

Carrying the sword Hrunting, Beowulf goes to the lake where Grendel's mother has her underwater lair. Then, fully armed, he dives to the depths of this watery hell.

THE MONSTER'S MOTHER

5

... He leaped into the lake, would not wait for anyone's
180 Answer; the heaving water covered him
Over. For hours he sank through the waves;
At last he saw the mud of the bottom.
And all at once the greedy she-wolf
Who'd ruled those waters for half a hundred
185 Years discovered him, saw that a creature
From above had come to explore the bottom
Of her wet world. She welcomed him in her claws,
Clutched at him savagely but could not harm him,
Tried to work her fingers through the tight
190 Ring-woven mail on his breast, but tore
And scratched in vain. Then she carried him, armor
And sword and all, to her home; he struggled
To free his weapon, and failed. The fight
Brought other monsters swimming to see
195 Her catch, a host of sea beasts who beat at
His mail shirt, stabbing with tusks and teeth
As they followed along. Then he realized, suddenly,
That she'd brought him into someone's battle-hall,
And there the water's heat could not hurt him,
200 Nor anything in the lake attack him through
The building's high-arching roof. A brilliant
Light burned all around him, the lake
Itself like a fiery flame.

Then he saw
The mighty water witch, and swung his sword,
205 His ring-marked blade, straight at her head;
The iron sang its fierce song,
Sang Beowulf's strength. But her guest
Discovered that no sword could slice her evil
Skin, that Hrunting could not hurt her, was useless
210 Now when he needed it. They wrestled, she ripped
And tore and clawed at him, bit holes in his helmet,
And that too failed him; for the first time in years
Of being worn to war it would earn no glory;
It was the last time anyone would wear it. But Beowulf
215 Longed only for fame, leaped back

179–203. Describe how Beowulf comes to the lair of Grendel's mother. What details remind you that Beowulf is not an ordinary man?

Silver and gold brooch with amber ornaments (9th century) from Roscrea, County Tipperary. National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.

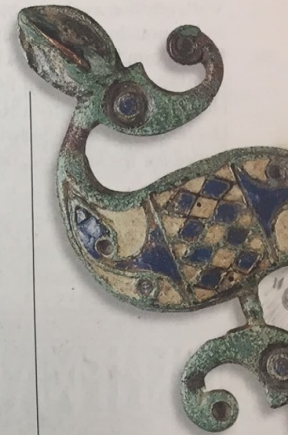


Into battle. He tossed his sword aside,
Angry; the steel-edged blade lay where
He'd dropped it. If weapons were useless he'd use
His hands, the strength in his fingers. So fame
220 Comes to the men who mean to win it
And care about nothing else! He raised
His arms and seized her by the shoulder; anger
Doubled his strength, he threw her to the floor.
She fell, Grendel's fierce mother, and the Geats'
225 Proud prince was ready to leap on her. But she rose
At once and repaid him with her clutching claws,
Wildly tearing at him. He was weary, that best
And strongest of soldiers; his feet stumbled *losing*
And in an instant she had him down, held helpless.
230 Squatting with her weight on his stomach, she drew
A dagger, brown with dried blood and prepared
To avenge her only son. But he was stretched
On his back, and her stabbing blade was blunted
By the woven mail shirt he wore on his chest.
235 The hammered links held; the point
Could not touch him. He'd have traveled to the bottom of
the earth,
Edgetho's son, and died there, if that shining
Woven metal had not helped—and Holy
God, who sent him victory, gave judgment
240 For truth and right, Ruler of the Heavens,
Once Beowulf was back on his feet and fighting.

6

Then he saw, hanging on the wall, a heavy
Sword, hammered by giants, strong
And blessed with their magic, the best of all weapons
245 But so massive that no ordinary man could lift
Its carved and decorated length. He drew it
From its scabbard, broke the chain on its hilt,^o
And then, savage, now, angry
And desperate, lifted it high over his head
250 And struck with all the strength he had left,
Caught her in the neck and cut it through,
Broke bones and all. Her body fell
To the floor, lifeless, the sword was wet
With her blood, and Beowulf rejoiced at the sight.
255 The brilliant light shone, suddenly,
As though burning in that hall, and as bright as Heaven's

216–241. What details in this description of the battle between Grendel's mother and Beowulf add to your suspense about the outcome? At what point do you think Beowulf may not be successful? What saves him?



Dragon-shaped brooch (2nd century) from the Romano-British period. © British Museum, London.

247. scabbard... hilt: A scabbard is a case that holds the blade of a sword; a hilt is a sword's handle.

242–254. How does Beowulf kill Grendel's mother?

Own candle, lit in the sky. He looked
At her home, then following along the wall
Went walking, his hands tight on the sword,
His heart still angry. He was hunting another
260 Dead monster, and took his weapon with him
For final revenge against Grendel's vicious
Attacks, his nighttime raids, over
And over, coming to Herot when Hrothgar's
265 Men slept, killing them in their beds,
Eating some on the spot, fifteen
Or more, and running to his loathsome moor
With another such sickening meal waiting
In his pouch. But Beowulf repaid him for those visits,
270 Found him lying dead in his corner,
Armless, exactly as that fierce fighter
Had sent him out from Herot, then struck off
His head with a single swift blow. The body
Jerked for the last time, then lay still. . . .

? **257–274.** What is Beowulf's final revenge against Grendel? What action of Beowulf's provides a **resolution**, or wrapping up, of the episode?



(Left) the Germanic hero Weland at his forge and (right) the adoration of the Magi (8th century), from the Franks casket. Whalebone. British Museum. © Michael Holford