From *Grendel* by John Gardner

I touch the door with my fingertips and it bursts, for all its fire-forged bands – it jumps away like a terrified deer – and I plunge into the silent hearth-lit hall with a laugh that I wouldn’t much care to wake up to myself. I trample the planks that a moment before protected the hall like a hand raised in horror to a terrified mouth (sheer poetry, ah!) and the broken hinges rattle like swords down the timbered walls. The Geats are stones, and whether it’s because they’re numb with terror or stiff from too much mead, I cannot tell. I am swollen with excitement, bloodlust and joy and a strange fear that mingle in my chest like the twisting rage of a bonfire. I step onto the brightly shining floor and angrily advance on them. They’re all asleep, the whole company! I can hardly believe my luck, and my wild heart laughs, but I let out no sound. Swiftly, softly, I will move from bed to bed and destroy them all, swallow every last man. I am blazing, half-crazy with joy. For pure, mad prank, I snatch a cloth from the nearest table and tie it around my neck to make a napkin. I delay no longer. I seize up a sleeping man, tear at him hungrily, bite through his bone-locks and suck hot, slippery blood. He goes down in huge morsels, head, chest, hips, legs, even the hands and feet. My face and arms are wet, matted. The napkin is sopping. The dark floor steams. I move on at once and I reach for another one (whispering, whispering, chewing the universe down to words), and I seize a wrist. A shock goes through me. Mistake!

It’s a trick! His eyes are open, were open all the time, cold-bloodedly watching to see how I work. The eyes nail me now as his hand nails down my arm. I jump back without thinking (whispering wildly: jump back without thinking). Now he’s out of his bed, his hand still closed like a dragon’s jaws on mine. Nowhere on middle earth, I realize, have I encountered a grip like his. My whole arm’s on fire, incredible, searing pain – it’s as if his crushing fingers are charged like fangs with poison. I scream, facing him, grotesquely shaking hands – dear long-lost brother, kinsman – thane – and the timbered halls scream back at me. I feel the bones go, ground from their sockets, and I scream again. I am suddenly awake. The long pale dream, my history, falls away. The mead hall is alive, great cavernous belly, gold-adorned, bloodstained, howling back at me. He has wings. Is it possible? And yet it’s true: out of his shoulders come terrible fiery wings. I jerk my head, trying to drive out illusion. The world is what it is and always was. That’s our hope, our chance. Yet even in times of catastrophe we people it with tricks. Grendel, Grendel, hold fast to what is true!

Suddenly, darkness. My sanity has won. He’s only a man. I can escape him. I plan. I feel the plan moving inside me like thaw-time waters rising between cliffs. When I’m ready I give a ferocious kick – but something’s wrong; I am spinning – Wa! – snatching at the huge twisted roots of an oak…a blinding flash of fire…no, darkness. I concentrate. I have fallen! Slipped on blood. He viciously twists my arm behind my back. By accident, it comes to me; I have given him a greater advantage. I could laugh. Woe! Woe!

And now something worse. He’s whispering – spilling words like showers of sleet, his mouth three inches from my ear. I will not listen. I continue whispering. As long as I whisper myself I need not hear. His syllables lick at me, chilly fire. His syllables lick at me, chilly fire. His syllables lick at me, chilly fire. His syllables lick…

**After You Read:** Thoughtfully answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. **How** did this story affect your feelings about Grendel? Explain.

2. **How** does this selection portray Grendel’s personality and motives? Consider his feelings, his shock upon encountering Beowulf, his confusion during and after the battle with Beowulf?

3. **Why** do you think Grendel insists that his death is an accident?

4. **Literary Concept:** Point of View. *Grendel* is told in first-person point of view. **How** is this selection’s point of view significant? Explain.