

BEOWULF

Beowulf is the longest epic poem in Old English. The legend relates the exploits of its hero in his successive battles with a monster named Grendel, with Grendel's revengeful mother, and with a dragon which was guarding a hoard of treasure.

The story of Beowulf

Beowulf is a classic tale of the triumph of good over evil, and divides neatly into three acts.

1. The poem opens in Denmark, where a monster is terrorizing the kingdom. Beowulf encounters the monstrous Grendel in unarmed combat and kills him.
2. Grendel's monstrous mother seeks revenge, and makes a brutal attack upon the king's men. Beowulf slays her after an almighty struggle.
3. The poem culminates 50 years later, in Beowulf's old age. Now king of the Geats, his own realm is faced with a rampaging dragon. Beowulf kills the dragon, but dies of his wounds. Beowulf closes with the heroic king's funeral,

The Action of *Beowulf* in Detail

Beowulf opens with a description of the origin and history of the Scylding dynasty, tracing its descent down to king Hrothgar, who builds Heorot, a great hall (like a castle). But the sound of warriors rejoicing angers a monster, Grendel, and one night he kills thirty sleeping men. These attacks go on for twelve years, during which no man can safely sleep in the hall.

Across the sea, Beowulf, nephew of Hygelac, king of the Geats, resolves to come to the aid of Hrothgar. He sails with fourteen warriors and, despite initial suspicion, is welcomed to Heorot. Hrothgar accepts Beowulf's proud offer to get

rid of Grendel. The Danes feast with the visiting Geats, but Beowulf's bravery is questioned by a Danish man named Unferth. Beowulf promises to conquer or die.

That night, the Danes and Beowulf's men fall asleep. Beowulf alone stays awake. Grendel arrives at Heorot, kills and eats a Danish warrior, and seizes Beowulf. The two fight bitterly. Beowulf eventually tears off Grendel's arm and Grendel retreats, mortally wounded. In the morning, many of the warriors follow the trail of Grendel's blood to a deep lake. Hrothgar praises Beowulf's victory. At a celebratory feast, Beowulf receives generous rewards.

But the curse is not over. The night of the feast, Grendel's mother enters the hall, intent on revenge. She carries off Æschere, a favorite nobleman of Hrothgar. Beowulf is again summoned.

With a company of Danes and Geats, Beowulf immediately heads to the deep lake where monsters live. He plunges into the water, reaches the bottom and is dragged by Grendel's mother to her cavern, where she has the upper-hand in the combat. Beowulf suddenly discovers a curious and very large sword and slays his foe – Grendel's mother. He then cuts off Grendel's head and swims to the surface, carrying the hilt of the sword. Back at Heorot, Beowulf recounts his experiences, to which Hrothgar responds with a big speech praising his bravery.

In the morning, Beowulf sails home, where he again gives an account of events to his own countrymen. He shares the rewards of war with his uncle and lives in Geatland with great honor – eventually becoming leader of the tribe.

Much later, after Beowulf has ruled the Geats for fifty years, the treasure of a dragon is robbed by a fugitive slave and the dragon responds by laying waste to surrounding lands. Beowulf resolves to kill the dragon. He fights the dragon. The dragon quickly overwhelms Beowulf with flame, and all his companions flee, with the exception of Wiglaf, who cares about his obligations of loyalty to Beowulf. Together they kill the dragon, but Beowulf receives a mortal wound.

The dying hero tells Wiglaf to bring some of the treasure out of the hoard and requests that a mound be built for him on the shore. Wiglaf sends news home of Beowulf's death; then the Geat warriors return to the treasure site, push the dragon's body into the sea and bear the king's body to the cliffs by the sea. A funeral pyre is built on the headland, and the dragon's treasure is buried under a funeral mound. Twelve warriors ride around the mound, praising Beowulf's deeds and virtues. So ends the legend of Beowulf.

When was *Beowulf* composed?

Nobody knows for certain when the poem was first composed. *Beowulf* is set in the pagan world of sixth-century Scandinavia, but it also contains echoes of Christian tradition. The poem must have been passed down orally over many generations, and modified by each successive bard, until the existing copy was made at an unknown location in Anglo-Saxon England.

How old is the manuscript?

Beowulf survives in a single medieval manuscript, housed at the British Library in London. The manuscript bears no date, and so its age has to be calculated by analyzing the scribes' handwriting. Many scholars have suggested that the manuscript was written at the end of the 10th century.