

Reflections:

*A Student Response Journal for...*

*Beowulf*  
*by Anonymous*

written by Kate Danaher Parks

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*Beowulf*

## To The Teacher

In order to allow the teacher maximum flexibility in his or her approach, we have grouped the prompts by sections. The teacher may, therefore, assign specific prompts or allow the students to select one or more prompts from each section

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## To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

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## *Beowulf*

### **Pre-Reading**

1. *Beowulf* is the oldest epic poem written in English. Scholars believe it was written some time between the eighth and tenth centuries, yet it takes place in a time following the year 449 A.D., when Germanic tribes first invaded England. However, the epic is not about native Englishmen; it is about those Germanic people whose descendants became the various ethnic groups who now inhabit Scandinavia—the Danes, Swedes, Norwegians, Icelanders, Germans, and Dutch. The poem deals with two particular Scandinavian tribes, the Danes and the Geats. The Danes lived on the Danish island of Zealand, and the Geats lived in Southern Sweden.

Imagine you decide to take a trip on a time machine. You buckle up and program in “anywhere, anytime.” You land in a place called Geatland, around the year 500. Describe a typical day in Geatland. Include what you see, hear, taste, touch, and smell. Since you probably know little about life in these times, there are no right or wrong answers. Just guess about what you think everyday life would have been like. Use your imagination!

2. Historians have studied the reasons why tribes in Europe left their homelands to go to other countries. Such reasons include the decline in the strength of the Roman Empire, deteriorating climate, trade opportunities, curiosity and the human need to explore, population growth, and pressure from invading Asian groups.

Imagine that you have decided to leave your homeland. You realize you will face hardships because intrusion into other people’s lands often results in war, especially if there are dwindling amounts of territory. Write a goodbye letter to your mother and father. Include the reasons why you have decided to leave.

## **Prelude**

3. In the Prelude, we read that a Dane named Scyld of Scefing “often wrested mead-benches from bands of enemies.” The Glossary tells us, “The mead-hall was a fortress and gathering place for medieval Norse and Germanic tribes. Members of society could gather there in safety under the king or chieftains’ protection so that they could feast, listen to or tell stories, and receive gifts from the king.”

Freewrite for fifteen minutes on why people would steal benches and what value or significance these benches could possibly have.

4. Mead, commonly thought to be the ancestor of all fermented drinks, is known to have existed in ancient history throughout Europe, Africa, and Asia. Archeological evidence of its existence has been found as far back as 7000 B.C.

Do some research on mead. Is there a standard recipe or are there several? Are there different ways to make it? Is it hard to make or easy? Are you surprised by the number of ingredients? Write down brief answers to the questions above and then compose an article about mead for a cooking column in your local newspaper. At the end of the article, include a recipe that you think would appeal to the readers.

5. Do a search on the origin of the word “medieval” and write down your findings in a paragraph. Include what interesting things your findings tell you about the English language.
6. Read about the medieval Norse and Germanic tribes and make a list of the top-ten amazing or intriguing facts that you find.

## **Chapter XVI**

25. Chapter XVI gives us more stories of medieval life, with the theme, “He who long sojourns through war-filled days in this world will have much of both pleasure and pain.”

Freewrite for fifteen minutes about this theme of pleasure and pain in times of war. Include any thoughts you have about people you know who have been in a war, movies you’ve seen, books you’ve read, stories you’ve heard, or events you’ve studied in history.

## **Chapter XVII**

26. In this chapter, celebration continues: “The lay, that bardic ballad, was sung to its end. Then the glad feast rose, and the sound of merriment grew brighter.” The ballad told of a man named Hengst who was “powerless to drive the ring-covered prow of his ship over the waters, as now the waves rolled fiercely with lashing winds or stood locked in icy winter’s chains.”

The sentence quoted above is interesting in that it contains both literal and figurative language about the waves. Literally, the waves “rolled fiercely with lashing winds.” Figuratively, the waves “stood locked in icy winter’s chains.” The waves are not literally locked in chains, but this is a wonderful description!

On your paper, draw lines to make two columns. In the left column, list ten things in nature like migrating birds, or great whales, or falling leaves. In the right column, describe those things using figurative language. Try to make your descriptions as vivid as the one in the text.

## **Chapter XXVII**

37. Before Beowulf leaves, he gives a sword, bound with gold, to the boat warden, who was ever after “more respected on the mead-bench for owning that blade, the ancient heirloom.”

Think about heirlooms. Are there any heirlooms in your family? If so, what are they? What significance do they hold for your family? If there are not any in your family that you might pass on, imagine an heirloom that you would like to leave to someone.

Write the answers to the following questions:

- What heirloom do you possess?
- Why is it valuable?
- To whom do you wish to leave this heirloom?
- What value do you place on this heirloom?
- What do you hope the person you leave it to will gain from owning it?

## **Chapter XXVIII**

38. When Beowulf lands on his home shore, “the world’s great candle, the sun, shone from the south.”

Make two headings across from each other at the top of your paper: “A Gem of Nature” and “A metaphor.” Number down the side of the page from 1 to 10. List ten things and next to them, write a metaphor for each one. Number 1 can be “sun” and “world’s great candle.” Use your imagination for numbers 2 through 10!

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*Beowulf*

57. Go back to question #1 where you were asked to guess what medieval life would have been like and read your answer.

After having read *Beowulf*, do you think you came close? Obviously the monsters and dragon aren't real, nor are *Beowulf's* feats, but there is much in the text that reveals what life was like.

Write a paragraph in which you compare what you guessed in question #1 to what you actually learned about medieval life while reading *Beowulf*.

58. John Gardner is an author famous for his novel, *Grendel*, written from the point of view of *Beowulf's* antagonist, Grendel. The novel explores the lives of the characters before *Beowulf* arrives; *Beowulf* plays only a minor role.

Imagine that you are John Gardner and write a first draft of your first page of your new novel, *Grendel*.

59. With regard to ancient myths about dragons, Rainer Maria Rilke has written that "perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us." Do you think this is true in the case of Grendel, Grendel's mother and the dragon in *Beowulf*? Brainstorm about the possibilities. Write an argument either for or against Rilke's proposition.

60. You have become rather well known as a medieval time-traveler, and your knowledge is in great demand.

Write the text for a AAA brochure about the medieval world.