



Reconstruction of helmet  
from Sutton Hoo ship burial

*After the banquet, Hrothgar and his  
followers leave Herot, and Beowulf and  
his warriors remain to spend the night.  
Beowulf reiterates his intent to fight Grendel  
without a sword and, while his followers sleep, lies  
waiting, eager for Grendel to appear.*

## THE BATTLE WITH GRENDEL

Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty  
Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,  
235 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  
240 Home before, knew the way—  
But never, before nor after that night,  
Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception

233–235 The translator uses punctuation to convey the effect of the midline pauses in the original Old English verses. How does the rhythm created by the midline punctuation reinforce the account of the action here?

So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless,  
 Straight to the door, then snapped it open,  
 245 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  
 250 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  
 255 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  
 260 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,  
 265 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,  
 270 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  
 275 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:  
 280 This was a different Herot than 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  
 285 Closer. The infamous killer fought

246 **threshold:** the strip of wood  
 or stone at the bottom of a  
 doorway.

WORDS  
 TO  
 KNOW

**talon** (tāl'ən) *n.* a claw  
**infamous** (ɪn'fə-məs) *adj.* having a bad reputation; notorious

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!  
 290 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  
 295 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  
 300 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  
 305 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  
 310 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  
 315 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  
 320 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  
 325 Had bewitched all men's weapons, laid spells  
 That blunted every mortal man's blade.

278–289 Up to this point Grendel  
 has killed his human victims easily.  
 Why might he be trying to run  
 away from Beowulf?

322–326 Why do you think no  
 weapons can hurt Grendel?

WORDS **writhing** (ri'thɪŋ) *adj.* twisting and turning in pain **writh** v.  
 TO **cowering** (kou'ə-rɪŋ) *adj.* cringing in fear **cower** v.  
 KNOW **taut** (tôt) *adj.* pulled tight

And yet his time had come, his days  
 Were over, his death near; down  
 To hell he would go, swept groaning and helpless  
 330 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  
 335 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  
 340 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  
 345 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,  
 350 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  
 355 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.

338 sinews (sīn'yōōz): the tendons  
 that connect muscles to bones.

And then, in the morning, crowds surrounded  
 360 Herot, warriors coming to that hall  
 From faraway lands, princes and leaders  
 Of men hurrying to behold the monster's  
 Great staggering tracks. They gaped with no sense  
 Of sorrow, felt no regret for his suffering,  
 365 Went tracing his bloody footprints, his beaten  
 And lonely flight, to the edge of the lake  
 Where he'd dragged his corpselike way, doomed  
 And already weary of his vanishing life.

355-358 Why do you think  
 Beowulf hangs Grendel's arm from  
 the rafters?

The water was bloody, steaming and boiling  
 370 In horrible pounding waves, heat  
 Sucked from his magic veins; but the swirling  
 Surf had covered his death, hidden  
 Deep in murky darkness his miserable  
 End, as hell opened to receive him.

375 Then old and young rejoiced, turned back  
 From that happy pilgrimage, mounted their hard-hooved  
 Horses, high-spirited stallions, and rode them  
 Slowly toward Herot again, retelling  
 Beowulf's bravery as they jogged along.

380 And over and over they swore that nowhere  
 On earth or under the spreading sky  
 Or between the seas, neither south nor north,  
 Was there a warrior worthier to rule over men.  
 (But no one meant Beowulf's praise to belittle

385 Hrothgar, their kind and gracious king!)

And sometimes, when the path ran straight and clear,  
 They would let their horses race, red  
 And brown and pale yellow backs streaming  
 Down the road. And sometimes a proud old soldier

390 Who had heard songs of the ancient heroes  
 And could sing them all through, story after story,  
 Would weave a net of words for Beowulf's  
 Victory, tying the knot of his verses  
 Smoothly, swiftly, into place with a poet's

395 Quick skill, singing his new song aloud  
 While he shaped it, and the old songs as well. . . .

389–396 What role do poets seem to play in Beowulf's society?

## Thinking Through the Literature

1. **Comprehension Check** What characteristics does Grendel have that make him particularly terrifying to the Danes?
2. What impressions of Beowulf do you have after reading this part of the poem?
3. What do you think causes Grendel to attack human beings?
 

THINK ABOUT	{	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• his relatives and ancestors</li> <li>• his actions and attitudes</li> <li>• the Danish warriors' reactions to him</li> </ul>
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4. Why do you think Beowulf offers to help a tribe other than his own, in spite of the danger?

WORDS  
TO  
KNOW

**murky** (mur'kâ) *adj.* cloudy; gloomy  
**pilgrimage** (pîl'grë-mîj) *n.* a journey to a sacred place or with a lofty purpose

Although one monster has died,  
another still lives. From her lair in a cold and  
murky lake, where she has been brooding over her  
loss, Grendel's mother emerges, bent on revenge.

## GRENDEL'S MOTHER

So she reached Herot,  
Where the Danes slept as though already dead;  
Her visit ended their good fortune, reversed  
400 The bright vane of their luck. No female, no matter  
How fierce, could have come with a man's strength,  
Fought with the power and courage men fight with,  
Smashing their shining swords, their bloody,  
Hammer-forged blades onto boar-headed helmets,  
405 Slashing and stabbing with the sharpest of points.  
The soldiers raised their shields and drew  
Those gleaming swords, swung them above  
The piled-up benches, leaving their mail shirts  
And their helmets where they'd lain when the terror took  
hold of them.  
410 To save her life she moved still faster,  
Took a single victim and fled from the hall,  
Running to the moors, discovered, but her supper  
Assured, sheltered in her dripping claws.  
She'd taken Hrothgar's closest friend,  
415 The man he most loved of all men on earth;  
She'd killed a glorious soldier, cut  
A noble life short. No Geat could have stopped her:  
Beowulf and his hand had been given better  
Beds; sleep had come to them in a different  
420 Hall. Then all Herot burst into shouts:  
She had carried off Grendel's claw. Sorrow  
Had returned to Denmark. They'd traded deaths,  
Danes and monsters, and no one had won,  
Both had lost!

**400 vane:** a device that turns to show the direction the wind is blowing—here associated metaphorically with luck, which is as changeable as the wind.

**404 boar-headed helmets:** Germanic warriors often wore helmets bearing the images of wild pigs or other fierce creatures in the hope that the images would increase their ferocity and protect them against their enemies.

**421** Why do you think Grendel's mother takes his claw?

*Devastated by the loss of his friend, Hrothgar sends for Beowulf and recounts what Grendel's mother has done. Then Hrothgar describes the dark lake where Grendel's mother has dwelt with her son.*

425 "They live in secret places, windy  
Cliffs, wolf-dens where water pours  
From the rocks, then runs underground, where mist  
Steams like black clouds, and the groves of trees  
Growing out over their lake are all covered  
430 With frozen spray, and wind down snakelike  
Roots that reach as far as the water  
And help keep it dark. At night that lake  
Burns like a torch. No one knows its bottom,  
No wisdom reaches such depths. A deer,  
435 Hunted through the woods by packs of hounds,  
A stag with great horns, though driven through the forest  
From faraway places, prefers to die  
On those shores, refuses to save its life  
In that water. It isn't far, nor is it  
440 A pleasant spot! When the wind stirs  
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  
445 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!"

**425–432** What sort of place is the underwater lair of Grendel's mother? How does the translator's use of alliteration make this description more effective?

**447–449** Germanic warriors placed great importance on amassing treasure as a way of acquiring fame and temporarily defeating fate.





Bronze matrix for pressed foil, cast with carved details. Bjørnhovda, Torstunda, Oland. 7th century A.D.

*Beowulf accepts Hrothgar's challenge, and the king and his men accompany the hero to the dreadful lair of Grendel's mother. Fearlessly, Beowulf prepares to battle the terrible creature.*

## THE BATTLE WITH GRENDEL'S MOTHER

- 450 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
- 455 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,
- 460 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
- 465 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,
- 470 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

- 475 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  
480 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;  
485 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  
490 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.  
495 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  
500 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  
505 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,  
Edgeth's son, and died there, if that shining  
Woven metal had not helped—and Holy  
510 God, who sent him victory, gave judgment  
For truth and right, Ruler of the Heavens,  
Once Beowulf was back on his feet and fighting.

**476 his ring-marked blade:** For the battle with Grendel's mother, Beowulf has been given an heirloom sword with an intricately etched blade.

**480 Hrunting (hrūn'tǣng):** the name of Beowulf's sword. (Germanic warriors' swords were possessions of such value that they were often given names.)

**490–492** How important is fame to Beowulf?

Then he saw, hanging on the wall, a heavy  
Sword, hammered by giants, strong  
515 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  
520 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  
525 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  
530 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  
535 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  
540 In his pouch. But Beowulf repaid him for those visits,  
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  
545 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,  
550 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  
555 Mighty mother, the she-wolf, had killed him.



Viking sword

550 graybeards: old men.

WORDS  
TO KNOW  
**loathsome** (lōth'səm) *adj.* disgusting; hateful

Gold torque (a collar or necklace) from Snettisham in Norfolk in eastern England, made sometime in the middle of the first century a.c.



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,  
560 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  
565 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  
570 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  
575 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  
580 Burdens he was bringing with him. He

578 that noble protector of all seamen: Beowulf, who will be buried in a tower that will serve as a navigational aid to sailors.

WORDS  
TO  
KNOW  
**fetter** (fēt'ər) *n.* a shackle or chain; restraint

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.  
 585 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  
 590 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.  
 595 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  
 600 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  
 605 And wonderful sight, and the warriors stared.

593–594 Why do you think the Geats want the Danes to see the monster's skull?

604 queen: Welthow, wife of Hrothgar.

## Thinking Through the Literature

- Comprehension Check** What heroic action does Beowulf perform in this part of the poem?
- Do you think you would have enjoyed living among the Danes of Beowulf's day? Why or why not?
- What qualities does Beowulf display in this second battle?
 

THINK ABOUT	{	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the description of Grendel's mother and her actions</li> <li>• the details describing her lair</li> <li>• Beowulf's motives and actions</li> </ul>
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- Are Beowulf's words and deeds those of a traditional **epic hero**? Support your opinion with evidence from the poem.
- Does the behavior of Grendel's mother seem as wicked or unreasonable as Grendel's behavior? Explain your answer.