And storms, waves splash toward the sky,
As dark as the air, as black as the rain
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,
Heaped-up ancient treasure, will reward you
For the battle you win!”

The Battle with Grendel’s Mother

Beowulf resolves to kill the “lady monster.” Arriving at
the lake under which she lives, Beowulf and his
companions see serpents in the water and sea beasts on
the rocks. The young hero kills one of the beasts with an
arrow and prepares to fight with Grendel’s mother.

Then Edgetho’s brave son spoke:

“Remember,
Hrothgar, Oh knowing king, now
When my danger is near, the warm words we uttered,
And if your enemy should end my life
Then be, oh 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
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
Of rings whose rewards I won and briefly
Relished. And you, Unferth,² let
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
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
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.
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
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.
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
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
Skin, that Hunting 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;
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
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.
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
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
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.

525 Edgerto's son, and died there, if that shining
Woven metal had not helped— and Holy
God, who sent him victory, gave judgment
For truth and right, Ruler of the Heavens,
Once Beowulf was back on his feet and fighting.

530 Then he saw, hanging on the wall, a heavy
Sword, hammered by giants, strong
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
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,

540 Broke bones and all. Her body fell
To the floor, lifeless, the sword was wet
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

545 Own candle, lit in the sky. He looked
At her home, then following along the wall
Went walking, his hands tight on the sword,
His heart still angry. He was hunting another
Dead monster, and took his weapon with him

550 For final revenge against Grendel's vicious
Attacks, his nighttime raids, over
And over, coming to Herot when Hrothgar's
Men slept, killing them in their beds,
Eating some on the spot, fifteen

555 Or more, and running to his loathsome moor
With another such sickening meal waiting
In his pouch. But Beowulf repaid him for those visits,
Found him lying dead in his corner,
Armless, exactly as that fierce fighter

560 Had sent him out from Herot, then struck off
His head with a single swift blow. The body
Jerked for the last time, then lay still.

The wise old warriors who surrounded Hrothgar,
Like him staring into the monsters' lake,

565 Saw the waves surging and blood
Spurting through. They spoke about Beowulf,
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
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,
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
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
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
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
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.
Behind them the water slowly thickened
As the monsters’ blood came seeping up.
They walked quickly, happily, across

Roads all of them remembered, left
The lake and the cliffs alongside it, brave men
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.
Soon, fourteen Geats arrived

from Beowulf  39
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
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
And wonderful sight, and the warriors stared.

The Last Battle

After being honored by Hrothgar, Beowulf and his fellow
Geats return home. He is welcomed by the king, his uncle
Higlac, and later becomes king himself when Higlac and
his son have died. Beowulf rules Geatland for fifty years.
Then a dragon menaces his kingdom. Although he is an
old man, Beowulf determines to slay the beast. Before
going into battle, he tells the men who have accompanied
him about the history of the royal house and his exploits
in its service.

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,
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
Like Grendel, gripped in my hands and torn
Limb from limb. But his breath will be burning
Hot, poison will pour from his tongue.
635 I feel no shame, with shield and sword
And armor, against this monster: when he comes to
me
I mean to stand, not run from his shooting
Flames, stand till fate decides
Which of us wins. My heart is firm,
640 My hands calm: I need no hot
Words. Wait for me close by, my friends.
We shall see, soon, who will survive
This bloody battle, stand when the fighting
Is done. No one else could do
645 What I mean to, here, no man but me
Could hope to defeat this monster. No one
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!"
650 Then Beowulf rose, still brave, still strong,
And with his shield at his side, and a mail shirt on
his breast,
Strode calmly, confidently, toward the tower, under
The rocky cliffs: no coward could have walked there!
And then who'd endured dozens of desperate
655 Battles, who'd stood boldly while swords and shields
Clashed, the best of kings, saw
Huge stone arches and felt the heat
Of the dragon's breath, flooding down
Through the hidden entrance, too hot for anyone
660 To stand, a streaming current of fire
And smoke that blocked all passage. And the Geats'
Lord and leader, angry, lowered
His sword and roared out a battle cry,
A call so loud and clear that it reached through
665 The hoary rock, hung in the dragon's
Ear. The beast rose, angry,
Knowing a man had come—and then nothing
But war could have followed. Its breath came first.
A steaming cloud pouring from the stone,
670 Then the earth itself shook. Beowulf
Swung his shield into place, held it
In front of him, facing the entrance. The dragon
Coiled and uncoiled, its heart urging it
Into battle. Beowulf's ancient sword
675 Was waiting, unsheathed, his sharp and gleaming
Blade. The beast came closer; both of them
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
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
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
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
Had failed him, deserted him, now when he needed it
Most, that excellent sword. Edgetho’s
Famous son stared at death,
Unwilling to leave this world, to exchange it
For a dwelling in some distant place—a journey
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
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
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
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
Shield and drew his sword—an ancient
Weapon that had once belonged to Onela’s
Nephew, and that Wexstan had won, killing

42 The Anglo-Saxon Period
The prince when he fled from Sweden, sought safety
With Herdred, and found death. And Wiglaf's father
Had carried the dead man's armor, and his sword,
To Onela, and the king had said nothing, only
Given him armor and sword and all,
Everything his rebel nephew had owned
And lost when he left this life. And Wexstan
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
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,
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
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
Our boasting words had some weight, believing
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,
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
 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
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

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

The Spoils

Together, Wiglaf and Beowulf kill the dragon, but the old
king is mortally wounded. As a last request, Beowulf asks
Wiglaf to bring him the treasure that the dragon was
guarding.

775 Then Wexstan’s son went in, as quickly
As he could, did as the dying Beowulf
Asked, entered the inner darkness
Of the tower, went with his mail shirt and his sword.
Flushed with victory he groped his way.

780 A brave young warrior, and suddenly saw
Plies of gleaming gold, precious
Gems, scattered on the floor, cups
And bracelets, rusty old helmets, beautifully
Made but rotting with no hands to rub

785 And polish them. They lay where the dragon left
them:
It had flown in the darkness, once, before fighting
Its final battle. (So gold can easily
Triumph, defeat the strongest of men,
No matter how deep it is hidden!) And he saw,

790 Hanging high above, a golden
Banner, woven by the best of weavers
And beautiful. And over everything he saw
A strange light, shining everywhere,
On walls and floor and treasure. Nothing

795 Moved, no other monsters appeared;
He took what he wanted, all the treasures
That pleased his eye, heavy plates
And golden cups and the glorious banner,
Loaded his arms with all they could hold.

800 Beowulf’s dagger, his iron blade,
Had finished the fire-spitting terror
That once protected tower and treasures
Alike; the gray-bearded lord of the Geats
Had ended those flying, burning raids

805 Forever.

Then Wiglaf went back, anxious
To return while Beowulf was alive, to bring him
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
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
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
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
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
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.
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
Left his flesh, flew to glory.

The Farewell

Wiglaf denounces the soldiers who deserted Beowulf in his combat with the dragon. The Geats burn their king's body on a great funeral pyre and bitterly lament his death.

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,
Sealed his ashes in walls as straight
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
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
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
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,
Crying that no better king had ever
Lived, no prince so mild, no man
So open to his people, so deserving of praise.
RESPONDING TO THE SELECTION

Your Response
1. Do you think that Beowulf grows in stature as a hero? Explain.

Recalling
2. Briefly summarize the battle between Beowulf and Grendel’s mother.
3. Describe what happens when Beowulf attempts to fight the dragon alone.

Interpreting
4. Critics have praised the Beowulf poet’s skill at describing various settings. (a) Find a passage in which the poet displays this skill. (b) Explain what makes the description so effective.
5. (a) Compare and contrast the three battles described in these excerpts. (b) In what ways are all three battles different versions of the poem’s main conflict?
6. (a) Identify the figure of speech that the poet uses in lines 578–583. (b) Explain how the figure of speech adds to the meaning of the poem.

Applying
7. Many critics claim that Beowulf contains themes that are relevant to modern life. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

ANALYZING LITERATURE

Tracing Pagan and Christian Elements
In Beowulf we can see evidence of the Anglo-Saxon warrior culture, with its stress on heroism, and Christianity’s emphasis on brotherly love and God’s compassion. For example, in the combat with the dragon, Beowulf seeks “fame” like any self-respecting warrior. As he is dying, however, he thanks “Our Father in Heaven” for the opportunity to give his people the treasure.
1. Reread the tribute to Beowulf in the last eight lines of the poem. Identify pagan and Christian influences in the qualities for which the king is praised. Give reasons for your conclusions.
2. A prominent Germanic pagan belief is that fame is the only thing that will survive a human’s death. (a) What evidence do you find in this poem of the importance placed on public esteem or reputation? (b) What value do you feel contemporary society places on fame?
3. The poem contains many references to the blind and mysterious power of Wyrd, or Fate, as in line 836. Do such references suggest pagan or Christian influence? Explain.

THINKING AND WRITING

Responding to Criticism
Burton Raffel, who wrote this translation, remarked that, “of all the many-sided excellences of Beowulf,” one of the most satisfying is “the poet’s insight into people.” Respond to this observation, expressing your agreement or disagreement. First, gather evidence. Identify instances in which the poet does or does not show insight into human nature. Then, write a thesis statement setting forth your point of view. Support this statement with references to specific passages in the poem. As you revise your essay, see whether you can find other passages that support your thesis. Remember that descriptions of action can reveal character as effectively as direct statements.

LEARNING OPTION

Art. Sculpt a model of Grendel’s mother or the dragon. First, review the details the poet uses to describe the monster. Then, choose materials (such as clay, papier-mâché, or plaster) that you think would be appropriate. Create some sketches of how your monster will look. Finally, construct your monster. Ask your classmates to compare your model with their mental images of the monster. How similar are they? In what ways do they differ?

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