

GG #5:

Gardner's Grendel

Journal Topic

Choice #5

Read the article,  
jot down some of

Ruud's major  
points, and

write a

page

response.

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"Gardner's Grendel and Beowulf:  
Humanizing the Monster"

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Synacise  
Graduate Studies  
In English

GARDNER'S GRENDDEL AND *BEOWULF*:  
HUMANIZING THE MONSTER\*

Jay Ruud

In *Beowulf*, the character of Grendel is a composite of three separate natures blended together into a unity whose main purpose is to inspire horror. The *Beowulf* poet uses images of darkness to create his monster, mixing the characters of ogre, devil, and exiled warrior into a single representation of the darkness of the unknown. It is the latter of these characters, that of the thinking and feeling outcast, to whom the title character of John Gardner's *Grendel* is most closely related. Therefore, the theme of alienation provides the clearest basis on which to compare and contrast the two characters. The alienation of the Grendel of *Beowulf* is taken in the context of its time, a terrifying and almost unbearable fate because it meant losing one's niche in society and having to face the enemy and the elements alone. The alienation of Gardner's Grendel partakes of contemporary literature of the absurd: Grendel is alienated from Hirothgar's society by the fact that he refuses to accept the values of law and order inherent in that society, in the face of what he knows to be a chaotic and meaningless universe. Thus to compare *Beowulf* with Grendel is to compare the eighth century with the twentieth. Twelve hundred years of human history stand between, and the monster of the one has become the alienated hero of the other.

The Grendel of *Beowulf* has three distinct characters. The first and most obvious of these is, of course, that of *monster*. Grendel is never described to us, but when he is first introduced he is referred to as *mære mærcstapa* (l. 103a),<sup>1</sup> or "night-monster of the border lands," for, as Nicolas Kiessling has pointed out, *mære* in this case does not mean "famous," but rather is related to the Scandinavian *mære* and our Modern English "nightmare," and so describes a monster of the darkness.<sup>2</sup> Grendel is also condemned to wander the *fifelcynnes eard* (104b), or the "home of the monster-race," because he is one of *Caines cynne* (109a), "Cain's kin." As legend describes, and as the *Beowulf* poet acknowledges, the descendants of Cain are monsters:

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\* Mr. Ruud's paper, under the title "Grendel: The Monster and the Man," won the Frederick J. Hoffman Award for best paper submitted by an English graduate student at the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee in 1974.

<sup>1</sup>Citations of *Beowulf* are to Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, ed., *ASPR*, 4 (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1953), line numbers hereafter given in parentheses.

<sup>2</sup>Nicolas K. Kiessling, "Grendel: A New Aspect," *MP*, 65(1968), 191.

eotenas ond ylfe            ond orcneas,  
 swylce gi [ga] ntas,       þa wið gode wunnon  
 lange þrage;

(trolls and elves and goblins, and likewise the giants who, for a  
 long time, strove against God)  
 (112a-114a)

Grendel is called *æglæca* (159a), or "monster," *eoten* (761a) — "giant" or "troll," and *þyrse* (426a), or "ogre." This latter is important since, as N. K. Chadwick points out, according to the Old English Gnostic verses the common abode of a *þyrs* is a fen,<sup>3</sup> and Grendel is called *se þe moras heold / fen ond fæsten* (103b-104a) — "he that held the moors, fen, and fastness." Finally, modern scholarship has determined that *Beowulf* is an example of the *Bear's Son* or *Three Stolen Princesses* folk motif.<sup>4</sup> Chambers<sup>5</sup> and others have pointed out Scandinavian analogues to the Beowulf story in the *Saga of Samson the Fair*, in the story of *Orm Storflosson*, and especially in the *Grettis Saga*, wherein the hero fights a *draumr*, "an animated corpse of hideous aspect and destructive habits."<sup>6</sup> Grendel, then, seems to be fellow to the entire brood of monsters. Critics see Grendel and his mother as "cannibal giants"<sup>7</sup> and "English ogres,"<sup>8</sup> Grendel himself as "a cannibalistic monster"<sup>9</sup> and "primarily an ogre, a physical monster, whose main function is hostility to humanity."<sup>10</sup> In short, Grendel is a horrid, hairy, inhuman beast.

But he is more than that. Grendel is seen also as *demonic*. He is not merely an amoral beast, devouring warriors of Hrothgar's hall whenever his hunger spurs him to do so. Grendel is also a devil, and hence a radically *evil*

<sup>3</sup>N. K. Chadwick, "The Monsters and Beowulf," in *The Anglo-Saxons: Studies in some Aspects of their History and Culture presented to Bruce Dickins*, ed. Peter Clemoes (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1959), p. 175.

<sup>4</sup>Hilda Ellis Davidson, "Archeology and Beowulf" in *Beowulf and Its Analogues*, trans. G. N. Garmonsway and Jacqueline Simpson (London: Dent, 1968), p. 331.

<sup>5</sup>R. W. Chambers, "Beowulf's Fight with Grendel and its Scandinavian Parallels," *ES*, 11(1929), 81-100.

<sup>6</sup>Chadwick, p. 178.

<sup>7</sup>Margaret E. Goldsmith, *The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf* (London: Athlone Press, 1970), p. 97.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>9</sup>Marie P. Hamilton, "The Religious Principle in Beowulf," *PMLA*, 61(1946), 392.

<sup>10</sup>J. R. R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 22(1936), rpt. in *The Beowulf Poet: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Donald K. Fry (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1968), p. 43.

creature. When first introduced, Grendel is called *feond on helle* (101b), "fiend of hell," and a little later he is among the *helhrnan* (163a), presumably those who know the "mysteries of hell." Later, when Beowulf first grasps Grendel's arm, the monster wants to flee and *secan deofla gedræg* (756a), "seek the host of devils." He is called *helle hæfton* (788a) — "slave of hell," *helle gast* (1274a) — "spirit of hell," and both Grendel and his mother are finally called *deofla* (1680a) — "devils." Just what the poet had in mind when equating Grendel with the devil is a problem often pondered by critics. Certainly the intent was to make Grendel into something more than a devouring beast — into something quite inhumanly and powerfully evil. But are the many demonic epithets cited above meant literally, or only figuratively? O. F. Emerson, discussing Grendel's motive in attacking Heorot, considers these lines:

Da se ellengæst            earfoðlice  
 þrage gefolode,        se þe on þystrum bad,  
 þæt he dogora gehwam       dream gehyrde  
 hludne on healle;        þær wæs hearpan sweg,  
 swutol sang scopes.

(Then the outcast spirit, he that dwelled in darkness, with difficulty tolerated, for a time, the joy that he heard each day loudly in the hall; there was the sound of the harp, the clear song of the scop.)  
 (86a-90a)

Emerson concludes that Grendel's chief motive in assaulting Hrothgar's hall is not mere thirst for gore, as we might suspect were Grendel described only as an ogre, but rather, as in the above lines, *envy* of the Danes' happiness — and envy was a chief characteristic of the medieval devil,<sup>11</sup> who, it may be noted, fell from heaven as a result of his envy of God's power, and his pride in aspiring to be greater than God. In the fact of his envy, then, Grendel is most certainly devilish. Other critics, however, have seen the demonic descriptions of Grendel as merely figurative. Margaret Goldsmith says that "if Grendel is a fleshly creature, as the whole story of the fight indicates, he cannot literally be a devil. An educated Christian would know this very well."<sup>12</sup> Goldsmith is here echoing Tolkien, who had said earlier that Grendel is "devilish" in the

<sup>11</sup>Oliver F. Emerson, "Grendel's Motive in Attacking Heorot," *MLR*, 16(1921), 116.

<sup>12</sup>Goldsmith, p. 106.

fact that he hates mankind and loves the darkness, but cannot be taken as a *real* devil because he does not destroy the soul.<sup>13</sup>

Whether or not Grendel is to be taken as a literal devil is a problem just as puzzling as that associated with the third and most important side of Grendel's character: his *human* nature. The question here is whether or not we are to take the many descriptions of Grendel as an outcast human being literally or ironically. Grendel is described early as *worsæli wer* (105a) — "unhappy man," who envies the happiness of Hrothgar's Danes. Later, Grendel is a *healdægn* (142a) — "hall thane." On the day following Beowulf's mortal struggle with Grendel in the hall, some of the Danes trace Grendel's trail of blood to the monster's lair — a dark mere — wherein, we are told,

... dreama leas  
on fenfreoðo feorh alegde,  
hæþene sawle; þær him hel onfeng.  
(850b-852b)

(the joyless one, in his fen-sanctuary, laid down his life, his heathen soul; there hell received him.)

If Grendel has a "heathen soul," and if he is to be sent to everlasting torment for his sins, then obviously he must be human — depraved, monstrous, demonic, but still human. And to the audience of *Beowulf*, Grendel would seem the worst kind of human . . . one who was an outcast, who did not fill his place in society, but wandered the wastelands alone. Grendel fights a personal war with Hrothgar, *ana wið eallum* (145a) — "one against all," and, unlike a civilized enemy, will make no peace nor pay any *wergeld* — the compensation paid to a murdered man's family, according to the laws of Germanic society, in order to avoid feuding:

sibbe ne wolde  
wið manna hwone mægenes Deniga,  
feorhbealo feorran, fea þingian,  
ne þær nænig witena wenan þorfite  
beorhtre bote to banan folmum,  
(154b-158b)

(He willed no peace with any man of the Danish host, [would not] reconcile himself with money for his life-afflicting crimes, nor need any of the counsellors expect bright compensation from the murderer's hands)

<sup>13</sup>Tolkien, p. 42.

As a result of his anti-social behavior, Grendel is prohibited from participation in the rites of Germanic society and, therefore, cannot approach the throne of any Germanic *cyting*, ring-giver, to receive the gifts of treasure bestowed on loyal warriors:

no he þone gifstol gretan moste,  
maþðum for metode, ne his myne wisse.  
(168a-169b)  
(never must he approach the gift-throne, the treasure of the creator, nor know his favor)

This passage seems to imply a double meaning: that Grendel, as an outlaw, cannot approach the throne of Hrothgar to receive gifts, and that he, as a cursed descendant of Cain, is also barred forever from approaching God's heavenly *gifstol* from whence He dispenses the gift of grace.

Some critics have seen the human descriptions of Grendel as ironic rather than literal. Tolkien calls Grendel a "parody of human form" which "becomes symbolical, explicitly, of sin."<sup>14</sup> Edward Irving suggests that the ironic descriptions of Grendel as a human being are an invitation by the poet to his audience "to try to bring Grendel into some meaningful and familiar pattern of reference, some relationship to the structure of human society."<sup>15</sup> More recently, Goldsmith has said that Grendel and his dam, "though bestial in habit . . . are understood to be human beings who hate their own kind."<sup>16</sup> Stephen Bandy dismisses the theory that Grendel's humanity is merely figurative, and declares that "Grendel's inner life, miserable as it is, would be unlikely for an unreflective beast."<sup>17</sup> It seems clear, particularly considering the fact that Grendel possesses a soul capable of sin and damnation, that the monster is more than a monster and is in fact some sort of depraved human.

The *Beowulf* poet, then, portrays Grendel as a three-sided figure: part monster, part devil, part human. Many critics, as noted above, have run into difficulty by attempting to reconcile the three into a logical unity. How can Grendel be a devil when he has a physical body? How can he be a man when he is so manifestly bestial? But such a reasonable reconciliation is unnecessary and, in fact, useless. The *Beowulf* poet is not striving for consistency, but rather for effect. His main purpose in his characterization of Grendel was the

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>15</sup>Edward B. Irving, Jr., *A Reading of Beowulf* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1968), p. 19.

<sup>16</sup>Goldsmith, p. 97.

<sup>17</sup>Stephen C. Bandy, "Cain, Grendel, and the Giants of *Beowulf*," *PLL*, 9(1973), 241.

depiction of horror – the horror of the outside, the “other,” the infinite circle of darkness enclosing the briefly lit beer-hall. And in his presentation of this terror the poet drew on the three most terrifying pictures his mind could conceive: first, the gigantic and powerful monster, a *þyrsl*-like creature of the darkness wandering the fens by night and devouring warriors whole; second, the medieval Devil, portrayed by priests as a monstrous spirit thirsty for souls and dwelling in the utter darkness of the absence of God’s light; and last, the outlawed warrior, fearful to men because his was a fate to which none aspired – the lonely, distrusted, and vulnerable refugee, longing for fellowship and banished forever to the accursed darkness beyond the mead-hall. Thus the three sides of Grendel’s character are linked in their common depiction of the terrifying power of Darkness. Marie Hamilton shows that Grendel and his mother “seem to have become associated with ‘the whole company of the damned,’”<sup>18</sup> while Goldsmith asserts that “the poet found no incompatibility in the simultaneous presentation of Grendel as a giant human enemy and as a devilish enemy.”<sup>19</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien first saw the ultimate nature of Grendel nearly forty years ago when he described the monsters of Beowulf as emblems of the chaos out of which human order sprang and to which that order eternally threatens to return: “a light starts . . . and there is the sound of music; but the outer darkness and its hostile offspring lie ever in wait for the torches to fail and the voices to cease. Grendel is maddened by the sound of harps.”<sup>20</sup>

When John Gardner adapts Grendel to the environment of the modern novel, he is primarily interested in the creature’s *human* side. This is not to say that Gardner’s Grendel is an exiled warrior wandering the fens. He is not that at all. We are immediately aware of the bestial nature of Gardner’s monster – “I shake my two hairy fists at the sky and I let out a howl so unspeakable that the water at my feet turns to sudden ice,” Grendel says on page 1.<sup>21</sup> But what makes Gardner’s Grendel more than monster is the constant and confused throbbing of his surprisingly modern mind – the monster is human, a “thing that thinks.” Grendel’s problem, like that of mankind in much medieval Christian theology, is the fact of his dual nature; half beast and half mind, he begins the book attempting to transcend his bestial side (“Why can’t these creatures discover a little dignity?” [p. 2]),

<sup>18</sup>Hamilton, 392.

<sup>19</sup>Goldsmith, p. 110.

<sup>20</sup>Tolkien, p. 40.

<sup>21</sup>Citations of *Grendel* are to John Gardner, *Grendel* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971), page numbers hereafter cited in parentheses.

and ends it asserting his monstrous nature (“Blood-lust and rage are my character.” [p. 107]). But the thinking processes which accompany the several philosophical stands at which Grendel arrives are what finally make him human.

The single element that most closely links the Grendels of Gardner and *Beowulf* is the fact that both are *alienated* from traditional Germanic society. This alienation is the chief basis for comparison of the two works. It has been indicated previously that in *Beowulf*, Grendel is barred from receiving the gifts of any Germanic lord, and how the monster can never be expected to pay the customary and legal *wergeld* to the families of those he devours. Three times he is called *ellorgæst* – “outcast spirit” (11. 86a, 1349a, 1617a), emphasizing his apartness from the world of men. Gardner’s Grendel is alienated as well. When we first see him, shouting and trying to drive away the mountain goat on page 1, he is alone – and he remains alone throughout the book, only occasionally communicating with another living being (the dragon, Unferth, or the old Priest). It is an utter aloneness of which the monster is acutely aware when, on pp. 13-17, he hangs trapped in a tree and his frenzied cries for help are answered by only emptiness. Grendel’s aloneness emphasizes his *apartheid* and, like the Grendel of *Beowulf*, Gardner’s Grendel totally rejects the values of Hrothgar’s society. Like that first Grendel, he is maddened by the song of the scop, not because it tells of a joy in which he has no part, but because it is a lie:

I knew very well that all he said was ridiculous, not light for their darkness but flattery, illusion, a vortex pulling them from sunlight to heat, a kind of midsummer burgeooning, waltz to the sickle.  
(p. 40)

In the same way, Gardner’s Grendel sees through the veneer of heroic speeches and rejects the ideal of the hero. When Unferth attacks him with a long-winded speech, Grendel undercuts the verbiage with a sharp-edged point of truth:

“The hero sees values beyond what’s possible. That’s the nature of a hero. It kills him, of course, ultimately. But it makes the whole struggle of humanity worthwhile.”

I nodded in the darkness. “And breaks up the boredom,”  
I said.  
(p. 77)

And so, in both versions of the legend, Grendel is an estranged being. The vast difference between the two works, however, is a function of the contrasting attitudes held by the two periods – *Beowulf*’s eighth century and *Grendel*’s twentieth – toward the concept of alienation.

In the close-knit Germanic society portrayed in *Beowulf*, alienation was a serious and often fatal mode of existence. Unlike our modern impersonal world, wherein people shut themselves away in little boxes and communicate by computer, the Anglo-Saxon world was harsh and threatening, and survival was a community project. The society, as Alexander points out, was organized into tiny groups, each of which was called a *cynn* and centered around a particular lord.<sup>22</sup> The lord's prestige was reflected in his number of retainers, and the customary social bond that united the lord and his personal thanes, his *comitatus*, was long ago described by Tacitus. The followers of the chief owed him unflinching loyalty: "to defend and protect him, and to let him get the credit for their own acts of heroism, are the most solemn obligations of their allegiance."<sup>23</sup> In return, the lord's responsibility was the protection of his people. United for the purpose of mutual protection from disaster, "the dangers which men had originally banded together to overcome — animals, elements, enemies, hunger, disease — were never far enough away for the essential identity of interest to disintegrate . . . a man without a lord was orphaned, outcast."<sup>24</sup> One modern critic sees exile as "a much worse fate in those days when the protection of one's lord established one's place in society."<sup>25</sup> Outside the warm glow of the mead-hall, the darkness was pregnant with unknown horrors — conquerable in the companionship of the *cynn*, devastating in the loneliness of exile.

It is true that after the arrival of Christianity and through the influence of the Irish hermit and *peregrinus*, some Anglo-Saxon Christians deliberately isolated themselves from the society of the *cynn* in order to endure rigorous hardships in the name of Christ — either for the sake of penance or for the purpose of forsaking material pleasures in order to contemplate unhindered the spiritual. A hint of this is present at the end of "The Dream of the Rood,"<sup>26</sup> where the speaker is in solitude:

Is me nu lifes hyht  
 þæt ic þone sigebeam      secan mote

<sup>22</sup>Michael Alexander, *The Earliest English Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 1966), p. 63.

<sup>23</sup>Tacitus, *Germania in The Agricola and the Germania*, trans. H. Mattingly (London: Penguin Classics, 1948; rev. S. A. Handford, 1970), p. 113.

<sup>24</sup>Alexander, p. 63.

<sup>25</sup>M. W. Grosse and Deirdre McKenna, *Old English Literature* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973), p. 94.

<sup>26</sup>"The Dream of the Rood," *The Vercellit Book*, ed. George Philip Krapp, ASPR, 2 (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1932), pp. 61-65.

ana oftor      þonne ealle men,  
 well weorþian;

(The hope of life is now in me, that I, more often alone than other men, may seek to honor the tree of victory) (126b-129a)

In general, however, alienation is an involuntary condition in Old English poetry, and its descriptions in the extant exile poetry portray such estrangement as a terrifying and disastrous condition. The speaker of "The Wife's Lament"<sup>27</sup> describes the state of one in exile in all its bleak grimness:

Under stanhlīfe      storme behrimed,  
 wine werrigmod,      wætre beflown  
 on dreorsele,      dreogeð se min wine  
 micle modcære;      he gemon to oft  
 wynlicran wic.      Wa bið þam þe sceal  
 of langofe      leofes abidan.

(48a-53b)

(Under a rocky slope, covered with hoar-frost by a storm, my friend is weary of spirit. Water surrounds that dreary hall; there my friend suffers much heartache. He remembers too often a more pleasant dwelling. Woeful are they that must continue living in longing for love.)

*Beowulf* itself contains several passages which reflect this Anglo-Saxon fear of exile. Ecgtheow, Beowulf's father, once came to Hrothgar seeking protection when his own people cast him out (457a-464b). More graphically, Wiglaf describes what will be the plight of the lordless Geats now that they have allowed Beowulf to be killed:

Nu sceal sincþego      ond swyrdgifu,  
 eall eðelwyn      eowrum cynne,  
 lufen mægburge      monna æghwylc  
 idel hweorfan,      siððan æðelingas  
 feorran gefricgean      fleam eowerne,  
 domleasan dæd.

(2884a-2890a)

(Now shall the receiving of treasure, and the giving of swords, and all the delights of the homeland, cease for your beloved race. Every man of your kindred must now wander, void of his land-

<sup>27</sup>"The Wife's Lament," *The Exeter Book*, ed. George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, ASPR, 3 (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1936), pp. 210-211.



It is exactly this trait which makes the character of Grendel so appealing to a modern writer. Beowulf, hero of his own age, turns in the face of death and darkness to the consolation of the heroic ideal and of the mutual bond of loyalty and protection between lord and retainer. He defends his people against the scourge of the dragon. He kills Grendel out of his eagerness for *fame* — the consolation that even after death his name would live on. In this same spirit, he tells Wiglaf to build him a great funeral pyre, visible to sea-farers from their tall ships, *se scel to gemyndum minum leodum* (2804) — “that shall be a reminder to my people.” But in John Gardner’s treatment of the story, when Beowulf speaks about that same heroic ideal, he is seen in a quite different light:

The stranger had said it all so calmly, so softly, that it was impossible to laugh. He believed every word he said. I understood at last the look in his eyes. He was insane. (p. 142)

The modern world no longer provides an unquestioned set of values. We have no longer a closely-knit society in which one can find comfort in the mutual bond of loyalty and protection from the darkness and absurdity outside. All the gods are dead. And so those who, like Beowulf, express unflinching adherence to any absolute code, are viewed as insane. So Yosarian describes Clevinger in *Catch-22*:

As always occurred when he quarreled over principles in which he believed passionately, he would end up gasping furiously for air and blinking back bitter tears of conviction. There were many principles in which Clevinger believed passionately. He was crazy.<sup>30</sup>

If the traditional hero is insane, then, who becomes the modern hero? As John Gardner realizes, it *must* be Grendel — the monster who totally rejects all traditional values of his world needs only a few slight alterations to become a perfect absurd hero. Gardner’s novel fits neatly into the category of contemporary absurdist literature.

To modern man, the universe has become meaningless. He is adrift in a world without certainties, rejecting religion, absolutist science and technology, even Communism, or any other system which purports to have the “answers.” And if there is no longer any unifying principle to give a purpose to life, then life itself is made totally meaningless by the final, conclusive certainty of a death that is total annihilation. There is *nothing* beyond; hence

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (2nd ed., New York: Dell, 1961), p. 17.

what we do here ultimately comes to nothing. As Gardner’s dragon tells Grendel, life is “a brief pulsation in the black hole of eternity” (p. 63). It seems an echo of Pozzo in *Waiting for Godot*, who tells us “they give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more.”<sup>31</sup>

Gardner’s monster muses long and often on the meaninglessness of the world. Early in the book, he says:

I understood that the world was nothing: a mechanical chaos of casual, brute enmity on which we stupidly impose our hopes and fears. (p. 16)

And toward the novel’s end, Grendel states again that the world is chaotic, and that men merely impose a superficial kind of order upon it. But that order is only a dream, an imaginary solace, and will always break down because it is the natural inclination of chaos to return to chaos:

The mind lays out the world in blocks, and the hushed blood waits for revenge. All order, I’ve come to understand, is theoretical, unreal — a harmless, sensible, smiling mask men slide between the two great, dark realities, the self and the world. (p. 138)

Men, then, try to make sense out of a meaningless world. This is what Albert Camus calls *absurd*:

This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world.<sup>32</sup>

Gardner’s Grendel realizes this. He calls men the “pattern makers” (p. 21). He is maddened by the song of the scop — the “Shaper” — just as the *Beowulf* Grendel was, but for, perhaps, a different reason: the Shaper recreates history into an ordered pattern, he reshapes the world with words, and this Grendel cannot stand because he sees, better than others, the chaos of the darkness in which he dwells:

What was he? The man had changed the world, had torn up the past by its thick, gnarled roots and had transmuted it, and they, who knew the truth, remembered it his way — and so did I. (p. 36)

<sup>31</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), p. 58.

<sup>32</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage, 1955), p. 16.



The dragon explains to Grendel the Shaper's purpose. Men, he says, have uneasy feelings that all they live by is nonsense. . . . That's where the Shaper saves them. Provides an illusion of reality — puts together all their facts with a gluey whine of connectedness. (p. 55)

There is a danger that those who see, as Grendel does, the meaningfulness of all things, will cease to *do* anything. Since morality is arbitrary, then all actions are ultimately equally good or bad. Unfortunately, in this view, all actions are also equally useless, and so it is just as valuable, as in *Waiting for Godot*, to do nothing:

Vladimir: Well? What do we do?

Estragon: Don't let's do anything. It's safer.<sup>33</sup>

So Grendel tells himself when he is at the point of killing the Queen:

I changed my mind. It would be meaningless, killing her. As meaningless as letting her live. It would be, for me, mere pointless pleasure, an illusion of order in this one frail, foolish flicker-flash in the long dull fall of eternity. (p. 94)

The monster then resolves to kill himself, but "the next instant, for no particular reason, I changed my mind" (p. 95). Grendel seems at this point in the novel to be sinking into a state of mind that John Barth calls "cosmopsis." In Barth's novel *The End of the Road*, the hero Jake Horner remains motionless for twelve hours in Pennsylvania Station because he cannot decide whether or not to go on a trip. The cure for "cosmopsis" is "mythotherapy," which is, in essence, role-playing. The doctor in *The End of the Road* tells Jake that "mythotherapy" is based on two assumptions: "that human existence precedes human essence . . . and that a man is free not only to choose his own essence but to change it at will."<sup>34</sup> This seems to be exactly what Grendel does in Gardner's novel: he identifies himself as the personification of the chaotic darkness from which men absurdly hew patterns, and he asserts his adopted role of "monster" by gobbling up Hrothgar's thanes. The dragon (who seems to be an omniscient and extremely powerful being) tells Grendel:

<sup>33</sup>Beckett, p. 12.

<sup>34</sup>John Barth, *The End of the Road* (2nd ed., New York: Bantam, 1967), p. 88.

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 exitant by which they learn to define themselves. The exile, captivity, death they shrink from — the blunt facts of their mortality, their abandonment — that's what you make them recognize, embrace! (p. 62)

So Grendel, after he makes his first raid on Heorot, feels a "strange, unearthly joy," and realizes

I was a new focus for the clutter of space I stood in . . . I had become something, as if born again. I had hung between possibilities before, between the cold truths I knew and the heart-sucking conjuring tricks of the Shaper; now that was passed: I was Grendel, Ruiner of Meadhalls, Wrecker of Kings! (p. 69)

Thus, what began as a nihilistic statement of the meaninglessness of the universe becomes an assertion that there are at least *relative* values, like the science and religion that the dragon mentions (and, particularly, art — as represented by the song of the scop and by the novel itself, both rebelling against the disordered darkness by making patterns). Though it may be absurd, it is at least *relatively* better to adopt a role to play in society than to do nothing. It is insane to accept unquestioningly, as Beowulf does, the values of one's culture, but it is more desirable to become a contributing member of society and to improve the quality of life than to commit suicide. Hence, paradoxically, Grendel's bloody acts in Gardner's novel are not intended to *destroy* Hrothgar but to *improve* him through a struggle against the meaningless chaos that Grendel represents.

The wheel has come full circle. The villain has become the hero, the accepted values of society have become insanity, acts of murder and violence have become acts of creation. A comparison of *Beowulf* and John Gardner's *Grendel* becomes quite naturally a comparison of the eighth century with our own. And we learn this much about the similarities between the two ages: men now, as always, fear the darkness of the unknown, and try to make for themselves a secure light out of the world's chaotic gloom. But we also learn something of how our age differs from Beowulf's: the set of values of Anglo-Saxon society, symbolized by the mead-hall, provided an island of protection and security amid the tumultuous uncertainty inhabited by Grendel. For our modern world there are no set values; there is no island.





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November 7, 2005

Linda Wallenberg  
Eden Prairie High School  
17185 Valley View Rd.  
Eden Prairie, MN 55347

Dear Ms. Wallenberg:

Attached, per your request, is a copy of my ancient article "Gardner's *Grendel* and *Beowulf*: Humanizing the Monster," from *Thoth* 14 (1974): 3-17. (*Thoth* was a journal put out by the graduate school at Syracuse University that ceased publication shortly after my article appeared. I'm not sure whether there was a connection or not).

Interestingly, there was an article by Robert Merrill (called "John Gardner's *Grendel* and the Interpretation of Modern Fables") that appeared in *American Literature* 56 (1984): 162-180, that starts out with a long quotation from my article, and then compares it to a quotation from Gardner himself in which he contradicts just about everything I said about the novel. Merrill suggests that this indicates writers are not always the best interpreters of their own work.

Anyway, I'm glad you were interested in the article and I hope your students enjoy it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jay Ruud".

Jay Ruud  
Chair, Department of English