***Beowulf* Summaries ENG-111** / **Provided as an aid to understanding *Beowulf***

MLA formatting uses the fewest numerals needed. 241-4 means lines 241-244

**Summary of Reading 1 (lines 1-455 / pp. 3-31)**

The line of Danish kings that leads to Hrothgar is discussed, beginning with Shield Sheafson.

A foundling (an orphan), Shield grew into a powerful king who was feared all along the whale-road (the sea). He was a "wrecker of mead-benches" and "the terror of the hall-troops" (5-6). We infer that Shield basically showed his power by inflicting violence on neighboring peoples until they agreed to pay him to stop rampaging in their mead-halls. Shield's son Beow became famous throughout the North. When Shield died, the Danes paid tribute by sending his body out to sea in a ship piled high with treasure and war-gear (weapons). After Beow's reign, Beow's son Halfdane ruled. The second-oldest of Halfdane's sons is Hrothgar (the Danish king during our story), and he is favored by fortune and successful in war. Hrothgar decreed that a great mead-hall would be built. It is called **Heorot**, and it was a magnificent structure known far and wide as the greatest of mead-halls. (Mead is an alcoholic drink made from fermented honey) But, the narrator tells us, the hall will someday experience a "barbarous burning" (83). "[T]he killer instinct / [will be] unleashed among in-laws," and "blood lust [will be] rampant" (84-5). **Notice how every great accomplishment in *Beowulf* is accompanied by a prediction of future disaster or a story about something bad that happened in the past.**

Out in the dark moors (areas of open, boggy land) a demonic creature named Grendel was tormented by the loud celebrations coming from Heorot. Grendel is said to be of "Cain's clan" (106). That means he is a descendant of the Bible's first murderer, Cain, son of Adam & Eve. All was well with Hrothgar and his men until Grendel began to terrorize them, killing and making off with 30 Danes on the first night of his attack. Grendel struck again and again, because his blood-lust and hunger for human flesh could never be quenched. Heorot stood deserted each night when the monster reigned. For **twelve years** Grendel rampaged. Hrothgar and his men prayed to their heathen gods, but that did them no good, since (according to the narrator) only those who follow the Christian God can only hope for anything but hell. Tales of Hrothgar's misfortune jumped the seas until the horror of Grendel's attacks was sung by the scops (storytellers) of many other peoples in many other mead-halls.

In the land of the Geats (southern Sweden) a mighty warrior named Beowulf ("Hygelac's thane") heard the news from Denmark. The wise men among the Geats believed the omens were good for Beowulf's mission. He ordered a ship to be fitted-out with war-gear and gathered 14 of the bravest Geats to accompany him across the sea to help his father's friend Hrothgar in his time of need. The journey goes smoothly. Beowulf and his war-band arrive on the Danish coast and are challenged by a coast-guard who can see that these are impressive men led by a mighty warrior. Beowulf announces that they are from the Geat people. Beowulf asks if the tales of the monster terrorizing Heorot are true. He has come to aid Hrothgar in destroying the "corpse-maker" (276).

Beowulf and his men, impressively armored, march in step toward Heorot. The great mead-hall looms into view as they draw near. Heorot is described as a "dazzling stronghold" (313). Hrothgar's herald Wulfgar says he has never seen such an impressive group of men. He says that their stout-heartedness rather than banishment (exile) must have brought them to the Danish shore. Beowulf identifies himself and asks to speak to Hrothgar in person.

Wulfgar goes to make Beowulf's request. Hrothgar remembers meeting Beowulf when the latter was just a boy. The old king has heard marvelous tales of Beowulf's prowess: how he has the "strength of thirty / in the grip of each hand" (380-1). Hrothgar says he will repay Beowulf with great treasure and riches if he can defeat the monster and that Wulfgar should allow Beowulf to enter.

Beowulf greets the king respectfully, tells of how he has heard the tales of Grendel and his terror, brags about some of his mighty exploits (like killing sea-beasts and chaining trolls), and requests he be allowed to defeat the monster and purge Heorot of evil. He adds that since Grendel uses no weapons, neither will he. This will heighten the fame of his leader Hygelac. If Beowulf should die in his attempt to destroy Grendel, there will be nothing left of him―send his "breast-webbing" (a chain-mail shirt) back to Lord Hygelac in Geatland. Beowulf finishes his speech by acknowledging that fate will decide the outcome of the fight.

**Summary of Reading 2 / Lines 456-955 (pp. 31-63)**

Hrothgar recalls the time he helped Beowulf's father who started a feud by killing a Wulfing named Heatholaf. Hrothgar had been a young king then, serving because his older brother had died. Hrothgar "healed the feud" by giving treasure to the Wulfings (470). Hrothgar says that his men often brag when drinking during the day that they will kill Grendel, but by the next morning, they are all dead and the benches in Heorot are spattered with their blood.

Hrothgar calls for a feast in honor of his guests. One of Hrothgar's thanes, Unferth, challenges Beowulf's tales of glory and says that Beowulf lost his famous swimming match with Breca. Beowulf says that Unferth is drunk. Beowulf then recounts the story of the epic swimming match across the sea. He and Breca were separated in a storm, and Beowulf was attacked by sea monsters. His chain-mail armor protected him. He killed them all and swam to safety. He then calls Unferth a kin-killer and asks if he were such a great warrior, why hasn't Unferth killed Grendel himself? Beowulf's defense of his deeds pleases Hrothgar. Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's queen, comes in like a royal hostess and serves her king and his guests. She is described as very proper, dignified, and attired in gold. She is also called "the Helming woman" which tells of her ancestry (620). [Marriages in monarchies often have the purpose of peacefully uniting different kingdoms. You will hear female royalty referred to in *Beowulf* as "peace-weavers."]

Beowulf makes a "formal boast" by pledging to kill Grendel or die in the attempt. This pleases Wealhtheow. Everyone is merry until it is time for Hrothgar ("Halfdane's heir") to go to bed. Hrothgar tells Beowulf that he has never given control of Heorot to anyone but him. Beowulf says he'll match his strength against Grendel. The king departs and Beowulf and his men bed down for the night. The other Geats do not expect to survive.

Grendel approaches Heorot from the misty moors, greedily thinking about the men he will kill and eat. Beowulf watches in the darkened hall as Grendel seizes one of his men and devours him "hand and foot" (744). Grendel then reaches for Beowulf who grabs his clawed arm and does not let go. "The two contenders" crash and roll through the mead-hall (769). In the middle of the fight, the narrator takes a moment to talk about the strong and beautiful mead-hall Heorot. Only fire could destroy it. [There's that fire reference again.] Beowulf's Geat warriors try to aid him in his fight with the monster, but are ineffective. As Beowulf and Grendel continue their battle, the sinews in Grendel's shoulder begin to break until his arm is completely torn off. The monster limps back to his swamp "fatally hurt" (819). Beowulf displays the monster's arm from the rafters of the hall like a trophy.

The next morning, clans from near and far gather at Heorot to share the tale of Beowulf's victory and follow Grendel's bloody footprints to the mere (swamp) where he died. The story of Beowulf's triumph is told and retold. *Hrothgar's minstrel (a storyteller or "scop") sang of Beowulf and of the tale of Sigemund the dragon-slayer. King Heremod is remembered and contrasted with Beowulf: "Evil entered into Heremod" (914).*

Hrothgar emerges from the "women's quarters" with his queen and her "crowd of maidens" (923). When Hrothgar arrives at the steps of Heorot, he gives a speech thanking God and heaping praise on Beowulf. He also singles out Beowulf's mother, "[w]hoever she was," and says that "the Lord of Ages / bestowed a grace on her" (941, 944-5).

**Summary of Reading 3 / Lines 956-1382 (pp. 63-97)**

Beowulf speaks and says he wished the monster's entire corpse were there for all to see. Still, Grendel limped off to die and must now await God's judgment. Hrothgar's people quickly refurbish Heorot so that a feast of celebration can be held. Hrothgar enters and is called a "ring-giver" which is a kenning denoting his generosity. "The benches filled with famous men," and all were in "high spirits" (1012, 1015). The narrator then gives an ominous prediction: "Inside Heorot / there was nothing but friendship. The Shielding nation (Hrothgar's kingdom) / was not yet familiar with feud and betrayal" (1016-8). [Not *yet*?]

Hrothgar lavishes gifts upon Beowulf including fancy war-gear and horses. All of Beowulf's remaining men receive gifts as well. *The minstrel sings the "Saga of Finn," a song of a Danish princess named Hildeburh who was married to Finn, king of the Frisians (Dutch). She lost her son and brother in a battle at Finn's mead-hall. Danish leader Hnaef is killed. The survivors, led by Hengest, fight the Frisians to an uneasy truce. It is agreed that the Danes will spend the winter with the Frisians at Finn's hall. Things go badly, and in the spring, the Danes rise up, kill Finn, and bring Hildeburh back to Denmark*.

The narrator says that everyone enjoyed the song, but again hints at future disaster: "Wealhtheow came to sit / in her gold crown between two good men, / uncle and nephew, each one of whom / still trusted the other" (1161-4). The uncle and nephew are Hrothgar and Hrothulf. Wealhtheow speaks next, and she worries that Hrothgar wants "to adopt / this warrior [Beowulf] as a son" (1175-6). She then reminds Hrothgar of his duty toward their own two sons (Hrethric & Hrothmund) and expresses her confidence that Hrothgar's nephew Hrothulf will help them, too. Jewelry, including a gold torque necklace, is given to Beowulf. The narrator tells of a future disaster when Beowulf's leader Hygelac, wearing the very same torque, will "provoke / a feud with the Frisians" (1206-7). Hygelac will die, and lesser men will plunder his corpse, making off with the necklace (1206-7).

Beowulf and his Geat warriors do not sleep in the mead-hall on this night. Only Danes, including Hrothgar's oldest friend and advisor Aeschere, are bedded down there. We are told that "an avenger lurked and was still alive" (1257). It was Grendel's mother. She is compared to an Amazon warrior. She enters the hall to revenge her son's death and takes Grendel's arm and Aeschere's corpse back to her fen (swamp). Hrothgar is devastated by the news. He calls for Beowulf and tells him what has happened. Hrothgar recalls that in the past, people have seen two monsters, one of whom "looks like a woman" (1351). Grendel and his mother are said to be "fatherless creatures" whose "ancestry is hidden in a past / of demons and ghosts" (1355, 1356-7). They live in a mere (marsh) whose waters flame at night. Hrothgar offers Beowulf even more treasure if he can kill Grendel's mother.

**Summary of Reading 4 / Lines 1383-1913 (pp. 97-131)**

Beowulf agrees to attack Grendel's mother in her home in the wild lands. It is a perilous journey along cliffs and crags to her lair. They find Aeschere's head nearby. The water is teeming with strange reptiles. Unferth, who has now become Beowulf's friend and admirer, offers his own ancestral sword "Hrunting" to help Beowulf slay Grendel's mother. Beowulf gives a speech, asking Hrothgar to send the gifts he gave him to Hygelac (Beowulf's King) and to take care of his men if he dies. Beowulf then gives his own family heirloom sword to Unferth, promising to "gain glory [with Hrunting] or die" (1491).

Beowulf dives into the water and swims down for "the best part of a day" before reaching the bottom (1495). Grendel's mother sends sea-beasts to attack him, but his chain-mail shirt protects him from their teeth. The sword "Hrunting" is useless against Grendel's mother, and it clangs against her head harmlessly. He flings it aside and begins to fight her hand-to-hand. She ends up on top of him. Beowulf "felt daunted" when she drew a dagger and plunged the blade downward to "avenge / her only child" (1543, 1546-7). Once again, he is saved by his mail shirt. Beowulf gets back to his feet and finds a sword made by giants hanging on the wall. He swings it and chops off her head. Beowulf then finds Grendel's corpse and beheads it also.

Back on the surface, watchers see a disturbance in the water and they think that Beowulf is dead. At the "ninth hour" (3:00 p. m. - the time when Christ dies on the cross in the Gospels), Hrothgar and his men walk sadly away (1600). Back at the bottom, the giant's sword held by Beowulf melts away except for the hilt. Beowulf swims for the surface carrying the sword-hilt, Hrunting, and Grendel's head. The serpents and sea-beasts perish after the death of their queen. Beowulf emerges from the lake triumphant, and it takes four of his men to carry Grendel's huge head.

Upon their return to Heorot, Beowulf makes a speech about the underwater battle and his discovery of the huge sword. He presents Grendel's head and the sword-hilt to Hrothgar. The hilt has elaborate carvings depicting "how war first came into the world / and the flood destroyed the tribe of giants" (1689-90). Hrothgar makes a long speech in which he praises Beowulf. The tale of King Heremod is mentioned again. Hrothgar speaks eloquently about men who gain great power and then forget that they are mortal. He warns Beowulf, "flower of warriors," not to "give way to pride" (1758, 1760). Hrothgar says he ruled for fifty years and thought that his enemies "had faded from the face of the earth" (1773). They have another feast in Heorot and then everyone goes to bed.

The next morning, Beowulf returns Hrunting to Unferth and says it had been "a friend in battle" even though it hadn't (1810). As Beowulf and his men are about to sail back to Geatland, their ship laden with Hrothgar's gifts, Beowulf tells the old king that he'll stand ready if Hrothgar ever needs him again. Hrothgar breaks into tears as he hugs Beowulf, because he has a strong foreboding [a feeling about the future] that he will never see Beowulf again. Giving the coast-guard a golden sword as a parting gift, the Geats set sail.

**Summary of Reading 5 / lines 1914-2541 (131-71)**

Beowulf's ship makes landfall in Geatland and his treasure is unloaded. He is home. Hygelac's mead-hall is "magnificent" and his queen, Hygd, is thoughtful and well-mannered despite her youth. [At this point in the manuscript, a second scribe takes over.] The brief story of "Queen Modthryth" highlights the "terrible wrongs" she committed and her eventual transformation. (1931-2). This little anecdote allows the narrator to school readers (and hearers) about queens and their responsibilities: “Even a queen / outstanding in beauty must not overstep like that. / A queen should weave peace, not punish the innocent / with loss of life for imagined insults” (1940-3). Her husband Offa, the “hero king” is mentioned. He is described as “the best king, it has been said, / between the two seas or anywhere else / on the earth” (1955-7). Since **kingship** is one of the themes we’ll examine, even this brief reference to Offa is important.

As Beowulf approaches Hygelac’s hall, the “young king, Ongentheow’s killer” is giving out treasure to his thanes (1968). Hygelac asks Beowulf how his trip went, and says he “pleaded” with Beowulf not to go (1994). Beowulf says his victory is “hardly a secret,” then goes on to describe his arrival in Denmark and his kind reception by Hrothgar and Wealhtheow (2000). Beowulf then tells a side-story about Hrothgar’s daughter Freawaru and her impending marriage to Ingeld of the Heathobards (a people of northern Germany). Beowulf predicts the marriage will not bring peace between the Danes and the Heathobards, because of former battles between them. Beowulf then continues his story.

Beowulf describes his battle with Grendel and the “lavish rewards” he and his men received from “the lord of the Danes [Hrothgar]” (2101). Everyone was happy until that night when Grendel’s mother attacked and took Hrothgar’s oldest friend. Beowulf describes his underwater battle with “the terror-monger” and the further rewards he received after his victory (2136). This is the war-gear Beowulf now offers to Hygelac. He presents Queen Hygd with a gorget (neck-armor) and a torque. King Hygelac then gives gifts to Beowulf including his own hall.

Hygelac later died in battle, and “the wide kingdom / reverted to Beowulf. He ruled it well / for fifty winters” (2207-9). One day, a slave stole a goblet (a fancy cup) from a dragon’s barrow (a mound built by humans). The “riches of a high-born race,” now forgotten, were hidden underground long ago (2235). A fire-breathing dragon later found the treasure and ruled over the hoard for three centuries. Now, the dragon knows that someone has looted his treasure. He sees the footprints of the thief. The dragon circles the mound and works himself up “by imagining battle” (2299). Each night, the dragon scorches nearby villages, burning homes and people. He even burns Beowulf’s hall to the ground.

Beowulf is “too proud” to raise an army to go against the dragon (2345). Beowulf’s mighty deeds are recalled by the narrator, and we get the backstory about Beowulf becoming king of the Geats. Hygd had offered the throne to him after Hygelac’s death, but Beowulf insisted that Hygelac’s son Heardred deserved the kingship and offered the boy his guidance. Heardred was slain by Swedes, and Beowulf became king.

Back in the present, Beowulf takes eleven men and makes the thief who stole the dragon’s cup lead them to the dragon's barrow. Beowulf sits on the cliff-top, “sad at heart,” and addresses his men (2419). He describes his battles and relates how King Hrethel (father of Hygelac) took him in as a boy and raised him like a son. One of Hrethel’s boys accidentally killed his own brother with an arrow. He says Hrethel’s sadness would be like a man who sees his son’s body hanging on the gallows and feels miserable and powerless. This passage is known as “The Father’s Lament” (2444-62). The lament is an **epic simile** – an extended comparison between two things. Epic similes are common devices in the poems of Homer (*The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*), but this is the only one in *Beowulf*. He goes on to talk about the battles between the Geats and the Swedes in which he fought. Beowulf makes one final boast and says he will go into the barrow and fight the dragon. He says the men should remain outside. Fate will decide who wins. Beowulf heads into the barrow: "No coward path" (2541).

**Summary of Reading 6 / Lines 2542-end (171-213)**

**Swaddled**: wrapped

**Prince**: generic term for a king or leader

**Vex**: annoy

**Pyre**: a stand for burning a body

**Litany**: a list of things recited

**Lament**: sadness for a loss

**Abasement**: humiliation; degradation

**Dirge**: a slow, sad funeral song

**Keen**: eager

Beowulf gives a battle cry, and he and the dragon begin fighting. This dragon is much more of a flying snake (serpent) than the dragons we see in movies. As they fight, the dragon "looped and unleashed itself. / Swaddled in flames, it came gliding and flexing / and racing towards its fate" (2568-70). The narrator tells us that for the first time, fate will deny Beowulf victory. He slashes at the dragon, but his blade barely makes a cut. The two of them clash further. Beowulf's "hand-picked troop / broke ranks and ran for their lives" (2598-9). Only one man had the courage to go to the aid of his king. It is Wiglaf, whom we later learn is from the same clan as Beowulf. Wiglaf addresses his cowardly comrades, telling them that they pledged their loyalty. He would rather die than run. As Wiglaf joins the fight, Beowulf makes a brave thrust at the dragon's head, but his sword breaks. The dragon sinks his fangs into Beowulf's neck. Wiglaf thrusts his blade into the belly of the Dragon. Beowulf rallies one last time and sticks a dagger into the dragon's flank (side) and makes a "deadly wound" (2705).

As the dragon's poison surges through Beowulf, Wiglaf bathes his king's wounds. Beowulf says he wishes he could have bestowed his armor on his own son, but it was not his "fortune to have fathered an heir" (2731). He says no neighboring clan would dare to face him in his prime. He never started quarrels and never "swore to a lie" (2739). He asks Wiglaf to go into the inner chamber of the barrow and bring back some of the dragon's hoard of treasure to look upon before he dies. Wiglaf carries some of the treasure back to Beowulf. The dying king thanks God that he can "behold this treasure," and can leave his people "well endowed" on the day he dies (2796, 2798). He asks Wiglaf to oversee the building of a great barrow (in this case, a burial mound) by the sea. All who pass by "will call it Beowulf's barrow, as they steer / ships across the wide and shrouded waters" (2807-8). He says that Wiglaf is now the last of their clan, the Waegmundings: "Fate swept us away, sent my whole brave high-born clan / to their final doom. Now I must follow them" (2814-6). These are Beowulf's last words.

The dragon is remembered almost affectionately: "Never again would he glitter and glide / and show himself off in midnight air" (2832-2). The ten "tail-turners" who fled when Beowulf was battling the dragon come back, ashamed, behind their shields. Wiglaf scolds them, saying that when Beowulf gave them gifts of war-gear, he was "throwing weapons uselessly away" (2871). Wiglaf says it is "goodbye now to all you know and love" because "our whole nation, / will be dispossessed, once princes / from beyond get tidings of how you turned and fled / and disgraced yourselves" (2887-90).

Word is sent to the other Geats who waited for news of the battle. The "rider" who addresses the crowd tells them that Beowulf died slaying the dragon with Wiglaf beside him. The rider predicts that "war is looming," and it will soon be known "far and wide, / that the king is gone" (2910, 2912-3). Franks, Frisians, and Swedes will attack because of past battles. The rider predicts that the Geats will be exiles, "bowed under woe" (3019). The narrator say that it was a "dire report" the man gave, but he "got little wrong / in what he told and predicted" (3029-30).

The Geats go to see the body of their king. The dragon is stretched out beside him, fifty feet long. We are told that the treasure hoard had been in the barrow for a thousand years. Wiglaf speaks to the crowd: "Often when one man follows his own will / many are hurt. This happened to us. / Nothing we advised could ever convince / the prince we loved, our land's guardian, / not to vex the custodian of the gold" (3077-81). He tells how bravely Beowulf died, and his order to construct a barrow by the sea for his tomb. Wiglaf and seven other men go into the barrow and haul out the treasure. They "pitched the dragon / over the clifftop, let tide's flow / and backwash take the treasure-minder" (3131-3). They make a pyre for Beowulf, heap treasure around it, and light "the hugest of all / funeral fires" (3143-4).

The Geats wail in sadness. A Geat woman cries out, telling "a wild litany / of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded, / enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles, / slavery and abasement" (3152-5). The mound is built, and Beowulf's remains are buried in the barrow along with piles of treasure. Twelve warriors ride horses around the tomb, "chanting in dirges"

(3171). They praise Beowulf for his good qualities and say he was "keenest to win fame" (3182).