



from **BEOWULF**

Translated by Burton Raffel



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*The selection opens during an evening of celebration at Herot, the banquet hall of the Danish king Hrothgar (hroth' gār). Outside in the darkness, however, lurks the monster Grendel, a murderous creature who poses a great danger to the people inside the banquet hall.*

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### 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,<sup>1</sup> 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  
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,<sup>2</sup> 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.

1. hall: Herot.

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

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  
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  
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

◆ **Build Vocabulary**

**reparation** (rep'ə rā' shən)  
*n.*: Making up for wrong  
or injury

**solace** (səl' is) *n.*: Com-  
fort; relief

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

So the living sorrow of Healfdane's son<sup>3</sup>  
 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's<sup>4</sup>  
 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

**3. Healfdane's** (hǎ' alf den' nēz) **son:** Hrothgar.

**4. Higlac's** (hig' laks): Higlac was the king of the Geats (gā' ats) and Beowulf's feudal lord and uncle.



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<sup>5</sup> shirts and armor rattling  
As they swiftly moored their ship. And then  
They gave thanks to God for their easy crossing.

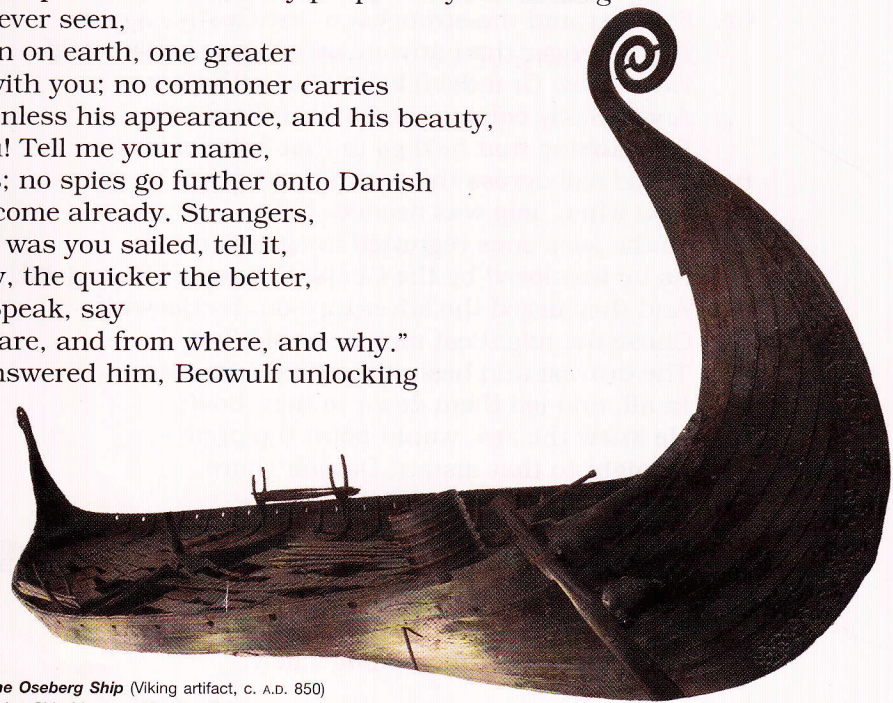
High on a wall a Danish watcher  
145 Patrolling along the cliffs saw  
The travelers crossing to the shore, their shields  
Raised and shining; he came riding down,  
Hrothgar's lieutenant, spurring his horse,  
Needing to know why they'd landed, these men  
150 In armor. Shaking his heavy spear  
In 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

**5. mail:** Flexible body armor made of metal.

◆ **Literary Focus**

Is the kenning *sea-road* an effective description of the ocean? Explain.



*The Oseberg Ship* (Viking artifact, c. A.D. 850)  
Viking Ship Museum, Bygdoy, Oslo

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.”

◆ **Reading Strategy**

Paraphrase lines  
179–198, giving  
Beowulf’s reasons for  
coming to the Danish  
land.

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 bravely 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 about to be escorted in to see King Hrothgar.*



Beowulf arose, with his men

230 Around him, ordering a few to remain  
With their weapons, leading the others quickly  
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  
235 Gleaming with a smith's high art, he greeted  
The Danes' great lord:  
"Hail, Hrothgar!  
Higlac is my cousin<sup>6</sup> and my king; the days  
Of my youth have been filled with glory. Now Grendel's  
Name has echoed in our land: sailors  
240 Have brought us stories of Herot, the best  
Of all mead-halls,<sup>7</sup> deserted and useless when the moon  
Hangs in skies the sun had lit,  
Light and life fleeing together.  
My people have said, the wisest, most knowing  
245 And best of them, that my duty was to go to the Danes'  
Great king. They have seen my strength for themselves,  
Have watched me rise from the darkness of war,  
Dripping with my enemies' blood. I drove  
Five great giants into chains, chased  
250 All of that race from the earth. I swam  
In the blackness of night, hunting monsters  
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  
255 Together, and I've come. Grant me, then,  
Lord and protector of this noble place,  
A single request! I have come so far,  
Oh shelterer of warriors and your people's loved friend,  
That this one favor you should not refuse me—  
260 That I, alone and with the help of my men,  
May purge all evil from this hall. I have heard,  
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  
265 Might think less of me if I let my sword  
Go where my feet were afraid to, if I hid  
Behind some broad linden<sup>8</sup> shield: my hands  
Alone shall fight for me, struggle for life  
Against the monster. God must decide



Gift silver brooch from Gotland (Pre-Viking Scandinavia)  
Statens Historiska Museet, Stockholm

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

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

**8. linden:** Very sturdy type of wood.

- 270 Who will be given to death's cold grip.  
 Grendel's plan, I think, will be  
 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,  
 275 There'll be nothing to mourn over, no corpse to prepare  
 For its grave: Grendel will carry our bloody  
 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  
 280 Will fret about sewing our shrouds, if he wins.  
 And if death does take me, send the hammered  
 Mail of my armor to Higlac, return  
 The inheritance I had from Hrethel, and he  
 From Wayland.<sup>9</sup> Fate will unwind as it must!"

## The Battle with Grendel

*That night Beowulf and his men take the places of Hrothgar and the Danes inside Herot. While his men sleep, Beowulf lies awake, eager to meet with Grendel.*

- 285 Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty  
 Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,  
 Grendel came, hoping to kill  
 Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot.  
 He moved quickly through the cloudy night,  
 290 Up from his swampland, sliding silently  
 Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited Hrothgar's  
 Home before, knew the way—  
 But never, before nor after that night,  
 Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception  
 295 So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless,  
 Straight to the door, then snapped it open,  
 Tore its iron fasteners with a touch  
 And rushed angrily over the threshold.  
 He strode quickly across the inlaid  
 300 Floor, snarling and fierce: his eyes  
 Gleamed in the darkness, burned with a gruesome  
 Light. Then he stopped, seeing the hall  
 Crowded with sleeping warriors, stuffed  
 With rows of young soldiers resting together.  
 305 And his heart laughed, he relished the sight,  
 Intended to tear the life from those bodies  
 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  
 310 Grendel to gnaw the broken bones  
 Of his last human supper. Human

### ◆ Reading Strategy

To follow what happens when Beowulf and Grendel meet, paraphrase lines 264–279, describing their plans of action.

**9. Wayland:** From Germanic folklore, an invisible blacksmith.

### ◆ Build Vocabulary

**purge** (pɜːrj) v.: Purify; cleanse