John Gardner's *Grendel* Discussion Questions

Within your group, discuss the following questions and quotations. Take notes as you discuss, noting passages and page numbers that support your answers. You will be able to use both your annotated novel and notes during Wednesday’s Socratic Seminar.

1. Gardner structures each chapter around a specific sign of the zodiac, but he does it in a fairly stealthy way (so much so that you may have missed it). What is the point of this device? How might this structure help us understand something about the characters, themes, or purpose of the novel?

2. Why do you think Grendel singles out Unferth? How is Unferth’s punishment worse than death? Do you think Unferth learns or grows from his encounter with Grendel?

3. How does Gardner bring beauty into an otherwise ugly, bleak world? Discuss some of the beautiful moments in the novel and how they contribute to overall themes.

4. *Grendel* can be classified as a bildungsroman, a coming of age story. How does Grendel come of age through the course of the novel?

5. Despite horrible atrocities, Grendel is presented to us in a (mostly) sympathetic light. Discuss the specific details that make Grendel sympathetic in this novel.

6. Even a cursory knowledge (or a brief google search) of *Beowulf* reveals that Grendel is an evil monster and Beowulf is a great hero. In what ways does *Grendel* reverse the roles of “hero” and “villain”? What effect does this reversal have on reader?

7. Philosophy plays an important role in this novel, helping to define characters and the agenda of the work. In what ways do these larger concepts or beliefs help us to understand the novel as a whole?

8. Why does Grendel occasionally break out of the traditional narrative mode to frame the story as a play or a poem? How do these changes affect the story as a whole?

9. Is the dragon right when he says that we (humans) need something to fear? Explain.

10. Consider the novel’s argument about fate vs. free will. Do you agree or disagree with the argument that John Gardner presents?
Discuss the context and importance of the following quotes:

11. “But the ram stays; the season is upon us. And so begins the twelfth year of my idiotic war” (5).

12. “The sky says nothing, predictably. I make a face, uplift a defiant middle finger, and give an obscene little kick. The sky ignores me, forever unimpressed. Him too I hate, the same as I hate these brainless budding trees, those brattling birds” (6).

13. “When her strange eyes burned into me, it did not seem quite sure. I was intensely aware of where I sat, the volume of darkness I displaced, the shiny-smooth span of packed dirt between us, and the shocking separateness from me in my mama’s eyes. I would feel, all at once, alone and ugly, almost—as if I’d dirtied myself—obscene” (17).

14. “I understood that the world was nothing; a mechanical chaos of casual, brute enmity on which we stupidly impose our hopes and fears. I understood that, finally and absolutely, I alone exist” (22).

15. “He told me of an ancient feud between two brothers which split all the world between darkness and light. 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!” (51).

16. “My knowledge of the future does not cause the future. It merely sees it, exactly as creatures at your low level recall things past. And even if, say, I interfere—burn up somebody’s meadhall, for instance, whether because I just feel like it or because some supplicant asked me to—even then I do not change the future, I merely do what I saw from the beginning” (63).

17. “But I’d cured myself. That much, at least, I could say for my behavior. I concentrated on the memory of the ugliness between her legs (bright tears of blood) and laughed as I ran through the heavy snow” (110).

18. “Shaper. Beauty! Holiness! How my heart rocked! He is dead. I should have captured him, teased him, tormented him, made a fool of him. I should have cracked his skull midsong and sent his blood spraying out wet through the meadhall like a shocking change of key. One evil deed missed is a loss for all eternity” (146).

19. “Afraid or not, I would go to the meadhall, I knew. I toyed, of course, with the ridiculous theory that I’d stay where I was safe, like a sensible beast” (157).

20. “They watch on, evil, incredibly stupid, enjoying my destruction. ‘Poor Grendel’s had an accident,’ I whisper. ‘So may you all’” (174).