

# **Grendel Book Notes**

## **Grendel by John Gardner**

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## Author/Context

John Gardner was born in 1933 and grew up in Batavia, New York. A classical scholar and an insatiable reader, he nevertheless avoided the literary uppercrust, preferring to speak his own mind, whether or not he offended people. He was married twice and was preparing to wed a third time when he died in a motorcycle accident at the age of 49. His reputation as a novelist, philosopher, and dynamic personality was solidified at the time of his death, and has perhaps grown since then.

*Grendel* is in large part Gardner's response to existentialism. This philosophy, whose most famous supporter was Jean-Paul Sartre, proclaims that people have the power and responsibility to create their own identities--a person is born with a "blank slate" that he or she must fill in. This can be extended to mean that each person creates his or her own world. Grendel, a parody of an existentialist, believes not just that his perceptions make up his reality, but that he created the world through his perceptions. He believes he is the center of the universe. He also, like some existentialists, believes that life is pointless. When he sees the Danes building their society, seemingly oblivious to the meaninglessness of their lives, he is furious and vows to destroy them. Grendel, in many ways, is meant to represent Sartre himself, who Gardner admired but also criticized.

Gardner's other major philosophical influences, in *Grendel* and elsewhere, include Alfred North Whitehead (Gardner saw himself in much of Whitehead's work) and the Medieval conception of Platonic philosophy. This is a schema that defines humankind's struggle to be moral: we are intelligent and civilized, but we are also animals, so we must learn to reconcile that conflict. Gardner once said, "That system comes up in disguise after disguise and it can always be modernized; it can be Vishnu, Brahma, Siva, or God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost, or ego, superego, id-it just keeps shape-shifting."

Morality was one of Gardner's primary concerns throughout his life. He believed that art, and fiction in particular, could be a moral force: an educator for a confused society. While he did not believe that the United States was in moral decline, he did criticize contemporary novelists and their works. He believed that writers were shunning their responsibilities as teachers. They were obligated, he believed, to try to tell the truth and to take themselves seriously. These ideas are explored in Gardner's 1978 book, *On Moral Fiction*. He was a self-appointed and very opinionated cultural critic, which, at a time of experimentation and freedom in American fiction, earned him disapproval from some and admiration from others.

Gardner's other books include several novels and critical works. While *Grendel*, published early in his career, made his reputation, *The Sunlight Dialogues*, published a year later, is considered his most complex and ambitious novel. It consists of a series of dialogues between a police chief and a madman. Their talks trace Babylonian cultural history, and its Hebraic counterpart. *October Light*, a similarly theoretical work, was published in 1976 and discussed the state of intellectualism in America, and its future.

Gardner wanted, in part, to explore the nature of heroism, and the dangers and benefits of mythologizing heroes. Though his novels are full of philosophy and history, they are rarely dense or pretentious. He enjoyed including jokes at even the most somber moments in his books. Gardner also wrote several plays, including *Death and the Maiden*, edited numerous fiction and nonfiction anthologies, and wrote a number of children's books.

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# Plot Summary

Grendel is a large, frightening monster who lives in a cave near King Hrothgar's castle. Though he looks like a beast, he is intelligent. He can speak well, tell sophisticated jokes, and theorize about the meaning of life. He tells his stories in a series of flashbacks, mixed in with "present-day" scenes. He lives with his mother, who he hates for her apparent inability to speak or reason, and her sometimes suffocating love. He hates the animals around him for their animal stupidity. He even hates the sky above him, because it ignores him. He happily eats Hrothgar's people, enjoying their screams. He remembers when he first found the outside world: he dove through a secret pit in his cave, and wandered around until he got his foot caught between two trees. As he cried for his mother, he was approached by a group of men who, for no real reason, attacked him. His mother fought them off. This was his first meeting with Hrothgar. He remembers Hrothgar's development as a king: when all the other minor rulers were fighting each other, Hrothgar had the sense to make friends with his neighbors, slowly convincing them to be part of one large kingdom ruled by him. A singer (Grendel calls him the Shaper) came to the castle, and awed everyone with his beautiful music and his songs about the glorious history of their people. Grendel was deeply moved, but at the same time he believed that the singer had just put a good face on battles that were, in reality, brutal and petty.

Grendel says he has changed the singer's songs: now they are full of sadness, because of all the death he has witnessed. Grendel remembers that listening to the songs, and the confusion they caused in him, made him aware of some other presence. He finally gave into it, and visited the dragon, who had apparently been beckoning him from his lair. The dragon was a frightening beast, even for Grendel. He enjoyed cruelty, and believed life was pointless. Grendel tried to talk to him about the Shaper, but the dragon dismissed the songs as an attempt to create meaning and community where there was none. He told Grendel to do whatever he wanted, because there was absolutely no reason not to. Though Grendel is confused by this advice, and doesn't entirely believe it, he is influenced by the dragon. The feelings of rage and isolation he has always had are finally supported. He has a new confidence in his animal need to kill. Plus, the dragon has enchanted him, so that he can't be hurt. This forces him further into isolation--he doesn't even have to fight the men before he eats them--but he also enjoys it. Unferth, one of the strongest men, approaches him. When he learns that Grendel is invincible and can speak, Unferth begins to talk grandly about how he, a hero, will defeat the evil Grendel. Grendel laughs at him, making it clear that he thinks heroism is a sham, then knocks him to the ground and leaves. Incredibly, Unferth follows him, crawling, and arrives at Grendel's cave days later. He tries to explain how noble his heroic acts are, but Grendel just smirks, and decides to punish him by refusing to kill him. For years after, Grendel protects Unferth, even though he wants desperately to die a hero's death.

Grendel is becoming a little bored. He thinks about killing the queen. She is a beautiful, pure young woman who was given to Hrothgar as a peace offering. Grendel is confused by his feelings for her: he sees something meaningful in her beauty and kindness, and he hates himself for it. He decides to kill her, and nearly does, but then decides that to



kill her would be just as pointless as letting her live. Soon after, Hrothulf, Hrothgar's nephew, comes to live with them after his father is killed. Hrothulf is a sullen, thoughtful teenager, who believes that the peasants should not tolerate their poverty while the king is so rich, and also covets the throne. He has long talks with an old, anarchist peasant, who serves as his mentor and advisor.

Grendel feels like something bad is going to happen soon, but he doesn't know what. He waits. He toys with a priest, pretending to be God and asking the old man to describe Him. But the priest surprises Grendel: he gives a thoughtful analysis of religion, and then is moved to tears, thinking he has finally achieved his life's goal. Grendel leaves in angry confusion. Later, he is still waiting, increasingly nervous. He tries to kill a mountain goat, but it will not stop climbing toward him--it is, he says, the goat's nature to climb, so it climbs. The Shaper dies, and Grendel is pleased. This changes things: he is less reluctant to kill the townspeople now. His mother seems to be warning him of something, but he doesn't understand her. He goes to the Shaper's funeral, knowing that his world is changing.

Finally, something has happened. Strangers from across the sea have come: huge men, the largest of whom (Beowulf) promises to kill Grendel. Grendel is very excited: this man is strange and frightening, but he also looks forward to fighting with him. There is a long day of anticipation, and then night falls. Grendel breaks into the meadhall, and everyone is asleep. He eats one man and then picks up another. But this one was only pretending to sleep--it is Beowulf, and he has the strongest grip Grendel has ever felt. He rips Grendel's arm off, and Grendel runs away, saying it was an accident--he was tricked. He knows he is dying and somehow cannot stop himself from running towards a dark pit. The animals he has tormented over the years watch as he falls into it, crying bitterly.

## Major Characters

**Grendel:** The narrator. A large, hairy, frightening monster who lives in a cave near King Hrothgar's castle. Though he looks like a beast, Grendel can speak in a language very similar to that of Hrothgar and his people. He is thus disappointed when the townspeople are afraid of him and hate him. He feels alone: he hates his mother, because she cannot speak and is much more of an animal than he, but he can never relate to men, either, because he can't stop himself from eating them. He thinks deeply about whether life has meaning or not, but he is essentially immature and unable to form complete philosophical ideas. One moment he decides that since it doesn't matter whether he kills the Danes or not, he may as well kill them. But then the next moment, he hears a Dane singing about their glorious history, and he feels that their lives are so meaningful and rich that he wants to join them. He is torn between his mother's animalistic nature, the generally moral and humane world of the Danes, and the philosophy of the dragon. The dragon, who is thousands of years old and knows everything, tells Grendel that life is pointless, so he should just take what he wants when he can get it. These differing philosophies, and Grendel's inability to resolve them, leave him confused and angry throughout his violent, isolated life.

**Grendel's mother:** An ugly, smelly beast, who Grendel resents and yet loves in a dependent, childish way. Though she cannot speak, she tries to communicate with her son by caressing and holding him, sometimes even suffocating him. She seems helpless at times--she waits for him to bring her food--but when he needs her, he cries for her like a baby, and she usually saves him. She is the one who prevents him from being killed by the Danes when he first discovers the outside world. Though she sometimes seems pathetic--Grendel picks her up like a child--she is also fierce and terrifying.

**The dragon:** A huge, ancient beast who even Grendel fears. The dragon knows everything, past, present, and future, and it has made him cynical and bored. He has no patience for Grendel's innocent questions. He enjoys teasing Grendel, watching him grow more and more frightened, and he also likes to ramble pompously. He makes long, confused speeches, and then gets angry when Grendel doesn't understand. He tells Grendel that life is meaningless, so he may as well do whatever he wants. If he wants to kill the Danes, for any reason, he should. Grendel doesn't quite believe this, (he sees meaning in the Danes' culture) but it confuses him and makes him feel empty and sad and angry. Once he meets the dragon, he feels the creature's presence constantly. It pulls him down whenever he tries to climb into civilization or rationality. The confusion the dragon creates in him makes him even more vicious.

**King Hrothgar:** King of the Danes, or Scyldings. When he first meets Grendel, he seems childish (he throws an axe at Grendel for no reason) but as he grows up, he becomes a wise and powerful king. He builds an empire when most rulers are fighting pettily amongst themselves. He marries the young and beautiful Wealtheow, and tries to love her and take care of her. He worries over his nephew and the kings who are jealous of him. Grendel watches him grow wise with sorrow--in later years Hrothgar



spends his life waiting for Grendel, fearful but helpless, and the waiting makes him quiet and thoughtful. Grendel respects Hrothgar, and even views them as similar.

**The Shaper:** A blind singer/poet, who arrives at the castle one night with a young assistant. The Shaper has an amazing ability to make everyone believe his songs: after listening to him, the Danes are inspired by their glorious history (which, as Grendel points out, has been brutal and petty at times.) This is why he is called the Shaper: he shapes peoples' opinions of themselves and others. He even convinces Grendel that the lives of the Danes are meaningful, which makes it very hard for him to kill them. He does not entirely believe the Shaper's stories, but he is influenced by his beautiful songs nonetheless. The Shaper dies near the end of the book, and the reader learns for the first time that he sometimes directed his songs at a beautiful, married woman, who perhaps loved him back. Once he is dead, Grendel feels much more comfortable murdering Danes again.

**Hrothulf:** Hrothgar's nephew, who comes to live with Hrothgar and Wealtheow after his father is murdered. Shy, awkward and thoughtful, Hrothulf is a little like Grendel. He has an immature but ambitious mind, always wanting to solve philosophical problems but never quite making progress. For example, he hates the injustice that the peasants suffer under the king, and hates that none of them seem to mind it. But though he seems to be optimistic about the possibility of change, he does little but whine and rant. He also has his own ambitions for the throne. His friend and advisor, an elderly peasant, seems to have great influence over the impressionable prince.

**Beowulf:** His name is never even mentioned in the book, but based on the context, the reader knows that the huge, cold, determined stranger who comes to kill Grendel is Beowulf. A powerful and isolated man, Beowulf has little interest in politeness or small talk. He is willing to watch a friend die so that he can learn how Grendel fights. His single purpose is to kill Grendel in any way he can, and he has perfect confidence that he can do it. He is the only person who uses his wits to defeat the monster (in fact, when he whispers to Grendel, it seems that his words hurt Grendel as much as his blows). Grendel says that his defeat is an accident, but really it is the result of careful planning on Beowulf's part. He achieves in one night what Hrothgar's whole castle could not do in twelve years.

### Minor Characters

**Unferth:** A great soldier, who is deeply conflicted. Years ago he killed his brothers in a drunken rage. Today, he desperately wants to be a hero, and once Grendel learns this, he teases Unferth by keeping him safe, even as he kills all the soldiers around him. Unferth, who longs for a heroic death, feels ashamed, and disguises himself so that he can be killed in battle with Grendel, but Grendel always sees through the disguises. Unferth tried once to explain his ideas about heroism to Grendel, but his muddled---though heartfelt---theories were no match for Grendel's cruel cynicism. Because of the mistakes he made in the past and the shameful protection he gets from Grendel now, Unferth is defensive, sensitive to criticism, and sometimes a bully.





**Hygmod:** Wealtheow's brother and rival of Hrothgar. When he is forced to appease Hrothgar with something valuable, he knows that the only thing that will work is his beautiful sister, since Hrothgar is already very rich. He reluctantly gives her up, but he makes little attempt to disguise his hatred for Hrothgar. Hrothgar knows that, brother-in-law or not, Hygmod will always be a threat to him.

**Wealtheow:** Hrothgar's wife, sister of Hygmod. Beautiful, young and pure, Wealtheow seems to improve the character of everyone at court, just by being nice to people. Everyone, including Grendel, is inspired by her. He respects her (he watches her, knowing she is homesick, and is impressed that she does not complain or try to leave) and this confuses him. Unable to bear her goodness, he decides to kill her, and nearly rips her apart before abruptly deciding that it would be meaningless to kill her, just as her life is meaningless.

**Ork:** An old, earnest priest who Grendel teases. The monster, pretending to be God, tells Ork to describe God to him. Unexpectedly, Ork offers a complex and reasonable description of God, and then weeps with emotion. He says that God cannot be judged by our rational standards, because God is not only beyond rational thought, but also created it. God is what gives meaning to their lives, Ork continues. Grendel doesn't understand this, but he is moved enough not to kill Ork, as he had planned to do.

## Objects/Places

**Grendel's Cave:** Grendel's home, where he lives with his mother. Dark, frightening and full of mysterious creatures, Grendel's cave sometimes disappoints him. He asks his mother why they have to live there: it is too much like an animal's shelter for the thoughtful, ambitious Grendel. His mother does not answer. She is unable to speak, and seems to prefer the darkness of the cave.

**Hrothgar's Meadhall:** A dining hall where the soldiers drink and eat together. Important meetings are held there, boasts, stories and songs are related there, and the soldiers sleep there too. Grendel attacks them at night, though the place is guarded. He hates that they never give up hope: they always rebuild the meadhall, no matter how many times he destroys it.

**The dragon's lair:** A frightening and vast space filled with jewels and gold. The dragon sits, counting his riches, for eternity. It is his only goal, since he has decided that life is meaningless. Though Grendel tries to argue with him, the dragon is too smart--and too wily--to let him. The dragon confuses Grendel until he is unsure of everything. After his visit with the dragon, Grendel is much less innocent. He wishes, at times, that he had never met the dragon.

# Quotes

Quote 1: "Not that I fool myself with thoughts that I'm more noble." Chapter 1, pg. 6

Quote 2: "Bulls do such things, though they don't even know that the calves they defend are theirs." Chapter 2, pg. 20

Quote 3: "I create the whole universe, blink by blink." Chapter 2, pg. 22

Quote 4: "It was slightly ominous because of its strangeness--no wolf was so vicious to other wolves--but I half believed they weren't serious." Chapter 3, pg. 32

Quote 5: "I clamped my palms to my ears and stretched up my lips and shrieked again: a stab at truth, a snatch at apocalyptic glee." Chapter 3, pg. 45

Quote 6: "My heart was light with Hrothgar's goodness, and leaden with grief at my own bloodthirsty ways." Chapter 4, pg. 48

Quote 7: "He told of an ancient feud between two brothers which split all the world between darkness and light. And I, Grendel, was the dark side...I believed him! Such was the power of the Shaper's harp!" Chapter 4, pg. 52

Quote 8: "Why *not* frighten them?" Chapter 5, pg. 61

Quote 9: "You want the word. That's what you've come for. My advice is, don't ask! Do as I do! Seek out gold--but not *my* gold--and guard it!" Chapter 5, pg. 62

Quote 10: "It was unfair. For all I knew he might be telling me gibberish on purpose. I sat down. Let him babble." Chapter 5, pg. 70

Quote 11: "something will come of all this." Chapter 5, pg. 73

Quote 12: "I had become, myself, the mama I'd searched the cliffs for once in vain." Chapter 6, pg. 80

Quote 13: "Enough of that! A night for tearing heads off, bathing in blood!" Chapter 7, pg. 93

Quote 14: "Impossibly, like roses blooming in the heart of December, she said, 'That's past.' And it was. The demon was exorcised." Chapter 7, pg. 104

Quote 15: "a hero who'd killed a girl's old father out of love for the girl, and how the girl; after that had both loved and hated the hero and finally had killed him." Chapter 7, pg. 107

Quote 16: "So much for meaning as quality of life! I would kill her and teach them reality." Chapter 7, pg. 110



Quote 17: "Any action (A) of the human heart must trigger an equal and opposite reaction (A1)." Chapter 8, pg. 113

Quote 18: "The law of the world is a winter law, and casual." Chapter 8, pg. 115

Quote 19: "If the Revolution comes to grief, it will be because you and those you lead have become alarmed at your own brutality." Chapter 8, pg. 117

Quote 20: "All systems are evil." Chapter 8, pg. 120

Quote 21: "How, if I know all this, you may ask, could I hound him--shatter him again and again, drive him deeper and deeper into woe? I have no answer, except perhaps this: why should I *not*?" Chapter 8, pg. 122

Quote 22: "The image clings to my mind like a growth. I sense some riddle in it." Chapter 9, pg. 127

Quote 23: "He is the eternal urge of desire establishing the purposes of all creatures." Chapter 9, pg. 132

Quote 24: "So it goes," Chapter 10, pg. 142

Quote 25: "I will forget, tomorrow, so her pain is a matter of indifference." Chapter 10, pg. 147

Quote 26: "*Nihilo ex nihilo*," Chapter 10, pg. 150

Quote 27: "Only in a world where everything is patently being lost can a priest stir men's hearts as a poet would by maintaining that nothing is in vain." Chapter 11, pg. 159

Quote 28: "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, pg. 170

Quote 29: "If you think I created that wall that cracked my head, you're a fucking lunatic." Chapter 12, pg. 171

Quote 30: "Poor Grendel's had an accident. *So may you all*." Chapter 12, pg. 174



# Topic Tracking: Human/Animal

## Chapter 1

Human/Animal 1: Grendel sets himself apart from his mother, who cannot speak and, according to him, does not think coherently. He believes he is above her, and the animals that live near his cave. He seems to think of men as like him: he knows they are thoughtful, like he is. However, he also knows that he has animal urges: when he gets hungry, he needs blood, whether he wants it or not.

## Chapter 2

Human/Animal 2: Grendel thinks of himself as more of a civilized, thoughtful creature than he used to be. When he was younger, he was curious, and as frisky as a puppy. He felt closer to his mother then. Now, he is isolated, and cynically thoughtful.

Human/Animal 3: While the men see Grendel as less than even a mammal--a fungus--Grendel sees the men as less than human. He thinks of them like rats, and understands their language better than they understand his. Yet he also fears them, because he can see that, unlike animals, men can think and plan on a complex level.

## Chapter 3

Human/Animal 4: The men are becoming more "human," and less part of the wildlife of the land. They build roads and towns, frighten away the animals, and destroy the landscape. Though Grendel is interested in them, he is both more animal (he is a solitary hunter) and more humane (he is disgusted with the way the men treat their environment.)

Human/Animal 5: Grendel tries to fight the ultimate form of humanity--the songs of the Shaper--by screaming like an animal. Still, the civilized idea of culture is very appealing to him. He cannot shut it out with his savage behavior.

## Chapter 4

Human/Animal 6: Grendel sees the animal cruelty the Danes are capable of when he finds the corpse outside the village. He contrasts it cynically with the pious, cultured songs the Shaper sings. Still, however, he is drawn to the Danes' civilization. He wants to be a part of it, even if he has to play the role of Evil.

## Chapter 7

Human/Animal 7: Grendel continues to try to combine his two warring natures. He thinks of the men as part of his life: they all give each other a reason to live. And he feels for Wealtheow in much the same way the Danes do. Yet he cannot accept these feelings. He thinks they are weak and irrational, and hates himself for giving in to them. He reminds himself that life is pointless, and tries to get excited about eating people.



## **Chapter 9**

Human/Animal 8: Grendel highlights what he believes to be the animal nature of ritual. The priests, when praying, use a language similar to Grendel's. This is striking in light of how often Grendel equates ability to speak with intelligence and sophistication (he hates his mother because she has no language, and he shocks Unferth when he speaks to him). The townspeople rebuilt the holy place when Grendel destroyed it, he says, in an instinctual way. They did so not because they cared about their religion, but because it seemed vaguely like something they had to do.

Human/Animal 9: Grendel sees, in spite of himself, that Ork transcends the ritual prayers and the often brutal life of the Danes. He does so by thinking, by trying to understand God and do what He wants. Ork claims that his life goal has been achieved: he has spoken with the King of the Gods. The dragon had almost convinced Grendel that one goal was as good as another, but Grendel sees that Ork's goal was really worth something: it made him think and gave him joy. Grendel, who has always believed that there is no God, is disturbed to see that this intelligent, kindly man believes with all his heart. Feeling threatened and losing his appetite, Grendel backs away.

## **Chapter 10**

Human/Animal 10: Grendel feels closer than ever to Hrothgar after the Shaper dies. He recognizes that part of what separated them was the Shaper's ability to make events seem meaningful: he had a masterful command of language. Hrothgar, who rarely speaks, needed the Shaper to make his people loyal and his kingdom strong. Without the Shaper between them, Grendel and Hrothgar are two sides of the same coin. The differences between man and monster fade away.

# Topic Tracking: Identity

## Topic Tracking: Identity

### Chapter 1

Identity 1: Grendel wants to force the men to accept his version of reality--life is meaningless, so it doesn't matter who lives or dies--but he only succeeds in pushing them away from him. He kills some of them, and the rest hate him, but are even more committed to their traditions and communities than before. He wants to drive them apart, but he cannot, and he wants to hate them, but also wants to be with them.

### Chapter 2

Identity 2: Grendel looks back on his young days with the perspective of a thoughtful adult. He sees himself as a completely different creature now. He can laugh at his innocence, see his relationship with his mother developing, and understand how he has matured.

### Chapter 3

Identity 3: Grendel is confused by the soldiers' behavior. He is disgusted by their pettiness, their brutality, and their wastefulness, and these things seem completely alien to him. Yet he also speaks their language, and something draws him to their town over and over, as much as he wants to avoid it.

### Chapter 4

Identity 4: The Shaper has the power to change Grendel's identity. Grendel never thought of the world in terms of Good vs. Evil, and certainly never thought of himself as an evil force, but after listening to the Shaper's description of him as the "dark side," he is ready to believe it.

### Chapter 5

Identity 5: The dragon tries to simplify Grendel's life by convincing him that his worries are ridiculous: he shouldn't wonder about whether killing people is "right" or "wrong." There's no such thing as morality. Grendel has a vague idea that the dragon is wrong, but he is also very drawn to what the dragon tells him. The dragon wants to turn Grendel into an unthinking beast, and he partially succeeds: after their meeting, Grendel is much more willing to murder people.

### Chapter 6

Identity 6: Interestingly, as Grendel becomes more powerful, he also becomes more alone and more unhappy. Clearly, though he hated the villagers in some ways, he also wanted to interact with them. Now, he does not even have the opportunity to fight them:



he simply takes a few victims and leaves. He pretends that he enjoys this, but he knows that his new power is not necessarily a positive one.

Identity 7: Grendel takes control of his own identity for one moment, arguing relatively rationally with Unferth until he finally forces the man to see that heroism is not so simple as he thinks. He contrasts himself with both the Shaper and the dragon, two figures who have been warring in his mind for some time. Though Grendel does not really establish his own philosophy of life--he remains confused throughout the book--he recognizes this point as a small triumph (for himself, if not for Good.) He says that the apple fight was the most enjoyable battle of his life.

## Chapter 8

Identity 8: Grendel's confusion about who he is continues. He sees himself as immensely powerful--he has made Hrothgar who he is today--but at the same time, he has no concept of *why* he does what he does. He tries to say that he does it because he is a monster, but he knows as well as the reader that that is only partially true. Grendel may have an instinct to kill, but he also has the power to decide whether or not to indulge that instinct. He tries to reject that power by claiming that he is at the mercy of his instincts. Still, he seems to know that this idea is questionable, because he talks about it in vague terms and then contradicts himself the next moment.

## Chapter 9

Identity 9: Grendel seems to be seeing something of his future in the death of the deer. Perhaps he sees himself as a pawn in a game as well: he never quite understands why he tortures the Danes, and yet he cannot seem to stop. He is in some respects like the deer, which seems to have a single purpose in life: to be killed by the hunter, just as the hunter's single purpose seems to be to kill the deer. Grendel comments that they appear to exist because of each other, an idea he has hinted at in reference to his own relationship with Hrothgar. Hrothgar has made Grendel into what he is today, and the opposite is true as well. Their identities are dependent on each other, and their actions seem planned from the beginning. This may be Gardner's way of showing the reader that his story takes place in the same world as Beowulf, and therefore the characters must act the same way, with the same results. It was the deer's destiny to die, just as it is Grendel's destiny to torment Hrothgar and be killed by Beowulf.

## Chapter 10

Identity 10: When Grendel describes the goat as climbing because it is in his nature to climb, he hints at his own nature: he throws rocks at the goat because it is his nature to throw rocks, both literally and figuratively. The goat keeps climbing, even after it is dead, and Grendel keeps throwing rocks.

Identity 11: Grendel's identification with Beowulf is so strong that even his mother can feel it. It's in the air: something is coming that will have a great effect on Grendel. One could say that Beowulf is Grendel's destiny. He cannot avoid it; all of his protestations that he creates his own reality are useless.





# Topic Tracking: Philosophy

## Topic Tracking: Philosophy

### Chapter 1

Philosophy 1: Grendel sees everything as meaningless, but at the same time he yearns for meaning. He protests that he doesn't think of himself as important--he's just an animal murderer--but he gets angry at the sky when it "ignores" him. When he sees the men rebuilding their castle, he gets very angry. He doesn't want them to think they are doing anything of importance, but at the same time he can tell that they are. No matter how many of them he kills, he cannot break their spirits, and that enrages him.

### Chapter 2

Philosophy 2: Grendel is beginning to outline his philosophy. He believes that "perception is reality"--he creates the universe, because it is only his experience of his environment that makes it real. However, he takes this relatively reasonable idea to an extreme, deciding that he alone exists. It leads, eventually, to his belief that only he matters, and he can therefore do whatever he wants to everyone else.

Philosophy 3: Grendel's philosophy is getting more dangerous, to himself and the townspeople: he thinks of reality in terms of conflict--it's him against everybody else--and decides life is just one big accident. There is no God, and there is no point to anything. Therefore, he can give in to his urge to kill, without wondering where it comes from.

### Chapter 4

Philosophy 4: Grendel's mind is confused and immature. When he is confronted with art and culture, which seem to bring meaning to the lives of the Danes, he gets angry, because he wants to believe that life is meaningless. That conviction makes it easier for him to understand his own life (he is intelligent, but for some reason lives in a cave and is driven by a need to hunt) and he resents the Danes for shaking his belief.

Philosophy 5: Though Grendel at times allows his basic emotions--fear, loneliness, anger--to influence his beliefs, and is usually totally self centered, he is sometimes able to think clearly about other people. He realizes that the Shaper's and Hrothgar's philosophies isolate them, perhaps as much as he himself is isolated. He has a sophisticated understanding of Hrothgar's ambition and the Shaper's creative ability. The reader can see Grendel contradicting himself: though he would like to say that he is just a crude beast, prisoner of his instincts, he is actually quite intelligent and able to choose whether or not to kill. He just doesn't want the responsibility of that choice.

### Chapter 5

Philosophy 6: The dragon's philosophy is a destructive but rather common one, and Gardner wrote the dragon's speeches as parodies of this self-centered system. The dragon insists that there is no meaning to anything, which excuses him from making the world better, allowing him to pursue entirely selfish hobbies.

## **Chapter 6**

Philosophy 7: Grendel's philosophy changes in this chapter: with the dragon's words as a shield, he is no longer as influenced by the Shaper. The Shaper's songs about the glory and nobility of the lives of the Danes still confuse Grendel, but now he has the dragon's cold, brutal ideas to hide behind, so his confusion makes him lash out, rather than try to communicate with the Danes. The dragon has made Grendel sadder and more isolated, but he has hardened his ideas.

Philosophy 8: Unferth has built his life around a philosophy that Grendel dismisses with a wave of his hand. Simply put, Unferth believes that what one does is worth something, whether other people know about it or not. Heroic deeds are valuable in and of themselves. Still, Unferth is not able to explain his beliefs clearly, and it is all too easy for Grendel to thwart him. Unferth has a good idea--even Grendel sometimes feels, in spite of himself, that life has meaning--but he is not a well-spoken philosopher, so Grendel can easily ignore him. Unferth is a stark contrast to the dragon, whose speeches can be viewed as generally meaningless but are very convincing nonetheless.

## **Chapter 8**

Philosophy 9: Alone and depressed, Hrothulf wrestles with the pain he feels about the natural cruelty in the world. He shouldn't be upset to see trees killing the plants under them with their shade. Does that then mean that a king growing rich off the labor of his subjects is also morally acceptable? These thoughts are mixed with more personal debates: does Wealtheow really love him? Is love what he wants? His youth and innocence clearly influence his thoughts, as does his ambition for the throne. At times, in fact, he echoes Grendel: thoughtful but immature.

Philosophy 10: Though Hrothulf tries to keep up with his advisor's cynical comments, he does not believe, as the old man does, that all governments are evil and the only answer is violence. Yet he keeps silent, because he does not know what the real answer could be. Grendel watches all this, knowing that the ultimate irony is that no matter what either man believes, they are subject to the laws of the land. As a prince, Hrothulf has freedoms that the old man could never have, and neither of them seems to even realize it.

## **Chapter 10**

Philosophy 11: Grendel, using the excuse that no one matters or knows anything but himself, dismisses his mother's warnings. He adds to this theory by reasoning that because time passes moment by moment, the past is just as irrelevant as the future. He can ignore anything that isn't happening right now. He decides that not only is his

mother ignorant, but her concern for him will fade from his memory by tomorrow, so he need not let it influence him in any way. These ideas seem to come partly from the dragon and partly from Grendel's fear that his mother actually does know something, but is unable to tell him.

Philosophy 12: Grendel sums up his philosophy in three words: *nihilo ex nihilo*, or nothing from nothing. This Latin phrase reveals Grendel's pretentiousness, and his desire to simplify things. This philosophy is clearly at odds with reality, because Grendel soon learns that he should have trusted his instincts and his mother's warnings. Beowulf shatters Grendel's illusion that nothing matters, that none of his actions have consequences. He shows Grendel that things can happen whether or not he believes in them.

# Chapter 1

Grendel, a large, hairy monster, watches a ram approach his cave. He tries to force the ram to go away, yelling at it and throwing rocks, but it just stands there stupidly. Grendel suddenly decides he doesn't care. He says that he is not close-minded like the ram: he is intelligent, learns from his past, and has complicated emotions. The ram's stupidity makes him very angry. "Not that I fool myself with thoughts that I'm more noble."

Chapter 1, pg. 6 Grendel knows he is a murderer--he eats people and cows--and he sees nothing either good or bad about that. He thinks about how mindless the world is--the sky stares down at him, day after day--and about the people he's killed, year after year. Now it is spring again. A deer sees him and is terrified, and this insults him. He would never kill a deer: cows are meatier and easier to catch. No one, not even humans, understands what Grendel is really like. All creatures except himself and humans, in fact, is too simple to understand anything. Grendel is depressed by how similar each day is to the next. He knows spring is coming: he feels it even from the cave where he lives with his mother, whose stupidity and ugly body disgust him. He hates his own biological needs: he comes out of hibernation in spite of himself, hungry for blood. He goes out into the night, at first afraid of the darkness and the sound of his own howling. But then he realizes that the screams are just his own voice, and the landscape can't hurt him. He thinks about yelling some insult out into the night, and this cheers him up. He notices how everything is afraid of him, and he remembers how he used to enjoy that, when he was younger. He knows his mother is waiting for him. She seems disturbed, though she does not speak. Grendel thinks of her as a fool; he does not believe she thinks about anything. He used to believe she had some secret to tell him, but that was before the dragon told him the ugly truth.

Topic Tracking: Human/Animal 1

He comes to the meadhall (dining hall) of old King Hrothgar, as he has done every spring for twelve years. Everyone is fearfully expecting him. He takes several people and devours them outside, listening to the cries of those left behind. They think he has been sent as a curse, and they pray for him to leave them. He thinks this is ridiculous. He watches the Shaper, a blind musician, sitting alone, and sees that Hrothgar does not join the people in prayer. The people begin gathering the body parts Grendel left behind, so they can be burned at a funeral ceremony. They faithfully begin to rebuild the door Grendel tore down, as they have done every year since he has come. Grendel watches them restore their castle and honor their dead, and it infuriates him. He runs home.

Topic Tracking: Philosophy 1

Topic Tracking: Identity 1

## Chapter 2

Grendel talks to himself, though no one can understand him and he himself thinks of it as more automatic than intelligent. He remembers how he used to explore his cave when he was very young. He discovered a secret door, guarded by snakes, and when he went through the door the snakes didn't bother him. This is how he discovered the world outside. He explored farther and farther. He looked at the other creatures living in the cave, and decided that only his mother really cared about him or loved him--though sometimes he didn't understand the look in her eyes, either. Sometimes he would get so disturbed that he would throw himself at her, and though they fought, she also held him to her body as though she loved him. Sometimes he felt mature and confident. Other times he felt confused and afraid.

Topic Tracking: Human/Animal 2

Topic Tracking: Identity 2

One morning, he'd been out much longer than he expected to be, and got his foot caught in between two trees. He cried for his mother, in terrible pain. He was terrified and angry that he would die and no one would even remember him. He desperately needed his mother, but she didn't appear. A bull approached, angry because Grendel was near his calf. Grendel thought this was silly: "Bulls do such things, though they don't even know that the calves they defend are theirs." Chapter 2, pg. 20 Grendel was afraid--if he were free he could kill the bull easily, but right then, he was defenseless. But when the bull charged him and hit his knee, Grendel understood that the bull was only acting instinctively: there was no strategy to its attack. All Grendel had to do was pull his leg out of the way at the last moment, and he would be safe. Musing, Grendel decides that there is no such thing as an objective reality. People create their own realities from their hopes and fears. "I create the whole universe, blink by blink." Chapter 2, pg. 22 He is his own god--he created himself and the world he lives in.

Topic Tracking: Philosophy 2

The bull charges over and over, and Grendel doesn't even care if he gets hit anymore. He sleeps, and thinks about his mother. He wonders what he means to her. That night, he sees men for the first time. He is confused by the crowd, then realizes they are speaking his language, though with a strange accent. They are small and annoying, and they move mechanically. The men (who are Vikings) puzzle over Grendel. They decide he is some kind of fungus. Grendel is frozen, watching them. They decide not to chop him out of the tree, because they think he is a spirit. They decide to feed him pigs, and he laughs suddenly. This frightens them. They don't understand him when he speaks, and though he wants to say they're crazy, his words come out like moans. The king (Hrothgar) throws an axe and Grendel cries out in pain. Afraid, the men surround him, and he realizes they are intelligent and rational--and therefore very dangerous. They are about to kill him when they hear his mother coming, her screams terrifying. He wakes up back in the cave, and tries to tell her what has happened, but she just stares at him. He wonders if she ever knew how to speak. He thinks of reality as a pointless conflict

between himself and the world around him. He thinks about what he knows: his mother's fur is bristly, and she smells like wild pig and fish. She clutches him to her. They struggle, and he is afraid as he hears her heart all around him.

Topic Tracking: Human/Animal 3

Topic Tracking: Philosophy 3

## Chapter 3

Grendel explains that he doesn't hate Hrothgar because he threw the axe. In fact, he began tormenting Hrothgar long after that, when Hrothgar was an old man. His men worked in teams, though they often fought amongst themselves. "It was slightly ominous because of its strangeness--no wolf was so vicious to other wolves--but I half believed they weren't serious." Chapter 3, pg. 32 But Grendel learns the men *are* serious. Though he hates himself for doing it, he can't stop watching the men, and one day he discovers a village that has been completely destroyed. All the people and animals are dead. He learns that there has always been war: he just discovered these people at a time of relative peace. Hrothgar's men listen to the Shaper sing about the great things they have done and will do. Then, every once in a while, another village attacks them, and many are killed. Grendel doesn't know what to feel: he has no connection to the men, but at the same time, he knows that since they speak the same language, they must be related somehow. He is disgusted at the waste of all the dead: he tries to store as many of them for food as possible.

Topic Tracking: Identity 3

The fighting between groups went on for years. Then Hrothgar began to understand how to grow strong. He made the nearest neighbors allies. He showed them how powerful he was, then forced them to give him gifts and supplies. He made himself seem like their leader, and they gradually came to believe he was. Grendel watched all of this happen: the hard trips Hrothgar's men made to the other villages, and the way they beat their horses and oxen when they couldn't walk any further. Hrothgar and his people decided to build roads, so that they could communicate more easily with their neighbors. Thus, his power increased. Grendel watched as the men destroyed everything around him: they killed animals for fun, set fires by accident that ruined the landscape, and scared away the wildlife.

Topic Tracking: Human/Animal 4

One night a blind singer came to the meadhall, along with a young boy. Grendel watched, unable to hear what was being said. Then the man began to sing, playing his harp. He sang beautifully about the glory of Hrothgar's people, the Danes. Everyone was quiet, awestruck. He is the Shaper, a singer/poet who "shapes" peoples' ideas about history. He is very skilled: his song about Hrothgar touched even Grendel, who suddenly felt that all the fighting he witnessed, which seemed petty and brutal to him, was grand and noble. Grendel left, confused. Which version of events was true? The Shaper had strongly influenced him. He tried to regain his confidence, and screamed to clear his mind. "I clamped my palms to my ears and stretched up my lips and shrieked again: a stab at truth, a snatch at apocalyptic glee." Chapter 3, pg. 45 He ran away to the pond near his cave.

Topic Tracking: Human/Animal 5

## Chapter 4

Twelve years later, the Shaper sings sadder songs: songs about how even rich kings like Hrothgar are unhappy when so many of their men are killed by Grendel. The people are burning their dead from the last time Grendel attacked. But still, they have not given up hope. Grendel believes that the Shaper built this kingdom: by singing about a great and powerful meadhall, he gave the people the inspiration to build one. Once it was built, the Shaper sang again about its greatness. Grendel listened, knowing the whole thing was ridiculous, but believing it nonetheless. "My heart was light with Hrothgar's goodness, and leaden with grief at my own bloodthirsty ways." Chapter 4, pg. 48 He knew those men, who pretended to be so bonded to each other, were capable of killing each other over almost nothing: he'd seen them do it. Yet he began to think that maybe the Shaper had changed them. He tried to figure out what to believe, and suddenly felt like the forest was mocking him. He began to think out loud, but felt self-conscious and arrogant. He wondered if the Shaper was just using his songs to gain power at the court. He tried to believe that the songs were just pretty melodies: they hadn't changed anything. But he felt that the Shaper sang as though he was meant to sing those very words. Thinking that the Shaper might be a good man after all, Grendel was terrified and confused. He felt paranoid, as if he were being watched by something out to get him. Then Grendel went toward the town, and the feeling disappeared.

Topic Tracking: Philosophy 4

He watches the townspeople talk and play games. Everything seems nice and innocent, but Grendel is bothered by something vague. Then he steps on a body: someone has cut the man's throat. Grendel picks the man up and listens as the Shaper begins to sing again. He sings about how the world was formed by the greatest god. "He told of an ancient feud between two brothers which split all the world between darkness and light. And I, Grendel, was the dark side...I believed him! Such was the power of the Shaper's harp!" Chapter 4, pg. 52 Grendel cries, though he knows that the corpse he carries is proof that there is no light or dark side, and there is no such god. Nevertheless, because of the song Grendel runs to the meadhall, trying to make peace with the people and become friends with them. They try to kill him. He has no choice but to fight back. He runs away, crying, and swears at them with the words he learned from listening to them. He screams, but thinks it sounds silly and stops. He wants to talk to God, and asks the stars why he has no one to talk to. They don't answer, and he tries not to be offended. He at first thinks that everyone else has people to talk to, then decides he is wrong. If Hrothgar and the Shaper really want to create a peaceful, powerful kingdom, and be remembered for it, they will be disappointed, he thinks. No one else in the town understands these goals. They just want to fight and get rich. Grendel begins to think that this might not be true--the townspeople might be influenced by the king and his singer--but he knows in his heart that they are doomed, and it makes him happy.

Topic Tracking: Philosophy 5

Topic Tracking: Human/Animal 6



Grendel cannot stay away from the Shaper's performances. The Shaper sings about Grendel's recent "attack"--Grendel says all of it is lies, meant to make the Danes feel important. Yet it makes him angry in a way he does not understand. He keeps thinking that maybe the Shaper's version of history is true: he can't shake the thought, and he feels like it's coming from outside of him--it feels older and darker than himself. He feels the presence pulling him in. He brushes off the idea, and goes home. His mother is irritated that he hasn't brought any food, but he is busy thinking about the Shaper. It is a lie, he knows, that a god created the world and separated it neatly into good and evil, light and dark. But what if the Shaper's songs could make the story true? Grendel realizes he wants it to be true, even if he has to be the evil side. He looks at his mother. She scratches at herself and tries to speak. Grendel is disgusted, and tries to ignore her. He goes to sleep, then later wakes up suddenly, knowing that the presence he felt earlier has returned. He gives in to it, and goes to the dragon

Topic Tracking: Identity 4

## Chapter 5

The dragon is a terrifying creature, even to Grendel. He sits in his lair on a neverending pile of beautiful jewels, and his eyes look dead. The dragon knows him, and seems happy to see him. His voice sounds ancient. The dragon talks kindly to Grendel, but in a mocking sort of way. Grendel is too afraid to speak--the dragon speaks quietly and with disinterested amusement, and that is worse than a monstrous roar. He sees Grendel's fear, and begins to laugh horribly. Grendel gets angry and starts to throw a large emerald, and the dragon commands him to never touch his possessions again. Grendel realizes that this is how men feel about him, and he decides never to frighten or eat them for no reason again. Suddenly the dragon interrupts his thoughts. "Why *not* frighten them?" Chapter 5, pg. 61

The dragon is irritated: he knows everything Grendel is thinking--in fact, he knows everything. He gives Grendel a terrible look, which almost kills him, and the dragon doesn't even seem to care. He saves Grendel from dying of fear with a laugh--not because Grendel matters to him in the least, but simply because he is amused. He says, "You want the word. That's what you've come for. My advice is, don't ask! Do as I do! Seek out gold--but not *my* gold--and guard it!" Chapter 5, pg. 62 The dragon tries to explain the Shaper. He says that dragons can see everything, past, present and future, as if from a mountaintop. He stresses that this doesn't mean dragons cause things to happen. He says there is no free will: he always knows what will happen before it does. He says that men don't do anything worthwhile, they just think they do. All their theories and strategies amount to nothing. They just know a bunch of facts, without understanding the whole picture. They think the Shaper gives them that understanding, but it's a fake feeling of connectedness. It's made up. Grendel doesn't understand this at all, but the dragon thinks Grendel is a good listener, so he tells him about Time and Space. He explains that creatures like Grendel think that because something is true for them, it must be true for the rest of the world, too, which is not logical. He begins to talk pompously about how limited most creatures' thinking is: they can only see certain ways of categorizing or naming things. He sees that Grendel is very confused and bored, and gets angry.

Grendel protests, assuring the dragon that he is interested in other things besides violence. Frustrated, the dragon changes course. He tells Grendel that it is very hard for him to talk to a creature of "the Dark Ages." He mutters that no age is darker than any other--that's just a name that a later (but not better) age decided to give to the time that this story takes place. Faltering, the dragon tries to explain that the universe is made up of both order and randomness. He stops, and continues in another vein, holding out a golden jug but being careful not to let Grendel touch it. He rambles nearly incoherently about the difference between a jug and a living thing: living things exist individually, because they can express themselves, but objects like jugs are generalized, because they have no way of changing themselves. A jug can be nothing but a simple, complete, whole jug. The dragon seems to believe he is being perfectly clear, and gets angry when Grendel doesn't understand. He tries again: vegetables are different from people because none of their parts are essential to their functioning: if you cut the top of a



carrot off, it can still be a carrot as much as it was before. But if you cut a man's head off, he cannot function as he did before, because he has individual parts that are all essential in different ways. The explanation is vague and half-baked, but again, the dragon gets angry when Grendel doesn't get it. He tries to tell Grendel that people relate to the world in different ways than do rocks: rocks "relate" to everything the same way, while people have different attitudes toward different things. Grendel gives up. "It was unfair. For all I knew he might be telling me gibberish on purpose. I sat down. Let him babble." Chapter 5, pg. 70

The dragon tells Grendel he shouldn't have come, then tries one last time to explain simply. Nothing is permanent, he says. Everything happens over and over again, in different ways. Grendel sees that the dragon knows this for a fact. It's all dust, no matter how it behaves, says the dragon. Everything will end one day, in an ugly, pointless way. Grendel thinks of the Shaper and doesn't believe it could be true. The dragon is getting sick of Grendel, and hardly cares if he believes what he's being told. When Grendel asks him why he thinks it's stupid to try to improve one's character, the dragon brushes him off. He tells him that Grendel actually improves the Danes with his attacks: he forces them to think, and write songs, and plan ways to kill him. The dragon says that if he stops torturing the Danes he will be replaced by another monster, and whether or not he continues to kill them makes no difference, so he may as well do it. He says that his own goal is to count all his jewels--which, according to him, is a goal no different from helping the poor or killing random people. Grendel tries to tell him about the Shaper, and when the dragon scoffs, Grendel somehow knows the dragon is right. The stories the Shaper tells about God and the beginning of the world are made up. Still, Grendel believes "something will come of all this." Chapter 5, pg. 73 The dragon disagrees.

Topic Tracking: Philosophy 6

Topic Tracking: Identity 5

## Chapter 6

Grendel believes that, while before he just thought vaguely that the Shaper's songs were false and silly, because of the dragon he now knows it for sure. Everything seems hopeless and pointless to him. Plus, the dragon put a spell on Grendel so that no weapon can hurt him. This changes him: he used to feel some closeness with the men, but now he is completely alone.

Topic Tracking: Identity 6

At first, he thought this new power was a good thing. One night in the first year that he tormented Hrothgar's kingdom, he heard the Shaper singing. He had never attacked the hall itself--only killed people outside of it. But he feels a change within him: hearing the Shaper's song, about how blessed they are, infuriates him. He hates their happy, confident faces. Suddenly a guard appears and attacks Grendel--but nothing happens. They are both surprised. They fight, and gradually Grendel realizes he can't be hurt. He thinks it's all hilarious--the way the men attack him even though he isn't bothering them, how easily he can kill them, how terrified they are of him. He bites the head off a guard in front of everyone, just to torment them. He feels joyful. "I had become, myself, the mama I'd searched the cliffs for once in vain." Chapter 6, pg. 80

He is a great and powerful fighter, and he is proud of himself. But he also feels more alone than ever. He notices it for the first time a few nights later. He hears the men yelling about how they will serve their king by dying. He knows this is idiotic, but he feels empty inside as he kills them. He knows the killing is meaningless too, especially since they can't fight him. He begins to smash things, enraged at his own feelings. Then Unferth appears. He is a tall, brave man, who speaks self-righteously to Grendel, telling him he is going to die and asking him to make peace with his god. Grendel teases him, and Unferth realizes that Grendel can speak, though he can't quite understand the words. He begins to talk to Grendel like a human, rather than an animal, telling him that tonight will make his reputation as a hero. Grendel thinks this is pompous. He gets a cruel idea, and, teasing Unferth, moves toward a pile of apples. He tells Unferth that he doesn't envy him the job of being a hero. It must be a lot of pressure, making sure one never fails. Though there are good things about it too, he continues mockingly. One can act superior, and heroic acts impress women. Plus, it must be nice simply to know that one is a hero. Listening to this, Unferth gets more and more angry. Grendel throws a single apple, then hits Unferth with so many apples that the man falls to the ground, bleeding and crying. Grendel is extremely pleased: Unferth is not such a hero after all.

Grendel goes back to his cave, sure that Unferth will not follow. But he does follow, secretly, and comes to Grendel's cave three days later to fight him again. Grendel holds his angry mother back and looks at Unferth, who is collapsed on the ground. Grendel realizes that he must have crawled his way to the cave. The man tells Grendel that when he kills him, his great deed will be remembered forever, even if he himself dies as well. Unferth tries to explain heroism. It is not just showing off, or talking poetically, or doing good things to get good things for yourself in return. The fact that he is there



alone, without anyone to see him give up his life to kill Grendel, proves that heroism is real. People might never know that Unferth died this way, but it doesn't matter. Grendel is irritated: will people sing songs about Unferth for years to come, or won't they? He wishes the man would stick to one story, no matter how silly it might be. Unferth tries to convince Grendel, angry that nothing seems to change his condescending smirk. Grendel doesn't think that heroism has any meaning: it's just another way of passing the time. Unferth informs him that one of them will die tonight: is *that* boring, he asks? Grendel decides to carry Unferth back to Hrothgar unharmed, just to spite him. Though Unferth threatens to kill himself, he knows that to do so would be cowardly. Unferth, exhausted, falls asleep. For years now, Grendel has avoided killing Unferth, though Unferth desperately wants to die a heroic death. Grendel is pleased: he understands reality differently now. The Shaper and Unferth may be wrong, but so is the dragon. Some things do have meaning.

Topic Tracking: Identity 7

Topic Tracking: Philosophy 7

Topic Tracking: Philosophy 8

## Chapter 7

Grendel is half bored and half excited by his long war against the Danes. He knows it defines them, like the dragon said--it gives them something to focus on. And he knows the war does that for him too. He is still confused about it, though, and wonders if he is going crazy. Winter of the twelfth year is coming soon. Grendel hopes something will change this year. He wonders what would happen to him if the men decided to ignore him. Then he thinks, "Enough of that! A night for tearing heads off, bathing in blood!" Chapter 7, pg. 93 He feels the dragon's presence. He is happy that he and his cave are in good physical condition, and knows that he has not yet done the worst thing he could do, the thing that would hurt the Danes' confidence most: he has not killed the queen. He self-consciously theorizes about killing her. What is the queen, after all? How much of her presence is her body itself, and how much of it is her influence? He has a flashback to the second year of his war with the Danes. He remembers that they were going through tough times, and could not defend themselves the way they could before. Another king was using Hrothgar's same strategy as Hrothgar, conquering his neighbors and growing stronger, and now he was a threat. Grendel watched as Hrothgar's men banded together--they who, just recently, would have killed one another for almost no reason. This made Grendel furious. They formed an army, and Grendel saw that it was huge. One night he watched the meeting between Hrothgar and the other king, Hygmod. Hygmod, leading a bear by a chain, saw that he could not defeat such a large army. He had a short conversation with an advisor, then offered Hrothgar a truce. He wanted to give Hrothgar so much treasure that he wouldn't even be able to pay his army anymore: then Hrothgar would be rich, and Hygmod's people could no longer threaten him. But Hrothgar refused: he had all the money he wanted, and besides, Hygmod could easily steal it back from him. He wanted to fight. Then Hygmod brought out something Hrothgar couldn't refuse: his sister Wealtheow. Grendel watched this, scoffing at the ridiculous ceremony. But he also saw in Wealtheow something as touching as one of the Shaper's songs: she was innocent, beautiful and pure. He hated himself for loving her (or, at least, the idea of her), but he couldn't help it. He laughed and cried, a prisoner of his emotions even though he knew the whole ceremony was a sham.

Topic Tracking: Human/Animal 7

For the rest of the winter, Grendel was unable to attack Hrothgar. He stayed in his cave. His mother knew something was wrong, and was upset that she couldn't help him. Grendel knew that she, like Wealtheow, would give her life to protect those she loved. All females are the same, he thinks. He feels the dragon's presence. Sometimes, he remembers, he went down to the meadhall to watch the queen. She gracefully served the men at the table, preventing arguments and making everyone feel calmer and happier. One night, she asked Unferth if he wanted anything more to drink, and he declined. Another man made a joke about something from Unferth's past: one night when he was very drunk, he killed his brothers. Everyone was shocked into silence. Grendel understood what had happened to Unferth: he had been exposed as a meaningless fool, who pretended to be a hero but was really just a simple man with a



shameful past who would have killed himself if that hadn't been "unheroic." Unferth sat there, ashamed. Then the queen spoke. "Impossibly, like roses blooming in the heart of December, she said, 'That's past.' And it was. The demon was exorcised." Chapter 7, pg. 104 Everyone relaxed. Grendel knew that the queen was not giving happiness and peace to everyone because she herself was happy and peaceful. He watched her lie awake at night next to Hrothgar, and he knew she was thinking about her home. Sometimes she went outside at night, just standing there, not letting her constant guards know she was upset. She was a child, but she was very mature, and Grendel was impressed and moved.

One winter her brother came to visit, bringing his bear and many friends. Grendel could hardly watch the celebration. Hrothgar seemed happy and thoughtful as he watched the queen with her people. The queen seemed to forget he existed, she was so happy. Grendel vaguely saw that the king and queen seemed somehow distant from each other. The queen's brother played a harp and sang. Though he was not talented, everyone listened to him because of the story he told. His song was about "a hero who'd killed a girl's old father out of love for the girl, and how the girl; after that had both loved and hated the hero and finally had killed him." Chapter 7, pg. 107 Wealtheow listened sadly, and Hrothgar seemed a little nervous about the harsh looks her brother was giving him. Grendel watched that night as the queen looked thoughtfully at her husband as he slept.

Grendel feels ridiculous. He knows life is meaningless--he met the dragon, after all--but he cannot shake his feelings for Wealtheow. He believes that what the Danes are doing is meaningful, and he feels happy, even though it has nothing to do with him. He is so disturbed by his conflicted feelings that he attacks the castle. He kills the bear easily, then decides, once and for all, to brutally kill the queen. "So much for meaning as quality of life! I would kill her and teach them reality." Chapter 7, pg. 110 Then he realizes that to kill her would be just as meaningless as her life. He lets her go, and the people are amazed. Grendel decides to kill himself, but changes his mind immediately.



## Chapter 8

In verse and play-like scenes, the story is told of how Hrothgar's brother Halga was killed, and his son, fourteen year old Hrothulf, came to live with Hrothgar. Wealtheow takes him in graciously, but Hrothulf seems sly and sarcastic. Grendel has a theory that "Any action (A) of the human heart must trigger an equal and opposite reaction (A<sup>1</sup>)."

Chapter 8, pg. 113 He is thus pleased to see that as Wealtheow and Hrothgar welcome their nephew, he seems to dislike them. Hrothulf talks privately: he thinks the peasants are stupid for following the king when he is so rich and they are so poor. They think the king cares for them, but he is really just getting rich off their labor. They think they are happy, but they are deluding themselves. The world is still violent and vicious--now it's just brutality in the name of the king. Hrothulf wishes the peasants would think about the injustices they suffer at the hands of the king. In the woods, Hrothulf speaks in poetry about the tree he stands under. Should he hate it because it kills every plant beneath it with its shade? Of course not. "The law of the world is a winter law, and casual."

Chapter 8, pg. 115 He says that he can be as tough as his uncle, striving for power above all things. He thinks about his aunt: she seems to care for him, but he wants something more stable than love. Everything around him seems as dead as the ground beneath the tree.

### Topic Tracking: Philosophy 9

Wealtheow watches Hrothulf sleep, amazed at how sad such a young man is. She murmurs that he will grow sadder still: his young cousins, who he loves now, will one day take the throne, and rule over him. He will not feel so close to them then. She herself used to be calm and loving, but now that she has grown up, she does not sleep well anymore.

Grendel watched Hrothulf get sadder and angrier. He never spoke, except to an old peasant who was his advisor. Grendel hated this old man: he was deaf and so yelled at everyone, and he smelled bad, and spit when he talked. Grendel listened sometimes to the two of them talking philosophically. The old man talked about revolutions: violence occurs when current events make it unavoidable, and then violence becomes heroic. He saw this as natural and good--it is sometimes the only way to change things. "If the Revolution comes to grief, it will be because you and those you lead have become alarmed at your own brutality." Chapter 8, pg. 117 Hrothulf fell down, but the old man didn't notice. He continued, telling the young prince that kingdoms exist to protect those in power and pretend to protect the poor. Hrothulf was upset by the injustice of such a system. The old man said that revolutions are equally valid but no more just forms of controlling people: each is just a different way of gaining power for some and keeping others down. Hrothulf protested: it didn't have to be like that, he said. He got angry, not realizing that he was revealing his own powerful status: as the prince, he had a right to get angry, but the peasant did not. He cried that no one would say that violence is good, no matter what the result of it was. The peasant disagreed: that's just what he believed. "All systems are evil." Chapter 8, pg. 120 He said he didn't believe in justice. Hrothulf said nothing, looking thoughtful.



### Topic Tracking: Philosophy 10

Hrothulf is kind to his cousins, who are both toddlers. He is awkward around everyone else. Everyone in the meadhall knows that one day these boys will grow up and become violent rulers, but no one can really believe it--except Hrothgar, whose sad life, tortured by Grendel, has made him wise. He was once a great man, but now he can only use his wisdom to wonder when Grendel will attack next, and about which other kings are ready to overthrow him. He looks at Wealtheow, knowing that she is too young and beautiful for him, knowing that she knows all his fears and worries, which makes them worse. Grendel says, "How, if I know all this, you may ask, could I hound him--shatter him again and again, drive him deeper and deeper into woe? I have no answer, except perhaps this: why should I *not*?" Chapter 8, pg. 122, Grendel claims that nothing he could do now would make him and the king friends. In fact, he has made the king the wise, noble man he is today. He adds that he is simply what he is: a monster, driven by blood-lust, so he acts like one. But he cannot believe that all of the pain and confusion, on both sides, could lead to nothing. He gives Hrothgar what he calls a horrible dream, about their first meeting, when Grendel was stuck in the tree trunk and Hrothgar threw an axe at him.

### Topic Tracking: Identity 8

## Chapter 9

It is December, and the landscape is frightening and dangerous. Everything is dead or dying. Grendel is afraid without knowing exactly why. He watches one of Hrothgar's men hunting a deer. It is an image of beauty and calmness. It almost looks as if it were planned from the beginning, as though the deer was waiting for the hunter. Everything is slow and still, until the deer is hit with the arrow. Then time speeds up--the deer crumples to the ground and abruptly dies. "The image clings to my mind like a growth. I sense some riddle in it." Chapter 9, pg. 127

Topic Tracking: Identity 9

Grendel watches a religious ceremony. The priests, using a language closer to Grendel's than to the Danes', pray to each of their many gods. Grendel and Hrothulf's advisor are equally disgusted. It's all ritual, with no feeling behind it. Years ago, Grendel remembers, he destroyed their holy place, smashing their statues. No one, he says, minded much except the priests. The place was restored--people seemed to think doing so was boring, but necessary--and Grendel never bothered to attack it again.

Topic Tracking: Human/Animal 8

At midnight, everyone is at home, sleeping fitfully or trying to sleep. They know Grendel is probably coming. But Grendel waits in the holy place, and hears someone walking near. It is Ork, an ancient, kindly priest. Grendel pretends to be the greatest god, the Destroyer. Grendel teases Ork, asking him what he knows about the King of the Gods. Unexpectedly, the priest begins a complex speech: there can be no rational explanation for the god, because he is beyond rational thought. He is, in fact, the basis of rational thought. Grendel is surprised to see that Ork is crying. Ork continues: the King of Gods creates meaning for humans. He is the reason life is not pointless. "He is the eternal urge of desire establishing the purposes of all creatures." Chapter 9, pg. 132 Ork says that the mystery of god is that in order to be truly human, one must also be limited, and eventually die. The ultimate wisdom is in knowing the way things are connected, even though they might not seem to be. Grendel is utterly confused, but he hears people coming and is forced to sneak away. Three priests approach Ork, and Grendel listens secretly. They chide Ork for staying out late in the cold. None of them believe that Ork talked to God, and they are all preoccupied with being proper and holy in every way. Another, younger priest runs up. He is very excited that Ork has seen the Destroyer. He says that Ork never used to be able to see anything but rational, concrete ideas and things, but now, he understands the absurd and the fantastic. The young priest is thrilled and keeps yelling, but the other men seem to think he is a fool. Grendel no longer feels like killing them, and leaves.

Topic Tracking: Human/Animal 9

Everything is quiet now. The king and his people are asleep. Grendel watches, knowing he should be at home too. He would like to go to the dragon, but he can't. He looks up

at the sky, and sees that it is black, but bright. He is confused, and feels uncomfortable. He is waiting for something.

## Chapter 10

Grendel is driven crazy from waiting. He feels the dragon in the earth, hears the young priest yelling praise for the gods, and learns that the Shaper is sick. A goat approaches Grendel's lair, and he tells it to go away. It doesn't listen, so he throws stones at it. Though he breaks its skull open and knocks it down several times, the goat does not give up. Its instinct is to climb, so it keeps climbing. Grendel keeps throwing rocks.

Topic Tracking: Identity 10

Grendel watches the town at work. People farm, cook, and build. He hears a woman tell a story about a man who lives across the sea, a man as strong as thirty of their men. She says that one day, he will come to their town. Grendel appears in this quiet, country scene, killing some of the children. He sees the whole thing as a cycle. "So it goes," Chapter 10, pg. 142 he says.

The Shaper is very sick. People wait on him, and he asks for a woman who does not come. Grendel is pleased that the old man, who once so easily manipulated him, is now helpless. He assumes that everyone sitting at the Shaper's bedside is just waiting for him to die. The Shaper begins to speak about the future of the Danes, but before he can come to the point, he dies. Grendel looks in on a woman in a nearby house. She is the one the Shaper wanted to see. Grendel knows that sometimes he sang his songs for her. But she is married, and nothing ever happened between them. Grendel suddenly has the urge to kill the woman, but he resists it. He looks again at the Shaper, who is being prepared for his funeral. Unsatisfied, he finally returns home.

At home, Grendel is irritated with his mother. She seems disturbed and crazy, sometimes walking on two legs, sometimes on four. She doesn't want to let him leave. She tries to speak, but always fails. Grendel, however, is thinking deeply about the Shaper's death. He no longer feels the same about history. He now thinks that history does not exist: there are only moments in time, one after the other. There is only now. He thinks about how he used to love his mother, when he was small, and how he should have killed the Shaper long ago. He goes to the funeral. His mother tries to stop him, and for a moment he thinks she knows something that he doesn't, but then he dismisses the idea. She is upset, but "I will forget, tomorrow, so her pain is a matter of indifference." Chapter 10, pg. 147

Topic Tracking: Philosophy 11

The young Shaper's assistant, who is now an adult, sings at the funeral. He sings a song the Shaper sang many times, about a man who becomes king of his enemies, because in war he has killed their king, and they have killed all his people. Eventually, the people turned against their new king. Hrothgar's men listen to the song with blank faces. As they burn the Shaper's body, Grendel knows that he and the king are alone again, the way they were before the Shaper came.

Topic Tracking: Human/Animal 10

The next morning, Grendel wakes up suddenly. He thinks he can still hear the mountain goat trying to climb to his cave. His mother is making upset sounds, and he strains to understand: Beware the fish, she says, or seems to say. He feels like something is about to happen, though he thinks he knows nothing will. He feels the dragon again, and he feels conflicted, too: he should sleep until spring. He feels vaguely afraid. Then he thinks he's being silly. He says, "*Nihilo ex nihilo*," Chapter 10, pg. 150 nothing from nothing.

Topic Tracking: Philosophy 12

Topic Tracking: Identity 11

## Chapter 11

Grendel feels what he thinks is joy: something exciting is happening. "Heroes" from across the sea have just arrived by boat. He could feel them coming: a strange feeling he had never experienced before. He went out to wait for the boat, and his mother did not stop him. He heard it coming steadily, the oars moving almost mechanically, and finally he saw the sail of the boat. He watched them arrive, and a coastguard rode up to question them. Though the man acted self-important, Grendel could see that if these men wanted to fight, the coastguard was doomed. The guard asked who they were and why they were there, but they just looked at him. The leader, Beowulf, calmly told the guard that they were Geats. His father was famous. He came to kill Grendel. He said all this politely, but there was something unfeeling and mocking in his tone. Grendel, listening to all this, pretended to be confident, but he was nervous. Yet he was also excited--suddenly, looking at Beowulf, he felt alive. Grendel wanted to follow them to the meadhall, but he was afraid that, during the day, he might be seen. He went back to the cave and pondered the heroes, confused. He couldn't tell whether he was afraid or not. He felt like he was part of nature, as thoughtless and mechanical as a cave or a tree. He doesn't know what it means. He recalls seeing an otherwise rational, ordinary man, father of seven, travel one night to another woman's bed. Grendel can't make sense of this. Grendel believes that all sense of order in the world is just created by humankind. He knows he will go to the meadhall, though it might be safer to stay home. He knows he isn't free. His thoughts wander from subject to subject. He thinks about the time when he decided that since if the world exists, he is the negative half of the world--the dark half--then the world must not be real. He knows that his even his mother does not love him for himself. She loves him because he is her son. He believes he could destroy Hrothgar's kingdom if he wanted to--but then what would he do? He would have no purpose. He goes to the meadhall to see how Beowulf and his companions were received. The Danes are ashamed that they are being "saved" by strangers. The priests are unhappy because they have always said that God will save them. Grendel muses that religion thrives on inaction and decay. "Only in a world where everything is patently being lost can a priest stir men's hearts as a poet would by maintaining that nothing is in vain." Chapter 11, pg. 159

Grendel decides to kill Beowulf, to protect the honor of the priest, and Hrothgar's men. He sees that while the Danes would like to fight these strangers, Hrothgar is resigned to the fact that he needs the Geats. He can't beat Grendel alone. Suddenly Unferth speaks up. He asks Beowulf if he was the man who swam for seven nights against another man, on a dare. Unferth slyly proclaims that Beowulf lost the bet, and predicts that he will lose against Grendel tonight. Beowulf calmly tells Unferth that he in fact won the bet. He fought whales and sea monsters those seven nights, and beat them all. The men in the meadhall laugh at first, then realize Beowulf is crazy--he actually believes what he is saying. In the same calm, almost indifferent voice, Beowulf reminds Unferth that he murdered his brothers, and tells him he's going to hell. Everyone is shocked into silence. Whether or not he actually killed sea monsters, the men are afraid of Beowulf now, just because of the things he says. Hrothgar is pleased, though: this crazy man

might be able to use his madness on Grendel. He calls the queen out to serve them, and she too praises Beowulf. Grendel listens to all this, confused. It is as if he can't hear or understand anything anymore. He is afraid. Then he abruptly abandons the fear: he has easily killed bulls as strong as Beowulf. Unferth is overcome with shame, and tries to feel hopeful for Beowulf's success, as a true hero would. He cannot do it, and leaves the room quickly, upset. Hrothgar is friendly with Beowulf, telling him about his plans for the future. Grendel sees that Beowulf knows that the kingdom is doomed. Grendel is more afraid of him, and at the same time wants to fight him even more. One by one, everyone goes to bed. Grendel knows that it is his place to fight Beowulf, just as it is Beowulf's place to fight him. They are like the mountain goat, who climbs by instinct.

## Chapter 12

Grendel bursts through the door of the meadhall. He cannot tell if the Geats are asleep or paralyzed with fear. Grendel is overjoyed and afraid at the same time. He eats a man hungrily, then grabs another. But the man is Beowulf, who has only pretended to be asleep. He has watched Grendel eat the other man, so that he knows how Grendel works. Beowulf looks at Grendel coldly, and Grendel feels that the hand on his arm has a stronger grip than he has ever felt before. Grendel screams, and tries to escape, but Beowulf holds him tightly. Grendel begins to hallucinate. He tries to clear his mind, and decides that Beowulf is just a man, who can be easily defeated. He carefully plans his next move: he kicks viciously. But somehow it doesn't work--he is falling--and he realizes that he has slipped on blood. Then Beowulf starts to whisper. At first Grendel doesn't listen, but then he can't help himself. Beowulf whispers that Grendel is doomed. "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, pg. 170 Grendel cries for his mother, telling Beowulf that if he beats him, it will only be because he accidentally fell down. Beowulf seems to be arguing against Grendel's philosophy: he says that Grendel creates the world by being in it. As a kind of proof, he bashes Grendel's head against a wall to make him understand that the wall is hard. Grendel cries, "If you think I created that wall that cracked my head, you're a fucking lunatic." Chapter 12, pg. 171 Beowulf ignores him. He forces Grendel to sing about the wall, and Grendel surprises him with his poetic skill. Grendel's mind races, making excuses for his losing ground. Beowulf tears off his arm, and Grendel realizes he is dying. He cries for his mother, and runs away. No one follows him. He grows weaker, still muttering that this all happened because of an accident. He stumbles closer to a cliff, unable to stop himself. The darkness below looks strangely familiar. He feels that he is going to throw himself into it, willingly and unwillingly at the same time. Animals he has tormented in the past gather to watch him die. He thinks, amazed, that he might feel joyful. He speaks to the animals who stare at him stupidly. "Poor Grendel's had an accident. *So may you all.*" Chapter 12, pg. 174