

From Beowulf

Anonymous

The epic poem *Beowulf* is one of the few surviving texts originally written in Old English. The characters in the poem, however, are not English. Rather, they

are from Germanic tribes that inhabited areas in what are now Denmark, Sweden, and other surrounding countries. This selection from the poem records the initial assault on Heorot, a mead hall that is more than just a place to eat and drink: the hall is an attempt to bring civilization to a wild, unknown world. Angered by hearing sounds of feasting and songs of praise to God, the monster Grendel invades the hall at night, slaughtering the men inside. He does so night after night, with no man able to kill him and avenge the deaths. The original text is from about 1000 CE, but the story may have originated as much as four hundred years earlier. This translation is by Seamus Heaney, a poet, playwright, and translator who won the 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature. [Editor's note: line numbers follow the Heaney translation.]

The fortunes of war favored Hrothgar.
Friends and kinsmen flocked to his ranks, 65
young followers, a force that grew
to be a mighty army. So his mind turned
to hall-building: he handed down orders
for men to work on a great mead-hall
meant to be a wonder of the world forever; 70
it would be his throne-room and there he would dispense
his God-given goods to young and old—
but not the common land or people's lives.
Far and wide through the world, I have heard,
orders for work to adorn that wall stead 75
were sent to many peoples. And soon it stood there,
finished and ready, in full view,
the hall of halls. Heorot was the name
he had settled on it, whose utterance was law.
Nor did he renege, but doled out rings 80
and torques at the table. The hall towered,
its gables wide and high and awaiting
a barbarous burning. That doom abided,
but in time it would come: the killer instinct
unleashed among in-laws, the blood-lust rampant. 85

Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark,
nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him

to hear the din of the loud banquet
 every day in the hall, the harp being struck
 and the clear song of a skilled poet 90
 telling with mastery of man's beginnings,
 how the Almighty had made the earth
 a gleaming plain girdled with waters;
 in His splendor He set the sun and moon 95
 to be earth's lamplight, lanterns for men,
 and filled the broad lap of the world
 with branches and leaves; and quickened life
 in every other thing that moved.

So times were pleasant for the people there 100
 until finally one, a fiend out of Hell,
 began to work his evil in the world.
 Grendel was the name of this grim demon
 haunting the marches, marauding round the heath
 and the desolate fens;^o he had dwelt for a time 105
 in misery among the banished monsters,
 Cain's clan, whom the creator had outlawed
 and condemned as outcasts. For the killing of Abel
 the Eternal Lord had exacted a price:
 Cain got no good from committing that murder 110
 because the Almighty made him anathema^o
 and out of the curse of his exile there sprang
 ogres and elves and evil phantoms
 and the giants too who strove with God
 time and again until He gave them their final reward.

So, after nightfall, Grendel set out 115
 for the lofty house, to see how the Ring-Danes
 were settling into it after their drink,
 and there he came upon them, a company of the best
 asleep from their feasting, insensible to pain
 and human sorrow. Suddenly then 120
 the God-cursed brute was creating havoc:
 greedy and grim, he grabbed thirty men
 from their resting places and rushed to his lair,

fens: lowlands covered wholly or partially by water.

anathema: one that is cursed or loathed.

flushed up and inflamed from the raid,
blundering back with the butchered corpses. 125

Then as dawn brightened and the day broke
Grendel's powers of destruction were plain:
their wassail^o was over, they wept to heaven
and mourned under morning. Their mighty prince,
the storied leader, sat stricken and helpless, 130
humiliated by the loss of his guard,
bewildered and stunned, staring aghast
at the demon's trail, in deep distress.

He was numb with grief, but got no respite
for one night later the merciless Grendel 135
struck again with more gruesome murders.
Malignant by nature, he never showed remorse.
It was easy then to meet with a man
shifting himself to a safer distance
to bed in the bothies,^o for who could be blind 140
to the evidence of his eyes, the obviousness
of that hall-watcher's hate? Whoever escaped
kept a weather-eye open and moved away.

So Grendel ruled in defiance of right,
one against all, until the greatest house 145
in the world stood empty, a deserted wall stead.
For twelve winters, seasons of woe,
the lord of the Shieldings^o suffered under
his load of sorrow; and so, before long,
the news was known over the whole world. 150
Sad lays^o were sung about the beset king,
the vicious raids of Grendel,
his long and unrelenting feud,
nothing but war; how he would never
parley or make peace with any Dane 155
nor stop his death-dealing nor pay the death-price.
No counselor could ever expect
fair reparation from those rabid hands.

wassail: a toast to someone's health.

bothies: huts.

Shieldings: or Scyldings, another name for Hrothgar's warriors.

lays: ballads or songs.

All were endangered; young and old
 were hunted down by that dark death-shadow
 who lurked and swooped in the long nights
 on the misty moors; nobody knows
 where these reavers^o from Hell roam on their errands.

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"So Grendel ruled in
 defiance of right,
 One against all, until the
 greatest house
 In the world stood empty."

So Grendel waged his lonely war,
 inflicting constant cruelties on the
 people,
 atrocious hurt. He took over Heorot,
 haunted the glittering hall after dark,
 but the throne itself, the treasure-seat,
 he was kept from approaching; he was
 the Lord's outcast.

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These were hard times, heart-breaking
 for the prince of the Shieldings; powerful counselors,
 the highest in the land, would lend advice,
 plotting how best the bold defenders
 might resist and beat off sudden attacks.

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Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed
 offerings to idols, swore oaths
 that the killer of souls might come to their aid
 and save the people. That was their way,
 their heathenish hope; deep in their hearts

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they remembered Hell. The Almighty Judge
 of good deeds and bad, the Lord God,
 head of the Heavens and High King of the World,
 was unknown to them. Oh, cursed is he
 who in time of trouble had to thrust his soul
 in the fire's embrace, forfeiting help;
 he has nowhere to turn. But blessed is he
 who after death can approach the Lord
 and find friendship in the Father's embrace.

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Understanding the Text

1. Why is Grendel upset by songs of praise to God? Consider his lineage, as a descendant of Cain. How is it fitting that Grendel is part of that lineage?
2. How long does Grendel rule over the hall? At what time of day does he rule? Why is he not able to approach the throne?
3. Since the characters in the story are not Christianized, the poet says, "The Lord God, / Head of the Heavens and the High King of the World, / Was unknown to them" (ll. 181–83). What does the poet say is the result of their not knowing God?

Reflection and Response

4. In your opinion, why does Grendel attack only the mead hall and not the surrounding huts and other lodgings? Why does he attack only at night? Consider what this means about the purpose of his attacks.
5. A key feature of the Germanic tribal culture of *Beowulf* is the concept of *wergild*, in which one must seek revenge for the killing of a fellow member of the tribe. The revenge can be either another killing or receipt of a monetary payment — "the death-price" (l. 156). Since the Danes are unable to kill the monster Grendel or induce him to pay for the deaths, how does he represent a threat not only to their lives but also to their cultural values?
6. Analyze the tension that exists between the Christian poet and the pagan characters of the poem. Examine particularly the criticism the poet launches against the characters who pray at pagan shrines for relief from Grendel. How might the poet use the monster to tell a moral tale?

Making Connections

7. Consider the character of Grendel in light of Stephen T. Asma's "Alexander Fights Monsters in India" (p. 156). How is Grendel similar to the kind of monsters Alexander encounters? Asma specifically mentions *Beowulf* in connection to the idea that "macho monster fights" are "outmoded" today.
8. Read more of *Beowulf* (many texts are available online as well as in libraries) to see how the hero Beowulf ultimately defeats Grendel. Then argue whether or not the modern world still sees the need for heroes who conquer monsters.
9. The popularity of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, written by J. R. R. Tolkien, has led to the creation of an entire genre of its own: an early-medieval fantasy world populated by knights, dragons, and numerous strange creatures, in which good fights against evil. Not surprisingly, Tolkien himself was a scholar of Old English who knew the story of *Beowulf* well. Consider which kinds of actions are praised and admired, and which are condemned, in *Beowulf* and in this new genre. How are the social values and actions of characters in *Beowulf* present, in one form or another, in one of Tolkien's stories or in another story in the same genre (e.g., the HBO series *Game of Thrones*)?