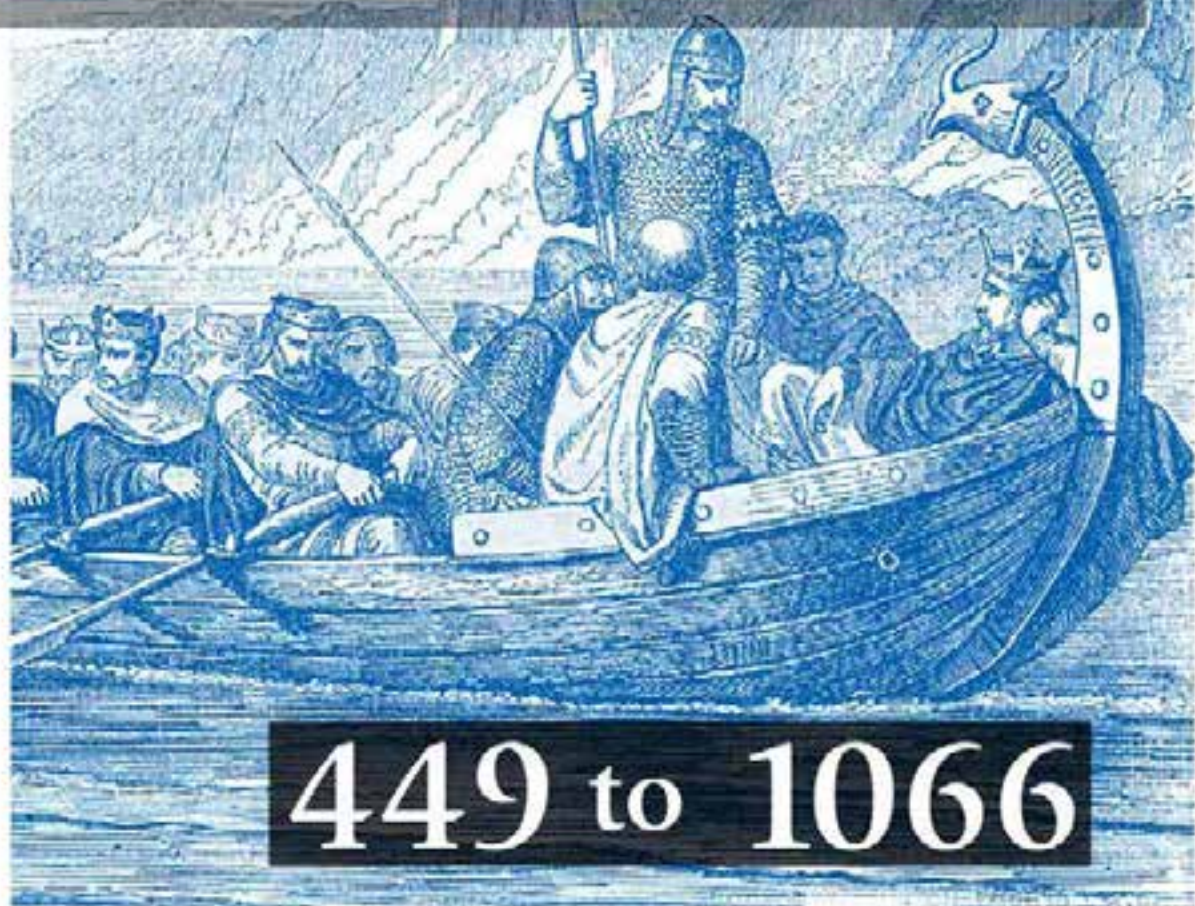


Unit 1:

The Anglo-Saxon Period



449 to 1066

Eye on an Era

449

The Germanic Anglo and Saxon Tribes arrive in southeast Britain.

476

German general Odoacer defeats Romulus Augustus and becomes the first non-Roman ruler of Italy.

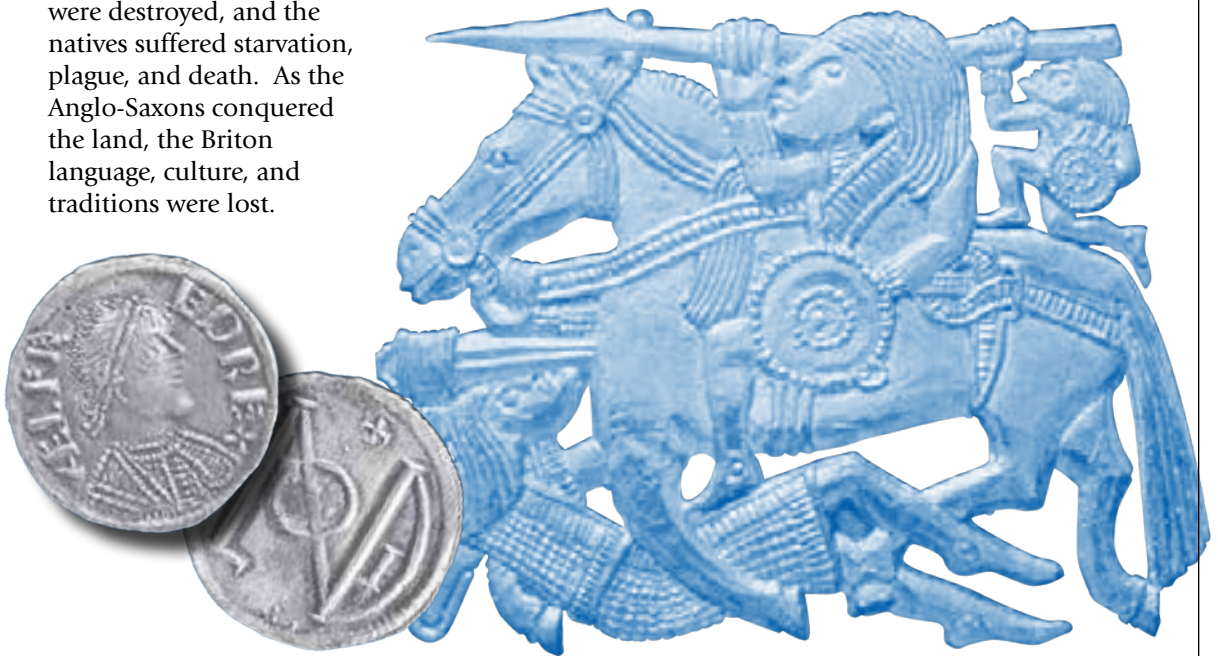
516

Britons defeat the Anglo-Saxons at Mount Badon. Throughout history, success is attributed to King Arthur's leadership, but no proof exists that he led the Britons in this particular battle.



When the Romans withdrew troops from Britain in the early fifth century, Germanic tribes of Angles, Saxons, and Jutes took advantage of Rome's diminishing presence in the country and began invading at the borders.

These tribes arrived primarily from northern Germany and Scandinavia, and their goal was to conquer the native people (Britons, an Anglo-Saxon word meaning "slaves") and colonize their lands. The Britons alone did not have enough troops and were too scattered to fight off the majority of the attacks, and the Anglo-Saxons took control. Whole villages were destroyed, and the natives suffered starvation, plague, and death. As the Anglo-Saxons conquered the land, the Briton language, culture, and traditions were lost.



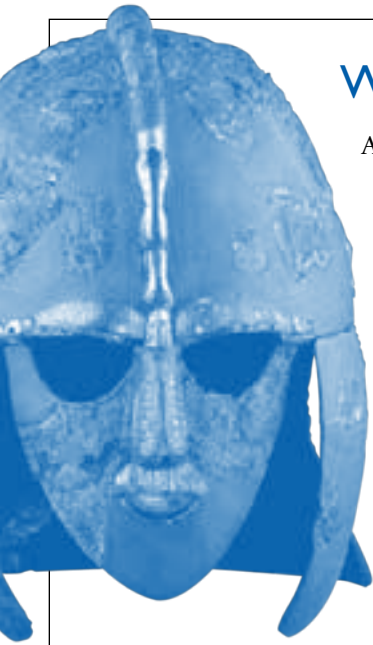
565

Columba founds a monastery on the island of Iona off the coast of Scotland. It will come to house one of the greatest libraries in Western Europe, contributing greatly to Dark Age learning.

597

St. Augustine arrives in England; he converts King Ethelbert to Christianity.





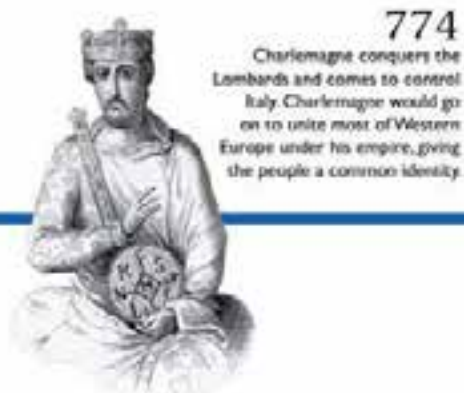
Warrior Society

Anglo-Saxons were loyal, fierce warriors. They lived by a code of honor and took oaths to obey their tribe and kin. Insults against their tribe could lead to bloody feuds, and warriors were expected to fight until victory or death. If a warrior's leader was killed, it was the warrior's duty to avenge the death. When warriors were not defending and protecting their lands, they spent much time celebrating battles and holidays by feasting. Men and women gathered to eat and drink, sometimes celebrating for as long as sixteen hours.

While Anglo-Saxon Britain was certainly a patriarchal, male-dominated society, women had more power than they would in later time periods. Unmarried women could be landowners and had the same rights as men to wield power over workers, arrange finances, and defend their households. A woman could not be forced to marry against her will, and, once married, her personal property remained her own. If a married woman's husband died, she ruled his kingdom.

Paganism and Christianity

The native Britons had been converted to Christianity when they were controlled by the Roman Empire, but the spread of Christianity drastically diminished when the Anglo-Saxons, who worshiped gods and goddesses of the natural world, took control. Referred to as "pagans," which came to mean heathens, they held rituals and often offered blood sacrifices to please their gods. Missionaries began traveling to Britain to establish monasteries and convert the pagans; with St. Augustine's conversion of the king and other royalty, Christianity began to flourish again. The transition from paganism to Christianity was not smooth, however, and missionaries allowed the adoption of pagan traditions and rituals to ease Anglo-Saxons' concerns. For example, Christians began celebrating Christmas on December 25, when pagans celebrated the Winter Solstice. Unfortunately, the adoption of pagan customs did not mean problems disappeared, and the issue of religion continued to cause disputes between different kingdoms within Britain.



Oral Tradition

Very few Anglo-Saxons could read or write, so the only way to pass down their culture's history was through storytelling. Scops, or oral poets, would travel the land entertaining and educating audiences with legends and songs that had been passed down through the ages. Parents would share with their children stories of loyalty and bravery, tragedy and triumph, and these stories would be passed down from generation to generation. These stories gave Anglo-Saxons their identity and purpose. Because of Anglo-Saxons' strong reliance on oral tradition, we have few records of the culture's history or literature. *Beowulf* and "The Wanderer" are two examples of oral traditions that were written down and are now preserved, offering us a glimpse into the Anglo-Saxon culture.



793

The Vikings (Danes) begin a period of raids on England with their attack of the monastery on the island of Lindisfarne.

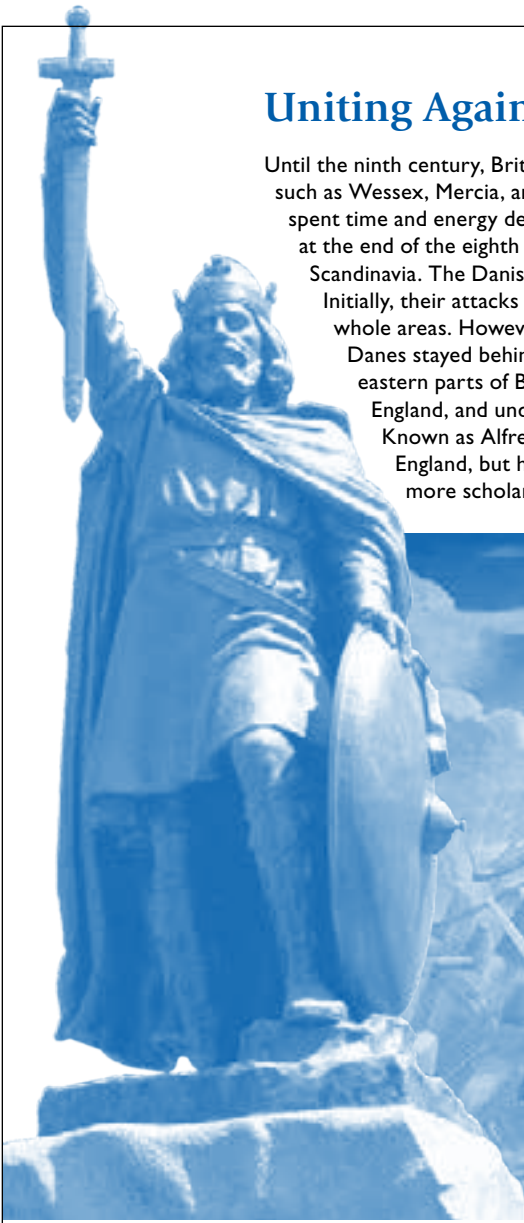


843

Kenneth MacAlpine unites the Scots and the Picts in one "kingdom of Scotland"

Uniting Against a Common Enemy

Until the ninth century, Britain remained an island divided into various powerful kingdoms such as Wessex, Mercia, and Northumbria. The various tribes controlling these kingdoms spent time and energy defending their land against the other kingdoms of Britain. Then, at the end of the eighth century, attacks began from a foreign enemy: Vikings from Scandinavia. The Danish warriors attacked monasteries and villages all over the islands. Initially, their attacks were swift, and they would leave after pillaging and destroying whole areas. However, as the attacks continued throughout the ninth century, the Danes stayed behind after their attacks, eventually gaining control of northern and eastern parts of Britain. The king of Wessex, Alfred, united all the kingdoms of England, and under his leadership, the English were able to defeat the Danes. Known as Alfred the Great, this king not only defeated the Danes and united England, but he also established the first permanent military and encouraged more scholarly and literary works to be produced.



867

The Kingdom of York is established by the Vikings.

890

King Alfred establishes a permanent army and navy.



878

King Alfred defeats the Danes at Wessex.

886

King Alfred and the Danes sign a treaty that divides England.



A Teen of the Time

Aerlene's father looked to her for her answer: Yes or no? This was the biggest decision she had ever had to make. If the question had come up five years earlier, when she was twelve, her parents would have made it for her. But now it became her choice. A young man named Oeric from a neighboring village had asked her to marry him. To show his sincerity—and offer her some financial security—he had offered her a cow and two sheep. According to custom, he would provide her these gifts the morning after they married. These animals would be hers (not her father's or her husband's) to keep—even if the marriage did not work out.

Aerlene knew Oeric, at least well enough to like him. If she said yes, she could predict her life. Like almost everyone she had ever met—only a few hundred people at most—Oeric was a peasant farmer. They would live in a small house—a one-room hut, really—in his village of Wilfridham. He would walk ten or twenty minutes to one of the strips of land around the village that he rented and tend his crops. He might grow wheat in one field, oats in another, and barley in a third. She would keep busy working at home—sewing, weaving, spinning, growing vegetables. And if they hoped to live to see their children grown, they should start their family immediately.

What if she said no? Might she get a better offer? She was a little surprised, and a little hurt, that Tondbert had not asked her. His wife had recently died in childbirth, a sad but common occurrence. He needed a wife to help raise his children. Like his father, Tondbert was a tanner. He made leather shoes, reins, and bags.

Part of her liked the idea of marrying a tanner. He made a little money that they could use to buy luxuries from the trader who visited their village from time to time. But one part of her did not like the idea: her nose. Now Aerlene was accustomed to many smells. People rarely bathed, so the smell of human sweat did not bother her. Their hut had no chimney, so she was used to smoke and the smell of burning wood. And livestock, such as sheep, cattle, pigs, goats, and horses, sometimes shared their hut, so she did not mind all the smells that came with them. But the smell of treating animal hides? That was awful. It was so bad that tanners located their shops far from the village. Tondbert had to walk nearly half an hour to his shop each day.

Besides Oeric and Tondbert, Aerlene had met only a few other eligible men. Only about fifty people lived in her village, and other nearby villages were no larger, so the choices were limited.

"So," her father now asked, "what is your answer? Will you marry Oeric?"

Aerlene drew in a deep breath. "Yes."

973

Edgar is crowned king of England at Bath, fourteen years after taking power.



1016

Canute of Denmark becomes king of England.



1040

Macbeth defeats Duncan I and crowns himself king of Scotland.

1042

The reign of Edward the Confessor begins.

1066

William the Conqueror (of Normandy) becomes king of England.

1000

The epic poem *Beowulf* is believed to have been recorded around this time. The poem is considered the most important literary work of the Anglo-Saxon Period.



1050

The Bishop of Exeter is gifted with a book of poetry. The Exeter Book is the largest known collection of Anglo-Saxon literature. Included in the book is the famous poem "The Wanderer."



Understanding the Anglo-Saxon Period: Compare and Contrast

The Anglo-Saxon period may seem so distant to you in both time and place that you may not believe the literature of the time could speak to you in any meaningful way. How could an Old English poem relate to a twenty-first century teenager in the United States? The answer to that question lies in readers' natural inclinations to find similarities and differences between their own lives and what they are reading. Comparing—looking for similarities—and contrasting—looking for differences—are ways readers find personal relevance, no matter what time or in what place the literature was created.

Comparisons and contrasts can become all the more meaningful as you learn about the historical context of the work of literature. To help set the scene, each unit in this book opens with a timeline and an overview of the social, political, and economic issues of the era. You can supplement that information with your own research. The Web provides a wealth of information on the Anglo-Saxon period. One of the most extensive sites, Regia Anglorum (www.regia.org/village.htm) offers the visitor the virtual village of Wichamstow. Here you can learn about the work and pastimes of an English village during the 800s to the 1000s. These specific details of life in Anglo-Saxon England make comparison and contrast to your own life vivid and meaningful.

Comparing and contrasting are skills you will use throughout this unit—and beyond. The following pairs of topics are just a few of the many you could illuminate through comparison and contrast:

- Life in Anglo-Saxon England and life in Christian Rome
- Lives of nobles and lives of peasants
- Roles of men and roles of women
- Roles of Anglo-Saxon women and roles of contemporary women
- Oral literary traditions and written traditions

Comparing and contrasting can also highlight the “big ideas.” What qualities made someone a hero to the Anglo-Saxon people, and what qualities do today’s heroes have? How did Anglo-Saxons experience and work through grief, and how do people mourn today? If you ask these questions and try to answer them as you read, you may feel the barriers of distant centuries and different cultures come tumbling down.



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Before You Read *Beowulf*: “Grendel,” “The Coming of Beowulf,” and “The Battle with Grendel”

Beowulf was originally an untitled oral poem authored between 700 and 750 A.D. Although the epic poem was composed in England, the story itself takes place in Scandinavia during the fifth century. It tells the tale of the two Germanic tribes—the Danes and the Geats—and the brave Geatan warrior Beowulf who saves the Danes by slaying the monster Grendel. Although no one knows exactly who composed *Beowulf*, the poem’s content offers some clues. The many biblical references—for example, Grendel is described as a descendant of Cain, and God is identified as humankind’s creator—show that the poet was likely a Christian. In fact, scholars often view the poem as a religious work in which good conquers evil. And yet, the poet also draws on historical facts and Germanic legends, creating characters with pagan traditions and values (see page 18). The blending of the two traditions seems to reveal the tension felt by Anglo-Saxon pagans when Christianity first arrived in England.

Literary Lens

EPIC *Beowulf* is an epic, or long narrative poem. Epics have been written throughout the ages and are still written today. Epics share many characteristics:



- They are based on both historical fact and legend.
- The hero is a male of noble birth who values courage and honor.
- The hero is courageous and almost superhuman.
- The hero must complete a long and dangerous journey and fight supernatural creatures.
- The hero’s actions determine the fate of his people or nation.
- The themes, such as good versus evil, are universal.

The Poet’s Language

Beowulf was composed in Old English, the language of the Anglo-Saxons. The earliest form of the English language, it derived from Germanic languages and included about fifty thousand words and dialects—one spoken in each of the four largest kingdoms. This language was spoken until 1066, when the French Normans conquered England and a new language, Middle English, emerged. Old English looks and sounds nothing like Modern English, and very few people today can read or speak it.

Think Critically

Before you read, use critical thinking to deepen your understanding.

1. Study the characteristics of an epic. What epic stories or movies are you already familiar with?
2. Little is known about Anglo-Saxon pagan beliefs, but they are related to the better-recorded beliefs of the Norse. What do you know about Norse mythology and such gods as Thor and Wotan?
3. Working with a partner and your current knowledge, make a chart comparing and contrasting Christianity and Anglo-Saxon paganism. As you read, look for evidence of both belief systems.



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from
BEOWULF

translated by Burton Raffel

Beowulf begins as the monster Grendel approaches the mead¹ hall of Hrothgar, the Danish king. After an evening of drinking and celebration, Hrothgar's warriors fall into a heavy sleep, unaware of the danger that lurks outside.

Grendel

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 moor,² the wild
Marshes, and made his home in a hell
Not hell but earth. He was **spawned** in that slime,

spawned: produced;
created

1 **mead:** fermented, alcoholic drink made from honey

2 **moor:** stretch of desolate land



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.³ The Almighty drove
 Those demons out, and their exile was bitter,

3 **Cain and Abel:** sons of Adam and Eve; in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, Cain murders Abel.



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.

lair: *hideout*

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.

reparation: *making
amends for a wrong*

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 heathen⁴ 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

4 **heathen:** pagan, not Christian



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 son⁵
 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's⁶
 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 **pro**w
 Straight to that distant Danish shore. . . .

omens: events that signify evil or good by their occurrence

prow: pointed, front part of a boat that rises out of the water

The Battle with Grendel

125 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.

5 **Healfdane's son:** Hrothgar was Healfdane's second son and took the throne upon his death.

6 **Higlac:** king of Geatland

He moved quickly through the cloudy night,
 130 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
 135 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
 140 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.
 145 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
 150 Grendel to gnaw the broken bones
 Of his last human supper. Human
 Eyes were watching his evil steps,
 Waiting to see his swift hard claws.
 Grendel snatched at the first Geat
 155 He came to, ripped him apart, cut
 His body to bits with powerful jaws,
 Drank the blood from his veins and bolted
 Him down, hands and feet; death
 And Grendel's great teeth came together,
 160 Snapping life shut. Then he stepped to another
 Still body, clutched at Beowulf with his claws,
 Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful sleeper
 —And was instantly seized himself, claws
 Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm.
 165 That shepherd of evil, guardian of crime,
 Knew at once that nowhere on earth



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
170 Hard grip. Grendel's one thought was to run
From Beowulf, flee back to his marsh and hide there:
This was a different Herot than the hall he had emptied.
But Higlac's follower remembered his final
Boast and, standing erect, stopped
175 The monster's flight, fastened those claws
In his fists till they cracked, clutched Grendel
Closer. The infamous killer fought
For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,
Desiring nothing but escape; his claws
180 Had been caught, he was trapped. That trip to Herot
Was a miserable journey for the writhing monster!
 The high hall rang, its roof boards swayed,
And Danes shook with terror. Down
The aisles the battle swept, angry
185 And wild. Herot trembled, wonderfully
Built to withstand the blows, the struggling
Great bodies beating at its beautiful walls;
Shaped and fastened with iron, inside
And out, artfully worked, the building
190 Stood firm. Its benches rattled, fell
To the floor, gold-covered boards grating
As Grendel and Beowulf battled across them.
Hrothgar's wise men had fashioned Herot
To stand forever; only fire,
195 They had planned, could shatter what such skill had put
Together, swallow in hot flames such splendor
Of ivory and iron and wood. Suddenly
The sounds changed, the Danes started
In new terror, cowering in their beds as the terrible
200 Screams of the Almighty's enemy sang
In the darkness, the horrible shrieks of pain
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
205 Was the strongest.



That mighty protector of men
Meant to hold the monster till its life
Leaped out, knowing the fiend was no use
To anyone in Denmark. All of Beowulf's
210 Band had jumped from their beds, ancestral
Swords raised and ready, determined
To protect their prince if they could. Their courage
Was great but all wasted: they could hack at Grendel
From every side, trying to open
215 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
Had bewitched all men's weapons, laid spells
That blunted every mortal man's blade.
220 And yet his time had come, his days
Were over, his death near; down
To hell he would go, swept groaning and helpless
To the waiting hands of still worse fiends.
Now he discovered—once the afflictor
225 Of men, tormentor of their days—what it meant
To feud with Almighty God: Grendel
Saw that his strength was deserting him, his claws
Bound fast, Higlac's brave follower tearing at
His hands. The monster's hatred rose higher,
230 But his power had gone. He twisted in pain,
And the bleeding **sinews** deep in his shoulder
Snapped, muscle and bone split
And broke. The battle was over, Beowulf
Had been granted new glory: Grendel escaped,
235 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
Of all his days. And after that bloody
Combat the Danes laughed with delight.
240 He who had come to them from across the sea,
Bold and strong-minded, had driven affliction
Off, purged Herot clean. He was happy,
Now, with that night's fierce work; the Danes
Had been served as he'd boasted he'd serve them; Beowulf,

sinews: tendons or ligaments

.....

245 A prince of the Geats, had killed Grendel,
Ended the grief, the sorrow, the suffering
Forced on Hrothgar's helpless people
By a bloodthirsty fiend. No Dane doubted
The victory, for the proof, hanging high
250 From the rafters where Beowulf had hung it, was the
monster's
Arm, claw and shoulder and all.

And then, in the morning, crowds surrounded
Herot, warriors coming to that hall



From faraway lands, princes and leaders
 255 Of men hurrying to behold the monster's
 Great staggering tracks. They gaped with no sense
 Of sorrow, felt no regret for his suffering,
 Went tracing his bloody footprints, his beaten
 And lonely flight, to the edge of the lake
 260 Where he'd dragged his corpselike way, doomed
 And already weary of his vanishing life.
 The water was bloody, steaming and boiling
 In horrible pounding waves, heat
 Sucked from his magic veins; but the swirling
 265 Surf had covered his death, hidden
 Deep in murky darkness his miserable
 End, as hell opened to receive him.
 Then old and young rejoiced, turned back
 From that happy **pilgrimage**, mounted their hard-hooved
 270 Horses, high-spirited stallions, and rode them
 Slowly toward Herot again, retelling
 Beowulf's bravery as they jogged along.
 And over and over they swore that nowhere
 On earth or under the spreading sky
 275 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
 Hrothgar, their kind and gracious king!)
 And sometimes, when the path ran straight and
 clear,
 280 They would let their horses race, red
 And brown and pale yellow backs streaming
 Down the road. And sometimes a proud old soldier
 Who had heard songs of the ancient heroes
 And could sing them all through, story after story,
 285 Would weave a net of words for Beowulf's
 Victory, tying the knot of his verses
 Smoothly, swiftly, into place with a poet's
 Quick skill, singing his new song aloud
 While he shaped it, and the old songs as well. . . .

pilgrimage: long
 journey made to visit
 a sacred place or pay
 homage

.....

After You Read *Beowulf*: “Grendel,” “The Coming of Beowulf,” and “The Battle with Grendel”

Literary Lens: Epic

What characteristics of an epic did you find in *Beowulf*? Make a chart like the one below. Write the characteristics of an epic in the left column and examples from the text in the right column. Circle the elements you felt were the most powerful.

Characteristics of an Epic	Examples from <i>Beowulf</i>

Explore Context: Pagan and Christian Beliefs and Traditions

How are Christianity and paganism portrayed in *Beowulf*? Write a paragraph about the conflict between Christian beliefs and pagan beliefs. Use evidence from the poem to support your answer.

Apply and Create: Epic Movie

Working with a partner, choose one of the excerpts from *Beowulf* and rewrite it as a scene for a present-day movie version of the poem. To get started, think about elements in an epic movie you have seen. You will need to create dialogue, provide stage directions for your characters, and describe the sets and action. Then act out your scene for the class or another group.

Read Critically

Reread the following passage from *Beowulf*. Answer the questions and support your answers with details from the passage.

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. . . .

1. Based on Grendel's actions and Hrothgar's response, what conclusions can you draw about Grendel and Hrothgar?
2. Why does Hrothgar fear that "The beginning might not be the end"? Is he right? Cite examples to support your answer.
3. Reread the last nine lines. How do they foreshadow, or hint at, what happens next? What other lines are examples of foreshadowing?

.....

Before You Read *Beowulf*: “Grendel’s Mother” and “The Battle with Grendel’s Mother”

Like other Old English poems, *Beowulf* was passed orally from generation to generation and chanted for audiences by scopps, or oral poets (see page 19). Scopps did not simply memorize stories and songs, they often improvised on them—creating new verses to combine with the old. Experimenting with the repetition and alliteration of words and phrases, as well as the poem’s rhythm, allowed scopps to create new verses while maintaining the original story line. Although manuscripts of *Beowulf* were eventually created, the only surviving Anglo-Saxon manuscript was written around 1000 A.D. This copy was nearly destroyed in a fire in 1731, and several lines of the poem were lost. While *Beowulf* is now the most famous Anglo-Saxon heroic epic, it was not published until 1815. Most of England’s greatest authors, including Chaucer and Shakespeare, never read it.

Literary Lens

ELEGY OR EPIC NARRATIVE There is some debate, but many scholars classify *Beowulf* as a heroic elegy, a poem celebrating the life and death of a heroic figure. Others feel it is an epic narrative, a long poem in the oral tradition telling of a hero’s deeds. *Beowulf* certainly has characteristics of both.



ALLITERATION *Beowulf*’s poet uses alliteration, or the repetition of sounds at the beginning of words, to create a musical effect and emphasize ideas. In his translation, Burton Raffel uses alliteration to preserve the poem’s sound and style.

RHYTHM AND REPETITION In the original poem, rhythm was created by a pause in each line called a *caesura*. This pause is shown as a space that divides the line. Translator Raffel uses punctuation to create pauses and rhythm. Repetition, or the recurrence of sounds, is used to emphasize ideas and to give a sense of unity to a poem.

The Poet’s Language

Beowulf, composed orally in Old English, was later written down—possibly recited by a poet to a scribe—in that same language. Beginning in the Middle Ages, monks began translating the poem into Latin, which was the language of scholars and the Church. Modern versions of the poem are often translated from the Latin versions. Not surprisingly, many of the original poetic qualities of the poem—the repetition, alliteration, rhythm, and improvisation—have been lost in translation.

Think Critically

Before you read the excerpts that follow, use critical thinking to deepen your understanding.



1. How do you think listening to the poem would be different from reading it?
2. Relate what you read about the Anglo-Saxons on pages 16–21 with what you’ve read of the poem so far. What values and traditions do the characters share with the Anglo-Saxons?
3. Based on what you have read so far, do you think *Beowulf* is an epic narrative or a heroic elegy?

Of being worn to war it would earn no glory;
 65 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
 70 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.
 75 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
 80 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

 85 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,
 Edgethó's son, and died there, if that shining
 Woven metal had not helped—and Holy
 90 God, who sent him victory, gave judgment
 For truth and right, Ruler of the Heavens,
 Once Beowulf was back on his feet and fighting.
 Then he saw, hanging on the wall, a heavy
 Sword, hammered by giants, strong
 95 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

avenge: to inflict harm in return for an injury or wrongdoing

scabbard: sheath for a sword

hilt: handle of a sword



100 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
105 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
110 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
115 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
120 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
125 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,
130 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
135 Mighty mother, the she-wolf, had killed him.
The sun slid over past noon, went further



Two on each side of the spear jammed through it—
Yet proud of their ugly load and determined
175 That the Danes, seated in Herot, should see it.
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
180 Herot, covered with glory for the daring
Battles he had fought . . .

.....

After You Read *Beowulf*: “Grendel’s Mother” and “The Battle with Grendel’s Mother”

Literary Lens: Alliteration, Rhythm, and Repetition

The alliteration, rhythm, and repetition in *Beowulf* allowed scopos to create original verse and still remember the story line. Raffel maintains these literary elements in his translation. Create a graphic organizer like the one below on a separate sheet of paper. Then complete the organizer with examples of each type of element from *Beowulf*.

Alliteration:
Rhythm:
Repetition:

Explore Context: Warrior Society

The Anglo-Saxons were warriors and lived by a code of honor. Review what you learned about their culture and society (page 18), and write a paragraph demonstrating how this code is reflected in the poem. Provide examples of the characters’ actions or beliefs that express the Anglo-Saxon culture and code of honor.

Apply and Create: Become a Scop

Beowulf was originally chanted. Today, we generally read the poem. However, Benjamin Bagby has become a modern scop and entralls his audiences with his performance of the epic—in the original Anglo-Saxon language. See a clip of his performance at www.bagbybeowulf.com/. Choose a short excerpt from the poem, and prepare to become a scop. Read the excerpt several times to get a feel for the rhythm and story. Underline words you will emphasize, and mark places where you will pause for effect. Practice chanting the excerpt to a partner. Then perform it for a small group or your class.

Read Critically

Reread the following excerpt from *Beowulf*. Answer the questions and support your answers with details from the passage.

For final revenge against Grendel’s vicious
Attacks, his nighttime raids, over
115 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

120 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

125 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,

130 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

135 Mighty mother, the she-wolf, had killed him.
 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,

140 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

145 Eternal Lord loosens invisible
 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

150 Rich treasures, but all that Beowulf took
 Was Grendel's head and the hilt of the giants'
 Jeweled sword; . . .



1. Why does Beowulf search for Grendel and cut off his head?
2. The Geats never leave the lake. Compare their actions with those of the Danes. What conclusions can you draw about them from their actions?
3. Based on Beowulf's actions, do you think he is a true hero? Explain using examples from the passage.

.....

Before You Read *Beowulf*: “The Battle with the Dragon” and “The Death of Beowulf”

Though the original manuscript was created around 1000 A.D., *Beowulf* wasn't read or understood until 1705, when a librarian cataloged it. This sole copy, badly damaged by fire, was virtually unknown until a Danish historian commissioned a copy to be made in 1786. He then made a copy for himself, and in 1815 he published the first copy of *Beowulf* in Old English and Latin. By the time it was first published in English in 1833, the epic was considered a historical record.

By the twentieth century, the original manuscript had greatly deteriorated, and thousands of words and letters were lost as the burned edges of the manuscript crumbled. In 1993, Anglo-Saxon experts Kevin Kiernen and Paul Szarmach began using electronic photography and digital reproduction to study the original manuscript. Their work, known as *The Electronic Beowulf*, allows scholars to study the original manuscript without touching and further damaging it. The digital reproduction has also recovered some of the words that had been invisible to previous scholars. See examples of scanned images by visiting www.uky.edu/~kiernan/eBeowulf/main.htm.

Literary Lens

FORESHADOWING Writers use foreshadowing, hints about what will happen next or how the narrative will end, to add suspense to the plot and to draw the reader into the story.

THEME A work's theme is its main message. Many works contain universal themes—themes that apply to all times, cultures, or places. *Beowulf*'s theme can be determined by noting what the characters say and do and how they change.

PROTAGONIST AND ANTAGONIST The main character of a literary work is often a hero, such as Beowulf. This character is called the *protagonist*, and is usually the person the reader identifies with most strongly. Opposing the protagonist is the *antagonist*, the character (or force) that stands in the hero's way. Grendel and his mother were the antagonists in your previous reading of *Beowulf*. In the upcoming excerpt, Beowulf is about to meet the antagonist who will be his ruin. Be aware of the ways in which this next antagonist is portrayed.

The Poet's Language

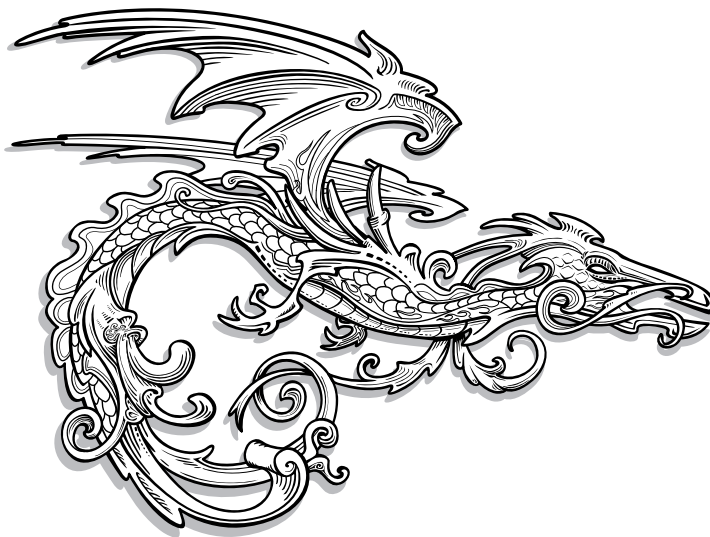
Old English did not consist of many words, and the same word could have a different meaning depending on how long the vowel was held. To create new words or denote shades of meaning, nouns and verbs were joined with other words or word parts. These imaginative compound nouns, called *kennings*, can be found in *Beowulf*. The poet also used words not found in any other Old English manuscripts. Though the poet may have heard these words, some scholars believe they are his own creation. Others theorize that because it contains conventions and spellings from two different dialects, *Beowulf* may have been created by two different people.

Think Critically

Before you read, use critical thinking to deepen your understanding.



1. Based on other heroic episodes you've read or seen, how do you think Beowulf will react to his next challenge?
2. How might the poet create suspense in Beowulf's last battle?
3. Compare *Beowulf* to accounts you have read about real historical figures. Can you understand why scholars consider *Beowulf* a historical record? Why or why not?



The Battle with the Dragon

Beowulf and his men are honored by the Danes and then return home to Geatland. Beowulf becomes king and rules for many years. When a dragon threatens his kingdom, Beowulf, though old, prepares to kill the beast.

Vomiting fire and smoke, the dragon
Burned down their homes. They watched in horror
As the flames rose up: the angry monster
Meant to leave nothing alive. And the signs
5 Of its anger flickered and glowed in the darkness,
Visible for miles, tokens of its hate
And its cruelty, spread like a warning to the Geats
Who had broken its rest. Then it hurried back
To its tower, to its hidden treasure, before dawn

10 Could come. It had wrapped its flames around
 The Geats; now it trusted in stone
 Walls, and its strength, to protect it. But they would not.
 Then they came to Beowulf, their king, and announced
 That his hall, his throne, the best of buildings,
15 Had melted away in the dragon's burning
 Breath. Their words brought misery, Beowulf's
 Sorrow beat at his heart: he accused
 Himself of breaking God's law, of bringing
 The Almighty's anger down on his people.
20 **Reproach** pounded in his breast, gloomy
 And dark, and the world seemed a different place.
 But the hall was gone, the dragon's molten
 Breath had licked across it, burned it
 To ashes, near the shore it had guarded. The Geats
25 Deserved revenge; Beowulf, their leader
 And lord, began to plan it, ordered
 A battle-shield shaped of iron, knowing that
 Wood would be useless, that no linden shield⁵
 Could help him, protect him, in the flaming heat
30 Of the beast's breath. That noble prince
 Would end his days on earth, soon,
 Would leave this brief life, but would take the dragon
 With him, tear it from the heaped-up treasure
 It had guarded so long. And he'd go to it alone,
35 **Scorning** to lead soldiers against such
 An enemy: he saw nothing to fear, thought nothing
 Of the beast's claws, or wings, or flaming
 Jaws—he had fought, before, against worse
 Odds, had survived, been victorious, in harsher
40 Battles, beginning in Herot, Hrothgar's
 Unlucky hall. He'd killed Grendel
 And his mother, swept that murdering tribe
 Away. And he'd fought in Higlac's war
 With the Frisians,⁶ fought at his lord's side
45 Till a sword reached out and drank Higlac's

reproach: blame;
disgrace

scorning: refusing
with contempt

1 **linden shield:** shield made out of a pale, soft wood often used in carving and furniture

2 **Frisians:** inhabitants of Frisia, an ancient region in northwestern Europe



Blood, till a blade swung in the rush
 Of battle killed the Geats' great king.
 Then Beowulf escaped, broke through Frisian
 Shields and swam to freedom, saving
 50 Thirty sets of armor from the scavenging
 Franks, river people who robbed
 The dead as they floated by. Beowulf
 Offered them only his sword, ended
 So many **jackal** lives that the few
 55 Who were able skulked silently home, glad
 To leave him. So Beowulf swam sadly back
 To Geatland, almost the only survivor
 Of a foolish war. Higlac's widow
 Brought him the crown, offered him the kingdom,
 60 Not trusting Herdred, her son and Higlac's,
 To beat off foreign invaders. But Beowulf
 Refused to rule when his lord's own son
 Was alive, and the leaderless Geats could choose
 A rightful king. He gave Herdred
 65 All his support, offering an open
 Heart where Higlac's young son could see
 Wisdom he still lacked himself: warmth
 And good will were what Beowulf brought his new king.
 But Swedish **exiles** came, seeking
 70 Protection; they were rebels against Onela,
 Healfdane's son-in-law and the best ring-giver⁷
 His people had ever known. And Onela
 Came too, a mighty king, marched
 On Geatland with a huge army; Herdred
 75 Had given his word and now he gave
 His life, shielding the Swedish strangers.
 Onela wanted nothing more:
 When Herdred had fallen that famous warrior
 Went back to Sweden, let Beowulf rule!
 80 "The gifts that Higlac gave me,
 And the land, I earned with my sword, as fate

jackal: wild dog

exiles: people banished
from their native land

3 **ring-giver:** A king was often called a ring-giver because he was expected to be generous and dish out spoils of war to his thanes.

Allowed: he never needed Danes
 Or Goths or Swedes, soldiers and allies
 Bought with gold, bribed to his side.
 85 My word was better, and always his.
 In every battle my place was in front,
 Alone, and so it shall be forever,
 As long as this sword lasts, serves me
 In the future as it has served me before. So
 90 I killed Dagref, the Frank, who brought death
 To Higlac, and who looted his corpse: Higd's
 Necklace, Welthow's treasure, never
 Came to Dagref's king. The thief
 Fell in battle, but not on my blade.
 95 He was brave and strong, but I swept him in my arms,
 Ground him against me till his bones broke,
 Till his blood burst out. And now I shall fight
 For this treasure, fight with both hand and sword."
 And Beowulf uttered his final boast:
 100 "I've never known fear; as a youth I fought
 In endless battles. I am old, now,
 But I will fight again, seek fame still,
 If the dragon hiding in his tower dares
 To face me."
 105 Then he said farewell to his followers,
 Each in his turn, for the last time:
 "I'd use no sword, no weapon, if this beast
 Could be killed without it, crushed to death
 Like Grendel, gripped in my hands and torn
 110 Limb from limb. But his breath will be burning
 Hot, poison will pour from his tongue.
 I feel no shame, with shield and sword
 And armor, against this monster: when he comes to me
 I mean to stand, not run from his shooting
 115 Flames, stand till fate decides
 Which of us wins. My heart is firm,
 My hands calm: I need no hot
 Words. Wait for me close by, my friends.
 We shall see, soon, who will survive



120 This bloody battle, stand when the fighting
Is done. No one else could do
What I mean to, here, no man but me
Could hope to defeat this monster. No one
Could try. And this dragon's treasure, his gold
125 And everything hidden in that tower, will be mine
Or war will sweep me to a bitter death!"
Then Beowulf rose, still brave, still strong,
And with his shield at his side, and a mail shirt on his
breast,
Strode calmly, confidently, toward the tower, under
130 The rocky cliffs: no coward could have walked there!
And then he who'd endured dozens of desperate
Battles, who'd stood boldly while swords and shields
Clashed, the best of kings, saw
Huge stone arches and felt the heat
135 Of the dragon's breath, flooding down
Through the hidden entrance, too hot for anyone
To stand, a streaming current of fire
And smoke that blocked all passage. And the Geats'
Lord and leader, angry, lowered
140 His sword and roared out a battle cry,
A call so loud and clear that it reached through
The hoary⁸ rock, hung in the dragon's
Ear. The beast rose, angry,
Knowing a man had come—and then nothing
145 But war could have followed. Its breath came first,
A steaming cloud pouring from the stone,
Then the earth itself shook. Beowulf
Swung his shield into place, held it
In front of him, facing the entrance. The dragon
150 Coiled and uncoiled, its heart urging it
Into battle. Beowulf's ancient sword
Was waiting, unsheathed, his sharp and gleaming
Blade. The beast came closer; both of them
Were ready, each set on slaughter. The Geats'
155 Great prince stood firm, unmoving, prepared

4 **hoary:** ancient; commanding respect

Behind his high shield, waiting in his shining
 Armor. The monster came quickly toward him,
 Pouring out fire and smoke, hurrying
 To its fate. Flames beat at the iron
 160 Shield, and for a time it held, protected
 Beowulf as he'd planned; then it began to melt,
 And for the first time in his life that famous prince
 Fought with fate against him, with glory
 Denied him. He knew it, but he raised his sword
 165 And struck at the dragon's scaly hide.
 The ancient blade broke, bit into
 The monster's skin, drew blood, but cracked
 And failed him before it went deep enough, helped him
 Less than he needed. The dragon leaped
 170 With pain, thrashed and beat at him, spouting
 Murderous flames, spreading them everywhere.
 And the Geats' ring-giver did not boast of glorious
 Victories in other wars: his weapon
 Had failed him, deserted him, now when he needed it
 175 Most, that excellent sword. Edgethó's
 Famous son stared at death,
 Unwilling to leave this world, to exchange it
 For a dwelling in some distant place—a journey
 Into darkness that all men must make, as death
 180 Ends their few brief hours on earth.
 Quickly, the dragon came at him, encouraged
 As Beowulf fell back; its breath flared,
 And he suffered, wrapped around in swirling
 Flames—a king, before, but now
 185 A beaten warrior. None of his comrades
 Came to him, helped him, his brave and noble
 Followers; they ran for their lives, fled
 Deep in a wood. And only one of them
 Remained, stood there, miserable, remembering,
 190 As a good man must, what kinship should mean.
 His name was Wiglaf, he was Wexstan's son
 And a good soldier; his family had been Swedish,
 Once. Watching Beowulf, he could see



How his king was suffering, burning. Remembering
195 Everything his lord and cousin had given him,
Armor and gold and the great estates
Wexstan's family enjoyed, Wiglaf's
Mind was made up; he raised his yellow
Shield and drew his sword—an ancient
200 Weapon that had once belonged to Onela's
Nephew, and that Wexstan had won, killing
The prince when he fled from Sweden, sought safety
With Herdred, and found death. And Wiglaf's father
Had carried the dead man's armor, and his sword. . . .
205 —He'd never worn
That armor, fought with that sword, until Beowulf
Called him to his side, led him into war.
But his soul did not melt, his sword was strong;
The dragon discovered his courage, and his weapon,
210 When the rush of battle brought them together.
And Wiglaf, his heart heavy, uttered
The kind of words his comrades deserved:
"I remember how we sat in the mead-hall, drinking
And boasting of how brave we'd be when Beowulf
215 Needed us, he who gave us these swords
And armor: All of us swore to repay him,
When the time came, kindness for kindness
—With our lives, if he needed them. He allowed us
to join him,
Chose us from all his great army, thinking
220 Our boasting words had some weight, believing
Our promises, trusting our swords. He took us
For soldiers, for men. He meant to kill
This monster himself, our mighty king,
Fight this battle alone and unaided,
225 As in the days when his strength and daring dazzled
Men's eyes. But those days are over and gone
And now our lord must lean on younger
Arms. And we must go to him, while angry
Flames burn at his flesh, help
230 Our glorious king! By almighty God,



I'd rather burn myself than see
Flames swirling around my lord.
And who are we to carry home
Our shields before we've slain his enemy
235 And ours, to run back to our homes with Beowulf
So hard-pressed here? I swear that nothing
He ever did deserved an end
Like this, dying miserably and alone,
Butchered by this savage beast: We swore
240 That these swords and armor were each for us all!"
Then he ran to his king, crying encouragement
As he dove through the dragon's deadly fumes:
"Belovéd Beowulf, remember how you boasted,
Once, that nothing in the world would ever
245 Destroy your fame: fight to keep it,
Now, be strong and brave, my noble
King, protecting life and fame
Together. My sword will fight at your side!"
The dragon heard him, the man-hating monster,
250 And was angry; shining with surging flames
It came for him, anxious to return his visit— .
Then the monster charged again, vomiting
Fire, wild with pain, rushed out
Fierce and dreadful, its fear forgotten.
255 Watching for its chance it drove its tusks
Into Beowulf's neck; he staggered, the blood
Came flooding forth, fell like rain.

And then when Beowulf needed him most
Wiglaf showed his courage, his strength
260 And skill, and the boldness he was born with. Ignoring
The dragon's head, he helped his lord
By striking lower down. The sword
Sank in; his hand was burned, but the shining
Blade had done its work, the dragon's
265 Belching flames began to flicker
And die away. And Beowulf drew
His battle-sharp dagger: the bloodstained old king



Still knew what he was doing. Quickly, he cut
The beast in half, slit it apart.
270 It fell, their courage had killed it, two noble
Cousins had joined in the dragon's death.
Yet what they did all men must do
When the time comes! But the triumph was the last
Beowulf would ever earn, the end
275 Of greatness and life together. The wound
In his neck began to swell and grow;
He could feel something stirring, burning
In his veins, a stinging venom, and knew
The beast's fangs had left it. He fumbled
280 Along the wall, found a slab
Of stone, and dropped down; above him he saw
Huge stone arches and heavy posts,
Holding up the roof of that giant hall.
Then Wiglaf's gentle hands bathed
285 The bloodstained prince, his glorious lord,
Weary of war, and loosened his helmet.
Beowulf spoke, in spite of the swollen,
Livid wound, knowing he'd unwound
His string of days on earth, seen
290 As much as God would grant him; all worldly
Pleasure was gone, as life would go,
Soon:
"I'd leave my armor to my son,
Now, if God had given me an heir,
295 A child born of my body, his life
Created from mine. I've worn this crown
For fifty winters: no neighboring people
Have tried to threaten the Geats, sent soldiers
Against us or talked of terror. My days
300 Have gone by as fate willed, waiting
For its word to be spoken, ruling as well
As I knew how, swearing no unholy oaths,
Seeking no lying wars. I can leave
This life happy; I can die, here,

305 Knowing the Lord of all life has never
Watched me wash my sword in blood
Born of my own family. Beloved
Wiglaf, go, quickly, find
The dragon's treasure: we've taken its life,
310 But its gold is ours, too. Hurry,
Bring me ancient silver, precious
Jewels, shining armor and gems,
Before I die. Death will be softer,
Leaving life and this people I've ruled
315 So long, if I look at this last of all prizes."

The Death of Beowulf

Then Wexstan's son went in, as quickly
As he could, did as the dying Beowulf
Asked, entered the inner darkness
Of the tower, went with his mail shirt and his sword.
320 **Flushed** with victory he groped his way,
A brave young warrior, and suddenly saw
Piles of gleaming gold, precious
Gems, scattered on the floor, cups
And bracelets, rusty old helmets, beautifully
325 Made but rotting with no hands to rub
And polish them. They lay where the dragon left them;
It had flown in the darkness, once, before fighting
Its final battle. (So gold can easily
Triumph, defeat the strongest of men,
330 No matter how deep it is hidden!) And he saw,
Hanging high above, a golden
Banner, woven by the best of weavers
And beautiful. And over everything he saw
A strange light, shining everywhere,
335 On walls and floor and treasure. Nothing
Moved, no other monsters appeared;
He took what he wanted, all the treasures
That pleased his eye, heavy plates
And golden cups and the glorious banner,

flushed: reddened
from emotion or
exertion



340 Loaded his arms with all they could hold.
Beowulf's dagger, his iron blade,
Had finished the fire-spitting terror
That once protected tower and treasures
Alike; the gray-bearded lord of the Geats
345 Had ended those flying, burning raids
Forever.

Then Wiglaf went back, anxious
To return while Beowulf was alive, to bring him
Treasure they'd won together. He ran,
350 Hoping his wounded king, weak
And dying, had not left the world too soon.
Then he brought their treasure to Beowulf, and found
His famous king bloody, gasping
For breath. But Wiglaf sprinkled water
355 Over his lord, until the words
Deep in his breast broke through and were heard.

haltingly: *in a way
that's hesitant or
wavering*

Beholding the treasure he spoke, **haltingly:**
"For this, this gold, these jewels, I thank
Our Father in Heaven. Ruler of the Earth—
360 For all of this, that His grace has given me,
Allowed me to bring to my people while breath
Still came to my lips. I sold my life
For this treasure, and I sold it well. Take
What I leave, Wiglaf, lead my people,
365 Help them; my time is gone. Have
The brave Geats build me a tomb,
When the funeral flames have burned⁹ me, and build it
Here, at the water's edge, high
On this spit of land, so sailors can see
370 This tower, and remember my name, and call it
Beowulf's tower, and boats in the darkness
And mist, crossing the sea, will know it."

Then that brave king gave the golden
Necklace from around his throat to Wiglaf,

5 **funeral flames have burned:** Anglo-Saxons were often cremated, especially after Christianity was brought to the region. Elaborate tombs were built to house the remains, and possessions were often buried with the deceased.

375 Gave him his gold-covered helmet, and his rings,
 And his mail shirt, and ordered him to use them well:
 “You’re the last of all our far-flung family.
 Fate has swept our race away,
 Taken warriors in their strength and led them
 380 To the death that was waiting. And now I follow them.”
 The old man’s mouth was silent, spoke
 No more, had said as much as it could;
 He would sleep in the fire, soon. His soul
 Left his flesh, flew to glory. . . .
 385 And when the battle was over Beowulf’s followers
 Came out of the wood, cowards and traitors,
 Knowing the dragon was dead. Afraid,
 While it spit its fires, to fight in their lord’s
 Defense, to throw their javelins and spears,
 390 They came like shamefaced jackals, their shields
 In their hands, to the place where the prince lay dead,
 And waited for Wiglaf to speak. He was sitting
 Near Beowulf’s body, wearily sprinkling
 Water in the dead man’s face, trying
 395 To stir him. He could not. No one could have kept
 Life in their lord’s body, or turned
 Aside the Lord’s will: world
 And men and all move as He orders,
 And always have, and always will.
 400 Then Wiglaf turned and angrily told them
 What men without courage must hear.
 Wexstan’s brave son stared at the traitors,
 His heart sorrowful, and said what he had to:
 “I say what anyone who speaks the truth
 405 Must say. . . .
 Too few of his warriors remembered
 To come, when our lord faced death, alone.
 And now the giving of swords, of golden
 Rings and rich estates, is over,
 410 Ended for you and everyone who shares
 Your blood: when the brave Geats hear
 How you bolted and ran none of your race



Will have anything left but their lives. And death
Would be better for them all, and for you, than the kind
415 Of life you can lead, branded with disgrace!" . . .

Then the Geats built the tower, as Beowulf
Had asked, strong and tall, so sailors
Could find it from far and wide; working
For ten long days they made his monument,
420 Sealed his ashes in walls as straight
And high as wise and willing hands
Could raise them. And the riches he and Wiglaf
Had won from the dragon, rings, necklaces,
Ancient, hammered armor—all
425 The treasures they'd taken were left there, too,
Silver and jewels buried in the sandy
Ground, back in the earth, again
And forever hidden and useless to men.
And then twelve of the bravest Geats
430 Rode their horses around the tower,
Telling their sorrow, telling stories
Of their dead king and his greatness, his glory,
Praising him for heroic deeds, for a life
As noble as his name. So should all men
435 Raise up words for their lords, warm
With love, when their shield and protector leaves
His body behind, sends his soul
On high. And so Beowulf's followers
Rode, mourning their beloved leader,
440 Crying that no better king had ever
Lived, no prince so mild, no man
So open to his people, so deserving of praise.

.....

After You Read *Beowulf*: “The Battle with the Dragon” and “The Death of Beowulf”

Literary Lens: Foreshadowing

The poet uses foreshadowing to create suspense and draw the reader into the action. Record examples of foreshadowing in “The Battle with the Dragon” and “The Death of Beowulf,” and explain the effect that each example has on the poem. Read the sample response below.

Foreshadowing	Effect
That noble prince/ Would end his days on earth, soon, . . . but would take the dragon/With him. . . .	This signals that Beowulf will die—don’t know how or if he will kill the dragon.

Explore Context: Traditions

When Christianity was adopted by the pagan Anglo-Saxons, some of their traditions and beliefs were retained. Based on what you know and have read, write a paragraph explaining which pagan traditions became part of the Christian religion. Then do more research to find out other pagan or ancient traditions that have become part of our culture.

Apply and Create: Graphic Novel

Work with a partner to identify a universal theme in *Beowulf*. How does that theme still apply today? What kind of story can you tell that shares that message? Create four or five pages of a graphic novel or comic book using a modern setting and heroic characters to illustrate your story and theme. Share your novel or comic with another group or with the class. See how many people can identify your theme.

Read Critically

Reread the following passages from “The Battle with the Dragon” and answer the questions that follow.

Quickly, the dragon came at him, encouraged
As Beowulf fell back; its breath flared,
And he suffered, wrapped around in swirling
Flames—a king, before, but now
185 A beaten warrior. None of his comrades
Came to him, helped him, his brave and noble
Followers; they ran for their lives, fled
Deep in a wood. And only one of them
Remained, stood there, miserable, remembering,
190 As a good man must, what kinship should mean. . . .





Then the monster charged again, vomiting
Fire, wild with pain, rushed out
Fierce and dreadful, its fear forgotten.
255 Watching for its chance it drove its tusks
Into Beowulf's neck; he staggered, the blood
Came flooding forth, fell like rain.

And then when Beowulf needed him most
Wiglaf showed his courage, his strength
260 And skill, and the boldness he was born with. Ignoring
The dragon's head, he helped his lord
By striking lower down. The sword
Sank in; his hand was burned, but the shining
Blade had done its work, the dragon's
265 Belching flames began to flicker
And die away. And Beowulf drew
His battle-sharp dagger: the bloodstained old king
Still knew what he was doing. Quickly, he cut
The beast in half, slit it apart.
270 It fell, their courage had killed it, two noble
Cousins had joined in the dragon's death.
Yet what they did all men must do
When the time comes! But the triumph was the last
Beowulf would ever earn, the end
275 Of greatness and life together. The wound
In his neck began to swell and grow;
He could feel something stirring, burning
In his veins, a stinging venom, and knew
The beast's fangs had left it. . . .



1. Why do Beowulf's men desert him? What conclusions can you draw about them based on their actions?
2. Create a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the young Beowulf with the old Beowulf. How has he changed?
3. Why does Wiglaf help Beowulf? What do his actions foreshadow?

.....

Before You Read “The Seafarer,” “The Wanderer,” and “The Wife’s Lament”

The authors of these three poems are unknown. The poems survive in a manuscript called *The Exeter Book*, which was created by Christian scribes around 975 A.D. Like *Beowulf*, the poems were most likely written by Christians and reflect both Christian and pagan beliefs.

Literary Lens

ELEGIAC VERSE These three poems are examples of elegiac verse. Unlike heroic verse that celebrated heroes and codes of honor, elegiac verse questioned the beliefs in these codes and focused on the hardships and uncertainties of Anglo-Saxon life—the disease, death, and loneliness faced by warriors or seamen. The speakers in both “The Seafarer” and “The Wanderer” are men who lament losing their leaders, fellow warriors, and families. The speakers are forced to live in exile and now search for salvation in God. The speaker in “The Wife’s Lament” is a woman who grieves over the loss of her family, husband, and former life. She too is in exile because she was forced to leave her community when she married.

Although the speaker is female, scholars disagree about the author’s gender, as women were forbidden or harshly criticized for writing.

DESCRIPTIVE DETAILS Poets use descriptive details to set a mood; emphasize ideas and emotions; and help the reader visualize people, objects, and actions. Descriptive details also help readers understand the poem’s meaning and the writer’s attitude toward the subject. For example, in “The Seafarer,” the phrases “ice-cold sea, whirled in sorrow” and “freezing waves” suggest isolation and despair.

The Poet’s Language

“The Seafarer,” “The Wanderer,” and “The Wife’s Lament” were written in Old English. The only copies survive in *The Exeter Book*—the largest collection of Old English poems. Sometime between 1050 and 1070, the book was donated to the Exeter Cathedral library. It was during this time that Old English was being replaced by Middle English. Soon, few people read or spoke Old English, and thus the book was neglected and remained so for centuries. The binding broke, and several pages were lost or badly damaged. Many poems vanished forever. Today, the book remains housed in Exeter Cathedral.

Think Critically

Before you read the poems, use critical thinking to deepen your understanding.

1. These poems are about loss and loneliness. When have you felt lost or lonely? Use your experience to connect to the poems while reading.
2. Use what you’ve read and your prior knowledge to make a chart comparing and contrasting heroic epics with elegiac verse.
3. You’ve probably read laments by other poets. How do you think the speaker in “The Wife’s Lament” will approach her misfortunes?

The Seafarer

Author Unknown

Translated by Burton Raffel

This tale is true, and mine. It tells
How the sea took me, swept me back
And forth in sorrow and fear and pain,
Showed me suffering in a hundred ships,
5 In a thousand ports, and in me. It tells
Of smashing surf when I sweated in the cold
Of an anxious watch, perched in the bow
As it dashed under the cliffs. My feet were cast
In icy bands, bound with frost,
10 With frozen chains, and hardship groaned
Around my heart. Hunger tore
At my sea-weary soul. No man sheltered
On the quiet fairness of earth can feel
How wretched I was, drifting through winter



15 On an ice-cold sea, whirled in sorrow,
 Alone in a world blown clear of love,
 Hung with icicles. The hailstorms flew.
 The only sound was the roaring sea,
 The freezing waves. The song of the swan
 20 Might serve for pleasure, the cry of the sea-fowl,
 The death-noise of birds instead of laughter,
 The mewling of gulls instead of mead.¹
 Storms beat on the rocky cliffs and were echoed
 By icy-feathered **terns** and the eagle's screams;
 25 No kinsman could offer comfort there,
 To a soul left drowning in **desolation**.
 And who could believe, knowing but
 The passion of cities, swelled proud with wine
 And no taste of misfortune, how often, how wearily,
 30 I put myself back on the paths of the sea.
 Night would blacken; it would snow from the north;
 Frost bound the earth and hail would fall,
 The coldest seeds. And how my heart
 Would begin to beat, knowing once more
 35 The salt waves tossing and the towering sea!
 The time for journeys would come and my soul
 Called me eagerly out, sent me over
 The horizon, seeking foreigners' homes.
 But there isn't a man on earth so proud,
 40 So born to greatness, so bold with his youth,
 Grown so brave, or so graced by God,
 That he feels no fear as the sails unfurl,
 Wondering what Fate has willed and will do.
 No harps ring in his heart, no rewards,
 45 No passion for women, no worldly pleasures,
 Nothing, only the ocean's heave;
 But longing wraps itself around him.
 Orchards blossom, the towns bloom,
 Fields grow lovely as the world springs fresh,
 50 And all these admonish that willing mind
 Leaping to journeys, always set

terns: seabirds related to and resembling gulls but smaller and with a forked tail

desolation: loneliness and sorrow

1 **mead:** fermented, alcoholic drink made from honey

90 Kept spinning by **toil**. All glory is tarnished.
 The world's honor ages and shrinks,
 Bent like the men who mold it. Their faces
Blanch as time advances, their beards
 Wither and they mourn the memory of friends.

95 The sons of princes, sown in the dust.
 The soul stripped of its flesh knows nothing
 Of sweetness or sour, feels no pain,
 Bends neither its hand nor its brain. A brother
 Opens his palms and pours down gold

100 On his kinsman's grave, strewing his coffin
 With treasures intended for Heaven, but nothing
 Golden shakes the wrath of God
 For a soul overflowing with sin, and nothing
 Hidden on earth rises to Heaven.

105 We all fear God. He turns the earth,
 He set it swinging firmly in space,
 Gave life to the world and light to the sky.
 Death leaps at the fools who forget their God.
 He who lives humbly has angels from Heaven

110 To carry him courage and strength and belief.
 A man must conquer pride, not kill it,
 Be firm with his fellows, **chaste** for himself,
 Treat all the world as the world deserves,
 With love or with hate but never with harm,

115 Though an enemy seek to scorch him in hell,
 Or set the flames of a funeral pyre ²
 Under his lord. Fate is stronger
 And God mightier than any man's mind.
 Our thoughts should turn to where our home is,

120 Consider the ways of coming there,
 Then strive for sure permission for us
 To rise to that eternal joy,
 That life born in the love of God
 And the hope of Heaven. Praise the Holy

125 Grace of Him who honored us,
 Eternal, unchanging creator of earth. Amen.

toil: *hard and continuous work*

blanch: *to become pale*

chaste: *pure or right in action*

2 **funeral pyre:** structure made of wood that is used to burn a body as part of a funeral rite

.....

THE *Wanderer*

Author Unknown
Translated by Burton Raffel

This lonely traveler longs for grace,
For the mercy of God; grief hangs on
His heart and follows the frost-cold foam
He cuts in the sea, sailing endlessly,
5 Aimlessly, in exile. Fate has opened
A single port: memory. He sees
His kinsmen slaughtered again, and cries:
 "I've drunk too many lonely dawns,
 Grey with mourning. Once there were men
10 To whom my heart could hurry, hot
 With open longing. They're long since dead.
My heart has closed on itself, quietly
Learning that silence is noble and sorrow
Nothing that speech can cure. Sadness
15 Has never driven sadness off;
Fate blows hardest on a bleeding heart.
So those who thirst for glory smother
Secret weakness and longing, neither
Weep nor sigh nor listen to the sickness
20 In their souls. So I, lost and homeless,
Forced to flee the darkness that fell
On the earth and my lord.
 Leaving everything,
Weary with winter I wandered out
25 On the frozen waves, hoping to find
A place, a people, a lord to replace
My lost ones. No one knew me, now,
No one offered comfort, allowed



65 But late. He who has it is patient;
 He cannot be hasty to hate or speak,
 He must be bold and yet not blind,
 Nor ever too **craven**, **complacent**, or **covetous**,
 Nor ready to gloat before he wins glory.
 70 The man's a fool who flings his boasts
 Hotly to the heavens heeding his spleen
 And not the better boldness of knowledge.
 What knowing man knows not the ghostly,
 Waste-like end of worldly wealth:
 75 See, already the wreckage is there,
 The wind-swept walls stand far and wide,
 The storm-beaten blocks besmeared with frost,
 The mead-halls crumbled, the monarchs thrown down
 And stripped of their pleasures. The proudest of warriors
 80 Now lie by the wall: some of them war
 Destroyed; some the monstrous sea-bird
 Bore over the ocean; to some the old wolf
 Dealt out death; and for some dejected
 Followers fashioned an earth-cave coffin.
 85 Thus the Maker of men lays waste
 This earth, crushing our callow mirth?
 And the work of old giants stands withered and still."

He who these ruins rightly sees,
 And deeply considers this dark twisted life,
 90 Who sagely remembers the endless slaughters
 Of a bloody past, is bound to proclaim:
 "Where is the war-steed? Where is the warrior?
 Where is his war-lord?
 Where now the feasting-places? Where now the mead-hall
 pleasures?
 95 Alas, bright cup! Alas, brave knight!
 Alas, you glorious princes! All gone,
 Lost in the night, as you never had lived.
 And all that survives you a **serpentine** wall,
 Wondrously high, worked in strange ways.

craven: easily
 defeated; cowardly

complacent: eager to
 please

covetous: excessively
 eager to obtain and
 possess

serpentine:
 resembling a serpent;
 snakelike

2 **callow mirth:** immature amusement or gaiety

100 Mighty spears have slain these men,
Greedy weapons have framed their fate.
These rocky slopes are beaten by storms,
This earth pinned down by driving snow,
By the horror of winter, smothering warmth
105 In the shadows of night. And the north angrily
Hurls its hailstorms at our helpless heads.
Everything earthly is evilly born,
Firmly clutched by a **fickle** Fate.
Fortune vanishes, friendship vanishes,
110 Man is fleeting, woman is fleeting,
And all this earth rolls into emptiness."

fickle: not constant
or loyal in affections

So says the sage in his heart, sitting alone with His
thought.
It's good to guard your faith, nor let your grief come forth
Until it cannot call for help, nor help but heed
115 The path you've placed before it. It's good to find your grace
In God, the heavenly rock where rests our every hope.





The Wife's Lament

Author Unknown
Translated by Ann Stanford

I make this song about me full sadly
my own wayfaring.² I a woman tell
what griefs I had since I grew up
new or old never more than now.
5 Ever I know the dark of my exile.

First my lord³ went out away from his people
over the wave-**tumult**. I grieved each dawn
wondered where my lord my first on earth might be.
Then I went forth a friendless exile
10 to seek service in my sorrow's need.
My man's kinsmen began to plot
by darkened thought to divide us two
so we most widely in the world's kingdom

lived wretchedly and I suffered longing.
15 My lord commanded me to move my dwelling here.
I had few loved ones in this land
or faithful friends. For this my heart grieves:
that I should find the man well matched to me
hard of fortune mournful of mind

tumult: disorder
and confusion

1 **wayfaring:** traveling, especially on foot

2 **my lord:** The speaker of the poem calls her husband "my lord."

20 hiding his mood thinking of murder.

Blithe was our bearing often we vowed
that but death alone would part us two
naught else. But this is turned round
now . . . as if it never were

blithe: *happy*

25 our friendship. I must far and near
bear the anger of my beloved.
The man sent me out to live in the woods
under an oak tree in this den in the earth.
Ancient this earth hall. I am all longing.
30 The valleys are dark the hills high
the yard overgrown bitter with briars
a joyless dwelling. Full oft the lack of my lord
seizes me cruelly here. Friends there are on earth
living beloved lying in bed
35 while I at dawn am walking alone
under the oak tree through these earth halls.
There I may sit the summerlong day
there I can weep over my exile
my many hardships. Hence I may not rest
40 from this care of heart which belongs to me ever
nor all this longing that has caught me in this life.

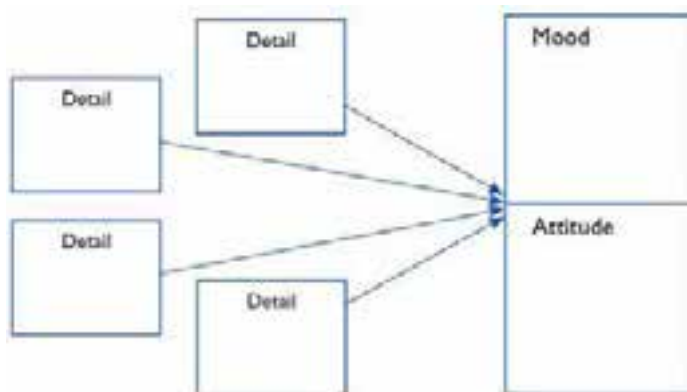
May that young man be sad-minded always
hard his heart's thought while he must wear
a blithe bearing with care in the breast
45 a crowd of sorrows. May on himself depend
all his world's joy. Be he outlawed far
in a strange folk-land— that my beloved sits
under a rocky cliff rimed with frost
a lord dreary in spirit drenched with water
50 in a ruined hall. My lord endures
much care of mind. He remembers too often
a happier dwelling. Woe be to them
that for a loved one must wait in longing.

.....

After You Read “The Seafarer,” “The Wanderer,” and “The Wife’s Lament”

Literary Lens: Descriptive Details

How did the descriptive details in the poems set the mood and help you understand them? Create an organizer like the one below. Fill in descriptive details from “The Wanderer.” Based on these details, what mood do the details create? What do you think the poet’s attitude is?



Explore Context: Women’s Roles

How were women viewed in Anglo-Saxon society? Write a paragraph explaining the roles of women and how they were perceived by men. Then write a paragraph comparing the roles of Anglo-Saxon women with the roles of modern women.

Apply and Create: Elegiac Poem

Like Anglo-Saxons long ago, people today sometimes feel isolation and loss. Think of a time you felt lonely or isolated. Write a poem about your situation. Use descriptive details to set a mood and to help the reader visualize the scene and understand your feelings and attitudes. Then exchange poems with someone of the opposite gender. Compare your approaches to the topic.

Read Critically

Reread the following excerpt from “The Seafarer” and answer the questions that follow.

65 Thus the joys of God
 Are fervent with life, where life itself
 Fades quickly into the earth. The wealth



Of the world neither reaches to Heaven nor remains.
No man has ever faced the dawn
70 Certain which of Fate's three threats
Would fall: illness, or age, or an enemy's
Sword, snatching the life from his soul.
The praise the living pour on the dead
Flowers from reputation: plant
75 An earthly life of profit reaped
Even from hatred and rancor, of bravery
Flung in the devil's face, and death
Can only bring you earthly praise
And a song to celebrate a place
80 With the angels, life eternally blessed
In the hosts of Heaven.

The days are gone
When the kingdoms of earth flourished in glory;
Now there are no rulers, no emperors,
85 No givers of gold, as once there were,
When wonderful things were worked among them
And they lived in lordly magnificence.
Those powers have vanished, those pleasures are dead.
The weakest survives and the world continues,
90 Kept spinning by toil. All glory is tarnished.
The world's honor ages and shrinks,
Bent like the men who mold it. Their faces
Blanch as time advances, their beards
Wither and they mourn the memory of friends.
95 The sons of princes, sown in the dust.
The soul stripped of its flesh knows nothing
Of sweetness or sour, feels no pain,
Bends neither its hand nor its brain. A brother
Opens his palms and pours down gold
100 On his kinsman's grave, strewing his coffin
With treasures intended for Heaven, but nothing
Golden shakes the wrath of God
For a soul overflowing with sin, and nothing
Hidden on earth rises to Heaven.



1. Compare what you read in lines 69–72 to what you have read about Anglo-Saxons. How do the lines in this poem reflect the hardships of Anglo-Saxon life?
2. Analyze the poet's feelings about earthly goods. What do these feelings tell you about the poet?
3. What are the poet's attitudes toward humankind and toward God?



Connecting Eras: Compare and Contrast



In this unit, you've read about the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain, their establishment of new cultures and traditions, and the spread of Christianity. You know that the poetry and art of the Anglo-Saxons celebrated their beliefs and their warrior society, bringing to light the hardships they faced and the changes to their culture. One of the biggest changes was the conversion of Anglo-Saxon pagans to Christianity.

Having read excerpts from the most famous poem of the era, *Beowulf*, you should have a good understanding of the heroic ideals of that time. This epic poem barely survived, and for centuries it was studied mainly by scholars who focused on the language, history, and poetic conventions, rather than the story and beauty of the poem. Although it was finally translated into English, the poem didn't reach a wide audience until 1936 when J. R. R. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, gave a lecture—later written as an essay—on the power of the poetry. Since then, *Beowulf* has become not only a poem about a hero of ancient times but a part of our culture, making its way into books, movies, and even video games.

It may seem hard to believe that a story set thousands of years ago in foreign lands is still mainstream. Yet, if you think about *Beowulf's* characters and the themes, such as the struggle between good and evil, it becomes clear just how universal the story is. Throughout the ages, literary heroes—even unlikely ones—have risen to the occasion: Think Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings* or Batman in any of the *Batman* comics. These tales, and the films that are based on them, continue to enthrall us.

In 2007, a film adaptation of *Beowulf* was directed by Robert Zemeckis, starring Angelina Jolie, Anthony Hopkins, and John Malkovich. Screenwriters Neil Gaiman and Roger Avary created a telling based in the past but with a modern sensibility. Read the following review by Paul Vallely, and think about how he compares and contrasts the literary epic to the movie and to other contemporary adaptations.



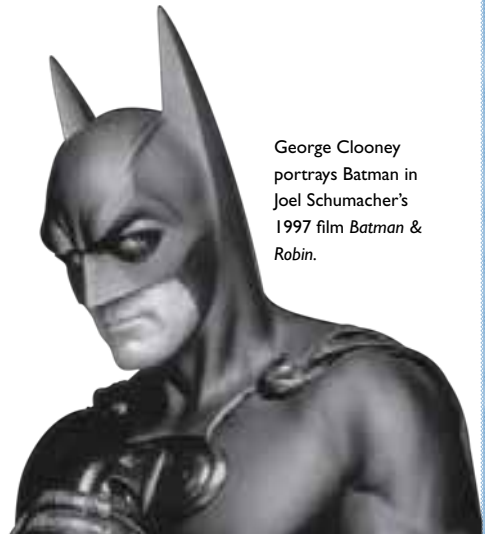
Ray Winstone plays Beowulf in Robert Zemeckis's 2007 movie adaptation of *Beowulf*.



Viggo Mortensen portrays Aragorn Strider in Peter Jackson's adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.



Christian Bale plays the caped crusader in Christopher Nolan's films *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*.



George Clooney portrays Batman in Joel Schumacher's 1997 film *Batman & Robin*.

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THE INDEPENDENT

Saturday, 10 November 2007
Beowulf: A hero for our times
Paul Vallely

BEOWULF IS BIG BOX-OFFICE



Discover the truth behind the legend.





Anthony Hopkins, Angelina Jolie, and Ray Winstone, stars of the 2007 film adaptation of *Beowulf*, pose for a photograph at the movie's premiere.

Being Anglo-Saxon we revere the past, but only so far as it fits with our present. Take *Beowulf*, the oldest surviving piece of literature in the English language, which is about to re-emerge into the national consciousness with the release of Robert Zemeckis's film version starring Ray Winstone, Anthony Hopkins, John Malkovich and the preternaturally proportioned Angelina Jolie

who plays—the scholars take a deep breath—the monstrous mother of that incarnation of evil, the half-demon Grendel.

Beowulf is burdened with superlatives. It is the oldest narrative poem in English. It is the major surviving work of Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry. It is routinely described as “England’s national epic,” despite the fact that it is about the adventures of a Swede in Denmark.

Epic in more senses than one, it survives only in a single charred manuscript of some 3,000 lines which can be read aloud in three or four hours, depending upon how dramatic is the actor’s declaration. But though it was set to parchment around AD 1010—and may well have had an existence in oral form up to 300 years earlier—our acquaintance with the work is comparatively recent. It was transcribed and published in a modern language, Danish, only as late as 1815. The first English manuscript dates from 1837. [or 1833, according to some sources.—ed]

In those early days it was the province only of scholars who preoccupied themselves with questions such as whether the manuscript was the product of two different scribes transcribing an earlier original. Why, they wondered with incisive precision, did the spellings mix the West Saxon and Anglian dialects of Old English? They engaged in close study of its measure and meter, its heavy use of poetic “kennings”—evocative euphemisms describing the sea as the “whale-road” and so forth—and its preoccupation with Anglo-Saxon alliteration. They were denizens of dusty diphthongs.



.....

Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum þeodcýninga þrym gefrunon hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.

Or as they construed the opening lines:

Lo! Of the Spear-Danes, in days of yore, we have heard; of the glory of the people's kings, how the noble ones did deeds of valor.

It was the romance of obscurity with its Scyldings, Scylfings and Wulfings, giving fodder for 19th-century archaeologists to argue that a mound in Uppsala—in which a powerful leader was buried around AD575—might be the grave of Beowulf himself.

But it was not until the translation by J. R. R. Tolkien, who was later to go on to create his own elvish epic in *The Lord of the Rings*, that the sheer power of the story began to reach a wider audience. His seminal 1936 essay “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*” is widely credited as the turning point in modern times when the poetry overpowered the pedantry in a work primarily regarded until then as of purely linguistic interest.

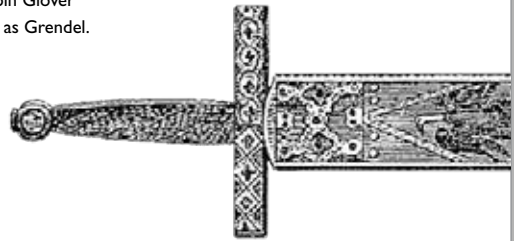
The poem tells the story of Beowulf, nephew of the king of the Geats, a tribe in the south of Sweden, who journeys over the sea to Heorot, the land of the Danes, to repay a debt of honor incurred by his uncle to the Danish king, Hrothgar. He has come to



Beowulf is played by Ray Winstone, and Brendan Gleeson stars as Wiglaf in the *Beowulf* film adaptation.



Crispin Glover
stars as Grendel.



release the people from the 12-year tyranny of a creature named Grendel who, night by night, has been attacking Hrothgar's noblemen and courtiers, killing and eating them.

In a great battle Beowulf slays Grendel, whose charmed skin cannot be pierced by any blade, by wrenching his arm and shoulder from his body. Grendel flees to his home in the marshes to die. The next night Grendel's mother appears to avenge her son and devours Hrothgar's favorite courtier. Beowulf then tracks her back to her underwater lair and, despite his armor, swims down to kill her in a ferocious battle. He then cuts off Grendel's head and takes it back to the king.



Angelina Jolie plays Grendel's mother.

Laden with wealth of honors he returns home to his uncle's court where he becomes king and rules, graciously and fairly, for 50 years. But then a dragon, whose hoard has been robbed of ancient treasure, devastates the countryside. Beowulf attacks the fearsome beast and kills it, cutting the wyrm in two. But in doing so he sustains a fatal wound from the dragon's poisonous horn. His people burn his body on a great cliff-top pyre and bury him, along with the dragon's treasure. So ends the story of the man who, of all the kings of the Earth, was most eager for fame.

.....

The story continues to grip. Michael Crichton's 1976 novel, *Eaters of the Dead*, was based on *Beowulf*. So was an episode of *Star Trek: Voyager*. Then there were cheap action movies like the one starring Christopher Lambert, of *Mortal Kombat* fame, which featured less than lapidary lines like: "The only thing that keeps me from becoming evil is fighting evil." In 1999 there was a new translation, brooding and blood-black, by the poet Seamus Heaney. And a couple of years back *Beowulf* was featured in *Spartan: Total Warrior*, a PS2 game.

What has been revealing is the subtext each new incarnation has assumed. *Beowulf* has long been characterized by such enculturation. The original written work did more than record the values of a pre-literate society. It critiqued them. The poet took the early pagan elements and tempered them in the crucible of his own imagination. He was a Christian who cast Grendel and his mother in a biblical context as the cursed kin of the archetypal first murderer Cain. And though he appeared to take at face value the codes of honor and kinship, which sought revenge or *weregild*, a blood-money reparation, he depicted war as a business which was steeped in the gory as much as in the glory that *Beowulf* seeks.

One of the most interesting interpretations has come from John Grigsby's *Beowulf & Grendel: The Truth Behind England's Oldest Legend*. Grigsby sees the work as a poetic account of forceful suppression of an older fertility cult, with human sacrifice central to its religion, in 5th-century England, and its replacement by an incoming warrior cult. Grendel stands for a vibrant English pagan religion as rich and complex as that of the early Celts. Grendel's mother represents the outgoing fertility goddess in whose sacred Danish lakes, Tacitus recorded, human victims were drowned.

It is their bodies, Grigsby suggests, that have been found by modern archaeologists preserved in peat bogs in Denmark—naked, strangled or stabbed and whose stomach contents show had eaten a meal of barley contaminated by a hallucinogenic fungus just before they died. It was this fertility goddess—now played, not perhaps so bizarrely, by Jolie—that *Beowulf* swam down to in his full armor to slay.

The two scriptwriters in the latest version Neil Gaiman and Roger Avary have their roots in science fiction and comedy. "Our theory," said Gaiman, "was that at any point where the poem tells you what happened, it's telling the truth. But at any point when somebody in the poem goes offstage, and then comes back on and says, 'While I was in the other room, this is what happened. . . .' they could be lying."

“So that when Beowulf disappears for eight days on the trail of Grendel’s mother and returns looking rather exhausted with Grendel’s head,” said Avary, “since he had already killed Grendel, why did he not return with the mother’s head?”

“We just started going, ‘This is very unreliable,’ ” said Gaiman. “It’s the concept of the unreliable narrator.”

“You have to ask yourself a lot of questions,” his partner continued. “For example, Grendel is described as half-man, half-demon. The mother is described as a water demon. So who’s Grendel’s father? Grendel’s always dragging men off alive to the cave? Why is he never attacking Hrothgar [the Danish king]? Perhaps Hrothgar is Grendel’s father.”



Ray Winstone stars as Beowulf and Anthony Hopkins as Hrothgar.

Thus the great hero is remade. Not as the leader of a warrior cult out to replace an ancient religion of fertility. Not as a Christian corrective to a prehistoric paganism. But as a kind of lying Hollywood vigilante out for revenge. Thus the world progresses. Not so much with reverence for the past, but to see how we can make it fit our present.



Critical Thinking: Compare and Contrast

Ask Yourself

1. How does the interest of early scholars in *Beowulf* compare with Tolkien's interest in it?
2. How does John Grigsby view the history of Grendel and Grendel's mother? How is his view different from the original work?
3. In 1999, Seamus Heaney published a translation of *Beowulf*. Read the following excerpt from *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*. How does it compare to lines 15–59 of the translation by Burton Raffel that you have read (pages 24–26)?

15 So times were pleasant for the people there
 until finally one, a fiend out of hell,
 began to work his evil in the world.
 Grendel was the name of this grim demon
 haunting the marshes, marauding round the heath
20 and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time
 in misery among the banished monsters,
 Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed
 and condemned as outcasts. For the killing of Abel
 the Eternal Lord had exacted a price:
25 Cain got no good from committing that murder
 because the Almighty made him anathema
 and out of the curse of his exile sprang
 ogres and elves and evil phantoms
 and the giants too who strove with God
30 time and again until He gave them their reward.
 So, after nightfall, Grendel set out
 for the lofty house, to see how the Ring-Danes
 were settling into it after their drink,
 and there he came upon them, a company of the best
35 asleep from their feasting, insensible to pain

and human sorrow. Suddenly then
the God-cursed brute was creating havoc:
greedy and grim, he grabbed thirty men
from their resting places and rushed to his lair,
40 flushed up and inflamed from the raid,
blundering back with the butchered corpses.

Then as dawn brightened and the day broke,
Grendel's powers of destruction were plain:
their wassail was over, they wept to heaven
45 and mourned under morning. Their mighty prince,
the storied leader, sat stricken and helpless,
humiliated by the loss of his guard,
bewildered and stunned, staring aghast
at the demon's trail, in deep distress.

50 He was numb with grief, but got no respite
for one night later merciless Grendel
struck again with more gruesome murders.
Malignant by nature, he never showed remorse.
It was easy then to meet with a man
55 shifting himself to a safer distance
to bed in the bothies, for who could be blind
to the evidence of his eyes, the obviousness
of the hall-watcher's hate? Whoever escaped
kept a weather-eye open and moved away.

4. According to Vallely, how did the screenwriters change the original epic *Beowulf* story when adapting it for the 2007 movie?
5. Watch the movie *Beowulf*. Select a scene and compare and contrast it with the section in the original epic. Discuss your findings with a partner or group.

Examine the Writing

As you read on page 22, comparing and contrasting ideas, time periods, beliefs, characters, and themes can help you understand creative works. You've discovered that while *Beowulf's* ancient voice may seem irrelevant, its themes are perhaps more relevant than ever. Heroes striving for right and justice will never die in literature—or in any of the art forms. We need these heroes and what they represent to lift us up and give us hope in any age.

Choose one of the following topics related to heroes and villains or good versus evil. Address the topic by writing an essay or giving an oral presentation.

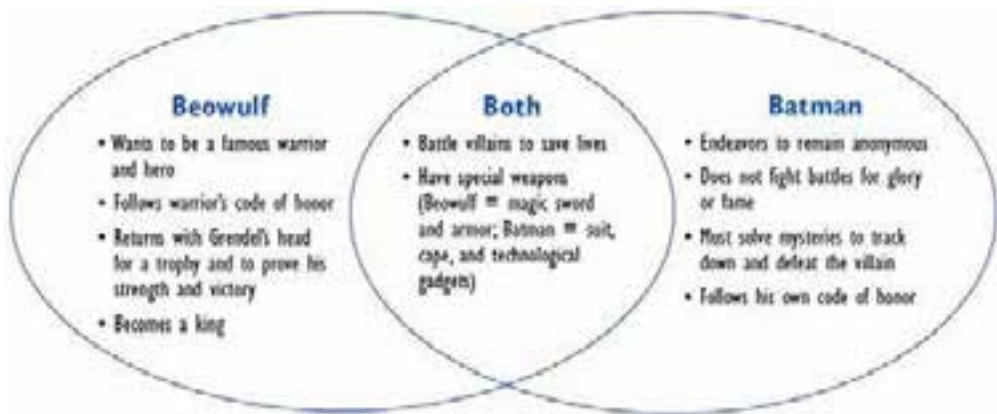
1. Research other adaptations of *Beowulf*, including those mentioned in the review. Choose one and compare it with the original poem. Or compare two of the modern adaptations. Then explain which you prefer, and why.
2. Choose a hero from a movie or book you've recently read. Compare and contrast that hero to Beowulf. Think about the villains each hero faces; the deeds each performs; and the people, values, or ideals each fights to protect.
3. Choose a villain from a book that was written within the last ten years. Compare and contrast that villain to Grendel. What is each villain out to get? How does he or she go about getting it? Who stands in the way? Who lends a hand? Which villain do you think best represents true villainy, and why?



4. Consider the hero in *Beowulf*. What are his values and his challenges? Compare them with the challenges and values of any individual today. Then answer this question in depth: Can Beowulf's heroism help me understand how to be a hero?

Organize Your Thoughts

You can use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast people, times, or ideas. The example below compares the heroes Beowulf and Batman. Create a Venn diagram of your own comparing Beowulf to another famous literary or film hero. Expand your thinking to come up with similarities and differences that transcend beyond the obvious.



Get Active

By now you should have a clear idea of what constitutes a hero and what makes an exciting epic plot. With a partner, list the important character and plot elements in the *Beowulf* excerpts you have read. Then imagine that you have been transported into the *Beowulf* legend—one of you portraying a person of that time and the other portraying yourself. The person of that time, seeing that the other possesses “magical” gadgets such as an MP3 player and a cell phone, pleads for heroic efforts in vanquishing an evil dragon. Write a play, humorous or dramatic, based on this imagined situation. Your play, although short, should contain an exposition, a climax, and some kind of resolution. It should also exhibit characteristics of an epic. Perform your play for the class.

