

# BEOWULF

# LIVING LITERATURE SERIES

BURTON RAFFEL, Translator

A PERMA-BOUND PRODUCTION

## TEACHER'S GUIDE

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### SYNOPSIS

Shield, an abandoned child, is accepted as the ruler of the Danes. Following a successful reign, his line continues from his own son, Beo, to Healfdane and finally to Hrothgar, who leads the Danes to glory. Hrothgar builds Herot, a lofty stone banquet hall which honors the royal line and which represents both his generosity to his followers and the height which his reign attains.

After a sumptuous feast during which Hrothgar presents worthy retainers with rich gifts, thirty bodyguards remain to protect Herot from enemies. During the night, a loathsome swamp creature, the offspring sired by Cain, attacks and eats the entire detail of bodyguards. For twelve years Herot stands deserted as Hrothgar grieves for the evil that stalks his land.

Through Hrothgar's poets, the story spreads to the Geats of King Higlac's court. The king's nephew, Beowulf, who grew up from the age of seven in his uncle's court, gathers fourteen warriors and sails to Hrothgar's shores. Treated to hospitality, Beowulf introduces himself and his past deeds and asks permission to cleanse Herot of evil.

During the evening's conversation, Unferth, made brave by too much mead, ridicules Beowulf's swimming match against Brecca. Beowulf sets the record straight and reminds his accuser that no one tells heroic tales of Unferth, who is known for murdering his own brothers. During the night, Grendel crawls out of the bog and murders Hondshew, one of the Geats. Beowulf accomplishes what he sets out to do—without a sword, he grabs Grendel, rips his arm from the socket, and hangs it up for all to marvel at. Grendel escapes to his lair, mortally wounded.

Hrothgar showers Beowulf with thanks and handsome gifts, including armor, weapons, the Brosings' necklace, and eight horses with golden bridles and jeweled saddles, one of which the king rode into battle. During the celebration of Beowulf's victory, the court poet sings of past events—of Siegmund's victories and Hermod's and Hengest's treacheries. Queen Welthow, the hostess, offers Beowulf a cup and asks him to protect her son.

After much feasting and celebration, Cain's consort, who is Grendel's mother, kills Esher, Hrothgar's best friend, and reclaims her son's arm. The next morning, Hrothgar begs Beowulf to rid Herot of the second monster. Beowulf and his men follow Grendel's mother to her hiding place in the marshland, which bubbles with blood. On a cliff over the lake hangs Esher's head. Unferth helps Beowulf arm himself for the struggle, lending him Hrunting, a famous sword.

Beowulf plunges for hours into the lake. He locates Grendel's mother, a feisty beast who is unable to claw through

his armor. Just as the demon gets the upper hand, Beowulf grasps a huge magic sword from the wall and hacks through her neck. He removes the head from Grendel's corpse and swims to the surface, bearing only the hilt of the sword, which was melted by evil blood. Only the Geats remain to greet him, the Danes having departed in despair. It requires the strength of four Geats to bear the gory head back to Hrothgar's court.

Hrothgar cautions the much ballyhooed hero to guard against pride. Loading him with treasure, he sends Beowulf home in honor. On his way to his ship, Beowulf rewards the Danish watchman with a sword. The Geats rush home with the good news. Higlac is eager to hear all the details. Beowulf showers his uncle with his newly acquired gifts. To Queen Higd Beowulf gives the priceless necklace and three horses.

Fifty years pass, during which time Beowulf assumes Higlac's throne, but only after the death of Higlac's son, Herdred, whom he avenges. When Beowulf is long past his youth, a slave, escaping his master, arouses the anger of a dragon, which lurks in an abandoned tower filled with treasure. Because the slave steals a cup from its trove, the dragon ravages the countryside with fiery exhalations. Beowulf, accompanied by his men, sets out to subdue the dragon. The Geats doubt the strength of their aged king and hold little hope of his success.

Beowulf is no longer strong enough to strangle the dragon and must defeat it in combat. During the struggle, he is severely burned by flames from the dragon's mouth. Only Wiglaf remains loyal to his suffering king and moves in close against the dragon. With Wiglaf's master stroke to the dragon's body, Beowulf completes the job, severing the beast in half. Wiglaf, realizing that Beowulf has sustained a deadly sting on his neck, tends the dying king. At Beowulf's request, Wiglaf surrounds him with treasures from the dragon's tower.

Beowulf begs to be honored with a memorial tower near the sea. He rewards Wiglaf's bravery, passing his kingly power to the only Geat who showed courage and loyalty. Wiglaf, angered by the poor showing of Geatish warriors, shames them for their cowardice. Speaking an extensive eulogy, Wiglaf orders a monarch's funeral pyre to honor Beowulf. The Geats abandon the treasure near Beowulf's tower and tell stories of his greatness.

### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

The only surviving manuscript of *Beowulf*, a 3,182-line epic poem, narrates in two handwritings the key events in the life of a Scandinavian hero who kills three monsters—first Grendel, then Grendel's mother, and forty years later, a fire dragon. The final battle leads to the death of Beowulf, who has become king

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of his people, the Geats. Historically, the tenth-century manuscript narrates events of the sixth century, but the poem itself may have been composed nearer the eighth century. Internal evidence suggests that the author was a Christian, possibly allied to a wave of conversions that took place before 750 A.D.

Like Homer's verse, *Beowulf* may have existed as part of an oral tradition for several hundred years before finding its way into written form, probably through transcription by a Latin-educated clerk who wanted to preserve the heroic tale which he heard sung by a minstrel. Possibly, the person who transcribed the poem from earlier sources may have given it its moral underpinnings, although many critics maintain that the original author was indeed Christian.

Little else about the poem gives any clue to the author's identity. The signature of Lawrence Nowell, a sixteenth-century scholar, suggests that he had some part in preserving what remains of the text. Translators and literary historians have suggested links to fill in various gaps, but the body of the work remains just as it was composed, some twelve centuries ago.

Burton Raffel (1928- ), whose 1963 translation of *Beowulf* has been recorded on Folkways Records, captures the form and substance of Old English verse. A scholar and translator *par excellence*, Raffel has published anthologies of Old English, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Roman, Greek, and Russian poetry. His published works include a study of the translation process (1971), and analyses of the works of Robert Lowell (1981) and T. S. Eliot (1982).

### CRITIC'S CORNER

Critically, *Beowulf* is significant to the history of the English language in that it is the first major work to utilize the Anglian vernacular. Even though it was composed in England, either in Northumbria or Mercia, it received little serious attention before 1705, when Humphrey Wanley described it in his catalog of ancient northern languages. The Cotton Vitellius manuscript, the only existing copy, was damaged in a fire in 1731 and now resides in the British Museum. The first competent translation was rendered in 1833 by J. M. Kemble.

The style is characteristic of Teutonic literature—unrhymed lines heavily marked by internal alliteration. The lines, separated halfway by caesura, contain two accented syllables on either side of the pause. Another distinctive poetic device is the use of "kenning," a two-word metaphor such as *swan-road* for *sea* or *ring-giver* for *king*.

Figuratively, the poem bears obvious kinship with Germanic style and characterization and contains historical fact dating from the kingship of Higlac, Beowulf's uncle. The key battles, however, are fictional, based on mythical beasts with allegorical significance.

Grendel, the night-stalker, represents the human warrior's fears of an invasive evil, the kin of Cain. The dragon, on the other hand, becomes everyman's nemesis, which wallows in its lair until the opportune moment. It is Beowulf's fatal battle with the dragon that releases the people's great love and appreciation for their leader. After his demise, their celebrations renew their faith in leadership and generosity.

### GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To set both the events and the completed poem in the framework of history
2. To comprehend techniques which assure the survival of sixth-century Scandinavians
3. To characterize Teutonic narrative style with its reliance on digression, kenning, descriptions of nature, and repeated motifs
4. To analyze the guest code and its role in male-dominated affairs
5. To account for the emphasis on generosity and loyalty as major factors in human character
6. To discuss the theme of inherent evil in both human and supernatural beings
7. To analyze the Christian overtones of the story, particularly as they apply to the story of Cain
8. To note the importance of *Beowulf* as a monument of Old English literature
9. To contrast *Beowulf* with other heroic poems, particularly those of the Mediterranean world

### SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To separate Beowulf's contemporaries from those characters described in flashback
2. To note the contrast in Beowulf's behavior as a youth and an old man
3. To analyze the threat posed by Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the fire dragon
4. To detail the elegaic qualities of the last third of the text and the role played by Wiglaf, Beowulf's successor
5. To account for the animistic qualities assigned to swords
6. To contrast the settings of the three major battles
7. To characterize the reward system of Beowulf's day
8. To note the qualities of Beowulf as monarch and compare them with those of Shild, Higlac, and Hrothgar
9. To express the importance of Beowulf to his people long after his death

### MEANING STUDY

Below are words, phrases, or sentences that have a particular meaning in the poem. Explain the meaning each has in this poem. Page references are provided so that you can re-read the passage from which the item is taken.

1. He was spawned in that slime, conceived by a pair of those monsters born of Cain, murderous creatures banished by God, punished forever for the crime of Abel's death. (p. 26)

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*(The undefined monstrosity, Grendel, is directly associated with Cain, who, according to Hebrew mythology, committed the world's first murder. In Genesis 4, Cain slew his brother Abel because Yahweh preferred Abel's livestock offering over Cain's agricultural produce. Cain lived out his life an outcast, a wanderer in the land of Nod, East of Eden. To protect him from attack, God placed a mark on him.)*

*Much speculation, both historical and anthropological, surrounds this grim story. Since the mark of Cain is not described, legend has advanced the notion that Cain was the first dark-skinned man. Other interpretations assume that the mark symbolized conscience, which in Cain was fated to bear the stigma of brother-killer.)*

2. Now Grendel's name has echoed in our land: sailors have brought us stories of Herot, the best of all mead-halls, deserted and useless when the moon hangs in skies the sun had lit, light and life fleeing together. (p. 36)

*(Mead, the fermented honey drink that became the focal point of Viking celebrations, relates to tales of Odin, who tricked the giant Suttung, bored a hole in a stone mountain, and drank up the magic brew made from honey mixed with the blood of a wise giant. Back on safe turf, Odin regurgitated the wholesome drink into heavenly vessels, from which all humankind draws poetic inspiration and oratorical skill.)*

*A mark of manhood and valor in Teutonic celebrations, mead, spiced with fruits and herbs, filled the carved horn or bone cups of Viking leaders, who placed bets on which warrior could drink the most at a single draught. Mead also had a place in Teutonic medicine, particularly as a battlefield tonic and restorative and as a ceremonial drink to honor fallen heroes.)*

3. All older and wiser heads warned you not to, but no one could check such pride. (p. 39)

*(Note that the sin of pride permeates Teutonic literature the same way it does Hebrew, Greek, and Roman writings. Beowulf, who, in his youthful derring-do, swam for a week in a contest with Brecca, receives a warning from Hrothgar, a worthy role model for a future king. Hrothgar cites a negative example, reminding Beowulf to avoid Hermod's excesses and "learn what a king must be . . . Guard against such wickedness, beloved Beowulf, best of warriors, and choose, instead, eternal happiness; push away pride!")*

4. Healfdane's son gave Beowulf a golden banner, a fitting flag to signal his victory, and gave him, as well, a helmet, and a coat of mail, and an ancient sword; they were brought to him while the warriors watched. (p. 55)

*(In gratitude for Beowulf's bravery, Hrothgar presents him a fitting gift—the armaments typical of his day. The working of iron dates to 400 B.C. By the Christian era, metal armor was commonplace, but by no means cheap. Because iron was expensive and*

*craftsmen difficult to come by, a helmet, coat of mail, and sword would have cost a small fortune.)*

*Long before the plated armor of the Middle Ages, coats of mail consisted of two styles—the oldest or jazeran style, found in Egyptian tombs and Roman bas-reliefs, was constructed of overlapping scales coating a cloth or leather garment; a later version was constructed of interlocking iron rings, which afforded greater flexibility.)*

*Beowulf's armor proves beneficial in his final battle, when he, "with his shield at his side, and a mail shirt on his breast, strode calmly, confidently toward the tower." Protected from flames by his shield, Beowulf fares far better than Wiglaf, whose "mail shirt could not help him" and who must jump behind Beowulf's shield to prevent immolation. In his death throes, Beowulf, true to the masculine tradition of Geat warriors, laments that he has no son to leave his armor to.)*

5. And he swore that his sword would silence wagging tongues if Frisian warriors stirred up hatred, brought back the past (p. 57)

*(The Geats [rhymes with treats], a lesser Scandinavian nation of southern Sweden which was subjugated by the Swedes in the sixth century, suffers invasion by Frisians, cunning plunderers who strike by dark and depart with lightning swiftness, leaving behind destruction. Historically, the Frisians are closely associated with the Angles and Saxons and helped settle the British Isles. Their culture, largely assimilated by what is now Holland and Hannover, leaves few literary remains.)*

6. His body, and his shining coat of mail, and that necklace, all lay for Franks to pluck, for jackal warriors to find when they walked through the rows of corpses; Geats, and their king, lay slaughtered wherever the robbers looked. (p. 61)

*(The Franks were a Germanic nation living in the Rhine valley from the third century A.D. Known for their sudden invasions of Roman and Gallic settlements, Frankish raiders distinguished themselves by their long mustaches and clean-shaven cheeks and chin, leather chaps, and lethal axes, known as franciscs. Their bowmen shielded themselves with wooden or wicker shields. During the rule of Clovis (481-511), the Franks embraced Christianity, but Clovis's four sons continued expanding land holdings by murderous and barbaric methods.)*

7. And Hrothgar saw runic letters clearly carved in that shining hilt, spelling its original owner's name, he for whom it was made, with its twisted handle and snakelike carvings. (p. 76)

*(The Teutonic alphabet, composed of characters called runes, can be divided into three minor classes—Anglo-Saxon, German, and Scandinavian.)*

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*The term rune comes from the Anglo-Saxon for secret [runa meaning magician]. The coming of Christianity broke the power of sorcerers, the only literate members of Teutonic society, and supplanted runes with the Roman alphabet.)*

8. And yet as a boy he was scorned; the Geats considered him worthless. When he sat in their mead-hall, and their lord was making men rich, he held no claim on the king's good will. They were sure he was lazy, noble but slow. The world spun round, he was a warrior more famous than any, and all the insults were wiped out. (p. 91)

*(A standard ploy of mythology is the tale of the great hero who succeeds in spite of some major weakness, such as lack of parents, poverty, a clear title to family name and/or wealth, some physical deformity, or isolation from society, either through imprisonment, or exile.*

*This description of Beowulf compares with the unusual circumstances surrounding King Arthur's rise to the throne. The thrust of both stories emphasizes deeds which bring to light the worth of the individual. The teller of this tale indicates that early assessments of a youth's potential are often proved wrong.)*

9. But Swedish exiles came, seeking protection; they were rebels against Onela, Healfdane's son-in-law and the best ring-giver his people had ever known. (p. 97)

*(Note that in Scandinavian literature, the motives of wanderers receive close scrutiny. When Beowulf arrives in Hrothgar's territory, the watchman questions cautiously, yet maintains proprieties due a visitor. When Herdred pities the exiles and gives them asylum among the Geats, he invites the vengeance of Onela, who swiftly marches "on Geatland with a huge army; Herdred had given his word and now he gave his life, shielding the Swedish strangers.")*

*The tenor of the times requires suspicion and vengeance. As undeserved reward for his soft-heartedness and lack of caution, Herdred dies in battle and is replaced by Beowulf. To settle the matter between Onela and Herdred, Beowulf carries the war "across the wide sea, where victory, and revenge, and the Swedish throne were won, and Onela was slain.")*

10. That noble prince would end his days on earth, soon, would leave this brief life, but would take the dragon with him, tear it from the heaped-up treasure it had guarded so long. (p. 96)

*(Note that suspense is not a factor in the orally composed lays of the scop, who told and retold familiar stories, fashioning them in their own style, but retaining the essential facts. In this line, the poet reveals that Beowulf will fight and kill the dragon, will himself die, and will divulge the hiding place of a great treasure.)*

## COMPREHENSION STUDY

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the poem.

### Questions 1-5 Literal Level

1. Describe the rule of Hrothgar at the beginning of the poem.

*(Hrothgar, ancestor of Shild, is chosen king after Healfdane's death because Hrothgar, of the three sons, demonstrates the greatest strength, the true test of a Teutonic leader. He is described as an able monarch who "led the Danes to such glory that comrades and kinsmen sword by his sword, and young men swelled his armies.")*

*The act for which Hrothgar is particularly memorable is the building of Heorot, which he conceives to "hold his mighty band and reach higher toward Heaven than anything that had ever been known to the sons of men." Heorot is a place for victorious men to assemble, celebrate their hardihood, and "divide the spoils of their victories, to old and young what they'd earned in battle." At its completion, Hrothgar, in typical open-handed fashion, invites all to a great banquet and enjoys his role as ring-giver until Grendel interferes with his largesse.*

*After Beowulf cleanses Heorot of its nightmares, Hrothgar, now a gray-haired king, resumes the role of ring-giver, gracing Beowulf with treasure beyond dreams. Hrothgar speaks openly his gratitude for god's goodness: "Let God be thanked! Grendel's terrible anger hung over our heads too long, dropping down misery; but the Almighty makes miracles when he pleases, wonder after wonder, and this world rests in His hands.")*

2. Explain Unferth's relation to Beowulf.

*(Unferth, a sneering, inhospitable fellow, sits at Hrothgar's feet and taunts Beowulf for the youthful pride which caused Beowulf to swim in competition against Brecca. Beowulf puts Unferth in his place, reminding Unferth that he has inbibed too much ale, and gives a straightforward account of the swimming match, which Brecca won.*

*At the end of Beowulf's reply, he reminds Unferth, "I've heard no tales of you, Unferth, telling of such clashing terror, such contests in the night!" He concludes that Unferth, who murdered his own brothers, shall surely "suffer hell's fires." It is this incident that assures Hrothgar that Beowulf is the right man for the job of killing Grendel.*

*When Beowulf proves himself equal to Grendel, Unferth begins to change his attitude toward the young Geat. On the day that Beowulf girds himself to challenge Grendel's mother, Unferth lends him Hrunting, "a fine, hilted old sword." An honest man at*

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heart, Unferth repents of his drunken words and readily acknowledges Beowulf's greater courage. After Beowulf bests Grendel's mother and rests up from his exertions, Unferth presents him Hrunting as a gift. They part friends.)

3. Explain how the dragon's lair is discovered.

(A runaway slave climbs the hidden path in flight from his master. Unaware of his proximity to countless treasures, he enters the dragon's tower, steals a jeweled cup, and flees the scaly monster. The stone tower, once the treasury of the last survivor of a noble dynasty, lies "near the sea, below a cliff, a sealed fortress with no windows, no doors, waves in front of it, rocks behind.")

The dragon, "flying through the darkness, wrapped in fire," takes up residence in the abandoned tower "for hundreds of years." Even though the slave ameliorates his position in the master's household by giving him the cup, the dragon "wrapped its flames around the Geats; now it trusted in stone walls, and its strength, to protect it.")

4. Describe Beowulf's contact with Grendel's mother.

(At the muddy bottom of Grendel's mother's lake home Beowulf locates the "greedy she-wolf, who'd ruled those waters for half a hundred years." She welcomes him into her claws, but is unable to "work her fingers through the tight ring-woven mail on his breast, but tore and scratched in vain." Undeterred, she drags him into her den, successfully penning his arms so that he struggles in vain to draw his weapon.

Amid a host of sea monsters, which stab and chew at his chest, she deposits him in her battle-hall, which lies outside the fiery lake. He aims a clear stroke of Hrunting at her flesh, but is unable to harm her. Again in a wrestling hold, the two grapple, the demon biting "holes in his helmet."

Beowulf, getting a second wind after abandoning Hrunting, faces her barehanded and seizes her shoulder, tossing her to the floor. Before he can leap on her, she reverses their positions. He stumbles and finds himself pinioned by the weight of the monster on his abdomen. She brandishes a dagger, which proves futile against his armor. Finally, Beowulf hits on the best strategy—he draws a magic sword made by giants, which hangs on her wall, and in one stroke, slices through her neck.)

5. Describe Beowulf's arrival in Geatland.

(The trip back from Denmark proves uneventful. Soon Beowulf and his men "see familiar headlands, cliffs that sprang out of Geatish soil." They beach their ship and receive the joyful greeting of harbor guards, who had watched for them for days. Directly they carry loads of treasure north from the sandy shore to Higlac's hall.

Beowulf remembers his manners, formally greets his uncle, and accepts cups of mead from Higd, Higlac's queen. Higlac, who worried about his nephew's

safety and hesitated to send him on the expedition, presses for details of the venture. Beowulf reveals not only the news about Grendel's death, but also pertinent information about Hrothgar's daughter Freaw, soon to marry Ingeld.

Returning to the central thread of his narrative, Beowulf announces the horrible death of Hondshew and continues the tale of his rewards and the revenge of Grendel's mother, who murdered Esher. Beowulf closes with a tribute to Higlac, his foster father: "I have almost no family, Higlac, almost no one, now, but you."

Generous in the tradition of Teutonic warriors, Beowulf showers the Danish gifts on Higlac—armor and four horses—as well as a necklace and horses to Higd. In his glory, Beowulf wipes out the old scorn of men who thought little of his potential. Higlac caps the evening with an appropriate gift—Beowulf's grandfather's sword. Now an established warrior, Beowulf gains title to "seven thousand hides of land, houses and ground and all." [Note that the old English measure of a hide equals 120 acres.]

### Questions 6-8 Interpretive Level

6. Explain the purpose of the stories of Siegmund and Fitla, Hermod, Finn, and Hengest.

(The story of Siegmund and Fitla, which appears as a simple diversion during an afternoon gallop, provides a useful commentary on a major theme of the poem. The men suggest the early relationship of Higlac and Beowulf and the later relationship between Beowulf and Wiglaf. Siegmund, son of Vels, bears the title of giant-killer. A popular legend, his exploits are featured in poet's stories.

Fitla, who earns no praise for heroism, is Sigemund's nephew and constant companion. Reminiscent of the younger Beowulf, in whom few people have confidence, much less high hopes, Fitla, nonetheless, allies himself with his uncle and serves as eyewitness of his daring feats. Like Wiglaf, he remains in harm's way, following the footsteps of his idol and noting the details of each heroic encounter.

As foil to Siegmund, the poet turns his verse to Hermod, also a mighty man, but a victim of pride. Hermod is the negative model which Hrothgar warns Beowulf against—a man who lets himself be defeated by vanity. Later that evening, as the traditional treasure-giving proceeds in Herot, the poet's song continues on the theme of treachery and dishonor, bemoaning Finn's unprovoked attack on Hnaf, his brother-in-law.

But Finn earns his hell on earth when weakened forces cause him to seek peace with Hengest, a man as treacherous as he. Coupled in an unholy alliance, Hengest chafes in silence in Denmark and dreams of home. At the right moment, Hengest repays Finn's treachery, jabbing him in the gut, "butchering the king under his own roof."

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*The upshot of these gory lays, which delight the celebrating hearers, is a narrative representation of their value system. To the Teutonic mind, glory and valor are uppermost in a man's mind, but the tendency toward vanity and disloyalty are never far behind. The true hero—embodied in Beowulf—is the man who can defeat his enemies and still control his negative urges.)*

7. How does Wiglaf serve his king?

*(In the final episode of the poem, Beowulf, no longer so strong or formidable after fifty years on the throne of the Geats, still commands the respect of his men, who follow him dispiritedly toward danger. Like Fitla, Wiglaf sticks close by his idol, treasuring his example and trusting him implicitly.*

*In a reversal of roles, Beowulf depends on Wiglaf, an untried warrior, as they battle close beneath the fire dragon's belly while lesser warriors cower in fear of a fiery death. Although Wiglaf's armor fails him, he ducks behind Beowulf's shield and strikes a death blow beneath the dragon's head.*

*Even though the dragon lies split in two, Wiglaf refrains from joy as he dribbles water on the fatal fang wound in Beowulf's neck. In gratitude to the most likely heir to the Geat throne, Beowulf passes his rule to Wiglaf. Saddened and angered by the turn of events, Wiglaf uses the occasion for didactic purposes, chastising the Geats who "came like shamefaced jackals, their shields in their hands, to the place where the prince lay dead."*

*In strict accordance with Beowulf's wishes, Wiglaf arranges a kingly cremation and causes a tower to be built in Beowulf's honor. The treasure which Beowulf wished to view before his death lies unclaimed about the corpse. With Wiglaf's help, Beowulf passes from storied king to legend, a model of royal grace, wisdom, courage, and goodness.)*

8. Why is Cain important to the story?

*(The author of the epic poem, steeped in Christian as well as Teutonic lore, mixes the two in a believable blend. To explain the existence of evil so virulent that it can crush Higlac's bodyguard and turn the knees of a nation to jelly, the author falls back on the first crime—so terrible that God punishes its perpetrator with a special mark. Cain, not only the world's first murderer, but the killer of a brother who is innocent of any wrongdoing, makes no appearance in the poem. Yet, his coupling with a female monster spawns Grendel, symbol of a terror that stalks the earth in less civil times.*

*To the author, Cain sets the chain of events in motion. It is the goodness in Beowulf that allows him to face consummate evil and best Cain's offspring without man-made weapons. Yet, it is Beowulf's self-control and avoidance of wrong that tempers the hero, preventing the dire sin of pride, the undoing of men no less formidable.)*

### Questions 9 and 10 Critical Level

9. What lure draws modern readers to the tale of Beowulf, a sixth-century legend?

*(The story of Beowulf ranks among great adventure stories for obvious reasons—it is well told, it underscores the morality of its time, and it contains the trappings of romantic narrative, right up to the kingly funeral. Beginning with the example of Shild, who goes to his just reward with royal shroud, treasures, and the people's honor, the story covers the rise of Beowulf, from unlikely seven-year-old at his uncle's court to an even more beloved hero and king.*

*Appropriate digressions fill in enough of the history of Scandinavia to characterize the people and their value system. Beowulf, an obvious paragon among lesser heroes, lives a blameless life, fights for his people's safety to the end of his days, and goes to his death with courage. The existential theme rings true throughout—all men must die, but while they live, may decorate their good names with honor.)*

10. How does Beowulf present the age of Teutonic heroes?

*(The Geats and Danes of this tale are doughty, bold, and honest human beings. They value straightforward dealings and generosity while they decry the sneak and the miser. Their business, however begun, must come to a resolution—evil must be repaid with evil, good with good. In this sense, their Christianity seems more attuned to Old Testament lore than Christly teachings of the New Testament.*

*Their fervor and zest for life deserve praise, for they face unknown dangers, cold seas, and death far from home in the name of friendship and loyalty. The individual warrior and even the womenfolk demand much of self and fall back on little of the trappings that bolster modern warriors. To the modern reader, Beowulf's generation seems boastful, but the oral rehashing of wars fought and won, gifts received from noble leaders, and battles yet to face are the expression of their lifestyle, which is bound up in the glory of muscle against aggressor, be it man or beast.)*

### Questions 11 and 12 Creative Level

11. Research the runic alphabet and copy a line or two from an ancient manuscript or caption. Contrast the runic writing system with those of Greece, Rome, Egypt, and China.
12. Read aloud the section of *Beowulf* which describes the hero's funeral. Explain to the class why a warrior would choose cremation and a ceremonial display of horses and weapons as a suitable end to life. Contrast the dismal choice of Shild, whose corpse reposes aboard a sailless vessel and drifts out to sea.

### STUDENT INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES

1. Tape record an adventure story about an American folk hero, such as Paul Bunyan, Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett,

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Joe Magarac, Calamity Jane, Annie Oakley, or Casey Jones. Emphasize the legendary aspects of the story.

2. Make a report on the treasure of Sutton Hoo and the discovery of Tollund Man. Pinpoint these discoveries on a map. Explain what cultural information anthropologists and historians gleaned from each discovery.
3. Draw an illustrated timeline of the early history of Scandinavia, stressing Angles, Saxons, Danes, Swedes, Frisians, and Geats. Show how the various tribes developed unique cultural differences in language and lifestyle.
4. Sketch a multi-frame cartoon showing Beowulf's landing and eventual triumph over Grendel. Depict Beowulf's departure in his treasure-laden ship. Use artists' conceptions of the Viking vessels as models.
5. Compose a serious theme on the kind of heroism that people look for in their ideals. Differentiate between male and female role models and their influence on young people.
6. Make a list of supernatural characteristics in the poem. Suggest ways of explaining some of them, for example, how Beowulf managed to breathe during his dive to the underwater lair or withstand the heat of the fire dragon.
7. Discuss the importance of hospitality and entertainment in the lives of sixth-century Scandinavians. Why was mead an important adjunct in their festivities? Why were these festivities an appropriate time for the ring-giving ceremonies?
8. Listen to some of the heroic music of Richard Wagner or Edvard Grieg. Describe how music can help the listener envision the spirit of the time in which Beowulf lived. Research the role this music played in Hitler's plans for a master race.
9. Explain the role of the poet in the days before people could read. How could a singer of long poems assist people in appreciating their heritage?
10. Discuss why women play so minor a role in Beowulf's story.

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## BEOWULF

### VOCABULARY TEST

In the list that follows each quotation, circle a word which is **not** a synonym for the italicized word.

1. Only its roof was undamaged when the blood-stained demon burst out of Herot, desperately breaking Beowulf's grip, running wildly from what no one escapes, struggle and *writhe* as he will.  
**[contort, brandish, convulse, seethe, serpentine]**
2. They spoke about Beowulf, all the *graybeards*, whispered together and said that hope was gone, that the hero had lost fame and his life at once, and would never return to the living, come back as triumphant as he had left . . . .  
**[witlings, sages, eminences, savants, elders]**
3. Beowulf offered them only his sword, ended so many *jackal* lives that the few who were able skulked home, glad to leave him.  
**[fawning, parasitic, servile, demure, base]**
4. Then silver and gold and precious jewels were put on a wagon, with Beowulf's body, and brought down the jutting sand, where the *pyre* waited.  
**[conflagration, bier, crematory, immolation, combustion]**
5. He strode quickly across the *inlaid* floor, snarling and fierce: his eyes gleamed in the darkness, burned with a gruesome light.  
**[tessellated, mosaic, embedded, intaglio, scrolled]**
6. Suddenly the sounds changed, the Danes started 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 . . . .  
**[constricted, contracted, apprehensive, constrained, lithe]**
7. Your strength must *solace* your people, now, and mine no longer.  
**[hearten, console, exacerbate, assuage, disburden]**
8. And then Beowulf left him, left Herot, walked across the green in his golden armor, *exulting* in the treasures heaped high in his arms.  
**[denigrating, reveling, jubilating, swaggering, rejoicing]**
9. Beloved Beowulf, tell us what your trip to far-off places brought, your sudden *expedition* on the salty waves, your search for war in Herot?  
**[campaign, perambulation, excursion, trek, peregrination]**
10. Beowulf spoke, in spite of the swollen, *livid* wound, knowing he'd unwound his string of days on earth, seen as much as God would grant him. . . .  
**[discolored, bruised, gory, unremarkable, disfigured]**
11. Flushed with victory he *groped* his way, a brave young warrior, and suddenly saw piles of gleaming gold . . . .  
**[scrabbled, stalked, rummaged, fumbled, detected]**
12. These are the quarrels, the hatreds, the *feuds*, that will bring us battles, force us into war with the Swedes, as soon as they've learned our lord is dead, know that the Geats are leaderless . . . .  
**[ameliorations, animosities, altercations, wrangles, contentions]**
13. . . . the Geats were not troubled with *scruples* or fears, but quickly gathered up treasure and carried it out of the tower.  
**[compunction, self-reproach, qualms, impenitence, rue]**
14. And Heaven swallowed the *billowing* smoke.  
**[undulating, streaming, surging, eddying, leaching]**
15. And so Beowulf's followers rode, mourning their beloved leader, crying that no better king had ever lived, no prince so *mild*, no man so open to his people, so deserving of praise.  
**[rigorous, tolerant, lenient, clement, forbearing]**



## BEOWULF

### COMPREHENSION TEST A

#### Part I: Quotation Identification (20 points)

Match each quotation with the name of a speaker. Place the letter of your response in the blank provided at left.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I swam in the blackness of night, hunting monsters out of the ocean, and killing them one by one; death was my errand and the fate they had earned.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Our warmhearted lord will be told of your coming; I shall tell our king, our giver of bright rings, and hurry back with his word, and speak it here, however he answers your request.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. But your sons will be safe, sheltered in Hrothulf's gracious protection, if fate takes their father while Hrothulf is alive; I know your nephew's kindness, I know he'll repay in kind the goodness you have shown him, support your two young sons as you and I sustained him in his own early days, his father dead and he but a boy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Everyone knows the treasure his life bought; but Beowulf was worth more than this gold, and the gift is a harsh one.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Beloved Beowulf, tell us what your trip to far-off places brought you, your sudden expedition on the salty waves, your search for war in Herot?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. None have ever come more openly—and yet you've offered no password, no sign from my prince, no permission from my people for your landing here.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. My father was a famous soldier, known far and wide as a leader of men. His name was Edgetho.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. You're Beowulf, are you—the same boastful fool who fought a swimming match with Brecca, both of you daring and young and proud, exploring the deepest seas, risking your lives for no reason but the danger?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I was seven years old when Hrethel opened his home and his heart for me, when my king and lord took me from my father and kept me, taught me, gave me gold and pleasure, glad that I sat at his knee.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. I bought the end of Edgetho's quarrel, sent ancient treasures through the ocean's furrows to the Wulfings; your father swore he'd keep that peace.

- |            |                    |
|------------|--------------------|
| A. Welthow | F. Hrothgar        |
| B. Freaw   | G. Wulfgar         |
| C. Beowulf | H. Danish watchman |
| D. Onela   | I. Wiglaf          |
| E. Higlac  | J. Unferth         |

#### Part II: Matching (30 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. is the first Geat that Grendel snatches and murders.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. arrives in Denmark alone, an abandoned child.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. keeps a truce with Finn, but longs to return to Denmark.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. is a proud king who dies in exile with the Jutes.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. is the offspring sired by Cain.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. fights at the side of his brave uncle, Siegmund.

## BEOWULF

- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. kills nine sea monsters before reaching Finnish soil.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. is the borrowed weapon, which Beowulf carries into the lake.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. fears to follow Beowulf on the journey to Grendel's mother's lair.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. accidentally kills his brother while hunting.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. discovers the dragon's hidden treasure and takes a jeweled cup.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. salutes Beowulf with a cup of mead for helping her afflicted people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. breaks to pieces against the fire dragon.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. slices through a dragon and pins it to a wall.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. is Higlac's oldest son.

- |             |             |             |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| A. Hengest  | F. Hermod   | K. Hrunting |
| B. Grendel  | G. Beowulf  | L. Welthow  |
| C. Hathcyn  | H. Siegmund | M. Nagling  |
| D. Hondshew | I. Shild    | N. Hrethric |
| E. Fitla    | J. slave    | O. Unferth  |

### Part III: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either **T** for true or **F** if any part is false.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Before leaving Hrothgar's kingdom, Beowulf rewards the watchman with a sword.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Hrothgar clasps Esher's corpse to him and grieves the loss of a good friend and trusted counselor.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. On his return to Geatland, Beowulf awards Higd the necklace given him by Welthow.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. In the battle in which Higlac dies, Beowulf manages to swim to freedom and keeps the Frisians from stripping thirty dead warriors.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. After Higlac's death, Beowulf refuses to rule the Geats so long as Herdred is alive.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Despite Brecca's boast, Beowulf outswims him and arrives at the cliffs of Norway.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Beowulf was obviously a champion from early childhood and outshone the other warriors at Higlac's court.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. According to his wishes, the Geats build a tower as a memorial to Beowulf.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Beowulf kills Grendel's mother with a magic sword, which was made by giants and hung on the wall of her den.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. On a cliff above the bloody lake hangs the head of Hondshew, a grim reminder of Grendel's mother's vengeance.

### Part IV: Essay Questions (30 points)

- 1. No one who goes visiting far-off lands is more welcome than a strong and noble warrior.
- 2. It is better for us all to avenge our friends, not mourn them forever.
- 3. A bride can bring a little peace, make spears silent for a time, but not long.

## BEOWULF

### COMPREHENSION TEST B

#### Part I: Identifying Things and Places (20 points)

Match each description below with a thing or place from the list that follows.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. A borrowed sword, which Beowulf takes with him on the quest for Grendel's mother.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Where Beowulf swims after escaping the Franks.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Where Esher's head is found.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Beowulf's monument.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Where Grendel's arm is displayed.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Beowulf's gift to the watchman.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Where runic letters are carved.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Where the Franks raid.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Where kings reward their warriors.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. What the slave steals.

- |                       |                |
|-----------------------|----------------|
| A. Geatland           | F. cliff       |
| B. giant's sword hilt | G. sword       |
| C. Hrunting           | H. Herot       |
| D. Rhine              | I. jeweled cup |
| E. mead-hall          | J. tower       |

#### Part II: Short Answer (20 points)

Supply a word or phrase in answer to each of the following questions. Place your response in the blank provided at left.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Where does Nagling break?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Who wins the swimming contest?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. What king arrives in Denmark as an abandoned child?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. To whom does Beowulf give the gold collar?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. How many warriors accompany Beowulf to Hrothgar's kingdom?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. How long does Beowulf rule?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Who kills Dagref, the Frank?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Who discovers the fire dragon's cave?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Which king is killed in a war with Onela?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Who refuses to rule as long as Higlac's son is alive?

## BEOWULF

### Part III: Fill-in (30 points)

Supply a word or phrase from the list below to complete each of the following statements.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Ah! \_\_\_\_\_, my friend, your face is hot with ale, and your tongue has tried to tell us about Brecca's doings.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. But Wiglaf sprinkled \_\_\_\_\_ over his lord, until the words deep in his breast broke through and were heard.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Then the \_\_\_\_\_ melted, blood-soaked, dripping down like water, disappearing like ice . . . .
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. The monsters' hall was full of rich treasures, but all that Beowulf took was \_\_\_\_\_ . . . .
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. And Wextan's wise son took seven of the noblest Geats, led them together down the tunnel, deep into the dragon's \_\_\_\_\_ . . . .
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. He told them of \_\_\_\_\_'s people, attacking Hnaf with no warning, half wiping out that Danish tribe, and killing its king.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. That tower was heaped high with hidden treasure, stored there years before by the last survivor of a noble race, ancient riches left in the darkness as the end of a \_\_\_\_\_ came.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. There were tales of giants wiped from the earth by \_\_\_\_\_'s might—and forever remembered fame that would last him beyond life and death, his daring battle with a treasure-rich dragon.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Be not as \_\_\_\_\_ once was to my people, too proud to care what their hearts hid, bringing them only destruction and slaughter.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. \_\_\_\_\_'s famous son stared at death, unwilling to leave this world, to exchange it for a dwelling in some distant place—a journey into darkness that all men must make, as death ends their few brief hours on earth.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. And who are we to carry home our shields before we've slain his enemy and ours, to run back to our homes with \_\_\_\_\_ so hard-pressed here?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. It fell, their courage had killed it, two noble cousins had joined in the \_\_\_\_\_'s death.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. The path he'd shown them was paved, cobbled like a \_\_\_\_\_ road.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. Our Holy Father has sent him as a sign of His grace, a mark of His favor, to help us defeat \_\_\_\_\_ and end that terror.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. Then \_\_\_\_\_, Hrothgar's gold-ringed queen, greeted the warriors; a noble woman who knew what was right . . . .

arm   Beowulf   Cain   dragon   dynasty   Edgetho   Finn   Fitla   Grendel   Grendel's head  
Hermod   hilt   Roman   sea monster   Siegmund   sword   tower   Unferth   water   Welthow

### Part IV: Essay Questions (30 points)

1. Discuss Beowulf's attitude toward boasting.
2. Explain the code of conduct expected of a visiting warrior.
3. Describe Hrothgar's generosity.

## BEOWULF

### VOCABULARY TEST ANSWER KEY

- |                |                   |
|----------------|-------------------|
| 1. brandish    | 9. perambulation  |
| 2. wittlings   | 10. unremarkable  |
| 3. demure      | 11. stalked       |
| 4. bier        | 12. ameliorations |
| 5. scrolled    | 13. impenitence   |
| 6. lithe       | 14. leaching      |
| 7. exacerbate  | 15. rigorous      |
| 8. denigrating |                   |

### COMPREHENSION TEST A ANSWER KEY

#### Part I: Quotation Identification (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. B | 6. H  |
| 2. G | 7. C  |
| 3. A | 8. J  |
| 4. I | 9. B  |
| 5. E | 10. F |

#### Part II: Matching (30 points)

- |      |       |       |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. D | 6. E  | 11. J |
| 2. I | 7. G  | 12. L |
| 3. A | 8. K  | 13. M |
| 4. F | 9. O  | 14. H |
| 5. B | 10. C | 15. N |

#### Part III: True/False (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. T | 6. F  |
| 2. F | 7. F  |
| 3. T | 8. T  |
| 4. T | 9. T  |
| 5. T | 10. F |

#### Part IV: Essay Questions (30 points)

Answers will vary.

### COMPREHENSION TEST B ANSWER KEY

#### Part I: Identifying Places (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. C | 6. G  |
| 2. A | 7. B  |
| 3. F | 8. D  |
| 4. J | 9. E  |
| 5. H | 10. I |

#### Part II: Short Answer (20 points)

- |                         |                |
|-------------------------|----------------|
| 1. on the dragon's head | 6. fifty years |
| 2. Brecca               | 7. Beowulf     |
| 3. Shild                | 8. a slave     |
| 4. Higd                 | 9. Herdred     |
| 5. fourteen             | 10. Beowulf    |

#### Part III: Fill-in (30 points)

- |                   |             |
|-------------------|-------------|
| 1. Unferth        | 9. Hermod   |
| 2. water          | 10. Edgetho |
| 3. sword          | 11. Beowulf |
| 4. Grendel's head | 12. dragon  |
| 5. tower          | 13. Roman   |
| 6. Finn           | 14. Grendel |
| 7. dynasty        | 15. Welthow |
| 8. Siegmund       |             |

#### Part IV: Essay Questions (30 points)

Answers will vary.

**BEOWULF**

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