid of their king. With sorrow the Geats cremate the corpse of their greatest king. They place his ashes, along with all of the dragon’s treasure, in a huge burial tower by the sea, where it can be seen by voyagers.

10

Then twelve warriors rode around the tomb,
chieftains’ sons, champions in battle,
440 all of them distraught, chanting in dirges,
mourning his loss as a man and a king.
They extolled his heroic nature and exploits
and gave thanks for his greatness; which was the proper thing,
for a man should praise a prince whom he holds dear
445 and cherish his memory when that moment comes
when he has to be convoyed from his bodily home.
So the Geat people, his hearth companions,
sorrowed for the lord who had been laid low.
They said that of all the kings upon the earth
450 he was the man most gracious and fair-minded,
kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.

Vocabulary

assail (ə • sāil’) v.: attack.

extolled (ek • stōld’) v.: praised.

438–451. The closing lines of *Beowulf* serve as a kind of **elegy**—a poem that mourns the death of a person or laments something lost.

? According to these elegiac final lines of the epic, what qualities made *Beowulf* a great hero?



A Celtic shield, found in Battersea, near the Thames River, perhaps thrown in the river as an offering to the river god.
Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum, London.