

from

Beowulf

translated by Burton Raffel

About the Reading *The story of a mighty hero, Beowulf was composed in the 700s but probably not written down until much later. The hero of the story, Beowulf, is a Geat, a member of a group that lived in what is now Sweden. One day he hears of a terrible monster, Grendel, who has killed and eaten many Danish warriors in Britain. To help the Danish king—and to prove his own valor—Beowulf sails across the sea and promises to rid the Danes of their enemy. One night, he lies in wait for Grendel inside Herot, the hall of the Danish king, ready to kill the monster.*

AS YOU READ Look for details that reflect Beowulf's heroism.

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 . . . ❶
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
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
Still body, clutched at Beowulf with his claws,
Grasped at a strong-hearted wakeful sleeper ❷
—And was instantly seized himself . . .

That shepherd of evil, guardian of crime,
Knew at once that nowhere on earth
Had he met a man whose hands were harder . . .

All of Beowulf's



to protect their prince if they could. ❸ Their courage
was great but 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. . . .
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 ❹ 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. ❺