Beowulf

Book Basics

AUTHOR	Unknown
YEARS WRITTEN	c. 700–750 CE
GENRE	Adventure
PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATOR	*Beowulf* is told from a third-person omniscient perspective as the narrator shows glimpses of many characters' feelings and viewpoints.
TENSE	*Beowulf* is told primarily in the past tense.
ABOUT THE TITLE	*Beowulf* is named after its heroic protagonist, Beowulf, as a way of further honoring his achievements and moral character.

1) In Context

Beowulf is the oldest existing Old English poem. While the story and its historical elements arguably take place between the end of the 5th and the beginning of the 8th century, it was most likely put into its current written form centuries later. The historical and cultural elements within the poem—such as the description of the king's burial ceremony and the construction of the majestic hall, Heorot, by King Hrothgar—have helped scholars narrow the time frame and the location for the setting.

The mix of pagan traditions interspersed with Christian values contributes to the poem's mystique but is often up for debate among scholars as to its exact time and date. In 2013, however, archaeologists claimed to have found the ruins of Heorot, located in Lejre, Denmark, about 20 miles west of Copenhagen, and dating to the 6th century.

The poem was most likely written down by two monks in England; handwriting analysis of the single medieval manuscript dated it to the early 11th century. The manuscript now resides in the British Museum and is one of the most—if not *the* most—translated texts in history, translated hundreds of times in both narrative and poetic form. The story transcends time and place and is as relevant today as it was in the Middle Ages. Its original audiences most likely heard of Beowulf's heroism, loyalty, and honor in a fire-lit room as the poet chanted to the accompaniment of a harp and drums.

Today theaters are filled with larger-than-life characters much like Beowulf, whose heroic acts and noble deeds are projected onto a huge screen for all to see. Many of these characters and themes could easily be traced to the original Scandinavian tales presented in *Beowulf*. Outside the worlds of entertainment and academic study, the themes of *Beowulf* still apply in everyday life. People apply the heroic code in their lives when they seek to gain the respect and trust of others and to honor those whom they respect. The theme of good versus evil still plays out daily on a personal and international level, as reported in the various news media, and loyalty can be seen in the relationships among friends and family, as well as students' feelings about their school, fans' devotion to an athletic team, and citizens' love of their country.

2) Author Biography

What is known about the author of *Beowulf* has been derived from studying the time period in which it was written and the storytelling methods and poetic form of the piece. It is believed to have been composed between 700–750 CE as a story to be told orally and was written down centuries later. The poet was gifted in the art of storytelling and alliteration. Alliteration is the repetition of sounds within a text that creates a rhythmic quality to the work. In *Beowulf*, the poet repeats the beginning sound

of words throughout the text, setting up a rhythm that begs for the poem to be performed and chanted and suggests that it stemmed from the tradition of oral storytelling.

3) Full Characters' List

Beowulf	Beowulf is the poem's brave hero.
King Hrothgar	King Hrothgar is the ruler of the Danes and Beowulf's loyal friend.
Grendel	Grendel is the evil beast that terrorizes King Hrothgar's men, and whom Beowulf kills.
Wealhtheow	Wealhtheow is King Hrothgar's queen and an ambassador of peace.
The dragon	The dragon is an evil, fire-breathing creature that fatally wounds Beowulf before his own death.
Grendel's mother	Grendel's mother is a beast that seeks to avenge her son's death and is killed by Beowulf.
Wiglaf	Wiglaf is Beowulf's cousin and companion who helps him defeat the dragon.
Aeschere	Aeschere is Hrothgar's adviser; he is killed by Grendel's mother.
Beow	Beow is Hrothgar's grandfather.
Breca	Breca is Beowulf's childhood friend.
Ecgtheow	Ecgtheow is Beowulf's father.
Finn	Finn is the king of the Frisians.
Halfdane	Halfdane is Hrothgar's father.
Heardred	Heardred is the son of Hygelac and Hygd.
Hildeburh	Hildeburh is King Finn's queen.
Hnaef	Hnaef is a Danish ruler; brother of Hildeburh; killed by King Finn.
Hrethric	Hrethric is Hrothgar's oldest son and heir until his cousin steals the crown.
Hrothulf	Hrothulf is Hrothgar's nephew who Wealhtheow suggests should inherit the crown.
Hrothmund	Hrothmund is Hrothgar's second son.
Hygd	Hygd is Beowulf's aunt; queen of the Geats.
Hygelac	Hygelac is Beowulf's uncle and mentor; king of the Geats.
King Heremod	King Heremod is an ancient king who eventually betrayed his subjects.
King Hrethel	King Hrethel is the previous king of the Geats; Beowulf's great-uncle and foster father.
Sigemund	Sigemund is an ancient warrior and dragon-slayer.
Unferth	Unferth is one of Hrothgar's men whose spite for Beowulf grows into admiration.

3) Plot Summary

With loyalty and heroism in mind, Beowulf comes to the rescue of the Danes and King Hrothgar. They have suffered at the hands of an evil monster, Grendel, who has pillaged their kingdom for more than 12 years and killed many men.

Beowulf, nephew to the king of the Geats, sails across the seas to try to defeat the beast. Once he has convinced Hrothgar and Unferth of his many feats, they allow Beowulf to defend the hall from the monster. Because of his code of honor, Beowulf lays down his armor and sword so that he is Grendel's equal and has no unfair advantage. Upon Grendel's arrival a great battle ensues, and Beowulf—with his mighty strength—tears Grendel's arm from his body.

Mortally injured, Grendel retreats home to die. Prepared to avenge her son's death, Grendel's mother arrives the next day and kills one of Hrothgar's elders. Beowulf follows her down into her swampy home and attempts to fight her, but his sword doesn't make a scratch on the horrible beast. He grabs a magical sword hanging on her wall and wields a deadly blow. Then, he spots Grendel's corpse and severs his head. Grendel's poisonous blood melts and destroys the sword down to its hilt.

Beowulf comes to the surface and presents Grendel's head and the hilt to Hrothgar. A grand celebration in Beowulf's honor ensues.

Beowulf then returns to the Geats, where he is proclaimed a hero. Eventually, Beowulf becomes a great king of the Geats. But, as with Hrothgar, all good things must come to an end. Fifty years into his reign, a great dragon is disturbed. A man happens upon the beast's lair and steals some of the treasure the dragon has been hoarding for years. The dragon seeks his revenge and wreaks havoc in Beowulf's kingdom. Beowulf knows that it will be difficult to defeat the beast, but he has the best armor and swords. With his loyal warriors, he sets out to defeat the dragon. Beowulf orders his men to stay back while he battles the dragon alone. The warriors agree and, upon seeing the dragon, all of his warriors run from his side—except a young thane called Wiglaf. Although Beowulf fights heroically, he is fatally wounded. Before Beowulf dies, Wiglaf presents him with some of the riches from the dragon's hoard.

The story ends much like it starts: with a death and an elaborate burial. Beowulf is laid to rest with a mountain of treasure to mark his heroic life. Sadly, at his death Beowulf finally shows some fallibility and dies without naming an heir—a kingdom without an heir is at great risk of pillaging, death, and enslavement.

4) Plot Diagram

Introduction
1. Grendel terrorizes Heorot for 12 years.
Rising Action
2. Beowulf arrives to fight the monster.
3. Beowulf kills Grendel.
4. Grendel's mother arrives to avenge his death.
Climax
5. Beowulf kills Grendel's mother.
Falling Action
6. As king, Beowulf fights, kills the dragon.
Resolution
7. Beowulf dies from his injuries

5) Themes

Heroic Code
This theme, found in Beowulf and other Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, and Greek tales, is made up of a set of rules governing honorable behavior primarily for warriors and rulers. To conform to the heroic code, warriors were expected to be courageous, loyal, and strong. Their loyalty to their ruler was never in question; in fact, they would be willing to sacrifice everything, including their lives, in order to protect those to whom they were loyal. Rulers were expected to display great generosity in rewarding those who served them. They were also expected to be capable of governing wisely.
Good versus Evil
Beowulf and Hrothgar are the two main representatives of good in the poem, while Grendel, his mother, and the dragon embody the concept of evil. Where Grendel, his mother, and the dragon battle only because of their hatred and greed, Beowulf goes into conflict on behalf of others and, when given rewards, shares them rather than retaining the riches for himself. Beowulf's victory over the three monsters is described as almost biblical battles of superhuman strength and courage against evil incarnate.
Loyalty
Loyalty was a guiding force during the period in which Beowulf was written and is evident within the poem. The theme of loyalty appears multiple times in Beowulf's actions. The loyalty is passed on from generation to generation as seen by Beowulf's loyalty to King Hrothgar. He was loyal to

Hrothgar for several reasons: Hrothgar was his king and had saved his father's life, and Beowulf honored the longtime loyalty shared by his father and King Hrothgar. Beowulf displayed loyalty to King Hygelac of Geatland, giving him much of the reward that King Hrothgar had bestowed on Beowulf and serving Hygelac steadfastly until the king's death. When offered the crown upon Hygelac's death, Beowulf instead declared that Prince Heardred should be king—and then served the young king loyally. Only at the death of King Heardred did Beowulf accept the crown, and then ruled Geatland for 50 years.

Hospitality

For rulers such as King Hrothgar and King Hygelac, a significant part of the heroic code relates to generosity and hospitality. Visiting nobility and warriors returning from conflict expect to be hosted at grand banquets in the king's mead hall. The 12 years of terror that Grendel brought to Heorot Hall took the lives of many of Hrothgar's subjects and also disrupted the governing of the kingdom. Without the use of his hall, Hrothgar could not offer the hospitality expected. There's little wonder, therefore, that the feasts held to celebrate Beowulf's arrival and his victories over Grendel and Grendel's mother show such an outpouring of generous hospitality.

6) Symbols

Grendel

Grendel symbolizes evil and jealousy. He is a descendant of Cain, the biblical character who jealously murdered his brother Abel—a crime for which his descendants (including Grendel) were banished.

Dragon

The dragon symbolizes greed. He hoards gold and treasures in his lair, which represents the opposite of the Anglo-Saxons' accepted practice.

Heorot Hall

Heorot Hall is a symbol not only of happiness and pride, but also of distress. The great hall is Hrothgar's legacy, built to honor great warriors and their accomplishments. It is meant to be a refuge where members of the court and the realm's warriors can gather to feast and celebrate.

7) Analyse and criticise the following quotations

"They said that of all the kings upon the earth/he was the man most gracious and fairminded,/ kindest to his people and keenest to win fame." — Narrator , Lines 2892–3182 (Beowulf's Funeral)
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"He was spawned in that slime/of Cain, murderous creatures banished/by God." — Narrator , Lines 64–193 (Terror at King Hrothgar's Hall)
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"I drove/five great giants into chains. ... I swam/in the blackness of night, hunting monsters." — Beowulf , Lines 194–661 (Beowulf in Heorot)

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"I give thanks to God/for all this gold and treasure that I see before me/and for the opportunity to give it/to my countrymen on this, my last day./I have traded my life for this treasure/so be sure to use it for the good of our country." — Beowulf , Lines 2892–3182 (Beowulf's Funeral)

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