



Reconstruction of helmet
from Sutton Hoo ship burial

*After the banquet, Hrothgar and his
followers leave Herot, and Beowulf and
his warriors remain to spend the night.
Beowulf reiterates his intent to fight Grendel
without a sword and, while his followers sleep, lies
waiting, eager for Grendel to appear.*

THE BATTLE WITH GRENDEL

Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty
Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,
235 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
Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited Hrothgar's
240 Home before, knew the way—
But never, before nor after that night,
Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception

233–235 The translator uses punctuation to convey the effect of the midline pauses in the original Old English verses. How does the rhythm created by the midline punctuation reinforce the account of the action here?

So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless,
 Straight to the door, then snapped it open,
 245 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
 Gleamed in the darkness, burned with a gruesome
 250 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
 255 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
 260 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,
 265 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,
 270 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
 275 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:
 280 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
 285 Closer. The infamous killer fought

246 threshold: the strip of wood
 or stone at the bottom of a
 doorway.

WORDS **talon** (təl'ən) *n.* a claw
 TO **infamous** (ɪn'fə-mes) *adj.* having a bad reputation; notorious
 KNOW

For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,
 Desiring nothing but escape; his claws
 Had been caught, he was trapped. That trip to Herot
 Was a miserable journey for the writhing monster!
 290 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
 295 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
 300 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
 305 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
 In the darkness, the horrible shrieks of pain
 310 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.

278–289 Up to this point Grendel
 has killed his human victims easily.
 Why might he be trying to run
 away from Beowulf?

That mighty protector of men
 Meant to hold the monster till its life
 315 Leaped out, knowing the fiend was no use
 To anyone in Denmark. All of Beowulf's
 Band had jumped from their beds, ancestral
 Swords raised and ready, determined
 To protect their prince if they could. Their courage
 320 Was great but all wasted: they could hack at Grendel
 From every side, trying to open
 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
 325 Had bewitched all men's weapons, laid spells
 That blunted every mortal man's blade.

322–326 Why do you think no
 weapons can hurt Grendel?

WORDS **writhing** (rī'thīŋg) *adj.* twisting and turning in pain **writhe** *v.*
 TO **cowering** (kou'ə-rīŋg) *adj.* cringing in fear **cover** *v.*
 KNOW **taut** (tôt) *adj.* pulled tight

And yet his time had come, his days
 Were over, his death near; down
 To hell he would go, swept groaning and helpless
 330 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
 335 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
 340 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
 345 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,
 350 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
 355 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.

338 sinews (sīn'yōōz): the tendons that connect muscles to bones.

And then, in the morning, crowds surrounded
 360 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,
 365 Went tracing his bloody footprints, his beaten
 And lonely flight, to the edge of the lake
 Where he'd dragged his corpselike way, doomed
 And already weary of his vanishing life.

355-358 Why do you think Beowulf hangs Grendel's arm from the rafters?

The water was bloody, steaming and boiling
 370 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.

375 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.

380 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.
 (But no one meant Beowulf's praise to belittle

385 Hrothgar, their kind and gracious king!)
 And sometimes, when the path ran straight and clear,
 They would let their horses race, red
 And brown and pale yellow backs streaming
 Down the road. And sometimes a proud old soldier

390 Who had heard songs of the ancient heroes
 And could sing them all through, story after story,
 Would weave a net of words for Beowulf's
 Victory, tying the knot of his verses
 Smoothly, swiftly, into place with a poet's

395 Quick skill, singing his new song aloud
 While he shaped it, and the old songs as well. . . .

389–396 What role do poets seem to play in Beowulf's society?

Thinking Through the Literature

1. **Comprehension Check** What characteristics does Grendel have that make him particularly terrifying to the Danes?
 2. What impressions of Beowulf do you have after reading this part of the poem?
 3. What do you think causes Grendel to attack human beings?
- THINK ABOUT {

 - his relatives and ancestors
 - his actions and attitudes
 - the Danish warriors' reactions to him
4. Why do you think Beowulf offers to help a tribe other than his own, in spite of the danger?

WORDS TO KNOW
murky (mur'kē) *adj.* cloudy; gloomy
pilgrimage (pīl'grə-mīj) *n.* a journey to a sacred place or with a lofty purpose