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Grendel

BY JOHN GARDNER



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Name: _____

Date: _____

Pre-reading

Context

Objective: Researching and presenting relevant background information
 Using information about *Beowulf* to predict plot events in *Grendel*

In order to fully appreciate John Gardner's work, *Grendel*, it is helpful to at least be familiar with the literary classic, *Beowulf*, upon which it is based.

Activity

If your class has read *Beowulf*, hold a discussion in order to refresh your memory about the story. Go over relevant themes and subjects in *Beowulf*, such as the Germanic heroic code. What does this story say about this code? Discuss the hero, Beowulf, and the villains, Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon. How is each portrayed? What are their fates? In the end, is it clear who the winner is and who is the loser? Is it clear which is the hero and which the villain?

If your class has not read *Beowulf*, do some research in the library or on the Internet, looking up plot summaries and essays on themes present in the story. As a class, hold a discussion about what you've learned, focusing on the topics listed above.

Based on your discussions about *Beowulf*, make some predictions as to how you think the novel *Grendel* will be different. Discuss how you think each of the characters will be portrayed. Why does the title influence your thinking?

Name: _____

Date: _____

As You Read**Chapter Titles****Objective:** Creating informative titles for each chapter

Unlike many modern novels, *Grendel* does not have names for its chapters. This reflects a choice by the author—not to give anything away before the reader gets to it in the text. However, sometimes chapter titles can be helpful. They can help readers with comprehension by preparing them for what's to come. They might also prove helpful when you are going back through the text, looking for a particular scene, as you would do whenever studying the text.

Activity

Create a title for each of the chapters in *Grendel*. Make sure your title is relevant to the plot, and also that it matches the tone of the novel. Use the following table to create your chapter titles. We have done one for you as an example.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Chapters 1–4

Grendel

Objective: Using contextual clues to develop a mental picture

In modern stories, characters are often physically described in great detail. However, in the classic poem *Beowulf*, the monster Grendel is hardly described at all. It is suggested by scholars that this is because the monster was an archetype of the time and did not need description.

Likewise, in Gardner's *Grendel*, besides some rough illustrations, not much physical description is offered by Grendel about himself. However, there are many instances of indirect descriptions, which you can use to make a pretty good mental picture.

Activity 1

Pick out passages from Chapters 1–4 that offer any information about Grendel's physical attributes. Place them in the following chart. An example is done for you.

CHARACTERISTIC CHART

Passage from the book	Page	Characteristic(s)	What we learn about Grendel
I hurl a skull-size stone at him.	5	Size and strength	Grendel is very strong if he can hurl a stone as big as a skull. He must be fairly large, as well.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Chapter 8

Sayings

Objective: Thinking about the origins of popular sayings
Creating an original saying and background story

Activity

Though we don't often think about it, popular sayings, ones we use every day, all have roots in history. Most often, we use a saying like, "The jig is up!" knowing what it means in common usage, but having no idea of how the saying originated. The saying, "The jig is up" is actually derived from old fishing jargon. The "jig" is a weighted part on a fishing line that rises to the surface when a fish is caught—a sign to the fishermen above to reel it in. Thus, in modern usage, the saying means: "You're caught!" Several popular sayings and their origins are listed below. Using these examples, create a saying from the book *Grendel* and a story to go along with it.

The following examples are for sayings that originated in the 1500s. Some of them may be tall tales, but all offer an explanation of the origins of sayings we use today. Use these examples as models to come up with your own saying and explanation.

Examples:

Long ago, baths consisted of a big tub filled with hot water that had to be heated over the fire. The man of the house had the privilege of the nice clean water, then the women and finally the children. The babies were the very last to be washed. By that time the water was so dirty you could actually lose someone in it. This led to the saying, "Don't throw the baby out with the bath water."

Houses had thatched roofs made of thick straw piled high. It was the only place for animals to get warm, so all the cats and other small animals (mice, bugs, etc.) lived in the roof. When it rained it became slippery and sometimes the animals would slip and fall off the roof. From this we get the saying, "It's raining cats and dogs."

In England, cemetery space became a premium, and often people would dig up coffins, take the bones to a bone-house and reuse the grave site. When reopening these coffins, 1 out of 25 coffins were found to have scratch marks on the inside, and they realized they had been burying people alive. After that realization, they would tie a string on the wrist of the corpse, lead it through the coffin and up through the ground and tie it to a bell. Someone would have to sit out in the graveyard all night (the "graveyard shift") to listen for the bell; thus, someone could be "saved by the bell."

It was a privilege to have pork, especially enough to share with visitors. Families would often hang up their bacon to show off when visitors came over as a sign of wealth. This would show that the man of the house could "bring home the bacon." They would then cut off a little to share with guests and would all sit around and "chew the fat."

Here is an example of a saying created from *Grendel*:

Each time the monster Grendel came to the mead hall, he would smash the door, surprising all the men inside, and take his pick of a few to eat before running off back to his lair. Each time Grendel left, the men would rebuild the door, adding extra bars and bolts to try to strengthen it against the monster's charge. But despite their efforts, Grendel would smash the door again with no difficulty. From this we can come up with the saying "an extra bar won't keep the hungry far!"

Name: _____

Date: _____

Wrap-Up

Characterization

Objective: Understanding character motivation
Synthesizing character traits

Activity

Write an "I am" poem for one of the characters from *Grendel*. Draw your information from the character's words and actions in the novel. You may choose to use direct quotations where appropriate.

Line 1: Begin with the words "I am."

Line 2: Write three nouns about which your character has strong feelings.

Line 3: Write a complete sentence about two things your character likes.

Line 4: Begin with three nouns that describe qualities your character appreciates in other people. End the sentence with the words "are important to me."

Line 5: Write a sentence explaining something positive your character likes about him- or herself.

Lines 6 & 7: Begin a sentence in line 6 in which you show something negative your character sees in himself or herself or in others; finish the sentence in line 7 by showing that out of something bad can come good. Use the word "but" or "however" to link 7 with 6.

Lines 8, 9, 10: Write three short sentences explaining things about which your character has strong feelings—likes or dislikes. These do not have to relate to each other or to the previous lines you have written.

Line 11: End the poem with the words, "I am _____." (Fill in the name of the character you have chosen.)

Example:

1. I am
2. Strength, flexibility, and leadership.
3. I like showing the way.
4. Honesty, Humor, and Peace are important to me.
5. I find satisfaction in a job well done.
6. I can be fearsome when my ideas are challenged,
7. But I thrive on intelligent conversation.
8. I love the human spirit.
9. I can be counted on to help others in pain.
10. I have strong feelings when lives are threatened.
11. I am _____.