See ALLITERATION in the Handbook of Literary Terms, page 926.

from Beowulf

translated by **Charles W. Kennedy**

The tale of Beowulf's adventures begins with the legendary Scyld, founder of the Danish royal line. Sailing alone over the sea, the child Scyld mysteriously comes to the Danish people. As a young man he leads them through a series of battles in which they capture the mead-halls of surrounding tribes, subduing them and forcing them to pay tribute to the Danes. Thus Scyld establishes a pattern for success as a ruler. At his death the Danes return him to his mysterious source, setting his body, amid a heap of the treasures he has won, adrift at sea.

The Danish Court and the Raids of Grendel

Lo! we have listened to many a lay
Of the Spear-Danes'[1] fame, their splendor of old,
Their mighty princes, and martial deeds!
Many a mead-hall Scyld, son of Sceaf,[2]
Snatched from the forces of savage foes.
From a friendless foundling, feeble and wretched,
He grew to a terror as time brought change.
He throve under heaven in power and pride
Till alien peoples beyond the ocean
Paid toll and tribute. A good king he! . . .
'Tis by earning honor a man must rise
In every state. Then his hour struck,
And Scyld passed on to the peace of God.
As their leader had bidden, whose word was law
In the Scylding realm[3] which he long had ruled,
His loving comrades carried him down
To the shore of ocean; a ring-prowed ship,
Straining at anchor and sheeted with ice,
Rode in the harbor, a prince's pride.
Therein they laid him, their well-loved lord,
Their ring-bestower, in the ship's embrace,
The mighty prince at the foot of the mast
Amid much treasure and many a gem
From far-off lands. No lordlier ship
Have I ever heard of, with weapons heaped,
With battle-armor, with bills and byrnies.[4]
On the ruler's breast lay a royal treasure
As the ship put out on the unknown deep.
With no less adornment they dressed him round

1. ***Spear-Danes.*** The poet supplies the Danish people with various epithets (descriptive names) in the course of the poem, partly to help his lines alliterate, and perhaps partly as an attempt at characterization. In addition to "Spear-Danes," he calls them "Ring-Danes" and "Bright-Danes," as well as "South-," "East-," and "West-Danes."
2. ***Scyld*** (shild), ***son of Sceaf*** (shāf), founder of the Danish line of kings, the *Scyldingas,* "descendants of Scyld." The Danish people are also referred to as "Scyldings." Scyld's name means "Shield, son of Sheaf," or perhaps "Shield with a sheaf."
3. ***Scylding realm,*** Denmark.
4. ***bills and byrnies,*** swords and shirts of chain mail.

Or gift of treasure, than once they gave
Who launched him first on the lonely sea
While still but a child. A golden standard
They raised above him, high over head,
Let the wave take him on trackless seas.
Mournful their mood and heavy their hearts;
Nor wise man nor warrior knows for a truth
Unto what haven that cargo came. . . .

In the next lines, omitted here, the poet traces the subsequent line of Danish kings, descended from Scyld: first his son Beowulf (not the hero of this poem, but a warrior of more ancient times); then his grandson Healfdene (hä'alf den ə). In time one of Healfdene's four children, Hrothgar (hrōth'gär), takes command of the kingdom. Following the young Scyld's earlier example, he begins by gathering about him a band of warriors.

To Hrothgar was granted glory in war,
Success in battle; retainers bold
Obeyed him gladly; his band increased
To a mighty host. Then his mind was moved
To have men fashion a high-built hall,
A mightier mead-hall than man had known,
Wherein to portion to old and young
All goodly treasure that God had given,
Save only the folk-land,[5] and lives of men.
His word was published to many a people
Far and wide o'er the ways of earth
To rear a folk-stead richly adorned;
The task was speeded, the time soon came
That the famous mead-hall was finished and done.
To distant nations its name was known,
The Hall of the Hart;[6] and the king kept well
His pledge and promise to deal out gifts,
Rings at the banquet. The great hall rose
High and horn-gabled,[7] holding its place. . . .
Then an evil spirit who dwelt in the darkness
Endured it ill that he heard each day
The din of revelry ring through the hall,
The sound of the harp, and the scop's sweet song. . . .[8]
They called him Grendel, a demon grim
Haunting the fen-lands, holding the moors,
Ranging the wastes, where the wretched wight
Made his lair with the monster kin;
He bore the curse of the seed of Cain[9]
Whereby God punished the grievous guilt
Of Abel's murder. Nor ever had Cain
Cause to boast of that deed of blood;
God banished him far from the fields of men;
Of his blood was begotten an evil brood,
Marauding monsters and menacing trolls,
Goblins and giants who battled with God
A long time. Grimly He gave them reward!
Then at the nightfall the fiend drew near
Where the timbered mead-hall towered on high,
To spy how the Danes fared after the feast.
Within the wine-hall he found the warriors
Fast in slumber, forgetting grief,
Forgetting the woe of the world of men.
Grim and greedy the gruesome monster,
Fierce and furious, launched attack,
Slew thirty spearmen asleep in the hall,
Sped away gloating, gripping the spoil,
Dragging the dead men home to his den.
Then in the dawn with the coming of daybreak

5. ***folk-land,*** common land (the public land owned by the community). Germanic tribal law reserved this land for grazing.
6. ***Hall of the Hart, Heorot*** (hä'ə rot), Hrothgar's mead-hall. The hart (or stag) was a symbol of Germanic kingship. The head of the scepter found at Sutton Hoo (see pages 42-43) was a stag.
7. ***horn-gabled,*** perhaps with roof ornaments carved to resemble a stag's antlers, or perhaps simply "wide-gabled."
8. ***scop's sweet song.*** The scop (skop) was the tribe's storyteller, chanting his tales to the sound of the harp.
9. ***seed of Cain.*** In Genesis, Cain murders his brother Abel and is driven into the wilderness by God. According to legend his offspring included a variety of monsters. The poet mentions *eotenas,* "etans" (cannibal giants like trolls), *ylfe* "elves," (beautiful but evil), and *orc-nēas,* "goblins" (animated corpses like zombies). Grendel may have been a creature of this last type (see Comment on page 12).

The war-might of Grendel was widely known.
Mirth was stilled by the sound of weeping;
The wail of the mourner awoke with day.
And the peerless hero, the honored prince,[10]
Weighed down with woe and heavy of heart,
Sat sorely grieving for slaughtered thanes,[11]
As they traced the track of the cursed monster.
From that day onward the deadly feud
Was a long-enduring and loathsome strife.
Not longer was it than one night later
The fiend returning renewed attack
With heart firm-fixed in the hateful war,
Feeling no rue for the grievous wrong.
'Twas easy thereafter to mark the men
Who sought their slumber elsewhere afar,
Found beds in the bowers, since Grendel's hate
Was so baldly blazoned in baleful signs.
He held himself at a safer distance
Who escaped the clutch of the demon's claw.
So Grendel raided and ravaged the realm,
One against all, in an evil war
Till the best of buildings was empty and still.
'Twas a weary while! Twelve winters' time
The lord of the Scyldings had suffered woe,
Sore affliction and deep distress.
And the malice of Grendel, in mournful lays,
Was widely sung by the sons of men,
The hateful feud that he fought with Hrothgar—
Year after year of struggle and strife,
An endless scourging, a scorning of peace
With any man of the Danish might.
No strength could move him to stay his hand,
Or pay for his murders;[12] the wise knew well

10. ***honored prince,*** Hrothgar.
11. ***thanes,*** warriors. A thane ranked between an earl (a nobleman) and an ordinary freeman.
12. ***murders.*** The poet here ironically refers to the Danes' inability to force Grendel to pay *wergild* ("man-payment"), or compensation, to the families of the warriors he has murdered. In Anglo-Saxon and Germanic law, a fixed price in money was placed on the life of every individual in the tribe, from the churl (the lowest-ranking freeman) to the king. This money was paid by the killer's family to that of the victim to avoid blood feud.

Comment

The Nature of Grendel

Grendel's nature is, of course, diabolical from a Christian point of view: he is a member of the race of Cain, from whom all misshapen and unnatural beings were spawned, such as ogres and elves. He is a creature dwelling in the outer darkness, a giant, a cannibal. When he crawls off to die, he is said to join the rout of devils in Hell. However, he also appears to have roots in Scandinavian folklore. In Old Norse literature, monsters of his type make their appearance chiefly as *draugar,*[1] or animated corpses. They are ordinary folk who have been buried upright in cairns,[2] according to Norse custom, but if they harbor a grievance after death they will refuse to stay put and will roam about at night wreaking aimless vengeance. They are articulate and usually angry, in contrast to the silent zombies of Haiti. A *draugr* is supernaturally strong and invulnerable (being already dead) and will often have a mother called a *ketta,* or "she-cat," who is even more monstrous than he. Grendel, then, appears to be a blend of the *draugr* figure and a devilish monster from the world of Christian folklore.

1. ***draugar*** (drou'gär), plural of *draugr* (drou'gər).
2. ***cairns*** (kernz, karnz). A cairn is a pile of stones serving as a memorial, tomb, or landmark.

From *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition,* translated by Howell D. Chickering, Jr. Garden City: Anchor Books, 1977.

They could hope for no halting of savage assault.
Like a dark death-shadow the ravaging demon,
Nightlong prowling the misty moors,
Ensnared the warriors, wary or weak.
No man can say how these shades of hell
Come and go on their grisly rounds. . . .
The son of Healfdene was heavy-hearted,
Sorrowfully brooding in sore distress,
Finding no help in a hopeless strife;
Too bitter the struggle that stunned the people,
The long oppression, loathsome and grim.

The Geats (yā′əts) lived in southwestern Sweden. Hygelac, their king as the story begins, is historical. He was famous for his unusual height. ("Even when he was twelve years old, no horse could carry him," claims an eighth-century *Book of Monsters*.) He died in battle while raiding the European mainland in 521. Beowulf, as Hygelac's thane, owes the king obedience. But hearing of Grendel's attacks on the neighboring Danes, he decides to go to their rescue, sailing from the valley of the Göta river in Sweden to the Danish island of Zealand, where Hrothgar has erected his mead-hall, Heorot (see map, page 5).

The Coming of Beowulf

Then tales of the terrible deeds of Grendel
Reached Hygelac's thane in his home with the Geats;
Of living strong men he was the strongest,
Fearless and gallant and great of heart.
He gave command for a goodly vessel
Fitted and furnished; he fain would sail
Over the swan-road to seek the king
Who suffered so sorely for need of men.
And his bold retainers found little to blame
In his daring venture, dear though he was;
They viewed the omens, and urged him on.
Brave was the band he had gathered about him,
Fourteen stalwarts seasoned and bold,
Seeking the shore where the ship lay waiting,
A sea-skilled mariner sighting the landmarks.
Came the hour of boarding; the boat was riding
The waves of the harbor under the hill.
The eager mariners mounted the prow;
Billows were breaking, sea against sand.
In the ship's hold snugly they stowed their trappings,
Gleaming armor and battle-gear;
Launched the vessel, the well-braced bark,
Seaward bound on a joyous journey.
Over breaking billows, with bellying sail
And foamy beak, like a flying bird
The ship sped on, till the next day's sun
Showed sea-cliffs shining, towering hills
And stretching headlands. The sea was crossed,
The voyage ended, the vessel moored.
And the Weder people[13] waded ashore
With clatter of trappings and coats of mail;
Gave thanks to God that His grace had granted
Sea-paths safe for their ocean-journey.
Then the Scylding coast guard watched from the sea-cliff
Warriors bearing their shining shields,
Their gleaming war-gear, ashore from the ship.
His mind was puzzled, he wondered much
What men they were. On his good horse mounted,
Hrothgar's thane made haste to the beach,
Boldly brandished his mighty spear
With manful challenge: "What men are you,

13. ***Weder people, Weder-Gēatas,*** "Storm-Geats," an epithet for Beowulf's people.

Carrying weapons and clad in steel,
Who thus come driving across the deep
On the ocean-lanes in your lofty ship?
Long have I served as the Scylding outpost,
Held watch and ward at the ocean's edge
Lest foreign foemen with hostile fleet
Should come to harry our Danish home,
And never more openly sailed to these shores
Men without password, or leave to land.
I have never laid eyes upon earl on earth
More stalwart and sturdy than one of your troop,
A hero in armor; no hall-thane he
Tricked out with weapons, unless looks belie him
And noble bearing. But now I must know
Your birth and breeding, nor may you come
In cunning stealth upon Danish soil.
You distant-dwellers, you far seafarers,
Hearken, and ponder words that are plain:
'Tis best you hasten to have me know
Who your kindred and whence you come."
The lord of the seamen gave swift reply,
The prince of the Weders unlocked his word-hoard:
"We are sprung of a strain of the Geatish stock,
Hygelac's comrades and hearth-companions.
My father was famous in many a folk-land,
A leader noble, Ecgtheow[14] his name! . . .
With loyal purpose we seek your lord,
The prince of your people, great Healfdene's son. . . .
You know if it's true, as we've heard it told,
That among the Scyldings some secret scather,
Some stealthy demon in dead of night,
With grisly horror and fiendish hate
Is spreading unheard-of havoc and death.
Mayhap I can counsel the good, old king
What way he can master the merciless fiend,
If his coil of evil is ever to end
And feverish care grow cooler and fade—
Or else ever after his doom shall be
Distress and sorrow while still there stands
This best of halls on its lofty height."
Then from the saddle the coast guard spoke,
The fearless sentry: "A seasoned warrior
Must know the difference between words and deeds,
If his wits are with him. I take your word
That your band is loyal to the lord of the Scyldings.
Now go your way with your weapons and armor,
And I will guide you; I'll give command
That my good retainers may guard your ship, . . ."
Then the Geats marched on; behind at her mooring,
Fastened at anchor, their broad-beamed boat
Safely rode on her swinging cable. —per 2
Boar-heads[15] glittered on glistening helmets
Above their cheek-guards, gleaming with gold;
Bright and fire-hardened the boar held watch
Over the column of marching men.
Onward they hurried in eager haste
Till their eyes caught sight of the high-built hall,
Splendid with gold, the seat of the king,
Most stately of structures under the sun;
Its light shone out over many a land.
The coast guard showed them the shining hall,
The home of heroes; made plain the path;
Turned his horse; gave tongue to words:
"It is time to leave you! The mighty Lord
In His mercy shield you and hold you safe
In your bold adventure. I'll back to the sea
And hold my watch against hostile horde."

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14. ***Ecgtheow***, (edj'thā ō).
15. ***Boar-heads***. Germanic tribesmen regularly used the boar's head as a magical decoration for their helmets. The boar, sacred to the Norse god Frey, is a desperate fighter when cornered.

Reader's Note

The Poetry of *Beowulf*

To celebrate Beowulf's victory over Grendel, one of Hrothgar's thanes steps forward,

> A minstrel mindful of saga and lay.
> He wove his words in a winsome pattern,
> Hymning the burden of Beowulf's feat,
> Clothing the story in skillful verse.

This is the way the Anglo-Saxon minstrel, or *scop*, composed poetry—spontaneously, in oral form, before an audience. The audience usually knew the story already and, as the poet says, the scop's art was to "clothe" it in "skillful verse," shaping the words and the details of the story to fit the occasion. The *Beowulf*-poet could read and write, but he worked in the traditions of this older oral poetry, as did the writers of the other Anglo-Saxon poetry that survives.

How were the scops able to stand in front of a crowd and compose acceptable poetry for hours at a time? First, they knew intimately a body of stories they had heard from earlier scops—the history and legends of their tribe. Probably they knew long passages of these earlier tellings by memory.

Second, they used a form of verse that is simple, direct, and relatively flexible, admirably fitted to oral composition. Printed above are a few lines from *Beowulf*[1] that serve to illustrate how Anglo-Saxon verse works. The symbol ð, called *edh* (eth), stands for the *th* sound.

Each line, as you can see, breaks in the middle. This pause is called a *caesura* (si zhůr'ə, si zyůr'ə). Thus each line of verse divides into two half-lines, the basic building-blocks of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Each half-line contains two stressed syllables and any number of unstressed syllables; thus there are four strong beats to each line. Note the absence of rhyming. In Anglo-Saxon poetry a different type of repetition is used—the repetition of initial sounds called *alliteration*. Normally, alliterating consonants appear in the stressed syllables, one or two in the first half-line, and one in the second. Vowels in this scheme can also alliterate. (Any vowel was considered as alliterating with any other.) Read a few lines aloud to yourself and you will begin to get a feel for its rhythm.

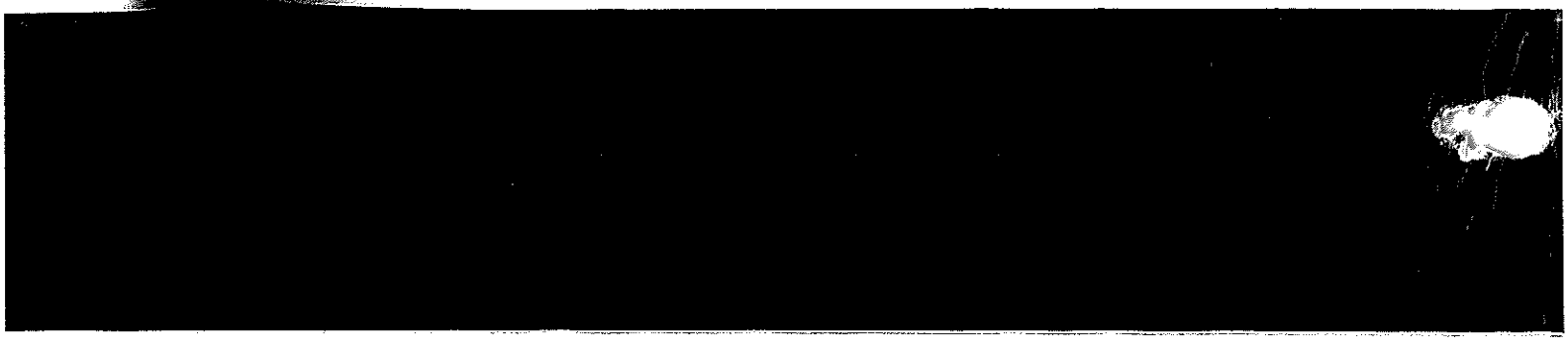
Alliterating words are in red.

Fyrst forð ġewāt; | flota wæs on ȳðum,
bāt under beorge. | Beornas ġearwe
on stefn stigon, — | strēamas wundon,
sund wið sande; | Half line
Caesura

Another device that helped the scop to compose on the spot was what Anglo-Saxons called a *word-hoard*, a great store of words to choose from. Their language was rich in synonyms: *beorn*, *freca*, and *wiga* all mean "warrior," but with different connotations, derived from their original meanings as terms for "bear," "wolf," and "fighter." In addition, the scops had developed a special vocabulary for poetry over the centuries, words and phrases that fit neatly together. Alternate forms were available to fit a particular context. For example, if the scop began a line with a stressed syllable starting with an *h* sound, he could say "on the sea" by the phrase *on hranrāde* ("on the whale-road"); whereas if he began with an *s* sound, he could use *on seglrāde* ("on the sail-road").

Most of the compound words used in *Beowulf*, like "shield-bearer," are easily understood. But sometimes a more farfetched, riddling kind of descriptive comparison appears, for instance in the phrase "candle of heaven" (line 1060), used to describe the sun. This is a *kenning*, two or more words that name something by a metaphor. There are many of them in Anglo-Saxon poetry: "whale-road" for ocean, "peace-weaver" for woman, "light of battle" for sword.

1. A literal translation is: "Time forth went; floater was on waves,/boat under cliff. Warriors eager/on prow climbed; streams eddied,/sea against sand . . ." See lines 145–148 in your text.



Beowulf's Welcome at Hrothgar's Court

The street had paving of colored stone;
The path was plain to the marching men.
Bright were their byrnies, hard and hand-linked;
In their shining armor the chain mail sang
As the troop in their war-gear tramped to the hall.
The sea-weary sailors set down their shields,
Their wide, bright bucklers along the wall,
And sank to the bench. Their byrnies rang.
Their stout spears stood in a stack together
Shod with iron and shaped of ash.
'Twas a well-armed troop! Then a stately warrior
Questioned the strangers about their kin:
"Whence come you bearing your burnished shields,
Your steel-gray harness and visored helms,
Your heap of spears? I am Hrothgar's herald,
His servant-thane. I have never seen strangers,
So great a number, of nobler mien.
Not exiles, I ween, but high-minded heroes
In greatness of heart have you sought out Hrothgar."
Then bold under helmet the hero made answer,
Mighty of heart: "We are Hygelac's men,
His board-companions; Beowulf is my name.
I will state my mission to Healfdene's son,
The noble leader, your lordly prince,
If he will grant approach to his gracious presence."
And Wulfgar answered, the Wendel prince,[16]
Renowned for merit in many a land,
For war-might and wisdom: "I will learn the wish
Of the Scylding leader, the lord of the Danes,
Our honored ruler and giver of rings,
Concerning your mission, and soon report
The answer our leader thinks good to give."
He swiftly strode to where Hrothgar sat
Old and gray with his earls[17] about him;
Crossed the floor and stood face to face
With the Danish king; he knew courtly custom.
Wulfgar saluted his lord and friend:
"Men from afar have fared to our land
Over ocean's margin—men of the Geats,
Their leader called Beowulf—seeking a boon,
The holding of parley, my prince, with thee.
O gracious Hrothgar, refuse not the favor!
In their splendid war-gear they merit well
The esteem of earls; he's a stalwart leader
Who led this troop to the land of the Danes."
Hrothgar spoke, the lord of the Scyldings:
"Their leader I knew when he still was a lad. . . .
Seafaring men who have voyaged to Geatland
With gifts of treasure as token of peace,
Say that his hand-grip has thirty men's strength.
God, in His mercy, has sent him to save us—
So springs my hope—from Grendel's assaults.
For his gallant courage I'll load him with gifts!
Make haste now, marshal the men to the hall,
And give them welcome to Danish ground."
Then to the door went the well-known warrior,
Spoke from the threshold welcoming words:
"The Danish leader, my lord, declares
That he knows your kinship; right welcome you come,
You stout sea-rovers, to Danish soil.
Enter now, in your shining armor
And vizored helmets, to Hrothgar's hall.
But leave your shields and the shafts of slaughter
To wait the issue and weighing of words."
Then the bold one rose with his band around him,

16. ***Wulfgar . . . the Wendel prince.*** Hrothgar's herald may have been one of the Vandals, a Germanic tribe living south of the Baltic Sea (see map, page 5).
17. ***earls,*** his chief men.

Viking ships are shown in this scene from the Bayeux Tapestry. circa 1077. *Museum of Queen Matilda, Bayeux, France*

A splendid massing of mighty thanes;
A few stood guard as the Geat gave bidding
Over the weapons stacked by the wall.
They followed in haste on the heels of their leader
Under Heorot's roof. Full ready and bold
The helmeted warrior strode to the hearth;
Beowulf spoke; his byrny glittered,
His war-net woven by cunning of smith:
"Hail! King Hrothgar! I am Hygelac's thane,
Hygelac's kinsman. Many a deed
Of honor and daring I've done in my youth.
This business of Grendel was brought to my ears
On my native soil. The seafarers say
This best of buildings, this boasted hall,
Stands dark and deserted when sun is set,
When darkening shadows gather with dusk.
The best of my people, prudent and brave,
Urged me, King Hrothgar, to seek you out;
They had in remembrance my courage and might.
Many had seen me come safe from the conflict,
Bloody from battle; five foes I bound
Of the giant kindred, and crushed their clan.
Hard-driven in danger and darkness of night
I slew the nicors[18] that swam the sea,
Avenged the woe they had caused the Weders,
And ended their evil—they needed the lesson!
And now with Grendel, the fearful fiend,
Single-handed I'll settle the strife!
Prince of the Danes, protector of Scyldings,
Lord of nations, and leader of men,
I beg one favor—refuse me not,
Since I come thus faring from far-off lands—
That I may alone with my loyal earls,
With this hardy company, cleanse Hart-Hall.
I have heard that the demon in proud disdain
Spurns all weapons; and I too scorn—
May Hygelac's heart have joy of the deed—
To bear my sword, or sheltering shield,
Or yellow buckler, to battle the fiend.
With hand-grip only I'll grapple with Grendel;
Foe against foe I'll fight to the death,
And the one who is taken must trust to God's grace! . . .
If death shall call me, he'll carry away
My gory flesh to his fen-retreat
To gorge at leisure and gulp me down,

18. *nicors*, water demons, animal in shape.

Soiling the marshes with stains of blood.
There'll be little need longer to care for my body!
If the battle slays me, to Hygelac send
This best of corselets that covers my breast, . . .
Finest of byrnies. Fate goes as Fate must!"
Hrothgar spoke, the lord of the Scyldings:
"Deed of daring and dream of honor
Bring you, friend Beowulf, knowing our need! . . .
It is sorrow sore to recite to another
The wrongs that Grendel has wrought in the hall,
His savage hatred and sudden assaults.
My war-troop is weakened, my hall-band is wasted;
Fate swept them away into Grendel's grip.
But God may easily bring to an end
The ruinous deeds of the ravaging foe.
Full often my warriors over their ale-cups
Boldly boasted, when drunk with beer,
They would bide in the beer-hall the coming of battle,
The fury of Grendel, with flashing swords.
Then in the dawn, when the daylight strengthened,
The hall stood reddened and reeking with gore,
Bench-boards wet with the blood of battle;
And I had the fewer of faithful fighters,
Beloved retainers, whom Death had taken.
Sit now at the banquet, unbend your mood,
Speak of great deeds as your heart may spur you!"
Then in the beer-hall were benches made ready
For the Geatish heroes. Noble of heart,
Proud and stalwart, they sat them down
And a beer-thane served them; bore in his hands
The patterned ale-cup, pouring the mead,
While the scop's sweet singing was heard in the hall.
There was joy of heroes, a host at ease,
A welcome meeting of Weder and Dane.

Unferth Taunts Beowulf

Then out spoke Unferth, Ecglaf's son,[19]
Who sat at the feet of the Scylding lord,
Picking a quarrel—for Beowulf's quest,
His bold sea-voyaging, irked him sore;
He bore it ill that any man other
In all the earth should ever achieve
More fame under heaven than he himself:
"Are you the Beowulf that strove with Breca[20]
In a swimming match in the open sea,
Both of you wantonly tempting the waves,
Risking your lives on the lonely deep
For a silly boast? No man could dissuade you,
Nor friend nor foe, from the foolhardy venture
Of ocean-swimming; with outstretched arms
You clasped the sea-stream, measured her streets,
With plowing shoulders parted the waves.
The sea-flood boiled with its wintry surges,
Seven nights you toiled in the tossing sea;
His strength was the greater, his swimming the stronger! . . .
Therefore, I ween, worse fate shall befall,
Stout as you are in the struggle of war,
In deeds of battle, if you dare to abide
Encounter with Grendel at coming of night."
Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow:
"My good friend Unferth, addled with beer
Much have you made of the deeds of Breca!
I count it true that I had more courage,
More strength in swimming than any other man.
In our youth we boasted—we were both of us boys—
We would risk our lives in the raging sea.
And we made it good! We gripped in our hands
Naked swords, as we swam in the waves,

19. ***Unferth, Ecglaf's*** (edj'lafs) ***son.*** Unferth's name can be interpreted as "Peacebreaker." His role is a familiar one in heroic poetry, that of the king's rude retainer whose mockery provokes the hero to reveal himself. Something very like the Unferth episode occurs in Book VIII of the *Odyssey*.

20. ***Breca*** (brek'ə).

Guarding us well from the whales' assault.
In the breaking seas he could not outstrip me,
Nor would I leave him. For five nights long
Side by side we strove in the waters
Till racing combers wrenched us apart,
Freezing squalls, and the falling night,
And a bitter north wind's icy blast.
Rough were the waves; the wrath of the sea-fish
Was fiercely roused; but my firm-linked byrny,
The gold-adorned corselet that covered my breast,
Gave firm defense from the clutching foe.
Down to the bottom a savage sea-beast
Fiercely dragged me and held me fast
In a deadly grip; none the less it was granted me
To pierce the monster with point of steel.
Death swept it away with the swing of my sword.
The grisly sea-beasts again and again
Beset me sore; but I served them home
With my faithful blade as was well-befitting.
They failed of their pleasure to feast their fill
Crowding round my corpse on the ocean-bottom!
Bloody with wounds, at the break of day,
They lay on the sea-bench slain with the sword.
No more would they cumber the mariner's course
On the ocean deep. From the east came the sun,
Bright beacon of God, and the seas subsided;
I beheld the headlands, the windy walls.
Fate often delivers an undoomed earl
If his spirit be gallant! And so I was granted
To slay with the sword-edge nine of the nicors.
I have never heard tell of more terrible strife
Under dome of heaven in darkness of night,
Nor of man harder pressed on the paths of ocean.
But I freed my life from the grip of the foe
Though spent with the struggle. The billows bore me,
The swirling currents and surging seas,
To the land of the Finns.[21] And little I've heard
Of any such valiant adventures from you!
Neither Breca nor you in the press of battle
Ever showed such daring with dripping swords—
Though I boast not of it! But you stained your blade
With blood of your brothers, your closest of kin;
And for that you'll endure damnation in hell,
Sharp as you are! I say for a truth,
Son of Ecglaf, never had Grendel
Wrought such havoc and woe in the hall,
That horrid demon so harried your king,
If your heart were as brave as you'd have men think!
But Grendel has found that he never need fear
Revenge from your people, or valiant attack
From the Victor-Scyldings; he takes his toll,
Sparing none of the Danish stock.
He slays and slaughters and works his will
Fearing no hurt at the hands of the Danes!
But soon will I show him the stuff of the Geats,
Their courage in battle and strength in the strife;
Then let him who may go bold to the mead-hall
When the next day dawns on the dwellings of men,
And the sun in splendor shines warm from the south."
Glad of heart was the giver of treasure,[22]
Hoary-headed and hardy in war;
The lordly leader had hope of help
As he listened to Beowulf's bold resolve.

21. ***Finns,*** probably the Lapps, inhabitants of Finmarken, around the North Cape in the northern extremity of Norway and considerably above the Arctic Circle.
22. ***giver of treasure,*** Hrothgar.

There was revel of heroes and high carouse,
Their speech was happy; and Hrothgar's queen,
Of gentle manners, in jewelled splendor
Gave courtly greeting to all the guests. . . .

Beowulf Slays Grendel

In the hall as of old were brave words spoken,
There was noise of revel; happy the host
Till the son of Healfdene would go to his rest.
He knew that the monster would meet in the hall
Relentless struggle when light of the sun
Was dusky with gloom of the gathering night,
And shadow-shapes crept in the covering dark,
Dim under heaven. The host arose.
Hrothgar graciously greeted his guest,
Gave rule of the wine-hall, and wished him well,
Praised the warrior in parting words:
"Never to any man, early or late,
Since first I could brandish buckler and sword,
Have I trusted this ale-hall save only to you!
Be mindful of glory, show forth your strength,
Keep watch against foe! No wish of your heart
Shall go unfulfilled if you live through the fight."
Then Hrothgar withdrew with his host of retainers, . . .
The Geatish hero put all his hope
In his fearless might and the mercy of God!
He stripped from his shoulders the byrny of steel,
Doffed helmet from head; into hand of thane
Gave inlaid iron, the best of blades;
Bade him keep well the weapons of war.
Beowulf uttered a gallant boast,
The stalwart Geat, ere he sought his bed:
"I count myself nowise weaker in war
Or grapple of battle than Grendel himself.
Therefore I scorn to slay him with sword,
Deal deadly wound, as I well might do!
Nothing he knows of a noble fighting,
Of thrusting and hewing and hacking of shield,
Fierce as he is in the fury of war.
In the shades of darkness we'll spurn the sword
If he dares without weapon to do or to die.
And God in His wisdom shall glory assign,
The ruling Lord, as He deems it right."
Then the bold in battle bowed down to his rest,
Cheek pressed pillow; the peerless thanes
Were stretched in slumber around their lord.
Not one had hope of return to his home,
To the stronghold or land where he lived as a boy.
For they knew how death had befallen the Danes,
How many were slain as they slept in the wine-hall. . . .
Then through the shades of enshrouding night
The fiend came stealing; the archers slept
Whose duty was holding the horn-decked hall—
Though one was watching—full well they knew
No evil demon could drag them down
To shades under ground if God were not willing.
But the hero watched awaiting the foe,
Abiding in anger the issue of war.
From the stretching moors, from the misty hollows,
Grendel came creeping, accursed of God,
A murderous ravager minded to snare
Spoil of heroes in high-built hall.
Under clouded heavens he held his way
Till there rose before him the high-roofed house,
Wine-hall of warriors gleaming with gold.

Nor was it the first of his fierce assaults
On the home of Hrothgar; but never before
Had he found worse fate or hardier hall-thanes!
Storming the building he burst the portal,
Though fastened of iron, with fiendish strength;
Forced open the entrance in savage fury
And rushed in rage o'er the shining floor.
A baleful glare from his eyes was gleaming
Most like to a flame. He found in the hall
Many a warrior sealed in slumber,
A host of kinsmen. His heart rejoiced;
The savage monster was minded to sever
Lives from bodies ere break of day,
To feast his fill of the flesh of men.
But he was not fated to glut his greed
With more of mankind when the night was ended!
The hardy kinsman of Hygelac waited
To see how the monster would make his attack.
The demon delayed not, but quickly clutched
A sleeping thane in his swift assault,
Tore him in pieces, bit through the bones,
Gulped the blood, and gobbled the flesh,
Greedily gorged on the lifeless corpse,
The hands and the feet. Then the fiend stepped nearer,
Sprang on the Sea-Geat lying outstretched,
Clasping him close with his monstrous claw.
But Beowulf grappled and gripped him hard,
Struggled up on his elbow; the shepherd of sins
Soon found that never before had he felt
In any man other in all the earth
A mightier hand-grip; his mood was humbled,
His courage fled; but he found no escape!
He was fain to be gone; he would flee to the darkness,
The fellowship of devils. Far different his fate
From that which befell him in former days!
The hardy hero, Hygelac's kinsman,
Remembered the boast he had made at the banquet;
He sprang to his feet, clutched Grendel fast,
Though fingers were cracking, the fiend pulling free.
The earl pressed after; the monster was minded
To win his freedom and flee to the fens.
He knew that his fingers were fast in the grip
Of a savage foe. Sorry the venture,
The raid that the ravager made on the hall.
There was din in Heorot. For all the Danes,
The city-dwellers, the stalwart Scyldings,
That was a bitter spilling of beer!
The walls resounded, the fight was fierce,
Savage the strife as the warriors struggled.
The wonder was that the lofty wine-hall
Withstood the struggle, nor crashed to earth,
The house so fair; it was firmly fastened
Within and without with iron bands
Cunningly smithied; though men have said
That many a mead-bench gleaming with gold
Sprang from its sill as the warriors strove.
The Scylding wise men had never weened
That any ravage could wreck the building,
Firmly fashioned and finished with bone,
Or any cunning compass its fall,
Till the time when the swelter and surge of fire
Should swallow it up in a swirl of flame.[23]
Continuous tumult filled the hall;
A terror fell on the Danish folk
As they heard through the wall the horrible wailing,
The groans of Grendel, the foe of God
Howling his hideous hymn of pain,
The hell-thane shrieking in sore defeat.
He was fast in the grip of the man who was greatest
Of mortal men in the strength of his might,
Who would never rest while the wretch was living,

23. *swirl of flame.* This is one of a number of references in the poem to the later burning of Heorot.

Counting his life-days a menace to man.
Many an earl of Beowulf brandished
His ancient iron to guard his lord,
To shelter safely the peerless prince.
They had no knowledge, those daring thanes,
When they drew their weapons to hack and hew,
To thrust to the heart, that the sharpest sword,
The choicest iron in all the world,
Could work no harm to the hideous foe.
On every sword he had laid a spell,
On every blade; but a bitter death
Was to be his fate; far was the journey
The monster made to the home of fiends.
Then he who had wrought such wrong to men,
With grim delight as he warred with God,
Soon found that his strength was feeble and failing
In the crushing hold of Hygelac's thane.
Each loathed the other while life should last!
There Grendel suffered a grievous hurt,
A wound in the shoulder, gaping and wide;
Sinews snapped and bone-joints broke,
And Beowulf gained the glory of battle.
Grendel, fated, fled to the fens,
To his joyless dwelling, sick unto death.
He knew in his heart that his hours were numbered,
His days at an end. For all the Danes
Their wish was fulfilled in the fall of Grendel.
The stranger from far, the stalwart and strong,
Had purged of evil the hall of Hrothgar,
And cleansed of crime; the heart of the hero
Joyed in the deed his daring had done.
The lord of the Geats made good to the East-Danes
The boast he had uttered; he ended their ill,
And all the sorrow they suffered long
And needs must suffer—a foul offense.
The token was clear when the bold in battle
Laid down the shoulder and dripping claw—
Grendel's arm—in the gabled hall!

The Joy of the Danes

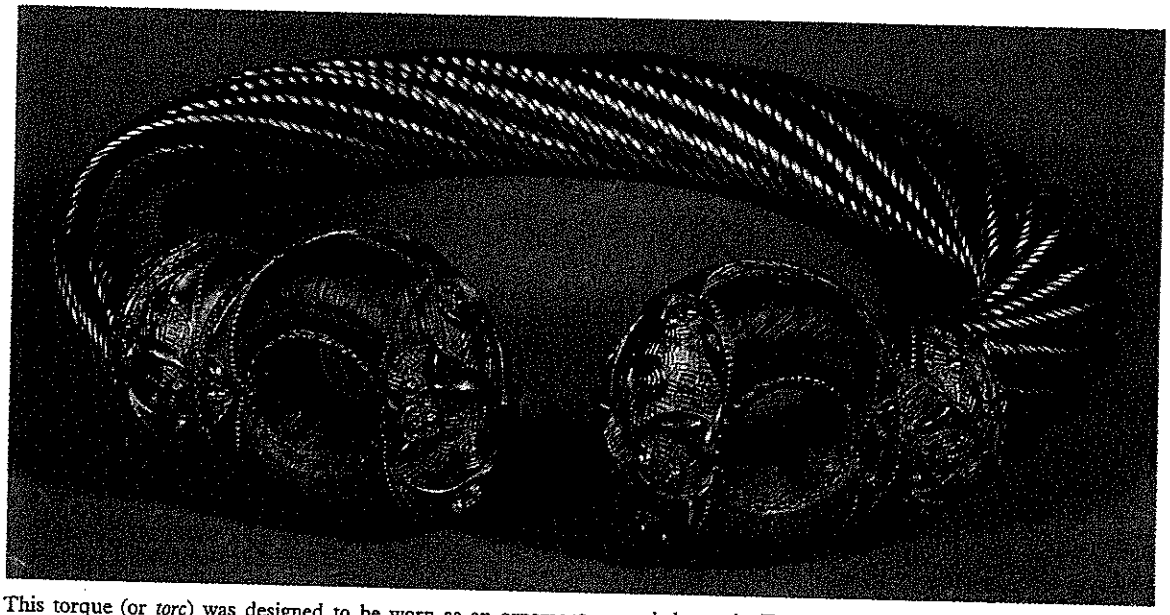
When morning came, as they tell the tale,
Many a warrior hastened to hall,
Folk-leaders faring from far and near
Over wide-running ways, to gaze at the wonder,
The trail of the demon. Nor seemed his death
A matter of sorrow to any man
Who viewed the tracks of the vanquished monster
As he slunk weary-hearted away from the hall,
Doomed and defeated and marking his flight
With bloody prints to the nicors' pool.
The crimson currents bubbled and heaved
In eddying reaches reddened with gore;
The surges boiled with the fiery blood.
But the monster had sunk from the sight of men.
In that fenny covert the cursed fiend
Not long thereafter laid down his life,
His heathen spirit; and hell received him.
Then all the comrades, the old and young,
The brave of heart, in a blithesome band
Came riding their horses home from the mere.
Beowulf's prowess was praised in song;
And many men stated that south or north,
Over all the world, or between the seas,
Or under the heaven, no hero was greater.
Then spoke Hrothgar; hasting to hall
He stood at the steps, stared up at the roof
High and gold-gleaming; saw Grendel's hand:
"Thanks be to God for this glorious sight!
I have suffered much evil, much outrage from Grendel,
But the God of glory works wonder on wonder.
I had no hope of a haven from sorrow
While this best of houses stood badged with blood,
A woe far-reaching for all the wise
Who weened that they never could hold the hall

Against the assaults of devils and demons.
But now with God's help this hero has compassed
A deed our cunning could no way contrive.
I will keep you, Beowulf, close to my heart
In firm affection; as son to father
Hold fast henceforth to this foster-kinship.
You shall know not want of treasure or wealth
Or goodly gift that your wish may crave,
While I have power. For poorer deeds
I have granted guerdon,[24] and graced with honor
Weaker warriors, feebler in fight.
You have done such deeds that your fame shall flourish
Through all the ages! God grant you still
All goodly grace as He gave before."
Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow:
"By favor of God we won the fight,
Did the deed of valor, and boldly dared
The might of the monster. I would you could see
The fiend himself lying dead before you!
I thought to grip him in stubborn grasp
And bind him down on the bed of death,
There to lie straining in struggle for life,
While I gripped him fast lest he vanish away.
But I might not hold him or hinder his going
For God did not grant it, my fingers failed.
Too savage the strain of his fiendish strength!
To save his life he left shoulder and claw,
The arm of the monster, to mark his track,
But he bought no comfort; no whit thereby
Shall the wretched ravager racked with sin,
The loathsome spoiler, prolong his life.
A deep wound holds him in deadly grip,
In baleful bondage; and black with crime
The demon shall wait for the day of doom
When the God of glory shall give decree."
Then slower of speech was the son of Ecglaf,
More wary of boasting of warlike deeds,
While the nobles gazed at the grisly claw,
The fiend's hand fastened by hero's might
On the lofty roof. Most like to steel
Were the hardened nails, the heathen's hand-spurs,
Horrible, monstrous; and many men said
No tempered sword, no excellent iron,
Could have harmed the monster or hacked away
The demon's battle-claw dripping with blood.

The Feast

In joyful haste was Heorot decked
And a willing host of women and men
Gaily dressed and adorned the guest-hall.
Splendid hangings with sheen of gold
Shone on the walls, a glorious sight
To eyes that delight to behold such wonders.
The shining building was wholly shattered
Though braced and fastened with iron bands;
Hinges were riven; the roof alone
Remained unharmed when the horrid monster,
Foul with evil, slunk off in flight. . . .
Soon was the time when the son of Healfdene
Went to the wine-hall; he fain would join
With happy heart in the joy of feasting.
I never have heard of a mightier muster
Of proud retainers around their prince. . . .
Upon Beowulf, then, as a token of triumph,
Hrothgar bestowed a standard of gold,
A banner embroidered, a byrny and helm.
In sight of many, a costly sword
Before the hero was borne on high; . . .
On the crest of the helmet a crowning wreath,
Woven of wire-work, warded the head
Lest tempered swordblade, sharp from the file,
Deal deadly wound when the shielded warrior
Went forth to battle against the foe.
Eight horses also with plated headstalls
The lord of heroes bade lead into hall;

24. *guerdon* (gėrd'n), reward.



This torque (or *torc*) was designed to be worn as an ornament around the neck. Found at Snettisham, in Norfolk, it is fashioned from electrum, an alloy of gold and silver. 1st century B.C. *British Museum.*

On one was a saddle skillfully fashioned
And set with jewels, the battle-seat
Of the king himself, when the son of Healfdene
Would fain take part in the play of swords;
Never in fray had his valor failed,
His kingly courage, when corpses were falling. . . .
Then on the ale-bench to each of the earls
Who embarked with Beowulf, sailing the sea-paths,
The lord of princes dealt ancient heirlooms,
Gift of treasure, and guerdon of gold
To requite his slaughter whom Grendel slew,
As he would have slain others, but all-wise God
And the hero's courage had conquered Fate. . . .
Stewards poured wine from wondrous vessels;
And Wealhtheow,[25] wearing a golden crown,
Came forth in state where the two were sitting,
Courteous comrades, uncle and nephew,[26]
Each true to the other in ties of peace. . . .
Wealhtheow spoke to the warrior host:
"Take, dear Beowulf, collar and corselet,
Wear these treasures with right good will!
Thrive and prosper and prove your might!
Befriend my boys with your kindly counsel;
I will remember and I will repay.
You have earned the undying honor of heroes
In regions reaching as far and wide
As the windy walls that the sea encircles.
May Fate show favor while life shall last!
I wish you wealth to your heart's content;
In your days of glory be good to my sons!
Here each hero is true to other,
Gentle of spirit, loyal to lord,
Friendly thanes and a folk united,
Wine-cheered warriors who do my will."
Then she went to her seat. . . .

25. ***Wealhtheow*** (wā'al thā ō), Hrothgar's wife, the queen of the Danes.
26. ***uncle and nephew,*** Hrothgar and Hrothulf, the son of Hrothgar's younger brother Halga.

THINK AND DISCUSS

Understanding

1. Explain the process by which Hrothgar wins power and fame.
2. What kind of monster is Grendel? Describe his appearance, the way he lives, and his methods of attack.
3. Before Beowulf fights Grendel, he defeats Unferth in a battle of words (lines 406–472). What arguments does he use?
4. Why does Beowulf insist upon fighting Grendel without weapons? How does he kill the monster?
5. In what ways does Hrothgar reward Beowulf?

Analyzing

6. What achievements of Hrothgar and Beowulf does the poet choose to describe? What do his choices tell you about what matters most to people in his society?
7. What are Beowulf's motives in aiding Hrothgar? Explain how they suggest an Anglo-Saxon idea of heroism.

Extending

8. Beowulf repeatedly makes the kind of speech that the poet calls "a gallant boast" (line 505). How does his audience respond? How do you respond?
9. Is Grendel evil? Explain your answer.

APPLYING: Alliteration

See Handbook of Literary Terms, p. 926

Alliteration is the repetition of sounds, usually consonants, at the beginning of words or accented syllables:

Their *s*tout *s*pears *s*tood in a *s*tack together.

In Anglo-Saxon verse, alliteration is used rather than rhyme to provide verbal music and to underscore rhythms.

1. Which words alliterate in lines 629–632? in lines 659–662?
2. Read these two examples aloud, putting most stress on the syllables that alliterate. How many beats do you hear in each line?

COMPOSITION

Writing an Anglo-Saxon Letter

Imagine that you are a thane in Hrothgar's court on a night when Grendel attacks. Write a letter to a distant friend about what happens. Begin by looking over the first part of *Beowulf* for ideas or details. Brainstorm for other details to make your narrative interesting. Plan your letter to run at least four paragraphs. In the first you might describe the mead-hall during the evening meal. In the second explain how you feel as you prepare for sleep. In the third narrate, from your point of view, what happens when Grendel attacks. In your final paragraph, tell of your reactions the next morning.

Explaining Beowulf's Motives

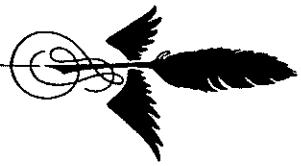
Explain to someone who has not read the poem why Beowulf would risk a hazardous ocean voyage to battle an unknown beast for a distant king. In outlining your paper, plan for at least three paragraphs, one each devoted to Beowulf's ideas about honor, fame, and courage. Scan his speeches in the first part of the poem to find what he has to say about these values, and use short quotations from the text to illustrate your explanation. See "The Writing Process" in the Composition Handbook.

ENRICHMENT

Researching a Reference

Look up the original story of Cain and Abel in a Bible (Genesis 4:1–16). Read it aloud to your classmates, and then as a group discuss why the *Beowulf*-poet calls Grendel "the seed of Cain" in line 65. Be sure to consider where Grendel lives, how he treats others, and how they deal with him.

Reader's Note



Translating *Beowulf*

At first glance, most modern readers of English would think that a passage from *Beowulf*, like that below, is in a foreign language. A closer look, however, suggests something a little different. In the first line is the word *lond*, in the second *wulf*, in the third *strēam*. A little guesswork will suggest modern English equivalents for these words. The lines below are translated by Charles Kennedy on page 29 (lines 868–884). Four other translations of this same passage appear on page 27. Notice how these five translations differ.

Hīe dȳgel lond
warigeað, wulf-hleoþu, windige næssas,
frēcne fen-gelād, ðǣr fyrgen-strēam
under næssa genipu niþer gewīteð,
flōd under foldan. Nis þæt feor heonon
mīl-gemearces, þæt se mere stan[*d*]eð
ofer þǣm hongiað hrinde bearwas,
wudu wyrtum fæst wæter oferhelmað.
Þǣr mæg nihta gehwæm nīð-wundor sēon,
fȳr on flōde. Nō þæs frōd leofað
gumena bearna þæt þone grund wite.
Đēah þe hǣð-stapa hundum geswenced,
heorot hornum trum holt-wudu sēce,
feorran geflȳmed, ǣr hē feorh seleð,
aldor on ōfre, ǣr hē in wille,
hafelan [*hȳdan*]. Nis þæt hēoru stōw!

In line 12 of the Anglo-Saxon, the poet uses the kenning *hæ -stapa* to describe a male deer. Both Spaeth and Kennedy choose a very literal, only slightly modernized version of the original words: "heather-stepper." Crossley-Holland uses a slightly different form: "moor-stalker." These odd phrases can puzzle some readers, so to make it easier Alexander stretches the kenning out until it becomes a whole image: "The hart that roams the heath . . ." Now its meaning may be clearer, but the translation doesn't sound very much like the original. Raffel avoids the difficulty, and the poetic force, of the kenning altogether—in his version it becomes just "A deer."

At the beginning of line 10 in the Anglo-Saxon is the phrase *fȳr on flōde*, part of a description of the frightful lake where Grendel and his mother live. The word *on* can be translated in various ways, and so, depending upon whose translation you turn to, the fire is "beneath" (Spaeth), "in" (Kennedy and Alexander), or "on" (Crossley-Holland) the water. Again Raffel ingeniously turns to a different solution: "At night that lake/Burns like a torch."

As the irregular line lengths suggest, all these translators try not only to convey the ideas, but also the quality of the poetry in *Beowulf*. While you may not be able to understand the third line of the Anglo-Saxon here, it is easy enough to notice the alliteration created by the repeated initial *f* sound, as well as the caesura, the gap in the middle of the line that indicates a pause. Now the question is, can the translators somehow imitate these sounds and rhythms in a form the modern reader can understand? Alexander's translation is very close to the order and the literal meaning of the original words: "and treacherous fen-paths: a torrent of water." There are four *t* sounds here, but only two in stressed syllables. There is alliteration, then, but it is not very pronounced. Spaeth employs a different solution, intertwining the repetition of the *m* and *s* sounds: "Ledges of mist, where mountain torrents . . ."

Every good translation makes a statement of some kind about the text it translates. For example, when Raffel uses a plain word like "deer" he emphasizes fact and action; when Kennedy uses "hart" he suggests a more elevated and remote world. Spaeth's "To die on the brink ere he brave the plunge" is certainly different from Alexander's "will die there/ sooner than swim"; the one echoes an older tradition of poetic speech, while the other sounds almost like slang.

translated by **J. Duncan Spaeth** (1921)

Lonely and waste is the land they inhabit,
Wolf-cliffs wild and windy headlands,
Ledges of mist, where mountain torrents
Downward plunge to dark abysses,
And flow unseen. Not far from here
O'er the moorland in miles, a mere expands.
Spray-frosted trees o'erspread it, and hang
O'er the water with roots fast wedged in the rocks.
There nightly is seen, beneath the flood,
A marvelous light. There lives not the man
Has fathomed the depth of the dismal mere.
Though the heather-stepper, the strong-horned stag,
Seek this cover, forspent with the chase,
Tracked by the hounds, he will turn at bay,
To die on the brink ere he brave the plunge,
Hide his head in the haunted pool.

translated by **Kevin Crossley-Holland** (1968)

. . . These two live
in a little-known country, wolf-slopes, windswept headlands,
perilous paths across the boggy moors, where a mountain stream
plunges under the mist-covered cliffs,
rushes through a fissure. It is not far from here,
if measured in miles, that the lake stands
shadowed by trees stiff with hoar-frost.
A wood, firmly-rooted, frowns over the water.
There, night after night, a fearful wonder may be seen—
fire on the water; no man alive
is so wise as to know the nature of its depths.
Although the moor-stalker, the stag with strong horns,
when harried by hounds will make for the wood,
pursued from afar, he will succumb
to the hounds on the brink, rather than plunge in
and save his head. That is not a pleasant place.

From *Old English Poetry*, translated by J. Duncan Spaeth. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1921.
Excerpt from *Beowulf*, translated by Kevin Crossley-Holland. Translation copyright © 1968 by Kevin Crossley-Holland. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc. and Deborah Rogers Ltd. Literary Agency.

translated by **Burton Raffel** (1963)

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!

translated by **Michael Alexander** (1973)

Mysterious is the region
they live in—of wolf-fells, wind-picked moors
and treacherous fen-paths: a torrent of water
pours down dark cliffs and plunges into the earth,
an underground flood. It is not far from here,
in terms of miles, that the Mere lies,
overcast with dark, crag-rooted trees
that hang in groves hoary with frost.
An uncanny sight may be seen at night there
—the fire in the water! The wit of living men
is not enough to know its bottom.
The hart that roams the heath, when hounds have pressed him
long and hard, may hide in the forest
his antlered head; but the hart will die there
sooner than swim and save his life;
he will sell it on the brink there, for it is not a safe place.

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See METAPHOR in the Handbook of Literary Terms, page 906.

The Troll-Wife Avenges Grendel

. . . At the fairest of feasts
Men drank of the wine-cup, knowing not Fate,
Nor the fearful doom that befell the earls
When darkness gathered, and gracious Hrothgar
Sought his dwelling and sank to rest.
A host of heroes guarded the hall
As they oft had done in the days of old.
They stripped the benches and spread the floor
With beds and bolsters. But one of the beer-thanes
Bowed to his hall-rest doomed to death.
They set at their heads their shining shields,
Their battle-bucklers; and there on the bench
Above each hero his towering helmet,
His spear and corselet hung close at hand.
It was ever their wont to be ready for war
At home or in field, as it ever befell
That their lord had need. 'Twas a noble race!
Then they sank to slumber. But one paid dear
For his evening rest, as had often happened
When Grendel haunted the lordly hall
And wrought such ruin, till his end was come,
Death for his sins; it was easily seen,
Though the monster was slain, an avenger survived
Prolonging the feud, though the fiend had perished.
The mother of Grendel, a monstrous hag,
Brooded over her misery, doomed to dwell
In evil waters and icy streams. . . .
But rabid and raging his mother resolved
On a dreadful revenge for the death of her son!
She stole to the hall where the Danes were sleeping,
And horror fell on the host of earls
When the dam[1] of Grendel burst in the door.
But the terror was less as the war-craft is weaker,
A woman's strength, than the might of a man . . .
As soon as discovered, the hag was in haste
To fly to the open, to flee for her life.
One of the warriors she swiftly seized,
Clutched him fast and made off to the fens.
He was of heroes the dearest to Hrothgar,
The best of comrades between two seas;
The warrior brave, the stouthearted spearman,
She slew in his sleep. Nor was Beowulf there;
But after the banquet another abode
Had been assigned to the glorious Geat.
There was tumult in Heorot. She tore from its place
The bloodstained claw. Care was renewed!
It was no good bargain when both in turn
Must pay the price with the lives of friends!
Then the white-haired warrior, the aged king,
Was numb with sorrow, knowing his thane
No longer was living, his dearest man dead.
Beowulf, the brave, was speedily summoned.
. . .
The hero came tramping into the hall
With his chosen band—the boards resounded—
Greeted the leader, the Ingwine[2] lord,
And asked if the night had been peaceful and pleasant.

1. *dam,* mother.
2. *Ingwine* (ing'wi nə), literally, "friends of Ing," an epithet for the Danes. Ing was an epithet of the Norse god Frey.

Hrothgar spoke, the lord of the Scyldings:
"Ask not of pleasure; pain is renewed
For the Danish people. Æschere[3] is
dead! . . .
He was my comrade, closest of counsellors,
My shoulder-companion as side by side
We fought for our lives in the welter of war,
In the shock of battle when boar-helms
crashed.
As an earl should be, a prince without peer,
Such was Æschere, slain in the hall
By the wandering demon! I know not
whither
She fled to shelter, proud of her spoil,
Gorged to the full. She avenged the
feud. . . .
Oft in the hall I have heard my people,
Comrades and counsellors, telling a tale
Of evil spirits their eyes have sighted,
Two mighty marauders who haunt the
moors.
One shape, as clearly as men could see,
Seemed woman's likeness, and one seemed
man,
An outcast wretch of another world,
And huger far than a human form.
Grendel my countrymen called him, not
knowing
What monster-brood spawned him, what
sire begot.
Wild and lonely the land they live in,
Windswept ridges and wolf-retreats,
Dread tracts of fen where the falling torrent
Downward dips into gloom and shadow
Under the dusk of the darkening cliff.
Not far in miles lies the lonely mere
Where trees firm-rooted and hung with frost
Overshroud the wave with shadowing
gloom.
And there a portent appears each night,
A flame in the water; no man so wise
Who knows the bound of its bottomless
depth.
The heather-stepper, the horned stag,
The antlered hart hard driven by hounds,
Invading that forest in flight from afar
Will turn at bay and die on the brink
Ere ever he'll plunge in that haunted pool.
'Tis an eerie spot! Its tossing spray
Mounts dark to heaven when high winds stir
The driving storm, and the sky is murky,
And with foul weather the heavens weep.
On your arm only rests all our hope!
Not yet have you tempted those terrible
reaches,
The region that shelters that sinful wight.
Go if you dare! I will give requital
With ancient treasure and twisted gold,
As I formerly gave in guerdon of battle,
If out of that combat you come alive."
Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow:
"Sorrow not, brave one! Better for man
To avenge a friend than much to mourn.
All men must die; let him who may
Win glory ere death. That guerdon is best
For the noble man when his name survives
him.
Then let us rise up, O ward of the realm,
And haste us forth to behold the track
Of Grendel's dam. And I give you pledge
She shall not in safety escape to cover,
To earthy cavern, or forest fastness,
Or gulf of ocean, go where she may.
This day with patience endure the burden
Of every woe, as I know you will."
Up sprang the ancient, gave thanks to God
For the heartening words the hero had
spoken.

Beowulf Slays the Troll-Wife

Quickly a horse was bridled for Hrothgar,
A mettlesome charger with braided mane;
In royal splendor the king rode forth
Mid the trampling tread of a troop of
shieldmen.
The tracks lay clear where the fiend had
fared
Over plain and bottom and woodland path,

3. *Æschere* (ash'her ə).

Through murky moorland making her way
With the lifeless body, the best of thanes
Who of old with Hrothgar had guarded the hall.
By a narrow path the king pressed on.
Through rocky upland and rugged ravine,
A lonely journey, past looming headlands,
The lair of monster and lurking troll.
Tried retainers, a trusty few,
Advanced with Hrothgar to view the ground.
Sudden they came on a dismal covert
Of trees that hung over hoary stone,
Over churning water and bloodstained wave.
Then for the Danes was the woe the deeper,
The sorrow sharper for Scylding earls,
When they first caught sight, on the rocky sea-cliff,
Of slaughtered Æschere's severed head.
The water boiled in a bloody swirling
With seething gore as the spearmen gazed.
The trumpet sounded a martial strain;
The shield-troop halted. Their eyes beheld
The swimming forms of strange sea-dragons,
Dim serpent shapes in the watery depths,
Sea-beasts sunning on headland slopes;
Snakelike monsters that oft at sunrise
On evil errands scour the sea.
Startled by tumult and trumpet's blare,
Enraged and savage, they swam away;
But one the lord of the Geats brought low,
Stripped of his sea-strength, despoiled of life,
As the bitter bow-bolt pierced his heart.
His watery-speed grew slower, and ceased,
And he floated, caught in the clutch of death.
Then they hauled him in with sharp-hooked boar-spears,
By sheer strength grappled and dragged him ashore,
A wondrous wave-beast; and all the array
Gathered to gaze at the grisly guest.
Beowulf donned his armor for battle,
Heeded not danger; the hand-braided byrny,
Broad of shoulder and richly bedecked,
Must stand the ordeal of the watery depths.
Well could that corselet defend the frame
Lest hostile thrust should pierce to the heart.
Or blows of battle beat down the life.
A gleaming helmet guarded his head
As he planned his plunge to the depths of the pool
Through the heaving waters—a helm adorned
With lavish inlay and lordly chains,
Ancient work of the weapon-smith
Skillfully fashioned, beset with the boar,
That no blade of battle might bite it through.
Not the least or the worst of his war-equipment
Was the sword the herald of Hrothgar loaned
In his hour of need—Hrunting[4] its name—
An ancient heirloom, trusty and tried;
Its blade was iron, with etched design,
Tempered in blood of many a battle.
Never in fight had it failed the hand
That drew it daring the perils of war,
The rush of the foe. Not the first time then
That its edge must venture on valiant deeds. . . .
Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow:
"O gracious ruler, gold-giver to men,
As I now set forth to attempt this feat,
Great son of Healfdene, hold well in mind
The solemn pledge we plighted of old,
That if doing your service I meet my death
You will mark my fall with a father's love.
Protect my kinsmen, my trusty comrades,
If battle take me. And all the treasure
You have heaped on me bestow upon Hygelac. . . ."
After these words the prince of the Weders
Awaited no answer, but turned to the task,
Straightway plunged in the swirling pool.
Nigh unto a day he endured the depths
Ere he first had view of the vast sea-bottom.
Soon she found, who had haunted the flood,
A ravening hag, for a hundred half-years,
Greedy and grim, that a man was groping

4. ***herald of Hrothgar . . . Hrunting*** (hrün'ting). Hrothgar's herald here is Unferth, now reconciled to Beowulf. *Hrunting* may mean "Thruster."

In daring search through the sea-troll's home.
Swift she grappled and grasped the warrior
With horrid grip, but could work no harm,
No hurt to his body; the ring-locked byrny
Cloaked his life from her clutching claw;
Nor could she tear through the tempered mail
With her savage fingers. The she-wolf bore
The ring-prince down through the watery depths
To her den at the bottom; nor could Beowulf draw
His blade for battle, though brave his mood.
Many a sea-beast, strange sea-monsters,
Tasked him hard with their menacing tusks,
Broke his byrny and smote him sore.
Then he found himself in a fearsome hall
Where water came not to work him hurt,
But the flood was stayed by the sheltering roof.
There in the glow of firelight gleaming
The hero had view of the huge sea-troll.
He swung his war-sword with all his strength,
Withheld not the blow, and the savage blade
Sang on her head its hymn of hate.
But the bold one found that the battle-flasher
Would bite no longer, nor harm her life.
The sword-edge failed at his sorest need.
Often of old with ease it had suffered
The clash of battle, cleaving the helm,
The fated warrior's woven mail.
That time was first for the treasured blade
That its glory failed in the press of the fray.
But fixed of purpose and firm of mood
Hygelac's earl was mindful of honor;
In wrath, undaunted, he dashed to earth
The jewelled sword with its scrolled design,
The blade of steel; staked all on strength,
On the might of his hand, as a man must do
Who thinks to win in the welter of battle
Enduring glory; he fears not death.
The Geat-prince joyed in the straining struggle,
Stalwart-hearted and stirred to wrath,
Gripped the shoulder of Grendel's dam
And headlong hurled the hag to the ground.
But she quickly clutched him and drew him close,
Countered the onset with savage claw.
The warrior staggered, for all his strength,
Dismayed and shaken and borne to earth.
She knelt upon him and drew her dagger,
With broad bright blade, to avenge her son,
Her only issue. But the corselet's steel
Shielded his breast and sheltered his life
Withstanding entrance of point and edge. . . .
Swift the hero sprang to his feet;
Saw mid the war-gear a stately sword,
An ancient war-brand of biting edge,
Choicest of weapons worthy and strong,
The work of giants, a warrior's joy,
So heavy no hand but his own could hold it,
Bear to battle or wield in war.
Then the Scylding warrior, savage and grim,
Seized the ring-hilt and swung the sword,
Struck with fury, despairing of life,
Thrust at the throat, broke through the bone-rings;
The stout blade stabbed through her fated flesh.
She sank in death; the sword was bloody;
The hero joyed in the work of his hand.
The gleaming radiance shimmered and shone
As the candle of heaven shines clear from the sky.
Wrathful and resolute Hygelac's thane
Surveyed the span of the spacious hall;
Grimly gripping the hilted sword
With upraised weapon he turned to the wall. . . .
And there before him bereft of life
He saw the broken body of Grendel
Stilled in battle, and stretched in death,
As the struggle in Heorot smote him down.
The corpse sprang wide as he struck the blow,
The hard sword-stroke that severed the head.

Then the tried retainers, who there with Hrothgar
Watched the face of the foaming pool,
Saw that the churning reaches were reddened,
The eddying surges stained with blood.
And the gray, old spearmen spoke of the hero,
Having no hope he would ever return
Crowned with triumph and cheered with spoil.
Many were sure that the savage sea-wolf
Had slain their leader. At last came noon.
The stalwart Scyldings forsook the headland;
Their proud gold-giver departed home.
But the Geats sat grieving and sick in spirit,
Stared at the water with longing eyes,
Having no hope they would ever behold
Their gracious leader and lord again.
Then the great sword, eaten with blood of battle,
Began to soften and waste away
In iron icicles, wonder of wonders,
Melting away most like to ice
When the Father looses the fetters of frost,
Slackens the bondage that binds the wave,
Strong in power of times and seasons;
He is true God! Of the goodly treasures
From the sea-cave Beowulf took but two,
The monster's head and the precious hilt
Blazing with gems; but the blade had melted,
The sword dissolved, in the deadly heat,
The venomous blood of the fallen fiend. . . .

Beowulf Returns to Heorot

With sturdy strokes the lord of the seamen
To land came swimming, rejoiced in his spoil,
Had joy of the burden he brought from the depths.
And his mighty thanes came forward to meet him,
Gave thanks to God they were granted to see
Their well-loved leader both sound and safe.
From the stalwart hero his helmet and byrny
Were quickly loosened; the lake lay still,
Its motionless reaches reddened with blood. . . .
From the sea-cliff's brim the warriors bore
The head of Grendel, with heavy toil;
Four of the stoutest, with all their strength,
Could hardly carry on swaying spear
Grendel's head to the gold-decked hall.
Swift they strode, the daring and dauntless,
Fourteen Geats, to the Hall of the Hart;
And proud in the midst of his marching men
Their leader measured the path to the mead-hall.
The hero entered, the hardy in battle,
The great in glory, to greet the king;
And Grendel's head by the hair was carried
Across the floor where the feasters drank—
A terrible sight for lord and for lady—
A gruesome vision whereon men gazed!
Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow:
"O son of Healfdene, lord of the Scyldings!
This sea-spoil wondrous, whereon you stare,
We joyously bring you in token of triumph!
Barely with life surviving the battle,
The war under water, I wrought the deed
Weary and spent; and death had been swift
Had God not granted His sheltering strength.
My strong-edged Hrunting, stoutest of blades,
Availed me nothing. But God revealed—
Often His arm has aided the friendless—
The fairest of weapons hanging on wall,
An ancient broadsword; I seized the blade,
Slew in the struggle, as fortune availed,
The cavern-warders. But the war-brand old,
The battle-blade with its scrolled design,
Dissolved in the gush of the venomous gore;
The hilt alone I brought from the battle.
The record of ruin, and slaughter of Danes,
These wrongs I avenged, as was fitting and right.
Now I can promise you, prince of the Scyldings,
Henceforth in Heorot rest without rue

For you and your nobles; nor need you dread
Slaughter of follower, stalwart or stripling,
Or death of earl, as of old you did."
Into the hand of the aged leader,
The gray-haired hero, he gave the hilt,
The work of giants, the wonder of gold. . . .
Hrothgar spoke, beholding the hilt,
The ancient relic whereon was etched
An olden record of struggle and strife,
The flood[5] that ravaged the giant race,
The rushing deluge of ruin and death.
That evil kindred were alien to God,
But the Ruler avenged with the wrath of the deep! . . .
Then out spoke Hrothgar, Healfdene's son,
And all the retainers were silent and still:
"Well may he say, whose judgment is just,
Recalling to memory men of the past,
That this earl was born of a better stock!
Your fame, friend Beowulf, is blazoned abroad
Over all wide ways, and to every people.
In manful fashion have you showed your strength,
Your might and wisdom. My word I will keep,
The plighted friendship we formerly pledged.
Long shall you stand as a stay to your people. . . .
'Tis a wondrous marvel how mighty God
In gracious spirit bestows on men
The gift of wisdom, and goodly lands,
And princely power! He rules over all!
He suffers a man of lordly line
To set his heart on his own desires,
Awards him fullness of worldly joy,
A fair homeland, and the sway of cities,
The wide dominion of many a realm,
An ample kingdom, till, cursed with folly,
The thoughts of his heart take no heed of his end.
He lives in luxury, knowing not want,
Knowing no shadow of sickness or age;
No haunting sorrow darkens his spirit,
No hatred or discord deepens to war;
The world is sweet, to his every desire,
And evil assails not—until in his heart
Pride overpowering gathers and grows!
The warder slumbers, the guard of his spirit;
Too sound is that sleep, too sluggish the weight
Of worldly affairs, too pressing the Foe,
The Archer who looses the arrows of sin.
Then is his heart pierced, under his helm,
His soul in his bosom, with bitter dart.
He has no defense for the fierce assaults
Of the loathsome Fiend. What he long has cherished
Seems all too little! In anger and greed
He gives no guerdon of plated rings.
Since God has granted him glory and wealth
He forgets the future, unmindful of Fate.
But it comes to pass in the day appointed
His feeble body withers and fails;
Death descends, and another seizes
His hoarded riches and rashly spends
The princely treasure, imprudent of heart.
Beloved Beowulf, best of warriors,
Avoid such evil and seek the good,
The heavenly wisdom. Beware of pride!
Now for a time you shall feel the fullness
And know the glory of strength, but soon
Sickness or sword shall strip you of might,
Or clutch of fire, or clasp of flood,
Or flight of arrow, or bite of blade,
Or relentless age; or the light of the eye
Shall darken and dim, and death on a sudden,
O lordly ruler, shall lay you low.
A hundred half-years I've been head of the Ring-Danes,
Defending the folk against many a tribe
With spear-point and sword in the surges of battle
Till not one was hostile 'neath heaven's expanse.
But a loathsome change swept over the land,
Grief after gladness, when Grendel came,

5. *flood,* Noah's flood, which also destroyed the giant race mentioned in Genesis 6:4.

That evil invader, that ancient foe!
Great sorrow of soul from his malice I suffered;
But thanks be to God who has spared me to see
His bloody head at the battle's end!
Join now in the banquet; have joy of the feast,
O mightly in battle! And the morrow shall bring
Exchange of treasure in ample store."
Happy of heart the Geat leader hastened,
Took seat at the board as the good king bade.
Once more, as of old, brave heroes made merry
And tumult of revelry rose in the hall.
Then dark over men the night shadows deepened;
The host all arose, for Hrothgar was minded,
The gray, old Scylding, to go to his rest.
On Beowulf too, after labor of battle,
Came limitless longing and craving for sleep.
A hall-thane graciously guided the hero,
Weary and worn, to the place prepared,
Serving his wishes and every want
As befitted a mariner come from afar.
The stout-hearted warrior sank to his rest;
The lofty building, splendid and spacious,
Towered above him. His sleep was sound
Till the black-coated raven, blithesome of spirit,
Hailed the coming of Heaven's bliss.

The Parting of Beowulf and Hrothgar

Then over the shadows uprose the sun.
The Geats were in haste, and eager of heart
To depart to their people. Beowulf longed
To embark in his boat, to set sail for his home.
The hero tendered the good sword Hrunting
To the son of Ecglaf, bidding him bear
The lovely blade; gave thanks for the loan,
Called it a faithful friend in the fray,
Bitter in battle. The greathearted hero
Spoke no word in blame of the blade!
Arrayed in war-gear, and ready for sea,
The warriors bestirred them; and, dear to the Danes,
Beowulf sought the high seat of the king.
The gallant in war gave greeting to Hrothgar;
Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow:
"It is time at last to tell of our longing!
Our homes are far, and our hearts are fain
To seek again Hygelac over the sea.
You have welcomed us royally, harbored us well
As a man could wish; if I ever can win
Your affection more fully, O leader of heroes,
Swift shall you find me to serve you again!"
Hrothgar addressed him, uttered his answer:
"Truly, these words has the Lord of wisdom
Set in your heart, for I never have hearkened
To speech so sage from a man so young.
You have strength, and prudence, and wisdom of word! . . .
The Sea-Geats could have no happier choice
If you would be willing to rule the realm,
As king to hold guard o'er the hoard and the heroes.
The longer I know you, the better I like you,
Beloved Beowulf! You have brought it to pass
That between our peoples a lasting peace
Shall bind the Geats to the Danish-born;
And strife shall vanish, and war shall cease,
And former feuds, while I rule this realm."
Then the son of Healfdene, shelter of earls,
Bestowed twelve gifts on the hero in hall,
Bade him in safety with bounty of treasure
Seek his dear people, and soon return.
The peerless leader, the Scylding lord,
Kissed the good thane and clasped to his bosom
While tears welled fast from the old man's eyes.
Both chances he weighed in his wise, old heart,
But greatly doubted if ever again
They should meet at council or drinking of mead.

Nor could Hrothgar master—so dear was the man—
His swelling sorrow; a yearning love
For the dauntless hero, deep in his heart,
Burned through his blood. Beowulf, the brave,
Prizing his treasure and proud of the gold,
Turned away, treading the grassy plain.
The ring-stemmed sea-goer, riding at anchor,
Awaited her lord. There was loud acclaim
Of Hrothgar's gifts, as they went their way.
He was a king without failing or fault,
Till old age, master of all mankind,
Stripped him of power and pride of strength.

THINK AND DISCUSS

Understanding

1. Describe the lair of Grendel's mother.
2. How does Beowulf defeat this enemy?
3. What trophies does Beowulf take from his victory in the cavern?

Analyzing

4. The battle scenes in *Beowulf* are full of specific, sometimes grisly, detail. What do you think is the attitude of the poet toward the violent actions he portrays?
5. List the sounds that create **alliteration** in lines 1032–1037.
6. What warning does Hrothgar give Beowulf right after the hero's victory (lines 1206–1214)? Why does he do so?
7. What examples of human affection appear in *Beowulf*?

Extending

8. Compare Beowulf's fight with Grendel and his fight with Grendel's mother. Which seems more dangerous from these accounts?
9. Why do you suppose fictional encounters with monsters—both ancient and modern—so often take place in caves or underground spaces?

APPLYING: Metaphor

See Handbook of Literary Terms, p. 906

A **metaphor** is a figure of speech that makes a comparison between two basically unlike things that have something in common. This comparison may be stated or implied, but contains no connectives such as *like* or *as*. For example, in lines 1087–1088, Beowulf's sword "Began to soften and waste away/In iron icicles . . . . " Here the metal of the sword is compared to ice.

1. " . . . From the east came the sun,/Bright beacon of God . . . " (lines 438–439). What is the sun compared to? Why is the comparison appropriate?
2. "I thought to grip him in stubborn grasp/And bind him down on the bed of death,/There to lie straining in struggle for life . . . " (lines 702–704). Why is *bed* more appropriate than *chair, floor,* or *ground?*
3. "Called it [the sword] a faithful friend in the fray . . . " (line 1253). What does the sword have in common with a friend?

COMPOSITION

Describing a Monster's Lair

Lines 868–887 describe where Grendel's mother lives. Write a description of an appropriate lair for a modern monster. To begin, review the scene in *Beowulf*, noting the important details. Then, using your imagination, translate those details into modern terms. For example, the hidden cave might become a sewer pipe or an underground garage. Organize your description in the form of a journey, the first paragraph picturing the surrounding countryside, the second the means of entering the hiding place, the

third what the lair itself looks like, and the last the kinds of things one finds there. Assume that your classmates will be your audience and write to capture their interest.

Writing a Persuasive Essay

In several speeches Beowulf talks about his achievements. Write an essay of at least five paragraphs directed to your classmates in which you take a side on the question: Is Beowulf a braggart? First review Beowulf's speeches, listing statements that seem to you excessively boastful, or, by contrast, appropriate for the situation. Next outline your argument. Your first paragraph should define *brag;* you may use a dictionary definition or write your own. In the second, third, and fourth paragraphs, examine your text examples to determine whether they are or are not brags. Finally, in a concluding paragraph, sum up your ideas about the way this hero talks. See "Writing to Persuade an Audience" in the Writer's Handbook.

HT **See FORESHADOWING in the Handbook of Literary Terms, page 908.**

Beowulf Returns to Geatland

Then down to the sea came the band of the brave,
The host of young heroes in harness of war,
In their woven mail; and the coast-warden viewed
The heroes' return, as he heeded their coming!
No uncivil greeting he gave from the sea-cliff
As they strode to ship in their glistening steel;
But rode toward them and called their return
A welcome sight for their Weder kin.
There on the sand the ring-stemmed ship,
The broad-bosomed bark, was loaded with war-gear,
With horses and treasure; the mast towered high
Over the riches of Hrothgar's hoard.
A battle-sword Beowulf gave to the boat-warden
Hilted with gold; and thereafter in hall
He had the more honor because of the heirloom,
The shining treasure. The ship was launched.
Cleaving the combers of open sea
They dropped the shoreline of Denmark astern.
A stretching sea-cloth, a bellying sail,
Was bent on the mast; there was groaning of timbers;
A gale was blowing; the boat drove on.
The foamy-necked plunger plowed through the billows,
The ring-stemmed ship through the breaking seas,
Till at last they sighted the sea-cliffs of Geatland,
The well-known headlands; and, whipped by the wind,
The boat drove shoreward and beached on the sand. . . .
Then the hero strode with his stalwart band
Across the stretches of sandy beach,
The wide sea-shingle. The world-candle shone,
The hot sun hasting on high from the south.
Marching together they made their way
To where in his stronghold the stout young king, . . .
Dispensed his treasure. Soon Hygelac heard
Of the landing of Beowulf, bulwark of men,

That his shoulder-companion had come to his court
Sound and safe from the strife of battle.
The hall was prepared, as the prince gave bidding,
Places made ready for much travelled men.
And he who came safe from the surges of battle
Sat by the side of the king himself, . . .
In friendly fashion in high-built hall
Hygelac questioned his comrade and thane;
For an eager longing burned in his breast
To hear from the Sea-Geats the tale of their travels. . . .

Beowulf now tells the king of his battles with Grendel and Grendel's mother, and of the rewards his victory has won. He concludes:

"These riches I bring you ruler of heroes,
And warmly tender with right good will.
Save for you, king Hygelac, few are my kinsmen,
Few are the favors but come from you."
Then he bade men bring the boar-crested headpiece,
The towering helmet, and steel-gray sark,[1]
The splendid war-sword, and spoke this word:
"The good king Hrothgar gave me this gift,
This battle-armor, and first to you
Bade tell the tale of his friendly favor. . . .
Well may you wear it! Have joy of it all.". . .
Then the battle-bold king, the bulwark of heroes,
Bade bring a battle-sword banded with gold,
The heirloom of Hrethel;[2] no sharper steel,
No lovelier treasure, belonged to the Geats.
He laid the war-blade on Beowulf's lap,
Gave him a hall and a stately seat
And hides[3] seven thousand. Inherited lands
Both held by birth-fee, home and estate.
But one held rule o'er the spacious realm,
And higher therein his order and rank.

This carved wooden face ornaments the end of a cross-piece supporting the body of a Viking cart. 7th century. *University Museum of Antiquities, Oslo, Norway*

The Fire-Dragon and the Treasure

It later befell in the years that followed
After Hygelac sank in the surges of war, . . .
That the kingdom came into Beowulf's hand.
For fifty winters he governed it well,
Aged and wise with the wisdom of years,
Till a fire-drake[4] flying in darkness of night
Began to ravage and work his will.
On the upland heath he guarded a hoard,
A stone barrow lofty. Under it lay
A path concealed from the sight of men.
There a thief broke in on the heathen treasure,
Laid hand on a flagon all fretted with gold,
As the dragon discovered, though cozened in sleep
By the pilferer's cunning. The people soon found

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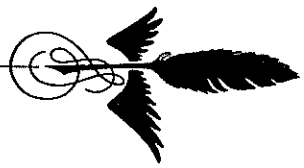
1. ***sark***, shirt (here, of mail).
2. ***Hrethel*** (hreth'əl), king of the Geats, father of Hygelac, grandfather of Beowulf.
3. ***hides***. The *hide* (roughly, as much land as could be worked by one plow in a single year) varied from 40 to 120 acres. Seven thousand hides is a huge piece of land.
4. ***fire-drake***, a fire-breathing dragon.

That the mood of the dragon was roused to wrath! . . .
For three hundred winters this waster of peoples
Held the huge treasure-hall under the earth
Till the robber aroused him to anger and rage,
Stole the rich beaker and bore to his master,
Imploring his lord for a compact of peace.
So the hoard was robbed and its riches plundered;
To the wretch was granted the boon that he begged;
And his liege-lord first had view of the treasure,
The ancient work of the men of old.
Then the worm awakened and war was kindled,
The rush of the monster along the rock,
When the fierce one found the tracks of the foe; . . .
Swiftly the fire-drake sought through the plain
The man who wrought him this wrong in his sleep.
Inflamed and savage he circled the mound,
But the waste was deserted—no man was in sight.
The worm's mood was kindled to battle and war;
Time and again he returned to the barrow
Seeking the treasure-cup. Soon he was sure
That a man had plundered the precious gold.
Enraged and restless the hoard-warden waited
The gloom of evening. The guard of the mound
Was swollen with anger; the fierce one resolved
To requite with fire the theft of the cup.
Then the day was sped as the worm desired;
Lurking no longer within his wall
He sallied forth surrounded with fire,
Encircled with flame. For the folk of the land
The beginning was dread as the ending was grievous
That came so quickly upon their lord.
Then the baleful stranger belched fire and flame,
Burned the bright dwellings—the glow of the blaze
Filled hearts with horror. The hostile flier
Was minded to leave there nothing alive.
From near and from far the war of the dragon,
The might of the monster, was widely revealed
So that all could see how the ravaging scather
Hated and humbled the Geatish folk.
Then he hastened back ere the break of dawn
To his secret den and the spoil of gold.
He had compassed the land with a flame of fire,
A blaze of burning; he trusted the wall,
The sheltering mound, and the strength of his might—
But his trust betrayed him! The terrible news
Was brought to Beowulf, told for a truth,
That his home was consumed in the surges of fire. . . .
Dark thoughts stirred in his surging bosom,
Welled in his breast, as was not his wont.
The flame of the dragon had levelled the fortress,
The people's stronghold washed by the wave.
But the king of warriors, prince of the Weders,
Exacted an ample revenge for it all.
The lord of warriors and leader of earls
Bade work him of iron a wondrous shield,
Knowing full well that wood could not serve him
Nor linden[5] defend him against the flame.
The stalwart hero was doomed to suffer
The destined end of his days on earth;
Likewise the worm, though for many a winter
He had held his watch o'er the wealth of the hoard.

5. ***linden,*** a shield of linden wood.

Comment



Heroic Morality

In his *Germania*, the Roman historian Tacitus (A.D. 55?–120?) gave a detailed and generally reliable account of the customs of the Germanic tribes from among whom came the Anglo-Saxon peoples that would later populate England:

"On the field of battle it is a disgrace to a chief to be surpassed in courage by his followers, and to the followers not to equal the courage of their chief. And to leave a battle alive after their chief has fallen means lifelong infamy and shame. To defend and protect him, and to let him get the credit for their own acts of heroism, are the most solemn obligations of their allegiance. The chiefs fight for victory, the followers for their chief. Many noble youths, if the land of their birth is stagnating in a long period of peace and inactivity, deliberately seek out other tribes which have some war in hand. For the Germans have no taste for peace; renown is more easily won among perils, and a large body of retainers cannot be kept together except by means of violence and war. They are always making demands on the generosity of their chief, asking for a coveted war horse or a spear stained with the blood of a defeated enemy. Their meals, for which plentiful if homely fare is provided, count in lieu of pay. The wherewithal for this openhandedness comes from war and plunder. A German is not so easily prevailed upon to plough the land and wait patiently for harvest as to challenge a foe and earn wounds for his reward. He thinks it tame and spiritless to accumulate slowly by the sweat of his brow what can be got quickly by the loss of a little blood."

From *The Agricola and The Germania* of Tacitus, translated by H. Mattingly, revised by S. A. Handford. New York: Penguin Books, 1948, 1970.

The ring-prince scorned to assault the dragon
With a mighty army, or host of men.
He feared not the combat, nor counted of worth
The might of the worm, his courage and craft,
Since often aforetime, beset in the fray,
He had safely issued from many an onset,
Many a combat and, crowned with success,
Purged of evil the hall of Hrothgar
And crushed out Grendel's loathsome kin. . . .
With eleven comrades, kindled to rage
The Geat lord went to gaze on the dragon.
Full well he knew how the feud arose,
The fearful affliction; for into his hold
From hand of finder the flagon had come.
The thirteenth man in the hurrying throng
Was the sorrowful captive who caused the feud.

With woeful spirit and all unwilling
Needs must he guide them, for he only knew
Where the earth-hall stood near the breaking billows
Filled with jewels and beaten gold.
The monstrous warden, waiting for battle,
Watched and guarded the hoarded wealth.
No easy bargain for any of men
To seize that treasure! The stalwart king,
Gold-friend of Geats, took seat on the headland,
Hailed his comrades and wished them well.
Sad was his spirit, restless and ready,
And the march of Fate immeasurably near;
Fate that would strike, seek his soul's treasure,
And deal asunder the spirit and flesh.
Not long was his life encased in the body!
Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow:
"Many an ordeal I endured in youth,
And many a battle. I remember it all. . . .

For all the rich gifts that Hygelac gave me
I repaid him in battle with shining sword,
As chance was given. He granted me land,
A gracious dwelling and goodly estate. . . .
I was always before him alone in the van.
So shall I bear me while life-days last,
While the sword holds out that has served me well, . . .
With hand and hard blade, I must fight for the treasure," . . .

Beowulf and Wiglaf Slay the Dragon

The king for the last time greeted his comrades,
Bold helmet-bearers and faithful friends:
"I would bear no sword nor weapon to battle
With the evil worm, if I knew how else
I could close with the fiend, as I grappled with Grendel.
From the worm I look for a welling of fire,
A belching of venom, and therefore I bear
Shield and byrny. Not one foot's space
Will I flee from the monster, the ward of the mound.
It shall fare with us both in the fight at the wall
As Fate shall allot, the lord of mankind.
Though bold in spirit, I make no boast
As I go to fight with the flying serpent.
Clad in your corselets and trappings of war,
By the side of the barrow abide you to see
Which of us twain may best after battle
Survive his wounds. Not yours the adventure,
Nor the mission of any, save mine alone,
To measure his strength with the monstrous dragon
And play the part of a valiant earl.
By deeds of daring I'll gain the gold
Or death in battle shall break your lord."
Then the stalwart rose with his shield upon him,
Bold under helmet, bearing his sark
Under the stone-cliff; he trusted the strength
Of his single might. Not so does a coward!
He who survived through many a struggle,
Many a combat and crashing of troops,
Saw where a stone-arch stood by the wall
And a gushing stream broke out from the barrow.
Hot with fire was the flow of its surge,
Nor could any abide near the hoard unburned,
Nor endure its depths, for the flame of the dragon.
Then the lord of the Geats in the grip of his fury
Gave shout of defiance; the strong-heart stormed.
His voice rang out with the rage of battle,
Resounding under the hoary stone.
Hate was aroused; the hoard-warden knew
'Twas the voice of a man. No more was there time
To sue for peace; the breath of the serpent,
A blast of venom, burst from the rock.
The ground resounded; the lord of the Geats
Under the barrow swung up his shield
To face the dragon; the coiling foe
Was gathered to strike in the deadly strife.
The stalwart hero had drawn his sword,
His ancient heirloom of tempered edge;
In the heart of each was fear of the other!
The shelter of kinsmen stood stout of heart
Under towering shield as the great worm coiled;
Clad in his war-gear he waited the rush.
In twisting folds the flame-breathing dragon
Sped to its fate. The shield of the prince
For a lesser while guarded his life and his body
Than heart had hoped. For the first time then
It was not his portion to prosper in war;
Fate did not grant him glory in battle!
Then lifted his arm the lord of the Geats
And smote the worm with his ancient sword
But the brown edge failed as it fell on bone,
And cut less deep than the king had need
In his sore distress. Savage in mood
The ward of the barrow countered the blow
With a blast of fire; wide sprang the flame. . . .

Not long was the lull. Swiftly the battlers
Renewed their grapple. The guard of the hoard
Grew fiercer in fury. His venomous breath
Beat in his breast. Enveloped in flame
The folk-leader suffered a sore distress.
No succoring band of shoulder-companions,
No sons of warriors aided him then
By valor in battle. They fled to the forest
To save their lives; but a sorrowful spirit
Welled in the breast of one of the band.
The call of kinship can never be stilled
In the heart of a man who is trusty and true.
His name was Wiglaf, Weohstan's son,
A prince of the Scylfings, a peerless thane,
Ælfhere's kinsman;[6] he saw his king
Under his helmet smitten with heat.
He thought of the gifts which his lord had given,
The wealth and the land of the Wægmunding line
And all the folk-rights his father had owned;
Nor could he hold back, but snatched up his buckler,
His linden shield and his ancient sword. . . .
Wiglaf spoke in sorrow of soul,
With bitter reproach rebuking his comrades:
"I remember the time, as we drank in the mead-hall,
When we swore to our lord who bestowed these rings
That we would repay for the war-gear and armor,
The hard swords and helmets, if need like this
Should ever befall him. He chose us out
From all the host for this high adventure.
. . .
Now is the day that our lord has need
Of the strength and courage of stalwart men.
Let us haste to succor his sore distress
In the horrible heat and the merciless flame.
God knows I had rather the fire should enfold
My body and limbs with my gold-friend and lord. . . .
One helmet and sword, one byrny and shield,
Shall serve for us both in the storm of strife."
Then Wiglaf dashed through the deadly reek
In his battle-helmet to help his lord.
Brief were his words: "Beloved Beowulf,
Summon your strength, remember the vow
You made of old in the years of youth
Not to allow your glory to lessen
As long as you lived. With resolute heart,
And dauntless daring, defend your life
With all your force. I fight at your side!"
Once again the worm, when the words were spoken,
The hideous foe in a horror of flame,
Rushed in rage at the hated men.
Wiglaf's buckler was burned to the boss
In the billows of fire; his byrny of mail
Gave the young hero no help or defense.
But he stoutly pressed on under shield of his kinsman
When his own was consumed in the scorching flame.
Then the king once more was mindful of glory,
Swung his great sword-blade with all his might
And drove it home on the dragon's head.
But Nægling[7] broke, it failed in the battle,
The blade of Beowulf, ancient and gray. . . .
A third time then the terrible scather,
The monstrous dragon inflamed with the feud,
Rushed on the king when the opening offered,
Fierce and flaming; fastened its fangs

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6. ***Wiglaf . . . kinsman.*** Wiglaf's father Weohstan (wā'ō-stan) was apparently both a prince of the Scylfings (shil'fings), the ruling family among the Swedes, and a member of the Wægmunding (wag'mùn ding) family (see lines 1567-1568), the Geatish clan to which Beowulf belonged. Weohstan may have been a Swedish exile in Geatland (as the result of a blood feud) who had settled on Wægmunding lands. Ælfhere (alf'her rə) is not otherwise known.

7. ***Nægling*** (nag'ling). The name of Beowulf's sword is related to *nægl*, "nail."

In Beowulf's throat; he was bloodied with gore;
His lifeblood streamed from the welling wound.
As they tell the tale, in the king's sore need
His shoulder-companion showed forth his valor,
His craft and courage, and native strength.
To the head of the dragon he paid no heed,
Though his hand was burned as he helped his king.
A little lower the stalwart struck
At the evil beast, and his blade drove home
Plated and gleaming. The fire began
To lessen and wane. The king of the Weders
Summoned his wits; he drew the dagger
He wore on his corselet, cutting and keen,
And slit asunder the worm with the blow.
So they felled the foe and wrought their revenge;
The kinsmen together had killed the dragon.
So a man should be when the need is bitter!
That was the last fight Beowulf fought;
That was the end of his work in the world.

Comment

The Treasure of Sutton Hoo

In the late spring of 1939, archaeologists began excavating a large burial mound on an estate called Sutton Hoo, on the east coast of England in the area once known as East Anglia (see map, page 5). The mound was the largest in a group of earth mounds or barrows that lay on a steep hundred-foot slope overlooking the inlet where the River Deben flows into the North Sea. As the painstaking work continued, the diggers realized they had uncovered the richest hoard of early Anglo-Saxon objects ever found. A jeweled sword, a richly decorated shield and helmet, gold coins, silver bowls, and, above all, nineteen pieces of magnificently wrought gold jewelry set with thousands of elaborately cut garnets—these objects must have been the treasure of a mighty king. The great gold buckle alone weighs over fourteen ounces. With these objects were found an iron standard-frame and a two-foot carved whetstone, the symbols of sovereignty of an East Anglian king.

The treasure, scattered and corroded by time, lay within the hull of what had once been an eighty-nine-foot wooden ship. Only the iron bolts and nails remained, but the outline of the ship was plainly visible in the sand. No trace of a body was found; the ship was evidently a cenotaph or memorial to a king[1] whose bones lay elsewhere. From the evidence offered by the coins placed with the hoard —perhaps intended as payment for the ghostly oarsmen who were to convey the king to the next world—it is thought that the burial must have been made between the years A.D. 625 and 660. Ship burials were fairly numerous among the pagan Vikings of Europe at a later period, but rare in Anglo-Saxon England. The Sutton Hoo find was hailed as the most exciting archaeological discovery of the century in Britain.

In August 1939 a local Coroner's Jury was called upon to decide the legal status of the Sutton Hoo finds—whether they should be considered as treasure-trove and therefore the property of the Crown, or whether they belonged to Mrs. Pretty, the owner of the Sutton Hoo estate. If the artifacts had been secretly hidden, with the intent of recovering them later, they would become Crown property. But if it could be shown that they had been publicly buried

1. Some scholars think the king may have been Redwald, mentioned by Bede in his story of the conversion of King Edwin (see page 60). Redwald had been converted to Christianity, but lapsed into pagan practices. This would account for the combination of Christian and pagan elements in the cenotaph.

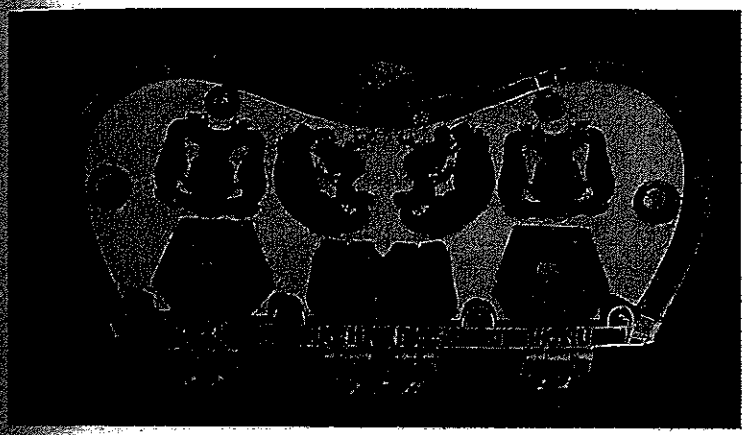
with no intention of ever recovering them, they would remain the property of Mrs. Pretty.

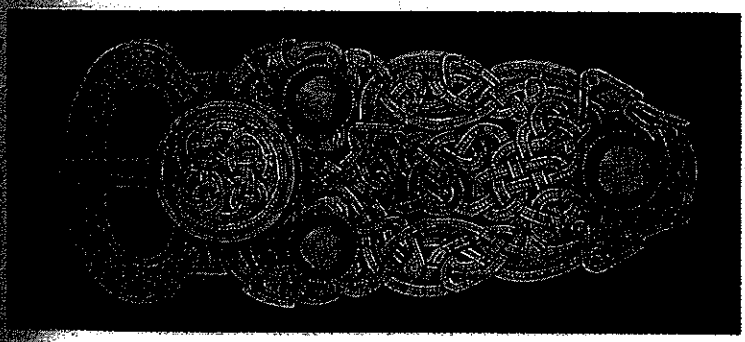
The evidence presented to the jury consisted of the description in *Beowulf* of Scyld Sceafing's ship-passing and the story of the final disposal of the dragon's hoard in the account of Beowulf's funeral. The jury easily concluded on the basis of this evidence that the Sutton Hoo treasures must have been buried at a public ceremony and been intended to remain forever undisturbed. Thus they became the property of Mrs. Pretty, who then generously presented them to the British Museum, where they are now on public display.

The opening section of *Beowulf* is said to be the earliest existing documentary evidence of a ship funeral. But the description of the rich treasures that were placed in the ship had generally been looked upon as poetic fancy. The find at Sutton Hoo confirmed the historical accuracy of the *Beowulf* description of a heroic society rich in gold and other beautifully wrought objects.

Beowulf may have been composed at a time when the spectacular Sutton Hoo ship burial was still remembered. Some scholars even think the poem may have been intended as a compliment to a king of East Anglia; there is evidence pointing to the possibility that an ancestor of the East Anglian royal line was a member of the Geatish or South Swedish tribe to which Beowulf belonged.

The articles found at Sutton Hoo indicate not only that Anglo-Saxon culture of the seventh century was far more advanced than had previously been imagined, but also that the Anglo-Saxons traded widely. Found on the site were a Swedish helmet and shield, the blade of a sword probably forged in the Rhineland, silver bowls and spoons from the Near East, and gold coins from France.





Among the objects found at Sutton Hoo are the Purse-lid, decorated with garnets and gold; the Buckle (the heaviest solid gold object ever found in England); and the Helmet, here reconstructed from hundreds of corroded iron fragments. 7th century. *British Museum*

Beowulf's Death

The wound which the dragon had dealt him began
To swell and burn; and soon he could feel
The baneful venom inflaming his breast.
The wise, old warrior sank down by the wall
And stared at the work of the giants of old,
The arches of stone and the standing columns
Upholding the ancient earth-hall within.
His loyal thane, the kindest of comrades,
Saw Beowulf bloody and broken in war;
In his hands bore water and bathed his leader,
And loosened the helm from his dear lord's head.
Beowulf spoke, though his hurt was sore,
The wounds of battle grievous and grim.
Full well he weened that his life was ended,
And all the joy of his years on earth;
That his days were done, and Death most near:
"My armor and sword I would leave to my son
Had Fate but granted, born of my body,
An heir to follow me after I'm gone.
For fifty winters I've ruled this realm,
And never a lord of a neighboring land
Dared strike with terror or seek with sword.
In my life I abode by the lot assigned,
Kept well what was mine, courted no quarrels,
Swore no false oaths. And now for all this
Though my hurt is grievous, my heart is glad.
When life leaves body, the Lord of mankind
Cannot lay to my charge the killing of kinsmen!
Go quickly, dear Wiglaf, to gaze on the gold
Beneath the hoar stone. The dragon lies still
In the slumber of death, despoiled of his hoard.
Make haste that my eyes may behold the treasure,
The gleaming jewels, the goodly store,
And, glad of the gold, more peacefully leave
The life and the realm I have ruled so long."
Then Weohstan's son, as they tell the tale,
Clad in his corselet and trappings of war,
Hearkened at once to his wounded lord.
Under roof of the barrow he broke his way.
Proud in triumph he stood by the seat,
Saw glittering jewels and gold on the ground,
The den of the dragon, the old dawn-flier,
And all the wonders along the walls.
Great bowls and flagons of bygone men
Lay all unburnished and barren of gems,
Many a helmet ancient and rusted,
Many an arm-ring cunningly wrought.
Treasure and gold, though hid in the ground,
Override man's wishes, hide them who will!
High o'er the hoard he beheld a banner,
Greatest of wonders, woven with skill,
All wrought of gold; its radiance lighted
The vasty ground and the glittering gems. . . .
As I've heard the tale, the hero unaided
Rifled those riches of giants of old,
The hoard in the barrow, and heaped in his arms
Beakers and platters, picked what he would
And took the banner, the brightest of signs. . . .
In haste returning enriched with spoil.
He feared, and wondered if still he would find
The lord of the Weders alive on the plain,
Broken and weary and smitten with wounds.
With his freight of treasure he found the prince,
His dear lord, bloody and nigh unto death.
With water he bathed him till words broke forth
From the hoard of his heart and, aged and sad,
Beowulf spoke, as he gazed on the gold:
"For this goodly treasure whereon I gaze
I give my thanks to the Lord of all,
To the Prince of glory, Eternal God,
Who granted me grace to gain for my people
Such dower of riches before my death.

I gave my life for this golden hoard.
Heed well the wants, the need of my people;
My hour is come, and my end is near.
Bid warriors build, when they burn my body,
A stately barrow on the headland's height.
It shall be for remembrance among my people
As it towers high on the Cape of the Whale,
And sailors shall know it as Beowulf's Barrow,
Seafaring mariners driving their ships
Through fogs of ocean from far countries."
Then the great-hearted king unclasped from his throat
A collar of gold, and gave to his thane;
Gave the young hero his gold-decked helmet,
His ring and his byrny, and wished him well.
"You are the last of the Wægmunding line.
All my kinsmen, earls in their glory,
Fate has sent to their final doom,
And I must follow." These words were the last
The old king spoke ere the pyre received him,
The leaping flames of the funeral blaze,
And his breath went forth from his bosom, his soul
Went forth from the flesh, to the joys of the just. . . .
Not long was it then till the laggards in battle
Came forth from the forest, ten craven in fight,
Who had dared not face the attack of the foe
In their lord's great need. The shirkers in shame
Came wearing their bucklers and trappings of war
Where the old man lay. They looked upon Wiglaf.
Weary he sat by the side of his leader
Attempting with water to waken his lord.
It availed him little; the wish was vain! . . .
He reproached the cowards whose courage had failed: . . .

"Lo! he may say who would speak the truth
That the lord who gave you these goodly rings,
This warlike armor wherein you stand—
When oft on the ale-bench he dealt to his hall-men
Helmet and byrny, endowing his thanes
With the fairest he found from near or from far—
That he grievously wasted these trappings of war
When battle befell him. The king of the folk
Had no need to boast of his friends in the fight.
But the God of victory granted him strength
To avenge himself with the edge of the sword
When he needed valor. Of little avail
The help I brought in the bitter battle!
Yet still I strove, though beyond my strength,
To aid my kinsman. And ever the weaker
The savage foe when I struck with my sword;
Ever the weaker the welling flame!
Too few defenders surrounded our ruler
When the hour of evil and terror befell.
Now granting of treasure and giving of swords,
Inherited land-right and joy of the home,
Shall cease from your kindred. And each of your clan
Shall fail of his birthright when men from afar
Hear tell of your flight and your dastardly deed.
Death is better for every earl
Than life besmirched with the brand of shame!"

The Messenger Foretells the Doom of the Geats

Then Wiglaf bade tell the tidings of battle
Up over the cliff in the camp of the host
Where the linden-bearers all morning long
Sat wretched in spirit, and ready for both,
The return, or the death, of their dear-loved lord.

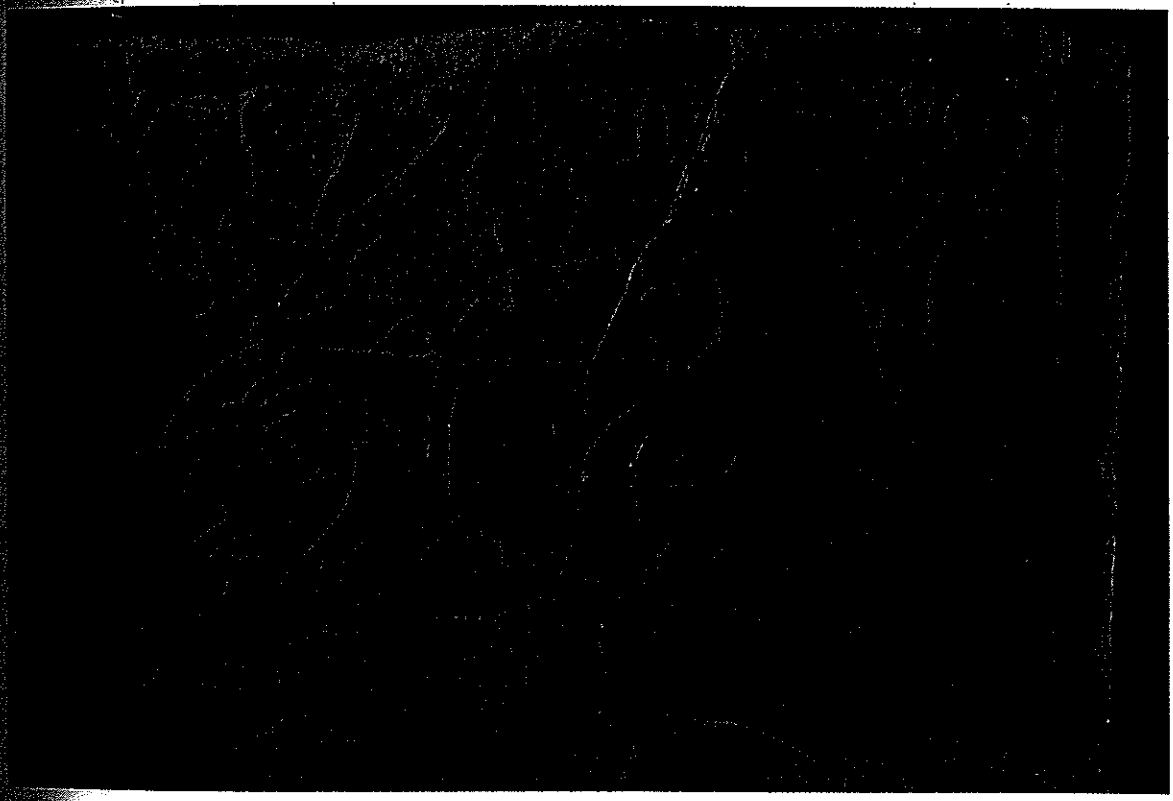
Not long did he hide, who rode up the headland,
The news of their sorrow, but spoke before all:
"Our leader lies low, the lord of the Weders,
The king of the Geats, on the couch of death.
He sleeps his last sleep by the deeds of the worm.
The dreadful dragon is stretched beside him
Slain with dagger-wounds. Not by the sword
Could he quell the monster or lay him low. . . .
Let us go quickly to look on the king
Who brought us treasure, and bear his corpse
To the funeral pyre. The precious hoard
Shall burn with the hero. There lies the heap
Of untold treasure so grimly gained,
Jewels and gems he bought with his blood
At the end of life. All these at the last
The flames shall veil and the brands devour.
No man for remembrance shall take from the treasure,
Nor beauteous maiden adorn her breast
With gleaming jewel; bereft of gold
And tragic-hearted many shall tread
A foreign soil, now their lord has ceased
From laughter and revel and rapture of joy.
Many a spear in the cold of morning
Shall be borne in hand uplifted on high.
No sound of harp shall waken the warrior,
But the dusky raven despoiling the dead
Shall clamor and cry and call to the eagle
What fare he found at the carrion-feast
The while with the wolf he worried the corpses." . . .
They went with tears to behold the wonder.
They found the friend, who had dealt them treasure
In former days, on the bed of death,
Stretched out lifeless upon the sand. . . .
They had sighted first, where it lay outstretched,
The monstrous wonder, the loathsome worm,
The horrible fire-drake, hideous-hued,
Scorched with the flame. The spread of its length
Was fifty foot-measures! Oft in the night
It sported in air, then sinking to earth
Returned to its den. Now moveless in death
It had seen the last of its earthly lair.
Beside the dragon were bowls and beakers,
Platters lying, and precious swords
Eaten with rust, where the hoard had rested
A thousand winters in the womb of earth. . . .
Then spoke Wiglaf, Weohstan's son:
"Often for one man many must sorrow
As has now befallen the folk of the Geats.
We could not persuade the king by our counsel,
Our well-loved leader, to shun assault
On the dreadful dragon guarding the gold;
To let him lie where he long had lurked
In his secret lair till the world shall end.
But Beowulf, dauntless, pressed to his doom. . . .
Let us haste once more to behold the treasure,
The gleaming wonders beneath the wall.
I will show the way that you all may see
And closely scan the rings and the gold.
Let the bier be ready, the pyre prepared,
When we come again to carry our lord,
Our leader beloved, where long he shall lie
In the kindly care of the Lord of all."

Beowulf's Funeral

Then the son of Weohstan, stalwart in war,
Bade send command to the heads of homes
To bring from afar the wood for the burning
Where the good king lay: "Now glede[8] shall devour,
As dark flame waxes, the warrior prince
Who has often withstood the shower of steel
When the storm of arrows, sped from the string,
Broke over shield, and shaft did service,

8. *glede* (glēd), glowing coal, ember.

With feather-fittings guiding the barb."
Then the wise son of Weohstan chose from the host
Seven thanes of the king, the best of the band;
Eight heroes together they hied to the barrow
In under the roof of the fearful foe;
One of the warriors leading the way
Bore in his hand a burning brand.
They cast no lots who should loot the treasure
When they saw unguarded the gold in the hall
Lying there useless; little they scrupled
As quickly they plundered the precious store.
Over the sea-cliff into the ocean
They tumbled the dragon, the deadly worm,
Let the sea-tide swallow the guarder of gold.
Then a wagon was loaded with well-wrought treasure,
A countless number of every kind;
And the aged warrior, the white-haired king,
Was borne on high to the Cape of the Whale.
The Geat folk fashioned a peerless pyre
Hung round with helmets and battle-boards,
With gleaming byrnies as Beowulf bade.
In sorrow of soul they laid on the pyre
Their mighty leader, their well-loved lord.
The warriors kindled the bale on the barrow,
Wakened the greatest of funeral fires.
Dark o'er the blaze the wood-smoke mounted;
The winds were still, and the sound of weeping
Rose with the roar of the surging flame
Till the heat of the fire had broken the body.



...gon in classic Ringerike style, a tombstone from St. Paul's Cathedral churchyard, ...ndon. 11th century.

With hearts that were heavy they chanted
their sorrow,
Singing a dirge for the death of their lord;
And an aged woman with upbound locks
Lamented for Beowulf, wailing in woe.
Over and over she uttered her dread
Of sorrow to come, of bloodshed and
slaughter,
Terror of battle, and bondage, and shame.
The smoke of the bale-fire rose to the sky!
The men of the Weder folk fashioned a
mound
Broad and high on the brow of the cliff,
Seen from afar by seafaring men.
Ten days they worked on the warrior's
barrow
Inclosing the ash of the funeral flame
With a wall as worthy as wisdom could
shape.
They bore to the barrow the rings and the
gems,
The wealth of the hoard the heroes had
plundered.
The olden treasure they gave to the earth,
The gold to the ground, where it still remains
As useless to men as it was of yore.
Then round the mound rode the brave in
battle,
The sons of warriors, twelve in a band,
Bemoaning their sorrow and mourning their
king.
They sang their dirge and spoke of the hero
Vaunting his valor and venturous deeds.
So is it proper a man should praise
His friendly lord with a loving heart,
When his soul must forth from the fleeting
flesh.
So the folk of the Geats, the friends of his
hearth,
Bemoaned the fall of their mighty lord;
Said he was kindest of worldly kings,
Mildest, most gentle, most eager for fame.

circa 725

THINK AND DISCUSS

Understanding

1. What further honors come to Beowulf?
2. For how many years does he govern his kingdom before the dragon appears?
3. How does Beowulf kill this enemy? In what way does Wiglaf help?
4. What punishment awaits the men who fail to stay by Beowulf during the fight?

Analyzing

5. Beowulf has survived wounds before. Why does he die from this one?
6. Why is Beowulf, even as he is dying, so eager to see the dragon's treasure?
7. What does his death mean for the Geats?
8. How does Beowulf's funeral reflect the feelings and the fears of his people?
9. Explain the **metaphors** in lines 1834–1836 and line 1850.

Extending

10. Do you think Beowulf's struggle against his three foes is meant to be interpreted on a larger, more universal level? Explain.

APPLYING: Foreshadowing

See Handbook of Literary Terms, p. 908

When hints or clues in a narrative suggest events that will occur later, the author is using the technique of **foreshadowing.** For example, when the dragon first attacks Beowulf's people, the narrator comments:

For the folk of the land
The beginning was dread as the ending was
grievous
That came so quickly upon their lord.

The obscure reference to a "grievous" ending foreshadows Beowulf's death, though exactly how the hero will end is not clear. Here foreshadowing darkens the account of Beowulf preparing for battle, since the reader now knows the hero will die.

1. Lines 1470–1474 describe Beowulf's state of mind as he plans the fight with the fire-dragon. Explain how these lines foreshadow the ending.
2. Find further examples of foreshadowing in the last part of the epic.

READING LITERATURE SKILLFULLY

Comparison/Contrast

The *Beowulf*-poet frequently creates parallels between characters, actions, even whole scenes. By comparing and contrasting these elements, you can understand the poem much more fully.

1. Beowulf engages in three major battles. What characteristics do these battles share?
2. How do Beowulf's enemies differ?
3. Compare the ways Beowulf rises to each of these challenges. What does this comparison reveal about Beowulf's heroism?
4. What do people today consider a hero to be? Compare and contrast modern concepts of a hero with Anglo-Saxon concepts, as exemplified by Beowulf.

VOCABULARY

Etymology

An etymology is the derivation of a word, an account of the word's origin and history. In the Glossary (page 978), etymologies are given in brackets at the ends of entries. The symbol < means "derived from." Use your Glossary to determine the etymologies of the following words from *Beowulf*. On separate paper, write a brief explanation for each.

- martial (line 3)
- blazon (line 102)
- stalwart (line 142)
- brandish (line 169)
- boon (line 277)
- guerdon (line 692)
- besmirched (line 1761)
- dirge (line 1867)

THINKING SKILLS

Classifying

To classify things is to arrange them into categories or groups according to some system. For example, writings can be classified as prose or poetry, and poetry can be further classified as epic, dramatic, lyric, and so on.

1. Scan *Beowulf* to find what kinds of personal possessions are mentioned and classify them according to purpose (clothing, adornment, weapons, and so on.)
2. Classify the characters mentioned by name in the poem. Devise your own classifications.

COMPOSITION

Defining Beowulf's Heroism

Beowulf is obviously the hero of this poem, but what makes him a hero? To answer this question, write an essay of at least four paragraphs in which you define for your fellow students what makes an Anglo-Saxon hero and why Beowulf qualifies as one. Begin by listing what you think are Beowulf's most significant traits, and then skim through the poem to find examples of them. Next outline your essay, devoting the first paragraph to defining heroism and subsequent paragraphs to describing different heroic characteristics. Support your ideas with quotes from the poem. See "Writing About Characters" in the Writer's Handbook.

Explaining Wiglaf's Role in *Beowulf*

Quite late in his epic, the *Beowulf*-poet introduces Wiglaf, a new and important character. Write an essay of at least four paragraphs in which you explain to other students why Wiglaf is included. First clarify your understanding of Wiglaf's role by going over the scenes in which he appears, imagining how each would be different if he were absent. Try to figure out why he is not mentioned earlier. Next outline your essay, devoting the first paragraph to Wiglaf's first appearance and subsequent paragraphs to what he does at specific, important moments. In your concluding paragraph, determine what impact this character has on the entire poem.