

Beowulf

Crack...a fallen branch snapped under Beowulf's heavy foot. He froze instinctively, the silent drumbeat of his heart the only movement. When he was sure that he hadn't been exposed, he let out a heavy breath and grumbled to himself. He'd slain monsters before, that wasn't what was scaring him. The legend of Grendel was far worse than anything he'd encountered, though. Behind him, the sound of singing and feasting filtered through the wooden walls of Herot. The great hall was the home of Beowulf's good friend King Hrothgar.

Deep in his heart, the mighty warrior knew he didn't have a choice but to stay out in the cold. He'd made a solemn promise to the king that he would defeat the mighty beast that had been terrorising the king's lands. That was the plan tonight. Beowulf knew that the monster would attack and he wanted to be there to fight him when he did.

Suddenly, a deep and mournful cry swirled through the night sky. Beowulf shivered. Instinctively, he reached for his trusted sword before remembering that he'd left it back in the great hall. He'd argued that the only noble choice was to match the monster unarmed. Partly, he'd made the promise out of honour but equally, it was out of sheer devilment after the devious thane Unferth had questioned his bravery. He was beginning to regret his decision.

The howl continued for such a long time that Beowulf began to wonder what creature could possess such big lungs. Eventually, it died down, and silence once again snatched the night in its grasp. At least he knew where the monster lay now, and Beowulf slunk deeper into the shadows to wait for his prey. Once again, the deathly silence was broken by a scream; this time of a smaller animal and cut off mid-shriek.

Beowulf stood as still as he could until the shadows darkened, and chilled air filled his nostrils. He knew the ogre was close. Grunts and groans of something substantial moved up ahead. Again, he paused and waited. This time, a pair of blood-shot eyes pierced the black velvet a hundred yards in front of him.

“Hello, Grendel.” Beowulf stepped forward into the weak and flickering light of the reed torches on the front of the hall and tried to make his voice sound as brave and confident as he could. “I have heard that your scorn of men is so great that you need no weapon and fear none. Therefore, I am here unarmed to bring an end to your reign of terror.”

For a second, Grendel didn’t answer. When he did, it was nothing more than a short grunt. A cloud shifted in the sky, allowing the moonlight to break through and cast a tunnel of light onto the ogre. Beowulf held his tongue. The monster stood a dozen feet tall and was as broad as an ox. Scales and open sores that oozed thick green blood covered his skin. Sharp teeth thrust out of his mouth at odd angles, and his nose had long ago been flattened against his face. Many brave men had tried to defeat Grendel in the past, but none had succeeded. They’d left their mark, though, and his body told the tale of every battle.

Sensing an attack, Beowulf clenched his fists. He’d have one chance to overwhelm the ogre. He had to be ready. He leaned back on his heels, his bare feet sinking into the mud, and took a deep breath. Grendel lunged forward and covered the distance between them in one step. Beowulf leapt...

VOCABULARY

1. Can you research what a “thane” was?
2. Explain what “Silence snatched the night in its grasp” means.
3. What does “held his tongue” mean?
4. Write the definition for “mournful”.

VIPERS QUESTIONS

- I** How does Beowulf feel in the first paragraph? How do you know?
- E** Explain how you know that this is a myth or legend.
- R** What is the weather like?
- P** What happened after Beowulf leapt?
- S** Retell the story from the point of view of Grendel.

Answers:

1. A local royal official, normally from Scotland
2. The night fell quiet or similar explanation
3. Stayed quiet
4. Feeling or inducing sadness or grief

I: Scared and worried

E: It contains beasts such as ogres but some elements of real history

R: Cold

P: Any suitable prediction