

Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

Art as Falsehood

Throughout the novel, Grendel remains painfully stranded between what he knows to be true and what he wishes were true. From an intellectual standpoint, Grendel understands the world as a brute, mechanical place that follows no meaningful pattern or universal laws. He knows that all the beautiful concepts of which the Shaper sings—heroism, religion, love, beauty, and so on—are merely human projections on the universe's chaos, attempts to shape the world that exists in reality into one that the humans would like to see. The Shaper, for example, tells the Danes stories of their heritage so that the Danes learn to see themselves within a certain moral context. Upon hearing glorious tales of Scyld Shefing, the founder of Hrothgar's line, the Danes begin to see themselves as inheritors of a proud tradition and consequently feel a need to adhere to the strict moral and ethical code that the Shaper has established. The Shaper, in this manner, gives history meaning, cleaning up its messy ambiguities and producing explicit, rigid moral systems in its place. This clear, knowable vision of the world comforts the Danes, who are agreeable to the idea of a world in which kings are kings, warriors are warriors, and virgins are virgins.

Grendel, however, knows that the version of history the epics set forth is essentially a lie, as he has witnessed with his own eyes the truly barbaric evolution of the Danes. Despite his unflagging belief in rational thinking, Grendel still finds himself yearning for the emotional and spiritual fulfillment that the Shaper's beautiful fictions provide. When Grendel first hears the Shaper's song, he is so overcome that he bursts into tears and momentarily loses the ability to speak. Time and again, Grendel's intellect is overcome by the emotional response he has to the Shaper's art. At times, Grendel is even willing to accept the role of the scorned, evil adversary in order to be granted a place in the Shaper's world.

The Power of Stories

The power of the Shaper's art and imagination turns Grendel's world upside down, causing Grendel to desire what he knows to be illusory. Grendel finds the epic poems so stirring that he wants to be a part of them, even if it means he must be forever trapped in the role of the villain. On a linguistic level, Grendel is also affected by the narrative he hears the Shaper reciting. When Grendel decides to begin a war with Hrothgar, he triumphantly refers to himself as "Grendel, Ruiner of Meadhalls, Wrecker of Kings!" Even when Grendel glorifies himself, he resorts to the language of the original Anglo-Saxon poet of Beowulf, who often refers to characters by such strings of descriptive titles. Perhaps more poignant, when Grendel is chased out of Hart while attempting to join the humans, he expresses his frustration with a stream of human swearwords. Grendel then bitterly observes, "We, the accursed, [do not] even have words for swearing in!" Part of Grendel's frustration with his state is that he must rely on the language of the humans in order to relate his tale.

Grendel is affected not only by stories he hears, but also by stories that exist outside his own experience. Because the events of the epic poem Beowulf predetermine the events of the

novel *Grendel*, the earlier poem has incredible power over the world of the novel. In *Grendel*, the plotline of *Beowulf* operates like the hand of fate: before we read the first page of the novel, we know that Grendel must necessarily encounter Beowulf and die at Beowulf's hands, for the event is already recorded in the earlier poem. Indeed, Anglo-Saxon culture viewed fate as an immensely powerful force, one that was wholly inescapable. This overarching pattern and plan governing the novel contradicts Grendel's basic assertion that the world is meaningless and follows no set order.

The Pain of Isolation

Grendel's relationship with humans is defined by his intellectual interest in their philosophies, but it is also characterized by his emotional response to the concept of community. Grendel lives in a world in which his attempts at communication are continually frustrated. The animals that surround him are dumb and undignified. His mother not only lacks the capacity for language, but is also dominated by emotional instinct; indeed, we sense that even if she could speak, she would likely be an unworthy conversational partner for the intelligent, inquisitive Grendel. Grendel, then, often finds himself talking to the sky, or the air, and never hears a response. He is largely trapped in a state of one-way communication, an extended interior monologue.

Grendel's most painful rebuffing comes from the humans, who resemble Grendel in many ways. Grendel and the humans share a common language, but the humans' disgust for and fear of Grendel preclude any actual meaningful exchange. Grendel's pain is all the more acute because he is brought so close to mankind and yet always kept at an unbreachable distance. The Shaper's tale of Cain and Abel—the two sons of Adam and Eve who are the ancestors of Grendel and humankind, respectively—further underscores Grendel's tragic status. Grendel and humankind share a common heritage, but this heritage keeps them forever locked in enmity as opposed to bringing them closer. Grendel is just one in a long line of literary monsters whose inner lives resemble those of humans but whose outer appearances keep them from enjoying the comforts of civilization and companionship.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

The Seasons

Although the narrative of *Grendel* skips around chronologically, the novel is patterned after the passage of one calendar year. *Grendel* opens in the spring of Grendel's final year of life and ends with his death in the winter of the same year. The seasons are common motifs in literature, with each season having come to symbolize certain archetypes or ideas. Spring, for example, the time when cold weather retreats and new vegetation appears on the earth, has become a traditional symbol for growth and new beginnings—thus making it an appropriate time of year to set the beginning of a tale. Winter, in turn, traditionally has come to symbolize age, maturity, and death. As *Grendel* moves into its final chapters and into winter, the glory of Hart is fading, and the once virile Hrothgar is bowed with age, doubt, and grief.

The period of transition from winter into spring is of particular importance in *Grendel*. This time of year includes aspects of the winter, with its assurance of death, and the spring, with its promise of an eventual rebirth. In the song sung at the Shaper's funeral, we see that this

transitional time between winter and spring is the time of year when the Danes gained their freedom from the Frisians, but also the time that brought a tragic queen who ultimately lost her brother and her son. The winter-spring transition is a moment when the Danes regain a sense of freedom, but it also necessarily results in the death of our protagonist, Grendel.

The Zodiac

The seasons are one example of a cycle that takes a year to complete; the zodiac, or astrological system, is another. Grendel is split into twelve chapters, each linked with one month of the year and one astrological sign. Gardner includes at least one allusion to each sign within its corresponding chapter. Chapter 1, for example, occurs under the sign of Aries, the Ram, and the ram is the creature with whom we find Grendel arguing as the novel opens. Some chapters feature their astrological signs more prominently than others: the chapters of Aries, Taurus, and Capricorn all feature significant encounters between Grendel and their representative animals. Some chapters and signs require a more interpretive reading. Wealtheow arrives during the month of Libra, the balance; appropriately, we see that she is indeed a force of balance, first between the Scyldings and the Helmings and later within Hart. The zodiac motif appears to have been a late addition to the Grendel manuscript, and critics are still divided as to how much weight its symbolism should be given.

Machinery

References to mechanics and machinery abound in Grendel. Grendel often uses these metaphors as a way of expressing his frustration with what he sees as pointless, mindless adherence to set patterns of behavior. Grendel sees this tendency in the ram, which instinctually responds to the arrival of spring with a rash of ludicrous behavior. Grendel is especially frustrated when he sees this tendency in himself: he describes himself as “mechanical as anything else” when the warm weather causes him to begin attacking men again. When Grendel is stuck in the tree, both a bull and a band of humans attack him. Once the bull starts attacking Grendel, it never changes its tactics: it fights by a “blind mechanism ages old.” Humans, on the other hand, have the ability to make new patterns, to break out of routine and mechanism. This ability is the source of Grendel’s lifelong fascination with the human race.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

The Bull

Throughout the novel, Grendel condemns animals for the unthinking manner in which they follow patterns. In his view, animals, like machines, pursue tedious routines determined by outside forces (an engineer or programmer in the case of machines, nature and instinct in the case of animals), never making imaginative leaps of their own. The bull that attacks Grendel in the tree is one of the most powerful examples of this unthinking action. The bull, which continues to attack Grendel in the same, ineffective way time and again, comes to represent the world, which similarly acts in a brute, uncalculated manner.

The Corpse

Just before he hears the Shaper describe how he is the descendant of Cain, Grendel stumbles upon the dead body of a Dane who has apparently been murdered by a fellow Scylding.

Grendel takes this corpse to represent the essential, inarguable falsehood that lies at the center of the Shaper's myth: the division between human and beast is not as clear-cut as the Shaper would make it seem. Man is just as capable of cruelty and violence as Grendel; it is a lie to say that one of them is cursed while the other is blessed. The dead body represents the burden of the curse that both man and Grendel must bear. However, though Grendel thinks as much about the corpse, he also feels overcome by the beauty of the Shaper's elegant, unambiguous moral system. Grendel stumbles into Hart with the corpse in his hands, yelling "Mercy! Peace!" The corpse expands in significance, becoming not only a symbol of man and Grendel's twinned fate, but also of Grendel's desire to be accepted by the human community with which he has so many similarities. Later, the symbol of the corpse is echoed in the figure of the Danish guard whose head Grendel bites off, signaling the beginning of his twelve-year war with humankind.

Hart

For Hrothgar, his meadhall is a symbol of both his great political power and his altruism. For the Danish community at large, Hart is a symbol of the persistence of their belief: every time Grendel knocks down the door, the Danes tirelessly repair it. The fact that the Danes do so despite Grendel's continued destruction mirrors their unshakable belief in their value systems despite the cruel, chaotic nature of the world at large.