

# 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.

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.