

***Grendel* by John Gardner**

Critical Analysis of the Full Text of *Grendel*

Chapter 1: Aries, the Ram.

1. What does Grendel's relationship with nature -- the ram, the sky, grass, the doe, the baby bird, owls, and wolves -- reveal about his own personality?
2. Quote the various phrases Grendel uses to describe himself. What do they reveal about his self-image and how it was developed?
3. What is the significance of the scene wherein Grendel challenges the "dark chasms"?
4. What does Grendel mean when he speaks of "playing cat and mouse with the universe"? What does it mean to "see all life without observing it"?
5. Describe Grendel's mother and his relationship with her.
6. From Grendel's point of view, what is man?

Chapter 2: Taurus, the Bull.

1. In a flashback to his early childhood, what is Grendel's relationship with the "large old shapes" and with his mother?
2. What is the significance of the scene wherein Grendel catches his foot in the crack in the tree trunks and is attacked by a bull?
3. What does Grendel mean when he says "there was nothing, or, rather, there was everything but my mother"? How is this a loss of innocence?
4. Explain what Grendel means when he says, "I create the whole universe, blink by blink."
5. How does Grendel's first meeting with men affect him? Why does he fear them more than he fears the bull?
6. How is Grendel's world view and self-concept affected by his experience with men? How does this event affect his relationship with the "old shapes" and with his mother?
7. Explain the meaning of "the world is all pointless accident."

Chapter 3: Gemini, the Twins.

1. As a detached observer, what does Grendel learn about Hrothgar and his theories? What shocks Grendel about man's behavior to other men and to nature? Why does Grendel fear Hrothgar?
2. Why is Grendel so impressed and affected by the Shaper? Why does he fear the Shaper?
3. According to Grendel, what is the truth about poetry?
4. Why does Grendel scream "Lost!" and crawl on all fours as the chapter ends?

Chapter 4: Cancer, the Crab.

1. How can mor(t)ality be the creation of the Shaper?
2. Why does Hrothgar build Heorot, the Hall of the Hart?
3. What is the power of the "projected possible"?
4. How does the story of Cain and Abel affect Grendel?
5. What is Grendel's "conversion"?
6. What is "the presence" Grendel feels in the darkness?
7. Why not?

Chapter 5: Leo, the Lion.

1. Why does Grendel visit the dragon? What does the dragon tell him about himself and about the “word”?
2. How does the dragon’s mind differ from Grendel’s and from men’s?
3. From the dragon’s point of view, what is man? What is man’s mind?
4. How does the dragon explain the role of the Shaper?
5. Explain the following statements made by the dragon:
 - a. “Knowledge is not cause.”
 - b. “Connectedness is the essence of everything.”
 - c. “The essence of life is to be found in the frustrations of established order.”
 - d. “Novel order (is) a primary requisite for important experience.”
 - e. “Importance is derived from the immanence of infinitude in the finite.”
 - f. “Expression is founded on the finite occasion. It is the activity of infinitude impressing itself on its environment.”
6. In his attempt to explain the difference between Importance and Expression to Grendel, the dragon uses the examples of the difference between vegetables and animals and the difference between an angry man and a rock. Explain.
7. How does Grendel “improve” men?
8. What is the dragon’s ambition? His final advice? His motto?
9. How is Grendel “caged in a limited mind”?

Chapter 6: Virgo, the Harvest Virgin.

1. How is the dragon’s charm a curse?
2. How does Grendel now react to the Shaper’s song?
3. How is Grendel “transformed” by his first raid on Heorot? In what sense does he “become” himself?
4. According to Unferth, what is heroism? What is poetry?
5. Why doesn’t Grendel kill Unferth? And why is Unferth so bitter?
6. Who or what is the dragon?

Chapter 7: Libra, the Balance.

1. What is Grendel’s law? What does it mean?
2. How is Wealtheow like the Shaper’s songs? How is she different?
3. Why doesn’t Grendel rape, torture, and murder Wealtheow? Or does he?
4. What does Grendel mean by “balance is everything”?
5. What is “meaning as quality”?
6. What is the parallel between Wealtheow and Grendel’s mother?
7. What has happened to Unferth? How does the Queen affect him?

Chapter 8: Scorpio, the Scorpion.

1. What threats surround Hrothgar after Hrothulf’s arrival? How is Hrothulf like a scorpion?
2. What is Grendel’s Theorem? What does it mean?
3. How can violence be creative? What do Grendel and Red Horse have to say about violence and “legitimate force”?
4. Describe Red Horse’s political ideology.
5. What is the meaning of the “horrible dream which Grendel imputes to Hrothgar”?
6. How can the old king Hrothgar be a giant? In what ways is he like Job?

Chapter 9: Sagittarius, the Hunter.

1. What ironies occur in this section?
2. How can Time be inside the hunter and the hart?
3. What is Grendel's opinion of religion?
4. What is the significance of Grendel's encounter with Ork? What does Ork have to say about the King of the Gods and about the nature of Evil?
5. Why is Grendel so disgusted by the speeches of the Fourth Priest?

Chapter 10: Capricorn, the Goat.

1. Explain the saying "Tedium is the worst pain."
2. Why is Grendel so frightened and so infuriated by the goat?
3. How does the Shaper's death affect Grendel?
4. What is "the pastness of the past"?
5. How has Grendel's mother changed? What is their relationship now?
6. Who is the other monster Grendel meets on the moors?
7. Explain "Nihil ex nihilo, I always say."

Chapter 11: Aquarius, the Water-bearer.

1. How does Grendel perceive Beowulf and the Geats?
2. In what ways are Beowulf and Grendel alike?
3. What has Grendel come to understand about the "dark realities" of self and the world?
4. What does Grendel mean when he says he has seen "the vision of the dragon"?
5. How does Grendel divide the world?
6. Explain the saying "Things fade; alternatives exclude."
7. What happens when Unferth challenges Beowulf about Breca?
8. How does the Queen respond to Beowulf?

Chapter 12: Pisces, the Fish.

1. How and why is Grendel defeated?
2. How do illusion and words help cause Grendel's death?
3. Why does Beowulf make Grendel sing of walls?
4. How does this last chapter echo lines, events, characters, and images from early chapters ?
5. Explain Grendel's last words: "Poor Grendel's had an accident. . . So may you all."

General Questions:

1. How does the narrative point of view function in this story?
2. Are there any authorial intrusions in this story? If so, how do they function?
3. In what ways does the story Grendel differ from Beowulf?
4. In what ways do Grendel and Beowulf complement each other?
5. What is the truth about heroes and heroic action from Grendel's point of view?
6. What moral, philosophical, or metaphysical observations about human and/or monstrous existence are made in Grendel?
7. What is the "heroic vision" of this story?
8. Does the fact that Grendel is told from the monster's point of view qualify the story in any way ?
9. How is the zodiac used as a structure for the book?

Critical Essay on *Grendel*: Write an essay supporting one of the following thesis statements.

1. John Gardner's *Grendel* provides a fascinating penetration into the ineluctable mystery of order and chaos, good and evil, hero and monster, claiming throughout a place for the monster's point of view.

2. *Grendel* by John Gardner is a presentation of the dark, the misunderstood, and the ugly, speaking always for itself, urging empathy for its pain, and claiming some rightful place in the shaping of whatever is real. Or perhaps human.

3. Because Grendel is so akin to men, but at the same time distant enough to be an alien, his point of view provides an opportunity for us to see more clearly what it means to live as *homo sapiens*.