

Beowulf, Agon One: Grendel

As you know, scholars typically divide *Beowulf* into three parts, called **agons**, based on the three monsters the hero faces during the course of the poem. The following notes and discussion questions will focus on Agon One, which focuses on Beowulf's battle with the monster Grendel.

Characters and Setting

The character and location names in *Beowulf* can be confusing and difficult to keep track of, so below is a description of each character and location in the poem.

- **Hrothgar**- King of the Danes. He commissioned the construction of Heorot. Also referred to as the “ring-giver” and the “Prince of Shieldings.”
- **Grendel**- ancient monster that terrorizes Heorot. He is banished from civilization because he is a descendant of Cain, the Biblical figure who murdered his brother.
 - For more information on the story of Cain, [visit this website](#).
- **Hygelac**- King of Geatland and Beowulf's ruler.
- **Ecgethrow**- Beowulf's father. Hrothgar helped him out of a bad situation, which is one reason why Beowulf came to his aid.
- **Wealththeow**- Hrothgar's wife and queen.
- **Unferth**- a Dane in Hrothgar's court who publicly contradicts Beowulf's skill as a warrior. Like Cain, Unferth is disliked because he killed his brother.
- **Heorot**- a grand mead hall in Denmark commissioned by Hrothgar. Hrothgar's warriors, also known as **Thanes**, gather there after battles to feast, drink, and tell stories. Grendel breaks into Heorot every night and attacks the Thanes.
- **Geatland**- the area where Beowulf is from. Today, it is part of Sweden.
- **The Fen**- the boggy, marsh-like land under which Grendel lives.



Fig. 1: A map of the setting of *Beowulf*. Heorot is located in the land of the Danes, while Beowulf is from Geatland.

Vocabulary

Below is a list of vocabulary words specific to Anglo-Saxon England and the surrounding areas that you will find in *Beowulf*.

- **scop**- an oral storyteller who often performed with light music.
- **wergild**- the “death price” that a warrior must pay to the family of the person he killed in battle. The main motivation for paying the wergild was to avoid a revenge
- **wyrd**- fate or destiny.
- **comitatus**- a relationship between rulers and their nobleman that is mutually beneficial.

Comprehension and Discussion Questions

Answer the questions below using direct evidence from the text.

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1. *Beowulf* is influenced by both pagan and Christian beliefs. Where in Agon One do you see these beliefs intertwine, and where do you see them contradict each other? What, if anything, does this tell you about progression of religious beliefs in early Medieval England?
2. Reread Beowulf's introduction to Hrothgar (ll. 407-454).
 - a. What major characteristics about Beowulf are you able to discern from this speech?
 - b. Based off these characteristics, give a profile of an Anglo-Saxon hero. How do these traits differ from those typically attributed to a modern hero?
3. Compare the description of Grendel attacking Heorot (ll. 115-145) with the similar scene in John Gardner's *Grendel* (pp.11-14).
 - a. How do the two characterizations of Grendel compare?
 - b. Does Gardner make Grendel seem like a sympathetic figure? If so, how?
4. Reread lines 459-472. How did Hrothgar help Beowulf's father?
5. How does Beowulf's agreement with Hrothgar align with the Anglo-Saxon tradition of comitatus?
6. Look carefully at the descriptions and actions of Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's queen. Based off this character, what role do you think women had in Anglo-Saxon society? How were they expected to behave?
7. How does Beowulf defeat Grendel?

The next set reading guide will cover Agon Two: Grendel's Mother.

Happy reading!