

## Chapter 1

The novel begins in the twelfth year of Grendel's war with the humans. Wandering outside, he encounters a ram and tries to scare it away. He throws a rock at it, strikes the ground, and howls, but the ram doesn't move. Grendel is frustrated by the ram's mindlessness.

Grendel walks away from the ram, toward a forest, reflecting on his difference from animals and asking the sky why creatures like the ram are so undignified. He raises his middle finger at the unresponsive sky. While different from creatures like the ram, Grendel reflects that he is not noble and calls himself a **"pointless, ridiculous monster"** who murders men, children, and cows, something of which he is neither proud nor ashamed. As Grendel observes the beginnings of spring in nature all around him, he remembers killing humans at this very location. He cries out angrily and smashes some trees.

A doe in a clearing sees Grendel and runs away. Grendel cries out that this is unfair since he has never killed a deer (since cows have more meat). Grendel notes that deer and other animals **"see all life without observing it."** He walks along, muttering and talking to his only companion: his shadow. He describes his words as walls between himself and the rest of the world.

The beginning of spring is apparent even in the underground lair where Grendel lives with his foul, monstrous mother. He has felt the stirrings of spring and so has come out of his den, swimming through a marshy lake filled with firesnakes, to satisfy his hunger for blood. Enjoying being out under the open night sky, Grendel walks to some nearby cliffs.

Grendel shouts and mocks the cliffs, from whose height he could fall and die. He is momentarily frightened by the sound of his own voice. Leaving the cliffs, he makes his way for the mead hall of Hrothgar, king of the Danes, and continues to talk to nature. Wolves and other animals are alarmed when they see Grendel coming.

Grendel thinks of his mother sleeping in their underground lair. He thinks that she feels guilty for an ancient crime and that she must have some human ancestry. But according to Grendel, his mother does not think or ponder about her life at all.

**"Behind my back, at the world's end, my pale slightly glowing fat mother sleeps on, old, sick at heart, in our dingy underground room. Life-bloated, baffled, long-suffering hag Guilty, she imagines, of some unremembered, perhaps ancestral crime. (She must have some human in her.) Not that she thinks. Not that she dissects and ponders the dusty mechanical bits of her miserable life's curse." (pg. 11)**

When they sleep, she grabs at him to pull him near but he breaks away. Grendel remembers that he used to ask her why they lived in their underground den but she would never respond. But this was before Grendel met the old dragon, who Grendel says told him the truth.

Grendel comes to Hrothgar's mead hall, where he's been busting down the door and terrorizing the inhabitants for eleven years now. Each time, people cry out and an old blind man with a harp, called the Shaper, flees out a back window. Hrothgar's men try to fight Grendel but never succeed. This time, they try blowing out all the candles and hiding, but Grendel can see clearly in the dark. He kills and eats his fill of men, as he usually does.

As he leaves the mead hall, Grendel hears various humans saying that he is a punishment sent to them because a god is angry and Hrothgar's people are sinful. He leaves the mead hall, as the humans are praying to their gods, which Grendel refers to as merely "sticks and stones." Grendel notes that the king does not pray because he has his own theories. He recalls the dragon saying of the humans, **"They'd map out roads through hell with their crackpot theories!"**

Watching from the edge of the forest, Grendel observes as the humans pray and then prepare a funeral mound for the deceased—or at least what Grendel has left behind of their bodies. Builders replace the door to the mead hall, adding improvements to try (in vain) to keep Grendel out. The humans burn the remains of the dead on a funeral pyre and throw golden rings, swords, and helmets onto the fire. They sing a funeral song, which makes Grendel angry. Frustrated and blinded by the rising sun, Grendel goes back to his underground home.

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## Chapter 2

Grendel walks around the wilderness while talking and muttering. He says that his words enclose him like a coffin. He remembers his youth and how he used to play games and explore the underground, playing with invented friends: **"I used to play games when I was young -- it might as well be a thousand years ago."**

He explored all the chambers of his mother's cave and eventually discovered a pool of firesnakes. He swam through the pool and discovered a door that led to the world above the ground.

Grendel recalls how he would gradually play farther and farther out into the world, fleeing back underground by dawn. He remembers a group of large shapes with eyes that sat in his mother's cave and watched him. Grendel reflects that he thought his mother loved him in some way, but was never sure. Sometimes he would feel like his mother and he were one being, but at other times he would feel intensely *separate* from her. He would often cry and she would hold him against her.

**“Of all the creatures I knew, in those days, only my mother really looked at me. -- Stared at me as if to consume me, like a troll. She loved me, in some mysterious sense I understood without her speaking it. I was her creation. We were one thing, like the wall and the rock growing out of it.” (pg. 17)**

Grendel remembers one morning when he went out hunting in the woods for a calf and got his foot trapped between two joined tree trunks. Trapped out in the world after dawn, he called out for his mother and cried loudly, *but she didn't come*. **“I'm going to die,” I wailed. “Poor Grendel! Poor old Mama!”** The sun rose and the world seemed horrible without his mother. He continued to cry out for her, but she didn't appear.

Then, a bull appeared, probably protecting the calf that Grendel was searching for. Grendel shouted at it, but it wouldn't go away. It charged and struck the tree, impaling one of Grendel's legs with its horn, but not doing any real harm to him. The bull mindlessly repeated its charges, and Grendel realized he could easily dodge the bull's horns each time.

Grendel laughed at the stupidity of the bull and kept looking around for his mother. He wondered if the shapes staring at him in the cave were relatives of his. He began to theorize about the world and came to the conclusion that *he alone truly exists*.

The bull kept charging and Grendel kept laughing at it, not even bothering anymore to dodge its horns. Grendel fell asleep and when he woke up the bull was gone. Vultures were flying overhead. He tried to imagine the world from his mother's perspective and realized that he could never know how she perceives him. He fell asleep again.

That night, Grendel awoke to a strange smell and an eerie silence. He looked around to find men gathering around him with lit torches. The men were talking and, at first, seemed to be speaking in some foreign language, but then Grendel realized they were speaking his same language.

**“I found I understood them: it was my own language, but spoken in a strange way... They were small, these creatures, with dead-looking eyes and gray-white faces, and yet in some ways they were like us, except ridiculous and, at the same time, mysteriously irritating, like rats. Their movements were stiff and regular, as if figured by logic... We stared at each other.” (pg. 24)**

He attempted to move but could barely move his hand.

The humans then tried to decide what Grendel was. One suggested that he was a fungus or growth. One human, identified as a king (Hrothgar), suggested that they could cut the fungus out of the tree, but another thought that Grendel might actually be a tree spirit. One of the humans, described by Grendel as hairless, moved about frantically and then suddenly agreed that Grendel was a spirit. The king asked if

the spirit was friendly. The hairless one answered that Grendel was hungry and would eat pig. Some humans rode off to get pigs, while others debated whether the spirit was angry.

Grendel tried to yell “**pig**” to confirm that he was hungry, but his voice scared the humans. The king hurled an axe at Grendel, grazing his shoulder. Grendel tried to shout at them, but his voice came out as a moan. *He cried out for his mother.* The king ordered his men to surround Grendel and he realized that the humans were “**thinking creatures.**” He tried to scare them off by shouting at them, but they attacked him with bows and javelins.

Grendel was convinced that he was done for when suddenly he heard a shriek even louder than his. His terrifying mother came rushing in, roaring and shattering trees in her wake. The men fled.

The next thing Grendel remembers is waking up back in the cave. The other shapes were gone now and Grendel guesses that they had receded further underground. Alone with his mother, he attempted to explain to her what he had discovered about the world: its “meaningless objectness” and “universal bruteness.” But his mother could not understand his language.

**“I tried to tell her all that had happened, all that I’d come to understand: the meaningless objectness of the world, the universal bruteness. She only stared, troubled at my noise. She’d forgotten all language long ago, or maybe had never known any.” (pg. 28)**

Grendel emerges from his memory, once again in his underground cave, and keeps talking and theorizing about the world and how he is the only thing in the world that exists. He becomes upset as his mother continues to not understand him, and then his mother hurls herself on top of him to embrace him, smothering him. He keeps talking to himself. When he can’t breathe under her, he claws to get free but is alarmed when he realizes his claws have drawn blood.

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## Chapter 3

Grendel says that he didn’t decide to be Hrothgar’s enemy because of the ax he threw, and only decided to take that role once Hrothgar was already an old man. He remembers how, from the edges of the forest and up in the trees, he observed Hrothgar and his men going about their business. First, bands of hunters would occasionally fight each other and tell their comrades about the fights.

Eventually, the humans settled down and built houses, decorating the interiors with tapestries. They developed farming and the women worked the land and tended to animals while the men hunted. The men would drink and brag about their fights with other bands of men. Grendel was amused by the humans, observing their violence that “**no wolf was so vicious to other wolves.**”

Grendel describes how humans would gather around mead hall tables and boast. Occasionally an argument would break out and one man would kill another. The killer would be put on trial and either executed, excused, or exiled. Grendel first tried befriending such exiles, and then ignoring them, but ended up eating them. But at this time Grendel would not usually murder humans. Rather, he would steal their cows while they slept.

One spring, Grendel noticed a change in the humans' behavior. Groups of men would shout that they were going to steal another community's gold and burn their mead hall. Though frustrated with himself at his compulsive need to spy on the humans, Grendel continued to observe them.

One night, around midnight, Grendel found a hall in ruins, the community's cows slaughtered but not eaten, the humans burned and killed, and all of the gold stolen from the hall. Full-scale wars began amongst the humans. According to the songs of the men, war had always been around and the tranquil period Grendel experienced was merely a temporary peace.

From his place up in the trees, Grendel could often hear the singers in the mead halls singing of glorious deeds of dead kings, to the delight of their drunken human audience. Grendel would occasionally see enemies arrive and watch the men fight. They'd stop twenty feet apart and yell at each other, boasting and threatening, talking about honor and justice, before finally fighting. Sometimes the aggressors would be repelled, and sometimes they would win and destroy the mead hall or capture the king and ransom him for gold and other goods. Grendel was frightened and confused by this behavior.

Grendel felt safe from the humans' wars up in the trees. Though he and the humans spoke the same language and so were somehow related, the men were of little importance to Grendel. He was sickened by the waste of their wars, all the animals killed but not eaten. He tried to collect some of the waste and store it in his cave, but his mother didn't like it.

As wars continued, some groups of humans formed alliances (though some allies betrayed each other). Grendel watched season after season, sometimes from the high cliff wall near his den, as Hrothgar gradually rose above the other men in power. Hrothgar collected tribute from nearby groups, who pledged to fight for him. His messengers and their carts often got stuck in the soft earth and the men would whip and hit the oxen until they bled and sometimes ran away. Carts would often get irretrievably stuck and had to be destroyed.

Hrothgar met with his council about these problems and decided to build roads throughout his realm. Now his men could easily go to the aid of their subjects and Hrothgar's large army could easily defeat most bands of attackers. New roads were built as Hrothgar's kingdom expanded and amassed more treasure. His mead hall became piled high with gold and other treasures.

Men hacked down trees and thinned forests, hunted large amounts of game, and killed birds for sport. Their own animals grazed and cleared hedges. Grendel says that “there was nothing to stop the advance of man.” He began to feel a vaguely violent unrest:

**“They hacked down trees in widening rings around their central halls and blistered the land with peasant huts and pigpen fences till the forest looked like an old dog, dying of mange. They thinned out the game, killed birds for sport, set accidental fires that would burn for days. Their sheep killed hedges, snipped valleys bare, and their pigs nosed up the very roots of what might have grown... There was nothing to stop the advance of man.” (pg. 40)**

One night, watching from behind a cowshed, Grendel saw a blind man arrive at Hrothgar’s mead hall with a harp and a young companion. The harper went inside and talked to Hrothgar, and then played his harp and sang of old kings’ glorious deeds. Men became quiet, and Grendel says that the very landscape hushed “as if brought low by language.” The harp-player, known as the **Shaper**, offered to sing of Hrothgar’s glory for pay.

Grendel was swept up in the song and music of the Shaper even though he knows that the Shaper’s version of a heroic history is false. Grendel felt as though the Shaper had changed the world and the past. Grendel remembered the true past, with random bands of men slaughtering each other, but could now also remember the version of the past the Shaper invented as if it were true.

Grendel fled from the mead hall crying, feeling ridiculous and pained by the Shaper’s poetry. He attempted to reason about how true or false the Shaper was. From the top of the cliff overlooking Hrothgar’s realm, he screamed loudly.

**“I was so filled with sorrow and tenderness I could hardly have found in my heart to snatch a pig!” (pg. 44)**

The scream sounded ugly compared to the Shaper’s beautiful music. He screamed again and ran back to his cave.

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## Chapter 4

In the present day, the Shaper still sings, as Grendel continually spies on Hrothgar’s greatest mead hall, Hart (*Heorot*). Grendel says that the Shaper built the hall with the power of his songs. He once sang of a glorious mead hall that would have power over the whole world and Hrothgar liked the idea of building such a hall by the sea.

Grendel knew the Shaper was lying but his words *sounded* true. Hrothgar gathered a slew of workers to construct the new mead hall. Grendel kept listening to the Shaper's songs, which he knew were mere flattery but was still swept up by it. Grendel felt bad about his monstrous nature and retreated into the darkness where he couldn't hear the Shaper's music, though he was "tormented by its images."

Talking to himself out in the wild, Grendel thought about how the Shaper was able to reshape the world and change it. As he thought, Grendel thought he heard something talk back to him, some "impression from another mind" in the forest. The Shaper's manner of speaking began to affect Grendel, who started to speak with pompous, poetic speech. The Shaper was able to change what people thought and thereby make the world better. Grendel knew that the Shaper only sang for pay, but was still fascinated by the Shaper, who seemed to be inspired by some force outside of himself. Grendel concluded that the Shaper created "the projected possible."

Feeling some kind of presence around him, Grendel went toward Hart. At the edge of the settlement, he accidentally stepped on a dead man, whose clothes had been stolen. As the Shaper began to play, Grendel picked up the body and went closer to the hall to listen.

The Shaper sang of how the earth was first created by the greatest of gods and *how two ancient brothers fought, splitting the world between darkness and light, between one cursed and one blessed race. Grendel was the descendant of the cursed race.* Grendel believed the song and cried.

**"And I, Grendel, was the dark side, he said in effect. The terrible race God cursed. I believed him. Such was the power of the Shaper's harp!" (pg. 51)**

Grendel then rushed into the hall crying out "**mercy!**" and "**peace!**" The Shaper stopped playing and the *men screamed and attacked Grendel.* Grendel dropped to his knees, saying "**friend.**"

**"The harper broke off, the people screamed. (They have their own versions, but this is the truth.) Drunken men rushed me with battle-axes. I sank to my knees, crying, 'Friend! Friend!' They hacked at me, yipping like dogs." (pg. 52)**

One of the humans' spears tipped with venom nicked Grendel and he suddenly realized that they could kill him. He fled to the forest.

In the middle of the forest, Grendel moaned and wept. He screams profane words he doesn't understand, only repeating what he heard the humans say. After calming down, he cries out: "**Why can't I have someone to talk to?... The Shaper has people to talk to... Hrothgar has people to talk to.**" (pg. 53)

But then he pondered whether the humans were as miserable as he was.

Two nights later, Grendel went back to hear the Shaper, addicted to his singing. The Shaper sang lies about how men had fought heroically against Grendel. Grendel was outraged by the song. He felt a presence around him but thought it might just be his imagination. After calming himself, he returned to his lair, remembering the Shaper's songs.

Back in his cave, Grendel was convinced that the Shaper's songs about the creation of the world and the feud between two ancient brothers were lies. But, the Shaper might make it true. Grendel then realized that he wanted the story to be true. He wanted the beauty and order of the story, even if he had to be the outcast. Grendel's mother whimpered and scratched at her breast, from which Grendel had not nursed in years. Grendel describes her as "pitiful" and "foul."

Grendel awoke suddenly, feeling some presence around him again. He asked who it was, but no one replied. He went above-ground, where he cleared his mind and **"sank away through earth and sea, toward the dragon."**

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## Chapter 5

Grendel recalls his meeting with the dragon, a humongous creature who lay on top of his treasure hoard in his cave. The dragon told Grendel he was expecting him. Grendel was in awe of the dragon, who commented that Grendel now knew how the humans felt about him. The dragon laughed at how silly the terrified Grendel looked.

Irritated, Grendel picked up an emerald to throw at the dragon. The dragon got immediately stern and told Grendel never to touch the treasure. Grendel thought about no longer trying to scare the humans, but the dragon encouraged him to keep doing it.

The dragon gave Grendel the advice to find some gold and the dragon, who got angry and told him to stay still. The dragon told him about the Shaper, calling his art mere illusion. The dragon said that he knew everything: past, present, and future.

The dragon referred to the humans as "counters, measurers, theory-makers," saying that "they'd map out roads through Hell with their crackpot theories!" When the humans realize that their theories are flawed, the dragon explained, the Shaper helps by providing a pleasing illusion of reality.

The dragon decided to tell Grendel about time and space, emphasizing the importance of scale and perspective in terms of time when thinking about nature. The dragon continued his philosophical explanation, suspicious that Grendel was not paying attention.

The dragon tried to explain further, saying that “the essence of life is to be found in the frustrations of established order.” Grendel had trouble following the dragon’s abstract language filled with philosophical jargon.

Continuing to try to educate Grendel, the dragon explained the difference between animals and vegetables. Grendel pondered whether the dragon was intentionally telling him nonsense. The dragon kept talking and then told Grendel that he was foolish to come.

The dragon then attempted to give a general summary of his ideas for Grendel: “things come and go.” The dragon explained that all life was meaningless, a small “swirl in the stream of time, a temporary gathering of bits.” Grendel refused to believe the dragon, who told him he was hampered by his small mind.

Grendel asked the dragon why he shouldn’t stop terrifying the humans. The dragon answered that Grendel improved the humans, forcing them to think and scheme:

**“Ah, Grendel!” he said. He seemed that instant almost to rise to pity. “You improve them, my boy! Can’t you see that yourself? You stimulate them! You make them think and scheme. You drive them to poetry, science, religion, all that makes them what they are for as long as they last. You are, so to speak, the brute existent by which they learn to define themselves.” (pg. 72)**

The dragon explained his own personal ambition: to count all of his treasure. He advises Grendel, “know thyself.” Grendel told the dragon of the Shaper’s story of the world’s creation, which the dragon called ridiculous. The dragon reiterated the unimportance of all life in the grand scheme of eternity. Grendel protested. Finally, the dragon told him to **“seek out gold and sit on it.”**

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## Chapter 6

After his meeting with the dragon, Grendel felt an air of futility and doom around himself. Also, the *dragon had put a charm on him so that no weapon could cut him*. This newfound invulnerability drove him to visit Hart more often but also isolated him further as the humans could no longer really fight with him.

In the summer of the first year of Grendel’s war with Hrothgar, Grendel was drawn to the mead hall though he had not yet begun systematic raids. He would wait at the edge of the forest, listening to the Shaper’s songs, which enraged him with their confidence and hope. He went up to the wall of the mead hall and peered in through a crack. The Shaper sang of how God had been kind to Hrothgar’s people, who were the richest and most powerful on earth.

One night as he was doing this, a stick snapped behind Grendel and a dog barked. A guard discovered him and struck him with a sword, but could not hurt Grendel. More men came and attacked in vain. Grendel laughed. He had meant them no harm. He walked off, carrying the guard with him, and ate the guard. He returned to the woods happily.

Three or four nights later, Grendel performed his first raid. He burst into the hall while the men were sleeping and ate seven of them, taking joy in the killing. He says that he himself became the mother he had once searched for. He felt as though he had finally “become something” and called himself **“Grendel, Ruiner of mead halls, Wrecker of Kings.”** But, Grendel notes, *he also felt more alone than ever.* (pg. 80)

A few nights later, Grendel raided Hart again. The humans tried to attack him bravely, but their weapons were useless against the dragon’s charm. Grendel laughed as man after man attacked him, shouting about honor, Hrothgar, and God. Though laughing, Grendel felt empty and imagined himself going on killing without difficulty indefinitely. Filled with rage, he smashed and destroyed benches, tables, and beds.

Then, a man named Unferth appeared. Grendel calls Unferth his salvation. Taller than the other men, Unferth took on Grendel single-handedly and acted like a righteous hero, threatening Grendel. Grendel laughed at Unferth’s heroic posturing and spoke back to him. Unferth was shocked to learn that Grendel could speak and pledged to kill him. **Grendel responded sarcastically, mocking Unferth’s heroism and saying that he thought heroes only existed in poetry.** (pg. 84) Frustrated, Unferth charged at Grendel, but Grendel picked up apples from a nearby table and threw them at Unferth, hitting him so that he bled. Unferth slipped on the bloody floor, making Grendel laugh. Unferth attempted to charge again, but Grendel tipped the table of apples over on top of him. Unferth was extremely angered, but Grendel simply left. He says that he got more pleasure from that fight than any other.

Grendel returned to his cave. Three nights later, Unferth arrived, having followed him. Grendel woke up startled, stopped his mother from going to Unferth, and went to see Unferth himself. **Unferth was exhausted and injured by the firesnakes he had to swim by to get to Grendel’s den.** He announced his arrival and said that his heroic acts would be sung in future songs. He waited for Grendel to kill him, but Grendel just watched him silently.

Frustrated, Unferth told Grendel that he was wrong about heroism, that it really did exist and that Unferth was a true hero because no one would know whether he found Grendel and died heroically or simply fled. According to Unferth, this defines “inner heroism.” Unferth continued to refer to himself as a hero, which annoyed Grendel.

**“It will be sung,” he whispered, then paused again to get wind. “It will be sung year on year and age on age that Unferth went down through the burning lake—” he**

**paused to pant “—and gave his life in battle with the world-rim monster.” He let his cheek fall to the floor and lay panting for a long time, saying nothing. It dawned on me that he was waiting for me to kill him. I did nothing. I sat down and put my elbows on my knees and my chin on my fists and merely watched. (pg. 87)**

Grendel decided to carry Unferth back to Hrothgar’s mead hall safe and unharmed.

Unferth fell asleep and Grendel carried him back home, leaving him at the mead hall door. Grendel says that Unferth still lives, challenging Grendel in vain, ashamed that he alone is spared in Grendel’s raids.