“Fate often spares the undoomed warrior if his courage holds good.”

—Beowulf
The Epic and the Epic Hero

“That mighty protector of men
Meant to hold the monster till its life
Leaped out . . . ”

—from Beowulf

People are living in fear as an evil force threatens to destroy the land. Then a superhero appears. Brave, strong, and good, the hero defeats the evil force and saves the land and its people. You know this story well. It is one of the most widely told stories in literature as well as one of the oldest. In times past, the deeds of the superhero were told in the form of an epic—a long narrative poem that recounts, in formal language, the exploits of a larger-than-life hero. Ancient epic poets and their audiences viewed the epic as the early history of their people.

The earliest epics date back to a time when most people were illiterate. Recited by poets, probably with musical accompaniment, these epics were the movies of their day. Audiences were enthralled by monsters, perilous journeys, and fierce battles. Some of the early epics were eventually written down. Of most, we have only fragments, but a few complete epics have survived. Historians and anthropologists look at epics as cultural records of the societies that produced them.

“I will proclaim to the world the deeds of Gilgamesh.”

—The Epic of Gilgamesh

The epic is found in cultures around the world, thus indicating the timeless and universal human need to transmit legends from one generation to another. The earliest epic is the Epic of Gilgamesh (see pages 56–57), composed by the Sumerians in one of the ancient languages of Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq). It tells of the great deeds of Gilgamesh, a legendary king who had ruled hundreds of years earlier. Centuries later, the ancient Greeks had their epics: the Iliad and the Odyssey. The Spanish had The Song of El Cid; the French, The Song of Roland; and the Anglo-Saxons, Beowulf. Modern heroes such as Superman and Luke Skywalker continue the epic tradition today.

Epic Form

More than a thousand years after Gilgamesh, the ancient Greek poet Homer established the standard features of the epic form in Western literature with the Iliad and the Odyssey. These features include:

- poetic lines that have regular meter and rhythm and formal, elevated, or even lofty language
- main characters who have heroic or superhuman qualities
- gods or godlike beings who intervene in the events
- action on a huge scale, often involving the fates of entire peoples
- stories that begin in medias res (Latin for “in the middle of things”) or at a critical point in the action
The classical Greek epics also established the use of certain literary devices. One of these is the **epithet**, a word or brief phrase often used to characterize a particular person, place, or thing. For example, the goddess Athena is “gray-eyed” and the sea is “wine-dark.” Standardized comparisons known as **kennings** perform a similar function in the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*. For example, a king is a “ring-giver” and the sea is the “whale-road.” Both epithets and kennings helped epic poets mold their ideas to their poetic forms.

### The Epic Hero

The epic hero is a man—women take subordinate roles in traditional epics—of high social status whose fate affects the destiny of his people. Epic plots typically involve supernatural events, long periods of time, distant journeys, and life-and-death struggles between good and evil. Through physical strength, skill as a warrior, nobility of character, and quick wits, the epic hero almost always defeats his enemies, be they human or demonic. The hero is rarely modest, and boasting is almost a ritual in epics.

The epic hero embodies the ideals and values of his people. Odysseus, for example, displays the Greek ideal *arête*, or all-around excellence. He is a great warrior, a cunning leader, a clever speaker, and highly skilled at everything from sailing to plowing. Rooted in ancient Germanic tradition, the values celebrated in *Beowulf* include courage, endurance, and loyalty. The last word of the poem, which describes Beowulf as “most eager for fame,” touches on one of the most universal and enduring characteristics of heroes, from Gilgamesh to today’s comic book and movie heroes.

### RESPONDING AND THINKING CRITICALLY

1. In your opinion, what are today’s epics? How do modern audiences differ from ancient ones in their responses to epics?

2. Identify three characteristics that we might expect today’s epic heroes to exhibit.

3. Which characteristics of the traditional epic hero might be difficult for readers today to accept?

4. How are epithets and kennings similar and different?

### OBJECTIVES

- Analyze the epic and the epic hero.
- Connect to historical context of literature.
MEET THE BEOWULF-POET

It is a curious fact that some of the world’s greatest literature has come to us from an unknown hand. Beowulf ranks high among such literature. It is the oldest of the surviving national epics produced in Western Europe after the fall of Rome. It is one of Europe’s first literary works to be composed in the vernacular, or the language of the people, rather than in Latin, the language of church scholarship. Like other national epics—Spain’s The Song of El Cid and France’s Song of Roland, for example—Beowulf relates the deeds of a great national hero. That hero arose from the Anglo-Saxons’ ancestral home on the European mainland where legends about him were part of the oral tradition of the Germanic tribes.

“The newly Christian understanding of the world which operates in the poet’s designing mind displaces him from his imaginative at-homeness in the world of his poem—a pagan Germanic society governed by a heroic code of honor.”

—Seamus Heaney

Anglo-Saxon Poet Beginning in the 400s, those Germanic tribes, later known collectively as the Anglo-Saxons, invaded and settled the territory that later would become known as England. They brought their songs and legends about heroes with them, passed down from one scop (shōp), or oral poet, to another and reshaped with each performance. In the early eighth century, scholars believe, an Anglo-Saxon poet thoroughly versed in the scops’ stock of legends, historical accounts, and poetic devices composed Beowulf. By that time, the Anglo-Saxons had converted to Christianity, and the Vikings had not yet begun their invasions in England. The Beowulf-poet was clearly a Christian, for his poem contains references to the Bible and many expressions of a deep religious faith. He was also well educated, displaying knowledge of Greek and Roman mythology and familiarity with the Aeneid, the great Latin epic by the ancient Roman poet Virgil.

It is uncertain whether the Beowulf-poet composed the poem orally and later transcribed it, or wrote it down in the form in which we now have it. But at some time the poem was written down, and Christian scribes made a copy of it in the late tenth century. It is their manuscript that has survived over the years, despite various misadventures, including a fire in 1731 that destroyed some of the lines. Today, the Beowulf manuscript, which consists of about 3,200 lines, is carefully preserved in the British Library in London.

In his groundbreaking essay “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,” J. R. R. Tolkien stated that the Beowulf-poet presented a vision of the past, “pagan but noble and fraught with a deep significance—a past that itself had depth and reached back into a dark antiquity of sorrow.” By vividly imagining that pagan past, the Beowulf-poet created an inspiring tale of courage—and the first great heroic poem in the English language.

Author Search For more about the Beowulf-poet, go to www.glencoe.com.
Connecting to the Epic

In *Beowulf*, the poet describes the exploits of a larger-than-life hero. As you read, think about these questions:

- Who are some heroes or role models in society today?
- What qualities do these heroes have in common?

Building Background

Imagine a time when war bands from northern Europe regularly raided one another’s shores to loot and burn settlements; when great warriors feasted, drank, and bragged of their bloody conquests in huge banquet halls; when kings bestowed riches upon their bravest warriors to retain their allegiance; and when people believed in monsters and dragons. That time was the sixth century—the period in which *Beowulf* is set.

The story of *Beowulf* is not set in England, however. The story takes place in Scandinavia, and it involves the Geats (gêts), a tribe from southern Sweden, and the Danes, a tribe from Denmark.

Setting Purposes for Reading

**Big Idea**  The Epic Warrior

In the primitive world of the early Anglo-Saxons, the hero held a place of great importance. As you read, consider the heroic qualities that Beowulf displays.

**Literary Element**  Conflict

Conflict is the central struggle between two opposing forces in a story or drama. An *external conflict* exists when a character struggles against some outside force, such as another person or nature. An *internal conflict* is a struggle within the mind of a character. As you read *Beowulf*, notice the conflicts in which the hero is involved.


Vocabulary

- *lament* (lə ment/) n. expression of sorrow; song or literary composition that mourns a loss or death; p. 25 The mother’s lament for her child brought tears to my eyes.
- *forged* (fôrd/) adj. formed or shaped, often with blows or pressure after heating; p. 25 By hammering and bending the white hot iron, the blacksmith forged an axle.
- *shroud* (shroud) n. burial cloth; p. 30 The bodies of the slain were wrapped in shrouds.
- *infamous* (in’ fo mas) adj. having a bad reputation; notorious; p. 31 The pirate was infamous for his brutal treatment of prisoners.
- *writhing* (rith’ing) adj. twisting, as in pain; p. 31 Whining and writhing, the wounded dog rolled its head from side to side.

Vocabulary Tip: Analogies  An analogy is a type of comparison that is based on the relationships between things or ideas.

**Reading Strategy**  Identifying Sequence

**Identifying sequence** is finding the logical order of ideas or events in a text. In *Beowulf*, the poet retells three principal episodes in the hero’s life. As you read, identify the sequence of events in each episode.

**Reading Tip: Taking Notes**  Use a graphic organizer like the one started below to record the order of events in each episode.
GRENDEL ATTACKS THE DANES

A powerful monster, living down
In the darkness, growled in pain, impatient
As day after day the music rang
Loud in that hall,° the harp's rejoicing
Call and the poet's clear songs, sung
Of the ancient beginnings of us all, recalling
The Almighty making the earth, shaping
These beautiful plains marked off by oceans,
Then proudly setting the sun and moon
To glow across the land and light it;
The corners of the earth were made lovely with trees
And leaves, made quick with life, with each
Of the nations who now move on its face. And then
As now warriors sang of their pleasure:
So Hrothgar's men lived happy in his hall
Till the monster stirred, that demon, that fiend,
Grendel, who haunted the moors, the wild
Marshes, and made his home in a hell
Not hell but earth. He was spawned° in that slime,
Conceived by a pair of those monsters born
Of Cain,° murderous creatures banished
By God, punished forever for the crime
Of Abel's death. The Almighty drove
Those demons out, and their exile was bitter,
Shut away from men; they split
Into a thousand forms of evil—spirits
And fiends, goblins, monsters, giants,
A brood forever opposing the Lord's
Will, and again and again defeated.

Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel
Went up to Herot, wondering what the warriors
Would do in that hall when their drinking was done.
He found them sprawled in sleep, suspecting
Nothing, their dreams undisturbed. The monster's
Thoughts were as quick as his greed or his claws:

° hall: The Danish King Hrothgar's mead hall, Herot.

° spawned: born. Usually, spawned refers to the production of young by fish, amphibians, or other water-dwelling creatures.

° Cain: According to the Bible (Genesis 4:8), Cain, the eldest son of Adam and Eve, murdered his brother, Abel.
He slipped through the door and there in the silence
Snatched up thirty men, smashed them
Unknowing in their beds and ran out with their bodies,
The blood dripping behind him, back
To his lair, delighted with his night’s slaughter.

At daybreak, with the sun’s first light, they saw
How well he had worked, and in that gray morning
Broke their long feast with tears and laments
For the dead. Hrothgar, their lord, sat joyless

In Herot, a mighty prince mourning
The fate of his lost friends and companions,
Knowing by its tracks that some demon had torn
His followers apart. He wept, fearing
The beginning might not be the end. And that night

Grendel came again, so set
On murder that no crime could ever be enough,
No savage assault quench his lust
For evil. Then each warrior tried
To escape him, searched for rest in different
Beds, as far from Herot as they could find,
Seeing how Grendel hunted when they slept.
Distance was safety; the only survivors
Were those who fled him. Hate had triumphed.

So Grendel ruled, fought with the righteous,
One against many, and won; so Herot
Stood empty, and stayed deserted for years,
Twelve winters of grief for Hrothgar, king
Of the Danes, sorrow heaped at his door
By hell-forged hands. His misery leaped

The seas, was told and sung in all
Men’s ears: how Grendel’s hatred began,
How the monster relished his savage war
On the Danes, keeping the bloody feud
Alive, seeking no peace, offering

No truce, accepting no settlement, no price
In gold or land, and paying the living
For one crime only with another. No one
Waited for reparation from his plundering claws:

**Literary Element**  
**Conflict**  
*What does the conflict between the Danes and Grendel symbolize?*

**Reading Strategy**  
**Identifying Sequence**  
*By the time Hrothgar’s grief is told and sung, what events have occurred in the poem? List them in order.*

**Vocabulary**  

- **lament** (la ment*) n. expression of sorrow; song or literary composition that mourns a loss or death
- **forged** (förjéd) adj. formed or shaped, often with blows or pressure after heating

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**Viking pendants from Sweden**

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73 **reparation**: payment or action done to make amends for a wrong or an injury.
That shadow of death hunted in the darkness,
Stalked Hrothgar’s warriors, old
And young, lying in waiting, hidden
In mist, invisibly following them from the edge
Of the marsh, always there, unseen.
   So mankind’s enemy continued his crimes,
Killing as often as he could, coming
Alone, bloodthirsty and horrible. Though he lived
In Herot, when the night hid him, he never
Dared to touch king Hrothgar’s glorious
Throne, protected by God.

THE COMING OF BEOWULF

So the living sorrow of Healfdane’s son
Simmered, bitter and fresh, and no wisdom
Or strength could break it: that agony hung
On king and people alike, harsh
And unending, violent and cruel, and evil.

In his far-off home Beowulf, Higlac’s
Follower and the strongest of the Geats—greater
And stronger than anyone anywhere in this world—
Heard how Grendel filled nights with horror
And quickly commanded a boat fitted out,
Proclaiming that he’d go to that famous king,
Would sail across the sea to Hrothgar,
Now when help was needed. None
Of the wise ones regretted his going, much
As he was loved by the Geats: the omens were good,
And they urged the adventure on. So Beowulf
Chose the mightiest men he could find,
The bravest and best of the Geats, fourteen
In all, and led them down to their boat;
He knew the sea, would point the prow
Straight to that distant Danish shore.

Then they sailed, set their ship
Out on the waves, under the cliffs.
Ready for what came they wound through the currents,
The seas beating at the sand, and were borne
In the lap of their shining ship, lined
With gleaming armor, going safely
In that oak-hard boat to where their hearts took them.
The wind hurried them over the waves,
The ship foamed through the sea like a bird
Until, in the time they had known it would take,
Standing in the round-curved prow they could see
Sparkling hills, high and green,
Jutting up over the shore, and rejoicing
In those rock-steep cliffs they quietly ended

Their voyage. Jumping to the ground, the Geats
Pushed their boat to the sand and tied it
In place, mail shirts° and armor rattling
As they swiftly moored their ship. And then
They gave thanks to God for their easy crossing.

High on a wall a Danish watcher
Patrolling along the cliffs saw
The travelers crossing to the shore, their shields
Raised and shining; he came riding down,
Hrothgar's lieutenant, spurring his horse,

Needing to know why they'd landed, these men
In armor. Shaking his heavy spear
In their faces he spoke:

"Whose soldiers are you,
You who've been carried in your deep-keeled ship°
Across the sea-road to this country of mine?
Listen! I've stood on these cliffs longer
Than you know, keeping our coast free
Of pirates, raiders sneaking ashore
From their ships, seeking our lives and our gold.

None have ever come more openly—
And yet you've offered no password, no sign
From my prince, no permission from my people for your landing
Here. Nor have I ever seen,
Out of all the men on earth, one greater

Than has come with you; no commoner carries
Such weapons, unless his appearance, and his beauty,
Are both lies. You! Tell me your name,
And your father's; no spies go further onto Danish
Soil than you've come already. Strangers,

From wherever it was you sailed, tell it,
And tell it quickly, the quicker the better,
I say, for us all. Speak, say
Exactly who you are, and from where, and why."

Their leader answered him, Beowulf unlocking
Words from deep in his breast:

"We are Geats,
Men who follow Higlac. My father
Was a famous soldier, known far and wide
As a leader of men. His name was Edgetho.

His life lasted many winters;
Wise men all over the earth surely
Remember him still. And we have come seeking
Your prince, Healfdane’s son, protector
Of this people, only in friendship: instruct us,
Watchman, help us with your words! Our errand
Is a great one, our business with the glorious king
Of the Danes no secret; there’s nothing dark
Or hidden in our coming. You know (if we’ve heard
The truth, and been told honestly) that your country
Is cursed with some strange, vicious creature
That hunts only at night and that no one
Has seen. It’s said, watchman, that he has slaughtered
Your people, brought terror to the darkness. Perhaps
Hrothgar can hunt, here in my heart,
For some way to drive this devil out—
If anything will ever end the evils
Afflicting your wise and famous lord.
Here he can cool his burning sorrow.
Or else he may see his suffering go on
Forever, for as long as Herot towers
High on your hills.”

The mounted officer
Answered him bluntly, the brave watchman:
“A soldier should know the difference between words
And deeds, and keep that knowledge clear
In his brain. I believe your words, I trust in
Your friendship. Go forward, weapons and armor
And all, on into Denmark. I’ll guide you
Myself—and my men will guard your ship,
Keep it safe here on our shores,
Your fresh-tarred boat, watch it well,
Until that curving prow carries
Across the sea to Geatland a chosen
Warrior who bravely does battle with the creature
Haunting our people, who survives that horror
Unhurt, and goes home bearing our love.”

Then they moved on. Their boat lay moored,
Tied tight to its anchor. Glittering at the top
Of their golden helmets wild boar heads gleamed,
Shining decorations, swinging as they marched,
Erect like guards, like sentinels, as though ready
To fight. They marched, Beowulf and his men
And their guide, until they could see the gables
Of Herot, covered with hammered gold

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**Literary Element**  
Conflict  
*According to Beowulf, what are Hrothgar’s options?*

**Reading Strategy**  
Identifying Sequence  
*What happens before Beowulf and his followers leave their ship?*
And glowing in the sun—that most famous of all dwellings,
Towering majestic, its glittering roofs
Visible far across the land.
Their guide reined in his horse, pointing
To that hall, built by Hrothgar for the best
And bravest of his men; the path was plain,
They could see their way.

Beowulf arose, with his men
Around him, ordering a few to remain
With their weapons, leading the others quickly
Along under Herot’s steep roof into Hrothgar’s
Presence. Standing on that prince’s own hearth,
Helmeted, the silvery metal of his mail shirt
Gleaming with a smith’s high art, he greeted
The Danes’ great lord:

“Hail, Hrothgar!
Higlac is my cousin° and my king; the days
Of my youth have been filled with glory. Now Grendel’s
Name has echoed in our land: sailors
Have brought us stories of Herot, the best
Of all mead-halls, deserted and useless when the moon
Hangs in skies the sun had lit,
Light and life fleeing together.
My people have said, the wisest, most knowing
And best of them, that my duty was to go to the Danes’
Great king. They have seen my strength for themselves,
Have watched me rise from the darkness of war,
Dripping with my enemies’ blood. I drove
Five great giants into chains, chased
All of that race from the earth. I swam

In the blackness of night, hunting monsters
Out of the ocean, and killing them one
By one; death was my errand and the fate
They had earned. Now Grendel and I are called
Together, and I’ve come. Grant me, then,

Lord and protector of this noble place,
A single request! I have come so far,
Oh shelterer of warriors and your people’s loved friend,
That this one favor you should not refuse me—
That I, alone and with the help of my men,
May purge all evil from this hall. I have heard,
Too, that the monster’s scorn of men
Is so great that he needs no weapons and fears none.
Nor will I. My lord Higlac
Might think less of me if I let my sword
Go where my feet were afraid to, if I hid  
Behind some broad linden° shield: my hands  
Alone shall fight for me, struggle for life  
Against the monster. God must decide  
Who will be given to death's cold grip.

Grendel’s plan, I think, will be  
What it has been before, to invade this hall  
And gorge his belly with our bodies. If he can,  
If he can. And I think, if my time will have come,  
There’ll be nothing to mourn over, no corpse to prepare

For its grave: Grendel will carry our bloody  
Flesh to the moors, crunch on our bones  
And smear torn scraps of our skin on the walls  
Of his den. No, I expect no Danes  
Will fret about sewing our shrouds, if he wins.

And if death does take me, send the hammered  
Mail of my armor to Higlac, return  
The inheritance I had from Hrethel, and he  
From Wayland.° Fate will unwind as it must!”

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 rushing 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

Vocabulary

shroud (shroud) n. burial cloth

251 linden: made from the wood of a linden tree.

267–268 inheritance . . . Wayland:  
The inheritance is the armor that  
Wayland, a blacksmith of Germanic  
legend, forged for Hrethel, Beowulf’s  
grandfather and former king of the Geats.

Page of text with a dragon illustration on vellum. 15th century. Flemish School,  
43 x 31 cm. Musée Conde, Chantilly, France.
With the thought of food and the feasting his belly
Would soon know. But fate, that night, intended
Grendel to gnaw the broken bones
295 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
300 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
305 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,
310 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
315 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
320 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
325 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

A helmet made of iron, bronze,
and silver from the Sutton Hoo
ship burial.
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 corpse-like 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.
Then old and young rejoiced, turned back
From that happy pilgrimage, mounted their hard-hooved
Horses, high-spirited stallions, and rode them
Slowly toward Herot again, retelling

**Literary Element**  
**Conflict**  
*Why does Beowulf hang Grendel’s arm in the rafters?*
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.

THE BATTLE WITH GRENDEL’S MOTHER

The night after Grendel’s defeat, his mother, a monster who lives at the bottom of a cold, dark lake, goes to Herot to avenge her son’s death. She kills Hrothgar’s closest friend, retrieves Grendel’s arm from the rafters where Beowulf had hung it, and returns to her lake. When Beowulf hears of this, he pursues her.

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,

Reading Strategy  Identifying Sequence  Summarize what happens the morning after Beowulf’s triumph.

Big Idea  The Epic Warrior  What might Beowulf’s journey to the she-wolf’s lair symbolize?
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,°

**Big Idea**

What qualities of Beowulf does this passage reveal?

**Big Idea**

What does this description imply about Beowulf’s strength?
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 monster’s 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

535 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

540 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

545 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

550 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

560 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,

565 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

570 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

552 that noble protector of all seamen: Beowulf. This phrase recalls an account Beowulf tells earlier in the epic and sums up in lines 234–238, in which he boasts of having slain sea monsters and thus prevented them from attacking other seamen.

Carved dragon-head post from the ship burial at Oseberg, c. a.d. 850
Viking Ship Museum, Bygdøy, Norway.
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.

THE BATTLE WITH THE DRAGON

Beowulf presents Hrothgar with the jeweled hilt of the magic sword. In recognition of Beowulf’s heroic services to Denmark, Hrothgar proclaims the Danes and the Geats to be allies. The following morning, Beowulf sets sail for Geatland. After he arrives in his homeland, he meets with his uncle, Higlac, the king, to recount the slayings of the monsters and to convey Hrothgar’s pledge of friendship.

Afterwards, in the time when Higlac was dead
And Herdred, his son, who’d ruled the Geats
After his father, had followed him into darkness—
Killed in battle with the Swedes, who smashed
His shield, cut through the soldiers surrounding
Their king—then, when Higd’s one son
Was gone, Beowulf ruled in Geatland,
Took the throne he’d refused, once,
And held it long and well. He was old
With years and wisdom, fifty winters
A king, when a dragon awoke from its darkness
And dreams and brought terror to his people. 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
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.

But the thief had not come to steal; he stole,
And roused the dragon, not from desire
But need. He was someone’s slave, had been beaten
By his masters, had run from all men’s sight,
But with no place to hide; then he found the hidden
Path, and used it. And once inside,
Seeing the sleeping beast, staring as it
Yawned and stretched, not wanting to wake it,
Terror-struck, he turned and ran for his life,
610 Taking the jeweled cup.

That tower
Was heaped high with hidden treasure, stored there
Years before by the last survivor
Of a noble race, ancient riches
615 Left in the darkness as the end of a dynasty
Came. Death had taken them, one
By one, and the warrior who watched over all
That remained mourned their fate, expecting,
Soon, the same for himself, knowing
620 The gold and jewels he had guarded so long
Could not bring him pleasure much longer. He brought
The precious cups, the armor and the ancient
Swords, to a stone tower built
Near the sea, below a cliff, a sealed
625 Fortress with no windows, no doors, waves
In front of it, rocks behind. Then he spoke:
“Take these treasures, earth, now that no one
Living can enjoy them. They were yours, in the beginning;
Allow them to return. War and terror
630 Have swept away my people, shut
Their eyes to delight and to living, closed
The door to all gladness. No one is left
To lift these swords, polish these jeweled
Cups: no one leads, no one follows. These hammered
635 Helmets, worked with gold, will tarnish
And crack; the hands that should clean and polish them
Are still forever.
And these mail shirts, worn
In battle, once, while swords crashed
And blades bit into shields and men,
640 Will rust away like the warriors who owned them.
None of these treasures will travel to distant
Lands, following their lords. The harp’s
Bright song, the hawk crossing through the hall
On its swift wings, the stallion tramping
645 In the courtyard—all gone, creatures of every
Kind, and their masters, hurled to the grave!”

And so he spoke, sadly, of those
Long dead, and lived from day to day,
Joyless, until, at last, death touched
650 His heart and took him too. And a stalker
In the night, a flaming dragon, found
The treasure unguarded; he whom men fear
Came flying through the darkness, wrapped in fire,
Seeking caves and stone-split ruins
655 But finding gold. Then it stayed, buried

Literary Element  Conflict  What does this passage suggest about Beowulf’s upcoming conflict with the dragon?
Itself with heathen silver and jewels
It could neither use nor ever abandon.

So mankind’s enemy, the mighty beast,
Slept in those stone walls for hundreds
Of years; a runaway slave roused it,
Stole a jeweled cup and bought
His master’s forgiveness, begged for mercy
And was pardoned when his delighted lord took the present
He bore, turned it in his hands and stared

At the ancient carvings. The cup brought peace
To a slave, pleased his master, but stirred
A dragon’s anger. It turned, hunting
The thief’s tracks, and found them, saw
Where its visitor had come and gone. He’d survived,

Had come close enough to touch its scaly
Head and yet lived, as it lifted its cavernous
Jaws, through the grace of almighty God
And a pair of quiet, quick-moving feet.
The dragon followed his steps, anxious
To find the man who had robbed it of silver
And sleep; it circled around and around
The tower, determined to catch him, but could not,
He had run too fast, the wilderness was empty.
The beast went back to its treasure, planning

A bloody revenge, and found what was missing,
Saw what thieving hands had stolen.
Then it crouched on the stones, counting off
The hours till the Almighty’s candle went out,
And evening came, and wild with anger

It could fly burning across the land, killing
And destroying with its breath. Then the sun was gone,
And its heart was glad: glowing with rage
It left the tower, impatient to repay
Its enemies. The people suffered, everyone
Lived in terror, but when Beowulf had learned
Of their trouble his fate was worse, and came quickly.

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,
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
The Geats; now it trusted in stone
Walls, and its strength, to protect it. But they would not.
Then they came to Beowulf, their king, and announced
That his hall, his throne, the best of buildings,
Had melted away in the dragon's burning
Breath. Their words brought misery, Beowulf's
Sorrow beat at his heart: he accused
Himself of breaking God's law, of bringing
The Almighty's anger down on his people.
Reproach pounded in his breast, gloomy
And dark, and the world seemed a different place.
But the hall was gone, the dragon's molten
Breath had licked across it, burned it
to ashes, near the shore it had guarded. The Geats
Deserved revenge; Beowulf, their leader
And lord, began to plan it, ordered
A battle-shield shaped of iron, knowing that
Wood would be useless, that no linden shield
Could help him, protect him, in the flaming heat
Of the beast's breath. That noble prince
Would end his days on earth, soon,
Would leave this brief life, but would take the dragon
With him, tear it from the heaped-up treasure
It had guarded so long. And he'd go to it alone,
Scorning to lead soldiers against such
An enemy: he saw nothing to fear, thought nothing
Of the beast's claws, or wings, or flaming
Jaws—he had fought, before, against worse
Odds, had survived, been victorious, in harsher
Battles, beginning in Herot, Hrothgar's
Unlucky hall.

And Beowulf uttered his final boast:
"I've never known fear; as a youth I fought
In endless battles. I am old, now,
But I will fight again, seek fame still,
If the dragon hiding in his tower dares
To face me."

Then he said farewell to his followers,
Each in his turn, for the last time:
"I'd use no sword, no weapon, if this beast
Could be killed without it, crushed to death
Like Grendel, gripped in my hands and torn

Big Idea  The Epic Warrior  What does this passage reveal about Beowulf as a ruler of his people?
Limb from limb. But his breath will be burning

745 Hot, poison will pour from his tongue.
I feel no shame, with shield and sword
And armor, against this monster: when he comes to me
I mean to stand, not run from his shooting
Flames, stand till fate decides

750 Which of us wins. My heart is firm,
My hands calm: I need no hot
Words. Wait for me close by, my friends.
We shall see, soon, who will survive
This bloody battle, stand when the fighting

755 Is done. No one else could do
What I mean to, here, no man but me
Could hope to defeat this monster. No one
Could try. And this dragon’s treasure, his gold
And everything hidden in that tower, will be mine

760 Or war will sweep me to a bitter death!"

Then Beowulf rose, still brave, still strong,
And with his shield at his side, and a mail shirt on his breast,
Strode calmly, confidently, toward the tower, under
The rocky cliffs: no coward could have walked there!

765 And then he who’d endured dozens of desperate
Battles, who’d stood boldly while swords and shields
Clashed, the best of kings, saw
Huge stone arches and felt the heat
Of the dragon’s breath, flooding down

770 Through the hidden entrance, too hot for anyone
To stand, a streaming current of fire
And smoke that blocked all passage. And the Geats'
Lord and leader, angry, lowered
His sword and roared out a battle cry,

775 A call so loud and clear that it reached through
The hoary rock, hung in the dragon’s
Ear.° The beast rose, angry,
Knowing a man had come—and then nothing
But war could have followed. Its breath came first.

780 A steaming cloud pouring from the stone,
Then the earth itself shook. Beowulf
Swung his shield into place, held it
In front of him, facing the entrance. The dragon

°775–777 A call ... ear: The dragon hears the echoing sound of Beowulf’s battle cry.
Coiled and uncoiled, its heart urging it
Into battle. Beowulf’s ancient sword
Was waiting, unsheathed, his sharp and gleaming
Blade. The beast came closer; both of them
Were ready, each set on slaughter. The Geats’
Great prince stood firm, unmoving, prepared
Behind his high shield, waiting in his shining
Armor. The monster came quickly toward him,
Pouring out fire and smoke, hurrying
To its fate. Flames beat at the iron
Shield, and for a time it held, protected
Beowulf as he’d planned; then it began to melt,
And for the first time in his life that famous prince
Fought with fate against him, with glory
Denied him. He knew it, but he raised his sword
And struck at the dragon’s scaly hide.
The ancient blade broke, bit into
The monster’s skin, drew blood, but cracked
And failed him before it went deep enough, helped him
Less than he needed. The dragon leaped
With pain, thrashed and beat at him, spouting
Murderous flames, spreading them everywhere.
And the Geats’ ring-giver did not boast of glorious
Victories in other wars: his weapon
Had failed him, deserted him, now when he needed it
Most, that excellent sword. Edgetho’s
Famous son stared at death,
Unwilling to leave this world, to exchange it
For a dwelling in some distant place—a journey
Into darkness that all men must make, as death
Ends their few brief hours on earth.
Quickly, the dragon came at him, encouraged
As Beowulf fell back; its breath flared,
And he suffered, wrapped around in swirling
Flames—a king, before, but now
A beaten warrior. None of his comrades
Came to him, helped him, his brave and noble
Followers; they ran for their lives, fled
Deep in a wood. And only one of them
Remained, stood there, miserable, remembering,
As a good man must, what kinship should mean.

His name was Wiglaf, he was Wexstan’s son
And a good soldier; his family had been Swedish,

826 his family had been Swedish:
Wiglaf, though of Swedish descent, considers himself to be a Geat. It was not
unusual for a warrior from one people to
serve the chief or king of another people.
Once. Watching Beowulf, he could see
How his king was suffering, burning. Remembering
Everything his lord and cousin had given him,

830 Armor and gold and the great estates
Wexstan's family enjoyed, Wiglaf's
Mind was made up; he raised his yellow
Shield and drew his sword—an ancient
Weapon that had once belonged to Onela's

835 Nephew, and that Wexstan had won, killing
The prince when he fled from Sweden, sought safety
With Herdred, and found death. And Wiglaf's father
Had carried the dead man's armor, and his sword,
To Onela, and the king had said nothing, only

840 Given him armor and sword and all,
Everything his rebel nephew had owned
And lost when he left this life. And Wexstan
Had kept those shining gifts, held them
For years, waiting for his son to use them,

845 Wear them as honorably and well as once
His father had done; then Wexstan died
And Wiglaf was his heir, inherited treasures
And weapons and land. He'd never worn
That armor, fought with that sword, until Beowulf

850 Called him to his side, led him into war:
But his soul did not melt, his sword was strong;
The dragon discovered his courage, and his weapon,
When the rush of battle brought them together.
And Wiglaf, his heart heavy, uttered

855 The kind of words his comrades deserved:
"I remember how we sat in the mead-hall, drinking
And boasting of how brave we'd be when Beowulf
Needed us, he who gave us these swords
And armor: all of us swore to repay him,

860 When the time came, kindness for kindness
—With our lives, if he needed them. He allowed us to join him,
Chose us from all his great army, thinking
Our boasting words had some weight, believing
Our promises, trusting our swords. He took us

865 For soldiers, for men. He meant to kill
This monster himself, our mighty king,
Fight this battle alone and unaided,
As in the days when his strength and daring dazzled
Men's eyes. But those days are over and gone

833–835 an ancient weapon . . . that
Wexstan had won: Wexstan killed the
rebellious nephew of Onela, the king of
Sweden, in battle. Wexstan was therefore
entitled to the nephew's sword.

Study of a Dragon's Head after Michelangelo. John Ruskin
(1819–1900). Ink on paper.
Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal, Cumbria, UK.

Reading Strategy Identifying Sequence
What sequence of events led to Wiglaf's receiving his armor and sword?

Big Idea The Epic Warrior
What does this passage reveal about the relationship between a chief and his followers?
And now our lord must lean on younger
Arms. And we must go to him, while angry
Flames burn at his flesh, help
Our glorious king! By almighty God,
I’d rather burn myself than see
Flames swirling around my lord.
And who are we to carry home
Our shields before we’ve slain his enemy
And ours, to run back to our homes with Beowulf
So hard-pressed here? I swear that nothing
He ever did deserved an end
Like this, dying miserably and alone,
Butchered by this savage beast: we swore
That these swords and armor were each for us all!”

Then he ran to his king, crying encouragement
As he dove through the dragon’s deadly fumes:
“Beloved Beowulf, remember how you boasted,
Once, that nothing in the world would ever
Destroy your fame: fight to keep it,
Now, be strong and brave, my noble
King, protecting life and fame
Together. My sword will fight at your side!”

The dragon heard him, the man-hating monster,
And was angry; shining with surging flames
It came for him, anxious to return his visit.

Waves of fire swept at his shield
And the edge began to burn. His mail shirt
Could not help him, but before his hands dropped
The blazing wood Wiglaf jumped
Behind Beowulf’s shield; his own was burned
To ashes. Then the famous old hero, remembering
Days of glory, lifted what was left
Of Nagling, his ancient sword, and swung it
With all his strength, smashed the gray
Blade into the beast’s head. But then Nagling
Broke to pieces, as iron always
Had in Beowulf’s hands. His arms
Were too strong, the hardest blade could not help him,
The most wonderfully worked. He carried them to war
But fate had decreed that the Geats’ great king
Would be no better for any weapon.

Then the monster charged again, vomiting
Fire, wild with pain, rushed out
Fierce and dreadful, its fear forgotten.
Watching for its chance it drove its tusks
915 Into Beowulf’s neck; he staggered, the blood
Came flooding forth, fell like rain.

And then when Beowulf needed him most
Wiglaf showed his courage, his strength
And skill, and the boldness he was born with. Ignoring
920 The dragon’s head, he helped his lord
By striking lower down. The sword
Sank in; his hand was burned, but the shining
Blade had done its work, the dragon’s
Belching flames began to flicker
925 And die away. And Beowulf drew
His battle-sharp dagger: the blood-stained old king
Still knew what he was doing. Quickly, he cut
The beast in half, slit it apart.
It fell, their courage had killed it, two noble
930 Cousins had joined in the dragon’s death.
Yet what they did all men must do
When the time comes! But the triumph was the last
Beowulf would ever earn, the end
Of greatness and life together. The wound
935 In his neck began to swell and grow;
He could feel something stirring, burning
In his veins, a stinging venom, and knew
The beast’s fangs had left it. He fumbled
Along the wall, found a slab
940 Of stone, and dropped down; above him he saw
Huge stone arches and heavy posts,
Holding up the roof of that giant hall.
Then Wiglaf’s gentle hands bathed
The blood-stained prince, his glorious lord,
945 Weary of war, and loosened his helmet.
        Beowulf spoke, in spite of the swollen,
Livid wound, knowing he’d unwound
His string of days on earth, seen
As much as God would grant him; all worldly
950 Pleasure was gone, as life would go,
Soon:
        “I’d leave my armor to my son,
Now, if God had given me an heir,
A child born of my body, his life
955 Created from mine. I’ve worn this crown
For fifty winters: no neighboring people
Have tried to threaten the Geats, sent soldiers
Against us or talked of terror. My days
Have gone by as fate willed, waiting
960 For its word to be spoken, ruling as well
As I knew how, swearing no unholy oaths,
Seeking no lying wars. I can leave
This life happy; I can die, here,
Knowing the Lord of all life has never
Watched me wash my sword in blood
Born of my own family. Beloved
Wiglaf, go, quickly, find
The dragon’s treasure: we’ve taken its life,
But its gold is ours, too. Hurry,
Bringing ancient silver, precious
Jewels, shining armor and gems,
Before I die. Death will be softer,
Leaving life and this people I’ve ruled
So long, if I look at this last of all prizes.”

Then Wæstan’s son went in, as quickly
As he could, did as the dying Beowulf
Asked, entered the inner darkness
Of the tower, went with his mail shirt and his sword.
Flushed with victory he groped his way,
A brave young warrior, and suddenly saw
Piles of gleaming gold, precious
Gems, scattered on the floor, cups
And bracelets, rusty old helmets, beautifully
Made but rotting with no hands to rub
And polish them. They lay where the dragon left them;
It had flown in the darkness, once, before fighting
Its final battle. (So gold can easily
Triumph, defeat the strongest of men,
No matter how deep it is hidden!) And he saw,
Hanging high above, a golden
Banner, woven by the best of weavers
And beautiful. And over everything he saw
A strange light, shining everywhere,
On walls and floor and treasure. Nothing
Moved, no other monsters appeared;
He took what he wanted, all the treasures
That pleased his eye, heavy plates
And golden cups and the glorious banner,
Loaded his arms with all they could hold.
Beowulf’s dagger, his iron blade,
Had finished the fire-spitting terror
That once protected tower and treasures
Alike; the gray-bearded lord of the Geats
Had ended those flying, burning raids
Forever.

**Big Idea** The Epic Warrior *Why does Beowulf believe that he has been a good king?*

**Big Idea** The Epic Warrior *Why does the treasure mean so much to Beowulf?*
Then Wiglaf went back, anxious
To return while Beowulf was alive, to bring him
Treasure they’d won together. He ran,
hoping his wounded king, weak

And dying, had not left the world too soon.
Then he brought their treasure to Beowulf, and found
His famous king bloody, gasping
For breath. But Wiglaf sprinkled water
Over his lord, until the words

Deep in his breast broke through and were heard.
Beholding the treasure he spoke, haltingly:
“For this, this gold, these jewels, I thank
Our Father in Heaven, Ruler of the Earth—
For all of this, that His grace has given me,

Allowed me to bring to my people while breath
Still came to my lips. I sold my life
For this treasure, and I sold it well. Take
What I leave, Wiglaf, lead my people,
Help them; my time is gone. Have

The brave Geats build me a tomb,
When the funeral flames° have burned me, and build it
Here, at the water's edge, high
On this spit of land, so sailors can see
This tower, and remember my name, and call it
Beowulf’s tower, and boats in the darkness
And mist, crossing the sea, will know it.”

Then that brave king gave the golden
Necklace from around his throat to Wiglaf,
Gave him his gold-covered helmet, and his rings,
And his mail shirt, and ordered him to use them well:
“You’re the last of all our far-flung family.
Fate has swept our race away,
Taken warriors in their strength and led them
To the death that was waiting. And now I follow them.”

The old man’s mouth was silent, spoke
No more, had said as much as it could;
He would sleep in the fire, soon. His soul
Left his flesh, flew to glory.

And when the battle was over Beowulf’s followers

 Came out of the wood, cowards and traitors,
Knowing the dragon was dead. Afraid,
While it spit its fires, to fight in their lord’s
Defense, to throw their javelins and spears,
They came like shamefaced jackals, their shields
In their hands, to the place where the prince lay dead,
And waited for Wiglaf to speak. He was sitting
Near Beowulf’s body, wearily sprinkling
Water in the dead man’s face, trying
To stir him. He could not. No one could have kept
Life in their lord’s body, or turned
Aside the Lord’s will: world
And men and all move as He orders,
And always have, and always will.
Then Wiglaf turned and angrily told them
What men without courage must hear.
Wexstan’s brave son stared at the traitors,
His heart sorrowful, and said what he had to:
“I say what anyone who speaks the truth
Must say. Your lord gave you gifts,
Swords and the armor you stand in now;
You sat on the mead-hall benches, prince
And followers, and he gave you, with open hands,
Helmets and mail shirts, hunted across
The world for the best of weapons. War
Came and you ran like cowards, dropped
Your swords as soon as the danger was real.
Should Beowulf have boasted of your help, rejoiced
In your loyal strength? With God’s good grace
He helped himself, swung his sword
Alone, won his own revenge.
The help I gave him was nothing, but all
I was able to give; I went to him, knowing
That nothing but Beowulf’s strength could save us,
And my sword was lucky, found some vital
Place and bled the burning flames
Away. Too few of his warriors remembered
To come, when our lord faced death, alone.
And now the giving of swords, of golden
Rings and rich estates, is over,
Ended for you and everyone who shares
Your blood: when the brave Geats hear
How you bolted and ran none of your race
Will have anything left but their lives. And death
Would be better for them all, and for you, than the kind
Of life you can lead, branded with disgrace!”

THE FUNERAL FIRE

A huge heap of wood was ready,
Hung around with helmets, and battle
Shields, and shining mail shirts, all
As Beowulf had asked. The bearers brought
Their belovèd lord, their glorious king,
And weeping laid him high on the wood.
Then the warriors began to kindle that greatest
Of funeral fires; smoke rose
Above the flames, black and thick,
And while the wind blew and the fire
Roared they wept, and Beowulf’s body
Crumbled and was gone. The Geats stayed,
Moaning their sorrow, lamenting their lord:
A gnarled old woman, hair wound
Tight and gray on her head, groaned
A song of misery, of infinite sadness
And days of mourning, of fear and sorrow
To come, slaughter and terror and captivity.
And Heaven swallowed the billowing smoke.
Then the Geats built the tower, as Beowulf
Had asked, strong and tall, so sailors
Could find it from far and wide; working
For ten long days they made his monument,
Sealed his ashes in walls as straight
And high as wise and willing hands
Could raise them. And the riches he and Wiglaf
Had won from the dragon, rings, necklaces,
Ancient, hammered armor—all
The treasures they’d taken were left there, too,
Silver and jewels buried in the sandy
Ground, back in the earth, again
And forever hidden and useless to men.
And then twelve of the bravest Geats
Rode their horses around the tower,
Telling their sorrow, telling stories
Of their dead king and his greatness, his glory,
Praising him for heroic deeds, for a life
As noble as his name. So should all men
Raise up words for their lords, warm
With love, when their shield and protector leaves
His body behind, sends his soul
On high. And so Beowulf’s followers
Rode, mourning their belovèd leader,
Crying that no better king had ever
Lived, no prince so mild, no man
So open to his people, so deserving of praise.
RESPONDING AND THINKING CRITICALLY

Respond
1. What are your impressions of Beowulf? Explain.

Recall and Interpret
2. (a) Describe where Grendel lives and the nature of his origins. (b) What do the details about Grendel’s origins and dwelling place add to your impression of him?
3. (a) Summarize what happens during the battle between Grendel and Beowulf. (b) How does learning about Grendel’s fears and feelings during the battle affect your impression of the monster?
4. (a) Why does Grendel’s mother try to kill Beowulf? Describe their struggle and its outcome. (b) After the struggle with Grendel’s mother, why does Beowulf search for Grendel? Why does he feel the way he does?
5. (a) Why does Beowulf believe he must fight the dragon? (b) Summarize the outcome of the battle.
6. (a) Why does Wiglaf come to Beowulf’s aid in his fight with the dragon? (b) In what ways are Beowulf and Wiglaf similar? In what ways are they different?

Analyze and Evaluate
7. Given the fact that most of Beowulf’s men abandon him during his fight with the dragon, what might this indicate about the future of the kingdom?
8. For which character did you feel the most sympathy? What strategies did the poet use to create sympathy for that character?
9. A symbol is a person, thing, or event that stands for something else, often an idea or concept. What might Beowulf symbolize? What might Grendel and the dragon represent?

Connect
10. **Big Idea**: The Epic Warrior From the description of Beowulf’s character, what traits do you think the Anglo-Saxons considered heroic?

Creating a Storyboard

One way to visualize the flow of events in an epic poem is to create a storyboard—a series of sketches depicting the most important events in sequence. Each sketch illustrates a single scene or action.

**Group Activity** With a group of classmates, list details about the setting, characters, and events in a selected passage from the poem. For example, review lines 658–693, and then add details to the third column in the chart below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Characters</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>inside the dragon’s lair</td>
<td>* a runaway slave</td>
<td>The dragon sleeps inside stone walls.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* a sleeping dragon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Then turn your chart into a storyboard, or a series of cartoon panels, to illustrate the events. Consider how graphic storytelling increases your understanding of the poem.
Literary Element: Conflict
An external conflict exists when a character struggles against some outside force, such as another person, nature, society, or fate. An internal conflict is a struggle that takes place within the mind of a character who is torn between opposing feelings, desires, or goals.

1. Which of Beowulf’s external conflicts seems the most challenging? Explain.
2. In lines 707–717, what internal conflict does Beowulf face? How does he resolve it?

Review: Epic Hero
As you learned on page 21, an epic hero is typically a person of high social status who usually embodies the ideals of his people.

Group Activity An epic hero is defined by his or her society. How might Beowulf, an Anglo-Saxon epic hero, behave in our society? What kinds of jobs might he hold? With a group of your classmates, discuss Beowulf’s main character traits—both good and bad. Create a diagram like the one below to record your observations. Then discuss how Beowulf might act in present-day situations as well as how others might regard him. Share your conclusions with the rest of your class.

Reading Strategy: Identifying Sequence
Identifying the sequence of events is an important step in determining an author’s purpose for writing. In Beowulf, the hero fights three monsters in succession: Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and the fire-breathing dragon.

1. What does the poet suggest about Beowulf’s challenges by using this sequence of battles?
2. How would you contrast Beowulf in youth with Beowulf in old age?
3. Why might the poet show Beowulf fighting monsters but not other human beings?

Vocabulary Practice
Complete each analogy below.

1. hammer : forge :: chisel :
   a. paint  b. sand  c. sculpt
2. pain : writhing :: cold :
   a. warming  b. skiing  c. shivering
3. criminal : infamous :: philanthropist :
   a. reputable  b. careful  c. joyous
4. cheer : celebrate :: lament :
   a. rejoice  b. mourn  c. criticize
5. pajamas : nap :: shroud :
   a. burial  b. wedding  c. convalescence

Academic Vocabulary
Here are two words from the vocabulary list on page R82. These words will help you think, write, and talk about the selection.

concept (kon’ sept) n. a general idea based on knowledge or experience

policy (po’ la sé) n. a consistent plan of action

Practice and Apply
1. What concept of fate influences Beowulf?
2. What policy does Beowulf follow as king of the Geats?
Writing About Literature

Analyzing Settings

In the first part of *Beowulf*, Grendel attacks Herot, Hrothgar’s hall. In the last part of the epic, the dragon destroys Beowulf’s hall. In a brief essay, analyze the significance of the two settings. What does Herot mean to Hrothgar and the Danish people? What does the destruction of Beowulf’s hall represent? Use details from the poem to support your explanation.

As you draft, write from start to finish. Follow the writing path shown here to help organize your essay and keep your writing on track.

- **Introduction**
  - general statement about setting
  - thesis: specific statement about the settings in *Beowulf*

- **Body Paragraph(s)**
  - details about Herot
  - details about Beowulf’s hall

- **Conclusion**
  - restatement of thesis in different words
  - related insight about the symbolic use of setting

After you finish your draft, meet with a peer reviewer to evaluate each other’s work and suggest revisions. Then proofread and edit your draft for errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

The *Beowulf*-Poet’s Language and Style

Using Possessive Pronouns

A possessive pronoun takes the place of the possessive form of a noun. In *Beowulf*, the poet often uses possessive pronouns to emphasize meaning and create rhythm:

“A child born of my body, his life
Created from mine.” (lines 954–955)

Afraid,/ While it spit its fires, to fight in their lord’s Defense, . . . (lines 1046–1048)

And then twelve of the bravest Geats
Rode their horses around the tower, . . . (lines 1123–1124)

Possessive pronouns act as adjectives when they modify nouns. In the first example above, the possessive pronouns *my* and *his* modify the nouns *body* and *life*, respectively. Notice that possessive pronouns do not contain apostrophes. Take particular note that the possessive pronoun *its* has no apostrophe. It is a common error to mistake *its* and the contraction *it’s* (*it is*). In the following sentence, the pronoun and the contraction are used correctly: *It’s* the theft of a cup from *its* hoard that outrages the dragon.

Possessive pronouns have person and number, as shown in the chart below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Possessive Pronouns</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Person</td>
<td><em>my, mine</em></td>
<td><em>our, ours</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Person</td>
<td><em>your, yours</em></td>
<td><em>your, yours</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Person</td>
<td><em>his</em></td>
<td><em>their, theirs</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>her, hers</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>its</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Activity

Create a chart of your own in which you list other examples of possessive pronouns in the poem and identify the words that each modifies.

Revising Check

Possessive Pronouns

With a partner, review your essay on analyzing setting. Look for places where using possessive pronouns could strengthen the style. Revise your essay accordingly.

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**Web Activities**

**For eFlashcards, Selection Quick Checks, and other Web activities, go to [www.glencoe.com](http://www.glencoe.com).**
Comparing Literature Across Time and Place

Connecting to the Reading Selections

Throughout history, writers from different cultures have explored the terrifying intrusion of dark forces into human life and the heroic struggles to destroy those forces. The four writers compared here—the *Beowulf*-poet, the creator of *Gilgamesh*, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Gareth Hinds—portray this timeless conflict between good and evil.

**from *Beowulf*** ............................................................... epic .................... 22

*Strength, self-sacrifice, and heroic spirit*

**from *Gilgamesh*** ............................................................... epic .................... 55

*The bonds of friendship*

**J. R. R. Tolkien**

**“The Battle of the Pelennor Fields”**

**from *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*** ............................................. fantasy .................... 58

*Loyalty to a fallen king*

**Gareth Hinds**

**from *The Collected Beowulf*** ...................... graphic novel .................... 62

**COMPARING THE Big Idea  The Epic Warrior**

Epic warriors face life-threatening challenges. Their responses to these challenges define them as heroes and help characterize them as individuals. The *Beowulf*-poet, the creator of *Gilgamesh*, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Gareth Hinds all portray larger-than-life warriors who struggle against the forces of evil.

**COMPARING Heroes’ Goals**

From Odysseus and Beowulf to Batman and Luke Skywalker, the superhero represents goodness and nobility. Heroes’ personal goals motivate them to take risks, pursue adventures, and perform great deeds. These goals not only drive the plot of the story but suggest the theme, or the writer’s message about life.

**COMPARING Cultures**

The values of a culture find expression in its art, music, and literature. The heroes in these stories embody the values cherished by their respective cultures.
The Death of Humbaba from Gilgamesh

Building Background

The epic of Gilgamesh was lost for more than two thousand years. Only because of an ancient king named Assurbanipal (āˈsär bāˈ nā pāl) and an accidental discovery by a British archeologist do we know it today.

From 668 to 627 B.C., Assurbanipal reigned over the ancient empire of Assyria. During his reign, Assurbanipal sent men out to find ancient texts at such historical sites of learning as Babylon, Uruk, and Nippur. He then asked that these texts be translated into Akkadian Semitic, the language of his empire. Gilgamesh was one of the works found and was transcribed onto clay tablets, which were then stored in Assurbanipal’s library at Nineveh.

Thousands of years later, in 1839, a British traveler named Austen Henry Layard, on his way to Ceylon (today known as Sri Lanka), stopped to investigate some mounds in Mesopotamia. What was intended as a brief delay became the work of years for Layard, as the mounds eventually proved to be the buried library of Assurbanipal. Here, among nearly twenty-five thousand broken tablets, Layard unearthed the text of Gilgamesh.

Who Was Gilgamesh? Gilgamesh was an actual king who lived sometime between 2800 and 2500 B.C. and reigned over the ancient Sumerian city-state of Uruk (ōˈrŏk), located in what is now southeastern Iraq. During the first several hundred years following Gilgamesh’s death, people recited tales of his adventures as separate stories. Then, sometime between 2000 and 1600 B.C., storytellers began to string these tales together, forming the work that is now known as the epic of Gilgamesh. The following selection is taken from that epic.

Context At the point in the epic in which the tale reprinted here begins, Gilgamesh’s ambition to build great walls and temples to glorify his name has driven him to the forest for building materials. There, he and his friend, Enkidu, plan to chop down a great cedar tree. However, they both believe that these precious trees are guarded by supernatural forces that will attempt to block their efforts—the greatest of these forces being Humbaba, a giant who serves the gods and protects the woods with his own physical strength and magical powers. Therefore, Gilgamesh has asked the sun-god Shamash for protection and has promised, in return, to build a great temple for him.
At dawn Gilgamesh raised his ax
And struck at the great cedar.
When Humbaba heard the sound of falling trees,
He hurried down the path that they had seen
But only he had traveled. Gilgamesh felt weak
At the sound of Humbaba's footsteps and called to Shamash
Saying, I have followed you in the way decreed;
Why am I abandoned now? Suddenly the winds
Sprang up. They saw the great head of Humbaba
Like a water buffalo's bellowing down the path,
His huge and clumsy legs, his flailing arms
Thrashing at phantoms in his precious trees.
His single stroke could cut a cedar down
And leave no mark on him. His shoulders,
Like a porter's under building stones,
Were permanently bent by what he bore;
He was the slave who did the work for gods
But whom the gods would never notice.
Monstrous in his contortion, he aroused
The two almost to pity.
But pity was the thing that might have killed.
It made them pause just long enough to show
How pitiless he was to them. Gilgamesh in horror saw
Him strike the back of Enkidu and beat him to the ground
Until he thought his friend was crushed to death.
He stood still watching as the monster leaned to make
His final strike against his friend, unable
To move to help him, and then Enkidu slid
Along the ground like a ram making its final lunge
On wounded knees. Humbaba fell and seemed
To crack the ground itself in two, and Gilgamesh,
As if this fall had snapped him from his daze,
Returned to life.

Retold by Herbert Mason
And stood over Humbaba with his ax
35 Raised high above his head watching the monster plead
In strangled sobs and desperate appeals
The way the sea contorts under a violent squall.¹
I’ll serve you as I served the gods, Humbaba said;
I’ll build you houses from their sacred trees.

Enkidu feared his friend was weakening
40 And called out: Gilgamesh! Don’t trust him!
As if there were some hunger in himself
That Gilgamesh was feeling
That turned him momentarily to yearn
For someone who would serve, he paused;
And then he raised his ax up higher
And swung it in a perfect arc
Into Humbaba’s neck. He reached out
To touch the wounded shoulder of his friend,

And late that night he reached again
50 To see if he was yet asleep, but there was only
Quiet breathing. The stars against the midnight sky
Were sparkling like mica² in a riverbed.
In the slight breeze
55 The head of Humbaba was swinging from a tree.

1. A squall is a sudden, violent storm.
2. Mica is a mineral that sparkles in the light.

Quickwrite
In what ways is Gilgamesh a heroic character? What qualities make
him seem to be an ordinary human being? Write a brief essay
exploring his character.
Building Background

While grading papers in 1928, J. R. R. Tolkien (%) came across a page left blank by a student. On this blank page, Tolkien scribbled, “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.” From that sentence evolved his vastly popular children’s fantasy, The Hobbit. This novel in turn helped Tolkien crystallize his musings about an imaginary realm—Middle Earth, later the setting for the most influential body of fantasy writing in the twentieth century.

Born in South Africa, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien moved with his family to England at the age of four after his father’s death. A devout Roman Catholic, like his mother, Tolkien served in World War I and afterward became a professor of English language and literature at Oxford University. His academic achievements included an edition of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and an acclaimed lecture, “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,” which greatly influenced subsequent studies of that epic.

An Imaginary World In his spare time, Tolkien continued developing his intricate, fictional world, complete with its own language, history, geography, and characters—including dwarves and elves. He created much of his early fantasy writing to entertain his four children. Included in these writings is The Hobbit, which was published in 1937. As an extension of this popular work, Tolkien continued developing the story of Middle Earth into The Lord of the Rings, published seventeen years later. Because of its length, this work was originally divided into three volumes: The Fellowship of the Ring, The Two Towers, and The Return of the King. Into this modern fantasy epic, Tolkien wove elements drawn from the heroic traditions of the Germanic and Celtic peoples.

In the United States, The Lord of the Rings became a cult classic on college campuses when it was published in paperback in 1965. In the late 1990s, New Zealand-born film director Peter Jackson began adapting Tolkien’s work in the form of a trilogy for the screen. Jackson’s film version of The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King won eleven Oscars, including Best Picture, in 2004.

Context At the point in The Lord of the Rings in which this episode occurs, the conflict between the forces of good and evil is nearing its climax. The Dark Lord, Sauron, has sent his vast armies to besiege the city of Minas Tirith. The leader of Sauron’s forces is the Lord of the Nazgûl, a spectral demon astride a huge, foul, dragonlike steed. Among those defending the city are the Rohirrim, the mounted warriors of the Mark of Rohan, led by their aged king, Théoden. Unknown to Théoden, his beloved niece, Éowyn, disguised as the warrior Dernhelm, has accompanied his troops. With her is Merry, a Hobbit.

J. R. R. Tolkien was born in 1892 and died in 1973.

LiteratureOnline Author Search For more about J. R. R. Tolkien, go to www.glencoe.com.
Théoden King of the Mark had reached the road from the Gate to the River, and he turned towards the City that was now less than a mile distant. He slackened his speed a little, seeking new foes, and his knights came about him, and Dernhelm was with them. Ahead nearer the walls Elfhelm's men were among the siege-engines, hewing, slaying, driving their foes into the fire-pits. Well nigh all the northern half of the Pelennor was overrun, and there camps were blazing, orcs were flying towards the River like herds before the hunters; and the Rohirrim went hither and thither at their will. But they had not yet overthrown the siege, nor won the Gate. Many foes stood before it, and on the further half of the plain were other hosts still unfought. Southward beyond the road lay the main force of the Haradrim, and there their horsemen were gathered about the standard of their chieftain. And he looked out, and in the growing light he saw the banner of the king, and that it was far ahead of the battle with few men about it. Then he was filled with a red wrath and shouted aloud, and displaying his standard, black serpent upon scarlet, he came against the white horse and the green with great press of men; and the drawing of the scimitars of the Southrons was like a glitter of stars.

Then Théoden was aware of him, and would not wait for his onset, but crying to Snowmane he charged headlong to greet him. Great was the clash of their meeting. But the white fury of the Northmen burned the hotter, and more skilled was their knighthood with long spears and bitter. Fewer were they but they clove through the Southrons like a fire-bolt in a forest. Right through the press drove Théoden Thengel's son, and his spear was shivered as he threw down their chieftain. Out swept his sword, and he spurred to the standard, hewed staff and bearer; and the black serpent foundered.

Then all that was left unslain of their cavalry turned and fled far away. But lo! suddenly in the midst of the glory of the king his golden shield was dimmed. The new morning was blotted from the sky. Dark fell about him. Horses reared and screamed. Men cast from the saddle lay groveling on the ground.

1. Elfhelm is one of the Rohirrim.
2. The Pelennor is the region immediately around Minas Tirith.
3. Orcs are troll-like beings who form one of the principal groups serving the Dark Lord.
4. The Haradrim are the men of Harad, a region to the south, who serve Sauron. They are also known as Southrons.
5. A standard is a banner or emblem.
6. Snowmane is Théoden’s horse.
7. Hewed means “cut.”
8. Foundered means “fell.”
“To me! To me!” cried Théoden. “Up, Eorlingas!⁹ Fear no darkness!” But Snowmane wild with terror stood up on high, fighting with the air, and then with a great scream he crashed upon his side: a black dart had pierced him. The king fell beneath him.

The great shadow descended like a falling cloud. And behold! it was a winged creature: if bird, then greater than all other birds, and it was naked, and neither quill nor feather did it bear, and its vast pinions¹⁰ were as webs of hide between horned fingers; and it stank. A creature of an older world maybe it was, whose kind, lingering in forgotten mountains cold beneath the Moon, outstayed their day, and in hideous eyrie¹¹ bred this last untimely brood, apt to evil. And the Dark Lord took it, and nursed it with fell¹² meats, until it grew beyond the measure of all other things that fly; and he gave it to his servant to be his steed. Down, down it came, and then, folding its fingered webs, it gave a croaking cry, and settled upon the body of Snowmane, digging in its claws, stooping its long naked neck.

Upon it sat a shape, black-mantled, huge and threatening. A crown of steel he bore, but between rim and robe naught was there to see, save only a deadly gleam of eyes: the Lord of the Nazgûl. To the air he had returned, summoning his steed ere the darkness failed, and now he was come again, bringing ruin, turning hope to despair, and victory to death. A great black mace¹³ he wielded.

But Théoden was not utterly forsaken. The knights of his house lay slain about him, or else mastered by the madness of their steeds were borne far away. Yet one stood there still: Dernhelm the young, faithful beyond fear; and he wept, for he had loved his lord as a father. Right through the charge Merry had been borne unharmed behind him, until the Shadow came; and then Windfola¹⁴ had thrown them in his terror, and now ran wild upon the plain. Merry crawled on all fours like a dazed beast, and such a horror was on him that he was blind and sick.

“King’s man! King’s man!” his heart cried within him. “You must stay by him. As a father you shall be to me, you said.” But his will made no answer, and his body shook. He dared not open his eyes or look up.

Then out of the blackness in his mind he thought that he heard Dernhelm speaking; yet now the voice seemed strange, recalling some other voice that he had known.

“Begone, foul dwimmerlaik, lord of carrion!¹⁵ Leave the dead in peace!”

A cold voice answered: “Come not between the Nazgûl and his prey! Or he will not slay thee in thy turn. He will bear thee away to the houses of lamentation, beyond all darkness, where thy flesh shall be devoured, and thy shriveled mind be left naked to the Lidless Eye.”

A sword rang as it was drawn. “Do what you will; but I will hinder it, if I may.”

“Hinder me? Thou fool. No living man may hinder me!”

Then Merry heard of all sounds in that hour the strangest. It seemed that Dernhelm laughed, and the clear voice was like the ring of steel.

“But no living man am I! You look upon a woman. Éowyn I am, Éomund’s daughter. You stand between me and my lord and kin. Begone,

---
⁹. The Eorlingas are the men of Rohan, whose ancestor was Eorl.
¹⁰. Pinions means “wings.”
¹¹. Eyrie means “nest.”
¹². Fell means “deadly.”
¹³. A mace is a war-club.
¹⁴. Windfola is Dernhelm’s horse.
¹⁵. Carrion refers to the flesh of dead people and animals.
if you be not deathless! For living or dark undead, I will smite you, if you touch him."

The winged creature screamed at her, but the Ringwraith made no answer, and was silent, as if in sudden doubt. Very amazement for a moment conquered Merry's fear. He opened his eyes and the blackness was lifted from them. There some paces from him sat the great beast, and all seemed dark about it, and above it loomed the Nazgûl Lord like a shadow of despair. A little to the left facing them stood she whom he had called Dernhelm. But the helm of her secrecy had fallen from her, and her bright hair, released from its bonds, gleamed with pale gold upon her shoulders. Her eyes grey as the sea were hard and fell, and yet tears were on her cheek. A sword was in her hand, and she raised her shield against the horror of her enemy's eyes.

Éowyn it was, and Dernhelm also. For into Merry's mind flashed the memory of the face that he saw at the riding from Dunharrow: the face of one that goes seeking death, having no hope. Pity filled his heart and great wonder, and suddenly the slow-kindled courage of his race awoke. He clenched his hand. She should not die, so fair, so desperate! At least she should not die alone, unaided.

The face of their enemy was not turned towards him, but still he hardly dared to move, dreading lest the deadly eyes should fall on him. Slowly, slowly he began to crawl aside; but the Black Captain, in doubt and malice intent upon the woman before him, heeded him no more than a worm in the mud.

Suddenly the great beast beat its hideous wings, and the wind of them was foul. Again it leaped into the air, and then swiftly fell down upon Éowyn, shrieking, striking with beak and claw. Still she did not blench:16 maiden of the Rohirrim, child of kings, slender but as a steel-blade, fair but terrible. A swift stroke she dealt, skilled and deadly. The outstretched neck she clove asunder,17 and the hewn head fell like a stone. Backward she sprang as the huge shape crashed to ruin, vast wings outspread, crumpled on the earth; and with its fall the shadow passed away. A light fell about her, and her hair shone in the sunrise.

Out of the wreck rose the Black Rider, tall and threatening, towering above her. With a cry of hatred that stung the very ears like venom he let fall his mace. Her shield was shivered in many pieces, and her arm was broken; she stumbled to her knees. He bent over her like a cloud, and his eyes glittered; he raised his mace to kill.

But suddenly he too stumbled forward with a cry of bitter pain, and his stroke went wide, driving into the ground. Merry's sword had stabbed him from behind, shearing through the black mantle, and passing up beneath the hauberk18 had pierced the sinew behind his mighty knee.

"Éowyn! Éowyn!" cried Merry. Then tottering, struggling up, with her last strength she drove her sword between crown and mantle, as the great shoulders bowed before her. The sword broke sparkling into many shards. The crown rolled away with a clang. Éowyn fell forward upon her fallen foe. But lo! the mantle and hauberk were empty. Shapeless they lay now on the ground, torn and tumbled; and a cry went up into the shuddering air, and faded to a shrill wailing, passing with the wind, a voice bodiless and thin that died, and was swallowed up, and was never heard again in that age of this world.

16. **Blench** means "turn white," as with fear.

17. **Asunder** means "in half."

18. A **hauberk** is a long coat of chain armor.

**Discussion Starter**

What background knowledge of *The Lord of the Rings* did you bring to your reading of this selection? How would you account for the enduring popularity of Tolkien's epic?
Building Background

There have been several comic book versions of *Beowulf* in recent years. Certainly the most elegant is the graphic novel by American illustrator Gareth Hinds, who first issued his *Beowulf* in three comic books that each presents one of the hero’s combats in the epic. Hinds’s *The Collected Beowulf* appeared in 2003.

In a recent interview, Hinds explained his choice of *Beowulf* as a subject for a graphic novel by saying that he “wanted to do a superhero book, without the modern superhero conventions.” For the text of his graphic novel, Hinds used a 1910 translation of *Beowulf* by Francis Gummere, which he felt provides a sense, “to the greatest extent possible in modern English, that you were actually reading the Old English poem.” The excerpt you are about to read shows Beowulf’s arrival in Denmark.
...a hero that hither his handymen has led.

(who) knew him of yore in his youthful days,
his aged father was Ecgtheow named,
to whom, at home, gave birth the Geat
his only daughter. Their offspring bold
fares hither to aid a steadfast ally.
And seamen, too, have said me this--
who carried my gift to the Geatish court;
thus for thanks, -- he has thirty men's
best of great in the grasp of his hand;
the bold in battle aye.
Chou broecgaur, hail! Englata's 1,
kinnian, and followeer. Fane a plencg
have I gained in yowc! These Grendel-deeds
I heard in my homeland heralded clear.
Seafarers say how stands this hall,
of buildings brest, for your band of chynes
empty and idle when every sun
in the harbor of heaven is hidden away.

so my vassale advised me well, --
brave and wise, the beest of men, --
O sorrow broetchgar, to seek thee here,
for my nerve and my might they knew full well
themselves had sorrow from slayctor come
blood flecked from foe, where five I bound,
and the wild broed warned f1 the wars I saw
nears by nght, in need and peril
swerving the Widera, whose war they sought;
cruising the grey zones. Graceful now,
mysterion cruel, be mine to quell
in single barcel! So, from thee,
than sorrow of the Shining-Danes,
Sytulings-burhwerk, a bay I seek, --
and friend-of-the folk, refuse it now,
O Warslers, shuld now I've wandered far, --
that I alone with my kinsmen here,
this hardy band, may hearer purge!
Discussion Starter

Comic books use various conventions, such as panels to organize narrative. Discuss how Hinds uses this graphic convention to effectively present part of the story of Beowulf.
Wrap-Up: Comparing Literature Across Time and Place

- *Beowulf*  
  “The Death of Humbaba” from *Gilgamesh*
- *“The Battle of the Pelennor Fields” from* *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* by J. R. R. Tolkien
- *from The Collected Beowulf* by Gareth Hinds

**COMPARING THE Big Idea**  
*The Epic Warrior*

**Partner Activity** With a partner, review the following quotations. Then discuss the particular challenges faced by each epic warrior. Which warrior strikes you as most heroic in his or her response to these challenges? Support your interpretation with additional evidence from the selections.

“The monster came quickly toward him,  
Pouring out fire and smoke . . .  
And for the first time in his life that famous prince  
Fought with fate against him, with glory  
Denied him. He knew it, but he raised his sword  
And struck at the dragon’s scaly hide.”

—“The Battle with the Dragon” from *Beowulf*

“Out of the wreck rose the Black Rider, tall and threatening, towering above her. With a cry of hatred that stung the very ears like venom he let fall his mace. Her shield was shivered in many pieces, and her arm was broken; she stumbled to her knees.”

—“The Battle of the Pelennor Fields” from *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*

“They saw the great head of Humbaba /  
Like a water buffalo’s bellowing down the path, /  
His huge and clumsy legs, his flailing arms /  
Thrashing at phantoms in his precious trees.”

—“The Death of Humbaba” from *Gilgamesh*

“. . . but with gripe alone must I front the fiend and fight for life, foe against foe. Then faith be his in the doom of the Lord, whom death shall take.”

—*from The Collected Beowulf*

**COMPARING**  
*Heroes’ Goals*

**Group Discussion** With a small group, compare the personal goals of Beowulf (in the epic and the graphic novel), Gilgamesh, and Éowyn. Discuss the following questions:

1. Why does each hero put himself or herself at risk?
2. What other motives surface during the course of each hero’s struggle?

**COMPARING**  
*Cultures*

**Visual Display** Create a visual display, such as a chart or a collage, to accompany one of these selections. In your display, present images that depict the culture in the selection you chose. Use the Internet and library materials as research sources.

**OBJECTIVES**
- Compare and contrast authors’ messages.  
  - Analyze epic warriors.  
  - Compare and contrast cultures.
In “A Brief History of Heroes,” Tristram Hunt describes how the concept of heroism has changed through the centuries.

1. Skim the article by glancing quickly over the entire piece. Which pattern of organization do you think the writer will use to present his thoughts?
2. Notice the writer’s first question. Consider how you might use your ideas about heroism to answer it.
3. Examine the photos on pages 71 and 72. What do they suggest about heroes of the past and present?

Set a Purpose for Reading

Read to learn how the concept of heroism has evolved over time.

Reading Strategy

Connecting to Contemporary Issues

When you connect an informational text to contemporary issues, you relate what you have read in a selection to your understanding of current events, challenges, and concerns. Ask yourself:

- Does this information support or refute what I already know about an issue?
- How is my understanding affected by this work?

As you read, use a chart to list the connections you make between ideas in this article and issues in today’s world.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideas</th>
<th>Issues</th>
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Most of us have our own definition of heroism—we think we know a hero when we see one. History and literature are filled with both epic and ordinary heroes, but pinning down the attributes of a hero is a challenge. Your hero may not look much like mine. So it’s worth asking: Are there certain unchallengeable characteristics that all heroes have in common? Do today’s heroes share personality traits with heroes of the past? Or are heroes shaped mostly by circumstance? Although most would agree that there are some timeless, universal qualities known as heroic, throughout history the idea of the hero has fluctuated and evolved to suit the culture of the times.

The modern concept of the hero would not have been possible without the Renaissance, a period in European history that saw a revived interest in the classical art, literature, and learning of ancient Greece and Rome. Previously, the Middle Ages had not looked favorably upon man’s achievements. Living under the shadow of human sin, the Roman Catholic scholars of medieval Europe stressed the afterlife. Greatness came from God, not man, so the true heroes of Christendom were the martyrs, missionaries, and priests preparing for salvation.

The Renaissance challenged this bleak vision. Part of the challenge came from 14th-century Italy’s rediscovery of classical literature. The writings of the Roman historian Tacitus, the biographies of the Greek philosopher Plutarch, but above all, the letters and speeches of the Roman orator Cicero opened the classical world anew. What they all emphasized was man’s capacity for greatness.

In the 14th century, it was the Italian poet Francesco Petrarch, known as Petrarch, who ushered in the new humanism, a philosophy that focused on human values and capabilities. What excited Petrarch
was the classical tradition of education. The aim of education, according to Cicero, was not to teach a narrow range of technical skills, like those needed to practice a trade, but rather to cultivate the single, noble virtue of manliness. During the Renaissance, this classical idea of virtus (moral excellence and goodness) went on to inspire many advice books outlining what was needed to become a well-rounded man. A manly man was proficient in warfare, scholarship, government, literature, and even the art of love. In the city-states of 15th-century Italy arose a new belief in human potential. The modern hero was born, and the ideal of the Renaissance man remains a heroic value today.

From this Renaissance culture—this new stress on the capabilities and virtue of man—came a series of histories in the late 14th century that recounted the inspirational lives of great men. Petrarch’s De Viris Illustribus (On Famous Men) ignored saints and martyrs, concentrating instead on the achievements of generals and statesmen. For Petrarch, heroism demanded the purposeful display of virtus: from Romulus, the founder of Rome, to the war leader Scipio, Petrarch celebrated heroes who conquered fortune, beat the odds and rose to the top.

There was, however, one dissenting voice: that of the Florentine diplomat Niccolò Machiavelli. He ridiculed Cicero’s lofty sentiments about virtus. In his book, The Prince (1513), Machiavelli turned these Renaissance ideas on their head. Where Petrarch had stressed the virtues of justice, mercy, and honesty in great men, Machiavelli offered the more ruthless concepts of realpolitik, which focuses on the advancement of individual interests—be they the interests of a person or nation. Machiavelli’s heroes were those who thought it was better to be feared than loved; who practiced cruelty rather than charity; who didn’t base their conduct on firm principles or values, but on the winds of fortune. Machiavelli’s hero was not the valiant General Scipio, but the scheming, manipulative prince Cesare Borgia. This notion of antiheroism represented a shocking reversal of thinking and secured Machiavelli his everlasting notoriety (and it finds its echo today in some scheming statesmen and princes of industry).

**THE HERO OF ROMANTICISM**

Yet Petrarch’s more benevolent vision of classical heroism continued to dominate European culture for centuries to come. Only in the 18th century did the well-rounded Renaissance man finally fall out of fashion. The philosophers of Europe’s Enlightenment period had little time for the vanity of personal greatness. As part of a movement that considered reason the highest virtue, these thinkers instead advocated the heroism of humanity. A scientific approach to social problems and a belief in universal human progress were to be honored, not the petty achievements of politicians and conquerors, or “celebrated villains,” as the French writer Voltaire called them.

Inevitably, the impersonal equality of the Enlightenment produced a reaction: Romanticism. Beginning in the late 1790s with the writings of Johann von Schiller, August von Schlegel, and Novalis, the early German Romantics criticized the elevation of logic and reason above feeling. Instead, through art, literature, music, and love they celebrated the inner emotions and creative development of the human spirit. The Romantics believed in man’s natural goodness and the call of individuals to develop their personality to the full. If the Renaissance tradition had emphasized military glory and outward achievement, the German Romantics emphasized the uniqueness of each meaningful experience. The heroes of the day were not warriors but poets, dreamers, philosophers, and rebels. Britain’s Lord Byron (1788–1824) managed to embody it all: author, lover, and revolutionary. Through the work of writers such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Robert Southey, British culture became steeped in Romanticism, which stressed individual imagination and rebellion against social conventions and injustice. In France, Victor Hugo, author of Les Misérables and The Hunchback of Notre-Dame, championed the human spirit in the face of all adversity. And Italy awaited its own Romantic hero in the form of revolutionary Giuseppe Garibaldi, who fought to unify Italy.

**THE VICTORIAN HERO**

But it was the Victorian author Thomas Carlyle who turned the countercultural Romantic hero into the Great Man of history. A painfully tortured genius, Carlyle found in the humanism of the Romantics a refuge from his own brutal, mechanical age. For Carlyle, the Britain of the Industrial Revolution was a petty, soulless society run by technocrats lacking any conception of greatness.

In 1840, he delivered a series of lectures, titled On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History, lamenting this cultural poverty and championing the role of great men in history. From the prophet Muhammad to William Shakespeare to Martin Luther to Napoleon Bonaparte, Carlyle argued, “Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here.” For Carlyle,
heroic conduct was not a skill that could be taught, as Renaissance thinkers had hoped. It was something individuals were gifted with. Moreover, heroes were not people to be emulated, but rather demigods to be acknowledged as possessing greater power. It was a potentially dangerous idea, but one that struck a chord in Victorian Britain and led to such national saviors of the 20th century as Winston Churchill and General de Gaulle.

**THE QUIET HERO OF THE 19TH CENTURY**

Yet even as Carlyle praised his Great Men, there emerged an alternative: the earnest heroism of middle-class virtue. Where the Renaissance hero achieved greatness in battle and the Romantic hero turned his back on society, the 19th-century hero quietly did his duty. As the British lecturer Samuel Smiles put it in his global best seller, *Self-Help*, “Many are the lives of men unwritten, which have nevertheless as powerfully influenced civilization and progress as the more fortunate Great whose names are recorded in biography.” Heroism had become democratized, and the earnest, unpublicized work of those who provided people with their basic needs was now considered heroic.

As the democratic 20th century dawned, there was an ever-stronger emphasis on those whom history forgot. For the traditional marks of heroism had passed over the worthy lives of millions. Some seemed even to believe that every human being was intrinsically heroic. The late-19th-century Russian anarchist Alexander Herzen suggested that it was “quite enough to be simply a human being, to have something to tell.” British writer, Virginia Woolf remarked: “Since so much is known that used to be unknown, the question now inevitably asks itself, whether the lives of great men only should be recorded. Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography—the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious? And what is greatness? And what smallness?” It was up to modern biographers to set up new standards of merit and “new heroes for our admiration.”

**THE 20TH-CENTURY HERO**

As the 20th century progressed, many felt the need to reject heroism altogether. Carlyle’s Great Man had morphed into German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s Super-Man with devastating global consequences. The warmongering of European statesmen led British novelist E.M. Forster to condemn hero-worship as “a dangerous vice.” For Forster, one of democracy’s merits was that “it does not . . . produce that unmanageable type of citizen known as the Great Man,” but “produces instead different kinds of small men—a much finer achievement.”

Small heroes seemed absolutely necessary in the face of Adolf Hitler. The thinkers of the mid-20th century fled from the idea of connecting militarism with greatness. Even during wartime, the British novelist George Orwell felt able to write in 1944, “The English people have no love of military glory and not much
admiration for great men.” Orwell did not assign to heroism semidivine greatness or classical virtus; instead he admired “a moral quality which must be vaguely described as decency.”

**THE MULTICULTURAL MEDIA AGE HERO**

Heroism today is even more complex. The lack of privacy that mass media demands means that personal failings can, in the public imagination, often overshadow great acts. Today, John F. Kennedy is as much remembered for his love life as for the achievements of his presidency. The cult of celebrity often threatens to undermine true heroism. On the other hand, some celebrities, like the British actress Emma Thompson and U2’s Bono, have used their fame to further the public good.

Perhaps most problematic—and most encouraging—is that few modern Western states are uniform societies that can instinctively rally around “national heroes.” An educated, multicultural citizenry rarely shares a common idea of heroism—which is why everyday people like Fadéla Amara, a French woman of Algerian descent fighting for women’s rights, and Hasan Saltik, a half-Turkish, half-Kurdish man who’s been persecuted for trying to preserve Kurdish music, can be singled out as heroes. At the same time, when Hicham El Guerrouj, Morocco’s star runner wins an Olympic medal after years of struggle, how many among us can fully resist sharing the national pride?

The tension between multiculturalism and national pride is precisely why it’s important to focus on the qualities which all heroes share. Perhaps that’s why when people today think about heroes, many choose an encompassing definition of heroism based on merit and humanity; one that seeks to recognize the often forgotten achievements of ordinary people; and one that values overcoming adversity and celebrates selfless acts to help others.

—Updated 2005, from TIME, October 11, 2004

### Responding and Thinking Critically

**Respond**

1. Which ideas in this article did you find most interesting? Why?

**Recall and Interpret**

2. (a) Which people were regarded as heroes during the Middle Ages? (b) What shift occurred that affected people’s view of heroes during the Renaissance?

3. (a) What accomplishments distinguished the Renaissance man? (b) How did Machiavelli challenge the Renaissance ideal of a hero?

4. (a) Which faculty did people during the Enlightenment value the most? (b) What faculty did the Romantics emphasize instead?

**Analyze and Evaluate**

5. How does Thomas Carlyle’s view of heroism differ from Virginia Woolf’s?

6. How well do you think the writer supports the thesis, or main idea, of this article? Explain.

7. Review the chart you made on page 69. Which of the ideas presented in this article most enhances your understanding of contemporary issues? Explain.

**Connect**

8. How does this article affect your understanding of the epic warriors featured in Unit One: Beowulf, Gilgamesh, and Éowyn? Support your answer with evidence from this article and the selections.
Vocabulary Workshop

Word Origins and Word Parts

Understanding Anglo-Saxon Derivations

“Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel
Went up to Herot, wondering what the warriors
Would do in that hall when their drinking was done.”
—Beowulf, lines 30–32

Connecting to Literature

Some of the words in the modern English translation of Beowulf are derived from Anglo-Saxon words. In the above quotation, the word darkness comes from the Old English root deorc (dark), wondering from wundor (to wonder), drinking from drincan (to drink), and do and done both come from the root dōn (to act). Knowing Anglo-Saxon, or Old English, word parts can make analyzing unfamiliar language much easier.

Anglo-Saxon Word Parts

Below is a chart listing some common Anglo-Saxon word parts and their meanings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prefix or Suffix</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Example Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a-</td>
<td>in a condition</td>
<td>asleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be-</td>
<td>completely, thoroughly</td>
<td>befuddle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for-</td>
<td>completely</td>
<td>forsake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>un-</td>
<td>reverse</td>
<td>unfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ful</td>
<td>full of</td>
<td>plentiful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ly</td>
<td>in the manner of</td>
<td>quickly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ness</td>
<td>state, condition</td>
<td>likeness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ship</td>
<td>quality, state, or condition</td>
<td>kinship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-some</td>
<td>having the quality of</td>
<td>burdensome</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exercise

Read the following sentences from Beowulf. Using the chart above, determine which word or words contain an Old English suffix or prefix. Explain how each word is derived from Old English.

1. “Of Cain, murderous creatures banished / By God, punished forever for the crime / Of Abel’s death.” (lines 21–23)
2. “That agony hung / On king and people alike, harsh / And unending, violent and cruel, and evil.” (lines 87–89)
3. “In the lap of their shining ship, lined / With gleaming armor, going safely.” (lines 110–111)

Vocabulary Terms

Anglo-Saxon word parts originated in Anglo-Saxon England and remain a part of our vocabulary.

Test-Taking Tip

You can identify unfamiliar words more easily in a test-taking situation by memorizing a few common word parts, such as the ones listed in the chart.

Reading Handbook

For more about word origins and word parts, see Reading Handbook, p. R20.

eFlashcards

For eFlashcards and other vocabulary activities, go to www.glencoe.com.
Connecting to the Poem

In “The Seafarer,” a sailor laments the hardships he has faced at sea. Yet the sailor also feels drawn to sea life, accepting his fate. As you read the poem, think about the following questions:

- What is fate? Do you feel it plays a role in your life?
- How do you deal with circumstances that are both unavoidable and unpleasant?

Building Background

Created by an unknown writer, “The Seafarer” is representative of the somewhat grim Anglo-Saxon worldview. The Anglo-Saxons believed that a person’s *wyrd*, or fate, was unavoidable: all roads led inescapably to death. In “The Seafarer,” this view is united with Christianized notions of heaven and God.

Some scholars, noting that the tone of the poem changes dramatically in line 64, believe that a monk added to the last sections of the poem to create a work more religious in tone. Other scholars argue that “The Seafarer” is the work of one poet.

Setting Purposes for Reading

**Big Idea** The Epic Warrior

As you read, notice how the speaker combines descriptions of the failed human world with the “hope of Heaven.”

**Literary Element** Mood

Mood is the emotional quality of a work of literature. A number of elements may contribute to creating mood, such as a writer’s choice of language, subject matter, setting, and tone, as well as sound devices such as rhyme, rhythm, and meter. As you read, examine how the poet creates a somber, mournful mood.


**Vocabulary**

| **admonish** (ad mon’ish) v. to warn; to reprimand; p. 76 | The teacher was forced to repeatedly admonish his class for their lack of effort. |
| **rancor** (rang’ kor) n. bitter malice or resentment; p. 77 | The rancor Herman felt was visible in the scowl on his face. |
| **flourish** (flur’ish) v. to exist at the peak of development or achievement; to thrive; p. 77 | With enough water and sun, the plants should flourish. |
| **blanch** (blanch) v. to turn white or become pale; p. 78 | The chemicals that the painter was using, while safe, were causing her skin to blanch. |

**Vocabulary Tip: Analogies** Analogies are comparisons based on a similarity between things that are otherwise dissimilar. To complete an analogy, decide on the relationship represented by the first pair of words. Then, apply that relationship to the second set of words.
This tale is true, and mine. It tells
How the sea took me, swept me back
And forth in sorrow and fear and pain,
Showed me suffering in a hundred ships,
In a thousand ports, and in me. It tells
Of smashing surf when I sweated in the cold
Of an anxious watch,° perched in the bow°
As it dashed under cliffs. My feet were cast
In icy bands, bound with frost,
With frozen chains, and hardship groaned
Around my heart. Hunger tore
At my sea-weary soul. No man sheltered
On the quiet fairness of earth can feel
How wretched I was, drifting through winter
On an ice-cold sea, whirled in sorrow,
Alone in a world blown clear of love,
Hung with icicles. The hailstorms flew.
The only sound was the roaring sea,
The freezing waves. The song of the swan
Might serve for pleasure, the cry of the sea-fowl,
The death-noise of birds instead of laughter,
The mewing of gulls instead of mead.
Storms beat on the rocky cliffs and were echoed
By icy-feathered terns° and the eagle’s screams;

° watch: a period of time during a day on a ship in which a crew member is on duty. 
° bow: the front section of the ship
° terns: seabirds that resemble small gulls and have forked tails
No kinsman could offer comfort there,
To a soul left drowning in desolation.
     And who could believe, knowing but
The passion of cities, swelled proud with wine
And no taste of misfortune, how often, how wearily,
I put myself back on the paths of the sea.
     Night would blacken; it would snow from the north;
Frost bound the earth and hail would fall,
     The coldest seeds. And how my heart
Would begin to beat, knowing once more
The salt waves tossing and the towering sea!
     The time for journeys would come and my soul
Called me eagerly out, sent me over
The horizon, seeking foreigners’ homes.
     But there isn’t a man on earth so proud,
So born to greatness, so bold with his youth,
     Grown so brave, or so graced by God,
That he feels no fear as the sails unfurl,
     Wondering what Fate has willed and will do.
No harps ring in his heart, no rewards,
     No passion for women, no worldly pleasures,
Nothing, only the ocean’s heave;
     But longing wraps itself around him.
Orchards blossom, the towns bloom,
      Fields grow lovely as the world springs fresh,
And all these admonish that willing mind
     Leaping to journeys, always set
In thoughts traveling on a quickening tide.
     So summer’s sentinel,° the cuckoo, sings
In his murmuring voice, and our hearts mourn
As he urges. Who could understand,
     In ignorant ease, what we others suffer
As the paths of exile stretch endlessly on?
And yet my heart wanders away,
     My soul roams with the sea, the whales’
Home, wandering to the widest corners
     Of the world, returning ravenous with desire,
Flying solitary, screaming, exciting me
To the open ocean, breaking oaths
On the curve of a wave.

°sentinel: one who keeps guard

Vocabulary

admonish (ad mon’ish) v. to warn; to reprimand
Thus the joys of God
Are fervent° with life, where life itself
Fades quickly into the earth. The wealth
Of the world neither reaches to Heaven nor remains.
No man has ever faced the dawn
Certain which of Fate's three threats
Would fall: illness, or age, or an enemy's
Sword, snatching the life from his soul.
The praise the living pour on the dead
Flowers from reputation: plant
An earthly life of profit reaped
Even from hatred and rancor, of bravery
Flung in the devil's face, and death
Can only bring you earthly praise
And a song to celebrate a place
With the angels, life eternally blessed
In the hosts of Heaven.

The days are gone
When the kingdoms of earth flourished in glory;
Now there are no rulers, no emperors,
No givers of gold, as once there were,
When wonderful things were worked among them
And they lived in lordly magnificence.
Those powers have vanished, those pleasures are dead.
The weakest survives and the world continues,
Kept spinning by toil. All glory is tarnished,
The world’s honor ages and shrinks,
Bent like the men who mold it. Their faces
blanch as time advances, their beards
Wither and they mourn the memory of friends.
The sons of princes, sown in the dust.
The soul stripped of its flesh knows nothing
Of sweetness or sour, feels no pain,
Bends neither its hand nor its brain. A brother
Opens his palms and pours down gold
On his kinsman’s grave, strewing his coffin
With treasures intended for Heaven, but nothing
Golden shakes the wrath of God
For a soul overflowing with sin, and nothing
Hidden on earth rises to Heaven.
We all fear God. He turns the earth,
He set it swinging firmly in space,
Gave life to the world and light to the sky.
Death leaps at the fools who forget their God.
He who lives humbly has angels from Heaven
To carry him courage and strength and belief.
A man must conquer pride, not kill it,
Be firm with his fellows, chaste for himself,
Treat all the world as the world deserves,
With love or with hate but never with harm,
Though an enemy seek to scorch him in hell,
Or set the flames of a funeral pyre\(^a\)
Under his lord. Fate is stronger
And God mightier than any man’s mind.
Our thoughts should turn to where our home is,
Consider the ways of coming there,
Then strive for sure permission for us
To rise to that eternal joy,
That life born in the love of God
And the hope of Heaven. Praise the Holy
Grace of Him who honored us,
Eternal, unchanging creator of earth. Amen.

**Reading Strategy**  Making Inferences About Theme  *What can you infer about the theme from these lines?*

**Vocabulary**

blanch  (blanch) v. to turn white or become pale

114 funeral pyre: a heap of flammable material on which a dead body is burned
RESPONDING AND THINKING CRITICALLY

Respond
1. Which images in the poem did you find the most memorable? Explain.

Recall and Interpret
2. (a) What hardships of life at sea does the speaker describe at the beginning of the poem (lines 1–26)? (b) What mood do these lines create?
3. (a) What pleasures of life on the land does the speaker mention? (b) In your opinion, does the speaker long for a comfortable life on land or does he willingly go to sea? Explain.
4. (a) What does the speaker say is different about life in his time as compared with life in the past? (b) What does the speaker’s attitude about the past suggest about his feelings for the time in which he lives?

Analyze and Evaluate
5. (a) How does the sea function literally and figuratively in the poem? (b) In what ways is the sea an effective symbol?
6. (a) What change do you notice in the focus and tone midway through the poem? (b) Which half of the poem do you prefer? Explain.
7. How does the poem’s imagery help to convey the speaker’s conflicted emotions?

Connect
8. The Epic Warrior In what ways does this poem capture the brooding worldview of the Anglo-Saxons?

LITERARY ANALYSIS

Literary Element Mood
While there are many contributing factors to a literary work’s mood, imagery is one of the most significant elements. Frequent use of dark, strange, or repellent images can help create a bleak mood. Lighthearted images help create a pleasant mood. However, authors sometimes use images as a counterpoint to the prevailing mood of a piece. By including images that conflict with the mood, authors can create more complicated or ironic works.

1. What is the principal mood of “The Seafarer”?
2. Identify several images from the poem that contribute to this mood.
3. Are there any images that conflict with the principal mood of the piece? List any that you find.

Review: Conflict
As you learned on page 23, conflict refers to the central struggle between two opposing forces in a story or drama. There are two main types of conflict that can occur in a work of literature. External conflict exists when a character struggles against an outside force, such as a war or nature. Internal conflict is present when a struggle takes place within the mind of a character. In “The Seafarer,” the speaker experiences both types of conflict.

Partner Activity Meet with another classmate to discuss the speaker’s conflicts, the causes of these conflicts, and how they affect the poem’s mood. Be sure to cite textual evidence during your discussion to support your claims.
Reading Strategy  Making Inferences About Theme

The theme of a literary work can have multiple, interrelated parts. The theme of “The Seafarer,” for example, has several aspects. The conflict within the speaker, as well as the speaker's feelings about fate and eternity, all contribute different elements to the poem's broader theme.

1. What is the theme of “The Seafarer”?
2. In support of your theme, list three important details from the poem and the inferences you drew from them.

Vocabulary  Practice

Practice with Analogies  Choose the word that best completes each analogy.

1. supported : flourished :: neglected :
   a. aged  c. deteriorated
   b. regretted  d. promoted

2. white : blanch :: red :
   a. examine  c. blush
   b. embarrass  d. beet

3. urge : encourage :: admonish :
   a. warn  c. admire
   b. praise  d. amuse

4. irritation : rancor :: fondness :
   a. love  c. anger
   b. apathy  d. cowardice

Academic Vocabulary

Here are two words from the vocabulary list on page R82.

derive (di riv*) v. to reach a conclusion based on logic or reasoning; to deduce
ensure (en shoor*) v. to confirm or make certain

Practice and Apply

1. What lessons about life could a reader derive from “The Seafarer”?
2. What does the poem's speaker suggest is ensured for all earthly things?

Writing About Literature

Respond to Mood  What feelings did you have as you read “The Seafarer”? Did you experience a range of emotions? Was one emotion stronger than the others? Write a brief essay in which you describe how the mood of “The Seafarer” affected your emotions. Use examples from the poem to support your position.

Before you begin drafting, it is important to take notes to guide the writing of your response. Look over the poem again and record any impressions that strike you, as well as the poem's main ideas and your response to those ideas. Also, write down quotations that evoke the emotions you experienced while reading the poem. Compile your notes in an outline, like the one below.

I. Poem's main ideas
   A. Life is impermanent.
   B.

II. My impressions and responses to main ideas
   A.
   B.

III. Supporting quotations
   A. Line 89: “The world’s honor ages and shrinks”
   B.

After you complete your draft, meet with a peer reviewer to evaluate each other's work and to suggest revisions. Then proofread and edit your draft for errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

Internet Connection

A number of universities have Web pages devoted to the study of Old English verse. To hear Old English poetry read aloud, and to read other Old English elegies, search the Web, using the key words “Old English verse.”

Web Activities  For eFlashcards, Selection Quick Checks, and other Web activities, go to www.glencoe.com.