

Beowulf

Come here and listen well my weary-warriors, and I will tell you an epic tale that has been told for thousands of years before. Although it is an old story, you will soon discover that it terrifies and troubles us now as much as it ever did our ancestors, for we still fear the evil that stalks out there in the darkness and beyond.

Let us go back long, long ago, back to the fifth century after the birth of Christ, over the seas to the land of the Danes that you may know now as Norway and Denmark. Spine-chilling monsters roamed the misty moors. Across there lived a creature that was terrible to look upon. Grendel. Even his name was enough to turn stomachs. Greedy, ghastly, gruesome; it had claws like knives, burning eyes and an unhoty stench. The beast lived in a derelict swamp, which he shared with a forest of misshapen alder trees and little else.

The king of the Danes, named Hrothgar, came to the throne after his father, King Healfdene, died. Like his father, and his father before him, Hrothgar was a fierce warlord and refused to be scared of the horrors that took refuge in his lands. Because of this bravery, his kingdom prospered from his treasures brought back from his conquests. His land and its people were safe, well-fed and happy. To celebrate this, he decided to build a grand banqueting hall on the edge of Grendel's swamp. As he was a popular king, who had more friends than most kings tended to have, he decided that the hall would have to be larger and more splendid than any other in the land of Denmark. This was how Heorot came into being - Heorot the mead-hall, the home of feasting, singing and storytelling.

Night after night, the most valiant warriors were invited by the king to a lavish feast of roasted meats, jugs of frothing ale and music for dancing feet. Inside, the men ate and drank until they fell asleep, but outside something evil was rising... Outside the walls of Heorot in the dim and the dark, Grendel heard their celebrations from the depths of the swamp. He heard their laughter. He heard their joy. He heard their drinking songs and the music from their wretched harps. He smelt roasted boars' flesh, and he felt hunger gnaw at his belly like a rat in a trap. Nothing had ever so enraged this beast; it was more than his evil heart could bear.

The night Grendel struck was the darkest night of all. While the king and his men slept, he came stalking across the marshes and up to the great oak door. He pounced on the guards with such violence and fury that none could escape the terrible slaughter. Thirty lords were murdered in his bloodlust, as savage and swift in his death-dealing as a maddened fox in a chicken hut. He left not one of them alive, but carried them off home to his lair to feast on their blooded corpses at his leisure. Only the next day did Hrothgar and his warriors discover the dreadful evidence of the holocaust at Heorot. Gone was the laughter, gone was the music, gone was the merriment.

But the horrors were not yet over, for the next night Grendel came. However, this time the warriors had barricaded themselves and thought they would be safe. Grendel, again, burst in and slaughtered everyone he found there, gorging himself at will. He spared no one. He left nothing behind him but the taste of blood fear.

Reluctantly, the king abandoned the hall and left it deserted – the only guests left were the sparrows and gathering dust. Grendel ruled the night and the great Heorot stood empty for twelve winters.

By now, news of this tragedy spread far and wide to all the princes and kings of different lands. But only one of them, the greatest and bravest – Beowulf he was called – decided this night-beast must be stopped. He ordered a strong and seaworthy ship and hand-picked fourteen of the fiercest warriors he knew. His wooden ship carved through the whale-roads and when he landed, the warrior, who was dressed in a blue cloak over a silvery mail-shirt, leapt from the bow into the waves. Wasting no time, the stranger approached King Hrothgar.

“Who are you?” demanded the trembling king. Never had he seen a warrior so tall, so strong.

“I am Beowulf, son of Edgetheow, a famous fighter among my people, the Geats. I seek to add to that fame by destroying the terrible beast that has emptied your stately hall,” responded the warrior.

Sudden hope warmed the old king’s heart as he looked upon Beowulf standing there before him. “Well your name is known to me – and that of your father. I bid you welcome. I heard that you possess the strength of at least thirty men in each hand. I am thinking, and I am praying, that you might have been sent here to us by God himself to stand against Grendel, that fiend of the night. However, this beast has already taken at least ninety of my finest warriors. I fear your quest is hopeless.”

“Not so!” Beowulf replied with a broad smile. “Only last year I dealt death to five giants, broke their necks with my bare hands. I did the same to dozens of sea-serpents who plagued our waters.” Beowulf knelt nobly on one knee in front of the king and declared, “I am determined to drive out this evil once and for all, to bring peace and joy again to your kingdom. Be assured, I shall do all that is in my power to achieve this. It is my promise.”

After Beowulf’s promise, the Danes slowly and nervously returned to their grand hall. It was not too long before the sound of singing and laughter ran through the oaken beams once more. They roasted an ox, drank fine mead and many great stories were told.

Eventually, the Danes fell asleep. Half-awake, Beowulf waited in the great hall – he waited with clenched teeth. The great warrior had removed his coat and mail and given his sword to a servant. Gradually, shadows filled each corner, and sparrows settled in the rafters, quietly chattering for a moment. Then, the hall held its breath...

As darkness swallowed the light, the swamp bubbled and Grendel rose. Slipping silently through the marshes, Grendel came. Like a dark plague staining the fields, he dragged his terrible soul up to the hall and walked through the door. Beowulf crouched in the shadows, his steely eyes fixed on the murdering monster. Beowulf had expected Grendel to make straight for him. Instead, the creature seized a young soldier who had fallen asleep against the door. As he awoke, this unfortunate youth was being torn into chunks of flesh and devoured.

Only then, driven to a brutal frenzy by the taste of blood, did Grendel attack Beowulf. At once, the monster knew that he had made a fatal mistake. Without a weapon, Beowulf pounced and gripped the creature's arm with strength that seemed impossible in a human. Suddenly afraid, Grendel writhed and thrashed and tried to pull away and slither back into the darkness in which he had been born, but it was too late; Beowulf would not let go. Struggle though he might, Grendel could not escape.

The hall shuddered. The benches shattered. Grendel howled. He howled in terror and sobbed in pain. Soon Grendel was screaming at Beowulf, and their heads were almost touching. Yet, Beowulf still did not let go. The monster, who had never once known fear, had now discovered unimaginable terror. Grendel had to get away from the impossible human who held him in a savage grip. Away he went – snapping the tendons in his own shoulder, unlocking the bones and tearing the skin. When the creature fled from Heorot, his arm was left behind. Grendel was defeated.

Still howling with pain, Grendel, his life-blood flowing from his shoulder, slouched back into the swamp to bathe his bleeding stump. By dawn, the twisted creature was dead. Never again would the creature return. Meanwhile, Beowulf nailed his dreadful trophy to a beam where it stayed for many months, rotting away until in the end there was nothing left but a stain.

Of course, Grendel's death was not the end of the story; deep in the marsh, Grendel's mother had watched him die. Now she wanted revenge... But that is another story for another time.