

How does John Gardner's *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?

Chapter 1

What allusions to Anglo-Saxon texts and culture does Gardner make? See, for example, 5: cowshed (Caedmon; see also 40-1). See 43 about the "former harper" and read the Old English poem *Deor* [compare also the line "So it goes" page 142, which is in itself a reference to Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (published in 1969)]. See also *The Battle of Maldon* and page 80-1. Does Grendel accept this heroic vision?

Grendel mentions riddles (127); look at Old English riddles to analyze the form. Also compare the young Shaper's song at the blind Shaper's funeral (147) to the Fight at Finnsburg passage in *Beowulf* (lines 1070ff.).

What clues on page 5 tell us when this novel is set juxtaposed with *Beowulf*?

Grendel calls himself "monster" on page 6. Do you continue to think of him that way? What does Gardner mean by that word? Is it a species designation or a behavioral one? Is anyone else a "monster"? If so, who and how so?

What Anglo-Saxon techniques does Gardner use? Think of alliteration and kennings. (See, for example, 7 "shadow-shooter, earth-rim-roamer" etc.; 61 and alliteration). Gardner utilizes arcane words too: "unfooled" (10). Do you understand them? Does the context help? Why does he do this?

Where does he live? How is it described? How does it differ from the mere in *Beowulf*?

Periodically, Grendel imagines what a being ten centuries from his time would think (pages 11, 15). That puts it at just our time period (the *Beowulf* manuscript dates from about the year 1000). Why does Gardner do this? How "modern" is this Grendel? These "meta" moments (textual moments about the text you are reading) take us out of the direct action to be more objective to it. What effect does this have? Refer also to the dragon's comments about "the Dark Ages" (67).

Gardner echoes *Beowulf's* language: "He was not a friend" (12), referring to the dragon. "It was a hard trip" (38). "That was a good king!" (42). Can you find other instances of this archaic language?

Grendel is obsessed with the Shaper. The Old English word for *scop* or poet/minstrel comes from the word "to shape." The poet is a shaper of words. Even God is a "shaper," a creator of worlds. Who is the Shaper to Grendel throughout the book? How does his attitude develop? Is Grendel a shaper himself, and, if so, how?

A song causes rage in Grendel (14). Look at *Beowulf*, lines 86ff. Connect these passages. See also page 51 and 76-7. Why does it anger him? See what Grendel imagines being sung about him and Unferth (87)?

Chapter 2

How does he describe his mother? How does his relationship with her change? Can you associate this change with child development arguments about child-mother relations? Look especially at Chapter 2.

What disturbs Grendel 21-22? How does this reflect his growing up?

What does he see for the first time on page 23? Discuss the importance of language. If you have read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, compare the creature's development to that of Grendel.

In this final scene in Chapter 2 (23-29), what do the men think Grendel is? What does this tell us about their religious system? Compare the scene to Shakespeare's character Caliban in *The Tempest*. Also see pages 52, 55.

Page 27 Grendel realizes these men are "pattern makers, the most dangerous things I'd ever met." Why are "pattern makers" dangerous?

Grendel says, "I observe myself observing what I observe...I am lack" (29). What does he mean by this?

Chapter 3

What do Grendel observe about Hrothgar and his culture over the years? How does it differ from what we are told in *Beowulf*? What is the role of violence in Grendel's view? How does the pattern of warring change as Hrothgar's kingdom expands (37ff)?

How does Grendel feel when he realizes that he is "incredibly, related" (36) to men? What brings about this insight?

The blind shaper arrives with a boy assistant. What other singer of oral poetry was said to have been blind? What song does the shaper sing 41-2? Compare to the opening lines of *Beowulf*. How does this coincidence make us read *Beowulf* differently? How can a song be sung about something that hasn't yet happened? How can the song of creation that angers Grendel be *Beowulf* itself? See also page 51.

Grendel says the Shaper tells "lies" (43). What does that say about the novel itself? How has the "man changed the world" (43)? Does poetry remake his memories? See also 47-9 and the rest of Chapter 4 and *Beowulf*, lines 86ff.

Chapter 4

Read the first sentence in this chapter. It uses apposition: Anglo-Saxon repetition of noun or verbal phrases with a similar grammatical function. These lines also have alliteration. How often does Gardner need to use Anglo-Saxon verse techniques in his modern novel to make it "work"?

When Grendel comes into the hall, people "screamed." Grendel says, "They have their own versions, but this is the truth" (52). When Grendel returns, the Shaper sings of how men fought Grendel: "It was all lies" (54). "Yet he, the old Shaper, might make it true, by the sweetness of his harp, his cunning trickery" (55). What is the truth?

Chapter 5

Gardner ties in aspects of the dragon in *Beowulf* to Grendel's development. What are some similarities to the dragon in the Old English poem (hoard, etc.)? Are there links to be made to Tolkien's Smaug?

How does this dialogue between Grendel and the dragon function? What does it impart to the reader? How does it change (if it does) Grendel's understanding of the world?

Do you find this chapter funny? How so?

How does Grendel view his cannibalism (not a word he uses)? See page 60? How do you view his eating of humans?

What does the dragon know (62-3)? Does foreknowledge prevent free will? Why not? For a source for this perspective, read Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which the Anglo-Saxon King Alfred translated.

What does the dragon say about systems and the role of the Shaper (65)? If Grendel is the Shaper for this novel, what does that then suggest?

The dragon argues for differences between what is animate and inanimate (68). What is the point of this?

Is this the *Beowulf* dragon? See page 70.

Is Gardner making an ecocritical argument about the environment in the early 1970s when *Grendel* was published? See page 71.

How do humans define themselves (73)? Can you make a comparable parallel to the way we define ourselves? What does this line mean: "You are mankind, or man's condition" (73)?

This is a very philosophical chapter. Why does Gardner include it?

Chapter 6

What charm does the dragon put on Grendel (75)? What effect does this have on him (76)? Why does it have this effect?

Grendel describes the guard's helmet (78). Look up images of the Sutton Hoo treasure at the British Museum. Find a helmet that resembles this one in the book.

How does killing transform Grendel (80)? What does he think about the Shaper now?

Unferth is a key character in *Grendel* and their association is the focus of this chapter. Be sure to read *Beowulf* carefully to note Unferth's presence. How does Unferth realize he and Grendel speak the same language (82)? Why is this surprising to him?

What does Grendel impart to Unferth about heroism (84ff.; see also 104)? What is "inner heroism" (88)? What does the discussion of Unferth and Grendel say about the hero cycle (89)? How does Grendel undermine the hero cycle (90) [if he does]?

Chapter 7

Occasionally in this chapter, there will be parenthetical passages (i.e. page. 92). Who is speaking?

This chapter focuses on women and the role of women; in particular, Wealhtheow. How does this portrayal of Wealhtheow and her coming to Heorot contrast with that in *Beowulf*?

What do "Cut A" (94) and "Cut B" (110) mean?

What almost massacre takes place in this chapter? How is it averted?

What do women do, according to Grendel (102)?

A drunk man almost causes mayhem in the meadhall with Unferth (103-4). What does he say and how is it averted?

Why in *Grendel* does he typically portray Wealhtheow and Hrothgar as not connecting emotionally?

Why does Grendel decide *not* to kill Wealhtheow (109-11)?

Chapter 8

Why does Gardner make part of this chapter in the form of a play?

Trace who Hrothulf is in *Beowulf* and how he is developed here. Why does Grendel say Hrothulf is a "sweet scorpion" (113)?

What is Hrothulf's philosophical outlook? How is it similar to or different than that of Grendel? See especially his soliloquy 113ff. Compare Hrothulf to Hamlet in Shakespeare's play. Both are Danish, both are nephews, and both have names that start with "H"! Are there any other connections?

What is the tension between Wealhtheow, who must protect her children, and Hrothulf, the cousin of those children?

Hrothulf has a companion/adviser named Red Horse (117), an old peasant who seems to spout Marxist ideology. What is his role? How does he influence Hrothulf? What does Red Horse mean when he says, "By a single stroke, the most criminal acts must be converted to heroic and meritorious deeds" (117) and "your fiction of consent" (118)?

What is foreshadowed for Freawaru (121)? Compare to her fate in *Beowulf*.

What does Grendel mean by saying, "I made him what he is" (123) with reference to Hrothgar? Is he right? Why or why not?

Chapter 9

Grendel feels a sense of foreboding (126). Why? What is coming?

We encounter the pagan priests or shamans in this chapter. How do they taste (129)?

Ork the shaman meets Grendel (130ff.). What is Ork philosophy (132-3)?

How does Ork interpret this meeting? How does the young priest?

What magical powers does Grendel have? Who can he put a spell on (136-7)?

Chapter 10

We encounter a goat as opposed to a ram as on the first page of the book (139ff.).

What is the significance of the goat? Is it the same goat?

Gardner says "So it goes" (142). What famous novel is he quoting? Why?

Why does Gardner have the Shaper die in this chapter and the young boy, now grown, take over?

What is the point of the Shaper's love for a red-haired woman (144-5)?

Why does Grendel decide to attend the Shaper's funeral? Compare the young Shaper's song at the blind Shaper's funeral (147) to the Fight at Finnsburg passage in *Beowulf* (lines 1070ff.).

Chapter 11

New heroes arrive at the start of this chapter. Pages 151-2 are heavily laden with Anglo-Saxon conventional language. Cite examples of this language. Why do you think this chapter is so "Anglo-Saxon"-y?

How is Beowulf characterized in *Grendel*? Is it justifiable?

Grendel senses the danger of Beowulf (155 ff). What makes Grendel nervous? Note the line "They moved like one creature, huge strange machine" (155). Analyze Grendel's observation of Beowulf physically. Why is he both attracted and repulsed? How are they doubles of each other? How are they different?

Grendel's interior monologue 157-8 sums up many of his attitudes and insights. What are they?

Grendel says he has to kill the Geats "for the honor of Hrothgar's thanes" (159)? Why does he feel this way?

Compare the dialogue between Unferth and Beowulf here and in *Beowulf*. What differences are there?

Compare the line about fate here (page 162) and *Beowulf* lines 572-3. Also compare Beowulf's knowledge about Freawaru (164-5) and that in *Beowulf*.

Is Beowulf crazy (162)?

Chapter 12

Grendel bursts into Heorot; compare page 167 with the description of the battle between Grendel and Beowulf in *Beowulf*, lines 702 ff.

What do you make of Beowulf's words (in italics, 170-2)?

Who does Grendel turn to as Beowulf is about to kill him (172-3)?

What are Grendel's final words? Does he get his comeuppance?

CONNECTIONS WITH SUSAN SIGNE MORRISON'S

GRENDel'S MOTHER: THE SAGA OF THE WYRD-WIFE

Mentions of Grendel's Mother in Gardner

9, 11, 16 ff., 27-9, 36, 55-6 ("waste"), 86 when Unferth comes; 102, 145-7, 158, 170, 172-3)

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

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* (Wealththeow, Hrothulf, Freawaru). How are they different or similar?

How do Gardner and Morrison differ in their imaginings of the *Beowulf* 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?