

Beowulf the Warrior Study Guide

Beowulf the Warrior by Ian Serraillier

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Overview

Beowulf the Warrior is a remarkably faithful retelling of the central narrative events of the epic poem Beowulf, the greatest Old English work that survives from the early medieval period. This epic continues to be held in high regard not only because of its antiquity but because its hero's exploits, in victory and in death, are as stirring for modern readers as they were for medieval listeners.

Central to the meaning of the poem is the code of conduct it exalts, often referred to as the "heroic ideal." According to this ideal, the true hero is one whose life reflects the virtues of courage in the face of adversity, of strength and skill in defeating one's enemies, and of loyalty and generosity toward one's companions and kin. The hero's goal is to perform exploits worthy of praise in songs and poems, leading to enduring fame. The valor and heroism of Beowulf can inspire the pursuit of these virtues in younger readers.

About the Author

The literary career of English writer Ian Serraillier has been long and varied, spanning five decades from the 1940s to the 1980s. His works include poems for adults, adventure novels for young adults, verse narratives for young adults based on classical and medieval sources, plays in verse for broadcast on BBC radio, picture books for younger readers, and a nonfiction introduction to the age of Chaucer for high school and college students. His poems have been broadcast in the United Kingdom, the United States, and elsewhere, and his novel *The Silver Sword* was serialized for BBC television.

Serraillier was born in London on September 24, 1912. He attended a private boarding school in Sussex and then Brighton College, where he became fascinated with classical mythology. He won a scholarship to Oxford University, where he studied from 1931 to 1935, taking a master's degree in English language and literature. During his studies at Oxford he developed an interest in medieval literature, which provided the sources for several of his most important later writings.

Although Serraillier always aspired to a writing career, during the first half of his adult life he wrote more as avocation than vocation. From 1936 to 1961 he held a series of teaching positions and devoted most of his vacations to writing.

His first published poems appeared in a 1942 collection, *Three New Poets: Roy McFadden, Alex Comfort, Ian Serraillier*.

Shortly thereafter two volumes of poetry for younger readers appeared—*The Weaver Birds* (1944) and *Thomas and the Sparrow* (1946). In 1946 he published his first adventure novel for young adults—*They Raced for Treasure* (later abridged and reissued as *Treasure Ahead*). He followed this quickly with other books of suspense. Most of these early novels now seem rather dated, with one major exception—*The Silver Sword*.

This novel (later reissued as *Escape from Warsaw*) is loosely based on actual events in the lives of four refugee children from Poland who traveled through Europe during World War II in search of their parents. It is Serraillier's most acclaimed work.

During the 1950s Serraillier began to pursue a more singular theme in his writing—the celebration of heroic human achievement. One narrative poem from this period commemorated Thor Heyerdahl's perilous voyage across the Pacific on the *Kon-Tiki*, another concerned Sir Edmund Hillary's conquest of Mt. Everest. Also during this period, Serraillier published *Beowulf the Warrior*, the first and perhaps best of his reworking of medieval literary materials.

His most important works from the 1960s and 1970s are narrative-verse renditions of classical myths and medieval legends. These include the Greek stories of Perseus, Theseus, Jason, Daedalus, and Heracles; *The Song of Roland* from Old French

literature; and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the Robin Hood ballads, and Havelok the Dane from Middle English literature. Serrailier retells some of Shakespeare's plays in *The Enchanted Island*, and his interest in the works of Chaucer led him to produce a major nonfiction book, *Chaucer and His World*, and to retell selections from *Canterbury Tales*. More recently he has written primarily for younger readers.

Plot Summary

The first version of this story was written most likely in the 8th century in Anglo-Saxon. It was translated by Ian Serrailier and published in 1994. Serrailier's version, though re-written in easy-to-understand blank verse, is otherwise faithful to the events and characters of the original. *Beowulf the Warrior* tells the story of a great Geatish warrior who travels from modern day Sweden to Denmark to rid the Danes of a vicious monster called Grendel who has long been slaughtering the finest of the Danish warriors. With his great bravery and cunning Beowulf will forge a bond between the Danes and Hrothgar, King of the Danes, who, till then, had been enemies. After killing Grendel, Beowulf must also kill the monster's mother before he can return to Geatland.

As he has done for the past twelve years Grendel enters Heorot, the mead hall of Hrothgar but is met there by Beowulf who tears his arm off mortally wounding the great beast. In grief and vengeance, Grendel's mother comes to the mead hall killing one of the Danish warriors then returns home across the moors to await the coming of Beowulf.

As expected, Beowulf pursues Grendel's mother and after a brief struggle and by the grace of God, the Geatish warrior is able to slay the monster using a giant-forged sword that melts with the heat of her blood. He returns to Heorot in triumph gaining Hrothgar's esteem for himself and an ally for his country.

Returning to Sweden, Beowulf becomes king of his own people. He grows old and respected and there is peace in his land for fifty years until the coming of a fire-breathing dragon threatens the lives of his people. Like the noble man he is Beowulf kills the dragon but is mortally wounded in the process; leaving his land without an heir. Beowulf is the tale of a Scandinavian warrior and hero told by an early Christian Anglo-Saxon. The teller of the tale often seems torn between Christian morals and the pagan heroic ideal his main character embodies.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

In *Beowulf the Warrior*, the title character travels to Denmark in order to confront a beast that has been plaguing the king there for twelve years. Having slaughtered the man-eating beast, Beowulf must then kill its mother before he can sail back to his home in Geatland. Having arrived there he rules his people peacefully for half a century before the coming of a fire-breathing dragon forces him into battle again. The dragon is killed but not before Beowulf is mortally wounded. He dies leaving his country without an heir.

Beowulf arrives unexpected to Denmark but when he explains his mission there he is welcomed with open arms and much celebration by Hrothgar. After the feasting while the other warriors, both Danish and Geat, slumber in Heorot, Hrothgar's grand hall Beowulf waits for the coming of Grendel. The monster, twelve feet tall and fierce to behold, arrives as usual in the dead of night immediately grabbing up and devouring the first warrior he comes to. Unfortunately for Grendel, the next warrior he comes to is Beowulf who grapples manfully with the monster who - he has been told by Hrothgar - cannot be harmed man-made weapons.

The two wrestle about the hall with Grendel screaming in a pain he has never known before. Finally Beowulf pulls the beast's massive arm from his body - a lethal wound. Grendel limps home bleeding gore and shouting his anguish. The arm is nailed to the wall in Heorot - a dreadful trophy of Beowulf's victory. The battle is followed by a great celebration in which Hrothgar awards Beowulf much gold and even greater honor.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Perhaps the first thing worth noting about *Beowulf* is that, although the story concerns the Danes and the Swedes, it is written in Anglo-Saxon - the precursor to English - by an Anglo-Saxon author. It was written at a time when Christianity was still new to the Northern countries, hence its heathen overtones. In fact, the monster Grendel could be seen as the last of a heathen world attempting to force itself upon a Christian one. Beowulf is an early Christian hero. Certainly the nailing of Grendel's arm to the wall of Hrothgar recalls the Crucifixion.

Significantly the story is not overtly Christian. That seems to be the effect of having been written in a time when Christianity's hold over the Northern European world was relatively precarious. Grendel is said to be shaped in the distorted likeness of humanity not like humans themselves, in the image of God, according to the Christian Bible. In a sense then Grendel is created by man, like heathenism, and therefore a distorted image of the true religion, which is Christianity.

As an enemy, Grendel is certainly inhuman but not without human characteristics. His motivation for killing, for instance, is simple malevolence. He hates men and as



despicable as this trait is it is not without its human counterparts. The spite and hatefulness of this monster are recognizable to the readers of *Beowulf* and so Grendel is not an entirely alien figure.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Following the death of Grendel, Grendel's mother is understandably grief-stricken and set on revenge. She travels over the moors to Heorot where she snatches, not only her son's severed arm, but also a sleeping warrior. With her spoil she returns home. Unfortunately, an exhausted Beowulf slumbers straight through this.

The following morning when Beowulf and his companions go to give their usual morning greeting to Hrothgar the king tells them the terrible news. His description of Grendel's mother's home, the lair to which Beowulf will have to travel if he is to take on this second monster, is nothing short of terrifying. A mile across the dark and wolf-infested moors is a lake of fire, beneath which lives Beowulf's next challenge. The hero sets off without hesitation along with his warriors, the king, and his guard.

Because this monster does not come to them and where she lives this second task is much more difficult. Not only is the terrain they must cross quite rough, diving beneath a lake of fire full of strange, serpentine monsters is much more of a challenge than simply waiting and watching in Hrothgar, but also Grendel's mother seems to multiply the strength and the ferocity of her son.

Beowulf takes his sword, named Hrunting, in hand and leaves Hrothgar, possibly forever and dives into the lake. The monsters within rip and tear at his coat of armor while Grendel's mother waits for Beowulf to come close enough to grab and squeeze tight to her furry chest. At the bottom of the lake Grendel's mother lives in a buttressed hall, which seems to be a monstrous parallel to Heorot. Hrunting, though it has never before failed its bearer falls to pieces against the strength of Grendel's mother who traps the hero on the floor of her hall softly crying for the death of her beloved son.

Beowulf, it would appear, is dead for certain, but God Almighty - incontestably the Christian God - takes pity on his champion and releases him. A sword - giant-forged - hangs on the wall, which Beowulf springs up and takes to hand. With it he slashes off the monster's head and God, through the heat of Grendel's mother's blood, melts the sword until only the hilt remains. Beowulf surfaces with the beast's head which is spitted upon a pike and carried off to Heorot by four strong warriors. At Beowulf's return to Hrothgar, Beowulf promises eternal faithfulness while Hrothgar promises a bond of friendship between their two peoples that will never be broken.

Chapter 2 Analysis

In this second part the author does not exactly sympathize with the beast but he does offer that a cause for her murderous grief was because her only son had died. At the same time he presents her as a true brute, displaying the head of her victim in a manner even more grisly than the one in which Beowulf displayed his trophy. This reminds the



reader that she returned to Hrothgar to retrieve her son's arm and, in turn, causes the reader to wonder if perhaps her son who was only mortally wounded and not dead when he began his journey back home, died in his mother's presence. Her position then becomes even more peculiarly empathetic. This characterization of Grendel's mother may represent a grief in the author for the exchange of the heathen world he knew for the Christian one that was gradually taking over. Further evidence for this is the sword made long ago by giants. Though God uses this pagan weapon to His own purpose He destroys it immediately after.

The bond that Hrothgar offers Beowulf at the end of the "Grendel's Mother" section is significantly not only one of friendship and trust but also one of trade. The medieval world is changing in more ways than one. New ideologies are being spread just as goods cross back and forth across the Baltic. A revolution is taking place on all fronts but just as it is presented in celebratory terms in the second part of *Beowulf* in the third part, as we shall see, the author is more hesitant to accept the changes with open arms.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

By the third part of the story Beowulf the young warrior has become an old king who has ruled his people peacefully for half a century. This peace is shattered abruptly, however, with the arrival of a fire-breathing dragon that wreaks deadly havoc on the Swedes. Despite his great age Beowulf calls for an iron shield to be made, one that can stand up to the heat of the dragon's breath. He chooses eleven of his best warriors to accompany him to the dragon's cave. As Beowulf sits waiting for the beast he reminisces about his youth and all of his heroic accomplishments. He lacks the bloodlust of his younger days and the thirst for battle but feels the responsibility of his position to protect his people. With Beowulf thinking solemnly upon death and Fate he takes leave of his warriors and strides headlong toward the dragon's cave.

Shouting his battle cry Beowulf awakens the sleeping dragon, which slowly uncoils and begins immediately to circle the ground madly burning everything within reach. Beowulf, however, rushes into the smoke-cloud without fear; however, he is soon overcome. Seeing Beowulf fall, choking, to the ground his supposedly noble and fearless warriors flee the scene. A speech from Wiglaf, Beowulf's young kinsman, scolding the warriors and reminding them of their oath to stand by their king no matter the danger fails to stir them. They remain cringing in a nearby forest while Wiglaf himself rushes into the smoke.

Battling side-by-side, Wiglaf and Beowulf slay the dragon but the poison in the old king's wounds is gradually killing him. Beowulf laments the fact that he will leave his people with no heir but takes comfort in knowing that he ruled them peacefully for fifty years. His dying wish is to see the spoils of his last battle - the dragon's horde of gold and jewels hidden away in the cave.

Wiglaf hurries to honor his king's desire and upon seeing the loot Beowulf thanks God Almighty and declares that to will such a gift to his people is worth an old man's life. Finally asking Wiglaf to bury his body under a great mound upon the Whale's Headland and name it the "Mound of Beowulf" - a monument for all to see - the old King dies.

The warriors who had previously fled now return from their hiding place in the forest but Wiglaf reprimands them severely forbidding them any part in the spoils and stripping them of their rights as citizens. The dragon's body is heaved into the sea and Beowulf is buried as per his request but the treasure which he wanted for his people is buried as well for carrying the curse of Beowulf's death.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The third part of Beowulf introduces an entirely new kind of foe into the hero's world, a fire-breathing dragon. Unlike Grendel and to a certain extent Grendel's mother the



dragon does not initiate hostilities between himself and the people. Instead, one of the Geats, stealing a goblet from the dragon's horde incurs the largely unthinking wrath of the beast.

Until the object is stolen the dragon merely sleeps in Geatland disturbing no one. It is only after he has been violated that he becomes violent, raining fire down indiscriminately on the guilty and the innocent alike. That his weapon is fire is no accident. The dragon is an elemental character without real consciousness unlike the preceding villains who possessed and utilized an at least semi-human capacity for thought. That Beowulf leaves a kinsman but no clear heir seems to be a sign that there has been no clean break from the heathen world for the new Christian one. In other words, a hero of Beowulf's type belongs more rightfully to the older values of heathenism - the glorification of violence and strength - than to Christianity, which professes to forgiveness and non-violence. It seems that the author of *Beowulf* is ambivalent as to the new religion and mourns the loss of the hero's code that he previously knew and respected.

The dragon's lack of self-consciousness is necessary to the effective execution of this memorial to the heathen world. To give the dragon any human characteristics would be to confuse the issue with sympathy and morality. Beowulf is the hero. The dragon is the foe. The eleven warriors who flee the scene are uncomplicated cowards, and Wiglaf, though he is not quite fit to be king is admirable for his loyalty and his bravery. The third part of *Beowulf*, unlike the first two parts in which anthropomorphic monsters experience human emotions such as hate and pain and loss, is painted in just such broad terms.

The third part of *Beowulf* has a very different character from the first two parts. Unlike parts one and two in which the killing of the monsters is met with joyous celebration, in the third part the sense of loss and uncertainty following the death of Beowulf the King overwhelms any happiness at the death of the dragon. At the end of *Beowulf* everything seems to be tainted with the King's blood even the spoils that Beowulf believes he has secured for his people are disposed of. *Beowulf* ends with praise for the King but it does not end with celebration. Instead the reader is left wondering at the stability of this changing world.



Characters

Beowulf

Beowulf is a young hero from the land of the Geats and later the aged king of that same land. Propelled by the desire for heroic glory, Beowulf sets out from Geatland to Denmark to rid the Danes of a monster called Grendel that has been slaughtering their finest warriors. Beowulf succeeds in slaying Grendel and his mother and, later in his own country, a fire-breathing dragon. Beowulf is the archetypal hero acting with courage and honor above what might seem to be judgment. His fighting and survival skills are far greater than those of even the greatest of his peers and he is, at the same time, famously even tempered. The greatest offense of which Beowulf can be accused is of dying and leaving his people without a proper heir thereby making them vulnerable to civil insurrection and outside invaders.

The character of Beowulf is also a symbol of a heathen world in which the warrior's code of ethics, bravery and even violence, is honored as opposed to the Christian code of ethics in which forgiveness and non-violence are more venerated. At the time of the writing of *Beowulf* this Christian code was gradually taking the place of the heathen one. This older, heroic time is mourned by the author of *Beowulf* most clearly in his description of the Swedish king's death and in his sorrow at the lack of an heir. Christianity, he seems to say, is not quite adequate to the demands of his society.

Wulfgar

Wulfgar is the King of Denmark's Herald. It is Wulfgar who first spots Beowulf and his men arriving on the Danish shore. He believes them at first to be invaders, but upon finding out their mission hurries them to the King's audience.

Grendel

Grendel is a hairy, twelve-foot tall monster with red eyes who has been traveling across the moors from his home under the lake of fire to kill and devour the warriors of Denmark for a full twelve years. Grendel's acts of violence are irrational but pointed. He hates men with a ferocious temper and so in the dead of night haunts their mead hall - the scene of their most joyous celebrations - and kills them when they are most unprotected. Grendel's motivation for killing - pure spite - is a very human emotion and so despite his less-than-human appearance he is not entirely alien.

Significantly, both Grendel and his mother are descended from Cain, the elder son of Adam and Eve, and according to the Bible, the world's first murderer. This reference sets the story in a Christian framework from the outset, which is able to define the story without greatly inhibiting it. In other words, the reader knows that he is entering a Christian world but not one that is necessarily limited to Christian values.



Hrothgar

Hrothgar is the king of Denmark who is powerless to stop Grendel from slaying his men. He welcomes Beowulf the hero to his land and treats him as he would a son. Later when Beowulf has accomplished his tasks of slaying Grendel and his mother, Hrothgar opens trade with the Geats and offers Denmark as an ally. Also as the aged King, Hrothgar prefigures what Beowulf will himself become in the third part of the story. Unlike Beowulf, however, Hrothgar cannot protect his people from the monsters himself and for twelve years must watch as his warriors are devoured alive by Grendel. In this way the character of Hrothgar demonstrates to just what extent Beowulf can be called a hero. Not only does he win glory as a young man he can both effectively rule and effectively protect his own people well into his old age. As such Hrothgar and Beowulf present two very different pictures of age and kingship.

Queen Wealhtheow

The gracious queen of Denmark, Wealhtheow's most striking feature is her gown, embroidered with gold and having a long, black train that sparkles as if with tiny galaxies. The Queen embodies the Christian virtue of humility as she kneels to offer the warriors the mead cup

Unferth

Unferth is a disaffected warrior who scoffs at a story of Beowulf's youthful heroics. According to the King, Unferth is himself a jealous and cowardly man not even fit for Beowulf's anger. Puzzlingly, Beowulf wills that his sword is to pass to Unferth should he himself die in his battle with Grendel's mother. This gesture is clearly meant to say more about Beowulf than about Unferth. It demonstrates the hero's very Christian ability to forgive, a virtue that might get lost in the violent shuffle of monsters and mead halls. It also shows Beowulf's forethought in allowing Unferth a chance to redeem and improve himself. It is this characteristic that sets him apart as a leader and not simply a warrior.

Grendel's Mother

Like her son, Grendel's mother is an inhuman beast. Unlike her son, however, her actions appear to have more reason behind them. Grendel's mother only attacks the Danes in grief and vengeance after the death of Grendel. She is a deeply emotional character and her mourning mirrors that of any mother for her child. As such Grendel's mother is a much more sympathetic character than her son. Grendel's mother also proves to be a better match for Beowulf than her son. Because she is both grief-driven and fighting in her own environment and on her own terms Grendel's mother is able to bring Beowulf to a point in the conflict where only God can save him.



Aeschere

Hrothgar's friend and counselor, Aeschere is also the first casualty of Grendel's mother killed in recompense for her son's death. His head ends up on a stake near the Lake of Fire.

Hygelac

Hygelac is the son of Hrethel, Beowulf's uncle and king of Geatland prior to his nephew.

Heardred

Heardred is the slain son of Hygelac and the cousin whose death opens the way for Beowulf to take the throne.

Fire Dragon

The third and final of Beowulf's foes, the fire-dragon sleeps guarding a cave full of treasure. When he is robbed he awakes and lashes out breathing fire over the Swedish countryside and killing Beowulf's people. Unlike Grendel and his mother the fire-dragon is a mere animal with no sense whatsoever of consciousness beyond the fact that his territory has been violated.

Wiglaf

Beowulf's young kinsman, as noble as his king, he attempts to stir to action a group of fleeing soldiers with a rousing speech about honor and oath breaking. Though this has no effect on the soldiers, Wiglaf rushes into battle with Beowulf, helping him to kill the fire-dragon. When Beowulf dies, Wiglaf mourns deeply and, in partial recompense for the death, strips the cowardly soldiers of all of their rights as warriors and as men. That Wiglaf reacts in such a way to his kinsman's death is both understandable and in keeping with the hero's code of honor but it does not mark him out as a good candidate to replace his king. A leader, as has been seen in *Beowulf* must be both heroic and even-tempered. Hrothgar, for example, does not rage when the cowardly Unferth accuses Beowulf of overstating his heroism and Beowulf himself is said time and again to be both mighty and mild. Wiglaf, on the other hand when presented with the first real test of his mettle shows himself unripe for leadership.



Objects/Places

Denmark

The site of Grendel's attacks and the country in which *Beowulf* begins is Denmark. Hrothgar, Denmark's King is unable for twelve years to put a stop to the slaying of his warriors by Grendel. Having heard of Denmark's great sadness Beowulf sets out across the Baltic Sea to help them. Once Beowulf has slain the monsters, Hrothgar and his nation become an ally and a trading partner of Geatland, Beowulf's homeland.

Geatland

Geatland is the country from which Beowulf hails and where he later rules. After Beowulf's successful killing of Grendel and his mother, Geatland is given a great ally in Denmark. Later, during Beowulf's reign as king, Geatland is attacked by a fire-breathing dragon which Beowulf kills but in the process is mortally wounded leaving his country with no king and no heir.

Gold Rings

Gifts given by the king to his warriors are gold rings. Hence the king's alternate title: "Ring-giver."

Heorot

Heorot is Hrothgar's mead hall. A mead hall was a place of festive gatherings. Heorot, with its high gleaming roof, is the site of Grendel's killings because it is the place in which the warriors are most vulnerable and the place that most offends his irrational hatred of men. As the mead hall, Heorot is the center of life in pagan and medieval Denmark. It encompasses everything that belongs to the warrior's code of ethics - comradeship, bravery, strength, skill in fighting, and honor. Heorot has an analogue in Grendel's mother's hall beneath the Lake of Fire and if Heorot encompasses everything that belongs to the warrior's code the lair beneath the Lake of Fire represents complete alienation from that world.

The Moor

In order to reach the lair of Grendel's mother beneath the Lake of Fire Beowulf must travel across a hilly, craggy moor. The moor is home to vicious wolves and spirits. Its crossing symbolizes the obstacles the hero must overcome simply to be called a hero.



The Lake of Fire

The Lake's situation far across the treacherous moors symbolizes the journey the hero must undergo before he can take up his actual task. In essence he must prove himself before he can be truly tested. The Lake itself is filled both with flame and deadly sea serpents. Beneath this lake is the dwelling of Grendel's mother, which is a monstrous reflection of Heorot itself. Once beneath the Lake of Fire and inside Grendel's mother's lair Beowulf is completely on his own. None of his comrades can reach him. He is at the mercy of God Himself.

Hrunting

Hrunting is the sword given to Beowulf by Hrothgar, called the "death-dealer." Striking the beast's skull, however, Hrunting crumples failing Beowulf. It is the collapse of Hrunting that forces Beowulf to depend on the grace of God Almighty.

Before he dives beneath the Lake and loses Hrunting, however, Beowulf wills the sword to Unferth the envious and cowardly man who accuses Beowulf of overstating his own youthful heroism. By this gesture Beowulf proves his own sense of honor, his ability to forgive, and his exceptional ability to help men overcome their own vices and to develop themselves positively. This capacity is no doubt one of the characteristics that make him an effective king for five decades.

Grendel's Mother's Lair

The hall beneath the Lake of Fire in which Grendel's mother resides. Like Heorot it has a stone floor and high rafters. It is watertight and hung with weapons such as the giant-fashioned sword with which Beowulf slays her.

The Dragon's Burial Mound

Situated on a headland above the sea and surrounded by great rocks the burial mound contains a vast treasure unseen by human eyes until it is breached by one of the Geats thus raising the ire of the Fire-Dragon.

The Golden Goblet

Along with a collection of rings the item stolen from the Fire-Dragon by the Geatish grave robber.

Whale's Headland

The headland is where Beowulf is buried. It is subsequently named "Beowulf's Mound."

Setting

Although this epic was composed in England during the eighth or ninth century, its setting is southern Scandinavia. The events of the poem, to the extent that there is any historical foundation at all, would have taken place several centuries earlier.

The Old English text begins with a short preliminary episode not directly related to Beowulf's adventures. Serrailier bypasses this scene and begins retelling the poem by describing Heorot, a magnificent mead-hall constructed by King Hrothgar of Denmark. The joyfulness of the Danes in their splendid new hall provokes the savage attacks of a spiteful monster named Grendel. The monster ravages the countryside.

The youthful warrior Beowulf of Geatland (which may represent either southern Sweden or the island of Zealand near the Swedish coast) hears of the slaughter and destruction wreaked upon the Danes by the monster. With a group of his most trusted companions, he sets out across the Baltic Sea to aid the king and battle Grendel. After defeating Grendel and Grendel's monstrous mother, Beowulf returns to his homeland, where he becomes the powerful and respected leader of his own people. The action of the poem then skips ahead fifty years. Now well past his prime and no longer eager for fame, Beowulf must protect his own country from yet another monstrous threat. This time he faces a fire-spewing dragon, more terrible by far than anything ever confronted in his youth.

Social Sensitivity

One of the controversial aspects of Beowulf for scholars is the poem's blending together of pagan and Christian elements. The story itself was originally a pagan story that was "christianized" by a later poet. This matter, however, need not concern readers of Serrailier's popular adaptation.

An element of the poem that cannot be played down is its considerable violence.

The Germanic world recreated in the poem was a violent one in which few men died a natural death—certainly not those who attempted to fulfill heroic aspirations. One aspect of the violence that is prevalent in the original poem stems from the constant warring among the Germanic tribes. In Serrailier's version, this dimension of the poem is largely omitted, as is the strong sense of doom for Beowulf's people that hovers over the conclusion of the poem. Serrailier does preserve, necessarily, much of the original poem's violence that occurs between men and monsters. This violence can be rather graphic, as when Grendel devours one of Beowulf's men: "pouncing on the nearest/ [he] tore him limb from limb and swallowed him whole/ Sucking the blood in streams, crunching the bones." As graphically realistic as Serrailier's retelling sometimes is, it represents an appropriate treatment of the poem's original subject matter.

Literary Qualities

Beowulf is considered an epic because it is a lengthy narrative poem that follows the adventures of a single great hero. It does not, however, reflect all of the formal characteristics of other great literary epics such as Homer's *Iliad*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, or Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Differences stem from the fact that Beowulf was originally composed, probably for oral recitation, in a Germanic verse form known as alliterative verse. In contrast to the poetry most familiar to modern readers—which is written in regular metered verse forms such as iambic pentameter and usually has end-rhyme—a line of alliterative verse has no set number of syllables.

Instead of end-rhyme, it uses an internal repetition of initial sounds.

This adaptation of Beowulf is unique among the several modern versions because it is written in poetry rather than in prose. Few others have attempted versifying this difficult poem, but Serrailier succeeds admirably. Although his forms do not strictly accord with alliterative verse, he captures its flavor very well, using vigorous and stirring language as befits a folk epic. Serrailier freely paraphrases the original, translates few verses directly, and through abridgement reduces the Old English epic to less than one third of its original length. Yet few things pertinent to the main story have been omitted. Much of what has been left out belongs to the so-called "digressions" of Beowulf, which are typically stories alluded to in passing or ballads sung by bards that have been inserted into the main narrative. These stories would have been familiar to Anglo-Saxon audiences and would surely have had thematic relevance to the plot, but most modern readers find them intrusive and often puzzling.

The following passage describing Grendel's abode reflects Serrailier's success in capturing the somber and haunting qualities of Old English alliterative verse; the alliterating sounds are indicated by italics: . . . the tonely land Where dwell the dark spirits, by paths of peril.

By cloud-haunted hills where wolves go hunting, By winding cliffs where swollen torrents tumbling Plunge headlong into the misty deep.

The grumbling under-water.

Old English poetry is also characterized by the presence of several common poetic devices. One of these is a special kind of compound metaphor known as the kenning. Serrailier retains a few of these in phrases such as "the whale road" and "the swan's path" for the sea, "God's beacon" for the sun, and "the life-house" for the human body.



Themes

Heroism

The author of *Beowulf* never leaves any question as to whether the title character is a hero. He is not only a hero, but also he is the archetypal hero embodying all of the necessary traits and displaying them in each of his actions while every other character in the story comes up short throwing his heroism into even higher relief.

Beowulf is not called by King Hrothgar to come and fight Grendel. He decides on his own out of both a sense responsibility to the sorrowing Danes and a desire for glory to travel across the Baltic and take on the monster. This is important because, no matter what material goods he wins from Hrothgar and no matter what allies he secures for his country subsequently his initial intentions are purely honorable.

At a very early point the author hangs a tag on Beowulf that will follow him through the rest of the tale: He is both mild and mighty. That Beowulf is mighty is undeniable, stories of his youth and the events told in *Beowulf* attest to this but what is the significance of his characterization as "mild?" Were Beowulf to retain his strength, his skill in fighting, and his obvious desire to do so without a concomitant even-temper he would not be a hero but simply a brute apt to become violent at the slightest provocation. The brief scene with Unferth in which the envious Dane insults Beowulf demonstrates that, while prepared to defend his honor Beowulf will not initiate violence without good cause. Not only does he not attack Unferth, Beowulf later wills his sword to him in a gesture of Christian forgiveness and an apparent desire to help Unferth realize his better qualities.

This mildness of Beowulf's is later made clearer by its lack in his young kinsman, Wiglaf. Following the death of Beowulf the King, Wiglaf has the opportunity to forgive a group of cowardly soldiers who have fled from the scene of danger and thus left the side of their King at a crucial moment breaking an oath to stand by him and belying their positions as warriors. But Wiglaf, lacking the even-temper of his late kinsman turns on the soldiers and in anger applies the greatest punishment available to him: He strips them of all their rights not only as soldiers but also as men. Wiglaf, thus shows himself to be strong, skilled, and courageous but ultimately not heroic. His nature lacks the vital quality of mildness that defined half of who Beowulf was throughout his life.

Even as a king, Beowulf is said to be mighty and mild as well as keen for praise. Clearly, age and elevated position do not change him. He does not become a tyrant with his kingship as he might. Instead, he treats his people with the same deference he has always shown in his quests for heroic glory and, as opposed to the earlier example of the aged King Hrothgar; Beowulf takes absolute responsibility for the protection of his nation. When the fire-dragon comes he does not wait twelve years - as Hrothgar does - watching his people die until a young hero comes from another country to rid him of the pestilence. He immediately sets out after the problem himself and, though he loses his life in the process, he saves his people.



There is only one provision Beowulf can be accused of not making for his people. He leaves them without an heir. Though this does not affect his heroism it signals the decisive death of the type of hero that he is. Beowulf, despite his few Christian characteristics is of a sort that belongs more appropriately to pagan times than the early Christian ones. Leaving Beowulf without an heir seems to be an effort on the part of the author of *Beowulf* to express a fear for the future and a doubt that this new religion will be sufficient to take the place of the old one. This does not, however, mean that Beowulf is less of a hero. It only means that he is the last of his kind.

Christianity and Heathenism

The references to God in *Beowulf* most certainly point to the Christian one. Nevertheless they are peculiar references significant in what they say and even more intriguing in what they do not. First, in *Beowulf* there is no preaching, no doctrine, and no scripture. There is in fact no real feeling of religion, per se, just a distant sense on the part of the narrator of belonging to an institution greater than oneself but impersonal and amorphous. The most direct reference to God Almighty occurs in the second part of *Beowulf* when the hero seems lost and is, at the crucial moment, saved by God's grace alone. Two facts heighten the significance of this salvage: One, the place in which the battle with Grendel's mother occurs and two, the weapon with which Beowulf slays her.

Beowulf is enclosed in Grendel's mother's hall the analogue to Heorot for their decisive battle. He has, therefore, been completely shut away from the remainder of his world. He can hope for no help from the outside. The only potential for support lies in God, Himself. The old world symbolized by the mead hall is distant and unreachable. Victory in this new kind of conflict depends on God.

The sword with which Beowulf ultimately slays Grendel's mother says the author of *Beowulf* is giant-forged. It is then a product of the old heathen world that is so fast disappearing. The Christian God utilizes this sword for His own purposes but in the process destroys it. The changeover it would seem is complete. The enemy is dead, the weapon of the pagans is melted, and the thanks are due entirely to God. But there is a third part to Beowulf.

The fire-dragon is an uncomplicated enemy. He lacks self-consciousness. He has no emotions. He is an animal. Though he is greatly aged by the time the dragon begins to terrorize his people Beowulf resolves to take on the dragon without a thought to passing the task to someone else as Hrothgar had done in the first two parts of *Beowulf*. With his ringing battle cry and his headlong rush, alone, into a cloud of smoke from the dragon's breath this aged Beowulf seems to embody the heroic code of ethics and when he dies the code goes with him. Furthermore, as he leaves no heir it would seem that the author of the third part is somewhat uncertain as to Christianity's ability to replace the pagan beliefs he has previously lived by.



Heroism versus Cowardice

Beowulf is a hero and as such his story is a hero's tale but what of the story's other characters? Can any of them be considered heroes? Are there any cowards? And perhaps most interestingly can either Grendel or his mother participate in the hero/coward archetype, or as villains, are they unable?

In terms of other heroes one man alone stands out in *Beowulf* - Wiglaf the old king's kinsman. When the other eleven warriors flee at the sight of the fire-dragon, Wiglaf attempts to rouse them to action but is unable. He does, however, battle beside his king helping him to achieve victory. Wiglaf's courage, strength, and skill in battle are not in doubt following the battle with the dragon. But his abilities as a leader are. He not only cannot persuade the men to join him in the fight he does not deal well with their cowardice. Instead of forgiving and encouraging them, setting them on a path to improvement, he lashes out in grief and anger and strips them of their rights. In one sense then, Wiglaf is heroic but he is not a hero as Beowulf is. He will never move beyond his station as a soldier. He can never be king.

The primary cowards in *Beowulf* are Unferth a warrior of the Danes and those eleven warriors of the King himself who desert him during the battle with the fire-dragon. There is no certain demonstration of Unferth's cowardice except for a snide comment he makes at one of Beowulf's tales of heroism that causes Hrothgar to point to Unferth as a jealous and cowardly man. In this way Unferth's cowardice is less significant in its own right than it is as a set-up for a demonstration of virtue on the part of Beowulf later in the story. As Beowulf prepares to plunge into the lake of fire he wills his sword to Unferth showing a very Christian ability to forgive and a clever manner of persuading a man filled with vice to better himself.

The eleven warriors who flee at the sight of the fire-dragon, however, seem set there to demonstrate Beowulf's capacities as a heathen warrior and hero. The old king rushes into a cloud of smoke while the greatest of his soldiers turn and run into a nearby forest unable to be coaxed out even after being scolded for oath breaking and disloyalty by Wiglaf. As a result of their actions they are stripped of all their rights. Heroism is not something that consists only in acts of bravery. Heroism is a code of honor and an entire mode of living and cowardice reduces the coward to something less than a man.

Grendel and his mother though both ferocious, bloodthirsty beasts have two very different motivations for, and methods to their killing, and in these separate actions display monstrous reflections of the code of heroism and its very obvious absence. Grendel himself makes a habit of attacking defenseless men in the dead of night. He kills without discretion and with no discernible reason other than his own appetite. When he is eventually confronted by a force as strong as or stronger than himself, i.e. Beowulf, he instantly folds. Because he has never fought before, only preyed upon the most vulnerable, his very first challenge destroys him.

The character of Grendel's mother, on the other hand, possesses a dimension lacked by her son that looks very much like heroism. Grendel's mother does not come to Heorot



out of spitefulness but as a result of her grief over the loss of her son. Vengeance, in the hero's world, is a far more honorable motivation than simple malevolence. Furthermore, Grendel's mother awaits Beowulf in her lair giving him time to prepare for the inevitable battle. They are to begin, as far as is possible, on equal footing. In addition, Grendel's mother stops the battle in order to mourn for her son. She is not fighting for the sake of violence alone but out of a genuine feeling of injury seeking out Beowulf for much the same reason that Beowulf first sought out her son; the indignation of grief.

Grendel's mother also shows herself a more skilled opponent than her son. Beowulf destroys two swords: Hrunting, the death-dealer and a giant-forged sword he finds in the underwater hall. Beowulf is only able to defeat her with the help of God Almighty. Her son, on the other hand, is mortally wounded almost instantly.



Themes/Characters

The epic is named for Beowulf, its dominant figure, who is portrayed at two distinct periods of his life. He first appears as an ambitious young warrior eager to test his courage and skills against the might of Grendel. He recounts an earlier adventure with a youth named Breca that foreshadows his heroic potential. At the same time, Beowulf is contrasted with Unferth, a character who talks about performing heroic deeds but fails to back up his words with actions. Beowulf's proud boast to King Hrothgar—"I will rid you of the Brute/ That nightly robs you of rest. I am no weakling."—represents not idle boasting but a commitment to fulfill the deed or to die trying. Later, a tired and aged King Beowulf faces another monstrous foe, which he vanquishes to save his people but only at the cost of his own life. Nothing is said of the intervening years between youth and old age, which is unusual in epic narratives of this period.

By contrasting these two distinct phases of Beowulf's life, the poet seems to present two ideal patterns of behavior—a youthful Beowulf who provides a perfect model for young people to imitate, and a mature, kingly Beowulf who provides a model of the ideal ruler. The Danish King Hrothgar is portrayed in a favorable light, yet he never achieves the heroic standing of Beowulf and ultimately fails as a model ruler. His inability to protect his people from the attacks of Grendel stands in stark contrast to the old Beowulf's success against the dragon. Something else that emerges from the poem's unusual narrative structure is the suggestion that life is fleeting. Youth leads too quickly to decline. No one, regardless of his or her earthly prowess, remains a hero for long. Therefore, people must make the most of the brief time allotted to them.

Other characters in the poem are presented as worthy of emulation, such as Wiglaf, the only one of Beowulf's men who does not desert him in his final hour. Passionately, Beowulf proclaims to him, "O valiant, valiant knight/ Who at King's peril never did falter! Such/ Should a warrior strive to be."

There is a sizable cast of supporting characters. Beowulf is continually surrounded by companions in his youth and courtly retainers in his old age. The first group follows him to Denmark, accompanies him into battle, and faithfully awaits his re-emergence even when it seems their leader has not survived his underwater struggle with Grendel's mother. In the final section of the poem, King Beowulf's retainers fail him. Fearing for their lives, all but Wiglaf flee.

Other significant minor characters make their appearance at the Danish court, such as Unferth, an official who taunts Beowulf but lacks the prowess to perform heroic deeds himself, and King Hrothgar's beloved friend and advisor, Aeschere, who is attacked by Grendel's mother the night after Grendel's death.

Hrothgar's wife, Wealhtheow, who serves the guests in Heorot, is one of the few women in the poem. The limited presence of women is characteristic of the poetry of this period, which was chiefly concerned with depicting a maledominated warrior society. There is one important "woman" in the poem, though—Grendel's mother. In spite of her ferocity,



at least her motivations are simple and understandable. Whereas Grendel's actions are motivated by jealousy and mean-spiritedness, his mother attacks the Danes because of her maternal feelings, which Serrailier emphasizes: "She . . . brooded upon Grendel/ Her son—her only son—whom long ago/ By the lapping water tenderly herself had suckled;/ Whom as a babe she had fended from brute assault/ And loved more than her own life."



Style

Setting

The setting of the first two parts of *Beowulf* is Denmark and the third, Geatland or modern-day Sweden. The setting within the first part of *Beowulf* is Heorot, Hrothgar, the King of Denmark's mead hall. It is in Heorot that the killings are perpetrated by Grendel and the place in which Beowulf mortally wounds the monster. The hall itself is significant as the center of medieval warrior society. By breaking into the mead hall, Grendel is breaching the heart of society itself. In this way Grendel could be a symbol of Christianity - that new religion that was unceremoniously replacing the code of ethics by which the northern Europeans had lived for so long. Grendel represents uncertainty, the unknown, and the alien, which has somehow penetrated the barriers of what was known as civilization.

In the second part of *Beowulf* the hero with a company of Danes must cross the misty moors filled with howling wolves and other dangers to reach the lake of fire under which dwells Grendel's mother. The lake of fire though described only briefly is a powerful image in its own right. Not only does it burn but also it is roiling with sharp-toothed serpents that attack Beowulf as he plunges below the surface to meet his enemy. The challenges of these two environments, the moor and the lake, which Beowulf must meet, ensure that he is prepared to do battle with his ultimate foe Grendel's mother.

Beneath the lake of fire is a hall, much like Heorot, in which the monster's mother waits for Beowulf. Now, instead of being locked inside the hall with the other warriors Beowulf is locked away from them. While this prevents the hero from doing the unthinkable, fleeing, it has another effect as well. Because Beowulf is in the monster's den itself he is forced to call on this Christian God that has come across the sea to replace the pagan gods of old. God aids Beowulf in his fight saving the warrior's life and allowing him to slay the beast and he does so in a manner that very clearly demonstrates the change over from heathenism to Christianity and this is made possible only by the fact that Beowulf is now shut out of the Danes' mead hall. He has traveled through wolf-ridden moors and plunged into a serpent-infested lake of fire to be shut away as completely as possible from the rest of his society in a place where he can only call on this new God to help him in his trial.

Language and Meaning

Seraillier has adapted *Beowulf's* original Old English for understanding by a modern audience. However, certain antiquated traits remain. *Beowulf* is written in simple blank verse that reads more like prose than poetry. Its language is uncomplicated and heroic and, perhaps most like its Old English predecessor, Serrailier's *Beowulf* contains a number of hyphenated words, such as "whale-road" to designate the ocean and "death-dealer," Beowulf's sword. These words do more than simply name, they describe,



adding a vitality and sensuality that is so essential to the hero's tale. The most important task of the language of *Beowulf* is to convey the experience of living in the hero's world, the world of the mead hall and the sights and sounds of the battles because, although the author has a message or messages to convey, he is coming out of a tradition of oral storytelling in which the most important task was to maintain the attention of your audience.

Structure

Beowulf is divided into three parts: "Grendel," "Grendel's Mother," and "The Fire Dragon." The first two parts of the story seem to follow one code of ethics while the third follows a separate one. In the first two parts, both set in Denmark, Beowulf is a young warrior slaughtering monsters. In the third part he is an aging king attempting to protect his people from a fire-breathing dragon.

In addition, the first two major scenes in *Beowulf* the battle scenes between Beowulf and Grendel and then Beowulf and Grendel's mother take place in halls, first Hrothgar's mead hall, Heorot then Grendel's mother's buttressed dwelling. The third battle scene, with the dragon takes place in the open. This is significant partly because it demonstrates one of the most important changes taking place in the society at that time. No longer does the mead hall stand at the center of medieval life. It has been replaced just like the warrior's code of ethics has given way to Christianity. Also, this open space makes it possible for Wiglaf and the other eleven soldiers to decide whether or not to join Beowulf in his fight. The other warriors are not, as with Grendel, locked inside with Beowulf nor are they, as with Grendel's mother, locked out. They must themselves decide what will be their contribution to their leader's effort. Of course, only Wiglaf chooses to take advantage of this opportunity for glory. The other warriors flee at the first sign of danger.

The death of Beowulf ends the story. Though he rules his kingdom peacefully for fifty years and though the author calls him mighty, mild, kind, and keen for praise, a sense of foreboding hangs over the epitaph and the story seems peculiarly unfinished. With no heir from Beowulf it is not clear into whose hands Geatland will fall. This reflects the uncertainty the author of the third part of *Beowulf* must have felt at the shift from pagan to Christian values in the society around him. There was no guarantee at this point in Northern European Christianity's history that it would be a successful replacement for the pagan warriors' code of ethics and this tenuousness is very evident in this last part of *Beowulf*.

Quotes

"A hideous monster lurked, fiend from hell,/ Misbegotten son of a foul mother,/ Grendel his name, hating the sound of the harp,/ The minstrel's song, the bold merriment of men/ In whose distorted likeness he was shaped/ Twice six feet tall, with arms of hairy gorilla/ And red ferocious eyes and ravening jaws." Chapter 1, pg. 2

"That fiend from hell, foul enemy of God." Chapter 1, pg. 2

"Now there lived overseas/ In the land of the Geats, a youth of valiance abounding,/ Mightiest yet mildest of men, his name Beowulf." Chapter 1, pg. 4

"We are from Sweden, O guardian of the shore. Fear not,/ For in loyalty we come - from friendly fields/ That tremble to the tale of your suffering and horror/ Unspeakable. Crowding sail, hot haste we are come/ With stout spears of ashwood and shields to protect you." Chapter 1, pg. 5

"Pouncing on the nearest/ Tore him limb from limb and swallowed him whole,/ Sucking the blood in streams, crunching the bones./ Half-gorged, his gross appetite still unslaked,/ Greedily he reached his hand for the next - little reckoning for Beowulf." Chapter 1, pg. 13

"Alone, Beowulf/ Tore Grendel's arm from his shoulder asunder,/ Wrenched it from the root while the tough sinews/ cracked." Chapter 1, pg. 13

"But she, softly keening, brooded upon Grendel/ Her son - her only son - whom long ago/ By the lapping water tenderly herself had suckled;/ Whom as a babe she had fended from brute assault/ And loved more than her own life." Chapter 2, pg. 27

"And God Almighty in His wisdom set him free./ The warrior sprang up. On the wall, gleaming, he spied/ A tremendous sword (by giants of olden time/ Forged in the furnace of the sun)." Chapter 2, pg. 27

"He raised the magic sword/ And struck off the ghastly head. Then a wonder befell./ So poisonous, so burning hot the blood, the blade/ Melted." Chapter 2, pg. 28

"Fellow warriors! The King needs us now/ As never before. Is this the time to desert him?/ Have you forgotten the gifts he gave us in the mead hall/ When we feasted together - the gold rings, the shields,/ And flashing swords? Have you forgotten that solemnly/ We swore to protect him from peril?" Chapter 3, pg. 40

"Dear cousin,/ You are the last of our line, the noble Waegmundings,/ Royal house of Sweden. The rest has Fate/ Swept to their doom." Chapter 3, pg. 44

"Of all the kings in the world/ Beowulf they named the mightiest in valor, in his ways/ The mildest, most kind to his people and keenest for/ praise." Chapter 3, pg. 48



Topics for Discussion

1. The Old English poem Beowulf is usually considered to be an epic. What epic qualities are found in Serrailier's retelling of the Beowulf story? What qualities found in other famous epics does it lack?

2. In the world created in the poem, what qualities is the hero expected to possess? Besides Beowulf, what other characters have some of these qualities?

Which qualities do they have?

3. Why is Beowulf eager to come to the aid of others in the poem?

4. Does Beowulf change in the course of the poem?

5. Which particular human emotions are most often revealed in this poem?

Which common human emotions are absent from the poem?

6. In the original Old English poem, the desire for revenge is especially important. How important is revenge in Serrailier's version of the poem?

7. What is the role of material goods and possessions in the poem?

8. What roles do women play in the poem?

9. To what extent can this poem be viewed as a "conduct book"—one designed to influence human behavior?



Essay Topics

Discuss Beowulf's initial motivation for traveling to Denmark. Does he accomplish his goal? What else does he accomplish?

What is the role of religion in *Beowulf*? How do Beowulf's actions illuminate this role and what seems to be the author's attitude toward religion? Does that attitude change between the three parts?

Explain why Beowulf wills his sword to Unferth even though the other has insulted his honor. Compare this treatment of a coward to Wiglaf's treatment of the eleven soldiers who fled the scene at the battle of the dragon. What do these separate reactions say about each of the two men?

What are the differences in the killing styles of Grendel and his mother? What do these differences say about each monster?

Is the fire-dragon a villain of the same caliber of Grendel and his mother or is he more of an elemental force?

What is Beowulf's greatest failure as a king? Explain how that failure relates to the notion of leadership in *Beowulf*.

In what ways does the third part of *Beowulf* differ from the first two? Given these differences, is there any reason to suspect that the third part might have had another author?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. There are several other modern adaptations of Beowulf— by such authors as Rosemary Sutcliff, Kevin Crossley-Holland, William Leonard, Burton Raffel, Stanley Greenfield, and Robert Nye. Compare the depiction of a single scene or a single character in one of these other versions with Ian Serrailier's handling of the same scene or character. Which do you prefer? Why?
2. Consider the use of violence in the poem. Is it necessary? What does it contribute?
3. Compare the figure of Beowulf with the figure of Roland in Serrailier's Ivory Horn, an adaptation of the Old French epic The Song of Roland. Is it necessary that both of these characters die?
4. Compare the "heroic" qualities of Beowulf with the "chivalric" qualities of Sir Gawain in Serrailier's Challenge of the Green Knight, an adaptation of Sir Gauzsin and the Green Knight, a famous Middle English romance. What characteristics do these two "codes" have in common? How do they differ? For which of these heroes do you have greater sympathy?
5. Where is realism found in the poem?

What does it contribute to the poem?

What is its effect on the tone of the poem?

Further Study

Chadwick, H. M. *The Heroic Age*. 1912.

Reprint. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1974. This scholarly work of long standing remains one of the best studies of the early Germanic culture reflected in *Beowulf*.

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Tolkien, J. R. R. "Beowulf. The Monster and the Critics." In *An Anthology of "Beowulf" Criticism*, edited by Lewis B. Nicholson. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963. Tolkien's essay from 1937 is still hailed as one of the best discussions of the poem. It may be found in an abbreviated form in the Tuso edition of *Beowulf* cited below.

Tuso, Joseph, ed. *"Beowulf": A Norton Critical Edition*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1975. This convenient paperback text contains a prose translation of the Old English poem by the eminent American scholar E. T. Donaldson. It also contains articles on the background and sources of *Beowulf* and critical articles about the poem. It has a useful selected bibliography and valuable appendices.

Related Titles

Among Ian Serrailier's other writings based on medieval sources are several verse narratives that relate the exploits of a famous central character. The Ivory Horn, an adaptation of the Old French epic *The Song of Roland*, depicts the heroic actions and death of Roland, the most preeminent of Charlemagne's knights. In *The Challenge of the Green Knight* (adapted from the Middle English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), Serrailier retells one of the greatest adventures involving the figure of Sir Gawain, one of King Arthur's most valued knights. The adventures of the quasi-historical figure Robin Hood are treated in two of Serrailier's volumes, *Robin in the Greenwood* and *Robin and His Merry Men*. These volumes are based upon the ballads of Robin Hood that originated in early times.



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