

A close-up photograph of a hand wearing a chainmail gauntlet, gripping the hilt of a sword. The hilt is made of dark wood or leather with a metal crossguard. The background is dark and textured, possibly a wall or a piece of fabric.

Beowulf

(Lines 144–300)

POETRY

Anglo-Saxon Tradition
(translated by Seamus Heaney)
8th to 11th Centuries

Introduction

studysync^{tv}

A foundational work of Old English literature dating from sometime between the 8th and 11th centuries, *Beowulf* narrates the deeds of a young nobleman from Geatland who comes to rid his Danish neighbors of a marauding monster, Grendel. In this modern translation of the epic poem, readers are introduced to Grendel's twelve-year reign of terror—and to the hero intent on stopping it—courtesy of poet and translator Seamus Heaney (1939–2013), the winner of the 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature. American poet Robert Lowell dubbed Heaney “the most important Irish poet since Yeats.”

“No counsellor could ever expect
fair reparation from those rabid hands.”

144 So Grendel ruled in defiance of right,
145 one against all, until the greatest house
146 in the world stood empty, a deserted wallstead.
147 For twelve winters, seasons of woe,
148 the lord of the Shieldings¹ suffered under
149 his load of sorrow; and so, before long,
150 the news was known over the whole world.
151 **Sad lays were sung about the beset king,**
152 the vicious raids and ravages of Grendel,
153 his long and unrelenting feud,
154 nothing but war; how he would never
155 parley or make peace with any Dane
156 nor stop his death-dealing nor pay the death-price.
157 No counsellor could ever expect
158 fair **reparation** from those rabid hands.
159 All were endangered; young and old
160 were hunted down by that dark death-shadow
161 who lurked and swooped in the long nights
162 on the misty moors; nobody knows
163 where these reavers from hell roam on their errands.

164 So Grendel waged his lonely war,
165 inflicting constant cruelties on the people,
166 atrocious hurt. He took over Heorot²,
167 haunted the glittering hall after dark,
168 but the throne itself, the treasure-seat,
169 he was kept from approaching; he was the Lord's outcast.

170 These were hard times, heart-breaking
171 for the prince of the Shieldings; powerful counsellors,
172 the highest in the land, would lend advice,
173 plotting how best the bold defenders

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SAMPLE ANNOTATION

Context and
Connotation –
Reference Materials

*The word **lays** looks like a plural noun, since it comes after the adjective **sad** and before the verb **were**. Also, I suspect that **lays** are like songs, since the poem says they are “sung.” I can try swapping **lays** for **songs** . . .*

1. **Shieldings** descendants of a legendary royal family of Danes
2. **Heorot** represents the seat of Hrothgar's power, a mead-hall that is also a residence for the king's warriors

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174 might resist and beat off sudden attacks.
 175 Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed
 176 offerings to idols, swore oaths
 177 that the killer of souls might come to their aid
 178 and save the people. That was their way,
 179 their heathenish hope; deep in their hearts
 180 they remembered hell. The Almighty Judge
 181 of good deeds and bad, the Lord God,
 182 Head of the Heavens and High King of the World,
 183 was unknown to them. Oh, cursed is he
 184 who in time of trouble has to thrust his soul
 185 in the fire's embrace, **forfeiting** help;
 186 he has nowhere to turn. But blessed is he
 187 who after death can approach the Lord
 188 and find friendship in the Father's embrace.

189 So that troubled time continued, woe
 190 that never stopped, steady **affliction**
 191 for Hafdane's son³, too hard an ordeal.

SAMPLE ANNOTATION

Comparative Reading

Heaney's translation sounds more contemporary and very different from the Old English and the Gummere translation: they sound more like a song. The Heaney translation is less connected to the alliterative sounds of the Old English translation and more focused on the themes of fear with words like "panic," "raids," and "terror."

192 There was panic after dark, people endured
 193 raids in the night, riven by the terror.

194 When he heard about Grendel, Hygelac's thane⁴
 195 was on home ground, over in Geatland.
 196 There was no one else like him alive.
 197 In his day, he was the mightiest man on earth,
 198 high-born and powerful. He ordered a boat
 199 that would ply the waves. He announced his plan:
 200 to sail the swan's road and search out that king,
 201 the famous prince who needed defenders.
 202 Nobody tried to keep him from going,
 203 no elder denied him, dear as he was to them.
 204 Instead, they inspected omens and spurred
 205 his ambition to go, whilst he moved about
 206 like the leader he was, enlisting men,
 207 the best he could find; with fourteen others
 208 the warrior boarded the boat as captain,
 209 a canny pilot along coast and currents.

210 Time went by, the boat was on water,
 211 in close under the cliffs.
 212 Men climbed eagerly up the gangplank,

3. **Hafdane's son** King Hrothgar

4. **Hygelac's thane** a noble who provided military assistance to the King of the Geats, Hygelac



213 sand churned in surf, warriors loaded
 214 a cargo of weapons, shining war-gear
 215 in the vessel's hold, then heaved out,
 216 away with a will in their wood-wreathed ship.
 217 Over the waves, with the wind behind her
 218 and foam at her neck, she flew like a bird
 219 until her curved prow had covered the distance
 220 and on the following day, at the due hour,
 221 those seafarers sighted land,
 222 sunlit cliffs, sheer crags
 223 and looming headlands, the landfall they sought.
 224 It was the end of their voyage and the Geats vaulted
 225 over the side, out on to the sand,
 226 and moored their ship. There was a clash of mail
 227 and a thresh of gear. They thanked God
 228 for that easy crossing on a calm sea.

229 When the watchman on the wall, the Shieldings' lookout
 230 whose job it was to guard the sea-cliffs,
 231 saw shields glittering on the gangplank
 232 and battle-equipment being unloaded
 233 he had to find out who and what
 234 the arrivals were. So he rode to the shore,
 235 this horseman of Hrothgar's, and challenged them
 236 in formal terms, **flourishing** his spear:

237 "What kind of men are you who arrive
 238 rigged out for combat in coats of mail,
 239 sailing here over the sea-lanes
 240 in your steep-hulled boat? I have been stationed
 241 as lookout on this coast for a long time.
 242 My job is to watch the waves for raiders,
 243 any danger to the Danish shore.
 244 Never before has a force under arms
 245 **disembarked** so openly—not bothering to ask
 246 if the sentries allowed them safe passage
 247 or the clan had consented. Nor have I seen
 248 a mightier man-at-arms on this earth
 249 than the one standing here: unless I am mistaken,
 250 he is truly noble. This is no mere
 251 hanger-on in a hero's armour.
 252 So now, before you fare inland
 253 as **interlopers**, I have to be informed
 254 about who you are and where you hail from.



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255 Outsiders from across the water,
 256 I say it again: the sooner you tell
 257 where you come from and why, the better.”

258 The leader of the troop unlocked his word-hoard;
 259 the distinguished one delivered this answer:
 260 “We belong by birth to the Geat people
 261 and owe allegiance to Lord Hygelac⁵.
 262 In his day, my father was a famous man,
 263 a noble warrior-lord named Ecgtheow.
 264 He outlasted many a long winter
 265 and went on his way. All over the world
 266 men wise in counsel continue to remember him.
 267 We come in good faith to find your lord
 268 and nation’s shield, the son of Hafdane.
 269 Give us the right advice and direction.
 270 We have arrived here on a great errand
 271 to the lord of the Danes, and I believe therefore
 272 there should be nothing hidden or withheld between us.
 273 So tell us if what we have heard is true
 274 about this threat, whatever it is,
 275 this danger abroad in the dark nights,
 276 this corpse-maker mongering death
 277 in the Shieldings’ country. I come to proffer
 278 my wholehearted help and counsel.
 279 I can show the wise Hrothgar a way
 280 to defeat his enemy and find respite—
 281 if any respite is to reach him, ever.
 282 I can calm the turmoil and terror in his mind.
 283 Otherwise, he must endure woes
 284 and live with grief for as long as his hall
 285 stands at the horizon, on its high ground.”

286 Undaunted, sitting astride his horse,
 287 the coast-guard answered, “Anyone with gumption
 288 and a sharp mind will take the measure
 289 of two things: what’s said and what’s done.
 290 I believe what you have told me: that you are a troop
 291 loyal to our king. So come ahead
 292 with your arms and your gear, and I will guide you.
 293 What’s more, I’ll order my own comrades
 294 on their word of honour to watch your boat
 295 down there on the strand—keep her safe

5. Lord Hygelac King of the Geats and Beowulf’s uncle

296 in her fresh tar, until the time comes
297 for her curved prow to preen on the waves
298 and bear this hero back to Geatland.
299 May one so valiant and venturesome
300 come unharmed through the clash of battle.”

Excerpted from *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* by Seamus Heaney,
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