Pre-Reading

1. *Grendel*, by John Gardner, finds its origins in the Old English epic poem, *Beowulf*. In the poem, Grendel is one of the central antagonists to the heroic warrior, Beowulf. Grendel is portrayed as a sub-human, monstrous being that attacks the Danish nobility for no other reason than to impart fear and evil onto the kingdom. *Grendel*, the novel, is Gardner’s attempt to make this character a more three-dimensional figure. In essence, the book is Grendel’s fictitious autobiography.

   Read a summary of *Beowulf*, either online or in a literary resource book at the library. Imagine you are an anthropologist, a person who studies humanity, and you need funding to go observe this being called Grendel. You have found a wealthy donor who is open to your idea, but, first, he wants an explanation as to why he should pay for your trip to study this unknown being. Write a letter in which you explain to this wealthy donor why it is important that people understand Grendel, where you expect to find him, what you expect to learn from him, etc.

2. An argument can be made that by writing the novel from the perspective of Grendel, one of literature’s most notorious villains, John Gardner is attempting to show that this evil character has more depth and intellect than has been previously explored by scholars.

   Think of an evil person in history, such as Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Queen Mary I (also known as “Bloody Mary”), or a person of your choosing. Read an overview of the person’s life, either online or in resource materials in the library. Then, write an autobiography of at least half a page in which you assume that individual’s perspective of events. You do not necessarily need to make the person empathetic or naïve about their infamous actions; the idea is to show that it is possible that the person is more complex than history makes him or her appear.
3. John Gardner uses lines from a William Blake poem as an epigraph, a type of preface that suggests the theme or motif of the book. The lines read: “And if the Babe is born a Boy / He's given to a Woman Old, / Who nails him down upon a rock, / Catches his shrieks in cups of gold.” This excerpt is taken from a poem entitled “The Mental Traveler.” Much of *Grendel* is centered on the relationship between Grendel and his mother.

Think of a relationship you have with a person of the opposite sex. The person can be a relative, a friend, or an acquaintance. Write a poem about the relationship. Make sure to convey whether the relationship is one that you are happy about or one that you struggle with.

**Chapter 1**

4. It is important to pay close attention to the first paragraph of a novel because it sets the story into motion, has clues to themes and symbols of the book, and introduces the central characters. *Grendel* opens with an old ram standing near the edge of a cliff and Grendel watching the ram in disbelief at its stupidity. He tries to get its attention by yelling and throwing stones at it, but the ram refuses to move. Finally, Grendel says, “I shake my two hairy fists at the sky and I let out a howl so unspeakable that the water at my feet turns sudden ice and even I myself am left uneasy.” The ram still does not move. Grendel notices that spring has begun, marking the twelfth year of his “idiotic war.”

Reread the first paragraph in its entirety. Based on the information that is given in this paragraph, list three potential themes you think may emerge in this novel and why.

5. With the arrival of spring comes the arrival of the old ram's desires, which further frustrates Grendel. He is angry about the lust and the stupidity of the animals. However, he admits that he is not much better than these beings because he has committed acts of pointless violence. During his walk, he comes across a doe, which is frightened by him. Grendel thinks this reaction is unjust, as he has never hurt a deer and doesn't plan to. He shouts, “Ah, the unfairness of everything!”
Think about a time that you felt confused and misunderstood. Write a journal entry about what you’ve felt wrongly judged for, how it made you feel, and if you think there is a way to correct this misconception.

6. Grendel makes a visit to the surface of the earth in order to recommence his battle with the humans. He is rather bored by it all. Once he moves from his underworld home, he wanders through the night, and finds himself at a cliff’s edge. Once there, he acknowledges the dark forces inside of him and becomes aware that the war with the humans could result in his death. Out of frustration, he screams into the abyss. An echo comes back to him, and he is terrified by the sound of his own voice.

Think of something you have chosen to do, perhaps more than once, that you knew would probably lead to frustration. Write a short essay about why you still did this activity. Include what the consequences of your actions were, and why you will or will not engage in the activity again.

7. Grendel and his mother share living quarters in the underground mere; their relationship is a combination of tenderness and distance. His mother has committed a crime that weighs on her conscience, but not only does she not speak of it, she has stopped speaking entirely. Grendel tells us, “Not that she dissect and ponders the dusty mechanical bits of her miserable life’s curse. She clutches at in her sleep as if to crush me. I break away. ‘Why are we here?’ I used to ask her. ‘Why do we stand this putrid, stinking hole?’ She trembles at my words. Her fat lips shake. ‘Don’t ask!’ her wiggling claws implore.”

Create and complete a dialogue below, in which Grendel’s mother speaks and answers his questions. Be creative in your responses, but remain true to the characters and the story.

Grendel: “Why do we stand this putrid, stinking hole?”

Grendel’s mother’s answer: ____________________________________________
Near the conclusion of Chapter 1, Hrothgar and his people start to rebuild the mead hall after Grendel has, once again, destroyed it. Imagine you are a newspaper reporter who has been sent to write a story about the rebuilding of the mead hall. The article should explain who, what, where, when, why, and how. News articles have quotes from people directly involved in a story, so include quotes by any character you believe have an important role in the reconstruction of the hall. Quotes from the novel may be used in the article, however, you may also invent quotes.

Chapter 2

In chapter 2, the story flashes back to Grendel’s youth. Grendel says, “I used to play games when I was young—it might as well be a thousand years ago. Explored our far-flung underground world in an endless wargame of leaps onto nothing, ingenious twists into freedom or new perplexity, quick whispered plotting with invisible friends.”

Recollecting your own childhood, think about a place where you loved to spend time by yourself. Write a response in which you describe the place you spent happy moments as a child and what you liked about it. Now that you are a teenager, do you ever go back to that place? If so, does it still have the same value and meaning to you? When you think about this location, can you relate to the contentment and satisfaction that Grendel describes?

Becoming more and more curious, Grendel eventually finds the courage to leave the cave. He swims up through the pond, and for the first time he sees moonlight. He does not go very far his first night out of the cave, fearing what might be out there. Each night, though, he explores more of the earth’s terrain. One evening, Grendel gets trapped in a tree. Instinctively, he calls for his mother. She cannot hear him and does not come to his rescue.
Look back to a time you did something of which you suspected adults or authority figures would not approve. Why did you do this activity without their consent? Did you get in trouble and need to call them for help? What was the adults’ reaction, and what were the consequences when they found out about what you’d done? Did they never find out about the activity? What would happen if they did find out? Write a journal entry about this experience.

12. While Grendel is trapped in the tree, a bull sees him. Grendel yells to divert the bull from charging, but his protests have no effect. The bull runs his horns into Grendel, tearing at his knee. Grendel survives the incident by observing that the bull always attacks the same way and aims low, so all Grendel has to do is move out of the way, and the bull’s charge will have no effect. Grendel explains a life altering lesson from this episode, “I understood that the world was nothing: a mechanical chaos of casual, brute enmity on which we stupidly impose our hopes and fears. I understood that, finally and absolutely, I alone exist.”

Write a letter to Grendel. Whether you agree with his above statement and whether you like Grendel, try to relate in some way to his loneliness. Explain to him that you understand why he feels alone and that you understand his situation, showing him that he is not as alone as he thinks he is.

13. When Grendel is stuck in the tree, he has his first experience with humans. A group of Danes are in the woods, and they discover him. At first, they believe he is a tree spirit, and they talk about getting him a pig to eat. Grendel is thrilled at the thought of food. He releases a laugh of joy, but the Danes believe it’s malicious growl. The men quickly turn on Grendel and attempt to hurt him. Grendel tries to communicate with them, but they do not understand his speech and proceed to attack him.

The reader knows from Chapter 1 that Grendel has been assaulting the Danes for twelve years. Write a one-page response about what could have happened if Grendel and the Danes understood each other during this first encounter. Would the ability to communicate have prevented the ongoing feud, or are Grendel and the Danes views about too different to make a difference?