



The Hero Beowulf In the epic poem you are about to read, 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 that are fought in this long epic poem.

Forging an Epic The tales in *Beowulf* originated from a time when stories and poems were passed along by word of mouth. This process is known as *oral tradition*, and it included many different literary forms, such as riddles and proverbs, in addition to epic poems.

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. Today, it survives in a single manuscript, which is in the collection of the British Museum in London.

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 and Celtic folk tales. Even a detail as specific as Beowulf’s seizure of Grendel’s arm can be traced to earlier tales.

Poetry in Performance From the clues provided in *Beowulf* itself, we gain a general idea of how the epic may have sounded in performance. Anglo-Saxon poetry was sung or chanted to musical accompaniment, with the scop playing a primitive harp as he performed the narrative. Each rhythmic verse had four stressed syllables and an indefinite number of unstressed ones, with two or three of the stressed syllables tied together by *alliteration*, the repetition of initial consonant sounds. Each line of verse was divided in half by a slight pause called a *caesura*.

A Guide to Life By forging different traditions into one unified tale, and by incorporating 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 to one’s fellows, of the monsters that spite and hatred could breed, and of the heroism needed to conquer such monsters.

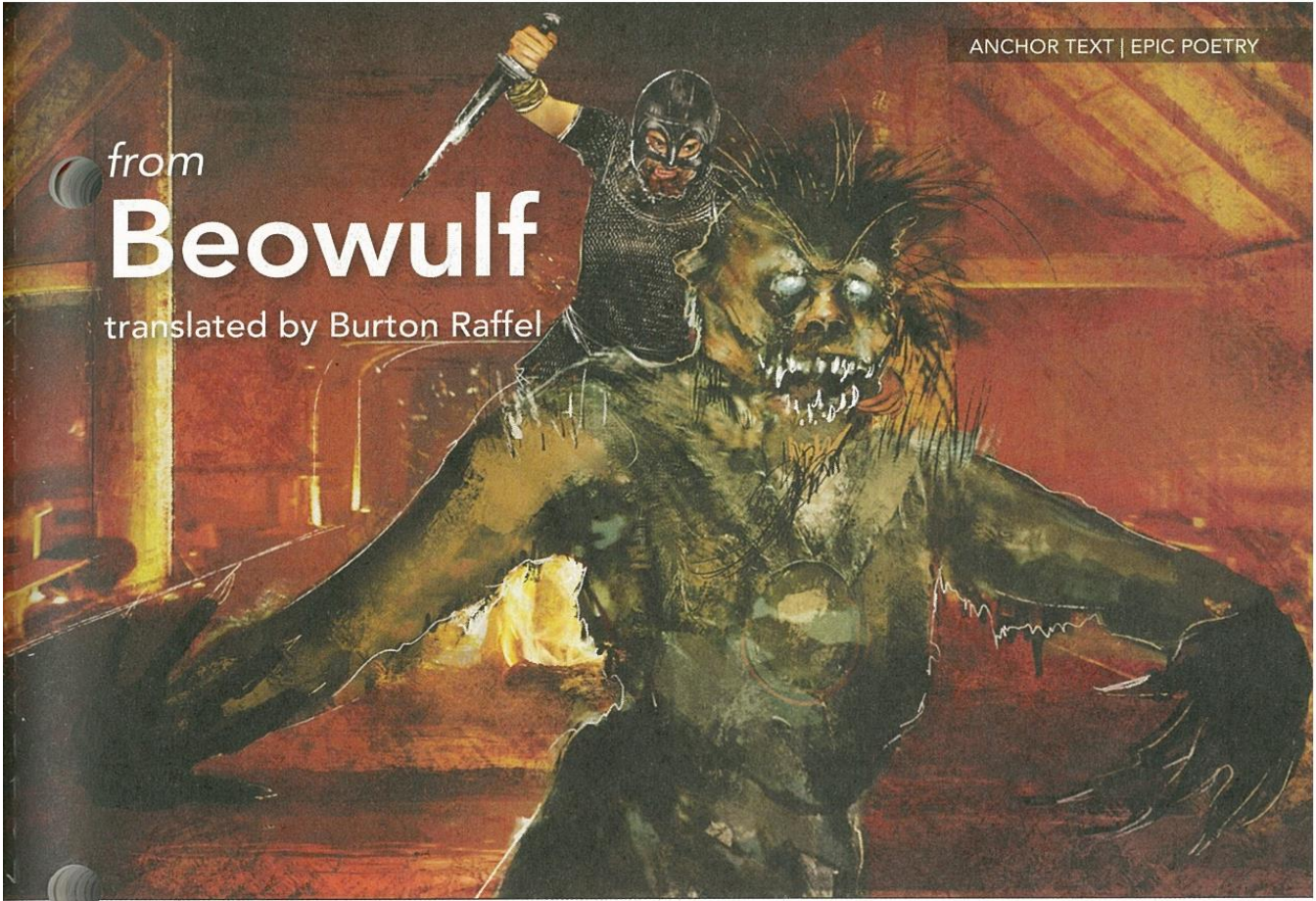
Besides its relationship to Anglo-Saxon culture, *Beowulf* displays archetypal literary elements. *Archetypes* are patterns in literature found around the world. Beowulf himself is an archetypal hero: extraordinarily strong and unshakably loyal. His struggle against the monsters and the dragon is an archetypal conflict of good versus evil.



from

Beowulf

translated by Burton Raffel

SCAN FOR
MULTIMEDIA 

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

1. hall Herot.

NOTES



NOTES

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
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

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



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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

NOTES

lair (lair) *n.* den; hiding place

NOTES

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: Mark the repeated word in lines 67–73.

QUESTION: Why might an author choose to repeat a word in such rapid succession?

CONCLUDE: What does the repetition here reveal about Grendel?

stalked (stawk) *v.*
pursued stealthily;
hunted

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
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

NOTES

- 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.
- 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, mail shirts⁵ 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

3. **Healfdane's** (HAY alf deh nuhz) **son** Hrothgar.

4. **Higlac's** (HIHG laks) Higlac was the king of the Geats (GAY ots) and Beowulf's feudal lord and uncle.

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

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: Mark two details in lines 151–171 that show what the watchman finds unusual about the arrival of Beowulf and his men.

QUESTION: What do these details suggest about the threats the Danes face and the personal qualities they value?

CONCLUDE: What is the effect of describing Beowulf's arrival from the point of view of the watchman?

- 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
- 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,



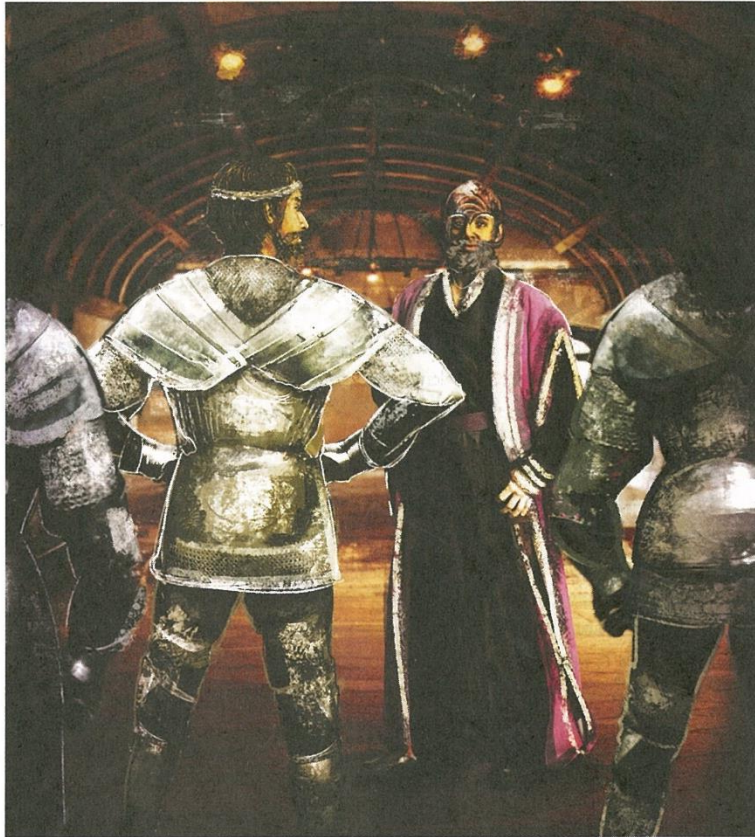
For some way to drive this devil out—
 If anything will ever end the evils
 Afflicting your wise and famous lord.
 195 Here he can cool his burning sorrow.
 Or else he may see his suffering go on
 Forever, for as long as Herot towers
 High on your hills.”

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 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
 Around him, ordering a few to remain
 With their weapons, leading the others quietly
 230 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
 Gleaming with smith’s high art, he greeted
 The Danes’ great lord:

**CLOSE READ**

ANNOTATE: Mark details in lines 235–253 that show the specific heroic deeds Beowulf recounts to Hrothgar.

QUESTION: What can you infer about Beowulf from the details he shares with Hrothgar?

CONCLUDE: What do these details reveal about the world in which this story is set?

“Hail, Hrothgar!

235 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
Have brought us stories of Herot, the best
Of all mead-halls,⁷ deserted and useless when the moon
240 Hangs in skies the sun had lit,
Light and life fleeing together.
My people have said, the wisest, most knowing
And best of them, that my duty was to go to the Danes’
Great king. They have seen my strength for themselves,
245 Have watched me rise from the darkness of war,
Dripping with my enemies’ blood. I drove
Five great giants into chains, chased
All of that race from the earth. I swam
In the blackness of night, hunting monsters
250 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

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

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

- Together, and I've come. Grant me, then,
 Lord and protector of this noble place,
 255 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—
 That I, alone and with the help of my men,
 May purge all evil from this hall. I have heard,
 260 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
 Might think less of me if I let my sword
 Go where my feet were afraid to, if I hid
 265 Behind some broad linden⁸ shield: my hands
 Alone shall fight for me, struggle for life
 Against the monster. God must decide
 Who will be given to death's cold grip.
 Grendel's plan, I think, will be
 270 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,
 There'll be nothing to mourn over, no corpse to prepare
 For its grave: Grendel will carry our bloody
 275 Flesh to the moors, crunch on our bones
 And smear torn scraps of our skin on the walls
 Of his den. No, I expect no Danes
 Will fret about sewing our shrouds, if he wins.
 And if death does take me, send the hammered
 280 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

- Out from the marsh, from the footy of misty
 Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred
 285 Grendel came, hoping to kill
 Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot.
 He moved quickly through the cloudy night,
 Up from his swampland, sliding silently
 Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited Hrothgar's
 290 Home before, knew the way—
 But never, before nor after that night,

8. **linden** (LIHN duhn) very sturdy type of wood.

9. **Wayland** blacksmith from Germanic folklore.

NOTES

gorge (gawri) *v.* to fill by eating greedily

NOTES

gruesome (GROO suhm) *adj.*
horrible; ghastly

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: In English syntax, **apposition** may be used to rename or explain a person or thing. Mark the two identifying, appositive phrases used to rename Grendel in line 323.

QUESTION: How do the renamings of Grendel in this line emphasize the significance of the battle that is about to begin?

CONCLUDE: What is the effect of using two or more appositives in a row?

writhing (RY ihng) *adj.*
making twisting or turning motions

Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception
So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless,
Straight to the door, then snapped it open,
295 Tore its iron fasteners with a touch
And rushed angrily over the threshold.
He strode quickly across the inlaid
Floor, snarling and fierce: his eyes
Gleamed in the darkness, burned with a **gruesome**
300 Light. Then he stopped, seeing the hall
Crowded with sleeping warriors, stuffed
With rows of young soldiers resting together.
And his heart laughed, he relished the sight,
Intended to tear the life from those bodies
305 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
Grendel to gnaw the broken bones
Of his last human supper. Human
310 Eyes were watching his evil steps,
Waiting to see his swift hard claws.
Grendel snatched at the first Geat
He came to, ripped him apart, cut
His body to bits with powerful jaws,
315 Drank the blood from his veins and bolted
Him down, hands and feet; death
And Grendel's great teeth came together,
Snapping life shut. Then he stepped to another
Still body, clutched at Beowulf with his claws,
320 Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful sleeper—
And was instantly seized himself, claws
Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm.
That shepherd of evil, guardian of crime,
Knew at once that nowhere on earth
325 Had he met a man whose hands were harder;
His mind was flooded with fear—but nothing
Could take his talons and himself from that tight
Hard grip. Grendel's one thought was to run
From Beowulf, flee back to his marsh and hide there:
330 This was a different Herot from the hall he had emptied.
But Higlac's follower remembered his final
Boast and, standing erect, stopped
The monster's flight, fastened those claws
In his fists till they cracked, clutched Grendel
335 Closer. The infamous killer fought
For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,
Desiring nothing but escape; his claws
Had been caught, he was trapped. That trip to Herot
Was a miserable journey for the **writhing** monster!

340 The high hall rang, its roof boards swayed,
 And Danes shook with terror. Down
 The aisles the battle swept, angry
 And wild. Herot trembled, wonderfully
 Built to withstand the blows, the struggling
 345 Great bodies beating at its beautiful walls;
 Shaped and fastened with iron, inside
 And out, artfully worked, the building
 Stood firm. Its benches rattled, fell
 To the floor, gold-covered boards grating
 350 As Grendel and Beowulf battled across them.
 Hrothgar's wise men had fashioned Herot
 To stand forever; only fire,
 They had planned, could shatter what such skill had put
 Together, swallow in hot flames such splendor
 355 Of ivory and iron and wood. Suddenly
 The sounds changed, the Danes started
 In new terror, cowering in their beds as the terrible
 Screams of the Almighty's enemy sang
 In the darkness, the horrible shrieks of pain
 360 And defeat, the tears torn out of Grendel's
 Taut throat, hell's captive caught in the arms
 Of him who of all the men on earth
 Was the strongest.

That mighty protector of men
 Meant to hold the monster till its life

365 Leaped out, knowing the fiend was no use
 To anyone in Denmark. All of Beowulf's
 Band had jumped from their beds, ancestral
 Swords raised and ready, determined
 To protect their prince if they could. Their courage
 370 Was great but all wasted: they could hack at Grendel
 From every side, trying to open
 A path for his evil soul, but their points
 Could not hurt him, the sharpest and hardest iron
 Could not scratch at his skin, for that sin-stained demon
 375 Had bewitched all men's weapons, laid spells
 That blunted every mortal man's blade.
 And yet his time had come, his days
 Were over, his death near; down
 To hell he would go, swept groaning and helpless
 380 To the waiting hands of still worse fiends.
 Now he discovered—once the afflictor
 Of men, tormentor of their days—what it meant
 To feud with Almighty God: Grendel
 Saw that his strength was deserting him, his claws
 385 Bound fast, Higlac's brave follower tearing at
 His hands. The monster's hatred rose higher,

But his power had gone. He twisted in pain,
 And the bleeding sinews deep in his shoulder
 Snapped, muscle and bone split
 390 And broke. The battle was over, Beowulf
 Had been granted new glory: Grendel escaped,
 But wounded as he was could flee to his den,
 His miserable hole at the bottom of the marsh,
 Only to die, to wait for the end
 395 Of all his days. And after that bloody
 Combat the Danes laughed with delight.
 He who had come to them from across the sea,
 Bold and strong-minded had driven affliction
 Off, purged Herot clean. He was happy,
 400 Now, with that night's fierce work; the Danes
 Had been served as he'd boasted he'd serve them: Beowulf,
 A prince of the Geats, had killed Grendel,
 Ended the grief, the sorrow, the suffering
 Forced on Hrothgar's helpless people
 405 By a bloodthirsty fiend. No Dane doubted
 The victory, for the proof, hanging high
 From the rafters where Beowulf had hung it, was the monster's
 Arm, claw and shoulder and all.

The Danes celebrate Beowulf's victory. That night, though, Grendel's mother kills Hrothgar's closest friend and carries off her child's claw. The next day, the horrified king tells Beowulf about the two monsters and their underwater lair.

The Monsters' Lair

"I've heard that my people, peasants working
 410 In the fields, have seen a pair of such fiends
 Wandering in the moors and marshes, giant
 Monsters living in those desert lands.
 And they've said to my wise men that, as well as they could see,
 One of the devils was a female creature.
 415 The other, they say, walked through the wilderness
 Like a man—but mightier than any man.
 They were frightened, and they fled, hoping to find help
 In Herot. They named the huge one Grendel:
 If he had a father no one knew him,
 420 Or whether there'd been others before these two,
 Hidden evil before hidden evil.
 They live in secret places, windy
 Cliffs, wolf-dens where water pours
 From the rocks, then runs underground, where mist

- 425 Steams like black clouds, and the groves of trees
 Growing out over their lake are all covered
 With frozen spray, and wind down snakelike
 Roots that reach as far as the water
 And help keep it dark. At night that lake
- 430 Burns like a torch. No one knows its bottom,
 No wisdom reaches such depths. A deer,
 Hunted through the woods by packs of hounds,
 A stag with great horns, though driven through the forest
 From faraway places, prefers to die
- 435 On those shores, refuses to save its life
 In that water. It isn't far, nor is it
 A pleasant spot! When the winds stir
 And storms, waves splash toward the sky,
 As dark as the air, as black as the rain
- 440 That the heavens weep. Our only help,
 Again, lies with you. Grendel's mother
 Is hidden in her terrible home, in a place
 You've not seen. Seek it, if you dare! Save us,
 Once more, and again twisted gold,
- 445 Heaped-up ancient treasure will reward you
 For the battle you win!"

Beowulf resolves to kill Grendel's monstrous mother. He travels to the lake in which she lives.

The Battle With Grendel's Mother

Then Edgeth's brave son¹⁰ spoke:

"Remember,

- Hrothgar, O knowing king, now
 When my danger is near, the warm words we uttered,
- 450 And if your enemy should end my life
 Then be, O generous prince, forever
 The father and protector of all whom I leave
 Behind me, here in your hands, my beloved
 Comrades left with no leader, their leader
- 455 Dead. And the precious gifts you gave me,
 My friend, send them to Higlac. May he see
 In their golden brightness, the Geats' great lord
 Gazing at your treasure, that here in Denmark
 I found a noble protector, a giver
- 460 Of rings whose rewards I won and briefly
 Relished. And you, Unferth,¹¹ let

10. **Edgeth's brave son** Beowulf. Elsewhere he is identified by such phrases as "the Geats' proud prince" and "the Geats' brave prince."

11. **Unferth** Danish warrior who had questioned Beowulf's bravery before the battle with Grendel.

NOTES

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: Mark words and phrases in lines 477–489 that contain sound devices and parallel structures.

QUESTION: What effect might these word choices have had on listeners?

CONCLUDE: In what way does the language of the story help make it memorable for both the storyteller and the audience?

My famous old sword stay in your hands:
I shall shape glory with Hrunting, or death
Will hurry me from this earth!"

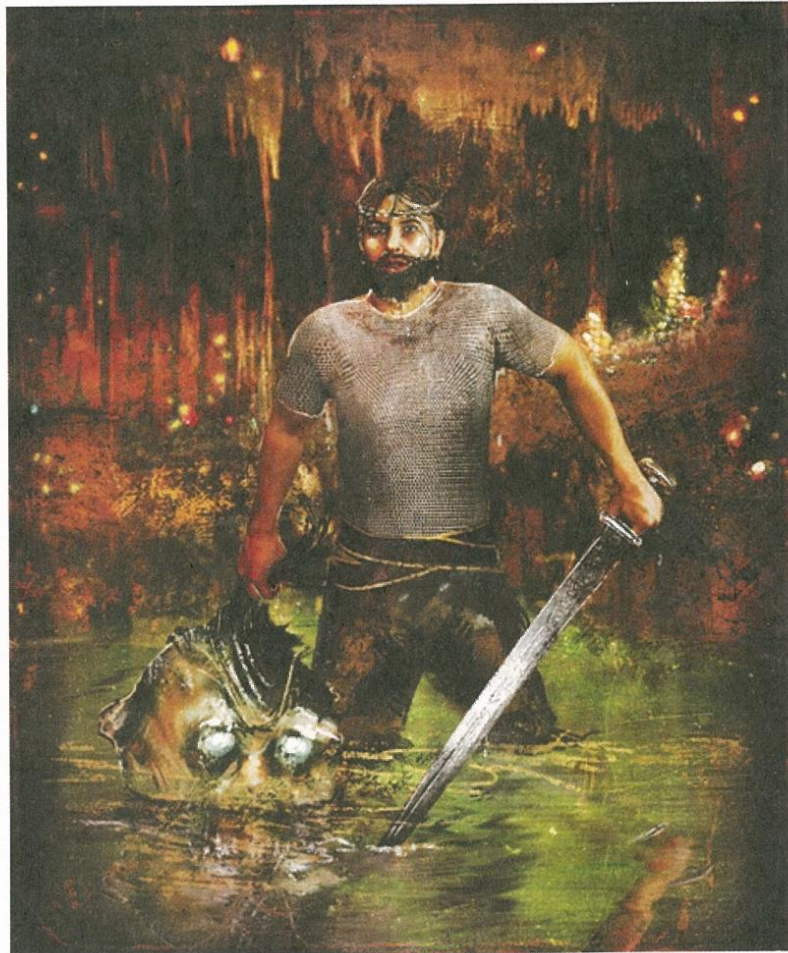
As his words ended

- 465 He leaped into the lake, would not wait for anyone's
Answer; the heaving water covered him
Over. For hours he sank through the waves;
At last he saw the mud of the bottom.
And all at once the greedy she-wolf
- 470 Who'd ruled those waters for half a hundred
Years discovered him, saw that a creature
From above had come to explore the bottom
Of her wet world. She welcomed him in her claws,
Clutched at him savagely but could not harm him,
- 475 Tried to work her fingers through the tight
Ring-woven mail on his breast, but tore
And scratched in vain. Then she carried him, armor
And sword and all, to her home; he struggled
To free his weapon, and failed. The fight
- 480 Brought other monsters swimming to see
Her catch, a host of sea beasts who beat at
His mail shirt, stabbing with tusks and teeth
As they followed along. Then he realized, suddenly,
That she'd brought him into someone's battle-hall,
- 485 And there the water's heat could not hurt him.
Nor anything in the lake attack him through
The building's high-arching roof. A brilliant
Light burned all around him, the lake
Itself like a fiery flame.
- Then he saw
- 490 The mighty water witch and swung his sword,
His ring-marked blade, straight at her head;
The iron sang its fierce song,
Sang Beowulf's strength. But her guest
Discovered that no sword could slice her evil
- 495 Skin, that Hrunting could not hurt her, was useless
Now when he needed it. They wrestled, she ripped
And tore and clawed at him, bit holes in his helmet,
And that too failed him; for the first time in years
Of being worn to war it would earn no glory;
- 500 It was the last time anyone would wear it. But Beowulf
Longed only for fame, leaped back
Into battle. He tossed his sword aside,
Angry; the steel-edged blade lay where
He'd dropped it. If weapons were useless he'd use
- 505 His hands, the strength in his fingers. So fame
Comes to the men who mean to win it
And care about nothing else! He raised

His arms and seized her by the shoulder; anger
 Doubled his strength, he threw her to the floor.
 510 She fell, Grendel's fierce mother, and the Geats'
 Proud prince was ready to leap on her. But she rose
 At once and repaid him with her clutching claws,
 Wildly tearing at him. He was weary, that best
 And strongest of soldiers; his feet stumbled
 515 And in an instant she had him down, held helpless.
 Squatting with her weight on his stomach, she drew
 A dagger, brown with dried blood, and prepared
 To avenge her only son. But he was stretched
 On his back, and her stabbing blade was blunted
 520 By the woven mail shirt he wore on his chest.
 The hammered links held; the point
 Could not touch him. He'd have traveled to the bottom of the earth,
 Edgetho's son, and died there, if that shining
 Woven metal had not helped—and Holy
 525 God, who sent him victory, gave judgment
 For truth and right, Ruler of the Heavens,
 Once Beowulf was back on his feet and fighting.
 Then he saw, hanging on the wall, a heavy
 Sword, hammered by giants, strong
 530 And blessed with their magic, the best of all weapons
 But so massive that no ordinary man could lift
 Its carved and decorated length. He drew it
 From its scabbard, broke the chain on its hilt
 And then, savage, now, angry
 535 And desperate, lifted it high over his head
 And struck with all the strength he had left,
 Caught her in the neck and cut it through.
 Broke bones and all. Her body fell
 To the floor, lifeless, the sword was wet
 540 With her blood, and Beowulf rejoiced at the sight.
 The brilliant light shone, suddenly,
 As though burning in that hall, and as bright as Heaven's
 Own candle, lit in the sky. He looked
 At her home, then following along the wall
 545 Went walking, his hands tight on the sword,
 His heart still angry. He was hunting another
 Dead monster, and took his weapon with him
 For final revenge against Grendel's vicious
 Attacks, his nighttime raids, over
 550 And over, coming to Herot when Hrothgar's
 Men slept, killing them in their beds,
 Eating some on the spot, fifteen
 Or more, and running to his loathsome moor
 With another such sickening meal waiting
 555 In his pouch. But Beowulf repaid him for those visits,

NOTES

loathsome (LOATH suhm) *adj.*
 disgusting; detestable



Found him lying dead in his corner,
Armless, exactly as that fierce fighter
Had sent him out from Herot, then struck off
His head with a single swift blow. The body
560 jerked for the last time, then lay still.
The wise old warriors who surrounded Hrothgar,
Like him staring into the monsters' lake,
Saw the waves surging and blood
Spurting through. They spoke about Beowulf,
565 All the graybeards, whispered together
And said that hope was gone, that the hero
Had lost fame and his life at once, and would never
Return to the living, come back as triumphant
As he had left; almost all agreed that Grendel's
570 Mighty mother, the she-wolf, had killed him.
The sun slid over past noon, went further
Down. The Danes gave up, left
The lake and went home, Hrothgar with them.
The Geats stayed, sat sadly, watching,

- 575 Imagining they saw their lord but not believing
They would ever see him again.
—Then the sword
Melted, blood-soaked, dripping down
Like water, disappearing like ice when the world's
Eternal Lord loosens invisible
- 580 Fetters and unwinds icicles and frost
As only He can. He who rules
Time and seasons, He who is truly
God. The monsters' hall was full of
Rich treasures, but all that Beowulf took
- 585 Was Grendel's head and the hilt of the giants'
Jeweled sword; the rest of that ring-marked
Blade had dissolved in Grendel's steaming
Blood, boiling even after his death.
And then the battle's only survivor
- 590 Swam up and away from those silent corpses;
The water was calm and clean, the whole
Huge lake peaceful once the demons who'd lived in it
Were dead.

- Then that noble protector of all seamen
Swam to land, rejoicing in the heavy
Burdens he was bringing with him. He
- 595 And all his glorious band of Geats
Thanked God that their leader had come back unharmed;
They left the lake together. The Geats
Carried Beowulf's helmet, and his mail shirt.
- 600 Behind them the water slowly thickened
As the monsters' blood came seeping up.
They walked quickly, happily, across
Roads all of them remember, left
The lake and the cliffs alongside it, brave men
- 605 Staggering under the weight of Grendel's skull,
Too heavy for fewer than four of them to handle—
Two on each side of the spear jammed through it—
Yet proud of their ugly load and determined
That the Danes, seated in Herot, should see it.
- 610 Soon, fourteen Geats arrived
At the hall, bold and warlike, and with Beowulf,
Their lord and leader, they walked on the mead-hall
Green. Then the Geats' brave prince entered
Herot, covered with glory for the daring
- 615 Battles he had fought; he sought Hrothgar
To salute him and show Grendel's head.
He carried that terrible trophy by the hair,
Brought it straight to where the Danes sat,
Drinking, the queen among them. It was a weird
- 620 And wonderful sight, and the warriors stared.

After being honored by Hrothgar, Beowulf and his fellow Geats return home, where he eventually becomes the king. Beowulf rules Geatland for fifty years. When a dragon menaces his kingdom, Beowulf, now an old man, determines to slay the beast. Before going into battle, he tells his men about the royal house and his exploits in its service.

The Last Battle

And Beowulf uttered his final boast:

"I've never known fear, as a youth I fought
In endless battles. I am old, now,
But I will fight again, seek fame still,
625 If the dragon hiding in his tower dares
To face me."

Then he said farewell to his followers,
Each in his turn, for the last time:

"I'd use no sword, no weapon, if this beast
Could be killed without it, crushed to death
630 Like Grendel, gripped in my hands and torn
Limb from limb. But his breath will be burning
Hot, poison will pour from his tongue.
I feel no shame, with shield and sword
And armor, against this monster: when he comes to me
635 I mean to stand, not run from his shooting
Flames, stand till fate decides
Which of us wins. My heart is firm,
My hands calm: I need no hot
Words. Wait for me close by, my friends.
640 We shall see, soon, who will survive
This bloody battle, stand when the fighting
Is done. No one else could do
What I mean to, here, no man but me
Could hope to defeat this monster. No one
645 Could try. And this dragon's treasure, his gold
And everything hidden in that tower, will be mine
Or war will sweep me to a bitter death!"

Then Beowulf rose, still brave, still strong,
And with his shield at his side, and a mail shirt on his breast,
650 Strode calmly, confidently, toward the tower, under
The rocky cliffs: no coward could have walked there!
And then he who'd endured dozens of desperate
Battles, who'd stand boldly while swords and shields
Clashed, the best of kings, saw
655 Huge stone arches and felt the heat
Of the dragon's breath, flooding down
Through the hidden entrance, too hot for anyone
To stand, a streaming current of fire

- And smoke that blocked all passage. And the Geats'
 660 Lord and leader, angry, lowered
 His sword and roared out a battle cry,
 A call so loud and clear that it reached through
 The hoary rock, hung in the dragon's
 Ear. The beast rose, angry,
 665 Knowing a man had come—and then nothing
 But war could have followed. Its breath came first.
 A steaming cloud pouring from the stone,
 Then the earth itself shook. Beowulf
 Swung his shield into place, held it
 670 In front of him, facing the entrance. The dragon
 Coiled and uncoiled, its heart urging it
 Into battle. Beowulf's ancient sword
 Was waiting, unsheathed, his sharp and gleaming
 Blade. The beast came closer; both of them
 675 Were ready, each set on slaughter. The Geats'
 Great prince stood firm, unmoving, prepared
 Behind his high shield, waiting in his shining
 Armor. The monster came quickly toward him,
 Pouring out fire and smoke, hurrying
 680 To its fate. Flames beat at the iron
 Shield, and for a time it held, protected
 Beowulf as he'd planned; then it began to melt,
 And for the first time in his life that famous prince
 Fought with fate against him, with glory
 685 Denied him. He knew it, but he raised his sword
 And struck at the dragon's scaly hide.
 The ancient blade broke, bit into
 The monster's skin, drew blood, but cracked
 And failed him before it went deep enough, helped him
 690 Less than he needed. The dragon leaped
 With pain, thrashed, and beat at him, spouting
 Murderous flames, spreading them everywhere.
 And the Geats' ring-giver did not boast of glorious
 Victories in other wars: his weapon
 695 Had failed him, deserted him, now when he needed it
 Most, that excellent sword. Edgeth's
 Famous son stared at death.
 Unwilling to leave this world, to exchange it
 For a dwelling in some distant place—a journey
 700 Into darkness that all men must make, as death
 Ends their few brief hours on earth.
 Quickly, the dragon came at him, encouraged
 As Beowulf fell back; its breath flared,
 And he suffered, wrapped around in swirling
 705 Flames—a king, before, but now
 A beaten warrior. None of his comrades

Came to him, helped him, his brave and noble
 Followers; they ran for their lives, fled
 Deep in a wood. And only one of them
 710 Remained, stood there, miserable, remembering
 As a good man must, what kinship should mean.

His name was Wiglaf, he was Wexstan's son
 And a good soldier; his family had been Swedish,
 Once. Watching Beowulf, he could see
 715 How his king was suffering, burning. Remembering
 Everything his lord and cousin had given him,
 Armor and gold and the great estates
 Wexstan's family enjoyed, Wiglaf's
 Mind was made up; he raised his yellow
 720 Shield and drew his sword—an ancient
 Weapon that had once belonged to Onela's
 Nephew, and that Wexstan had won, killing
 The prince when he fled from Sweden, sought safety
 With Herdred, and found death.¹² And Wiglaf's father
 725 Had carried the dead man's armor, and his sword,
 To Onela, and the king had said nothing, only
 Given him the armor and sword and all,
 Everything his rebel nephew had owned
 And lost when he left this life. And Wexstan
 730 Had kept those shining gifts, held them
 For years, waiting for his son to use them,
 Wear them as honorably and well as once
 His father had done; then Wexstan died
 And Wiglaf was his heir, inherited treasures
 735 And weapons and land. He'd never worn
 That armor, fought with that sword, until Beowulf
 Called him to his side, led him into war.
 But his soul did not melt, his sword was strong;
 The dragon discovered his courage, and his weapon,
 740 When the rush of battle brought them together.
 And Wiglaf, his heart heavy, uttered
 The kind of words his comrades deserved:
 "I remember how we sat in the mead-hall, drinking
 And boasting of how brave we'd be when Beowulf
 745 Needed us, he who gave us these swords
 And armor: all of us swore to repay him.
 When the time came, kindness for kindness—
 With our lives, if he needed them. He allowed us to join him,
 Chose us from all his great army, thinking
 750 Our boasting words had some weight, believing

12. **Onela's / Nephew . . . found death** When Onela seized the throne of Sweden, his two nephews sought shelter with the king of Geatland, Herdred. Wiglaf's father, Wexstan, killed the older nephew for Onela.

Our promises, trusting our swords. He took us
For soldiers, for men. He meant to kill
This monster himself, our mighty king,
Fight this battle alone and unaided,

- 755 As in the days when his strength and daring dazzled
Men's eyes. But those days are over and gone
And now our lord must lean on younger
Arms. And we must go to him, while angry
Flames burn at his flesh, help
760 Our glorious king! By almighty God,
I'd rather burn myself than see
Flames swirling around my lord.
And who are we to carry home
Our shields before we've slain his enemy
765 And ours, to run back to our homes with Beowulf
So hard-pressed here? I swear that nothing
He ever did deserved an end
Like this, dying miserably and alone
Butchered by this savage beast: we swore
770 That these swords and armor were each for us all!"
Then he ran to his king, crying encouragement
As he dove through the dragon's deadly fumes.

*Wiglaf and Beowulf kill the dragon, but the old king is mortally wounded.
As he dies, Beowulf asks Wiglaf to bring him the treasure that the dragon
was guarding.*

The Spoils

- Then Wexstan's son went in, as quickly
As he could, did as the dying Beowulf
775 Asked, entered the inner darkness
Of the tower, went with his mail shirt and his sword.
Flushed with victory he groped his way,
A brave young warrior, and suddenly saw
Piles of gleaming gold, precious
780 Gems, scattered on the floor, cups
And bracelets, rusty old helmets, beautifully
Made but rotting with no hands to rub
And polish them. They lay where the dragon left them;
It had flown in the darkness, once, before fighting
785 Its final battle. (So gold can easily
Triumph, defeat the strongest of men,
No matter how deep it is hidden!) And he saw,
Hanging high above, a golden
Banner, woven by the best of weavers
790 And beautiful. And over everything he saw

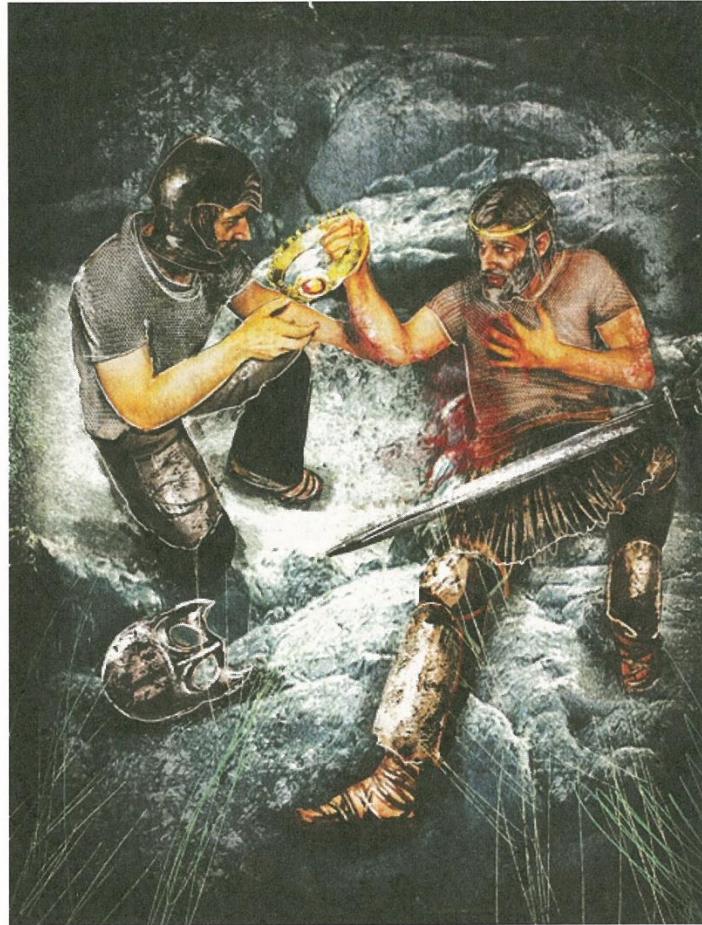
NOTES

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: Mark details in lines 743–770 that show what Beowulf's men were like in the beginning and how they changed.

QUESTION: How have Beowulf's men, with the exception of Wiglaf, changed?

CONCLUDE: How do these contrasting details help the reader better understand Beowulf's dilemma?



A strange light, shining everywhere,
On walls and floor and treasure. Nothing
Moved, no other monsters appeared;
He took what he wanted, all the treasures
795 That pleased his eye, heavy plates
And golden cups and the glorious banner,
Loaded his arms with all they could hold.
Beowulf's dagger, his iron blade,
Had finished the fire-spitting terror
800 That once protected tower and treasures
Alike; the gray-bearded lord of the Geats
Had ended those flying, burning raids
Forever.

Then Wiglaf went back, anxious
To return while Beowulf was alive, to bring him
805 Treasure they'd won together. He ran,

- Hoping his wounded king, weak
 And dying, had not left the world too soon.
 Then he brought their treasure to Beowulf, and found
 His famous king bloody, gasping
 810 For breath. But Wiglaf sprinkled water
 Over his lord, until the words
 Deep in his breast broke through and were heard.
 Beholding the treasure he spoke, haltingly:
 "For this, this gold, these jewels, I thank
 815 Our Father in Heaven, Ruler of the Earth—
 For all of this, that His grace has given me,
 Allowed me to bring to my people while breath
 Still came to my lips. I sold my life
 For this treasure, and I sold it well. Take
 820 What I leave, Wiglaf, lead my people,
 Help them; my time is gone. Have
 The brave Geats build me a tomb.
 When the funeral flames have burned me, and build it
 Here, at the water's edge, high
 825 On this spit of land, so sailors can see
 This tower, and remember my name, and call it
 Beowulf's tower, and boats in the darkness
 And mist, crossing the sea, will know it."
 Then that brave king gave the golden
 830 Necklace from around his throat to Wiglaf,
 Gave him his gold-covered helmet, and his rings,
 And his mail shirt, and ordered him to use them well:
 "You're the last of all our far-flung family.
 Fate has swept our race away,
 835 Taken warriors in their strength and led them
 To the death that was waiting. And now I follow them."
 The old man's mouth was silent, spoke
 No more, had said as much as it could;
 He would sleep in the fire, soon. His soul
 840 Left his flesh, flew to glory.

Wiglaf denounces the warriors who deserted Beowulf. The Geats burn their king's body on a funeral pyre and bitterly lament his death.

The Farewell

- Then the Geats built the tower, as Beowulf
 Had asked, strong and tall, so sailors
 Could find it from far and wide; working
 For ten long days they made his monument,
 845 Sealed his ashes in walls as straight

NOTES

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: Mark details in lines 814–828 that show how Beowulf wants to be buried and remembered.

QUESTION: What do Beowulf's dying wishes tell you about him?

CONCLUDE: What can you conclude about the character of Beowulf, based on his last words?

NOTES

And high as wise and willing hands
Could raise them. And the riches he and Wiglaf
Had won from the dragon, rings, necklaces,
Ancient, hammered armor—all
850 The treasures they'd taken were left there, too,
Silver and jewels buried in the sandy
Ground, back in the earth, again
And forever hidden and useless to men.
And then twelve of the bravest Geats
855 Rode their horses around the tower,
Telling their sorrow, telling stories
Of their dead king and his greatness, his glory,
Praising him for heroic deeds, for a life
As noble as his name. So should all men
860 Raise up words for their lords, warm
With love, when their shield and protector leaves
His body behind, sends his soul
On high. And so Beowulf's followers
Rode, mourning their beloved leader,
865 Crying that no better king had ever
Lived, no prince so mild, no man
So open to his people, so deserving of praise.