

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Grendel

by John Gardner

written by Kay Hampson

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ISBN 978-1-935467-68-7

Reorder No. 308227

Grendel

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. trace the philosophical development of the narrator and protagonist from solipsism to empiricism.
2. examine the symbolism of the astrological signs.
3. discuss how the use of consonance and alliteration to create emphasis, unity, and rhythm.
4. examine the use of similes, metaphors, and personification.
5. analyze the view of women depicted in the novel.
6. examine the use of Biblical allusion and discuss its contributions to plot, character, and theme.
7. recognize the influence of the author's upbringing on his work.
8. explain how the retelling of a familiar story allows the author to concentrate on developing philosophical viewpoints.
9. interpret examples of dramatic and verbal irony.
10. identify and discuss the main themes:
 - Art has the power to change the world.
 - Emotional humanity in an indifferent, mechanical universe.
 - The meaning or meaninglessness of life.
 - The need for community.
11. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Exam.
12. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Exam.

Background Lecture

John Gardner was born in Batavia, New York on July 21, 1933. His mother taught English, and his father was a lay preacher and a farmer. Gardner entered DePaw University in 1951, and graduated Phi Beta Kappa with his A.B. in 1955 from Washington University in Saint Louis. He received his M.A. from the State University of Iowa in 1956, and he finished his Ph.D. two years later, in 1958. Gardner began his career teaching medieval literature and creative writing at colleges. He moved around frequently because of his philosophical views and his strange teaching style. In 1969, he received a grant to work on the story of Grendel, a monster from the 8th century epic of *Beowulf*. His early writings had received mixed reviews, but *Grendel*, published in 1971, was named one of the year's best fiction books by *Time* and *Newsweek*.

In 1973, Gardner stopped teaching to concentrate on writing. Known by his contemporaries as a "Literary Outlaw," he caused debate with his controversial ideas about what fiction should be. His 1978 book *On Moral Fiction* was particularly controversial because Gardner criticized several contemporary authors.

In addition to *Grendel*, Gardner wrote several other novels, including *The Wreckage of Agathon*, *The Sunlight Dialogues*, and *October Light*. He also wrote children's books based on classic works of literature. Gardner divorced twice and was engaged a third time when he died in a motorcycle accident in Pennsylvania on September 14, 1982.

Grendel is the monster in the eighth-century epic *Beowulf*. John Gardner retells the tale from the monster's point of view. He uses the circumstances surrounding the beast and the beast's response to them to explore the philosophies of solipsism, existentialism, and empiricism, among others. Speaking of the monster, Grendel, John Gardner says he "wanted to go through the main ideas of Western Civilization...and go through them in the voice of the monster, with the story already taken care of, with the various philosophical attitudes, and see what I could do." Because the tale of *Beowulf* already had a familiar plot and established characters, Gardner was able to focus his attention on theme.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Which characters of the novel come closest to each of the heroic types: epic, tragic, romantic, and anti-hero?
2. Examine the ways in which Wealtheow is a foil for Grendel.
3. Consider the denotation of “mechanical.” Examine how Gardner uses “mechanical” to develop ideas and create unity.
4. Grendel is an observer of humans. Trace the evolution of his thoughts regarding man from when he was a young monster to after his visit with the dragon.
5. In what ways did *Grendel* serve as a vehicle for John Gardner to explore and comment on various philosophies?
6. Examine one of the novel’s themes. What techniques does Gardner use to develop that theme?
7. John Gardner’s father was a lay minister and raised his son with Christian beliefs. How does this novel reflect the influence of his family’s belief? In what other ways does John Gardner express himself in this novel?
8. Gardner assigns a different astrological sign to each chapter. Do the signs enhance or distract from the story? Do they suggest the meaning in each chapter, or does their use seem contrived?
9. Gardner introduced many philosophical viewpoints: solipsism, existentialism, Machiavellian theory, Whitehead’s metaphysics, empiricism, and nihilism. Choose one of the theories and explain how it applies to this novel.
10. Gardner uses several rhetorical devices in *Grendel*, including alliteration, consonance, personification, simile, and metaphor. Choose one and explain how Gardner uses it to construct and convey meaning.
11. Chart the appearances of women in the novel. What was the role of women in medieval times? How are they portrayed?

Grendel

Chapter 1

1. In the first paragraph, what do Grendel's actions indicate about him?

2. From what point of view is the story told?

3. What astrological sign is implied in Chapter 1? What does the sign represent?

4. What role do cycles, represented by Aries and the cycle of the zodiac, play in the chapter?

Chapter 3

1. At what stage of life is Grendel?

2. What effect does Gardner create with his use of polysyndeton and asyndeton?

3. What role do women play in this society?

4. What is Grendel implying when he makes the observation that “no wolf was so vicious to other wolves”?

5. Gemini is the astrological sign of this chapter. Identify how Gardner weaves the symbol into this chapter.

Chapter 5

1. Sum up the metaphysical view the dragon presents.

2. How does Gardner’s description influence the reader’s opinion of the dragon?

3. Why does Grendel have trouble understanding what the dragon is saying?

4. How are nature, time, and space personified?

5. Why does Grendel seek out the dragon?

Chapter 7

1. Interpret the significance of the boat.

2. How long has Grendel's war been going on? When does Chapter 7 take place on the timeline of the war?

3. How does Gardner convey to the reader the changes taking place in Grendel?

4. What one object captivates Grendel and holds him in check?

5. Trace the progression of the setting.

Chapter 9

1. How does the author use nature to portray the winter?

2. The image of the bowman pursuing a hart resonates with Grendel. He says that he senses “some riddle in it.” Give a possible interpretation of the riddle.

3. What is ironically humorous about Ork’s “vision” of the Destroyer?

4. With what is the third priest concerned? What is he not concerned with?

5. Sum up Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy and cite evidence of its presence in the novel.

6. What does the sign of Sagittarius contribute to this chapter?

Chapter 11

1. What is the astrological sign that follows Capricorn? What symbol represents it? How does Gardner weave aspects of the eleventh sign into this chapter?

2. Who arrives in the boat? Why do they come?

3. Describe the Geats, citing the similes Gardner uses. What is the significance of the types of similes Grendel uses to describe these strange creatures?

4. Grendel metaphorically compares his thoughts with what?

5. Cite portions of the text that support Grendel's transition to existential thought.

6. What color does the author use in setting the grim mood of this chapter?
