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*Grendel: When Monsters Transcend Meaning*

The complexity of human nature is something that authors have explored through fantasy, and this exploration often shows that it is not as simple as good versus evil, right versus wrong and is, instead, a myriad of choices that sit within the human construct. In my essay, I will explore the themes of *Grendel* by John Gardner as a mirror of not just man's monstrosity, but of the complexity of human nature where even the monstrous can have moments of mercy. In addition, I will examine how *Grendel* challenges the ideals of humanity, set within a fantastical world that touches our own and how *Grendel's* meaning transcends time both within the novel itself and for the reader.

One of the main purposes of fantasy, as explained in the course notes, is that fantasy helps the reader come to terms with the social anxieties, desires and problems that can be found in the real world through a process of displacing the world for the reader (Kelly 3). *Grendel*, at its very heart, fills this role of fantasy as it is a discourse on the complexity of human nature, exploring the monstrosity of man through the exploration of *Grendel's* own growth, yet complicating that discourse by creating a kinship between reader and monster. The humans, Danes that are centered in history, is a mirror of *Grendel* and shows that men are not only heroes driven by virtue and good intent. Instead, Hrothgar and his thanes are a negative reflection of society and culture that is still present today; their greed for land and gold as they kill each other, gives rise to the barbarity of man as, "no wolf was so vicious to other wolves" (Gardner 32). The

reader is introduced to the ambition of man as seen through Grendel's eyes set in a fantastical Earth.

Grendel's world has the same rules as the world of the reader, such as the goat, when he "bleats, falling, flopping over with a jerk" (Gardner 140); a victim of gravity as much as he was a victim of Grendel. Even in the moments where reality is revealed, the reader explores the foreshadowing of Grendel's own end; a final theme of the inevitable mortality that waits for all; an often-avoided discourse in modern society with its quest for eternal youth and legacy.

One theme that is central to Grendel is the flow of time and space. Grendel explores his story by moving back and forth through memory and through space of his cave and the world of men. This allows for these themes to expand outside of the time and space of the novel to reflect discourses of modernity in the real world that are often hard to explore. One example is in the death of God, "no one...is convinced the gods have life in them," (Gardner 128) yet there is a fervor to believe that God is still there, although Grendel views it as further proof of the weakness of men. This complicated history with God is felt in the fervor of Christian conservatives today as they push the fervor that the only way to overcome the monstrosity of human nature in the modern age is through a God that many are not convinced has a life of his own. The passage, "Not that one age is darker than another," (Gardner 67) illustrates how man is corrupted with evil throughout history, which can be linked to present day discourses.

Furthermore, Grendel is the "brute existent by which they [men] learn to define themselves. The exile, captivity, death they shrink from—the blunt facts of their mortality, their abandonment," (Gardner 73) all are mirrors of the brute existence that men still adhere to, going back to that political discourse today where each political party is the "brute existent" by which

the other rails against. Grendel is here, his presence given new shape in the rhetoric that echoes in politics and online... “brute existents...a dime a dozen” (Gardner 73).

And it is that reshaping of Grendel that allows the novel to be a mirror to society, and to the complexity of human nature even today. He is the monster, the evil that sneaks into the hearts of men and the violence that snatches up the innocent from their beds and consumes them for his pleasure. But Grendel is also the child, creating a kinship with the reader from the start, where the world is limited to his mother’s breast, expanding to his mother’s cave as he “nosed out, in my childish games, every shark-toothed chamber and hall” (Gardner 15).

That child growing to adulthood with a longing to be accepted as he “staggered out of the open and up toward the hall...groaning out, ‘Mercy! Peace!’” (Gardner 51) only to be attacked by those he longed to be accepted by. That longing to be accepted is as natural in human nature as Grendel’s bitterness when one is rejected. And the realization that while society clings to the ideas of goodness within humanity, they are taught that they are also “the terrible race God cursed,” (Gardner 51) when God removed them from Eden, although not as violently as the Danes removed Grendel from their hall.

And the violence of Grendel whispers in the hearts of men, showing the reader all the evil that man is capable of. However, that complicated nature of Grendel is there in the end, when even though he realizes that this would be a different battle, he feels a kinship with Hrothgar and his people. Even as a monster, he makes a noble decision when, “for old time’s sake, for the old priest’s honor...for the honor of Hrothgar’s thanes,” (Gardner 159) he would kill the stranger. The decision leads to Grendel’s doom, and even as he dies, the mirror is held up to show that man still “enjoys...destruction” (Gardner 174).

Finally, Grendel is more than a monster that visits now and then, he is always there, watching the village, understanding the evil in men's hearts from Hrothulf wanting to overthrow Hrothgar to the doubts the queen has in her king and his thanes. The reader knows the lives of men, the judgements Grendel places on them are the judgments humanity places on each other. It is inescapable, the silent monstrous nature that humanity can slip into. And it is that reminder throughout the book, that the evil inside men is there, waiting "at the edge of the forest, looking up the long hill at the meadhall lights," (Gardner 76) waiting for a moment when it can step into the open and wreak havoc upon the world. And there is a fear that Grendel, that mirror, is there watching [reflecting] as the "idea of violence...and apprehension," (Gardner 117) grows within the complex nature of our humanity.

In conclusion, Grendel is a complicated creature that is flawed in the ways that men are flawed. He yearns for inclusion, as illustrated in the moments he sits in the village, watching, longing for the queen or for the mercy of the thanes, but his exclusion creates a bitterness within him that lashes out in anger. Perhaps, in the end, it is that longing that is a true reflection of the complexity of human nature, and why Grendel is the perfect mirror where longing becomes bitterness in the hearts of men.

Works Cited

Gardner, John. *Grendel*. Random House, 1971.

Kelly, John “Introduction to Fantasy Literature and Introductory Stories”, *Speculative Fiction: Fantasy*, 6 May, 2024, Western University, Course Lecture Notes.