

from Beowulf

Part One, translated by Burton Raffel

As the epic begins, we are introduced to King Hrothgar, a revered and successful leader who has ruled the Danes for many years. He has recently built the mead hall Herot to commemorate his many victories. As Hrothgar's men celebrate and enjoy life in Herot, however, a monster called Grendel lurks in the swamps nearby, seething with resentment and hatred for humans. Eventually Grendel attacks Herot and mercilessly kills thirty of Hrothgar's men. This marks the beginning of Grendel's reign of terror over the Danes, which lasts for twelve years.

Rescue finally comes in the form of a great warrior named Beowulf who hails from the land of the Geats (Sweden). Beowulf hears of Hrothgar's troubles and decides to journey to Denmark with some of his strongest men to do battle with Grendel. Once he arrives, he meets with Hrothgar and boasts of his numerous past achievements, which qualify him to challenge Grendel. Beowulf then announces that he will fight the monster that night without weapons. A celebratory feast ensues. As it ends, Beowulf and his men take the place of Hrothgar's followers and lie down to sleep in Herot. Beowulf, however, is wakeful, eager to meet his enemy. He is not kept waiting long.



Animal head from a Viking ship (c. 800).

University Museum of Natural Antiquities, Oslo, Norway.

(Background) First page of Beowulf manuscript (c. 1000).

The Art Archive/British Library, London.

THE BATTLE WITH GRENDEL

1

Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty
Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,
Grendel came, hoping to kill

Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot.

5 He moved quickly through the cloudy night,
Up from his swampland, sliding silently
Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited Hrothgar's
Home before, knew the way—

10 But never, before nor after that night,
Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception
So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless,
Straight to the door, then snapped it open,
Tore its iron fasteners with a touch,
And rushed angrily over the threshold.
15 He strode quickly across the inlaid
Floor, snarling and fierce: His eyes
Gleamed in the darkness, burned with a gruesome
Light. Then he stopped, seeing the hall
Crowded with sleeping warriors, stuffed
20 With rows of young soldiers resting together.
And his heart laughed, he relished the sight,
Intended to tear the life from those bodies
By morning; the monster's mind was hot
With the thought of food and the feasting his belly
25 Would soon know. But fate, that night, intended
Grendel to gnaw the broken bones
Of his last human supper. Human
Eyes were watching his evil steps,
Waiting to see his swift hard claws.
30 Grendel snatched at the first Geat
He came to, ripped him apart, cut
His body to bits with powerful jaws,
Drank the blood from his veins, and bolted
Him down, hands and feet; death
35 And Grendel's great teeth came together,
Snapping life shut. Then he stepped to another
Still body, clutched at Beowulf with his claws,
Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful sleeper
—And was instantly seized himself, claws
40 Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm.
That shepherd of evil, guardian of crime,
Knew at once that nowhere on earth
Had he met a man whose hands were harder;
His mind was flooded with fear—but nothing
45 Could take his talons and himself from that tight
Hard grip. Grendel's one thought was to run
From Beowulf, flee back to his marsh and hide there:
This was a different Herot than the hall he had emptied.
But Higlac's follower remembered his final
50 Boast and, standing erect, stopped
The monster's flight, fastened those claws
In his fists till they cracked, clutched Grendel
Closer. The infamous killer fought
For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,
55 Desiring nothing but escape; his claws



Dragonhead from a Viking horse collar (detail) (10th century). Denmark.
National Museum, Copenhagen.

25–27. These lines foreshadow, or hint at, the outcome of the battle between Grendel and Beowulf.

? Grendel has been attacking Herot successfully for years. What will be different about this visit to Herot?

44–56. "Higlac's follower" is Beowulf. He had earlier sworn to kill Grendel with his bare hands.

? What details in these lines demonstrate Beowulf's superhuman strength?

Had been caught, he was trapped. That trip to Herot
Was a miserable journey for the writhing monster!

The high hall rang, its roof boards swayed,
And Danes shook with terror. Down
60 The aisles the battle swept, angry
And wild. Herot trembled, wonderfully
Built to withstand the blows, the struggling
Great bodies beating at its beautiful walls;
Shaped and fastened with iron, inside
65 And out, artfully worked, the building
Stood firm. Its benches rattled, fell
To the floor, gold-covered boards grating
As Grendel and Beowulf battled across them.
Hrothgar's wise men had fashioned Herot
70 To stand forever; only fire,
They had planned, could shatter what such skill had put
Together, swallow in hot flames such splendor
Of ivory and iron and wood. Suddenly
The sounds changed, the Danes started
75 In new terror, cowering in their beds as the terrible
Screams of the Almighty's enemy sang
In the darkness, the horrible shrieks of pain
And defeat, the tears torn out of Grendel's
Taut throat, hell's captive caught in the arms
80 Of him who of all the men on earth
Was the strongest.

2

That mighty protector of men
Meant to hold the monster till its life
Leaped out, knowing the fiend was no use
To anyone in Denmark. All of Beowulf's
85 Band had jumped from their beds, ancestral
Swords raised and ready, determined
To protect their prince if they could. Their courage
Was great but all wasted: They could hack at Grendel
From every side, trying to open
90 A path for his evil soul, but their points
Could not hurt him, the sharpest and hardest iron
Could not scratch at his skin, for that sin-stained demon
Had bewitched all men's weapons, laid spells
That blunted every mortal man's blade.
95 And yet his time had come, his days
Were over, his death near; down
To hell he would go, swept groaning and helpless
To the waiting hands of still worse fiends.



Eagle shield ornament
(7th century), from
the Sutton Hoo ship
treasure, Suffolk, England.
British Museum, London.

76–81. The “Almighty’s enemy”—God’s enemy—in line 76 refers to Grendel. Earlier in the epic, Grendel’s origin is explained: He is the offspring of one of the descendants of Cain, the son of Adam and Eve who killed his brother, Abel, and became the first murderer. Cain was eternally cursed by God and, according to legend, fathered all the evil beings that plague humankind: monsters, demons, and evil spirits.

? In what ways is this battle between Grendel and Beowulf really a battle between good and evil? What details in the description of the battle make this clear?

? **88–94.** According to these lines, why can’t Beowulf’s men harm Grendel?

Now he discovered—once the afflictor
Of men, tormentor of their days—what it meant
100 To feud with Almighty God: Grendel
Saw that his strength was deserting him, his claws
Bound fast, Higlac’s brave follower tearing at
His hands. The monster’s hatred rose higher,
105 But his power had gone. He twisted in pain,
And the bleeding sinews deep in his shoulder
Snapped, muscle and bone split
And broke. The battle was over, Beowulf
Had been granted new glory: Grendel escaped,
110 But wounded as he was could flee to his den,
His miserable hole at the bottom of the marsh,
Only to die, to wait for the end
Of all his days. And after that bloody
Combat the Danes laughed with delight.
115 He who had come to them from across the sea,
Bold and strong-minded, had driven affliction
Off, purged Herot clean. He was happy,
Now, with that night’s fierce work; the Danes
Had been served as he’d boasted he’d serve them; Beowulf,
120 A prince of the Geats, had killed Grendel,
Ended the grief, the sorrow, the suffering
Forced on Hrothgar’s helpless people
By a bloodthirsty fiend. No Dane doubted
The victory, for the proof, hanging high
125 From the rafters where Beowulf had hung it, was the monster’s
Arm, claw and shoulder and all.

3

And then, in the morning, crowds surrounded
Herot, warriors coming to that hall
From faraway lands, princes and leaders
130 Of men hurrying to behold the monster’s
Great staggering tracks. They gaped with no sense
Of sorrow, felt no regret for his suffering,
Went tracing his bloody footprints, his beaten
And lonely flight, to the edge of the lake
135 Where he’d dragged his corpselike way, doomed
And already weary of his vanishing life.
The water was bloody, steaming and boiling
In horrible pounding waves, heat
Sucked from his magic veins; but the swirling
140 Surf had covered his death, hidden
Deep in murky darkness his miserable
End, as hell opened to receive him.



Detail of three-ringed gold torcs
(6th century).
Statens Historiska Museer, Stockholm

? **99–108.** How does Beowulf defeat Grendel?

? **123–126.** How does Beowulf prove his victory over Grendel? Why might he do this?

? **131–142.** What has happened to Grendel?

Then old and young rejoiced, turned back
From that happy pilgrimage, mounted their hard-hooved
145 Horses, high-spirited stallions, and rode them
Slowly toward Herot again, retelling
Beowulf's bravery as they jogged along.
And over and over they swore that nowhere
On earth or under the spreading sky
Or between the seas, neither south nor north,
150 Was there a warrior worthier to rule over men.
(But no one meant Beowulf's praise to belittle
Hrothgar, their kind and gracious king!) . . .

Grendel's monstrous mother, in grief for her son, next attacks Herot, and in her dripping claws she carries off one man—Hrothgar's closest friend. The monster also carries off Grendel's arm, which Beowulf had hung high from the rafters. Beowulf is awakened and called for again. In one of the most famous verses in the epic, the old king describes where Grendel and his mother live.

4

. . . "They live in secret places, windy
155 Cliffs, wolf-dens where water pours
From the rocks, then runs underground, where mist
Steams like black clouds, and the groves of trees
Growing out over their lake are all covered
With frozen spray, and wind down snakelike
160 Roots that reach as far as the water
And help keep it dark. At night that lake
Burns like a torch. No one knows its bottom,
No wisdom reaches such depths. A deer,
Hunted through the woods by packs of hounds,
165 A stag with great horns, though driven through the forest
From faraway places, prefers to die
On those shores, refuses to save its life
In that water. It isn't far, nor is it
A pleasant spot! When the wind stirs
170 And storms, waves splash toward the sky,
As dark as the air, as black as the rain
That the heavens weep. Our only help,
Again, lies with you. Grendel's mother
Is hidden in her terrible home, in a place
175 You've not seen. Seek it, if you dare! Save us,
Once more, and again twisted gold,
Heaped-up ancient treasure, will reward you
For the battle you win!"



Anglo-Saxon
gold buckle
(7th century), from the
Sutton Hoo ship treasure,
Suffolk, England.
British Museum, London.

172–178. What is
Hrothgar asking Beowulf
to do?