

## Essay 1–Comparing *Beowulf* Translations

Select one of the following four passages from *Beowulf* (194-224, 790-818, 1537-69, or 2672-2708) and compare Seamus Heaney’s translation (in the *Norton Anthology*) with either E. Talbot Donaldson’s prose translation or with Alan Sullivan and Timothy Murphy’s alliterative verse translation. Look for differences in word choice, syntax, and poetic form and explain how these differences affect the meaning of the passage. Reproduce both translations of the passage early in your essay and refer to them frequently throughout your analysis.

Begin your paper with a genuine question about how the translations differ. Make that question the last sentence of your first paragraph. The rest of the essay should answer this question. Present your analysis in a clear and well-organized manner. Each paragraph should deal with a specific element of the translations, explain how that element works, and present its main point in a clear topic sentence. Draw your conclusions in your final paragraph. Briefly sum up the answers to the question posed at the start of your essay.

Read both translations of the passage slowly, carefully, and repeatedly in order to make worthwhile observations on them. Your assignment is to analyze the translation itself, not the characters who speak the lines, or the plot they’re involved in, or the themes or ideas they express. So don’t get bogged down in plot summary or paraphrase. Everything you say in your analysis must relate directly to the actual words of the text. Don’t get sidetracked; stick with the words. The more specific you are the better your analysis will be.

Make your prose as clear and concise as possible. Don’t waste my time and yours trying to sound impressive.

Your essay should be 2-3 pages (500-800 words). Put the exact word count for your paper on the final page.

Since your only source for this essay will be your chosen passage, you do not need to have a Works Cited page. Use proper MLA style for formatting your document. (See <http://drmarkwomack.com/mla-style/>: “Document Format,” “Anatomy of a Citation,” and “How to Quote Verse.”)

In evaluating your essay, I will focus on the intelligence and specificity of your ideas, the precision of your analysis, the clarity of your prose, and the originality and persuasiveness of your thesis.

### **Due Date:**

- I will write comments on all papers submitted on or before Monday, **September 21**.
- I will write little or nothing on papers submitted on or before Monday, **September 28**, but I will grade these papers just the same as those turned in on the earlier date.
- I will assign a zero to any papers not turned in by Monday, **September 28**.

## E. Talbot Donaldson (1966)

*Beowulf: The Donaldson Translation, Backgrounds And Sources, Criticism.* Norton, New York, 1975

### *Beowulf Sails to Denmark (194-224)*

A thane of Hygelac, a good man among the Geats, heard in his homeland of Grendel's deeds: of mankind he was the strongest of might in the time of this life, noble and great. He bade that a good ship be made ready for him, said he would seek the war-king over the swan's road, the famous prince, since he had need of men. Very little did wise men blame him for that adventure, though he was dear to them; they urged the brave one on, examined the omens. From the folk of the Geats the good man had chosen warriors of the bravest that he could find; one of fifteen he led the way, the warrior sought the wooden ship, the sea-skilled one the land's edge. The time had come: the ship was on the waves, the boat under the cliff. The warriors eagerly climbed on the prow -- the sea currents eddied, sea against sand: men bore bright weapons into the ship's bosom, splendid armor. Men pushed the well-braced ship from shore, warriors on a well-wished voyage. Then oer the sea waves, blown by the wind, the foam-necked traveled, most like a bird, until at good time on the second day the curved prow had come to where the seafarers could see land, the sea-cliffs shine, towering hills, great headlands. Then was the sea crossed, the journey at end.

### *Beowulf Fights Grendel (790-818)*

Not for anything would the protector of warriors let the murderous guest go off alive: he did not consider his life-days of use to any of the nations. There more than enough of Beowulf's earls drew swords, old heirlooms, wished to protect the life of their dear lord, famous prince, however they might. They did not know when they entered the fight, hardy-spirited warriors, and when they thought to hew him on every side, to seek his soul, that not any of the best of irons on earth, no war-sword, would touch the evil-doer: for with a charm he had made victory-weapons useless, every sword-edge. His departure to death from the time of this life was to be wretched; and the alien spirit was to travel far off into the power of fiends. Then he who before had brought trouble of heart to mankind, committed many crimes - he was at war with God - found that his body would do him no good, for the great-hearted kinsman of Hygelac had him by the hand. Each was hateful to the other alive. The awful monster had lived to feel pain in his body, a huge wound in his shoulder was exposed, his sinews sprang apart, his bone-locks broke.

### *Beowulf Fights Grendel's Mother (1537-69)*

Then he seized by the hair Grendel's mother - the man of the War-Geats did not shrink from the fight. Battle-hardened, now swollen with rage, he pulled his deadly foe so that she fell to the floor. Quickly in her turn she repaid him his gift with her grim claws and clutched at him: then weary-hearted, the strongest of warriors, of foot-soldiers, stumbled so that he fell. Then she sat upon the hall-guest and drew her knife, broad and bright-edged. She would avenge her child, her only son. The woven breast-armor lay on his shoulder: that protected his life, withstood entry of point or or edge. Then the son of Ecgtheow would have fared amiss under the wide ground, the champion of the Geats, if the battle-shirt had not brought help, the hard war-net - and holy God brought about victory in war; the wise Lord, Ruler of the Heavens, decided it with right, easily, when Beowulf had stood up again.

Then he saw among the armor a victory-blessed blade, an old sword made by the giants, strong of its edges, glory of warriors: it was the best of weapons, except that it was larger than any other man might bear to war-sport, good and adorned, the work of giants. He seized the linked hilt, he who fought for the Scyldings, savage and slaughter-bent, drew the patterned blade; desperate of life, he struck angrily so that it bit her hard on the neck, broke the bone-rings. The blade went through all the doomed body. She fell to the floor, the sword was sweating, the man rejoiced in his work.

### *Beowulf and Wiglaf Kill the Dragon (2672-2708)*

Fire advanced in waves; shield burned to the boss; mail-shirt might give no help to the young spear-warrior; but the young man went quickly under his kinsman's shield when his own was consumed with flames. Then the war-king was again mindful of fame, struck with his war-sword with great strength so that it stuck in the head-bone, driven with force: Nægling broke, the sword of Beowulf failed in the fight, old and steel-gray. It was not ordained for him that iron edges might help in the combat. Too strong was the hand that I have heard strained every sword with its stroke, when he bore wound-hardened weapon to battle: he was none the better for it.

Then for the third time the folk-harmer, the fearful fire-dragon, was mindful of feuds, set upon the brave one when the chance came, hot and battle-grim seized all his neck with his sharp fangs: he was smeared with life-blood, gore welled out in waves.

Then, I have heard, at the need of the folk-king the earl at his side made his courage known, his might and his keenness - as was natural to him. He took no heed for that head, but the hand of the brave man was burned as he helped his kinsman, as the man in armor struck the hateful foe a little lower down, so that the sword sank in, shining and engraved, and then the fire began to subside. The king himself then still controlled his senses, drew the battle-knife, biting and war-sharp, that he wore on his mail-shirt: the protector of the Weather-Geats cut the worm through the middle. They felled the foe, courage drove his life out, and they had destroyed him together, the two noble kinsmen.

Alan Sullivan and Timothy Murphy (2004)  
*Beowulf*. Pearson Longman, New York, 2004

*Beowulf Sails to Denmark* (194-224)

A thane of Hygelac heard in his homeland  
of Grendel's deeds. Great among Geats,  
this man was more mighty than any then living.  
He summoned and stocked a swift wave-courser,  
and swore to sail over the swan-road  
as one warrior should for another in need.  
His elders could find no fault with his offer,  
and awed by the omens, they urged him on.  
He gathered the bravest of Geatish guardsmen.  
One of fifteen, the skilled sailor  
strode to his ship at the ocean's edge.

He was keen to embark: his keel was beached  
under the cliff where sea-currents curled  
surf against sand; his soldiers were ready.  
Over the bow they boarded in armor,  
bearing their burnished weapons below,  
their gilded war-gear to the boat's bosom.  
Other men shoved the ship from the shore,  
and off went the band, their wood-braced vessel  
bound for the venture with wind on the waves  
and foam under bow, like a fulmar in flight.

On the second day their upswept prow  
slid into sight of steep hillsides,  
bright cliffs, wide capes at the close of their crossing,  
the goal of their voyage gained in good time.

*Beowulf Fights Grendel* (790-818)

That shielder of men meant by no means  
to let the death-dealer leave with his life,  
a life worthless to anyone elsewhere.  
Then the young soldiers swung their old swords  
again and again to save their guardian,  
their kingly comrade, however they could.  
Engaging with Grendel and hoping to hew him  
from every side, they scarcely suspected  
that blades wielded by worthy warriors  
never would cut to the criminal's quick.  
The spell was spun so strongly about him  
that the finest iron of any on earth,  
the sharpest sword-edge left him unscathed.  
Still he was soon to be stripped of his life  
and sent on a sore sojourn to Hell.  
The strength of his sinews would serve him no more;  
no more would he menace mankind with his crimes,  
his grudge against God, for the high-hearted kinsman  
of King Hygelac had hold of his hand.  
Each found the other loathsome in life;  
but the murderous man-bane got a great wound  
as tendons were torn, shoulder shorn open,  
and bone-locks broken.

*Beowulf Fights Grendel's Mother (1537-69)*

Grabbing the tresses of Grendel's mother,  
the Geats' battle-chief, bursting with wrath,  
wrestled her down: no deed to regret  
but a favor repaid as fast as she fell.

With her grim grasp she grappled him still.  
Weary, the warrior stumbled and slipped;  
the strongest foot-soldier fell to the foe.  
Astraddle the hall-guest, she drew her dagger,  
broad and bright-bladed, bent on avenging  
her only offspring. His mail-shirt shielded  
shoulder and breast. Barring the entry  
of edge or point, the woven war-shirt  
saved him from harm. Ecgtheow's son,  
the leader of Geats, would have lost his life  
under Earth's arch but for his armor  
and heaven's favor furnishing help.  
The Ruler of All readily aided  
the righteous man when he rose once more.

He beheld in a hoard of ancient arms  
a battle-blessed sword with strong-edged blade,  
a marvelous weapon men might admire  
though over-heavy for any to heft  
when finely forged by giants of old.  
The Scyldings' shielder took hold of the hilt  
and swung up the sword, though despairing of life.  
He struck savagely, hit her hard neck  
and broke the bone-rings, cleaving clean through  
her fated flesh. She fell to the floor;  
the sword sweated; the soldier rejoiced.

*Beowulf and Wiglaf Kill the Dragon (2672-2708)*

His dreadful fire-wind drove in a wave,  
charring young Wiglaf's shield to the boss,  
nor might a mail-shirt bar that breath  
from burning the brave spear-bearer's breast.  
Wiglaf took cover close to his kinsman,  
shielded by iron when linden was cinder.  
Then the war-king, recalling past conquests,  
struck with full strength straight at the head.  
His battle-sword, Naegling, stuck there and split,  
shattered in combat, so sharp was the shock  
to Beowulf's great gray-banded blade.  
He never was granted the gift of a sword  
as hard and strong as the hand that held it.  
I have heard that he broke blood-hardened brands,  
so the weapon-bearer was none the better.

The fearful fire-drake, scather of strongholds,  
flung himself forward a final time,  
wild with wounds yet wily and sly.  
In the heat of the fray, he hurtled headlong  
to fasten his fangs in the foe's throat.  
Beowulf's life-blood came bursting forth  
on those terrible tusks. Just then, I am told,  
the second warrior sprang from his side,  
a man born for battle proving his mettle,  
keen to strengthen his kinsman in combat.  
He took no heed of the hideous head  
scorching his hand as he hit lower down.  
The sword sank in, patterned and plated;  
the flames of the foe faltered, faded.  
Quick-witted still, the king unsheathed  
the keen killing-blade he kept in his corselet.  
Then the Geats' guardian gutted the dragon,  
felling that fiend with the help of his friend,  
two kinsmen together besting the terror.