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Prestwick House
Literature
Teaching Unit
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Grendel

by John Gardner

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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Grendel

Objectives

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

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

Grendel

Questions for Essay and Discussion

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

Grendel

Chapter 1

VOCABULARY

sycophant – a person who tries to gain favor by flattering people
chasm – a deep cleft, abyss
fuliginous – full of smoke, sooty
thanes – landowners, noblemen
hoarfrost – white frost, frozen dew on the ground
dirge – a funeral hymn, a song or poem of grief
dogmatism – the arrogant assertion of an opinion without proof or evidence

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

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

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

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

4. “Woe to the man...who shall through wicked hostilities shove his soul down into the fire’s hug! Let him hope for no change: he can never turn away! But lucky the man who, after his deathday, shall seek the Prince, find peace in his father’s embrace!”

What hope is the Shaper singing about in the passage above? Why do you think this hope enrages Grendel?

Chapter 5

VOCABULARY

undulant – waving
debauched – corrupted
ignoramus – an ignorant person
supplicant – one who petitions, entreats, or implores
intercession – the act of mediating
monistic – a philosophy that states that reality is an organic whole without any separate parts; only one Supreme Being
immanence – the belief that God is present throughout the universe
infinitude – infinity, the quality of being limitless
irascible – easily provoked to anger
existents – having existence, in the present, immediate
credulity – belief; without doubt
sine qua non – a Latin phrase meaning “the essential part”
nonce-rule – a rule made for one particular occasion
fontanel – the soft spot on a baby’s head
dictum – a formal pronouncement

1. Briefly describe the dragon and its surroundings.

3. In the counselor's opinion, what does a kingdom pretend to do? What does it really do?

4. What is the counselor's opinion on governments in general?

5. What historical incidents might Red Horse be referring to in his description of police and military intervention "in a time of domestic or foreign crisis"? Consider when Grendel was written.

6. Hrothgar feels trapped by his nephew. He knows Hrothulf is planning a revolution and is a danger to his [Hrothgar 's] sons, but Hrothgar can not abandon Hrothulf. List four more traps Grendel believes Hrothgar worries about while sitting on this throne.

7. Analyze Hrothgar's dream. What do you think the twisted tree trunk might represent?
