GRENDEL ATTACKS THE DANES

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
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
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:
So Hrothgar's men lived happy in his hall
Till the monster stirred, that demon, that fiend,
Grendel, who haunted the moors, the wild
Marshes, and made his home in a hell
Not hell but earth. He was spawned® in that slime,
Conceived by a pair of those monsters born
Of Cain,® murderous creatures banished
By God, punished forever for the crime
Of Abel's death. The Almighty drove
Those demons out, and their exile was bitter,
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.

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
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
Unknowning in their beds and ran out with their bodies,
The blood dripping behind him, back
To his lair, delighted with his night's slaughter.
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
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
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
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,
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
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
No truce, accepting no settlement, no price

Conflict: What does the conflict between the Danes and Grendel symbolize?

Identify Sequence: By the time Hrothgar's grief is told and sung, what events have occurred in the poem? List them in order.

Vocabulary:

lament (la ment') n. an expression of sorrow; song or literary composition that mourns a loss or death

forged (førjd) adj. formed or shaped, often with blows or pressure after heating

BEOWULF 25
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.

So mankind's enemy continued his crimes,
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.

THE COMING OF BEOWULF

85 So the living sorrow of Healfdane's son
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.

90 In his far-off home Beowulf, Higlac's
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,

95 Proclaiming that he'd go to that famous king,
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
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 prow

105 Straight to that distant Danish shore.
Then they sailed, set their ship
Out on the waves, under the cliffs.
Ready for what came they wound through the currents,
The seas beating at the sand, and were borne

110 In the lap of their shining ship, lined
With gleaming armor, going safely
In that oak-hard boat to where their hearts took them.

The Epic Warrior What are your first impressions of Beowulf?
The wind hurried them over the waves,  
The ship foamed through the sea like a bird
Until, in the time they had known it would take,  
Standing in the round-curved prow they could see  
Sparkling hills, high and green,  
Jutting up over the shore, and rejoicing  
In those rock-steep cliffs they quietly ended
Their voyage. Jumping to the ground, the Geats  
Pushed their boat to the sand and tied it  
In place, mail shirts and armor rattling  
As they swiftly moored their ship. And then  
They gave thanks to God for their easy crossing.
High on a wall a Danish watcher  
Patrolling along the cliffs saw  
The travelers crossing to the shore, their shields  
Raised and shining; he came riding down,  
Hrothgar’s lieutenant, spurring his horse,
Needing to know why they’d landed, these men  
In armor. Shaking his heavy spear  
In their faces he spoke:
“Whose soldiers are you,  
You who’ve been carried in your deep-keeled ship  
Across the sea-road to this country of mine?  
Listen! I’ve stood on these cliffs longer  
Than you know, keeping our coast free  
Of pirates, raiders sneaking ashore  
From their ships, seeking our lives and our gold.
None have ever come more openly—  
And yet you’ve offered no password, no sign  
From my prince, no permission from my people for your landing  
Here. Nor have I ever seen,  
Out of all the men on earth, one greater  
Than has come with you; no commoner carries  
Such weapons, unless his appearance, and his beauty,  
Are both lies. You! Tell me your name,  
And your father’s; no spies go further onto Danish  
Soil than you’ve come already. Strangers,
From wherever it was you sailed, tell it,  
And tell it quickly, the quicker the better,  
I say, for us all. Speak, say  
Exactly who you are, and from where, and why.”

Their leader answered him, Beowulf unlocking
Words from deep in his breast:

The Epic Warrior: How do the watchman’s words help characterize Beowulf?
"We are Geats,
Men who follow Higlac. My father
Was a famous soldier, known far and wide
As a leader of men. His name was Edgetho.
His life lasted many winters;
Wise men all over the earth surely
Remember him still. And we have come seeking
Your prince, Healfdane’s son, protector
Of this people, only in friendship: instruct us,
Watchman, help us with your words! Our errand
Is a great one, our business with the glorious king
Of the Danes no secret; there’s nothing dark
Or hidden in our coming. You know (if we’ve heard
The truth, and been told honestly) that your country
Is cursed with some strange, vicious creature
That hunts only at night and that no one
Has seen. It’s said, watchman, that he has slaughtered
Your people, brought terror to the darkness. Perhaps
Hrothgar can hunt, here in my heart,
For some way to drive this devil out—
If anything will ever end the evils
Afflicting your wise and famous lord.
Here he can cool his burning sorrow.
Or else he may see his suffering go on
Forever, for as long as Herot towers
High on your hills."

The mounted officer
Answered him bluntly, the brave watchman:
“A soldier should know the difference between words
And deeds, and keep that knowledge clear
In his brain. I believe your words, I trust in
Your friendship. Go forward, weapons and armor
And all, on into Denmark. I’ll guide you
Myself—and my men will guard your ship,
Keep it safe here on our shores,
Your fresh-tarred boat, watch it well,
Until that curving prow carries
Across the sea to Geatland a chosen
Warrior who bravely does battle with the creature
Haunting our people, who survives that horror
Unhurt, and goes home bearing our love.”

Then they moved on. Their boat lay moored,
Tied tight to its anchor. Glittering at the top
Of their golden helmets wild boar heads gleamed,

Conflict According to Beowulf, what are Hrothgar’s options?

Identify Sequence What happens before Beowulf and his followers leave their ship?
Shining decorations, swinging as they marched,  
Erect like guards, like sentinels, as though ready  
To fight. They marched, Beowulf and his men  
And their guide, until they could see the gables  
Of Herot, covered with hammered gold  
And glowing in the sun—that most famous of all dwellings,  
Towering majestic, its glittering roofs  
Visible far across the land.  
Their guide reined in his horse, pointing  
To that hall, built by Hrothgar for the best  
And bravest of his men; the path was plain,  
They could see their way.

Beowulf arose, with his men  
Around him, ordering a few to remain  
With their weapons, leading the others quickly  
Along under Herot’s steep roof into Hrothgar’s  
Presence. Standing on that prince’s own hearth,  
Helmeted, the silvery metal of his mail shirt  
Gleaming with a smith’s high art, he greeted  
The Danes’ great lord:

“Hail, Hrothgar!  
Higelac is my cousin and my king; the days  
Of my youth have been filled with glory. Now Grendel’s  
Name has echoed in our land: sailors  
Have brought us stories of Herot, the best  
Of all mead-halls, deserted and useless when the moon  
Hangs in skies the sun had lit,  
Light and life fleeing together.  
My people have said, the wisest, most knowing  
And best of them, that my duty was to go to the Danes’  
Great king. They have seen my strength for themselves,  
Have watched me rise from the darkness of war,  
Dripping with my enemies’ blood. I drove  
Five great giants into chains, chased  
All of that race from the earth. I swam  
In the blackness of night, hunting monsters  
Out of the ocean, and killing them one  
By one; death was my errand and the fate  
They had earned. Now Grendel and I are called  
Together, and I’ve come. Grant me, then,

Lord and protector of this noble place,  
A single request! I have come so far;  
Oh shelterer of warriors and your people’s loved friend,  
That this one favor you should not refuse me—
That I, alone and with the help of my men,
May purge all evil from this hall. I have heard,
Too, that the monster’s scorn of men
Is so great that he needs no weapons and fears none.
Nor will I. My lord Higlac
Might think less of me if I let my sword
250 Go where my feet were afraid to, if I hid
Behind some broad linden® shield: my hands
Alone shall fight for me, struggle for life
Against the monster. God must decide
Who will be given to death’s cold grip.
255 Grendel’s plan, I think, will be
What it has been before, to invade this hall
And gorge his belly with our bodies. If he can,
If he can. And I think, if my time will have come,
There’ll be nothing to mourn over, no corpse to prepare
260 For its grave: Grendel will carry our bloody
Flesh to the moors, crunch on our bones
And smear torn scraps of our skin on the walls
Of his den. No, I expect no Danes
Will fret about sewing our shroud, if he wins.
265 And if death does take me, send the hammered
Mail of my armor to Higlac, return
The inheritance I had from Hrethel, and he
From Wayland.° Fate will unwind as it must!”

THE BATTLE WITH GRENDIEL

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.
He moved quickly through the cloudy night,
Up from his swampland, sliding silently
270 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
So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless,
275 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
Floor, snarling and fierce: his eyes

**Vocabulary**

| shroud (shroud) n. a burial cloth |

267–268 inheritance...
Wayland: The inheritance is the armor that Wayland, a blacksmith of
Germanic legend, forged for Hrethel, Beowulf’s grandfather and former
king of the Geats.
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.
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
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
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,
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.
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
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
The monster’s flight, fastened those claws
In his fists till they cracked, clutched Grendel
Closer. The infamous killer fought

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Identify Sequence  What future event in the story do these lines foreshadow?

Conflict:  How does Beowulf differ from other warriors whom Grendel has attacked?

The Epic Warrior  What motivates Beowulf in his time of need?

Vocabulary

infamous  (in’ fas mas) adj. having a bad reputation; notorious
For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,
Desiring nothing but escape; his claws
Had been caught, he was trapped. That trip to Herot
325
Was a miserable journey for the **wretining** monster!
The high hall rang, its roof boards swayed,
And Danes shook with terror. Down
The aisles the battle swept, angry
And wild. Herot trembled, wonderfully
Built to withstand the blows, the struggling
Great bodies beating at its beautiful walls;
Shaped and fastened with iron, inside
And out, artfully worked, the building
Stood firm. Its benches rattled, fell
To the floor, gold-covered boards grating
As Grendel and Beowulf battled across them.
Hrothgar's wise men had fashioned Herot
To stand forever; only fire,
They had planned, could shatter what such skill had put
Together, swallow in hot flames such splendor
Of ivory and iron and wood. Suddenly
The sounds changed, the Danes started
In new terror, cowering in their beds as the terrible
Screams of the Almighty's enemy sang
345
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
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
Band had jumped from their beds, ancestral
355
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

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**Identify Sequence** What events have occurred since Grendel entered Herot on this night?

**The Epic Warrior** What heroic traits do Beowulf's followers show?

**Vocabulary**

*writhing (adj.)* twisting, as in pain

**32 UNIT 1** THE ANGLO-SAXON PERIOD AND THE MIDDLE AGES
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.
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
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,
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,
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.
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,
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
 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
Of men hurrying to behold the monster's
Great staggering tracks. They gaped with no sense
Of sorrow, felt no regret for his suffering,

Conflict Why does Beowulf hang Grendel's arm in the rafters?
Went tracing his bloody footprints, his beaten
And lonely flight, to the edge of the lake
Where he'd dragged his corpse-like 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
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
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
Or between the seas, neither south nor north,
Was there a warrior worthier to rule over men.

THE BATTLE WITH GRENDEL'S MOTHER

The night after Grendel's defeat, his mother, a monster who lives at the bottom of a
cold, dark lake, goes to Herot to avenge her son's death. She kills Hrothgar's closest
friend, retrieves Grendel's arm from the rafters where Beowulf had hung it, and
returns to her lake. When Beowulf hears of this, he pursues her.

He leaped into the lake, would not wait for anyone's
Answer; the heaving water covered him
Over. For hours he sank through the waves;
At last he saw the mud of the bottom.

And all at once the greedy she-wolf
Who'd ruled those waters for half a hundred
Years discovered him, saw that a creature
From above had come to explore the bottom
Of her wet world. She welcomed him in her claws,

Clutched at him savagely but could not harm him,
Tried to work her fingers through the tight
Ring-woven mail on his breast, but tore
And scratched in vain. Then she carried him, armor
And sword and all, to her home; he struggled

To free his weapon, and failed. The fight
Brought other monsters swimming to see

Identify Sequence  Summarize what happens the morning after Beowulf's triumph.

The Epic Warrior  What might Beowulf's journey to the she-wolf's lair symbolize?
Her catch, a host of sea beasts who beat at
His mail shirt, stabbing with tusks and teeth
As they followed along. Then he realized, suddenly,
That she'd brought him into someone's battle-hall,
And there the water's heat could not hurt him,
Nor anything in the lake attack him through
The building's high-arched roof. A brilliant
Light burned all around him, the lake

455 Itself like a fiery flame.

Then he saw
The mighty water witch, and swung his sword,
His ring-marked blade, straight at her head;
The iron sang its fierce song,

450 Sang Beowulf's strength. But her guest
Discovered that no sword could slice her evil
Skin, that Hrunting® could not hurt her, was useless
Now when he needed it. They wrestled, she ripped
And tore and clawed at him, bit holes in his helmet,
And that too failed him; for the first time in years
Of being worn to war it would earn no glory;
It was the last time anyone would wear it. But Beowulf
Longed only for fame, leaped back
Into battle. He tossed his sword aside,

460 Angry; the steel-edged blade lay where
He'd dropped it. If weapons were useless he'd use
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.
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
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

470 To avenge her only son. But he was stretched
On his back, and her stabbing blade was blunted
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,

480 Edgetho's son, and died there, if that shining

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458 Hrunting: a sword that a Danish warrior had lent to Beowulf.

Silver Viking figurine.
Woven metal had not helped—and Holy
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
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
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
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
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
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
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
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,
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
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,
Imagining they saw their lord but not believing
They would ever see him again.

—Then the sword
Melted, blood-soaked, dripping down
Like water, disappearing like ice when the world’s
Eternal Lord loosens invisible
Fetters and unwinds icicles and frost
As only He can, He who rules
Time and seasons, He who is truly
God. The monsters’ hall was full of
Rich treasures, but all that Beowulf took
Was Grendel’s head and the hilt of the giants’
Jeweled sword; the rest of that ring-marked
Blade had dissolved in Grendel’s steaming
Blood, boiling even after his death.
And then the battle’s only survivor
Swam up and away from those silent corpses;
The water was calm and clean, the whole
Huge lake peaceful once the demons who’d lived in it
Were dead.

Then that noble protector of all seamen
Swam to land, rejoicing in the heavy
Burdens he was bringing with him. He
And all his glorious band of Geats
Thanked God that their leader had come back unharmed;
They left the lake together. The Geats
Carried Beowulf’s helmet, and his mail shirt.
Behind them the water slowly thickened
As the monsters’ blood came seeping up.
They walked quickly, happily, across
Roads all of them remembered, left
The lake and the cliffs alongside it, brave men
Staggering under the weight of Grendel’s skull,
Too heavy for fewer than four of them to handle—
Two on each side of the spear jammed through it—
Yet proud of their ugly load and determined
That the Danes, seated in Herot, should see it.
Soon, fourteen Geats arrived

At the hall, bold and warlike, and with Beowulf;
Their lord and leader, they walked on the mead-hall
Green. Then the Geats' brave prince entered
Herot, covered with glory for the daring
Battles he had fought; he sought Hrothgar

To salute him and show Grendel's head.
He carried that terrible trophy by the hair,
Brought it straight to where the Danes sat,
Drinking, the queen among them. It was a weird
And wonderful sight, and the warriors stared.

THE BATTLE WITH THE DRAGON

Beowulf presents Hrothgar with the jeweled hilt of the magic sword. In recognition of Beowulf's heroic services to Denmark, Hrothgar proclaims the Danes and the Geats to be allies. The following morning, Beowulf sets sail for Geatland. After he arrives in his homeland, he meets with his uncle, Higlac, the king, to recount the slayings of the monsters and to convey Hrothgar's pledge of friendship.

Afterwards, in the time when Higlac was dead
And Herdred, his son, who'd ruled the Geats
After his father, had followed him into darkness—
Killed in battle with the Swedes, who smashed
His shield, cut through the soldiers surrounding

Their king—then, when Higd's one son
Was gone, Beowulf ruled in Geatland,
Took the throne he'd refused, once,
And held it long and well. He was old
With years and wisdom, fifty winters

A king, when a dragon awoke from its darkness
And dreams and brought terror to his people. The beast
Had slept in a huge stone tower, with a hidden
Path beneath; a man stumbled on
The entrance, went in, discovered the ancient

Treasure, the pagan jewels and gold
The dragon had been guarding, and dazzled and greedy
Stole a gem-studded cup, and fled.
But now the dragon hid nothing, neither
The theft nor itself; it swept through the darkness,

And all Geatland knew its anger.

Identify Sequence What events precede the dragon's attack on the Geats?

38 UNIT 1 THE ANGLO-SAXON PERIOD AND THE MIDDLE AGES
But the thief had not come to steal; he stole,
And roused the dragon, not from desire
But need. He was someone’s slave, had been beaten
By his masters, had run from all men’s sight,
605 But with no place to hide; then he found the hidden
Path, and used it. And once inside,
Seeing the sleeping beast, staring as it
Yawned and stretched, not wanting to wake it,
Terror-struck, he turned and ran for his life,
610 Taking the jeweled cup.

That tower
Was heaped high with hidden treasure, stored there
Years before by the last survivor
Of a noble race, ancient riches
615 Left in the darkness as the end of a dynasty
Came. Death had taken them, one
By one, and the warrior who watched over all
That remained mourned their fate, expecting,
Soon, the same for himself, knowing
620 The gold and jewels he had guarded so long
Could not bring him pleasure much longer. He brought
The precious cups, the armor and the ancient
Swords, to a stone tower built
Near the sea, below a cliff, a sealed
625 Fortress with no windows, no doors, waves
In front of it, rocks behind. Then he spoke:
“Take these treasures, earth, now that no one
Living can enjoy them. They were yours, in the beginning;
Allow them to return. War and terror
630 Have swept away my people, shut
Their eyes to delight and to living, closed
The door to all gladness. No one is left
To lift these swords, polish these jeweled
Cups: no one leads, no one follows. These hammered
635 Helms, worked with gold, will tarnish
And crack; the hands that should clean and polish them
Are still forever. And these mail shirts, worn
In battle, once, while swords crashed
And blades bit into shields and men;
640 Will rust away like the warriors who owned them.
None of these treasures will travel to distant
Lands, following their lords. The harp’s
Bright song, the hawk crossing through the hall
On its swift wings, the stallion trampling
In the courtyard—all gone, creatures of every
Kind, and their masters, hurled to the grave!"
And so he spoke, sadly, of those
Long dead, and lived from day to day,
Joyless, until, at last, death touched

650 His heart and took him too. And a stalker
In the night, a flaming dragon, found
The treasure unguarded; he whom men fear
Came flying through the darkness, wrapped in fire,
Seeking caves and stone-split ruins.
655 But finding gold. Then it stayed, buried
Itself with heathen silver and jewels
It could neither use nor ever abandon.
So mankind’s enemy, the mighty beast,
Slept in those stone walls for hundreds

660 Of years; a runaway slave roused it,
Stole a jeweled cup and bought
His master’s forgiveness, begged for mercy
And was pardoned when his delighted lord took the present
He bore, turned it in his hands and stared
At the ancient carvings. The cup brought peace
To a slave, pleased his master, but stirred
A dragon’s anger. It turned, hunting
The thief’s tracks, and found them, saw
Where its visitor had come and gone. He’d survived,
670 Had come close enough to touch its scaly
Head and yet lived, as it lifted its cavernous
Jaws, through the grace of almighty God
And a pair of quiet, quick-moving feet.
The dragon followed his steps, anxious
To find the man who had robbed it of silver
And sleep; it circled around and around
The tower, determined to catch him, but could not,
He had run too fast, the wilderness was empty.
The beast went back to its treasure, planning
680 A bloody revenge, and found what was missing,
Saw what thieving hands had stolen.
Then it crouched on the stones, counting off
The hours till the Almighty’s candle went out,
And evening came, and wild with anger

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Conflict: How do the dragon’s motives differ from those of Grendel?

Identify Sequence: What is ironic about this sequence of events?
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It could fly burning across the land, killing
And destroying with its breath. Then the sun was gone,
And its heart was glad: glowing with rage
It left the tower, impatient to repay
Its enemies. The people suffered, everyone
Lived in terror, but when Beowulf had learned
Of their trouble his fate was worse, and came quickly.

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
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
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,
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.
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
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 shield
Could help him, protect him, in the flaming heat
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,
Scorning to lead soldiers against such
An enemy: he saw nothing to fear, thought nothing

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The Epic Warrior  What does this passage reveal about Beowulf as a ruler of his people?
Of the beast's claws, or wings, or flaming
Jaws—he had fought, before, against worse
Odds, had survived, been victorious, in harsher
Battles, beginning in Herot, Hrothgar's
Unlucky hall.

And Beowulf uttered his final boast:

"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."

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
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
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
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
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
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

The Epic Warrior  How would you contrast Beowulf's and Hrothgar's responses to attack?

Conflict  Is Beowulf being foolhardy or noble in deciding to fight alone? Explain.
Huge stone arches and felt the heat
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
His sword and roared out a battle cry,
A call so loud and clear that it reached through
The hoary rock, hung in the dragon's Ear. The beast rose, angry,
Knowing a man had come—and then nothing
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 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' Great prince stood firm, unmoving, prepared
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 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 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 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 Most, that excellent sword. Edgetho's

Identify Sequence What effect does this sequence of events create?

The Epic Warrior What does this passage reveal about Beowulf?
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
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
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,
As a good man must, what kinship should mean.

His name was Wiglaf, he was Wæstan's son
And a good soldier; his family had been Swedish, 2
Once. Watching Beowulf, he could see
How his king was suffering, burning. Remembering
Everything his lord and cousin had given him,

Armor and gold and the great estates
Wæstan's family enjoyed, Wiglaf's
Mind was made up; he raised his yellow
Shield and drew his sword—an ancient
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 Herdered, and found death. And Wiglaf’s father
Had carried the dead man’s armor, and his sword,
To Onela, and the king had said nothing, only

Given him armor and sword and all,
Everything his rebel nephew had owned
And lost when he left this life. And Wexstan
Had kept those shining gifts, held them
For years, waiting for his son to use them,
Wear them as honorably and well as once
His father had done; then Wexstan died
And Wiglaf was his heir, inherited treasures
And weapons and land. 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,
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
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
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,
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
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
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
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:
"Belovèd Beowulf, remember how you boasted,
Once, that nothing in the world would ever
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,
And was angry; shining with surging flames
It came for him, anxious to return his visit.
Waves of fire swept at his shield
And the edge began to burn. His mail shirt
Could not help him, but before his hands dropped
The blazing wood Wiglaf jumped
Behind Beowulf's shield; his own was burned
To ashes. Then the famous old hero, remembering
Days of glory, lifted what was left
Of Nagling, his ancient sword, and swung it
With all his strength, smashed the gray
Blade into the beast's head. But then Nagling
Broke to pieces, as iron always
Had in Beowulf's hands. His arms
Were too strong, the hardest blade could not help him;
The most wonderfully worked. He carried them to war
But fate had decreed that the Geats' great king
Would be no better for any weapon.
Then the monster charged again, vomiting
Fire, wild with pain, rushed out
Fierce and dreadful, its fear forgotten.
Watching for its chance it drove its tusks

Conflict: How might Wiglaf's actions affect the fight?

Conflict: What is ironic about Beowulf's strength?
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.
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
Belching flames began to flicker
And die away. And Beowulf drew
His battle-sharp dagger; the blood-stained old king
Still knew what he was doing. Quickly, he cut
The beast in half, slit it apart.
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
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
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
The blood-stained 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
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,
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
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,
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,
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
So long, if I look at this last of all prizes."

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.
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
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,
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,
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,
Loaded his arms with all they could hold.

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The Epic Warrior Why does Beowulf believe that he has been a good king?

The Epic Warrior Why does the treasure mean so much to Beowulf?
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
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,
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
Over his lord, until the words
Deep in his breast broke through and were heard:
Beholding the treasure he spoke, haltingly:
“For this, this gold, these jewels, I thank
Our Father in Heaven, Ruler of the Earth—
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,
Help them; my time is gone. Have
The brave Geats build me a tomb,
When the funeral flames* have burned me, and build it
Here, at the water’s edge, high
On this spit of land, so sailors can see
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,
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
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.

*funeral flames: It was the custom to cremate the bodies of the dead on a pile of flammable materials known as a funeral pyre.
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,
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
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.
Then Wiglaf turned and angrily told them
What men without courage must hear.
Wæstan’s brave son stared at the traitors,
His heart sorrowful, and said what he had to:
“I say what anyone who speaks the truth
Must say. Your lord gave you gifts,
Swords and the armor you stand in now;
You sat on the mead-hall benches, prince
And followers, and he gave you, with open hands,
Helmets and mail shirts, hunted across
The world for the best of weapons. War
Came and you ran like cowards, dropped
Your swords as soon as the danger was real.
Should Beowulf have boasted of your help, rejoiced
In your loyal strength? With God’s good grace
He helped himself, swung his sword

Alone, won his own revenge.
The help I gave him was nothing, but all
I was able to give; I went to him, knowing
That nothing but Beowulf’s strength could save us,
And my sword was lucky, found some vital
Place and bled the burning flames
Away. 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,
Ended for you and everyone who shares
Your blood: when the brave Geats hear
How you bolted and ran none of your race

Identify Sequence  Beowulf’s followers return to their leader after, not during, the battle. What can you conclude about them?
Will have anything left but their lives. And death
Would be better for them all, and for you, than the kind
Of life you can lead, branded with disgrace!"

THE FUNERAL FIRE

A huge heap of wood was ready,
Hung around with helmets, and battle
Shields, and shining mail shirts, all
As Beowulf had asked. The bearers brought
Their beloved lord, their glorious king,
And weeping laid him high on the wood.
Then the warriors began to kindle that greatest
Of funeral fires; smoke rose
Above the flames, black and thick,
While the wind blew and the fire
Roared they wept, and Beowulf’s body
Crumbled and was gone. The Geats stayed,
Moaning their sorrow, lamenting their lord:
A gnarled old woman, hair wound
Tight and gray on her head, groaned
A song of misery, of infinite sadness
And days of mourning, of fear and sorrow
To come, slaughter and terror and captivity.
And Heaven swallowed the billowing smoke.

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,
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
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
Rode their horses around the tower,
Telling their sorrow, telling stories

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The Epic Warrior Why did the Anglo-Saxons regard cowardice as particularly shameful?

The Epic Warrior What does the hero’s death mean to his people?
Visitors from Overseas. Nikolai Roerich. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia.

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  
Raise up words for their lords, warm  

1130 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,  
Crying that no better king had ever  

1135 Lived, no prince so mild, no man  
So open to his people, so deserving of praise.