Literary Analysis of Beowulf

Setting: Beowulf takes place in early 6th-century Scandinavia, primarily in what is known today as Denmark and Sweden.

Characters:

Danes (Scyldings)

****Scyld Scefing**** A mythical figure, Scyld was the founder of the tribe of the Scyldings long before Beowulf's story begins. His ship funeral early in the poem is a significant ritual.

**Hrothgar**The aging king of the Danes welcomes Beowulf's assistance in facing the menace of Grendel. His sermon to Beowulf before the Geat champion's departure is thematically important; his great mead-hall, Heorot, symbolizes the kingdom's success, civilization, and joy.

**Wealhtheow** Hrothgar's queen welcomes Beowulf and is the embodiment of charm and hospitality.

**Unferth** One of Hrothgar's top retainers, Unferth insults Beowulf after dipping too deeply into the mead bowl at the first banquet. He later lends Beowulf a sword for a crucial battle.

Geats (Weder-Folk or Weders)

**Beowulf**A mighty warrior and noble individual, the poem's hero, with the strength of 30 in his hand-grip, comes to the aid of Hrothgar's Danes. Later Beowulf is king of the Geats.

**Wiglaf**The only thane to stand with Beowulf against the dragon, he is the Geats' future king and a symbol of loyalty within the social/political structure of the *comitatus*.

**Hygelac**King of the Geats and uncle to Beowulf, his death in battle (c. 520) is recorded historically, unlike most of the events in the poem.

**Hygd**Hygelac's queen is a perfect hostess in the style of Wealhtheow and exemplifies propriety in royalty. Beowulf is loyal to her and her young son, Heardred, when Hygelac dies.

**Heardred**Despite Beowulf's support, the young king, son of Hygelac and Hygd, is killed in a feud. Beowulf then becomes king of the Geats.

Monsters

**Grendel**A descendant of the biblical Cain, the enormous ogre despises mankind's joy. He menaces Hrothgar and the Danes for 12 years before facing Beowulf in battle.

**Grendel's mother**Although not as powerful as her son, she is a formidable foe. She and her son live in a cave beneath a swampy lake (or mere) where she battles Beowulf.

**Dragon** Guarding a treasure-trove in Geatland, he is angered when a fugitive steals a single gold-plated flagon. His raids throughout the countryside lead to a battle with Beowulf, the king's last.

Two Men, Three Swords, and a Great Mead-Hall

**Breca** A royal member of the Brondings, he and Beowulf engaged in a swimming contest against each other as adolescents, which Unferth claims Beowulf lost.

**Weland**The legendary, magical blacksmith who made Beowulf's armor.

**Hrunting**Beowulf receives the ancient sword from Unferth and uses it, albeit unsuccessfully, against Grendel's mother.

**Naegling**Beowulf's own mighty sword is ineffective in the fight with the fiery dragon.

**Magical Giant Sword**Beowulf miraculously finds this wonderful weapon in the underwater cave and uses it to kill Grendel's mother. It melts down to the hilt after Beowulf uses it to decapitate Grendel's corpse. Beowulf presents the hilt to Hrothgar along with Grendel's head.

**Heorot**Hrothgar's mead-hall is more like a palace, symbolizing his and the Scyldings' success. Grendel sees it as a symbol of mankind's joy and delights in raiding and capturing it nightly.

Plot: Beowulf is one of the most important texts in Old English and is believed to date from somewhere between 975 and 1025 - around the time of Alfred the Great. The author is unknown.

The poem consists of 3,182 lines and exists in a single copy, housed in the **[British Museum](https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/beowulf)**. This is an external link. The BBC is not responsible for the content.

*Beowulf* is the longest and greatest surviving Anglo-Saxon poem. The setting of the epic is the sixth century in what is now known as Denmark and southwestern Sweden. The poem opens with a brief genealogy of the Scylding (Dane) royal dynasty, named after a mythic hero, Scyld Scefing, who reached the tribe's shores as a castaway babe on a ship loaded with treasure. Scyld's funeral is a memorable early ritual in the work, but focus soon shifts to the reign of his great-grandson, Hrothgar, whose successful rule is symbolized by a magnificent central mead-hall called Heorot. For 12 years, a huge man-like ogre named Grendel, a descendant of the biblical murderer Cain, has menaced the aging Hrothgar, raiding Heorot and killing the king's thanes (warriors). Grendel rules the mead-hall nightly.

Beowulf, a young warrior in Geatland (southwestern Sweden), comes to the Scyldings' aid, bringing with him 14 of his finest men. Hrothgar once sheltered Beowulf's father during a deadly feud, and the mighty Geat hopes to return the favor while enhancing his own reputation and gaining treasure for his king, Hygelac*.*At a feast before nightfall of the first day of the visit, an obnoxious, drunken Scylding named Unferth insults Beowulf and claims that the Geat visitor once embarrassingly lost a swimming contest to a boyhood acquaintance named Breca and is no match for Grendel. Beowulf responds with dignity while putting Unferth in his place. In fact, the two swimmers were separated by a storm on the fifth night of the contest, and Beowulf had slain nine sea monsters before finally returning to shore.

While the Danes retire to safer sleeping quarters, Beowulf and the Geats bed down in Heorot, fully aware that Grendel will visit them. He does. Angered by the joy of the men in the mead-hall, the ogre furiously bursts in on the Geats, killing one and then reaching for Beowulf. With the strength of 30 men in his hand-grip, Beowulf seizes the ogre's claw and does not let go. The ensuing battle nearly destroys the great hall, but Beowulf emerges victorious as he rips Grendel's claw from its shoulder socket, sending the mortally wounded beast fleeing to his mere (pool). The claw trophy hangs high under the roof of Heorot.

The Danes celebrate the next day with a huge feast featuring entertainment by Hrothgar's *scop* (pronounced "shop"), a professional bard who accompanies himself on a harp and sings or chants traditional lays such as an account of the Danes' victory at Finnsburh. This bard also improvises a song about Beowulf's victory. Hrothgar's wife, Queen Wealhtheow, proves to be a perfect hostess, offering Beowulf a gold collar and her gratitude. Filled with mead, wine, and great food, the entire party retires for what they expect to be the first peaceful night in years.

But Grendel's mother — not quite as powerful as her son but highly motivated — climbs to Heorot that night, retrieves her son's claw, and murderously abducts one of the Scyldings (Aeschere) while Beowulf sleeps elsewhere. The next morning, Hrothgar, Beowulf, and a retinue of Scyldings and Geats follow the mother's tracks into a dark, forbidding swamp and to the edge of her mere. The slaughtered Aeschere's head sits on a cliff by the lake, which hides the ogres' underground cave. Carrying a sword called *Hrunting,* a gift from the chastised Unferth, Beowulf dives into the mere to seek the mother.

Near the bottom of the lake, Grendel's mother attacks and hauls the Geat warrior to her dimly lit cave. Beowulf fights back once inside the dry cavern, but the gift sword, Hrunting, strong as it is, fails to penetrate the ogre's hide. The mother moves to kill Beowulf with her knife, but his armor, made by the legendary blacksmith Weland,protects him. Suddenly Beowulf spots a magical, giant sword and uses it to cut through the mother's spine at the neck, killing her. A blessed light unexplainably illuminates the cavern, disclosing Grendel's corpse and a great deal of treasure. Beowulf decapitates the corpse. The magic sword melts to its hilt. Beowulf returns to the lake's surface carrying the head and hilt but leaving the treasure.

After more celebration and gifts and a sermon by Hrothgar warning of the dangers of pride and the mutability of time, Beowulf and his men return to Geatland. There he serves his king well until Hygelac is killed in battle and his son dies in a feud. Beowulf is then named king and rules successfully for 50 years. Like Hrothgar, however, his peace is shattered in his declining years. Beowulf must battle one more demon.

A fiery dragon has become enraged because a lone fugitive has inadvertently discovered the dragon's treasure-trove and stolen a valuable cup. The dragon terrorizes the countryside at night, burning several homes, including Beowulf's. Led by the fugitive, Beowulf and eleven of his men seek out the dragon's barrow. Beowulf insists on taking on the dragon alone, but his own sword, Naegling*,*is no match for the monster. Seeing his king in trouble, one thane, Wiglaf, goes to his assistance. The others flee to the woods. Together, Wiglaf and Beowulf kill the dragon, but the mighty king is mortally wounded. Dying, Beowulf leaves his kingdom to Wiglaf and requests that his body be cremated in a funeral pyre and buried high on a seaside cliff where passing sailors might see the barrow. The dragon's treasure-hoard is buried with him. It is said that they lie there still.

Themes: Some of the themes in Beowulf include courage, good versus evil, loyalty, generosity, reputation, and the heroic code. One of the major themes in Beowulf is courage. Beowulf is the epitome of courage, always charging into

battle even though the odds are steeply against him.

Quizz

## Quiz

After Beowulf defeats Grendel’s mother, how long does he rule over the Geats?

* 10 years
* 20 years
* 3 years
* 50 years

Beowulf defeats Grendel’s mother by using a giant, magical

* bow and arrow
* catapult
* dagger
* sword

Beowulf defeats Grendel by ripping off its

* claw
* head
* tongue

Grendel’s mother lives

* in a lake
* in the dungeon
* in the woods
* on an island

The mythological character that founded Hrothgar’s kingdom was named

* Guthlaf
* Healfdene
* Queen Modthrytho
* Scyld Scefing

Who comes to Beowulf’s aid in the dragon fight and then becomes the future Geat king?

* Aeschere
* Heardred
* Hygelac
* Wiglaf

Here is information about some of the best and most noteworthy film adaptations of *Beowulf*:

*Beowulf and Grendel*

* 2005
* Director: Sturla Gunnarsson
* Rated: R

This is purely a medieval action flick with plotting loosely based on the original epic poem. In this adaptation, the character of Grendel is stripped of most of his supernatural elements, and thus the action here is totally down-to-earth rather than being an epic story of monsters vs. men. The movie is entertaining in a period piece kind of way, and the cinematography is beautiful with most of the film having been shot in Iceland and Canada.

*Beowulf*

* 2007
* Director:
* Rated PG-13

This animated IMAX version of Beowulf (in 3D!) is WAY over the top. Other than the setting and plot starting point, this adaptation does not follow the original epic poem at all. The screenplay was written by Neil Gaiman and Roger Avary, and reflects their dark and satirical visions as reflected in some of their other works. The movie features an impressive voice-cast, including British actor Ray Winstone as Beowulf, Anthony Hopkins as King Hrothgar, and Angelina Jolie as Grendel's Mother. Very entertaining stuff, even though it's only marginally useful as a reference for the original epic poem.