A powerful monster, living down
In the darkness, growled in pain, impatient
As day after day the music rang
Loud in that hall, (1) the harp’s rejoicing

5 Call and the poet’s clear songs, sung
Of the ancient beginnings of us all, recalling
The Almighty making the earth, shaping
These beautiful plains marked off by oceans,
Then proudly setting the sun and moon

10 To glow across the land and light it;
The corners of the earth were made lovely with
trees And leaves, made quick with life, with each
Of the nations who now move on its face. And then
As now warriors sang of their pleasure:

15 So Hrothgar’s men lived happy in his hall
Till the monster stirred, that demon, that fiend,
Grendel, who haunted the moors, the wild
Marshes, and made his home in a hell
Not hell but earth. He was spawned in that slime,

20 Conceived by a pair of those monsters born
Of Cain, (2) murderous creatures banished
By God, punished forever for the crime
Marshes, and made his home in a hell
Not hell but earth. He was spawned in that slime,

20 Conceived by a pair of those monsters born
Of Cain, (2) murderous creatures banished
By God, punished forever for the crime
Of Abel’s death. The Almighty drove
Those demons out, and their exile was bitter,

25 Shut away from men; they split
Into a thousand forms of evil—spirits
And fiends, goblins, monsters, giants,
A brood forever opposing the Lord’s
Will, and again and again defeated.
Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel went up to Herot, wondering what the warriors would do in that hall when their drinking was done. He found them sprawled in sleep, suspecting nothing, their dreams undisturbed. The monster’s thoughts were as quick as his greed or his claws: he slipped through the door and there in the silence snatched up thirty men, smashed them unknowing in their beds and ran out with their bodies, the blood dripping behind him, back to his lair, delighted with his night’s slaughter.

At daybreak, with the sun’s first light, they saw how well he had worked, and in that gray morning broke their long feast with tears and laments for the dead. Hrothgar, their lord, sat joyless in Herot, a mighty prince mourning the fate of his lost friends and companions, knowing by its tracks that some demon had torn his followers apart. He wept, fearing the beginning might not be the end. And that night Grendel came again, so set on murder that no crime could ever be enough, no savage assault quench his lust for evil. Then each warrior tried to escape him, searched for rest in different beds, as far from Herot as they could find, seeing how Grendel hunted when they slept. Distance was safety; the only survivors were those who fled him. Hate had triumphed.

So Grendel ruled, fought with the righteous, one against many, and won; so Herot stood empty, and stayed deserted for years, twelve winters of grief for Hrothgar, king of the Danes, sorrow heaped at his door. By hell-forged hands. His misery leaped the seas, was told and sung in all men’s ears: how Grendel’s hatred began, how the monster relished his savage war on the Danes, keeping the bloody feud alive, seeking no peace, offering no truce, accepting no settlement, no price in gold or land, and paying the living...
For one crime only with another. No one
Waited for reparation from his plundering claws:
That shadow of death hunted in the darkness,
Stalked Hrothgar’s warriors, old
And young, lying in waiting, hidden
In mist, invisibly following them from the edge
Of the marsh, always there, unseen.

So mankind’s enemy continued his crimes,
Killing as often as he could, coming
Alone, bloodthirsty and horrible. Though he lived
In Herot, when the night hid him, he never
Dared to touch King Hrothgar’s glorious
Throne, protected by God—God,
Whose love Grendel could not know. But Hrothgar’s
Heart was bent. The best and most noble
Of his council debated remedies, sat
In secret sessions, talking of terror
And wondering what the bravest of warriors could do.

And sometimes they sacrificed to the old stone gods,
Made heathen vows, hoping for Hell’s
Support, the Devil’s guidance in driving
Their affliction off. That was their way,
And the heathen’s only hope, Hell

Always in their hearts, knowing neither God
Nor His passing as He walks through our world, the Lord
Of Heaven and earth; their ears could not hear
His praise nor know His glory. Let them
Beware, those who are thrust into danger,

Clutched at by trouble, yet can carry no solace
In their hearts, cannot hope to be better! Hail
To those who will rise to God, drop off
Their dead bodies and seek our Father’s peace!

THE COMING OF BEOWULF

So the living sorrow of Healfdane’s son (3)
Simmered, bitter and fresh, and no wisdom
Or strength could break it: that agony hung
On king and people alike, harsh
And unending, violent and cruel, and evil.

In his far-off home Beowulf, Higlac’s (4)
Follower and the strongest of the Geats—greater
And stronger than anyone anywhere in this world—
Heard how Grendel filled nights with horror
And quickly commanded a boat fitted out,
Proclaiming that he’d go to that famous king.

Would sail across the sea to Hrothgar,
Now when help was needed. None
Of the wise ones regretted his going, much
As he was loved by the Geats: the omens were good,
And they urged the adventure on. So Beowulf

Chose the mightiest men he could find,
The bravest and best of the Geats, fourteen
In all, and led them down to their boat;
He knew the sea, would point the prow
Straight to that distant Danish shore.

Then they sailed, set their ship
Out on the waves, under the cliffs.
Ready for what came they wound through the currents,
The seas beating at the sand, and were borne
In the lap of their shining ship, lined

With gleaming armor, going safely
In that oak-hard boat to where their hearts took them.
The wind hurried them over the waves,
The ship foamed through the sea like a bird
Until, in the time they had known it would take,

Standing in the round-curled prow they could see
Sparkling hills, high and green
Jutting up over the shore, and rejoicing
In those rock-steep cliffs they quietly ended
Their voyage. Jumping to the ground, the Geats

Pushed their boat to the sand and tied it
In place, mail (S) shirts and armor rattling
As they swiftly moored their ship. And then
They gave thanks to God for their easy crossing.

High on a wall a Danish watcher
Patrolling along the cliffs saw
The travelers crossing to the shore, their shields
Raised and shining; he came riding down,
Hrothgar’s lieutenant, spurring his horse,
Needing to know why they’d landed, these men

In armor. Shaking his heavy spear
In their faces he spoke:
“Whose soldiers are you,
You who’ve been carried in your deep-keeled ship
Across the sea-road to this country of mine?
Listen! I’ve stood on these cliffs longer

Than you know, keeping our coast free
Of pirates, raiders sneaking ashore
From their ships, seeking our lives and our gold.
None have ever come more openly—
And yet you’ve offered no password, no sign

From my prince, no permission from my people for your landing
Here. Nor have I ever seen,
Out of all the men on earth, one greater
Than has come with you; no commoner carries
Such weapons, unless his appearance, and his beauty
Are both lies. You! Tell me your name,
And your father’s; no spies go further onto Danish
Soil than you’ve come already. Strangers,
From wherever it was you sailed, tell it,
And tell it quickly, the quicker the better,

I say, for us all. Speak, say
Exactly who you are, and from where, and why."

Their leader answered him, Beowulf unlocking
Words from deep in his breast:
“We are Geats,
Men who follow Higlac. My father

Was a famous soldier, known far and wide
As a leader of men. His name was Edgetho.
His life lasted many winters;
Wise men all over the earth surely
Remember him still. And we have come seeking

Your prince, Healfdane’s son, protector
Of this people, only in friendship: instruct us,
Watchman, help us with your words! Our errand
Is a great one, our business with the glorious king
Of the Danes no secret; there’s nothing dark
Or hidden in our coming. You know (if we’ve heard
The truth, and been told honestly) that your country
Is cursed with some strange, vicious creature
That hunts only at night and that no one
Has seen. It’s said, watchman, that he has slaughtered

Your people, brought terror to the darkness. Perhaps
Hrothgar can hunt, here in my heart,
For some way to drive this devil out—
If anything will ever end the evils
Afflicting your wise and famous lord.

Here he can cool his burning sorrow.
Or else he may see his suffering go on
Forever, for as long as Herot towers
High on your hills.”

The mounted officer
Answered him bluntly, the brave watchman:

“A soldier should know the difference between words
And deeds, and keep that knowledge clear
In his brain. I believe your words, I trust in
Your friendship. Go forward, weapons and armor
And all, on into Denmark. I’ll guide you
Myself—and my men will guard your ship,
Keep it safe here on our shores,
Your fresh-tarred boat, watch it well,
Until that curving prow carries
Across the sea to Geatland a chosen
Warrior who bravely does battle with the creature
Haunting our people, who survives that horror
Unhurt, and goes home bearing our love.”

Then they moved on. Their boat lay moored,
Tied tight to its anchor. Glittering at the top
Of their golden helmets wild boar heads gleamed,
Shining decorations, swinging as they marched,
Erect like guards, like sentinels, as though ready
To fight. They marched, Beowulf and his men
And their guide, until they could see the gables
Of Herot, covered with hammered gold
And glowing in the sun—that most famous of all dwellings,
Towering majestic, its glittering roofs
Visible far across the land.
Their guide reined in his horse, pointing
To that hall, built by Hrothgar for the best
And bravest of his men; the path was plain,
They could see their way. . . .

Beowulf and his men arrive at Herot and are called to see their way
Beowulf and his men arrive at Herot and are called to see the King.

Beowulf arose, with his men
Around him, ordering a few to remain
With their weapons, leading the others quickly
Along under Herot’s steep roof into Hrothgar’s
Presence. Standing on that prince’s own hearth,
Helmeted, the silvery metal of his mail shirt
Gleaming with a smith’s high art, he greeted
The Danes’ great lord:
“Hail, Hrothgar!
Higlac is my cousin (6) and my king; the days
Of my youth have been filled with glory. Now Grendel’s
Name has echoed in our land: sailors
Have brought us stories of Herot, the best
Of all mead-halls, (7) deserted and useless when the moon
Hangs in skies the sun had lit,
Light and life fleeing together.
My people have said, the wisest, most knowing
And best of them, that my duty was to go to the Danes’
Great king. They have seen my strength for themselves,
Have watched me rise from the darkness of war,
Dripping with my enemies’ blood. I drove
Five great giants into chains, chased
All of that race from the earth. I swam
In the blackness of night, hunting monsters
Out of the ocean, and killing them one
By one; death was my errand and the fate
They had earned. Now Grendel and I are called
Together, and I’ve come. Grant me, then,
Lord and protector of this noble place,
A single request! I have come so far,
O shelterer of warriors and your people’s loved friend,
That this one favor you should not refuse me—
That I, alone and with the help of my men,
May purge all evil from this hall. I have heard,
Too, that the monster’s scorn of men
Is so great that he needs no weapons and fears none.
Nor will I. My lord Higlac
Might think less of me if I let my sword
Go where my feet were afraid to, if I hid
Behind some broad linden (8) shield: my hands
Alone shall fight for me, struggle for life
Against the monster. God must decide
Who will be given to death’s cold grip.
Grendel’s plan, I think, will be
What it has been before, to invade this hall
And gorge his belly with our bodies. If he can,
If he can. And I think, if my time will have come,
There’ll be nothing to mourn over, no corpse to prepare
For its grave: Grendel will carry our bloody
Flesh to the moors, crunch on our bones
And smear torn scraps of our skin on the walls
Of his den. No, I expect no Danes
Will fret about sewing our shrouds, if he wins.
And if death does take me, send the hammered
Mail of my armor to Higlac, return
The inheritance I had from Hrethel, and he
From Wayland. (9) Fate will unwind as it must!”

That night Beowulf and his men stay inside Herot. While his men sleep, Beowulf lies awake, eager to meet with Grendel.

**THE BATTLE WITH GRENDEL**

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.
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,
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.
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
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
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.
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
—And was instantly seized himself, claws
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
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
Boast and, standing erect, stopped
The monster’s flight, fastened those claws
In his fists till they cracked, clutched Grendel
Closer. The infamous killer fought
For his freedom, wanting no flesh but retreat,
Desiring nothing but escape; his claws
Had been caught, he was trapped. That trip to Herot
Was a miserable journey for the writhing monster!
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.
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,

395 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,

400 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,

405 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

410 Arm, claw and shoulder and all.

The Danes celebrate Beowulf’s victory. That night, though, Grendel’s mother kills Hrothgar’s closest
friend and carries off her child’s claw. The next day the horrified king tells Beowulf about the two
monsters and their underwater lair.