

# from *Beowulf*

Part One, translated by Burton Raffel

As the epic begins, we are introduced to King Hrothgar, a revered and successful leader who has ruled the Danes for many years. He has recently built the mead hall Herot to commemorate his many victories. As Hrothgar's men celebrate and enjoy life in Herot, however, a monster called Grendel lurks in the swamps nearby, seething with resentment and hatred for humans. Eventually Grendel attacks Herot and mercilessly kills thirty of Hrothgar's men. This marks the beginning of Grendel's reign of terror over the Danes, which lasts for twelve years.

Rescue finally comes in the form of a great warrior named Beowulf who hails from the land of the Geats (Sweden). Beowulf hears of Hrothgar's troubles and decides to journey to Denmark with some of his strongest men to do battle with Grendel. Once he arrives, he meets with Hrothgar and boasts of his numerous past achievements, which qualify him to challenge Grendel. Beowulf then announces that he will fight the monster that night without weapons. A celebratory feast ensues. As it 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. He is not kept waiting long.



Animal head from a Viking ship (c. 800).

University Museum of National Antiquities, Oslo, Norway.

(Background) First page of *Beowulf* manuscript (c. 1000).

The Art Archive/British Library, London.

## THE BATTLE WITH GRENDEL

### 1

Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty  
Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,  
Grendel came, hoping to kill  
Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot.  
5 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—

Lines have been renumbered and do not correspond to the New American Library edition or the Farrar, Straus, and Giroux edition.

10 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,  
And rushed angrily over the threshold.  
15 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  
Crowded with sleeping warriors, stuffed  
20 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  
With the thought of food and the feasting his belly  
25 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,  
Waiting to see his swift hard claws.  
30 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  
Him down, hands and feet; death  
35 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  
—And was instantly seized himself, claws  
40 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;  
His mind was flooded with fear—but nothing  
45 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.  
But Higlac's follower remembered his final  
50 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  
For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,  
55 Desiring nothing but escape; his claws



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

**25–27.** These lines foreshadow, or hint at, the outcome of the battle between Grendel and Beowulf.

**?** Grendel has been attacking Herot successfully for years. What will be different about this visit to Herot?

**44–56.** “Higlac’s follower” is Beowulf. He had earlier sworn to kill Grendel with his bare hands.

**?** What details in these lines demonstrate Beowulf’s superhuman strength?

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,  
And Danes shook with terror. Down  
60 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;  
Shaped and fastened with iron, inside  
65 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.  
Hrothgar's wise men had fashioned Herot  
70 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  
The sounds changed, the Danes started  
75 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  
Taut throat, hell's captive caught in the arms  
80 Of him who of all the men on earth  
Was the strongest.

## 2

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  
85 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  
From every side, trying to open  
90 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  
That blunted every mortal man's blade.  
95 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.



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

**76–81.** The “Almighty’s enemy”—God’s enemy—in line 76 refers to Grendel. Earlier in the epic, Grendel’s origin is explained: He is the offspring of one of the descendants of Cain, the son of Adam and Eve who killed his brother, Abel, and became the first murderer. Cain was eternally cursed by God and, according to legend, fathered all the evil beings that plague humankind: monsters, demons, and evil spirits.

**?** In what ways is this battle between Grendel and Beowulf really a battle between good and evil? How do the details in the description of the battle make this clear?

**?** **88–94.** According to these lines, why couldn’t Beowulf’s men harm Grendel?

100 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  
 His hands. The monster's hatred rose higher,  
 105 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  
 Had been granted new glory: Grendel escaped,  
 110 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  
 Combat the Danes laughed with delight.  
 115 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  
 Had been served as he'd boasted he'd serve them; Beowulf,  
 120 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  
 The victory, for the proof, hanging high  
 125 From the rafters where Beowulf had hung it, was the monster's  
 Arm, claw and shoulder and all.

### 3

And then, in the morning, crowds surrounded  
 Herot, warriors coming to that hall  
 From faraway lands, princes and leaders  
 130 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  
 And lonely flight, to the edge of the lake  
 135 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  
 Sucked from his magic veins; but the swirling  
 140 Surf had covered his death, hidden  
 Deep in murky darkness his miserable  
 End, as hell opened to receive him.



Detail of three-ringed gold  
(6th century).  
Statens Historiska Museer, Stockholm

? 99–108. How does Beowulf defeat Grendel?

? 123–126. How does Beowulf prove his victory over Grendel? Why might he do this?

? 131–142. What has happened to Grendel?

Then old and young rejoiced, turned back  
From that happy pilgrimage, mounted their hard-hooved  
145 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  
On earth or under the spreading sky  
150 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 the most famous verses in the epic, the old king describes where Grendel and his mother live.*

#### 4

. . . "They live in secret places, windy  
155 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  
160 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,  
165 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! When the wind stirs  
170 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  
Is hidden in her terrible home, in a place  
175 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!"



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

? 172–178. What is  
Hrothgar asking Beowulf  
to do?