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Teaching John Gardner's

Grendel

from

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *Grendel*

GRENDEL IS A WORK OF LITERARY FICTION, a story more attuned to meaning, style, and characterization than popular or genre fiction—often with less action or movement in the narrative. This is especially true of *Grendel*, which re-envisioned the seventh-century British epic poem *Beowulf* as a modern novel and shifts the point of view to a reinterpreted characterization of the original work's arch villain, thereby also shifting the focus from battles to the psychology of individuals and relationships. Though also set in Denmark, and therefore exhibiting some elements of historical fiction, *Grendel* primarily functions as both a postmodern fable and a philosophical allegory on being and existence. It is a meditation on the traditions and archetypes of the *Beowulf* narrative—the oldest literary text in the English language—on the forms and functions of fiction itself, and the nature of man in both the historical and contemporary frames. Indeed, though the sourcework is centuries old, and the *Grendel* author, John Gardner is a Medieval scholar, the work is decidedly mid-twentieth century, full of skepticism toward tradition and brimming with experimentation. Consider, then, *Beowulf* merely as its jumping-off point: Gardner rescues the titular character, his mother, and the dragon from stock villainhood; complicates the relationship between man and violence; and takes a longitudinal and Sisyphean (and, potentially, Christian) perspective on the follies and travails of life. It is a hero's tale no longer obliged to the heroic tradition.

That this is *Beowulf* for post-industrial America is evident in the subtly subversive streak of Gardner's prose and characterization. Grendel, a murderer of hundreds, earns our sympathies, even our admiration; monsters, children, and minor characters alike become philosophers. An anachronistic bent courses through the novel, with characters freely swearing, talking of technology, referring to atoms, molecules, and transmutation freely as if they were universally known concepts in seventh-century Europe. Time is both condensed, for the development of human civilizations, and expanded, for the dragon. Fantasy freely mixes with a cold, hard reality. The structure mixes first-person confessional with playwriting and poetic forms. The eponymous hero of the ancient epic is not even named in the twentieth-century parable.

Through it all, it is clear that *Grendel* himself is a vehicle, a means by which to reflect on larger philosophical concerns. Far beyond inhabiting the role of a simple archetypal villain, Gardner's Grendel is a lab rat for the principles of existentialism: that life's meaning is subjective and solely the result of the choices an individual makes; he is contrasted by the dragon, an immortal seer, who functions as a nihilist, laying out for Grendel a universe of meaningless tangents and accidents, right up to the very end of times, when some distant form of man—namely us, the reader—renders an ecological apocalypse; and by various human characters, who posit forms of Marxism and solipsism. It is often noted that existentialism and nihilism are the end of philosophy—that is, there is little speculation about matters of life once these concepts are accepted—and Grendel, in essence, reflects the conflict faced by the individual who attempts to find meaning in such a world: the monster is us, searching blindly for connections, for meaning, while the “smoke of the dragon” lingers about us.

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *Grendel*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.



Activity One

Identifying the Functioning of Id, Ego, and Superego in Grendel

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *Grendel*: Psychoanalytic Theory Activity One.
2. Divide the class into pairs or small groups of three or four.
3. Review with students Freud's concepts of id (desire, passion), superego (conscience), and ego (mediator between id and superego).
4. Have each group examine the novel and identify the character that best represents each of the three components of the psyche; they can choose the same character to represent more than one character, if relevant.
 - For each component, have the groups record reasons, evidence, and implications (i.e., the significance of the determination) in the chart on their handout.
5. Form new groups with a representative from each original small group; have the new groups share and discuss their findings, as well as complete question #1 on the handout.
 - Have each group select a spokesperson who will report back to the class.
6. Reconvene the class and have the students discuss their groups' findings.
7. Discuss the following questions:
 - What psychoanalytic patterns do you see in the text? In the interpretations of your classmates?
 - What conclusions can you draw about how the class psychoanalyzed Grendel? What do such judgments tell us about our group as readers and our reactions to this text?
 - How might Freud respond to Grendel?
8. Have students return to their original groups and discuss/record their responses to question #2.

Mythological/Archetypal Theory Applied to *Grendel*



Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is “a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested.” He believed that human beings were born with an innate knowledge of certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When looking for archetypes or myths, critics take note of general themes, characters, and situations that recur in literature and myth. In modern times, traditional literary and mythological archetypes are successfully translated to film. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* was adapted into the popular Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to feel that they know the characters in a work with very little background information. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!

Activity One

Determining the Plausibility of an Archetypal Reading of *Grendel*

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *Grendel*: Mythological/Archetypal Activity One: Key Episodes from *Beowulf*, and *Grendel*: Mythological Activity One: Arguing the Archetype.

NOTE: You may want to distribute the “Key Episodes” the day before you plan to do this activity and assign the students to (re)read the episodes for homework.

NOTE: If your students already have a copy of the poem, you can save preparation time (and paper) by referring them to the following episodes:

- The rise of the Danes/Hrothgar (*Grendel* Chapter 3)
 - Grendel’s first attack on Hrothgar’s mead hall (*Grendel* Chapter 6)
 - Beowulf’s arrival (*Grendel* Chapter 11)
 - Beowulf and Unferth’s confrontation (*Grendel* Chapter 11)
2. Divide the class into groups of three to five students.
 3. Give groups 10 minutes to read their excerpt, as well as review the corresponding chapter(s) in *Grendel* (unless students have already done this reading for homework).
 4. Have groups list details from each account of the episode and note key differences and similarities.
 5. Have groups discuss the questions on the handout.
 6. Reconvene the class and have each group report its findings to the class. Use the questions on the handout as the basis for a class discussion on how Gardner, in *Grendel*, portrays, adapts, or parodies certain hero archetypes.



Formalism Applied to *Grendel*

Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



Activity One

Examining the Occurrence and Function of Literary Devices and Conventions

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *Grendel*: Formalism Activity One.
2. Conduct a quick think-pair-share by asking students to write or think about the following question:
“What characterizes Grendel’s narrative voice?”
3. Explain to the class that this activity further addresses Grendel’s voice by connecting the author’s use of language to the meaning of the work.
4. Divide the class into five groups, or a number of groups divisible by five.
5. Assign to each, or allow each to choose, one of the tasks on the worksheet.
6. After the groups have had a chance to work, you may want to combine groups or redistribute them so that students are still working on the same task but with different partners for broader input.
7. After the groups have completed their assigned task, have them discuss and draft two or three thesis statements that address their stylistic element, how it is used, and what it contributes to *Grendel*’s overall meaning.
8. Reconvene the class and have each group present its findings to the class.
9. As a class, discuss major findings, patterns, or big ideas that emerged from analysis of the language.
10. Discuss the students’ thesis statements.

NOTE: As an extension of this exercise, you may want to assign the students a thesis (or allow them to choose one) and have them write an essay in support of the thesis’s argument.