

Grendel's inevitable death



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The ancient Anglo-Saxon epic poem of Beowulf describes his many heroic feats, one of which involves Beowulf slaying the notorious monster Grendel. Throughout Beowulf's numerous adventures, the poem repeatedly stresses the Anglo-Saxon idea of *wyrd*, or fate. A modern interpretation of Beowulf's first battle, *Grendel* by John Gardner, allows audiences to view this encounter from the monster's perspective. As the novel *Grendel* cycles through one complete calendar year of twelve months, Gardner utilizes zodiac astrology signs to convey how the inevitable death of Grendel results from the ancient Anglo-Saxon belief of fate and personal destiny.

Grendel's encounter with the ram in the first chapter demonstrates the inevitable beginning of his end. When the novel begins, Grendel watches as “the old ram stands looking down over rockslides, stupidly triumphant”, and notes how the ram refuses to budge even as Grendel yells and attacks him (Gardner, 1). The ram represents the first astrological sign in the zodiac, Aries the Ram, who commonly stands for persistence and new beginnings. The ram appropriately appears in the beginning of *Grendel*, and serves as a reminder to Grendel that another season has arrived. No matter how hard he tries to drive the ram away, Grendel observes that “the ram stays; the season is upon us” (Gardner, 1). The ram's stubborn decision to remain in place despite Grendel's threats symbolizes how the seasons always come regardless of one's actions. Grendel, like every other creature, cannot escape the enslavement of the time. Furthermore, Grendel cannot escape the cycle of the seasons no matter what he thinks or does, Grendel's helplessness in this situation emphasizes how as time inevitably progresses,

Grendel can only watch as he acts out what fate has planned for him.

Gardner suggests that fate controls everything in Grendel's life.

While the ram in chapter one signified the inevitable beginning of Grendel's end, the bull in chapter two shows the unchanging and predictable nature of the world. When Grendel traps himself in a tree, a bull repeatedly charges at Grendel, and each time the bull “ turned and looped back to where he'd charged [Grendel] from before ... he fought by instinct [with] blind mechanism ages old” (Grendel, 21). The bull symbolizes Taurus, the second zodiac sign. Taurus represents devotion and stubbornness, traits that the bull exhibits during its encounter with Grendel. Grendel compares the bull's repetitive actions to that of a machine: predictable, programmed by higher powers, and unchangeable. The bull's comparison to a machine suggests that the bull also represents Grendel's world, as the Anglo-Saxons believed that the world was “ programmed” by fate. Similarly, Grendel portrayed the bull as a machine with pre-programmed instructions. While humans program instructions for machines, fate programs instructions for the world. The bull in chapter two represents the predictability of Grendel's world, as fate predicts everything in Grendel's future.

Chapter ten further reinforces the Anglo-Saxon idea of fate by demonstrating how Grendel's actions cannot change fate's plan for his destiny. When Grendel observes a goat climbing up a hill, he throws a rock and “ smashes his mouth ... penetrates to the jugular. [The goat] drops to his knees, gets up again ... he climbs toward [Grendel]” (Gardner, 140). The goat represents the tenth zodiac symbol, Capricorn the goat, who traditionally portrays pessimism. The goat approaches Grendel just like death, and even though

Grendel apparently manages to kill the goat, it keeps on walking. This symbolizes how Grendel's fate draws closer and closer, no matter what he does. Although Grendel may sometimes falsely trick himself into thinking that he has control over his fate, his actions ultimately have no result on his life. Fate's plans approach Grendel like the goat, and Grendel's helplessness causes him to become pessimistic. This leads Grendel into realizing that his actions cannot change his destiny, and he begins to understand that he cannot control his own life. Fate has planned everything out for Grendel, and his own thoughts and actions do not matter.

Finally, Gardner utilizes the twelfth zodiac sign to predict the inevitable demise of Grendel. During the only time that Grendel's mother communicates with him, she tells Grendel to "beware the fish" (Grendel 149). Pisces the fish is the twelfth and final zodiac sign, and he represents the end. The fish symbolizes Grendel's end in the form of Beowulf, who came from the sea and possesses especially strong swimming skills. Although Grendel had warnings about his eventual demise, he still could not prevent his doom. This strengthens the idea that fate led to Grendel's inevitable death. No matter what Grendel knew or did, he could not overcome his ultimate fate.

Similar to how individual chapters in Grendel carry zodiac symbols that represent the role of fate on Grendel's death, Grendel's structure as a whole also strengthens this idea. Gardner's novel consists of exactly twelve chapters, each chapter containing a symbol of its corresponding zodiac sign. The book takes place over the course of exactly one year, or four calendar seasons. This precise, rigid novel structure represents how fate is precise

and unchanging. Fate predicted Grendel's life, and no matter what Grendel did, his actions could not change the plan that fate created for him.

Gardner uses zodiac signs to convey how fate affects Grendel just like it influenced Beowulf. Zodiac signs in several chapters symbolize Grendel's helplessness and how fate led to his ultimate demise. Gardner suggests that fate had planned out all of Grendel's life. Although Grendel realized what was happening, he was helpless to change his final fate. From examining fate's role in Grendel, an intriguing question emerges: do modern day humans have control over their own destiny?