

Grendel Study Guide

Grendel by John Gardner

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Plot Summary

Grendel is a first-person account of Grendel, the creature Beowulf kills in the sixth-century epic poem Beowulf. Grendel looks like a terrifying beast, but he has highly developed cognitive skills. Throughout the novel, he debates philosophical ideas while trying to figure out exactly what and who he is. While this battle is raging inside him, Grendel is also terrorizing the Danes and their king, Hrothgar. Grendel observes humanity as it develops, and he struggles with whether or not they are a worthy of living. As Grendel grows complacent with his own life, an unknown boy comes along and strikes fear and excitement into him. This turns out to be Beowulf, and he slays Grendel in a fight. Grendel uses his last few moments debating the philosophical implications of death.

Grendel first begins his journey when he finds a hole leading from his mother's cave to the outside world. He is cautious of the vast land, but he grows more confident as he explores more. One night, he becomes stuck in a rotting tree and is unable to get down. A bull notices him and begins charging. However, Grendel is too high for the bull to reach. After the bull leaves, Grendel sees humans approaching. He has never seen humans before, so he is curious as to what they are. Grendel tries speaking to them, but they grow afraid. They try to attack him, but his mother saves him by scaring the humans away.

Later, Grendel begins exploring the human settlement. He notices that one man, King Hrothgar, is quickly gathering the support of the townships around him. One day, a blind man Grendel calls the Shaper appears. He sings songs about the Danish ancestry, and Grendel becomes inspired by the Shaper's words of peace and harmony. He finds a corpse in the forest and brings it back to Hart, the mead hall. When he enters, the humans think he is attacking them. They immediately fight him off. He takes this as a sign of hostility and swears war on the humans.

Angry, Grendel begins running and finds a cave with a dragon. The dragon begins sharing his philosophical views with Grendel. He says humans are a paltry, worthless race, who supports their behavior with grand ideals of valor and bravery. Grendel doesn't exactly understand, so he leaves the dragon in anger. On his way back home, a group of humans tries to attack him. He realizes, though the dragon has put a spell on him, making him impervious to harm. He uses this new power as a shield while attacking Hart. An up-and-coming thane named Unferth tries to kill Grendel, but he is unsuccessful. He begs Grendel to kill him so he can have an honorable death. Grendel does not comply, making Unferth live his life in shame.

Grendel watches as another nation tries to take over Hrothgar's land. As a peace offering, the other king gives Hrothgar his sister, Wealtheow, to be his wife. Grendel is quite taken by her loveliness. In a way, Wealtheow also serves as a peace offering for Grendel as well. He doesn't want to attack Hart because of her. He eventually becomes upset and tries to kill her. At the last minute, he decides against it and runs back to his home. Later, the king's orphaned nephew comes to live with him. Grendel overhears his



growing anger with the class division in the kingdom. Grendel uses this to justify killing off humans. He also tricks a priest into thinking he is the great deity.

Over twelve years, Grendel grows weary of killing because he realizes he is doing the same thing each year. He then notices a feeling of dread come over him, and it makes him slightly excited that his life might change. He notices a ship coming across the water, and a group of men get off the boat. He follows them all back to Hart, and the most youthful one claims he will kill Grendel for Hrothgar. Grendel doesn't believe him, so he later comes and tries to kill the boy. However, the unnamed boy (who is actually Beowulf) defeats Grendel by ripping his arm off. Grendel limps back into the woods and waits to die.



Chapter 1

Summary

While in his cave, Grendel sees a ram. He tries to scare it off, but the ram completely ignores Grendel's roars. The ram's obstinacy reminds Grendel spring has arrived, thus beginning his twelfth year of war against the humans. Spring also reminds Grendel the animals will begin copulation soon. He thinks the whole affair is silly, and he asks the sky why animals like the ram haven't figured out how to have sex in private. The sky, doesn't answer him. This reminds Grendel he is also a mindless creature now because all he does is kill. Passing his sleeping mother, who does not talk, he leaves and goes to Hart, the mead hall of King Hrothgar of the Danes.

When Grendel arrives, he barges through the door and begins killing humans. The people turn the lights off to confuse Grendel, but he can see perfectly in the dark. He steals a few bodies and carries them to the woods where he eats them. The "success" of his night is spoiled in the morning because he realizes he is just beginning another mindless cycle of killing sprees. He walks back down to the town and observes the people gathering their dead and burning them on a pyre. They also start reconstructing the damage Grendel has caused. Then the humans call out to the gods asking what they had done to deserve this terror.

Analysis

From the opening scene, it is easy to see that Grendel lives a very isolated life. He could be part animal, but he is unable to communicate with the animals in the real world. Grendel can't even scare the ram into leaving; the ram merely sits while Grendel roars at him to leave. The same can be said for his mother. Because she has never spoken to him, he does not know if she can speak at all. Either she has given up speech or she was never able to speak in the first place. For the past twelve years, Grendel has dreamed of being able to communicate with someone, but he cannot.

Because much of this book considers the philosophical implications of life, having a lonely and isolated narrator is the best way to provide an unbiased point of view. Grendel sits on the outside of humanity; he does not participate in it. When he is describing the humans' rituals after his desecration, he is looking at them from an outsider's perspective. He is neither defending nor condemning them. Instead, he observes.

Vocabulary

trudge, atremble, docile, brattling, leering, sly, crocuses, mulch, reel, sycophantish, trifling, tuberstirrings, luminous, inanimate, fuliginous, hex, fens, moors, dingy, putrid, aswirl, mired, eaves, surmounts, futilely, dirge, dogmatism, quavering



Chapter 2

Summary

Chapter 2 describes how Grendel comes to find the outside world. Many years ago, he was content to stay only in his mother's cave. While exploring the darkness, he finds a pool with hundreds of firesnakes swimming around. He dives in and sees the moon for the first time. Each night he reemerges and explores a bit farther each time. His mother doesn't like his leaving her so often. She sometimes tries to hold him close to her like she wants him to be a part of her again. He still explores slightly comforted that his mother cares for him, though she only shows it physically.

The next time he goes out, Grendel gets himself stuck in a rotting tree. Nobody can hear his calls, so he waits to die. Soon after, a bull appears. The bull charges at the tree and initially cuts Grendel's leg with its horn. Grendel realizes, though, the bull won't hurt the rest of him because the bull will only charge at the base of the tree. Hours later, a group of humans (though Grendel doesn't know they are humans) arrives. They discuss whether or not Grendel is a tree god, and Grendel realizes they speak a language similar to the one he speaks. Grendel tries to communicate, but his garbled words scare the humans. They begin attacking, but Grendel's mother appears and scares them away. He wakes up back in the cave with his mother. When he begins discussing the outside world, she only stares back at him. He gets upset, and she tries to comfort him.

Analysis

Breaking free from the cave represents a loss of innocence for Grendel. Before, he was content to play in the dark of the caves. Similar to Plato's Allegory of the Cave, Grendel was living in darkness and didn't know the realities of the world. When he emerges, he is overwhelmed with everything the world has to offer. He notices, though, his relationship with his mother begins to suffer. Before Grendel left her cave, they lived contentedly. They still shared a strong bond. After he left, Grendel's mother feels his innocence slipping away. She wants to keep him safe in her care, but Grendel is growing up. Even though she can't communicate with verbal language, she still goes through the same withdrawals human mothers feel when their children gain independence.

When Grendel is trapped by the bull, though, he realizes he isn't "old" enough to be fully on his own. Even with all his philosophical reasoning, he isn't strong or mature enough to break free from the tree. He also isn't fearsome enough to scare away the bull or the humans. Grendel still needs his mother to help him out of tough situations. If she had not helped him, he might have been stuck in the tree until he died. Yet Grendel still feels suffocated by his mother. He is grateful she saved him, but he wants his freedom more than he wanted her help.



Vocabulary

degenerate, ingenious, perplexity, ardently, boles, flue, foist, putrefaction, loll, loped, crevasse, anarchistic, pungent, shale, javelins



Chapter 3

Summary

Grendel recalls how the people developed their society. At first, humans lived in small groups. Different factions would battle each other fiercely, and the people who survived would go back to their caves and tell exaggerated tales of the fight. As the groups grew larger, the people started constructing community buildings and developing their technology. All the groups developed at a similar rate, but they all thought they were superior to other groups. One man, Hrothgar, was successful in overtaking the outlying groups. He started making the groups pay tribute to him, and his own town became wealthy. He also constructed roads and a strong military presence.

One night after Hrothgar becomes King of the Danes, a blind bard Grendel calls “the Shaper” comes to Hrothgar’s court. He begins singing a song about Scyld Shefing, the progenitor of the Danish peoples. As Grendel listens outside, he realizes the Shaper is taking great liberties with his history: The Shaper is praising Shefing for his violent tendencies. The song ends and the Danes are inspired by the rendition of their history. Grendel, though, leaves the scene and begins screaming into the wind.

Analysis

In this chapter, Gardner begins showing how art can deceive. Grendel saw a large portion of humanity’s rise to greatness. He realized the humans’ history was bloody, savage, and cruel. Peace and cooperation were not options for the people who wanted to tear their neighbors’ lands apart. Yet the Shaper’s version of history describes Shefing as a just and righteous leader. His vicious actions toward other people groups were spun as a positive trait, and Shefing was hailed as a great leader. The Danes’ reactions show the people only want their violence to be justified. The Shaper sings Shefing’s praises because this culture glorifies strong and vengeful actions against others.

What causes Grendel to be disturbed, though, is he feels inspired by the Shaper’s song as well. He witnesses humanity’s cruelty and always condemned their behavior. Yet the Shaper’s words make him forget his misgivings. Gardner uses this to show how art can lead people away from the truth; art creates beautiful lies, and people would rather enjoy the lie than face the truth.

Vocabulary

adder, tapestries, gewgaw, ominous, exile, teeming, burbling, acrid, aloof, akin, crosshatched, mired, wench, impenetrable, mange, pious, marauders, recompense, intoned, gild



Chapter 4

Summary

The Shaper and his stories inspire Hrothgar to build a magnificent mead hall. He invites artisans from all over his nation to contribute to the building. Grendel thinks the mead hall, named Hart, is superfluous, but he is still caught up in the excitement of the grand opening. He runs out to the forest and sees a young man and woman courting. He then sees a man who had been murdered and then robbed of his clothes. He picks the person up, and then he begins to hear the Shaper sing. The Shaper is telling about how good and evil were created by a feud between two brothers. He also says Grendel and his family come from the family that God had cursed.

Hearing this, Grendel decides to bring the man to Hart as a sign of goodwill. He enters Hart and begs for forgiveness for his family's sins. However, none of the humans can understand Grendel and his harsh accent. They also think he has killed the man. They get up and begin trying to kill Grendel. Grendel escapes to the forest and declares war on Hrothgar and his people. A couple of days later, Grendel returns to Hart and listens to the Shaper sing. The aggrandized words anger him, but he feels compelled to believe them because they are so beautiful. He goes back to the cave where his mother tries to converse with her son. However, her words only come out as syllabic mutterings.

Analysis

The allusion that the Shaper sings about is the biblical story of Cain and Abel. Cain was jealous of his brother's sacrifices to God, so he committed the first murder. God cursed Cain for his sins, but he also gave Cain a blessing saying if anyone tried to kill him, they would be punished in return. It can be inferred the curse God placed on Cain and his children was the hideous physiques they were born with. Gardner alludes to this earlier in the novel when Grendel is describing his mother. He says she always seems troubled by an "unremembered, perhaps ancestral crime."

The affect the Shaper's songs have over Grendel is apparent in his need to be accepted by the humans. He wants to make up for his "ancestral crimes" and bridge the gap between his cursed family and people. These feelings upset Grendel, though, because he knows none of the Shaper's words are true. He saw first-hand how brutal and pitiless the humans were to each other; in his mind, Cain's murder of Abel couldn't have been significant because he saw people killing each other over the most trivial of matters. Yet art has the power to seduce and confuse. Grendel knows this, but it is still difficult to fight art's power.

Vocabulary

victualers, vortex, burgeoning, belligerent, pompous, petulant, infallibly, dreary, sullen, moor



Chapter 5

Summary

After Grendel leaves his cave in anger, he travels in search of the dragon. The red and gold dragon enjoys the fact he is able to scare Grendel. He makes the comparison that Grendel is afraid of him the same way people are afraid of Grendel. Grendel in return makes a conscious decision to stop terrorizing the humans. The dragon reads Grendel's mind and asks Grendel why he would want to stop terrorizing him. According to the dragon, he is able to see time forward and backward. He has a higher level of intellect, even higher than Grendel's, and the dragon knows humans have extremely flawed arguments. Rather than accepting things they can't understand, they fill in the gaps with religion and mysticism in order to grasp a small understanding of the world. Whenever they begin to realize their beliefs are patchy and unreliable, they call on people like the Shaper to propagandize their minds.

The dragon also explains to Grendel he plays an important role in the humans' lives. Grendel's only role is to be humanity's antithesis so they can believe they are the most blessed of all creatures. It would be impossible for Grendel to try and change this role. The humans will always look for an evil counterpart in order to justify their own evil ways. The dragon grows weary of Grendel's small mind and tells Grendel to "seek out gold and sit on it" just like he does.

Analysis

Gardner makes the dragon a foil for the Shaper. Whereas the Shaper is able to piece together fragments of the world, the dragon wants the fragments to stay unconnected. He sees the Shaper as the peak of humanity's self-absorption; rather than accepting that existence is complex, humans decide they are the sole purpose of the world. They use art as a way to hold their theory together. But the dragon cannot entirely blame humans for their folly. He says humans are shortsighted because they cannot see the "bigger picture" like he can. Their art and stories are their way of coping with the world's complications.

Vocabulary

undulant, miser, minutely, convulsed, peevish, granary, testy, piddling, supplicant, paltry, dubious, jargon, requisite, monistic, finite, irascible, ponderous, fontanel, dictum, credulity



Chapter 6

Summary

Grendel's discussion with the dragon has begun to affect his thinking. Rather than enjoying the Shaper's songs, he grows angry that the listeners derive self-satisfaction from the egocentric words. He then turns around and sees a Danish guard behind him. The guard tries to kill Grendel, but the spear is unable to pierce Grendel's skin. Grendel realizes the dragon has placed an enchantment on him, which makes Grendel impervious to harm. He surges with both excitement and anger, killing the guards. Days later, Grendel comes to Hart and attacks. He later learns even though many men always die during his raids, the humans still sing about their heroism and bravery against Grendel.

One night during an attack, a young thane named Unferth stands up and poetically declares he will kill Grendel in Hrothgar's name. Grendel begins to talk back and debates the meaning of heroics. Unferth is shocked Grendel can talk, and then Grendel pelts Unferth with apples rather than giving him the satisfaction of dying heroically. Unferth follows Grendel back to the cave. They launch into another debate about heroics, and Unferth asserts heroism comes from the heart. Grendel, though, knows Unferth is only trying to be noble. As Unferth falls asleep from exhaustion, Grendel carries the thane back down to Hart as a humiliating gesture; from then on, he spares Unferth's life in every fight so Unferth can never die a hero.

Analysis

Grendel sees the dragon's enchantment as a blessing. Because he is unable to be hurt, he can engage in any type of hostile act without repercussion. He feels a surge of life and excitement whenever he kills a human, and he loves the fact humans fear him and his wrath. However, the dragon's enchantment is also a curse. Grendel wants to be able to communicate with people; he wants humans to accept him. While he gets to be in contact with them during fights, the fact he has the upper hand makes the fights meaningless. He has no stake in the battle, making the divide between him and the humans grow even farther. It can also be assumed the enchantment Grendel receives is an echo of the one God placed on Cain after he killed his brother.

The exchange between Grendel and Unferth is an example of two individuals who are both trying to grapple with the meaning of their existence. Both men see life without meaning is futile. Grendel chooses to satisfy this meaning by wreaking havoc on the humans and complicating their lives. Unferth, though, chooses to find meaning in heroics. He knows heroics keep away the feelings of uselessness and nihilism. He makes a conscious effort to give himself importance because he would not be able to cope with living a meaningless life.



Vocabulary

futility, acrid, solitary, hunkered, swinish, bumptious, bleary, brume, taunt, geyser, pompous, interminable, orations, maniacally, reeling, trestle, sidled, barrage, festering, pretensions, reedy, shoddy, cynicism, petulant



Chapter 7

Summary

Grendel remembers the second year he began terrorizing Hrothgar's court. A larger army has come and is making plans to attack. One day, they come to Hrothgar and make a peace offering. Hrothgar won't accept any of their gifts except one, the other king's beautiful sister, Wealtheow. Seeing Wealtheow stirs up strong emotions in Grendel. She makes him feel the same way the Shaper's songs made him feel. He longs to be her friend or companion, but he knows it can never happen.

Wealtheow's presence has a calming effect on Hrothgar's men. Even the Shaper stops singing about history and instead focuses on love and happiness. Grendel also stops attacking the people because of Wealtheow's presence. Grendel, though, grows anxious knowing a human has interrupted his objective view of mankind, and he intends to remedy his feelings. Grendel goes on a raid with the full intent to kill Wealtheow as a symbolic gesture. Once she is in his hands, though, he realizes killing her is just as meaningless as letting her live. He puts her down and runs back into the forest. However, he is pleased he is able to make an objective realization again, proving Wealtheow has no more power over him.

Analysis

The style of Chapter 7 is very different than the style of the previous chapters. Before, he was using only narrative prose to communicate with the readers. Chapter 7, though, contains italics, brackets, and other typographic changes. The chapter also contains a major tone shift from informative to slightly mocking. Grendel learned from the Shaper and evolved his methods to better communicate with the readers. He scoffed at art's place in the world, but he employed it within his own narrative.

Grendel saw Wealtheow was not just a common woman. Instead, she was the symbol of balance and harmony. She served as a bridge between the two nations as well as humanity and Grendel. However, Wealtheow only served as a liaison between men. She was also the perfect queen: She was beautiful, kind, gentle, loving, and peaceful. She served her husband's men as though they were her own husbands. This ideal seduced Grendel. He knew all women weren't like Wealtheow, but he exalted her higher than he did other women.

Vocabulary

quota, nihilism, torus, cylindrical, decimated, reeked, ruts, byrnie, ingenious, tediously, carp, simpering, sulphurous, illusory, bludgeoning, nautical, wiles, antics, chilblains



Chapter 8

Summary

Hrothgar's orphaned nephew Hrothulf comes to live with his aunt and uncle. He is fourteen years old, yet he despises how Hrothgar runs his nation. Hrothulf sees the injustice and poverty, and he hates knowing there is such a large divide between the rich class and the lower class. He compares a tree to his uncle: A tree gives life to the birds and animals which inhabit it, yet its shade kills any plants that try to grow on the ground. He becomes friends with an older man named Red Horse and talks about an impending revolution. Red Horse tries to mentor Hrothulf on how best to stage a revolution, but he says all revolutions are alike. They take one government and replace it with another that is just as bad.

At dinner one night, Hrothgar is looking at the people surrounding him. He knows his nephew is plotting a revolution. He also sees people in his court that wish to throw him out of power. There are neighboring lands trying to control his nation, but he doesn't know how he will stop them. He also feels sorry for his young and beautiful wife, who wasted her youth being the wife of an old man. Grendel then takes control of his narrative and says the humans all deserve the suffering they are experiencing.

Analysis

The majority of Chapter 8 is told from the perspective of another character, not Grendel. However, he uses other narrative forms to tell their stories. He sets up many of the scenes like a play script, and each of the characters has their own soliloquy. By doing this, Grendel is still able to be the narrator. However, he is setting up a situation where the humans are characters in his own story. He controls what they say and what they think because he has created a script for them. While the script coincides with what they think and feel, it is still Grendel's words.

Hrothulf and Red Horse are the two politically-motivated characters in the novel. They both are the personification of Grendel and the dragon. Hrothulf perceives his uncle is wrong, and he wants to make a change for the better. His way of making the change is through violence, the mode Grendel uses. Red Horse represents the nihilistic view that everything is pointless. No matter how hard someone tries, there is no tangible solution to the world's chaos. These sentiments perfectly echo the dragon's own beliefs, making Hrothulf and Red Horse's conversation a mirror of the one Grendel and the dragon had.

Vocabulary

dappled, incitement, transvaluation, meritorious, transmogrified, marauder, triviality, truce, indignity, impute



Chapter 9

Summary

Winter has begun in Denmark and Grendel feels uneasy. He watches as an archer shoots a deer, and he feels like there is some sort of symbolism in the image. He later watches as the priests in Hrothgar's town perform a religious ceremony using an ancient dialect. The place where the ceremony is performed is a ring of land surrounded by large wooden figures of multiple deities. That night, he goes down to the land and contemplates the Danes and their religion. An elderly priest comes outside, and Grendel hides behind a statue. The priest begins talking with Grendel, asking him if he is the "Destroyer." Playing along, Grendel claims he is the Destroyer.

The priest, Ork, begins exalting Grendel, and Grendel uses this time to speak about metaphysics. He says he, "the Destroyer," has set limits on mankind. Yet he demands people live up to the standard of perfection he exudes. Ork replies evil isn't as simple as "good and bad." Instead, evil is caused by time and the fact humans can see only from their personal perspective. Rather than being able to understand the universe is timeless with a great number of alternative perspectives, mankind is shortsighted. Ork begins to cry, and Grendel is rendered speechless. A group of priests come out, and Ork begins to proclaim he conversed with the Destroyer.

Analysis

Grendel's conversation with Ork reveals a new way of thinking about the meaning of existence. Even though religion in the Danes is waning, Ork has a prolific view of life. He is able to mix religion with reason rather than using religion to explain all the holes found in life's complex web. He knows that life, without meaning, leads to feelings of emptiness. That is why Ork believes in religion. However, he does not delusion himself by thinking religion is truth. Instead, religion gives people a chance to fight the limitations that they were born with.

Vocabulary

apocalyptic, obsequious, stalactites, inchoate, palsied, impish, epitomized, ossified, extrapolate, stifled



Chapter 10

Summary

When Grendel gets back home, he sees a goat climbing the mountainside. He throws rocks and manages to bash its head in. The goat, though, keeps climbing the mountain. He then hears an old woman tell a group of children one day a strong hero will come from the sea. Next, he watches as the town gathers around the Shaper. He is on his deathbed; right before he dies, he tries to give a prediction about the fate of the Danes. However, he dies before he can finish his sentence. At the Shaper's funeral, his long-time companion sings a song about a man named Finn who battles against the Danes. He eventually conquers the land and tries to control the people. However, a thane kills him and brings his people back to Denmark.

At the cave, Grendel's mother clings to her son. She begins going crazy trying to keep Grendel in the cave. She tries harder to communicate with him, but she is only able to say, "Warowish." Grendel later interprets this to mean, "Beware the fish." Both can sense danger is coming soon, but Grendel wants to stand and meet it while his mother wants to keep him safe with her.

Analysis

The goat Grendel sees is reminiscent of the ram and the bull he encounters earlier in the novel. With the previous two, Grendel knew they were only following their natural, yet mechanical, instincts. He didn't like that they weren't capable of thinking and adapting, but he was able to handle it. Seeing the goat, though, opens a wound in Grendel's mind. He realizes he is just as mechanical and predictable as the goat. He wants to destroy the goat to break its cycle. His anger predates his mother's behavior because both can feel that something dangerous is approaching. She has further foresight than he as she can see the water will be dangerous for him. A garbled warning of "beware the fish" and her attempts to keep Grendel in the cave add to the sense that Grendel's life is in danger. Even the season—winter—foreshadows the end is near.

Vocabulary

tedium, ascend, mere, seams, scree, feign, voyeur, fidelity, decorum, allusion, ensued, epoch



Chapter 11-12

Summary

Grendel sees a ship coming across the horizon, and he is filled with excitement; he feels a change coming, but he can't figure out why he is so happy. Fifteen towering men step off the boat and Grendel is taken with their leader. He is handsome yet soft-spoken, and his voice sounds almost ethereal to Grendel. When the group is presented to Hrothgar, the king is weary. But Hrothgar sees these men are not to be feared when the leader describes a tale where he raced his friend in a swimming contest while fighting off sea monsters. The stranger then tells Hrothgar he has heard about the monster Grendel, and he has come to kill the beast. This makes Grendel feel alive because he sees a formidable opponent in the stranger.

After all the men go to sleep in Hart, Grendel bursts through the doors and starts eating people. He realizes, though, that the group of men had set a trap. The stranger then leaps and forces Grendel's arm behind his own back. Grendel slips on a pool of blood, which puts him in a more defenseless position. The stranger then begins whispering and taunting Grendel. Grendel begins to see wings unfurl behind the stranger and hot fire spews from his mouth. The stranger forces Grendel to sing and refuses to stop the pain until Grendel complies. Grendel lets out a feeble song, and then the stranger rips Grendel's arm out of its socket. Grendel runs out and barely makes it to his mother's cave. As he lies dying, a group of animals gathers to watch.

Analysis

Although he is never named, the stranger in these two chapters is Beowulf from the epic poem Beowulf. Grendel doesn't know anything about Beowulf, only that their fates are intertwined. He senses this stranger can break him from the senseless machination he has become over the past twelve years. Another thing that strikes Grendel is that Beowulf doesn't proclaim heroics like the Danes in Hrothgar's court. He instead has a quiet and humble aura surrounding him. This changes, though, when Beowulf has Grendel pinned. The flames and wings are reminiscent of the dragon Grendel speaks to earlier in his personal journey. All along, his excitement about Beowulf culminated into Grendel's own death. Like the goat, Grendel realizes the only way to break free from the cycle is to die. So when Grendel is on the precipice of his home, he doesn't feel upset at his impending death. Instead, he feels excited and free.

Vocabulary

inexorable, gannet, pommel, insubstantial, cockles, stagnant, touted, credulous, preposterous, carbuncle, copulating, transmogrify



Characters

Grendel

Grendel is a hairy beast-like creature. He looks like an animal, except he has the reasoning capabilities like a human. He is best known from the sixth-century epic poem *Beowulf* as the first beast Beowulf defeated. The difference between the poetic Grendel and Gardner's Grendel is the higher cognitive properties. The poetic Grendel was a primitive being, only capable of the most basic functions. However, Gardner's Grendel possesses higher critical thinking skills than the humans. He grapples with his identity as compared to the humans. He is a descendant of the biblical Cain, the brother that murdered his brother out of jealousy. This sin caused a hostile separation between the two, and they were natural enemies.

Grendel follows the creature as he tries to understand exactly who and what he is while he watches the humans live. At first, he is intrigued by the humans. He sees them as equals, things he can relate to. But when the humans spurn him, Grendel sees them as his adversaries. From this stage, his emotions range from nihilism to admiration for the humans' beliefs, art, and society. He feels his death coming and is powerless to stop it; for Grendel, meeting his destiny is an exciting yet fearful experience.

The Shaper

The Shaper is the name Grendel gives to the bard in Hrothgar's court. He is never given a physical description. The only thing said about the Shaper is that he is blind and he feels unrequited love for a woman in the village. He also has a devoted aide. But this lack of information is most likely because the Shaper represents an ideal. The Shaper and his songs are the embodiment of the Danes' ideas of glory, virtue, and heroism. It is these stories which the Danes rely on to break them from their everyday lives. Bravery and greatness about their ancestors give them something to believe in. They have religion to believe in, but the Shaper's songs reaffirm the tenants of religion.

As the Shaper, the bard is the personification of everything they dream of. What is ironic about the Shaper (and what he represents) is that his stories are largely false. He sings about the Danes and their strong history, but Grendel knows these are only exaggerations. He has seen the humans, and they aren't noble like the people in the stories. Regardless, the Shaper is good at his job, which is to make the people forget about their problems and evil deeds. He even succeeds in convincing Grendel for a short time that humans are essentially good.

The Dragon

The dragon plays the antithesis to the Shaper. Where the Shaper provides a strong sense of meaning for humanity, the dragon believes all forms of society and culture are



irrelevant. The dragon is an old creature that has lived for thousands of years. He has seen the rise and fall of many civilizations. So when Grendel comes to him to ask about the humans and their society, the dragon tries to impart his nihilistic wisdom to Grendel. The dragon's language is extremely heightened and polished, although he even considers talking to Grendel considered to be beneath him. He does convince Grendel that his point of view is correct, but Grendel is too shortsighted to completely understand what the dragon is saying.

Even though Grendel sees the dragon in only one chapter, Grendel feels the dragon's presence throughout the novel. There are two ways to perceive this: one way is to see the dragon as an ever-present power who guides Grendel's moral decisions. The other way is to think of the dragon as merely metaphysical. Grendel's journey to and conversation with the dragon might have only been in his mind. While there was an actual dragon in the poem *Beowulf*, Gardner might have made him a metaphor for Grendel's conflicting state of mind rather than an actual dragon.

Hrothgar

Hrothgar is the King of the Danes. He conquered and then unified the smaller townships early in his career, and much of his time is spent battling other areas for control of their land. Once he is King, though, he creates a prosperous nation built on trust and loyalty. Once Grendel begins terrorizing his lands, though, Hrothgar becomes wary as his defenses weaken. He is a proud man and finds it difficult to accept help from others. In the poem *Beowulf*, Hrothgar is personified like a deity, a perfect model of a king.

Grendel's Mother

Very little description is given to Grendel's mother. She is also nameless. She is less human than Grendel because she cannot speak. She is also much smaller than he because Grendel can lift her like a child. While Grendel is young, she hardly mothers him; however, she too can sense Grendel's death. As his death approaches, she tries harder and harder to keep him near her. Grendel's mother is in the poem *Beowulf* as the second beast that Beowulf defeats.

Wealtheow

Wealtheow is Hrothgar's wife and queen of the Danes. She was given to Hrothgar as a present to keep the peace between two warring nations. Grendel is extremely obsessed with her when she first arrives. He thinks she is too young and graceful to be with the older Hrothgar. He also comments extensively on her beauty and refinement. One night, he gets extremely angry with the people, and he decides to kill her to satisfy his rage. However, while holding her upside down, he sees her genitals and becomes disgusted. He then loses his obsession with Wealtheow, though he still looks upon her from time to time.



Unferth

Unferth is one of Hrothgar's thanes. He firmly believes in the hero culture that pervades the time period, and he believes it is only honorable for him to die defending his home. When Grendel bursts into the mead hall, Unferth declares he will kill Grendel or die trying. Unferth follows Grendel to the cave and nearly dies in the process. When he reaches Grendel, he gives a semi-rousing speech about his honor. Grendel thinks the whole situation is pathetic. Instead of letting Unferth die nobly, he carries him back to the mead hall. Unferth is dishonored. He tries to regain his integrity, but Grendel thinks Unferth is a laughing stock.

Beowulf

Beowulf is the epic hero from the sixth-century poem of the same name. In his story, he is gallant and kind, a sensitive and warmhearted man. However, Grendel's Beowulf is less of a hero and more of a bully. He hears about the problem Hrothgar is having with Grendel. Rather than coming to help, he wants to defeat Grendel as a cold, heartless act. Yet Grendel still has a high amount of respect for him. Until Beowulf comes, nobody is able to hurt Grendel. Beowulf, though, has the strength to completely maim Grendel to death. During the fight scene with Beowulf, Grendel notices Beowulf has somehow grown wings out of his back. He is also breathing fire. This is significant because it shows Beowulf is somehow connected with the dragon. Whereas the first dragon sees the humans existence as moot, Beowulf comes to rid them of Grendel. That way, humanity will have a chance to thrive.



Objects/Places

Grendel's Cave

Grendel and his mother live in a cave accessible only by water.

Hart

Hart is the name of the mead hall that Hrothgar built after the Shaper moved to the town.

The Dragon's Cave

The dragon lives in a cave surrounded by all of his treasure.

The Ring of the Gods

Grendel sneaks into a ring of deity carvings and tricks a priest into thinking he is a god called the Destroyer.

The Bull

Grendel gets stuck in a tree. Before he can climb down, a bull charges at him for hours.

The Corpse

Grendel comes across the corpse of a Dane who was murdered by another Dane.

The Door on Hart

Grendel breaks the door to Hart each time he attacks the town.

The Ram

Grendel sees a ram at the beginning of his "twelfth season" hunting the humans.

The Firesnakes

A hoard of firesnakes lives in the water and guards Grendel's cave.

The Shaper's Harp

The Shaper plays a harp whenever he is singing to the men in Hart.



Themes

Mechanics

Because Grendel is able to function on a higher mental plane, he sees life in a different way than most humans do. Rather than viewing life as a series of individual and unique moments, Grendel sees life is like a machine. Living is a repetitive, inescapable cycle, and most humans aren't even aware they are trapped in the loop. This thinking plays a huge role in why Grendel despises humans and even other animals. The ram at the beginning of the novel keeps trying to copulate, something Grendel knows the ram can never end. Also, when Grendel is stuck up in the tree, the bull keeps charging at the tree in the same way; rather than trying to figure out a way actually to reach Grendel, the bull only hits the tree trunk for hours.

What made Grendel so keen on the humans at first was they appeared to have higher cognitive skills than the bull. Rather than charging for the base of the tree, they inspected what was in the tree and tried to reason what it was before attacking. Grendel was impressed with their intellect. However, he grew weary of humans once he realized the human cycle takes longer than most animals' cycles. After twelve years of observation, he sees them only as machines. The most difficult part for Grendel, though, is he starts noticing the same repetitive tendencies in himself over twelve years. Each spring, summer, and fall, he attacks the humans. Every winter, he goes into repose. For Grendel, the only way to escape the machination of life is to die. This explains his excitement when Beowulf arrives; he knows a monumental change is coming and he embraces it wholly.

Art

Because Grendel views the world as a mechanical loop, it is very difficult for him to find an emotional link. Seeing the world as a machination doesn't allow for meaningful connections, and so Grendel often has bouts of extreme loneliness. When the Shaper appears, his music and words fill Grendel with purpose, something he never experienced when the world was mechanized. Seeing how art inspires the humans makes Grendel want to be a part of something important. Since he is an outsider, though, it is difficult. At first he is just content to listen to the Shaper's stories. Yet Grendel still wants more.

Because of his attacks on Hart, Grendel soon finds he is the subject of many songs the Shaper sings. Rather than being the ideal, though, Grendel is shown as the evil opponent in contrast to the Danes' virtuosity. Grendel knows these words to be false; he knows he isn't a brute, and he also knows the Danes aren't virtuous, kind, brave, and heroic. But the art and the connection it forged in him allowed him to overlook the falsehoods. The Shaper is able to take the undesirable parts of stories and turn them



into positives. He can turn even the ugliest scenario and make it a moral and righteous tale of Danish valor.

The Yearly Cycle

Grendel's story takes place over the course of twelve years. However, each of the twelve chapters describes a different month under the zodiac during those twelve years. The beginning of the story starts in spring under the sign of Aries as signified by the ram. As each of the chapters unfold, so does a new zodiac symbol. The bull that trees Grendel is symbolic of Taurus; Capricorn is present when Grendel sees a goat climbing a mountain. The other zodiac symbols are more difficult to recognize, so readers must be creative when trying to decipher the symbols. When Wealtheow is given as a peace offering, she represents Libra, the balance between the two nations. Unferth represents Virgo as Grendel refers to him as the "harvest virgin" because of Unferth's attempts to kill Grendel.

Grendel's rise and fall also coincides with the seasons. At the beginning of Grendel's journey, he is young and innocent. He is curious about the world around him, especially the humans. He is trusting and naïve. As the seasons change, Grendel's life changes along with it. During the summer as the temperature rises, Grendel and the humans become more hostile toward each other. During the fall, Grendel begins losing his interest in killing humans because his beliefs are waning. Then, during the winter, Grendel ultimately loses faith and sees the only way to be happy is to die.

Style

Point of View

The novel is told from Grendel's point of view. It is told in first person, so much of the novel is Grendel's inner thoughts. Grendel is a very pensive and contemplative creature, so he sometimes will narrate the story from another person's point of view. However, he is always the narrative voice. His tone is very sarcastic because Grendel has such a cynical view of humanity. There are times, though, where Grendel tries to have compassion for people. But for the most part, Grendel keeps his distance from the civilization.

Setting

Grendel takes place during the fourth century in Denmark. The people live in a feudal society, so there is a large divide between the upper and lower classes. Many of the different towns are also trying to remain independent. Once a smaller town is conquered by a larger area, the remaining people are pulled into the care and protection of the conquering land. Many groups are pulled together by interfamily marriages. A king gives his daughter or sister to the ruler of another land in order to keep peace between the two nations.

Language and Meaning

Due to the highly philosophical nature of Grendel, some of the language and passages are extremely dense, making them difficult to understand. Most of the chapters are fairly straightforward. Other areas, like the chapter containing Grendel's conversation with the dragon, are thick with theoretical and metaphysical language. This is all essential because of the novel's nature; however, many parts take significantly longer to work through than others.

Structure

The novel is divided into twelve different chapters, each chapter representing each of the twelve zodiac symbols. The story begins in the spring and works its way through the seasons. Coinciding with the seasons is Grendel's annual interactions with the humans. Spring, summer, and fall are all seasons when Grendel raids Hart. Winter is his downtime, but he still keeps an eye on the town below. Over the course of Grendel's moral changes, he struggles with the ideas of whether he agrees with humanity's unwavering faith or if humanity is being too hopeful for their future.

Many of the chapters break from the traditional narrative prose form and instead opt to tell the story in a different way. There are sections of poetry, play dialogue, and even

songs to heighten the novel's art theme. These narrative forms also give Gardner the chance to explore his main character and express himself more freely.



Quotes

I am terrified at the sound of my own huge voice in the darkness. I stand there shaking from head to foot, moved to the deep-sea depths of my being, like a creature thrown into an audience with thunder. (Chapter 1)

I understood that the world was nothing: a mechanical chaos of casual, brute enmity on which we stupidly imposed our hopes and fears. I understood that, finally and absolutely, I alone exist. (Chapter 2)

The leaders on both sides held their javelins high in both hands and shook them, howling their lungs out. Terrible threats, from the few words I could catch. Things about their fathers and their fathers' fathers, things about justice and honor and lawful revenge—their throats swollen, their eyes rolling like a newborn colt's, sweat running down their shoulders. Then they would fight. (Chapter 3)

If the ideas of art were beautiful, that was art's fault, not the Shaper's. A blind selector, almost mindless: a bird. Did they murder each other more gently because in the woods sweet songbirds sang? (Chapter 4)

That's where the Shaper saves them. Provides an illusion of reality—puts together all their facts with a gluey whine of connectedness. He knows no more than they do about total reality—less, if anything: works with the same old clutter of atoms, the givens of his time and place and tongue. But he spins it all together with hard runs and hoots, and they think what they think is alive, and Heaven loves them. (Chapter 5)

I was transformed. I was a new focus for the clutter of space I stood in: if the world had once imploded on the tree where I waited, trapped and full of pain, it now blasted outward, away from me, screeching terror. (Chapter 6)

The smell of the dragon lay around me like a sulphurous smoke. At times I would wake up in panic, unable to breathe. (Chapter 7)

Revolution, my dear prince, is not the substitution of immoral for moral, or of illegitimate for legitimate violence; it is simply the pitting of power against power, where they issue is freedom for the winners and enslavement for the rest. (Chapter 8)

The image clings to my mind like a growth. I sense some riddle in it. (Chapter 9)

He keeps on climbing, mindless, mechanical, because it is the business of goats to climb. (Chapter 10)

He had a strange face that, little by little, grew unsettling to me: it was a face, or so it seemed for an instant, from a dream I had almost forgotten. (Chapter 11)

Though you murder the world, turn plains to stone, transmogrify life into I and it, strong searching roots will crack your cave and rain will cleanse it: The world will burn green,

sperm, build again. My promise. Time is the mind, the hand that makes (fingers on harpstrings, hero-swords, the acts, the eyes of queens). By that I kill you. (Chapter 12)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

How is the novel structured? What is important about the structure of the novel?

Topic 2

Find the chapter that coincides with Sagittarius. What part of the chapter alludes to this zodiac sign?

Topic 3

Find the chapter that coincides with Pisces. What part of the chapter alludes to this zodiac sign?

Topic 4

Find the chapter that coincides with Gemini. What part of the chapter alludes to this zodiac sign?

Topic 5

Find the chapter that coincides with Leo. What part of the chapter alludes to this zodiac sign?

Topic 6

Describe Grendel's physical appearance. Why does he look this way? Do the humans know that he is intelligent?

Topic 7

Why is Beowulf portrayed as a dragon? To Grendel, what does Beowulf represent?

Topic 8

Explain the dragon's beliefs as he told them to Grendel. Why is the dragon cynical of humanity?



Topic 9

What does Grendel think about art? How do his thoughts about art interfere with his beliefs?

Topic 10

Why is Grendel so attracted to the Shaper? Why is he willing to let the Danes demonize him just so he can listen to the Shaper's songs?