The Battle with Grendel

translated by Burton Raffel

LITERARY FOCUS: THE EPIC HERO

An epic is a long, involved story that tells of the great deeds of a larger-than-life hero. The central character in an epic—the epic hero—embodies the values and ideals of a particular society. Most epic heroes undertake a long, dangerous journey, or quest, to achieve something of great value to themselves or their people.

Beowulf is an archetype, or perfect example, of an epic hero. He possesses superhuman strength and reflects the highest ideals of his culture—the Anglo-Saxon culture of ancient England. The heroic archetype that Beowulf represents is that of the dragon slayer: In his quest, the hero must protect a community by defeating a gruesome monster that seeks to destroy it.

What Makes a Hero? In the left-hand column of the chart below, create your own list of heroes. In the right-hand column, write at least one detail or characteristic that proves each hero is truly heroic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My List of Heroes</th>
<th>Proof of Heroism</th>
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READING SKILLS: IDENTIFYING DETAILS

Beowulf demonstrates a number of characteristics that identify him as an archetype of the epic hero. These characteristics are listed below.

Characteristics of an Epic Hero

- is significant and glorified
- is on a quest
- has superior or superhuman strength, intelligence, and/or courage
- is ethical
- Risks death for glory or for the greater good of society
- is a strong and responsible leader
- Performs brave deeds
- Reflects the ideals of a particular society

Use the Skill As you read the selection, underline or highlight details that describe Beowulf as an epic hero. Refer to the list above for hints.
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At the beginning of the epic, we are introduced to King Hrothgar, ruler of the Danes. He has recently built the great hall Herot to commemorate his many victories. As Hrothgar’s people enjoy life in Herot, however, a monster called Grendel lurks in the swamps nearby, seething with hatred for humans. Eventually Grendel attacks Herot and kills thirty of Hrothgar’s men. This marks the beginning of Grendel’s reign of terror over the Danes, which lasts for twelve years.

A great warrior named Beowulf hears of Hrothgar’s troubles. Beowulf, who comes from the land of the Geats (Sweden), decides to journey to Denmark with some of his strongest men to do battle with Grendel. Beowulf meets King Hrothgar and announces that he will fight the monster that night without weapons. After a celebration feast, Beowulf and his men take the place of Hrothgar’s followers and lie down to sleep in Herot. Beowulf is awake, however, and eager to meet his enemy. He is not kept waiting long.

1

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.

5
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,

10
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 rushed angrily over the threshold.

15 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

20 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
With the thought of food and the feasting his belly
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25 Would soon know. But fate, that night, intended
Grendel to gnaw the broken bones
Of his last human supper. Human
Eyes were watching his evil steps,
Waiting to see his swift hard claws.
30 Grendel snatched at the first Geat
He came to, ripped him apart, cut
His body to bits with powerful jaws,
Drank the blood from his veins, and bolted
Him down, hands and feet; death
35 And Grendel’s great teeth came together,
Snapping life shut. Then he stepped to another
Still body, clutched at Beowulf with his claws,
Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful sleeper
—And was instantly seized himself, claws
40 Bent back as Beowulf leaned up on one arm.
That shepherd of evil, guardian of crime,
Knew at once that nowhere on earth
Had he met a man whose hands were harder;
His mind was flooded with fear—but nothing
45 Could take his talons and himself from that tight
Hard grip. Grendel’s one thought was to run
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
50 Boast and, standing erect, stopped
The monster’s flight, fastened those claws
In his fists till they cracked, clutched Grendel
Closer. The infamous killer sought
For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,
55 Desiring nothing but escape; his claws
Had been caught, he was trapped. That trip to Herot
Was a miserable journey for the writhing monster!

* Higlac’s follower: Beowulf. Higlac is Beowulf’s leader.
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IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 58-81, and circle images that appeal to your sense of hearing. Underline images that appeal to your sense of sight. Draw a box around images that appeal to your sense of touch. Some images appeal to more than one sense. (Review Skill)

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FLUENCY

Read the boxed passage aloud twice. Focus on conveying simple meaning the first time around. During your second reading, strive to bring the images to life by paying special attention to the descriptive words you have underlined.

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WORD STUDY

Ancestral (an-se'atrnl), in line 85, is an adjective meaning "inherited from an ancestor or forebear." The word ancestor is made of the Latin prefix ante-, meaning "before," and cedere, meaning "to go."

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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.

2

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
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
125 From the rafters where Beowulf had hung it, was the monster’s Arm, claw and shoulder and all.

(Left) the Germanic hero Beowulf at his forge and (right) the adoration of the Magy (8th century), from the Franks Casket. Whalebone.

British Museum © Michael Holbud.

3

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
145 Slowly toward Herot again, retelling
Beowulf’s bravery as they jogged along.
And over and over they swore that nowhere
On earth or under the spreading sky
150 Or between the seas, neither south nor north,
Was there a warrior worthier to rule over men.
(But no one meant Beowulf’s praise to belittle
Hrothgar, their kind and gracious king!) . . .
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**Reading Skills: Identifying Details**

Review the details you highlighted or underlined in “The Battle with Grendel” that show Beowulf is an epic hero. Then, complete this chart with details that illustrate each of the characteristics of an epic hero.

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