Hrothgar (hróth'gár'), king of the Danes, has built a wonderful mead hall called Herot (hér'ät), where his subjects congregate and make merry. As this selection opens, a fierce and powerful monster named Grendel invades the mead hall, bringing death and destruction.

**GRENDEL**

A powerful monster, living down In the darkness, growled in pain, impatient As day after day the music rang Loud in that hall, the harp’s rejoicing

Call and the poet’s clear songs, sung Of the ancient beginnings of us all, recalling The Almighty making the earth, shaping These beautiful plains marked off by oceans, Then proudly setting the sun and moon To glow across the land and light it; The corners of the earth were made lovely with trees And leaves, made quick with life, with each Of the nations who now move on its face. And then As now warriors sang of their pleasure: So Hrothgar’s men lived happy in his hall Till the monster stirred, that demon, that fiend,
Grendel, who haunted the moors, the wild Marshes, and made his home in a hell Not hell but earth. 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. The Almighty drove Those demons out, and their exile was bitter, Shut away from men; they split Into a thousand forms of evil—spirits And fiends, goblins, monsters, giants, A brood forever opposing the Lord’s Will, and again and again defeated.

Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel Went up to Herot, wondering what the warriors Would do in that hall when their drinking was done. He found them sprawled in sleep, suspecting Nothing, their dreams undisturbed. The monster’s Thoughts were as quick as his greed or his claws: He slipped through the door and there in the silence Snatched up thirty men, smashed them Unknowing in their beds and ran out with their bodies, The blood dripping behind him, back To his lair, delighted with his night’s slaughter.

At daybreak, with the sun’s first light, they saw How well he had worked, and in that gray morning Broke their long feast with tears and laments For the dead. Hrothgar, their lord, sat joyless

In Herot, a mighty prince mourning The fate of his lost friends and companions, Knowing by its tracks that some demon had torn His followers apart. He wept, fearing The beginning might not be the end. And that night Grendel came again, so set

On murder that no crime could ever be enough, No savage assault quench his lust

For evil. Then each warrior tried To escape him, searched for rest in different Beds, as far from Herot as they could find,

Seeing how Grendel hunted when they slept. Distance was safety; the only survivors Were those who fled him. Hate had triumphed.

So Grendel ruled, fought with the righteous,

WORDS TO KNOW

lament (lə-mənt) n. an audible expression of grief; wail

GUIDE FOR READING

17 moors (mōr): broad, open regions with patches of bog.
19 spawned: born.
21 Cain: the eldest son of Adam and Eve. According to the Bible (Genesis 4), he murdered his younger brother Abel.
19–29 Who were Grendel’s earliest ancestors? How did he come to exist?
40 lair: the den of a wild animal.
49 What is meant by “The beginning might not be the end”?
58 In what way has hate triumphed?

Prow of ninth-century Oseberg ship
One against many, and won; so Herot
Stood empty, and stayed deserted for years,
Twelve winters of grief for Hrothgar, king
Of the Danes, sorrow heaped at his door
By hell-forged hands. His misery leaped
The seas, was told and sung in all
Men’s ears: how Grendel’s hatred began,
How the monster relished his savage war
On the Danes, keeping the bloody feud
Alive, seeking no peace, offering
No truce, accepting no settlement, no price
In gold or land, and paying the living
For one crime only with another. No one
Waited for reparation from his plundering claws:
That shadow of death hunted in the darkness,
Stalked Hrothgar’s warriors, old
And young, lying in waiting, hidden
In mist, invisibly following them from the edge
Of the marsh, always there, unseen.

So mankind’s enemy continued his crimes,
Killing as often as he could, coming
Alone, bloodthirsty and horrible. Though he lived
In Herot, when the night hid him, he never
Dared to touch king Hrothgar’s glorious
Throne, protected by God—God,
Whose love Grendel could not know. But Hrothgar’s
Heart was bent. The best and most noble
Of his council debated remedies, sat
In secret sessions, talking of terror
And wondering what the bravest of warriors could do.
And sometimes they sacrificed to the old stone gods,
Made heathen vows, hoping for Hell’s
Support, the Devil’s guidance in driving
Their affliction off. That was their way,
And the heathen’s only hope, Hell
Always in their hearts, knowing neither God
Nor His passing as He walks through our world, the Lord
Of Heaven and earth; their ears could not hear
His praise nor know His glory. Let them
Beware, those who are thrust into danger,
Clutched at by trouble, yet can carry no solace
In their hearts, cannot hope to be better! Hail
To those who will rise to God, drop off
Their dead bodies and seek our Father’s peace!

What does the phrase “hell-forged hands” suggest about Grendel?

reparation: something done to make amends for loss or suffering.
In Germanic society, someone who killed another person was generally expected to make a payment to the victim’s family as a way of restoring peace.

The reference to God shows the influence of Christianity on the Beowulf Poet. What does Grendel’s inability to know God’s love suggest about him?

heathen (hā’than): pagan; non-Christian. Though the Beowulf Poet was a Christian, he recognized that the characters in the poem lived before the Germanic tribes were converted to Christianity, when they still worshiped “the old stone gods.”

WORDS TO KNOW

- relish (re-lish) v. to enjoy keenly
- affliction (af-fik’shen) n. a cause of pain or distress
So the living sorrow of Hrothgar. Healfdane's son

105 Simmered, bitter and fresh, and no wisdom
Or strength could break it: that agony hung
On king and people alike, harsh
And unending, violent and cruel, and evil.
In his far-off home Beowulf, Higlac's

110 Follower and the strongest of the Geats—greater
And stronger than anyone anywhere in this world—
Heard how Grendel filled nights with horror
And quickly commanded a boat fitted out,
Proclaiming that he'd go to that famous king,

115 Would sail across the sea to Hrothgar,
Now when help was needed. None
Of the wise ones regretted his going, much
As he was loved by the Geats: the omens were good,
And they urged the adventure on. So Beowulf

120 Chose the mightiest men he could find,
The bravest and best of the Geats, fourteen
In all, and led them down to their boat;
He knew the sea, would point the prow
Straight to that distant Danish shore.

Beowulf and his men sail over the sea to the land of the Danes to offer help to Hrothgar. They are escorted by a Danish guard to Herot, where Wulfgar, one of Hrothgar's soldiers, tells the king of their arrival. Hrothgar knows of Beowulf and is ready to welcome the young prince and his men.

Then Wulfgar went to the door and addressed
The waiting seafarers with soldier's words:

“My lord, the great king of the Danes, commands me
To tell you that he knows of your noble birth
And that having come to him from over the open

130 Sea you have come bravely and are welcome.
Now go to him as you are, in your armor and helmets,
But leave your battle-shields here, and your spears,
Let them lie waiting for the promises your words
May make."

Beowulf arose, with his men

135 Around him, ordering a few to remain
With their weapons, leading the others quickly
Along under Herot's steep roof into Hrothgar's Presence. Standing on that prince's own hearth, Helmeted, the silvery metal of his mail shirt Gleaming with a smith's high art, he greeted The Danes' great lord:

“Hail, Hrothgar!

Higlac is my cousin and my king; the days Of my youth have been filled with glory. 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.

My people have said, the wisest, most knowing
And best of them, that my duty was to go to the Danes' Great king. They have seen my strength for themselves,
Have watched me rise from the darkness of war,
Dripping with my enemies’ blood. I drove
Five great giants into chains, chased

155 All of that race from the earth, 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. Now Grendel and I are called

160 Together, and I’ve come. Grant me, then,
Lord and protector of this noble place,
A single request! I have come so far,
Oh shelterer of warriors and your people’s loved friend,
That this one favor you should not refuse me—

165 That I, alone and with the help of my men,
May purge all evil from this hall. I have heard,
Too, that the monster’s scorn of men
Is so great that he needs no weapons and fears none.
Nor will I. My lord Higlac

170 Might think less of me if I let my sword
Go where my feet were afraid to, if I hid
Behind some broad linden shield: my hands
Alone shall fight for me, struggle for life
Against the monster. God must decide

175 Who will be given to death’s cold grip.
Grendel’s plan, I think, will be
What it has been before, to invade this hall
And gorge his belly with our bodies. If he can,
If he can. And I think, if my time will have come,

180 There’ll be nothing to mourn over, no corpse to prepare
For its grave: Grendel will carry our bloody
Flesh to the moors, crunch on our bones
And smear torn scraps of our skin on the walls
Of his den. No, I expect no Danes

185 Will fret about sewing our shrouds, if he wins.
And if death does take me, send the hammered
Mail of my armor to Higlac, return
The inheritance I had from Hrithel, and he
From Wayland. Fate will unwind as it must!”

189 Hrothgar replied, protector of the Danes:
“Beowulf, you’ve come to us in friendship,
and because

172 linden shield: shield made from the wood of a linden tree.

172–174 Beowulf insists on fighting Grendel without weapons. Why do you think this is so important to him?

185 shrouds: clothes in which dead bodies are wrapped.

188 Hrithel (hrith’ēl): a former king of the Geats—Higlac’s father and Beowulf’s grandfather.

189 Wayland: a famous blacksmith and magician.

WORDS TO KNOW

purge (pūrj) v. to cleanse or purify

gorge (gōrj) v. to stuff with food
Of the reception your father found at our court.
Edgelmund had begun a bitter feud,  
Killing Hloth nod to the Wulfing warrior:

Your father's craftsmen were afraid of war,
If he returned to his home, and they turned him away.  
Then he traveled across the curving waves  
To the land of the Danes. I was new to the throne,  
Then, a young man ruling this wide

Kingdom and its golden city: Hrungnarsark,  
My older brother, a far better man  
Than I, had died and dying made me,  
Second among Healfdene's sons, first  
In this nation. I bought the end of Edgelmund’s

Quarrel, sent ancient treasures through the ocean's  
Furrows to the Wulfsings; your father swore  
He'd keep that peace. My tongue grows heavy,  
And my heart, when I try to tell you what Grendel  
Has brought us, the damage he's done, here

In this hall, You see for yourself how much smaller  
Our ranks have become, and can guess what we've lost  
To his terror. Surely the Lord Almighty  
Could stop his madness, smother his lust!  
How many times have my men, glowing  

With courage drawn from too many cups  
Of ale, sworn to stay after dark  
And stem that horror with a sweep of their swords.  
And then, in the morning, this mead-hall glittering  
With new light would be drenched with blood, the benches

Stained red, the floors, all wet from that fiend's  
Savage assault—and my soldiers would be fewer  
Still, death taking more and more.  
But to table, Beowulf, a banquet in your honor:  
Let us toast your victories, and talk of the future."

Then Hrothgar's men gave places to the Geats,  
Yielding benches to the brave visitors  
And led them to the feast. The keeper of the mead  
Came carrying out the carved flasks,  
And poured that bright sweetness. A poet  

Sang, from time to time, in a clear  
Pure voice. Danes and visiting Geats  
Celebrated as one, drank and rejoiced.
After the banquet, Hrothgar and his followers leave Herot, and Beowulf and his warriors remain to spend the night. Beowulf reiterates his intent to fight Grendel without a sword and, while his followers sleep, lies waiting, eager for Grendel to appear.

**The Battle with Grendel**

Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,

Grendel came, hoping to kill
Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot.
He moved quickly through the cloudy night,
Up from his swampland, sliding silently
Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited Hrothgar's

Home before, knew the way—
But never, before nor after that night,
Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception

233-235 The translator uses punctuation to convey the effect of the midline pauses in the original Old English verses. How does the rhythm created by the midline punctuation reinforce the account of the action here?
So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless,  
Straight to the door, then snapped it open,  
Tore its iron fasteners with a touch  
And rushed angrily over the threshold.  
He strode quickly across the inlaid  
Floor, snarling and fierce: his eyes  
Gleamed in the darkness, burned with a gruesome  
Light. Then he stopped, seeing the hall  
Crowded with sleeping warriors, stuffed  
With rows of young soldiers resting together.  
And his heart laughed, he relished the sight,  
Intended to tear the life from those bodies  
By morning: the monster's mind was hot  
With the thought of food and the feasting his belly  
Would soon know. But fate, that night, intended  
Grendel to gnaw the broken bones  
Of his last human supper. Human  
Eyes were watching his evil steps,  
Waiting to see his swift hard claws.  
Grendel snatched at the first Geat  
He came to, ripped him apart, cut  
His body to bits with powerful jaws,  
Drank the blood from his veins and bolted  
Him down, hands and feet; death  
And Grendel's great teeth came together,  
Snapping life shut. Then he stepped to another  
Still body, clutched at Beowulf with his claws,  
Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful sleeper  
—And was instantly seized himself, claws  
Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm.  
That shepherd of evil, guardian of crime,  
Knew at once that nowhere on earth  
Had he met a man whose hands were harder.  
His mind was flooded with fear—but nothing  
Could take his talons and himself from that tight  
Hard grip. Grendel's one thought was to run  
From Beowulf, flee back to his marsh and hide there:  
This was a different Herot than the hall he had emptied.  
But Higlac's follower remembered his final  
Boast and, standing erect, stopped  
The monster's flight, fastened those claws  
In his fists till they cracked, clutched Grendel  
Closer. The infamous killer fought
For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,  
Desiring nothing but escape; his claws  
Had been caught, he was trapped. That trip to Herot  
Was a miserable journey for the writhing monster!

The high hall rang, its roof boards swayed,  
And Danes shook with terror. Down  
The aisles the battle swept, angry  
And wild. Herot trembled, wonderfully  
Built to withstand the blows, the struggling  
Great bodies beating at its beautiful walls;  
Shaped and fastened with iron, inside  
And out, artfully worked, the building  
Stood firm. Its benches rattled, fell  
To the floor, gold-covered boards grating  

As Grendel and Beowulf battled across them.  
Hrothgar's wise men had fashioned Herot  
To stand forever; only fire,  
They had planned, could shatter what such skill had put  
Together, swallow in hot flames such splendor  

Of ivory and iron and wood. Suddenly  
The sounds changed, the Danes started  
In new terror, cowering in their beds as the terrible  
Screams of the Almighty's enemy sang  
In the darkness, the horrible shrieks of pain  

And defeat, the tears torn out of Grendel's  
Taut throat, hell's captive caught in the arms  
Of him who of all the men on earth  
Was the strongest.

That mighty protector of men  
Meant to hold the monster till its life  
Leaped out, knowing the fiend was no use  
To anyone in Denmark. All of Beowulf's  
Band had jumped from their beds, ancestral  
Swords raised and ready, determined  
To protect their prince if they could. Their courage  

Was great but all wasted: they could hack at Grendel  
From every side, trying to open  
A path for his evil soul, but their points  
Could not hurt him, the sharpest and hardest iron  
Could not scratch at his skin, for that sin-stained demon  

Had bewitched all men's weapons, laid spells  
That blunted every mortal man's blade.

WORDS

writhing (writ'•ing) adj. twisting and turning in pain writhe v.  
cowering (kou'•er•ing) adj. crouching in fear cower v.  
taut (tåt) adj. pulled tight
And yet his time had come, his days
Were over, his death near, down
To hell he would go, swept groaning and helpless
To the waiting hands of still worse fiends.

Now he discovered—once the afflictor
Of men, tormentor of their days—what it meant
To feud with Almighty God: Grendel
Saw that his strength was deserting him, his claws
Bound fast, Hrothgar’s brave follower tearing at
His hands. The monster’s hatred rose higher,
But his power had gone. He twisted in pain,
And the bleeding sinews deep in his shoulder
Snapped, muscle and bone split

And broke. The battle was over, Beowulf
Had been granted new glory: Grendel escaped,
But wounded as he was could flee to his den,
His miserable hole at the bottom of the marsh,
Only to die, to wait for the end

Of all his days. And after that bloody
Combat the Danes laughed with delight.
He who had come to them from across the sea,
Bold and strong-minded, had driven affliction
Off, purged Herot clean. He was happy,

Now, with that night’s fierce work; the Danes
Had been served as he’d boasted he’d serve them; Beowulf,
A prince of the Geats, had killed Grendel,
Ended the grief, the sorrow, the suffering
Forced on Hrothgar’s helpless people

By a bloodthirsty fiend. No Dane doubted
The victory, for the proof, hanging high
From the rafters where Beowulf had hung it, was the monster’s
Arm, claw and shoulder and all.

And then, in the morning, crowds surrounded
Herot, warriors coming to that hall
From faraway lands, princes and leaders
Of men hurrying to behold the monster’s
Great staggering tracks. They gaped with no sense
Of sorrow, felt no regret for his suffering,

Went tracing his bloody footprints, his beaten
And lonely flight, to the edge of the lake
Where he’d dragged his corpse-like way, doomed
And already weary of his vanishing life.
The water was bloody, steaming and boiling
In horrible pounding waves, heat
Sucked from his magic veins; but the swirling
Surf had covered his death, hidden
Deep in murky darkness his miserable
End, as hell opened to receive him.

Then old and young rejoiced, turned back
From that happy pilgrimage, mounted their hard-hooved
Horses, high-spirited stallions, and rode them
Slowly toward Herot again, retelling
Beowulf's bravery as they jogged along.

And over and over they swore that nowhere
On earth or under the spreading sky
Or between the seas, neither south nor north,
Was there a warrior wortlier to rule over men.
(But no one meant Beowulf's praise to belittle
Hrothgar, their kind and gracious king!)

And sometimes, when the path ran straight and clear,
They would let their horses race, red
And brown and pale yellow backs streaming
Down the road. And sometimes a proud old soldier

Who had heard songs of the ancient heroes
And could sing them all through, story after story,
Would weave a net of words for Beowulf's
Victory, tying the knot of his verses
Smoothly, swiftly, into place with a poet's
Quick skill, singing his new song aloud
While he shaped it, and the old songs as well. . . .

389–396 What role do poets seem to play in Beowulf's society?

Thinking Through the Literature

1. Comprehension Check What characteristics does Grendel have that make him particularly terrifying to the Danes?

2. What impressions of Beowulf do you have after reading this part of the poem?

3. What do you think causes Grendel to attack human beings?

4. Why do you think Beowulf offers to help a tribe other than his own, in spite of the danger?

WORDS TO KNOW

murky (mur'kā) adj. cloudy, gloomy
pilgrimage (pil'gra-mij) n. a journey to a sacred place or with a lofty purpose
Although one monster has died,
another still lives. From her lair in a cold and
murky lake, where she has been brooding over her
loss, Grendel’s mother emerges, bent on revenge.

**Grendel’s Moother**

So she reached Herot,
Where the Danes slept as though already dead;
Her visit ended their good fortune, reversed
The bright vane of their luck. No female, no matter
How fierce, could have come with a man’s strength,
Fought with the power and courage men fight with,
Smashing their shining swords, their bloody,
Hammer-forged blades onto boar-headed helmets,
Slashing and stabbing with the sharpest of points.
The soldiers raised their shields and drew
Those gleaming swords, swung them above
The piled-up benches, leaving their mail shirts
And their helmets where they’d lain when the terror took
hold of them.

To save her life she moved still faster,
Took a single victim and fled from the hall,
Running to the moors, discovered, but her supper
Assured, sheltered in her dripping claws.
She’d taken Hrothgar’s closest friend,
The man he most loved of all men on earth;
She’d killed a glorious soldier, cut
A noble life short. No Geat could have stopped her:
Beowulf and his band had been given better
Beds; sleep had come to them in a different
Hall. Then all Herot burst into shouts:
She had carried off Grendel’s claw. Sorrow
Had returned to Denmark. They’d traded deaths,
Danes and monsters, and no one had won,
Both had lost!

400 vane: a device that turns to show the direction the wind is blowing—here associated metaphorically with luck, which is as changeable as the wind.

404 boar-headed helmets: Germanic warriors often wore helmets bearing the images of wild pigs or other fierce creatures in the hope that the images would increase their ferocity and protect them against their enemies.

421 Why do you think Grendel’s mother takes his claw?
Devastated by the loss of his friend, Hrothgar sends for Beowulf and recounts what Grendel’s mother has done. Then Hrothgar describes the dark lake where Grendel’s mother has dwelt with her son.

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

425–432 What sort of place is the underwater lair of Grendel’s mother? How does the translator’s use of alliteration make this description more effective?

447–449 Germanic warriors placed great importance on amassing treasure as a way of acquiring fame and temporarily defeating fate.
Beowulf accepts Hrothgar's challenge, and the king and his men accompany the hero to the dreadful lair of Grendel's mother. Fearlessly, Beowulf prepares to battle the terrible creature.

**The Battle with Grendel's Mother**

430 He leaped into the lake, would not wait for anyone's Answer; the heaving water covered him Over. For hours he sank through the waves; At last he saw the mud of the bottom, And all at once the greedy she-wolf

455 Who'd ruled those waters for half a hundred Years discovered him, saw that a creature From above had come to explore the bottom Of her wet world. She welcomed him in her claws, Clutched at him savagely but could not harm him,

Tried to work her fingers through the tight Ring-woven mail on his breast, but tore And scratched in vain. Then she carried him, armor And sword and all, to her home; he struggled To free his weapon, and failed. The fight

460 Brought other monsters swimming to see Her catch, a host of sea beasts who beat at His mail shirt, stabbing with tusks and teeth As they followed along. Then he realized, suddenly, That she'd brought him into someone's battle-hall,

470 And there the water's heat could not hurt him, Nor anything in the lake attack him through
The building's high-arching roof. A brilliant light burned all around him, the lake itself like a fiery flame.

Then he saw

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

476 his ring-marked blade: For the battle with Grendel's mother, Beowulf has been given an heirloom sword with an intricately etched blade. 480 Hrunting (hrūn'tīnɡ): the name of Beowulf's sword. (Germanic warriors' swords were possessions of such value that they were often given names.)

478 It was the last time anyone would wear it. But Beowulf Longed only for fame, leaped back Into battle. He tossed his sword aside, Angry; the steel-edged blade lay where He'd dropped it. If weapons were useless he'd use

480 His hands, the strength in his fingers. So fame Comes to the men who mean to win it And care about nothing else! He raised His arms and seized her by the shoulder; anger Doubled his strength, he threw her to the floor.

481 How important is fame to Beowulf?

484 She fell, Grendel's fierce mother, and the Geats' Proud prince was ready to leap on her. But she rose At once and repaid him with her clenching claws, Wildly tearing at him. He was weary, that best And strongest of soldiers; his feet stumbled

485 And in an instant she had him down, held helpless. Squatting with her weight on his stomach, she drew A dagger, brown with dried blood, and prepared To avenge her only son. But he was stretched On his back, and her stabbing blade was blunted By the woven mail shirt he wore on his chest. The hammered links held; the point Could not touch him. He'd have traveled to the bottom of the earth, Edgitho's son, and died there, if that shining Woven metal had not helped—and Holy

489 God, who sent him victory, gave judgment For truth and right, Ruler of the Heavens, Once Beowulf was back on his feet and fighting.
Then he saw, hanging on the wall, a heavy
Sword, hammered by giants, strong
And blessed with their magic, the best of all weapons
But so massive that no ordinary man could lift
Its carved and decorated length. He drew it
From its scabbard, broke the chain on its hilt,
And then, savage, now, angry
And desperate, lifted it high over his head
And struck with all the strength he had left,
Caught her in the neck and cut it through,
Broke bones and all. Her body fell
to the floor, lifeless, the sword was wet
With her blood, and Beowulf rejoiced at the sight.
The brilliant light shone, suddenly,
As though burning in that hall, and as bright as Heaven's
Own candle, lit in the sky. He looked
At her home, then following along the wall
Went walking, his hands tight on the sword,
His heart still angry. He was hunting another
Dead monster, and took his weapon with him
For final revenge against Grendel's vicious
Attacks, his nighttime raids, over
And over, coming to Herot when Hrothgar's
Men slept, killing them in their beds,
Eating some on the spot, fifteen
Or more, and running to his loathsome moor
With another such sickening meal waiting
In his pouch. But Beowulf repaid him for those visits,
Found him lying dead in his corner,
Armless, exactly as that fierce fighter
Had sent him out from Herot, then struck off
His head with a single swift blow. The body
Jerked for the last time, then lay still.
The wise old warriors who surrounded Hrothgar,
Like him staring into the monsters' lake,
Saw the waves surging and blood
Spurting through. 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; almost all agreed that Grendel's
Mighty mother, the she-wolf, had killed him.
The sun slid over past noon, went further
Down. The Danes gave up, left
The lake and went home, Hrothgar with them.
The Geats stayed, sat sadly, watching,
Imagining they saw their lord but not believing
They would ever see him again.

—Then the sword
Melted, blood-soaked, dripping down
Like water, disappearing like ice when the world’s
Eternal Lord loosens invisible
Fetters and unwinds icicles and frost
As only He can, He who rules
Time and seasons, He who is truly
God. The monsters’ hall was full of
Rich treasures, but all that Beowulf took
Was Grendel’s head and the hilt of the giants’
Jeweled sword; the rest of that ring-marked
Blade had dissolved in Grendel’s steaming
Blood, boiling even after his death.
And then the battle’s only survivor
Swam up and away from those silent corpses;
The water was calm and clean, the whole
Huge lake peaceful once the demons who’d lived in it
Were dead.

Then that noble protector of all seamen
Swam to land, rejoicing in the heavy
Burdens he was bringing with him. He

WORDS
TO
KNOW
fetter (fē’tər) n. a shackle or chain, restraint
And all his glorious band of Geats
Thanked God that their leader had come back unharmed;
They left the lake together. The Geats
Carried Beowulf’s helmet, and his mail shirt.

585
Behind them the water slowly thickened
As the monsters’ blood came seeping up.
They walked quickly, happily, across
Roads all of them remembered, left
The lake and the cliffs alongside it, brave men

590
Staggering under the weight of Grendel’s skull,
Too heavy for fewer than four of them to handle—
Two on each side of the spear jammed through it—
Yet proud of their ugly load and determined
That the Danes, seated in Herot, should see it.

595
Soon, fourteen Geats arrived
At the hall, bold and warlike, and with Beowulf,
Their lord and leader, they walked on the mead-hall
Green. Then the Geats’ brave prince entered
Herot, covered with glory for the daring

600
Battles he had fought; he sought Hrothgar
To salute him and show Grendel’s head.
He carried that terrible trophy by the hair,
Brought it straight to where the Danes sat,
Drinking, the queen among them. It was a weird

605
And wonderful sight, and the warriors stared.

Thinking Through the Literature

1. Comprehension Check What heroic action does Beowulf perform in this part of the poem?

2. Do you think you would have enjoyed living among the Danes of Beowulf’s day? Why or why not?

3. What qualities does Beowulf display in this second battle?

   • the description of Grendel’s mother and her actions
   • the details describing her lair
   • Beowulf’s motives and actions

4. Are Beowulf’s words and deeds those of a traditional epic hero? Support your opinion with evidence from the poem.

5. Does the behavior of Grendel’s mother seem as wicked or unreasonable as Grendel’s behavior? Explain your answer.
With Grendel’s mother destroyed, peace is restored to the land of the Danes, and Beowulf, laden with Hrothgar’s gifts, returns to the land of his own people, the Geats. After his uncle and cousin die, Beowulf becomes king of the Geats and rules in peace and prosperity for 50 years. One day, however, a fire-breathing dragon that has been guarding a treasure for hundreds of years is disturbed by a thief, who enters the treasure tower and steals a cup. The dragon begins terrorizing the Geats, and Beowulf, now an old man, takes on the challenge of fighting it.

**Beowulf’s Last Battle**

And Beowulf uttered his final boast:

“I’ve never known fear, as a youth I fought
In endless battles. I am old, now,
But I will fight again, seek fame still,
If the dragon hiding in his tower dares
To face me.”

Then he said farewell to his followers,
Each in his turn, for the last time:

“I’d use no sword, no weapon, if this beast
Could be killed without it, crushed to death
Like Grendel, gripped in my hands and torn
Limb from limb. But his breath will be burning
Hot, poison will pour from his tongue.
I feel no shame, with shield and sword
And armor, against this monster: when he comes to me...
I mean to stand, not run from his shooting
Flames, stand till fate decides
Which of us wins. My heart is firm,
My hands calm: I need no hot
Words. Wait for me close by, my friends.

We shall see, soon, who will survive
This bloody battle, stand when the fighting
Is done. No one else could do
What I mean to, here, no man but me
Could hope to defeat this monster. No one
Could try. And this dragon's treasure, his gold
And everything hidden in that tower, will be mine
Or war will sweep me to a bitter death!"

Then Beowulf rose, still brave, still strong,
And with his shield at his side, and a mail shirt on his breast,

Strode calmly, confidently, toward the tower, under
The rocky cliffs: no coward could have walked there!
And then he who'd endured dozens of desperate
Battles, who'd stood boldly while swords and shields
Clashed, the best of kings, saw

Huge stone arches and felt the heat
Of the dragon's breath, flooding down
Through the hidden entrance, too hot for anyone
To stand, a streaming current of fire
And smoke that blocked all passage. And the Geats'

Lord and leader, angry, lowered
His sword and roared out a battle cry,
A call so loud and clear that it reached through
The hoary rock, hung in the dragon's
Ear. The beast rose, angry,

Knowing a man had come—and then nothing
But war could have followed. Its breath came first,
A steaming cloud pouring from the stone,
Then the earth itself shook. Beowulf
Swung his shield into place, held it

In front of him, facing the entrance. The dragon
Coiled and uncoiled, its heart urging it
Into battle. Beowulf's ancient sword
Was waiting, unsheathed, his sharp and gleaming
Blade. The beast came closer; both of them

Were ready, each set on slaughter. The Geats'
Great prince stood firm, unmoving, prepared
Behind his high shield, waiting in his shining
Armor. The monster came quickly toward him,
Pouring out fire and smoke, hurrying
To its fate. Flames beat at the iron
Shield, and for a time it held, protected
Beowulf as he’d planned; then it began to melt,
And for the first time in his life that famous prince
Fought with fate against him, with glory
Denied him. He knew it, but he raised his sword
And struck at the dragon’s scaly hide.
The ancient blade broke, hit into
The monster’s skin; drew blood, but cracked
And failed him before it went deep enough, helped him
Less than he needed. The dragon leaped
With pain, thrashed and beat at him, spouting
Murderous flames, spreading them everywhere.
And the Geats’ ring-giver did not boast of glorious
Victories in other wars; his weapon
Had failed him, deserted him, now when he needed it
Most, that excellent sword. Edgith’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.
Quickly, the dragon came at him, encouraged
As Beowulf fell back; its breath flared,
And he suffered, wrapped around in swirling
Flames—a king, before, but now
A beaten warrior. None of his comrades
Came to him, helped him, his brave and noble
Followers; they ran for their lives, fled
Deep in a wood. And only one of them
Remained, stood there, miserable, remembering,
As a good man must, what kinship should mean.

His name was Wiglaf, he was Wexstan’s son
And a good soldier; his family had been Swedish,
Once. Watching Beowulf, he could see
How his king was suffering, burning. Remembering
Everything his lord and cousin had given him,
Armor and gold and the great estates
Wexstan’s family enjoyed, Wiglaf’s
Mind was made up; he raised his yellow
Shield and drew his sword.

And Wiglaf, his heart heavy, uttered
The kind of words his comrades deserved:
"I remember how we sat in the mead-hall, drinking
And boasting of how brave we'd be when Beowulf

Needed us, he who gave us these swords
And armor: all of us swore to repay him,
When the time came, kindness for kindness
—With our lives, if he needed them. He allowed us to join him,
Chose us from all his great army, thinking

Our boasting words had some weight, believing
Our promises, trusting our swords. He took us
For soldiers, for men. He meant to kill
This monster himself, our mighty king,
Fight this battle alone and unaided,

As in the days when his strength and daring dazzled
Men's eyes. But those days are over and gone
And now our lord must lean on younger
Arms. And we must go to him, while angry
Flames burn at his flesh, help

Our glorious king! By almighty God,
I'd rather burn myself than see
Flames swirling around my lord.
And who are we to carry home
Our shields before we've slain his enemy

And ours, to run back to our homes with Beowulf
So hard-pressed here? I swear that nothing
He ever did deserved an end
Like this, dying miserably and alone,
Butchered by this savage beast: we swore

That these swords and armor were each for us all!"
Wiglaf joins Beowulf, who again attacks the dragon single-handed; but the remnant of his sword shatters, and the monster wounds him in the neck. Wiglaf then strikes the dragon, and he and Beowulf together finally succeed in killing the beast. Their triumph is short-lived, however, because Beowulf's wound proves to be mortal.

THE DEATH OF BEOWULF

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; all worldly
Pleasure was gone, as life would go,
Sooner:

"I'd leave my armor to my son,
Now, if God had given me an heir,
A child born of my body, his life
Created from mine. I've worn this crown

For fifty winters: no neighboring people
Have tried to threaten the Geats, sent soldiers
Against us or talked of terror. My days
Have gone by as fate willed, waiting
For its word to be spoken, ruling as well

As I knew how, swearing no unholy oaths,
Seeking no lying wars. I can leave
This life happy; I can die, here,
Knowing the Lord of all life has never
Watched me wash my sword in blood

Born of my own family. Beloved
Wiglaf, go, quickly, find
The dragon's treasure: we've taken its life,
But its gold is ours, too. Hurry,
Bring me ancient silver, precious

Jewels, shining armor and gems,
Before I die. Death will be softer,
Leaving life and this people I've ruled
So long, if I look at this last of all prizes."

Words to Know:

livid (lit.'red') adj. discolored; black and blue

Viking purse clip of gold, garnet, and glass, from Sutton Hoo ship burials
Then Wæxstan's son went in, as quickly

As he could, did as the dying Beowulf
Asked, entered the inner darkness
Of the tower, went with his mail shirt and his sword.
Flushed with victory he groped his way,
A brave young warrior, and suddenly saw

Piles of gleaming gold, precious
Gems, scattered on the floor, cups
And bracelets, rusty old helmets, beautifully
Made but rotting with no hands to rub
And polish them. They lay where the dragon left them;

It had flown in the darkness, once, before fighting
Its final battle. (So gold can easily
Triumph, defeat the strongest of men,
No matter how deep it is hidden!) And he saw,
Hanging high above, a golden

Banner, woven by the best of weavers
And beautiful. And over everything he saw
A strange light, shining everywhere,
On walls and floor and treasure. Nothing
Moved, no other monsters appeared;

He took what he wanted, all the treasures
That pleased his eye, heavy plates
And golden cups and the glorious banner,
Loaded his arms with all they could hold.
Beowulf's dagger, his iron blade,

Had finished the fire-spitting terror
That once protected tower and treasures
Alike; the gray-bearded lord of the Geats
Had ended those flying, burning raids
Forever.
Then Wiglaf went back, anxious
To return while Beowulf was alive, to bring him
Treasure they'd won together. He ran,
Hope his wounded king, weak
And dying, had not left the world too soon.
Then he brought their treasure to Beowulf, and found
His famous king bloody, gasping
For breath. But Wiglaf sprinkled water
Over his lord, until the words
Deep in his breast broke through and were heard.
Beholding the treasure he spoke, haltingly:

“For this, this gold, these jewels, I thank
Our Father in Heaven, Ruler of the Earth—
For all of this, that His grace has given me,
Allowed me to bring to my people while breath
Still came to my lips. I sold my life
For this treasure, and I sold it well. Take
What I leave, Wiglaf, lead my people,
Help them; my time is gone. Have
The brave Geats build me a tomb,
When the funeral flames have burned me, and build it

Here, at the water’s edge, high
On this spit of land, so sailors can see
This tower, and remember my name, and call it
Beowulf’s tower, and boats in the darkness
And mist, crossing the sea, will know it.”

Then that brave king gave the golden
Necklace from around his throat to Wiglaf,
Gave him his gold-covered helmet, and his rings,
And his mail shirt, and ordered him to use them well:

“You’re the last of all our far-flung family.

Fate has swept our race away,
Taken warriors in their strength and led them
To the death that was waiting. And now I follow them.”

The old man’s mouth was silent, spoke
No more, had said as much as it could;

He would sleep in the fire, soon. His soul
Left his flesh, flew to glory. . . .

And when the battle was over Beowulf’s followers
Came out of the wood, cowards and traitors,
Knowing the dragon was dead. Afraid,

While it spit its fires, to fight in their lord’s

816 spit: a narrow point of land extending into a body of water.

805-819 How will Beowulf continue to aid his people after his death?

833 In what sense are Beowulf’s followers traitors? Whom or what have they betrayed?
Defense, to throw their javelins and spears,
They came like shamfaced jackals, their shields
In their hands, to the place where the prince lay dead,
And waited for Wiglaf to speak. He was sitting
Near Beowulf’s body, wearily sprinkling
Water in the dead man’s face, trying
To stir him. He could not. No one could have kept
Life in their lord’s body, or turned
Aside the Lord’s will: world
And men and all move as He orders,
And always have, and always will.

Then Wiglaf turned and angrily told them
What men without courage must hear.
Wæstan’s brave son stared at the traitors,
His heart sorrowful, and said what he had to:
“I say what anyone who speaks the truth
Must say. . .
Too few of his warriors remembered
To come, when our lord faced death, alone.
And now the giving of swords, of golden
Rings and rich estates, is over,
Ended for you and everyone who shares
Your blood: when the brave Geats hear
How you bolted and ran none of your race
Will have anything left but their lives. And death
Would be better for them all, and for you, than the kind
Of life you can lead, branded with disgrace!” . . .

Then the warriors rose,
Walked slowly down from the cliff, stared
At those wonderful sights, stood weeping as they saw
Beowulf dead on the sand, their bold
Ring-giver resting in his last bed;
He’d reached the end of his days, their mighty
War-king, the great lord of the Geats,
Gone to a glorious death. . .
MOURNING BEOWULF

Then the Geats built the tower, as Beowulf
Had asked, strong and tall, so sailors
Could find it from far and wide; working
For ten long days they made his monument,

Sealed his ashes in walls as straight
And high as wise and willing hands
Could raise them. And the riches he and Wiglaf
Had won from the dragon, rings, necklaces,
Ancient, hammered armor—all

The treasures they'd taken were left there, too,
Silver and jewels buried in the sandy
Ground, back in the earth, again
And forever hidden and useless to men.
And then twelve of the bravest Geats

Rode their horses around the tower,
Telling their sorrow, telling stories
Of their dead king and his greatness, his glory,
Praising him for heroic deeds, for a life
As noble as his name. So should all men

Raise up words for their lords, warm
With love, when their shield and protector leaves
His body behind, sends his soul
On high. 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.