

## Module 3: Exploring Good, Evil, and Noble Sacrifice

### Topic 2 Content: The Battle With the Dragon

#### From *Beowulf*

- Beowulf spake, and a battle-vow made  
his last of all: "I have lived through many  
wars in my youth; now once again,  
old folk-defender, feud will I seek,  
[5] do doughty deeds, if the dark destroyer  
forth from his cavern come to fight me!"  
Then hailed he the helmeted heroes all,  
for the last time greeting his liegemen dear,  
comrades of war: "I should carry no weapon,  
[10] no sword to the serpent, if sure I knew  
how, with such enemy, else my vows  
I could gain as I did in Grendel's day.  
But fire in this fight I must fear me now,  
and poisonous breath; so I bring with me  
[15] breastplate and board. From the barrow's keeper  
no footbreadth flee I. One fight shall end  
our war by the wall, as Wyrð allots,  
all mankind's master. My mood is bold  
but forbears to boast o'er this battling-flyer.  
[20] —Now abide by the barrow, ye breastplate-mailed,  
ye heroes in harness, which of us twain  
better from battle-rush bear his wounds.  
Wait ye the finish. The fight is not yours,  
nor meet for any but me alone  
[25] to measure might with this monster here  
and play the hero. Hardily I  
shall win that wealth, or war shall seize,  
cruel killing, your king and lord!"  
Up stood then with shield the sturdy champion,  
[30] stayed by the strength of his single manhood,  
and hardy 'neath helmet his harness bore  
under cleft of the cliffs: no coward's path!  
Soon spied by the wall that warrior chief,  
survivor of many a victory-field  
[35] where foemen fought with furious clashings,  
an arch of stone; and within, a stream  
that broke from the barrow. The brooklet's wave  
was hot with fire. The hoard that way  
he never could hope unharmed to near,  
[40] or endure those deeps, for the dragon's flame.  
Then let from his breast, for he burst with rage,  
the Weder-Geat prince a word outgo;  
stormed the stark-heart; stern went ringing  
and clear his cry 'neath the cliff-rocks gray.  
[45] The hoard-guard heard a human voice;  
his rage was enkindled. No respite now  
for pact of peace! The poison-breath

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- of that foul worm first came forth from the cave,  
hot reek-of-fight: the rocks resounded.
- [50] Stout by the stone-way his shield he raised,  
lord of the Geats, against the loathed-one;  
while with courage keen that coiled foe  
came seeking strife. The sturdy king  
had drawn his sword, not dull of edge,
- [55] heirloom old; and each of the two  
felt fear of his foe, though fierce their mood.  
Stoutly stood with his shield high-raised  
the warrior king, as the worm now coiled  
together amain: the mailed-one waited.
- [60] Now, spire by spire, fast sped and glided  
that blazing serpent. The shield protected,  
soul and body a shorter while  
for the hero-king than his heart desired,  
could his will have wielded the welcome respite
- [65] but once in his life! But Wyrð denied it,  
and victory's honors.—His arm he lifted  
lord of the Geats, the grim foe smote  
with atheling's heirloom. Its edge was turned  
brown blade, on the bone, and bit more feebly
- [70] than its noble master had need of then  
in his baleful stress.—Then the barrow's keeper  
waxed full wild for that weighty blow,  
cast deadly flames; wide drove and far  
those vicious fires. No victor's glory
- [75] the Geats' lord boasted; his brand had failed,  
naked in battle, as never it should,  
excellent iron!—'Twas no easy path  
that Edgetho's honored heir must tread  
over the plain to the place of the foe;
- [80] for against his will he must win a home  
elsewhere far, as must all men, leaving  
this lapsing life!—Not long it was  
ere those champions grimly closed again.  
The hoard-guard was heartened; high heaved his breast
- [85] once more; and by peril was pressed again,  
enfolded in flames, the folk-commander!  
Nor yet about him his band of comrades,  
sons of athelings, armed stood  
with warlike front: to the woods they bent them,
- [90] their lives to save. But the soul of one  
with care was cumbered. Kinship true  
can never be marred in a noble mind!

- Wiglaf his name was, Wexstan's son,  
linden-thane loved, the lord of Scylfings,
- [95] Aelfhere's kinsman. His king he now saw

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- with heat under helmet hard oppressed.  
He minded the prizes his prince had given him,  
wealthy seat of the Waegmunding line,  
and folk-rights that his father owned
- [100] Not long he lingered. The linden yellow,  
his shield, he seized; the old sword he drew:—  
as heirloom of Eanmund earth-dwellers knew it,  
who was slain by the sword-edge, son of Ohtere,  
friendless exile, erst in fray
- [105] killed by Wexstan, who won for his kin  
brown-bright helmet, breastplate ringed,  
old sword of Eotens, Onela's gift,  
weeds of war of the warrior-thane,  
battle-gear brave: though a brother's child
- [110] had been felled, the feud was unfelt by Onela.  
For winters this war-gear Wexstan kept,  
breastplate and board, till his bairn had grown  
earlship to earn as the old sire did:  
then he gave him, mid Geats, the gear of battle,
- [115] portion huge, when he passed from life,  
fared aged forth. For the first time now  
with his leader-lord the liegeman young  
was bidden to share the shock of battle.  
Neither softened his soul, nor the sire's bequest
- [120] weakened in war. So the worm found out  
when once in fight the foes had met!  
Wiglaf spake,—and his words were sage;  
sad in spirit, he said to his comrades:—  
"I remember the time, when mead we took,
- [125] what promise we made to this prince of ours  
in the banquet-hall, to our breaker-of-rings,  
for gear of combat to give him requital,  
for hard-sword and helmet, if hap should bring  
stress of this sort! Himself who chose us
- [130] from all his army to aid him now,  
urged us to glory, and gave these treasures,  
because he counted us keen with the spear  
and hardy 'neath helm, though this hero-work  
our leader hoped unhelped and alone
- [135] to finish for us,—folk-defender  
who hath got him glory greater than all men  
for daring deeds! Now the day is come  
that our noble master has need of the might  
of warriors stout. Let us stride along
- [140] the hero to help while the heat is about him  
glowing and grim! For God is my witness  
I am far more fain the fire should seize  
along with my lord these limbs of mine!  
Unsuited it seems our shields to bear
- [145] homeward hence, save here we essay

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to fell the foe and defend the life  
of the Weders' lord. I wot 'twere shame  
on the law of our land if alone the king  
out of Geatish warriors woe endured

[150] and sank in the struggle! My sword and helmet,  
breastplate and board, for us both shall serve!"

Through slaughter-reek strode he to succor his chieftain,  
his battle-helm bore, and brief words spake:—

"Beowulf dearest, do all bravely,  
[155] as in youthful days of yore thou vowedst  
that while life should last thou wouldst let no wise  
thy glory droop! Now, great in deeds,  
atheling steadfast, with all thy strength  
shield thy life! I will stand to help thee."