

Then Hrothgar left that hall, the Danes'
Great protector, followed by his court; the queen
Had preceded him and he went to lie at her side,
Seek sleep near his wife. It was said that God
Himself had set a sentinel in Herot,
Brought Beowulf as a guard against Grendel and a shield
Behind whom the king could safely rest.

And Beowulf was ready, firm with our Lord's
High favor and his own bold courage and strength.

He stripped off his mail shirt, his helmet, his sword
Hammered from the hardest iron, and handed
All his weapons and armor to a servant,
Ordered his war-gear guarded till morning.
And then, standing beside his bed,
He exclaimed:

"Grendel is no braver, no stronger
Than I am! I could kill him with my sword; I shall not,
Easy as it would be. This fiend is a bold
And famous fighter, but his claws and teeth
Scratching at my shield, his clumsy fists
Beating at my sword blade, would be helpless. I will meet him
With my hands empty—unless his heart
Fails him, seeing a soldier waiting
Weaponless, unafraid. Let God in His wisdom
Extend His hand where He wills, reward
Whom He chooses!"

Then the Geats' great chief dropped
His head to his pillow, and around him, as ready
As they could be, lay the soldiers who had crossed the sea
At his side, each of them sure that he was lost
To the home he loved, to the high-walled towns
And the friends he had left behind where both he
And they had been raised. Each thought of the Danes
Murdered by Grendel in a hall where Geats
And not Danes now slept. But God's dread-loom
Was woven with defeat for the monster, good fortune
For the Geats; help against Grendel was with them,
And through the might of a single man
They would win. Who doubts that God in His wisdom
And strength holds the earth forever
In His hands? Out in the darkness the monster
Began to walk. The warriors slept
In that gabled hall where they hoped that He
Would keep them safe from evil, guard them
From death till the end of their days was determined

And the thread should be broken. But Beowulf lay wakeful,
Watching, waiting, eager to meet
His enemy, and angry at the thought of his coming.

The Battle with Grendel

Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty
Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,
Grendel came, hoping to kill
Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot.
He moved quickly through the cloudy night,
Up from his swampland, sliding silently
Toward that gold-shining hall. He had visited Hrothgar's
Home before, knew the way—
But never, before nor after that night,
Found Herot defended so firmly, his reception
So harsh. He journeyed, forever joyless,
Straight to the door, then snapped it open,
Tore its iron fasteners with a touch
And rushed angrily over the threshold.
He strode quickly across the inlaid
Floor, snarling and fierce: his eyes
Gleamed in the darkness, burned with a gruesome
Light. Then he stopped, seeing the hall
Crowded with sleeping warriors, stuffed
With rows of young soldiers resting together.
And his heart laughed, he relished the sight,
Intended to tear the life from those bodies
By morning: the monster's mind was hot
With the thought of food and the feasting his belly
Would soon know. But fate, that night, intended
Grendel to gnaw the broken bones
Of his last human supper. Human
Eyes were watching his evil steps,
Waiting to see his swift hard claws.
Grendel snatched at the first Geat
He came to, ripped him apart, cut
His body to bits with powerful jaws,
Drank the blood from his veins and bolted
Him down, hands and feet; death
And Grendel's great teeth came together,

Snapping life shut. Then he stepped to another
Still body, clutched at Beowulf with his claws,
Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful sleeper
—And was instantly seized himself, claws
Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm.

That shepherd of evil, guardian of crime,
Knew at once that nowhere on earth
Had he met a man whose hands were harder;
His mind was flooded with fear—but nothing
Could take his talons and himself from that tight
Hard grip. Grendel's one thought was to run
From Beowulf, flee back to his marsh and hide there:
This was a different Herot than the hall he had emptied.
But Higlac's follower remembered his final
Boast and, standing erect, stopped
The monster's flight, fastened those claws
In his fists till they cracked, clutched Grendel
Closer. The infamous killer fought
For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,
Desiring nothing but escape; his claws
Had been caught, he was trapped. That trip to Herot
Was a miserable journey for the writhing monster!

The high hall rang, its roof boards swayed,
And Danes shook with terror. Down
The aisles the battle swept, angry
And wild. Herot trembled, wonderfully
Built to withstand the blows, the struggling
Great bodies beating at its beautiful walls;
Shaped and fastened with iron, inside
And out, artfully worked, the building
Stood firm. Its benches rattled, fell
To the floor, gold-covered boards grating
As Grendel and Beowulf battled across them.
Hrothgar's wise men had fashioned Herot
To stand forever; only fire,
They had planned, could shatter what such skill had put
Together, swallow in hot flames such splendor
Of ivory and iron and wood. Suddenly
The sounds changed, the Danes started
In new terror, cowering in their beds as the terrible
Screams of the Almighty's enemy sang
In the darkness, the horrible shrieks of pain
And defeat, the tears torn out of Grendel's
Taut throat, hell's captive caught in the arms
Of him who of all the men on earth
Was the strongest. . . .

That mighty protector of men
Meant to hold the monster till its life
Leaped out, knowing the fiend was no use
To anyone in Denmark. All of Beowulf's
Band had jumped from their beds, ancestral
Swords raised and ready, determined
To protect their prince if they could. Their courage
Was great but all wasted: they could hack at Grendel
From every side, trying to open
A path for his evil soul, but their points
Could not hurt him, the sharpest and hardest iron
Could not scratch at his skin, for that sin-stained demon
Had bewitched all men's weapons, laid spells
That blunted every mortal man's blade.
And yet his time had come, his days
Were over, his death near; down
To hell he would go, swept groaning and helpless
To the waiting hands of still worse fiends.
Now he discovered—once the afflictor
Of men, tormentor of their days—what it meant
To feud with Almighty God: Grendel
Saw that his strength was deserting him, his claws
Bound fast, Higlac's brave follower tearing at
His hands. The monster's hatred rose higher,
But his power had gone. He twisted in pain,
And the bleeding sinews deep in his shoulder
Snapped, muscle and bone split
And broke. The battle was over, Beowulf
Had been granted new glory: Grendel escaped,
But wounded as he was could flee to his den,
His miserable hole at the bottom of the marsh,
Only to die, to wait for the end
Of all his days. And after that bloody
Combat the Danes laughed with delight.
He who had come to them from across the sea,
Bold and strong-minded, had driven affliction
Off, purged Herot clean. He was happy,
Now, with that night's fierce work; the Danes
Had been served as he'd boasted he'd serve them; Beowulf,
A prince of the Geats, had killed Grendel,
Ended the grief, the sorrow, the suffering
Forced on Hrothgar's helpless people
By a bloodthirsty fiend. No Dane doubted
The victory, for the proof, hanging high
From the rafters where Beowulf had hung it, was the monster's
Arm, claw and shoulder and all. . . .

And then, in the morning, crowds surrounded
 Herot, warriors coming to that hall
 From faraway lands, princes and leaders
 Of men hurrying to behold the monster's
 Great staggering tracks. They gaped with no sense
 Of sorrow, felt no regret for his suffering,
 Went tracing his bloody footprints, his beaten
 And lonely flight, to the edge of the lake
 Where he'd dragged his corpselike way, doomed
 And already weary of his vanishing life.
 The water was bloody, steaming and boiling
 In horrible pounding waves, heat
 Sucked from his magic veins; but the swirling
 Surf had covered his death, hidden
 Deep in murky darkness his miserable
 End, as hell opened to receive him.

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Then old and young rejoiced, turned back
 From that happy pilgrimage, mounted their hardhooved
 Horses, high-spirited stallions, and rode them
 Slowly toward Herot again, retelling
 Beowulf's bravery as they jogged along.
 And over and over they swore that nowhere
 On earth or under the spreading sky
 Or between the seas, neither south nor north,
 Was there a warrior worthier to rule over men.

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Getting at Meaning

RECALLING, INTERPRETING, CRITICAL THINKING

PROLOGUE

1. Who is Shild? What kind of person is he? Support your conclusions with evidence from the selection.
2. Describe Shild's burial. What do the burial rituals suggest about the cultural values of the Danes?
3. Trace the genealogy from Shild to Hrothgar. What seems to be Hrothgar's major talent?

GRENDDEL

4. What contrast is established in the "poet's song" that begins this section? What is the effect of this contrast?
5. How is the existence of Grendel explained?
6. Describe Grendel's assaults on Herot. How long do they last? What is their result?
7. "The bloody feud" refers to the war between Grendel and the Danes and also indirectly to an

ancient war between good and evil. If Grendel is evil, what evidence suggests that Hrothgar is on the side of "good"?

BEOWULF

8. What are your first impressions of Beowulf, based on his opening address to Hrothgar?
9. What are the conditions under which Beowulf will fight Grendel?
10. In what sense is Beowulf proud? In what sense is he humble?

THE BATTLE WITH GRENDDEL

11. In which lines is the reader told who is going to win the battle? What words and phrases create an ominous atmosphere at the beginning of this section?
12. What evidence in this section supports the conclusion that ". . . of all the men on earth/ [Beowulf] Was the strongest"?

Grendel's Mother

Although one monster has died, another still lives. Grendel's mother, living in a murky cold lake, has brooded on her loss until, finally, she emerges from her den bent on revenge.

. . . So she reached Herot,
 Where the Danes slept as though already dead;
 Her visit ended their good fortune, reversed
 The bright vane of their luck. No female, no matter
 How fierce, could have come with a man's strength,
 Fought with the power and courage men fight with,
 Smashing their shining swords, their bloody,
 Hammer-forged blades onto boar-headed helmets,
 Slashing and stabbing with the sharpest of points.
 The soldiers raised their shields and drew
 Those gleaming swords, swung them above
 The piled-up benches, leaving their mail shirts
 And their helmets where they'd lain when the terror took hold
 of them.

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To save her life she moved still faster,
 Took a single victim and fled from the hall,
 Running to the moors, discovered, but her supper
 Assured, sheltered in her dripping claws.
 She'd taken Hrothgar's closest friend,
 The man he most loved of all men on earth;
 She'd killed a glorious soldier, cut
 A noble life short. No Geat could have stopped her:
 Beowulf and his band had been given better
 Beds; sleep had come to them in a different
 Hall. Then all Herot burst into shouts:
 She had carried off Grendel's claw. Sorrow
 Had returned to Denmark. They'd traded deaths,
 Danes and monsters, and no one had won,
 Both had lost!

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The wise old king
 Trembled in anger and grief, his dearest
 Friend and adviser dead. Beowulf
 Was sent for at once: a messenger went swiftly
 To his rooms and brought him. He came, his band
 About him, as dawn was breaking through,
 The best of all warriors, walking to where Hrothgar
 Sat waiting, the gray-haired king wondering
 If God would ever end this misery.

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The Geats tramped quickly through the hall; their steps
Beat and echoed in the silence. Beowulf
Rehearsed the words he would want with Hrothgar;
He'd ask the Danes' great lord if all
Were at peace, if the night had passed quietly.

Beowulf spoke:

"Let your sorrow end! It is better for us all
To avenge our friends, not mourn them forever.
Each of us will come to the end of this life
On earth; he who can earn it should fight
For the glory of his name; fame after death
Is the noblest of goals. Arise, guardian
Of this kingdom, let us go, as quickly as we can,
And have a look at this lady monster.
I promise you this: she'll find no shelter,
No hole in the ground, no towering tree,
No deep bottom of a lake, where her sins can hide.
Be patient for one more day of misery;
I ask for no longer."

The old king leaped
To his feet, gave thanks to God for such words.
Then Hrothgar's horse was brought, saddled
And bridled. The Danes' wise ruler rode,
Stately and splendid; shield-bearing soldiers
Marched at his side. The monster's tracks
Led them through the forest; they followed her heavy
Feet, that had swept straight across
The shadowy waste land, her burden the lifeless
Body of the best of Hrothgar's men.
The trail took them up towering, rocky
Hills, and over narrow, winding
Paths they had never seen, down steep
And slippery cliffs where creatures from deep
In the earth hid in their holes. Hrothgar
Rode in front, with a few of his most knowing
Men, to find their way. Then suddenly,
Where clumps of trees bent across
Cold gray stones, they came to a dismal
Wood; below them was the lake, its water
Bloody and bubbling. And the Danes shivered, . . .

They could see the water crawling with snakes,
Fantastic serpents swimming in the boiling
Lake, and sea beasts lying on the rocks
—The kind that infest the ocean, in the early
Dawn, often ending some ship's
Journey with their wild jaws. They rushed

Angrily out of sight, when the battle horns blew.
Beowulf aimed an arrow at one
Of the beasts, swimming sluggishly away,
And the point pierced its hide, stabbed
To its heart; its life leaked out, death
Swept it off. Quickly, before
The dying monster could escape, they hooked
Its thrashing body with their curved boar-spears,
Fought it to land, drew it up on the bluff,
Then stood and stared at the incredible waveroamer,
Covered with strange scales and horrible. Then Beowulf
Began to fasten on his armor,
Not afraid for his life but knowing the woven
Mail, with its hammered links, could save
That life when he lowered himself into the lake,
Keep slimy monsters' claws from snatching at
His heart, preserve him for the battle he was sent
To fight. Hrothgar's helmet would defend him;
That ancient, shining treasure, encircled
With hard-rolled metal, set there by some smith's
Long dead hand, would block all battle
Swords, stop all blades from cutting at him
When he'd swum toward the bottom, gone down in the surging
Water, deep toward the swirling sands.
And Unferth¹ helped him, Hrothgar's courtier
Lent him a famous weapon, a fine,
Hilted old sword named Hrunting; it had
An iron blade, etched and shining
And hardened in blood. No one who'd worn it
Into battle, swung it in dangerous places,
Daring and brave, had ever been deserted—
Nor was Beowulf's journey the first time it was taken
To an enemy's camp, or asked to support
Some hero's courage and win him glory.
Unferth had tried to forget his greeting
To Beowulf, his drunken speech of welcome;
A mighty warrior, he lent his weapon
To a better one. Only Beowulf would risk
His life in that lake; Unferth was afraid,
Gave up that chance to work wonders, win glory
And a hero's fame. But Beowulf and fear
Were strangers; he stood ready to dive into battle. . . .
Then Edgeth's² brave son spoke:

1. Unferth (un' fārth).
2. Edgeth: Beowulf's father.

"Remember,

Hrothgar, Oh knowing king, now
When my danger is near, the warm words we uttered,
And if your enemy should end my life
Then be, oh generous prince, forever
The father and protector of all whom I leave
Behind me, here in your hands, my beloved
Comrades left with no leader, their leader
Dead. And the precious gifts you gave me,
My friend, send them to Higlac. May he see
In their golden brightness, the Geats' great lord
Gazing at your treasure, that here in Denmark
I found a noble protector, a giver
Of rings whose rewards I won and briefly
Relished. And you, Unferth, let
My famous old sword stay in your hands:
I shall shape glory with Hrunting, or death
Will hurry me from this earth!"

As his words ended

He leaped into the lake, would not wait for anyone's
Answer; the heaving water covered him
Over. For hours he sank through the waves;
At last he saw the mud of the bottom.
And all at once the greedy she-wolf
Who'd ruled those waters for half a hundred
Years discovered him, saw that a creature
From above had come to explore the bottom
Of her wet world. She welcomed him in her claws,
Clutched at him savagely but could not harm him,
Tried to work her fingers through the tight
Ring-woven mail on his breast, but tore
And scratched in vain. Then she carried him, armor
And sword and all, to her home; he struggled
To free his weapon, and failed. The fight
Brought other monsters swimming to see
Her catch, a host of sea beasts who beat at
His mail shirt, stabbing with tusks and teeth
As they followed along. Then he realized, suddenly,
That she'd brought him into someone's battle-hall,
And there the water's heat could not hurt him,
Nor anything in the lake attack him through
The building's high-arching roof. A brilliant
Light burned all around him, the lake
Itself like a fiery flame.

Then he saw
The mighty water witch, and swung his sword,

His ring-marked blade, straight at her head;
The iron sang its fierce song,
Sang Beowulf's strength. But her guest
Discovered that no sword could slice her evil
Skin, that Hrunting could not hurt her, was useless
Now when he needed it. They wrestled, she ripped
And tore and clawed at him, bit holes in his helmet,
And that too failed him; for the first time in years
Of being worn to war it would earn no glory;
It was the last time anyone would wear it. But Beowulf
Longed only for fame, leaped back
Into battle. He tossed his sword aside,
Angry; the steel-edged blade lay where
He'd dropped it. If weapons were useless he'd use
His hands, the strength in his fingers. So fame
Comes to the men who mean to win it
And care about nothing else! He raised
His arms and seized her by the shoulder; anger
Doubled his strength, he threw her to the floor.
She fell, Grendel's fierce mother, and the Geats'
Proud prince was ready to leap on her. But she rose
At once and repaid him with her clutching claws,
Wildly tearing at him. He was weary, that best
And strongest of soldiers; his feet stumbled
And in an instant she had him down, held helpless.
Squatting with her weight on his stomach, she drew
A dagger, brown with dried blood, and prepared
To avenge her only son. But he was stretched
On his back, and her stabbing blade was blunted
By the woven mail shirt he wore on his chest.
The hammered links held; the point
Could not touch him. He'd have traveled to the bottom of
the earth,
Edgetho's son, and died there, if that shining
Woven metal had not helped—and Holy
God, who sent him victory, gave judgment
For truth and right, Ruler of the Heavens,
Once Beowulf was back on his feet and fighting.
Then he saw, hanging on the wall, a heavy
Sword, hammered by giants, strong
And blessed with their magic, the best of all weapons
But so massive that no ordinary man could lift
Its carved and decorated length. He drew it
From its scabbard, broke the chain on its hilt,
And then, savage, now, angry
And desperate, lifted it high over his head

And struck with all the strength he had left,
Caught her in the neck and cut it through,
Broke bones and all. Her body fell
To the floor, lifeless, the sword was wet
With her blood, and Beowulf rejoiced at the sight.

The brilliant light shone, suddenly,
As though burning in that hall, and as bright as Heaven's
Own candle, lit in the sky. He looked
At her home, then following along the wall
Went walking, his hands tight on the sword,
His heart still angry. He was hunting another
Dead monster, and took his weapon with him
For final revenge against Grendel's vicious
Attacks, his nighttime raids, over
And over, coming to Herot when Hrothgar's
Men slept, killing them in their beds,
Eating some on the spot, fifteen
Or more, and running to his loathsome moor
With another such sickening meal waiting
In his pouch. But Beowulf repaid him for those visits,
Found him lying dead in his corner,
Armless, exactly as that fierce fighter
Had sent him out from Herot, then struck off
His head with a single swift blow. The body
Jerked for the last time, then lay still.

The wise old warriors who surrounded Hrothgar,
Like him staring into the monsters' lake,
Saw the waves surging and blood
Spurting through. They spoke about Beowulf,
All the graybeards, whispered together
And said that hope was gone, that the hero
Had lost fame and his life at once, and would never
Return to the living, come back as triumphant
As he had left; almost all agreed that Grendel's
Mighty mother, the she-wolf, had killed him.
The sun slid over past noon, went further
Down. The Danes gave up, left
The lake and went home, Hrothgar with them.
The Geats stayed, sat sadly, watching,
Imagining they saw their lord but not believing
They would ever see him again.

—Then the sword
Melted, blood-soaked, dripping down
Like water, disappearing like ice when the world's
Eternal Lord loosens invisible
Fetters and unwinds icicles and frost

As only He can, He who rules
Time and seasons, He who is truly
God. The monsters' hall was full of
Rich treasures, but all that Beowulf took
Was Grendel's head and the hilt of the giants'
Jeweled sword; the rest of that ring-marked
Blade had dissolved in Grendel's steaming
Blood, boiling even after his death.
And then the battle's only survivor
Swam up and away from those silent corpses,
The water was calm and clean, the whole
Huge lake peaceful once the demons who'd lived in it
Were dead.

Then that noble protector of all seamen
Swam to land, rejoicing in the heavy
Burdens he was bringing with him. He
And all his glorious band of Geats
Thanked God that their leader had come back unharmed,
They left the lake together. The Geats
Carried Beowulf's helmet, and his mail shirt.
Behind them the water slowly thickened
As the monsters' blood came seeping up.
They walked quickly, happily, across
Roads all of them remembered, left
The lake and the cliffs alongside it, brave men
Staggering under the weight of Grendel's skull,
Too heavy for fewer than four of them to handle—
Two on each side of the spear jammed through it—
Yet proud of their ugly load and determined
That the Danes, seated in Herot, should see it.
Soon, fourteen Geats arrived
At the hall, bold and warlike, and with Beowulf,
Their lord and leader, they walked on the mead-hall
Green. Then the Geats' brave prince entered
Herot, covered with glory for the daring
Battles he had fought; he sought Hrothgar
To salute him and show Grendel's head.
He carried that terrible trophy by the hair,
Brought it straight to where the Danes sat,
Drinking, the queen among them. It was a weird
And wonderful sight, and the warriors stared. . . .

Beowulf spoke:
"Hrothgar! Behold,
Great Healfdane's son, this glorious sign
Of victory, brought you by joyful Geats.

My life was almost lost, fighting for it,
 Struggling under water: I'd have been dead at once, 310
 And the fight finished, the she-devil victorious,
 If our Father in Heaven had not helped me. Hrunting,
 Unferth's noble weapon, could do nothing,
 Nor could I, until the Ruler of the world 315
 Showed me, hanging shining and beautiful
 On a wall, a mighty old sword—so God
 Gives guidance to those who can find it from no one
 Else. I used the weapon He had offered me,
 Drew it and, when I could, swung it, killed 320
 The monstrous hag in her own home.
 Then the ring-marked blade burned away,
 As that boiling blood spilled out. I carried
 Off all that was left, this hilt.
 I've avenged their crimes, and the Danes they've killed.
 And I promise you that whoever sleeps in Herot 325
 —You, your brave soldiers, anyone
 Of all the people in Denmark, old
 Or young—they, and you, may now sleep
 Without fear of either monster, mother 330
 Or son."

Then he gave the golden sword hilt
 To Hrothgar, who held it in his wrinkled hands
 And stared at what giants had made, and monsters
 Owned, it was his, an ancient weapon
 Shaped by wonderful smiths, now that Grendel 335
 And his evil mother had been driven from the earth,
 God's enemies scattered and dead. That best
 Of swords belonged to the best of Denmark's
 Rulers, the wisest ring-giver Danish
 Warriors had ever known. The old king 340
 Bent close to the handle of the ancient relic,
 And saw written there the story of ancient wars
 Between good and evil, the opening of the waters,
 The Flood sweeping giants away, how they suffered
 And died, that race who hated the Ruler 345
 Of us all and received judgment from His hands,
 Surging waves that found them wherever
 They fled.³ And Hrothgar saw runic letters⁴
 Clearly carved in that shining hilt,

3. **The Flood . . . wherever they fled:** a universal deluge, recorded in the Bible as having occurred during the days of Noah (Genesis 7). The flood was a sign of God's wrath because of man's disobedience.

4. **runic letters:** the characters of certain ancient alphabets.

Spelling its original owner's name, 350
 He for whom it was made, with its twisted
 Handle and snakelike carvings. Then he spoke,
 Healfdane's son, and everyone was silent.
 "What I say, speaking from a full memory
 And after a life spent in seeking 355
 What was right for my people, is this: this prince
 Of the Geats, Beowulf, was born a better
 Man! Your fame is everywhere, my friend,
 Reaches to the ends of the earth, and you hold it in your
 heart wisely,
 Patient with your strength and our weakness. What I said
 I will do, I will do, 360
 In the name of the friendship we've sworn. Your strength
 must solace your people,
 Now, and mine no longer. . . .

The Fire Dragon

Beowulf rules in peace and prosperity for fifty years. A spirit of complacency prevails, until a fierce fire dragon awakens from its darkness and dreams, striking terror throughout the kingdom.

. . . The beast
 Had slept in a huge stone tower, with a hidden
 Path beneath, a man stumbled on
 The entrance, went in, discovered the ancient
 Treasure, the pagan jewels and gold 5
 The dragon had been guarding, and dazzled and greedy
 Stole a gem-studded cup, and fled.
 But now the dragon hid nothing, neither
 The theft nor itself, it swept through the darkness,
 And all Geatland knew its anger. . . . 10
 Vomiting fire and smoke, the dragon
 Burned down their homes. They watched in horror
 As the flames rose up: the angry monster
 Meant to leave nothing alive. And the signs
 Of its anger flickered and glowed in the darkness, 15
 Visible for miles, tokens of its hate
 And its cruelty, spread like a warning to the Geats
 Who had broken its rest. Then it hurried back
 To its tower, to its hidden treasure, before dawn
 Could come. It had wrapped its flames around 20
 The Geats; now it trusted in stone
 Walls, and its strength, to protect it. But they would not.