

Character List

Beowulf - A Geatish hero who comes across the sea to rid the Scyldings of Grendel. Huge and exceedingly strong, Beowulf is cold and mechanical, showing little emotion or personality. In the climactic battle with Grendel, Beowulf appears to sprout wings and speak fire, prompting comparisons to the dragon.

Ecgtheow - Beowulf's father.

Finn - Character in a song that the Shaper's assistant sings at the Shaper's funeral.

Freawaru - Hrothgar's teenage daughter. Hrothgar plans to marry Freawaru off to Ingeld in order to avoid a war with the Heathobards.

Grendel - The protagonist and narrator of the novel. A great, bearlike monster, Grendel is the first of three monsters defeated by the Geatish hero Beowulf in the sixth-century poem Beowulf. In Grendel, he is a lonely creature who seeks an understanding of the seemingly meaningless world around him. As an outsider, Grendel observes and provides commentary on the human civilization he battles.

Grendel's mother - A foul, wretched being, and Grendel's only apparent family member. Grendel's mother lives with Grendel in a cave in a vast underground realm. She desperately tries to protect Grendel from the humans and his fate. She has either forgotten or never knew how to speak, though at times her gibberish approaches coherent language.

Halga - Hrothgar's brother and Hrothulf's father. When Halga is murdered, Hrothulf comes to live with his uncle at Hart.

Hengest, - Character in a song that the Shaper's assistant sings at the Shaper's funeral.

Hildeburth - Character in a song that the Shaper's assistant sings at the Shaper's funeral.

Hnaef, - Character in a song that the Shaper's assistant sings at the Shaper's funeral.

Hrothgar - King of the Danes. Hrothgar maintains a highly powerful and prosperous kingdom until Grendel begins terrorizing the area. In Beowulf, Hrothgar is an exemplary model of kingship, but in Grendel he is more flawed and human. Grendel often describes his war with the humans as a personal battle between Hrothgar and himself.

Hrothulf - Hrothgar's orphaned nephew. In Beowulf, Hrothulf usurps Hrothgar's son as ruler of the Scyldings. In Grendel, Hrothulf is a young man who forms ideas of revolution after seeing the aristocratic thanes subjugate the Danish peasants.

Hygilac - King of the Geats and Beowulf's lord.

Hygmod - King of the Helmings and Wealtheow's brother. Hygmod, a young king who is gaining in power and prominence, presents Hrothgar with a constant military threat.

Ingeld - King of the Heathobards and an enemy of the Scyldings.

Ork - An old, blind, Scylding priest. Ork is a theologian—one who studies the theories behind religion. Mistaking Grendel for the Destroyer, the supreme Scylding deity, Ork describes ultimate wisdom as a vision of a universe in which nothing is lost or wasted. Ork is one of only a few priests in the novel for whom religion is more than an empty show.

Red Horse - Hrothulf's mentor and advisor. A crotchety old man, Red Horse believes that all governments are inherently evil and that revolution does nothing but replace one corrupt system with another.

Scyld Shefing - The legendary king from whom Hrothgar is descended. In Scyld Shefing's honor, the Danes are sometimes referred to as the Scyldings.

The bull - A bull that discovers Grendel hanging in a tree and attacks him repeatedly. The encounter with the bull is a formative event in Grendel's philosophical development.

The dragon - A great cranky beast that rules over a vast hoard of treasure. The dragon provides a vision of the world as essentially meaningless and empty. Throughout the novel, Grendel frequently finds himself weighing the fatalistic words of the dragon against the beautiful words of the Shaper. Some critics hold that the dragon is not actually a separate character, but rather a personified aspect of Grendel's own mind. Although Grendel only visits the dragon once, he feels its presence throughout the novel.

The fourth priest - A younger priest who is overjoyed at the news of Ork's encounter with the Destroyer. The fourth priest has a vision of the universe to which Beowulf alludes in his battle with Grendel.

The goat - A goat that climbs a cliff despite Grendel's repeated yells and screams. Grendel tries to bludgeon the goat to death with stones, but it continues to climb.

The ram - The first creature Grendel encounters in the novel. The ram stands stupidly at the edge of a cliff and will not budge despite Grendel's repeated protests.

The Shaper - A harpist and storyteller in Hrothgar's court. The Shaper provides the Danes with an image of the world as essentially connected and purposeful—an image that Grendel finds incredibly seductive, despite his awareness that the glorious stories of Hrothgar's court are built on a foundation of lies. The Shaper represents the power of art and imagination to create meaning in a meaningless world.

The Shaper's assistant - A young man when he first arrives at Hart with the Shaper, the young apprentice takes over the Shaper's duties upon his death.

Unferth - A Scylding hero who is unable to defeat Grendel in battle. Unferth believes wholeheartedly in the heroic ideals of his warrior culture. When Grendel denies Unferth the opportunity to embody those ideals, he becomes a bitter and broken man.

Wealtheow - Hrothgar's wife and queen of the Danes. Originally a Helming princess, Wealtheow represents love, altruism, and an ideal image of womanhood, bringing balance and harmony to her adopted community.