# Study Guide

for

# Beowulf

## A translation by Burton Raffel
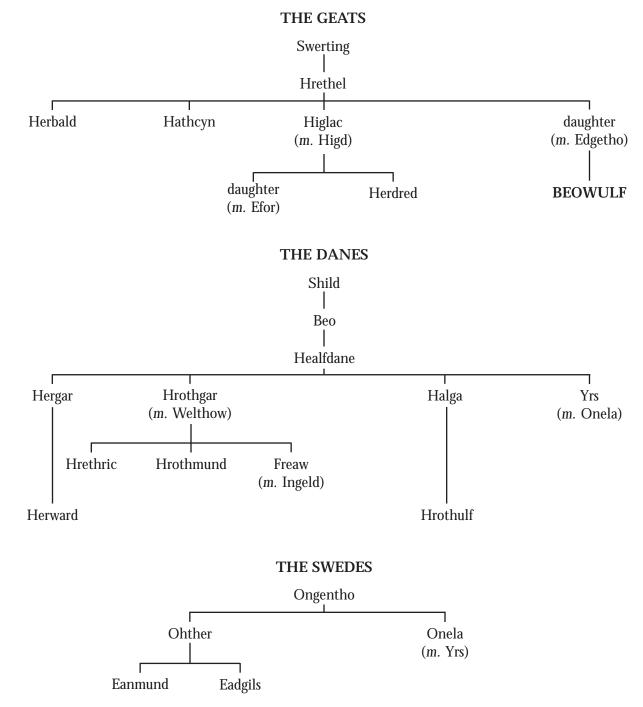
❧

# Meet the Geats, Danes, and Swedes of *Beowulf*

By the time that *Beowulf* was written down, Germanic tribes from Scandinavia and elsewhere in northern Europe had been invading England's shores for centuries. The principal human characters in *Beowulf* hail from three Scandinavian tribes: the Geats, the Danes, and the Swedes. The genealogy of these tribes is shown below.

**THE GEATS**

Swerting

Hrethel

- Herbald
- Hathcyn
- Higlac (*m.* Higd)
  - daughter (*m.* Efor)
  - Herdred
- daughter (*m.* Edgetho)
  - **BEOWULF**

**THE DANES**

Shild

Beo

Healfdane

- Hergar
  - Herward
- Hrothgar (*m.* Welthow)
  - Hrethric
  - Hrothmund
  - Freaw (*m.* Ingeld)
- Halga
  - Hrothulf
- Yrs (*m.* Onela)

**THE SWEDES**

Ongentho

- Ohther
  - Eanmund
  - Eadgils
- Onela (*m.* Yrs)

# Introducing the Poem

*One of the most important remains of Anglo-Saxon literature is the epic poem* Beowulf. *Its age is unknown; but it comes from a very distant and hoar antiquity . . . It is like a piece of ancient armor; rusty and battered, and yet strong.*

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

## BACKGROUND

It is a curious fact that some of the world's greatest literature has come to us from an unknown hand. *Beowulf,* the first epic poem in the English language, ranks high among such literature. Scholars believe that this epic about a brave warrior who vanquishes evil monsters was composed between the mid-seventh century and the end of the tenth century. Some of the story materials the poet uses may have been passed down by word of mouth from one generation to the next.

*Beowulf* was probably composed in writing by one man. Although no one knows the identity of the author, he lived in what is now England, probably somewhere north of the river Thames. Little more can be said about the author with certainty, except that he was highly skilled in poetic technique and was thoroughly familiar with the traditional themes and legends of early Germanic culture.

What is it about *Beowulf* that moved the American poet Longfellow to compare it to "a piece of ancient armor; rusty and battered, and yet strong"? Perhaps it is that the poet fused early Germanic history, legends, mythology, and ideals with Christian faith and values to create an enduring work of art that inspires as it entertains. Or perhaps it is that we still cherish many of the qualities that Beowulf embodies—among them courage, loyalty, and generosity.

## THE TIME AND PLACE

The poem is set mainly in Denmark and Geatland (now southern Sweden) during the sixth century.

The map at right shows the locations of peoples mentioned in *Beowulf.* The proximity of those peoples to one another, together with the warrior code they followed, made for frequent clashes.

## CHARACTER LIST

Much of the early action takes place in Herot, a great mead hall, or banquet hall, where the well-loved and generous Danish king Hrothgar holds court. The following list includes the principal characters in *Beowulf,* some of whom appear in the genealogies on page 13.

**Beowulf,** an ideal warrior of the Geats and the hero of the poem

**Dragon,** a fire-breathing, snakelike monster that terrorizes the Geats

**Grendel,** a monster with human qualities that terrorizes Herot for twelve years

**Grendel's mother,** a monster that also terrorizes Herot

**Hrothgar,** Danish king and builder of Herot

**Higlac,** king of the Geats and uncle of Beowulf

**Shild,** legendary king of the Danes and great-grandfather of Hrothgar

**Unferth,** a warrior in Hrothgar's court who challenges Beowulf's bravery

**Welthow,** Hrothgar's wife

**Wiglaf,** a young warrior and relative of Beowulf



**Early Denmark and Sweden During the Time of Beowulf**

Swedes

Geats

Jutes

North Sea

Danes

Baltic Sea

Frisians

Franks

## Did You Know?

In 1939, excavations at Sutton Hoo (in Suffolk, England) uncovered a royal treasure-filled ship buried in the seventh century—perhaps not long before *Beowulf* was first composed. The ship is thought to be the burial site of an early Anglo-Saxon king or nobleman. The treasures found there were so much like those described in *Beowulf* that scholars suggest *Beowulf* may have been based, in part, on memories of the ancient burial. Some have even speculated that the poem was composed as a tribute to the late king, but no solid evidence has been found to support this notion.

## CRITIC'S CORNER

*The account of the hero's funeral with which the poem ends . . . [is] at once immemorial and oddly contemporary. The Geat woman who cries out in dread as the flames consume the body of her dead lord could come straight from a late-twentieth-century news report, from Rwanda or Kosovo; her [lament] is a nightmare glimpse into the minds of people who have survived traumatic, even monstrous events and who are now being exposed to a comfortless future. We immediately recognize her predicament and the pitch of her grief and find ourselves the better for having them expressed with such adequacy and dignity and unforgiving truth.*

—Seamus Heaney, introduction to *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*

# Before You Read

## *Beowulf* Prologue–Part 18

## FOCUS ACTIVITY

Who are today's heroes? What special qualities do these people possess?

### Share Ideas

With a small group of classmates, brainstorm a list of people who are admired as heroes. Next to the name of each person on the list, jot down a few qualities that make this person a hero. What does your list suggest about the qualities that people prize today?

### Setting a Purpose

Read to discover the qualities that make Beowulf a hero.

## BACKGROUND

### Did You Know?

*Beowulf* contains one of the earliest instances in English of a *flyting*—a dispute, or an exchange of personal abuse, in verse. In part 8, the Danish warrior Unferth calls Beowulf a "boastful fool" and taunts him for undertaking and losing a reckless swimming match. Beowulf responds by telling how the match really went, accusing Unferth of fratricide, and faulting him for lacking the heart to confront Grendel.

### The Epithet

An epithet is usually an adjective or a brief phrase used to characterize a person, place, or thing. For example, in *Beowulf* God is variously described as "the Lord of all Life," "the Ruler of glory," "the Lord of heaven and earth," and "our eternal Lord." As you read *Beowulf,* pay attention to the epithets. Note how they provide a brief summary of major characters' most essential qualities.

## VOCABULARY PREVIEW

**lair** [lār]  *n.* home or resting place, esp. of a wild animal (l. 125)

**lament** [lə ment′]  *n.* expression of sorrow or grief (l. 128)

**loathsome** [lōth′səm]  *adj.* extremely disgusting; repulsive; offensive (l. 985)

**purge** [purj]  *v.* to cleanse or rid of whatever is unclean or undesirable (l. 432)

**reparation** [rep′ə rā′shən]  *n.* act of giving satisfaction or making amends, as for a wrong or an injury (l. 158)

**reprisal** [ri prī′zəl]  *n.* retaliation against an enemy for injuries or losses suffered, with the intent of inflicting equal or greater injury (l. 597)

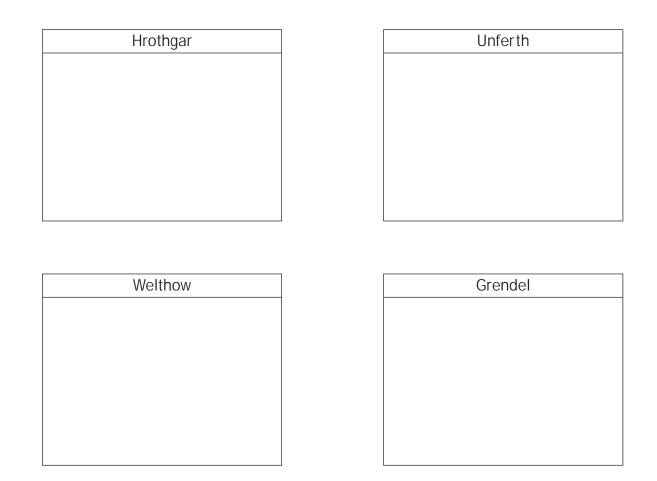**solace** [sol′is]  *n.* relief from sorrow or disappointment; comfort; consolation (l. 185)

# Active Reading

## *Beowulf* Prologue–Part 18

Several key characters are introduced in the first section of the poem. Write a brief description of each character in the appropriate boxes below to help fix the character in your mind.

| Shild |
| --- |
| |

| Beowulf |
| --- |
| |

| Hrothgar |
| --- |
| |

| Unferth |
| --- |
| |

| Welthow |
| --- |
| |

| Grendel |
| --- |
| |

# Responding

## *Beowulf* Prologue–Part 18

## Personal Response

What are your first impressions of Beowulf?

_____

_____

_____

## Analyzing Literature

### Recall and Interpret

1. Why does Hrothgar build Herot? Why doesn't it collapse when Beowulf engages Grendel in combat? What might its collapse have symbolized?

_____

_____

_____

2. How did Hrothgar come to know Beowulf's father? Do you think that Beowulf feels indebted to Hrothgar for his past kindnesses to the family? Explain.

_____

_____

_____

3. Briefly describe Grendel. What might Grendel symbolize?

_____

_____

_____

4. Contrast Beowulf and Unferth. What function does Unferth serve in the poem?

_____

_____

_____

5. Based on Welthow's actions in the poem, what role or roles do you think women played in Anglo-Saxon society?

_____

_____

_____

# Responding

## *Beowulf* Prologue–Part 18

## Analyzing Literature *(continued)*
### Evaluate and Connect

**6.** In your opinion, would the story be better if it were written in prose rather than verse? Explain.

_____

_____

_____

**7.** How might a contemporary of Beowulf's answer the **Focus Activity** question on page 16?

_____

_____

_____

## Literature and Writing
### Analyzing Purpose

In a few paragraphs, analyze the purpose of the prologue, or introduction, to *Beowulf*. How does it set the stage for the action that follows?

## Extending Your Response
### Literature Groups

Some readers view Beowulf as a boastful glory seeker. Other readers view Beowulf as a noble, selfless man. With a small group of classmates, discuss each point of view. Try to come to a consensus on Beowulf's character. Then share your opinion with the class, supporting it with evidence from the poem.

### Learning for Life

Using the author's descriptions of Grendel, develop a psychological profile. Describe the monster's personality and possible motivations for his behavior.

***Save your work for your portfolio.***

# Before You Read

*Beowulf* Parts 19–31

## FOCUS ACTIVITY

Recall a time when you stood up for a friend or family member. Why did you defend the person?

**Journal**
In your journal, describe the situation and explain why you took a stand.

**Setting a Purpose**
Read to find out who stands up for Grendel and why.

## BACKGROUND

**Did You Know?**
During medieval times, nobles often chose marriage partners for their children. A princess of one people might be given in marriage to the ruler of another in order to create alliances between their two peoples. As you read *Beowulf,* note the marriages that are described and think about the alliances that they create.

**Foreshadowing in Beowulf**
**Foreshadowing** is the use of hints or clues to prepare readers for events to come. As you read *Beowulf,* look for clues about how the tale will end. Pay close attention to speeches and descriptions that appear to suggest more than what they actually describe.

## VOCABULARY PREVIEW

**exulting** [ig zult′ing]  *adj.* rejoicing greatly (l. 1881)

**fetters** [fet′ərz]  *n.* anything that confines or restrains (l. 1609)

**host** [hōst]  *n.* large number; multitude (l. 1788)

**imperious** [im pēr′ē əs]  *adj.* dictatorial; domineering; overbearing (l. 1932)

**niggardly** [ nig′ərd lē]  *adj.* miserly; tight-fisted; penurious (l. 1929)

**surging** [surj ing]  *adj.* moving with a violent, heaving, swelling motion (l. 1453)
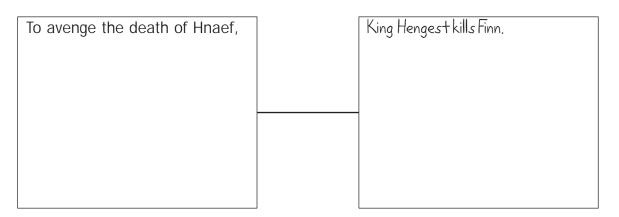
# Active Reading

## *Beowulf* Parts 19–31

Many of the characters in *Beowulf* are motivated by vengeance. As you read the next section of *Beowulf,* use the chart below to note characters who seek revenge.

| To avenge the death of Hnaef, | King Hengest kills Finn. |
|---|---|

| To avenge | |
|---|---|

| To avenge | |
|---|---|

# Responding

### *Beowulf* Parts 19–31

## Personal Response
What lines linger in your mind? Why?

_____

_____

_____

## Analyzing Literature
### Recall and Interpret

**1.** Grendel's mother is a major figure, but nothing is known about Grendel's father. In a poem in which ancestry is important, what does Grendel's ancestry suggest about his character?

_____

_____

**2.** What is the mood at Herot at the beginning of Part 19? How does the mood change? Why?

_____

_____

**3.** What does Beowulf's speech just before fighting Grendel's mother suggest about his relationship to his men? To Higlac?

_____

_____

**4.** Contrast Beowulf and Hermod. How does the contrast help define Beowulf's character?

_____

_____

**5.** What sword does Beowulf take into battle? Who gave him the sword? What does the sword's failure in battle suggest about its owner?

_____

_____

# Responding

## *Beowulf* Parts 19–31

## Analyzing Literature *(continued)*

### Evaluate and Connect

**6.** The literary term *deus ex machina* refers to the improbable and unexpected introduction of a person or device to make things turn out right. In your opinion, does the term apply to Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother? Explain.

_____

_____

**7.** In *Beowulf* what are the consequences of seeking revenge? What other ways might problems be worked out?

_____

_____

## Literature and Writing

### Recognizing Allusions

Allusions are references in a work of literature to a well-known person, place, event, written work, or work of art. *Beowulf* contains numerous biblical allusions. For example, Grendel is described as an offspring of Cain. In a paragraph or two, explain what this allusion or any other allusion of your choice adds to the poem.

## Extending Your Response

### Literature Groups

With a small group of classmates, discuss *Beowulf*'s portrayal of women (including Grendel's mother). Based on the portrayal of women in the poem, describe the "ideal" Anglo-Saxon woman. How would she have behaved? What roles would she have played? Share your description with the class.

### Performing

With a partner, discuss the tone of parts 20 and 21, in which Hrothgar laments the murder of his trusted counselor Esher and Beowulf responds. How do you think the king and Beowulf feel? How might these feelings be conveyed in their tones of voice and facial expressions? Choose roles and rehearse the scene; then perform it for your class.

***Save your work for your portfolio.***

# Before You Read

*Beowulf* Parts 32–43

## FOCUS ACTIVITY

Are some things worth sacrificing one's life for? What might they be?

**Think-Pair-Share**
With a partner, talk about someone who risked his or her life to help someone else. What was the result?

**Setting a Purpose**
Read to discover how, out of selflessness, a man makes the ultimate sacrifice.

## BACKGROUND

**Did You Know?**
Old English poems rely heavily on alliteration, the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words in close proximity. Note, for example, the alliteration in these lines from the prologue to *Beowulf*: "We've heard of Danish heroes / . . . and the glory they cut . . . swinging mighty swords! / How Shild made slaves of soldiers from every / Land, crowds of captives he'd beaten." As you read the final section of *Beowulf,* look for instances of alliteration, and think about how they add to the music of the poem.

**The Kenning As a Literary Device**
Another device that often appears in Old English poetry is the **kenning,** a descriptive figure of speech that takes the place of a familiar noun. *Beowulf* contains numerous examples of this special use of words. For example, the route that Beowulf and his men sail is called a "sea-road," and the waves are called "ocean furrows." As you continue to read, look for other examples of this literary device.

## VOCABULARY PREVIEW

**bolt** [bōlt] *v.* to break away from control; start and run off (l. 2888)

**hoary** [hôr′ē] *adj.* venerable; ancient (l. 2553)

**livid** [liv′id] *adj.* having a grayish-blue coloration from a bruise (l. 2724)

**reproach** [ri prōch′] *n.* act of reproaching; blame; reproof (l. 2331)

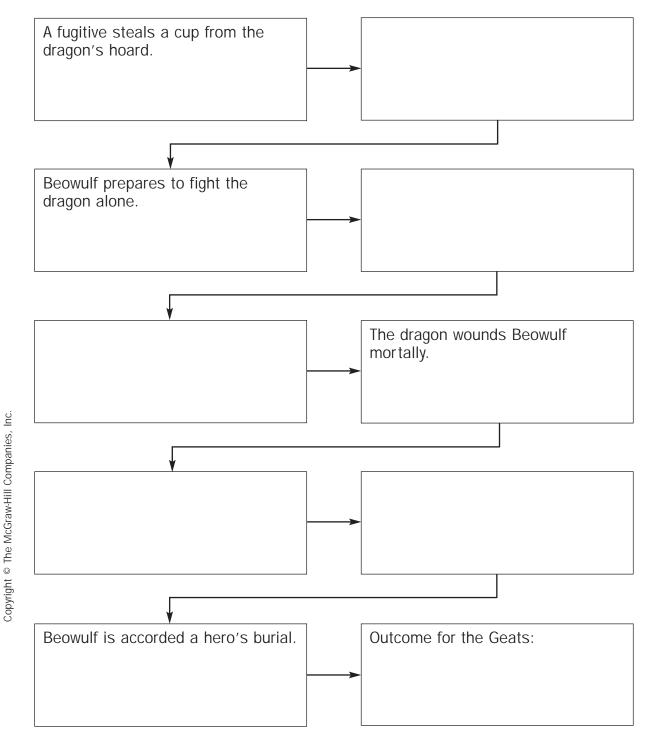**skulk** [skulk] *v.* to move in a furtive or stealthy manner (l. 2366)

**venomous** [ven′ə məs] *adj.* able to inflict a poisonous wound, esp. by biting or stinging; secreting and transmitting venom (l. 2838)

# Active Reading

## *Beowulf* Parts 32–43

*Beowulf* is a narrative poem that moves through a sequence of events. As you read Parts 32–43 of the poem, trace the events from the beginning of this section to the end by completing the boxes below. At the end, predict the fate of the Geats.

A fugitive steals a cup from the dragon's hoard. →

Beowulf prepares to fight the dragon alone. →

→ The dragon wounds Beowulf mortally.

→

Beowulf is accorded a hero's burial. → Outcome for the Geats:

# Responding

## *Beowulf* Parts 32–43

## Personal Response

Were you surprised by the conclusion of *Beowulf?* How would you have ended the poem? Why?

_____

_____

_____

## Analyzing Literature

### Recall and Interpret

**1.** What incident leads the dragon on the path to vengeance?

_____

_____

**2.** How does Beowulf become king of the Geats? Explain how his ascension to the throne reinforces the character traits he displays earlier in the poem.

_____

_____

_____

**3.** In what way does Wiglaf resemble the younger Beowulf? What makes him a worthy successor to Beowulf?

_____

_____

_____

**4.** Why is Beowulf's death a turning point for the Geats?

_____

_____

_____

**5.** What is usually done with treasures taken from a defeated enemy? Why is it significant that the treasure from the dragon's den is buried with Beowulf?

_____

_____

_____

# Responding

## *Beowulf* Parts 32–43

### Analyzing Literature *(continued)*
**Evaluate and Connect**

**6.** How might you account for the enduring popularity of *Beowulf*? Would you recommend it to a friend? Why or why not?

_____

_____

_____

**7.** How do you think Wiglaf would answer the question in the **Focus Activity** on page 24? Why?

_____

_____

_____

### Literature and Writing

Pretend that you are Beowulf writing a letter to Wiglaf, your successor. What advice would you give to him to lead the Geats? What mistakes might you warn him against making? What values would you suggest he hold dear? Draw upon details from Beowulf's life that you think would be instructive to the young leader.

### Extending Your Response

**Literature Groups**

With a small group of students, discuss a theme, or main idea, developed in *Beowulf.* Together, write a sentence or two that sums up the theme. Then share your summary with the class, explaining how you arrived at it.

**Learning for Life**

With a small group of students, write the script for a news broadcast on the death of Beowulf. Recap his illustrious career, the main events in his life, his rise to fame and eventual death. Include brief "man-on-the-street" interviews with Geats responding to the loss. Choose roles and rehearse the broadcast; then videotape the production and play it for your class or, if you prefer, do a live performance.

***Save your work for your portfolio.***

# The New Beowulf Online NewsHour with Seamus Heaney

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

What do people mean when they say that something is "lost in translation"? What does it take to create a good translation of a work?

### Background

Rarely does poetry make the bestseller list. Yet Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* did just that. Heaney's translation has been hailed as "both direct and sophisticated, making previous versions look slightly flowery and antique by comparison." In this interview, Heaney talks about the work.

## Responding to the Reading

1. What does Heaney mean when he says that the *Beowulf* poet "lived in two worlds"?

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. What connection does Heaney make between the Old English in which *Beowulf* was originally written and the language spoken in the rural community where he grew up?

   _____

   _____

   _____

3. According to Heaney, in what ways are conflicts in *Beowulf* similar to the conflicts in contemporary Northern Ireland? How are they different?

   _____

   _____

   _____

4. What does Heaney mean when he says that "poetry has no tense"? Do you agree? Explain.

   _____

   _____

   _____

5. **Making Connections** In the interview, Heaney reads his translation of lines 86–96 of *Beowulf.* Compare with Heaney's translation Burton Raffel's translation in your text. Which translation do you prefer? Why?

## Writing About Literature

Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* has been described as being more accessible than earlier versions of the poem. Get a copy of Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* from your school or community library and compare it with the translation in your text. Then, in a few paragraphs, tell what you think makes it more accessible than Raffel's version. Support your opinion by quoting passages from both translations.

## John Gardner | *from* Grendel

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

Think of a time when you had to weigh two sides of a story before you could form an opinion. How did the two points of view differ? How did you decide which one to believe?

### Background

John Gardner taught creative writing and published poems, novels, short stories, criticism, and children's books before his untimely death in 1982. This excerpt is from the last two chapters of his novel *Grendel*. It describes Grendel's encounter with Beowulf from the monster's point of view.

## Responding to the Reading

1. What is Grendel's reaction to Beowulf's seizing his arm? How does he explain it?

_____

_____

_____

2. What does Grendel think of Beowulf?

_____

_____

_____

3. What was the accident that, in Grendel's mind, gave Beowulf the upper hand?

_____

_____

_____

4. Does Grendel attribute Beowulf's success to his prowess or to the accident? How do you know?

_____

_____

_____

5. **Making Connections** How does the portrayal of the monster in *Grendel* differ from the portrayal in *Beowulf?*

_____

_____

_____

## Creative Writing

Using the excerpt from *Grendel* as a model, rewrite a folktale from the monster's point of view. For example, you might retell "Little Red Riding Hood" from the wolf's point of view or "Jack and the Beanstalk" from the giant's point of view. Share your story with your class.

| translated by Charles W. Kennedy | # Old English Riddles |

## Before You Read

### Focus Question
Why are riddles able to engage and hold our interest?

### Background
The *Exeter Book,* a collection of Old English texts from which these riddles come, contains ninety-five such poems, suggesting the popularity of riddling in Anglo-Saxon society.

## Responding to the Reading

**1.** What is the solution to each riddle? Which words and phrases in the first riddle provide the best clues to the solution?

_____

_____

_____

**2.** What paradox, or apparent contradiction, is set up in the first two half-lines of the second riddle?

_____

_____

_____

**3.** Why might the object in the third riddle be described as "smitten"?

_____

_____

_____

**4.** In which riddle does the subject express itself with the greatest emotion? is the object given the most emotional content? In what terms does it describe itself?

_____

_____

_____

**5. Making Connections** Choose a kenning from *Beowulf* and explain how it might be viewed as a riddle.

### Creative Writing
Using these riddles as models, write a verse riddle of your own. Choose an everyday object and describe its most essential characteristics. Share your riddle with your classmates and see if they can solve it.

*Beowulf* Study Guide

**Dino Buzzati** | # The Slaying of the Dragon

## Before You Read

### Focus Question
Monster movies continue to draw large audiences. Why do so many people enjoy stories about monsters? What is the appeal of movie monsters like Godzilla and King Kong?

### Background
Italian author Dino Buzzati wrote several distinguished fantasy stories and novels. In his works, he often combined the real and the fantastic. Buzzati died in 1972.

## Responding to the Reading

1. What warning does Dr. Taddei give Andronico? Why doesn't Andronico heed Dr. Taddei's warnings?

_____

_____

_____

2. Briefly describe the dragon. In your opinion, is the portrayal of the dragon sympathetic? Explain why you feel as you do.

_____

_____

_____

3. In your opinion, are the dragon slayers in this story heroes? Explain.

_____

_____

_____

4. What might the dragon symbolize?

_____

_____

_____

5. **Making Connections**  Compare the dragon in "The Slaying" with the dragon in *Beowulf*. In what ways are the two monsters similar? different?

_____

_____

_____

## Literature Groups
With a group of classmates, discuss the techniques that Buzzati uses to make the story of the dragon plausible.

**Jane Cahill**

# Medusa's Story

## Before You Read
### Focus Question
If someone could foretell your future, would you want the person to describe what will happen to you or would you rather not know? Why?

### Background
If you believe that there are two sides to every story, then you will enjoy this retelling of the Medusa myth. "Medusa's Story" recounts the events in the Greek myth from the monster's point of view.

## Responding to the Reading

1. Why does Athena punish Medusa? In your opinion, does the punishment fit the crime? Explain.

2. How does Medusa feel about her impending death? Why?

3. How might Medusa answer the **Focus Question?** How can you tell?

4. Does Medusa arouse your sympathy? Explain why or why not.

5. **Making Connections** Describe the role of fate in *Beowulf* and in "Medusa's Story." How are Beowulf's and Medusa's responses to fate different?

### Listening and Speaking
Use library resources or the Internet to find a copy of the Greek myth on which "Medusa's Story" is based. Compare and contrast the portrayal of Medusa in the two works. Then share your findings in a brief oral report to your class.

**edited by Minnie Postma**

# The Woman with the Big Thumbnail

from
*Tales of the Basotho*

## Before You Read

### Focus Question
Many folktales tell about monsters. What do the monsters in folktales have in common?

### Background
Virtually all cultures have legends about man-eating monsters. This African folktale describes a legendary monster who has a unique way of killing people. The tale is an old one that has been handed down from one generation of Basotho to the next.

## Responding to the Reading

1. Why is Sechakatane so lonely?

_____

_____

_____

2. How does Sechakatane meet Bulane?

_____

_____

_____

3. How do Bulane and his men manage to kill Machakatane?

_____

_____

_____

4. What evidence is there in the story that the tale has been conveyed orally from generation to generation?

_____

_____

_____

5. **Making Connections**  What similarities do you see in "The Woman with the Big Thumbnail" and *Beowulf?*

## Performing
Practice reading "The Woman with the Big Thumbnail" aloud. Pay attention to the natural rhythms of speech it captures and vary the rate and pitch of your voice to express the varying tones of the story. Then read the story aloud to your class.