GRENDEL

By John Gardner
John Gardner’s Biography

• Born in New York on July 21, 1933
• Father: dairy farmer/lay Presbyterian preacher; mother: English teacher
• Killed his younger brother, Gilbert, in a farm accident
  – Haunted by this event all of his life, suffering from nightmares and flashbacks
• Died in a motorcycle accident at the age of 49
Gardner’s Interests and Education

• Interested in comics and cartoons

• Created grotesque, cartoonish imagery to distance readers emotionally from his characters

• Graduated from Washington University and the University of Iowa

• Studied medieval literature and creative writing
Gardner’s Professional Life

• As a professor of English specializing in medieval literature, Gardner had been teaching *Beowulf*, the source of inspiration for *Grendel*, for many years at various colleges.

• Gained prominence as a teacher of creative writing at Bread Loaf Writer’s Conference in Middlebury, Vermont.

• Wrote novels, plays, poetry, short stories, operas, scholarly texts, and children’s picture books.
Grendel: Background

• Completed in 1970 and published the following year, *Grendel* was the first of Gardner's novels to bring him not just critical but popular success.

• A **metafiction**—a fiction about a fiction

• A **bildungsroman**—a novel that follows the development of the (anti)hero from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity
Grendel: Structure of the Novel

- Told from the first-person point of view in a series of flashbacks, allusions, and foreshadowing, the novel moves in and out of the present to the past, telling the story of the twelve years of Grendel’s war.
- Grendel attempts to maintain a satirical, mocking distance with his tone, thereby proving his disdain for human notions.
- Grendel struggles, within his own mind, to understand his place in a potentially meaningless world.
Characters & Themes

• **Grendel**: In *Beowulf*, Grendel is a symbol for "darkness, chaos, and death," according to critic John M. Howell. In Gardner's version, however, Grendel becomes a three-dimensional character with "a sense of humor and a gift for language." Grendel even has a weakness for poetry. As a would-be artist, Grendel strives, however comically, to escape from his baseness. *Art is so powerful,* Gardner seems to be saying, *that even a monster can be affected by it.*

• **Grendel’s mother**: Gardner builds up the role of Grendel's mother, who is inarticulate, to emphasize the *importance of language in the development of civilization*. Her inability to communicate also develops the theme that *isolation causes pain*. 
Characters & Themes

• **Beowulf**: Once again, he is the hero who saves the day, as he proves that *actions and beliefs are stronger than the forces of evil*; this also alludes to all the characters in the story who have acted in the common good—including the Shaper, Unferth, and Wealtheow.

• **Hrothgar**: Learns that *true power comes not from destruction but through unity*.

• **Unferth**: Gardner develops the theme of *heroism as another moral force that enables society to advance* by elevating Unferth, a minor character in the original poem, to a major character and foil for Grendel.
Minor Characters

- **Dragon**: Gardner also creates a relationship between Grendel and the cynical dragon in order to expand the concept of nihilism—the belief that there is no purpose to existence, and the world has no meaning.

- **The Shaper**: the name given to the king’s poet-musician-historian because he can shape reality with his words.

- **Red Horse**: delivers almost verbatim the anarchist philosophy of Georges Sorel: “The total ruin of institutions and morals is an act of creation.”
Minor Characters

- **Ork**: High priest, blind, name is taken from a character in William Blake’s poetry; seems to represent, at times, Prometheus or Christ

  - The other priests in the chapter suggest Gardner’s disgust with religious hypocrisy, as they seem to be concerned with physical, outward appearances, not spiritual.
Motifs: Recurring Images, Ideas, Figures of Speech

• **The seasons**: Novel begins in the spring and ends in the winter of the following year; spring symbolizes new beginnings, while winter symbolizes aging and death

• **The zodiac**: Another yearlong cycle—the novel is divided into twelve chapters and each is linked to a different zodiac sign

• **Machinery**: Mechanical actions and references to machinery abound and serve to highlight Grendel’s frustration with what he sees as pointless, mindless adherence to set patterns of behavior

• **The number 12**: Considered a “perfect number,” 12 refers to the signs of the zodiac, the months in a year, the sons of Israel, the apostles, and many more
Symbols & Archetypes

• The bull: acts in an unthinking, mechanical way, much like the world, which Grendel sees as acting in a brute, unfeeling manner

• The corpse: the body of a dead Dane proves to Grendel that the divide between animals and man is not clear-cut; humans are capable of cruelty and violence

• Hart (Herot): great political power and persistence

• Fish: Christ figure
The Chapters

- Each chapter of the book is associated with the passing of time and a change in Grendel’s thinking, as indicated by a heroic ideal, the sign of the zodiac, anda philosophy.
Heroic Ideals, Signs, and Philosophies

Chapter One: Cycle of Life

Aries: ram, the beginning of a new cycle; Orphisim: body is the prison of the soul, belief in reincarnation

Chapter Two: Caring Love

Taurus: encounter with the bull; Solipsism: there are no thoughts, experiences, emotions other than one’s own

Chapter Three: Poetry & Art

Gemini: sign of the twins; Sophism: teaching anything for a price, not virtue; emphasizes perversion of truth

Chapter Four: The home

Cancer: crab, the nourisher, shows growth of religion; Old Testament: basic values of good vs. evil
Heroic Ideals, Signs, and Philosophies

Chapter Five: Knowledge

Leo: lion, the dramatizer, portrayed by the dragon; Nihilism: all values are baseless, extremely pessimistic

Chapter Six: Heroism

Virgo: virgin; Ethical egotism: do what is in one’s own best interest, supports anarchy

Chapter Seven: Marriage

Libra: scales or balance

Skepticism vs. New Testament: Grendel’s beliefs vs. the goodness and faith of Weathow

Chapter Eight: Loyalty

Scorpio: scorpion Machiavellianism: tendency to deceive and manipulate others for personal gain
Heroic Ideals, Signs, and Philosophies

Chapter Nine: Religion

Sagittarius: archer Whitehead’s process: existence is best understood in terms of processes, in change, as opposed to stability

Chapter Ten: Hope

Capricorn: goat; Nietzsche: tragedy is an affirmation of life; put forward the idea that God is dead

Chapter Eleven: Friendship

Aquarius: water bearer

Existentialism: emphasizes the primacy of individual existence: “I will make of myself whatever I will.”

Chapter Twelve: Faith

Pisces: fish (end of astrological cycle) Empiricism: origin of all knowledge is in sense experience