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Reflections: A Student Response Journal



Grendel
John Gardner



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To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

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.

Grendel

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 dissects 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: _____

Grendel

14. Eventually, Grendel's mother comes to rescue him from the tree and from the humans. Grendel awakes in his mother's underground cave, and she shows an expression of concern. Grendel attempts to explain to her the life lessons he learned while stuck in the tree, but she does not have the ability to understand him. She sees his confusion and frustration, and she comforts him in an embrace, but Grendel feels suffocated by this gesture. "I can't breathe, and I claw to get free. She struggles. I smell my mama's blood and, alarmed, I hear from the walls and floor of the cave the booming, booming, of her heart."

Reflect on a relationship you have with a person who, while he or she means well, makes you feel suffocated. Write a paragraph about this relationship. Is it one of choice, or one you cannot avoid? What about it makes you to feel suffocated? Is there anything you can do to feel less smothered? What advice would you give Grendel to improve the relationship between him and his mother?

Chapter 3

15. Chapter 3 begins with Grendel discussing how humans evolved into communal beings. He believes that at the heart of people coming together is a survival instinct; communal groups are people who have allied to build kingdoms and gather food. He adds that a part of that survival instinct is to challenge other groups for the best land and resources. Grendel imagines human life as a never-ending battle.

Write an essay in which you agree or disagree with Grendel's assessment of human evolution. Use the Internet or library resources to find evidence supporting your argument.

16. From the safety of a tree, Grendel watches battles between different groups of people. He learns that, within these tribes of warring humans, certain people are celebrated more than others. He claims that there is a singer, who he calls the Shaper, who the people love to listen to, because the Shaper sings of the tribe's triumphs and virtues. Grendel reports, "Whenever he stopped, thinking up formulas for what to say next, the people would all shout and thump each other and drink to the Shaper's long life."

Grendel

Grendel believes that people are greedy by nature, and there is no way Hrothgar's vision of philanthropy will be carried on by future generations of Danes. Grendel believes that future Danes will keep the money for themselves.

Look up philanthropic organizations on the Internet that provide services for others. Find one of interest to you, and learn as much as you can about it. Then, write a conversation in which Grendel and a spokesperson for the organization debate people's ability to be benevolent.

Grendel: People are greedy by nature and look out for themselves first and foremost.

Spokesperson of philanthropic organization: We have had a different experience. In our work, we help people by...

24. Grendel becomes enamored with the Shaper's words. Grendel can't resist the Shaper's eloquent and powerful message. However, while Grendel admires the Shaper, the sound of the songs and their moral righteousness causes Grendel to become angry, once again. He seeks solace in the mere. His mother does her best to comfort her son, but she can only make a meaningless sound. Grendel goes to the edge of a cliff and ponders deeply. He decides his course of action: he will visit the dragon.

Think about a time you felt alone and had to make a tough decision. What was it about that particular circumstance that caused you to feel alone? Did you try to discuss your dilemma with people? Like Grendel, did those conversations leave you feeling more alienated, or did they help you? Write our response in a paragraph or two.