

## Teaching Materials: *Beowulf*

### Old English Literature

The Anglo-Saxons lived in early medieval England; their language was called Old English. They loved telling each other stories, both about things that had really happened and also made-up stories. They also liked reading and writing, and they knew many stories from other countries, not just from England. Not everybody in Anglo-Saxon England could read and write, however: only people living in monasteries learned how to do that, and they could read both Old English and Latin, the two languages of Anglo-Saxon England.

### The story of *Beowulf*: Background

One of the most famous of those stories written in Old English is that of the boy called *Beowulf*. We don't know much about the Anglo-Saxon author who wrote the story of *Beowulf*. It was probably a man, not a woman (because more men than women would have known how to read and write), and he probably lived and worked in a monastery. We don't know where he lived, but it was probably somewhere in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia. We don't know when he wrote his story; perhaps in the eighth century. His story could be both for grown-ups and for children.

### Versions of the poem *Beowulf*

#### Online Children's Version:

Here's the link to a children's version of the poem, written by Joshua Gray (which takes about 12 minutes to read out):

<https://qarrtsiluni.com/2011/04/12/beowulf-a-retelling-with-children-in-mind/>

#### Book Version for Children:

Rosemary Sutcliff, *Dragon Slayer: The Story of Beowulf* (Harmondsworth: Puffin Books, 1966)

#### Online Translation for Adults:

A translation of *Beowulf* for adults, by Frances B. Gummere, can be found here:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50114/beowulf-modern-english-translation>

#### Online Old English and Translated Versions Side-by-Side:

<https://heorot.dk/beowulf-rede-text.html>

#### Book Translation for Adults:

Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (London, 2001)

## **Beowulf: Plot Summary**

Beowulf is a superhero who travels to Denmark to fight a gigantic monster called Grendel that has been causing problems there. (The reason why Grendel is angry is that he's not allowed to join the Danes when they are having a good time; they don't like him because he comes from a bad family. One of his ancestors, a long time ago, was Cain, who killed his brother Abel.). When Beowulf arrives in Denmark, the king and his followers are glad that Beowulf has come to fight Grendel the monster, but they are unsure whether Beowulf can succeed. They had been praying their pagan gods to help them, but they got no help from the gods. But Beowulf is very confident he can solve their problem. He doesn't even want to use weapons in the fight; he just uses his bare hands. He is so strong that he rips the monster's arm off when it arrives during the night. The monster runs off, bleeding, and dives into the pond where he lives. Beowulf then runs after the monster and fights Grendel's mother as well, in their monster den at the bottom of the pond. He kills Grendel's mother, and he finds Grendel dead as well (he's bled to death). Beowulf then gets out of the pond, taking some monster body parts with him, as proof. He notices that his mates, who had come with him to the pond, hadn't hung around to wait for him; they had gone home. Beowulf returns to the Danish king's hall. The king and the people of Denmark are very glad that the monsters are now dead, and give Beowulf presents as a reward. The king of Denmark also warns Beowulf not to get too arrogant because of his strength and his success. Beowulf then leaves Denmark, taking his presents with him, and sails back to his home country Geatland. We then hear that later, when Beowulf is old, he wants to fight a poisonous dragon, alone. The reason why he wants to fight the dragon is that the dragon has been setting fire to Beowulf's buildings and killing people in them. (The reason why the dragon does this is that he's angry; it had been sitting on a treasure in a mound, and someone had snuck in and stolen a cup from him). The dragon looks like a gigantic snake, and has really tough skin. During the dragon fight, Beowulf's people who had been watching the fight all run off because they are afraid, except for his young friend Wiglaf, who stays with him helping him. Together they kill the dragon. But Beowulf has got bitten by the dragon during the fight, and he then dies from the poison. Before he dies he gives some of his things to his friend Wiglaf, because he has no children himself. He is glad that he managed to kill the dragon, so that it can't harm his people any more and so that they can have the dragon's treasure. Beowulf's people are very sad at his death and they put on a big funeral for him.

### **Study Questions on the Plot of *Beowulf*:**

Do you like Beowulf?

What's he like?

What is he good at?

Is Beowulf a bit of a monster himself?

How do you feel about the monsters?

Why do Grendel and his mother live at the bottom of a pond?

What does Grendel look like? If you had to describe a scary monster, what would you make him look like?

What do we know about Grendel's family?

Why does Grendel hate the Danes?

Why are there no girls in the story?

Why don't the Danish king and his followers do something about the monsters themselves?

Why doesn't Beowulf take people with him when he goes to fight the dragon?

Is the dragon more dangerous than Grendel and his mother, or less dangerous?

Is Beowulf good at team work?

### **Study Questions On What we Can Learn from Beowulf's Story:**

**Question:** What makes a good monster-fighter?

[**Answer:** They need to be strong and fearless. The people who are good at fighting monsters are a bit like monsters themselves. You can only be good at fighting monsters if you're a bit like them. Good monster-fighting heroes probably don't have a family and children, because otherwise they would worry about them and couldn't be so fearless.]

**Question:** If you've killed one monster, does that mean you're strong enough to kill other monsters too?

[**Answer:** If you succeed in one monster fight, it doesn't mean that you'll carry on being successful. At some point, your luck may run out and you will lose a fight. You mustn't think that you will only be successful in life.]

**Question:** Do we like people who're really good at something?

[**Answer:** Sometimes we do; sometimes we don't. Sometimes we may be jealous. If you're really good at something, other people may not always understand that, and they may not always want to help you.]

**Question:** What do Grendel, his mother and the dragon have in common?

[**Answer:** They all have a good reason for being so angry: Grendel is jealous because he's not allowed to join the Danes. If you don't let other people join you, they may get sad and angry, because it doesn't feel nice to be excluded. Grendel's mother is sad and angry because Beowulf has killed her son Grendel. The dragon is furious because someone has stolen a golden cup from him while he was asleep. All three monsters take revenge.]

**Question:** Is it OK to try and want to be a super hero, on your own?

[**Answer:** It's dangerous to try and solve a problem on your own; it may be wiser to work together with others.]

## Other Stories for Comparison

We think that the person who wrote *Beowulf* didn't make up the story entirely by himself. There was a fairy tale in Anglo-Saxon England called 'The Bear's Son', and we think that the *Beowulf* poet knew that fairy tale, and then changed that story to make the story of *Beowulf*.

Here's the fairy tale of the Bear's Son:

### The Bear's Son

Once upon a time, there was a boy who grew up in a bear's den. His mother also lived there and she was a normal human person, but his father was a bear. The boy, who was called The Bear's Son, was a bit lazy and was never afraid of anything. Like a bear, he had furry ears, although he looked like a boy otherwise. He was also super strong so that when he was twelve years old, he could lift tree trunks, and he wanted to go out into the world on adventures. He took two friends to come with him. They came to an empty house in the forest, and they were told that it was haunted and that they shouldn't stay the night, because of the monster that came every night. But they decided to stay, because the Bear's Son was not afraid. During the night, his friends carried on sleeping when the monster came, but the Bear's Son wrestled with the monster and just tried to keep holding on to the monster. But the monster escaped. The next morning the Bear's son and his friends tried to find the monster, and came to a very deep hole in the ground. His friends let the Bear's Son down by a rope. At the bottom, he found himself in a great hall, and saw three beautiful princesses who were kept prisoner. He fought the monster looking after the princesses and freed the princesses. But his friends had meanwhile gone away, because they thought he wouldn't come back. So he had nobody helping to pull them all up again to the surface. But the Bear's Son still managed to get himself and the princesses up to the surface. They then all celebrated together. And the Bear's Son married the youngest princess and his friends the other princesses. And they all lived happily ever after.

### Study Questions on the Bear's Son and *Beowulf*:

Which story do you like better, *Beowulf* or The Bear's Son, and why?

Why might the *Beowulf* poet have changed the fairy tale when he wrote his own story?

Which parts would you change, if you had to rewrite the story?

Is it OK to change other people's stories?

Fairy tales can teach important things to children. What can we learn from the Bear's Son fairy tale?

**[Answer:** Monsters aren't so scary if you don't worry too much about them. If your mates don't help you, you can do things on your own and still be OK. If you solve tricky problems on your own, you can help other people. You can find new friends that way, or find a girl or boy that you can later marry. If you're a bit weird, and people in your family are weird, that can be a good thing, because it makes you different from other people. Your weirdness can be

your superpower. And it can help you do things that other people can't. If you travel far away from home, you can still have a good time, have adventures and make new friends.]

**Question:** What is the same in both stories, *Beowulf* and The Bear's Son?

[**Answer:** both stories have a young, strong hero who's a bit like a bear, not easily scared, loves fighting against monsters, has mates who're not very helpful, likes helping people when they're in trouble.]

**Question:** What is different in the two stories?

[**Answer:** Beowulf doesn't just fight when he's young, but also when he's old, whereas the Bear's Son is young. Beowulf doesn't free any princesses and doesn't marry one, like the Bear's Son does. The Bear's Son only fights two monsters, but not a dragon; the dragon bit is missing from the Bear's Son story. There's no happy ending for Beowulf at the end of that story; instead he dies and the story ends with his funeral. Beowulf is set in the pagan past, whereas in the Bear's Son's story religion doesn't play a role. Beowulf's story is set abroad in Denmark; we don't know where the Bear's Son story takes place. In *Beowulf*, the monsters live underwater; in the Bear's Son, they live in a hole in the ground.]