

With Grendel's mother destroyed, peace is restored to the land of the Danes, and Beowulf, laden with Hrothgar's gifts, returns to the land of his own people, the Geats. After his uncle and cousin die, Beowulf becomes king of the Geats and rules in peace and prosperity for 50 years. One day, however, a fire-breathing dragon that has been guarding a treasure for hundreds of years is disturbed by a thief, who enters the treasure tower and steals a cup. The dragon begins terrorizing the Geats, and Beowulf, now an old man, takes on the challenge of fighting it.



Viking cup, silver and gilt

BEOWULF'S LAST BATTLE

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.”

610

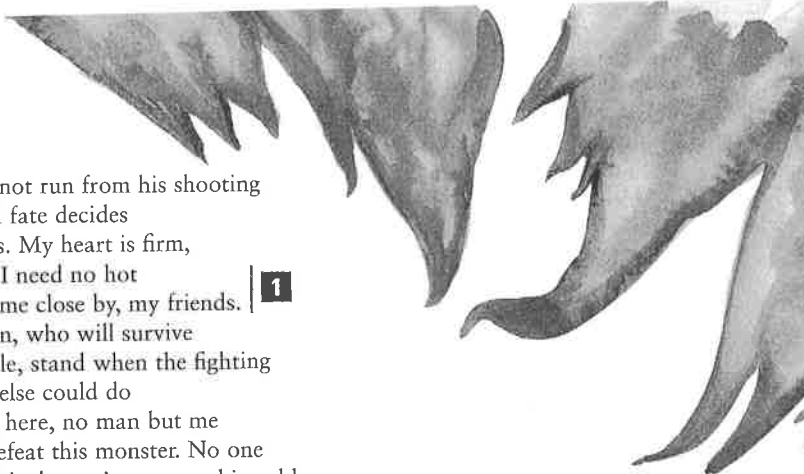
A

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

615

B



620 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
2 Words. Wait for me close by, my friends. | 1
625 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
630 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,
635 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
640 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'
645 Lord and leader, angry, lowered
His sword and roared out a battle cry,
A call so loud and clear that it reached through

3 The hoary rock, hung in the dragon's
Ear. The beast rose, angry,
650 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
655 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
660 Were ready, each set on slaughter. The Geats'
Great prince stood firm, unmoving, prepared

648 hoary (hōr'ē): gray with age.

1

665 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
 670 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
 675 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
 680 Had failed him, deserted him, now when he needed it
 Most, that excellent sword. Edgeth's
 Famous son stared at death,
 Unwilling to leave this world, to exchange it
 For a dwelling in some distant place—a journey
 685 Into darkness that all men must make, as death
 Ends their few brief hours on earth.

2

Quickly, the dragon came at him, encouraged
 As Beowulf fell back; its breath flared,
 And he suffered, wrapped around in swirling
 690 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
 695 Remained, stood there, miserable, remembering,
 As a good man must, what kinship should mean.

B

C

His name was Wiglaf, he was Wexstan's son
 And a good soldier; his family had been Swedish,
 Once. Watching Beowulf, he could see
 700 How his king was suffering, burning. Remembering
 Everything his lord and cousin had given him,
 Armor and gold and the great estates
 Wexstan's family enjoyed, Wiglaf's

A

670-671 Why do you t
 Beowulf keeps fighting

678 ring-giver: king; lo
 man swore allegiance to
 Germanic lord in return
 protection, the lord typ
 bestowed a ring on his
 symbolize the bond.

Mind was made up; he raised his yellow
Shield and drew his sword. . . .

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!”

D 694–705 How is Wiglaf unlike Beowulf’s other subjects?

E 717–723 What does Wiglaf suggest is the reason Beowulf has failed to defeat the dragon?

Wiglaf joins Beowulf, who again attacks the dragon single-handed; but the remnant of his sword shatters, and the monster wounds him in the neck. Wiglaf then strikes the dragon, and he and Beowulf together finally succeed in killing the beast. Their triumph is short-lived, however, because Beowulf's wound proves to be mortal.

THE DEATH OF BEOWULF

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. Belovèd
 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."

B

C

737–738 What view of fate does the image of the unwinding convey?

D

741–763 What values are emphasized in Beowulf's speech?



Viking purse clip of gold, garnet, and glass, from Sutton Hoo ship burial

WORDS

TO livid (lĪV'Īd) *adj.* discolored; black and blue

KNOW



Gold buckle from Sutton Hoo ship burial, showing animals, snakes, and birds

Then Wexstan's son went in, as quickly
765 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
770 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;
775 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
780 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;
785 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.
Beowulf's dagger, his iron blade,
790 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
 795 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
 800 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:
 805 "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
 810 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
 815 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."
 820 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.
 825 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;
 830 He would sleep in the fire, soon. His soul
 Left his flesh, flew to glory. . . .
 And when the battle was over Beowulf's followers
 Came out of the wood, cowards and traitors,
 Knowing the dragon was dead. Afraid,
 835 While it spit its fires, to fight in their lord's

T

A

B

C

D

816 spit: a narrow point extending into a body of water

805–819 How will Beowulf continue to aid his people after his death?

833 In what sense are the followers traitors? Why have they betrayed?

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.
Wexstan's brave son stared at the traitors,
His heart sorrowful, and said what he had to:
"I say what anyone who speaks the truth
Must say. . . .

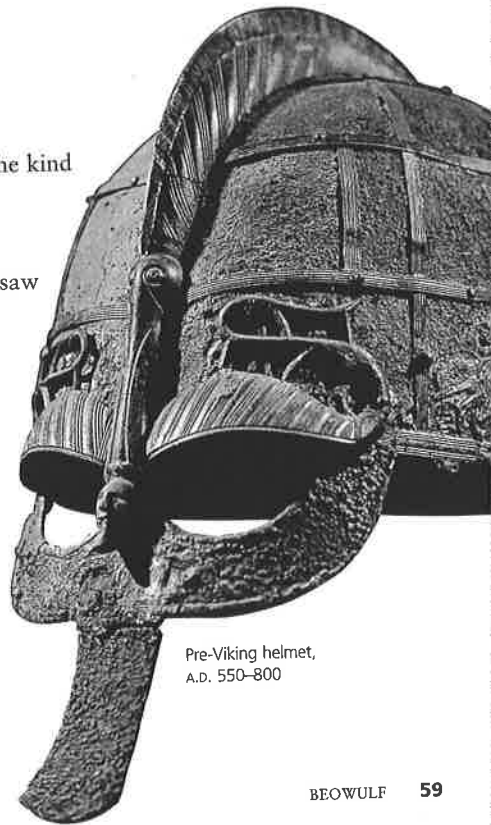
Too few of his warriors remembered
To come, when our lord faced death, alone.
And now the giving of swords, of golden
Rings and rich estates, is over,
Ended for you and everyone who shares
Your blood: when the brave Geats hear
How you bolted and ran none of your race
Will have anything left but their lives. And death
Would be better for them all, and for you, than the kind
Of life you can lead, branded with disgrace!" . . .

Then the warriors rose,
Walked slowly down from the cliff, stared
At those wonderful sights, stood weeping as they saw
Beowulf dead on the sand, their bold
Ring-giver resting in his last bed;
He'd reached the end of his days, their mighty
War-king, the great lord of the Geats,
Gone to a glorious death. . . .

836 javelins (jāv'lynz): light spears used as weapons.

837 jackals (jāk'eiz): doglike animals that sometimes feed on the flesh of dead beasts.

859 bolted: ran away; fled.




Pre-Viking helmet,
A.D. 550–800

MOURNING BEOWULF

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,
875 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
880 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
885 Rode their horses around the tower,
Telling their sorrow, telling stories
Of their dead king and his greatness, his glory,
Praising him for heroic deeds, for a life
As noble as his name. So should all men
890 Raise up words for their lords, warm
With love, when their shield and protector leaves
His body behind, sends his soul
On high. And so Beowulf's followers
Rode, mourning their beloved leader,
Crying that no better king had ever
895 Lived, no prince so mild, no man
So open to his people, so deserving of praise.

A

B



Ornamental bird used as decoration on a shield, from the Sutton Hoo ship burial

896 mild: gentle or kind
agree that Beowulf was ruler? Why or why not?