

THE GLENCOE LITERATURE LIBRARY

Study Guide

for

Beowulf

A translation by Burton Raffel



New York, New York Columbus, Ohio Woodland Hills, California Peoria, Illinois

To the Teacher

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- *Media Links*: annotated listings of audio, visual, electronic, and print resources related to the work
- *Teaching Options*: high-interest activities for introducing the work and individualizing instructions
- *Assessment Options*: alternative assessment activities for greater flexibility in evaluating students' understanding of the work
- *Options for Using Related Readings*: suggested approaches to the Related Readings included with the work
- *Answer Key and Assessment Rubrics*: detailed answers to all questions and reading activities and evaluations for alternative assessment activities

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- *Meet the Author*: a lively overview of the author's life
- *Introducing the Work*: background information that provides a meaningful context in which to read the work
- *Before You Read* and *Responding* pages: pre- and postreading questions and activities
- *Active Reading*: graphic organizers for students to complete as they read activities
- *Test*: a comprehensive two-part test of the work

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About the Work

BEOWULF

Beowulf is the first great heroic poem in English literature. No one knows when, where, by whom, or under what conditions *Beowulf* was composed. We do know that it has existed in written form for more than a thousand years. The epic describes the legendary Geatish hero Beowulf and his three great battles against supernatural monsters. *Beowulf* is acclaimed as one of the finest examples of heroic poetry in the English language and as an inspiring tale of courage. Moreover, *Beowulf* provides a fascinating glimpse into early Germanic life.

SYNOPSIS

Hrothgar, prosperous ruler of the Danes, builds a magnificent mead hall, Herot, to share the spoils of war with his men. Grendel, an evil monster that prowls the moors nearby, is so envious of the merry-making at Herot that he breaks into the hall one night and seizes thirty of Hrothgar's warriors. The monster drags the men to his den for slaughter, starting a twelve-year reign of terror. When news of the Danes' plight reaches Beowulf, the greatest warrior among the Geats, a neighboring tribe to the north, he gathers fourteen of his fiercest warriors and sets sail for Denmark. Hrothgar gives Beowulf a warm welcome, but Unferth, one of Hrothgar's warriors, is less friendly. Jealous of Beowulf's fame, Unferth suggests that Beowulf will meet with failure if he dares to challenge Grendel.

That night, Grendel returns to Herot, and Beowulf engages the monster in battle. When Beowulf tears off one of Grendel's arms, the monster is mortally wounded. The following day, the Danes hang Grendel's arm from the rafters of Herot, and Hrothgar hosts a victory celebration. The victory is short-lived, however, because that night, Grendel's mother seeks revenge. After the warriors have fallen asleep, she steals into Herot and kills Hrothgar's counselor and old

friend, Esher. Once again, Beowulf offers Hrothgar his help. He pursues the ogress to her underwater lair and, after a fierce battle, slays her. When Beowulf returns to Herot, Hrothgar showers him with gifts. Beowulf and his men then return to Geatland.

Years later, Higlac, King of the Geats and Beowulf's uncle, is killed in battle. Beowulf ascends to the throne and rules for fifty years. All is well until a slave raises the ire of a dragon by stealing a cup from its hoard of treasures. Beowulf sets out with a handful of his bravest men to vanquish the creature but is deserted by all the men except Wiglaf, a kinsman. With Wiglaf's help, Beowulf slays the dragon, but he is mortally wounded during the battle and dies a hero's death.

*Note: A list of characters is provided on page 15 of this study guide.

MAJOR THEMES OF THE POEM

- *The search to attain a measure of immortality by performing heroic deeds.* This theme is introduced in the prologue, which describes

*Danish heroes,
Ancient kings and the glory they cut
For themselves, swinging mighty swords!*

It is developed throughout the poem in descriptions of Beowulf's exploits and is reinforced in the conclusion, in which the Geats praise Beowulf for his heroic deeds.

- *The importance of maintaining a civilized, orderly society.* *Beowulf* abounds with contrasts between order (good) and chaos (evil). Note, for example, the sharp difference between the misery that the Danes suffer when they are kingless and the prosperity that they enjoy when Shild takes control—or the contrast between Hrothgar and Grendel, Herot and Grendel's lair, the Danes' victory feasts and Grendel's man-eating attacks.
- *The display of courage in the face of death.* Before confronting each of his three major

adversaries, Beowulf vows to fight unyieldingly even if he is fated to die.

APPROACHES TO TEACHING THE POEM

- *Use Beowulf to teach the defining characteristics of epic poetry.* Explain that an epic is a long narrative poem that recounts in formal language the exploits of a larger-than-life hero. Ask students to describe the heroes and plots of epics that they have read (such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*). Follow up by asking students to make predictions about the hero and plot of *Beowulf*. Encourage students to jot down their predictions in their journals.

As students read *Beowulf*, periodically ask them to review their notes to see whether their predictions are accurate. Encourage students to make further predictions about the plot.

After students have finished reading the poem, ask them whether it fits the definition of an epic and why.

- *Use Beowulf to introduce major devices of Old English poetry.* Describe major devices of Old English verse, such as alliteration, caesuras, and kennings. Provide students with examples of each.

As students read *Beowulf*, ask them to find examples of each device. Call for volunteers to share their examples with the class.

After students have finished reading the poem, follow up by assigning them to write brief poems that contain one or more devices of Old English verse.

FURTHER READING FOR THE TEACHER

- *Beowulf: Modern Critical Interpretations*, edited by Harold Bloom, 1987, is a helpful collection of critical essays about the work.

- *A Beowulf Handbook*, edited by Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, 1997, is an indispensable guide to the work.
- “Why Bother with Beowulf?,” by Melissa Snell, is an illuminating essay that can be found on the Internet at <http://historymedren.about.com/library/weekly/aa011698.htm>
- “Why Read Beowulf?,” by Robert F. Yeager, provides excellent rationales for reading the poem. The Internet address is as follows: <http://www.neh.gov/publications/humanities/1999-03/yeager.html>

Media Links



Videos

The following videos about superheroes may be used to help students better understand the characters and themes of the epic as a genre.

- *Excalibur* (starring Patrick Stewart and Liam Neeson; 1981, 140 minutes)
- *Willow* (directed by Ron Howard, starring Val Kilmer; 1988)
- *Dragonheart* (starring Sean Connery and Dennis Quaid; 1996, 103 minutes)



Music

Students might enjoy listening to composer Howard Hanson's famous work *The Lament of Beowulf*, Op. 25, performed by the Seattle Symphony Orchestra and the Seattle Symphony Chorale (Delos International, 1991). The 19-minute piece captures the Geats' outpouring of grief over Beowulf's death. A libretto accompanies the CD.



Audiocassettes

To heighten students' sense of the aural texture of *Beowulf*, suggest that they listen to readings of it in the original Old English.

- *Beowulf*, read by J. D. Bessinger Jr. (Harper Collins, 1996)



Art

The book *Beowulf: A Likeness* by Randolph Swearer, Raymond Oliver, and Marijane Osborne, 1990, features striking photographic images that capture the historical setting.



Internet Connection

The Internet can be a valuable research tool. Suggest that students visit some of these sites:

- Anglecynn: Anglo-Saxon Living History 400–900 A.D., The Historical Background of Beowulf, at <http://www.geocities.com/athens/2471/>
- *The Adventures of Beowulf*, an adaptation from the Old English by David Breeden, at <http://www.lone-star.net/literature/beowulf/index.html>
- Reproduction of Anglian Dress, a photo and description of Anglo-Saxon clothing at <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/MelanieWilson/dresspic.htm>
- Grendel's Cave, a multiplayer role-playing adventure game at <http://www.grendelscave.com/index.html>

At the time this study guide went to press, these Web sites were in operation. Before assigning students to visit the sites, check to ensure that the sites still exist.



Further Reading for Students

- *Introduction to Beowulf*, by Edward B. Irving Jr., 1969, provides an overview and historical context for students who are new to the poem.
- *A Readable Beowulf*, by Stanley B. Greenfield, 1982, is a translation of the poem written at a comfortable reading level.
- *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, by Seamus Heaney, 2000, is a sophisticated but very accessible retelling of the epic.

Be sure to preview all media links to determine whether the material is appropriate for your class.

Teaching Options

Options for Motivating Students

Fascination with Epic Heroes

Provide meaningful context by discussing the appeal of heroes.

- Point out that stories about heroes fighting evil monsters are highly popular. Ask students to describe heroes in movies, games, or books that fit the genre.
- Divide the class into small groups. Have groups brainstorm a list of reasons why epic heroes are so popular. After about five minutes, ask groups to share their lists.
- Prepare students to read *Beowulf* by introducing it as the first epic poem in the English language. Point out that the poem was written more than a thousand years ago and that it is about a legendary hero who wins fame by fighting three supernatural monsters. Encourage students to note *Beowulf*'s heroic qualities as they read the poem. Ask them to consider why the poem is still read and admired today.

The Poet as Performer

Introduce students to verse as a form of creative expression.

- Briefly define performance poetry as a relatively recent (and controversial) form of entertainment in which poets perform their works for audiences. Point out that typical venues for performance poets are coffeehouses, bars, and rock-entertainment TV stations such as MTV. Explain that poets compete against each other in “poetry slams” and that the winners are decided by the amount of applause they receive from the audience.
- Invite a couple of volunteers to perform from memory a brief rap verse or song lyric suitable for the class. Tell student performers that they will be competing against each other, and the audience will decide the winner. Afterward, ask student performers how they felt about reciting verse for an audience. Then ask audience members to describe the criteria that they used to evaluate the performances. Initiate a brief discussion on the merits and drawbacks of the poetry slam.

- Prepare the class for *Beowulf* by explaining that scōps (shops), or bards, recited narratives for audiences at castles, royal courts, and mead halls (banquet houses) in Anglo-Saxon times. Mention that some of the story materials the *Beowulf* poet used were probably performed long before they were written down. Tell students that some of the devices of Old English verse, such as formulaic repetition, originally served scōps as mnemonic devices. Briefly discuss the place of performance poetry in the oral tradition.

Laying the Groundwork

Provide Historical Background (Interdisciplinary: Social Studies).

- Explain that the early medieval Europe in which *Beowulf* is set was dominated by independent Germanic bands or tribes that often fought one another and yet shared much the same language, customs, and ideals. The families that composed each tribe united under a single chieftain, or “king,” and a small group of fellow warriors loyal to him. The king relied on his warriors to fight for him. In exchange, he gave them food, shelter, and gifts from the spoils of battle.
- Together with students, review the map of early Denmark and its neighbors on page 14 of this guide. Note that it shows the location of several of the peoples that figure in *Beowulf*. Point out that their proximity to one another might have encouraged clashes like those the poem relates.
- Share with students images of sites resembling key elements of the setting of *Beowulf*, such as photos of a re-created Anglo-Saxon village; a sacrificial bog in Lejre, Denmark; the hull of a Viking ship; the Viking Age hall interior and exterior in Trelleborg, Denmark; a facsimile of Herot; and a barrow, or burial mound, overlooking the sea. (See **Media Links**, page 4, for sources of background images.) Show students photos of chain mail and other war gear used by Germanic warriors in early medieval times. Follow up by asking students to do further research about everyday life in the world of *Beowulf*.

Meeting Individual Needs

The style and structure of *Beowulf* make it appropriate for students who enjoy challenging reading material. The following activities are designed to help you present the poem in ways that meet the needs and interests of all students.

Less-Proficient Readers

Encourage students to work together to understand the poem.

- Have students form small discussion groups. (This is an opportunity to pair gifted students with less-proficient readers and with English-language learners.) After students complete each reading assignment, have them meet in their groups to discuss the poem and share any questions that they have.
- You might also suggest that students work together to develop a rough outline of the important events in the poem. Encourage students to review the outline before they begin each new reading assignment.

Model how to read the poem aloud.

- Explain that verse usually has a rhythmic pattern and that pausing at appropriate points can enhance both the meaning and the music of the verse. Model how to read enjambed lines, pausing only where sense or punctuation dictates rather than at the end of each line. Then have students select partners and take turns reading parts of the poem aloud. Follow up by having partners work together to summarize what happens in each part.

English-Language Learners

Explain to students that familiar words are used in original ways to achieve poetic effects.

- Kennings (metaphoric compound nouns used in place of more familiar words) may present special difficulties for English-language learners. Explain that the poet sometimes combines words, often with a hyphen, to form an expression used in place of a more familiar word—for example, “sea road” for *ocean* and “ring-giver”

for *king*. Explain that these are not new words, but used for imaginative or musical effect. Encourage students to make a list of words that present difficulties and to use contextual clues to determine the definitions of the words.

Provide students with an alternate translation.

- Refer students to the adaptation *The Adventures of Beowulf*, by David Breeden. (See **Media Links**, page 4.)

Gifted and Talented

Provide literary criticism to extend and reaffirm student interpretation.

- In his critical essay “The Monsters and the Critics,” novelist and scholar J. R. R. Tolkien responds to scholar Friedrich Klaeber’s claim that “*Beowulf* lacks steady advance” by asserting that “the poem was not meant to advance, steadily or unsteadily. It is essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings.” Have students explain what “an opposition of ends and beginnings” means in relation to *Beowulf* the hero. What does Tolkien’s view suggest about the poem’s overall structure?

Assessment Options

Writing

Beowulf's Motives

- What motivates Beowulf as he moves from one exploit to another? Have students write a short essay presenting their points of view and use evidence from the poem to support their positions.

Good and Evil

- *Beowulf* contains several conflicts in which the forces of good struggle against the forces of evil. Ask students to write a brief essay analyzing one of the conflicts and the part it plays in developing a theme of *Beowulf*.

Herot Attacked!

- Ask students to write a brief newspaper account of Grendel's first attack on Herot. Tell students that they may use their imagination and quote "eyewitnesses" in their report but should remain true to the details of the poem.

Listening and Speaking

Hear Me!

- Ask students to perform a choral reading of the prologue to *Beowulf*. Have one group of students declaim it in the traditional style and another in the rapping style of today. Then have students vote on which style they prefer and have them explain why.

Sword Report

- Swords were prized possessions in Beowulf's warrior culture. Have students research the craft of sword making during the early medieval era and present their findings in a brief oral report. Students should answer the following questions: Of what were the best swords made, and for whom? Where were the swords made? What are some of the famous swords in *Beowulf* and in heroic legend?

Viewing and Representing

Map It!

- Have students create a story map that represents important events, decisions, and moments of discovery in the life of Beowulf. Display students' maps on a classroom bulletin board or in the school library.

You Have Mail

- Have students draw, photocopy, or scan images of early medieval armor and weaponry, label the items, and point out those referred to in the poem.

Interdisciplinary Connection

Beowulf's Lament

- Have students listen to composer Howard Hanson's *The Lament of Beowulf*, Op. 25 (see **Media Links**, page 4), and read the accompanying libretto. Then ask students to write a brief essay in which they evaluate how well the work captures the mood of the poem.

Options for Using Related Readings

Related Readings	Making Connections to <i>Beowulf</i>
<p>The New <i>Beowulf</i>, Online NewsHour with Seamus Heaney (BLM page 28)</p>	<p>In this interview, the award-winning poet explains how and why he decided to translate <i>Beowulf</i>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You may wish to teach this interview after students have finished reading <i>Beowulf</i>. • Before students read the interview, discuss the difficulties of translating a work of literature from one language to another. • After students read the interview, compare and contrast Heaney's translation with Burton Raffel's.
<p>from <i>Grendel</i> by John Gardner (BLM page 29)</p>	<p>This reading describes the fight between Grendel and Beowulf from Grendel's point of view.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You may wish to teach this reading after students read the first section of the poem (Prologue–Part 18), on which the excerpt is based. • Before students read the excerpt, state that <i>who</i> narrates a story is as important as <i>what</i> story is being told. Ask why this might be true. • After students read the excerpt, ask them to compare and contrast the portrayal of Grendel in <i>Beowulf</i> and in the excerpt. Discuss how the narrative point of view affects each portrayal.
<p>Old English Riddles (BLM page 30)</p>	<p>These three riddles can provide students with some insight into Anglo-Saxon culture.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the riddles to provide students with an easy and fun introduction to Old English poetry. • Point out the caesura, or medial pause in the lines, and then read the riddles aloud, pausing at the appropriate points. • Point out the connection between riddles and kennings: both make vivid something familiar by expressing it in unfamiliar or seemingly unrelated terms. Have students write riddles of their own.

Options for Using Related Readings

Related Readings	Making Connections to <i>Beowulf</i>
<p>The Slaying of the Dragon by Dino Buzzati (BLM page 31)</p>	<p>This short story looks at dragonslayers in a new light.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You may wish to teach this story after students read the third section of <i>Beowulf</i> (Parts 32–43), in which Beowulf is slain by the dragon. • Before students read the story, discuss the portrayal of the dragon in <i>Beowulf</i>. • After students read the story, ask them to contrast Beowulf the dragonslayer with the dragonslayer in the story. How does the story break from convention? Why?
<p>Medusa’s Story by Jane Cahill (BLM page 32)</p>	<p>This short story recounts the Medusa myth from Medusa’s point of view.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You may wish to teach this story after students read the second section of <i>Beowulf</i> (Parts 19–31), in which Grendel’s mother seeks revenge. • Before students read the story, review the Medusa myth with them. • After students read the story, discuss the portrayal of Medusa and ask students to find parallels between Medusa and the monsters in <i>Beowulf</i>.
<p>The Woman with the Big Thumbnail edited by Minnie Postma (BLM page 33)</p>	<p>This African folktale has many parallels with <i>Beowulf</i>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You may wish to teach the folktale after students read the second section of <i>Beowulf</i> (Parts 19–31), in which Grendel’s mother seeks revenge. • Before students read the story, point out that certain motifs recur in many legends and folktales. Ask why this might be so. • After students read the folktale, ask them to identify as many similarities between <i>Beowulf</i> and the folktale as they can. • Follow up by asking students what conclusions they might draw based on the similarities between the narratives.

Answer Key

ACTIVE READING

Prologue–Part 18

Shield: King of the Danes; arrived in a boat as a child; great grandfather of Hrothgar. *Hrothgar*: King of the Danes; builder of Herot; wise and generous. *Welthow*: wife of Hrothgar; ideal queen; generous and diplomatic. *Beowulf*: hero of the poem; ideal warrior; strong, brave, and honorable; Geat by birth. *Unferth*: one of Hrothgar's warriors; jealous challenger of Beowulf. *Grendel*: evil monster; an offspring of Cain; terrorizes Herot for twelve years; killed by Beowulf.

Parts 19–31

To avenge the death of Grendel, Grendel's mother kills Esher, Hrothgar's trusted counselor.
To avenge the death of Esher, Beowulf kills Grendel's mother.

Parts 32–43

The dragon seeks revenge by burning down the Geats' homes; All of Beowulf's men desert him in battle except Wiglaf; Beowulf strikes the dragon, but his sword is shattered; Wiglaf and Beowulf kill the dragon; Beowulf dies of his wounds; The Geats are leaderless, and Wiglaf rises to take Beowulf's place.

RESPONDING Prologue–Part 18

Recall and Interpret

1. Hrothgar builds Herot to share the gifts that God has given him. The hall doesn't collapse during battle because it is reinforced with iron. Its collapse would have symbolized the collapse of the Danish throne.
2. When Beowulf's father triggered a feud between the Geats and the Wulfings, he was forced to go into exile in Denmark. Hrothgar settled the feud by sending treasures to the Wulfings to appease them. Beowulf probably feels indebted to Hrothgar and welcomes the opportunity to repay his kindnesses.
3. Grendel is a powerful, evil outcast descended from Cain. Grendel symbolizes the forces of evil and chaos.
4. Unferth, though considered trustworthy by Hrothgar and Welthow, killed his own kin. Beowulf, however, has shown unquestionable loyalty to Higlac and to the Dane's cause. Unferth has a high reputation as a warrior but lacks the courage and strength Beowulf has to fight Grendel. By contrasting Beowulf with Unferth, the poem emphasizes Beowulf's greatness.
5. Answers may vary, but most students will probably agree that women played a subservient role, as evidenced by the fact that Welthow serves Hrothgar and the warriors.

Evaluate and Connect

6. Answers will vary. Some students may believe that the story would be easier to follow if it were written in prose. Other students may argue that the rhythm of the verse and the beauty of the language enhance the story.
7. Answers will vary, but most students will probably agree that Beowulf would be listed among the heroes because he is strong, fearless, and honors his father's memory by helping Hrothgar.

RESPONDING Parts 19–31

Recall and Interpret

1. Key characters' bloodlines are frequently mentioned, with names of male ancestors frequently conferring honor on the descendants. The lack of information about Grendel's father suggests that he may be illegitimate, which would make him an outcast and deserving of his fate.
2. The mood is joyous because Beowulf has triumphed over Grendel. The mood quickly changes to mournful and sad when Grendel's mother kills Esher.
3. Beowulf's speech shows his loyalty to his men, expressing

his concern that they be well provided for. Bequeathing his treasures to Higlac suggests his loyalty and closeness to Higlac, his king and his uncle.

4. Beowulf is brave, noble, and generous; Hermod is bloodthirsty, tyrannical, and selfish. The contrast sets off Beowulf's superior qualities and makes it clear that he is an ideal warrior and leader.
5. Beowulf takes Hrunting into battle. Unferth gave him the sword. Like Hrunting, Unferth is unreliable in battle.

Evaluate and Connect

6. Answers will vary. Some students might view the ancient sword that Beowulf discovers as an example of *deus ex machina*. Others may argue that divine intervention is an essential part of the poem and that instances of *deus ex machina* are acceptable in a fantasy.
7. Revenge leads to a vicious cycle of killing in which violence begets violence. Even in the world of *Beowulf* there are other, more effective ways to settle disagreements. Note that Hrothgar was able to settle the feud between the Geats, and Wulfings by offering gifts to the injured party. Students may also mention other means of settling disputes, such as arbitration.

RESPONDING Parts 32–43

Recall and Interpret

1. A slave of one of the Geat warriors steals from a hoard of treasures guarded by a dragon. In retaliation, the dragon burns the land of the Geats.
2. Beowulf assumes the throne when Herdred is killed in battle. He had a chance to become king when Queen Higd offered him the throne for fear that Herdred would not be able to protect the Geats, but Beowulf refused out of loyalty to his lord. As king, he continues to show the strength, bravery, and generosity he showed as a young warrior.
3. Like Beowulf in his youth, Wiglaf is brave, loyal, and has a strong sense of duty. Wiglaf rebukes the other warriors for their cowardice much as Beowulf rebuked Unferth for his cowardice. Wiglaf is a worthy successor because he has the same qualities as Beowulf.
4. Beowulf's death brings in the threat of war on the Geats at the hands of the Frisians, Franks, and Swedes.
5. Usually the treasures from a defeated enemy were shared with the people. The burial of the treasures with Beowulf signifies the great love and respect his people had for him.

Evaluate and Connect

6. Answers will vary, but most students will probably agree that *Beowulf* is an exciting adventure story that provides an interesting look into the past and exalts values that are still prized.
7. Answers will vary. Students should say that Wiglaf would probably agree that some things are worth sacrificing one's life for because he risked his own life to defend Beowulf against the dragon.

RELATED READINGS

The New Beowulf, Online NewsHour with Seamus Heaney

1. When Heaney says that the *Beowulf* poet "lived in two worlds," he means that the poet was familiar with both the pagan Scandinavian past and the "new" Christian Mediterranean culture.
2. Heaney makes a direct connection between Old English and the language spoken in his community when he says that the Old English word *thole* was still in use there.
3. Heaney says that the conflicts in Ireland are similar to those in *Beowulf* in that both cases involve small ethnic groups living together with memories of wrongs on each side. Heaney

Answer Key (continued from previous page)

points out, however, that unlike the characters in *Beowulf*, the Irish are not commanded by their leaders to seek revenge.

4. When Heaney says that poetry has “no tense,” he means that poetry is timeless because it deals with universal themes. Students are likely to agree.
5. Students’ answers will vary but should be supported by specific reasons.

Grendel

1. Grendel is shocked that Beowulf has seized his arm, saying that nowhere has he encountered a grip like his. He attributes it to Beowulf’s playing a trick on him and to accident.
2. Grendel thinks that he can outwit Beowulf, describing him as “only a man.” He believes that it was only because of luck that Beowulf was able to overcome him.
3. Grendel slipped on blood when he tried to kick Beowulf.
4. Grendel attributes Beowulf’s success to the accident, saying that the accident gave Beowulf the advantage.
5. In the excerpt, Grendel is portrayed as a thinking, calculating being whose philosophy is that chance determines the outcome of events. In the poem, Grendel is an unthinking beast with a lust for blood.

Old English Riddles

1. Students should offer the following solutions: anchor, fish in a river, and shield. Students should mention the phrases “under the sea,” “I feel out the bottom,” “In lying still,” and “if my grip holds out.”
2. “My house is not quiet, I am not loud.”
3. Students should have determined, based on context, that *smitten* means “hit” or “struck.” Since the shield has been struck by war-blades, “smitten” is an appropriate description.
4. The “shield” expresses itself with the greatest emotions. Terms that describe it include “lonely,” “wounded,” “without hope of comfort or help,” and “doomed.”
5. Kennings will vary. Students should see that the kennings, like the riddles, are metaphoric.

The Slaying of the Dragon

1. Dr. Taddei warns Andronico that the smoke the dragon emits is deadly. Andronico thinks that Dr. Taddei is misinformed.
2. The dragon is about six feet long, with a head similar to a crocodile’s, a long neck, and a short tail. Most students will agree that the portrayal is sympathetic, particularly when it becomes evident that the dragon is merely trying to find food and protect its young.
3. Answers may vary, but most students will agree that the apparent heroes of the story are not, in the end, heroes at all. The dragon never threatens them, and their method of killing the dragon is cowardly, as are their reasons for killing it.
4. The dragon is a relic of an earlier time, when human beings did not rule the earth. For that reason, the expeditioners feel threatened by it.
5. Both dragons are relics of an ancient past, and both prefer to remain secluded from humankind. The dragon in the story is not aggressive and does not directly threaten people. The dragon in *Beowulf* is aggressive and threatening.

Medusa’s Story

1. Athena is jealous of Medusa’s beauty and ability to attract men. Most students will agree that Medusa is blameless and that the punishment does not fit the crime.
2. Medusa welcomes death because she is so miserable.
3. Medusa would be likely to say that she would not want to know her fate. Knowing her fate has made her miserable.
4. Students are likely to say that Medusa does arouse their sympathy because she is burdened with the knowledge of her fate, she is forced to suffer when she meant no harm,

and she has been wronged because of Athena’s jealousy and because her own sisters betrayed her.

5. Fate plays an important role in both works, but the main characters’ responses to fate are different. Medusa knows her fate and feels cursed by that knowledge. Beowulf does not have foreknowledge of his fate but accepts it.

The Woman with the Big Thumbnail

1. Sechakatane is lonely because her mother has killed and eaten everyone else in their village.
2. Sechakatane meets Bulane when he comes to kill her mother.
3. Bulane and his men trick Machakatane and ambush her.
4. The repetition, conversational tone, and refrain “so say the old people” indicate that the poem belongs to the oral tradition.
5. Both the folktale and the epic poem describe man-eating female monsters that terrorize people, and in both works a hero comes to slay the monster.

TEST

Recall and Interpret

1. d 5. d
2. b 6. d
3. c 7. a
4. c 8. b

Evaluate and Connect (any 2)

1. Students’ answers will vary, but they might observe the following: Like the ruler Hrothgar describes, Beowulf becomes a famous, powerful, and prosperous king who keeps his people’s enemies at bay. When confronted by the dragon, Beowulf thinks at first that it brings God’s retribution for some sin Beowulf has committed. Even though Beowulf has ruled for many years and survived everything fate has thrown him, he knows that if God wills, the dragon might end his life and thus end his rule.
2. Beowulf is larger than life. He wins fame by risking his own life to perform glorious feats. He grip is so strong that swords break in his hand, he single-handedly wipes out a nest of giants, he swims and battles sea monsters for seven days, and he slays Grendel and Grendel’s mother. Equally important, Beowulf is a good man. He is loyal to his allies, respectful of his ancestors, and attends to his duties as a son, a friend, and a leader.
3. Both the prologue and the conclusion describe the funerals of great heroes. The prologue describes the burial of Shild, and the conclusion describes the burial of Beowulf. The structure of the poem invites comparisons between Shild and Beowulf, thus unifying the work.
4. Students’ answers may vary but should be supported by evidence from the poem. Statements of theme might include the following: Great deeds bring great fame; the forces of order and goodness inevitably conflict with the forces of chaos and evil; death should be faced with courage.
5. What Ker finds preposterous is *Beowulf*’s structure, which he faults for placing the hero’s fights with supernatural monsters at the center of the poem while placing plots of greater dignity or deeper significance on the periphery. Students who agree might argue that the poem would have had clearer relevance and thus greater impact if it had centered on a hero in conflict with himself or other human beings, as in situations the poem alludes to. Students who disagree might argue that focusing on fights with supernatural monsters, not merely other human beings, heightens Beowulf’s heroism and the tragedy of his death: even the best of humankind suffer final defeat.

Assessment Rubrics

Use these criteria as guidelines for evaluating students' performance on Assessment Options activities presented in this Study Guide.

Writing

Beowulf's Motives *Students' essays should*

- have a thesis statement that expresses the student's point of view
- include specific examples from the poem that support the thesis statement
- have a clear introduction, a well-developed body, and a logical conclusion

Good and Evil *Students' essay should*

- identify and analyze a conflict between good and evil
- include specific evidence from the poem
- explain how the conflict helps further the theme of the poem

Herot Attacked! *Students' reports should*

- accurately describe Grendel's attack on Herot
- include quotations from "eyewitnesses"
- display an awareness of newspaper style

Listening and Speaking

Hear Me! *Student performers should*

- capture the poem's original purpose in the oral tradition
- vary their tone of voice and facial expressions to communicate the tone of the poem
- capture and hold the audience's attention

Student evaluators should

- listen attentively
- vote on which performance they preferred and explain why
- offer constructive criticism

Sword Report *Students' reports should*

- describe the craft of sword making during the early medieval era
- explain what the best swords were made of, where they were made, and whom they were made for

Viewing and Representing

Map It! *Students' maps should*

- accurately identify important events, decisions, and moments of discovery in the life of Beowulf
- present events in chronological order
- be visually appealing to a wide audience

You Have Mail *Students' displays should*

- accurately depict armor and weaponry of the sixth or seventh century
- include labels that identify the items
- identify items referred to in *Beowulf*

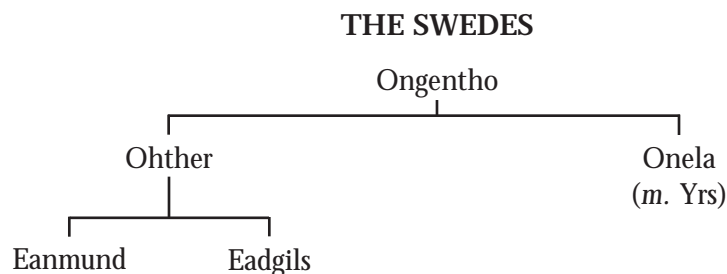
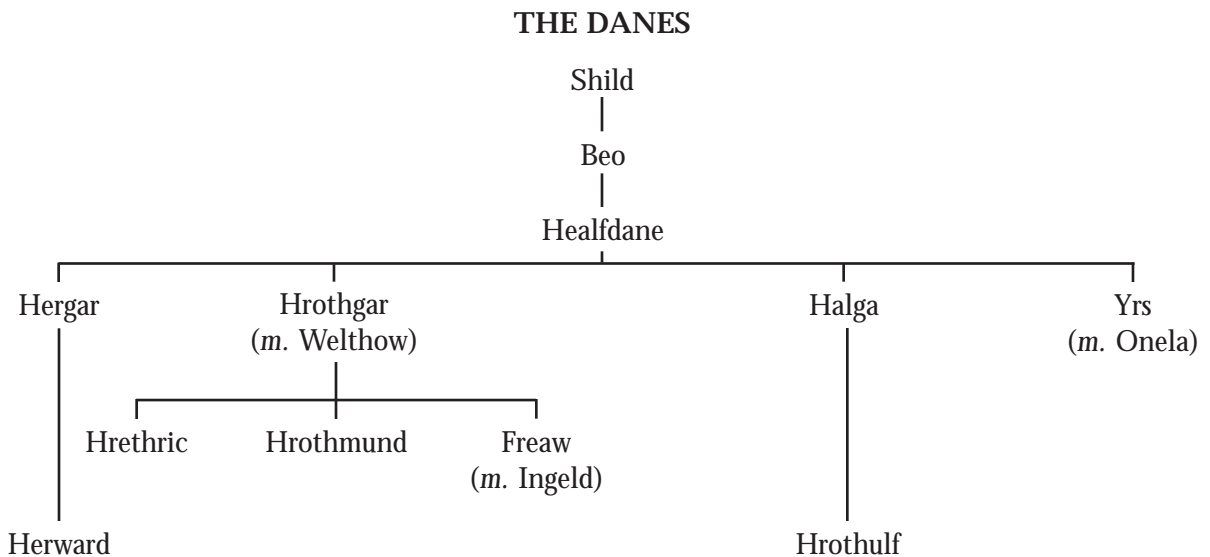
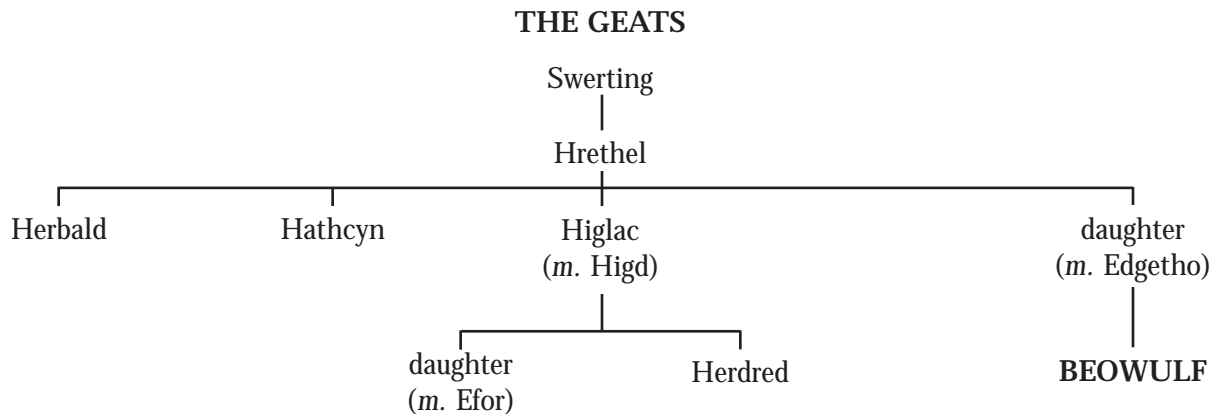
Interdisciplinary Connection

Beowulf's Lament *Students' essays should*

- display an awareness of the mood of *The Lament of Beowulf*, Op. 25, as expressed in both the music and the libretto
- evaluate the effectiveness of the composition in capturing the mood of Beowulf's death scene

Meet the Geats, Danes, and Swedes of *Beowulf*

By the time that *Beowulf* was written down, Germanic tribes from Scandinavia and elsewhere in northern Europe had been invading England's shores for centuries. The principal human characters in *Beowulf* hail from three Scandinavian tribes: the Geats, the Danes, and the Swedes. The genealogy of these tribes is shown below.



Introducing the Poem

One of the most important remains of Anglo-Saxon literature is the epic poem *Beowulf*. Its age is unknown; but it comes from a very distant and hoar antiquity . . . It is like a piece of ancient armor; rusty and battered, and yet strong.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

BACKGROUND

It is a curious fact that some of the world's greatest literature has come to us from an unknown hand. *Beowulf*, the first epic poem in the English language, ranks high among such literature. Scholars believe that this epic about a brave warrior who vanquishes evil monsters was composed between the mid-seventh century and the end of the tenth century. Some of the story materials the poet uses may have been passed down by word of mouth from one generation to the next.

Beowulf was probably composed in writing by one man. Although no one knows the identity of the author, he lived in what is now England, probably somewhere north of the river Thames. Little more can be said about the author with certainty, except that he was highly skilled in poetic technique and was thoroughly familiar with the traditional themes and legends of early Germanic culture.

What is it about *Beowulf* that moved the American poet Longfellow to compare it to “a piece of ancient armor; rusty and battered, and yet strong”? Perhaps it is that the poet fused early Germanic history, legends, mythology, and ideals with Christian faith and values to create an enduring work of art that inspires as it entertains. Or perhaps it is that we still cherish many of the qualities that *Beowulf* embodies—among them courage, loyalty, and generosity.

THE TIME AND PLACE

The poem is set mainly in Denmark and Geatland (now southern Sweden) during the sixth century.

The map at right shows the locations of peoples mentioned in *Beowulf*. The proximity of those peoples to one another, together with the warrior code they followed, made for frequent clashes.

CHARACTER LIST

Much of the early action takes place in Herot, a great mead hall, or banquet hall, where the well-loved and generous Danish king Hrothgar holds court. The following list includes the principal characters in *Beowulf*, some of whom appear in the genealogies on page 13.

Beowulf, an ideal warrior of the Geats and the hero of the poem

Dragon, a fire-breathing, snakelike monster that terrorizes the Geats

Grendel, a monster with human qualities that terrorizes Herot for twelve years

Grendel's mother, a monster that also terrorizes Herot

Hrothgar, Danish king and builder of Herot

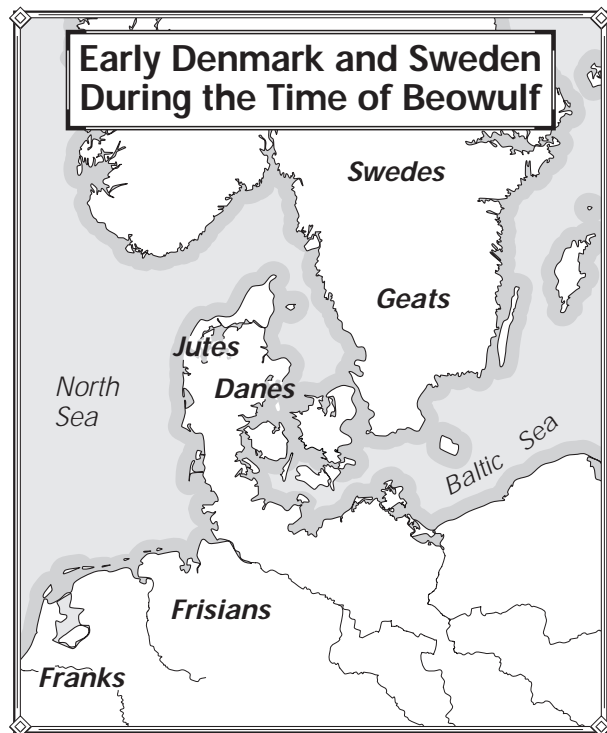
Higlac, king of the Geats and uncle of Beowulf

Shild, legendary king of the Danes and great-grandfather of Hrothgar

Unferth, a warrior in Hrothgar's court who challenges Beowulf's bravery

Welthow, Hrothgar's wife

Wiglaf, a young warrior and relative of Beowulf



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Did You Know?

In 1939, excavations at Sutton Hoo (in Suffolk, England) uncovered a royal treasure-filled ship buried in the seventh century—perhaps not long before *Beowulf* was first composed. The ship is thought to be the burial site of an early Anglo-Saxon king or nobleman. The treasures found there were so much like those described

in *Beowulf* that scholars suggest *Beowulf* may have been based, in part, on memories of the ancient burial. Some have even speculated that the poem was composed as a tribute to the late king, but no solid evidence has been found to support this notion.

CRITIC'S CORNER

The account of the hero's funeral with which the poem ends . . . [is] at once immemorial and oddly contemporary. The Geat woman who cries out in dread as the flames consume the body of her dead lord could come straight from a late-twentieth-century news report, from Rwanda or Kosovo; her [lament] is a nightmare glimpse into the minds of people who have survived traumatic, even monstrous events and who are now being exposed to a comfortless future. We immediately recognize her predicament and the pitch of her grief and find ourselves the better for having them expressed with such adequacy and dignity and unforgiving truth.

—Seamus Heaney, introduction to *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*

Before You Read

Beowulf Prologue–Part 18

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Who are today’s heroes? What special qualities do these people possess?

Share Ideas

With a small group of classmates, brainstorm a list of people who are admired as heroes. Next to the name of each person on the list, jot down a few qualities that make this person a hero. What does your list suggest about the qualities that people prize today?

Setting a Purpose

Read to discover the qualities that make Beowulf a hero.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

Beowulf contains one of the earliest instances in English of a *flyting*—a dispute, or an exchange of personal abuse, in verse. In part 8, the Danish warrior Unferth calls Beowulf a “boastful fool” and taunts him for undertaking and losing a reckless swimming match. Beowulf responds by telling how the match really went, accusing Unferth of fratricide, and faulting him for lacking the heart to confront Grendel.

The Epithet

An epithet is usually an adjective or a brief phrase used to characterize a person, place, or thing. For example, in *Beowulf* God is variously described as “the Lord of all Life,” “the Ruler of glory,” “the Lord of heaven and earth,” and “our eternal Lord.” As you read *Beowulf*, pay attention to the epithets. Note how they provide a brief summary of major characters’ most essential qualities.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

lair [lār] *n.* home or resting place, esp. of a wild animal (l. 125)

lament [lə ment'] *n.* expression of sorrow or grief (l. 128)

loathsome [lōth'səm] *adj.* extremely disgusting; repulsive; offensive (l. 985)

purge [purj] *v.* to cleanse or rid of whatever is unclean or undesirable (l. 432)

reparation [rep'ə rā'shən] *n.* act of giving satisfaction or making amends, as for a wrong or an injury (l. 158)

reprisal [ri prī'zəl] *n.* retaliation against an enemy for injuries or losses suffered, with the intent of inflicting equal or greater injury (l. 597)

solace [sol'is] *n.* relief from sorrow or disappointment; comfort; consolation (l. 185)

Active Reading

Beowulf Prologue–Part 18

Several key characters are introduced in the first section of the poem. Write a brief description of each character in the appropriate boxes below to help fix the character in your mind.

Shild

Beowulf

Hrothgar

Unferth

Welthow

Grendel

Responding

Beowulf Prologue–Part 18

Personal Response

What are your first impressions of *Beowulf*?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Why does Hrothgar build Herot? Why doesn't it collapse when *Beowulf* engages Grendel in combat? What might its collapse have symbolized?

2. How did Hrothgar come to know *Beowulf's* father? Do you think that *Beowulf* feels indebted to Hrothgar for his past kindnesses to the family? Explain.

3. Briefly describe Grendel. What might Grendel symbolize?

4. Contrast *Beowulf* and Unferth. What function does Unferth serve in the poem?

5. Based on *Welthow's* actions in the poem, what role or roles do you think women played in Anglo-Saxon society?

Responding

Beowulf Prologue–Part 18

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

6. In your opinion, would the story be better if it were written in prose rather than verse? Explain.

7. How might a contemporary of Beowulf's answer the **Focus Activity** question on page 16?

Literature and Writing

Analyzing Purpose

In a few paragraphs, analyze the purpose of the prologue, or introduction, to *Beowulf*. How does it set the stage for the action that follows?

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Some readers view Beowulf as a boastful glory seeker. Other readers view Beowulf as a noble, selfless man. With a small group of classmates, discuss each point of view. Try to come to a consensus on Beowulf's character. Then share your opinion with the class, supporting it with evidence from the poem.

Learning for Life

Using the author's descriptions of Grendel, develop a psychological profile. Describe the monster's personality and possible motivations for his behavior.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

Beowulf Parts 19–31

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Recall a time when you stood up for a friend or family member. Why did you defend the person?

Journal

In your journal, describe the situation and explain why you took a stand.

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out who stands up for Grendel and why.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

During medieval times, nobles often chose marriage partners for their children. A princess of one people might be given in marriage to the ruler of another in order to create alliances between their two peoples. As you read *Beowulf*, note the marriages that are described and think about the alliances that they create.

Foreshadowing in *Beowulf*

Foreshadowing is the use of hints or clues to prepare readers for events to come. As you read *Beowulf*, look for clues about how the tale will end. Pay close attention to speeches and descriptions that appear to suggest more than what they actually describe.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

exulting [ɪg zult'ɪŋ] *adj.* rejoicing greatly (l. 1881)

fetters [fet'ərz] *n.* anything that confines or restrains (l. 1609)

host [hōst] *n.* large number; multitude (l. 1788)

imperious [ɪm pēr'ē əs] *adj.* dictatorial; domineering; overbearing (l. 1932)

niggardly [nɪg'ərd lē] *adj.* miserly; tight-fisted; penurious (l. 1929)

surging [sɜrj ɪŋ] *adj.* moving with a violent, heaving, swelling motion (l. 1453)

Active Reading

Beowulf Parts 19–31

Many of the characters in *Beowulf* are motivated by vengeance. As you read the next section of *Beowulf*, use the chart below to note characters who seek revenge.

To avenge the death of Hnaef,	King Hengest kills Finn.

To avenge	

To avenge	

Responding

Beowulf Parts 19–31

Personal Response

What lines linger in your mind? Why?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Grendel's mother is a major figure, but nothing is known about Grendel's father. In a poem in which ancestry is important, what does Grendel's ancestry suggest about his character?

2. What is the mood at Herot at the beginning of Part 19? How does the mood change? Why?

3. What does Beowulf's speech just before fighting Grendel's mother suggest about his relationship to his men? To Higlac?

4. Contrast Beowulf and Hermod. How does the contrast help define Beowulf's character?

5. What sword does Beowulf take into battle? Who gave him the sword? What does the sword's failure in battle suggest about its owner?

Responding

Beowulf Parts 19–31

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

6. The literary term *deus ex machina* refers to the improbable and unexpected introduction of a person or device to make things turn out right. In your opinion, does the term apply to Beowulf’s fight with Grendel’s mother? Explain.

7. In *Beowulf* what are the consequences of seeking revenge? What other ways might problems be worked out?

Literature and Writing

Recognizing Allusions

Allusions are references in a work of literature to a well-known person, place, event, written work, or work of art. *Beowulf* contains numerous biblical allusions. For example, Grendel is described as an offspring of Cain. In a paragraph or two, explain what this allusion or any other allusion of your choice adds to the poem.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

With a small group of classmates, discuss *Beowulf*’s portrayal of women (including Grendel’s mother). Based on the portrayal of women in the poem, describe the “ideal” Anglo-Saxon woman. How would she have behaved? What roles would she have played? Share your description with the class.

Performing

With a partner, discuss the tone of parts 20 and 21, in which Hrothgar laments the murder of his trusted counselor Esher and Beowulf responds. How do you think the king and Beowulf feel? How might these feelings be conveyed in their tones of voice and facial expressions? Choose roles and rehearse the scene; then perform it for your class.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

Beowulf Parts 32–43

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Are some things worth sacrificing one's life for? What might they be?

Think-Pair-Share

With a partner, talk about someone who risked his or her life to help someone else. What was the result?

Setting a Purpose

Read to discover how, out of selflessness, a man makes the ultimate sacrifice.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

Old English poems rely heavily on alliteration, the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words in close proximity. Note, for example, the alliteration in these lines from the prologue to *Beowulf*: “We’ve heard of Danish heroes / . . . and the glory they cut . . . swinging mighty swords! / How Shild made slaves of soldiers from every / Land, crowds of captives he’d beaten.” As you read the final section of *Beowulf*, look for instances of alliteration, and think about how they add to the music of the poem.

The Kenning As a Literary Device

Another device that often appears in Old English poetry is the **kenning**, a descriptive figure of speech that takes the place of a familiar noun. *Beowulf* contains numerous examples of this special use of words. For example, the route that Beowulf and his men sail is called a “sea-road,” and the waves are called “ocean furrows.” As you continue to read, look for other examples of this literary device.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

bolt [bōlt] *v.* to break away from control; start and run off (l. 2888)

hoary [hōr’ē] *adj.* venerable; ancient (l. 2553)

livid [liv’id] *adj.* having a grayish-blue coloration from a bruise (l. 2724)

reproach [ri prōch’] *n.* act of reproaching; blame; reproof (l. 2331)

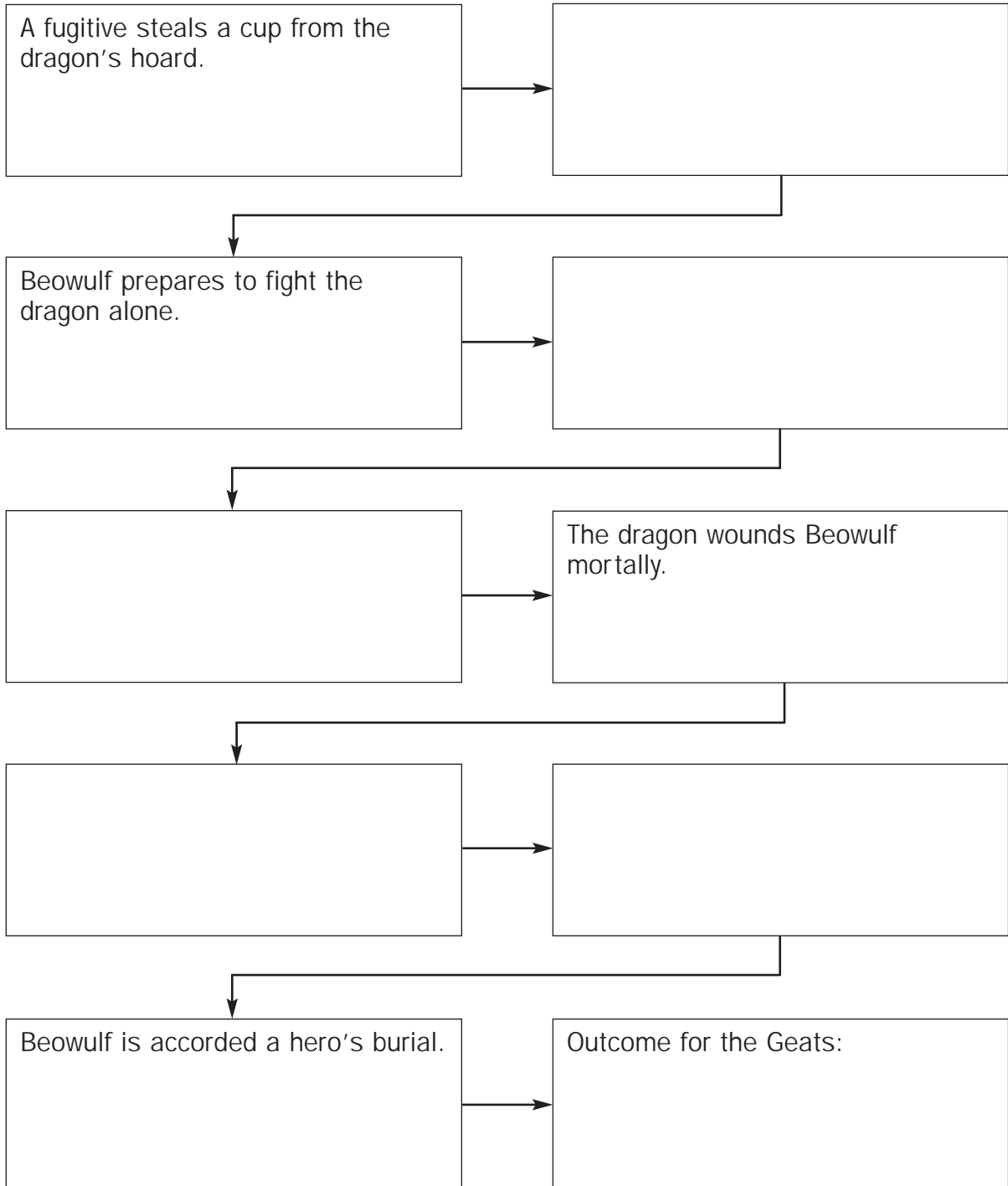
skulk [skulk] *v.* to move in a furtive or stealthy manner (l. 2366)

venomous [ven’ə məs] *adj.* able to inflict a poisonous wound, esp. by biting or stinging; secreting and transmitting venom (l. 2838)

Active Reading

Beowulf Parts 32–43

Beowulf is a narrative poem that moves through a sequence of events. As you read Parts 32–43 of the poem, trace the events from the beginning of this section to the end by completing the boxes below. At the end, predict the fate of the Geats.



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Responding

Beowulf Parts 32–43

Personal Response

Were you surprised by the conclusion of *Beowulf*? How would you have ended the poem? Why?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. What incident leads the dragon on the path to vengeance?

2. How does Beowulf become king of the Geats? Explain how his ascension to the throne reinforces the character traits he displays earlier in the poem.

3. In what way does Wiglaf resemble the younger Beowulf? What makes him a worthy successor to Beowulf?

4. Why is Beowulf's death a turning point for the Geats?

5. What is usually done with treasures taken from a defeated enemy? Why is it significant that the treasure from the dragon's den is buried with Beowulf?

Responding

Beowulf Parts 32–43

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

6. How might you account for the enduring popularity of *Beowulf*? Would you recommend it to a friend? Why or why not?

7. How do you think Wiglaf would answer the question in the **Focus Activity** on page 24? Why?

Literature and Writing

Pretend that you are Beowulf writing a letter to Wiglaf, your successor. What advice would you give to him to lead the Geats? What mistakes might you warn him against making? What values would you suggest he hold dear? Draw upon details from Beowulf's life that you think would be instructive to the young leader.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

With a small group of students, discuss a theme, or main idea, developed in *Beowulf*. Together, write a sentence or two that sums up the theme. Then share your summary with the class, explaining how you arrived at it.

Learning for Life

With a small group of students, write the script for a news broadcast on the death of Beowulf. Recap his illustrious career, the main events in his life, his rise to fame and eventual death. Include brief “man-on-the-street” interviews with Geats responding to the loss. Choose roles and rehearse the broadcast; then videotape the production and play it for your class or, if you prefer, do a live performance.



Save your work for your portfolio.

The New Beowulf Online NewsHour with Seamus Heaney

Before You Read

Focus Question

What do people mean when they say that something is “lost in translation”? What does it take to create a good translation of a work?

Background

Rarely does poetry make the bestseller list. Yet Seamus Heaney’s translation of *Beowulf* did just that. Heaney’s translation has been hailed as “both direct and sophisticated, making previous versions look slightly flowery and antique by comparison.” In this interview, Heaney talks about the work.

Responding to the Reading

1. What does Heaney mean when he says that the *Beowulf* poet “lived in two worlds”?

2. What connection does Heaney make between the Old English in which *Beowulf* was originally written and the language spoken in the rural community where he grew up?

3. According to Heaney, in what ways are conflicts in *Beowulf* similar to the conflicts in contemporary Northern Ireland? How are they different?

4. What does Heaney mean when he says that “poetry has no tense”? Do you agree? Explain.

5. **Making Connections** In the interview, Heaney reads his translation of lines 86–96 of *Beowulf*. Compare with Heaney’s translation Burton Raffel’s translation in your text. Which translation do you prefer? Why?

Writing About Literature

Heaney’s translation of *Beowulf* has been described as being more accessible than earlier versions of the poem. Get a copy of Heaney’s translation of *Beowulf* from your school or community library and compare it with the translation in your text. Then, in a few paragraphs, tell what you think makes it more accessible than Raffel’s version. Support your opinion by quoting passages from both translations.

John Gardner

from *Grendel*

Before You Read

Focus Question

Think of a time when you had to weigh two sides of a story before you could form an opinion. How did the two points of view differ? How did you decide which one to believe?

Background

John Gardner taught creative writing and published poems, novels, short stories, criticism, and children's books before his untimely death in 1982. This excerpt is from the last two chapters of his novel *Grendel*. It describes Grendel's encounter with Beowulf from the monster's point of view.

Responding to the Reading

1. What is Grendel's reaction to Beowulf's seizing his arm? How does he explain it?

2. What does Grendel think of Beowulf?

3. What was the accident that, in Grendel's mind, gave Beowulf the upper hand?

4. Does Grendel attribute Beowulf's success to his prowess or to the accident? How do you know?

5. **Making Connections** How does the portrayal of the monster in *Grendel* differ from the portrayal in *Beowulf*?

Creative Writing

Using the excerpt from *Grendel* as a model, rewrite a folktale from the monster's point of view. For example, you might retell "Little Red Riding Hood" from the wolf's point of view or "Jack and the Beanstalk" from the giant's point of view. Share your story with your class.

translated by
Charles W.
Kennedy

Old English Riddles

Before You Read

Focus Question

Why are riddles able to engage and hold our interest?

Background

The *Exeter Book*, a collection of Old English texts from which these riddles come, contains ninety-five such poems, suggesting the popularity of riddling in Anglo-Saxon society.

Responding to the Reading

1. What is the solution to each riddle? Which words and phrases in the first riddle provide the best clues to the solution?

2. What paradox, or apparent contradiction, is set up in the first two half-lines of the second riddle?

3. Why might the object in the third riddle be described as “smitten”?

4. In which riddle does the subject express itself with the greatest emotion? Is the object given the most emotional content? In what terms does it describe itself?

5. **Making Connections** Choose a kenning from *Beowulf* and explain how it might be viewed as a riddle.

Creative Writing

Using these riddles as models, write a verse riddle of your own. Choose an everyday object and describe its most essential characteristics. Share your riddle with your classmates and see if they can solve it.

Dino Buzzati

The Slaying of the Dragon

Before You Read

Focus Question

Monster movies continue to draw large audiences. Why do so many people enjoy stories about monsters? What is the appeal of movie monsters like Godzilla and King Kong?

Background

Italian author Dino Buzzati wrote several distinguished fantasy stories and novels. In his works, he often combined the real and the fantastic. Buzzati died in 1972.

Responding to the Reading

1. What warning does Dr. Taddei give Andronico? Why doesn't Andronico heed Dr. Taddei's warnings?

2. Briefly describe the dragon. In your opinion, is the portrayal of the dragon sympathetic? Explain why you feel as you do.

3. In your opinion, are the dragon slayers in this story heroes? Explain.

4. What might the dragon symbolize?

5. **Making Connections** Compare the dragon in "The Slaying" with the dragon in *Beowulf*. In what ways are the two monsters similar? different?

Literature Groups

With a group of classmates, discuss the techniques that Buzzati uses to make the story of the dragon plausible.

Jane Cahill

Medusa's Story

Before You Read

Focus Question

If someone could foretell your future, would you want the person to describe what will happen to you or would you rather not know? Why?

Background

If you believe that there are two sides to every story, then you will enjoy this retelling of the Medusa myth. "Medusa's Story" recounts the events in the Greek myth from the monster's point of view.

Responding to the Reading

1. Why does Athena punish Medusa? In your opinion, does the punishment fit the crime? Explain.

2. How does Medusa feel about her impending death? Why?

3. How might Medusa answer the **Focus Question**? How can you tell?

4. Does Medusa arouse your sympathy? Explain why or why not.

5. **Making Connections** Describe the role of fate in *Beowulf* and in "Medusa's Story." How are Beowulf's and Medusa's responses to fate different?

Listening and Speaking

Use library resources or the Internet to find a copy of the Greek myth on which "Medusa's Story" is based. Compare and contrast the portrayal of Medusa in the two works. Then share your findings in a brief oral report to your class.

edited by
Minnie
Postma

The Woman with the Big Thumbnail

from
Tales of the Basotho

Before You Read

Focus Question

Many folktales tell about monsters. What do the monsters in folktales have in common?

Background

Virtually all cultures have legends about man-eating monsters. This African folktale describes a legendary monster who has a unique way of killing people. The tale is an old one that has been handed down from one generation of Basotho to the next.

Responding to the Reading

1. Why is Sechakatane so lonely?

2. How does Sechakatane meet Bulane?

3. How do Bulane and his men manage to kill Machakatane?

4. What evidence is there in the story that the tale has been conveyed orally from generation to generation?

5. **Making Connections** What similarities do you see in “The Woman with the Big Thumbnail” and *Beowulf*?

Performing

Practice reading “The Woman with the Big Thumbnail” aloud. Pay attention to the natural rhythms of speech it captures and vary the rate and pitch of your voice to express the varying tones of the story. Then read the story aloud to your class.

TEST: *Beowulf* (continued)

2. Explain why Beowulf may be said to exemplify the epic hero.
3. Examine the structure of *Beowulf*. In what ways are the prologue and conclusion similar? How do these similarities help unify the poem?
4. What is the theme, or central idea, of *Beowulf*? Support your answer with evidence from the poem.
5. Critic W. P. Ker evaluated *Beowulf* this way:

The great beauty, the real value . . . is in its dignity of style. In construction it is curiously weak, in a sense preposterous; for while the main story is simplicity itself, the merest commonplace of heroic legend, all about it, in the historic allusions, there are revelations of a whole world of tragedy, plots different in import from that of Beowulf, more like the tragic themes of Iceland. . . . The thing itself is cheap; the moral and spirit of it can only be matched among the noblest of authors.

What aspect of *Beowulf* is Ker criticizing when he calls the work “preposterous”? Do you agree? Why or why not?