

# from Beowulf

Epic Poem by the Beowulf Poet

Translated by Burton Raffel

## Where do MONSTERS lurk?

*Beowulf* presents a dramatic battle between an evil monster and a legendary hero. Unlike the monsters in *Beowulf*, the monsters in our own world are often difficult to recognize. Evil hides in unexpected places: behind a smiling face, between the lines of a law, in otherwise noble-sounding words.

**PRESENT** What does evil mean to you? Write your own definition of evil, and then list some examples of real-life monsters. Present your ideas to a group of classmates.

### Definition of Evil

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### Examples of Monsters

1. Jack the Ripper

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2. 

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3. 

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4. 

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## Text Analysis: Characteristics of an Epic

An **epic** is a long narrative poem that depicts the adventures of a great hero. *Beowulf* is the only surviving epic poem written in Old English—the language of the people of the Anglo-Saxon period who lived in England prior to 1100 A.D. We do not know exactly when *Beowulf* was composed. However, the legendary events it describes took place in Scandinavia during the 500s. The chart below lists the characteristics of an epic.

Epic	
The Hero	The Poem
is of noble birth or high social position	uses formal <b>diction</b> (word choice and sentence structure) and a serious <b>tone</b> (the writer's attitude toward the subject)
embodies <b>character traits</b> that reflect the ideals of a society	reflects <b>universal themes</b> (themes common to most cultures and times)

As you read *Beowulf*, look for the characteristics of an epic. Notes in the side column will help you identify these characteristics and analyze them to understand the poem's larger meaning.

## Reading Strategy: Reading Old English Poetry

Epics were meant to be recited or sung for a live audience. Old English poetry is marked by a strong rhythm that is easy to chant or sing. Here are some techniques used in Old English poetry.

Technique	Example
<b>Alliteration</b> is the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginnings of words. Alliteration adds unity to lines of poetry and emphasizes important ideas in the poem.	So mankind's enemy <u>co</u> ntinued his <u>cr</u> imes.
A <b>caesura</b> (sĭ-zhŏŕ'e) is a pause dividing each line, with each part having two accented syllables. A caesura maintains the rhythm of lines.	He <u>tó</u> ok w <u>h</u> at h <u>e</u> w <u>á</u> nt <u>ě</u> d, // <u>á</u> ll the <u>t</u> re <u>á</u> s <u>u</u> res
A <b>kenning</b> is a metaphorical phrase that takes the place of a noun or a name. A kenning suggests certain traits of characters.	<i>mankind's enemy</i> used in place of <i>Grendel</i>

As you read *Beowulf*, notes in the margin will prompt you to find examples of these techniques and consider their effect on the rhythm and meaning of the poem.

## Vocabulary in Context

Note: Words are listed in the order in which they appear in the poem.

**lair** (lâr) *n.* the den or resting place of a wild animal

*Most people would be terrified to enter the monster's lair.*

**affliction** (ə-flĭk'shən) *n.* a force that oppresses or causes suffering

*Fear of heights can be a terrible affliction.*

**talon** (tăl'ən) *n.* a claw

*The monster seized its prey with its sharp talons.*

**infamous** (ĭn'fə-məs) *adj.* having a very bad reputation

*Grendel is infamous for his destructive ways.*

**SET A PURPOSE  
FOR READING**

As you read this excerpt from “Beowulf,” notice how Beowulf distinguishes himself as a hero of epic proportions.

# BEOWULF

Epic Poem by the

**BEOWULF POET**

Translated by

**BURTON RAFFEL**



**BACKGROUND** Beowulf is the hero celebrated in this long poem written in England many centuries ago. Beowulf is a powerful warrior of the Geats (gēts), a people from what is now Sweden. He is known for his bravery and almost superhuman deeds of strength. When he hears that the neighboring king of the Danes and his men are being terrorized by a vicious monster, the great warrior takes up the challenge. Poets recited the tales about Beowulf for many years. By the time they were written in the form of an epic, Beowulf was a symbol for the heroic qualities most admired in early England.

**A EPIC**

Reread the Background and introduction and underline clues that suggest Beowulf’s status as an **epic hero**. What can you predict about Beowulf?

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*Hrothgar (hrôth'gär'), king of the Danes, has built a wonderful mead hall called Herot (hě'r'ət), where his subjects congregate and make merry. As this selection opens, a fierce and powerful monster named Grendel invades the mead hall, bringing death and destruction. A*

## GRENDL

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



**© EPIC**

[illegible]

40 To his lair, delighted with his night's slaughter.

45 In Herot, a mighty prince mourning

50 Grendel came again, so set

55 Beds, as far from Herot as they could find,

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<sup>4</sup> 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. **D**
- So mankind's enemy continued his crimes,
- 80 Killing as often as he could, coming  
Alone, bloodthirsty and horrible. Though he lived  
In Herot, when the night hid him, he never  
Dared to touch king Hrothgar's glorious  
Throne, protected by God—God,<sup>5</sup>
- 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,

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

5. The reference to God shows the influence of Christianity on the Beowulf Poet.

### **D OLD ENGLISH POETRY**

Recall that a **kenning** is a metaphorical phrase that takes the place of a name or noun. Reread lines 74–78 and circle a kenning for Grendel. What does this kenning suggest about Grendel?

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**affliction** (ə-flɪk'shən) *n.* a force that oppresses or causes suffering

In what ways is Grendel an **affliction** to other characters in the poem?

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**PAUSE & REFLECT**

What have you learned so far about Hrothgar and Grendel? Describe the situation at Herot and the effect it has had on the Danes.

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**E OLD ENGLISH POETRY**

Reread lines 104–106. Underline each comma that creates a pause in the middle of a line. What effect do these **caesuras**, or midline pauses, have as you read about Grendel's approach?

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And the heathen's<sup>6</sup> 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!

**PAUSE & REFLECT**

*Beowulf hears of how Grendel attacks the Danes. Beowulf and his men sail to the land of the Danes to offer help to Hrothgar. They are taken by a Danish guard to Herot, where Wulfgar, one of Hrothgar's soldiers, tells the king of their arrival. Hrothgar knows Beowulf and welcomes the prince and his men. Beowulf tells of his deeds and offers his help to Hrothgar. He says he will fight Grendel using his hands alone because Grendel needs no weapons. Hrothgar accepts Beowulf's offer and holds a feast in his honor. After the banquet, Hrothgar and his followers leave Herot, and Beowulf and his warriors remain to spend the night. Beowulf restates his intent to fight Grendel without a sword and, while his followers sleep, lies waiting, eager for Grendel to appear.*

**THE BATTLE WITH GRENDEL**

- Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty
- 105 Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,  
Grendel came, hoping to kill **E**  
Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot.  
He moved quickly through the cloudy night,

6. **heathen** (hē'then): pagan; non-Christian. Though the Beowulf Poet was a Christian, he recognized that the characters in the poem lived before the Germanic tribes were converted to Christianity, when they still worshiped "the old stone gods."



- Up from his swampland, sliding silently  
 110 Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited Hrothgar's  
 Home before, knew the way—  
 But never, before nor after that night,  
 Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception  
 So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless,  
 115 Straight to the door, then snapped it open,  
 Tore its iron fasteners with a touch  
 And rushed angrily over the threshold.<sup>7</sup>  
 He strode quickly across the inlaid  
 Floor, snarling and fierce: his eyes  
 120 Gleamed in the darkness, burned with a gruesome  
 Light. Then he stopped, seeing the hall  
 Crowded with sleeping warriors, stuffed  
 With rows of young soldiers resting together.  
 And his heart laughed, he relished the sight,  
 125 Intended to tear the life from those bodies  
 By morning; the monster's mind was hot  
 With the thought of food and the feasting his belly  
 Would soon know. But fate, that night, intended  
 Grendel to gnaw the broken bones  
 130 Of his last human supper. Human **F**  
 Eyes were watching his evil steps,  
 Waiting to see his swift hard claws.  
 Grendel snatched at the first Geat  
 He came to, ripped him apart, cut  
 135 His body to bits with powerful jaws,  
 Drank the blood from his veins and bolted  
 Him down, hands and feet; death  
 And Grendel's great teeth came together,

**F OLD ENGLISH POETRY**

Complete the chart below by recording two examples of **alliteration** you find in lines 125–130.

Alliteration	
1.	_____
	_____
	_____
	_____
2.	_____
	_____
	_____
	_____

How do these examples of alliteration affect your reading of the poem?

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7. **threshold**: the strip of wood or stone at the bottom of a doorway.



**talon** (tāl'ən) *n.* a claw

**infamous** (ɪn'fə-məs) *adj.* having a very bad reputation

**OLD ENGLISH POETRY**

Reread lines 140–160. Underline three **kennings** that are used for Grendel. Then circle two that are used for Beowulf.

- Snapping life shut. Then he stepped to another
- 140 Still body, clutched at Beowulf with his claws,  
Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful sleeper  
—And was instantly seized himself, claws  
Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm.  
That shepherd of evil, guardian of crime,
- 145 Knew at once that nowhere on earth  
Had he met a man whose hands were harder;  
His mind was flooded with fear—but nothing  
Could take his **talons** and himself from that tight  
Hard grip. Grendel's one thought was to run
- 150 From Beowulf, flee back to his marsh and hide there:  
This was a different Herot than the hall he had emptied.  
But Higlac's follower remembered his final  
Boast and, standing erect, stopped  
The monster's flight, fastened those claws
- 155 In his fists till they cracked, clutched Grendel  
Closer. The **infamous** killer fought  
For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,  
Desiring nothing but escape; his claws  
Had been caught, he was trapped. That trip to Herot
- 160 Was a miserable journey for the writhing monster!<sup>8</sup>
- The high hall rang, its roof boards swayed,  
And Danes shook with terror. Down  
The aisles the battle swept, angry  
And wild. Herot trembled, wonderfully
- 165 Built to withstand the blows, the struggling  
Great bodies beating at its beautiful walls;  
Shaped and fastened with iron, inside  
And out, artfully worked, the building

8. Up to this point Grendel has killed his human victims easily.

- Stood firm. Its benches rattled, fell
- 170 To the floor, gold-covered boards grating  
As Grendel and Beowulf battled across them. **H**  
Hrothgar's wise men had fashioned Herot  
To stand forever; only fire,  
They had planned, could shatter what such skill had put
- 175 Together, swallow in hot flames such splendor  
Of ivory and iron and wood. Suddenly  
The sounds changed, the Danes started  
In new terror, cowering in their beds as the terrible  
Screams of the Almighty's enemy sang
- 180 In the darkness, the horrible shrieks of pain  
And defeat, the tears torn out of Grendel's  
Taut throat, hell's captive caught in the arms  
Of him who of all the men on earth  
Was the strongest.
- That mighty protector of men
- 185 Meant to hold the monster till its life  
Leaped out, knowing the fiend was no use  
To anyone in Denmark. All of Beowulf's  
Band had jumped from their beds, ancestral  
Swords raised and ready, determined
- 190 To protect their prince if they could. Their courage  
Was great but all wasted: they could hack at Grendel  
From every side, trying to open  
A path for his evil soul, but their points  
Could not hurt him, the sharpest and hardest iron
- 195 Could not scratch at his skin, for that sin-stained demon  
Had bewitched all men's weapons, laid spells  
That blunted every mortal man's blade.

**H OLD ENGLISH POETRY**

Reread lines 161–171. Underline alliteration that is created using hard *b* and *g* sounds. How does this **alliteration** affect the way you perceive the battle?

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**1 EPIC**

Reread lines 198–217. Underline words that suggest Grendel’s foul and evil nature. Circle words that suggest Beowulf’s lofty, righteous goals.

- And yet his time had come, his days  
Were over, his death near; down
- 200 To hell he would go, swept groaning and helpless  
To the waiting hands of still worse fiends.  
Now he discovered—once the afflictor  
Of men, tormentor of their days—what it meant  
To feud with Almighty God: Grendel
- 205 Saw that his strength was deserting him, his claws  
Bound fast, Higlac’s brave follower tearing at  
His hands. The monster’s hatred rose higher,  
But his power had gone. He twisted in pain,  
And the bleeding sinews<sup>9</sup> deep in his shoulder
- 210 Snapped, muscle and bone split  
And broke. The battle was over, Beowulf  
Had been granted new glory: Grendel escaped,  
But wounded as he was could flee to his den,  
His miserable hole at the bottom of the marsh,
- 215 Only to die, to wait for the end  
Of all his days. And after that bloody  
Combat the Danes laughed with delight. **1**  
He who had come to them from across the sea,  
Bold and strong-minded, had driven affliction
- 220 Off, purged Herot clean. He was happy,  
Now, with that night’s fierce work; the Danes  
Had been served as he’d boasted he’d serve them; Beowulf,  
A prince of the Geats, had killed Grendel,  
Ended the grief, the sorrow, the suffering
- 225 Forced on Hrothgar’s helpless people  
By a bloodthirsty fiend. No Dane doubted

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9. **sinews** (sĭn'yōōz): the tendons that connect muscles to bones.

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.

230 And then, in the morning, crowds surrounded  
 Herot, warriors coming to that hall  
 From faraway lands, princes and leaders  
 Of men hurrying to behold the monster's  
 Great staggering tracks. They gaped with no sense

235 Of sorrow, felt no regret for his suffering,  
 Went tracing his bloody footprints, his beaten  
 And lonely flight, to the edge of the lake  
 Where he'd dragged his corpselike way, doomed  
 And already weary of his vanishing life.

240 The water was bloody, steaming and boiling  
 In horrible pounding waves, heat  
 Sucked from his magic veins; but the swirling  
 Surf had covered his death, hidden  
 Deep in murky darkness his miserable

245 End, as hell opened to receive him.

Then old and young rejoiced, turned back  
 From that happy pilgrimage, mounted their hard-hooved  
 Horses, high-spirited stallions, and rode them  
 Slowly toward Herot again, retelling

250 Beowulf's bravery as they jogged along.  
 And over and over they swore that nowhere  
 On earth or under the spreading sky  
 Or between the seas, neither south nor north,  
 Was there a warrior worthier to rule over men. 1

### 1 EPIC

Think about the outcome of the battle between Beowulf and Grendel. What qualities of Beowulf do the warriors celebrate in lines 246–254? Name at least three, and give an example from the text to support each.

1. Quality: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Support: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Quality: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Support: \_\_\_\_\_

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3. Quality: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Support: \_\_\_\_\_

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**K OLD ENGLISH POETRY**

Reread lines 257–267. In what way does this description reflect the techniques and traditions used by Anglo-Saxon poets?

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- 255 (But no one meant Beowulf's praise to belittle  
Hrothgar, their kind and gracious king!)  
And sometimes, when the path ran straight and clear,  
They would let their horses race, red  
And brown and pale yellow backs streaming
- 260 Down the road. And sometimes a proud old soldier  
Who had heard songs of the ancient heroes  
And could sing them all through, story after story,  
Would weave a net of words for Beowulf's  
Victory, tying the knot of his verses
- 265 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. . . . **K**

## Text Analysis: Characteristics of an Epic

Complete the chart below to explain how *Beowulf* reflects the characteristics of an epic. Use specific examples from the text as you complete each column of the chart.

Characteristics of an Epic	Examples from Beowulf
The hero is of noble birth or high social position	
The hero embodies character traits that reflect the ideals of a society	
The poem uses formal diction and a serious tone.	
The poem reflects universal themes.	

Review your notes for *Beowulf* and the completed chart above. Then write a brief description of the legendary hero, Beowulf. What are his most important traits? What universal theme or themes are revealed through his words and deeds?

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## Reading Strategy: Reading Old English Poetry

Review the notes about Old English poetry you took while reading *Beowulf*. Then complete the chart below. Give two examples of each technique, and describe the effect each example has. Consider how these techniques add to the meaning of the poem.

Technique	Effect
<b>Alliteration</b>  1. _____  2. _____	1. _____  _____  2. _____  _____
<b>caesura</b>  1. _____  2. _____	1. _____  _____  2. _____  _____
<b>kennings</b>  1. _____  2. _____	1. _____  _____  2. _____  _____

## Where do MONSTERS lurk?

Review your notes about monsters on page 2. How would you adjust your definition now that you have met Grendel?

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## Vocabulary Practice

If the words in each pair are synonyms, circle them. If they are antonyms, underline them.

1. affliction/blessing

3. lair/hideout

2. infamous/respected

4. talon/claw



## Academic Vocabulary in Writing

concept

culture

parallel

section

structure

How has the **concept** of a hero changed since Beowulf's time? Write a paragraph about how the hero is represented in movies or TV in today's culture. Refer to at least one **section** of *Beowulf* for comparison. Use at least one additional Academic Vocabulary word in your response. Definitions of these words are on page 1.

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### Assessment Practice

**DIRECTIONS** Use this excerpt from *Beowulf* to answer questions 1–6.

- 1 Beowulf journeys to the land of the Danes because —
  - ☐ A Hrothgar pleaded with him for help
  - ☐ B he plans to overthrow Hrothgar
  - ☐ C he has heard of Grendel's attacks on Herot
  - ☐ D he wants to retrace his father's footsteps
- 2 The phrase "the infamous killer" is an example of —
  - ☐ A a caesura
  - ☐ B a kenning
  - ☐ C alliteration
  - ☐ D an epic
- 3 What character traits does Beowulf exhibit in lines 151–160?
  - ☐ A honesty and trustworthiness
  - ☐ B modesty and humility
  - ☐ C unbending loyalty
  - ☐ D superhuman strength and courage
- 4 One universal theme of *Beowulf* is the —
  - ☐ A importance of love
  - ☐ B power of good over evil
  - ☐ C sadness of death
  - ☐ D violence and futility of war
- 5 Which line describes something only an epic hero could do?
  - ☐ A *fastened those claws / In his fists till they cracked* (lines 154–155)
  - ☐ B *For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat* (line 157)
  - ☐ C *To hell he would go, swept groaning and helpless* (line 200)
  - ☐ D *singing his new song aloud / While he shaped it* (lines 266–267)
- 6 Which element from *Beowulf* is most characteristic of an epic poem?
  - ☐ A the gory nature of the battles
  - ☐ B Beowulf's stunning victory
  - ☐ C Herot's beauty and fame
  - ☐ D Grendel's evil nature