

Beowulf, translated by Seamus Heaney

Part II: Grendel's Mother



The poem continues on after the death of Grendel, with the next threat revealing itself only the night after Grendel is finally defeated. The demon Grendel had a mother, and upon discovering that her son was killed by King Hrothgar's people, she now seeks vengeance.

Celebrations of Grendel's Defeat

Lines 1232-1254

Celebrations continue into the night following Grendel's death, with much feasting, drinking and praising of Beowulf. People eventually settle down to sleep – they still keep their war gear with them when they sleep, out of routine.



Grendel's Mother's Revenge

Lines 1255-1277

The celebrations wind down and people go to sleep in the hall. At this point it is revealed that Grendel has a mother, a “monstrous hell-bride”. We are reminded of how all these creatures are traced back to Cain, the first murderer according to the Bible. We learn that Grendel returned to his den, where his mother found him, dying. Overcome with grief and anger, she now wants revenge.



Lines 1278-1298

Grendel's mother attacks the hall of Heorot, where the people are sleeping. We are told of her great strength: slightly less than that of Grendel, but still so great that the difference means nothing to those mortal men who face her. There is panic: men grab swords and shields, not bothering with mail or helmets in the confusion. She grabs a man, King Hrothgar's most beloved and trusted friend (Aeschere), kills him and takes his body back to her lair. (It is also revealed in line 1303 that she has also taken Grendel's arm back with her as well).

Lines 1299-1344

Beowulf comes to the hall (he had been given lodgings elsewhere for the night). Hrothgar is grieving over the death of his friend. He tells Beowulf that this man was his mentor and right-hand man, and one of the most admirable men he knew. Hrothgar believes that this attack was revenge for killing Grendel.



Lines 1345-1382

Hrothgar tells Beowulf of reports he had heard in the past of strange creatures, looking like a man and woman, prowling the moors. We get a very vivid description of this area, which makes it sound haunted and foreboding. Cold, wild, rock and infested by wolves; the water burns at night; deer will stop and rather a hunter kill them than enter the wood; constant storms. This must be where the demons live. Hrothgar asks Beowulf if he wishes to seek out Grendel's mother, promising him further riches if he succeeds in killing her.

The Battle at the Lake

Lines 1383-1421

Beowulf gives a speech about how action is better than mourning, and that everyone must die; the only thing that sets people apart is whether they attain glory before dying. He promises to kill Grendel's mother, and tells Hrothgar that he needs to man-up. Inspired, Hrothgar gathers his soldiers and they ride out to fight Grendel's mother. They head up into the cursed country to where they believe Grendel and his mother lived. They find Aeschere's severed head waiting at the base of a cliff.



Lines 1422-1496



At the base of the cliff is a lake filled with sea monsters (servants of Grendel's mother). The soldiers attack the monsters. Beowulf puts on his armour (which is described in a lot of detail – lines 1443-1454) and fights another of the monsters. Unferth – the man who had questioned Beowulf's story about winning the swimming race – was too cowardly to face the battle in the water. He gives his sword – a famous and heroic blade called Hrunting – to Beowulf, who fights with it.

In the midst of the battle, Beowulf turns to Hrothgar and asks, if he should die, that Hrothgar takes care of his soldiers and send his treasures back home to the Geats, so that they would know of his achievements. Beowulf gives Unferth his old sword: having felt the power of Hrunting, he knows he must use it in the battle ahead. He dives into the water to seek out Grendel's mother. It is very deep – it takes most of a day for him to reach the bottom.

The Fight with Grendel's Mother

Lines 1497-1569



Beowulf swims into the depths of the lake. Grendel's mother seizes Beowulf, taking him to her underwater cave. As she carries him hoards of monsters attack, tearing at his armour, but Beowulf holds on and fends them off.

They arrive in her lair. Beowulf attacks with his sword, but it cannot damage her. He throws it away and fights hand to hand. He seizes her shoulder – much as he did with Grendel – but she can break his grasp.

Beowulf and Grendel's mother grapple with each other, doing battle. Eventually Grendel's mother seizes a knife and stabs Beowulf in his shoulder, but he is protected by his amazing armour.

Beowulf sees another sword: an ancient weapon from the times of the giants. It is massive – Beowulf is the only man mighty enough to wield it. He swings the mighty blade at her head and decapitates Grendel's mother.

Lines 1570-1650

Beowulf inspects the lair. He finds Grendel's corpse and cuts off its head in anger. The blood from Grendel and his mother melts the blade of the sword.

Back at the lake there is a huge surge of waves (like an explosion) and blood fills the water. The battle ends. When Beowulf doesn't rise, they believe him to be killed. Grieving, many of the soldiers return home.

However, Beowulf is still in the cave. There is lots of treasure, but he leaves it all, taking only the severed heads and the hilt of the now-melted sword. He returns to the surface. His soldiers celebrate when they see him. They return to Heorot. Grendel's head is put atop a spear. People stare in astonishment.



Another Celebration at Heorot

Lines 1651-1865

Celebrations begin again. Beowulf tells the story of how he defeated Grendel's mother. Hrothgar praises Beowulf. He talks about how Beowulf's actions have made the Geats and Danes friends, despite their past hatreds (Lines 1843-1865). Beowulf returns home to the Geats.

The Adventure Continues...



This concludes Beowulf's adventures with Hrothgar and the Danes. Beowulf returns home, and eventually becomes King of the Geats. However, he has one final enemy to face, and one last act of heroism in defence of his people. When he is an old man, a dragon comes and threatens his homeland. Beowulf rides out to fight the dragon. He succeeds, but not before the dragon fatally wounds him. The poem ends sombrely, with Beowulf's death and funeral and the passing of an age...