

Beowulf: An Epic Poem

Introduction

The story of the hero Beowulf is the only surviving complete poem from Anglo-Saxon times. It is over 3000 lines long and was written by an Anglo-Saxon poet (minstrel) in the language of Old English. The tale tells of the life and adventures of the Swedish hero Beowulf who spends his time fighting monsters (Grendel and his mother in particular) across Denmark, Norway and Sweden (Scandinavia).



The Poem

The poem is set in three parts and opens with Grendel terrorising the people of Denmark. In the nearby country of Sweden, the prince of the Geats (in southern Sweden), Beowulf, hears of the monster and takes his soldiers with him setting sail to help the King (Hrothgar) and his people.

Unarmed, Beowulf fights the monster and after a long battle, he eventually wins by ripping off its arm. The Danish people are overjoyed and celebrate in the King's hall with Beowulf, but Grendel's mother has plans of her own.

She takes revenge on Hrothgar by attacking the King's hall, killing the King's best friend and taking his body away, along with the arm of her dead son. Beowulf follows her to her underwater lair (home) and fights another long and exhausting battle. At last, he grabs a magical sword from her and kills her too. Beowulf and his soldiers set sail for home in Sweden.



50 years later, Beowulf is now king of the Geats and his own kingdom is being threatened by a fierce dragon. Once more, Beowulf takes his soldiers and sets off to fight. The battle is fierce and all of the soldiers except one run for their lives. Beowulf is wounded, but still manages to cut the beast in half with his sword.

A translation of part of the poem

Grendel the Murderer

{Grendel attacks the sleeping heroes}

When the sun was sunken, he set out to visit
The lofty hall-building, how the Ring-Danes had used it
For beds and benches when the banquet was over.
Then he found there reposing many a noble
Asleep after supper; sorrow the heroes,
Misery knew not. The monster of evil
Greedy and cruel tarried but little.

{Grendel drags off thirty of them, and devours them}

Fell and frantic, and forced from their slumbers
Thirty of thanemen; thence he departed
Leaping and laughing, his lair to return to,
With surfeit of slaughter sallying homeward.

In the dusk of the dawning, as the day was just breaking,
Was Grendel's prowess revealed to the warriors.



When was the poem composed and written down?

In Anglo-Saxon times, poems and stories were told by a travelling minstrel as most people could not read or write. The poem must have been passed down through the generations, being changed by each storyteller, until the existing copy was written down by two scribes somewhere in Anglo-Saxon England over 1000 years ago.

Questions

1. Who is the text about and what nationality was he?

2. Which group of people was he prince of?

3. In the text, what are the sub-headings for?

4. Look at the poem in the text box; what are the unusual shaped brackets { } for? Where might you have seen them before?

5. Look at the poem in the text box. Can you find and record words which tell you when the monster arrived at the King's hall and when he returned to his lair?

6. Using clues from the text, what do you think the word 'banquet' and 'slumber' mean?

7. If the poem was not written down for many years, how did minstrels remember it? How much can you remember of the verse in the text box? Get a friend to test you.

8. How can historians tell us how old something is by looking at the writing?

Hint: think about the vocabulary that is written down?

9. From the poem in the text box, find and record examples of words that tell you the order of some of the events.

10. How do you think that historians knew that two people wrote the poem down?

11. Find and copy part of the text that interests you. Explain why you chose that part.
