

Contents

| | Page | Handouts |
|------------------------------------------|------|------------------------|
| Introduction | v | |
| Teacher Notes | vii | |
| 1 Background and Setting | 1 | 1, 2, 3, 4 |
| 2 Language and Style | 9 | 5, 6, 7 |
| 3 Understanding the Story | 19 | 8, 9, 10 |
| 4 Symbolism: The Necessary Monster | 27 | 11 |
| 5 Theme | 31 | 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 |
| 6 Point of View | 41 | 18, 19, 20, 21 |
| 7 Structure | 47 | 22 |
| 8 Character Development | 51 | 23, 24, 25, 26 |
| 9 Humor and Symbolism | 57 | 27, 28 |
| 10 Theme | 61 | 29, 30, 31 |
| Supplementary Materials | | |
| Crossword Puzzle | 67 | |
| Test— <i>Beowulf</i> | 68 | |
| Test— <i>Grendel</i> | 71 | |
| Essay Topics | 72 | |
| Answer Keys | 73 | |
| Bibliography | 75 | |

Lesson 8

Character Development

Objectives

- To trace Grendel's development from a fascinated spectator of men's activities to a cold-blooded killer of men
- To explore reasons behind Grendel's feuding
- To identify heroism in the characters
- To identify traits of the anti-hero in Grendel and Unferth

Notes to the Teacher

Grendel could be classified as a psychological or even a confessional novel since much of the novel is an interior monologue in which Grendel, the main character, searches for a meaning to his existence. The other characters play a subordinate role as measures against which Grendel hopes to find definition. He observes, discusses, terrifies and sometimes eats them in an attempt to discover if he matters or not.

Although Grendel is a monster, he shares intelligence, language, and a search for meaning with the humans who inhabit his world. He is fascinated by humans, especially their poetry and music. He cannot reconcile the reality of bloodshed, drunken boasting and betrayal with the idealistic heroism expressed by the singing in the mead-hall. He refuses to recognize the nobility, sacrifice, or heroism in Hrothgar, Wealtheow, or Unferth. He sees only cunning machinations, futile waste of beauty, and silly posturing in their attitudes.

In most of the novel, he agonizes over why he keeps killing the Danes and whether he should stop or not. He finds no answers to his questions nor does he get comfort from his mother or his shadowy ancestors; the dragon's explanations are either incomprehensible or unsatisfyingly close to his own pessimistic vision. He scornfully rejects the inspiration provided by the Shaper's beautiful songs that clothe the deeds of Hrothgar's people in heroic nobility whether deserved or not.

Grendel could be viewed as a psychological study. What causes Grendel to become a man-eater? Is it an unhappy childhood? Is it rejection? Grendel himself calls it a sickness. Or is it the charm turned curse because now that weapons are useless, nothing can stop his marauding?

Grendel has characteristics of an anti-hero. He calls himself the world-rim walker, outcast and outlawed. He rejects Danish society, politics, ideals, and religion. He tries and fails to find a better answer than accidental meaninglessness. He tries and fails to be accepted by men.

Yet the reader cannot hate him for even in his evilness, he evokes sympathy and sorrow while he gobbles down Hrothgar's thanes. Will he somehow be saved by his love for the Shaper's singing? Will he reject the wisdom of the dragon? It does not happen. He falls to his death whispering his litany: the world has no meaning; everything is *accident*.

Procedure

1. Distribute **Handout 23**. Allow students to work in small groups to find the references and to answer the questions in chapters 2–6. After discussing their findings, ask whether any one incident stands out as the main reason for Grendel's feud.

Suggested Responses:

Chapter 2—*Grendel is trapped in a tree. The men, at first, think he is a tree fungus; then they decide he is a spirit that eats pigs. The king, in fear, attacks him with an ax; he is saved by the appearance of his mother. He says they are dangerous because they think and scheme, and he calls them crazy.*

Chapter 3—*Grendel is emotionally affected by the Shaper's songs, but he calls the words lies. He feels torn apart because the reality of what he observes does not match the fine beauty and idealism of the Shaper's words.*

Chapter 4—*Grendel decides to convert after he hears the Shaper singing about the creation of the world and how he is the dark side of creation. He goes toward the mead-hall calling for mercy and peace, but the Danes attacked him with their weapons. He wishes for someone to talk to. He returns because he says he is addicted. He wants the Shaper's songs to be true even if he has to be the outcast.*

Chapter 5—*The dragon says that Grendel inspires the Danes and improves them, that if there were no Grendel, they would invent another to take his place because they need a*

monster. Therefore, Grendel, himself, is irrelevant. It will make no difference whether he stops or not; nothing will change.

Chapter 6—Grendel at first feels that the charm has defeated his enemies. He then realizes that now he has nothing to fear and nothing to stop him; his raids become a kind of inevitability. He discovers the charm when he accidentally runs into a guard, trips and is not hurt by the guard's sword. He has discovered a reason for his existence and is now the "Ruiner of Mead-halls, Wrecker of Kings."

Opinions will vary as to the main reason for the feud.

2. Distribute **Handout 24**. Ask students to imagine that Grendel is explaining to Hrothgar why he began the feud, and why he is entitled to consideration despite his murders. Tell them to model their speech that Frankenstein's monster makes to Dr. Frankenstein. Allow students who are good at dramatic interpretation to perform their speeches for the class.
3. Distribute **Handout 25**. Ask students what being a hero means to them. List their responses on the chalkboard. Formulate a consensus description of a hero. As a class, work on the descriptions of the three characters. Ask students to write their paragraphs individually as homework. When they have finished, ask for volunteers to read their answers aloud.

Suggested Responses:

Hrothgar's heroism is the patient kind which does not give up even when he realizes that Grendel cannot be stopped with Danish weapons, that his treaty with the Helmings will probably be broken, that Hrothulf will very likely try to take his kingdom from his sons.

Unferth does not hide, run away or commit suicide in spite of the fact that he has been cheated out of his heroic clash with Grendel by Grendel's refusal to fight him. He tries to make himself hope for Beowulf's success.

Wealthew carries out her duties as Hrothgar's Queen with grace in spite of Grendel's raids and her brother's hatred of Hrothgar. She soothes Unferth and treats Hrothulf with kindness in spite of his danger to her sons.

Beowulf's heroism is self-confident and sure, unafraid of danger. His eyes stare unfocused. He seems coolly insane to Grendel. The Danes are afraid of his lashing tongue.

4. Distribute **Handout 26**. Explain that the anti-hero is common in modern fiction. This type of hero can be defined as the opposite of the traditional hero. Some examples of anti-heroes are Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Heathcliff in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, Leopold Bloom in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Yossarian in Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*. Ask students to follow the directions on **Handout 26** to identify Grendel and Unferth as anti-heroes.

Suggested Responses:

Grendel: (1) It is because he murders and the Danes cannot punish him; (2) He sneaks around the town and mead-hall at night, spying, and when he tries to join them, they attack him; (3) He makes fun of the Danes and rejects all they stand for; (4) He keeps searching for answers but can only come up with meaninglessness; (5) He is crude, but the other descriptions don't fit. He isn't stupid or dishonest. Whether he is a failure can be argued. He is successful in his feud with the Danes, at least for twelve years, but he is a failure at establishing any answers or happiness for himself; (6) He often says he is angry.

Unferth: (1-3) They don't fit because although he did kill his brother, he made restitution according to society's law; (4) Some will argue that he tries for even greater heroism than the other Danes when he chases Grendel, and that he is forced to achieve an ideal which the other Danes might not understand because of the way Grendel humiliates him; (5) He seems to be a failure as a hero, yet he achieves an even more difficult kind of heroism by not giving up even in the face of humiliation, and he was involved in a crude and stupid mistake in his past; (6) Yes, he is angry.

Profile of a Killer

Directions: Grendel does not begin his systematic killing of the Danes, his war as he calls it, all at once. Use the references below to trace the steps which led up to his declaring the blood feud.

Chapter 2: Describe Grendel's first encounter with men. Why does he call them "the most dangerous things I'd ever met"? What does he conclude about them?

Chapter 3: What is Grendel's first reaction to the Shaper's songs? Why does he describe himself as "torn apart by poetry"?

Chapter 4: Describe Grendel's conversion. How do the Danes react to him? What does he wish for? Why does he go back again two nights later?

Chapter 5: What is the dragon's answer to Grendel's question of why he should not stop scaring the Danes?

Chapter 6: Why does Grendel say that he thought the dragon's charm an advantage *at first*? How does Grendel discover the charm? What is Grendel's explanation of the "strange, unearthly joy" that he feels after beginning his raids? What other result becomes apparent to him?

The Monster Talks Back

Directions: Another famous monster has no name, but he is known to everyone by the name of his creator, Frankenstein. Frankenstein's monster gives the following explanation to his creator for his murder of Frankenstein's brother. If Grendel were to give a similar speech to Hrothgar explaining his murders of Hrothgar's thanes, what would he say? Write the speech as Grendel would say it.

How can I move thee? Will no entreaties cause thee to turn a favourable eye upon thy creature, who implores thy goodness and compassion? Believe me, Frankenstein: I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity; but am I not alone, miserably alone? You, my creator, abhor me; what hope can I gather from your fellow-creatures, who owe me nothing? they spurn and hate me. The desert mountains and dreary glaciers are my refuge. I have wandered here many days; the caves of ice, which I only do not fear, are a dwelling to me, and the only one which man does not grudge. These bleak skies I hail, for they are kinder to me than your fellow-beings. If the multitude of mankind knew of my existence, they would do as you do, and arm themselves for my destruction. Shall I not then hate them who abhor me? I will keep no terms with my enemies. I am miserable, and they shall share my wretchedness. Yet it is in your power to recompense me, and deliver them from an evil which it only remains for you to make so great that not only you and your family, but thousands of others, shall be swallowed up in the whirlwinds of its rage. Let your compassion be moved, and do not disdain me. Listen to my tale: when you have heard that, abandon or commiserate me, as you shall judge that I deserve. But hear me. The guilty are allowed, by human laws, bloody as they are, to speak in their own defence before they are condemned. Listen to me, Frankenstein. You accuse me of murder; and yet you would, with a satisfied conscience, destroy your own creature. Oh, praise the eternal justice of man! Yet I ask you not to spare me: listen to me; and then, if you can, and if you will, destroy the work of your hands.¹

¹ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: Dutton, 1912), 101-102.

To Be or Not To Be . . . a Hero

Directions: Although Grendel refuses to recognize it, the Danes and the Geats do manage to achieve a measure of heroism in spite of their faults. On the lines next to each name, describe the heroism of each of the following characters:

Hrothgar _____

Unferth _____

Wealthew _____

Beowulf _____

Which comes closest to your idea of heroism? Answer in a paragraph or two.

The Anti-hero

Directions: Both Grendel and Unferth exhibit characteristics of the anti-hero, who frequently appears in modern literature, the opposite of the traditional hero. Examine the list of anti-hero traits. Not all anti-heroes will possess all of these traits. List the number of the trait and an example or explanation of why you chose it under the name *Grendel* and under the name *Unferth*. A trait may apply to only one or to both.

Traits of the Anti-hero

1. Deprived of the rules and consequences of society
2. Outlaw; has no status in society; must wander on fringes of society
3. Rejects values, rules, attitudes of society and political establishment
4. Seeks to establish his own rules and ethics
5. A failure, crude, sometimes stupid or even dishonest
6. Often angry

Grendel

Unferth
