

## English IV Summer Reading: Seamus Heaney's Translation of *Beowulf*

**THIS WILL BE DUE ON THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS**

This summer you will be reading a modern translation of the oldest epic in English literature — *Beowulf*. Although no one is certain exactly when it was first composed or transcribed, the poem probably evolved out of an oral tradition. Some researchers speculate that it was written down around A.D. 700 by an unknown author. The original language of *Beowulf*-- Old English -- is completely different from the Modern English we speak today; thus, what you will read is a twentieth-century translation.

Even though *Beowulf* is one of the earliest works of English literature, the story does not take place in England. Instead, it tells of events that occur in Sweden and on the Danish island of Zealand. Because the epic glorifies the actions of the Danes and the Geats, the adventure and historical story reflects the traditions and beliefs of the Anglo-Saxons and their Germanic ancestors.

At the beginning of the story, Hrothgar, King of the Danes on the island of Zealand, has built a great mead-hall named Heorot. Grendel, a monster believed to be descended from Cain, wreaks havoc and death in Heorot, forcing the Danes to abandon the hall for twelve years. After this period of time, *Beowulf*, a Geatish warrior, arrives with fourteen of his men and offers to defend the Danes against Grendel. And the hero's journey begins. . . .

Below you will find study questions to guide you in your reading.

Pages 1-47

1. Who is the great king described at the beginning of the story?
2. *Beowulf* is not a Dane but a \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Who is Wealhtheow?
4. What is Heorot?
5. Grendel is several times referred to as a descendent of \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Who is the first person *Beowulf* and his men encounter when they arrive in Denmark?
7. What story does Unferth tell during the banquet in an attempt to lessen *Beowulf's* honor?
8. How does *Beowulf* defend himself after Unferth speaks?
9. In order to make sure that he and Grendel are fighting on equal terms and in order to win more fame for his king, *Beowulf* decides he will fight (how?)'
10. What is the history between Hrothgar and *Beowulf*?

11. Grendel is referred to as a "God-cursed brute." This is an example of kenning, a literary device popular in the Anglo-Saxon period. A kenning replaces a word (like monster) with a 2-3 word phrase (like God-cursed brute). List three other kennings found in this section.
12. After one of his attacks, Grendel is described as "blundering back with the butchered corpses." What literary device is this? How does using this literary device make the story more interesting?

Pages 47-89

13. Most Danes believed that Heorot could only be destroyed by what?
14. Describe Grendel's home.
15. When Grendel flees back to his lair, what does he leave behind?
16. Although Beowulf has defeated Grendel, he is still disappointed in himself. Why?
17. Although Grendel is dead, Heorot is still not safe. Who has come to Heorot to seek revenge for Grendel's death?
18. After Beowulf defeats Grendel, Hrothgar's singer tells the tale of Sigemund, another hero who has defeated a \_\_\_\_\_

Pages 89-151

19. Why has Grendel's mother come to Heorot?
20. What is Hrothgar's response? Whom has Grendel's mother killed?
21. Describe Grendel's mother's home. (3 details)
22. How does Beowulf kill Grendel's mother? What weapon does he use? What happens to the sword he used to kill her?
23. What happens when Beowulf returns to the surface? Did his men expect him to return?
24. What does Beowulf give to Hrothgar?
25. What does Beowulf give to Unferth as he leaves? What does Beowulf say to him?
26. Beowulf reports to Hygelac that Hrothgar may marry his daughter Freawaru to Ingeld of the Heathobards. Why? What does Beowulf expect the result will be? (Remember the Finn story, lines 1070-1158.)
27. Based on the above (and some other references) how are women treated/used in Anglo-Saxon society?
28. Who becomes king in Geatland after Hygelac? How long does he rule?

Pages 151-213

29. What is the dragon guarding, and where did it come from?
30. What has made the dragon angry?
31. What major place/thing does the dragon destroy at the beginning of this section?
32. What does Beowulf do when he is first offered the throne by Hygd?
33. All of Beowulf's men, except \_\_\_\_\_, desert him.
34. As Beowulf dies, what does he give to this person?

35. What does Beowulf tell this person to do? (2 things)
36. In this section, "sky-roamer" and "mound-keeper" are (what type of literary devices?) describing (what character?).
37. Describe Beowulf's funeral (Be specific).