

Beowulf Summary

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Old English Epic Beowulf's Summary

Prologue

The story begins with the tale of Shield Sheafson, a brave and powerful king of the Danes. He is remembered for being a great warrior who defeated many enemies and brought peace and honor to his people. When Shield dies, he is given a grand funeral. His body is placed on a ship filled with treasures and sent out to sea. The story then explains how leadership passes down through his family until Hrothgar becomes king. Hrothgar is a wise and strong ruler who leads the Danes to prosperity.

King Hrothgar's Hall

King Hrothgar becomes very powerful and earns the loyalty of the citizens. Hrothgar builds a grand "mead-hall" called Heorot to celebrate his success and show his wealth. (A mead-hall was a large, single-room building in early Germanic societies that served as a community center, place of entertainment, and residence for a lord or king.) In Hrothgar's Heorot, people gather, feast, and enjoy life. However, their happiness is soon disrupted by a terrible monster named Grendel, a demon outcast. Grendel is angered by the loud celebrations in Heorot and the songs praising God. One night, he attacks the hall, killing 30 of Hrothgar's men and dragging their bodies to his lair. For twelve winters, Grendel continues his attacks, leaving Hrothgar in despair. The helpless king seeks advice from his counselors. They suggest building a shrine and offering sacrifices to heathen gods for help.

Beowulf at Heorot

Beowulf, a strong and confident warrior, hears about Hrothgar's troubles and decides to help out of loyalty and a sense of duty. He gathers his men, equips them with weapons and armor, and sails to Denmark. At Heorot, Beowulf meets Hrothgar and reminds him of the bond of friendship Hrothgar once shared with Beowulf's father. Beowulf also lists his past achievements, boasting of his victories against beasts, trolls, and sea monsters. He declares his intention to defeat Grendel using no weapons, wanting to bring greater honor to his people.

Hrothgar speaks about his connection with Beowulf's father and shares his grief over the suffering caused by Grendel. Meanwhile, Unferth, one of Hrothgar's courtiers, grows jealous of the attention and admiration Beowulf receives. He tries to discredit Beowulf by questioning his abilities. Beowulf confidently defends himself and accuses Unferth of lacking courage and moral character. Queen Wealhtheow praises Beowulf for his courage and thanks him for coming to their aid.

The Battle

After the feasting and boasting end, Beowulf prepares for his battle with Grendel by laying down his weapons. As everyone else sleeps, Grendel approaches Heorot Hall, ready for another night of killing. Grendel breaks into the hall and attacks, killing one of Beowulf's men before Beowulf can react. When Grendel reaches for Beowulf, the two engage in a fierce and violent fight. The battle is so loud and intense that it frightens people outside the hall. Beowulf's warriors try to help, but Grendel is protected by magic which makes weapons useless against him.

Beowulf proves to be a match for Grendel. As Grendel tries to escape, Beowulf grabs him and fatally injures him by ripping his arm off. Severely wounded and close to death, Grendel retreats to his lair beneath the swampy fen-banks, where he dies from his injuries.

Celebration

After Beowulf defeats Grendel, the Danes celebrate his victory with a grand feast. A minstrel (a medieval singer or musician, especially one who sang heroic poetry) sings about Beowulf's heroic deeds and tells stories of other legendary figures, such as Sigemund, the dragon-slayer, and King Heremod, an evil ruler who brought ruin to his people.

King Hrothgar thanks Beowulf and adopts him into his heart, expressing deep gratitude. He is so impressed by Beowulf's bravery that he struggles to find a gift worthy of his heroism. Beowulf humbly replies that he fought Grendel not for a reward but out of duty and honor. Hrothgar rewards Beowulf with many valuable gifts, including an arm-ring, a necklace, a precious sword, a banner, a helmet, and horses. Queen Wealhtheow gives a speech of thanks.

Grendel's Mother

After a grand evening of celebration, Hrothgar and Beowulf leave Heorot Hall to rest. However, the battle is not over. Grendel's mother, seeking revenge for her son's death, attacks the hall. She kills Aeschere, one of Hrothgar's most trusted advisers, and flees.

Beowulf is summoned and boldly declares his commitment to the heroic code. Unferth lends Beowulf his sword for the battle. Beowulf prepares himself and dives into the dangerous, poisonous waters of the swamp to confront Grendel's mother. She spots him and drags him into her underwater lair, a hall beneath the swamp. A fierce battle ensues, but Beowulf's sword proves useless against her. Beowulf notices a massive sword made for giants hanging on the wall. He grabs it and uses it to strike a fatal blow, beheading Grendel's mother. Above the swamp, the Danes and Geats watch as blood boils to the surface, assuming Beowulf has been defeated. The Danes leave, but the Geats remain, hoping for a sign of their hero's survival.

Beowulf finds Grendel's body in the lair and takes his head as a trophy, avenging all the men Grendel had killed. The poisonous blood melts the blade of the giant's sword. Beowulf returns triumphantly to Heorot Hall with Grendel's head and the hilt (the handle of a weapon) of the melted sword. He presents these trophies to Hrothgar, who rewards Beowulf with more gifts and gives him fatherly advice. Hrothgar praises Beowulf as a leader destined for greatness, contrasting him with the evil King Heremod. Another feast is held in Beowulf's honor before he and his men set sail for home.

Beowulf Returns Home

Beowulf and his men return home to the land of the Geats and arrive at King Hygelac's stronghold. Queen Hygd is introduced as a kind and gracious queen. To highlight her goodness, the poet contrasts her with Modthryth, an evil queen known for her cruelty.

Beowulf is warmly welcomed back and shares the story of his adventures in Denmark. He talks about his battles with Grendel and Grendel's mother, as well as the troubled history between the Danes and the Heathobards.

Beowulf presents the treasures he received from Hrothgar to King Hygelac, showing his loyalty and generosity. He also gives Queen Hygd a priceless necklace (the torque) that was gifted to him by Queen Wealhtheow. In return, King Hygelac rewards Beowulf with a mighty sword and large tracts of land, further honoring him for his bravery and accomplishments.

The Dragon

The poet quickly moves forward to describe the death of King Hygelac during a conflict with the Shylfings. Hygelac and Beowulf had attacked the Franks, a Germanic tribe known for their wealth of gold and jewels. However, the Franks retaliated, leading to Hygelac's death. Beowulf narrowly escaped, but many Geats were killed. Eventually, Beowulf became king and ruled wisely for 50 years until a dragon arose to threaten his kingdom.

The trouble begins when a runaway slave steals a golden goblet (a vessel for drinking) from a dragon's treasure hoard. The dragon, enraged by the theft, searches for the thief but finds no one. Furious, the dragon begins burning villages and lands across Beowulf's kingdom, causing widespread destruction. Beowulf, now an aged king, knows he must fight the dragon to save his people. He orders the creation of a great battle shield but decides not to raise a large army, confident in his ability to handle the beast on his own.

The story flashes back to Beowulf's earlier life. After Hygelac's death, his widow, Queen Hygd, wanted Beowulf to become king, but Beowulf declined, honoring Hygelac's son Heardred as the rightful heir. Heardred eventually became involved in a Swedish feud and was killed. After Heardred's death, Beowulf ascended to the throne. As king, he ended feuds and avenged Heardred by killing King Onela of Sweden.

Returning to the present, Beowulf chooses 11 men to accompany him to the dragon's lair. They find the thief who stole the goblet and force him to guide them to the dragon's barrow (mountain/den). At the cliff-top entrance to the lair, Beowulf gives a farewell speech, sensing that this might be his final battle. He recalls past events. He reflects on his life of loyalty and the rewards he received for his service. Beowulf prepares for the fight with the dragon, knowing it may be his most challenging battle yet.

Final Battle

Beowulf reflects on his past victories and praises the warriors who have joined him. He tells them to stay back and let him face the dragon alone, as this will be his final battle. Beowulf bravely enters the dragon's barrow and calls out to the beast. The dragon responds by breathing fire and rushing toward the entrance. Beowulf strikes the dragon with his sword, but it does little damage. Terrified by the dragon's flames, all but one of Beowulf's warriors flee. Wiglaf, a young warrior in his first battle, stays behind to help his king. Shielded from the flames, Wiglaf injures the dragon with his ancestral sword. Encouraged by Wiglaf's bravery and words of support, Beowulf gathers his strength and delivers the final blow with a knife to the dragon's abdomen. However, during the fight, the dragon bites Beowulf's neck with its venomous fangs, leaving him fatally wounded.

As Beowulf lies dying, Wiglaf brings him water and retrieves some of the treasure from the barrow, fulfilling Beowulf's last request. Beholding the treasure, Beowulf is pleased that he can leave something valuable for his people. He gives Wiglaf his battle gear and says his final goodbye. Overcome with grief, Wiglaf scolds the warriors who abandoned their king during the battle. He warns them that their cowardice will bring shame.

Beowulf's Funeral

A messenger is sent to inform the people of Beowulf's death. The messenger warns them of the troubles that may follow, predicting future wars with the Franks and the Frisians, who had only remained friendly because of Beowulf's leadership. The messenger believes that with Beowulf gone, enemies will seize the opportunity to attack.

The men find Beowulf's body and the dragon's corpse on the cliff. Wiglaf recounts Beowulf's bravery in the battle but also questions his decision to face the dragon alone. He orders the construction of a funeral pyre and takes seven warriors to retrieve the treasure from the dragon's hoard. The treasure is buried in a tall memorial built to honor Beowulf's legacy. At Beowulf's funeral, the people are overcome with grief. A woman sings a sorrowful song about sadness and doom, mourning the loss of their great king and fearing the hardships that lie ahead.