Beowulf: A Hero of the Ages

In a tale of monsters and castles, *Beowulf*, whose author remains unknown, dives deep below the surface to discover what it means to act as a true hero. Through all of the adventures, the author's definition of a hero forms the character of Beowulf. Beowulf, who owes a debt to King Hrothgar, travels across the ocean to save the king's hall from destruction by a terrible beast called Grendel. He volunteers himself to kill the monster with his own hands, never doubting his abilities. As he destroys both Grendel and Grendel's mother, Beowulf puts his faith in God, knowing that God's will maintains sovereignty in every circumstance. Beowulf returns to his country after he kills the two monsters, and he eventually becomes the king of Geatland. When a dragon begins to plague his land, Beowulf volunteers to fight it. In Beowulf's final defeat and death by this dragon, feelings of grief plague all who know him. From his first battle to his last breath, Beowulf represents a true hero of his time through his loyalty, pride, bravery, faith, death, and the love shown by his people.

Beowulf's loyalty shows throughout the story, beginning with his loyalty towards his family. Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, owes a debt to King Hrothgar for helping him in a time of trouble. Hrothgar tells his warrior, Wulfgar, "This man [Beowulf] is their [Ecgtheow and Hrethel's daughter] son, / here to follow up an old friendship" (375-376). He later explains to Beowulf that he "Shipped a treasure trove to the Wulfings, / and Ecgtheow acknowledged me with oaths of allegiance" (471-472). When Beowulf hears of the distress of Heorot, Hrothgar's
hall, he volunteers to come to their aid. Hrothgar tells Beowulf as he goes back home, "What you have done is to draw two peoples, / the Geat nation and us neighboring Danes, / into shared peace and a pact of friendship" (1855-1858). Beowulf knows of his father's debt to Hrothgar from the past and makes certain that the debt is repaid. He chooses to face treacherous tasks in order to pay this debt, showing how much he values his family. In the end, Beowulf unites the two countries, symbolizing the mended relationship between the two families. He shows loyalty to his country and King Hrothgar as well. Beowulf encounters endless challenges to protect both of them. King Hrothgar loves Beowulf for what he has done for Heorot, and he "broke down / in sudden tears" (1872-1873) when Beowulf leaves. Beowulf remains loyal to all friends, leaders, and lands he encounters. A true hero is a person who values loyalty in every situation, especially when it involves family.

In Beowulf's speech, pride appears often, and he rarely doubts his own abilities. Beowulf tells Unferth, "I was the strongest swimmer of all" (534) when Unferth tries to mock him. He tells King Hrothgar, "When it comes to fighting, I count myself / as dangerous any day as Grendel" (677-678). Beowulf understands his strength and places his confidence in his ability to win any competition or fight he participates in. After a fight, his confidence shows even more frequently, and he talks of his winnings with pride. After defeating Grendel, Beowulf says, "It would take too long to tell how I repaid / the terror of the land for every life he took / and so won credit for you, my king" (2093-2095). When he grows older and becomes king, his confidence remains. The narrator says of Beowulf, "Yet the prince of the rings was too proud / to line up with a large army / against the sky-plague" (2345-2347). In his death, Beowulf recalls his great accomplishments. He tells Wiglaf, "None had the power / to intimidate me" (2735-2736), speaking of the fifty years when he rules Geatland. In both his successes and his defeats,
Beowulf never loses confidence in himself or his abilities. He does not doubt that he can accomplish any tasks, and he takes risks to fight for the ones he loves. In the end, Beowulf takes pride in himself, which presents a quality that a true hero must possess.

Bravery emanates from every aspect of the story, and this bravery helps Beowulf fulfill his destiny as a hero. In the beginning, the narrator says, "He [Beowulf] announced his plan: / to sail the swan's road and seek out that king, / the famous prince who needed defenders" (199-201). Beowulf volunteers to travel to King Hrothgar's land to fight Grendel. He selflessly volunteers himself without any request from others. When he arrives, he explains to Hrothgar, "I meant to perform to the uttermost / what your people wanted or perish in the attempt, / in the fiend's clutches" (634-636). Fear seemingly does not enter Beowulf's mind as he prepares to defend Heorot from Grendel. He decides to use only his hands to fight the beast, and he feels "Indifferent to death" (1442). He defeats Grendel and Grendel's mother, and he feels no fear. He then says of his time serving the king back in Geatland, "I marched ahead of him, always there / at the front of the line; and I shall fight like that / for as long as I live" (2497-2499). This mindset of placing others' lives before his own perfectly describes Beowulf's brave nature. When he grows older, he volunteers to fight the dragon even though he knows his strength has passed. Beowulf never passes up a chance to protect the people he loves, and he never leaves someone in need. He consistently volunteers himself for tasks that everyone else fears, and this brave attitude further labels him as a true hero in the eyes of the author.

Religion helps to dictate Beowulf's actions throughout the story. He clearly places much faith in God and God's sovereignty. When speaking of the fight with Grendel, Beowulf states, "Whichever one death falls / must deem it a just judgment by God" (440-441). He also tells Hrothgar, "May the Divine Lord / in His wisdom grant the glory of victory / to whichever side
He sees fit" (685-687). After the fight, Beowulf says that "The Lord allowed" (967) his victory, and Grendel "Must await/ the mighty judgment of God in majesty" (977-978). The narrator explains, "He [Beowulf] relied for help on the Lord of All, / on His care and favor" (1272-1273). In times when Beowulf can easily take credit for the feats he accomplishes, he gives credit to God. He says, "If God had not helped me, / the outcome would have been quick and fatal" (1656-1657), when he celebrates at Heorot. In the end, when Beowulf hears of the dragon's evil deeds, the author says, "The wise man thought he must have thwarted / ancient ordinance of the eternal Lord, / broken his commandment" (2329-2331). Beowulf looks to God for ultimate judgment, and he carefully follows God's will to avoid punishment. In his last breath, Beowulf does not forget his God. He exclaims, "To the everlasting Lord of all, / to the King of Glory, I give thanks" (2794-2795). Beowulf places his confidence in God, and religion surrounds every fight and heroic act he performs. He draws his pride and bravery from faith in God, and the author views this value of religious belief as a characteristic of a true hero.

Great heroes cannot live forever, and Beowulf passes away as all heroes must. Beowulf dies a dramatic death saving the people of Geatland from a monstrous dragon. He ventures deep into a cave to find the dragon and to fight it alone. As the battle ensues, Beowulf finds that his strength and sword cannot conquer the monster alone anymore. Wiglaf joins to help him, and the pair finishes off the dragon. In the process, however, Beowulf becomes mortally injured by the dragon's poison and bites. The author says, "He [Beowulf] well knew his days in the world / had been lived out to the end - his allotted time / was drawing to a close, death was very near" (2726-2728). He asks Wiglaf to bring him some of the dragon's treasure, which he claims for Geatland. After Beowulf speaks a few words, "His soul fled from his breast / to its destined place among the steadfast ones" (2819-2820). Beowulf dies a valiant death, and even in his final breaths, he
thinks more of others than of himself. He does not slowly die of old age or accident or something along those lines. He dies an admirable death protecting his people, which the author sees as a characteristic of a true hero.

As Beowulf becomes injured and passes, the love felt for him by his friends and people becomes evident. When Wiglaf calls his fellow soldiers to action, he describes Beowulf as "The shepherd of our land, / a man unequaled in the quest for glory / and a name for daring" (2644-2646). Wiglaf joins the fight to help Beowulf, but the fight ends with both the monster and Beowulf fatally injured. The narrator says that Wiglaf must "Watch the one he held so dear / there on the ground, going through / his death agony" (2822-2824). A group of people wait to hear news about Beowulf, who the author describes as "the people's pride and love" (2900). The narrator says they "sat all morning, sad at heart, / shield-bearers wondering about / the man they loved" (2894-2896). The news of Beowulf's passing devastates all of his people. The warriors feel distraught, "Mourning a lord far-famed and beloved" (3142). They mourn the loss of their heroic king, and "They were disconsolate / and wailed aloud for their lord's decease" (3148-3149). All of Geatland knows of Beowulf's great achievements. His people say, "Of all the kings upon earth / he was the man most gracious and fair-minded, / kindest to his people and keenest to win fame" (3180-3182). He exemplifies his dedication to his country, and people view him as a great leader. A hero is one who everyone cares about, and Beowulf, throughout his life, earns love and respect as a great leader.

Beowulf becomes the author's perfect example of a true hero. Beowulf shows loyalty to his family by repaying his father's debt to Hrothgar. He acts and speaks with pride in his abilities even though he also gives credit to God. Beowulf bravely volunteers to fight monsters and save lands, and he fights when all others run in fear. He dies a dramatic death, and, in his death, it
becomes apparent that many people love him. The people of Geatland "extolled his heroic nature and exploits / and gave thanks for his greatness" (3173-3174). These all explain characteristics of a hero, according to the author. Beowulf rules as a great king whose actions stem from a love for his people, and he exemplifies what it means to be a real hero.
Work Cited