* The narrator tells us that a clan called the Spear-Danes, in "days gone by" (that's the past, to you) had some awesome heroic kings.
* The first of these hero-kings is Shield Sheafson, who is basically awesome because he could rampage and pillage with the best of them—both on the battlefield and in the mead hall, if you get our drift. He is an orphan, but he eventually becomes king and then subjugates other nearby clans, making them pay tribute to the Spear-Danes.
* Shield's son is Beow, a wise, prudent, valiant prince who sympathizes with the hardships his people have endured.
* Shield dies in the prime of his life and is buried at sea in a ship loaded with wealth and treasures, according to the custom of the Spear-Danes. It sails off and nobody knows what happens to it.
* Beow becomes king and rules long and well. He is succeeded by Halfdane, a warlord who has three sons, Heorogar, Hrothgar, and Halga, and one daughter. Halfdane's daughter isn't given a name in the poem, although we assume that she had one, but we do learn that she marries Onela, the king of the Swedes.
* Halfdane's son Hrothgar is fortunate in battle and gradually amasses the most followers and wealth of any of the princes, so he becomes king after his father.
* To consolidate his power, Hrothgar builds a grand mead-hall, Heorot Hall, which does dual duty as a throne room and a hangout for the powerful members of his "court." Okay, we say court, but it's really just a bunch of tough barbarians in grimy, blood-smeared armor sitting around a rough wooden table drinking mead and talking about battles.
* When Heorot Hall is finished, Hrothgar gives out treasures to his followers to celebrate and thank them for their help. The narrator knows, however, that the hall is doomed to burn down in the midst of a bloody battle. So much for suspense, right? But don't worry; it's still going to be totally awesome.
* A local demon named Grendel is disturbed by the presence of Heorot Hall; like your neighbors, he hates to hear everyone drinking and partying and listening to music. It's even worse because the bard is singing about God's creation of the world, which is something that drives demons crazy.
* Grendel, who is one of the monstrous descendants of the Biblical outcast Cain, has been hanging around the marshes in the area for a long time—like, since [Cain](http://www.shmoop.com/genesis/cain-abel.html).
* One night, Grendel attacks Heorot Hall in the dead of night, when everyone is in a sleepy, alcohol-induced stupor. Grendel kills thirty men and takes their corpses back to his lair. Now *that* guy knows how to throw a party.
* In the morning, everyone is shocked and horrified by the destruction that Grendel caused. King Hrothgar is humiliated and seems helpless.
* The next night, Grendel comes back and marauds some more. In fact, Grendel shows up almost every night, hunting down Danes and murdering them.
* Eventually, Heorot Hall is abandoned; everyone has been killed or fled. For twelve years, Grendel rules the hall at night.
* The story of Grendel's rampages, the suffering of the Spear-Danes, and the helplessness of King Hrothgar spreads throughout the world. People tell stories and write sad songs about it. Nothing can stop Grendel; he won't negotiate or even accept a ransom or bribe, and he kills everyone, young and old alike.
* (This is especially disturbing for a medieval European audience, because paying money to end feuds and wars was part of their code of behavior. Refusing to do so seems insane, because otherwise how would the killing ever stop?)
* So Grendel pretty much takes over Heorot Hall, although God keeps him from approaching Hrothgar's throne. (That kind of thing happens when you're the descendant of Cain, apparently.)
* Everyone wants to give King Hrothgar their two cents about how to get rid of Grendel. Some of them give advice about military strategy; others turn to idolatry and offer sacrifices to pagan gods.
* The narrator condemns their paganism and rejoices in the fact that he lives in a time where people know Christianity and can turn to "the Lord God, Head of the Heavens and High King of the World" (181-182) for help. (Confused about religion in Beowulf? Check out what we have to say about religion in the "Themes" section.)
* Despite all the good advice, Hrothgar and his followers can't defeat Grendel, and he keeps killing the Danes in the darkness of night.
* Across the water from the Danes in Geatland (today part of Sweden), the mightiest warrior on earth, a follower of King Hygelac, decides that he will travel to the Spear-Danes and help King Hrothgar defeat Grendel. He orders that a boat be made ready.
* Everyone knows better than to argue with this warrior or try to stop him. Instead, they help him get ready. They enlist fourteen other warriors to accompany him.
* Loading their ship with weapons, the mysterious hero and his followers set sail. After a day at sea, they come to the Danish coast, where they thank God for their easy passage.
* The Danish warrior on lookout duty rides down to the shore to find out who the new warriors are and whether they're on a mission of peace or of war. He issues a formal challenge to the Geats to explain who they are and why they've come, and he notices how noble and mighty the mysterious hero looks.
* The warrior explains that he is a Geat, a follower of King Hygelac, and the son of a noble and famous warlord named Ecgtheow. He explains that the Geats haven't come to fight the Danes, but to help fight the demonic enemy of the Danes.
* The lookout believes the warrior and allows him to pass; he even promises that he'll set a guard over the Geats' boat to keep it safe until they need to return home.
* Leaving their boat behind, the Geats, led by the Danish lookout that met them at the coast, march inland to Heorot Hall. When they arrive, they're dazzled by the golden majesty and obvious wealth of the hall. The lookout leaves them there and returns to his post.
* The Geats march up to the hall, resplendent in their shining mail-shirts and armor. When they arrive, they stack their shields and collect their spears together, and sink down on the benches, exhausted. Note: they're on benches, but they're not in Heorot Hall yet.
* Hrothgar's herald interrogates the Geats about where they've come from and what they're doing. He's impressed by their mighty appearance.
* The leader of the Geats announces his name—Beowulf—and his desire to see King Hrothgar. He's extremely polite and formal.
* Wulfgar, one of the Danes, agrees to take Beowulf's message to Hrothgar. Observing all the formalities, he goes over to Hrothgar and explains the arrival of the Geats to the king. Wulfgar advises Hrothgar to grant the Geats an audience, since they look respectable.
* King Hrothgar realizes that he knew Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, and had met Beowulf when he was a boy. Hrothgar agrees to give Beowulf an audience.
* Things stay formal: Wulfgar goes back to Beowulf and his men and announces that Hrothgar is willing to see them.
* Beowulf and a few of his most important companions enter Heorot; everyone else stays outside to keep watch over the weapons.
* Beowulf explains to Hrothgar why he has come, boasting about his own "awesome strength" (418) in the process.
* Beowulf formally declares that he's going to fight Grendel in single combat. He asks King Hrothgar for the "privilege" of "purifying" the hall.
* As if all this weren't enough, Beowulf announces that he's going to fight Grendel without weapons in hand-to-hand combat to the death. He even imagines what would happen if he lost: Grendel would carry his corpse back to his lair and feed on it. Gross.
* King Hrothgar responds by recalling how he met Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow. Ecgtheow had killed someone from another tribe and had to flee, so he came to Hrothgar's land. Hrothgar settled the feud by paying money to the family of the man who had been killed, and Ecgtheow swore his allegiance to Hrothgar. Basically, what this means is that Beowulf owes Hrothgar because Hrothgar helped his father.
* Hrothgar also describes how disturbed he is by Grendel's maniacal killing; he's seen many other heroes die after pledging to fight the demon.
* Now that the formalities are over, the party starts. Hrothgar hosts a feast for the visiting Geat warriors.
* One of Hrothgar's followers, Unferth, tries to spoil the party because he's jealous of all the attention Beowulf is getting. He asks if this is the same Beowulf who lost a swimming contest on the open sea with a man called Breca. If so, he says Beowulf will never defeat Grendel.
* Beowulf tells Unferth that he's got the story wrong. Beowulf has a different version: he and Breca were equally matched, swimming shoulder to shoulder, even though they were wearing armor and carrying swords so that they could defend themselves against sea monsters. Beowulf was caught by one monster and dragged down underwater, but managed to slay it with his sword. In fact, before he made it to the coast of Finland, he claims he killed nine different sea monsters.
* And now Beowulf delivers his parting shot: he asks what fights Unferth has ever been in. After all, if Unferth were any good as a warrior, Grendel wouldn't still be alive and wreaking havoc on
* Hrothgar is pleased by Beowulf's boasting and glad he's got this guy on his side.
* Enter Hrothgar's wife, Queen Wealhtheow. She salutes the warriors and moves among them, offering them a goblet from which to drink, and she thanks Beowulf for coming.
* Beowulf boasts once more that he's going to deliver the Spear-Danes from Grendel. Wealhtheow is pleased with his declaration and goes to sit by her husband.
* The banquet continues; everyone laughs and talks and tells stories.
* After sunset, King Hrothgar leaves to go to sleep, giving Heorot Hall over to Beowulf's keeping. This is the first time he's ever let anyone be in charge of Heorot except himself.
* Hrothgar and Wealhtheow leave and go to bed.
* Beowulf trusts himself to God, removing all his armor and putting his weapons aside. Since Grendel fights without weapons, he's going to fight Grendel with his bare hands.
* Beowulf and the Geats lie down and go to sleep in Heorot Hall, resting and waiting for Grendel's inevitable attack. They all expect to die, but the narrator tells us that God is planning a victory for them.
* Right on cue, Grendel comes lumbering in off the moors to attack the hall. He's drawn back to it again and again, even though it's defended more fiercely than anything else he's ever attacked.
* Enraged, Grendel tears the door off the hall, revealing the sleeping Geats. He feels a demonic glee as he imagines murdering them.
* Grendel grabs one of the Geat warriors and mauls him, drinking his blood and tearing lumps off him with his teeth.
* Grendel raises his arm to attack Beowulf, but Beowulf grabs his arm with the strongest grip Grendel has ever felt. Grendel begins to panic, because he's never met someone stronger than he is.
* Beowulf leaps to his feet and wrestles with Grendel, crashing into the furniture and sides of the building. More of the sturdy hall is wrecked than anyone could have thought possible.
* Overpowered by Beowulf, Grendel lets loose an unearthly, demonic howl.
* Beowulf's men try to help him by striking at Grendel with their swords—but what they don't know is that Grendel can't be harmed by any blade on earth.
* Grendel and Beowulf remain locked in combat. Grendel's shoulder begins to tear, and eventually his arm comes off entirely. Grendel flees, mortally wounded.
* Beowulf has won! He's fulfilled his boast and saved the Danes from the marauding demon. He even has Grendel's severed arm to prove it.
* In the morning, warriors and leaders gather to celebrate Grendel's death. The warriors track Grendel, following the trail of blood he left behind, to make sure he's actually dead… and he is. He jumped into the marsh and drowned there and, the narrator tells us, his soul went to hell.
* Everyone rides away again, happy and satisfied, praising Beowulf. In Beowulf's honor, Hrothgar's minstrel sings a well-known song about Sigemund the dragon-slayer, applying some parts of the song to Beowulf's own deeds.
* Everyone continues to celebrate Beowulf's defeat of Grendel. Danish warriors race their horses down the hills, the sun rises, and King Hrothgar and his queen return to Heorot Hall.
* King Hrothgar gives a short speech, thanking God for Grendel's defeat and claiming Beowulf as an adopted son. He's not literally adopting Beowulf, of course—hulking Geat warriors do okay without foster parents—he's just symbolically including Beowulf in his family.
* Now that Beowulf has Grendel's severed arm as a trophy, slimy Unferth isn't boasting anymore.
* Everyone works together to repair the damage caused to the inside of Heorot Hall by Beowulf's fight with Grendel.
* The narrator reminds us that we will all face death, just as Grendel had to face death.
* King Hrothgar comes to the hall in a formal procession for a victory feast. All the most famous warriors eat and drink together, and then drink some more, and some more, and everyone is friendly and at peace.
* Next, King Hrothgar presents Beowulf with gifts: an embroidered banner, breast-mail, an embossed helmet, and a sword. Last, but definitely not least, Hrothgar gives Beowulf eight horses with gold bridles, one of which has a fancy saddle designed for a king in battle. The narrator praises Hrothgar; this is exactly what a king is supposed to do to reward a hero.
* King Hrothgar also gives gifts of gold and treasures to the other Geat warriors.
* Hrothgar and Beowulf also have some morbid business to take care of. They negotiate a price for the life of the Geat who was killed by Grendel, and Hrothgar pays this money to Beowulf.
* In medieval Scandinavian culture, this "death-price" was to prevent a blood feud from happening when the relatives of the dead man became angry at whoever was responsible for his death. Think of it as life insurance that your family and friends buy after the fact instead of before.
* Now that all the eating, drinking, and gift-giving is done, all the Geats and Danes have left to do is listen to the minstrel sing tales of adventure. He begins his song with the moment when King Hnaef of the Danes dies in battle. Let the minstrel's tale begin.
* Hildeburh, the wife of King Finn, is caught in the middle of a war: members of her husband's tribe, the Frisians, are fighting a battle against her brother's tribe, the Danes. Hildeburh's son and brother are both killed and she mourns them bitterly.
* Many of King Finn's greatest Frisian warriors are also lost in the battle against the Danes. Finn is forced to negotiate a truce with the most important surviving Danish warrior, Hengest.
* The truce has two conditions. One, the Frisians will clear out a hall and throne-room for the Danes to use. Two, every day when King Finn gives out gifts and treasures to his followers, he'll give just as much to the Danes as he does to his own men.
* King Finn swears to the terms of the treaty and agrees that the surviving Danes will be guaranteed fair treatment. After all, they don't have a leader to give out treasure and hold them together anymore.
* The bodies of the slain Danes are burnt on a funeral pyre, still wearing their golden helmets and mail-coats. Hildeburh orders that her own son's body be burnt along with the body of his uncle, King Hnaef. She howls in mourning as their bodies are consumed in flames.
* The great days of the Danes are over now; they head back to their homes, saddened by the loss of many of their comrades.
* The Danish leader, Hengest, stays with the Frisians all winter, homesick and powerless, resenting King Finn and the truce. He can't go home because of the stormy winter seas.
* In the spring, Hengest longs to travel home across the seas—but he also longs for revenge against the Frisians and their allies, the Jutes.
* Another of the Danes, Hunlafing, goads Hengest into rebellion. There is an uprising; the Danes kill King Finn, murder his allies, loot his hall, and take Hildeburh back to Denmark with them.
* The minstrel ends his song there, with betrayal and rebellion.
* Back in the world of Beowulf and King Hrothgar, everyone is happy with the song. The wine jug passes around the room.
* Queen Wealhtheow comes to sit between King Hrothgar and his nephew, Hrothulf. Unferth is nearby, still praised for his courage in spite of the fact that he killed his own brothers recently. (If you're thinking, "He did *what*? Did I miss something?", don't worry. This is the first we've heard of it.)
* Wealhtheow gives Hrothgar a goblet to drink from and rejoices in their fortune and their family. She tells her husband that she is confident that Hrothulf is loyal and would take care of the tribe and Hrothgar's two young sons, Hrethric and Hrothmund, if Hrothgar were killed. (If you're starting to get lost in all the names starting with H, take a look at the "Characters" section to refresh your memory about the most important ones.)
* A goblet is brought to Beowulf, who is sitting between Hrothgar's sons. Beowulf is presented with even more expensive gifts: two gold arm bangles, a mail-shirt, rings, and a gold torque (a kind of necklace). The narrator describes what will happen to the torque in the future: Beowulf's king, Hygelac, will wear it in his last battle, and the Franks will steal it from his corpse. Cheery, eh?
* Queen Wealhtheow formally presents the torque to Beowulf, asking him to guide and protect her sons and wishing him luck and blessings.
* Everyone continues to drink wine and enjoy themselves, but the narrator knows that something sinister is about to happen.
* King Hrothgar retires for the night, and the rest of the warriors bed down to sleep in Heorot Hall for the night. Because Grendel is dead, they think they're completely safe—but at least one of them is already "marked for death" (1241).
* Even in their sleep, the Geatish and Danish warriors are ready for battle. They keep their shields at their heads and their armor, helmet, and spear on the bench just above where they're sleeping.
* The warriors go to sleep—but Grendel's mother, grieving for her son, is out marauding in the night, ready to revenge herself on her son's killers.
* Grendel's mother comes to Heorot Hall, which is filled with sleeping, unsuspecting warriors. She attacks, and she's nearly as powerful as Grendel himself was.
* The warriors wake up and grab their swords and shields; they don't have time to put on their helmets or chain-mail shirts.
* Grendel's mother panics. Clutching the corpse of one of Hrothgar's retainers, she flees back to the swamp.
* Where's our hero while all this is happening, you ask? Beowulf is somewhere else, because after his heroic exploits Hrothgar didn't want to make him sleep on the floor of the hall with the common soldiers.
* In Heorot Hall, everything is chaos. Not only did Grendel's mother kill several men from each tribe, Danes and Geats alike—she also stole Beowulf's trophy, the severed arm of Grendel.
* When King Hrothgar hears the news, he is grief-stricken by the death of his retainer, who was his dearest companion.
* Hrothgar, wondering if God is ever going to have mercy on him, sends for Beowulf, who doesn't know what has happened yet.
* Beowulf asks if Hrothgar has rested, and Hrothgar replies that he can never rest as long as the Danes are plagued by yet another demon. He laments the death of his counselor, whose name, we learn, is Aeschere.
* Hrothgar realizes that Grendel's mother is bound to avenge the death of her son. That's how things work in this medieval world: every killing brings about another killing, and deaths turn into blood feuds.
* There is a legend, Hrothgar tells Beowulf, among the local people, about two huge monstrous demons, one male and one female, who roam the countryside together. He thinks this explains the appearance of the second monster, Grendel's mother.
* Although earlier the poet has described Grendel as the descendant of Cain, here he's described as "fatherless," from a mysterious, ghostly, demonic source. Grendel and his mother live on the moors, where streams disappear into the mist.
* A few miles away from Heorot Hall, King Hrothgar tells Beowulf, there is a strange, eerie lake. As far as men can tell, it's bottomless, and at night the water burns. Deer who come to its banks would rather stay where they are and be torn apart by pursuing hounds than jump into it.
* Hrothgar thinks this lake must be the place where Grendel's mother lives. He puts his faith in Beowulf, asking him to seek the monster if he dares, and offering more treasures as a reward if he succeeds in killing it and coming back alive.
* Beowulf comforts Hrothgar with tough love, telling him that everyone dies and that it's better to avenge the deaths of our loved ones than to sit around mourning them. All warriors can do, he reminds Hrothgar, is try to win fame before they're eventually killed.
* Beowulf swears to track down Grendel's mother and kill her.
* Hrothgar praises God for Beowulf's promise. Hrothgar, Beowulf, and their followers ride out, tracking Grendel's mother across the moors. She's pretty easy to follow, since she's dragging Aeschere's corpse behind her.
* Hrothgar, Beowulf, and their retinue follow Grendel's mother up the cliffs, into places where they have to walk single-file along narrow ledges. Suddenly, they come to a place where some trees grow out at an angle—the path ends. They're at a dead end on a ledge above the watery lair of the demon.
* Everyone is disturbed to realize that Aeschere's severed head is lying at the foot of the cliff.
* The whole group sits down to watch the water of the lake, which is filled with sea-monsters and reptiles thrashing around. Someone blows a war-horn and the monsters go crazy.
* One of the Geats shoots one of the sea-monsters with an arrow, crippling it. Other warriors rush up and stab it with spears, dragging it onto the bank and looking at it in amazement.
* Beowulf dons his chain-mail armor and a golden helmet to protect himself from the crushing grip of the monsters.
* Unferth lends Beowulf an ancient sword called Hrunting, which was tempered in blood and which has never lost a battle.
* The narrator speculates that Unferth must not remember the drunken speech criticizing Beowulf that he made earlier. Unferth simply isn't brave enough to take on the monsters in the way Beowulf is willing to do.
* Beowulf says goodbye to Hrothgar, reminding him that he promised to take care of the Geat warriors if Beowulf is killed in battle and to send the treasures Beowulf won to the Geat king, Hygelac. Beowulf also announces that, if he is killed, Unferth will get Hrunting back.
* Without further ado, Beowulf leaps into the churning lake. It takes most of a day before he can see the bottom. (You'll just have to suspend your disbelief about the fact that he couldn't breathe if that were the case.)
* Grendel's mother senses that a human being has penetrated her lair. She catches him, but his body is protected by his chain-mail armor, which she can't tear.
* Once Grendel's mother touches the bottom of the lake, she carries Beowulf to her "court" (1507). He doesn't have a chance to fight her with his sword.
* Clusters of sea-monsters attack Beowulf, tearing his chain-mail.
* Beowulf isn't impeded by the water, because the roof of Grendel's mother's lair protects him from the force of the current. (It seems like he might be in a pocket of air in an underwater cave, perhaps, although the poem is ambiguous on this point.)
* Suddenly, Beowulf catches sight of Grendel's mother again, and swings his sword down onto her head with a blow of great force. Unfortunately, the sword fails to cut her.
* Remembering his reputation, Beowulf throws his sword aside and fights Grendel's mother with his bare hands.
* Beowulf and Grendel's mother wrestle and struggle together.
* Beowulf stumbles and falls.
* Grendel's mother whips out a huge knife and stabs at Beowulf's shoulder, but the chain-mail turns the blade and saves his life.
* Beowulf spots a huge, heavy, ancient sword from the days of the giants. He swings it toward Grendel's mother in a wide arc, cutting deeply into her neck and killing her.
* The lair becomes brighter after Grendel's mother dies, and Beowulf is able to inspect his surroundings. He finds Grendel's body and, to take further revenge, he decapitates the corpse.
* Back on the surface, the Geat and Dane warriors are watching the surface of the lake, waiting for Beowulf's return or a sign of his fate. When Beowulf cuts off Grendel's head, the water heaves and surges, and they can see blood. They bow their heads and assume that Beowulf has been killed.
* The Danes and King Hrothgar go home, but the Geat warriors stay where they are, waiting and wishing for Beowulf to return.
* The giant sword that Beowulf found melts like an icicle. Apparently, the blood of Grendel is so poisonous that it destroys metal.
* Beowulf sees enormous amounts of treasure in Grendel's mother's lair, but all he takes are the jewel-inlaid hilt of the melted sword and Grendel's severed head.
* Beowulf swims back to the surface of the lake, where his warriors are overjoyed to see him.
* The Geats return to Heorot Hall, taking Grendel's enormous severed head with them. The head is so large that they need four strong men to carry it.
* Beowulf tells King Hrothgar all about his fight with Grendel, giving most of the credit to God for helping him.
* Beowulf formally presents the jeweled sword hilt to Hrothgar. Hrothgar, examining it, notices that it is engraved with runes and pictures that tell the story of how war came into the world and how a flood that destroyed a race of giants—Scandinavian myths.
* King Hrothgar praises Beowulf, describing him as "even-tempered, prudent, and resolute" (1705-6). He contrasts Beowulf with a bad king, Heremod, who was bloodthirsty and stingy.
* Hrothgar uses the contrast between Beowulf and Heremod to illustrate the dangers of wealth and power, which can make men forget that they're all doomed to die and that God is really in charge. Hrothgar reminds Beowulf that he should focus on the afterlife and "eternal rewards" (1760), because he will die someday.
* Hrothgar explains that he himself had gotten carried away by his power. He thought he had defeated all his enemies for good and ruled supreme in his land, but when Grendel came marauding he realized that he wasn't all-powerful.
* Meanwhile, life is basically feasting, speeches, and battle for these guys, so, since the battle and speech are over for now, the Geats and Danes have another feast in Heorot Hall.
* Everyone goes to bed and actually manages to get one unbroken night of sleep.
* The Geats get up early, excited to start their return trip home.
* Beowulf remembers to give the sword called Hrunting back to Unferth.
* Beowulf and his warriors get ready to leave the Danes. Beowulf formally thanks Hrothgar for being so generous and hospitable to the Geats and offers to perform any last favors Hrothgar might need. Beowulf also pledges his own and King Hygelac's continuing loyalty to King Hrothgar.
* Hrothgar praises Beowulf once again, and suggests that, if his own sons are killed and his line dies out, Beowulf could come and defend the Danes again and become their ruler. Hrothgar also confirms the "shared peace and a pact of friendship" that exist between the Geats and Danes.
* Hrothgar gives Beowulf a set of twelve treasures and kisses him goodbye, breaking down into tears because he suspects he won't live to see Beowulf again. (If you're as mighty a king and warrior as Hrothgar, it's okay to cry, because everyone is too afraid to laugh at you.)
* The Geats *finally* leave Denmark and go back to the coast where their boat is waiting. The Danish lookout salutes them from the top of a cliff. The Geats load up their boat with all the treasures and riches they've been given and set off for home.
* The boat arrives safely at the shores of Geatland (modern-day Sweden). The Geatish lookout helps them anchor their boat and arranges for all their treasures to be carried ashore.
* The Geats make their way to King Hygelac's hall, where they are received by the gracious Queen Hygd.
* The poet contrasts Queen Hygd with an evil queen, Queen Modthryth. Queen Modthryth was very beautiful but disliked attention, and so if anyone except her lord looked directly at her, she would have him imprisoned, tortured, and killed. After she married Offa, however, she became mellower and was famous for her good works.
* Beowulf and his men are received by King Hygelac, who is in his hall dispensing treasures to his lords and followers. Hygelac greets them and they sit down to drink and talk.
* King Hygelac asks about everything that happened while Beowulf was in Hrothgar's land. Beowulf retells the story so far from the beginning, describing the way he defeated Grendel and Grendel's mother. He also describes Hrothgar's generosity and the kindness of his daughter Freawaru.
* Beowulf explains that Freawaru is engaged to Ingeld, the leader of the Heathobards. Hrothgar hopes that this marriage will end an old blood-feud between the Heathobards and the Danes, but Beowulf is worried that it will just provoke the Heathobards to start the feud all over again.
* Whoops! Beowulf realizes he's digressing and goes back to his story about Grendel. He describes Grendel's first attack and the way that the demon ate one of the Geatish warriors.
* Beowulf continues telling King Hygelac about everything that happened while he was visiting Hrothgar and fighting Grendel and his mother. He describes the lavish feast Hrothgar gave for the Geats and the treasures that he bestowed on them. He also tells Hygelac about the attack of Grendel's mother and the way that he defeated her, after some hand-to-hand combat, with a mighty sword.
* Beowulf formally presents all the treasures that Hrothgar gave to him to King Hygelac, explaining that these treasures belonged to Hrothgar's brother Heorogar. The gifts include a boar-framed standard, a helmet, a mail-shirt, a sword, and four horses. Beowulf also gives Queen Hygd a necklace and three horses.
* The poet praises Beowulf's virtuous behavior and self-control. Apparently, the Geats always thought Beowulf was a weakling, but he's sure proved them wrong now!
* Because there just hasn't been enough gift-giving yet, King Hygelac presents Beowulf with gifts of his own: a jeweled sword, 7,000 hides, land, a hall, and a throne of his own. Now Beowulf is a land-governing lord in his own right.
* We go into fast-forward—this is the part of the story that would probably happen in a quick montage if you were watching a film version of *Beowulf*. Hygelac dies in battle and his successor, Heardred, is killed. Beowulf rules the Geats for fifty years.
* Then, one day, a sleeping dragon is woken by someone who steals a goblet from his hoard of treasure.
* Da-*dum*! It's time for another cr-a-zy battle.
* The poet explains that the thief wasn't just greedy; he was a poor slave on the run from his cruel master.
* Were you wondering where the dragon's hoard came from? Well, even if you weren't, the poet is going to explain. Here's the story:
* Many years ago, a wealthy man from a now-forgotten tribe had an amazing stockpile of treasures in a barrow (hillside), but he didn't have any descendants or relatives to hand them down to.
* This treasure-owner lamented that his line was going to end and nobody would cherish all the armor and gold that he'd amassed.
* One day, the dragon happened to find the treasure, and he took up residence in the barrow, jealously guarding the gold.
* The dragon kept the treasure safe until the slave arrived and stole a goblet. He didn't use the goblet to buy his freedom—he gave it to his old master so that he would be forgiven and reinstated.
* Then the dragon woke and saw the footprints of the thief. He flew outside the mound, scorching the ground in wider and wider circles, searching for the robber.
* Each night, the dragon attacks the Geat people, killing them and burning their land. Each day, he goes back to the barrow to hide.
* Beowulf is told that the throne-room of the Geats has been destroyed by the dragon. He thinks that he must have offended God in some way. This makes him feel depressed and anxious.
* Beowulf begins to plan his counter-attack on the dragon. He begins by ordering an all-iron shield that the dragon won't be able to burn.
* The narrator tells us that Beowulf is destined to die in this encounter with the dragon. Apparently suspense wasn't that important to Anglo-Saxon audiences.
* After all his adventures, Beowulf isn't actually afraid of the dragon itself.
* The narrator digresses a little bit into a flashback to give an example of Beowulf's prowess and honor:
* In the battle where Hygelac was killed, Beowulf swam to safety carrying his loot—thirty battle-dresses.
* Then Queen Hygd offered Beowulf the throne because she didn't have any faith in her young son as a leader.
* However, Beowulf didn't want to usurp the throne from Heardred, so he just acted as regent until Heardred matured.
* An exiled group of Swedes came to visit the Heardred's court and rewarded his hospitality by murdering him.
* With Heardred dead, Beowulf finally became the actual king of the Geats.
* As king, Beowulf avenges Heardred's death and ends the feud with the Swedes by killing King Onela.
* Beowulf has triumphed over all his enemies—but finally there comes a day when he has to face his last and most difficult adversary: the dragon. Da da *dum*.
* With eleven other warriors, Beowulf goes to investigate the dragon's attacks. He discovers the original theif that enraged the dragon.
* Beowulf and his warriors force the thief to join them—after all, he's the only one who knows where the dragon's lair is. The thief becomes the thirteenth member of their group. (If you've read [*The Hobbit*](http://www.shmoop.com/hobbit/), or seen *The 13th Warrior*, this might sound familiar.)
* Beowulf and the Geats threaten and cajole the thief into showing them the barrow where the dragon lurks, guarding the treasure.
* The Geats pause on top of the cliff. Beowulf is sad, sensing that his death is near.
* Beowulf gives a long speech, recalling his past achievements and his path to kinghood. Here are some of the things he remembers:
* As a seven-year-old boy, Beowulf was sent by his father to the court of King Hrethel. Hrethel treated him like one of his own sons, and Beowulf grew up alongside the three princes of the kingdom, Herebeald, Haethcyn, and Hygelac.
* The eldest prince, Herebeald, was killed in a hunting accident by his brother, Haethcyn. King Hrethel was completely devastated. He couldn't bring himself to punish Haethcyn, but couldn't forgive him, either. King Hrethel abandoned his kingdom, leaving it to his sons, and retired into a quiet, God-fearing life.
* The Swedes and Geats, two different tribes of Swedish descent, continued their feuding. (Beowulf and his people are Geats, and the Swedes are their enemies.) When Hrethel died, the feuds became worse. Many of Beowulf's family members fought in the feuds and one of them was killed. Haethcyn was also killed. Eventually, one of Hygelac's followers, Eofor, killed the king of the Swedes, Ongentheow. The feuds were ended for a time.
* Beowulf became one of the lords in King Hygelac's retinue. Hygelac gave him land and wealth.
* As one of Hygelac's lords, Beowulf killed a great Frankish warrior, Dayraven, with his bare hands.
* At the end of his speech, Beowulf makes his last boast. Boasting was a formal part of warrior culture and especially important for great men. Beowulf's last boast is that he won battles often in his youth and that even in his old age he is going to fight the dragon "for the glory of winning" (2514).
* Before leaving them, Beowulf says a few words to his followers. He tells them that he wishes he could fight the dragon hand-to-hand, the way he fought Grendel when he was young, instead of using his sword. However, even Beowulf realizes that would be suicide, so he goes out to fight with a sword, a mail-shirt, and a shield.
* Beowulf orders his men to stay on top of the barrow in safety, observing the fight rather than participating in it. (This is a little confusing: it's a larger group of men that he orders to stay behind, while the group of eleven comrades goes with him a little further.)
* Beowulf steels himself and goes into the barrow to fight the dragon. He shouts out a challenge and the dragon, recognizing a human voice, bursts forward, breathing fire.
* There is a crazy battle scene, Beowulf trying to use his shield, the dragon writhing around and trying to burn him to a crisp.
* Beowulf swings his sword, but only gives the dragon a minor cut. The wound angers the dragon, and he steps up his attack.
* Beowulf's sword fails for the first time; he has to retreat. He's humiliated.
* The dragon takes a deep breath and hits Beowulf with another blast of fire. Beowulf is close to being defeated.
* Ten of Beowulf's hand-picked men break ranks and run for their lives into the woods nearby. Only one remains—Wiglaf, who remembers how well Beowulf has treated him and his family.
* The narrator describes Wiglaf's father, Weohstan, who earned a sword and mail-shirt in battle and passed them on to his son.
* Wiglaf, bearing his father's sword and mail-shirt, will enter battle for the first time at Beowulf's side, fighting the dragon.
* Before rushing to Beowulf's aid, Wiglaf lectures his companions, reminding them of how good a king Beowulf has been and how generously he rewarded them for their loyalty. Wiglaf says that, even though Beowulf wanted to face the dragon alone, he clearly needs their help. Wiglaf also says that he would rather die fighting the dragon than go home to the rest of the Geats in cowardly safety. (Again, this is a little confusing, because it seemed like the other ten guys already ran away, but this must happen before they skedaddle.)
* Wiglaf goes to Beowulf's side and encourages him, reminding him of his boasts, his great deeds, and his fame.
* The dragon attacks again, charring and destroying Wiglaf's shield. Beowulf shares his shield with Wiglaf.
* Inspired by Wiglaf's encouragement, Beowulf swings his sword at the dragon again—and it snaps. The narrator explains that Beowulf is fated to have bad luck with edged weapons in battle because he's too strong and his powerful strokes are too much for the weapons to bear.
* The dragon attacks a third time, biting Beowulf in the neck. Blood rushes everywhere.
* Seeing Beowulf in danger, Wiglaf lunges forward, stabbing the dragon in the belly. Its firepower lessens.
* Beowulf draws a knife from his belt and stabs the dragon in the side. This wound finally kills it. The narrator praises Beowulf and Wiglaf for their courage.
* The dragon has been defeated, but Beowulf's wound is getting worse—he realizes that it's poisoned. He finds a place to sit on the side of the barrow, looking at the massive structure.
* Wiglaf washes Beowulf's wounds.
* Beowulf realizes that he's dying and says the last things he needs to say. He explains to Wiglaf that he would have wanted to bestow his armor on his son, but he doesn't have a son.
* Beowulf recalls his long reign over the Geats: he's been king for fifty years, and all the neighboring kings were too afraid to attack or challenge him. He also behaved honestly and justly, which makes him feel a little better, because he knows that God won't be angry with him in the afterlife.
* Beowulf orders Wiglaf to go into the barrow, look at the treasure, and bring back some of it for him to see before he dies.
* Wiglaf obeys Beowulf's dying wish and goes down into the barrow, where he finds amazing piles of treasure, all of it rusting and decaying. He's able to see everything because of a glowing golden standard high overhead. The dragon is gone, killed by Wiglaf's sword.
* Wiglaf fills his arms with gold and treasure and takes the standard, too. He hurries back to Beowulf, hoping that the king is still alive.
* Beowulf is alive but bleeding profusely. Wiglaf begins to clean the king's wounds again as Beowulf gazes on the treasure.
* Beowulf thanks God for his last glance of the treasure and the fact that he is going to die "well endowed" with gold. He's traded his life for this golden hoard.
* Beowulf orders Wiglaf to build a barrow for him on the coast after his body has been burned on a funeral pyre. This barrow will be visible to ships and remind people of Beowulf's great deeds.
* Beowulf takes off his golden collar and gives it to Wiglaf, calling him "the last of the Waegmundings," the last member of his clan now that Beowulf is dying.
* Beowulf dies.
* Wiglaf watches Beowulf's death-agonies. Beside them, the dragon lies dead.
* Ten of the Geat warriors—the ones who abandoned Beowulf and Wiglaf earlier—creep back to the scene of the battle. Silently, they watch Wiglaf try to revive Beowulf with water, but the king is dead.
* Wiglaf angrily reprimands the other Geats for abandoning Beowulf, their generous and loyal king, in his hour of need.
* Wiglaf foresees that, with Beowulf dead and his warriors disgraced, the Geats will be attacked by their neighbors and their entire nation will be destroyed.
* Wiglaf orders that a messenger go to the rest of Beowulf's men, who are camped on the ridge, to tell them what has happened. The messenger tells the people that Beowulf has been destroyed by the dragon, but has managed to kill it before he died.
* Like Wiglaf, the messenger predicts that, with Beowulf gone, the Geats will be attacked by their neighbors, the Franks and the Frisians.
* The messenger also predicts that the old feud between the Geats and the Swedes will be revived. He explains some of the history behind the feud:
* King Hrethel's son, Haethcyn (the one who accidentally killed his brother), was killed in battle by a Swede named Ongentheow.
* Ongentheow's army surrounded the Geats and shouted threats at them all night. When dawn broke, Hygelac came to their rescue with a group of fresh troops.
* The battle continued; many Geats and Swedes were slain.
* Ongentheow withdrew to higher ground. Hygelac attacked and cornered Ongentheow. Ongentheow killed a warrior named Wulf, but was killed in turn by Wulf's brother, Eofor.
* Ongentheow's armor was presented to King Hygelac as a prize. The Geats, having won the battle, returned home and Eofor married Hygelac's daughter.
* The messenger explains that, because of this history, he's convinced the Swedes are going to strike back at the Geats. Now that Beowulf is dead, they won't have any fear of doing so.
* The messenger exhorts everyone to hurry to take one last look at Beowulf before they build a funeral pyre for him. He anticipates an enormous amount of gold and treasures on the pyre, all of it melting as Beowulf's body burns.
* The messenger also foresees that the Geat people will suffer greatly without the protection of King Beowulf.
* The Geat warriors rise and go to the place where Beowulf's body lies. They also see the dead dragon, fifty feet long and "scorched all colours" (3041).
* Beside the dragon lie some of the weapons and golden treasures from his hoard, now rusty and decaying. The narrator explains that this gold was under a spell that prevented anyone from taking it out of the barrow unless they had God's blessing.
* The man who originally created the hoard of treasure, of course, was slain by the dragon; now Beowulf and Wiglaf have avenged their fellow man against the monster.
* The narrator reminds us that, no matter how brave or famous a man may be, nobody knows when or how he will die. Beowulf didn't know for certain that he would die while fighting the dragon.
* The chiefs who originally buried the treasure in the barrow had declared that anyone who robbed from it would be punished in hell, but Beowulf didn't seek the treasure selfishly (so, we assume, he's safe).
* Wiglaf makes a speech about Beowulf, saying that "when one man follows his own will / many are hurt" (3077-8). This happened to the Geats, because nothing they could say would induce Beowulf to leave the dragon alone; he insisted on fighting it and meeting his destined end at the barrow.
* Wiglaf describes the inside of the barrow and the treasures, some of which he brought out so that Beowulf could see them. He also tells the other Geats about Beowulf's last wish: a barrow built on top of his funeral pyre that will serve as his memorial.
* Next, Wiglaf leads the Geats down into the barrow for a tour of the treasure.
* When the Geats return to the surface, Wiglaf orders the building of a funeral pyre so that they can burn Beowulf's body.
* Wiglaf selects seven of Beowulf's lords to go with him into the barrow to remove the treasure, which they load onto a cart and take back home for Beowulf's funeral.
* The Geats build Beowulf's funeral pyre, stacking it high with precious armor and treasures. They light the fire and Beowulf's body burns while his people wail and mourn him.
* One Geat woman in particular mourns Beowulf's death, singing a lament in which she anticipates the destruction of the Geat nation by invaders.
* After the pyre burns down, the Geats build a barrow over it. The barrow is an enormous memorial to Beowulf which takes ten days to build, and it can be seen from the sea.
* The Geats bury jewels, gold, and treasures in the barrow to honor Beowulf.
* Twelve Geat warriors ride around the tomb singing dirges, honoring Beowulf by describing his heroic deeds.