

Beowulf vs Grendel

Activity 1

LO: I can evaluate an author's use of language.	What I think	My teacher thinks
<i>I can remember to:</i>		
reread the text carefully to find the kenning.	☐	
infer from context what it means.	☐	
make notes on what images the kenning makes you think about.	☐	

kennings are compound words used to describe. They are usually joined with a hyphen. Kennings often conjure interesting images in the mind of the audience.

Identify what the kenning is describing and write down what it makes you think of. Find the kennings in the text to read them in context.

Kenning	Describes	Makes you think of...
whale-way	<i>the sea</i>	<i>It makes me think about a pod of whales going on a long journey across a stormy sea.</i>
cat-fire		
six-stringer		
dragon-slayer		
salt-waves		
sea-garment		



“Stranger!” called Hygelac.

The men near the king stopped talking and picking their teeth and swilling stone-cold mead over their gums. In the hall of the king of the Geats, a hundred men listened. Almost silence.

“Stranger!” called Hygelac.

Silence. The cat-fire hissed and spat, golden-eyed tapestries winked out of the gloom. Silence. The man rose from the stranger’s seat.

“Your name?” demanded Hygelac.

“Gangleri,” said the stranger. “In your tongue: Wanderer.”

“All right, Wanderer. It’s time you sang for your supper.”

Men on the mead-benches shifted their buttocks, and stretched out their legs. The gathering faced inwards towards the fire.

Wanderer stood in the poet's place by the hearth and rubbed his one gleaming eye.

"I'll fuel you," he said, "with a true story, and one close to my heart. This is a story of past and present and future."

"True?" called out a young man, the king's nephew, Beowulf by name. "How can it be true if it's in the future?"

"Because it is not finished," said Wanderer. "You must finish it."

Beowulf, not more than twenty, felt his cheeks flush with quickening blood.

Wanderer stooped and scooped up six-stringer, the harp that always stood in the poet's place. Gleaming maplewood, white willow pegs, white fingertips, a quivering face.

"Listen!" said Wanderer. "A story of heroes!" Now he plucked the harp with a plectrum. "A story of monsters!" And plucked it again. "A story of Denmark!"

"Ugh!" said Hygelac, and spat into the straw at his feet. "The old enemy."

But Beowulf leaned forward. Hadn't his own father Ecgtheow once taken refuge with the Danes? Hadn't Hrothgar, the Danish king, saved his father's skin? Hrothgar ... he sounded a good man.

"The first king of the Danes was Scyld Scefing," said Wanderer. "I loved him dearly. Scyld Scefing was set adrift, no man knows where. He was found, a tiny child, on the shores of Denmark. But he became a mighty king. All the neighbouring tribes, over the whale's way, had to obey him and pay him tribute."

"Even the Geats," added Hygelac in disgust. "Do you know we had to pay the Danes tribute? Never again!"

"And when he died," said Wanderer, "he returned to the ocean by which he had come. He was laid by the mast, as Balder will be, surrounded by weapons and treasure. They placed a golden banner above his head and let the waves take him, they bequeathed him to the sea."

In Wanderer's hands, the harp cried the stabbing cries of seabirds, and wept the salt-waves' weeping.

"Scyld's son was Beow and his grandson Healfdene," said Wanderer, "both brave kings. But I sing now of Scyld's great-grandson, the living king, Hrothgar."

Beowulf nodded. Hrothgar! He had known it.

“When he was a young man, Hrothgar built a glorious feasting-hall, the finest on this middle-earth. Heorot. He called it Heorot. Day after day the rafters echoed with the din of merrymaking, men drinking mead and ale. Year after year the king rewarded his followers with gifts at the feast - arm-rings of twisted gold, brooches, buckles, belts, beaver-skin bags, can you imagine it?”

My father has stood on that hall-floor; Hrothgar gave my father treasures in Heorot: that’s what Beowulf was thinking.

“And can you imagine,” said Wanderer, pausing and piercing Beowulf with his sword of an eye, “there was one, just one outsider who could not bear the sounds coming from the hall - the laughter, the happiness, the poet’s song and harp in harmony?”

Wanderer spun round, raised his elbows, spread out his cloak, and pointed at his monstrous shadow on the wall, the shadow reaching right above the gables. “Grendel!” growled Wanderer. “Grendel is his name.”

The hall was firelit and warm and the Geats there felt chill.

“No one knows where he lives. He ranges the moors, the fen and the fastness. He is the father of every evil being - monsters and dark elves and spiteful spirits,” Wanderer slowly turned back to face his audience. “One night Grendel came to Heorot, he came calling on the Danes when they were dead drunk, sprawled out and snoring. That monster barged in and broke the necks of thirty thanes. Thirty! He carried them out into the night and away to his lair.”

Beowulf crouched on the edge of a bench, intent, almost angry.

“Next morning,” said Wanderer, “when Hrothgar came to the hall, its guardians were gone - all thirty of them. And of Grendel there was not a trace except his ... gruesome spoor.”

Wanderer had said the words so that no one could mistake them... nor escape them.

“He was back next day,” continued Wanderer. “And after that the Danes learned their lesson. Those who had escaped his clutches stowed themselves into dark crannies and corners in the outbuildings. The great hall Heorot stood deserted after nightfall.”

Hygelac shook his head and breathed deeply.

“For twelve years now Grendel has terrorized the Danes. Men and women and children, old and young, they all live under the dark death shadow. He is so strong, so huge, so loathsome, that no one is able to do anything about it.”

“I will then!” Beowulf leaped up in front of the Geats and heard himself shouting, “I will then!”

Wanderer’s eye gleamed. He watched the warrior, unblinking, and spurred him on.

“All right, Beowulf,” called the king. “That’s as it should be.”

There were cheers in Hygelac’s hall.

“You’ve proved yourself much the strongest man here,” said the king. “Now prove it elsewhere! Brave men should seek fame in far-off lands.”

The cheers were renewed, there were shouts and boasts in the hall. The mead-horn passed from man to man, and each of them toasted Beowulf.





The next morning Beowulf chose fourteen men, as keen and well-tempered as warriors can be, to travel with him to Denmark.

The stronghold of the Geats rang with the blows of black smiths and swung to the shouts of chandlers as armour was made ready and a boat was fitted out for the sea-voyage.

On the third day, there were kisses and embraces on the windswept beach; some said they feared that Beowulf and his companions would never return, some wept, some said nothing.

Then the warriors were eager to begin their journey. They turned their backs on mothers and fathers, on wives and children; they springheeled over the shingle and embarked.

The great sea-bird rode over the breakers. And as soon as the Geats hoisted a sail, a bleached sea-garment, the boat foamed at the prow and surged over the waves, urged on by the wind.

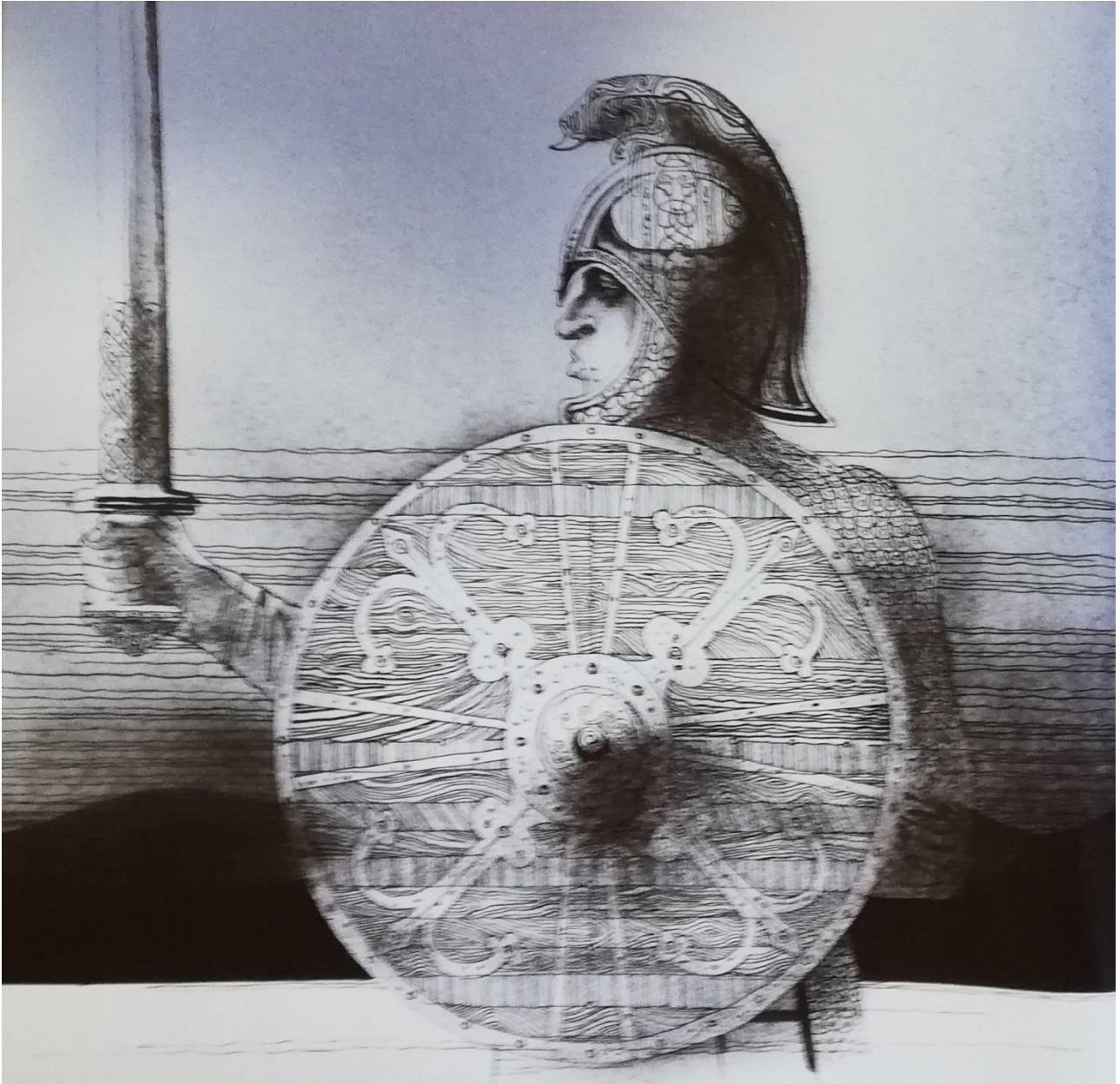
After that day and the night that darkened it, the warriors sighted shining cliffs, steep headlands - the shores of Denmark.

A Danish coastguard stood on a cliff-top. He watched the boat beat across the black-and-dazzling field of water, and heard it beach screaming on the shingle. When he saw men carrying flashing shields and gleaming war-gear down the gangway, he leaped on his horse, and brandishing a spear, galloped down to the water's edge.

“Warriors!” he shouted. “Who are you? Where do you come from?”

Beowulf held up his right hand like a flag. “Peace!”

“Your names!” demanded the coastguard. “What are you doing here? Before you step one foot further into Denmark.”



“Friends of the Danes!” called Beowulf.

“Foes of the monster!” said one of his companions.

“That’s the sum of it,” Beowulf said. “We’re all Geats. And I am Beowulf, the son of Ecgtheow. We’ve heard that Grendel has laid his hand on the Danes.”

“No man can stand against him,” said the coastguard.

“That is why we’ve come,” said Beowulf. “I’m here to pit myself - against this monster. I mean to put an end to Grendel?”

With a long bright gaze, a slow nod, a half-smile, the coastguard said, “Brave words, but every wise man knows that a wide ocean divides words from deeds.”

Beowulf smiled and inclined his head.

Then, the coastguard welcomed Beowulf and his companions, undertook to watch over their boat, and set them on the paved road that led to Heorot.

In high spirits, the Geats headed for the hall of the Danish king. Their helmets, crowned with boar-crests, shone under the sun; strong links of shining chain-mail clinked together. They followed the track over the surges of lonely moorland and, before dark, marched up to the huge timbered hall hung with many antlers, hemmed in by outbuildings. Heorot, Hrothgar’s court, bright home of brave men! A muster of warriors hurried out to meet the Geats, and challenged them as the coastguard had done.

“I am Beowulf, and my news is for the king.”

“Have you come as exiles?” asked one Danish warrior.

“Or,” said another man, “out of ambition?”

“My news is for Hrothgar,” Beowulf repeated. “You’ll hear about it soon enough. Ask him, will he give us leave to speak with him?”

The Danes told Beowulf and his band to leave all their weapons against one wall: linden shields inlaid with gold, coats of mail, a grey tipped forest of ash-spears. Then they led the Geats into Heorot.