Introduction

The legend of Beowulf is one of the oldest surviving poems written in Old English. It's an epic poem of over 3000 lines, which narrates the story of a heroic prince called Beowulf who saves King Hrothgar from an evil monster called Grendel and his mother. This extract will be engaging and exciting for pupils, as it sets the scene for a classic battle between good and evil. One of many modern translations, Ian Serraillier's version is more accessible for children, but it might be helpful to explain some background to the poem before you begin.

Answers

1. "huge hall" OR "high to heaven"
2. E.g. dangerous; unsafe; untrustworthy; unstable
3. E.g. One night when Hrothgar's men are sleeping, Grendel breaks into Heorot and kidnaps over twenty men. He takes them back to his home and eats them.
4. E.g. Very sad, because the hall rang with the "grief of the great King". He might also feel humiliated, as he hasn't been able to stop Grendel from terrorising his people.
5. E.g. The author's use of language makes Grendel sound evil. Descriptions like "fiend from hell" and "red ferocious eyes" create a threatening tone, which contrasts with the happiness at the start of the extract.
6. Any appropriate answer. E.g. Yes, because I want to know what happens to Grendel. I don't think he'll get away with killing so many people. The poem is also very exciting so it makes me want to read more.

Extra Activities

- Ask pupils to underline all the alliteration in the extract. As a class, discuss what effect it has on the rhythm. Lines 16-21 don't have any alliteration at all — why do pupils think the author did this?
- Tell the class the features of epic poetry (e.g. a long narrative poem that is usually about heroes and adventures). Ask them to rewrite an extract from a legend of their choosing, for example Robin Hood or an Arthurian legend, as an epic poem. Encourage them to use alliteration where they can.
- As a class, write a short summary of what happens in the extract. Then split pupils into groups and ask them to perform it. Encourage them to think about different ways of presenting the story, e.g. with a narrator reading the extract, by creating dialogue for the characters or with sound effects but no speech.
- Beowulf was written during the Anglo-Saxon period. Introduce pupils to some Anglo-Saxon history — where the Anglo-Saxons came from, when they came to England and what sort of lives they lived. Ask pupils to research the Anglo-Saxon burial site at Sutton Hoo in East Anglia. They should use their findings to write a newspaper report about the 1939 discovery of the ship buried there.
- Explain to pupils that this poem is set in Scandinavia, which is a region of Europe. Ask pupils if they know which countries are in Scandinavia and see if they can identify the region on a map. Then ask pupils to research one Scandinavian country and come up with a list of 'top ten' facts about it.