

Beowulf, translated by Seamus Heaney



Beowulf is the oldest piece of recorded writing that is written in the English language. However, we use the term ‘English’ quite loosely here – it is not written on ‘modern English’, but ‘old English’, which for many of us today would be almost indecipherable (look at the documents included after the poem to see what the original text is like). It was written at some point between the years 600 and 1000 CE by an English monk, and for most of history it has been ignored by scholars. On several occasions the only copy of the poem was almost destroyed. Its value was only realised when JRR Tolkien, one of the twentieth century’s most preeminent medievalist scholars, rediscovered and began analysing it in detail.

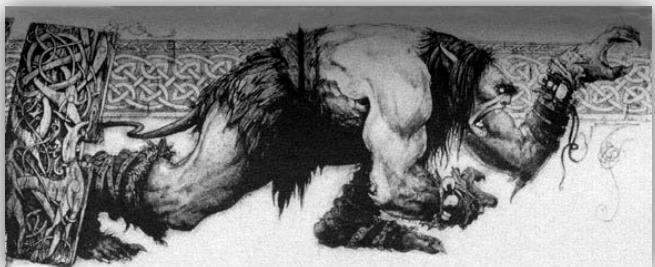
The following is a brief summary of the first part of the poem – the battle between a hero named Beowulf and a monster called Grendel – to help guide your reading of the text.

The poem begins with a prologue that explains the history of how the Danes – the ancient inhabitant of what is now modern-day Denmark and southern Scandinavia – come to power, the influence that they exercised, and how they became rich. It then begins to describe Grendel’s attacks on the Danish hall of Heorot.

Heorot Is Attacked

Lines 86-114

This part of the poem opens with a description of a powerful demon named Grendel. Grendel is jealous of the fun and feasting that goes on in the nearby hall of Heorot, which he hears as he stalks the nearby swamps and marshlands. Biblical references are made to describe how evil Grendel is and the danger he poses, and to emphasise that Grendel is linked with the devil.



Lines 115-188

Grendel is attacking Heorot – a great hall (not unlike a castle) that was the seat of power of the ancient Danes (the ‘Sheeldlings’). On his first attack he kills thirty men, causing great destruction and showing no mercy. These attacks continue for twelve winters (years), with constant assaults against Heorot, targeting anyone, young or old. The poem notes that the Danes are pagans and do not follow Christianity (line 175-185), and that they were unlucky, because when they were asking their pagan gods for help, they were actually asking help from the devil, who was in reality the true power behind Grendel.

The Hero Comes to Heorot

Lines 189-228

A prince in Geatland (who at this point is unnamed, referred to only as 'Hygelac's thane', but is later revealed to be Beowulf) hears about the terror which Grendel has unleashed. He is described as "the mightiest man on earth" (line 197). He takes a boat and fourteen other warriors and sets sail for Heorot.



Lines 229-331

Beowulf and his companions arrive. A Danish scout sees them and meets them down at the shore. He asks them why they have come, cautious because they appear to be fearsome and armed warriors. Beowulf tells him that they have come to see King Hrothgar (king of the Danes) to offer their help in defeating Grendel. Beowulf and his warriors travel to and arrive at the hall.



Lines 332-405

At Heorot Beowulf reveals who he is, and we are told his name for the first time. King Heorot's advisors urge the king to hear Beowulf's offer. They talk about what they have heard about him, and how God has guided him to them in order to help combat the menace of Grendel. There is much talk about ancestry (who Beowulf is related to), and that he is a noble warrior.

Lines 406-455

Beowulf explains that he has heard about Grendel. He then talks about his own exploits, that he is a magnificent warrior, and that he believes he is more than a match for Grendel. He then talks about how he will defeat Grendel – that he will not use weapons or shields because Grendel doesn't either. Instead he will fight him hand-to-hand.

Lines 456-490

King Hrothgar thanks Beowulf and accepts his offer. There is much feasting and celebration now that they have reason to hope that Grendel can be defeated.

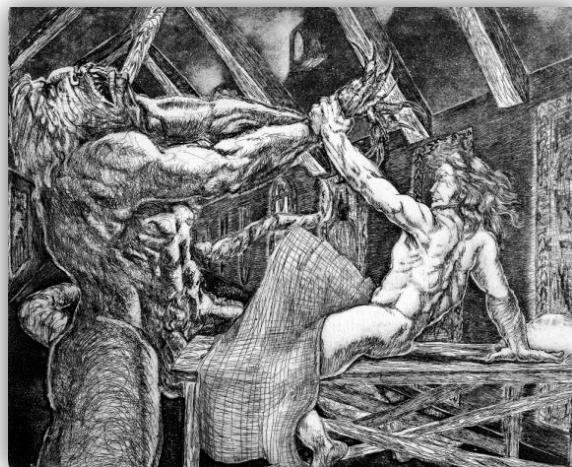
The Fight with Grendel

Lines 662-703

Beowulf is left alone in the hall with his warriors. Beowulf strips off his clothing and armour, and puts away his weapons, restating that he will fight hand-to-hand and without protection, because this is how Grendel himself fights. There are several references to how the outcome will be decided by God.

Lines 704-735

Grendel emerges from the night and attacks. He rips open the doors to the hall (line 724). We are told that “his days of ravening had come to an end” – that Grendel will be defeated by Beowulf (line 734).



Lines 736-835

The fight occurs between Grendel and Beowulf and is described in great detail. We are told that no weapon could harm Grendel because he is a demon. However, Beowulf was stronger, and because he was fighting hand-to-hand, was able to rip off Grendel's entire arm. Grendel runs away to die, and Beowulf is victorious.

Celebrations at Heorot



Lines 836-862

We learn that Grendel died from the wound that Beowulf inflicted upon him. The next morning the celebrations begin, and news of Beowulf's success spreads quickly, and although Hrothgar is still seen as a "good king", Beowulf is the hero.

This is only the first section of Beowulf's story. The poem continues for another 2,300 lines after this battle. Beowulf must continue on to face two more enemies. First he must defeat Grendel's Mother – a monstrous hag who comes seeking revenge now that her son has been killed. She is even more dangerous than Grendel himself.



Beowulf eventually becomes King of the Danes. However, he has one final enemy to face. When he is an old man, a dragon comes and threatens Heorot. Beowulf rides out to fight the dragon. He succeeds, but not before the dragon fatally wounds him. The poem ends with Beowulf's death and funeral.