

from Beowulf

Translated by Burton Raffel

Background When *Beowulf* was composed, England was changing from a pagan to a Christian culture. Pagan Anglo-Saxons told grim tales of life ruled by fate, tales in which people struggled against monsters for their place in the world. The missionaries who converted them to Christianity taught them that human beings and their choices of good or evil were at the center of creation. *Beowulf* reflects both pagan and Christian traditions.

The selection opens during an evening of celebration at Herot, the banquet hall of the Danish king Hrothgar (hroth' gār). Outside in the darkness, however, lurks the murderous monster Grendel.

The Wrath of Grendel

A powerful monster, living down
In the darkness, growled in pain, impatient
As day after day the music rang
Loud in that hall,¹ the harp's rejoicing
5 Call and the poet's clear songs, sung
Of the ancient beginnings of us all, recalling
The Almighty making the earth, shaping
These beautiful plains marked off by oceans,
Then proudly setting the sun and moon
10 To glow across the land and light it;
The corners of the earth were made lovely with trees
And leaves, made quick with life, with each
Of the nations who now move on its face. And then
As now warriors sang of their pleasure:
15 So Hrothgar's men lived happy in his hall
Till the monster stirred, that demon, that fiend,
Grendel, who haunted the moors, the wild
Marshes, and made his home in a hell
Not hell but earth. He was spawned in that slime,
20 Conceived by a pair of those monsters born

1. hall Herot.

Burton Raffel Translator's Insight

The reference at line 4 is not to the large, full-stringed harp we know, but something more like a lute or a small Spanish guitar.

Literary Analysis
The Epic What does the story of Grendel's origins suggest about the beliefs of Anglo-Saxon culture?

✓ Reading Check

What does Grendel resent about Hrothgar and his men?

Of Cain,² murderous creatures banished
By God, punished forever for the crime
Of Abel's death. The Almighty drove
Those demons out, and their exile was bitter,
25 Shut away from men; they split
Into a thousand forms of evil—spirits
And fiends, goblins, monsters, giants,
A brood forever opposing the Lord's
Will, and again and again defeated.

30 Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel
Went up to Herot, wondering what the warriors
Would do in that hall when their drinking was done.
He found them sprawled in sleep, suspecting
Nothing, their dreams undisturbed. The monster's
35 Thoughts were as quick as his greed or his claws:
He slipped through the door and there in the silence
Snatched up thirty men, smashed them
Unknowing in their beds and ran out with their bodies,
The blood dripping behind him, back
40 To his lair, delighted with his night's slaughter.

At daybreak, with the sun's first light, they saw
How well he had worked, and in that gray morning
Broke their long feast with tears and laments
For the dead. Hrothgar, their lord, sat joyless
45 In Herot, a mighty prince mourning
The fate of his lost friends and companions,
Knowing by its tracks that some demon had torn
His followers apart. He wept, fearing
The beginning might not be the end. And that night
50 Grendel came again, so set
On murder that no crime could ever be enough,
No savage assault quench his lust
For evil. Then each warrior tried
To escape him, searched for rest in different
55 Beds, as far from Herot as they could find,
Seeing how Grendel hunted when they slept.
Distance was safety; the only survivors
Were those who fled him. Hate had triumphed.

So Grendel ruled, fought with the righteous,
60 One against many, and won; so Herot
Stood empty, and stayed deserted for years,
Twelve winters of grief for Hrothgar, king
Of the Danes, sorrow heaped at his door
By hell-forged hands. His misery leaped
65 The seas, was told and sung in all

Reading Strategy

Paraphrasing What are the main ideas in the sentences in lines 34–40?

Literary Analysis

The Epic Terrorized by Grendel, Hrothgar and his followers face "Twelve winters of grief." How does the length of their suffering increase the epic feeling of this tale?

2. Cain oldest son of Adam and Eve, who murdered his brother Abel.

Men's ears: how Grendel's hatred began,
 How the monster relished his savage war
 On the Danes, keeping the bloody feud
 Alive, seeking no peace, offering
 70 No truce, accepting no settlement, no price
 In gold or land, and paying the living
 For one crime only with another. No one
 Waited for reparation from his plundering claws:
 That shadow of death hunted in the darkness,
 75 Stalked Hrothgar's warriors, old
 And young, lying in waiting, hidden
 In mist, invisibly following them from the edge
 Of the marsh, always there, unseen.

So mankind's enemy continued his crimes,
 80 Killing as often as he could, coming
 Alone, bloodthirsty and horrible. Though he lived
 In Herot, when the night hid him, he never
 Dared to touch King Hrothgar's glorious
 Throne, protected by God—God,
 85 Whose love Grendel could not know. But Hrothgar's
 Heart was bent. The best and most noble
 Of his council debated remedies, sat
 In secret sessions, talking of terror
 And wondering what the bravest of warriors could do.
 90 And sometimes they sacrificed to the old stone gods,
 Made heathen vows, hoping for Hell's
 Support, the Devil's guidance in driving
 Their affliction off. That was their way,
 And the heathen's only hope, Hell
 95 Always in their hearts, knowing neither God
 Nor His passing as He walks through our world, the Lord
 Of Heaven and earth; their ears could not hear
 His praise nor know His glory. Let them
 Beware, those who are thrust into danger,
 100 Clutched at by trouble, yet can carry no solace
 In their hearts, cannot hope to be better! Hail
 To those who will rise to God, drop off
 Their dead bodies and seek our Father's peace!

The Coming of Beowulf

So the living sorrow of Healfdane's son³
 105 Simmered, bitter and fresh, and no wisdom
 Or strength could break it: that agony hung
 On king and people alike, harsh
 And unending, violent and cruel, and evil.

3. Healfdane's (hǣ̅ alf den' nez) son Hrothgar.

Burton Raffel Translator's Insight

A normal feud involves two sides: it takes two to tangle. Literary lore suggests that monsters are interested in fights they know they will win.

Vocabulary Builder

reparation (rep' e rā' shen)
n. something making up for a wrong or an injury

Vocabulary Builder

solace (sāl' is) *n.* comfort; relief



Reading Check

Why do the Danes flee Herot at night?

In his far-off home Beowulf, Higlac's⁴
 110 Follower and the strongest of the Geats—greater
 And stronger than anyone anywhere in this world—
 Heard how Grendel filled nights with horror
 And quickly commanded a boat fitted out,
 Proclaiming that he'd go to that famous king.
 115 Would sail across the sea to Hrothgar,
 Now when help was needed. None
 Of the wise ones regretted his going, much
 As he was loved by the Geats: the omens were good,
 And they urged the adventure on. So Beowulf
 120 Chose the mightiest men he could find,
 The bravest and best of the Geats, fourteen
 In all, and led them down to their boat;
 He knew the sea, would point the prow
 Straight to that distant Danish shore.
 125 Then they sailed, set their ship
 Out on the waves, under the cliffs.
 Ready for what came they wound through the currents,
 The seas beating at the sand, and were borne
 In the lap of their shining ship, lined
 130 With gleaming armor, going safely
 In that oak-hard boat to where their hearts took them.
 The wind hurried them over the waves,
 The ship foamed through the sea like a bird
 Until, in the time they had known it would take,
 135 Standing in the round-curved prow they could see
 Sparkling hills, high and green
 Jutting up over the shore, and rejoicing
 In those rock-steep cliffs they quietly ended
 Their voyage. Jumping to the ground, the Geats
 140 Pushed their boat to the sand and tied it
 In place, mail⁵ shirts and armor rattling
 As they swiftly moored their ship. And then
 They gave thanks to God for their easy crossing.
 High on a wall a Danish watcher
 145 Patrolling along the cliffs saw
 The travelers crossing to the shore, their shields
 Raised and shining; he came riding down,
 Hrothgar's lieutenant, spurring his horse,
 Needing to know why they'd landed, these men

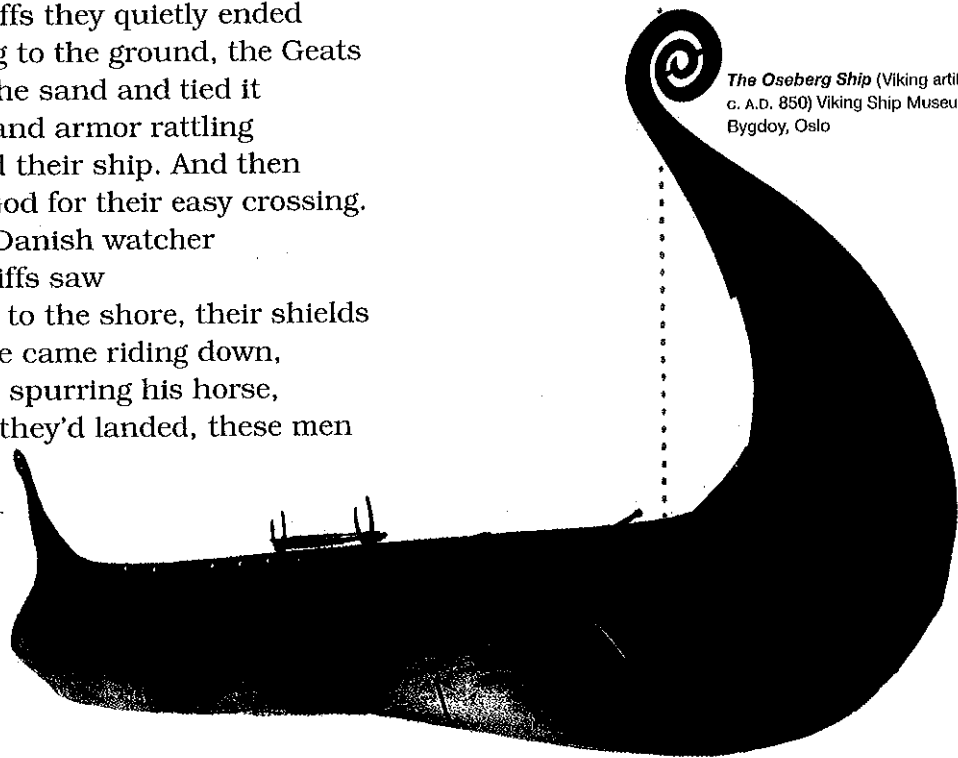
Reading Strategy

Paraphrasing Paraphrase lines 125–131. Remember that your paraphrase need not follow the word order of the original.

The Oseberg Ship (Viking artifact, c. A.D. 850) Viking Ship Museum, Bygdoy, Oslo

4. **Higlac's** (hig' laks) Higlac was the king of the Geats (gā' ats) and Beowulf's feudal lord and uncle.

5. **mail** flexible body armor made of metal.



150 In armor. Shaking his heavy spear
In their faces he spoke:

“Whose soldiers are you,
You who’ve been carried in your deep-keeled ship
Across the sea-road to this country of mine?

Listen! I’ve stood on these cliffs longer

155 Than you know, keeping our coast free

Of pirates, raiders sneaking ashore

From their ships, seeking our lives and our gold.

None have ever come more openly—

And yet you’ve offered no password, no sign

160 From my prince, no permission from my people for your landing

Here. Nor have I ever seen,

Out of all the men on earth, one greater

Than has come with you; no commoner carries

Such weapons, unless his appearance, and his beauty,

165 Are both lies. You! Tell me your name,

And your father’s; no spies go further onto Danish

Soil than you’ve come already. Strangers,

From wherever it was you sailed, tell it,

And tell it quickly, the quicker the better,

170 I say, for us all. Speak, say

Exactly who you are, and from where, and why.”

Their leader answered him, Beowulf unlocking
Words from deep in his breast:

“We are Geats,

Men who follow Higlac. My father

175 Was a famous soldier, known far and wide

As a leader of men. His name was Edgetho.

His life lasted many winters;

Wise men all over the earth surely

Remember him still. And we have come seeking

180 Your prince, Healfdane’s son, protector

Of this people, only in friendship: instruct us,

Watchman, help us with your words! Our errand

Is a great one, our business with the glorious king

Of the Danes no secret; there’s nothing dark

185 Or hidden in our coming. You know (if we’ve heard

The truth, and been told honestly) that your country

Is cursed with some strange, vicious creature

That hunts only at night and that no one

Has seen. It’s said, watchman, that he has slaughtered

190 Your people, brought terror to the darkness. Perhaps

Hrothgar can hunt, here in my heart,

For some way to drive this devil out—

If anything will ever end the evils

Afflicting your wise and famous lord.

195 Here he can cool his burning sorrow.

Literary Analysis

The Epic How do word choice and other stylistic features of the watchman’s speech add a serious, epic tone to his question?

Literary Analysis

The Epic and the Legendary Hero What does Beowulf’s way of identifying himself suggest about the values of a warrior culture?



Reading Check

Why does Beowulf sail to Denmark?

Or else he may see his suffering go on
Forever, for as long as Herot towers
High on your hills."

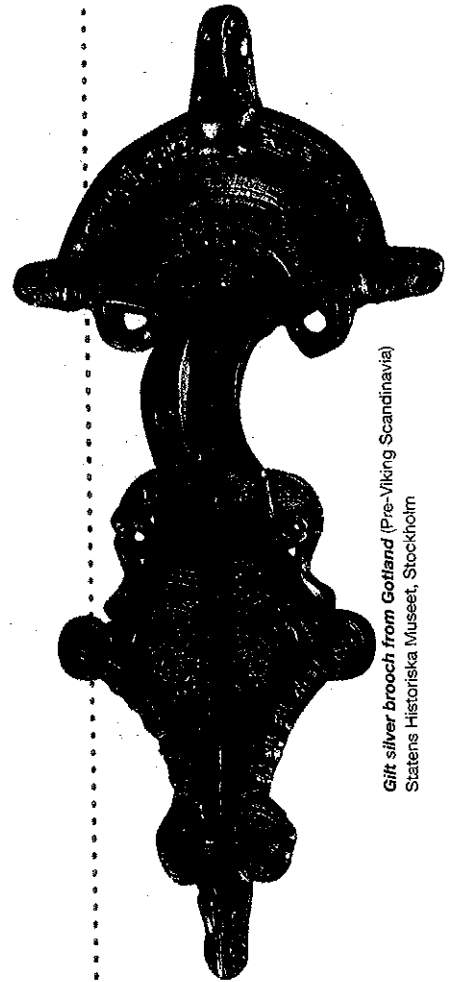
The mounted officer
Answered him bluntly, the brave watchman:

200 "A soldier should know the difference between words
And deeds, and keep that knowledge clear
In his brain. I believe your words, I trust in
Your friendship. Go forward, weapons and armor
And all, on into Denmark. I'll guide you
205 Myself—and my men will guard your ship,
Keep it safe here on our shores,
Your fresh-tarred boat, watch it well,
Until that curving prow carries
Across the sea to Geatland a chosen
210 Warrior who bravely does battle with the creature
Haunting our people, who survives that horror
Unhurt, and goes home bearing our love."

Then they moved on. Their boat lay moored,
Tied tight to its anchor. Glittering at the top
215 Of their golden helmets wild boar heads gleamed,
Shining decorations, swinging as they marched,
Erect like guards, like sentinels, as though ready
To fight. They marched, Beowulf and his men
And their guide, until they could see the gables
220 Of Herot, covered with hammered gold
And glowing in the sun—that most famous of all dwellings,
Towering majestic, its glittering roofs
Visible far across the land.
Their guide reined in his horse, pointing
225 To that hall, built by Hrothgar for the best
And bravest of his men; the path was plain,
They could see their way. . . .

—♦—
Beowulf and his men arrive at Herot and are called to see the King.
—♦—

Beowulf arose, with his men
230 Around him, ordering a few to remain
With their weapons, leading the others quickly
Along under Herot's steep roof into Hrothgar's
Presence. Standing on that prince's own hearth,
Helmeted, the silvery metal of his mail shirt
235 Gleaming with a smith's high art, he greeted
The Danes' great lord:



Gilt silver brooch from Gotland (Pre-Viking Scandinavia)
Statens Historiska Museet, Stockholm

“Hail, Hrothgar!

Higlac is my cousin⁶ and my king; the days
Of my youth have been filled with glory. Now Grendel's
Name has echoed in our land: sailors

240 Have brought us stories of Herot, the best
Of all mead-halls,⁷ deserted and useless when the moon
Hangs in skies the sun had lit,
Light and life fleeing together.

My people have said, the wisest, most knowing
245 And best of them, that my duty was to go to the Danes'
Great king. They have seen my strength for themselves,
Have watched me rise from the darkness of war,
Dripping with my enemies' blood. I drove
Five great giants into chains, chased

250 All of that race from the earth. I swam
In the blackness of night, hunting monsters
Out of the ocean, and killing them one
By one; death was my errand and the fate
They had earned. Now Grendel and I are called

255 Together, and I've come. Grant me, then,
Lord and protector of this noble place,
A single request! I have come so far,
O shelterer of warriors and your people's loved friend,
That this one favor you should not refuse me—
260 That I, alone and with the help of my men,
May purge all evil from this hall. I have heard,
Too, that the monster's scorn of men
Is so great that he needs no weapons and fears none.
Nor will I. My lord Higlac

265 Might think less of me if I let my sword
Go where my feet were afraid to, if I hid
Behind some broad linden⁸ shield: my hands
Alone shall fight for me, struggle for life
Against the monster. God must decide

270 Who will be given to death's cold grip.
Grendel's plan, I think, will be
What it has been before, to invade this hall
And gorge his belly with our bodies. If he can,
If he can. And I think, if my time will have come,

275 There'll be nothing to mourn over, no corpse to prepare
For its grave: Grendel will carry our bloody
Flesh to the moors, crunch on our bones
And smear torn scraps of our skin on the walls

6. **cousin** here, used as a general term for relative.

7. **mead-halls** To reward his thanes, the king in heroic literature would build a hall where mead (a drink made from fermented honey) was served.

8. **linden** very sturdy type of wood.

Literary Analysis

**The Epic and the
Legendary Hero** How do
Beowulf's boasts of great
deeds and his announce-
ment of his plan establish
him as a hero?

Vocabulary Builder

purge (pɜrj) v. purify;
cleanse

Reading Strategy

Paraphrasing Paraphrase
Beowulf's plans in lines
264–279.

Reading Check

What does Beowulf ask of
Hrothgar?

Of his den. No, I expect no Danes
280 Will fret about sewing our shrouds, if he wins.
And if death does take me, send the hammered
Mail of my armor to Higlac, return
The inheritance I had from Hrethel, and he
From Wayland.⁹ Fate will unwind as it must!"

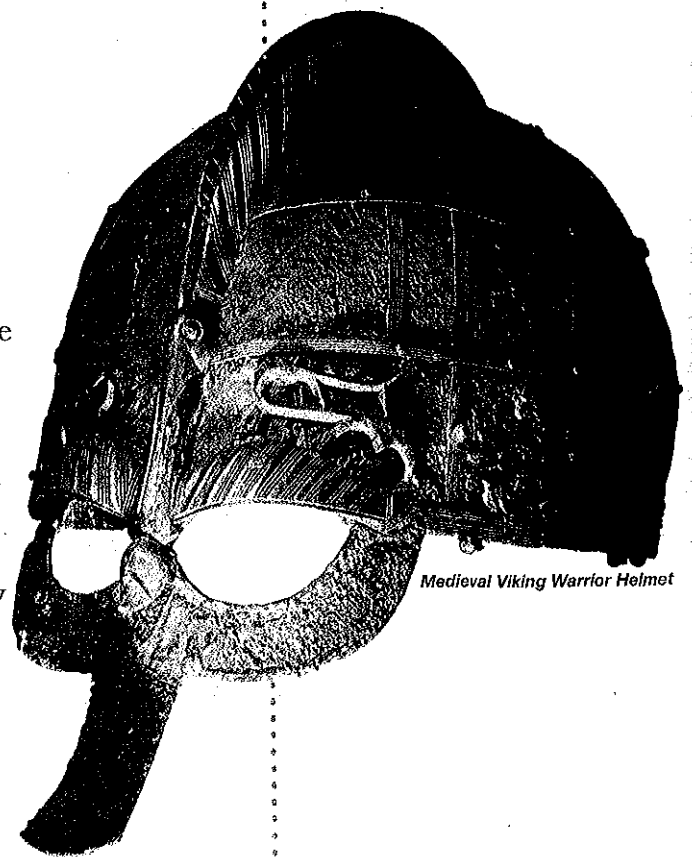
That night Beowulf and his men stay inside Herot. While his men sleep, Beowulf lies awake, eager to meet with Grendel.

The Battle with Grendel

285 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.
He moved quickly through the cloudy night,
290 Up from his swampland, sliding silently
Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited Hrothgar's
Home before, knew the way—
But never, before nor after that night,
Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception
295 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.
He strode quickly across the inlaid
300 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
With rows of young soldiers resting together.
305 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
Would soon know. But fate, that night, intended
310 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.
Grendel snatched at the first Geat
315 He came to, ripped him apart, cut

Literary Analysis

The Epic What values and beliefs of warrior culture does Beowulf's attitude toward death express?



Medieval Viking Warrior Helmet

9. Wayland from Germanic folklore, an invisible blacksmith.