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Beowulf

Anonymous · *c. 8th–11th century · J. Lesslie Hall translation*

Hall's alliterative English keeps the old poem's beat. A Geatish warrior crosses the sea to cleanse Hrothgar's hall of the monster Grendel, then of Grendel's mother, and, late in life, of a dragon that ravages his own people. The poem honours courage, generosity and — at the last — Wiglaf's faithfulness when other thanes fail.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does a good king, and a faithful thane, owe — even unto death?

"The son of Weohstan was Wiglaf entitled, / Shield-warrior precious, prince of the Scylfings, / Ælfhere's kinsman: he saw his dear liegelord / Enduring the heat 'neath helmet and visor."

The poet, as the thanes flee · Section XXXVI

Glory and gifts bind lord and man. Beowulf pays his debt to Hrothgar, rules generously at home, and meets the dragon himself when he is old. When his companions fail, Wiglaf keeps the bond. The funeral is honour; the warning is what happens to a people when courage and loyalty go.

KEY CHARACTERS

Beowulf
courage, generosity, a king's last duty

Hrothgar
an aged king; the warning against pride

Wiglaf
the faithful thane

Grendel
the hall-waster, of Cain's race

Grendel's mother
the feud renewed

The dragon
the hoard-guardian; the last foe

Hygelac
Beowulf's lord at home

Wealhtheow
the queen; peace and gifts

Unferth
the jealous courtier

Grades 9–10
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01 Heorot in Terror

SECTIONS I–VII

A great hall, and a monster who cannot bear its joy.

- The poem opens with the Spear-Danes' glory and the line of Scyld
- Hrothgar builds the hall **Heorot**; the Danes feast there
- **Grendel**, of the race of Cain, raids the hall by night and cannot be bought off
- For twelve years the house stands empty of joy after dark
- **Beowulf** of the Geats hears and sails to help, a thane paying a father's debt of friendship

> *"Lo! the Spear-Danes' glory through splendid achievements / The folk-kings' former fame we have heard of, / How princes displayed then their prowess-in-battle."*
>
> **The poet** · Section I, opening

02 The Fight with Grendel

SECTIONS VIII–XVIII

A hand-grip, a torn arm, and a hall made clean.

- Beowulf will meet Grendel without sword, matching strength with strength
- He waits in the hall; Grendel comes and finds a grip he cannot break
- The monster flees, leaving his arm; he dies in the mere
- The Danes rejoice; a scop sings; Hrothgar gives rich gifts
- Unferth, who had mocked, is quieter; Wealhtheow does the honour of the cup

03 Grendel's Mother

SECTIONS XIX–XXVI

The feud is not finished when the first foe falls.

- Grendel's mother comes by night and takes a favourite counsellor, Æschere
- Beowulf tracks her to the haunted mere and dives armed to her hall
- Ordinary swords fail; he finds a giant's blade and slays her; he brings back Grendel's head
- Hrothgar, in a long speech, warns him against pride and the hoarding of gifts
- Beowulf sails home and reports faithfully to his own king, Hygelac

> *"Weird often saveth … The undoomed hero if doughty his valor!"*
>
> **Beowulf, telling of an earlier swim** · Section IX (the Breca-lay)

04 King and Dragon

SECTIONS XXVII–XXXV

Years later, a hoard is disturbed, and an old king will not send another in his place.

- Hygelac falls in Frisia; in time Beowulf rules the Geats for fifty winters
- A cup stolen from a barrow wakes a **dragon**, who burns the land
- Beowulf, knowing his end may be near, goes to the barrow with eleven companions
- His sword fails in the heat; the dragon wounds him

05 Wiglaf and the Funeral

SECTIONS XXXVI–XLIII

One thane keeps faith; a people bury their shield.

- The companions flee; only **Wiglaf** enters the fire to stand with his lord
- Together they kill the dragon; Beowulf, dying, looks on the hoard and gives Wiglaf his arms
- Wiglaf rebukes the cowards: a people will suffer for one man's failing, and for theirs
- The Geats raise a barrow by the sea and ride around it, mourning a king "most gracious" and "kindest to his people"
- The hoard is buried with him; treasure did not save him, and will not save them

> *"Oft many an earlman on one man's account must … Sorrow endure, as to us it hath happened. … The liegelord belovèd we could little prevail on,"*
>
> **Wiglaf** · Section XLII

Courage | Loyalty | Kingship | Generosity | Pride & Fate | Death & Memory

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–10

1. Hall's verse is alliterative and slightly archaic ("Weird" for Fate or Wyrd). Read it aloud; the beat is part of the sense.
2. Grendel is of Cain's race: the poem already reads the monster against Scripture.
3. Hrothgar's sermon after the mere is a moral centre: gifts, pride, and the ending of strength.
4. Watch the thanes at the dragon-fight. The poem's standard of loyalty is Wiglaf, not the eleven who run.
5. Treasure is honour when it is given; it is a curse when it is hoarded. Where does the dragon's gold end?
6. The last word on Beowulf is not that he was the strongest, but that he was kind to his people and eager for praise rightly won.

Quotations are verbatim from the J. Lesslie Hall translation, Project Gutenberg #16328, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/beowulf/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.