

THE STORY

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THE STORY OPENS with a call to attention: ‘Hwæt’, translated by modern scholars in a myriad of ways from ‘Hey!’ to ‘Listen!’, to ‘What!’, ‘So’, and ‘Wow, the things I can tell you!’ The poet immediately reveals this will be a poem on an epic scale about the heroes and heroines of old—the ones we all know about through stories that bind our communities together. *This* sequence of myths and legends focuses principally on peoples of northern Europe—in Denmark and Southern Sweden, but with a cast of thousands, including the first murderer in the Bible, Cain; the greatest Germanic blacksmith, Weland; and a prophetic woman, with plaited or ‘bound-up’ hair, who knows and can foretell the dire consequences of conflict.

After an opening describing the funeral of Scyld Scefing, the founder of the Scyldings (that is, the Danes), the poet describes the building of the magnificent hall of Heorot by the king Hrothgar, and the attacks on the hall by the cannibalistic outcast, Grendel, that follow. At line 107, we learn that Grendel is descended from Cain, the first murderer, and an enemy of God, and, while the poem concerns itself with a monotheistic deity, at no point does explicit New Testament Christian history come into the narrative. Beowulf, the great heroic warrior of the Geats (the southern Swedes), hears about the attacks on Heorot, and wants to help Hrothgar, destroy Grendel, and end his twelve-year reign of terror; Beowulf comes to Heorot with a troop of his most loyal men, and he is true to his word, fighting and mortally wounding the monster who bursts into the hall as Beowulf and his men guard it overnight.

The following day and evening, there is great celebration. Hrothgar’s court, and his queen, Wealhtheow, praise and reward Beowulf for his heroism. That night, a second demonic visitor—Grendel’s mother—comes to the hall to avenge her son’s death, killing and carrying off a much beloved thane of Hrothgar’s. The following day, joy is transformed to sorrow and anger, and Beowulf sets off to the monsters’ mere to seek vengeance, descending beneath the hideous water to kill the ‘æglæcwif’ (monstrous woman) with the assistance of a fortuitously discovered weapon. Beowulf returns glorious to Heorot, where he is, once more, celebrated with speeches and treasure, admiration and the promise of fame. Beowulf returns to his own king, Hygelac, regaling him with the story of his exploits.

Fifty years pass, and Beowulf, now king himself, finds his kingdom attacked by a fire-breathing dragon, riled by the theft of a cup. Beowulf fights the dragon single-handedly but fully armed. His troops flee, except for his kinsman, Wiglaf, who assists Beowulf, even as the great hero is fatally wounded by the poison bite of the dragon. Despite his wound, Beowulf is able to kill the dragon, and gaze upon the treasure hoarded by the reptilian monster. Beowulf is mourned and buried in a barrow on a headland, his people distraught at their loss. More ominously, too, we are informed that with no heir, and with conflict heralded for the future, his people—the Geats—are likely not to survive future

onslaught. The poem closes with what seems like wonderfully humane praise for the most generous of kings, *Beowulf*:

he wære wyruldcyninga
 manna mildust ond monðwærust,
 leodum liðost ond lofgeornost.

He was, of all worldly kings,
 the mildest to men and the gentlest,
 kindest to his people and most eager for praise.

Quite how this gentleness and mercifulness can be tallied with a king who has ruled through periods of conflict against a backdrop of vicious violence and turmoil is one of the questions to be pondered in relation to the poem.

In this quick synopsis, *Beowulf* seems like a relatively straightforward story of one warrior's battles and demonstration of ideal leadership against three impressive monsters and through a host of other feuds. Throughout the poem, though, allusions and digressions are interwoven to create complex and multitemporal layers that bring *Beowulf* into conversation with the greatest of legendary heroes, with historically-attested kings and peoples, with stories of horrific personal loss, and with societies that persist in perpetuating war, vengeance, and a reliance on systems of gift exchange. Whether or not this early world, perhaps referring to the sixth century, is lauded or condemned by the *Beowulf* poets is something that appears to be asked of the reader's own imagination and close interpretation, and that is just one reason why this poem still attracts such a large audience.