

Relating With a Monster: *Grendel*

by Jenny S

John Gardner is an author of mystery, wonder, and talent. Owing hugely to his philosophical ideas and already successful works of literature, he has created a new genre of philosophical fiction, with a familiar twist. The expert mix of old plots and new ideas makes for [written at E. Alamance H,S. in 07] surprisingly relatable characters. This is especially displayed in Gardner's novel *Grendel*. Throughout this story, Gardner creates a most unsettlingly human monster. Gardner fashions a relatable protagonist through the monster's actions and words.

Gardner relies on character's actions to make them believable and realistic. This is an especially strange characteristic to discuss in relation to Grendel, who is an epic monster of sorts; but Grendel, monster or not, is seen as mostly human through the readers' eyes. Between "letting his birdie fly" at wild animals that frustrate him and getting down on his knees to beg for acceptance, Grendel is easily sympathized with and truly felt on a deeper level by the reader. Often, the actions of Grendel seemed to be overshadowed by his thoughts, making them seem less important, but one critic pointed out that, "It is [written at E. Alamance H.S. in 07] not that events do not have meanings, or that we do not sometimes see ourselves and others with sharp understanding" (Skow 132). It is Grendel's actions that prove this statement true: without the monster's actions, his thoughts mean nothing—they are merely fillers in the empty spaces. But by pairing the thoughts with the actions Gardner makes a stronger statement—one that says this monster is cognitive enough to think intelligent thoughts and act on them. The reader identifies with the thought and recognizes the following action as one that is almost his or

her own. One of the most memorable actions Gardner gives to Grendel is during Grendel's first meeting with Unferth. Grendel first makes fun of Unferth, then rains down apples on him. This scene is memorable because of the action taken in response to his feelings for Unferth. Every person in the audience can identify with Grendel's attempt at complete humiliation. The final action of Grendel's is the ultimate way to relate to every [written at E. Alamance H.S. in 07] human being: he dies. He doesn't die quietly in his sleep; he dies slowly and painfully, a fear of many a human. One can not help but feel sorry for Grendel. The deep-seeded fear living inside every reader of a lonely, excruciating death compels the reader's heart to reach out to Grendel, as if he were a not only a human, but a *real* human, not just one in a novel, at that! One almost wishes that Grendel could have lived on to see the day when the monsters and Danes could live together in peace. But the death was inevitable, as Alan Cheuse said of Gardner's novels, "...each concludes with the death of the main character as if to suggest that death—and the endings of novels—stand as the final response to all conjecture about meaning" (132).

Another way Gardner makes the monster relatable is through his words. Grendel, despite his unnaturally large size and excess of fur, possesses a mastery of the English language, especially of sarcasm. One can not help enjoying Grendel's quick wit and philosophical [written at E. Alamance H.S. in 07] conclusions. Grendel's experience with the dragon is one that will leave you feeling less scared of him, and maybe thinking of him in more human terms. Up until this point the reader has viewed Grendel as a frightening monster, but now that title is transferred to the dragon, as even Grendel quakes in his furry boots in the presence of the dragon. For the first time Grendel uses

phrases such as, “I’m sorry,” “Thank-you,” “Why,” and is even scared speechless at times (Gardner 59-65). The speech Grendel employs in this scene, or lack of it, does much to make the monster seem personable. He seems to revert to a child-like state, scared to say more than three or four words at a time, if at all, perhaps reminding the reader of a time [written at E. Alamance H.S. in 07] he or she was in trouble as a child and sent to the principal’s office. Grendel also becomes more relatable when he is injured, or dying as it were, crying such things as “Mama!” and bawling uncontrollably. The reader comes to feel sympathy for this big, ugly thing. “...I care more for Grendel than for any other Gardner character. Monstrously dying alone in the woods...And his last words form a curse to our very pleasures in reading it: ‘Poor Grendel’s had an accident,’ he says, ‘So may you all’” (Levine 114).

In a most entertaining tale of discovery and philosophy, Gardner creates a relatable monster through what Grendel does and says. An ingenious mix of sarcasm and sincerity, pity [written at E. Alamance H.S. in 07] and fear, Grendel comes across as merely a confused man (who is also a cannibal), searching for his purpose, and other’s purpose in life, and never quite figuring it out before a lonely, tragic death. A most pitiable existence, a most pitiable end, the overwhelming sympathy in the reader’s heart is unmistakable by the end. Gardner, much criticized and much acclaimed, remains to be seen as a new classic writer, or merely a good story teller whose stories may very well be soon forgotten—let his characters live on.

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