

Grendel's Mother: The Saga of the Wyrd-Wife

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SUSAN SIGNE
MORRISON

GRENDEL'S MOTHER

THE SAGA OF THE WYRD-WIFE

About the Book

Grendel's Mother: The Story of the Wyrd-Wife.

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Ages: Adult and Young Adult.

Book Summary

This feminist revision of the Old English epic, *Beowulf*, traces the life of Brimhild, who weaves peace and conveys culture to the kingdom, until the secret of her birth threatens to tear apart the fragile political stability. This is her story – the tale of Grendel's Mother, who is no monster. We see the many passages of her life: the brine-baby; the passionate hall-queen; the exiled mere-wife; and the seer. We learn how the invasion by brutal men is not a fairy tale, but a disaster doomed to cycle relentlessly through human history. Only the surviving women can sing poignant laments, preserve a glittering culture, and provide hope for the future.

A Note About Susan Signe Morrison

Professor of English at Texas State University, Susan Signe Morrison writes on topics lurking in the margins of history, ranging from recently uncovered diaries of a teenaged girl in World War II to medieval women pilgrims, excrement in the Middle Ages, and waste. Susan grew up in New Jersey by the Great Swamp, a National Wildlife Refuge with terrain not unlike that of Grendel's Mother's mere in *Beowulf*. Committed to bringing the lives of medieval women to a wider audience, Susan can be found at homefrontgirlidiary.com and grendelsmotherthenovel.com and tweets @medievalwomen. She lives in Austin, Texas with her husband, daughter, son, and a very barky Welsh corgi.

Praise for Grendel's Mother: The Saga of the Wyrd-Wife

"....**Morrison writes in alliterative, lyric prose that evokes the Old English of her source text:**

"There she saw the soft seaweed, barnacled bed, of a marine monster. Leaving her work, approaching with caution, she listened for linnets along the lime lane." An **incredible world** is spun out of blunt, staccato words: a world of customs and objects, of heroes and faiths, and, of course, of monsters. Morrison manages to update the medieval morality of the original poem while preserving its mournful sense of the old ways passing away.

An enchanting, poignant reimagining of Beowulf."

Kirkus Reviews

"[A] powerful extension of the story [of Beowulf] and a deep and compelling glimpse into the culture that produced it....Her richly evocative prose echoes the poetic structure of Old English alliterative verse....Grendel's Mother tells a universal story of heroic dimensions through the eyes of a woman who sees and understands and deeply feels everything that happens. It is a rare glimpse into a world that is both profoundly alien and surprisingly, wrenchingly, our own."

~Susan Wittig Albert, Story Circle Book Reviews

"What a gift! Grendel's Mother is sure to become an integral part of every class on Beowulf."

~Candace Robb, author of the Owen Archer Mystery Series and, as Emma Campion, A Triple Knot

"This fascinating narrative is to readers today what John Gardner's Grendel was to readers of the 1970s."

~Haruko Momma, Professor of English, New York University

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What does “Wyrđ” mean? It certainly is spelled in a different way than the modern “weird.” Does it mean the same thing? And, if so, what does it mean to be a “Wyrđ-Wife”?

Describe the woman in the photo on the cover. What can you tell about her and the time period when the image was fashioned? Read the description of the image on the back of the book. What is this object? What might it suggest about the story?

What does the language in this Prologue suggest to you? Is it difficult to read? Must you read a little more slowly? Is it poetic and, if so, why?

What could this riddle mean (3)? What is its connection to the story? Can you guess?

When do you finally figure out who the narrator of the novel is and who the speaker's grandmother is?

Why is Hrothgar a "good king" (15)?

Gobban tries to describe the Catholic mass and Christ's birth to the family. What confusion arises?

Here is the first poem/song in *Grendel's Mother* (41-2). What is the function of having such a poem/song? How does it work differently than prose?

At the end of reading Chapter 7, return to page 3 of the novel. What is the significance of the Anglo-Saxon riddle quoted there?

Ealhild says, "I was a good queen!" (73). Why and how was she a good queen in her view? What does she warn Brimhild about? Why does she worry about Brimhild? What makes for the best royal marriage/union in Ealhild's view? Re-visit this question at the end of reading this chapter and again at the end of the novel. Do you understand Ealhild's points differently now?

Discuss Brimhild's fertility plight. Why is it a concern? What does she try to do to help? What magic do they ultimately turn to?

Why does Hrothgar banish Brimhild and Grendel?

At the end of Part II, compare the last line of Chapter 14 to the last line in Chapter 7. Why are they the same?

Reread the quote on page 67. What does it mean to you now?

What could the solution be to this Old English riddle (119)?

Why does Grendel return to Heorot? What does he hope to achieve?

How do the warriors refashion history (123-4)?

Is bloody death "man's business" as Wealhtheow contends (133) or "woman's business" too, as Freawaru thinks?

What is Beowulf's relationship with Hondscio (148)? Why does Beowulf go to Scyldings?

How does the poem on 153 fit into the action? What is its connection to the riddle on page 119?

After the men surround her, what do you think happens to Freawaru (153)?

How does Beowulf's story of his encounter with Grendel's Mother (161-2) differ from the version we know to be true within the novel?

Why is the word "remember" spelt "Re Member" in this title and in the poems in Chapter 23?

Compare Freawaru's poem with pages 119 and 153.

Compare the chapter's closing lines (167) with pages 65 and 118.

When do you know who speaks directly in the italicized portions of *Grendel's Mother* on pages (4, 68, 120, 170). Who is it? Who is the narrator of this novel?

What impact does the word "kneaded" (184) suggest in referencing the fusion of Christian and pagan?

"That is a good home!" (193). The structure of this sentence echoes a number of other sentences ["That was a good king/queen/princess"]. What is the effect of repetition--a distinctive trait in Anglo-Saxon verse--in the novel?

What will happen to Brimhild's ashes (194)? What does this fate suggest about the cycle of history and concept of progression?

Why does each section end with the same line: "This once happened; so, too, this will pass."

Who is Hengest? Reread page 195. How do you re-read Section V of *Grendel's Mother* knowing who Sif's husband is?

Read the final page of the novel. What is the role of fate in this book? How does the final line resonate now?

How much free will does one have in a system of fate? Discuss free will as a concept in the pagan outlook and in the medieval Christian one. Compare to our conception of free will today.

Morrison writes that she wanted to include "different aspects of Anglo-Saxon womanhood" (206-7). What are these various aspects?

Morrison discusses the language she uses in the novel (207). How long did it take you to get used to the compact style of alliteration and Anglo-Saxon poetic variation? How does the style affect your reading experience?

Morrison weaves Norse and Germanic mythic lore throughout the work that she elaborates on in the list of Proper Names at the end of the volume. How does this lore cohere with the plot? Most readers aren't familiar with such mythology. Do these references annoy or intrigue you or both?

Morrison admits she set her book about one century earlier than the "usual dating of the action for dramatic purposes" (208). Does this matter? If she hadn't, she couldn't have integrated Hengest into the novel. Would that matter?

Morrison tells about the use of "digressions" (flashbacks and flash-forwards; interpolated stories like that of Sigemund, Hildeburh, etc.) in *Beowulf*. How does she utilize this technique in *Grendel's Mother*? What effect does it have to know what *will* happen?

Questions about *Grendel* along with *Beowulf* and *Grendel's Mother*

How does *Grendel*....

1. Weave passages from *Beowulf* into it?
2. Use the role of the Shaper/Scop/poet?

Do you pity Grendel?

What is the role of women in Gardner's vision of the *Beowulf* world?

How is *Grendel* funny?

Who is the dragon?

A number of poems, plays, novels, and films take a character from a work who is not the main focus of the action and make that character the central figure. Famous examples include Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (his take on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which presents the story of *Jane Eyre* from the point of view of Mr. Rochester's first wife. What is the value of undertaking such a project? How does this enhance (or not) the original, source work? Should the derivative text be self-standing?

What do both Gardner and Morrison do that is similar in their revisioning of *Beowulf*? Certain characters are developed beyond their presence in *Beowulf* (Wealhtheow, Hrothulf, Freawaru). How are they different or similar?

How do Gardner and Morrison differ in their imaginings of this heroic world?

How do the book stem from the time they were written in (1971; 2015)? Can we read *Grendel* as a Vietnam War novel? Can we read Morrison's as a feminist novel for its time?

How do *Grendel* and *Grendel's Mother* make you [re]interpret *Beowulf* in a new way?

Be sure to visit the **WEBSITE**, grendelsmotherthenovel.com. There are many **LINKS** to historical and cultural sites useful for research and fun. Also check out the **BLOG** for those interested in the Middle Ages, the Viking Age, Anglo-Saxon England, women in the Middle Ages, J. R. R. Tolkien and his works, John Gardner's *Grendel*, *Beowulf*, and *Grendel's Mother* and more! At the website, you can download a free **CURRICULUM GUIDE**, as well as **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR BOOK CLUBS**.