

## *Beowulf – from Spark Notes*

**full title** · *Beowulf*

**author** · Unknown

**type of work** · Poem

**genre** · Alliterative verse; elegy; resembles heroic epic, though smaller in scope than most classical epics

**language** · Anglo-Saxon (also called Old English)

**time and place written** · Estimates of the date of composition range between 700 and 1000 a.d.; written in England

**date of first publication** · The only manuscript in which *Beowulf* is preserved is thought to have been written around 1000 a.d.

**publisher** · The original poem exists only in manuscript form.

**narrator** · A Christian narrator telling a story of pagan times

**point of view** · The narrator recounts the story in the third person, from a generally objective standpoint—detailing the action that occurs. The narrator does, however, have access to every character's depths. We see into the minds of most of the characters (even Grendel) at one point or another, and the narrative also moves forward and backward in time with considerable freedom.

**tone** · The poet is generally enthusiastic about *Beowulf's* feats, but he often surrounds the events he narrates with a sense of doom.

**tense** · Past, but with digressions into the distant past and predictions of the future

**setting (time)** · The main action of the story is set around 500 a.d.; the narrative also recounts historical events that happened much earlier.

**setting (place)** · Denmark and Geatland (a region in what is now southern Sweden)

**protagonist** · *Beowulf*

**major conflict** · The poem essentially consists of three parts. There are three central conflicts: Grendel's domination of Heorot Hall; the vengeance of Grendel's mother after Grendel is slain; and the rage of the dragon after a thief steals a treasure that it has been guarding. The poem's overarching conflict is between close-knit warrior societies and the various menaces that threaten their boundaries.

**rising action** · Grendel's attack on Heorot, *Beowulf's* defeat of Grendel, and Grendel's mother's vengeful killing of Aeschere lead to the climactic encounter between *Beowulf* and Grendel's mother.

**climax** · *Beowulf's* encounter with Grendel's mother constitutes the moment at which good and evil are in greatest tension.

**falling action** · *Beowulf's* glorious victory over Grendel's mother leads King Hrothgar to praise him as a worthy hero and to advise him about becoming king. It also helps *Beowulf* to transform from a brazen warrior into a reliable king.

**themes** · The importance of establishing identity; tensions between the heroic code and other value systems; the difference between a good warrior and a good king

**motifs** · Monsters; the oral tradition; the mead-hall

**symbols** · The golden torque; the banquet

**foreshadowing** · The funeral of Shield Sheafson, with which the poem opens, foreshadows *Beowulf's* funeral at the poem's end; the story of Sigemund told by the scop, or bard, foreshadows *Beowulf's* fight with the dragon; the story of King Heremod foreshadows *Beowulf's* eventual ascendancy to kingship.