

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Grendel

by John Gardner

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ISBN 13: 978-1-60389-790-7
Reorder No. 201362

Grendel

Objectives

By the end of this unit, the student will be able to:

1. define vocabulary words from the novel.
2. point out the ways Grendel's opinions of mankind change throughout the novel
3. discuss Grendel as an evil character and whether or not he embodies evil or is pushed into becoming evil by the circumstances of his life.
4. define existentialism and discuss whether or not Grendel is an existentialist.
5. summarize the strategy King Hrothgar uses to build his kingdom.
6. discuss Grendel's fascination with the Shaper and how the Shaper's vision for mankind changes Grendel.
7. find passages in the novel which support the idea that the Shaper's songs contain the seeds of Christianity.
8. point out the ways the dragon is different from other creatures
9. discuss the dragon's point of view concerning the purpose of Grendel's life; also discuss the dragon's opinion of:
 - man's cunning mind,
 - men's free will,
 - the Shaper's songs.
10. define an epic hero; comment on whether or not Unferth, Grendel, or the stranger are epic heroes.
11. discuss the following generalizations about life that Grendel lives by:
 - There is no limit to desire but desire's needs.
 - Any action of the human heart must trigger an equal and opposite reaction.
 - Tedium is the worst pain.
 - One evil deed missed is a loss for all eternity.

Grendel

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Explain the philosophical terms that apply to Grendel's philosophy of life: dogmatism, nihilism, anarchism, pessimism, existentialism
2. Why does Grendel make war on Hrothgar for twelve years? What is Grendel's opinion of man's cunning mind?
3. What does the dragon tell Grendel about the Shaper's songs? Grendel is searching for the purpose of his life. What purpose does the dragon think Grendel serves for mankind?
4. How is the "spell" of Grendel's childhood broken? What does Grendel conclude about life after this incident?
5. Explore Grendel's relationship with his mother. Why does he feel justified in pushing her aside when she tries to prevent him from leaving the safety of their cave?
6. Discuss the following as possible symbols in the story: Red Horse, the twisted tree trunk, the goat.
7. Define a myth. For what reasons can this novel be called a mythological novel?
8. In what ways does Grendel in this story differ from the monster in the poem *Beowulf*?
9. Reread the song of the Shaper in Chapter 4. Why does this song enrage Grendel? What evidence is there in the song that as man builds his empires, he moves from a pagan religion toward Christianity?
10. What special abilities does the dragon have? What is the nature of the "charm" the dragon gives Grendel? Do you think this charm is a blessing or a curse for Grendel?
11. List three characteristics of an Epic Hero. How, in your opinion, does Unferth measure up to these characteristics? Why do you think the stranger succeeds in killing Grendel; whereas, Unferth fails?
12. Cite an incident from the story which helps to explain the following generalizations about life that Grendel lives by. "There is no limit to desire but desire's needs." "Any action of the human heart must trigger an equal and opposite reaction." "Tedium is the worst pain." "One evil deed missed is a loss for all eternity."
13. Discuss Red Horse's observations on the way government operates. For what reasons is Red Horse a bad influence on the king's nephew?

Grendel

Study Guide Student Copy

Chapter 1

Vocabulary

sycophant - *a person who tries to gain favor by flattering people*

chasm - *a deep cleft, abyss*

fuliginous - *full of smoke, sooty*

thanes - *landowners, noblemen*

hoarfrost - *white frost, frozen dew on the ground*

dirge - *a funeral hymn, a song or poem of grief*

dogmatism - *the arrogant assertion of an opinion without proof or evidence*

1. In the epic poem *Beowulf*, the monster Grendel is depicted as an evil being without human qualities. What evidence is there in this first chapter that the monster Grendel in this novel has emotions and feelings?

Use the following excerpt from the story to answer questions 2 and 3.

“It is true, perhaps, that I feel some trifling dislike of deer, but no more dislike than I feel for other natural things—discounting men. But deer, like rabbits and bears and even men, can make, concerning my race, no delicate distinctions. That is their happiness: they see all life without observing it. They’re buried in it like crabs in mud. Except men, of course. I am not in a mood, just yet, to talk of men.” (Pg. 8)

2. What difference does Grendel observe between men and the other animals? In what way are they alike?

Chapter 3

Vocabulary

gewgaw - *a pretty or showy thing of little value*

mead - *an alcoholic drink*

ominous - *evil, threatening, sinister*

obscure - *dark, dim, not easily understood*

recompense - *to repay, reward*

apocalyptic - *world-ending*

mere - *marsh, swamp*

1. Why do you suppose Grendel has a “stupid need to spy on them [the bands of men]”? (Pg. 33)
2. What is the function of the Shaper in the meadhall? Why do you suppose he is called the Shaper?
3. Grendel is sickened by the results of the battle between two bands of men. “I was sickened, if only at the waste of it: all they killed—cows, horses, men—they left to rot or burn. I sacked all I could and tried to store it...” (Pg. 36)

In what way might Grendel consider himself morally superior to men at this point in the story?

4. Hrothgar eventually becomes the strongest leader and manages to build a kingdom for himself. Briefly outline Hrothgar’s strategy.
5. Why is the king of the Shapers welcomed into Hrothgar’s hall?
6. For what reasons is Grendel upset by the king of the Shapers’ words?
7. Identify the following two literary terms: “The man had...torn up the past by its thick, gnarled roots...” (Pg. 43) “...the stars overheard were alive with the promise of Hrothgar’s vast power...” (Pg. 44)

Chapter 5

Vocabulary

undulant - *waving*

debauched - *corrupted*

ignoramus - *an ignorant person*

supplicant - *one who petitions, entreats, or implores*

intercession - *the act of mediating*

monistic - *a philosophy that states that reality is an organic whole without any separate parts; only one Supreme Being*

immanence - *the belief that God is present throughout the universe*

infinite - *infinity, the quality of being limitless*

irascible - *easily provoked to anger*

existents - *having existence, in the present, immediate*

credulity - *belief; without doubt*

sine qua non - *a Latin phrase meaning "the essential part"*

nonce-rule - *a rule made for one particular occasion*

fontanel - *the soft spot on a baby's head*

dictum - *a formal pronouncement*

1. Briefly describe the dragon and his surroundings.
2. Why does Grendel decide to stay hidden from the humans in the future?
3. In what way is the dragon's mind different from Grendel's and the minds of the humans?
4. What does the dragon tell Grendel about free will?
5. In the dragon's opinion, what does the Shaper do for the humans?

Chapter 7

Vocabulary

portent - *omen or warning*

torus - *nearly a circle*

byrnie - *a coat of chain mail used in the Middle Ages*

chilblains - *sores caused by the cold*

1. Why does Grendel refrain from killing all of the men in the meadhall? What does he mean when he says “Form is function”? (Pg. 91)
2. “There is no limit to desire but desire’s needs. (Grendel’s law.)” (Pg. 93)
What is the limit to Grendel’s desire?
3. What is the “ultimate act of nihilism” that Grendel has so far avoided committing? (Pg. 93)
4. When does Grendel first see the queen? How does he feel about her?
5. In what way does Grendel compare his mother to Wealtheow?
6. How is Grendel’s decision not to kill the queen an example of his philosophy?

Chapter 9

Vocabulary

hart - *a deer*

obsequious - *excessively willing to serve, overly submissive*

stalactite - *a icicle-shaped cone of lime attached to a cave roof*

inchoate - *rudimentary*

conrescence - *the act of growing or increasing*

ossified - *converted to bone*

nether - *below, under; in a lower place*

1. What are the children in the village doing when Grendel passes through?
2. Why is Grendel disturbed by the death of the hart?
3. What evidence is there in this chapter that the people are moving away from the belief in many gods toward Christianity and the believe in one God?
4. List three bits of wisdom the old priest relates to Grendel about the King of Gods.
5. Read the following except from the conversation between the old priest and Grendel. The priest tells Grendel his definition of the Ultimate Evil. Read and consider these passages and then rewrite them in your own words.

“The ultimate evil is that Time is perpetual perishing, and being actual involves elimination.” (Pg. 132) “‘Things fade and Alternatives exclude.’ ” (Pg. 133)

Chapter 11

Vocabulary

lineage - *ancestry*

stalagmite - *a conical buildup on the floor of a cave*

1. Why do you think Grendel is “mad with joy” because strangers have come?
2. Describe the leader of the strangers. What evidence is there that this unnamed stranger is Beowulf? What literary term is used in the description of Beowulf’s beard?
3. Grendel spends his life watching men. He thinks they do mysterious things. Through his observations, Grendel draws some conclusions. What does he conclude about the way man schedules or orders his life?
4. What two parts does Grendel think the world is divided into? How will that affect him?
5. The old priest told Grendel in Chapter 9 that the nature of evil is that “ ‘Things fade’ and ‘Alternatives exclude.’ ” (Pg. 133) The priest is referring to the fact that as the universe changes, the creatures in it will fade from life, to be replaced by alternatives or other lives. This is a natural process. Ultimate wisdom declares that nothing is ever lost. The things that fade are not lost; they become part of the new order.

When the strangers appear, they challenge the priest’s beliefs because if they kill Grendel they interfere with this process. How does this philosophy help to explain why Grendel chooses to fight Beowulf rather than remain safe in his own cave?