



BURTON RAFFEL INTRODUCES

Beowulf

A Legendary Tale, Larger Than Life

Beowulf is a sweeping, action-packed narrative. Written in highly dramatic language, it has characters who are almost all kings, princes, and their heroic followers. The plot is energized by a pair of powerful man-eating monsters and, at the end, a greedy, fire-spouting dragon. All three are killed by the poem's principal character, Beowulf, who possesses magical qualities of his own. He can swim for days on end; he can breathe for extended periods underwater; his very name tells us in three ways that he is no mere human. He is Beo, or "bear." He is also Wulf, or "wolf." And most important of all, his name does not begin exactly as his father's name, Edgetho: for everyone in Anglo-Saxon England, this break in tradition would have been a dead giveaway of Beowulf's extraordinary character.

A Grand Beginning The story crackles with wonderfully calculated suspense. The hero himself is not introduced at the start. Man-eating Grendel takes the stage, emerging out of the kind of darkness and terror in which Anglo-Saxon life was steeped. Beowulf comes to help the besieged king Hrothgar. (His exciting travel over the deep waves was the first part of the poem I read, over fifty years ago.) The poem carefully explains his heroic, profoundly social motives. Offering himself as a potential sacrifice to Grendel, he fights with and tears an arm off the monster, who flees back into darkness.

Everyone is overjoyed, there is much celebrating—until Grendel's mother enters the scene, hungry (literally) for revenge. Beowulf promptly accepts the challenge, diving far down into the water, finding the lady demon, and in the end killing her in a very close fight. Loaded with praise and gifts, he returns to his own king, to whose throne he succeeds.

The Passage of Time Fifty years later, the old Beowulf's land is terrorized by a fire-breathing dragon. Unlike a good king, and like some of the bad kings in the poem, the dragon fiercely guards and never shares its treasures. Beowulf does not hesitate. But he is old and not as strong as he was. Significantly, he must have help, and is so badly burned that, after the dragon is dead, Beowulf too dies. His people give him a royal burial, and a monument, and sing the praises due to a fearless ruler who so totally embodied the virtues of a warrior king.



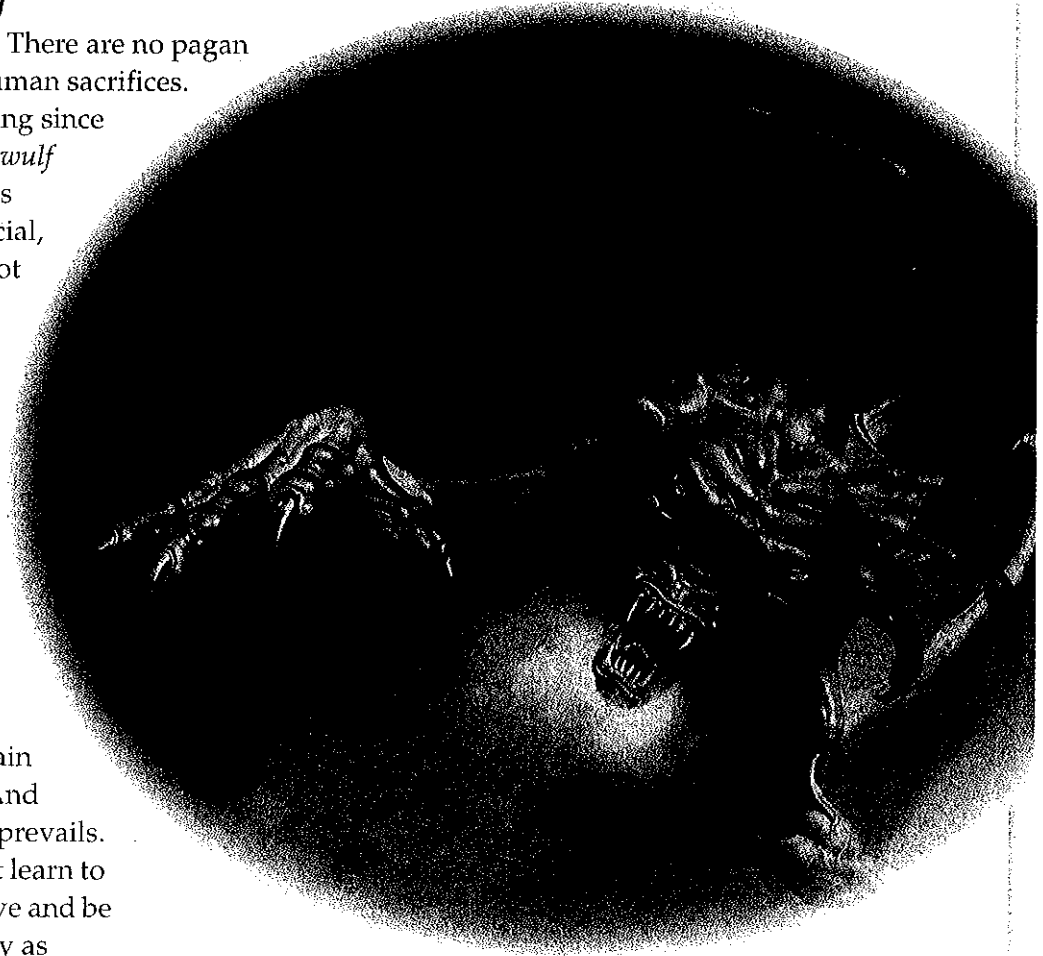
Burton Raffel

Burton Raffel has won the Frances Steloff Poetry Prize and the French-American Foundation's Translation Prize. He is the author of numerous poems, screenplays, and novels.

The Spirit of *Beowulf*

Beowulf is not a pagan poem. There are no pagan gods, no idols, no wanton human sacrifices.

Anglo-Saxon England had long since been Christianized when *Beowulf* was composed, but the epic is primarily concerned with social, not religious issues. Still, if not overtly Christian, *Beowulf*'s close identification with ancient Hebraic ways of life marks it as very much an Old Testament poem. "Almighty God," clearly and repeatedly evoked, operates ethically and holds humans to high moral standards. The creation story of Genesis is beautifully paraphrased. Hell is cited as the home of evil; the Abel and Cain tale is mentioned explicitly. And just as evil is punished, good prevails. The message is that men must learn to behave responsibly, and to love and be faithful to one another, exactly as *Beowulf* has shown that they can.



▲ Critical Viewing

Which of the dragon's characteristics might a storyteller share with an audience? [Connect]

Thinking About the Commentary

1. (a) **Recall:** What was the first part of *Beowulf* that Burton Raffel read?
(b) **Speculate:** Based on Raffel's introduction, what aspects of the poem do you think led to his lifelong interest in *Beowulf*?
2. (a) **Recall:** What details of the poem allow Raffel to say so definitely that *Beowulf* is not a pagan poem? (b) **Analyze:** What might the religious dimension of *Beowulf* tell us about the culture that produced it?

As You Read *Beowulf* . . .

3. Be ready to compare and contrast your reaction to the poem with Raffel's.
4. Think about how Raffel's passion for the poem is revealed in his translation.

from Beowulf

About Beowulf

At the dawn of English literature stands *Beowulf*. Like the epics of other cultures—the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of ancient Greece and the *Sundiata* of Mali—*Beowulf* is the self-portrait of a culture. In this adventure-packed poem, the Anglo-Saxons of eighth-century Britain embodied the traditions that shaped their world in one towering figure—Beowulf, sword-wielding slayer of monsters, upholder of the right, warrior-chieftain. The Anglo-Saxons left us few factual records of their life and history. In *Beowulf*, however, they vividly recorded their dreams, aspirations, and fears.

The Stuff of Legend Although the action takes place in sixth-century Scandinavia, *Beowulf* was originally told in Old English, the language spoken by the Anglo-Saxons of England during the years 500 to 1100. Beowulf, a Geat from a region that is today southern Sweden, sets sail to aid the Danish King Hrothgar in his fight against the monster Grendel. A terrifying swampland creature whose eyes burn "with gruesome light," Grendel has been terrorizing Hrothgar's great banquet hall, Herot, for twelve years. The battle between Beowulf, a young warrior of great strength and courage, and Grendel, his bloodthirsty foe, is the first of three mortal battles in this long poem.

Forging an Epic The tales in *Beowulf* originate from a time when stories and poems were passed along by word of mouth. In Anglo-Saxon England, traveling minstrels, called *scops*, captivated audiences with long narrative poems. These poems changed and grew as they were passed from one scop to another. *Beowulf* was told and retold in this fashion throughout England for hundreds of years. In the eleventh century, the epic was finally written down.

Beowulf grew out of other, earlier traditions. The monsters and dragons of the tale, the brave warriors steadfastly loyal to their heroic chief, the descent into the eerie regions below the earth—these were familiar elements of Scandinavian or Celtic folk tales. Even a detail as specific as Beowulf's seizure of Grendel's arm can be traced to earlier tales.

A Guide to Life By forging these various traditions into one unified tale and by adding the later influence of Christianity, the Anglo-Saxon scops created a central reference point for their culture. Listening to *Beowulf*, an Anglo-Saxon could learn of bravery and loyalty, of the monsters that spite and hatred could be, and of the heroism needed to conquer them.

From Oral Tradition to Cyberspace and Beyond The only original manuscript of the complete 3,182-line poem comes to us from Sir Robert Cotton's (1571–1631) collection of medieval manuscripts. In 1731, the manuscript was saved from a fire but did not escape damage—2,000

letters crumbled away from the edges of the manuscript. Thanks to an initiative called the Electronic *Beowulf* Project, the manuscript has now been preserved and made available electronically.

Although much of the attention given to the poem is scholarly, *Beowulf* is far from a museum piece. The adventuresome tale, clanging with blood-curdling battles and the noble ring of bold oaths, continues to thrill readers. In 2000, the celebrated Irish poet Seamus Heaney published his translation of *Beowulf* to public acclaim. Preserved in song, then in writing, then on a hard drive, the memory of Beowulf has stood strong through the ages, finally calling on a modern poet to renew the sounds and spirit of Britain's first epic.



Preview

Connecting to the Literature

It is a familiar but stirring scene: A brave hero battles his archenemy, an evildoer who will stop at nothing to win. The theme of hero and villain goes back more than twelve hundred years, to a time when Anglo-Saxon storytellers sang of the battles of Beowulf, legendary warrior.

Literary Analysis

The Epic

An **epic** is a long narrative poem, sometimes developed orally, that celebrates the deeds of a legendary or heroic figure. Epics are among the earliest forms of literature. Early epics, such as Homer's *Iliad* from ancient Greece, capture the cultural and religious values of the peoples who created and retold them. Common features of epics include the following:

- The hero battles forces that threaten the order of his world.
- The story is told in a serious manner, often in special, elevated language.

Beowulf, the epic of the Anglo-Saxons, uses elements of Anglo-Saxon poetry such as the **kenning** and **caesura**. (For more about these elements, see p. 17.)

Connecting Literary Elements

A **legendary hero** is a larger-than-life character whose accomplishments are celebrated in traditional tales. Beowulf's boastful self-confidence, his feats of strength, and his victories in battle make him a classic legendary hero. Upholding the values of his culture—loyalty, bravery, honor—he can teach modern readers a great deal about the Anglo-Saxon view of the world.

Reading Strategy

Paraphrasing

Although *Beowulf* has been translated into modern English, its long, involved sentences may still be difficult to follow. To aid your understanding, **paraphrase** complex passages—identify the key details in a passage and restate them in your own words. Use a graphic organizer like the one shown.

Vocabulary Builder

reparation (rep' ə rā' shən) *n.* something making up for a wrong or an injury (p. 43)

solace (säl' is) *n.* comfort; relief (p. 43)

purge (purj) *v.* purify; cleanse (p. 47)

writhing (rīth' in) *adj.* making twisting or turning motions (p. 49)

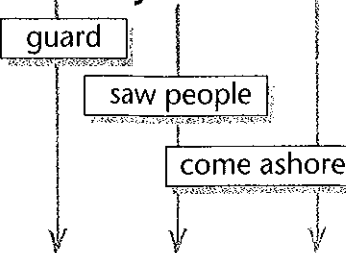
massive (mas' iv) *adj.* big and solid; bulky (p. 54)

loathsome (lōth' sem) *adj.* disgusting (p. 54)

Original

High on a wall a Danish
watcher / Patrolling along
the cliffs saw / The travelers
crossing to the shore,
their shields / Raised and
shining....

Key Details



Paraphrase

A Danish guard saw
strangers come ashore,
holding up their shields.