

## Beowulf Character Analysis

Beowulf exemplifies the traits of the perfect hero. The poem explores his heroism in two separate phases—youth and age—and through three separate and increasingly difficult conflicts—with Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon. Although we can view these three encounters as expressions of the heroic code, there is perhaps a clearer division between Beowulf's youthful heroism as an unfettered warrior and his mature heroism as a reliable king. These two phases of his life, separated by fifty years, correspond to two different models of virtue, and much of the moral reflection in the story centers on differentiating these two models and on showing how Beowulf makes the transition from one to the other.

In his youth, Beowulf is a great warrior, characterized predominantly by his feats of strength and courage, including his fabled swimming match against Breca. He also perfectly embodies the manners and values dictated by the Germanic heroic code, including loyalty, courtesy, and pride. His defeat of Grendel and Grendel's mother validates his reputation for bravery and establishes him fully as a hero. In first part of the poem, Beowulf matures little, as he possesses heroic qualities in abundance from the start. Having purged Denmark of its plagues and established himself as a hero, however, he is ready to enter into a new phase of his life. Hrothgar, who becomes a mentor and father figure to the young warrior, begins to deliver advice about how to act as a wise ruler. Though Beowulf does not become king for many years, his exemplary career as a warrior has served in part to prepare him for his ascension to the throne.

The second part of the story, set in Geatland, skips over the middle of Beowulf's career and focuses on the very end of his life. Through a series of retrospectives, however, we recover much of what happens during this gap and therefore are able to see how Beowulf comports himself as both a warrior and a king. The period following Hygelac's death is an important transitional moment for Beowulf. Instead of rushing for the throne himself, as Hrothulf does in Denmark, he supports Hygelac's son, the rightful heir. With this gesture of loyalty and respect for the throne, he proves himself worthy of kingship.

In the final episode—the encounter with the dragon—the poet reflects further on how the responsibilities of a king, who must act for the good of the people and not just for his own glory, differ from those of the heroic warrior. In light of these meditations, Beowulf's moral status becomes somewhat ambiguous at the poem's end. Though he is deservedly celebrated as a great hero and leader, his last courageous fight is also somewhat rash. The poem suggests that, by sacrificing himself, Beowulf unnecessarily leaves his people without a king, exposing them to danger from other tribes. To understand Beowulf's death strictly as a personal failure, however, is to neglect the overwhelming emphasis given to fate in this last portion of the poem. The conflict with the dragon has an aura of inevitability about it. Rather than a conscious choice, the battle can also be interpreted as a matter in which Beowulf has very little choice or free will at all. Additionally, it is hard to blame him for acting according to the dictates of his warrior culture.