

Beowulf

TRANSLATED BY SEAMUS HEANEY
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHARLES KEEPING

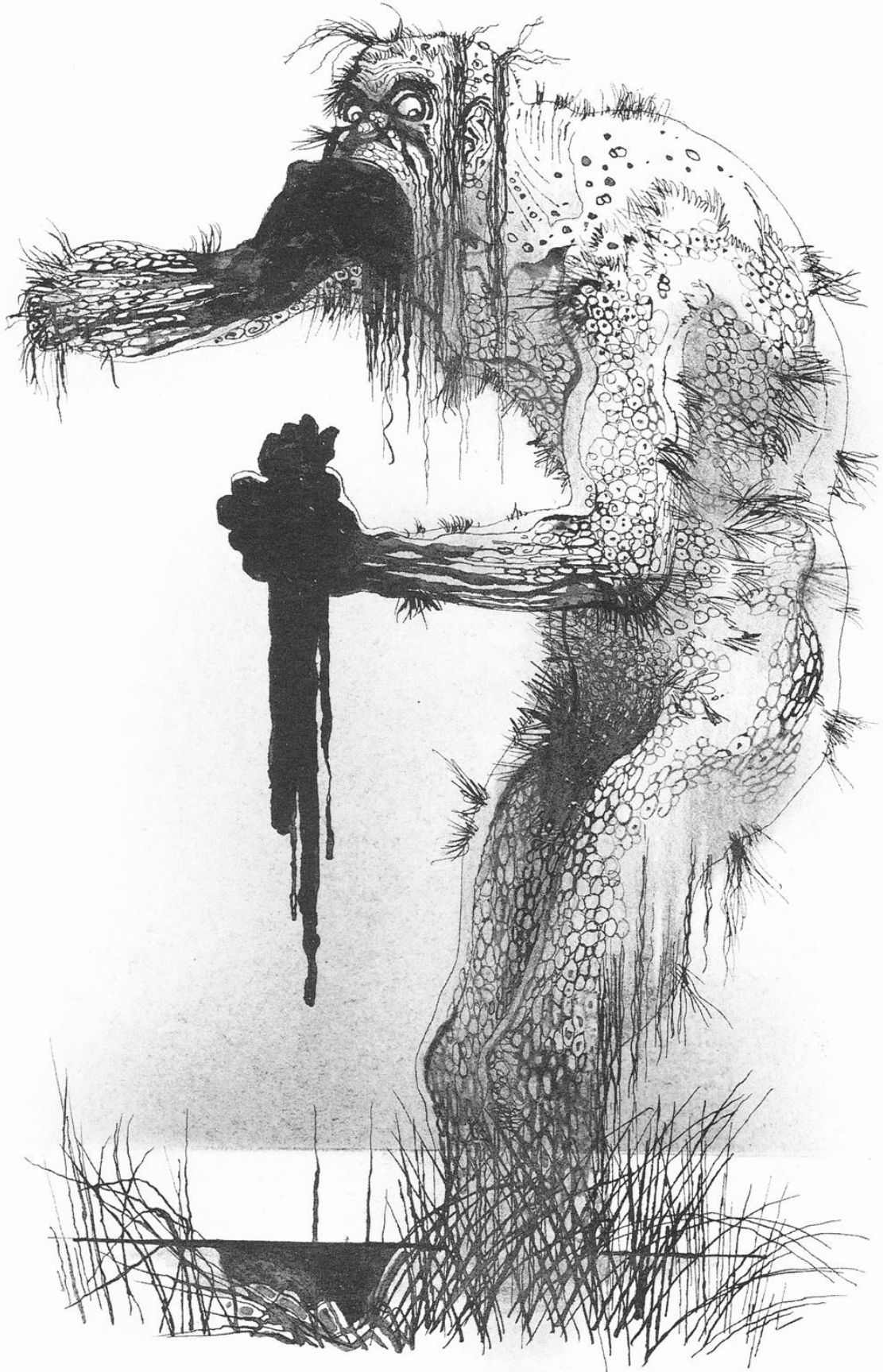


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Online Extras

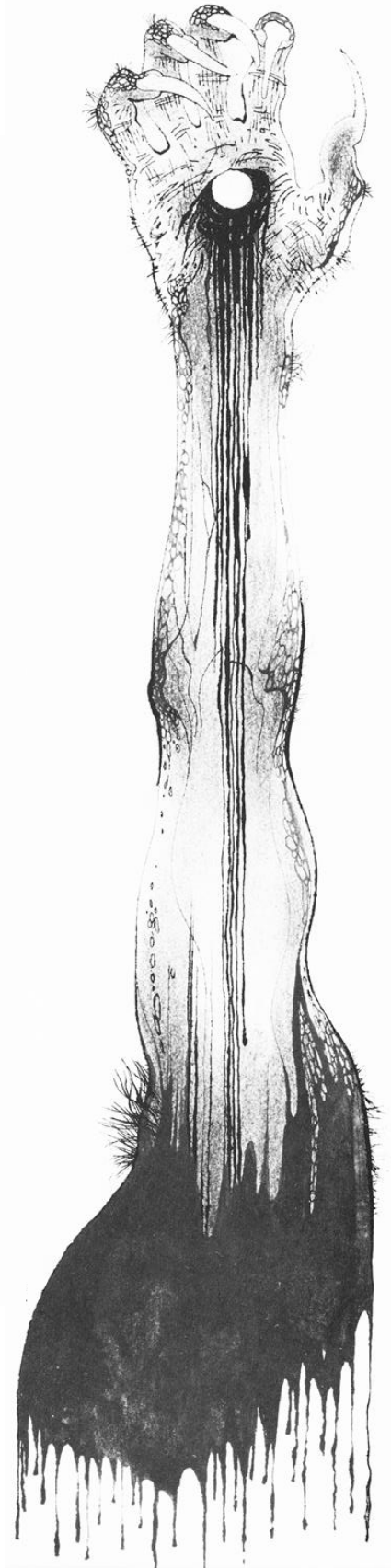
Beowulf (2000) translated and read by Seamus Heaney:

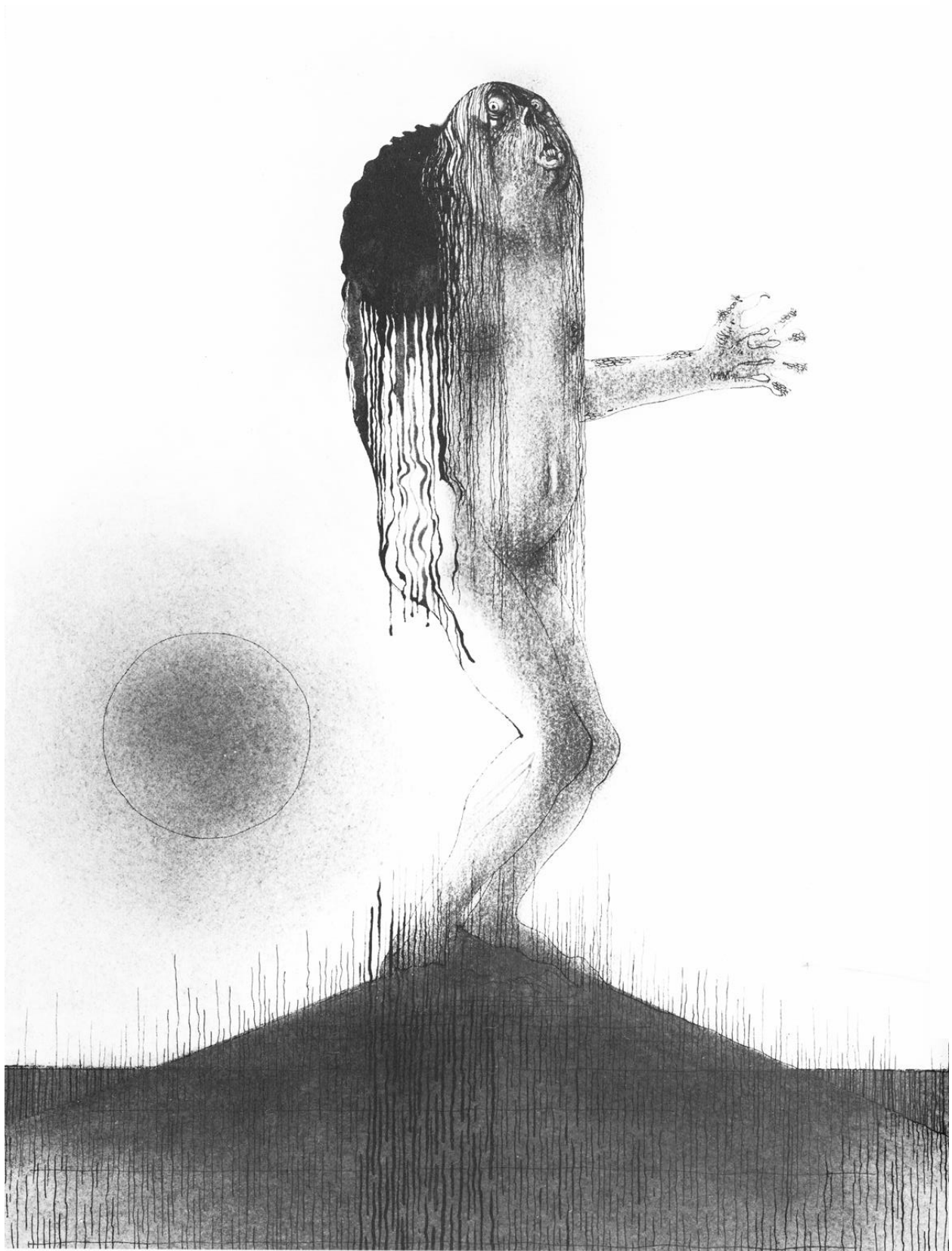
- Disc One: Lines 1-1491 on pages 3-103
- Disc Two: Lines 1492-3182 on pages 103-213

Animated Epics: Beowulf (1998) directed by Yuri Kulakov.

Beowulf (2007) directed by Robert Zemeckis.

For these resources and others, including electronic copies of this handout and accompanying PowerPoint presentation, go to www.mr.querino.com.





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ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Who was the original author of *Beowulf*? Why is *Beowulf's* authorship significant?

Who is Seamus Heaney? How is his *Beowulf* both a translation of one of the oldest English poems and a personal response to the violence of our own century?

What is an epic?

How are the values of the Anglo-Saxon period (450-1066) expressed within *Beowulf*?

How do works like the Bible and *Beowulf* determine our definitions of the nature of good and evil?

Beowulf SAT Vocabulary

These words which appear in Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* (2000) have been identified as words or derivatives of words that have appeared on past SAT and ACT exams. They are listed here in order of their appearance in the poem.

1. Campaign - a connected series of military operations forming a distinct phase of a war.
2. Flourish - to be prosperous: increase in wealth, honor, comfort, happiness, or whatever is desirable.
3. Prudent - marked by wisdom or judiciousness.
4. Revere - to regard with reverence or profound respect and affection.
5. Reneg - to break one's word: go back on a promise.
6. Malignant - evil in nature or influence or effect.
7. Affliction - a state of pain, distress, or grief.
8. Allegiance - devotion or loyalty especially to a person, group, or cause entitled to obedience or service and respect.
9. Undaunted - courageous with an undiminished resolution or boldness.
10. Formidable - exciting fear, dread, or apprehension.
11. Recompense - to give compensation to.
12. Plight - bad state or condition.
13. Renounce - to announce one's abandonment of the ownership of: give up, abandon, or resign usually formally.
14. Gorge - to eat greedily.
15. Lament - to express sorrow for.
16. Vanity - exaggerated self-love: inflated pride in oneself or in one's appearance, attainments, performance, possessions, or successes: hunger for praise or admiration.
17. Pinion - to disable or restrain by binding the arms usually to the body.
18. Keen - having a fine edge or point: affecting one as if by cutting.
19. Atrocity - a savagely brutal or cruel deed.
20. Bane - one that perversely or persistently spoils or thwarts.
21. Baleful - marked by a deadly, malign, or pernicious influence or effect.
22. Maul - wound by scratching or tearing.
23. Sinew - a piece of tough fibrous tissue uniting muscle to bone or bone to bone; a tendon or ligament.
24. Ignominious - marked by, full of, or characterized by disgrace or shame.

25. Unscathed - wholly unharmed: not injured.
26. Infringement - an encroachment or trespass on a right or privilege.
27. Provocation - action or speech that makes someone annoyed or angry, especially deliberately.
28. Insinuate - to introduce (as an idea or point of view) stealthily, slyly, or artfully: convey in a subtle, indirect, or covert way.
29. Effulgent - marked by or as if by brightly shining light: impressive in resplendence: extremely radiant.
30. Bequeath - to give or leave by will: give by formal declaration so that the thing given passes into ownership of the recipient after the death of the donor.



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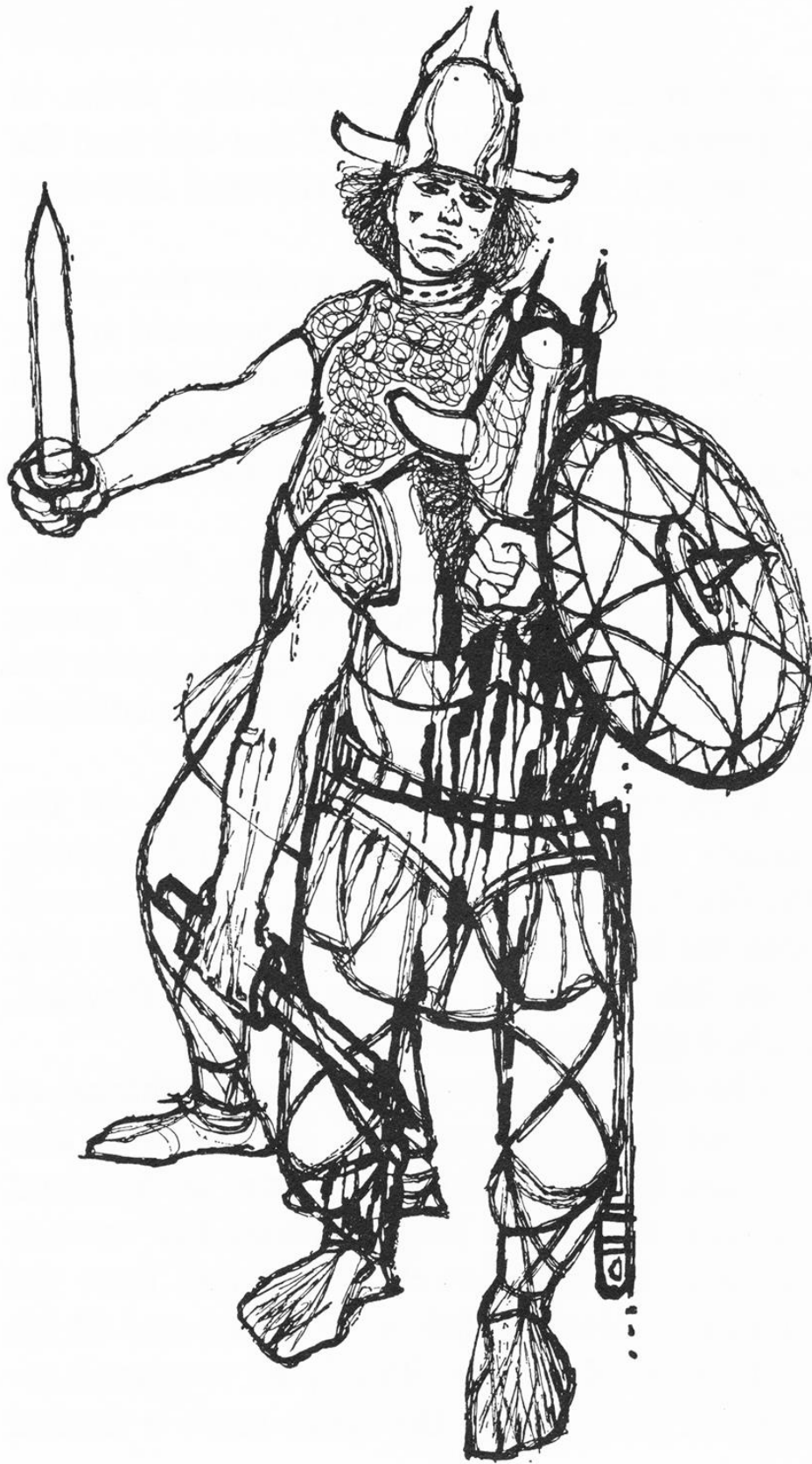
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BEOWULF: THE MONSTERS AND THE CRITICS

On 25 November 1936, Tolkien delivered “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*” to the British Academy, and it was published the next year in the Academy’s proceedings. It has been hailed ever since as the most important essay in the history of *Beowulf* scholarship. The following parable on the way critics treated *Beowulf* is an excerpt from the lecture: “A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man’s distant forefathers had obtained their building material. Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: ‘This tower is most interesting.’ But they also said (after pushing it over): ‘What a muddle it is in!’ And even the man’s descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: ‘He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did not he restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion.’ But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea.”

According to Tolkien, why weren’t so many literary critics able to enjoy *Beowulf*? How might this apply to Tolkien’s modern epic of Middle-earth?

What do you think Tolkien saw from the top of this tower? Could “building a tower” or “looking upon the sea” be metaphorical and if so, for what?



A Descendant of Cain



The swamp monster, Grendel, in *Beowulf* is said to be a descendant of Cain from the Bible. Read the story of Cain and Abel from Genesis below and then answer the questions about Grendel which follow:

Genesis 4.1-16¹

Cain and Abel

4.1 And Adam knew Eve his wife; who conceived and brought forth Cain, saying: I have gotten a man through God.

4.2 And again she brought forth his brother Abel. And Abel was a shepherd, and Cain a husbandman (farmer).

4.3 And it came to pass after many days, that Cain offered, of the fruits of the earth, gifts to the Lord.

4.4 Abel also offered of the firstlings of his flock, and of

their fat: and the Lord had respect to Abel, and to his offerings.

4.5 But to Cain and his offerings he had no respect: and Cain was exceeding angry, and his countenance fell.

4.6 And the Lord said to him: Why art thou angry? and why is thy countenance fallen?

4.7 If thou do well, shalt thou not receive? but if ill, shall not sin forthwith be present at the door? but the lust thereof shall be under thee, and thou shalt have dominion over it.

4.8 And Cain said to Abel his brother: Let us go forth abroad. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and slew him.

4.9 And the Lord said to Cain: Where is thy brother Abel? And he answered: I know not: am I my brother's keeper?

4.10 And he said to him: What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth to me from the earth.

4.11 Now, therefore, cursed shalt thou be upon the earth, which hath opened her mouth and received the blood of thy brother at thy hand.

4.12 When thou shalt till it, it shall not yield to thee its fruit: a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be upon the earth.

4.13 And Cain said to the Lord: My iniquity is greater than that I may deserve pardon.

4.14 Behold thou dost cast me out this day from the face of the earth, and from thy face I shall be hid, and I shall be a vagabond and a fugitive on the earth: every one, therefore, that findeth me, shall kill me.

¹ Given here in the "Douay-Rheims" English translation of the Latin Bible known to the medieval audience of *Beowulf*: *The Holy Bible Translated from the Latin Vulgate* (Baltimore: John Murphy, 1914).

4.15 And the Lord said to him: No, it shall not so be: but whosoever shall kill Cain, shall be punished sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, that whosoever found him should not kill him.

4.16 And Cain went out from the face of the Lord, and dwelt as a fugitive on the earth, at the east side of Eden.

Explain Grendel's nature as it is illustrated by the following circumstances:

a) His ancestry:

b) His isolation:

c) His motives for coming to Hrothgar's hall:

d) The part of nature with which he is associated:

The Finnsburg Episode

Beginning on line 1070, where Heaney's verse adopts a different rhythm, Hrothgar's poet recites a legendary story as part of the celebration following Beowulf's victory over Grendel. It has traditionally been called the Finnsburg Episode or the Finnsburg Fragment, though the *Beowulf* poet calls it *Freswæl*, the Frisian Slaughter. The narrative's oblique allusiveness makes sense only if one assumes that the audience was already familiar with the story.

The events concern a devastating skirmish between the followers of the Frisian king, Finn, and a Danish party led by Hnaef, who was in Frisia for peaceful purposes, perhaps by invitation. Hnaef had good reason to visit, because his sister Hildeburh was married to Finn. Ideally such a marriage would secure diplomatic ties between two tribes, perhaps to settle a feud but not always for that reason. Sometime during the Danes' visit, a party of Jutes in the service of Finn attack them in their guest-hall and kill Hnaef. At some point Hildeburh's son (not named) is also killed. After extensive fighting and mounting casualties a truce is called and, because winter is coming, terms are negotiated so that Hengest (now the leader of the Danes) is given a hall and his men are treated with the same privileges as Finn's. A funeral pyre is erected for Hnaef, and Hildeburh orders her Frisian son placed beside her Danish brother. When spring arrives, a sword is laid ceremoniously on Hengest's lap as a reminder of his duty for vengeance. Overcoming his reluctance to renew the bloodshed, Hengest capitulates and leads the Danes against the Frisians. They kill Finn, take Hildeburh, and ransack Finn's hall. Yet another, more descriptive name for the episode might be "Hildeburh's Grief," a perspective the *Beowulf* poet takes pains to emphasize.

In the end the feud stirred up by the Jutes cost her not only her brother and son, but also her husband Finn. Hildeburh bears the greatest grief of any, but the episode underscores the constant danger of violence erupting in an honor-bound warrior society, despite the most prudent efforts to suppress the imperative for retribution.



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KENNINGS ASSIGNMENT

What is a kenning? A *kenning* is an Icelandic word meaning ‘description.’ From Old Icelandic criticism of Norse alliterative verse it has been borrowed and used by us as a technical term for *those pictorial descriptive compounds or brief expressions which can be used in place of the normal plain word.* You could, of course, strike out a kenning for yourself, and all must at some time have been struck out by some poet; but the tradition of Old English verse-language contained a number of well-established kennings for such things as the sea, battle, warriors, and so on. They were part of its poetic diction. So, a kenning is a metaphorical phrase or compound word used instead of the name of a person or thing. For example, “whale-road” (line 10) is a kenning that means “ocean,” and “sky-plague” (line 2347) is a kenning that means “dragon.”

Find five kennings from anywhere in the reading (pages 3-213). Write down the kenning, the line number, and what it means:

Write down five of your own kennings to describe contemporary objects, places, and people; also write what your modern kennings mean:

Why do you think the poet included so many kennings in *Beowulf*? What do they add to the story?

