

AP Literature and Composition Summer Work (2026-2027)

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Summer Reading Assignment: *Beowulf* and *Grendel*

Texts:

I will have copies of both texts available for students to borrow for the summer in room 151 prior to the end of the 25/26 school year.

Beowulf (Seamus Heaney translation)

- Here is a [PDF version of the Heaney translation of *Beowulf*](#).

Grendel (John Gardner)

- There is an [online copy through archive.com](#), but it is blocked through your school-issued Chromebooks.
- There is an [Audiobook version of *Grendel*](#), if you're waiting for a hard copy.
- There is an eBook [available on OverDrive through the MontCo library system](#), but it is available to only one person at a time, so if you borrow it, please be responsible with your time.

AP Literature and Composition focuses on “careful reading and critical analysis of imaginative literature. Through the close reading of selected texts, students deepen their understanding of the ways writers use language to provide both meaning and pleasure for their readers.” With this in mind, please complete the following work by the first day of classes:

1. **Give yourself enough time to read the books deliberately.** Your reading will be more productive if you leave enough time to take both the text *and* the historical material behind it into account.
 - *Beowulf*: Read the introduction and translator’s note (p. ix-xxx of the book), as part of your preparation of the text. I have also included some questions that you need to be able to answer about the text; I will not collect your responses, but will expect you to be able to answer the questions in a detail-oriented fashion.
 - *Grendel*: I would recommend reading *Grendel* after *Beowulf*, since *Grendel* is a modern re-interpretation of the original Anglo-Saxon poem. I have also included some questions that you need to be able to answer about the text; I will not collect your responses, but, again, will expect you to be able to answer the questions in a detail-oriented fashion.

For *all* of your reading, remember that having specific textual support is terribly important.

2. **Analyze the texts.** Keep track of: intersecting themes, plot development, characterization, influence of the setting, literary techniques (imagery and symbolism), etc. Make an effort to apply literary terms/devices to what you are reading, and to make meaningful connections to other texts that you’ve studied, other disciplines (psychology, sociology, etc.), and your own experiences. These connections (and your ability to recall, in detail, your previous work in English class), will serve you well in class, and on the AP test.
3. **Be prepared to take a reading quiz, and to write an in-class thesis-driven AP-style essay within the first two weeks of class** that explores themes and/or symbols in the text. Neither assignment will ask you about the plot. You will be graded on the depth and quality of your analytical observations, and the organization and stylistic choices in your writing. If you need organizational and stylistic tips, I will provide you with a writing reference packet in the first week of school. (The scheduling of these assessments may change slightly, depending on how the school year begins.)
4. **Start gathering your college essay prompts!** We will jump into the college essay within the first few weeks of school. The more you know about what you’ll need to prepare, the better off you’ll be!

Advice and Warning: This is a reading intensive course. I expect you to read and write about everything that I give you completely, and with your full effort. It’s OK to struggle if you are motivated to improve! **If you are not motivated, this might be the wrong class for you, because of the extensive reading and writing.**

Collaborate! Do not be afraid to create an online group together over the summer to discuss the works. Collaboration is fine, but directly copying someone's work is not. Please be aware of the difference.

Excellent General Question Starters (For Notes, Discussions, or What Have You)

- Who is speaking, and to whom is the speaker speaking? Are they reliable? Do they have an agenda that they're pushing?
- Examine the motivations of the characters. Analyze their actions, conflicts, and word choices for unspoken motives. Examine the relationships between characters.
- What is the historical/social context of the text? Is it important?
- Are there key words in the text (diction)? If so, what's the point of these key words? (Remember that important diction usually clusters around major themes, symbols, etc.)
- What does the diction tell us about the plot/characters/speaker? How does connotation/denotation work in the text?
- Are there any important allusions in this text? Why are they there? What connections is the author/speaker trying to make for/with you?
- What kind of syntax does the author use? Does the syntax vary? If so, what is the effect?
- What is the effect of any repetition in the text? Repetition can refer to words, phrases, or concepts, both literal and abstract).
- What is the author's attitude toward what he or she is writing about? In other words, what is the tone of the piece?
- What connections can you make to other works/your own experiences to unlock the meaning of the text?
- What major themes can you identify and expand upon in the text?
- Remember that, in the closed world of a text, every detail is important/intentional. What stands out? Can you identify the purpose of every character/event/symbol, etc. in the larger work?
- Look for words/events/things (stuff?) that seem out of place. What is the function of these "outsiders"?

***Beowulf* Questions**

- Before you begin, might I suggest that you listen to episodes #60A-60C of the "Myths and Legends" podcast? It's certainly not necessary to understand the text, but it's an excellent podcast, and can only help. (Please do not watch the movie; it is garbage.)
- You might also want to take a serious gander at the family tree in the very back of the book. (There isn't a page number; why, I do not know.) Family and blood lines (and how they connect to identity) are terribly important in this book!
- What is a kenning, and what does it contribute to the overall effect of the poem?
- What effect does alliteration have? (This question is important for both *Beowulf* and "Junk"!)
- What is the purpose of a hero? What is the difference between a tragic hero and an epic hero (I would advise moving beyond Aristotle's definition)? Which one is Beowulf? How do you know? What is the connection between the hero and the monster in every story? (I would recommend looking up Joseph Campbell's *Hero's Journey*, if you've never learned about it, or need a refresher).
- Why do we need to know the lineage of the major characters? How does this family line add to characterization?
- What is the function of Heorot, both symbolically and literally? Consider houses as symbols.
- Who or what is Grendel? (Note: lineage is still important!) Why do he and his mother live isolated in the marshes? What images, symbols, etc. are connected with the characters? What is symbolically important about their entire approach to humanity, and especially the denizens of Heorot hall? (They may be different!)

- What kind of king/leader is Hrothgar? What kind of king/leader is Beowulf? Which one shows the strongest values of their culture, and under what circumstances? Is the poet making a comparison? What kind of relationship does each man have with his own society?
- What evidence of early Christianity is there in this poem? How does it blend both Christian and pagan myth? (Especially consider the hero-monster dynamic that is woven throughout the poem).
- What is the purpose of the character of Unferth? Who is he being compared to, and what does he add to the larger narrative that the poet is trying to build?
- Examine the roles of the female characters in the text. What kind(s) of power are they “allowed” to wield? How does this compare to the men around them?
- The image of a ring (especially a golden ring, but not always) shows up over and over again. What is its symbolic significance, and in how many different ways does the poet use the concept/image/symbol? (Hint: widen your search from jewelry to the idea of cycles – both literal and metaphorical).
- What is significant about the way that Beowulf fights each of the three major “creatures” in the book? Consider the role of armor/weapons, timing, his attitude, the expectations of the people around him, and the nature of his victory or defeat. (Threes are significant symbolically...think about where you’ve seen the number three used as a symbol before, and what it means!)
- Each of the three major “creatures” in this book have a lair, or preferred turf. How does this connect to their character, and what is the symbolism behind it? Also consider the order that they come in!
- Consider the hospitality rituals in this book. (Your experiences with the *Odyssey* will be helpful here.) What does the hospitality ritual require people to do (or not), and why do people follow (or not follow) it?
- Why does the book end the way that it does? What is foreshadowed at the end? How does the end of the story connect to the beginning?
- Consider the idea of reversal, and how it connects to the order vs. chaos conflict in the story.

Grendel Questions

- You might want to look up the philosophies of nihilism and existentialism. Even knowing the general major tenants of each one will be helpful.
- Is Grendel a hero? If he is, is he a tragic hero or an epic hero? How do you know? Why do you think Gardner is choosing to write from Grendel’s perspective? Is Grendel a reliable or an unreliable narrator? What effect does this have on the text?
- What does Grendel want? What does he believe in? What is he afraid of? How do you know?
- Comparison between *Beowulf* and *Grendel* is going to be huge in this text. It’s worth spending the time to compare each character who shows up in both texts. John Gardner is making deliberate choices about characterization and diction to make a point. Figure out what it is.
- How does Gardner use alliteration in *Grendel*? Is it a mirror or subversion of the Anglo-Saxon patterns that you saw in *Beowulf*?
- The symbol of the ring (and cycles) is back! How is this symbol used in *Grendel*, both symbolically and literally?
- Grendel talks a lot about the predator/prey relationship (and, tangentially, power). Where does he see himself in this dynamic, and under what circumstances? When does he feel powerful, and when does he feel powerless? Why?
- Who or what does Grendel have good relationships with? Who or what is he willing to listen to, and who or what does he resent? Why? Does Grendel belong to any society, or is he a total outsider? Is Gardner choosing to use the same themes/symbols from *Beowulf* about bloodlines and family trees?
- In *Grendel*, who or what is a monster? What does it mean to be monstrous?
- Consider, again, the idea of reversal. How does the shift in point of view change it (or not)?
- What has Gardner done with the characterization of Grendel’s mother and the dragon? What does each character want? What do they believe in? What effect do they have on Grendel?

- The Shaper is extremely important to Grendel. Why? What does he see as the function of storytelling?
- How does Grendel respond to both the concept of organized religion and to God? Why?
- How is Wealtheow used in this book (as opposed to *Beowulf*)? Compare how the poet from *Beowulf* characterizes her, and how Grendel sees her in *Grendel*. What has changed (or stayed the same), and why?
- How has the character of Unferth changed (or stayed the same?) Why is Grendel willing to connect with, or even notice him?
- In this book, Grendel is an observer of humans. Trace the evolution of his thoughts regarding man from when he was young to after his visit with the dragon. Where does he end up, philosophically? Why?
- Speaking of watching/observing/vision, you also might want to think about these things as symbols! When does Grendel watch, and when is he watched? When does he want to be seen? Who refuses to see him? How does he connect all of this to his own identity and state of being?
- How does Grendel define “war”? How does it compare to the significance of war in *Beowulf*?
- What role does Beowulf play in *Grendel*? How does Grendel react to his approach, and their battle? Does Beowulf have an effect on Grendel’s philosophy? How does he compare to the dragon?
- Is Grendel a round character, or a flat character?