



Grendel

Author
John Gardner

Year Published
1971

Original Language
English

THEMES

What Does It Mean to Be a Monster?

Grendel reimagines the terrible monster from the Old English *Beowulf* epic as a thinking and feeling being struggling to understand his place in the world. How is he defined by being a monster? What is the nature of the world? After encountering many possible answers, Grendel comes full circle when he encounters Beowulf.

Isolation

Grendel is a monster alone—separated from humans, animals, and even his mother.

Fate vs. Free Will

Grendel's end is never in doubt; it is unclear whether he has any control.

Monsters & Humans

The monster isn't always monstrous; the humans are not always humane.

Main Characters

Dragon

Teaches Grendel; greedy and cold

Grendel

Monster searching for meaning

Grendel's Mother

Monster without the power of speech

Hrothgar

King of the Danes; Grendel's adversary

Hrothulf

Hrothgar's nephew; wants to rule

Wealthew

Queen; brings balance to Danes

Shaper

Singer of stories that define Danes

Unferth

Frustrated hero whom Grendel lets live

Motifs

Zodiac

Each chapter connects to one of the signs of the zodiac, another yearly cycle.

Seasons

The cycle of the year echoes Grendel's journey through the novel.

Machinery

Grendel often compares mindless behavior to the mechanics of a machine.

Grendel by the Numbers

12

Chapters in the novel, each corresponding to a sign of the zodiac

1981

Year the animated film adaptation *Grendel Grendel Grendel* was released

1973

Year Gardner left teaching to focus on writing

1983

Year *Grendel* got his own comic book series

Author



JOHN GARDNER
1933–82

Grendel was the first in a string of critical and commercial successes for American writer Gardner, including *The Sunlight Dialogues* and award-winning *October Light*. He was also a scholar of Old and Middle English who had a reputation for holding controversial views and for introducing the young to complicated literature.

...was Grendel, Ruiner of Meadhalls, Wrecker of Kings! But also, as never before, I was alone.

Grendel, Chapter 6