

# Beowulf: An Epic Poem

## Introduction

The story of the hero Beowulf is the only surviving poem from Anglo-Saxon times. It is over 3,000 lines long and was written in Old English. The tale tells us about the Swedish hero Beowulf who spends his time fighting monsters (Grendel and his mother in particular) across Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

## The Poem

The poem is in three parts:

1. It opens when Beowulf travels to Denmark and kills the monster Grendel. The monster's mother decides to take revenge and attacks the King's hall, killing many soldiers, including the King's best friend.



2. Beowulf follows her to her underwater home and fights another long and exhausting battle. At last he grabs a magical sword from her and kills her too.



3. 50 years later, Beowulf is now king of his own kingdom, but his people are being threatened by a fierce dragon. Once more, Beowulf takes his warriors and sets off to fight. Beowulf is wounded, but eventually manages to cut the beast in half with his sword.

## A translation of part of the poem

### Grendel the Murderer

{Grendel attacks the sleeping heroes}

When the sun was sunken, he set out to visit  
 The lofty hall-building, how the Ring-Danes had used it  
 For beds and benches when the banquet was over.  
 Then he found there reposing many a noble  
 Asleep after supper; sorrow the heroes,  
 Misery knew not. The monster of evil  
 Greedy and cruel tarried but little.



{Grendel drags off thirty of them, and devours them}

Fell and frantic, and forced from their slumbers  
 Thirty of thanemen; thence he departed  
 Leaping and laughing, his lair to return to,  
 With surfeit of slaughter sallying homeward.  
 In the dusk of the dawning, as the day was just breaking,  
 Was Grendel's prowess revealed to the warriors.

### When was the poem created and written down?

As it was so long ago, it is really difficult to say for sure when it was created. At that time, poems and stories were told by travelling minstrels as most people could not read or write. The poem must have been passed down, being changed by each storyteller, until the surviving copy was written down by two people, somewhere in Anglo-Saxon England about 1000 years ago.

# Questions

1. Who is the text about?

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2. In which country did he live?

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3. In the text, what is the writing in bold called?

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4. In what language was the poem written?

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5. How many monsters did the hero fight in the poem?

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6. Look at the text box with part of the poem. Can you find and record words which tell you what time of day the monster returned home to his lair (home)?

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7. Where was the poem first written down and by whom?

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8. How do historians know that there were two people who wrote the poem?

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9. Can you find examples of words that tell you the order of some of the events?

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10. Draw a picture of what you think Beowulf would have looked like and what he may have worn.

# Answers

1. Who is the text about?  
**The text is about the Saxon hero Beowulf.**
2. In which country did he live?  
**Beowulf lived in Sweden.**
3. In the text, what is the writing in bold called?  
**The parts of the text in bold is headings and sub-headings.**
4. In what language was the poem written?  
**Beowulf was written in Old English.**
5. How many monsters did the hero fight in the poem?  
**Beowulf killed three monsters (Grendel, his mother and the dragon).**
6. Look at the text box with part of the poem. Can you find and record words which tell you what time of day the monster returned home to his lair (home)?  
**In the dusk of the dawning, as the day was just breaking.**
7. Where was the poem first written down and by whom?  
**The poem was written somewhere in Anglo-Saxon England by scribes.**
8. How do historians know that there were two people who wrote the poem?  
**Historians looked at the handwriting and could tell it was by two different people.**
9. Can you find examples of words that tell you the order of some of the events?  
**Words that tell the order of events are; opens, eventually, 50 years later.**
10. Draw a picture of what you think Beowulf would have looked like and what he may have worn.

# Beowulf: An Epic Poem

## Introduction

The story of the hero Beowulf is the only surviving complete poem from Anglo-Saxon times. It is over 3000 lines long and was written by an Anglo-Saxon poet (minstrel) in the language of Old English. The tale tells of the life and adventures of the Swedish hero Beowulf who spends his time fighting monsters (Grendel and his mother in particular) across Denmark, Norway and Sweden (Scandinavia).



## The Poem

The poem is set in three parts and opens with Grendel terrorising the people of Denmark. In the nearby country of Sweden, the prince of the Geats (in southern Sweden), Beowulf, hears of the monster and takes his soldiers with him setting sail to help the King (Hrothgar) and his people.

Unarmed, Beowulf fights the monster and after a long battle, he eventually wins by ripping off its arm. The Danish people are overjoyed and celebrate in the King's hall with Beowulf, but Grendel's mother has plans of her own.

She takes revenge on Hrothgar by attacking the King's hall, killing the King's best friend and taking his body away, along with the arm of her dead son. Beowulf follows her to her underwater lair (home) and fights another long and exhausting battle. At last, he grabs a magical sword from her and kills her too. Beowulf and his soldiers set sail for home in Sweden.



50 years later, Beowulf is now king of the Geats and his own kingdom is being threatened by a fierce dragon. Once more, Beowulf takes his soldiers and sets off to fight. The battle is fierce and all of the soldiers except one run for their lives. Beowulf is wounded, but still manages to cut the beast in half with his sword.



## A translation of part of the poem

### Grendel the Murderer

{Grendel attacks the sleeping heroes}

When the sun was sunken, he set out to visit  
 The lofty hall-building, how the Ring-Danes had used it  
 For beds and benches when the banquet was over.  
 Then he found there reposing many a noble  
 Asleep after supper; sorrow the heroes,  
 Misery knew not. The monster of evil  
 Greedy and cruel tarried but little.



{Grendel drags off thirty of them, and devours them}

Fell and frantic, and forced from their slumbers  
 Thirty of thanemen; thence he departed  
 Leaping and laughing, his lair to return to,  
 With surfeit of slaughter sallying homeward.  
 In the dusk of the dawning, as the day was just breaking,  
 Was Grendel's prowess revealed to the warriors.

### When was the poem composed and written down?

In Anglo-Saxon times, poems and stories were told by a travelling minstrel as most people could not read or write. The poem must have been passed down through the generations, being changed by each storyteller, until the existing copy was written down by two scribes somewhere in Anglo-Saxon England over 1000 years ago.

# Questions

1. Who is the text about and what nationality was he?

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2. Which group of people was he prince of?

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3. In the text, what are the sub-headings for?

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4. Look at the poem in the text box; what are the unusual shaped brackets { } for? Where might you have seen them before?

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5. Look at the poem in the text box. Can you find and record words which tell you when the monster arrived at the King's hall and when he returned to his lair?

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6. Using clues from the text, what do you think the word 'banquet' and 'slumber' mean?

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7. If the poem was not written down for many years, how did minstrels remember it? How much can you remember of the verse in the text box? Get a friend to test you.

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8. How can historians tell us how old something is by looking at the writing?

**Hint:** think about the vocabulary that is written down?

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9. From the poem in the text box, find and record examples of words that tell you the order of some of the events.

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10. How do you think that historians knew that two people wrote the poem down?

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11. Find and copy part of the text that interests you. Explain why you chose that part.

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# Answers

- Who is the text about and what nationality was he?  
**The text is about the hero Beowulf. He was Swedish.**
- Name the region in which he lived.  
**Beowulf was prince of the Geats.**
- In the text, what are the sub-headings for?  
**The sub-headings tell you what the next section of the text is about.**
- Look at the poem in the text box; what are the unusual shaped brackets { } for? Where might you have seen them before?  
**The brackets give more information about what is happening in the poem. They are also used for directions and to give more information in plays.**
- Look at the poem in the text box. Can you find and record words which tell you when the monster arrived at the King's hall and when he returned to his lair?  
**The monster arrived at the King's hall, 'when the sun was sunken' and returned to his lair, 'In the dusk of the dawning, as the day was just breaking'.**
- Using clues from the text, what do you think the word 'banquet' and 'slumber' mean?  
**A banquet is a grand meal and slumber means to sleep.**
- If the poem wasn't written down for many years, how did minstrels remember it? How much can you remember of the verse in the text box?  
**Minstrels repeated the poem so many times that they memorised it. Various answers.**
- How can historians tell us how old something is by looking at the words? Hint –think about the vocabulary that is written down?  
**The words that people use change over time, so historians can tell when they were first used. Just like today, some words come in and out of fashion.**
- From the poem in the text box, find and record examples of words that tell you the order of some of the events.  
**Words that order events are: eventually, at last and 50 years later.**
- How do you think historians knew that two people wrote the poem down?  
**Historians recognised the handwriting of the two scribes that wrote the poem down.**
- Find and copy part of the text that interests you. Explain why you chose that part.  
**Various answers that could include:**  
**Thirty of thanemen; thence he departed Leaping and laughing, his lair to return to, I like the thought that the monster could drag 30 warriors off to his lair at one time. He must have been big and strong and fierce to kill and take away that number of soldiers without being challenged himself.**

# Beowulf: An Epic Poem

## Introduction

The story of the hero Beowulf (written as an epic poem) is the only surviving complete poem from Anglo-Saxon times. It is over 3000 lines long and was written in Old English by an Anglo-Saxon poet (minstrel) or 'scop' (pronounced 'shop'). The tale tells of the life and adventures of one of the princes of Sweden, Beowulf, who spends his time fighting monsters (Grendel and his mother in particular) across Denmark, Norway and Sweden (Scandinavia).



## The Poem

The poem is set in three parts and opens with Grendel terrorising the people of Denmark. In the nearby country of Sweden, the prince of the Geats (a kingdom in southern Sweden), Beowulf, hears of the monster and takes his warriors (thanes) with him and sets sail to help the King (Hrothgar) and his people.

Beowulf fights the monster in unarmed combat and after a long battle, he eventually wins by ripping off its arm. The Danish people are overjoyed and celebrate in the King's hall with Beowulf, but Grendel's mother has plans of her own.

She takes revenge on Hrothgar by attacking the King's hall, killing the King's best friend (Aeschere) and taking his body away, along with the arm of her dead son. Beowulf follows her to her underwater lair and fights another long and exhausting battle. At last, he grabs a magical sword from her and kills her too. Beowulf and his warriors set sail for home in Sweden.



50 years later, Beowulf is now king of the Geats and his own kingdom is being threatened by a fierce dragon. Once more, Beowulf takes his warriors and sets off to fight. The battle is fierce and all of the soldiers except one (Wiglaf) flee. Beowulf is fatally wounded, but still manages to cut the beast in half with his sword.

## A translation of part of the poem

### Grendel the Murderer

{Grendel attacks the sleeping heroes}

When the sun was sunken, he set out to visit  
 The lofty hall-building, how the Ring-Danes had used it  
 For beds and benches when the banquet was over.  
 Then he found there reposing many a noble  
 Asleep after supper; sorrow the heroes,  
 Misery knew not. The monster of evil  
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{Grendel drags off thirty of them, and devours them}

Fell and frantic, and forced from their slumbers  
 Thirty of thanemen; thence he departed  
 Leaping and laughing, his lair to return to,  
 With surfeit of slaughter sallying homeward.  
 In the dusk of the dawning, as the day was just breaking,  
 Was Grendel's prowess revealed to the warriors.

### When was the poem composed and written down?

In Anglo-Saxon times, poems and stories were told by a travelling minstrel or scop as most people could not read or write. The poem must have been passed down through the generations, being modified by each storyteller, until the existing copy was written down by two scribes somewhere in Anglo-Saxon England over 1000 years ago.

# Questions

1. Which country and group of people was Beowulf prince of?

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2. Do you think ancient Scandinavian countries had only one king or many rulers? Find evidence from the text to support your answer.

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3. In the text, what are the sub-headings for? How does this help the reader?

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4. Look at the poem in the text box; what are the unusual shaped brackets { } for? Where might you have seen them before?

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5. Look at the poem in the text box. Can you find and record words which tell you when the monster arrived at the King's hall to begin his attack and when he returned to his lair (home)?

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6. Using clues from the text, what do you think the words 'reposing' and 'tarried' and 'surfeit' mean?

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7. Why does each new line of the poem begin with a capital letter?

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8. If the poem was not written down for many years after it was made up, how do you think minstrels remembered it? How do you think ancient people communicated with each other if there were no phones, newspapers or television?

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9. How can historians tell how old something is by looking at the words? Hint – think about the vocabulary that is written down.

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10. How do historians know there were two people who wrote the poem?

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11. Can you find six present tense verbs under the heading 'The poem' and record them in a table. Can you change them to past tense and record them too? Think about how you will set your table out.

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12. Some scholars believe Beowulf was an ancient day 'superhero'? Can you explain why they might think that?

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**Extension task:**

Do you think neighbouring countries should help each other out in battle, like Beowulf did for his Danish friends? What could happen if they did not want to? Explain your opinion.

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# Answers

1. Which country and group of people was Beowulf prince of?  
**Beowulf was prince of the Geats in southern Sweden.**
2. Do you think ancient Scandinavian countries had only one king or many rulers?  
**The text says the Geats lived in southern Sweden, so there must have been more than one kingdom and more than one ruler.**
3. In the text, what are the subheadings for? How does this help the reader?  
**The sub-headings tell you what the next section of the text is about. It helps direct the reader to information they may be interested in.**
4. Look at the poem in the text box; what are the unusual shaped brackets { } for? Where might you have seen them before?  
**The brackets give more information about what is happening in the poem. They are also used for directions and to give more information in plays.**
5. Look at the poem in the text box. Can you find and record words which tell you when the monster arrived at the King's hall and when he returned to his lair?  
**The monster arrived at the King's hall 'when the sun was sunken' and returned to his lair 'In the dusk of the dawning, as the day was just breaking'.**
6. Using clues from the text, what do you think the words 'reposing' and 'tarried' and 'surfeit' mean?  
**Reposing means resting, tarried means to stay and surfeit means a lot of something.**
7. Why does each new line of the poem begin with a capital letter?  
**In poetry, each new line starts with a capital letter even if it isn't the start of a sentence.**
8. If the poem was not written down for many years after it was made up, how do you think minstrels remembered it? How do you think ancient peoples communicated with each other if there were no phones, newspapers or television?  
**Minstrels told the poem so many times they memorised the words. They travelled from village to village telling stories and exchanging news.**
9. How can historians tell how old something is by looking at the writing? Hint – think about the vocabulary that is written down.  
**Historians know by the words that are used, how old a piece of writing is. Just like nowadays, words come in and out of fashion.**
10. How do historians know there were two people who wrote the poem?  
**Historians looked at the style of handwriting and could tell it was by just two people.**

11. Can you find 6 present tense verbs under the heading 'The poem' and record them in a table. Can you change them to past tense and record them too? Think about how you will set your table out.

**Various answers. For example; is/was, hears/heard, takes/took.**

12. Some scholars believe Beowulf was an ancient day 'superhero'? Can you explain why they might think that?

**Beowulf's strength and courage in the face of danger may lead scholars to believe he was an ancient day 'superhero'. He fought any monster that was threatening his people or his friends and neighbours and eventually died killing a dragon when all of his other warriors (except one) fled for their lives.**

### Extension task

Various opinions backed up with reasoning. Examples could be:

I think countries should help their neighbours out because if they don't then they may not have any help if they need it.

Or,

I do not think countries should help their neighbours out because if they do, they may make enemies out of their neighbours' enemies.