

# "Beowulf"

Seamus Heaney

## ***Introduction to Beowulf***

3182 lines in length, *Beowulf* is the longest surviving Old English poem. It survives in a single manuscript, thought to date from the turn of the eleventh century, though the composition of the poem is usually placed in the eighth or early ninth centuries, perhaps in an Anglian region. The action is set in Scandinavia, and the poem is chiefly concerned with the Geats (inhabitants of Southern Sweden), Danes and Swedes. It falls into two main sections, IIs. 1-2199, which describe young Beowulf's defeat of two monsters, Grendel and his mother, at the request of King Hrothgar, and IIs. 2200-3182, in which an aged Beowulf, now king, defeats a fire-breathing dragon but is mortally wounded and dies.

This coursepack includes three short excerpts from the poem: Beowulf's fight with Grendel (Ii. 702b-897), the so-called 'Lament of the Last Survivor' (2247-2266), and the poet's description of Beowulf's funeral (3156-3182). The former consists of the approach of Grendel to Heorot, and his hand-to-hand combat with Beowulf. The second contains the elegaic reflections of a warrior whom the poet imagines to be the sole remnant of a great tribe that once held the treasure now guarded by the dragon which threatens Beowulf's people. The poet powerfully conveys his nostalgia for dead companions and sense that treasure without an owner is worthless. The account of Beowulf's funeral describes a pagan cremation and records the Geats' epitaph for their dead leader.

## **The Action of Beowulf**

*Beowulf* opens with a description of the origin and history of the Scylding dynasty, tracing its descent down to Hrothgar, who builds Heorot, a great hall. But the sounds of rejoicing anger a monster, Grendel, and one night he kills thirty sleeping men. These attacks recur for twelve years, during which no man can safely sleep in the hall. Beowulf, nephew of Hygelac, king of the Geats, resolves to come to the aid of Hrothgar. He sails with fourteen warriors and, despite initial suspicion, is welcomed to Heorot. Hrothgar accepts Beowulf's offer to cleanse Heorot. The Danes feast with the visiting Geats and Beowulf's bravery is questioned by a Danish kinsmen, Unferth. Beowulf promises to conquer or die.

That night, the Danes and Beowulf's men fall asleep. Beowulf alone is vigilant. Grendel arrives at Heorot, devours a Danish warrior, and seizes Beowulf. The two wrestle bitterly. Beowulf eventually tears off Grendel's arm and Grendel retreats, mortally wounded. In the morning, many of the warriors follow the trail of Grendel's blood to a mere. A *scop* recites a lay about Sigemund and Heremod. Hrothgar praises Beowulf's victory. At a celebratory feast, Beowulf receives generous rewards and a *scop* narrates a lay.

The night of the feast, Grendel's mother enters the hall, intent on revenge. She carries off Æschere, a favorite thane of Hrothgar. Beowulf is again summoned. With a company of Danes and Geats, Beowulf immediately heads to the mere. He plunges into the water, reaches the bottom and is dragged by Grendel's mother to her cavern, where she has the

upper-hand in the combat. Beowulf suddenly discovers a curious and very large sword and slays his foe. He cuts off Grendel's head and swims to the surface, carrying also the hilt of the sword. Back at Heorot, Beowulf recounts his experiences, to which Hrothgar responds with moralising advice. In the morning, Beowulf sails home, where he again gives an account of events. He shares the spoils with his uncle and lives in Geatland with great honour.

Many years later, after Beowulf has ruled the Geats for fifty years, the hoard of a dragon is robbed by a fugitive slave and the dragon responds by laying waste to surrounding lands. Beowulf resolves to neutralise the threat alone. Before departing, he reviews his life. The dragon quickly overwhelms Beowulf with flame, and all his companions flee with the exception of Wiglaf, who is mindful of his obligations of loyalty and gratitude. Together they kill the dragon, but Beowulf has received a mortal wound. The dying hero tells Wiglaf to bring some of the treasure out of the hoard and requests that a mound be built for him on the headland. Wiglaf sends news home of Beowulf's death and the messenger foretells the disaster that will ensue. The Geat warriors return to the hoard, push the dragon's body into the sea and bear the king's body to the headland. A pyre is built on the headland, and the dragon's hoard is buried under a funeral mound. Twelve warriors ride around the mound, praising Beowulf's deeds and virtues.

## The *Beowulf* Manuscript

The only copy of *Beowulf* to survive is found in the manuscript with the modern shelf-mark London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv. It is known to critics as 'the *Beowulf* manuscript' or 'the Nowell codex'. In its modern form, the volume consists of several separate medieval manuscripts, which were very likely only bound together in the eighteenth century. The manuscript was damaged in the Cotton fire of 1731, which makes its structure difficult to discern. However, it is likely that the following texts comprised a single volume:

A fragment of a Life of St Christopher  
*The Marvels of the East*  
*Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*  
*Beowulf*  
*Judith*

All these texts are in Anglo-Saxon. The volume was the work of two scribes, who changed over halfway through *Beowulf*. It is difficult to discern the principles by which the codex was arranged, which is basically, to quote Sisam, 'a collection in verse and prose of marvellous stories' (see Orchard 1995). It is thought the manuscript was produced around the turn of the eleventh century.

In recent years, two studies of the manuscript have reached controversial conclusions. Kiernan 1996 argues that the *Beowulf* portion of the Nowell Codex was originally a separate manuscript and that the second scribe was the author of the poem, with his authorial corrections visible on fol. 179. Kiernan infers that *Beowulf* was composed during the reign of Cnut. More recently, Lapidge 2000 argued that the errors made by both scribes in copying certain letters suggest that the poem was at one stage written in a type of script not used after c. 750. The poem therefore was composed early in the Anglo-Saxon period. However, neither of these theories have achieved a consensus of support and both should be cited with caution.