



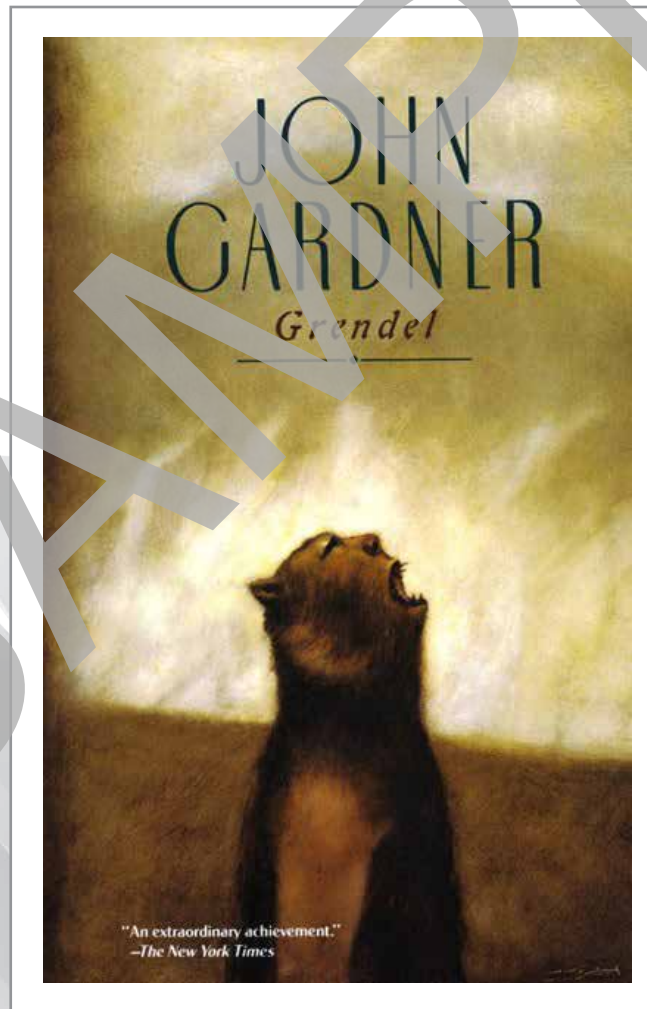
**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 9-12**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# Grendel

John Gardner



**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

# Grendel

John Gardner

## TEACHER GUIDE

**NOTE:**

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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## Skills and Strategies

### Critical Thinking

Analysis, compare/contrast,  
brainstorm, research

### Comprehension

Predicting, cause/effect,  
inference, plot development,  
conflict resolution

### Literary Elements

Metaphor, simile, allusion,  
symbolism, foreshadowing,  
irony, tone, characterization,  
setting, theme, mood, paradox,  
parody, oxymoron, alliteration,  
kenning, universality, foil, pun

### Writing

Poetry, script, acrostic, sequel,  
eulogy

### Vocabulary

Target words, definitions,  
application

### Listening/Speaking

Discussion, script performance,  
report

### Across the Curriculum

Music—ballad, appropriate  
background; Art—sketch,  
collage, design; Drama—  
performance

**Genre:** metafiction; specifically a parallel novel—a novel which has the same setting, time period, and some of the same characters as a previous work but is told from a different perspective

**Setting:** Denmark—area around and in Hrothgar's hall, sometime during the middle of the seventh century (based on information about the epic poem, *Beowulf*)

**Themes:** isolation, illusion vs. reality, vengeance, good vs. evil, importance of communication

**Conflict:** Grendel vs. Hrothgar and his thanes, Grendel's inner conflict, Grendel vs. Beowulf

**Tone:** ominous, pessimistic

**Mood:** dark, pensive

**Style:** first-person narrative; non-sequential, includes flashbacks

**Date of First Publication:** 1971

## Summary

Grendel, the evil monster antagonist from the epic poem *Beowulf*, narrates the story of the last 12 years of his life. Through a series of flashbacks, he tells of his early life when he lives in a cave with his mother, his only companion, but who is unable to communicate with him. He swims through a lake filled with firesnakes and reaches the world of humans. Grendel's isolation intensifies when he discovers that, although he can understand the humans' language, they fail to understand him when he speaks. His frustration and anger drive him to begin a series of raids on King Hrothgar's meadhall, *Hart*, in which he attacks and eats the thanes. Grendel describes encounters with various creatures, including a dragon that encourages him to continue the killing raids he has begun. His ongoing conflict with Hrothgar and his thanes culminates in his final battle with Beowulf, who is referred to as "the stranger" in Grendel's tale. Grendel, mortally wounded, escapes Beowulf and runs away to die.

## About the Author

**Personal:** John Champlin Gardner, Jr. was born on July 21, 1933, in Batavia, New York. His father was a dairy farmer and a lay preacher, and his mother was an English teacher. When John was a boy, his younger brother Gilbert was killed in a tragic farming accident. His brother's death haunted him for the rest of his life and influenced his writing. Gardner married Joan Louise Patterson in 1953, and they became parents of Joel and Lucy (note dedication page in novel). After their divorce, Gardner was briefly married to Liz Rosenberg (1980–1982). He died in a motorcycle accident on September 14, 1982, just two weeks before his planned marriage to Susan Shreve.

**Education:** Gardner began his advanced academic study at DePauw University in 1951 but left in 1953. He later attended Washington University in St. Louis, where he graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1955. He attended the State University of Iowa, which is now the University of Iowa, where he received his M.A. in 1956 and his Ph.D. in 1958.

**Note:** Examples of similes and metaphors from each section are included in the Supplementary Activities. References to alliteration and kennings are included in the Discussion Questions. Encourage students to identify these literary devices as they read the novel. Display the Foreshadowing Chart on page 35 of this guide to list foreshadowing clues as they occur in the novel. Guide students as they identify the occurrence of each foreshadowed event.

## Chapter 1

**Zodiac sign:** Aries (Ram)—fiery, self-willed; The ram refuses to give up his pursuit in spite of Grendel’s pleas.

In the spring of the beginning of his twelfth year of raiding Hrothgar’s meadhall, Grendel encounters a ram, whose stupidity confounds him. He enters the hall at night, captures and devours several thanes, and then watches as the others burn the remains on a funeral pyre. He flees for home.

Vocabulary	
docile	
sycophantish	
mere	
fuliginous	
putrid	
thanes	
hoary	
dogmatism	

### Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of Grendel’s encounter with the ram? Analyze the comparison between Grendel and the ram. (*The ram’s actions are indicative of the arrival of spring. Grendel, who does not usually raid in the winter [see p. 137], will soon begin his twelfth year of raids on Hrothgar’s hall. The ram’s mindless actions are symbolic of Grendel’s own tedious pursuit of something to ease his loneliness and isolation. Grendel’s frustration at his failure to communicate with the ram foreshadows his failed future attempts to communicate with others.*)
2. Assess Grendel’s self-evaluation, noting the kennings with which he identifies himself. (*He sees himself as a pointless, ridiculous monster that murders children, crouches in the shadows, and stinks of dead men. He calls himself the disfigured son of lunatics and recognizes that he is self-seeking [his sycophantish smile]. The kennings with which he refers to himself [an “earth-rim-roamer” and “walker of the world’s weird wall”] imply his loneliness as he roams over the earth trying to find his place. His reference to himself as a shadow-shooter suggests his struggle to differentiate between illusion and reality. Note also the alliteration in the kennings.*)
3. What evidence is there of Grendel’s isolation from everyone and everything? (*He feels locked into the passing of seasons and years, with nothing but terrible sameness and no hope of anything changing in his life. He has no one to talk to but his own shadow and spends his time spinning a web of words and dreams between himself and all he sees. Both humans and animals are afraid of him. His mother clutches at him but never speaks to him.*)
4. What effect does the coming of spring have on Grendel? (*He senses stirrings of violence within and begins to hunger for blood. He swims through the firesnakes to reach the mere and heads for Hrothgar’s meadhall, filled with murderous lust, yet sick at what he observes in himself. Spring has arrived; therefore, he resumes his killing raids.*)
5. Discuss information about Grendel’s mother. How does Grendel feel about her? Note the kennings that refer to her. (*She is encased in her own world of nightmares and memories, consumed by some guilt from the past. Grendel believes she must have some human in her, but she has grown progressively distant from him and now offers no companionship. She trembles when he speaks to her but never answers. The kennings describe her as a life-bloated, long-suffering hag.*)

- Discuss Grendel’s “visit” to Hrothgar’s hall, analyzing the irony of his arrival as a “respected guest.” *(He comes to the door and knocks politely, just as a welcome guest would do. Ironically, a respected guest would be greeted warmly, but his arrival creates chaos. The Shaper jumps out the back window. The thanes shout boasts, draw their swords, and blow out the lights. Hrothgar and his wife are both terrified. Grendel, who can see in the dark, laughs and sacks up his dead. The “respected guest” leaves the chaos behind him and withdraws to the woods to “dine” alone.)*
- How do the Danes and Grendel react in the aftermath of the attack? Analyze the Danes’ rebuilding of the meadhall. *(Grendel’s head aches, and he is nauseated. Initially, the people scream and pray, the dogs are silent, and the blind Shaper futilely stares straight at him. Hrothgar looks crazed but is speechless. The praying and groaning stop, and some of the people build a funeral pyre, while others begin rebuilding the meadhall. They light the fire of the funeral pyre, and Grendel watches as the remains of the bodies burn. Grendel becomes enraged as the entire crowd wails a song that implies they have won. He flees for home. Rebuilding the meadhall time after time signifies the Danes’ hope of finding something that will stop Grendel, even though their attempts are futile.)*

### Supplementary Activities

- Use the Metaphors and Similes chart on page 36 of this guide to write at least one simile and one metaphor from this section. This is an ongoing assignment for each section and will include both similes and metaphors when applicable. Examples: **Similes**—“They’re buried in it like crabs in mud” (p. 8); “Owls cross my path as silently as raiding ships...” (p. 10); **Metaphors**—words: web (p. 8); small flames: lizard tongues (p. 14)
- Working with a partner, create an acrostic for the word “Springtime” that reflects the effects of spring’s arrival on Grendel.
- Draw your own interpretation of Grendel based on one of the kennings with which he describes himself: “shadow-shooter,” “earth-rim-roamer,” “walker of the world’s weird wall” (p. 7).

## Chapter 2

**Zodiac sign:** Taurus (Bull)—deliberate, determined; After Grendel gets caught in a tree, the bull attacks him repeatedly, each time in an instinctive, mindless pattern.

In a flashback, Grendel explains that he first reached the world of men by swimming through a pool of firesnakes. He is caught in a tree and attacked by a bull. Men discover him hanging there and decide he is a tree spirit they must either appease or attack. His mother rescues him.

### Vocabulary

degenerate  
obscene  
cynical  
inviolable  
enmity  
anarchistic

### Discussion Questions

- Discuss Grendel’s flashback to his childhood, and assess his relationship with his mother. *(As a child, he plays games, explores his underground world, plots adventures with his invisible friends, and wanders away from the cave. He discovers a pool filled with firesnakes, works up the courage to swim through the pool, and realizes there is a world above ground. He begins to explore farther into this world, stopping his explorations when he feels the shapes in the cave watching him. During his childhood, his only real contact is with his mother. He knows she loves him and senses her need to keep him with her. He initially feels that he and she are “one thing” but begins to feel separate from her. He still finds comfort in her clutches, but at times she feels like a stranger to him.)*

# Vocabulary Word Map

**Synonyms**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Antonyms**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**WORD**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Definition in your own words**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Used in a sentence**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_