Beowulf is the name of an epic Anglo-Saxon poem written in Old English, named after the protagonist. It was composed probably around 1010 CE and is known from only a single manuscript, called the Nowell Codex after the name of its earliest (16th-century) known owner, Lawrence Nowell. It is a matter of debate whether the manuscript was the written version of an older oral tradition or the literary composition of the scribes, most likely monks, who put it into writing. What is known is that two scribes were responsible. The action of the poem takes place in what is now Denmark and southwestern Sweden in the late 5th century CE. Although the characters are all pagan, the Christian authors inject references to God and the Old Testament and occasionally comment about the unenlightened nature of the characters. The poem begins by relating the funeral of the legendary founder of the Scylding (Danish) royal family, Scyld Scefing, whose great-grandson Hrothgar now rules. Hrothgar is a wise old king who successfully ruled his people for 30 years before his troubles began. When he was prosperous, Hrothgar built a great mead hall, called Heorot, where his thanes and warriors celebrate nightly. One night, a vicious ogre named Grendel, who lives in a nearby cave in a swamp, attacks the mead hall and slaughters a number of Hrothgar’s men. It turns out that Grendel is a descendant of the biblical Cain, as are all monsters, and being an outcast, the ogre hates humankind for its joys and accomplishments. Hearing the celebrations in Heorot angers him, and he makes nightly raids upon it for 12 years. Beowulf, a young Geat (from Geatland in southwestern Sweden) warrior of surpassing size and strength, arrives at Hrothgar’s kingdom with 14 handpicked companions to rid the land of Grendel. Beowulf’s father had been sheltered from danger by Hrothgar years earlier, and Beowulf wishes to repay this debt, as well as earn riches and fame. That night, while the Scyldings sleep elsewhere, Beowulf and his men stay in Heorot to await the ogre’s arrival. When Grendel comes, he kills and eats one of the men, then attacks Beowulf. The two fight furiously, almost destroying the building, until Beowulf tears Grendel’s arm from its socket, mortally wounding him. Grendel retreats to his cave in the swamp to die, and Beowulf proudly presents the severed arm to Hrothgar, who hangs it from the roof of Heorot. Beowulf is richly rewarded and celebrated.

Later that night, Grendel’s mother, an ogress of almost as much strength as her son, attacks Heorot and abducts one of the men in revenge. Beowulf sets out the next day with his men to kill her, and they find the severed head of her victim awaiting them. Beowulf is given a mighty sword by one of Hrothgar’s thanes, Unferth, who previously had insulted Beowulf but now respects him. Beowulf dives into the swamp and confronts Grendel’s mother. He is unable to kill her with his weapon; she gains the
upper hand until the hero spots a miraculous great sword in her lair and uses it to kill her. A miraculous light illuminates the cave, which is full of treasure and also contains the body of Grendel. Beowulf uses the magical sword to cut off Grendel's head. The sword's blade then melts, and Beowulf takes his trophy and the remaining hilt back to Hrothgar. He is again rewarded and celebrated, and Hrothgar warns Beowulf of the dangers of pride and the vicissitudes of time. Beowulf returns to Geatland where his uncle, Hygelac, is king. Hygelac is later killed in battle, and when Beowulf is offered the throne, he declines it, opting instead to serve Hygelac's son Heardred, who is also killed in battle. Beowulf then becomes king and reigns well for 50 years. Disaster then strikes in the form of an outraged dragon that ravages the countryside in revenge for the theft, by a Geat fugitive, of a goblet from his treasure hoard. The hoard is 300 years old, the original property of a fallen tribe of warriors, and is cursed as well, making it of no use either to the dragon that guards it or to anyone else. The old Beowulf sets out in pursuit with a band of 11 loyal men. He challenges the dragon and they fight. Beowulf's weapons fail to harm the monster, and all but one of his men abandons him. The one true man, Wiglaf, stays to help and wounds the dragon enough so that Beowulf can kill it. Beowulf himself is mortally wounded and dies, leaving his kingdom to Wiglaf. He is buried underneath a great barrow together with the cursed treasure.

Like other epic poems such as the Iliad and the Odyssey, both composed more than a thousand years earlier, Beowulf continues to fascinate scholars and the reading public alike. Apart from the heroic action and adventure that the poem narrates, its timeless themes include the virtues of loyalty, reputation, generosity, and hospitality, as well as the dangers of envy and revenge. Although the character of Beowulf is larger than life, he is still a human being, a mortal man, subject to aging and the ill fortune that eventually befalls him. However, because of his great virtues—such as the loyalty to his lords that drove him to great deeds, his generosity to them and to those who served him, and his reputation as a great and noble fighter—he is remembered as the very model of a warrior king.

See also
Homer, Novels, Historical, Novels, Time in, Poetry, Shakespeare's Sonnets


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