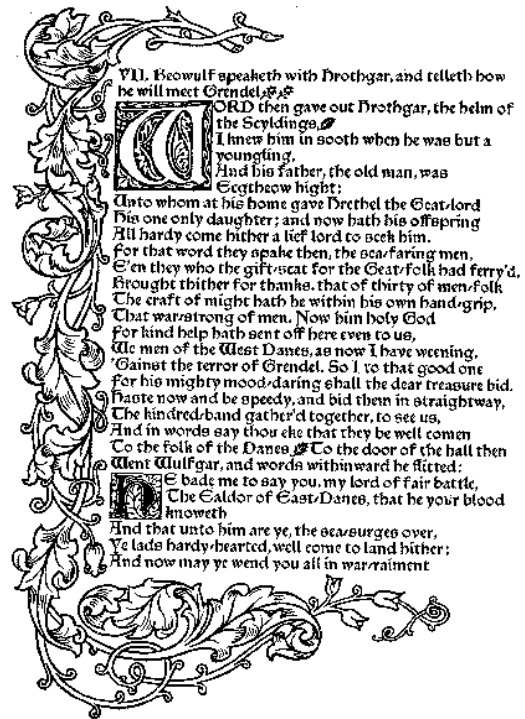


# Beowulf

*Beowulf is both the title and the main character of an ancient heroic epic, the oldest known epic story composed in the English language. Beowulf is a powerful warrior who lived in the 700's AD and comes to the aid of King Hrothgar of Denmark, whose hall (palace) is raided each night by the hideous man-eating ogre Grendel. The epic is probably a mixture of ancient Scandinavian (Viking) folk tales, put together by an unknown author sometime around the 900's AD.*

## A Brief Summary

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Hrothgar, king of the Danes (from Denmark), and his army are very powerful and successful in war. One day Hrothgar builds a large mead-hall, or palace, named "Heorot" for his army to stay in. Mead is a strong wine made with honey that he and his army really enjoy drinking, and Hrothgar is very pleased to have a place to party with his most loyal subjects. After they finish it, the guys in the army party like crazy.

Meanwhile Grendel, a huge and hideous ogre hears all these guys partying and becomes hatefully jealous. So one night he goes to the Heorot Hall and kills 30 of Hrothgar's people. Then for the next 12 years, Hrothgar is scared of the ogre Grendel. Hrothgar has no idea how to beat Grendel and no one is able to party anymore in his Heorot mead-hall.

Then Beowulf, a powerful warrior from Geatland (in what is now southern Sweden), hears about the ogre. Long ago, Hrothgar helped protect Beowulf's father during a deadly feud, so Beowulf hopes to return the favor to Hrothgar, and perhaps build up his own reputation as well. Beowulf gets 14 of his buddies (from Geats in Sweden) to come with him to slay Grendel.

Beowulf goes to Hrothgar's castle and is pretty arrogant about how easily he can kill the big ogre. One of Hrothgar's men, a drunken soldier named Unferth, insults Beowulf by saying that he isn't the great fighter he thinks he is. Beowulf gets mad and the two nearly start to rumble. To cool off the two arguing soldiers, King Hrothgar tells Beowulf that he will give him some money if he can kill Grendel. Beowulf, partly to repay Hrothgar for helping his father and partly to earn some money, accepts the job.

Beowulf and his men shack up for the night in the Heorot mead-hall, knowing that Grendel will eventually show up. He does, and kills one of Beowulf's men. Beowulf, with the strength of 30 men, starts fighting the ogre with his bare hands.

*Now the great room boomed. Clang and clatter shattered the night-silence Beowulf and Grendel lurched to and fro in their deathly tug-of-war. Tables and mead-benches were overturned, Grendel roared and snarled, and in the outbuildings Danes woke and listened in the darkness.*

*When the Geats saw that Grendel could not escape Beowulf's grip, they surrounded him and slashed at him with their swords.*

*Heorot flashed with battle-lights. Those warriors did not know that no kind of weapon, not even the finest iron on earth, could wound their enemy. His skin was like old rind, tough and almost hard; he had woven a secret spell against every kind of battle-blade.*

*Now Beowulf twisted Grendel's right arm behind his neck. He locked it and turned it, slowly he turned it, putting terrible pressure on Grendel's shoulder.*

*The monster bellowed and dropped to one knee. He jerked and his whole body shuddered and trembled. With superhuman strength he jerked again he tried to escape Beowulf's grip, he jerked and all at once, his right shoulder ripped. A ghastly tearing of muscle and sinew and flesh; a spurting of hot blood: the monster's arm came apart from his body. Grendel howled. He staggered away from Beowulf, and reeled out of the hall.*

The fatally wounded ogre, Grendel, rushes to his mother's underwater cave in a swamp and eventually dies of his wounds. Everyone in Hrothgar's kingdom is happy and they hold a ceremony to honor Beowulf. Grendel's arm is hung like a trophy in Hrothgar's mead-hall. King Hrothgar thanks Beowulf and pays him for a job well done. They get drunk, pass out, and enjoy what they think will be the first peaceful night in 12 years.

Meanwhile Grendel's mother is extremely irritated about the death of her son and wants revenge. The disgruntled mother goes to Hrothgar's Heorot mead-hall one night, sees her son's arm mounted on the wall, gets crazily angry, and kidnaps one of King Hrothgar's men. Beowulf, now really, really angry, gathers together his army buddies and goes with King Hrothgar to the swamp where Grendel's mother lives to rescue the king's advisor and kill the ogre. When Beowulf, Hrothgar, and the soldiers reach the swamp, they see King Hrothgar's advisor's head floating in the water.

Beowulf decides to dive into the swamp to hunt down Grendel's mother. Before he does, however, Unferth, the drunken soldier that nearly got into a fight with Beowulf earlier, gave Beowulf a magic sword, named Hrunting. Beowulf dives into the swamp. Near the bottom, Grendel's mother grabs the warrior and hauls him down into her underwater cave. Mighty though the magic sword Hrunting is, it cannot pierce the ogre's tough skin.

*Beowulf threw the monster to the ground. But then she tripped him, held him in a fearsome clinch, and drew a dagger. Beowulf could not throw her off. Then Grendel's mother stabbed at Beowulf's heart. She stabbed again. But the cunning links of chain-mail held firm and guarded Beowulf; his corslet saved him.*

*Now the Geat warrior sprang to his feet. He saw a sword, massive and double-edged, made by giants, lying in one corner of the chamber. It was so huge that only he of all men could have handled it.*

*Beowulf ran across the floor, gripped the ringed hilt, and swung the ornamented sword -- he struck Grendel's mother as she lumbered towards him. The blade slashed through her neck, smashed the vertebrae. The monster moaned and fell dead at his feet.*

A blessed light unexplainably illuminates the cavern, showing Grendel's dead body and a huge amount of treasure. Beowulf cuts Grendel's head off to take back to the Heorot mead-hall. This causes the magic sword to melt to its hilt. Beowulf returns to the surface of the swamp carrying Grendel's head and the hilt of the sword, but leaving the treasure behind.

Back at Hrothgar's mead-hall, everyone is happy and they have another feast. Beowulf boasts about his successes, and Hrothgar warns him about becoming too cocky. Again, for a job well done, King Hrothgar gives Beowulf some more reward money. Then Beowulf goes home to Geats (in Sweden) with his buddies and says goodbye to all the people in Denmark. Back at home Beowulf meets with his king, King Hygelac (King of Geats). Beowulf tells the king about the ogres (Grendel and his mother).

... Many years later ...

Beowulf becomes King of Geats and has now ruled for 50 years. Then one night, some guy steals a chalice (a decorated cup) from a fierce dragon. The dragon gets mad because it had been guarding the treasure for over 300 years and goes on a fire-breathing rampage, burning houses throughout the countryside. One of the houses the angry dragon burns is King Beowulf's castle! Beowulf grabs Naegling, his favorite sword, and goes to the dragon's cave to get revenge and kill the dragon. However, remember Beowulf is old and wrinkly now, so he is a weakling. The dragon bites Beowulf, sending poison throughout his body. Then Wiglaf, Beowulf's protégé (student or assistant), comes to the rescue to try to save Beowulf.

*The dragon welcomed Wiglaf with a blast of flame that set fire to his shield. The young warrior sweltered and crouched behind Beowulf's huge iron shield.*

*As the dragon wheeled, dragging its monstrous body, Beowulf stood up and crashed Naegling against its head. The sword point stuck in its skull! Then the serpent writhed and bucked and Naegling was not strong enough; it bent and it snapped.*

*Beowulf stared in dismay at his old grey-hued sword and at once the dragon lunged forward. It gripped Beowulf's neck between its sharp teeth. The old king was bathed in blood; it poured out of his arteries and veins.*

*Quickly Wiglaf took three strides and sank his sword into the dragon's belly. He buried it up to the hilt. The dragon gasped, and let go of Beowulf's neck, and at once the flames began to abate.*

*Then Beowulf fumbled for the deadly knife fastened to his corslet. He closed his eyes and swayed, then he launched himself forward, fell against the dragon, and slit its throat.*

*The serpent gurgled on its own blood. It jerked and shuddered; it lay still.*

Beowulf is hurt badly from the poisonous bite. On his deathbed, Beowulf gives his entire kingdom to Wiglaf and asks Wiglaf to bring the dragon's treasure to him. Then he asks Wiglaf to build a huge tower in his honor, where Beowulf's tomb will be. Beowulf dies.

Wiglaf yells at the army because they were wimps and ran away when they saw the dragon. Wiglaf then tells everyone that Beowulf is dead, and the people are scared that they will get attacked now that the king can no longer protect them. With Beowulf dead as a doorknob, Wiglaf builds the tower Beowulf requested and buries Beowulf with the dragon's treasure.

The End

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## Thorstein the Staff-Struck

An old Viking, named Thorarin, was living with his son, Thorstein, on a farm where they raised horses. An unpleasant man named Thord, who worked for the wealthy chieftain of the district around the village of Hóf, a man named Bjarni. Thord arranged a horse fight between one of his boss Bjarni's stallions and one of Thorstein's. During the fight, Thord, whose horse was losing, struck Thorstein on the forehead with a staff, causing Thorstein to bleed. Thorstein bandaged his head and asked that no one tell his quick-tempered father about the incident, but two other of Bjarni's men, Thorhall and Thorvald, kept joking about it and making fun of Thorstein, giving Thorstein the nickname "staff-struck."

Word of these happenings eventually reached old Thorarin, who confronted his son to find out the truth. After all, according to Viking tradition, revenge should be quickly carried out in response to such a disgrace. Ignoring Thorstein's suggestion that the hit might have been accidental, Thorarin calls his son Thorstein a coward and taunts him until Thorstein has no choice but to ride to the village of Hóf and deal with Thord, the man who struck him with the staff. When Thord refuses either to say he struck Thorstein by accident or to offer to pay Thorstein for his injuries, Thorstein kills Thord, announces the slaying to the villagers, and returns home to tell his father Thorarin. The next spring Bjarni the chieftain has Thorstein outlawed for the murder, partly to keep order and partly because Thord was one of his own workers. However, Thorstein ignores the order to move into exile and continues to work his farm and look after his father.

The autumn after Thorstein was outlawed, Bjarni overheard Thorhall and Thorvald (two of Bjarni's workers) gossiping among the farm hands, saying that it was a stain on Bjarni's honor to allow Thorstein to go on about his business without being punished for the murder of Thord. The next day Bjarni told Thorhall and Thorvald to ride over to Thorstein's farm and bring back Thorstein's head. As Bjarni expected, Thorhall and Thorvald's horses returned that evening with the bodies of Thorhall and Thorvald tied across their backs. Thorstein had killed them both.

That Yule (a winter festival), Bjarni's wife began to nag at him, claiming his men were starting to doubt the value of his support if he would not avenge the deaths of three of his own men (remember that Thorstein had killed Thord, Thorhall, and Thorvald). The next morning Bjarni took his sword and shield and rode to meet Thorstein. Although Bjarni's wife protested that he should ride without a group of men (as indeed was the custom when dealing with an outlaw), Bjarni insisted on going alone. When he reached Thorstein's farm, Bjarni demanded that he and Thorstein should fight a duel on the spot.

The two men began the duel with all the customary formalities and with great respect. Although they have no seconds (someone to help them if they get seriously injured) and the proper notice was not given, they observe the law of duels in taking alternating stabs at each other. First, Bjarni takes a stab at Thorstein, then, Thorstein lunges at Bjarni, and so on. Thorstein continually protests that he is no match for Bjarni and is willing to leave the country if Bjarni will take care of his father, Thorarin.

Bjarni finds the duel with Thorstein more difficult than he expected. When Bjarni asks for a break to get a drink of water, Thorstein brings them both new shields and offers Bjarni a better sword, saying the one he has been using can't be the one he fought with at the famous battle of Böðvarsdal (Bjarni was a well respected war hero). When Bjarni shatters Thorstein's shield with his next strike, Thorstein does the same to Bjarni's shield--and Bjarni now understands that Thorstein has been holding back throughout the fight. Bjarni declares he would consider himself repaid for the deaths of his three workers if Thorstein would take the place of the workers he killed, since he has the reputation of working as hard as three ordinary men. Seeing no reason to continue to fight, Thorstein accepts the offer to work for Bjarni.

All that remains now is to tell old Thorarin the news. Bjarni goes to greet old Thorarin in his bedroom, at first telling him that Thorstein has been killed. Bjarni also tells the old Viking that he will allow Thorarin to come live with him. The nearly blind old Viking Thorarin tells Bjarni to lean closer so they can shake hands on the deal, but Bjarni spots the dagger that Thorarin is planning to use on him and leaps back, calling him a miserable old fart! Thorarin wanted to kill Bjarni for two reasons: first to avenge the death of his son Thorstein (he wasn't really dead, but Bjarni had told Thorarin that he was because if Thorstein begins to work for Bjarni, Thorstein would no longer be able to look after Thorarin), and second because the Vikings believed that a warrior could automatically go to Valhalla (Heaven) by dying in combat.

Finally Bjarni arranges to have Thorstein enter Bjarni's service at Hóf, while Bjarni sends many workers to work old Thorarin's farm for the rest of his days.

The End