

ENG2DB – Unit 3 – Heroes and Myths - *Beowulf* Questions

Pre-Reading Questions

1. What are the elements that make up great heroes and villains?

Part 1 – Grendel (Lines 1 - 1061)

1. How does the poem mix Christian history and belief with fantastical elements? (consider the allusion to Cain and Abel)
2. What sort of place is Heorot before and after Grendel's attacks?
3. What are the watchman's and Wulfgar's roles at the court of Hrothgar? Why are these important?
4. How does Beowulf plan to fight Grendel? What does this reveal about his character?
5. How does Unferth challenge Beowulf? How does Beowulf answer?
6. Why is Beowulf's "boastfulness" in his dialogue with Unferth justified? What are Beowulf's heroic traits?
7. Describe the change of mood at Heorot between the arrival of Beowulf and the fall of night. Why would the poet depict this change?
8. From page 5, give several examples of the diction used to establish a gloomy mood and setting.
9. Read the battle of Grendel and Beowulf very carefully. Pick out five words that the poet uses to appeal to the reader's senses.
10. Why is it appropriate that Grendel is killed by having his arm ripped off?



Part 2 – Grendel's Mom (Lines 1061 - 2200)

1. One critic has said, "Grendel represents something beyond the experience of the Danes - something beyond the limits of their natural and social order." Why would they depict their hero battling such a horror?
2. Why is Grendel's mother associated with darkness and night?
3. Read the description of her lair, Grendel's lake, and select several words that the poet uses to convey to the reader the Anglo-Saxon ideas of evil.
4. Why is it appropriate, if Beowulf's trophy is Grendel's arm, that Grendel's mother's trophy

should be the head ... of "noble Aeschere"? How would the Anglo-Saxon (Gaet and Danes) warriors probably react when they see it? Why?

5. The entrance of her lair is guarded by the foulest of beasts, beasts found at the bottom of the Great Chain of Being (see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_chain_of_being "subdivisions"). Explain in what ways they are symbolic of our most profound and primal fears. Consider the archetype of the events which occurred in the Garden of Eden.
6. Why do you think the author tries to elicit sympathy for Grendel's mother when she mourns for her dead son?
7. How is Beowulf saved from the suffocating force of Grendel's mother? With what weapon does he slay her? How do you think this is symbolic?



Part 3 – Dragon (Lines 2200 - 3182)

1. Beowulf's battle with the fire dragon differs greatly from his other battles. In what ways? In what ways is the opponent similar to Grendel and Grendel's mother?
2. Describe the dragon analyzing the effectiveness of the poet's diction (use several direct quotations).
3. How does Wiglaf shame the other warriors who didn't fight with Beowulf?
4. How does the end of the epic herald the end of the Dark Ages era? How does Wiglaf indicate his awareness of this change?



Map of Beowulf's World



Key Characters in *Beowulf*

Beowulf - The protagonist of the epic, Beowulf is a Geatish hero who fights the monster Grendel, Grendel's mother, and a fire-breathing dragon. Beowulf's boasts and encounters reveal him to be the strongest, ablest warrior around. In his youth, he personifies all of the best values of the heroic culture. In his old age, he proves a wise and effective ruler.

King Hrothgar - The king of the Danes. Hrothgar enjoys military success and prosperity until Grendel terrorizes his realm. A wise and aged ruler, Hrothgar represents a different kind of leadership from that exhibited by the youthful warrior Beowulf. He is a father figure to Beowulf and a model for the kind of king that Beowulf becomes.

Grendel - A demon descended from Cain, Grendel preys on Hrothgar's warriors in the king's mead-hall, Heorot. Because his ruthless and miserable existence is part of the retribution exacted by God for Cain's murder of Abel, Grendel fits solidly within the ethos of vengeance that governs the world of the poem.

Grendel's Mother - An unnamed swamp-hag, Grendel's mother seems to possess fewer human qualities than Grendel, although her terrorization of Heorot is explained by her desire for vengeance—a human motivation.

The Dragon - An ancient, powerful serpent, the dragon guards a horde of treasure in a hidden mound. Beowulf's fight with the dragon constitutes the third and final part of the epic.

Other Danes:

Shield Sheafson - The legendary Danish king from whom Hrothgar is descended, Shield Sheafson is the mythical founder who inaugurates a long line of Danish rulers and embodies the Danish tribe's highest values of heroism and leadership. The poem opens with a brief account of his rise from orphan to warrior-king, concluding, "That was one good king" (11).

Beow - The second king listed in the genealogy of Danish rulers with which the poem begins. Beow is the son of Shield Sheafson and father of Halfdane. The narrator presents Beow as a gift from God to a people in need of a leader. He exemplifies the maxim, "Behavior that's admired / is the path to power among people everywhere" (24–25).

Halfdane - The father of Hrothgar, Heorogar, Halga, and an unnamed daughter who married a king of the Swedes, Halfdane succeeded Beow as ruler of the Danes.

Wealhtheow - Hrothgar's wife, the gracious queen of the Danes.

Unferth - A Danish warrior who is jealous of Beowulf, Unferth is unable or unwilling to fight Grendel, thus proving himself inferior to Beowulf.

Aeschere - Hrothgar's trusted adviser.

Other Geats:

Hygelac - Beowulf's uncle, king of the Geats, and husband of Hygd. Hygelac heartily welcomes Beowulf back from Denmark.

Wiglaf - A young kinsman and retainer of Beowulf who helps him in the fight against the dragon while

all of the other warriors run away. Wiglaf adheres to the heroic code better than Beowulf's other retainers, thereby proving himself a suitable successor to Beowulf.

Ecgtheow - Beowulf's father, Hygelac's brother-in-law, and Hrothgar's friend. Ecgtheow is dead by the time the story begins, but he lives on through the noble reputation that he made for himself during his life and in his dutiful son's remembrances.

Breca - Beowulf's childhood friend, whom he defeated in a swimming match. Unferth alludes to the story of their contest, and Beowulf then relates it in detail.

Taken from SparkNotes (<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/beowulf/characters.html>)