

Grendel: Savage Beast or Complex Creature

By: Emily C.

For those who have read the Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf, the character of Grendel is portrayed as a ravaging monster who survives on the screams and the flesh of innocent civilians. Although this interpretation is correct from the viewpoint of Beowulf, John Gardner provides a different perspective of Grendel in his novel Grendel. In Gardner's novel, Grendel is portrayed as a misunderstood creature who strives to assimilate himself into Hrothgar's meadhall. In [written at E. Alamance H. S. in 07] Gardner's novel the reader feels sympathy and sadness for Grendel in his effort to belong in a world that he seems not to belong in, instead of pure disgust from the viewpoint of Grendel in Beowulf. Gardner presents Grendel as a complex character that is more than just a simple-minded, blood-hungry villain. The novel portrays Grendel as a creature who opposed to all forms of order and control as well as is moved by persuasive literature.

Throughout the novel, Grendel is portrayed as a destructive anarchist. This idea is represented in the novel when Grendel issues social commentary on the absurdity of the chaos that man has created and man's attempt to mask it. In one instance, Grendel reminisces on how man was once a nomadic creature who would quarrel with other men who would come [written at E. Alamance H. S. in 07] across into a stable society that lives under one roof.. The novel focuses on the destruction that Grendel has caused the meadhall over the course of twelve years in an attempt to destroy Hrothgar's order. It is debatable about whether or not Grendel's anarchistic quality stems from his hatred towards Hrothgar's success. This idea is demonstrated in the novel when Gardener

quotes, “Then Hrothgar and his neighbors, loaded like ants on a long march, pushed foot by foot and day by day around the marshes.... Hrothgar’s realm was like a wobbly, lopsided wheel with spokes of stone,” but based upon evidence from the book this theory is most likely correct (Gardner 39). Other evidence of Grendel’s anarchist behavior is his attitude towards Unferth. Despite Unferth’s failed attempts to kill the savage beast, Grendel does [written at E. Alamance H. S. in 07] not kill the foolish soldier, which is out of character for the monster. Grendel reacts in this manner because the only reason Unferth sought out Grendel was to become a legend through the Shaper’s words. When Unferth descends into Grendel’s abode, he openly tells Grendel that he expects death, but in exchange, he will have immortality, “It will be sung that year on year and age on age that Unferth went down through the burning lake... and gave his life in battle...” (Gardner 87). In order to prevent Unferth from becoming a hero, and thus destroying the chaos that Grendel lives in, he decides to let Unferth live. Grendel actually goes a step beyond that, by humiliating Unferth’s ideology even more by waiting for him to fall asleep in order to pick, “him up gently, and [carry] him home” (Gardner 90). His inability to [written at E. Alamance H. S. in 07] let Unferth die and become a hero shows radical and extreme aggression towards conformity. Literary critics also agree that Grendel’s nonconformist nature is important to the novel, “the anarchistic quality of Grendel....prepares us for the paradoxical fusion of the monster’s chaotic world and the ordered world of man” (Murr 219). By developing Grendel’s radical idea, it shows his love for chaos, which in turn promotes his individual, yet complex characterization.

Grendel’s love and understanding of words is also important to his complexity as a character. This idea is demonstrated in the novel by Grendel’s reaction to the Shaper’s

singing and his own literary achievements towards the end of the novel. On countless occasions Grendel is moved to tears based upon the words of the scop's song. This emotional expression of sorrowfulness is indicative of Grendel being able to feel more than just simple feelings of hunger and tiredness. It shows his ability to connect with another creature on a deeper and on a more complex level and this demonstrates Grendel's capability to [written at E. Alamance H. S. in 07] be more than just the hollow creature depicted in Beowulf. Grendel also acknowledges his own reaction to the scop's song and it perplexes him, "Thus I fled, ridiculous hairy creature torn apart by poetry-- crawling, whimpering, streaming tears, across the world like a two-headed beast..." (Gardner 44). At one point in the novel the Shaper begins to describe Grendel as the horrible beast the Danes believe him to be, "And I, Grendel, was the dark side, he said in effect. The terrible race God cursed" (Gardner 51). Grendel is so moved by the scop's word that for a brief moment he too believed that he was evil and was once again reduced to tears. After the Shaper's death and as Grendel approached his own demise, he himself is transformed into the scop; "Grendel becomes an artist" (Strehle 218). As Beowulf and Grendel are fighting in the epic battle and Grendel loses the upper hand. Beowulf slams Grendel into the wall and demands that Grendel "sing of walls" (Gardner 171). In response to [written at E. Alamance H. S. in 07] Beowulf's command, Grendel creates a poem that "achieved successful form," but he has also, "arrived at a vision of time as both destructive and creative" (Strehle 218). This is appropriate for Grendel because as he approaches death he quotes in his poem that, "nothing made remains" (Gardner 172). Grendel's ability to understand and interpret words as well as his ability to construct a poem off the cuff demonstrates the intricacy of Gardener's protagonist.

Despite the rough and callous portrayal of Grendel in Beowulf, he is presented as a misunderstood, intelligent creature. In fact, Gardner transforms the character into a multifaceted creature in his novel, Grendel. The complexity of Grendle is exhibited in the novel through his anarchistic nature and his understanding of literature. The monster's ability to transcend the [written at E. Alamance H. S. in 07] pages of Beowulf and become a protagonist that the audience may actually side with shows his ability to be more than just a one-dimensional character. Grendel's character also has a rare and unique ability to connect with the reader due to his likeness to humankind. This idea is established in the novel through the character's constant battle between good and evil and trying to locate the boundary between the two forces.

Bibliography

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