

Grendel



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN GARDNER

John Gardner was an American writer, critic, and professor. After growing up in New York, he attended DePauw University and Washington University in St. Louis, studying English. He went on to get his M.A. and PhD. from the University of Iowa and then taught creative writing and medieval literature (including, no doubt, [Beowulf](#)) at various universities. Late in his career, Gardner wrote *Grendel* and the novel was his first work of fiction to garner much acclaim. *Grendel* established Gardner as a significant American writer and, while he went on to write several other well-received books, *Grendel* is still his best-known work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While the novel does not refer to any actual historical events, the story of Grendel takes place within the context of medieval Anglo-Saxon culture and its emphases on heroism, kingship, and loyalty.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Gardner's novel is a rewriting of the Anglo-Saxon epic [Beowulf](#). This epic poem was written in Old English and, like other Old English epics, celebrates the daring feats of a hero, as Beowulf defeats Grendel, Grendel's mother, and a dragon. As a scholar of medieval literature, Gardner would have been familiar with the epic tradition surrounding [Beowulf](#) and the Anglo-Saxon culture from which it emerged. Gardner borrows some of his plot and many character names from [Beowulf](#), but creates a full life for Grendel prior to his encounter with Beowulf. At several moments in *Grendel*, Gardner inserts passages of poetry that imitate the form of [Beowulf](#). In addition to rewriting the epic poem from the monster's point of view, Gardner's use of stream-of-consciousness narration and insertion of philosophical arguments into his novel allow us to gain modern insights into the mythic-medieval world of Grendel and Beowulf.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Grendel
- **When Written:** Mid-twentieth Century
- **Where Written:** USA
- **When Published:** 1971
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Novel

- **Setting:** Scandinavia, in the mythic past
- **Climax:** Grendel's fight with Beowulf
- **Antagonist:** Hrothgar, Beowulf
- **Point of View:** First person, from Grendel's perspective (with some passages narrated in third person)

EXTRA CREDIT

The Zodiac. Gardner repeatedly uses astrological motifs throughout *Grendel*. Signs of the Zodiac appear both literally (with the ram, bull, and goat for Aries, Taurus, and Capricorn) and more symbolically, as the characteristics of different astrological signs can be linked with different characters.

Nameless. In the entire novel, Beowulf's name is never mentioned. While his identity can be inferred, the absence of his name can be read as a slight to the hero. The entire point of accomplishing heroic deeds is to ensure one's fame in future stories and myths (as in the poem [Beowulf](#)), and Gardner denies Beowulf that reward in his novel.



PLOT SUMMARY

Grendel is a fearsome monster who lives underground in a cave with his mother. As spring begins, he encounters **a ram** and, irritated at the stupidity of the creature, tries to scare it away. The ram doesn't move. Grendel talks angrily to himself and heads for the meadhall of Hrothgar, whose kingdom he habitually raids.

Grendel recalls his youth. Once, he got his foot stuck in between two tree trunks in the forest. **A bull** found him and charged at him, though unable to harm Grendel significantly. The bull charged again and again to no avail until, tired, it simply left. Then, a group of humans led by Hrothgar found Grendel, and were unsure what kind of creature he was. Grendel tried to talk to them, but they were frightened at his monstrous voice and attacked him. Grendel's terrifying mother came and rescued him from the humans, who fled.

Grendel describes how the humans eventually developed agriculture and created settlements. As communities expanded, wars began to erupt and Hrothgar gradually gained power. The humans were relentless in their destruction of nature and of their human enemies. One night, once Hrothgar's power was firmly established, an old blind man arrived at his meadhall and offered to sing for pay. This man, the Shaper, sang beautiful songs that glorified Hrothgar and his people. His songs enraged but also enchanted Grendel, who was swept away by their beauty. Once, when Grendel was spying on

Hrothgar and the humans, the Shaper sang of two ancient brothers who feuded: one killed the other and so was cursed for eternity. According to the Shaper, Grendel is the descendant of the cursed brother. Greatly upset, Grendel rushed into the meadhall and tried to tell the Danes that he meant them no harm. But they were terrified at him and attacked him, so he fled.

After his encounter with the Shaper, Grendel visited the dragon, a wise but fearsome creature obsessed with his hoard of treasure. The dragon instructed Grendel about the humans, time, space, and the universe. Though Grendel had trouble following his abstract, philosophical ideas, he took away the main idea that all of life is meaningless when considered in the grand scheme of eternity. The dragon put a charm on Grendel, rendering him invulnerable to weapons. Shortly after, Grendel began his habitual raids on Hrothgar's meadhall. On one raid, he encountered a particularly strong Dane named Unferth, who thought of himself as a noble hero. Grendel teased and toyed with Unferth, denying the existence of real heroes. Grendel let Unferth live, and so Unferth followed Grendel back to his lair in order to die nobly. Grendel refused to kill him, though, and brought him safely back to Hrothgar.

Grendel then remembers the arrival of Hrothgar's queen, Wealtheow. Hrothgar was preparing for war with a rival king, but the king presented his sister Wealtheow as a gift in order to ensure peace between the two kingdoms. Grendel was fascinated by Wealtheow's grace and beauty and tormented by her just as he once was by the Shaper's art.

After Hrothgar's brother dies, his nephew Hrothulf comes to Hart. Hrothulf is highly critical of Hrothgar's rule. He and his adviser, an old man named Red Horse, theorize about the justice or injustice of revolution. Hrothulf takes no action, though, and continues to live under the care of Hrothgar, while still plotting to eventually overthrow Hrothgar. One night, Grendel decides to "impute" a dream to Hrothgar involving **two trees** that have grown so that they wind around each other. Another night, while spying on the Danes, Grendel sits down in a religious area with icons of the Danes' gods. An old priest named Ork comes to the area, but cannot see Grendel. Grendel speaks to him and pretends to be his god, toying with the human and his religious beliefs.

Grendel becomes bored with his continued raids. The Shaper dies and Grendel goes to watch his funeral. A group of strangers arrive at Hrothgar's kingdom, calling themselves the Geats. The unnamed leader of their group, who can be identified as the hero Beowulf, frightens and excites Grendel. Beowulf tells Hrothgar and his men that he has come to defeat Grendel for them. At Hrothgar's meadhall, he impresses the Danes with stories of his heroic accomplishments.

After all the humans fall asleep, Grendel breaks into the meadhall, looking for Beowulf. He grabs a sleeping man to eat him, but it turns out to be Beowulf, who was only pretending to

sleep. Beowulf grabs Grendel and begins to overpower him. He forces his extreme ideas—in particular, the idea that Grendel's mind makes the world what it is—upon Grendel, who finds Beowulf's words as painful as his unrelenting grasp on Grendel's arm. Beowulf tears off Grendel's arm and Grendel flees, defiantly shouting that Beowulf's victory was mere chance and meaningless. Grendel dies in the forest, surrounded by animals.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Grendel – Grendel is the protagonist and narrator of the novel. He is a terrifying monster who kills and eats humans, but he is also a lonely, isolated creature, who craves a friend or companion. Grendel is a relentlessly thinking and questioning character. As he grows and experiences new things, Grendel constantly theorizes about the world and ponders deep questions about time and space, formulating laws and drawing grand conclusions about the universe. Persuaded by the ideas of the dragon, Grendel accepts that the universe is meaningless and mechanical, but he is also deeply frustrated by the stupidity and indifference of nature and its inhabitants, as particularly shown through his interactions with the **ram, bull, and goat**. It is through Grendel's eyes that we see the humans, and Grendel's perspective emphasizes the cruelty and senseless violence of the humans. From Grendel's point of view, the grandiose ideas of heroism, justice, and religion upon which the humans found their society are simply false, foolish ideas. Unlike his monstrous mother, Grendel has the ability to speak, and although he despises the Danes, he is also to some degree jealous of their community and feels a special bond with them, especially Hrothgar. He takes care not to wipe out all of the Danes, so that he still has people to frighten and toy with.

Grendel's Mother – Unlike Grendel, his mother neither speaks nor questions the world. She spends most of her time in her underground lair and generally experiences the world in a purely physical way. Similarly, she is only able to express any affection for Grendel through physical gestures. Grendel expresses disdain for his mother, but when he is in danger he calls for her, and it is her that rescues him when he first encounters humans.

Hrothgar – Hrothgar is the king of the Danes. After rising gradually to power, Hrothgar created a vast kingdom. As the leader of the Danes, Hrothgar is Grendel's main rival. His kingdom flourishes on ideals of justice and heroism, which the Shaper's glorifying (and propagandistic) songs help establish. As he ages, though, Hrothgar faces numerous threats—from rival kingdoms and from unhappy inhabitants of his own, such as his nephew Hrothulf and his scheming adviser Red Horse, to Grendel himself. In the end, Hrothgar must rely on the help of

the Geats to defeat Grendel.

The Dragon – Though he is dismissive of Grendel, the dragon is the closest thing Grendel has to a mentor or intellectual companion. Able to see the past, present, and future, the dragon attempts to teach Grendel about the humans, time, space, and the universe. He gives Grendel the idea that the humans actually need him in order to better define and improve themselves, and tells Grendel that all things perish and that when considered in relation to all of eternity, all life is essentially meaningless. The dragon presents the most coherent and persuasive philosophical system in the novel, but can also be seen as selfish and greedy: all he does is stay in his cave and count his hoard of treasure. The dragon also grants Grendel invulnerability against the humans' weapons, which allows Grendel to terrorize the humans easily but also takes some of the joy out of it for Grendel.

The Shaper – The Shaper is an old, blind man who comes to Hrothgar offering to sing for money. He is the character through whom the novel most deeply explores ideas about language, art, and beauty. His skillful songs inspire Hrothgar's men to greatness and propagate ideas of heroism, justice, and religion. He also inspires Hrothgar to construct his great meadhall, Hart. For Grendel, the Shaper has the unique ability to shape and change the world, creating a sense of order, meaning, and beauty out of a chaotic universe. Grendel is fascinated and enticed by the beauty of the Shaper's art, but he is also enraged by it, since he knows that it false and full of lies. However, underlying Grendel's dislike of the Shaper is at least some jealousy, as Grendel wishes he could be a part of the community that is unified by the Shaper's stories. The dragon sees the shaper's songs as simply illusion, a tool that helps the humans deal with an irrational universe. While this may be true, the Shaper does possess real power and is able to make things actually happen in the real world (such as the construction of Hart).

Unferth – One of Hrothgar's men, Unferth is a strong, proud hero. When he attempts to fight Grendel, though, he is humiliated. Grendel mocks his ideas of heroism and refuses to allow Unferth to die a heroic death. Grendel's toying with Unferth reveals that a hero needs a cooperating monster in order to be heroic. By refusing to play the part of the monster for Unferth, Grendel denies him his heroic identity and robs Unferth's life of purpose.

Wealtheow – Wealtheow is Hrothgar's queen, given to him in marriage as a gesture of peace by a rival king. Wealtheow's presence at Hart exerts a calming power, easing tensions and resolving disputes between men. Her beauty and grace fascinate Grendel and torment him just as the beauty of the Shaper's songs first did. Grendel spends much time spying on her and sees that she is often homesick and sad, but in the presence of Hrothgar she maintains a positive, graceful appearance. Grendel's interest in Wealtheow causes him to

stop raiding Hart temporarily, until he finally breaks into her bedroom and picks her up. Grendel plans to kill Wealtheow but ultimately lets her live. She is the only human character for whom Grendel perhaps feels pity and is merciful. Unlike with Unferth, he does not appear to let her live for any devious purpose.

Ork – Ork is an old priest, who encounters Grendel at a sacred religious site one night. He cannot see who Grendel is and so believes him when he says he is The Destroyer, the king of Ork's gods. Pretending to be a god, Grendel teases Ork but is put off by his intense, earnest faith. The ease with which Ork is tricked demonstrates the fallacy of the Danes' religious practices, which Grendel sees as particularly foolish.

Beowulf – Beowulf is never named in the novel, but his identity can be inferred from context. He is the leader of the Geats and brings a band of men to come to Hrothgar and defeat Grendel for him. Beowulf's strength and commanding presence frighten Grendel when he first arrives. When he fights and defeats Grendel, he attempts to force his radical ideas upon him, telling Grendel that his mind makes the world what it is. After showing his physical and intellectual mastery over Grendel, he tears off Grendel's arm, causing his death. While Grendel dies denying that Beowulf is a real hero (since he defeated Grendel through chance and trickery), Beowulf is the best example of a hero that the novel offers.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Hrothulf – Hrothulf is the nephew of Hrothgar, who comes to live with Hrothgar after his father dies. Though he doesn't go as far as his adviser Red Horse (who advocates violent rebellion against Hrothgar), he is harshly critical of Hrothgar's state and its hierarchy.

Red Horse – Hrothulf's adviser, Red Horse sees all forms of government as equally evil. He tries to persuade Hrothulf to rebel against Hrothgar. Red Horse's critiques of Hrothgar and the violence upon which his rule is founded are comparable to Grendel's critical views of the humans.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



MONSTERS AND HUMANS

The most striking thing about *Grendel* is that the novel is narrated by a monster. Gardner takes the oldest story in English literature of a hero defeating

a monster (*Beowulf*) and turns it on its head by seeing the tale through the eyes of the monster Grendel. The novel thus continually asks what it means to be a monster and how monsters and humans differ or are related. When Grendel and the humans first meet, both recognize each other as a different kind of creature, but the two are actually rather similar. Significantly, they speak the same language. And the Shaper's use of the Biblical story of Cain and Abel to mark Grendel as a descendant of the evil Cain points to a distant shared ancestry of both humans and Grendel. While Grendel goes on murderous rampages to satisfy his desire for blood, the humans also murder each other for, as Grendel sees it, no real purpose. At many points during the novel, the distinction between monster and human seems to blur, as Grendel seems more human than the Danes, and the Danes more monstrous than Grendel.

But while Grendel and the humans often seem similar, both find it very important to stress their difference from each other. Both Grendel and the Danes use each other as an "other" against which they can better define themselves, as is most clearly expressed by the dragon. The dragon tells Grendel that he is "the brute existent by which [the Danes] learn to define themselves." The Danes use the monster-figure of Grendel to make themselves civilized, honorable, and human by contrast. After his meeting with the dragon, Grendel also recognizes that the same is true for him: his identity as a fearsome monster is dependent upon having human rivals to raid and terrorize. Grendel does not kill all of the Danes or wipe out their city entirely, because, as he himself says, "What will we call the Hrothgar-Wrecker when Hrothgar has been wrecked?" The relationship between monster and humans can be seen as one of mutual dependence—both rely on the other as a contrast to their own identity, even though in the end they may not really be so different.



LANGUAGE

Grendel explores the power, consequences, seductions, and deceptions of various forms of language. Language is what separates Grendel from nature and from his mother. His ability to speak marks him as different from the rest of the natural world that cannot respond to him. The very language that enables Grendel to tell his own story actually isolates him within what Grendel calls a "pale skin of words that closes me in like a coffin." His use of language connects him to the Danes, but even they are often unable (or unwilling) to understand him.

Through the character of the Shaper, the novel displays both the power and deception of language. The Shaper is able to make the lies of heroism seem true and alluring. His very name implies that his artful language has the power to shape and change things. In making a comprehensible order out of the chaos of the world and in presenting a glorified narrative of the

history of the Danes, the Shaper holds a central place in Hrothgar's kingdom. Grendel is both intrigued and outraged by the Shaper's songs, which he often goes to hear. He knows that the songs are lies, but is also carried away by the beauty and pleasure of the Shaper's art. As the novel progresses, Grendel's own narration is even influenced by the Shaper's language, as it becomes self-consciously poetic and interspersed with passages of verse.

The novel's stance on language is thus deeply ambiguous. On the one hand, language allows Grendel to communicate with the dragon and the Danes, but on the other hand it isolates him from his mother and from nature. As wielded by the Shaper, language is a powerful social force, uniting the Danes under a set of shared stories, and is able to attain a kind of order and beauty not found elsewhere in the world. But, as Grendel knows, this powerful use of language is built upon a series of lies and is ultimately deceitful and false.



LONELINESS AND ISOLATION

For much, if not all, of the novel, Grendel is simply looking for someone to talk to. His mother cannot communicate with him, and the various animals he addresses cannot respond. Utterly alone and isolated, he can talk only to himself. When he finally encounters humans, he tries to communicate with them, but they misunderstand him and brand him as a terrifying monster. The closest thing Grendel has to a friend or companion is perhaps the dragon, whom he meets only once. But the dragon is condescending and dismissive of Grendel.

Grendel's most significant relationship with anyone else in the novel is with his rivals Hrothgar and Unferth. By leaving Unferth alive and by never killing all of the Danes, Grendel plays a kind of game with his rivals that leaves him someone to interact with.

Gardner's rewriting of the character of Grendel makes the monster sympathetic largely through his pathetic loneliness. His violent outbursts and antagonistic relationship with humans can be seen as the result of a lonely creature's misunderstood attempts to reach out and communicate with someone else.



NATURE AND TIME

Throughout the novel, Grendel and other characters attempt to answer large questions concerning nature and time. Grendel speaks to nature and at times wonders if there is some kind of spirit in nature (as the Danes believe), but ultimately concludes that the world is made up of a series of mindless, mechanical processes. But then where do Grendel and the Danes fit into this understanding of nature? Is Grendel also simply carrying out a natural process, driven to act by his desires, or can he choose to

act in a particular way that might mean something? The answer to this question depends greatly on one's perspective of time. Having been around for much longer than the Danes, Grendel is able to laugh at their narrative of history and understanding of the world.

But the dragon—who can see past, present, and future—finds Grendel's perspective equally laughable. From the dragon's grand perspective, the world is simply “a swirl in the stream of time,” and “a temporary gathering of bits.” In the big picture, there is no order or meaning to the random chaos of nature. Regardless of whether one agrees with the ideas of the dragon, the novel ultimately suggests that one's understanding of nature is greatly dependent on one's perspective in time. How someone perceives his or her relation to the rest of the world depends on whether he or she is considering the world in terms of an individual's lifetime, the history of a particular people, the history of the entire human race, or all of eternity.



HEROISM

In the background of the novel is perhaps English literature's most significant text about heroism: *Beowulf*. Whereas the epic poem *Beowulf* builds up

the idea of a hero, much of *Grendel* criticizes and pokes fun at the very idea of heroism. From Grendel's perspective, the heroic feats celebrated by the Shaper are all lies. The Danes' exploits are simply examples of “violence no more legitimate than a wolf's.” Hrothgar's amassing of riches and tribute is perhaps no different from the dragon's selfish hoarding of treasure.

Grendel is especially able to mock ideals of heroism through his interactions with Unferth. By refusing to fight Unferth and instead throwing apples at him, he humiliates the hero and turns what should be a noble fight into a kind of pathetic slapstick comedy. By refusing to kill Unferth, Grendel denies him a heroic death and demoralizes him, showing him the emptiness of his ideas of heroism.

When Beowulf finally arrives and defeats Grendel, the novel presents the closest thing to a true hero. Stronger and cleverer than all the Danes, Beowulf overcomes Grendel in dramatic combat. But even as he dies, Grendel painstakingly maintains that his death is not the result of a heroic deed. With his dying breaths, Grendel insists that Beowulf defeated him through trickery and by sheer chance. Even as the novel seems to give an example of a true hero defeating an enemy, Grendel goes to the grave insisting that there is no such thing as real heroism, that Beowulf simply got lucky in one act of violence as meaningless as any other.



PHILOSOPHY, THEORY, AND BELIEF

Grendel can be seen as a novel of competing ideas. Different characters try to make sense of the world

in different ways, and as Grendel progresses through the novel, he must choose which set of theories or beliefs he adheres to. On one end of the spectrum, Grendel's mother experiences the world in purely physical, sensual way, and does not question or theorize at all. Grendel rejects this simplistic approach to the world early in the novel, and develops his own theories—for example, the idea that the world consists entirely of Grendel and not-Grendel. The humans, noted by the dragon for their “crackpot theories”, offer another system of beliefs with their ideas of heroism, religion, and logic. Grendel rejects the ideas of the humans, mocking their religion, and is generally persuaded by the dragon, who offers the novel's most complete system of philosophy.

The dragon believes in the ultimate meaninglessness of the universe and takes a self-centered approach to the world, advising Grendel to “seek out gold and sit on it.” Grendel's various struggles with the world and with other characters can be seen as a struggle with different sets of ideas and different philosophies. When Beowulf defeats Grendel, he not only physically overcomes him, but also overcomes him with his “lunatic theory” that the world is only what Grendel's mind makes it. Whereas the dragon claimed that the world was meaningless, Beowulf goes as far as to assert that the world only exists because Grendel perceives it, that there is no way to separate its existence from Grendel's own, suggesting that even the notion of history or time beyond Grendel's own existence is immaterial. As Grendel struggles to maintain his belief in the dragon's philosophy, Beowulf's ideas are almost as painful to him as the tearing off of his arm. Grendel repeats, “[Beowulf's] syllables lick at me, chilly fire.” The novel thus culminates not only with the physical conflict between Beowulf and Grendel, but also with the conflict of their competing beliefs.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE RAM, BULL, AND GOAT

These three animals come to epitomize Grendel's understanding of nature as indifferent and mechanical. At the beginning of the novel, the ram irritates Grendel because of the way it mindlessly follows its instincts and mechanical urges. When the young Grendel has his leg stuck in a tree, the bull repeatedly charges him in an attempt to defend its calf, which Grendel was hunting. The bull can do no real harm to Grendel, who can easily dodge its horns, but it repeatedly charges at Grendel without altering its approach at all. Grendel finds the bull's stupidity and inability to think amusing, laughing scornfully at the animal. Near the end of the

novel, the goat climbs up a rock cliff near Grendel's den. Grendel tries to scare it away, rolls a log down the cliff at it, and hits it with stones. But even as it is injured, bleeding, and dying, the goat keeps climbing forward. Unlike the ram, which frustrates Grendel, and the bull, which amuses him, the goat haunts him with its mindless persistence. As the goat keeps climbing toward its imminent death, it also foreshadows Grendel's upcoming death. While Grendel scorns the stupidity of nature, the novel also asks us to consider whether Grendel, who goes willingly to Beowulf though he knows it is dangerous, and the humans, who attempt to fight Grendel in the same way time and time again, are merely other instruments of a mechanical natural world that simply functions thoughtlessly.



THE INTERTWINING TREES

Hrothgar dreams that he sees two trees that have grown together, twisting around each other. This image encapsulates the mutual dependence that characterizes the relationship between Grendel and Hrothgar (and the humans more generally). The trees are two separate beings but are related and dependent on each other. Similarly, Hrothgar and Grendel rely on the other in their antagonistic relationship. As the dragon tells Grendel, he spurs the humans on to improve and provides a monstrous example from which they can distinguish themselves and thus define themselves as human. Similarly, Grendel gains a sense of identity as a monster from his rivalry with the Danes. Grendel's and Hrothgar's fate are intertwined, just like the trunks of the trees.



THE OAK OVERLOOKING THE ABYSS

Several times toward the end of the novel, Grendel has a strange vision of himself holding onto the roots of an oak, hanging over a dark abyss. As Grendel's death approaches, this foreboding vision symbolizes Grendel's life in relation to the grand conception of eternity offered by the dragon. As the dragon speaks of Grendel's life as merely a brief swirl in the huge stream of time, so this vision presents Grendel's life as a brief, futile struggle to hold onto some stability in the face of a much larger void, into which he will surely fall. Thus, this vision encapsulates the dragon's idea of the insignificance of individual life. While Grendel accepts this idea, he still struggles to stay alive, fighting with Beowulf. The void beneath the oak tree may be inevitable, but as Grendel illustrates, the role of the individual in the universe is to hold on to the oak for as long as possible.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Grendel* published in 1989.

“Behind my back, at the world's end, my pale slightly glowing fat mother sleeps on, old, sick at heart, in our dingy underground room. Life-bloated, baffled, long-suffering hag. Guilty, she imagines, of some unremembered, perhaps ancestral crime. (She must have some human in her.) Not that she thinks. Not that she dissects and ponders the dusty mechanical bits of her miserable life's curse.”

Related Characters: Grendel (speaker), Grendel's Mother

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Here we're introduced to Grendel's mother--a fearsome monster who, unlike Grendel himself, doesn't have the gift of speech. Grendel seems to feel no real affection for his mother whatsoever--instead, he regards her as a bloated hag. Grendel's lack of affection for his mother is paradoxical--on one hand, it's proof of his dignity and humanity (he's rejecting the barbarism with which he's usually associated); on the other, it suggests his own barbarism (it's barbaric to reject your own family).

Grendel is truly alone in the universe--even his own mother can't give him the company and conversation he craves. Grendel despises his mother because she represents everything he hates about himself--his ugliness, his foreignness to the humans, etc. Grendel aspires to be a thinker and a talker, but he can never form lasting bonds with other creatures because of his fearsome appearance. It's only appropriate that Grendel should both love and hate his mom.

“The king has lofty theories of his own. “Theories,” I whisper to the bloodstained ground. So the dragon once spoke. (“They'd map out roads through Hell with their crackpot theories!” I recall his laugh.)”

Related Characters: Grendel (speaker), Hrothgar, The Dragon

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Grendel talks about the prevalence of "theories" among human beings. Grendel notes that most of the humans with whom he's fighting believe that he is a

punishment sent from god. Grendel *also* notes that the king of the humans, Hrothgar, has different theories about the Grendel--theories which are no more accurate than his subjects'.

There's a lot to unpack here. First, it's clear that Grendel rejects humans' theories--indeed, much of human culture--as nonsense. The belief in god, for instance, is just a superstition to Grendel. Grendel is dismissive of human beliefs, but he's also insightful enough to tell the difference between Hrothgar's beliefs (the belief in heroism, it's implied) and his subjects' beliefs (a more religious belief in god and divinity).

The passage also mentions the Dragon--an almost omniscient yet somewhat unreliable character who embraces chaos and sneers at anyone who tries to make sense of it. The Dragon believes that all religions and beliefs are attempts to make sense of pain and suffering--attempts that do nothing to alleviate this suffering. (Hell burns, whether you have a theory about it or not.)

Chapter 2 Quotes

☝ Talking, talking, spinning a spell, pale skin of words that closes me in like a coffin.

Related Characters: Grendel (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Grendel has no friends, nobody to talk to. All he has to keep him company are his words. With words, Grendel can create imaginary friends, hold long conversations with himself, and generally give his life some semblance of a community. (In this way he's very similar to Frankenstein's monster in Shelley's *Frankenstein*.)

Grendel sneers at much of human society, but he's too clever to sneer at language. Grendel's command of language is one of the most important bonds linking him with human culture--ironically, he's every bit as eloquent as the humans with whom he fights, and who consider him a monster and barbarian. And yet Grendel hates himself for relying so excessively on language: by accepting language, Grendel is also accepting the supremacy of human culture--the very culture that defines itself against him and strives to murder him.

☝ 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.

Related Characters: Grendel (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Grendel recalls sketching out a radical theory of the universe: he is the only being who exists, imposing his reality upon chaos. Grendel was a lonely child, and he had nobody to talk to. After his encounter with the instinctual, mindless bull, he decides that he's lonely because there *is* nobody for him to talk to: only mindless animals like bulls.

Why does Grendel conclude that he alone exists? To begin with, Grendel's conclusion is a coping mechanism: it's easier for him to believe that he's alone in the universe than it is for him to believe that the other creatures of the universe are afraid of or hate him. On a more basic level, though, Grendel's thought process betrays his *need* for belief and theory. Grendel (later) sneers at human beliefs, and yet even he relies on "myths" about life--even if his choice of myth is much cruder and more straightforward than humans' myths. Grendel embodies the struggle to make sense of life--in his depression, Grendel decides that he alone exists.

☝ I found I understood them: it was my own language, but spoken in a strange way... They were small, these creatures, with dead-looking eyes and gray-white faces, and yet in some ways they were like us, except ridiculous and, at the same time, mysteriously irritating, like rats. Their movements were stiff and regular, as if figured by logic... We stared at each other.

Related Characters: Grendel (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Grendel comes face-to-face with his eventual opponents, the humans, for the first time. Grendel finds the humans as strange and frightening as the humans

find him. (And this, of course, is the whole point of Gardner's book: he reverses the poem *Beowulf* to tell Grendel's story from Grendel's point of view.)

In the novel, there is no true good or evil: Grendel and the humans are just two sides of the same coin; i.e., two different intelligent races who have decided to fight one another to the death, defining themselves against their supposed "opposite." Naturally, the humans like to *believe* that they're the "good guys" and Grendel is "evil," but in truth, both sides are equal--a fact that Gardner reinforces by noting Grendel and the humans' common language, and their common struggle with the realities of life and the universe.

☝ I tried to tell her all that had happened, all that I'd come to understand: the meaningless objectness of the world, the universal bruteness. She only stared, troubled at my noise. She'd forgotten all language long ago, or maybe had never known any.

Related Characters: Grendel (speaker), Grendel's Mother

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Grendel has just come from a bloody fight with the humans, and he wants to tell his mother what he's just discovered: he wants to tell her how scarring and frightening the fight was. Furthermore, Grendel wants to tell his mother what the fight has taught him: all of life is nothing but a meaningless and violent struggle for power. Unfortunately, Grendel's mother can't talk.

The passage is important because it reinforces the sympathy we're supposed to feel for Grendel. At first, Grendel just wants someone to talk to: his desire for conversation and companionship is far greater than his desire for food or power. And yet when Grendel tries to talk to the humans, he's attacked. Grendel has no friends in the universe--he's persecuted and punished for being an "other," and so he naturally assumes the role thrust upon him: that of a monster.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ Then once, around midnight, I came to a hall in ruins. The cows in their pens lay burbling blood through their nostrils, with javelin holes in their necks. None had been eaten. The watchdogs lay like dark wet stones, with their heads cut off, teeth bared. The fallen hall was a square of flames and acrid smoke, and the people inside (none of them had been eaten either) were burned black, small, like dwarfs turned dark and crisp.

Related Characters: Grendel (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

In this surprising passage, Grendel goes to the village of men and is shocked to find that someone has beaten him to his work: someone has attacked the humans and killed them. Slowly, Grendel comes to realize that *other humans* are the ones who have burned down the village. Indeed, these other humans' evil vastly exceeds Grendel's own--Grendel eats his victims quickly, while the humans have burned their fellow men alive, and haven't even eaten the animals they killed. Their violence was not of necessity, but was pure cruelty and sadism. Humanity's worst enemy isn't Grendel--it's other people.

The passage is crucial because it establishes the reason that humans choose to fight Grendel. Humans need an excuse to unite together; without this, they'll tear themselves apart. Grendel is the ultimate "other," a nice reminder that humans can define themselves as a unit--i.e., something different from Grendel. Paradoxically, Grendel is crucial to the survival of the human race--without Grendel to do battle with, humans would turn on themselves and go extinct.

☝ They hacked down trees in widening rings around their central halls and blistered the land with peasant huts and pigpen fences till the forest looked like an old dog, dying of mange. They thinned out the game, killed birds for sport, set accidental fires that would burn for days. Their sheep killed hedges, snipped valleys bare, and their pigs nosed up the very roots of what might have grown... There was nothing to stop the advance of man.

Related Characters: Grendel (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 40**Explanation and Analysis**

Grendel watches closely at Hrothgar begins to institute order and community among men. Before, the men fought with each other, destroying their own societies. Now, however, men unite together to form one great community headed by Hrothgar.

It's crucial to notice the subtle difference between this passage and the previous passage quoted. Before, humans turned on each other--their destruction was nihilistic and self-defeating. Now, humans have turned their capacity for violence *outward*, toward nature. Instead of fighting other humans, they fight the natural world, destroying it heartlessly. The implication is that humans are hopelessly violent--whether they fight each other or fight Grendel, they have to fight something. Moreover, humans are disgustingly wasteful; they destroy nature for no discernible reason other than their innate desire for power and conflict.

●● So he sang—or intoned, with the harp behind him—twisting together like sailors’ ropes the bits and pieces of the best old songs. The people were hushed. Even the surrounding hills were hushed, as if brought low by language.

Related Characters: Grendel (speaker), The Shaper**Related Themes:** **Page Number:** 42**Explanation and Analysis**

Here Grendel meets the Shaper--a bard who sings for the community of humans. The Shaper, Grendel knows full-well, is a liar: he sings beautiful, idealized songs about heroism, encouraging humans to go off and die for their communities. Without the influence of the Shaper, humans wouldn't be as violent: they need poets and writers to inspire them to go out and fight to the death.

And yet Grendel *also* finds the Shaper utterly transfixing. His words may be lies, but they're undeniably beautiful. In all, the passage reinforces Grendel's close relationship to humanity--a relationship that's mediated by the power of language. Grendel despises much of human culture, but he has a weakness for the single most essential part of human culture--words.

Chapter 4 Quotes

●● “Why can’t I have someone to talk to?” I said. The stars said nothing, but I pretended to ignore the rudeness.

Related Characters: Grendel (speaker)**Related Themes:**  **Page Number:** 53**Explanation and Analysis**

Grendel continues to feel a deep depression over the fact that he's all alone in the universe, without anyone to talk to or relate to. He's been cursed with a love for words and conversation, but because he's a frightening creature, he has nobody with whom to converse.

Grendel's frustration has increased since his encounters with the Shaper. The Shaper's command of language has inspired Grendel deeply: Grendel wishes he could communicate with others, honing his rhetorical skill and elevating it to the level of art. (This desire is even reflected in the text itself, as Grendel starts speaking poetry instead of prose sometimes). Grendel's misery is so complete that he asks the stars to talk to him. Even when the stars, of course, "said nothing," Grendel tries to imagine that the stars *could* talk to him and are just being rude: he's desperate for communication.

●● It was a cold-blooded lie that a god had lovingly made the world and set out the sun and moon as lights to land-dwellers, that brothers had fought, that one of the races was saved, the other cursed. Yet he, the old Shaper, might make it true, by the sweetness of his harp, his cunning trickery. It came to me with a fierce jolt that I wanted it. As they did too, though vicious animals, cunning, cracked with theories. I wanted it, yes! Even if I must be the outcast, cursed by the rules of his hideous fable.

Related Characters: Grendel (speaker), The Shaper**Related Themes:**    **Page Number:** 55**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Grendel considers everything the Shaper has sung about. In his song, the Shaper claims that Grendel is descended from a semi-Biblical "bad brother" who was punished by god for his disobedience. In other words, the Shaper claims that Grendel is being punished for the sins of

his ancestors. Humans, by contrast, are descended from a martyred "good brother." Notice that the Shaper's story echoes the Biblical Cain-Abel story, but with one major modification. In the Bible, Cain kills Abel before Abel can have any children, suggesting that *no one* is descended from the "good brother." Furthermore, Cain has children of his own and builds the first human city. (Although according to Judeo-Christian tradition, all of Cain's descendants are killed in the Great Flood, and the rest of humanity is descended from Adam and Eve's younger children.) If anything, then, humans are the descendants of the *bad* brother! But because humans refuse to accept their own sinful nature, they craft a different story, in which they're "good" and Grendel is "bad."

Grendel doesn't believe the Shaper's story, and yet his hunger for stories and art is so great that he accepts it—he *wants* to believe it. Grendel craves order and meaning in the universe. So even if he is cast as the villain in the Shaper's story, he'll accept this story because of the meaning it provides him. A sad story is better than no story at all.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ They'd map out roads through Hell with their crackpot theories, their here-to-the-moon-and-back lists of paltry facts.

Related Characters: The Dragon (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Grendel goes to visit the Dragon, and the Dragon here gives Grendel the advice he'd passed on to us in an earlier chapter: humans are so obsessed with order and theory that they'll even map out "roads through Hell." The Dragon's point is that humans have the challenge of making sense of utter chaos, a process that the Dragon compares to making maps and road. Humans need to believe that the world is something more than a swirl of meaningless chaos. The Shaper is crucial in fostering optimism and belief among human beings; by singing his songs, the Shaper creates the illusion that the world really *is* beautiful and sensible—not, as the Dragon believes, chaotic, eternal, and nihilistic.

☞ "A swirl in the stream of time. A temporary gathering of bits, a few random dust specks, so to speak—pure metaphor, you understand—then by chance a vast floating cloud of dustspecks, an expanding universe—" He shrugged. "Complexities: green dust as well as the regular kind. Purple dust. Gold. Additional refinements: sensitive dust, copulating dust, *worshipful dust!*"

Related Characters: The Dragon (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 70-71

Explanation and Analysis

The dragon continues to offer Grendel a complicated theory of the world. According to the Dragon, all of life is nonsense. Humans like to think that they're special, but in fact, they're not. Humans are just conglomerates of "dust." In the course of a lifetime, humans move all over—a process that amounts to the "swirling" of dust across the planet. In short, the Dragon sees humanity in the basest terms possible: humans' plans, hopes, and culture doesn't matter in the slightest in the larger scheme of thing.

The passage is an elaborate allusion to the Bible, in which God tells humans that they are formed from dust, and will one day return to dust. The Dragon goes above and beyond God's statements, however, by claiming that humans will only ever *be* dust—no amount of religion or culture can save them from the fundamental meaninglessness of their lives.

☞ "Ah, Grendel!" he said. He seemed that instant almost to rise to pity. "You improve them, my boy! Can't you see that yourself? You stimulate them! You make them think and scheme. You drive them to poetry, science, religion, all that makes them what they are for as long as they last. You are, so to speak, the brute existent by which they learn to define themselves."

Related Characters: The Dragon (speaker), Grendel

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

In this crucial passage, the Dragon argues for what Albert Murray called "antagonistic cooperation." The idea here is that two opponents have an uneasy alliance: they *need* one another to make sense of their selves. So humans, in spite of

their hostility toward Grendel, actually *need* Grendel in order to maintain their own identities. As we've already seen, humans are hopelessly violent and chaotic if left to themselves. But with Grendel to attack and define themselves against, humans have an excuse to band together and cooperate with one another. If Grendel were to vanish overnight, humanity would plunge into civil war and existential despair.

The Dragon's observation is remarkably perceptive, if paradoxical; it's a little strange to think that we *need* our enemies in any meaningful way. (It's worth noting that Gardner may have been slightly alluding to the Cold War here, during which Americans defined themselves according to their opposition to Communism and the Soviet Union.)

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝ I discovered that the dragon had put a charm on me: no weapon could cut me. I could walk up to the meadhall whenever I pleased, and they were powerless. My heart became darker because of that. Though I scorned them, sometimes hated them, there had been something between myself and men when we could fight. Now, invulnerable, I was as solitary as one live tree in a vast landscape of coal.

Related Characters: Grendel (speaker), The Dragon

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 75-76

Explanation and Analysis

After his conversation with the Dragon, Grendel discovers that no weapon can cut him because the Dragon has cast a spell of invulnerability upon him. But why does the Dragon cast such a charm on Grendel?

To begin with, the Dragon's charm proves his point: Grendel needs humans, and humans need Grendel. By rendering Grendel indestructible, the Dragon ensures that humans will always have to fight Grendel off. Therefore, humans will always have a rallying point: they'll always be able to band together against their common foe, ironically ensuring the survival of their civilization.

After the charm sets in, however, Grendel seems to have lost even this antagonistic bond between himself and humanity. Previously, Grendel felt a common connection with people--a connection rooted in language and mortality, as well as fighting and antagonism. Now, Grendel is forced to isolate himself from his opponents, existentially alone

again and stubbornly denying the "antagonistic cooperation" that the Dragon argued for.

☝ "It will be sung," he whispered, then paused again to get wind. "It will be sung year on year and age on age that Unferth went down through the burning lake—" he paused to pant "--and gave his life in battle with the world-rim monster." He let his cheek fall to the floor and lay panting for a long time, saying nothing. It dawned on me that he was waiting for me to kill him. I did nothing. I sat down and put my elbows on my knees and my chin on my fists and merely watched.

Related Characters: Grendel, Unferth (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

Unferth is a self-described hero who lives in the village. He tries to hunt down Grendel and kill him, claiming that his acts of bravery will be remembered forever. In short, Unferth is heroism incarnate. Unferth genuinely believes in the myths that the Shaper sings: he genuinely believes that it's worthwhile to sacrifice one's life for the greater goods of combat, courage, and being immortalized in art.

As we can imagine, Grendel is very irritated with Unferth--he needs to take Unferth down a couple notches and show him that heroism is just a sham. Grendel is tempted to kill Unferth, but of course, doing so would only allow Unferth to win in the long run: Unferth would be celebrated forever for his noble sacrifice (and, based on this passage, clearly *wants* precisely this to happen). Instead, Grendel decides to spare Unferth's life, successfully disillusioning Unferth to the silliness and arbitrariness of heroism and any kind of artistic immortality.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝ What will we call the Hrothgar-Wrecker when Hrothgar has been wrecked?

Related Characters: Grendel (speaker), Hrothgar

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

As the novel goes on, the Dragon's theory of antagonistic cooperation becomes truer and truer. Grendel had initially sneered at the idea that humans and monsters "need" each other. But here, he realizes that the Dragon was right all along. Grendel could easily destroy Hrothgar and his kingdom altogether. But then, Grendel would be all alone in the universe once again--life is better for Grendel and the humans when Grendel holds back and spares some lives.

The passage reiterates that Grendel depends upon some form of interaction with other people. Grendel can't stand to accept the fact that he's all alone in the universe. Even if his interactions with other beings are horribly violent, they still serve a useful purpose by reminding him that he's not all by himself--he has a name as long as others are there to give it to him, even if that name is monstrous and antagonistic.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☞ This nobility of his, this dignity: are they not *my* work? What was he before? nothing! A swollen-headed raider, full of boasts and stupid jokes and mead. ...I made him what he is. Have I not a right to test my own creation?

Related Characters: Grendel (speaker), Hrothgar

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

Here Grendel wonders why he continues to terrorize Hrothgar, even after Hrothgar has become an old man. Grendel's answer to his own rhetorical question is very interesting: he claims that he can do whatever he wants to Hrothgar, since he made Hrothgar what he is today. Grendel seems to have accepted the Dragon's theory: Grendel knows that he is useful to the humans, since he gives them something to unite against. His role as "monster" has essentially allowed Hrothgar to solidify his role as "king"--they are two sides of the same coin.

And yet the passage also represents a turning point in the novel. Previously, Grendel criticized humans for their excesses, and for wasting valuable resources. Here, however, Grendel seems to be sinking to humanity's level, wasting his time terrorizing a village and wasting the villages' resources for no practical reason whatsoever. Grendel has become the thing he hates most: a bored, corrupted human being.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☞ The ultimate evil is that Time is perpetual perishing, and being actual involves elimination. The nature of evil may be epitomized, therefore, in two simple but horrible and holy propositions: 'Things fade' and 'Alternatives exclude.'

Related Characters: Ork (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 132-133

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Grendel meets a pathetic priest named Ork. Ork is the very embodiment of mankind's overemphasis on order and control. Ork is extremely religious--he believes that the universe works according to a number of specific laws. There are only two such laws: 1) Things fade, and 2) Alternatives exclude.

It's worth thinking about these two laws a little more closely. Ork believes that all of life will eventually deteriorate into death; in other words, he accepts his own mortality. Second, Ork believes that it's impossible to believe two contradictory things at the same time--you can choose one or the other, but not both. Choosing one belief necessarily means *not* choosing another.

Grendel's existence challenges the validity of both rules. Grendel is a monster and seems to be exempt from the rules of mortality (he certainly can't be hurt in battle, thanks to the Dragon's charm). Furthermore, Grendel refuses to believe that "alternatives exclude." Instead, he embraces his own contradictions, criticizing waste while being incredibly wasteful; attacking humans while also acknowledging that humans are his only friends, etc. In short, Grendel sneers at Ork and the rules by which Ork lives his life and tries to find meaning in the universe.

☞ I recall something. A void boundless as a nether sky. I hang by the twisted roots of an oak, looking down into immensity. Vastly far away I see the sun, black but shining, and slowly revolving around it there are spiders. I pause in my tracks, puzzled--though not stirred--by what I see. But then I am in the woods again, and the snow is falling, and everything alive is fast asleep. It is just some dream. I move on, uneasy; waiting.

Related Characters: Grendel (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

Here Grendel recalls a vision or dream he had of an oak tree dangling over a deep chasm. The oak tree seems poised to fall into the abyss, never to be seen again. And yet it's tied to the ground by its strong, firm roots--and Grendel is hanging from the roots, dangling over the abyss.

One could argue that this dream symbolizes Grendel's existential dilemma. For the time being, Grendel's security is complete: thanks to the Dragon, he can't be harmed in battle. And yet Grendel seems to sense that his days are numbered--sooner or later, he's going to be swallowed up by the "abyss" of death. Likewise, Grendel is constantly fighting off the existential despair of acknowledging his own smallness and meaninglessness in the face of the abyss of the universe and time. Grendel's uneasiness in this passage suggests that on some level, he knows what the vision means, and recognizes that one day he'll be defeated.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☹☹ Tedium is the worst pain.

Related Characters: Grendel (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

Grendel is invulnerable to attacks from human beings--thanks to the Dragon's charms, no sword can cut him. As a result, Grendel begins to think of himself as an immortal. He has no real problems, because his life is never in any real danger, and so the greatest pain Grendel now experiences is the pain of dullness. Life is always exactly the same for Grendel: a battle with the humans, followed by incredible loneliness and existential despair.

The passage reiterates the extent of Grendel's isolation from the rest of the world. Previously, Grendel at least felt a bond with humanity because of his mortality; now that he's essentially immortal, Grendel feels no such bond, and thus, he's alienated from all other life forms.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☹☹ I am mad with joy. --At least I think it's joy. Strangers have come, and it's a whole new game.

Related Characters: Grendel (speaker), Beowulf

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Grendel feels a sudden rush of excitement--a very rare emotion for an isolated, essentially immortal creature. Grendel is excited because of the arrival of a new group of humans, including Beowulf (though Grendel doesn't know him yet, and he remains unnamed throughout the novel).

The passage reinforces the ambiguous relationship between Grendel and humanity. Grendel despises humanity and yet can't survive without humanity. He craves intelligent beings with whom to interact, and challenges to his strength and immortality; therefore, the arrival of more humans is a blessing. Of course, Grendel continues to dislike humans and sneer at their culture, but since he's isolated so much of the time, he can't be picky about who he spends his time with.

☹☹ *Grendel, Grendel! You make the world by whispers, second by second. Are you blind to that? Whether you make it a grave or a garden of roses is not the point.*

Related Characters: Beowulf (speaker), Grendel

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

In the climactic moments of the novel, Grendel has the encounter he's been craving and fearing for his entire life. He finally faces off against Beowulf, the human hero who eventually kills him. During the course of their fight together, Beowulf mocks Grendel, criticizing Grendel for the way he "makes the world."

Beowulf seems wiser about Grendel's hypocrisies and contradictions than anyone else in the novel. While Hrothgar dismisses Grendel as a mere monster, Beowulf is smart and perceptive enough to recognize Grendel for what he really is: a frustrated storyteller. Moreover, Beowulf truly

defeats Grendel by pointing out the basic contradiction in his entire life: Grendel mocks humans for telling silly stories to get through life, and yet Grendel himself has only managed to survive with his sanity because *he* tells himself stories. Grendel insists that he is the center of his own universe: all of human civilization is his creation. If Grendel were to admit the truth (his life is meaningless) he would go mad with grief.

In short, Beowulf sums up Grendel's entire existence. Beowulf's actions are at once hostile and friendly: paradoxically, Beowulf's insights into Grendel's character suggest that he could have been Grendel's greatest friend (someone who understood Grendel completely), but at the same time Beowulf is destined to act as a human "hero," and thus he must destroy Grendel physically.

“It was an accident,” I bellow back. I will cling to what is true. “Blind, mindless, mechanical. Mere logic of chance.”

Related Characters: Grendel (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

Beowulf has just defeated Grendel by ripping off his enormous arm, slowly killing him. Grendel refuses to believe that Beowulf has defeated him fairly and squarely--instead, he insists that Beowulf has won because of sheer dumb luck, because of the random chance of the universe's logic. Had Grendel reached inside the building on a different night, or had Beowulf been stationed somewhere else in the building, Grendel would still be alive.

Grendel's words reiterate his way of looking at the universe. Grendel refuses to acknowledge the existence of fate or destiny: even when he's been defeated, he refuses to admit that a true hero has defeated him. Instead, Grendel tries to downplay Beowulf's achievement, suggesting that Beowulf, in spite of his victory, is just another man. Ultimately, Grendel's true enemy isn't Beowulf; it's heroism itself. Grendel can't stand the idea that some people are meant to be great--and so, with his dying breaths, he continues to insist that Beowulf isn't really a hero at all.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The novel begins in the twelfth year of Grendel's war with the humans. Wandering outside, he encounters a **ram** and tries to scare it away. He throws a rock at it, strikes the ground, and howls, but the ram doesn't move. Grendel is frustrated by the ram's mindless sexuality and "ache to mount whatever happens near" with the onset of spring.

Grendel walks away from the **ram**, toward a forest, reflecting on his difference from animals and asking the sky why creatures like the ram are so undignified. He raises his middle finger at the unresponsive sky. While different from creatures like the ram, Grendel reflects that he is not noble and calls himself a "pointless, ridiculous monster" who murders men, children and cows, something of which he is neither proud nor ashamed. As Grendel observes the beginnings of spring in nature all around him, he remembers killing humans at this very location. He cries out angrily and smashes some trees.

A doe in a clearing sees Grendel and runs away. Grendel cries out that this is unfair, since he has never killed a deer (since cows have more meat). Grendel notes that deer and other animals "see all life without observing it." He walks along, muttering and talking to his only companion: his shadow. He describes his words as walls between himself and the rest of the world.

The beginning of spring is apparent even in the underground lair where Grendel lives with his foul, monstrous mother. He has felt the stirrings of spring and so has come out of his den, swimming through a marshy lake filled with firesnakes, to satisfy his hunger for blood. Enjoying being out under the open night sky, Grendel walks to some nearby cliffs.

Grendel shouts and mocks the cliffs, from whose height he could fall and die. He is momentarily frightened by the sound of his own voice. Leaving the cliffs, he makes his way for the meadhall of Hrothgar, king of the Danes, and continues to talk to nature. Wolves and other animals are alarmed when they see Grendel coming.

The ram's lack of reaction to Grendel symbolizes the mindless indifference of nature, which irritates the lonely Grendel. Grendel's anger at the ram shows the monster to be different from other wild creatures.



Grendel's speaking to the sky shows how isolated and desperate for someone to talk to he is. But he gets no response from the natural world, which is unsympathetic to his feelings. Grendel's thoughts shed light on his identity as a monster: while he is different from wild animals and able to look down on them as undignified, he still does not consider himself to be a noble creature.



The deer underscores for Grendel how unfair the unthinking natural world is. Animals like the deer go through life without examining it, in contrast to the theorizing and thinking that characterizes Grendel, the humans, and the dragon. Talking to his shadow, Grendel describes his use of language as something that separates himself from the rest of nature like a wall.



Grendel describes his mother without any affection, showing that his only familial relationship is a loveless one that does not assuage his loneliness.



Far from finding a sympathetic friend in nature, Grendel can't even find an antagonist: his attempt to mock and provoke the cliffs elicits no response. Even wolves flee from Grendel, leaving him entirely alone—except, that is, for the humans in whom he finds a rival.



Grendel thinks of his mother sleeping in their underground lair. He thinks that she feels guilty for an ancient crime and that she must have some human ancestry. But according to Grendel, his mother does not think or ponder about her life at all. When they sleep, she grabs at him to pull him near but he breaks away. Grendel remembers that he used to ask her why they lived in their underground den but she would never respond. But this was before Grendel met the old dragon, who Grendel says told him the truth.

Grendel comes to Hrothgar's meadhall, where he's been busting down the door and terrorizing the inhabitants for eleven years now. Each time, people cry out and an old blind man with a harp, called the Shaper, flees out a back window. Hrothgar's men try to fight Grendel but never succeed. This time, they try blowing out all the candles and hiding, but Grendel can see clearly in the dark. He kills and eats his fill of men, as he usually does.

As he leaves the meadhall, Grendel hears various humans saying that he is a punishment sent to them because a god is angry and Hrothgar's people are sinful. He leaves the meadhall, as the humans are praying to their gods, which Grendel refers to as merely "sticks and stones." Grendel notes that the king does not pray, because he has his own theories. He recalls the dragon saying of the humans, "They'd map out roads through hell with their crackpot theories!"

Watching from the edge of the forest, Grendel observes as the humans pray and then prepare a funeral mound for the deceased—or at least what Grendel has left behind of their bodies. Builders replace the door to the meadhall, adding improvements to try (in vain) to keep Grendel out. The humans burn the remains of the dead on a funeral pyre and throw golden rings, swords, and helmets onto the fire. They sing a funeral song, which makes Grendel angry. Frustrated and blinded by the rising sun, Grendel goes back to his underground home.

CHAPTER 2

Grendel walks around the wilderness while talking and muttering. He says that his words enclose him like a coffin. He remembers his youth and how he used to play games and explore underground, playing with invented friends. He explored all the chambers of his mother's cave and eventually discovered a pool of firesnakes. He swam through the pool and discovered a door that led to the world above the ground.

Grendel's mention of human ancestry hints that he and the humans might not be drastically different, but actually related. Despite his mother's attempts to be literally close to Grendel, he feels distant from her. His constant questioning and his use of language separate him from his mother.



Grendel takes pleasure in rampaging and murdering the humans. He derives a satisfaction from his interactions with the Danes that he cannot get from interactions with any other creature.



The humans use their religion to try to make sense of Grendel's attack. Grendel sees their religion as simply another example of humans' characteristic "crackpot theories."



The Danes' religious rites are a further example of humans' theories. Grendel scoffs at the practice, but also feels excluded by the funeral song, which emphasizes the human community as distinct from him as a monster.



Grendel again compares his words to a kind of barrier, emphasizing how his use of language isolates him from the world. His memories of imaginary childhood friends show that he has always been alone (save his mother). His anger and foul temperament can be seen as resulting from a lifetime of such solitude.



Grendel recalls how he would gradually play farther and farther out into the world, fleeing back underground by dawn. He remembers a group of large shapes with eyes that sat in his mother's cave and watched him. Grendel reflects that he thought his mother loved him in some way, but was never sure. Sometimes he would feel like his mother and he were one being, but at other times he would feel intensely separate from her. He would often cry and she would hold him against her.

Grendel remembers one morning when he went out hunting in the woods for a calf and got his foot trapped between two joined tree trunks. Trapped out in the world after dawn, he called out for his mother and cried loudly, but she didn't come. The sun rose and the world seemed horrible without his mother. He continued to cry out for her, but she didn't appear.

Then, a **bull** appeared, probably protecting the calf that Grendel was searching for. Grendel shouted at it, but it wouldn't go away. It charged and struck the tree, impaling one of Grendel's legs with its horn, but not doing any real harm to him. The bull mindlessly repeated its charges, and Grendel realized he could easily dodge the bull's horns each time.

Grendel laughed at the stupidity of the **bull** and kept looking around for his mother. He wondered if the shapes staring at him in the cave were relatives of his. He began to theorize about the world and came to the conclusion that he alone truly exists.

The **bull** kept charging and Grendel kept laughing at it, not even bothering any more to dodge its horns. Grendel fell asleep and when he woke up the bull was gone. Vultures were flying overhead. He tried to imagine the world from his mother's perspective and realized that he could never know how she perceives him. He fell asleep again.

That night, Grendel awoke to a strange smell and an eerie silence. He looked around to find men gathering around him with lit torches. The men were talking and at first seemed to be speaking in some foreign language, but then Grendel realized they were speaking his same language. He attempted to move but could barely move his hand.

Grendel's recollection of vague shapes with eyes is the only hint of his having relatives other than his mother. While Grendel could originally take comfort in his mother as a companion, he eventually outgrew her and now feels detached and distant from her.



Grendel's crying for his mother shows that, at least at this young age, he still felt a strong connection with her, though it is notable that he only seeks her protection, rather than any kind of intellectual companionship.



Much like the ram from the beginning of the novel, the bull shows the mindlessness of nature, as it is unable to think and change its ineffective charges at Grendel.



Alone with nothing to do, Grendel ponders the universe. At this early stage in the development of his ideas, he accepts the radical conclusion that he is the only thing in the world that really exists.



As the bull simply gives up on Grendel, it illustrates the pointlessness of nature. It exhausted itself charging countless times at Grendel, all for nothing. Grendel's attempt to see the world from a different point of view further characterizes him as a thinking, questioning creature.



Grendel's first encounter with humans probes his ambiguous relationship to them. They seem strange and foreign to Grendel, yet they speak the same language as him.



The humans then tried to decide what Grendel was. One suggested that he was a fungus or growth. One human, identified as a king (Hrothgar), suggested that they could cut the fungus out of the tree, but another thought that Grendel might actually be a tree spirit. One of the humans, described by Grendel as hairless, moved about frantically and then suddenly agreed that Grendel was a spirit. The king asked if the spirit was friendly. The hairless one answered that Grendel was hungry and would eat pig. Some humans rode off to get pigs, while others debated whether the spirit was angry.

Grendel tried to yell “pig” to confirm that he was hungry, but his voice scared the humans. The king hurled an axe at Grendel, grazing his shoulder. Grendel tried to shout at them, but his voice came out as a moan. He cried out for his mother. The king ordered his men to surround Grendel and he realized that the humans were “thinking creatures.” He tried to scare them off by shouting at them, but they attacked him with bows and javelins.

Grendel was convinced that he was done for, when suddenly he heard a shriek even louder than his. His terrifying mother came rushing in, roaring and shattering trees in her wake. The men fled.

The next thing Grendel remembers is waking up back in the cave. The other shapes were gone now and Grendel guesses that they had receded further underground. Alone with his mother, he attempted to explain to her what he had discovered about the world: its “meaningless objectness” and “universal bruteness.” But his mother could not understand his language.

Grendel emerges from his memory, once again in his underground cave, and keeps talking and theorizing about the world and how he is the only thing in the world that exists. He becomes upset as his mother continues to not understand him, and then his mother hurls herself on top of him to embrace him, smothering him. He keeps talking to himself. When he can’t breathe under her, he claws to get free but is alarmed when he realizes his claws have drawn blood.

CHAPTER 3

Grendel says that he didn’t decide to be Hrothgar’s enemy because of the axe he threw, and only decided to take that role once Hrothgar was already an old man. He remembers how, from the edges of the forest and up in the trees, he observed Hrothgar and his men going about their business. First, bands of hunters would occasionally fight each other and tell their comrades about the fights.

Grendel is as strange to the humans as they are to him. The humans’ attempt to identify Grendel provides insight into their use of reason, as different humans offer different hypotheses. The “hairless” human seems to be a kind of mystic or shaman. The fact that he misidentifies Grendel suggests that whatever magic or power he thinks he possesses has no actual power.



Finally encountering other beings able to talk, Grendel tries to communicate with them. But his attempt to break out of his isolation is misinterpreted, and the humans respond with violence. Their ability to strategize marks them as significantly different from the mindless bull that could not do any real harm to Grendel.



Grendel’s relief at his mother’s arrival and his mother’s rescuing him suggest at least some level of affection in their relationship.



While his mother’s rescuing Grendel points to some kind of mother-son bond, her lack of language and disinterest in large philosophical questions prevents any significant relationship between the two. His mother shows her love by keeping him alive, but can’t provide more than physical comfort.



Grendel’s interest in deep questions continues to separate him from his mother. She attempts on a very basic and physical level to have a close relationship with him, but Grendel feels merely smothered by her. His attempt to claw free is symbolic of the deeper self-imposed separation he feels from his mother. That he draws blood suggests that such separations are necessarily connected to violence.



Grendel’s emphasizing that he did not begin attacking the humans right away underscores the fact that he originally approached the humans as a friend, searching for people to talk to.



Eventually, the humans settled down and built houses, decorating the interiors with tapestries. They developed farming and the women worked the land and tended to animals while the men hunted. The men would drink and brag about their fights with other bands of men. Grendel was amused by the humans, observing of their violence that “no wolf was so vicious to other wolves.”

Grendel describes how humans would gather around meadhall tables and boast. Occasionally an argument would break out and one man would kill another. The killer would be put on trial and either executed, excused, or exiled. Grendel first tried befriending such exiles, and then ignoring them, but ended up eating them. But at this time Grendel would not usually murder humans. Rather, he would steal their cows while they slept.

One spring, Grendel noticed a change in the humans’ behavior. Groups of men would shout that they were going to steal another community’s gold and burn their meadhall. Though frustrated with himself at his compulsive need to spy on the humans, Grendel continued to observe them.

One night, around midnight, Grendel found a hall in ruins, the community’s cows slaughtered but not eaten, the humans burned and killed, and all of the gold stolen from the hall. Full-scale wars began amongst the humans. According to the songs of the men, war had always been around and the tranquil period Grendel experienced was merely a temporary peace.

From his place up in the trees, Grendel could often hear the singers in the meadhalls singing of glorious deeds of dead kings, to the delight of their drunken human audience. Grendel would occasionally see enemies arrive and watch the men fight. They’d stop twenty feet apart and yell at each other, boasting and threatening, talking about honor and justice, before finally fighting. Sometimes the aggressors would be repelled, and sometimes they would win and destroy the meadhall or capture the king and ransom him for gold and other goods. Grendel was frightened and confused by this behavior.

Grendel felt safe from the humans’ wars up in the trees. Though he and the humans spoke the same language and so were somehow related, the men were of little importance to Grendel. He was sickened by the waste of their wars, all the animals killed but not eaten. He tried to collect some of the waste and store it in his cave, but his mother didn’t like it.

As Grendel observes the progress of human history, he notes how violent humans are. His view of humans’ undignified fighting will later contrast greatly with the mythologized, heroic version of their own history that the humans develop for themselves later.



Grendel continues to be fascinated by the customs of the humans. His attempts to befriend the exiles show his desire for some kind of companion. As, at this time, Grendel seems to kill fewer humans than the humans themselves do, their behavior begs the question: are the humans or Grendel more of a monster?



As the humans’ random feuds begin to develop into organized disputes, Grendel feels an increasing need to watch them. He begins to feel a strange, voyeuristic bond with them.



Grendel learns about war. The humans are just as destructive as Grendel—and more wasteful. He at least kills to eat. They kill for all sorts of reasons. The singers claim that war has always existed, shaping history to fit and justify their present actions.



The humans continue to war with each other, claiming that they fight for honor and justice. But, from Grendel’s perspective, they simply attack each other for gold and other goods. Grendel is frightened by the humans, who seem in many ways crueler than Grendel.



Although he feels related to the humans, Grendel still sees them and their behavior as not really impacting him. He is disgusted by the wasteful destruction of their wars. When he kills animals, it is to eat.



As wars continued, some groups of humans formed alliances (though some allies betrayed each other). Grendel watched season after season, sometimes from the high cliff wall near his den, as Hrothgar gradually rose above the other men in power. Hrothgar collected tribute from nearby groups, who pledged to fight for him. His messengers and their carts often got stuck in the soft earth and the men would whip and hit the oxen until they bled and sometimes ran away. Carts would often get irretrievably stuck and had to be destroyed.

Hrothgar met with his council about these problems and decided to build roads throughout his realm. Now his men could easily go to the aid of their subjects and Hrothgar's large army could easily defeat most bands of attackers. New roads were built as Hrothgar's kingdom expanded and amassed more treasure. His meadhall became piled high with gold and other treasures.

Men hacked down trees and thinned forests, hunted large amounts of game, and killed birds for sport. Their own animals grazed and cleared hedges. Grendel says that "there was nothing to stop the advance of man." He began to feel a vaguely violent unrest.

One night, watching from behind a cowshed, Grendel saw a blind man arrive at Hrothgar's meadhall with a harp and a young companion. The harper went inside and talked to Hrothgar, and then played his harp and sang of old kings' glorious deeds. Men became quiet, and Grendel says that the very landscape hushed "as if brought low by language." The harp-player, known as the Shaper, offered to sing of Hrothgar's glory for pay.

Grendel was swept up in the song and music of the Shaper even though he knows that the Shaper's version of a heroic history is false. Grendel felt as though the Shaper had changed the world and the past. Grendel remembered the true past, with random bands of men slaughtering each other, but could now also remember the version of the past the Shaper invented as if it were true.

Grendel fled from the meadhall crying, feeling ridiculous and pained by the Shaper's poetry. He attempted to reason about how true or false the Shaper was. From the top of the cliff overlooking Hrothgar's realm, he screamed loudly. The scream sounded ugly compared to the Shaper's beautiful music. He screamed again and ran back to his cave.

Grendel continues to observe the development of the humans, who appear not only violent but also treacherous. As Hrothgar's power grows, notice how his men begin to act cruelly toward their animals. They are separating themselves from nature, seeing themselves as above it.



Roads tame nature. Hrothgar's kingdom grows in power, but the most apparent indicator of his success is his selfish amassing of treasure. He is like the dragon in this, hoarding gold.



As Hrothgar's kingdom expands, his people abuse nature more and more, causing Grendel to become angry toward them and their reckless treatment of plants and animals.



The Shaper's music is extremely powerful. It seems to change the entire natural world surrounding him and also creates a glorified, heroic human history. Grendel is in awe of the power of the Shaper's language. The fact that the Shaper sings for money, though, seems to undercut the heroism of his poetry, as it means he is creating this art for selfish ends.



Grendel feels very conflicted about the Shaper. He is fascinated by the beauty of his songs, but is frustrated at its falseness and lies about the past. He is confused by the power of the Shaper to alter the past through the beauty of his fiction.



The Shaper's art not only confuses Grendel, but also causes him pain. The beauty of his music makes Grendel more aware of his ugliness as a monster, which makes him both angry at the Shaper and jealous of his ability.



CHAPTER 4

In the present day, the Shaper still sings, as Grendel continually spies on Hrothgar's greatest meadhall, Hart. Grendel says that the Shaper built the hall with the power of his songs. He once sang of a glorious meadhall that would have power over the whole world and Hrothgar liked the idea of building such a hall by the sea.

Grendel knew the Shaper was lying but his words sounded true. Hrothgar gathered a slew of workers to construct the new meadhall. Grendel kept listening to the Shaper's songs, which he knew were mere flattery, but was still swept up by it. Grendel felt bad about his monstrous nature and retreated into the darkness where he couldn't hear the Shaper's music, though he was "tormented by its images."

Talking to himself out in the wild, Grendel thought about how the Shaper was able to reshape the world and change it. As he thought, Grendel thought he heard something talk back to him, some "impression from another mind" in the forest. The Shaper's manner of speaking began to affect Grendel, who started to speak with pompous, poetic speech. The Shaper was able to change what people thought and thereby make the world better. Grendel knew that the Shaper only sang for pay, but was still fascinated by the Shaper, who seemed to be inspired by some force outside of himself. Grendel concluded that the Shaper created "the projected possible."

Feeling some kind of presence around him, Grendel went toward Hart. At the edge of the settlement, he accidentally stepped on a dead man, whose clothes had been stolen. As the Shaper began to play, Grendel picked up the body and went closer to the hall to listen.

The Shaper sang of how the earth was first created by the greatest of gods and how two ancient brothers fought, splitting the world between darkness and light, between one cursed and one blessed race. Grendel was the descendant of the cursed race. Grendel believed the song and cried.

The Shaper has the power to inspire the humans to great deeds. The example of the meadhall Hart shows that the Shaper can use his fictional art of language and music to effect real change in the world, to make men want to create great things through the inspiration of a beautiful (though false) past.



The Shaper's alluring falsehoods continue to torment Grendel. He knows that he should disbelieve the songs, but is tempted by their beauty. Still, the beauty of the Shaper's art makes Grendel more aware of his difference and separation from the humans.



Grendel continues to ponder the Shaper's ability to reshape the world. This apparent ability of an individual's mind to change the world relates to Grendel's more general questioning of the relation between self and universe. The Shaper's language is so alluring that it begins to affect Grendel's own narration. He may feel anger and hate toward the Shaper, but he is also to some degree jealous of his artful language and so tries to imitate it.



Grendel thinks that he feels some presence in nature, which he will continue to think occasionally, although he knows nature to be mindless and mechanical. The dead man is further evidence of the humans' unexplained, treacherous behavior.



The Shaper sings of something resembling the Biblical story of Cain and Abel, in which Cain kills his brother Abel and is therefore cursed (and the story of Beowulf does identify Grendel as a descendant of Cain). This story provides the humans with a way to make sense of Grendel as a monster, something both inherently different from them—and evil in comparison to them—but somehow related.



Grendel then rushed into the hall crying out “mercy!” and “peace!” The Shaper stopped playing and the men screamed and attacked Grendel. Grendel dropped to his knees, saying “friend.” One of the humans’ spears tipped with venom nicked Grendel and he suddenly realized that they could kill him. He fled to the forest.

In the middle of the forest, Grendel moaned and wept. After calming down, he asked why he couldn’t have someone to talk to. He pondered whether the humans were as miserable as he was.

Two nights later, Grendel went back to hear the Shaper, addicted to his singing. The Shaper sung lies about how men had fought heroically against Grendel. Grendel was outraged by the song. He felt a presence around him, but thought it might just be his imagination. After calming himself, he returned to his lair, remembering the Shaper’s songs.

Back in his cave, Grendel was convinced that the Shaper’s songs about the creation of the world and the feud between two ancient brothers were lies. But, the Shaper might make it true. Grendel then realized that he wanted the story to be true. He wanted the beauty and order of the story, even if he had to be the outcast. Grendel’s mother whimpered and scratched at her breast, from which Grendel had not nursed in years. Grendel describes her as “pitiful” and “foul.”

Grendel awoke suddenly, feeling some presence around him again. He asked who it was, but no one replied. He went above-ground, where he cleared his mind and “sank away through earth and sea, toward the dragon.”

CHAPTER 5

Grendel recalls his meeting with the dragon, a humongous creature who lay on top of his treasure hoard in his cave. The dragon told Grendel he was expecting him. Grendel was in awe of the dragon, who commented that Grendel now knew how the humans felt about him. The dragon laughed at how silly the terrified Grendel looked.

Once again, Grendel’s peaceful intentions are misunderstood. The humans—who have now defined monstrous origins for Grendel—don’t take the time to listen to Grendel, but rather immediately perceive him as a dangerous monster.



Grendel’s attempt to communicate with the humans is another attempt at breaking out of his isolation. He simply desires someone to talk to. He wonders if, even if he can’t talk to the humans, he might share a connection to them through mutual but separate misery.



Grendel is addicted to the Shaper’s singing, but is outraged by his lies concerning Grendel and the fake heroism of Hrothgar’s men. He again momentarily thinks that there is some presence in nature.



The Shaper’s language and art has the ability to make false things true. Grendel’s realization that he wants the story to be true shows how desperate he is for some kind of relationship with the humans and for some kind of meaning in the world. He is willing to be their cursed monster if it gives him a meaningful place and some connection to other people. Grendel’s continued growth and learning separates him further from his mother, who seems to him increasingly simple and brutish.



Again, Grendel feels some kind of mysterious presence, in contrast to his ideas that he alone truly exists, and that nature is devoid of consciousness.



Grendel’s fear of the dragon shows him how the humans feel around him. The difference between monsters and other creatures is thus revealed to be, at least partially, a matter of perspective: Grendel is terrifying to the humans, but so is the dragon to him.



Irritated, Grendel picked up an emerald to throw at the dragon. The dragon got immediately stern and told Grendel never to touch the treasure. Grendel thought about no longer trying to scare the humans, but the dragon encouraged him to keep doing it.

The dragon gave Grendel the advice to find some gold and watch over it. Grendel attempted to question the dragon, who got angry and told him to stay still. The dragon told him about the Shaper, calling his art mere illusion. The dragon said that he knew everything: past, present, and future.

The dragon referred to the humans as “counters, measurers, theory-makers,” saying that “they’d map out roads through Hell with their crackpot theories!” When the humans realize that their theories are flawed, the dragon explained, the Shaper helps by providing a pleasing illusion of reality.

The dragon decided to tell Grendel about time and space, emphasizing the importance of scale and perspective in terms of time when thinking about nature. The dragon continued his philosophical explanation, suspicious that Grendel was not paying attention.

The dragon tried to explain further, saying that “the essence of life is to be found in the frustrations of established order.” Grendel had trouble following the dragon’s abstract language filled with philosophical jargon.

Continuing to try to educate Grendel, the dragon explained the difference between animals and vegetables. Grendel pondered whether the dragon was intentionally telling him nonsense. The dragon kept talking and then told Grendel that he was foolish to come.

Grendel is not yet committed to his rivalry with the humans, but the dragon encourages him to continue his feuds with them.



The dragon, who knows all, begins to lecture and teach Grendel about the world. He dismisses the Shaper’s songs as simple falsehoods. The dragon’s advice about gold can be taken as advice to embrace solitude and selfishness, to cease to yearn for connection.



The dragon scoffs at the humans’ endless theories (though he has his own system of theories and beliefs). The power of the Shaper’s language and art, according to the dragon, is to make the world seem comprehensible by being so compelling that the world seems to fit the humans’ theories. His songs are a way of creating comfortable lies.



The dragon continues to expound his philosophy regarding time and the universe. He emphasizes the importance of perspective in terms of time.



Grendel has trouble following the dragon’s explanations. While the dragon presents the most authoritative set of theories in the novel, his abstract and (at times) opaque language can be seen as a parody of idle, impractical philosophizing. The dragon’s philosophy works for someone content to sit and count his gold, but perhaps not for someone who wants to live in the world.



Grendel is unable to grasp the dragon’s lofty ideas. While the dragon and Grendel can converse, Grendel still lacks someone he can really talk to and communicate with.



The dragon then attempted to give a general summary of his ideas for Grendel: “things come and go.” The dragon explained that all life was meaningless, a small “swirl in the stream of time, a temporary gathering of bits.” Grendel refused to believe the dragon, who told him he was hampered by his small mind.

The dragon's main point is that individuals' lives are unimportant and meaningless in the context of the entire universe and all of eternity. Despite the persuasiveness and authority of the dragon's ideas, Grendel's refusal to believe again suggests that the dragon's viewpoint is so vast as to be untenable for someone who must live in the world.



Grendel asked the dragon why he shouldn't stop terrifying the humans. The dragon answered that Grendel improved the humans, forcing them to think and scheme. He calls Grendel “the brute existent by which they [the humans] learn to define themselves.”

The dragon is able to see that the humans need Grendel. Their antagonistic relationship propels the humans to improve. More fundamentally, the humans need a monster against which to define their humanity.



The dragon explained his own personal ambition: to count all of his treasure. He advises Grendel, “know thyself.” Grendel told the dragon of the Shaper's story of the world's creation, which the dragon called ridiculous. The dragon reiterated the unimportance of all life in the grand scheme of eternity. Grendel protested. Finally, the dragon told him to “seek out gold and sit on it.”

The dragon's view of the world is self-centered. He adapts the ancient Greek aphorism “know thyself” to justify the selfish seeking out of treasure. The dragon again denigrates the Shaper's stories as not just lies but as laughable, because he sees no value in a creation story—who cares about how things came to be if you are focused solely on yourself.



CHAPTER 6

After his meeting with the dragon, Grendel felt an air of futility and doom around himself. Also, the dragon had put a charm on him so that no weapon could cut him. This newfound invulnerability drove him to visit Hart more often, but also isolated him further as the humans could no longer really fight with him.

Grendel's invulnerability isolates him further from the humans. While they had a chance to kill him, he felt some connection—they were equals, defining each other. Now that he is too powerful for them, that mutual definition is no longer operable.



In the summer of the first year of Grendel's war with Hrothgar, Grendel was drawn to the meadhall though he had not yet begun systematic raids. He would wait at the edge of the forest, listening to the Shaper's songs, which enraged him with their confidence and hope. He went up to the wall of the meadhall and peered in through a crack. The Shaper sang of how God had been kind to Hrothgar's people, who were the richest and most powerful on earth.

The Shaper's songs continue to irritate Grendel. However, his anger at their arrogance and ignorance is at least partially also jealousy of the humans' community and their sense of hope. Grendel, with no community, has no hope. And he has no illusions about any gods giving kindness or blessings.



One night as he was doing this, a stick snapped behind Grendel and a dog barked. A guard discovered him and struck him with a sword, but could not hurt Grendel. More men came and attacked in vain. Grendel laughed. He had meant them no harm. He walked off, carrying the guard with him, and ate the guard. He returned to the woods happily.

Terrifying the humans brings at least some joy and purpose to Grendel's life. Perhaps he needs them as much as they need him. Notice, still, how Grendel at this point kills only to eat.



Three or four nights later, Grendel performed his first raid. He burst into the hall while the men were sleeping and ate seven of them, taking joy in the killing. He says that he himself became the mother he had once searched for. He felt as though he had finally “become something” and called himself “Grendel, Ruiner of Meadhalls, Wrecker of Kings.” But, Grendel notes, he also felt more alone than ever.

A few nights later, Grendel raided Hart again. The humans tried to attack him bravely, but their weapons were useless against the dragon’s charm. Grendel laughed as man after man attacked him, shouting about honor, Hrothgar, and God. Though laughing, Grendel felt empty and imagined himself going on killing without difficulty indefinitely. Filled with rage, he smashed and destroyed benches, tables, and beds.

Then, a man named Unferth appeared. Grendel calls Unferth his salvation. Taller than the other men, Unferth took on Grendel single-handedly and acted like a righteous hero, threatening Grendel. Grendel laughed at Unferth’s heroic posturing and spoke back to him. Unferth was shocked to learn that Grendel could speak and pledged to kill him. Grendel responded sarcastically, mocking Unferth’s heroism and saying that he thought heroes only existed in poetry. Frustrated, Unferth charged at Grendel, but Grendel picked up apples from a nearby table and threw them at Unferth, hitting him so that he bled. Unferth slipped on the bloody floor, making Grendel laugh. Unferth attempted to charge again, but Grendel tipped the table of apples over on top of him. Unferth was extremely angered, but Grendel simply left. He says that he got more pleasure from that fight than any other.

Grendel returned to his cave. Three nights later, Unferth arrived, having followed him. Grendel woke up startled, stopped his mother from going to Unferth, and went to see Unferth himself. Unferth was exhausted and injured by the firesnakes he had to swim by to get to Grendel’s den. He announced his arrival and said that his heroic acts would be sung in future songs. He waited for Grendel to kill him, but Grendel just watched him silently.

Frustrated, Unferth told Grendel that he was wrong about heroism, that it really did exist and that Unferth was a true hero, because no one would know whether he found Grendel and died heroically or simply fled. According to Unferth, this defines “inner heroism.” Unferth continued to refer to himself as a hero, which annoyed Grendel. Grendel decided to carry Unferth back to Hrothgar’s meadhall safe and unharmed.

Again, killing the humans makes Grendel happy and gives him an identity. He no longer feels the need to search for a companion in his mother. He has "birthed" himself as a "Ruiner of Meadhalls." Nonetheless, despite his antagonistic relationship with the humans, ultimately he still feels lonely.



Grendel in his strength, and knowing the truth of the human's past, knows that the ideals of honor, king, and god are in fact meaningless lies. Yet the ease with which Grendel defeats the humans takes some of the joy out of his raids. He craves some kind of rival or struggle, some connection through mutual risk.



Unferth attempts to provide Grendel with a rival, but he is not strong enough to be a true rival to Grendel. It is easy, therefore, for Grendel to mock Unferth’s ideas of heroism. Rather than fighting him, which would allow Unferth to be a kind of hero, Grendel humiliates him and makes him look ridiculous by pelting him with apples. Unferth’s identity as a hero depends on a cooperating monster. By refusing to cooperate, by fighting with apples rather than claws or swords, Grendel takes pleasure in destroying Unferth’s and the other humans ideals of heroism.



Unferth is desperate to be a hero, even if that means dying. By not killing him and not allowing him a heroic end, Grendel tortures him further.



Unferth persists in his beliefs about heroism. In his mind, he is a true hero since he pursued Grendel to his lair even though no men will know of his deed. Grendel again frustrates Unferth’s attempt to be a hero by deciding to return him safely to Hart.



Unferth fell asleep and Grendel carried him back home, leaving him at the meadhall door. Grendel says that Unferth still lives, challenging Grendel in vain, ashamed that he alone is spared in Grendel's raids.

By refusing to fight Unferth, by ensuring Unferth's safety, Grendel successfully demoralizes Unferth, making him lose faith in the idea of heroism.



CHAPTER 7

It is now mid-way through the twelfth year in Grendel's war with the humans. Grendel thinks that his enemies do define themselves against him, just as the dragon said. He could kill all of Hrothgar's men in one night, but he restrains himself, realizing that he needs the humans, as well. He asks, "What will we call the Hrothgar-Wrecker when Hrothgar has been wrecked?"

Grendel recognizes that the humans use him to define themselves. But he also realizes that he defines himself through his difference from and rivalry with the humans. Monsters and humans need each other.



Grendel sings, influenced by the language of the Shaper. He thinks he might be crazy but keeps singing. He narrates in third-person how he scares a human out in the wilderness. He has killed his quota of men for the season. Following from his self-imposed quota, Grendel formulates what he calls Grendel's law: "There is no limit to desire but desire's needs."

Grendel is further influenced by the Shaper's alluring singing. His new understanding of his relationship with the humans moves him to formulate "Grendel's law", a further example of his attempt to make sense of the world through theories and reason, just as the humans do.



As Grendel's stream of consciousness continues to alternate with third-person narration, he thinks of Hrothgar's queen, Wealtheow, and tries to define her geometrically and physically as a cross-section of time-space.

Grendel's attempt to see Wealtheow as a cross-section of time-space shows his commitment to rational investigation and theorizing.



Grendel remembers how Wealtheow first appeared, during the second year of his raids. Hrothgar had gathered all of his army to fight a new rival king. Grendel watched the army gather and march, eager for bloodshed.

The prospect of war, which used to disgust Grendel, now excites him in the boredom and isolation of his routine.



Hrothgar met with the other king. Grendel anticipated a battle, but the king asked for a truce and offered Hrothgar gifts. Hrothgar was skeptical, but then the king brought out a beautiful woman, his sister, and offered her in marriage to Hrothgar. Grendel was fascinated by the woman. She caused him pain in the same way that the Shaper's songs once did.

Wealtheow represents another aspect of human life which Grendel despises but also desires. Like the beauty of the Shaper's art, Wealtheow's physical, feminine beauty makes Grendel painfully aware of his own monstrosity and his own inability to ever have companionship with a woman.



All that winter, Grendel refrained from raiding Hart. He spent much time in his cave, thinking of Wealtheow and observing his mindless mother. At times Grendel would go to the meadhall and watch Wealtheow serve all the tables, charming Hrothgar like the Shaper. She softened tempers and mediated arguments, her beauty resolving men's disputes. She calmed Unferth when other men teased him about having killed his own brother.

Grendel spent much time pondering the power of Wealtheow's beauty. He often saw her cry at night, missing her old home. Once that winter, Wealtheow's brother came to Hart. All the men ate, drank, and listened to the Shaper. Grendel watched through the crack in the wall. The humans were all merry, though Grendel noticed some underlying tension between Hrothgar's men and Wealtheow's brother and his men. Back in his cave, Grendel was frustrated by the humans' merriment. Although he had met the dragon and knew that the world was meaningless, he was tempted by the humans' arrogant self-importance and happiness. Grendel was tortured by Wealtheow as he once was by the Shaper.

The next night, Grendel raided the meadhall, killing men on his way to the queen's bedroom. Finding Wealtheow, he picked her up and examined her, pulling her legs apart. He resolved to kill her, but then changed his mind, since killing her would be pointless. He let her go, noting that doing so disproved the humans' theories about him. Grendel ran back to his cave, thinking that he had "cured himself" of his recent melancholy, though part of him was still troubled by Wealtheow's beauty. He decided to kill himself but then changed his mind.

CHAPTER 8

Imitating an epic, heroic style, Grendel tells of how Hrothgar's brother was murdered and so his young nephew Hrothulf came to live at Hart. Grendel's narration starts to alternate with dramatic scenes of dialogue. In the first scene, Wealtheow welcomes Hrothulf to Hart. Grendel thinks the boy may already have thoughts of challenging Hrothgar's authority. Grendel presents a theorem that he ascribes to the Shaper: "Any action of the human heart must trigger an equal and opposite reaction."

Wealtheow's charming power is again compared to the Shaper—just as the Shaper gave men a history to support them, Wealtheow gives them a new sort of home to bring them together. Grendel is fascinated by her beauty and power. Her kind presence among Hrothgar's people is in stark contrast to Grendel's mother's presence in their cave, where Grendel is essentially alone.



Grendel's reaction to Wealtheow and to the humans' merriment is similar to his initial reaction to the Shaper's false but alluring songs. Having met the dragon, he knows better than the humans and scorns their self-important, ignorant happiness. Still, he envies these very traits. His simultaneous disdain for and jealousy of the humans torments him. Note also how Grendel's sadness and loneliness is somewhat akin to what Wealtheow shares. Grendel defines the men by being an adversary; Wealtheow defines them by being someone who joins men together. Yet this position also makes her lonely.



Grendel takes out his anger by attacking the humans. Picking Wealtheow up and examining her, he literally treats her as an object. But the men also treat her as an object, as a kind of combination of beauty and sex rather than as a person. Grendel congratulates himself on letting Wealtheow live, but the humans certainly don't share his sense that he has disproved their view of him. And Grendel's own thoughts betray his statement that he has "cured himself" of her. Incidentally, the phrase "cure himself" suggests that he sees Wealtheow as the problem, the disease, rather than his own overpowering need for her as the problem. This blaming of women is also a typically masculine thing to do.



Grendel again imitates the language of the Shaper (and perhaps mocks it). As his narration experiments more with different forms and styles, Grendel may be attempting to approach the art and skill of the Shaper's storytelling. Grendel, like the humans, continues to draw new theories and conclusions from new experience.



In the next scene, Hrothulf is in the yard, thinking about all of the peasants that toil in Hrothgar's kingdom. Hrothulf is frustrated that the entire kingdom is predicated on violence that is deemed legitimate.

The next scene presents Hrothulf enjoying the shade of a tree in the woods and philosophizing. He debates whether the tree could be called tyrannical, since it doesn't allow other plants to grow where it is, and then thinks of Wealtheow and her kind love.

In the next scene, Wealtheow is beside Hrothulf's bed and asks him why he is so sad at his young age. She speaks of future generations inheriting Hrothgar's riches. She says that she used to love unthinkingly, but has now had more life experience and often cannot sleep.

The novel returns to Grendel's narration, as he describes how he saw Hrothulf increasingly take to the idea of violence. Hrothulf was generally quiet and sullen, and spent much time with an old man named Red Horse, who advised him. Grendel followed the pair once and overheard them theorizing about rebellion and whether such violence could be legitimate. Red Horse claimed that the power structure of the kingdom protected those in power and oppressed others. Hrothulf agreed that the system was a fraud.

Red Horse proposed revolution as a simple act of violence, seeing all systems and states as equally evil. But Hrothulf disagreed, saying that he wanted a state with more freedom and that only a crazy person would praise violence for the sake of violence.

Grendel notes that Hrothgar is no longer physically strong and is aware of the scheming of his various relatives and children who are eager to take over the kingdom. Grendel wonders why he continues to terrorize Hrothgar, despite all the king's problems. His answer to himself is simple: why not? Grendel sees Hrothgar's realm as the product of his own work, since it was he, Grendel, who drove the humans to improve and build their kingdom.

Hrothulf provides another example of the questioning, theorizing nature of humans, as he thinks critically about Hrothgar's kingdom.



Hrothulf is further developed as a critically thinking person. Humans are defined by their theories and beliefs, but do not all subscribe to the same ideas. Hrothulf, in particular, develops ideas and beliefs against the power of Hrothgar.



While Grendel sees the humans as annoyingly happy in their community, this scene reveals that humans, too, often feel lonely, sad, and isolated within their communities. In this way, Grendel and the humans are actually similar.



Hrothulf and Red Horse exemplify mankind's thinking and theorizing nature. Their critique of Hrothgar's kingdom and its supposedly self-sanctioned legitimate violence is noticeably similar to Grendel's earlier critical observation of the development of Hrothgar's kingdom out of small warring groups.



Hrothulf and Red Horse differ in their political philosophies. While they are similar to Grendel in their view of Hrothgar's violence as no more legitimate than any other, Hrothulf's refusal to praise violence for its own sake differentiates him from the bloodthirsty Grendel, and establishes Hrothulf as perhaps the most noble character in the book.



Grendel takes responsibility for the humans' achievements, echoing the dragon's idea that Grendel improves the humans. Grendel further embraces the dragon's emphasis on selfishness in his reasoning for continuing to terrorize the humans. But note how Grendel, who used to deplore the human's wastefulness, now terrorizes them for no purpose other than enjoyment. In his conflict with the humans, he has become more like them.



Grendel thinks of a dream to “impute” to Hrothgar. Hrothgar then narrates the dream he has: he is alone standing in a thicket. There are **two trees** that have grown into one, winding around each other. There is the flash of a blade striking the tree.

Hrothgar’s dream is vague and mystical, but the two intertwining trees (and the fact that Grendel can basically send him a dream) can be read as symbolizing how the lives of Grendel and Hrothgar are intertwined and have grown mutually dependent on each other.



CHAPTER 9

It is now December, dark and cold. Children in town make snow angels, which Grendel notices as he goes to the meadhall at night. He feels that some event is coming and feels afraid. Grendel watches one of Hrothgar’s bowmen hunt a deer. He watches the deer die and the image sticks in his mind. He says he senses “some riddle in it.”

As Grendel senses some important event approaching, the simple death of the deer sticks in his mind as a reminder of his own mortality. Like all creatures, Grendel is simply gradually moving toward his own death.



Grendel observes some priests near the meadhall praying to a ring of icons of their gods. They sacrifice a calf. Grendel sees the priests’ rituals as mere showmanship. He notes that the weak humans observe the rituals, while the strong ones ignore them. He recalls once having destroyed the images of the gods. Only the priests were upset, and the icons were rebuilt.

The humans’ religion is another example of their systems of theories and beliefs. But even many humans don’t really believe in the priests’ gods.



One dark night, at midnight, Grendel sits in the center of the circle of the icons. The humans are all asleep, but an old priest comes near and hears Grendel. He asks who Grendel is, and Grendel responds that he is the priest’s god. The priest is terrified and bows down to pray, introducing himself as Ork. Grendel asks him what he knows about the king of the gods. The priest offers his ideas about the gods and goes on and on with his theories, weeping, to the amusement of Grendel.

Like Unferth, Ork is a human whose commitment to his beliefs allows Grendel to manipulate and play with him. Grendel is amused at the ridiculousness of Ork’s theories and religious beliefs.



Ork moans, shaking violently, and presents two axioms: “things fade” and “alternatives exclude.” He continues to preach and theorize, while Grendel thinks of what to do with him.

Ork’s abstract ideas that reduce to two extremely broad and vague aphorisms recall the philosophical language of the dragon. Both the dragon and the humans’ priests offer systems of belief that attempt to make sense of the world (the difference is that the humans think there is sense in the world, while the dragon sees the foundation of the world as being meaninglessness).



Three other priests arrive. Grendel narrates a dramatic dialogue of what follows. The priests ask what Ork is doing. Ork tells them that he has talked with the king of the gods. The other priests don't believe him and try to get Ork to go back to sleep. A younger priest arrives, who believes Ork and is persuaded that Ork's beliefs are correct, but Ork ignores him. Grendel's bloodlust is put off by the priests' conversation.

The other priests' reaction to Ork satirizes their beliefs to some degree. Not even the priests, who are supposedly committed to their beliefs, believe in Ork's encounter with a god. And when the younger priest does believe Ork, Ork does not seem interested in having a follower. His supposed breakthrough in his religion and understanding of the world causes no real change or effect. All the humans go right on believing the different things they believed before encountering their "god."



All the men but Unferth are asleep. As Grendel doesn't usually raid in the winter, he heads back to his home. He has a vision of himself hanging by the roots of **an oak, looking down into an abyss**, but then he is in the woods again and reasons that it was only a dream.

Grendel's vision symbolizes his brief, unimportant life, as expressed by the dragon. Though conscious of the void of eternity that renders his life meaningless, Grendel still clings to his brief, individual life, like the roots of a tree overlooking an endless abyss.



CHAPTER 10

Grendel is profoundly bored and sick of the scent of the dragon that is around him, accompanying his protective charm. He watches a **goat** climb the rock cliffs near his lair. He shouts at the goat to leave but it keeps climbing mindlessly. He hurls a boulder at it, but it keeps climbing. Grendel is annoyed by the animal's mindless stupidity. He rips up a tree and rolls the log down at the goat. The log trips the goat and Grendel pelts it with stones. The goat, bleeding and injured, still climbs on.

Invulnerable to the humans' attacks, Grendel is no longer as excited by his war with Hrothgar. Like the ram from the beginning of the novel, the goat symbolizes the indifference of nature, as it mindlessly propels itself toward its own death, not unlike how Grendel will soon go to his own death at the hands of Beowulf.



At dusk, Grendel watches Hrothgar's men going about their business. There are guards posted throughout the realm, though there is no danger. Grendel overhears a woman telling children that an extremely strong man will come from far away one day. Grendel eats some children who stay out after dark. As spring approaches, Grendel is still bored.

The woman's tale about a strong man foreshadows the arrival of Beowulf. As Hrothgar and his people have ceased to be a real rival or threat to Grendel, his life is again filled with boredom.



The Shaper is sick. Grendel watches as Hrothgar, Wealthew, and Hrothulf go to visit the Shaper's sickbed. Grendel laughs, asking "Where are all his fine phrases now?" The Shaper dies. Grendel sees a messenger go announce the death to a woman the Shaper was particularly fond of. Grendel considers taking the woman, but thinks better of it. He watches men put coins on the Shaper's closed eyelids, and then returns home.

Grendel takes some pleasure in the death of the Shaper, pleased that his powerful language could not protect him from the passage of time. But, his desire to go see the Shaper (perhaps not so different from Hrothgar's respectful visit to the dying man) suggests that he feels some kind of connection or relationship to him.



Back in the cave, Grendel continues to feel bored. His mother begins to block the entrance to the cave, trying to stop Grendel from leaving. When they sleep, she buries him under her fur. Prompted by the death of the Shaper, Grendel ponders the impossibility of going back to the past and remembers his youth.

Grendel takes the Shaper's death as an opportunity to theorize about the past. As earlier, Grendel's mother tries to express some kind of love or protective affection for Grendel, but Grendel sees it as smothering.



Grendel decides to attend the Shaper's funeral. His mother attempts to prevent him from leaving the cave. Grendel considers that she might know something he doesn't. He pushes her aside and goes to the funeral, where the Shaper's assistant sings. Men light the Shaper's funeral pyre and priests say prayers. Grendel feels that it is the end of an epoch.

Grendel's desire to go to the Shaper's funeral again suggests that he felt a strong connection to the man and, as much as he despised him, perhaps also admired him and his ability.



Back in his lair, Grendel awakes from a deep sleep, imagining that he still hears the goat climbing up the cliff. He gets up and leaves the cave. He reflects that he should put off war with the humans until spring.

The goat's mindless persistence continues to haunt Grendel: is Grendel merely another creature of nature, progressing blindly toward his death?



CHAPTER 11

Grendel is overjoyed because a new group of humans has arrived by boat. He sensed their arrival in his cave and went to go see them come ashore. They got off the boat, decked out in armor, and met one of Hrothgar's guards. Grendel particularly noticed the strangers' leader, a huge, strong man (who is never named but can be inferred to be Beowulf). The leader told the guard that they were the Geats and had come as friends to Hrothgar. Grendel was entranced by Beowulf's muscles and was simultaneously frightened and excited by him. The Geats went to Hrothgar's meadhall.

A new human rival gives Grendel a newfound sense of excitement. Once again he has someone he can test himself against, define himself against, now that his rivalry with Hrothgar has lost its excitement.



Back in his cave, Grendel wonders if he is afraid of the Geats. In any case, he is excited by their arrival. He reflects on the unexplainable actions of humans: once, he saw a man with a family cheat on his wife for no reason. Grendel is pained by his boredom, which the Geats might dispel. He thinks that all order is only theoretical and unreal.

Grendel's boredom and isolation irritate him so much that he is glad for the excitement of the Geats, even if they also scare him. He continues to believe in the worldview of meaninglessness promoted by the dragon.



Grendel decides to go to the meadhall, reflecting on the facts that he alone exists and his mother does not truly love him for himself but only as something that is hers. He considers that he could delay his raids until the Geats leave and continues to debate what he should do even as he approaches Hart. When he arrives, he peers through the crack in the meadhall's wall.

Grendel continues to mull over his ideas and theories about the world. He seems to have some presentiment about the danger posed by the Geats, but is driven by his desire for a human antagonist.



Grendel sees that Hrothgar's Danes are embarrassed and frustrated that foreigners have come to save them. It offends their sense of honor. Ork in particular looks frustrated, as the Geats, and not the gods, have come to their rescue. Grendel thinks that he will kill the strangers for Hrothgar's honor, because he sees that while Hrothgar is also upset, the king knows he needs the Geats' help to defeat Grendel.

Though the Geats have come to help the Danes, in doing so they both expose the Danes' inability to live up to their own heroic ideals and frustrate Ork's expectations of divine aid. Though Hrothgar is Grendel's enemy, the long conflict seems almost like friendship to Grendel. It is the only real human contact he has, even if it is antagonistic. And so Grendel has an instinct to help Hrothgar now that these other outsiders have arrived.



Unferth rises and asks Beowulf if he is the one who supposedly swam for seven nights in the middle of the winter in a contest with another man because of a boast. Unferth says that Beowulf lost the contest and predicts that he will be defeated by Grendel. Hrothgar's men laugh. Beowulf responds that he actually won the swimming contest, in which he swam through a storm and killed sea-monsters. He alludes to Unferth's killing his brother, saying he'll go to Hell for the deed. Hrothgar calls for Wealtheow, who enters and eases the tension in the hall.

Unferth, who has lost faith in ideas of heroism, mocks Beowulf, but Beowulf appears to be a real hero, and astonishes the Danes (and Grendel) with his confidence and exploits.



Grendel watches Beowulf and is transfixed by the warrior's mouth as he speaks and by his muscular shoulders. He has a momentary vision of himself **hanging by the roots of an oak tree over an abyss**. But Grendel reasons that he has no reason to fear the strangers. He watches as Unferth leaves the hall, clearly upset, and continues to spy on Beowulf, more and more frightened of him and yet more and more excited to encounter him.

Grendel's vision reminds him of his mortality and the insignificance of his life in the face of the huge abyss of eternity. Because Beowulf scares him, he is excited by the prospect of a fight with him. Grendel wants to feel something other than boredom, and Beowulf gives him that.



The Geats wait in the hall for Grendel as the new shaper sings. Grendel reflects that all beings obey the mechanics of time. Grendel and Beowulf both await their encounter, as other men go to sleep. Grendel says, "it is time."

Grendel sees time as pushing him and Beowulf toward each other. Though he believes in the meaninglessness of eternity, he also sees it as wanting him and Beowulf to meet—two contradictory ideas. In some ways, Grendel is acting here like the bull in chapter 2—mindlessly following time.



CHAPTER 12

Grendel forces open the doors of the meadhall and laughs. Everyone is asleep, so he seizes and devours a man. He reaches for another but is mistaken: it is Beowulf, who is actually awake, waiting for Grendel. Beowulf grabs Grendel's hand with a strong grip and doesn't let go. Grendel screams and imagines that Beowulf has fiery wings, but tells himself to hold onto reality: it is only a man.

Grendel's physical struggle with Beowulf coincides with a philosophical struggle to see the world as it really is and to understand reality without succumbing to what he rationally knows are fantastical visions.



Grendel tries to kick, but feels as though he is falling, clutching at the **oak's** roots from his vision. He falls and slips on the bloody floor. Beowulf is talking but Grendel refuses to listen, as Beowulf's words hurt him like "chilly fire." Grendel recalls the dragon's words about the insignificance of individual lives. Beowulf says that Grendel's time has come and that he will kill him.

Beowulf's language and ideas are as hurtful to Grendel as his physical fighting. Grendel tries to maintain faith in the dragon's ideas.



Grendel calls out for his mother and tells Beowulf that if he wins it is only because of “mindless chance” since he was tricked and then slipped by accident. Beowulf twists Grendel’s arm and hurls him into a table. He whispers that Grendel makes the world what it is and orders Grendel to sing of the wall he is thrown against. Grendel resists Beowulf’s idea that he creates the wall by imagining it, but obeys and sings. Beowulf laughs.

Grendel thinks Beowulf is crazy with his insane ideas. He maintains that it was chance and accident that caused Beowulf’s victory. Beowulf tears off Grendel’s arm. Grendel shrieks in pain. Beowulf appears to have white wings and to breathe out fire. Grendel sees winged men all around him but then comes out of his vision, now aware that he will die.

Grendel cries out for his mother and flees into the woods, crying out that Beowulf’s victory was an accident. Suddenly he is looking down into the abyss from his vision. He comes to in the middle of the forest. Animals have gathered around to watch him die with “mindless, indifferent eyes.” Grendel dies; with his last words, he says that he has had an accident and spitefully tells the rest of the world, “So may you all.”

Grendel is so overcome by Beowulf that he regresses and cries for his mother. Grendel tries to maintain that his death was a meaningless accident (in line with his understanding of the world as essentially mechanical and meaningless), not the result of Beowulf’s heroism or righteousness. But Beowulf has a radically different idea. The dragon sees the world as so vast as to make men and their doings meaningless. Beowulf believes the radical opposite—that the world does not even exist without men. That men (and monsters) create the world by imagining it. Beowulf’s beliefs might be described as radically heroic. He essentially sees himself as god, as creating the world by imagining it. Beowulf might be described as the next step in the philosophical evolution of mankind, in which men place themselves at the center of the universe and replace their own gods. Grendel is unprepared for such a fight.



Grendel is overcome both physically and mentally by Beowulf, and Beowulf in Grendel’s vision comes to look like a different sort of dragon. Grendel struggles to separate reality from his strange visions, in some sense succumbing to Beowulf’s proposition that the world is what his mind makes it.



With his dying words, Grendel clings to his understanding of the world and denial of heroism. He maintains his belief in the random and meaningless chance of the world, refusing to believe that his death is anything other than an accident, not a meaningful heroic deed for Beowulf.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Fredericksen, Erik. "Grendel." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 16 Sep 2013. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Fredericksen, Erik. "Grendel." LitCharts LLC, September 16, 2013. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/grendel>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Grendel* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Gardner, John. *Grendel*. Vintage. 1989.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Gardner, John. *Grendel*. New York: Vintage. 1989.