

Grendel's mother is a vengeful creature who illustrates the constant cycle of war in the poem, even when the enemy appears to be defeated.

Beowulf
"The Battle with Grendel's Mother"

Then sank they to sleep and Grendel's mother,
monster of women, mourned her woe.
And his mother now,
gloomy and grim, would go on that quest
5 of sorrow, the death of her son to avenge.
To Herot came she, where helmeted Danes
slept in the hall. Too soon came back
old ills of the earls, when in she burst,
the mother of Grendel. Less grim, though, that terror,
10 even as terror of woman in war is less,
might of maid, than of men in arms . . .
Haste was hers; she would flee afar
and save her life when the liegemen saw her.
Yet a single nobleman up she seized
15 fast and firm, as she fled to the moor.
He was for Hrothgar of heroes the dearest . . .
-- Nor was Beowulf there; he slept in another house.
Uproar filled Heorot; the hand all had viewed,
blood-flecked, she bore with her.
20 Beowulf was brought in haste,
and he asked if the night had passed in peace.

Hrothgar spoke, "Pain is renewed
to Danish folk. Dead is my wise adviser, Aeschere.
Here in Heorot a hand hath slain him.
25 Grendel in grimmest grasp you killed, --
Now another comes, keen and cruel, her kin to avenge,
I have heard that such a pair is sometimes seen,
mighty marsh-stalkers haunting the moorland,
wandering spirits: one of them seemed,
30 so far as my folk could fairly judge,
of womankind; and one, accursed,
in man's guise trod the misery-track
of exile, though huger than human bulk.
Grendel in days long gone they named him.

35 They live in secret places, windy
Cliffs, wolf-dens where water pours
From the rocks, then runs underground, where mist
Steams like black clouds, and the groves of trees
Growing out over their lake are all covered
40 With frozen spray, and wind down snakelike

Roots that reach as far as the water
And help keep it dark. At night that lake
Burns like a torch. No one knows its bottom,
No wisdom reaches such depths. A deer,
45 Hunted through the woods by packs of hounds,
A stag with great horns, though driven through the forest
From faraway places, prefers to die
On those shores, refuses to save its life
In that water. It isn't far, nor is it
50 A pleasant spot! When the wind stirs
And storms, waves splash toward the sky,
As dark as the air, as black as the rain
That the heavens weep. Our only help,
Again, lies with you. Grendel's mother
55 Is hidden in her terrible home, in a place
You've not seen. Seek it, if you dare! Save us,
Once more, and again twisted gold,
Heaped-up ancient treasure, will reward you
For the battle you win!"

60 Beowulf spoke, "Sorrow not, king! It is better
to avenge friends than to fruitlessly mourn them."
On then went Beowulf and the warriors,
over stone-cliffs steep,
through narrow passes and unknown ways.
65 The Danish men had sorrow of soul,
when they found Aeschere's head by the lake.
Waves were welling, the warriors saw,
hot with blood; but the horn sang often
battle-song bold. The warriors sat down,
70 and watched on the water worm-like things,
sea-dragons strange that sounded the deep.
Then Unferth offered Beowulf his sword:
"Hrunting" they named the hilted sword,
of old-time heirlooms easily first;
75 iron was its edge, all etched with poison, with battle-blood hardened.
For Unferth thought not of that speech he had made,
drunk with wine. Now this weapon he lent
to a stouter swordsman. Unferth himself, though, dared not
under the waters wager his life. So he lost he his glory,

80 Beowulf leaped into the lake, would not wait for anyone's
Answer; the heaving water covered him
Over. For hours he sank through the waves;
At last he saw the mud of the bottom.
And all at once the greedy she-wolf
85 Who'd ruled those waters for half a hundred
Years discovered him, saw that a creature
From above had come to explore the bottom
Of her wet world. She welcomed him in her claws,

Clutched at him savagely but could not harm him,
90 Tried to work her fingers through the tight
Ring-woven mail on his breast, but tore
And scratched in vain. Then she carried him, armor
And sword and all, to her home; he struggled
To free his weapon, and failed. The fight
95 Brought other monsters swimming to see
Her catch, a host of sea beasts who beat at
His mail shirt, stabbing with tusks and teeth
As they followed along. Then he realized, suddenly,
That she'd brought him into someone's battle-hall,
100 And there the water's heat could not hurt him,
Nor anything in the lake attack him through
The building's high-arching roof. A brilliant
Light burned all around him, the lake
Itself like a fiery flame.
Then he saw
105 The mighty water witch, and swung his sword,
His ring-marked blade, straight at her head;
The iron sang its fierce song,
Sang Beowulf's strength. But her guest
Discovered that no sword could slice her evil
110 Skin, that Hrunting could not hurt her, was useless
Now when he needed it. They wrestled, she ripped
And tore and clawed at him, bit holes in his helmet,
And that too failed him; for the first time in years
Of being worn to war it would earn no glory;
115 It was the last time anyone would wear it. But Beowulf
Longed only for fame, leaped back
Into battle. He tossed his sword aside,
Angry; the steel-edged blade lay where
He'd dropped it. If weapons were useless he'd use
120 His hands, the strength in his fingers. So fame
Comes to the men who mean to win it
And care about nothing else! He raised
His arms and seized her by the shoulder; anger
Doubled his strength, he threw her to the floor.
125 She fell, Grendel's fierce mother, and the Geats'
Proud prince was ready to leap on her. But she rose
At once and repaid him with her clutching claws,
Wildly tearing at him. He was weary, that best
And strongest of soldiers; his feet stumbled
130 And in an instant she had him down, held helpless.
Squatting with her weight on his stomach, she drew
A dagger, brown with dried blood and prepared
To avenge her only son. But he was stretched
On his back, and her stabbing blade was blunted
135 By the woven mail shirt he wore on his chest.
The hammered links held; the point
Could not touch him. He'd have traveled to the bottom of the earth,
Edgethó's son, and died there, if that shining
Woven metal had not helped—and Holy
140 God, who sent him victory, gave judgment
For truth and right, Ruler of the Heavens,
Once Beowulf was back on his feet and fighting.

Then he saw, hanging on the wall, a heavy
Sword, hammered by giants, strong
145 And blessed with their magic, the best of all weapons
But so massive that no ordinary man could lift
Its carved and decorated length. He drew it
From its scabbard, broke the chain on its hilt,
And then, savage, now, angry
150 And desperate, lifted it high over his head
And struck with all the strength he had left,
Caught her in the neck and cut it through,
Broke bones and all. Her body fell
To the floor, lifeless, the sword was wet
155 With her blood, and Beowulf rejoiced at the sight.
The brilliant light shone, suddenly,
As though burning in that hall, and as bright as Heaven's
Own candle, lit in the sky. He looked
At her home, then following along the wall
160 Went walking, his hands tight on the sword,
His heart still angry. He was hunting another
Dead monster, and took his weapon with him
For final revenge against Grendel's vicious
Attacks, his nighttime raids, over
165 And over, coming to Herot when Hrothgar's
Men slept, killing them in their beds,
Eating some on the spot, fifteen
Or more, and running to his loathsome moor
With another such sickening meal waiting
170 In his pouch. But Beowulf repaid him for those visits,
Found him lying dead in his corner,
Armless, exactly as that fierce fighter
Had sent him out from Herot, then struck off
His head with a single swift blow. The body
175 Jerked for the last time, then lay still.

Soon, then, the wise companions
who waited with Hrothgar, watching the flood,
saw that the tossing waters grew blood-stained.
To many it seemed that the wolf-of-the-waves had won Beowulf's life.
180 The ninth hour came. The noble Danes
left and went homeward, but the Geats sat on,
stared at the waves, sick in heart,
and wished, to see their lord again.
Then Beowulf swam to the shore, sturdy-in-spirit.
185 The Geats went to greet him, and thanked God
that they could see him again safe and sound.