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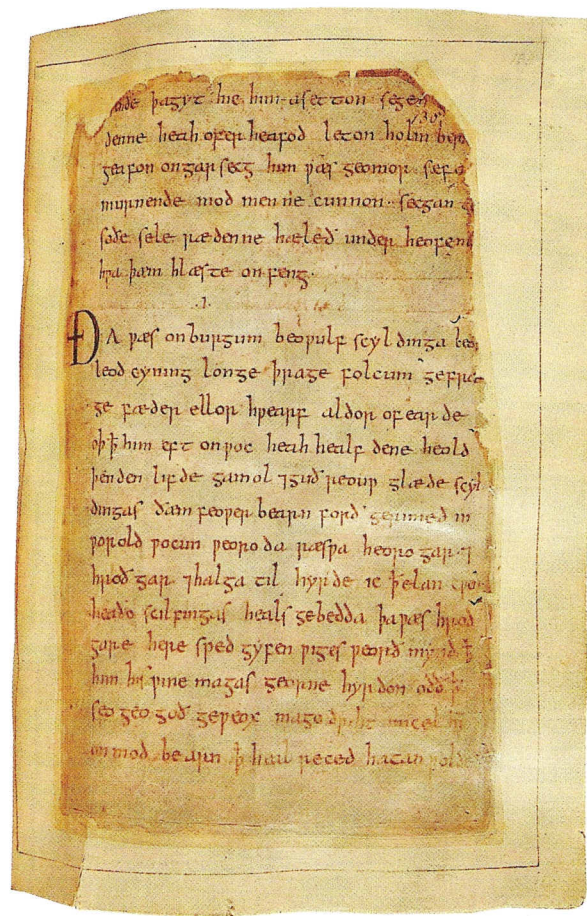
SONGS OF ANCIENT HEROES

from Beowulf
from Gilgamesh
“The Seafarer”

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

—*from Beowulf*, translated by Burton Raffel

Page from the *Beowulf* manuscript (c. 1000). Cotton MS Vitellius A XV, f.133.



Prow of the Oseberg ship.

University Museum of National Antiquities, Oslo, Norway.

By permission of the British Library, London.

Beowulf

Beowulf is to England what Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are to ancient Greece: It is the first great work of the English national literature—the mythical and literary record of a formative stage of English civilization. It is also an epic of the heroic sources of English culture. As such, *Beowulf* uses a host of traditional motifs, or recurring elements, associated with heroic literature all over the world.

The epic tells the story of Beowulf (his name may mean “bear”), a Geat from Sweden who crosses the sea to Denmark in a quest to rescue King Hrothgar from the demonic monster Grendel. Like most early heroic literature, *Beowulf* is oral art. It was handed down, with changes and embellishments, from one minstrel to another. The stories of *Beowulf*, like those of all oral epics, are traditional ones, familiar to the audiences who crowded around the harpist-bards in the communal halls at night. The tales in the *Beowulf*

epic are the stories of dream and legend, of monsters and of god-fashioned weapons, of descents to the underworld and of fights with dragons, of the hero's quest and of a community threatened by the powers of evil.

By the standards of Homer, whose epics run to nearly 15,000 lines, *Beowulf* is relatively short—approximately 3,200 lines. It was composed in Old English, probably in Northumbria in northeast England, sometime between the years 700 and 750. The world it depicts, however, is much older, that of the early sixth century. Much of the poem's material is based on early folk legends—some Celtic, some Scandinavian. Since the scenery described is the coast of Northumbria, not Scandinavia, it has been assumed that the poet who wrote the version that has come down to us was Northumbrian. Given the Christian elements in the epic, this poet may also have been a monk.

The only manuscript we have of *Beowulf* dates from the year 1000 and is now in the British Museum in London. Burned and stained, it was discovered in the eighteenth century: Somehow it had survived Henry VIII's destruction of the monasteries two hundred years earlier.

***Beowulf*: People, Monsters, and Places**

Beowulf: a Geat, son of Edgetho and nephew of Higlac, king of the Geats. Higlac is both Beowulf's feudal lord and his uncle.

Brecca: chief of the Brondings, a tribe, and Beowulf's friend.

Grendel: man-eating monster who lives at the bottom of a foul mere, or mountain lake. His name might be related to the Old Norse *grindill*, meaning "storm," or *grenja*, "to bellow."

Herot: golden guest-hall built by King Hrothgar, the Danish ruler. It was decorated with the antlers of stags; the name means "hart [stag] hall." Scholars think Herot might have been built near Lejre on the coast of Zealand, in Denmark.

Hrothgar: king of the Danes, builder of Herot. He had once befriended Beowulf's father. His father was called Healfdane (which probably means "half Dane"). Hrothgar's name might mean "glory spear" or "spear of triumph."

Unferth: one of Hrothgar's courtiers, reputed to be a skilled warrior. His sword, called Hrunting, is used by Beowulf in a later battle.

Welthow: Hrothgar's wife, queen of the Danes.

Wiglaf: a Geat warrior, one of Beowulf's select band, and the only one to help him in his final fight with the dragon. Wiglaf might be related to Beowulf.



Viking coin minted in England (10th–11th century). Most such coins consist of precious metals extorted from the English as tribute.
British Museum, London.

Make the Connection

The Dragon Slayer

This is a story about a hero from the misty reaches of the English past, a hero who faces violence, horror, and even death to save a people in mortal danger. The epic's events take place many centuries ago, but this story still speaks to people today—perhaps because there are so many people in need of a rescuer, a hero. Beowulf is ancient England's hero. In other times, in other cultures, the hero takes the shape of King Arthur, or Gilgamesh, or Sundiata, or Joan of Arc. In twentieth-century America, the hero may be a real person, like Martin Luther King, Jr., or a fictional character like Shane in the Western novel. This hero-type is the dragon slayer, representing a besieged community facing evil forces that lurk in the cold darkness. And Grendel, the monster lurking in the depths of the lagoon, may represent all those threatening forces.

Quickwrite

Take notes on several contemporary fictional heroes from novels, films, or even comics or television. Pick one of them, and briefly analyze him or her using these questions:



- What sort of evil or oppression does he confront?
- Why does she do it? What's her motivation?
- For whom does he do it?

- What virtues does she represent?

Now discuss some of the heroes you and your classmates chose. Do they all seem to qualify as hero-types, or do some of them fall short in one way or another?

Elements of Literature

The Epic Hero

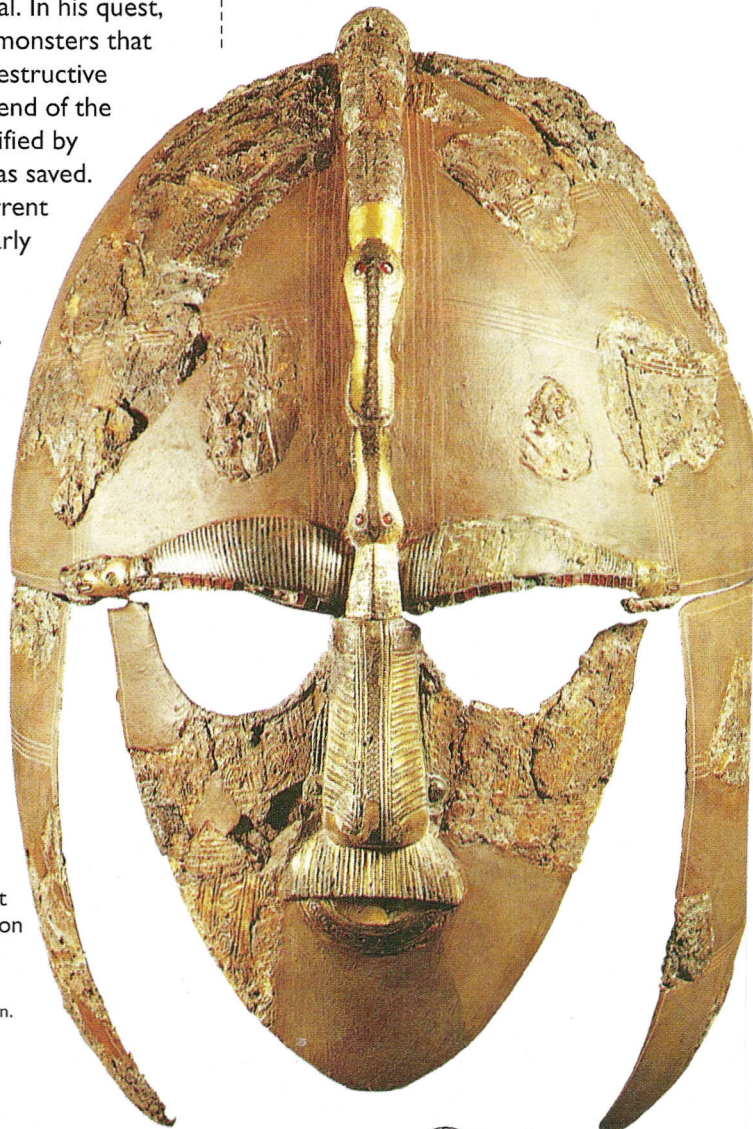
Beowulf, like all epic heroes, has superior physical strength and is supremely ethical. In his quest, he must defeat monsters that embody dark, destructive powers. At the end of the quest, he is glorified by the people he has saved. If you watch current events, particularly about people emerging from years of oppression, you will see this impulse toward glorification still at work. You might also see such glorification in the impressive monuments that are great tourist attractions in Washington, D.C.

Sutton Hoo helmet (7th century). Sutton Hoo ship treasure, Suffolk, England.

British Museum, London.

The **epic hero** is the central figure in a long narrative that reflects the values and heroic ideals of a particular society. An **epic** is a quest story on a grand scale.

For more on the Epic, see the *Handbook of Literary Terms*.



from *Beowulf*

translated by **Burton Raffel**

The Monster Grendel

1

... A powerful monster, living down
In the darkness, growled in pain, impatient
As day after day the music rang
Loud in that hall,^o the harp's rejoicing
5 Call and the poet's clear songs, sung
Of the ancient beginnings of us all, recalling
The Almighty making the earth, shaping
These beautiful plains marked off by oceans,
Then proudly setting the sun and moon
10 To glow across the land and light it;
The corners of the earth were made lovely with trees
And leaves, made quick with life, with each
Of the nations who now move on its face. And then
As now warriors sang of their pleasure:
15 So Hrothgar's men lived happy in his hall
Till the monster stirred, that demon, that fiend,
Grendel, who haunted the moors, the wild
Marshes, and made his home in a hell
Not hell but earth. He was spawned in that slime,
20 Conceived by a pair of those monsters born
Of Cain, murderous creatures banished
By God, punished forever for the crime
Of Abel's death. The Almighty drove
Those demons out, and their exile was bitter,
25 Shut away from men; they split
Into a thousand forms of evil—spirits
And fiends, goblins, monsters, giants,
A brood forever opposing the Lord's
Will, and again and again defeated.

2

30 Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel
Went up to Herot, wondering what the warriors
Would do in that hall when their drinking was done.
He found them sprawled in sleep, suspecting
Nothing, their dreams undisturbed. The monster's
35 Thoughts were as quick as his greed or his claws:
He slipped through the door and there in the silence

4. **hall:** guest-hall or mead-hall.
(Mead is a fermented drink made
from honey, water, yeast, and malt.)
The hall was a central gathering
place where Anglo-Saxon warriors
could feast, listen to a bard's stories,
and sleep in safety.



Animal head from Viking ship (c. 800).
University Museum of National Antiquities,
Oslo, Norway. Photo by Eirik Irgens Johnsen.

Lines have been renumbered and do not correspond with the New American Library edition.

Snatched up thirty men, smashed them
Unknowing in their beds, and ran out with their bodies,
The blood dripping behind him, back
40 To his lair, delighted with his night's slaughter.

At daybreak, with the sun's first light, they saw
How well he had worked, and in that gray morning
Broke their long feast with tears and laments
For the dead. Hrothgar, their lord, sat joyless
45 In Herot, a mighty prince mourning
The fate of his lost friends and companions,
Knowing by its tracks that some demon had torn
His followers apart. He wept, fearing
The beginning might not be the end. And that night
50 Grendel came again, so set
On murder that no crime could ever be enough,
No savage assault quench his lust
For evil. Then each warrior tried
To escape him, searched for rest in different
55 Beds, as far from Herot as they could find,
Seeing how Grendel hunted when they slept.
Distance was safety; the only survivors
Were those who fled him. Hate had triumphed.

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

So mankind's enemy continued his crimes,
80 Killing as often as he could, coming
Alone, bloodthirsty and horrible. Though he lived



Dragonhead from a Viking horse collar (detail) (10th century). Denmark.
National Museum, Copenhagen.

WORDS TO OWN

laments (lə·ments') *n. pl.*: cries of grief.

reparation (rep'ə·rā'shən) *n.*: payment to compensate for wrongdoing.

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

3

So the living sorrow of Healfdane's son°
 105 Simmered, bitter and fresh, and no wisdom
 Or strength could break it: That agony hung
 On king and people alike, harsh
 And unending, violent and cruel, and evil.
 In his far-off home Beowulf, Higlac's
 110 Follower° and the strongest of the Geats—greater
 And stronger than anyone anywhere in this world—
 Heard how Grendel filled nights with horror
 And quickly commanded a boat fitted out,
 Proclaiming that he'd go to that famous king,
 115 Would sail across the sea to Hrothgar,
 Now when help was needed. None
 Of the wise ones regretted his going, much
 As he was loved by the Geats: The omens were good,
 And they urged the adventure on. So Beowulf
 120 Chose the mightiest men he could find,
 The bravest and best of the Geats, fourteen
 In all, and led them down to their boat;
 He knew the sea, would point the prow°
 Straight to that distant Danish shore. . . .

104. **Healfdane's son:** Hrothgar.

110. **Higlac's follower:** Higlac is Beowulf's uncle and feudal lord.

123. **prow** (prou): front part of a boat.

WORDS TO OWN

solace (säl'is) *n.*: peace.

Invasion of Danes under Hinguar (Ingvar) and Hubba. From *Life, Passion, and Miracles of St. Edmund* (c. 1130). England.



The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

Beowulf arrives in Denmark and is directed to Herot, the mead-hall of King Hrothgar. The king sends Wulfgar, one of his thanes (or feudal lords), to greet the visitors.

The Arrival of the Hero

4

125 . . . Then Wulfgar went to the door and addressed

The waiting seafarers with soldier's words:

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

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

Beowulf arose, with his men

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

“Hail, Hrothgar!

Higlac is my cousin° and my king; the days
Of my youth have been filled with glory. Now Grendel's
Name has echoed in our land: Sailors
145 Have brought us stories of Herot, the best
Of all mead-halls, deserted and useless when the moon
Hangs in skies the sun had lit,
Light and life fleeing together.
My people have said, the wisest, most knowing
150 And best of them, that my duty was to go to the Danes'
Great king. They have seen my strength for themselves,
Have watched me rise from the darkness of war,
Dripping with my enemies' blood. I drove
Five great giants into chains, chased
155 All of that race from the earth. I swam
In the blackness of night, hunting monsters
Out of the ocean, and killing them one
By one; death was my errand and the fate
They had earned. Now Grendel and I are called
160 Together, and I've come. Grant me, then,
Lord and protector of this noble place,
A single request! I have come so far,
Oh shelterer of warriors and your people's loved friend,
That this one favor you should not refuse me—
165 That I, alone and with the help of my men,
Máy purge all evil from this hall. I have heard,
Too, that the monster's scorn of men
Is so great that he needs no weapons and fears none.
Nor will I. My lord Higlac
170 Might think less of me if I let my sword
Go where my feet were afraid to, if I hid
Behind some broad linden shield:° My hands
Alone shall fight for me, struggle for life
Against the monster. God must decide
175 Who will be given to death's cold grip.
Grendel's plan, I think, will be

139. **mail shirt:** armored garment
made of interlocking metal rings.
140. **smith's:** metalworker's.

142. **cousin:** any relative.

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

What it has been before, to invade this hall
 And gorge his belly with our bodies. If he can,
 If he can. And I think, if my time will have come,
 180 There'll be nothing to mourn over, no corpse to prepare
 For its grave: Grendel will carry our bloody
 Flesh to the moors, crunch on our bones,
 And smear torn scraps of our skin on the walls
 Of his den. No, I expect no Danes
 185 Will fret about sewing our shrouds,^o if he wins.
 And if death does take me, send the hammered
 Mail of my armor to Higlac, return
 The inheritance I had from Hrethel,^o and he
 From Wayland.^o Fate will unwind as it must!"

5

190 Hrothgar replied, protector of the Danes:
 "Beowulf, you've come to us in friendship, and because
 Of the reception your father found at our court.
 Edgetho had begun a bitter feud,
 Killing Hathlaf, a Wulfing warrior:^o
 195 Your father's countrymen were afraid of war,
 If he returned to his home, and they turned him away.
 Then he traveled across the curving waves
 To the land of the Danes. I was new to the throne,
 Then, a young man ruling this wide
 200 Kingdom and its golden city: Hergar,
 My older brother, a far better man
 Than I, had died and dying made me,
 Second among Healfdane's sons, first
 In this nation. I bought the end of Edgetho's
 205 Quarrel, sent ancient treasures through the ocean's
 Furrows to the Wulfings; your father swore
 He'd keep that peace. My tongue grows heavy,
 And my heart, when I try to tell you what Grendel
 Has brought us, the damage he's done, here
 210 In this hall. You see for yourself how much smaller
 Our ranks have become, and can guess what we've lost
 To his terror. Surely the Lord Almighty
 Could stop his madness, smother his lust!
 How many times have my men, glowing
 215 With courage drawn from too many cups
 Of ale, sworn to stay after dark
 And stem that horror with a sweep of their swords.
 And then, in the morning, this mead-hall glittering
 With new light would be drenched with blood, the benches
 220 Stained red, the floors, all wet from that fiend's
 Savage assault—and my soldiers would be fewer
 Still, death taking more and more.
 But to table, Beowulf, a banquet in your honor:

185. shrouds: cloths used to wrap a body for burial.

188. Hrethel: Beowulf's grandfather, former king of the Geats.

189. Wayland: a smith celebrated for his skill in making swords and mail shirts.

194. Wulfing warrior: The Wulfings were a Germanic tribe. Hrothgar's queen might have been a Wulfing.

Let us toast your victories, and talk of the future.”

225 Then Hrothgar’s men gave places to the Geats,
Yielded benches to the brave visitors,
And led them to the feast. The keeper of the mead
Came carrying out the carved flasks,
And poured that bright sweetness. A poet
230 Sang, from time to time, in a clear
Pure voice. Danes and visiting Geats
Celebrated as one, drank and rejoiced.

Unferth’s Challenge

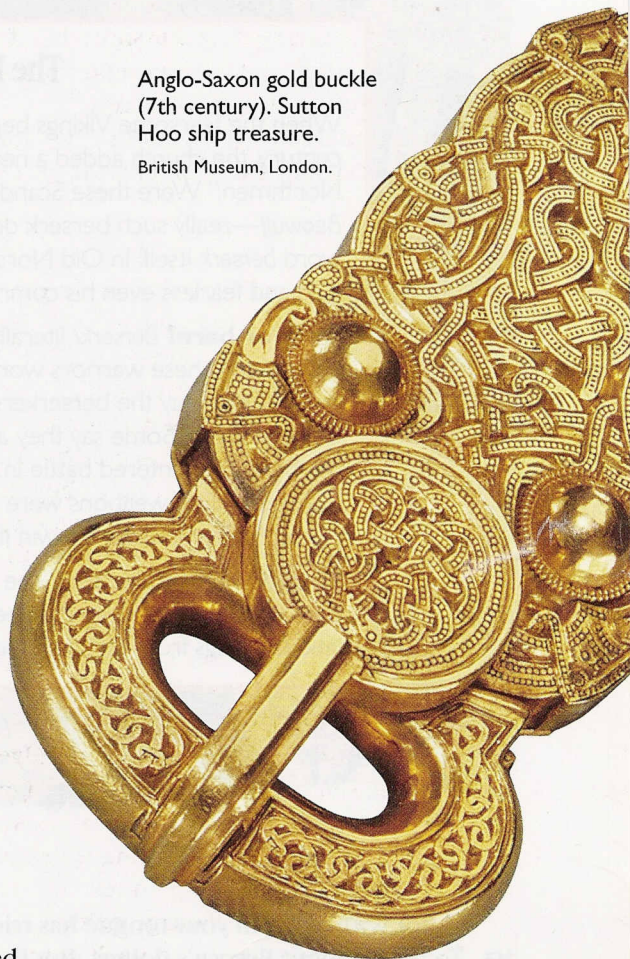
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Unferth spoke, Ecglaf’s son,
Who sat at Hrothgar’s feet, spoke harshly
235 And sharp (vexed by Beowulf’s adventure,
By their visitor’s courage, and angry that anyone
In Denmark or anywhere on earth had ever
Acquired glory and fame greater
Than his own):
“You’re Beowulf, are you—the same
240 Boastful fool who fought a swimming
Match with Brecca, both of you daring
And young and proud, exploring the deepest
Seas, risking your lives for no reason
But the danger? All older and wiser heads warned you
245 Not to, but no one could check such pride.
With Brecca at your side you swam along
The sea-paths, your swift-moving hands pulling you
Over the ocean’s face. Then winter
Churned through the water, the waves ran you
250 As they willed, and you struggled seven long nights
To survive. And at the end victory was his,
Not yours. The sea carried him close
To his home, to southern Norway, near
The land of the Brondings, where he ruled and was loved,
255 Where his treasure was piled and his strength protected
His towns and his people. He’d promised to outswim you:
Bonstan’s son^o made that boast ring true.
You’ve been lucky in your battles, Beowulf, but I think
Your luck may change if you challenge Grendel,
260 Staying a whole night through in this hall,
Waiting where that fiercest of demons can find you.”

Beowulf answered, Edgeth’s great son:

“Ah! Unferth, my friend, your face

Anglo-Saxon gold buckle
(7th century). Sutton
Hoo ship treasure.
British Museum, London.



257. Bonstan’s son: Brecca.

WORDS TO OWN

vexed (vekst) *adj.*: highly annoyed.



LITERATURE AND HISTORY

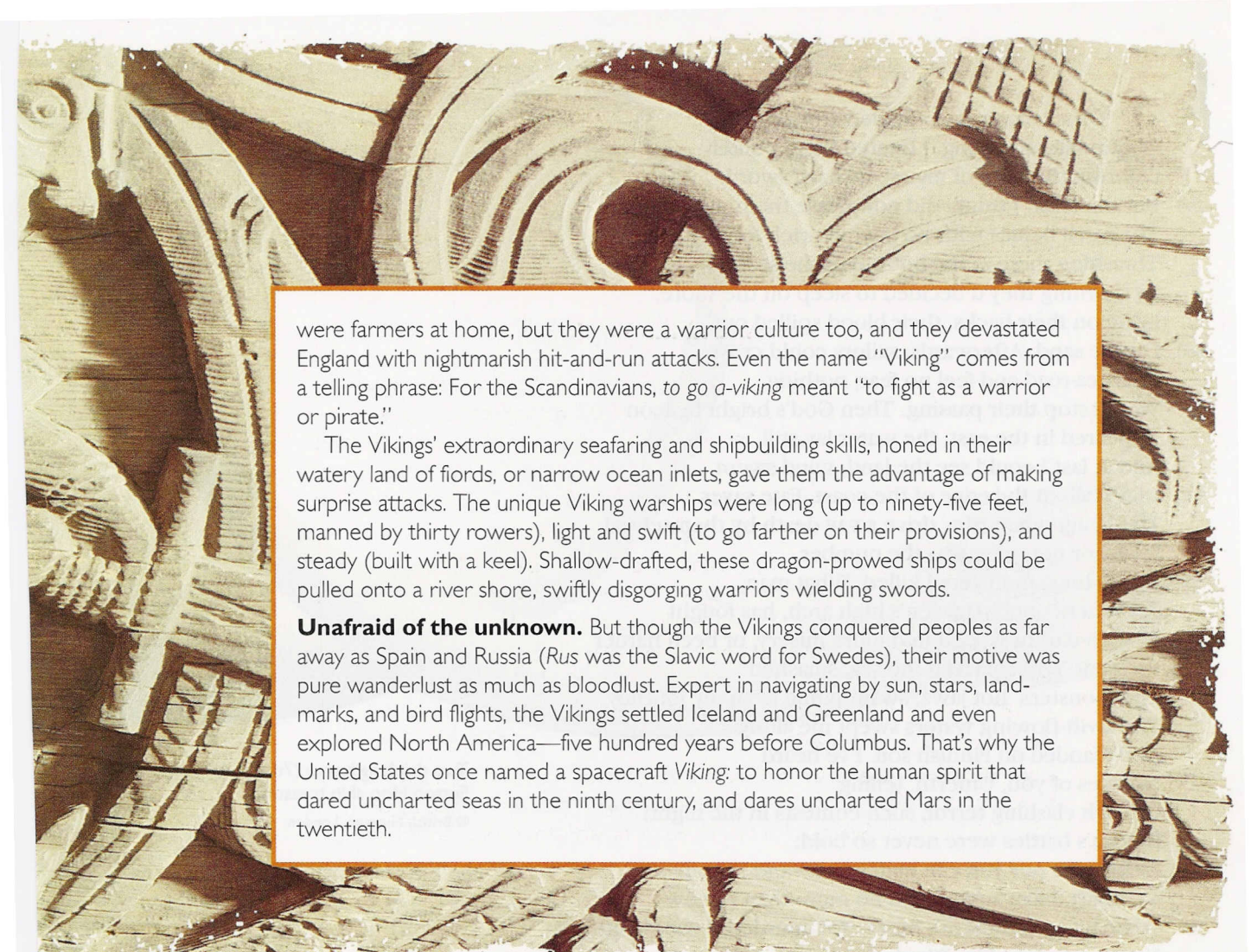
The Fury of the Northmen

When the fearsome Vikings began raiding England at the end of the eighth century, the church added a new prayer: "God, deliver us from the fury of the Northmen." Were these Scandinavian warriors—descended from the peoples of *Beowulf*—really such berserk destroyers? The fiercest ones were, indicated by the word *berserk* itself: In Old Norse, a *berserkr* was a "frenzied Norse warrior," so wild and fearless even his comrades kept clear.

Bear or bare? *Berserkr* literally means either "bear shirt" or "bare shirt," suggesting that these warriors wore bearskins or perhaps fought "bare"—without armor. Some say the berserkers were religious madmen, followers of Odin, god of death and war. Some say they ate mind-altering plants. Both may be true, because the berserker entered battle in a kind of fit, biting his shield, taunting death, and, like *Beowulf*, "If weapons were useless he'd use / His hands. . . . So fame / Comes to the men who mean to win it / And care about nothing else!" (lines 609–612).

Dragons from the sea. The Viking Age spanned the ninth through eleventh centuries, the European continent, and the Atlantic Ocean. Pushed by overpopulation, Vikings from Sweden, Norway, and Denmark struck out for new land. They

- Is hot with ale, and your tongue has tried
265 To tell us about Brecca's doings. But the truth
Is simple: No man swims in the sea
As I can, no strength is a match for mine.
As boys, Brecca and I had boasted—
We were both too young to know better—that we'd risk
270 Our lives far out at sea, and so
We did. Each of us carried a naked
Sword, prepared for whales or the swift
Sharp teeth and beaks of needlefish.
He could never leave me behind, swim faster
275 Across the waves than I could, and I
Had chosen to remain close to his side.
I remained near him for five long nights,



were farmers at home, but they were a warrior culture too, and they devastated England with nightmarish hit-and-run attacks. Even the name “Viking” comes from a telling phrase: For the Scandinavians, *to go a-viking* meant “to fight as a warrior or pirate.”

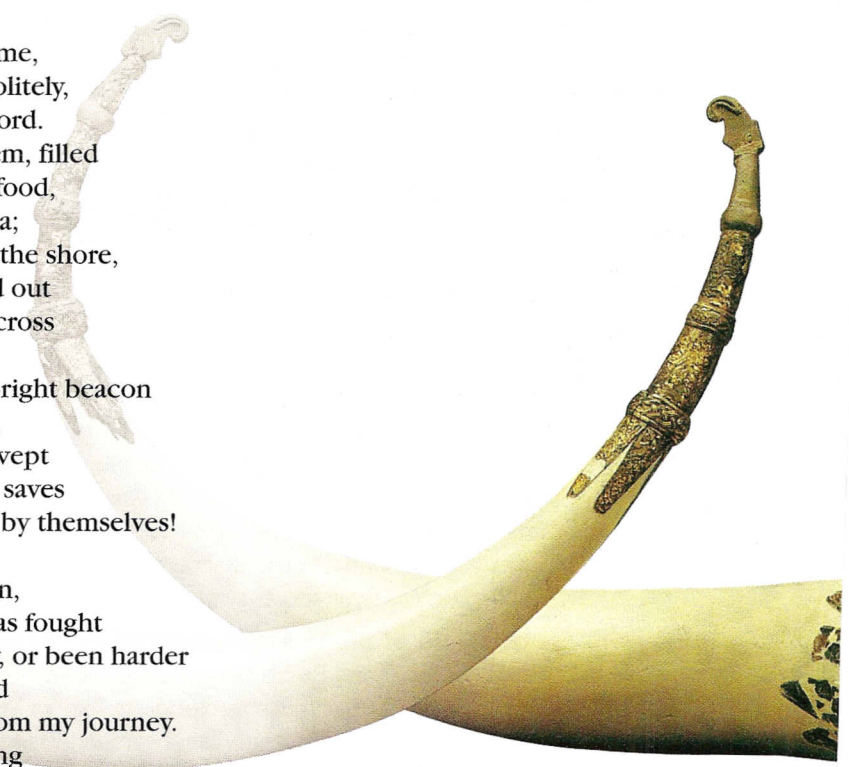
The Vikings' extraordinary seafaring and shipbuilding skills, honed in their watery land of fiords, or narrow ocean inlets, gave them the advantage of making surprise attacks. The unique Viking warships were long (up to ninety-five feet, manned by thirty rowers), light and swift (to go farther on their provisions), and steady (built with a keel). Shallow-drafted, these dragon-prowed ships could be pulled onto a river shore, swiftly disgorging warriors wielding swords.

Unafraid of the unknown. But though the Vikings conquered peoples as far away as Spain and Russia (*Rus* was the Slavic word for Swedes), their motive was pure wanderlust as much as bloodlust. Expert in navigating by sun, stars, landmarks, and bird flights, the Vikings settled Iceland and Greenland and even explored North America—five hundred years before Columbus. That's why the United States once named a spacecraft *Viking*: to honor the human spirit that dared uncharted seas in the ninth century, and dares uncharted Mars in the twentieth.

Universitetets Oldsaksamling, Oslo.

Until a flood swept us apart;
The frozen sea surged around me,
280 It grew dark, the wind turned bitter, blowing
From the north, and the waves were savage. Creatures
Who sleep deep in the sea were stirred
Into life—and the iron hammered links
Of my mail shirt, these shining bits of metal
285 Woven across my breast, saved me
From death. A monster seized me, drew me
Swiftly toward the bottom, swimming with its claws
Tight in my flesh. But fate let me
Find its heart with my sword, hack myself
290 Free; I fought that beast's last battle,
Left it floating lifeless in the sea.

“Other monsters crowded around me,
 Continually attacking. I treated them politely,
 Offering the edge of my razor-sharp sword.
 295 But the feast, I think, did not please them, filled
 Their evil bellies with no banquet-rich food,
 Thrashing there at the bottom of the sea;
 By morning they’d decided to sleep on the shore,
 Lying on their backs, their blood spilled out
 300 On the sand. Afterwards, sailors could cross
 That sea-road and feel no fear; nothing
 Would stop their passing. Then God’s bright beacon
 Appeared in the east, the water lay still,
 And at last I could see the land, wind-swept
 305 Cliff-walls at the edge of the coast. Fate saves
 The living when they drive away death by themselves!
 Lucky or not, nine was the number
 Of sea-huge monsters I killed. What man,
 Anywhere under Heaven’s high arch, has fought
 310 In such darkness, endured more misery, or been harder
 Pressed? Yet I survived the sea, smashed
 The monsters’ hot jaws, swam home from my journey.
 The swift-flowing waters swept me along
 And I landed on Finnish soil. I’ve heard
 315 No tales of you, Unferth, telling
 Of such clashing terror, such contests in the night!
 Brecca’s battles were never so bold;
 Neither he nor you can match me—and I mean
 No boast, have announced no more than I know
 320 To be true. And there’s more: You murdered your brothers,
 Your own close kin. Words and bright wit
 Won’t help your soul; you’ll suffer hell’s fires,
 Unferth, forever tormented. Ecglaf’s
 Proud son, if your hands were as hard, your heart
 325 As fierce as you think it, no fool would dare
 To raid your hall, ruin Herot
 And oppress its prince, as Grendel has done.
 But he’s learned that terror is his alone,
 Discovered he can come for your people with no fear
 330 Of reprisal; he’s found no fighting, here,
 But only food, only delight.
 He murders as he likes, with no mercy, gorges
 And feasts on your flesh, and expects no trouble,
 No quarrel from the quiet Danes. Now
 335 The Geats will show him courage, soon



Two drinking horns (7th century).
Sutton Hoo ship treasure.

© British Museum, London.

WORDS TO OWN

reprisal (ri·pri'zəl) *n.*: punishment in return for an injury.

He can test his strength in battle. And when the sun
Comes up again, opening another
Bright day from the south, anyone in Denmark
May enter this hall: That evil will be gone!"

340 Hrothgar, gray-haired and brave, sat happily
Listening, the famous ring-giver sure,
At last, that Grendel could be killed; he believed
In Beowulf's bold strength and the firmness of his spirit.

There was the sound of laughter, and the cheerful clanking
345 Of cups, and pleasant words. Then Welthow,
Hrothgar's gold-ringed queen, greeted
The warriors; a noble woman who knew
What was right, she raised a flowing cup
To Hrothgar first, holding it high

350 For the lord of the Danes to drink, wishing him
Joy in that feast. The famous king
Drank with pleasure and blessed their banquet.
Then Welthow went from warrior to warrior,

Pouring a portion from the jeweled cup
355 For each, till the bracelet-wearing queen
Had carried the mead-cup among them and it was Beowulf's
Turn to be served. She saluted the Geats'

Great prince, thanked God for answering her prayers,
For allowing her hands the happy duty

360 Of offering mead to a hero who would help
Her afflicted people. He drank what she poured,
Edgeth's brave son, then assured the Danish
Queen that his heart was firm and his hands
Ready:

"When we crossed the sea, my comrades
365 And I, I already knew that all
My purpose was this: to win the good will
Of your people or die in battle, pressed
In Grendel's fierce grip. Let me live in greatness
And courage, or here in this hall welcome
My death!"

370 Welthow was pleased with his words,
His bright-tongued boasts; she carried them back
To her lord, walked nobly across to his side.

The feast went on, laughter and music
And the brave words of warriors celebrating
375 Their delight. Then Hrothgar rose, Healfdane's
Son, heavy with sleep; as soon

As the sun had gone, he knew that Grendel
Would come to Herot, would visit that hall
When night had covered the earth with its net
380 And the shapes of darkness moved black and silent
Through the world. Hrothgar's warriors rose with him.

He went to Beowulf, embraced the Geats'
Brave prince, wished him well, and hoped

That Herot would be his to command. And then
He declared:

385 “No one strange to this land
Has ever been granted what I’ve given you,
No one in all the years of my rule.
Make this best of all mead-halls yours, and then
Keep it free of evil, fight
390 With glory in your heart! Purge Herot
And your ship will sail home with its treasure-holds full.” . . .

*The feast ends. Beowulf and his men take the place of
Hrothgar’s followers and lie down to sleep in Herot.
Beowulf, however, is wakeful, eager to meet his enemy.*

The Battle with Grendel

8

Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty
Hills and bogs, bearing God’s hatred,
Grendel came, hoping to kill
395 Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot.
He moved quickly through the cloudy night,
Up from his swampland, sliding silently
Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited Hrothgar’s
Home before, knew the way—
400 But never, before nor after that night,
Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception
So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless,
Straight to the door, then snapped it open,
Tore its iron fasteners with a touch,
405 And rushed angrily over the threshold.
He strode quickly across the inlaid
Floor, snarling and fierce: His eyes
Gleamed in the darkness, burned with a gruesome
Light. Then he stopped, seeing the hall
410 Crowded with sleeping warriors, stuffed
With rows of young soldiers resting together.
And his heart laughed, he relished the sight,
Intended to tear the life from those bodies
By morning; the monster’s mind was hot
415 With the thought of food and the feasting his belly
Would soon know. But fate, that night, intended
Grendel to gnaw the broken bones
Of his last human supper. Human
Eyes were watching his evil steps,
420 Waiting to see his swift hard claws.

Bronze plaque showing a
warrior killing a monster.



Satens Historiska Museer, Stockholm.

Grendel snatched at the first Geat
 He came to, ripped him apart, cut
 His body to bits with powerful jaws,
 Drank the blood from his veins, and bolted
 425 Him down, hands and feet; death
 And Grendel's great teeth came together,
 Snapping life shut. Then he stepped to another
 Still body, clutched at Beowulf with his claws,
 Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful sleeper
 430 —And was instantly seized himself, claws
 Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm.
 That shepherd of evil, guardian of crime,
 Knew at once that nowhere on earth
 Had he met a man whose hands were harder;
 435 His mind was flooded with fear—but nothing
 Could take his talons and himself from that tight
 Hard grip. Grendel's one thought was to run
 From Beowulf, flee back to his marsh and hide there:
 This was a different Herot than the hall he had emptied.
 440 But Higlac's follower remembered his final
 Boast and, standing erect, stopped
 The monster's flight, fastened those claws
 In his fists till they cracked, clutched Grendel
 Closer. The infamous killer fought
 445 For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,
 Desiring nothing but escape; his claws
 Had been caught, he was trapped. That trip to Herot
 Was a miserable journey for the writhing monster!
 The high hall rang, its roof boards swayed,
 450 And Danes shook with terror. Down
 The aisles the battle swept, angry
 And wild. Herot trembled, wonderfully
 Built to withstand the blows, the struggling
 Great bodies beating at its beautiful walls;
 455 Shaped and fastened with iron, inside
 And out, artfully worked, the building
 Stood firm. Its benches rattled, fell .
 To the floor, gold-covered boards grating
 As Grendel and Beowulf battled across them.
 460 Hrothgar's wise men had fashioned Herot
 To stand forever; only fire,
 They had planned, could shatter what such skill had put
 Together, swallow in hot flames such splendor
 Of ivory and iron and wood. Suddenly
 465 The sounds changed, the Danes started
 In new terror, cowering in their beds as the terrible
 Screams of the Almighty's enemy sang
 In the darkness, the horrible shrieks of pain
 And defeat, the tears torn out of Grendel's

Silver and gold brooch with amber
 ornaments (9th century). Roscrea,
 County Tipperary.

National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.



470 Taut throat, hell's captive caught in the arms
Of him who of all the men on earth
Was the strongest.

9

That mighty protector of men
Meant to hold the monster till its life
Leaped out, knowing the fiend was no use
To anyone in Denmark. All of Beowulf's
475 Band had jumped from their beds, ancestral
Swords raised and ready, determined
To protect their prince if they could. Their courage
Was great but all wasted: They could hack at Grendel
480 From every side, trying to open
A path for his evil soul, but their points
Could not hurt him, the sharpest and hardest iron
Could not scratch at his skin, for that sin-stained demon
Had bewitched all men's weapons, laid spells
485 That blunted every mortal man's blade.
And yet his time had come, his days
Were over, his death near; down
To hell he would go, swept groaning and helpless
To the waiting hands of still worse fiends.
490 Now he discovered—once the afflictor
Of men, tormentor of their days—what it meant
To feud with Almighty God: Grendel
Saw that his strength was deserting him, his claws
Bound fast, Higlac's brave follower tearing at
495 His hands. The monster's hatred rose higher,
But his power had gone. He twisted in pain,
And the bleeding sinews deep in his shoulder
Snapped, muscle and bone split
And broke. The battle was over, Beowulf
500 Had been granted new glory: Grendel escaped,
But wounded as he was could flee to his den,
His miserable hole at the bottom of the marsh,
Only to die, to wait for the end
Of all his days. And after that bloody
505 Combat the Danes laughed with delight.
He who had come to them from across the sea,
Bold and strong-minded, had driven affliction
Off, purged Herot clean. He was happy,
Now, with that night's fierce work; the Danes
510 Had been served as he'd boasted he'd serve them; Beowulf,

Eagle shield ornament (7th century).
Sutton Hoo ship treasure.
British Museum, London.



WORDS TO OWN

taut (tôt) *adj.*: stretched tight.

sinews (sin'yōōz) *n. pl.*: tendons or connective tissues.

A prince of the Geats, had killed Grendel,
Ended the grief, the sorrow, the suffering
Forced on Hrothgar's helpless people
By a bloodthirsty fiend. No Dane doubted
515 The victory, for the proof, hanging high
From the rafters where Beowulf had hung it, was the monster's
Arm, claw and shoulder and all.

10

And then, in the morning, crowds surrounded
Herot, warriors coming to that hall
520 From faraway lands, princes and leaders
Of men hurrying to behold the monster's
Great staggering tracks. They gaped with no sense
Of sorrow, felt no regret for his suffering,
Went tracing his bloody footprints, his beaten
525 And lonely flight, to the edge of the lake
Where he'd dragged his corpselike way, doomed
And already weary of his vanishing life.
The water was bloody, steaming and boiling
In horrible pounding waves, heat
530 Sucked from his magic veins; but the swirling
Surf had covered his death, hidden
Deep in murky darkness his miserable
End, as hell opened to receive him.

Then old and young rejoiced, turned back
535 From that happy pilgrimage, mounted their hard-hooved
Horses, high-spirited stallions, and rode them
Slowly toward Herot again, retelling
Beowulf's bravery as they jogged along.
And over and over they swore that nowhere
540 On earth or under the spreading sky
Or between the seas, neither south nor north,
Was there a warrior worthier to rule over men.
(But no one meant Beowulf's praise to belittle
Hrothgar, their kind and gracious king!) . . .

Grendel's monstrous mother, in grief for her son, next attacks Herot, and in her dripping claws she carries off one man—Hrothgar's closest friend. The monster also carries off Grendel's arm, which Beowulf had hung high from the rafters. Beowulf is awakened and called for again. In one of



Detail of picture stone from Larbro, Gotland, Sweden.

WORDS TO OWN

murky (mɜrk'ē) *adj.*: shadowy.

pilgrimage (pil'grim·ij) *n.*: journey made to a place of religious or historical interest.

- In his novel *Grendel* (1971), the contemporary American writer John Gardner (1933–1982) retells part of *Beowulf* from the point of view of the monster. In this excerpt, Grendel tells his own version of one of his raids on Hrothgar’s hall.

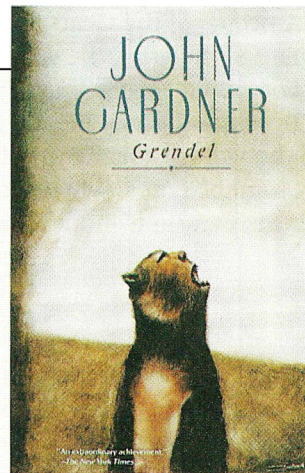
from *Grendel*

John Gardner

I sigh, sink into the silence, and cross it like wind. Behind my back, at the world’s end, my pale slightly glowing fat mother sleeps on, old, sick at heart, in our dingy underground room. Life-bloated, baffled, long-suffering hag. Guilty, she imagines, of some unremembered, perhaps ancestral crime. (She must have some human in her.) Not that she thinks. Not that she dissects and ponders the dusty mechanical bits of her miserable life’s curse. She clutches at me in her sleep as if to crush me. I break away. “Why are we here?” I used to ask her. “Why do we stand this putrid, stinking hole?” She trembles at my words. Her fat lips shake. “Don’t ask!” her wiggling claws implore. (She never

speaks.) “Don’t ask!” It must be some terrible secret, I used to think. I’d give her a crafty squint. She’ll tell me, in time, I thought. But she told me nothing. I waited on. That was before the old dragon, calm as winter, unveiled the truth. He was not a friend.

And so I come through trees and towns to the lights of Hrothgar’s meadhall. I am no stranger here. A respected guest. Eleven years now and going on twelve I have come up this clean-mown central hill, dark shadow out of the woods below, and have knocked politely on the high oak door, bursting its hinges and sending the shock of my greeting inward like a cold blast out of a cave. “Grendel!” they



Courtesy of Alfred A. Knopf.

the most famous verses in the epic, the old king describes where Grendel and his mother live.

11

- 545 . . . “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
550 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,

squeak, and I smile like exploding spring. The old Shaper, a man I cannot help but admire, goes out the back window with his harp at a single bound, though blind as a bat. The drunk-est of Hrothgar's thanes come reeling and clanking down from their wall-hung beds, all shouting their meady, outrageous boasts, their heavy swords aswirl like eagles' wings. "Woe, woe, woe!" cries Hrothgar, hoary with winters, peeking in, wide-eyed, from his bedroom in back. His wife, looking in behind him, makes a scene. The thanes in the meadhall blow out the lights and cover the wide stone fireplace with shields. I laugh, crumple over; I can't help myself. In the darkness, I alone see clear as day. While they squeal and screech and bump into each other, I silently sack up my dead and withdraw to the woods. I eat and laugh and eat until I can barely walk, my chest-hair matted with dribbled blood, and then the roosters on the hill crow, and dawn comes over the roofs of the houses, and all at once I am filled with gloom again.

"This is some punishment sent us," I hear them bawling from the hill.

My head aches. Morning nails my eyes.

"Some god is angry," I hear a woman keen.

"The people of Scyld and Herogar and Hrothgar are mired in sin!"

My belly rumbles, sick on their sour meat. I crawl through bloodstained leaves to the eaves of the forest, and there peak out. The dogs fall silent at the edge of my spell, and where the king's hall surmounts the town, the blind old Shaper, harp clutched tight to his fragile chest, stares futilely down, straight at me. Otherwise nothing. Pigs root dully at the posts of a wooden fence. A rumple-horned ox lies chewing in dew and shade. A few men, lean, wearing animal skins, look up at the gables of the king's hall, or at the vultures circling casually beyond. Hrothgar says nothing, hoarfrost-bearded, his features cracked and crazed. Inside, I hear the people praying—whimpering, whining, mumbling, pleading—to their numerous sticks and stones. He doesn't go in. The king has lofty theories of his own.

"Theories," I whisper to the bloodstained ground. So the dragon once spoke. ("They'd map out roads through Hell with their crackpot theories!") I recall his laugh.)

Then the groaning and praying stop, and on the side of the hill the dirge-slow shoveling begins. . . .

- 555 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
- 560 A pleasant spot! When the wind stirs
And storms, waves splash toward the sky,
As dark as the air, as black as the rain
That the heavens weep. Our only help,
Again, lies with you. Grendel's mother
- 565 Is hidden in her terrible home, in a place
You've not seen. Seek it, if you dare! Save us,
Once more, and again twisted gold,
Heaped-up ancient treasure, will reward you
For the battle you win!"

Gundestrup cauldron.
National Museum, Copenhagen.



First Thoughts

1. What **images** came to your mind as you read this part of the epic? Which image was most vivid?

Shaping Interpretations

2. In what specific ways does Herot **contrast** with the place where Grendel lives?
3. In lines 3–13, the poet describes the bard's songs in Hrothgar's hall. How does the content of the songs **contrast** with Grendel and his world?

Reading Check

- a. Why does Herot remain empty for twelve years?
- b. Why doesn't Grendel touch King Hrothgar's throne?
- c. What do Hrothgar and his council do to try to save his guest-hall?
- d. How is Beowulf taunted by the jealous Unferth? How does Beowulf reply?
- e. Describe what happens to Grendel when he raids Herot and finds Beowulf in charge.

4. What significance can you see in the fact that Grendel attacks at night? What **images** describing Grendel might associate him with death or darkness?
5. Why do you think Grendel hates Herot? What **symbolic** meaning might underlie the confrontation between Grendel and Hrothgar?
6. Consider the tale-within-a-tale about Beowulf's swimming match with Brecca. What does this story contribute to your understanding of Beowulf's heroic **character** and of his powers?
7. Why do you think it's important to Beowulf and to his image as an **epic hero** that he meet Grendel without a weapon? What **symbolism** do you see in the uselessness of human weapons against Grendel?
8. What do you think of John Gardner's depiction of Grendel in the **Connections** on page 36? Do you feel any sympathy for Grendel? Why or why not?

Connecting with the Text

9. Review the notes you made before you read this part of *Beowulf*. Does Beowulf remind you of any heroes from history, current events, books, television, or movies? Who? What similarities do you notice among them? Just as important, how are they different?



Sigurd kills the dragon. Detail of carved portal of Hylestad stave church (12th century).