



M C D X F S G

TEACHER'S GUIDE



Beowulf

A New Translation

Accelerated
Reader

BY
MARIA DAHVANA HEADLEY

"An iconic work of early English literature
comes in for up-to-the-minute treatment . . .
Her version is altogether brilliant."
—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)



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TO THE TEACHER



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MARIA DAHVANA HEADLEY's *Beowulf* is a translation that transcends, making the ancient story of kings, warriors, alliances, betrayal, men, and monsters feel immediate and relevant. This *Beowulf* "is not a quiet poem. It's a dazzling, furious, funny, vicious, desperate, hungry, beautiful, mutinous, maudlin, supernatural, rapturous shout," as she writes in her Introduction. At a glance, *Beowulf* is a heroic story about a warrior and the three defining battles of his life. A closer look reveals a complex examination of power and privilege, gender, fate, faith, responsibility, and self-determination.

“Electrifying . . . Headley’s version is more of a rewriting than a true translation, re-envisioning the poem for the modern reader rather than transmitting it line for line. It is brash and belligerent, lunatic and invigorating, with passages of sublime poetry punctuated by obscenities and social-media shorthand . . . But the overall effect is as if Headley, like the warrior queen she admired as a child, were storming the dusty halls of the library, upending the crowded shelf of *Beowulf* translations to make room for something completely new.”

—RUTH FRANKLIN, *The New Yorker*

“*Beowulf* is an ancient tale of men battling monsters, but Headley has made it wholly modern, with language as piercing and relevant as Kendrick Lamar’s Pulitzer Prize-winning album *DAMN*. With scintillating inversions and her use of *au courant* idiom—the poem begins with the word ‘Bro!’ and Queen Wealhtheow is ‘hashtag: blessed’—Headley asks one to consider not only present conflicts in light of those of the past, but also the line between human and inhuman, power and powerlessness, and the very nature of moral transformation, the ‘suspicion that at any moment a person might shift from hero into howling wretch.’ The women of *Beowulf* have often been sidelined. Not so here.”

—DANIELLE TRUSSONI, *The New York Times Book Review*

“The first thing I need to tell you is that you have to read it now. No, I don’t care if you’ve read *Beowulf* (the original) before. No, I don’t care if you loved it/hated it, if it traumatized you, if it ruined and/or energized the English language for you, or ruined you for translations or whatever. I don’t care what you think of when you think of *Beowulf* in any of its hundreds of other translations because this—*this*—version, Headley’s version, is an entirely different thing. It is its own thing . . . Headley has made it modern, not in form or style or content, but in temperament . . . Headley’s *Beowulf* is a big release—discussed, debated, talked about (as it should be) because it has everything: Love, sex, murder, magic, dungeons, dragons, giants, monsters. It spills blood by the bucket and gore by the gallon, makes heroes, slays villains and serves as an instruction manual for toxic masculinity, circa 700 AD . . . That’s what *Beowulf* *always* was. An epic poem made to be shouted over the howls of mead-drunk Spear-Danes as they toast the fallen and lovingly punch each other to sleep. It is thousand-year-old slam poetry, *Hamilton* for the Geats and Skyldings—full of blood and honor, inside jokes and historical digressions . . . So Headley’s version (translation? transcription?) is just as real and twice as vital right now as any other. It sings straight through, the alliteration and temper of it invigorating (as it should be) and roaring (as it should be), like *Beowulf*, introducing himself to Hrothgar . . . It *rolls*. It demands to be spoken, to be shouted and spat. To be taught as the thing that it is—the Marvel movie of its time . . . I always liked *Beowulf* a little for what it was: history, foundational myth, epic poem of swords and dragons, source material for paintings

on the sides of vans. But Maria Headley’s *Beowulf* I love for exactly what it is: a psychotic song of gold and blood, stylish as hell, nasty and brutish and funny all at once, mad and bad and sad and *alive* now in a way that these words simply haven’t been for more than a thousand years.”

—JASON SHEEHAN, NPR

PREPARING TO READ

This guide is divided into two sections. The first contains guided questions to prompt discussion and reflection as you read. The second contains writing prompts and topics for further research.

To make the guided reading questions easier to navigate, the poem has been divided into four sections:

Section One: Lines 1-605—Beowulf’s arrival in Heorot

Section Two: Lines 606-1241—Beowulf’s battle with Grendel

Section Three: Lines 1241-2210—Beowulf’s battle with Grendel’s mother

Section Four: Lines 2211-3182—Beowulf’s battle with the dragon

GUIDED READING QUESTIONS

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.A](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.9](#)

SECTION ONE: LINES 1-605 — BEOWULF’S ARRIVAL IN HEOROT

1. Explain the context of the observation, “Privilege is the way men prime power” (24). What does this suggest about who has access to power and who does not?
2. What does the text’s description of the burial of Scyld (lines 26-51) reveal about wealth and power?
3. What do lines 60-64 suggest about cultural attitudes towards women?
4. What do lines 85-125 of Headley’s translation suggest about Grendel’s motivation for hunting Hrothgar’s men? Do you find Grendel to be sympathetic? Explain your answer.
5. Explain the allusion to Cain and Abel found in lines 106-114. How does this allusion connect to the idea that Grendel has been “spurned by God” (line 169)?

6. The narrator refers to Grendel's nightly slaughter as a "blood feud" (line 149). In a historical context, what is a blood feud?
7. Heorot is described as "a place real men could be rebirthed" (line 311). What does this suggest about manhood?
8. Beowulf identifies himself in lines 406-454. What does the way he describes himself reveal about him?
9. How does Hrothgar react to news of Beowulf's arrival (lines 370-398)? What does his reaction suggest about the importance of alliances?
10. Who is Unferth? Why is there rivalry/jealousy between Beowulf and Unferth? How does Beowulf respond to Unferth's attempt to insult him? (see lines 504-605)

SECTION TWO: LINES 606-1241— BEOWULF'S BATTLE WITH GRENDEL

1. Describe Wealhtheow's appearance. What role does she play in the hall? Explain why the phrase "Hashtag: blessed" is used to describe her (line 623).
2. Why do you think Beowulf chooses to forego weapons and fight Grendel hand-to-hand?
3. In line 731, Headley writes about Grendel's *wyrd*, choosing to use an archaic term rather than the more familiar fate. Discuss the etymology and connotations of *wyrd*. Why use it here when the word fate was used for Beowulf?
4. While describing the fight between Beowulf and Grendel, the narrator comments, "though from what I've heard," thus reminding the reader or listener that this is a tale that has been and is being passed down (line 773). Why is this context important to note?
5. What do you learn about why previous warriors were unable to defeat Grendel in lines 801-3?
6. Why do you think the poet includes the "compare/contrast" of the story of Sigemund in his poem "The Tale of Beowulf"? (lines 875-915). Is there a moral to the tale of Sigemund?
7. What does Hrothgar offer Beowulf as a reward for killing Grendel? How does this section relate to the earlier observation: "Privilege is the way men prime power."

8. A poet entertains the court with the tale of Finn and his sons, yet the tale he tells begins from the perspective of Finn's wife, Hildeburh (lines 1071-1082). What does this glimpse into a woman's experience of a battle reveal?
9. What purpose does the story of Finn serve in the narrative? Is there a moral to this story?
10. What appeal does Wealhtheow make to Hrothgar in lines 1170-1202? What does she ask Beowulf to do?

SECTION THREE: LINES 1242-2210 — BEOWULF'S BATTLE WITH GRENDEL'S MOTHER

1. How does the text describe Grendel's mother? Compare and contrast her response to Grendel's death with the depiction of Hildeburh's grief in the previous section.
2. The men consider Grendel's mother's act of revenge "unjust, a bad bargain" (line 1304). Are her actions justified? How do you think she would say if she had a voice in the narrative?
3. Why does Hrothgar blame Beowulf for Æschere's murder?
4. Explain the significance of the imagery in lines 1431-1440.
5. What requests does Beowulf make before he enters the mere to fight Grendel's mother? What do these requests reveal about his values?
6. How is Beowulf able to defeat Grendel's mother?
7. When Beowulf tells the story of how he defeated Grendel's mother, what does he emphasize?
8. Paraphrase Hrothgar's wisdom and advice to Beowulf (lines 1724-68).
9. Explain what lines 1807-1870 reveal about diplomacy and alliance.
10. Why would Hrothgar have a premonition that keeping Beowulf in Denmark "could only end in flame" (line 1778)? Do you think he was wise to send Beowulf away?
11. What does the contrast between the queens Hygd and Modthryth reveal about a woman's "duty"?
12. Critically examine what the narrator says about Modthryth in lines 1932-62. How do you think Modthryth would tell her own story if she had a voice in the narrative?

13. What do lines 1987-98 reveal about the relationship between Hygelac and Beowulf?
14. Why is Beowulf skeptical of Hrothgar's decision to marry his daughter Freawaru to Ingeld? Do you think his skepticism is justified?
15. When Beowulf recounts his victories in Heorot, what does he emphasize? What does this suggest about his priorities?
16. What does the interaction between king Hygelac and Beowulf (found in lines 2069-2199) suggest about power and privilege?

SECTION FOUR: LINES 2211-3182— BEOWULF'S BATTLE WITH THE DRAGON

1. Lines 2231-2268 provide the backstory of how the dragon's treasure ended up in the cavern. What do these lines suggest about the themes of memory, glory, and futility?
2. What awakens the dragon? Is she justified to seek vengeance?
3. What do lines 2327-32 reveal about Beowulf's attitude towards God. Why do you think the narrator believes this is important to include in the poem?
4. While lines 2206-9 reveal that Beowulf eventually becomes the king of Geatland, the details of the deaths of Hygelac and Heardred are given later (lines 2350-90). Explain how these details develop Beowulf's character. Why does the narrator conclude this section with the refrain, "That was a good king" (line 2390)?
5. What causes Beowulf to underestimate the dragon?
6. Examine the epic simile in lines 2443-61. What causes Beowulf to meditate on the sorrow of losing a son? How is Beowulf in his old age different from the young warrior who defeated Grendel and Grendel's mother?
7. Why does Wiglaf decide to come to Beowulf's aid? Why are the other men reluctant to join him?
8. What moral is the story of Wiglaf's willingness to fight alongside Beowulf meant to emphasize to the reader or audience?
9. What do Beowulf's dying words (lines 2728-51 and 2792-2816) reveal about his values?
10. What message does the rider bring the people when announcing Beowulf's death in lines 2900-3028?

11. What happens to the dragon's hoard of treasure? What lesson are we meant to take away from this turn of events?
12. Contrast the "grieving the way men do" at Beowulf's funeral with the Geatish woman's dirge found in lines 3148-53.
13. How would you describe the narrator's tone in the last lines of Beowulf?

WRITING PROMPTS AND RESEARCH TOPICS

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.7](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.9](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.9](#)

ESSAY PROMPTS

Consider the following quotes and corresponding essay prompts from Maria Dahvana Headley's Introduction to *Beowulf*:

1. "*Beowulf bears the distinction of appearing to be basic—one man, three battles, lots of gold—while actually being an intricate treatise on morality, masculinity, flexibility, and failure.*" What does the poem say about the way two or more of these topics intersect? For example, how is flexibility (or a lack thereof) connected to failure? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2](#)
2. "*The phrase 'That was a good king' recurs throughout the poem, because the poem is fundamentally concerned with how to get and keep the title 'Good.'*" How does the poem define being good? Is there a different standard for goodness based on a character's social class or gender? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1](#)
3. "*The poem is, after all, a poem about willfully blinkered privilege, about the shock and horror of experiencing discomfort when one feels entitled to luxury.*" Examine the poem's attitude towards privilege. Does it merely reinforce systems of power and privilege, or does it contain subversive elements? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1](#)
4. "*There are noble characters in Beowulf, but the poem itself is not noble. There is elevated language in Beowulf, but the poem feels populist.*" What does the poem imply about social hierarchy? What does Headley mean when she says the poem "feels" populist? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1](#)
5. "*Beowulf is not a quiet poem. It's a dazzling, furious, funny, vicious, desperate, hungry, beautiful, mutinous, maudlin, supernatural, rapturous shout.*"

Choose one of the adjectives that Headley uses to describe *Beowulf* and use textual evidence to illustrate this aspect of the poem. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1](#)

ADDITIONAL WRITING PROMPTS AND RESEARCH TOPICS

1. The first line of the poem is, “Bro! Tell me we still know how to speak of kings!”. Ultimately, how does *Beowulf* speak of kings? In modern culture, do we still talk about some men in this way? If so, why have these ideas endured? If not, what happened? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.9](#)
2. When Beowulf arrives at Heorot, King Hrothgar invites him to, “Take your place in the tale of / my heroes and their hopes” (lines 488-9). Later in the poem, he advises Beowulf: “Keep yourself on even keel, aiming / your ambition at eternity, instead of the every day” (lines 1759-60). Examine how the poem develops the themes of memory and glory. Ultimately, what is Beowulf’s place in the tale of heroes and their hopes? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2](#)
3. After the death of Grendel, the narrator comments: “Death, no matter our desires, can’t be distracted” (lines 1002-3). How would you describe the meta-physical framework of the text? In other words, how does *Beowulf* deal with questions of mortality and life after death?
4. Examine the movement of objects through narrative, particularly the way the text personifies swords and weapons, in some cases even providing them with names and a lineage. Considering that Beowulf defeats both Grendel and Grendel’s mother without weapons, why does the poet place this emphasis on weapons? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5](#)
5. Rings are an essential element in the narrative. Examine the symbolism and cultural significance of rings in *Beowulf*. How are terms like ring-lord, ring-giver, ring-gift connected to power and privilege? How are rings used to grant access to or exclude others from power? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4](#)
6. Influential *Beowulf* scholar Frederick Klaeber noted the text’s structure by characterizing its digressions and nonlinear structure as a plot that lacks “steady advance.” Examine the text’s use of digression. What purpose do these digressions serve? How do they contribute to the theme of the transience of power? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5.](#)
7. Should *Beowulf* be categorized as an epic poem? Consider the poem’s structure, content, and themes as you craft your response. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5](#)
8. While it is possible to examine *Beowulf* through a historical lens rather than as a work of poetry, in a 1936 lecture, author J.R.R. Tolkien argued that the text is worthy of being considered for its poetic value: “Beowulf is in fact so

interesting as poetry, in places poetry so powerful, that this quite overshadows the historical content, and is largely independent even of the most important facts (such as the date and identity of Hygelac) that research has discovered” (Tolkien, “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics”). Analyze the text as a work of poetry, choosing one or more poetic elements to analyze in detail. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.5](#)

9. Consider *Beowulf* as a historical document and research the historical background of the kingdoms and kings referenced in the epic. How much of the narrative is based on historical fact? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.7](#)
10. In the introduction, Headley writes that, at a glance, *Beowulf* “appears to be a hero story.” What does a more in-depth examination of the text reveal? Is it a monomyth (hero’s journey), or something else? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5](#)
11. Toni Morrison’s essay, “Grendel and His Mother,” calls into question race issues through the othering of Grendel and Grendel’s mother. Critically examine the way the text deals with these characters. Is there any racial subtext in the way that these characters are described? Who labels them as “monsters”? Do they deserve this label? (The article “[The Question of Race in Beowulf](#)” on JSTOR Daily may be a helpful resource). [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1](#)
12. The fluidity of word meanings in Old English has resulted in descriptions of Grendel’s mother being interpreted by translators in different ways. Headley argues that, based on the original text, Grendel’s mother could be intended to be viewed as either a monster or warrior. While many male translators have chosen to describe her as a supernatural monster, Headley chose to describe her as a “warrior-woman,” “outlaw,” and “reclusive night-queen”. Analyze the treatment of Grendel’s mother in this translation. How does viewing Grendel’s mother as a human rival rather than a supernatural monster change the narrative? How does Headley’s decision to emphasize the humanity of Grendel and his mother encourage a more complex reading of the poem? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6](#)
13. A striking feature of this translation is Headley’s inspired choice to translate the Old English word *hwæt*, which has previously been translated with words like “Ho,” “So,” or “Listen,” as “Bro”. In her commentary, she explains that one reason for her choice is to keep the reader thinking of “the ways that men can afford (or deny) one another power and safety by using coded language, and erase women from power structures by speaking collegially only to other men.” Consider the poem from this vantage point: as a poem with a distinctly male speaker intended for an exclusively male audience. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6](#)

14. What is the poem’s message about community vs. individualism? What should we make of what Headley calls the “wild solitude” of Beowulf, Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and the dragon? Why do you think Beowulf chooses not to fulfill his duty of marrying and providing heirs? How should we view his decision? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2](#)
15. Headley writes that the decision to use the term “Bro” in her translation was made in part to satirize “a certain form of inflated, overconfident, aggressive male behavior.” How does the poem deal with and define masculinity? Is the poem’s view still relevant, or should it be considered “toxic masculinity”? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6](#)
16. When Hrothgar encounters Beowulf, the king acknowledges him based on prior knowledge of Beowulf’s father, but comments: “His mother, I forget who she is—is she still alive?” (line 941). While much of the poem is focused on fathers and sons, what is the poem’s attitude towards wives and mothers? What role are women given in the narrative? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1](#)
17. In her introduction, Headley states, “It is both pleasurable and desirable to read more than one translation of this poem, because when it comes to *Beowulf*, there is no sacred clarity.” Compare a significant passage from Headley’s translation with another translation. What does each translation emphasize? How do the translator’s choices develop theme and/or character? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.7](#)
18. Examine the poem’s use of alliteration by reading aloud or listening to sections being read aloud. How does the poet’s use of alliteration contribute to your experience and understanding of the poem? (Note: There is a video of Headley’s text being read aloud by a range of celebrity readers that is accessible on Vimeo (<https://tinyurl.com/ycpahqwu>)). [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4](#)
19. Analyze Headley’s artistic choice to incorporate modern phrasing, slang, and idioms alongside more traditional language. As an example, Beowulf is described as being “hard-core in his helmet” (line 340). Choose some examples of the use of contemporary language that you find particularly effective and analyze how modern phrases contribute to the poem’s meaning. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4](#)
20. In keeping with the stylistic and structural elements of Old English poetry, Headley intentionally uses a form of figurative language that is made of compound words known as *kennings* in her translation. Analyze the meaning of some of these kennings by examining them in context. How does this use of figurative language deepen meaning? A partial list of kennings is provided for reference: “whale-road” (line 9) “woe-walker” (line 101) “shadow-stalked” (line 111) “mead-medicated”(line 118) “swan-road”(line

198) “word-hoard”(line 257) “slaughter-slingers”(line 398) “fight-friend”(line 457) “war grace” (line 607) “home-holder”(line 616) “strife-soother” (line 665) “Almighty-abrogate” (line 787) “corpse-portion”(line 839) “story-glory”(line 884) “hoard-holder”(line 921) “hall-harvesting” (line 931) “bounty-bringer”(line 1013) “battle-dowry”(line 1030) “greed-grace”(line 1101) “flame-ravens”(line 1122) “blood-balm”(line 1152) “ghost-throned” (line 2326) “killer-kin”(line 2479) “ring-lord”(line 2504) “bone-vault”(line 2507) “serpent-raider”(line 2527) “grit-god”(line 2540) “battle-betrayals”(line 2543) “hoard-lair”(line 2549) “God-snubbed”(line 2573) “Fate-forsaken” (line 2573) “false-scaled”(line 2672) “word-vault”(line 2725) “brine-bedding”(line 3132)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4](#)

21. Modern adaptations and re-imaginings of *Beowulf* include *Grendel*, by John Gardner, *The Mere Wife* by Maria Dhavana Headley, and the *Beowulf* films of 1999 (Baker) and 2007 (Zemeckis). Compare one of these adaptations to the poem. How does it expand or complicate your understanding of *Beowulf*'s themes and characters? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.7](#)
22. In the introduction, Headley praises the way that the “democratization of information” brought about by the internet that has granted almost universal access to manuscripts and scholarship that was previously reserved for a select few with elite academic credentials. Research the significance of the Nowell Codex, which is viewable through the British Library (<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/beowulf>).
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.7](#)
23. *Beowulf* is set in a time when medieval culture that had recently been introduced to Christianity. Research the historical introduction of Christianity to the Anglo-Saxons. How important is religion in *Beowulf*? What role does God have in the narrative? Note for example the narrator’s comment: “You know how it goes: / God’s the final decider, and men only the / question-askers, students seeking solace” (lines 699-701). [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.7](#)

BEYOND THE BOOK

Consider the unabridged Audio Book edition, narrated by the translator, Maria Dahvana Headley, and JD Jackson.

Available on Vimeo is a video collection from a marathon reading of the new translation (beginning with the first passage in Old English) by twenty-five writers, actors, and artists, including Neil Gaiman, Alan Cumming, Sara Quinn, Anika Noni Rose, Miz Cracker, and Laurie Anderson. Have your students follow along to the spoken words, or assign them passages to interpret on their own. <https://vimeo.com/494648680>

FOR FURTHER READING

Maria Dahvana Headley, *The Mere Wife*
<https://us.macmillan.com/books/9781250214942>

John Gardner, *Grendel*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARIA DAHVANA HEADLEY is a #1 *New York Times* bestselling author and editor. Her books include the novels *The Mere Wife*, *Magonia*, *Aerie*, and *Queen of Kings*, and the memoir *The Year of Yes*. With Kat Howard, she is the author of *The End of the Sentence*, and with Neil Gaiman, she is the coeditor of *Unnatural Creatures*. Her stories have been short-listed for the Shirley Jackson, Nebula, and World Fantasy Awards, and her work has been supported by the MacDowell Colony and by Arte Studio Ginestrelle, where the first draft of *Beowulf* was written. She was raised with a wolf and a pack of sled dogs in the high desert of rural Idaho and now lives in Brooklyn, New York.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS TEACHER'S GUIDE

AMY JURSKIS is the author of numerous teaching guides, including *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot and *American Tapestry* by Rachel Swarns. She holds a BA in English from the University of Georgia and a MAT from Agnes Scott College. She currently serves as English Department Chair at Oxbridge Academy in Palm Beach, Florida.