

# WUOLF

*Hrothgar (hrôth'gär'), king of the Danes, has built a wonderful mead hall called Herot (hěr'ət), where his subjects congregate and make merry. As this selection opens, a fierce and powerful monster named Grendel invades the mead hall, bringing death and destruction.*

## GRENDL

A powerful monster, living down  
In the darkness, growled in pain, impatient  
As day after day the music rang  
Loud in that hall, 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, 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  
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,

WORDS  
TO  
KNOW

lament (lā-měnt') *n.* an audible expression of grief; wail

#### GUIDE FOR READING

17 moors (mōōrz): broad, open regions with patches of bog.

19 spawned: born.

21 Cain: the eldest son of Adam and Eve. According to the Bible (Genesis 4), he murdered his younger brother Abel.

19–29 Who were Grendel's earliest ancestors? How did he come to exist?

40 lair: the den of a wild animal.

49 What is meant by "The beginning might not be the end"?

58 In what way has hate triumphed?

Prow of ninth-century Oseberg ship

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  
 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!

64 What does the phrase "hell-forged hands" suggest about Grendel?

73 **reparation**: something done to make amends for loss or suffering. In Germanic society, someone who killed another person was generally expected to make a payment to the victim's family as a way of restoring peace.

84 The reference to God shows the influence of Christianity on the *Beowulf* Poet. What does Grendel's inability to know God's love suggest about him?

91 **heathen** (*hē'thən*): pagan; non-Christian. Though the *Beowulf* Poet was a Christian, he recognized that the characters in the poem lived before the Germanic tribes were converted to Christianity, when they still worshiped "the old stone gods."

WORDS  
 TO  
 KNOW     **relish** (*rēl'ɪʃ*) *v.* to enjoy keenly  
            **affliction** (*ə-ɪl'ɪk'shən*) *n.* a cause of pain or distress

# BEOWULF

So the living sorrow of Healfdane's son  
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  
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.

104 Healfdane's son: Hrothgar.

109–110 Higlac's follower: warrior loyal to Higlac (h'ɪg'læk'), king of the Geats (and Beowulf's uncle).

*Beowulf and his men sail over the sea to the land of the Danes to offer help to Hrothgar. They are escorted by a Danish guard to Herot, where Wulfgar, one of Hrothgar's soldiers, tells the king of their arrival. Hrothgar knows of Beowulf and is ready to welcome the young prince and his men.*

125 Then Wulfgar went to the door and addressed  
The waiting seafarers with soldier's words:  
"My lord, the great king of the Danes, commands me  
To tell you that he knows of your noble birth  
And that having come to him from over the open  
130 Sea you have come bravely and are welcome.  
Now go to him as you are, in your armor and helmets,  
But leave your battle-shields here, and your spears,  
Let them lie waiting for the promises your words  
May make."

Beowulf arose, with his men  
135 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  
140 Gleaming with a smith's high art, he greeted  
The Danes' great lord:

“Hail, Hrothgar!

Higlac is my cousin and my king; the days  
Of my youth have been filled with glory. Now Grendel's  
Name has echoed in our land: sailors

145 Have brought us stories of Herot, the best  
Of all mead-halls, deserted and useless when the moon  
Hangs in skies the sun had lit,  
Light and life fleeing together.

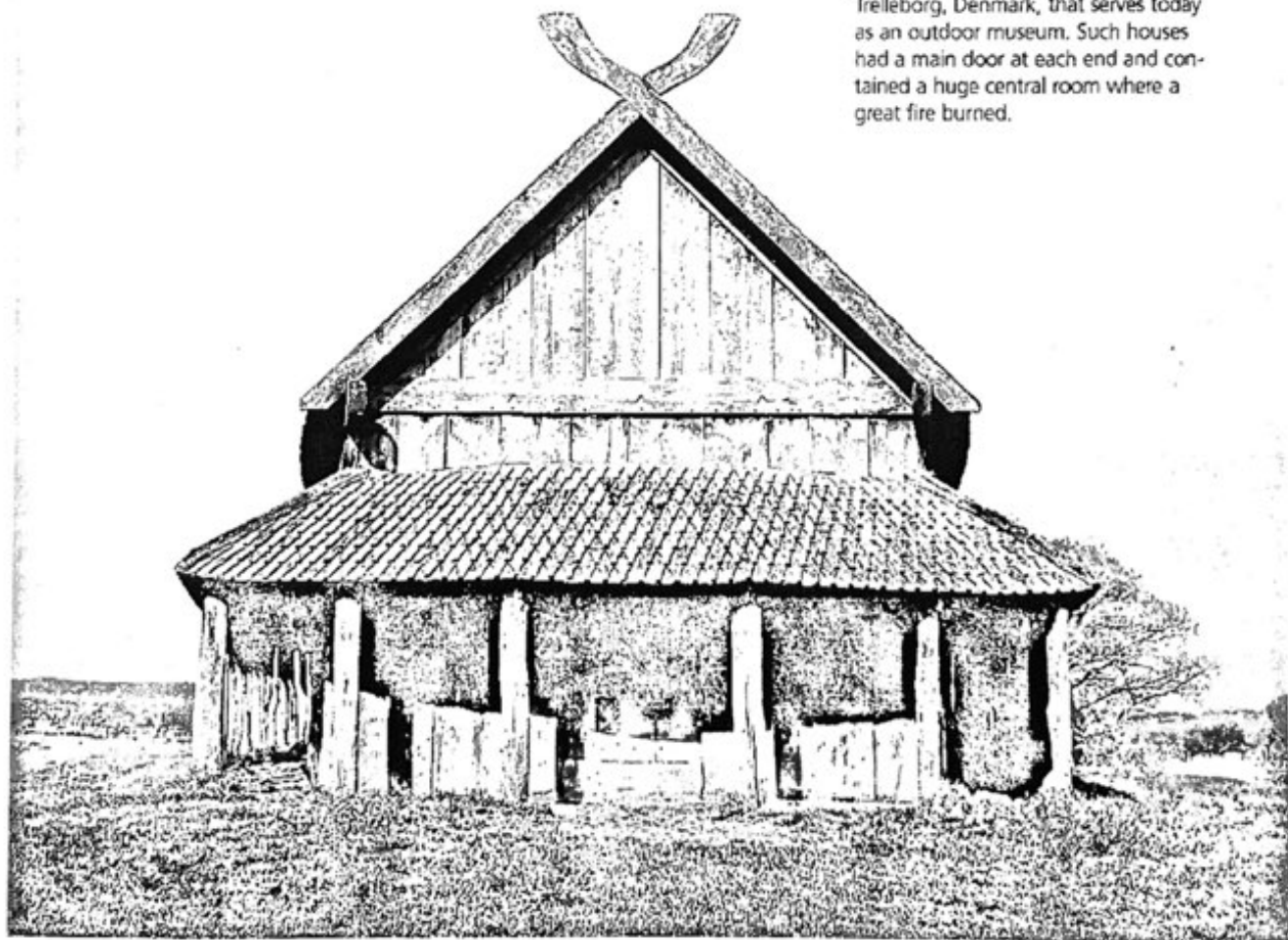
My people have said, the wisest, most knowing  
150 And best of them, that my duty was to go to the Danes'  
Great king. They have seen my strength for themselves,

**139 mail shirt:** flexible body armor made of metal links or overlapping metal scales.

**140 smith's high art:** the skilled craft of a blacksmith (a person who fashions objects from iron).

**142 cousin:** here, a general term for a relative. Beowulf is actually Higlac's nephew.

Front view of a wooden Viking house in Trelleborg, Denmark, that serves today as an outdoor museum. Such houses had a main door at each end and contained a huge central room where a great fire burned.



Have watched me rise from the darkness of war,  
 Dripping with my enemies' blood. I drove  
 Five great giants into chains, chased  
 155 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  
 160 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—  
 165 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  
 170 Might think less of me if I let my sword  
 Go where my feet were afraid to, if I hid  
 Behind some broad linden shield: my hands  
 Alone shall fight for me, struggle for life  
 Against the monster. God must decide  
 175 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,  
 180 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  
 185 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. Fate will unwind as it must!"  
 190 Hrothgar replied, protector of the Danes:  
 "Beowulf, you've come to us in friendship,  
 and because

**172 linden shield:** shield made from the wood of a linden tree.

**172–174 Beowulf insists on fighting Grendel without weapons.** Why do you think this is so important to him?

**185 shrouds:** cloths in which dead bodies are wrapped.

**188 Hrethel (hrĕth'al):** a former king of the Geats—Higlac's father and Beowulf's grandfather.

**189 Wayland:** a famous blacksmith and magician.

WORDS  
 TO  
 KNOW

**purge** (pûrj) *v.* to cleanse or purify  
**gorge** (gôrj) *v.* to stuff with food

Of the reception your father found at our court.  
 Edgetho had begun a bitter feud,  
 Killing Hathlaf, a Wulfing warrior:  
 195 Your father's countrymen were afraid of war,  
 If he returned to his home, and they turned him away.  
 Then he traveled across the curving waves  
 To the land of the Danes. I was new to the throne,  
 Then, a young man ruling this wide  
 200 Kingdom and its golden city: Hergar,  
 My older brother, a far better man  
 Than I, had died and dying made me,  
 Second among Healfdane's sons, first  
 In this nation. I bought the end of Edgetho's  
 205 Quarrel, sent ancient treasures through the ocean's  
 Furrows to the Wulfings; your father swore  
 He'd keep that peace. My tongue grows heavy,  
 And my heart, when I try to tell you what Grendel  
 Has brought us, the damage he's done, here  
 210 In this hall. You see for yourself how much smaller  
 Our ranks have become, and can guess what we've lost  
 To his terror. Surely the Lord Almighty  
 Could stop his madness, smother his lust!  
 How many times have my men, glowing  
 215 With courage drawn from too many cups  
 Of ale, sworn to stay after dark  
 And stem that horror with a sweep of their swords.  
 And then, in the morning, this mead-hall glittering  
 With new light would be drenched with blood, the benches  
 220 Stained red, the floors, all wet from that fiend's  
 Savage assault—and my soldiers would be fewer  
 Still, death taking more and more.  
 But to table, Beowulf, a banquet in your honor:  
 Let us toast your victories, and talk of the future."  
 225 Then Hrothgar's men gave places to the Geats,  
 Yielded benches to the brave visitors  
 And led them to the feast. The keeper of the mead  
 Came carrying out the carved flasks,  
 And poured that bright sweetness. A poet  
 230 Sang, from time to time, in a clear  
 Pure voice. Danes and visiting Geats  
 Celebrated as one, drank and rejoiced.

193 Edgetho (ēj'thō): Beowulf's father.

194 Wulfing: a member of another Germanic tribe.

191–206 What service did Hrothgar perform for Beowulf's father?