



Beowulf

Study Guide

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Beowulf Study Guide

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Synopsis

In sixth-century Scandinavia, the Danish king, Hrothgar, holds court in his mead hall, Heorot, a magnificent structure bright with camaraderie and celebration. Darkness falls on Heorot, however, when Grendel, a terrible monster descended from fratricidal Cain, begins making nightly raids on the hall, angrily slaughtering Hrothgar's best warriors. For 12 years Grendel's attacks continue; the aging Hrothgar cannot stop the sorrow and chaos being inflicted on his people.

Help arrives in the form of Beowulf, a young, strong, and confident warrior from the tribe of the Geats across the sea. Undaunted by either Grendel's might or the mockery of Hrothgar's soldier Unferth, Beowulf vows to defeat the monster in unarmed combat. Thanks to his own boldness and the will of God, he does.

Beowulf's adventures, however, are only beginning. Grendel's mother seeks vengeance for her son's defeat and launches her own attack on Heorot. Descending to her watery lair, Beowulf slays her. Even then, his labors are not finished. He returns to his own tribe with Hrothgar's wealth and wisdom, fights many battles in the service of his own king, and ultimately assumes the throne himself.

After five decades as the Geats' king, Beowulf faces his final, fatal challenge: a *bona fide* fire-breathing dragon whose scorching aerial assaults punish the whole nation for one man's theft of a cup from its hoarded treasure. With a heavy heart, an aged Beowulf engages in one more battle against a force of destruction and disorder, fighting not only for the future of his people but for the immortality of his name.

Lines 194–702

Vocabulary:

Match each word to the best possible synonym(s). You will not use all the choices. The line numbers will help you consult the poem for context clues.

- | | |
|--|---|
| a. bound, restrained | i. brave, firm |
| b. not discouraged, fearless | j. competed against, challenged |
| c. skilled; careful | k. intruders |
| d. travel | m. limitless, incomparable |
| e. enemies | n. meal, food |
| f. be eager for a fight; be eager to do violence | o. followers or servants of nobility |
| g. a time of relief, a reprieve | p. be ready to meet a challenge; be ready to do your best |
| h. rivals | |

1. _____ . . . a canny pilot along coast and currents (l. 209).
2. _____ So now, before you fare inland / as interlopers, I have to be informed. . . . (ll. 252–53)
3. _____ . . . a way / to defeat his enemy and find respite (ll. 279–80)
4. _____ . . . where Hrothgar sat, / an old man among retainers (l. 357).
5. _____ . . . proud in their bearing, / strong and stalwart (ll. 493–94)
6. _____ . . . but you vied for seven nights; and then he outswam you. . . . (l. 516)
7. _____ Pinioned fast / and swathed in its grip. . . . (ll. 554–55)
8. _____ Often, for undaunted courage, / fate spares the man it has not already marked. (ll. 572–73)
9. _____ Be on your mettle now, keep in mind your fame. . . . (l. 659)

Literary Technique: Characterization

C. Hugh Holman defines *characterization* as the “creation of images of [an author’s] imaginary persons so credible that they exist for the reader as real within the limits of the fiction” (Holman, p. 91). In this section of the poem, Beowulf makes a dramatic entrance, giving us our first opportunity to form opinions of him (although the poem’s original audience no doubt already knew of Beowulf and his exploits).

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Skillful authors use a variety of characterization techniques: *directly giving information* about the character to the reader; letting readers draw inferences about the character from *the character's appearance*; allowing *what the character says* and *what others say about the character* to develop that character; and *presenting the character in action*, inviting readers to judge the character through his or her deeds.

1. Though the *Beowulf* poet did not write according to modern literary conventions, he develops Beowulf's character using the above techniques. For each of the techniques listed below, quote or paraphrase two or three sentences or lines in which that technique is used. Include the line reference.

Direct information:

The character's appearance:

What the character says:

What others say about the character:

The character's actions:

2. Authors can also develop a character by providing that character a *foil*—"any person or sometimes thing that through strong contrast underscores or enhances the distinctive characteristics of another" (Holman, p. 226). In this section of the poem, how does Unferth act as a foil to Beowulf?

Literary Technique: The Anglo-Saxon Boast

Although they may initially strike some modern readers as immodest at best and boorish at worst, *Beowulf* scholar John M. Hill argues that the various boasts in the poem must be understood within the context of Anglo-Saxon culture:

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4. Who is Wealhtheow? What does she do in this section of the poem? For what does she tell Beowulf she has been praying?

Analysis:

5. How is Beowulf's swimming match with Breca relevant to the problem he has come to help the Danes face?

6. As night falls, Hrothgar, for the first time, entrusts Heorot to another man (ll. 655–57). Why do you think Hrothgar hopes and trusts that Beowulf will succeed in defending the hall from Grendel when his own “seasoned fighters” and “faithful retainers” (ll. 481, 488) have failed? Why do Beowulf's men seem dubious (ll. 691–96), and what might their doubts suggest about them?

7. In this section of the poem, how do characters testify to God's involvement in events? How does the poet? How would you describe the poem's view of God to this point?

8. As Beowulf concludes his first oath, he declares, “Fate goes ever as fate must” (l. 455). This line marks the first appearance of the word *wyrd*, or fate, in the text. According to Kevin Crossley-Holland, *wyrd*, in Anglo-Saxon thought, “governed the passage of a man's life from his first day to his last, and the only element of choice perceived by the Anglo-Saxon mind appears to have been the way in which a man reacted to his destiny.” Do you believe such a view of fate to be compatible with Christian faith? Why or why not? Support your answer with specific biblical references.

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As you continue to read, keep a running list of passages (on a separate piece of paper or in a reading response journal) that contain significant mentions of God and/or fate. You will want to refer to this list when reviewing and analyzing the poem as a whole.

Dig Deeper:

9. Boasts seem to have played a positive, community-strengthening role in Anglo-Saxon society. Read Psalms 12; 44:1–8; Psalm 75; Jeremiah 9:23–24; Luke 17:7–10; 2 Corinthians 12:1–10; Galatians 6:14; Ephesians 2:8–10; and James 4:13–17. According to the Bible, when, if ever, is boasting acceptable behavior?

How is the boasting about which Scripture teaches like and/or unlike the boasting of *Beowulf's* Anglo-Saxon context? How do you imagine Jesus might respond to Beowulf's boasts at Heorot?

Option: Extend this discussion by challenging students to use Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, and concordances to find further texts related to boasting. (Introduce students to the use of such resources as necessary.)

10. When deciding how to respond to Beowulf, Hrothgar and other Danes consider such factors as the newcomer's appearance, ancestry, personal past, and reputation. How far can or should Christians use these criteria to form conclusions about others? Consider 1 Samuel 16:6–7; Matthew 3:7–10; 7:1–5, 15–20; 1 Corinthians 1:26–31; and 2 Corinthians 5:16–17 in your response.

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hand, Jesus might consider Beowulf's liberation of the Danes from Grendel's attacks an example of doing God's will; certainly, the poet tells us Grendel was opposed to God (e.g., ll. 121, 810). Jesus' Spirit-empowered mission was "to proclaim freedom for the prisoners . . . [and] to release the oppressed" (Lk. 4:18). On the other hand, Beowulf never explicitly claims to be obeying God (although he does explicitly place the outcome of his fight in God's hands, ll. 685–87); he characterizes his quest as his own agenda; and he seems motivated as much by a pursuit of glory as a selfless desire to free the Danes (see, e.g., ll. 409–18, 636–37, 959–61).

14. The Teacher seems to reject the commonly held belief in immortality achieved through fame. The anecdote of the poor, wise man that saves his city but is nevertheless forgotten (9:13–16) challenges the idea that even our best achievements can earn us an everlasting place in the memory of others. The Teacher's lament at 2:15–16 reinforces this conclusion: both wise and foolish will share the same fate—oblivion—because all are subject to mortality. Biblical scholar W. Sibley Towner summarizes the Teacher's position: "Even with such good attainments as wisdom, wealth, and power there is no sure and certain hope in this life, and absolutely no hope in any other life." [W. Sibley Towner, "The Book of Ecclesiastes," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. V (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), p. 345.] Personal responses will vary regarding which point of view the student favors.

15. The immortality God promises is new, true life after death; it is greater than continuing on in others' memories (as important as those memories can be). Immortality, as defined by scripture, is that quality of being immune to death that belongs, properly, to God alone (1 Tim. 6:16). Humans can only "gain" immortality as a gift from God. Even those scriptural texts that correlate one's behavior in this life with immortality (e.g., Dan. 12:3; Rom. 2:6–8; Rev. 20:13, 15) do not teach that immortality is anything but a gift, given as God chooses. By the time of Jesus, many Jews believed in the promise of a general resurrection of the dead (see Dan. 12), including the authors of the New Testament. They understood the resurrection of Jesus on the first Easter to be God's inauguration of its full realization (1 Cor. 15). Christians thus believe Jesus of Nazareth to be, in himself, "the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25; see also 2 Tim. 1:10). Even our belief in him, however, is God's gift; unlike the immortality of which Hrothgar speaks, true immortality cannot be *achieved* by our effort, but only *received* in gratitude.

16. Responses will vary; some interpretive suggestions follow. The resurrection of Jesus reveals that death is not God's will for humanity; it is, the apostle Paul wrote, the "last enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26). Yet even Paul could also view death as the acceptable conclusion to his faithful life (2 Tim. 4:6–8), and as a blessing because, beyond it, he would "be with Christ" (Phil. 1:21). While Christians affirm that God has, in the resurrection of Jesus, denied death's ultimate power over humanity (Heb. 2:14–15; Rev. 1:17–18), we should take seriously the time God has given us in this life—the "length of our days" (Ps. 90:10)—as our only opportunity *now* (and so our only guaranteed opportunity, as Eccl. 12 teaches when urging readers to "[r]emember [their] Creator in the days of [their] youth," v. 1) to believe in and serve God and to do God's work in the world—"the work of our hands" (Ps. 90:17).

Lines 1251–1643

Vocabulary:

1. slathered; 2. depredations, heirlooms; 3. sallied; 4. brooding, sound; 5. scudding; 6. resolute, whetted