



Grendel

Study Guide by Course Hero



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👁 Book Basics

AUTHOR

John Gardner

YEAR PUBLISHED

1971

GENRE

Fantasy

PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATOR

Grendel is narrated in the first person by the monster Grendel,

who has an uncanny ability to move beyond his own consciousness to provide insight into other characters.

TENSE

Much of *Grendel* is written in the present tense, but multiple flashback sequences are written in the past tense.

ABOUT THE TITLE

Grendel takes its name from the book's protagonist and narrator, a monstrous creature who wreaks havoc in medieval Denmark and who originates in the English epic poem *Beowulf*.

🕒 In Context

Grendel is based on the epic poem *Beowulf*, the oldest known epic written in Old English, the language of Anglo-Saxon England before the 1066 Norman invasion and the precursor to modern English. At more than 3,000 lines, *Beowulf* may also be the longest poem written in Old English. The poem's medieval manuscript is estimated to be around 1,000 years old, but scholars believe the epic was passed down orally for many generations before it became a written record. Today, the manuscript is housed in the British Library in London.

Beowulf details the heroic acts of its title character, starting with his defeat of the monster Grendel, who periodically attacked the court of the Danish king Hrothgar for 12 years and is possibly the oldest villain in English literature. After *Beowulf* engages in hand-to-hand combat with Grendel and tears off the monster's arm, Grendel retreats to his cave and dies. Seeking revenge, Grendel's mother attacks Hrothgar's court. Then *Beowulf* enters Grendel's cave, kills his mother, and departs with Grendel's head. *Beowulf* then returns to his homeland, where he rules as king for 50 years. When a dragon terrorizes his kingdom, *Beowulf* fights and defeats it; however, he is mortally injured in the battle, and he dies a hero.

Two points drew Gardner to the story of Beowulf: the sensual visual images of the monster and the dragon, and the thematic link between humans and their inner monsters. Gardner's *Grendel* serves as a kind of prequel to *Beowulf*, describing how Grendel came to be at war with Hrothgar and his court. Grendel's mother and the dragon play prominent roles in Grendel's development, but Grendel's story ends essentially where *Beowulf's* begins, with the fight between the two that results in Grendel's death.

In 1971, when asked about his choice of subject matter for his seminal novel, John Gardner told an interviewer for the *Paris Review*,

There is no way an animator, or anyone else, can create an image from Grendel as exciting as the image in the reader's mind: Grendel is a monster, and living in the first person, because we're all in some sense monsters, trapped in our own language and habits of emotion. Grendel expresses feelings we all feel—enormous hostility, frustration, disbelief, and so on, so that the reader, projecting his own monster, projects a monster that is, for him, the perfect horror show.

Author Biography

John Gardner was born in Batavia, a small town in western New York, on July 21, 1933. His mother was an English teacher and his father was a lay minister, so his childhood was steeped in academic influences. Another pivotal influence was the loss of his younger brother, Gilbert, in a farming accident; Gardner was at the wheel of the machine involved. Many of Gardner's

thematic explorations in *Grendel* are linked with this incident, such as the examination of the monster inside everyone.

Gardner enjoyed a distinguished academic career. Although he planned to major in chemistry, he gravitated toward literature in college and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Washington University in St. Louis in 1955. He then attended the University of Iowa, where he earned a Master of Arts degree in 1956 and a PhD in medieval literature and creative writing in 1958. He taught at a number of colleges and universities, including Oberlin College in Ohio, Bennington College in Vermont, and the University of Rochester. But writing, not teaching, was his greatest calling; he once observed, "It's as if God put me on earth to write."

He published two novels, *The Resurrection* and *The Wreckage of Agathon*, before *Grendel* brought him fame in 1971. He published four more novels after *Grendel*, including *October Light*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1976. He also released translations of the classical epics *Jason and Medeia* (1973) and *Gilgamesh* (1984). He studied Old English and Middle English literature, which likely provided the background and inspiration for *Grendel*, and he also produced a children's book, *Dragon, Dragon and Other Tales* (1975), which included adaptations of other medieval stories, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Additionally, Gardner wrote three books addressing the process and practice of writing that have become staples in creative writing instruction. The first, *On Moral Fiction* (1978), criticized contemporary literature for its pessimistic bent and for lacking the depth that might inspire readers to pursue morality. While the monster Grendel cannot be considered an optimist, his character reflects both negative and positive qualities rooted in several different philosophies.

By the time of *Grendel's* publication in 1971, Gardner had developed a strong reputation in academic and literary circles for writing that combines eloquent narrative, Gothic elements, and philosophy or intellectualism. His protagonists are said to be characters whose free will is subverted by myth. However, neither of his two previously published novels was commercially successful. Perhaps *Grendel's* relatively familiar subject matter—the legend of a monster from the epic poem *Beowulf*—and the popularity of the fantasy genre and medievalism in 1960s' and 1970s' counterculture brought Gardner more mainstream recognition. *Grendel's* critical reception and sales were strong enough to earn Gardner a publishing contract and an advance for two more novels.

Grendel remains the most famous of Gardner's works. In 1981, it was adapted into an animated film, titled *Grendel Grendel Grendel*.

Although Gardner's life and career were cut short by a motorcycle accident on September 14, 1982, he left behind a substantial body of work that reflects his commitment to language and writing and the diversity of his interests.

Characters

Grendel

Grendel is born a monster, and he spends his early life feeding on cattle and other animals. He watches in fascination as Hrothgar becomes king and builds his empire. Although Grendel is put off by men's wasteful ways, he is also fascinated by their lives and spies on their meadhall. Only after Hrothgar's men repeatedly attack Grendel does he make war on them, continuing for 12 years until a visiting hero from another country kills him.

Hrothgar

Hrothgar becomes a king by making war and establishing treaties with neighboring kings. He and young Grendel meet one day when Grendel is stuck in a tree. Perceiving Grendel as a fungus or evil spirit, Hrothgar throws his battle-ax at Grendel, and their lifelong struggle begins. Hrothgar and his men come to live in terror of Grendel's late-night raids.

Grendel's mother

Grendel's mother, pale, slightly glowing, and fearful, lives in a dank cave with Grendel. She smothers her son in her attempts to comfort and control him. When Grendel gets stuck in a tree for many long hours and is attacked by Hrothgar and his men, she rescues him, knocking down trees with her strength. As Grendel nears his fateful encounter with the stranger who will bring Grendel's death, Grendel's mother senses the threat and conveys a warning message to Grendel telepathically. However, on his last night before the fateful battle, she does

not try to stop him from leaving their cave.

The dragon

When Grendel is frustrated by men's wasteful, violent ways and unfriendliness toward him, he questions the meaning of existence; the dragon offers him advice and a worldview both nihilistic and practical, telling Grendel nothing he does matters in the grand scheme of the universe. Grendel becomes permeated with the dragon's view of reality and energy, feeling it inside, and even smelling it at times.

Character Map



- Main character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Full Character List

Character	Description
Grendel	Grendel is a monster whose ongoing isolation drives him to wage war on the humans in Hrothgar's kingdom.
Hrothgar	Hrothgar is the powerful and violent king of the Danes who later tries to establish peace and rid his kingdom of Grendel's presence.
Grendel's mother	Grendel's mother is barely verbal, but she is fiercely protective, with a clinginess Grendel finds repelling.
The dragon	The dragon is an ancient serpent, weary of time and knowing all things past and future, including his own death to come and other creatures' thoughts; he jealously guards his precious treasure of gold and jewels.
Hrothulf	Hrothgar's nephew, Hrothulf, wants to rule the kingdom, and the young man's ambition to take the throne leads to tension with his uncle.
Ork	Ork is the oldest of Hrothgar's priests, and his encounter with Grendel, whom Ork knows only as the "Great Destroyer," affirms his beliefs about the gods.
First priest	The first priest is one of three who disagree with Ork's assessment of his meeting with the "Great Destroyer," questioning whether it even really happened; the priests are more concerned with their reputations and positions than with seeking truth.
Second priest	The second priest is one of three who disagree with Ork's assessment of his meeting with the "Great Destroyer," questioning whether it even really happened; the priests are more concerned with their reputations and positions than with seeking truth.

Third priest
The third priest is one of three who disagree with Ork's assessment of his meeting with the "Great Destroyer," questioning whether it even really happened; the priests are more concerned with their reputations and positions than with seeking truth.

Fourth priest
The fourth priest arrives after Ork has a conversation with the "Great Destroyer." The priest believes Ork's meeting happened, and he blesses Ork and takes the meeting as a sign of hope.

The Shaper
Grendel calls the court's minstrel the Shaper because his songs and stories influence Hrothgar and his men in profound ways; through these stories, the Shaper creates the reality in which the court lives.

The stranger
The stranger who arrives from a foreign land is never named, but the source material for the novel indicates this hero is Beowulf; he humiliates Grendel during battle and tears off his arm with his bare hands, and Grendel slinks away to die alone from his wounds.

Unferth
Unferth, Hrothgar's great hero at court, confronts Grendel during one of his first attacks on the meadhall; Grendel mocks Unferth's ideas about heroism, and humiliates him by refusing to kill him when Unferth follows Grendel to his cave.

Wealtheow
The young and beautiful Wealtheow, given in marriage to an aging Hrothgar, brings joy to the court and becomes an object of Grendel's fascination.

Plot Summary

The large, shaggy monster, Grendel, is hideous to behold. He spends his childhood stalking animals and watching the activities of the humans who wage war and build settlements around him. He lives in a cave with his bloated, obsessive mother, keenly aware of other creatures peering at him through the darkness. He might have spent his entire life stealing cows and hunching in the dark, but his experiences in the outside world set him on a different path.

Self-conscious and isolated as a child, with only imaginary friends for company, Grendel the monster is *made* monstrous by the loneliness, frustration, and monotony of his routine, as well as by his encounters with humans. He watches as they wage war on one another, destroying settlements and abusing animals, and his focus comes to rest on the man who has fought, burned, and pillaged his way to ruling the kingdom: Hrothgar.

When he first meets Hrothgar, Grendel is a young monster, caught in the gap between two tree trunks. Helpless, bleeding, and hungry, he hopes Hrothgar and his men will help him; instead, Hrothgar throws a battle-ax at him, which sets the stage for a combative relationship. Over time, Grendel comes to resent the king when he realizes that Hrothgar's kingdom, with its expanding roads and settlements, threatens his way of life. He also becomes envious when he spies on Hrothgar's meadhall, which is full of the warmth and connection Grendel lacks in his own life.

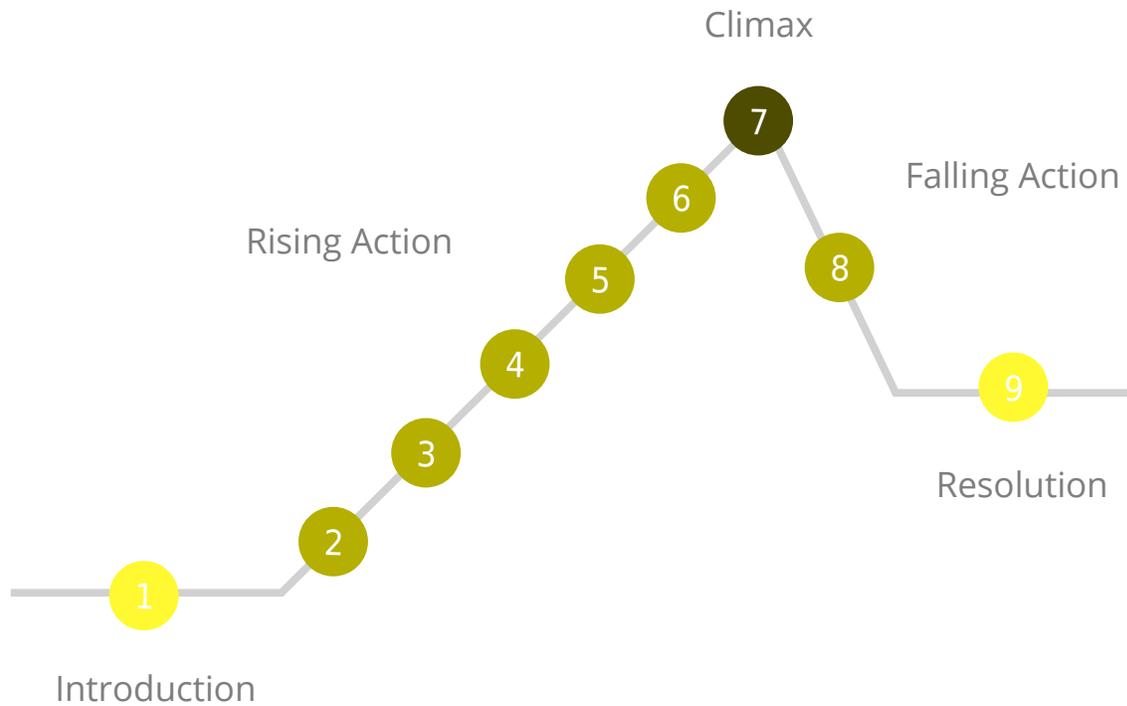
Grendel is especially fascinated by Hrothgar's minstrel, a man called the Shaper for his ability to inspire action and influence thought through his songs. Grendel envies that power and wishes to either prove the Shaper a liar or learn to shape reality himself. Yet Grendel remains alone in the shadows. Then Hrothgar's men attack Grendel twice more, and he visits a dragon who casts a spell that makes him impervious to weapons. That's when Grendel begins his 12-year war against Hrothgar and his people, conducting periodic raids to snatch sleeping men from their beds and eat them.

The war takes its toll on both Grendel and Hrothgar. Hrothgar loses his reputation as a powerful king, and other kings threaten to take over his realm. Even Hrothgar's own 14-year-old nephew, Hrothulf, plots against him. Grendel remains enmeshed in his loneliness and boredom, facing an existential crisis as he struggles to learn what—if anything—his actions mean and where he fits in the world. He is tormented by his desire for Hrothgar's queen, Wealtheow, as well as his own contradictory urges to be violent and to be understood. As Grendel becomes estranged even from his own mother, his isolation becomes soul-crushing.

After 12 years of attrition, a stranger (Beowulf) arrives from across the sea, accompanied by 14 other men, all superhuman in size and strength. Grendel later learns they are called the Geats. Grendel is energized by their arrival and excited by the challenge of new opponents. That night, he makes a raid on

the meadhall that ends in disaster. The stranger fights Grendel without weapons, using only the strength of his hands. He rips off Grendel's arm, sending the bleeding and weeping monster out into the night to die alone.

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. Grendel lives in a cave with his clingy, grotesque mother.

Rising Action

2. Grendel explores beyond his cave and hunts animals for food.
3. Grendel watches Hrothgar, disgusted by man's wasteful ways.
4. Hrothgar's men attack Grendel when he's near the meadhall.
5. The dragon convinces Grendel his purpose is to scare humans.
6. Grendel launches his war against Hrothgar.

Climax

7. Grendel fights the stranger, who rips off his arm.

Falling Action

8. Grendel retreats, claiming his defeat was an accident.

Resolution

9. Grendel dies, cursing all who continue to live.

Timeline of Events

May; Childhood

Grendel remembers the day Hrothgar throws an ax at him when he's stuck in a tree.

June; Youth

Grendel spies on Hrothgar's meadhall and hears the Shaper's songs, which fascinate him.

August; Youth

Grendel visits the dragon, who says life is meaningless and Grendel should enjoy attacking men.

October; Adulthood

Grendel's war continues; he sees Hrothgar marry Wealtheow, who occupies all of Grendel's thoughts.

November; Adulthood

April; Childhood

Grendel reflects on his childhood, and he questions why he and his mother live in such a dank place.

June; Youth

Grendel watches Hrothgar make war, waste animals, kill people, and change the landscape.

July; Youth

Overcome by the Shaper's song, Grendel makes contact with Hrothgar's men and is attacked again.

September; Adulthood

Grendel learns the dragon made him immune to weapons; he raids the meadhall and humiliates Unferth.

October; Adulthood

Grendel attacks Wealtheow; he doesn't kill her, but he breaks his obsession with her.

Grendel spies on Hrothulf and overhears his ambitions to take his Uncle Hrothgar's throne.

January; Adulthood

Grendel watches the Shaper die, surrounded by his friends, and Grendel is saddened by the loss.

March; Adulthood

Grendel raids the meadhall, fights the stranger, loses an arm, and dies near his cave.

December; Adulthood

Grendel pretends to be a god to expose a priest's hypocrisy, but Ork's vision stuns Grendel.

February; Adulthood

Grendel watches the Geats men arrive by ship, and he feels excited about facing new adversaries.

Chapter Summaries

Prefatory Poem

Summary

John Gardner places this verse from William Blake's poem "Mental Traveller" at the beginning of the novel, before the chapters begin:

*And if the babe is born a Boy
He's given to a Woman Old,
Who nails him down upon a rock,
Catches his shrieks in cups of
gold.
—William Blake*

Analysis

Blake's poem "The Mental Traveller" is about traveling in the realm of the mind. A complex poem, it is often read as the cycle of a new idea from "birth" to the idea's persecution by society, its triumph over society, to the idea's overripeness when generally accepted by society, to its transformation into a "renovated" idea, after which the idea begins anew and passes through the cycle over and over again. The poem is an exploration of how ideas and society interact on a grand scale, as well as the inner transformation ideas cause in individuals. By alluding to this verse from the poem in the preface of *Grendel*, the novel as a whole becomes intrinsically linked to Blake's vast mythology of symbols and characters. Grendel's relationship with his mother is given prominence, as the poem foreshadows their dynamic. The placement of the verse makes it necessary to interpret Grendel's journey on both a literal and figurative level: Grendel is a monster, yet he is also an idea moving through time.

Chapter 1

Summary

Grendel sees a ram on a hillside, recognizes that it is mating season, and considers the animal undignified and gross. He observes other signs of spring coming and feels angry. He extends his middle finger to the sky and howls in frustration. He remembers past kills and observes the monotony of his life, saying, "So it goes with me ... age by age." He recognizes that this is the beginning of his 12th year at war with Hrothgar.

As he stalks through the darkness, Grendel remembers his childhood contained the same monotony, even as he explored the world around him. He thinks of his mother clutching at him in the cave when he was young and her inability to explain why they lived in such a dreary, dark place. Grendel arrives at Hrothgar's meadhall, knocking "politely on the high oak door, bursting its hinges and sending the shock of [his] greeting inward like a cold blast out of a cave." Grendel wreaks havoc, scaring Hrothgar, his queen, and the Shaper. He kills some men and takes their remains with him.

The morning after this raid, Grendel wakes and hears the people lamenting the attack. He sees the men already at work building a funeral pyre and repairing the meadhall door. He sees the funeral pyre burn and hears the men and women singing, "as if by some lunatic theory they had won." Grendel, filled with rage, heads home.

Analysis

Grendel's isolation and anger at the world around him are evident from his introduction. The ram isn't doing anything to bother Grendel other than existing where Grendel can see him. Grendel's focus on the ram's drive to mate highlights Grendel's own isolation. While Grendel may think the ram's mounting of anything, ewe or not, is undignified, the ram at least has the option of mating, of forming a connection with another creature, however primitive or fleeting. The only other member of his species Grendel knows is his own mother, so he has no options for mating.

Many clues in Chapter 1 point to what Grendel is and is not, as the reader will likely try to guess at Grendel's physicality.

Grendel howls and the water at his feet turns to ice. This makes Grendel a force of nature. Yet Grendel is walking, talking, bursting open doors, and giving the sky the middle finger. To Grendel, he has fingers. To the men in the meadhall, he is a dark shadow. He sees trees, animals, space, sun, stars, and sky around him as mechanical, yet he is a part of the machinery he detests, with his instinctive "murderous lust" for blood, and when he is angry. Later in Chapter 1, Grendel says the stars taunt him toward making meaningful patterns that don't exist. Grendel, as a character, is at odds with the novel's structure, which is arranged in 12 chapters, each corresponding to a sign of the zodiac based on the shapes found in the constellations, which are patterns humans saw in the stars and used to create corresponding meanings. This initial contradiction between main character and structure separates the author from his creation. Gardner is showing that there are patterns, even if his character Grendel does not believe in them.

In fact, Grendel's atheism here is as obvious as it is contradictory. Grendel scoffs at religious notions, yet uses religious language to express himself. Looking toward the sky he says, "Him too I hate," implying he is speaking about God. He repeats this type of contradiction later when he dares the dark chasm to seize him, knowing it cannot; he will only fall in if "in a lunatic fit of religion" he jumps. He calls the villagers' prayers "dogmatism," and he brings up *abandonment*, a well-known idea in the philosophy of existentialism, coined by Jean Paul Sartre and described as the deep sadness individuals feel when they can no longer logically believe in God. "The cold night air is reality ... to show that the world is abandoned," Grendel declares, his words going far beyond the literal, as Grendel often becomes a philosophical mouthpiece in the novel.

Grendel's description of his cave—isolated, dark, damp—stands in sharp contrast with the meadhall and surrounding village, where men and women gather for warmth and safety. Even after the late-night raid leaves the survivors shaken, they come together in daylight to repair what damage they can and to pay respects to their dead. Their song, in a sense, does reflect a feeling of victory. They are still alive. They are together, and they have a sense of community Grendel lacks.

When Grendel describes his war with Hrothgar as "idiotic," he also reveals a disconnection from himself. He calls himself a "pointless, ridiculous monster crouched in the shadows," which reflects strongly negative feelings about himself and his quest

to destroy Hrothgar, even as he claims he is "neither proud nor ashamed" of his actions. His inability to acknowledge his feelings and actions fully indicates an inability (or unwillingness) to understand his own state of mind.

Chapter 2

Summary

Grendel remembers his childhood games, played with imaginary friends. He explores the corners of his cave, vaguely aware of other creatures living down there in the darkness with him and his mother, even though he never sees what they are. One night, he dives through the mere (pond), past the fire snakes, and emerges into the outside world, which frightens but fascinates him. He remembers the way his mother looks at him as a child, their sense of oneness, and her love for him as her creation. Aware of the eyes of the other creatures in the cave, Grendel often feels "alone and ugly." He flings himself at his mother for comfort, then returns to his stalking games in the outside world.

One day, Grendel, lured through the forest by the scent of a calf, gets his foot caught in the crack between two tree trunks and is unable to get himself free. His foot is injured and bleeding, so Grendel calls out for his mother, but she does not hear him. He fears he will die there. Then he sees a bull. His efforts to shoo the bull away only angers the bull, and the animal rams the tree. The bull persists in its attacks from morning through the afternoon, and Grendel falls asleep. When he wakes, the bull is gone and vultures are circling overhead.

That night, Hrothgar and his men happen upon Grendel and the tree. At first, they think Grendel is a fungus killing the tree, but then they decide he is a tree spirit. They speculate that Grendel is hungry—and he is—and Hrothgar sends some of his men to fetch Grendel some pigs. Grendel gets excited about this and cries out for pig. The men are alarmed; only one of them seems to understand what Grendel is saying. The horses are spooked, and Hrothgar throws a battle-ax at Grendel, grazing his shoulder. The men surround Grendel, meaning to kill him, but Grendel's mother finally arrives, knocking down trees in her path. Her noise and stink drive the men away. She frees Grendel and takes him back to the cave. Grendel tries to talk to her, but she only buries him under her bulk.

Analysis

Grendel's alienation from everything is clear from his account of his childhood as he describes the powerful moment shaping his belief he alone exists. He feels no connection to the creatures whose eyes peer at him in the darkness below; he doesn't even know what those creatures are. They could be, as he imagines while caught in the tree, his own relatives. Under the gaze of these creatures and those in the outside world, Grendel feels disquieting self-awareness. He believes that he is ugly and alone, and that no meaning can be shared or understood with other creatures, even his own mother. To Grendel, everyone is locked in their own minds and ways of looking at the world. Grendel, as a thinker, is obviously more advanced than his "relatives," and why he is more advanced is as much a mystery to Grendel as it is to the reader.

As a child, Grendel's only connection to another living being is to his mother. He is aware of her love for him, even though she does not speak. She clutches him to her body and seems unwilling to let him go. Her dependence on him is clear from her actions, but Grendel is equally dependent on her as a child. He cries for her when he is caught in the tree. As he bleeds and believes he will die there, he feels sorry for himself, but he also feels sorry for "Poor old Mama!" It is a rare moment of empathy for Grendel, as he understands what the loss of her child will mean to his mother, made even more bitter by the possibility she may never know what happened to him. Grendel's mother never leaves the cave, so when she understands he is missing, her instinct to protect him is strong enough to draw her to the surface. Her protective instincts are powerful enough to knock down trees and drive the men away from a great distance. Her anguish for her missing son is evident from the terrible sound she produces and the destruction she leaves in her wake. As Grendel is narrating his childhood experience from a mature perspective, it is interesting to note his comments about how his mother's presence could make the world "snap into position around her." Then right after, he says the world snapped into position around the bull. As much as Grendel says he does not believe in connectedness or an objective reality, he often contradicts his beliefs when speaking of events, as if there is meaning and reality but he chooses to ignore it.

The encounter with Hrothgar and his men also illustrates Grendel's relatively benign intentions and the way the world sees him in a light very different from his intent. In this sense,

Grendel is perhaps correct; every viewpoint is subjective, deeply personal to the individual perspective. Grendel is a wounded, young animal in a tree. The men take him for a fungus, a destructive growth that will damage the tree, which must be saved. Only when they consider he might be a protective spirit for the tree do they approach him with care. All of the men see or feel something different in the tree, and all of their versions of what Grendel is have a shade of truth in them. Things seem to be looking up for Grendel when they offer him pigs, but Grendel is doomed to be misunderstood even when his intentions are entirely positive. He is excited to eat after starving in the tree all day. He is excited to have an interaction with these men. They take his joy as aggression and attack him. This scenario, Grendel meaning no harm only to meet with hostility, will play out repeatedly in Grendel's early years, keeping him from the community he craves, and it reveals the men's fear of the unknown, and propensity for violence.

Chapter 3

Summary

Grendel doesn't hold Hrothgar's attack with the ax against him. Instead, he watches as Hrothgar builds his kingdom. Grendel sees small bands of men roaming the countryside, battling each other and building villages as their numbers grow. Grendel observes the activity in these villages: the walls decorated with tapestries, the women farming and cooking, the men celebrating their last victory and planning the next. He sees the men congregate in the mead halls and occasionally break into arguments that become deadly. If a man kills another man, the killer is either excused for his action or exiled for it.

Later, Grendel notices the men's talk becoming more violent—they will raid their neighbors and take their gold—as the villages become more prosperous. He hears them make declarations of war and sees the burned ruins of a mead hall surrounded by slaughtered animals and people. Only the gold has been taken. Soon after the wars begin in earnest; Grendel hears Shapers in other mead halls singing of the glories of war as the men celebrate. Then Grendel sees these halls invaded by enemies, saying, "Sometimes the attackers would be driven back, sometimes they'd win and burn the mead hall down, sometimes they'd capture the king of the mead hall and make

his people give weapons and gold rings and cows." Grendel is mostly offended by the wasted meat of the dead animals and people left in the wake of the fighting.

Hrothgar begins to "outstrip the rest," forming alliances with his neighbors who send tributes of weapons and gold in exchange for protection. Hrothgar builds roads to transport these goods more easily, which gives rise to more meadhalls and villages—and wealth for Hrothgar. A blind man comes to Hrothgar's court and sings about great kings of the past. The men and Grendel listen to the glorification of the old kings and the new king Hrothgar, but Grendel also remembers the way the wars started and the savagery. Grendel is angered and frightened by the song, but fascinated by the Shaper.

Analysis

Grendel reveals a forgiving nature when he lets go of any grudge he might have held against Hrothgar for throwing an ax at him. Granted, Grendel was not severely injured by the attack, but he also understands the motivation of a creature operating by instinct. He bears Hrothgar no ill will for his actions, but his forgiveness causes him to ignore the real threat Hrothgar poses to his own way of life by taming the wild country Grendel occupies. Grendel gets his first taste of Hrothgar's destructive potential as he watches the fighting between the bands of men roaming the countryside escalate into all-out war.

The connection between Grendel and the men, who have nothing to stop their advance, suggests Grendel is perhaps a natural predator whose purpose it is to keep men in check. As a creature who follows his instincts and kills other creatures for food, enjoying the stalking and hunting, Grendel is not especially different from any other wild predator or even the men who eat meat. Grendel kills cows, but those cows were always meant to be meat for *somebody*; his killing serves a concrete purpose. When Grendel sees the remains of the victims of the men's warring—the charred bodies of people and cattle left to rot—he has difficulty understanding why this is happening. When he hears the men talking about killing other villagers and taking their gold, Grendel is bothered by the lust for violence. Despite his rage and isolation, Grendel does not appear to have considered the possibility of killing for other reasons; all the wasted meat bothers him, and he attempts to salvage what he can from what he finds. While Grendel minimizes his objections in the narrative, this waste is not a

small point as it exposes the waste and savagery of all war. As the novel progresses, Grendel will become more like the men, killing for sport, malice, or revenge. In this chapter, the relationship between Grendel, the monster, and humans is established. Sharing a similar language, Grendel notices "we were, incredibly, related."

In almost every chapter, Grendel has an interaction with a tree. In Chapter 3, Grendel describes watching men's greed and violence from the safety of a tree. Grendel is at a crossroad here, more terrified of the men than they are of him. The men's attraction to gold and cruelty stirs a new instinct in Grendel. Also, the greed for gold in Chapter 3 alludes to a line in the prefatory poem by William Blake, where an old woman, referring to a baby born a boy, "Catches his shrieks in cups of gold." The poem seems to come to life within the chapter: the animals shriek from the violence of men; the men shriek violently at each other; and Grendel shrieks "violent, to the rims of the world ... like a thousand tortured rat-squeals" by the end of the chapter. In Blake's mythology, gold is likened to the root of evil, yet Blake uses the word *golden* positively when not referring to metal objects of material value. Grendel does the same when he describes the Shaper's songs as golden.

Grendel's response to hearing the Shaper sing for the first time is complicated. In retrospect, as Grendel narrates the past, he suggests the Shaper, who is "inspired by winds" strong enough to lead him to Hrothgar, actually accesses some guiding or natural force powerful enough to make men go "mad on art" and tear Grendel apart emotionally, as the novel explores the mystical power and source of poetry. In his youth, Grendel is drawn in by the Shaper's songs, just like all the men in Hrothgar's meadhall. The songs glorify the same violence and conquering behavior Grendel has seen around him for months, maybe years—the precise time span for the wars is only described in Grendel's vague term, "season after season." Grendel understands the Shaper's power to inspire the men to continue their activities and conquer further, which will lead to more death and destruction. The landscape will continue to change, which does represent an immediate threat to a creature such as Grendel.

Chapter 4

Summary

Grendel notices the Shaper's songs have become more melancholy since he arrived in Hrothgar's court. The Shaper could move on to serve another king, but he remains because he helped create Hrothgar's realm through his songs, inspiring Hrothgar to build his grand meadhall on a hill. Even as he sees the meadhall rise, Grendel thinks Hrothgar's vision is ridiculous. He describes the men acting peacefully, "as if not a man in all that lot had ever twisted a knife in his neighbor's chest." Grendel considers how the Shaper's songs may have genuinely changed the men. As he muses on the Shaper's power, he hears laughter from the meadhall, which annoys him and draws him closer. Grendel steps on the body of a man whose clothes have been stolen and whose throat has been cut. Grendel picks up the body and approaches the hall, annoyed. He hears the Shaper singing of the great God who created the world and of two brothers, "which split all the world between darkness and light" when one killed the other. Grendel is part of the dark side, cursed by God, and Grendel believes the Shaper's story. Distraught, Grendel steps into the hall with the body. He begs for mercy and peace, calling out "friend." They attack him with spears, and Grendel must use the body as a shield as he flees.

Once Grendel escapes he weeps, then grows angry at the attack and swears at the men. He wonders why he has no one to talk to while Hrothgar and the Shaper do, but then he thinks they really don't have anyone, either. Grendel returns to watch the meadhall a few nights later and finds the Shaper singing about him. Grendel says the song is all lies. He angrily returns to his cave. He thinks the Shaper's songs about a loving God who created the world are also lies, but he wants them to be true. He watches his mother in mindless sleep and falls asleep himself. When Grendel wakes, he makes his mind blank and sinks away toward the dragon.

Analysis

Grendel's observation about the Shaper's option to move on to sing for a different king provides a glimpse at the effect Grendel's war is having on Hrothgar's reputation and standing. The implication is that greener pastures exist for the Shaper; Hrothgar's meadhall is not the shining example Hrothgar intended, and his wealth may be suffering as well. Constant vicious attacks from a monster tend to have an effect on a

kingdom.

In Chapter 1, Grendel tells the reader he is not proud nor ashamed; in Chapter 3, he speaks of Hrothgar's and the Shaper's pride, which motivates men, not Grendel. In fact, witnessing human pride infuriates Grendel, bringing into question for the reader Grendel's purpose. Is it religious? Is Grendel's instinct to smash Hrothgar's pride part of his fate? *Pride and shame* are religious tropes in Judeo-Christianity: Adam and Eve were tempted by the fruit of the forbidden tree of knowledge by Lucifer posing as a snake. Giving into temptation cast Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, where they experienced shame for the first time. Pride caused Lucifer to fall from God's favor, wanting to be as powerful as God. The religious idea of free will is also an important element in Lucifer's fall in that he chose to rebel against God. It is well known and confirmed by the author that in *Grendel*, each chapter represents a major mode of thought in Western tradition. Each chapter also aligns with a sign from the zodiac, which John Gardner has said in interviews gives clues to the core philosophy in the chapter. In Chapter 4, which aligns with the zodiac sign Cancer, Grendel comes face to face with Judeo-Christianity and its Lucifer character, the ancient serpent Grendel describes as a dark presence following him. The presence, Grendel wonders, seems to be within and without, and he specifically calls it evil. Grendel confuses snakes and vines as he wrestles with a dark presence throughout the chapter; the Shaper's song mentions Cain and Abel (Adam and Eve's sons). When the Shaper sings, "But lucky the man who ... shall seek the Prince, find peace in his father's embrace!" Grendel says, "Oh what a conversion!" A conversion is very specific to Christianity, as well as the Shaper singing about seeking a prince, which signifies Jesus, who is called the Prince of Peace. Grendel wants to believe in this idea of God but ultimately rejects it. In essence, Grendel moves through the Judeo-Christian spiritual milieu, then rejects it by the end, which spirals him toward the dragon, who Grendel says is "something deeper, an impression from another mind." The reader will wonder whether the dragon is real or something within Grendel. Gardner likely left it ambiguous on purpose, encouraging *Grendel* to be read literally and figuratively—Grendel is a monster, yet he is also an idea moving through time and the community living in that time.

At the heart of Grendel's rejection of the god the Shaper describes is his jealousy, which in Judeo-Christianity is considered evil. It is no accident that Grendel is teeming with jealousy in this chapter, where Cain and Abel are mentioned.

Cain killed Abel because he was jealous of his brother. Grendel is jealous of the Shaper's power. He looks at the Shaper from different angles and mimics him, speaking poetically, trying to shape reality, too. Earlier, Hrothgar's goodness makes Grendel jealous and his heart "leaden with grief at [his] own bloodthirsty ways." Like the crab, which signifies the zodiac sign of Cancer, Grendel's jealousy creates a hard shell around him and makes him scuttle in the darkness, backing away from the light. Grendel must use mental tricks to ease his jealousy, such as convincing himself it is not the Shaper who is powerful but art itself; or the Shaper is like a bird, not truly conscious of what he is even saying. Hrothgar's descendants will be greedy: all excuses to ease Grendel's destructive jealousy. Grendel contradicts his own understanding as he struggles with his own dark thoughts and the dark presence following him, perhaps tempting him; his belief in the Shaper and Hrothgar's goodness bleeds through his narrative, even as he rejects everything.

Chapter 5

Summary

Grendel arrives at the dragon's lair, a cave stuffed with gold, silver, and jewels. He sees the dragon resting on top of a pile of this treasure. The dragon greets him and cautions him to stand clear of potential fire that the dragon might breathe or cough. He recognizes Grendel's fear in his presence, and compares Grendel's fear of him with the fear men have for Grendel. This similarity makes the dragon laugh, and he becomes serious when Grendel picks up an emerald to throw at him, telling Grendel never to touch his things.

Grendel has decided to stay away from the men, feeling it is unfair to scare them for fun, but the dragon says, "Why *not* frighten them?" The dragon is impatient with Grendel and advises him to "seek out gold—but not *my* gold—and guard it!" He tells Grendel the Shaper's stories are an illusion and explains how, as a dragon, he has seen the past, present, and future. The dragon mocks men's obsession with facts and theories, saying they have "dim apprehensions" these theories are wrong, so they rely on the Shapers to pull together their reality. He talks about other ages and how everything comes and goes repeatedly over the long span of time.

Grendel struggles to follow the dragon's train of thought, but the dragon addresses Grendel's specific dilemma. He tells Grendel he improves the men by giving them something to think about and plot against. All their science, religion, and poetry evolves in response to the threat Grendel poses, and Grendel might as well scare them because if he doesn't, he will be replaced by a different monster. Grendel resolves to do something else, and the dragon mocks him again, saying his own ambition is to count and sort his hoard of treasure. He again advises Grendel to get his own pile of gold to sit on.

Analysis

The dragon represents an objective, detached view of reality. He is all-seeing, and he understands the connections between all things and the futility of action. The dragon wholly rejects free will, contradictorily arguing everything is predestined, so his choices turn out to be fate. He encourages Grendel not to ask questions or seek meaning but to do nothing and act as he pleases (Why *not* scare Hrothgar's men?), but his contradictions imply that he is lying to Grendel and tricking him. He uses cold reasoning and logic to espouse chaos and randomness theories, which are not predictive. If everything is random, how can the dragon have seen the past, present, and future? The dragon's logic is faulty; Grendel cannot follow the dragon's theories, but he still senses he is being lied to. Grendel even shyly tries to tell the dragon what the Shaper said about a god who created the world, hoping the dragon will confirm it. Grendel rejects his own intuition and clings instead to the dragon's version of the truth. The reader will perhaps pity Grendel or begin to root for him to find something to believe in or redemption.

The dragon explains how the Shaper's songs and stories help the men make sense of the contradictions in their reality, the conflict between what they *know* to be true, what they *suspect* to be true, and what they *want* to be true. Grendel has a similar problem. Yet, the dragon contradicts himself again. The dragon argues that the Shaper uses illusion to show the connectedness of creatures and nature to the people, which the dragon says earlier is the true reality in the world. This implies there is meaning, but Grendel misses the implication. The dragon also explains Grendel's importance to the men. They need a villain for the narrative they tell themselves, in order to make sense of their own lies. Paradoxically, the dragon's story is just that—another story Grendel hears and uses to try to make sense of *his* life. The dragon has shaped

his reality into one in which nothing ultimately matters because the story he knows and tells encompasses the vast swath of all time. Grendel and the men embrace other stories to make sense of the limited slices of time they experience. Whether dragon, monster, or man, however, each of them is creating a reality through the narratives they create for themselves. Even *Grendel* itself, a narrative from the viewpoint of the monster, represents an attempt for Grendel to tell his story and shape a reality for himself instead of leaving reality to be shaped by others. The importance of perspective is not lost on Grendel, as he experiences the fear the men have of *him* when he meets the dragon. That fear is the men's reality and their motivation. Grendel's fear of the dragon is his reality, and it motivates him to a different understanding of his role in his own story and in the Shaper's stories.

Chapter 6

Summary

Even though Grendel does not fully understand the dragon, he leaves the meeting with a sense of "futility" and "doom" that he can't escape. He also discovers the dragon has made him impervious to weapons. Grendel returns to Hrothgar's meadhall, only to observe. He has no intention of scaring the men on purpose, but as Grendel listens to the Shaper and the people celebrate God's bounty in the harvest, a guard happens upon him. The guard attacks Grendel with his sword, which has no effect. As Grendel and the guard fight, other men join in with spears and swords, but Grendel remains unhurt. Grendel backs away with the guard in hand and bites the man's head off in full view of the crowd before escaping into the forest.

A few nights later, Grendel makes his first raid, taking seven men from their beds and eating them. He continues the raids for several months; sometimes the men rise from their beds in an attempt to fight. On one such night, Unferth, known as a great hero among Hrothgar's men, attempts to attack Grendel. Grendel mocks Unferth's walk and his speech before pelting him with apples.

Later that night, Grendel awakens in his cave to see his mother stalking something, and discovers Unferth is there. Unferth came to kill Grendel, but he did not estimate the difficulty of the journey to the cave, the water, and the fire snakes. Still,

Unferth believes his death will become a topic of songs, even as he denounces poetry and fairy tales. Grendel refuses to kill Unferth, and Unferth threatens to kill himself. Then Unferth falls asleep. Grendel returns Unferth to Hrothgar's doorstep, but he kills two guards to "make [his] meaning clear." Unferth lives on, and periodically attempts to challenge Grendel's attacks, season after season.

Analysis

Grendel finds his newfound invincibility somewhat disappointing. It removes his final connection to the men and makes him go further into darkness. "Though I scorned them, sometimes hated them, there had been something between myself and the men when we could fight," Grendel says. The connection of battle lies in the possibility that anything is possible; either opponent can get the upper hand. It is, at least, an honest interaction, and it was the only real interaction Grendel had before the dragon put a charm on him. With this final barrier between Grendel and the rest of the world in place, Grendel abandons any remaining desire he may have had to do no harm to the men.

As the dragon implies, Grendel's actions make no difference. The men will attack him no matter what he does, so he lashes out in the only way he can. Also, Grendel has fully embraced the dragon's philosophy, and this is the outcome, which is the main point of the chapter. The dragon has confused Grendel and taken away whatever sense of choice or free will Grendel is using to find meaning in his existence; the dragon's charm makes him feel mechanical, like the other animals he detests, subject to instinct alone, without reasoning, without language. However, the dragon has so thoroughly tricked Grendel that the reader will wonder if he is acting by instinct or simply suppressing the good inclinations he has. Is being a monster his true destiny or calling, his fate, or did the dragon take him over in some way? After all, he is charmed now and cannot be killed. This points to some mystical relationship with the dragon, and at one point in the chapter, Grendel feels the dragon as if it is a mist around him.

In retrospect, Grendel says Unferth was his salvation before recalling their first encounter. When Grendel comes up against Unferth's innocence and idealism, it extinguishes his wrath, and mocking him brings more joy than killing Unferth will. It is telling that Grendel cannot bring himself to kill Unferth, even if he is rejecting the thane's lofty idealism and ridiculous heroism.

There is still hope for Grendel; witnessing "a new kind of Scylding" causes a new shift in Grendel's interior life. He wholly identifies with Unferth's search for meaning, desire to shape reality, and need to follow a higher calling. Grendel makes a sly confession in this chapter, too; he says that if Unferth were to cry—"If for even an instant he pretended to misery like mine"—Grendel would have killed him. This shows the depth of the monster's isolation, the intensity of his pain, and perhaps why he is so angry toward the human community.

Chapter 7

Summary

Grendel recognizes his ability to destroy all of Hrothgar's men in a single night, but he holds back. He reflects on the progress of his war with Hrothgar and counts his blessings: sound teeth, sound cave, and his ability to refrain from "the ultimate act of nihilism," killing the queen. Then Grendel recalls how the queen, Wealtheow, comes to live at the meadhall during the second year of his war on Hrothgar. At this point, Hrothgar's position and reputation have been severely compromised by his inability to defend his hall against the monster's attacks. Other kings present a threat to Hrothgar's realm as a result, so Hrothgar gathers an army and marches to another king's hall. King Hygmod recognizes the threat posed by Hrothgar's forces and offers gifts to make peace, the most important of which is his sister, Wealtheow. Grendel watches from afar and is overwhelmed by her beauty. Hrothgar accepts Wealtheow as his wife, and the marriage creates an alliance between the two kings.

Grendel spends the winter avoiding raids on the meadhall, hiding in his cave and punching the walls in frustration. His mother pities him but is unable to alleviate her child's suffering. Grendel does go to spy on the meadhall, watching Wealtheow serve the men, and keeping the peace when they argue. The Shaper sings songs about new topics, "comfort, beauty, a wisdom softer, more permanent, than Hrothgar's." When one of the men accuses Unferth of killing his own brother, Wealtheow steps in with a smile and says that happened in the past, which instantly softens Unferth.

Grendel also sees Wealtheow's private grief at being separated from her family and married to an old man. When

her brother comes to visit in winter, Grendel sees her joy. Even though Grendel is fixated on Wealtheow to the point of obsession, he resists the urge to attack the meadhall for months. When he does resume his raids, during the visit from Wealtheow's brother he bursts into Wealtheow's bedroom. The men of the meadhall, including Hrothgar and Wealtheow's brother, are too terrified to defend the queen, yet Grendel does not kill her. He thinks about it and changes his mind. After he leaves the meadhall, he claims to be over his fascination with Wealtheow. He then considers killing himself "for love of the Baby Grendel that used to be," but in the next moment, he changes his mind about that as well.

Analysis

Wealtheow's presence in the meadhall precipitates an unraveling for Grendel. He feels paralyzed to attack the hall while she is there, and he is confused by the protective feelings for her. His comments about her beauty and her presence, as well as the nature of his attack on her in her bed—which veers dangerously close to a rape—indicate that Grendel feels desire for Wealtheow. However, her presence "teases" Grendel toward disbelieving the dragon's truths. Wealtheow represents something beyond reason, "mother's love," and perhaps the general qualities of goodness and love. At this point, Grendel considers anything coming between his fixed view of reality as a trap. His capricious decision to attack her, followed by his midattack decision to kill her, followed by the decision *not* to kill her expose how her influence has left Grendel unable to clear his thoughts and commit the actions that should come easily to him. Near the start of the chapter, Grendel calls killing the queen "the ultimate act of nihilism"—a rejection of all moral principals and religious sentiments—and this idea echoes in his realization during the attack that killing her would be "meaningless." Grendel still carries the dragon's influence with him, but he also wants his actions to mean something, especially where Wealtheow is concerned. While he claims to be disgusted by Wealtheow after his attack on her and "cured" of his feelings for her, he also momentarily contemplates suicide. He is as capricious about his own death as he has been about Wealtheow's, but his reference to Baby Grendel implies a measure of guilt about the machine he has become—killing and terrorizing for pleasure—in contrast with the relatively innocent creature who killed for food. Grendel's thoughts are not unusual, as most adults feel some sorrow for the loss of childhood innocence, but the move toward suicide

confirms the self-loathing that has crept around the edges of Grendel's being for years.

Chapter 7 breaks structural consistency with the rest of *Grendel*, as an omniscient narrative voice breaks in to describe Grendel observing three lightning-struck trees, portents that point to Christianity and the three crosses on Golgatha, where Jesus was crucified. The narrative voice says Grendel is looking for signs, and "Oh man, us portents!" suggests the viewpoint here is that of the trees or the signs Grendel seeks. Perhaps Gardner is making the point that more is happening than Grendel is aware of. Several threads of magic appear unexplained in the novel: Grendel is charmed by the dragon, and during this particular winter, Grendel is also unable to kill humans for some unknown reason. "I couldn't lay a hand on them, prevented as if by a charm," Grendel tells the reader. If Grendel can be charmed by the dragon, who represents darkness, then it is possible goodness or light could also be a force. As it is Wealtheow's presence that coincides with the charm acting as a barrier, perhaps it is the power of love stopping Grendel, even if he is unaware of it. He believes he is the one who decides not to kill Wealtheow, but the structure in the chapter calls his viewpoint into question.

Another break in the narrative structure in *Grendel* happens in this chapter when an obvious cut ("Time-space cross-section ... Cut A:") signifies Grendel's flashback to when he first saw Wealtheow. This connects to the omniscient narrator describing how Grendel "*lies on the cliff-edge, scratching his belly, and thoughtfully watches his thoughtfully watching the queen.*" The form of the chapter is self-conscious, matching Grendel's self-consciousness, and the author is drawing attention to the narrative construct on purpose. Instead of seamlessly weaving the past into Grendel's narrative, he makes a filmic cut to show that memory is a form of time travel, perhaps the only true form of traveling to the past, unless the dragon is telling the truth and the past, present, and future are all happening simultaneously. Even if the contradictions are not resolved, the central focus of the chapter is an exploration on time, as it begins with Grendel's metaphor of being like a boat headed toward hell, mast up to poke out heaven's eye, riding out time.

Chapter 8

Summary

Hrothulf, Hrothgar's 14-year-old nephew, comes to live at the meadhall after his father dies. While the Shaper sings to celebrate the boy's arrival, Grendel spots more sinister intentions in the new arrival. Grendel imagines Hrothulf's thoughts as he moves through the woods, his mind filled with thoughts against the king and queen, to "snatch my daylight by violent will and be glorified for the deed, like him." Grendel observes Hrothgar, and Wealtheow also noticing the boy's intentions.

After Hrothulf's first year at the meadhall, Grendel sees growing signs of violence in the boy. He watches as Hrothulf meets with a peasant who serves as Hrothulf's counselor and promises to help him overthrow the king. The peasant tells Hrothulf that violence is a necessary part of overthrowing the kingdom, but the kingdom deserves this violence because of the violence the kingdom does to the people. Laws and government only exist to protect the powerful and keep power out of the hands of the common people. He tells Hrothulf to ingratiate himself with the king's thanes, drive out the ones that won't play along, keep the workers in line, and answer challenges with cries of "Law!" and "Common good!" The peasant views the entire process as a pure exchange of power, of might conquering might.

Grendel sees Wealtheow in a stage of denial about the threat Hrothulf poses to her husband and her children, but Hrothgar has no such illusions, even though he cannot turn out his dead brother's son. Hrothulf is only one of many threats to his legacy Hrothgar faces these days. Aside from the monster that continues to assault his hall, Hrothgar knows his alliance with Wealtheow's brother will only last through his lifetime and will not apply to his children. Other threats from other kings who might overthrow a living Hrothgar are more pressing, and Hrothgar knows he may or may not be able to buy peace through tributes of the marriage of his daughter. Grendel remembers the "swollen-headed raider, full of boasts and stupid jokes and mead" Hrothgar was in his younger years, the Hrothgar who repeatedly attacked Grendel; Grendel feels no hesitation about continuing his attacks on the meadhall.

Analysis

Grendel catches on to Hrothulf's propensity for violence

almost immediately after the boy arrives in Hrothgar's hall. Hrothulf, so Grendel imagines, is like Grendel: isolated and prone to violence, not idealism or glory-seeking. Finding a human to identify with takes Grendel to a new level, as his imagination leaps in this chapter and he constructs scenarios, dialogue, and dreams. Grendel has become creative, and he now considers Hrothgar his own creation—a reference to the dragon's explanation that the men need to be able to fight Grendel to facilitate their own improvement—and asserts his right to test the limits of his creation. As much as Grendel enjoys seeing Hrothgar struggle, if Hrothgar were replaced as king, it raises the question whether Grendel could feel the same sense of purpose attacking an enemy with whom he shares no long history. The war with Hrothgar is the only connection Grendel has with another living creature. Even though the connection is based on mutual animosity, it is important to Grendel's identity.

Hrothgar's precarious position demonstrates how his past deeds are coming back to haunt him. Grendel believes Hrothulf feels entitled to take Hrothgar's realm by force because Hrothgar did the same in building the kingdom, as seen in the use of the words *like him* in Hrothulf's imagined internal monologue. The other kings who seek to dethrone Hrothgar also feel the same entitlement to use the same force against Hrothgar that Hrothgar used in his youth to build the kingdom. Grendel's focus on his image of Hrothgar as a younger man, the braggart drunkard conquering lands, keeps Hrothgar's past actions at the fore, easing Grendel's increasingly guilty conscience. Even the dream Grendel creates for Hrothgar is a retelling of their first meeting in the forest, when Hrothgar threw the battle-ax at Grendel.

In the estimation of at least some of his people, Hrothgar's violence did not end with kingdom-building. The peasants of Hrothgar's realm work hard and receive little food. Hrothulf's peasant adviser, Red Horse, cites the king's violence and oppression of the people as he encourages Hrothulf to overthrow Hrothgar. Not that the peasant believes Hrothulf occupies any kind of moral high ground; the adviser is driven by deep resentment toward Hrothgar, as are all of Hrothgar's enemies. The complex exploration of "public force," mass organization of society, and government systems in the chapter goes far beyond what would be expected for the period depicted in the novel, hinting at modern Marxist theories of communism and socialism. Yet Grendel, as narrator, can understand all the intricacies and uses them as fodder to build imaginary scenarios and speak in poetry. Grendel has evolved

beyond his human counterparts (except Red Horse, the peasant), implying that the monster is much more sophisticated than the humans, whose understanding, consciousness, and awareness seem to dim as Grendel grows brighter.

Chapter 9

Summary

Grendel sees the onset of winter and the longest night of the year, and he feels uneasy for reasons he can't identify. He watches one of Hrothgar's men hunting a deer in the forest. When he sees the deer fall to the man's arrow, Grendel takes it as an omen.

Grendel later watches Hrothgar's men praying to the carved images of their gods, which stand in a circle near the meadhall. They pray to the Great Destroyer to defend Hrothgar's realm against his enemy, which amuses Grendel because he *is* the enemy they are praying to defeat. Grendel observes that the priests' actions seem to be more for show than rooted in any real sense of conviction. The same can be said of the people. When Grendel destroyed the god circle years ago, only the priests seemed bothered by the destruction. The people set up the toppled images again, but this was more a hedge against the possibility that the gods were real than any sense of true faith. Even Grendel is too bored with religion to try wrecking the shrine again.

As Grendel sits near the circle at midnight, he is aware of the hall's inhabitants—Hrothgar, Wealtheow, Unferth—either sleeping fitfully or not at all. Then Grendel hears a priest approach the circle. Ork declares himself the oldest and wisest of the priests, and he senses Grendel's presence and asks who is there. Grendel pretends to be one of the gods, the Destroyer, and he asks Ork about the King of the Gods. Ork gives a lengthy explanation of his vision of god as the basis for all reality, the limitation on the possibilities of human experience, and then he explains the only real evil is the passage of time and the way choices exclude all other choices. He is moved to tears as he describes his worldview. Four other priests approach the circle and ask Ork what he is doing. They do not believe he has talked to the Destroyer and decide the old man is losing his mind. They fear Ork's instability might cost

all of them their positions. A fourth priest, a young man, believes Ork has had a vision of the Destroyer and is overjoyed to see Ork break through the rationality that has been his trademark. All the priests, including Ork, dismiss the young priest's interpretation of these events.

Grendel moves on, as he does not make a habit of raiding the meadhall in winter. Everyone inside is asleep except Unferth, who does not see Grendel. Grendel considers hibernating in his cave and moves on toward it, feeling uneasy.

Analysis

The image of the archer shooting the deer references the zodiac sign for Sagittarius, associated with late autumn and early winter. Grendel is dimly aware that a change of some kind is coming, as seen in the sense of foreboding that also closes the chapter when he has a vision of a black sun in the forest. That change will bring the hero (to whom Grendel refers as the stranger) who will destroy Grendel, but Grendel has no way of knowing this. Grendel's uneasy feelings indicate his powerlessness to change the events that are to come. Grendel misses the signs but they serve as cues to the reader, who can interpret such mysteries as winged creatures in the snow, which signify angels. The discrepancy between Grendel the character, and the author's perception, released to the reader through contradictions between the narrative and Grendel, is important, indicating repeatedly that there is more than Grendel understands.

Grendel's attention turns to religion, just as the previous chapter featured government. However, Chapter 9 is the heart of the novel. During an interview, John Gardner boiled down *Grendel*, saying it is essentially a book of faith, where in every value Grendel is offered to believe in—such as love or heroism—he rationalizes away. The hypocrisy Grendel perceives in these priests leads him to mock Ork during their late-night encounter. Grendel impersonates the Destroyer god as a joke, a way of passing the time and distracting himself from his own uneasiness about the future. Yet Grendel is stunned when Ork has something like a true vision, defying Grendel's expectations. Whereas Grendel previously knocked down the men's wooden gods and ate priests, he cannot break up a vision like he would wooden sticks, and his reason, like Ork's, is overcome.

Ork appears to be one of the few priests who have genuine

beliefs. When they discover Ork out in the snow, the other priests dismiss Ork's meeting with the Destroyer as the product of a disturbed mind. They are not particularly concerned for Ork in this instance, but they are very concerned with how his seeming madness will affect their reputation. Yet Ork and the other priests speak in an ancient tongue, more similar to Grendel's language. This suggests a mystical relationship between them, and it serves as more evidence the dragon has lied to Grendel. It also raises the possibility that Grendel *is* the Destroyer; he just doesn't know it. Also, Ork's name is perhaps a nod to William Blake's character Orc, who appears in four of Blake's prophetic books.

Chapter 10

Summary

Grendel expresses the pain of his boredom and his apathy for the world around him before revealing the Shaper is sick. As a break in the monotony, Grendel confronts a goat lingering near his cave. Grendel is oddly protective of his space and attempts to shoo the goat away, although the goat remains standing after Grendel rolls a tree at it and pelts it with rocks that crack its skull and knock out its teeth. As the dying goat climbs toward Grendel, he grabs another stone.

In the evening, Grendel watches the activity in the nearby village, the men and apprentices at work, the watchmen standing guard, the children at play. He watches the people come and go from the house of the dying Shaper, including the king and queen. The Shaper asks after a specific woman who has not come to visit him. After the Shaper dies, Grendel watches this woman receive the news of the Shaper's death. Grendel calls her the "soul of fidelity, decorum." Although the Shaper displayed romantic interest in the woman, she never outwardly reciprocated his feelings. When she gets word of the Shaper's death, she looks toward the meadhall on the hill but remains composed. Grendel considers snatching her but only looks in on the Shaper's body one last time before returning to his cave.

Back in the cave, Grendel believes his mother is losing her mind. She scuttles about aimlessly and tries to keep Grendel from leaving the cave. She makes odd sounds, and claws at herself. Grendel is unmoved. He thinks about how only the

present moment exists, and the Shaper's histories, even his own youthful acts, do not exist; nor does the future. He regrets not tormenting the Shaper, but decides to attend the funeral. Grendel's mother tries to stop him, but he goes out anyway.

At the funeral, the Shaper's assistant sings of another ancient king of the Danes, and, as the pyre burns, Grendel recognizes the loss of the Shaper as the end of an era. He considers telling Hrothgar, "We're on our own again. Abandoned." The next morning, Grendel wakes to find his mother acting crazy again. Despite her inability to speak, she passes him a message: "*Beware the fish.*"

Analysis

The goat represents the zodiac sign of Capricorn, associated with deep winter, although Grendel's encounter with the goat mirrors his meeting with the ram in Chapter 1. While Grendel was content to leave the ram alone, judging it silently from afar, Grendel takes out his rage and frustration on the goat by pelting it with stones when it will not go away or die. Grendel feels exceptionally protective of his lair in this scene, not even wanting silent animals near him, and the source of his rage becomes apparent with the revelation that the Shaper is dying. Also, the way the goat moves mechanically up the mountain, thinking "with his spine," foreshadows how Grendel will move toward his own death. Even though Grendel tells the goat to use reason, Grendel's own reason is hopeless against the fate awaiting him in the ensuing chapters.

The Shaper has been a constant presence for years, a guide for Grendel in his search for meaning in his life. While Grendel's feelings about the Shaper and his songs have been mixed at times, the Shaper has also inspired Grendel's desire to build his own reality based on words and perceptions. As implied in his sense of abandonment at the Shaper's funeral, without the Shaper as a guide, Grendel is left to his own devices to create his reality and define his place in it. The loss creates an existential crisis for Grendel in his cave. Without the stories and songs, Grendel limits himself to the belief that only the present moment exists; past and future have no bearing on reality. Such is the power of storytelling.

The emergence of the Shaper's unrequited love for a married woman also reveals the limitations of storytelling and song. Although the Shaper sang for this woman, he was not able to construct a reality in which she loved him in return; or, if she

did love him, there is no reality in which she expresses that love. She hears the news of his death but remains discreet. She does not cry or express regret, even alone. She only looks to the meadhall that will certainly be emptier without the Shaper's songs to entertain. Grendel's passing thought of snatching the woman as she quietly accepts the loss reflects a sense of loyalty to the Shaper's memory; Grendel could punish the woman for not reciprocating the Shaper's feelings, although Grendel ultimately admires her reserve and discretion.

The declining sanity Grendel views in his mother belowground parallels the upheaval happening aboveground with the loss of the Shaper. As Grendel's mother scurries about in her restlessness and tries to block Grendel's exit from the cave, he finds even this stable part of his world is thrown into turmoil. These changes are precursors to the change that is coming toward Grendel, but they further destabilize Grendel's already precarious sense of security. Grendel says his mother does not know anything, yet she is able to overcome her speechlessness to deliver him a prophetic message. Grendel is wrong about his mother, and he has likely been wrong about her all along. As the climax approaches, it becomes clearer that Grendel's view of himself and those around him is somewhat unreliable. He has never truly given in to the meaninglessness and hopelessness that the dragon convinced him to believe in when he was young.

Chapter 11

Summary

Grendel is excited when he sees a ship arrive carrying 15 heroes; he learns they are called the Geats. Almost inhumanly large and strong, the Geats intimidate the guard who asks them why they have come. Grendel is amused by the contrast between the giant strangers and the small guard, but he is unsettled by the group's leader, whose soft voice contrasts sharply with his massive bulk. This leader is Beowulf; Grendel refers to him throughout as the stranger. The Geats are subjects of another king; they have come to visit Hrothgar and advise him on how to handle the enemy that raids his hall at night. Grendel mocks the men in whispers, but he is intimidated by the size and obvious strength of the stranger. He knows the stranger is dangerous, yet he's intrigued.

The guard leads the men to Hrothgar's hall while Grendel stays behind, not daring to approach the meadhall in daylight. He returns to his cave and contemplates what kind of threat these new arrivals pose. He considers remaining in the safety of his cave, but decides to go to the meadhall that night. When he arrives, he sees the Danes and the Geats engaged in a tense dinner. The king only wants to get through the dinner without incident. Unferth asks the stranger about a legendary swimming competition in which, as Unferth heard, the stranger was bested by one of his friends. The stranger responds by explaining how he won the competition and then asks Unferth about how he killed his own brother, which quiets Unferth. Wealtheow is absent from the dinner because a woman's presence might cause the tensions to boil over. She makes an appearance after Hrothgar realizes the stranger will be useful against Grendel, and he calls for the queen; her presence seems to soothe rather than rile the men. She praises the stranger, and Hrothgar declares the man "like a son" to him. The stranger is polite but disinterested. Eventually, the king and queen retire. The warriors prepare to sleep, and Grendel prepares to attack.

Analysis

Although Grendel has felt a sense of unease and foreboding for some time now, he is also overwhelmed by the boredom of his routine. He finds it painful. The Shaper no longer has songs to distract Grendel. Grendel's mother has become increasingly clingy. Whatever raids he launches on Hrothgar's hall run the same course: break down the door, eat some men, escape safely. Grendel has always felt a sense of monotony with regard to his life, but the monotony threatens to crush him now. When the Geats arrive, Grendel is excited to see something new in the kingdom. He is intimidated by the size of these new men, but he is also eager to face a new adversary and conquer a new challenge. Grendel decides to meet this challenge because his many past victories make him confident; but also, whatever happens, at least it will be a break in Grendel's boredom.

When Grendel sees the Geats and the Danes at dinner, he thrives on the tension in the room. He seems to believe the animosity between the Danes and the Geats bodes well for him. Perhaps they will fight and weaken their numbers, although Hrothgar is taking great pains to be sure that does not happen. The Danes view the arrival of the Geats as an insult. Assistance from outsiders implies the Danes are not

strong or brave enough to handle their problems on their own, and they do not like ceding even a little power to these newcomers. Unferth's question to the stranger about his alleged loss in the swimming competition and the stranger's reply about his deeds accompanied with his cutting remark about Unferth's own infamy brings the tension to the fore. Unferth regards himself as the great hero of Hrothgar's hall, and the stranger threatens his position. Unferth fears the stranger will succeed where Unferth has failed so many times at defeating Grendel; the stranger has the advantage of size and strength, making his victory a real possibility. Hrothgar's declaration of favor toward the stranger and Wealtheow's kindness toward him only serve as fuel for Unferth's jealousy. These statements from the king and queen also allude to the tensions brewing in their own household as Hrothulf lurks around the edges of the feast, another "like a son" to Hrothgar.

Chapter 12

Summary

Grendel enters the hall, shattering the heavy door with a light touch. He thinks the Geats are asleep and ties a tablecloth around his neck as a napkin in his excitement to eat them. He kills and eats one of the men, but he finds his next intended victim, the stranger, is only pretending to sleep. The stranger watches Grendel make his first kill, studying Grendel's methods. The stranger grabs Grendel's arm, which is painful for the monster. Grendel envisions wings on the stranger's back, but the image quickly fades and returns to reality.

Hero and monster grapple, but the stranger gets the upper hand when Grendel slips on the bloody floor. The stranger whispers words that chill and burn Grendel; he says Grendel's vision of the world as one of his own making is incorrect, and reality exists beyond Grendel's own experience of it. Grendel calls for his mother and tells the stranger that if he wins, it is only by chance because Grendel slipped on the floor. The stranger responds by smashing Grendel into a wall and forcing him to sing of the wall's existence. Then the stranger rips off Grendel's arm. Blind with pain and bleeding profusely, Grendel imagines the stranger with white wings and breathing fire. Grendel runs for the door and cries out for his mother as he makes his way back to his cave. At the edge of a cliff, Grendel stops. The animals gather to watch Grendel die, and Grendel

can feel their eyes on him. He questions the feeling he has at this moment and wonders if it is joy. In his last words, Grendel says he has had an accident and says, "So may you all."

Analysis

Grendel's death is undignified, placing him on a level with the animals and men he has scorned over the years. In the same way Grendel once mocked Unferth and his view of himself as a hero, the stranger now mocks Grendel's worldview. Grendel has spent his life enmeshed in the belief that he creates and controls his own reality, but the stranger hits him with the truth in the form of a literal brick wall. He forces Grendel to acknowledge the existence of the wall, which breaks down the wall Grendel has built between himself and reality. During the battle, Grendel fights to retain the "truth" the dragon taught him, as he engages in a mystical battle of words, a clash of viewpoints, but the stranger uses words in a prayer-like manner to access a force far more powerful than Grendel's will or poetry. Paradoxically, after using words almost like a magic spell on Grendel, the stranger proves things exist beyond the realm of Grendel's mind. The reader will wonder how the stranger comes to know Grendel's viewpoint, what lesson Grendel needs to learn before he dies, and how to deliver the lesson. When Grendel envisions wings on the stranger's back and fire from his mouth, Grendel associates the stranger with the dragon; thus, Grendel comes to understand the interconnectedness of all things, which the dragon spoke of long ago. The stranger's powers can only be supernatural.

Grendel's indignity continues as he dies. He claims repeatedly his death was an accident, a twist of chance—a trick—the stranger has played on him. Grendel cannot accept the possibility he has been overpowered by superior strength and cunning, nor does he consider this was how he was destined to die. Instead, he cries "Wa!" and calls out for his mother as he did in childhood, when he was stuck in a tree and Hrothgar threw an ax at him. Now his association with Hrothgar ends in roughly the same terms, tears and a bleeding wound, as the novel comes full circle, reinforcing the idea connected to the prefatory verse from William Blake's poem "The Mental Traveller." Grendel, on a figurative level, is only an ideology, his character a philosophical mouthpiece very similar to rationality and existentialism, and his death represents the death of a philosophical way of thinking. Further, Grendel's calls for his mother allude to the source text of *Beowulf*, in which Grendel's mother does emerge from her cave after Grendel's death to

seek revenge on the men who killed her child.

On the literal level, Grendel's moment of death and his last words are deliberately ambiguous, a reflection of the contradictory feelings Grendel has expressed throughout his life. He asks, "*Is it joy I feel?*" The monotony of Grendel's life has been permanently broken, as death releases Grendel from the isolation and self-loathing he has felt for most of his days. The joy he feels when the stranger arrives in Chapter 11 and at the moment of his death in Chapter 12 gives readers hope that Grendel has fulfilled his purpose as a part of nature and he will find redemption after death. At the same time, Grendel has resisted his death to this moment—crying and screaming, shifting blame for the accident—and his character is a bitter and violent creature. In that respect, his last words ring as a curse, "so may you all suffer" as Grendel has suffered. However, it is more likely his final statement reads more like a hope, "so may you all" find the release and understanding Grendel has found.

“” Quotes

"Pointless, ridiculous monster crouched in the shadows, stinking of dead men, murdered children, martyred cows."

— Grendel , Chapter 1

Grendel introduces his sense of isolation from other living creatures by highlighting his approach to those creatures as prey and by mentioning himself as a resident of the shadows. He also introduces a sense of self-loathing when he describes himself as "pointless" and "ridiculous," and mentions the stink that surrounds him.

"The world resists me and I resist the world ... mountains are what I define them as."

— Grendel , Chapter 2

Grendel perceives that the world is hostile toward him, and he responds with hostility of his own. In his youth, he also learns to believe in his ability to shape his reality by defining the world through his own perceptions.

"The men ... talked in something akin to my language, which meant ... we were, incredibly, related."

— Grendel , Chapter 3

When Grendel first encounters Hrothgar and his men, he is trapped in a tree, and he feels both vulnerable and camouflaged. His recognition that he and the men speak a similar language and are therefore related demonstrates how men and monsters in the story have more in common than either would like to admit.

"My heart was light with Hrothgar's goodness, and leaden with grief at my own bloodthirsty ways."

— Grendel , Chapter 4

Grendel's perception of the Danes begins to change, and this changes his view of himself. He wants to believe in something meaningful and good, but soon he gives in to an ancient darkness he feels pressing in on him.

"The Shaper was singing the glorious deeds of the dead men ... all lies."

— Grendel , Chapter 4

The Shaper sings songs that create one version of reality for

the king's men—in this case, a song telling the tale of men who bravely fought Grendel—but it isn't the same reality Grendel experiences. All perception is subjective; therefore, so is reality.

"I know everything, you see ... the beginning, the present, the end. Everything."

— The dragon , Chapter 5

The dragon knows about time and events beyond Grendel's understanding. As a result, the dragon assigns a different value—generally a lesser value—to the events he witnesses.

"They'd map out roads through Hell with their crackpot theories, their ... lists of paltry facts."

— The dragon , Chapter 5

The dragon holds men in contempt for their shortsighted view of reality and their cursory understanding of the world. Men know facts and develop theories, but they don't understand how time and matter are connected. The dragon's unique point of view allows him to see all these connections.

The dragon reinforces Grendel's view that humans distort facts to suit their emotional needs. The dragon also fills Grendel with doubts; Grendel begins to doubt that the Shaper has powers, that a god created the world, and that there is meaning in any creature's existence.

"In a billion, billion, billion years everything will have come and gone ... A certain man will absurdly kill me."

— The dragon , Chapter 5

In his summation of his long talk with Grendel, the dragon indicates that everything that can exist, everything that can happen, will exist and happen repeatedly over the course of all time, and the details of what will exist and happen are absurd. The dragon's reference to the man who will kill him—the same man who will kill Grendel, as the source material of *Beowulf* indicates—provides a connection between himself and Grendel.

*"But though I laughed, I felt
trapped, as hollow as a rotten
tree."*

— Grendel , Chapter 6

Grendel has just stormed the meadhall and slaughtered Hrothgar's men. He laughs, but real joy eludes him, and he sees himself killing mechanically, raising the question of whether Grendel has free will or is just like any other creature following its instincts.

*"I sighed. The word "hero" was
beginning to grate. He was an
idiot."*

— Grendel , Chapter 6

Grendel takes delight in embarrassing Hrothgar's great hero, Unferth. Grendel refuses to kill Unferth when they fight, preferring to make Unferth a source of his amusement. Grendel's mockery of Unferth extends to mockery of all heroes and of the very concept of heroism.

*"There is no limit to desire but
desire's needs. (Grendel's law.)"*

— Grendel , Chapter 7

Grendel knows he could destroy all of Hrothgar's men in one fell swoop, but he prefers to conduct his raids periodically, killing a few men at a time. This way, he can continue to fulfill his desire for mayhem rather than extinguish his desire by destroying its object.

*"Poor Grendel's had an accident.
So may you all."*

— Grendel , Chapter 12

When Grendel finally meets his end at the hands of the stranger, he convinces himself he has had an accident; by doing so, he resists the idea of fate. Even in his last breaths, he remains firm in this conviction, shaping his reality to his own perception instead of acknowledging he might have been outfought. His isolation and his contempt for others resonate in Grendel's final words, a curse wishing his own fate on everyone.

Symbols

Cave

Grendel's cave—cold, dark, dank, and protected by fire snakes—reflects his deep sense of isolation and loneliness. Its inhospitable character underlines the suffering of Grendel's loneliness. The cave is unappealing in the same way Grendel is unappealing to those he encounters. In Chapter 2, Grendel says, "I am *lack*." Grendel must confront the ancient emptiness and darkness inside himself; he embraces it instead of seizing opportunities for change and learning to believe in something greater, beyond reason. The hollow cave is home to Grendel's murky, speechless mother who never leaves, as well as dim shapes that are trapped in an "inviolable gloom," as Grendel observes. The cave dwellers represent emptiness, subjectivity, and an inner void. Grendel's comments in Chapter 11 clarify the symbolism of the cave: "The watchful mind lies, cunning and swift, about the dark blood's lust ... then sudden and swift the enemy strikes from nowhere, the cavernous heart." Grendel's

true enemy all along has been isolation and emptiness.

Meadhall

Hrothgar's meadhall stands in sharp contrast to Grendel's gloomy cave. It is a warm and hospitable respite from the dangers of nature and winter's cold. It is filled with light and song, a place where men may fight but also embrace one another as brothers. It represents the friendship and connection Grendel cannot enjoy. Mead is a beer-like drink from the Old English period, made from fermented honey, and it is used in *Grendel* to arouse a feeling of celebration and camaraderie among all members of the community, including women. The meadhall also symbolizes Hrothgar's dream of establishing a peaceful, productive community. Grendel may tell himself he attacks the meadhall because of his predator instincts or because of Hrothgar's pride, but in truth, he attacks because he is envious of Hrothgar's vision and theories. The meadhall is where the Shaper manipulates reality, and Grendel tries to undo the reality the humans are constructing because he is not included in a positive way. Grendel longs to be known, and if being known to humankind means he must be destructive, then so be it.

Themes

Isolation

Grendel resents his isolation from the rest of the world—from humans, from animals, from his own mother—even as he pretends to embrace it. He sees himself as a unique creature, forging his own reality, yet he resents Hrothgar and his men for their camaraderie, wishing to join in even though he believes their connections are not genuine. In his childhood, Grendel chose to isolate himself from men, his mother, and other creatures by embracing the ideas that meaning cannot be shared and he alone exists in the world. His choice to follow his instincts and reject idealism, heroism, love, and God, which he sees as traps, lead him further into isolation.

Although Grendel's suffering is the most acute, others around him also suffer from isolation. Wealtheow is "alone and never alone" as someone who has been willingly traded to a violent king to protect her people. As a pawn in a game she doesn't control, her isolation is intensified by the potential risks to her personal safety if she fails to please. In a world ruled by men, the women remain isolated; even Wealtheow's daughter, Freawaru, prepares to follow in her mother's footsteps as she is betrothed to hostile King Ingeld of the Heathobards for the same purposes. In addition, something vital is missing from Wealtheow's interactions with Hrothgar, and she is unable to judge Grendel as anything but a monster despite his good traits, calling into question just how connected two separate entities can be.

Fate versus Free Will

Readers who are familiar with *Grendel's* source material, *Beowulf*, know that Grendel's fate is sealed from the start. Less clear is whether Grendel has any control over his destiny; his conversation with the dragon hints that all events, including Grendel's life and death, are predetermined. Yet the dragon uses faulty logic and conflated philosophical babble to confuse Grendel into rejecting ideas about fate, God, and free will; readers will notice the dragon's illogical statements, even if Grendel does not. For example, the dragon says he may do what he wants to do, but that doesn't mean he causes events to happen; it just means he sees events before they happen. Following the dragon's blurry logic on the topic of free will, he says, "So much for free will and intercession!" Nothing comes of his comment, as it is far beyond Grendel's understanding.

Intercession is a major tenet in Christianity; Jesus, the angels, and the saints intercede or act in favor of someone else through prayer, moving God to mercy on behalf of creatures on Earth. It never occurs to Grendel to pray; he does not know the Judeo-Christian belief that the soul's free will is at stake, nor does he know of a serpent or a Lucifer whose purpose it is to tempt the soul. It is important to notice that the dragon explains nothing of substance to Grendel. The way the theme plays out suggests that Grendel is locked into his fate, and he feels death coming inexorably toward him. But Grendel also follows his natural instincts, which could equate to free will, though he grapples with and reaches for something beyond.

Because the dragon has so thoroughly tricked Grendel, Grendel never fully understands how to use his free will; nor does he comprehend how free will connects to the divine, faith, or belief in connectedness and meaning.

Paradoxically, it is possible at times to read about events in the novel from the humans' perspective, despite Grendel's narration. This perspective shows how spiritual forces are at play in the charm Grendel is under, during his encounter with Ork, and when Grendel is blocked from killing humans for no logical reason. And the stranger (as Grendel refers to as Beowulf) is portrayed as part human, part angel, confirming something mystical has a hand in Grendel's fate.

Monsters and Humans

Although Grendel is a monster, he has complex thoughts and feelings. He attempts to connect with the humans and has a familial connection to his mother. He shows devotion to the land he calls home and resents the changes humans make to his environment. Meanwhile, the humans attack Grendel without understanding him or his intentions, and they recklessly destroy resources as they conquer the lands around them. Grendel's actions and people's violence blur the line between monster and human. Like a human, Grendel theorizes, uses reason, searches for meaning, and senses he has more than one mind while he observes his own life. Grendel evolves into a poet like the Shaper and learns to use his imagination, outstripping humans who are locked into cycles of ambition, violence, and materialism. In some ways, Grendel is portrayed as a natural predator of humans, a part of nature meant to keep them in check. He compares his role to that of humans mastering and domesticating animals: "I cut down my visits, conserving the game, and watched them. Nature lover."

Storytelling

Grendel is fascinated with the power of words and stories to shape perceptions of reality—hence, the court minstrel/storyteller is called the Shaper. As the dragon tells Grendel, the men need a creature like Grendel to inform their

stories and press their own progress forward. Grendel's decision to tell his own story is an attempt to harness the same power for himself, to create and shape the reality of his own life. Throughout the novel, Grendel explores the nature of poetry and the idea of using words to shape the world. At first, he says the Shaper's inspiration comes from "winds (or whatever you please)," as though he does not quite believe in the Shaper's powers. The trees become a narrative perspective in Chapter 7, as though they are portents observing Grendel, who is still searching for signs. By Chapter 8, Grendel has learned to use his imagination to create poetry and scenes with powerful imagery; he fantasizes about what Hrothulf is thinking and feeling. It is as if Grendel has entered into a communion with nature, or something higher, and it gives him the power to create. When the Shaper dies, Grendel mourns the loss of his own history; without someone to tell his stories to, Grendel feels his poetic powers are ultimately useless. However, language and poetry are imbued with such power and mystical force in *Grendel* that his love and mastery of them points toward redemption for his character.

Motifs

Seasons

As time moves through "season after season," Grendel marks its passage. The cycle through summers and winters also marks Grendel's progression as a character. *Grendel* is organized into 12 chapters, corresponding to the signs of the zodiac, their ruling planets and constellations, and the symbolic meanings associated with each sign; from Chapter 1 to Chapter 12: Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius, Pisces. In spring, Grendel is hopeful. In summer, he draws back from the meaning he is creating. Winter, a season associated with Sagittarius, comes near the novel's climax; Grendel says, "The trees are dead, and only the deepest religion can break through time and believe they'll revive." Although Grendel embraces the dragon's truth that nothing matters and there is no God, Grendel's very being cycles between belief and emptiness.

Machinery

Grendel compares the mindless behavior of those around him—animals, men, his mother—to the actions of machines: unthinking, automatic, and often destructive. At his lowest and most disconnected emotional points, Grendel sees even the sun, moon, and stars as machines operating in a mechanical world. This perception leads him to believe he is more powerful than the reality around him. He makes himself a god over the mechanical, pointless universe: "I alone exist ... I create the whole universe, blink by blink." The more Grendel thinks this way, the more mechanical he becomes, and the more he follows his wrathful instinct to kill. Reason, poetry, love, and admiration are at the opposite end of the spectrum from *mechanical* in the novel. Throughout, Grendel rejects every opportunity to venture beyond the instinctive; instead, he clings hopelessly to the dragon's words about the meaninglessness of existence.

Zodiac

Each chapter of the novel makes reference to a figure from the astrological zodiac, seen literally in the introduction of the ram (Aries) in Chapter 1, the bull (Taurus) in Chapter 2, and the goat in Chapter 10 (Capricorn). The references are more symbolic and esoteric in other chapters. For example, when Wealthewo arrives during Chapter 7 (Libra), she represents a balancing force. This highly organized structure contrasts with Grendel's perceptions that the world is random and mechanical. Ultimately, Grendel lives in a world full of patterns; but although he often perceives and intuits signs and supernatural occurrences, he often chooses to rationalize them away.

- Aries: Ram
- Taurus: Bull
- Gemini: Twins
- Cancer: Crab
- Leo: Lion
- Virgo: Maiden
- Libra: Scales
- Scorpio: Scorpion
- Sagittarius: Archer
- Capricorn: Goat
- Aquarius: Water-bearer
- Pisces: Fish

Trees

Trees and their imagery reflect Grendel's interior state, worldview, or circumstances in almost every chapter. One pivotal event occurs when Grendel gets stuck in a tree and Hrothgar throws an ax at him; this sets the stage for Grendel's subsequent war on Hrothgar. By the end of the novel, Grendel feels empty and hollow as a rotting tree. Humans also mistake Grendel for a tree spirit or tree-killing fungus, implying there is a physical connection between Grendel and trees, and the men's perception of Grendel's body is vastly different from his own reality.

Suggested Reading

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