

Beowulf

Poetry

There is trace of native literature neither with the Celts, the early inhabitants of England, nor with the Romans, who occupied England from 55B.C. to 410 A.D.

The deeds of the heroes were once transmitted orally and chanted by **scoops** or minstrels in front of the king and his warriors on special occasions. A great number of songs were brought to Angleland (England) by the Anglo-Saxons who settled in southern and central England in the 5th century, after the Romans moved away, and later by the Danes who invaded England in the 8th century.

Some of these songs in time were written down, like *Beowulf*.

Other subjects of this early literature are religion (Caedmon's *Hymn of Creation*, 7th century), and personal sadness about the vanity of life and the passing of time (*The Seafarer*, *The Ruin*, *Deor's Lament*).

Epic Poetry - BEOWULF

<ul style="list-style-type: none">-epic poem-composed ca. 700 AD.-written in Old English-hero against monster-unknown author	<p><i>Beowulf</i> was originally made up of short poems which became a complete work in Northumberland in the 8th century. Later it was written down by monks in Anglo Saxon or Old English. Though fundamentally pagan, this epic poem also contains some Christian elements like good heart and generosity. With primitive simplicity it narrates how Beowulf comes from across the sea with his companions and frees the Danish King's hall from the terrible monster Grendel. Beowulf dies fifty years later in the fight against a dragon devastating Sweden.</p> <p>A good example of Anglo-Saxon poetry and language, <i>Beowulf</i> is also an important historical document because it describes the customs and the ways of life of the old Germanic warriors.</p>
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During the night, the monster Grendel comes out of the misty **marsh**¹ and walks to **Herot**², hoping to kill the king's warriors sleeping in the Great Hall.

[...]

1. Grendel **snatched** at the first **Geat**
2. He came to, **ripped** him apart, cut
3. His body to bits with powerful **jaws**,
4. Drank the blood from his veins and **bolted**
5. Him down, hands and feet; death
6. And Grendel's great teeth came together,
7. **Snapping** life shut. Then he stepped to another
8. **Still** body, **clutched** at Beowulf with his claws,
9. Grasped at a strong-hearted **wakeful** sleeper
10. -And was instantly seized himself, claws
11. Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm.
12. His mind was **flooded** with fear—but nothing
13. Could take his talons and himself from that **tight**
14. Hard grip. Grendel's one thought was to run
15. From Beowulf, **flee** back to his marsh and hide there:
16. This was a different Herot than the hall he had emptied.
17. But **Higlac**'s follower remembered his final
18. **Boast** and, standing erect, stopped
19. The monster's flight, **fastened** those claws
20. In his **fists** till they cracked, clutched Grendel
21. Closer.

Glossary

misty: full of fog; **marsh**: land full of water; **Herot**: the Danish King's castle; **snatched**: took hold of; **Geat**: inhabitant of South Sweden; **ripped ...apart**: tore into pieces; **jaws**: animal mouth; **bolted**: ate quickly; **snapping ...shut**: quickly cutting; **still**: motionless; **clutched**: snatched, seized, grasped; **wakeful**: alert; **flooded**: filled with; **tight**: firm and strong; **flee**: run ; **Higlac**: Beowulf's uncle and King of the Geats; **boast**: proud claim; **fastened**: took firmly; **fists**: hands closed tightly.

1. Comprehension

Answer the following questions.

- a. How does Grendel kill the first Geat?
- b. What happens when Grendel attacks Beowulf?
- c. Why is Beowulf able to react?
- d. Why is Grendel so afraid?
- e. What would Grendel like to do?
- f. What does Grendel realize?
- g. How does Beowulf kill Grendel?

h. What do you think he had boasted of doing?

2. Vocabulary

- a. Which verbs/ expressions in lines 1-7 tell you how aggressive and cruel Grendel is?**
- b. Which expressions / verbs in lines 12-15 tell you how frightened Grendel is?**
- c. Which parts of the body are mentioned?**

3. Writing

Write a paragraph saying what impression you have got of Beowulf.

Keys

1. Comprehension

- a. He cuts the Geat's body into pieces, drinks his blood and then he swallows hands, feet and body down; b. he is instantly seized by Beowulf and his claws are bent back; c. because he was wakeful, on the alert and his heart is strong and full of courage; d. because he cannot disengage himself from Beowulf's strong grip; e. he would like to run away, back to his marsh and hide there; f. he realizes that this Herot is different from the Hall where he killed the warriors so easily before; g. he fastens Grendel's claws in his fists till they crack; h. he had boasted of killing the monster and freeing Herot from his constant menace.

2. Vocabulary

- a. snatched, ripped apart, cut to bits, drank the blood, bolted down, snapping life shut.
- b. mind flooded with fear, to run from Beowulf, flee back and hide.
- c. jaws, blood, veins, hands, feet, teeth, arm, mind, talons, fists

3. Writing

Personal answer.

Suggested answer: Beowulf is certainly a strong man because he can clutch at Grendel with such strong grip that the monster cannot free himself. But he is also clever because, though the warriors around him are sleeping, he keeps alert, wakeful waiting for the enemy. Besides he boasted he would free Herot from the monster and cannot break his word.

Link

J. K. Rowling *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (1998)*

In modern times, the themes of Witchcraft and Wizardry, of Monsters and Heroes have been revisited by many authors, among whom stands **J. Rowling** with her saga of Harry Potter.

Joanne "Jo" Rowling (1965-) , known under the pen name J. K. Rowling, is the worldly famous British creator of the Harry Potter fantasy series, the idea for which was conceived on a train trip from Manchester to London in 1990.

The Giant Serpent

*This extract is taken from Rowling's second book, **Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets** (1998). When Harry returns to Hogwarts he finds the school plagued by a series of mysterious attacks and he begins hearing a strange hiss. He finds out the hiss comes from a basilisk at Lord Voldemort's command and fights against the monster.*

[...] Something **huge** hit the stone floor of the Chamber, Harry felt it **shudder**. He knew what was happening, he could sense it, could almost see the giant serpent **uncoiling** itself from Slytherin's mouth. Then he heard Riddle's hissing voice:

"Kill him."

The basilisk was moving toward Harry, he could hear its heavy body **slithering** ponderously across the dusty floor. Eyes still **tightly** shut, Harry began to run blindly **sideways**, his hands **outstretched**, feeling his way. Riddle was laughing....

Harry **tripped**. He fell hard onto the stone and tasted blood. The serpent was barely feet from him, he could hear it coming.

There was a loud, explosive spitting sound right above him, and then something heavy hit Harry so hard that he was smashed against the wall. Waiting for fangs to sink through his body he heard more mad **hissing**, something **thrashing** wildly off the pillars.

He couldn't help it - he opened his eyes wide enough to squint at what was going on.

The enormous serpent, bright, poisonous green, thick as an **oak trunk**, had raised itself high in the air and its great **blunt** head was weaving **drunkenly** between the pillars. [...]

[*The Heir of Slytherin*, Chapter 17 (British version)]

Glossary

huge: enormous ; **shudder**: shake, vibrate; **uncoiling**: twisting out of its spirals ; **slithering**: crawling; **tightly**: firmly; **sideways**: along one side ; **outstretched**: extended; **tripped**: fell; **hissing**: sound typical of the snake; **thrashing**: beating; **oak**: a large hard wood tree (quercia); **trunk**: part of a tree under its foliage; **blunt**: rounded ; **drunkenly**: like a drunk person