

(This letter may not be downloaded, reproduced or transmitted without the permission of Georges Borchardt, Inc., 136 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022)

Lynn Perdue---

"A Letter from John Gardner: 'Dear Susie West and Students'"

72 Monument Ave.

Bennington, Vermont 05201

February 23, 1976

Dear Susie West and students:

Forgive me for taking so long to answer your letter (Miss West) and comment on your papers (Teresa, David, and Robin). I'm always overloaded with work--editing other people's books, teaching, writing my own books, and traveling to do readings, make speeches, and otherwise generally straighten out this miserable, confused world. I'm pleased that you've read *Grendel* and thought about it--even more pleased that you've read the greatest single work in (loosely) English, *Beowulf*. If you're interested in what I think about *Beowulf* (what it means, why it's great), you might look up a book of mine, published by the Southern Illinois University Press, *The Construction of Christian Poetry in Old English*. One Comment in David's paper startled me a little, the suggestion that *Beowulf* is "optimistic." Perhaps David read too fast or had a bad translation. Surely the fact is that in *Beowulf* the hero does everything he can to be a perfect hero, and in the end he's killed, for reasons he doesn't understand (though the poet does), dies deluded--thinking he has saved his people when in fact the treasure he's captured is worthless (rusted and cursed) and his people are now certain to die, since the Swedes will no longer be held off by Beowulf's strength and wisdom (and friendship with certain Swedes). Some of the ironies at the end of *Beowulf* are very grim indeed. Throughout, the poem has hints of Christianity, though Beowulf and his companions come before Christianity and can't benefit from it. At the end of the poem Beowulf's friend and kinsman Wiglaf repeatedly sprinkles water over the dying king's face, but the effect of the snake cannot be stopped. A number of contemporary critics (none of them lunatics) have agreed that this is an ironic suggestion of baptism--that is, the sprinkling that now saves you from the snake (Satan) could not save our ancestors.

In other words, one of the main things *Beowulf* is about is how, in this world, you simply cannot win, no matter how noble you are. The best you can hope for is *fame*, and the poet

undercuts even that--in many, many ways, starting with the poem's first line, which means, literally, "Lo, we have *found out by search* the glory of the Spearmanes. . . ." In other words, fame eventually dies. It's true, of course. The greatest sculptor in ancient Greece, praised universally--by Aristotle and Plato, among others--leaves not one single surviving work. And of the hundred and some tragedies of Sophocles, we have now only a handful, and even those in flawed and partly lost copies. Except ironically, heaven is not the subject of *Beowulf*, and it's true that the poet implies that, bad as life may be on earth, there is a possibility of a better life, a more meaningful and joyful existence, elsewhere.

But the limits of the poem are human, and here in the world things are, the poet says, absolutely hopeless. Young people do not realize this, because they're not yet fully aware that they will die, and not only they themselves will die, but their whole civilization, everything they love and believe in will die--and sooner than they dream. That does not necessarily mean that all mankind will die, though that too is a possibility. *But it does mean that whatever values we hold dear we must treasure especially because they cannot outlast the planet.*

In my *Grendel*, the dragon (who is, remember, a *snake*) presents the long-range point of view: everything will eventually die, so you might as well go for short-term gratification: seek out gold and sit on it. (A line from *Beowulf*.) I'm a little insulted that all three of you, Teresa, David, and Robin, assume my opinions about life on earth must correspond with the opinions of a snake. (Take it easy; I'm kidding.) But the point is this: You've read, all of you, too quickly, too innocently--too much like children.

Serious works of literature are not like sermons at church, telling you directly what you should or shouldn't do. It's true (as Robin understands) that a good writer is indeed a careful philosopher; but his method is not to argue for a single position--in the way Nietzsche did, for instance--but rather to *explore*, with all the care and wisdom he's capable of mustering, the various implications, contributing factors, etc., that must be considered when any serious philosophical question is raised.

It's true, of course, that the writer is likely to have his own pretty strong opinion; but if he's a true artist, he doesn't ram it down the reader's throat: he sets up the alternative possibilities, he explores every avenue of the question, and he leaves the reader free. The first thing to notice, of course, is that no single character--in a decent work of fiction--fully and exactly represents the writer's point of view. On the contrary, the very essence of a writer is his ability to understand how all kinds of people think and feel, and to copy that down in a book without cheating--without oversimplifying, or condemning, or cheaply judging. It's a fact of life that people are as "good" as they know how to be. We all react in the same way to humiliation or sickness, betrayal, praise, cheap flattery, and so on: though it's of course true that in the long process of living, each of us learns to handle his emotions in a unique way.

Thus some people, on receiving what is obviously cheap flattery, get angry and strike the flatterer; others shrug it off and say thank you; still others believe the flattery (consciously lying to themselves), etc. etc. A novelist is by nature a person especially good at imitating the emotional devices of others--in other words, especially good at noticing what people are really thinking and feeling. And the only way, of course, that a novelist can do this, is by being an excellent mimic, so that when someone sneers, the novelist instantly imitates the sneer (at least in his mind) and figures out what that sneer would mean if he, the novelist, had sneered it at just that moment. Once he's developed the infallible gift of mimickry, that is, understanding others, he becomes able to present various points of view on any given question--and thus he becomes able to write a philosophical novel.

A philosophical novel starts, of course, with a subject, that is, a fundamental philosophical question. The question may come from everyday experience, from a philosophy book, from another novel or poem, or from almost anywhere.

The question in *Grendel* came from two places simultaneously--from the philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre (whom I dislike) and from the poem *Beowulf*. In *Beowulf* Grendel represents irrationality. When I ask myself what is the chief irrationality of the modern age, I answer Sartre's version of existentialism. In essence, Sartre argues that (1) there's no god or meaning in life, so (2) one can assert any meaning (or no meaning) as one pleases.

The trouble with this philosophy is not the first assertion. There may or may not be a God, but in all likelihood the question's irrelevant since we'll never know unless, if there is one, we meet him or her in an afterlife, at which point it's too late for *this* life. So it's a matter of opinion (whether or not there's a god), and given the way the world has always gone, it's an easy opinion that probably there isn't, in fact, a god. (So the Dragon maintains, but as I've said, he's a snake so---)

But the real question is, if there isn't a reachable god, and if life has no *inherent* meaning how should one live?

There are basically two choices: either you behave as if there were a god and try to determine what's right, in other words you *make up* values, you dream up a future better than the present and try to create it; or else you accept the world as it seems to be and scoff at all values (dreams for the future) because according to *what is true at this moment* they're lies.

When I say "All men are brothers" I am not accurately describing the way people behave in Angola (or anywhere else), I'm asserting that all men *ought* to be brothers. I lie about the present to create a better future. This is what poets always do. Thus in *Grendel* the Shaper comes to Hrothgar's court, a foul, bestial, savage place, and he describes Hrothgar's actions in an inaccurate way, glorifying them. (This is what we always do in history and art, of course. George Washington was not the hero we've made him. Or look at Lincoln: what could be more cynical than the Emancipation Proclamation, where he did not free *all* the slaves, but *explicitly excluded* slaves in states friendly to the North. In other words, however high-minded his ideals may have been, his purpose in issuing the proclamation was to cause turmoil and confusion in

enemy states, and to *preserve* slavery in friendly states. We may well be right to turn Lincoln into a hero, and to say to people, Grow up and be like Lincoln; but no one can deny that in praising Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, we lie in our teeth. It was a cynical war weapon, chiefly.)

Very well: the Shaper, an ordinary man with a touch of vulgarity and greed, makes up a vision of the future, makes up glorious values such as heroism, queenliness, etc. Priests do the same. Eventually, in fact, almost everybody in society begins making up noble (or ignoble) values. Grendel is at first tempted to accept these values, but because he's rebuffed--since he's funny looking and scary (but all of us are freaks in certain ways, and if one gives up because people different from oneself at first reject you, everything's hopeless)--Grendel inclines to deny all values as "lies."

He then "falls toward the dragon" in a kind of dream or vision or God-knows-what, and the dragon gives him a version of reality which he comes to take as correct. It leads gradually to his increasing isolation: he finds fault with all the great human values (and the fault is legitimate; *nothing in this world is perfect or even, I think, remotely close to perfect*). As a result of this fault-finding--as a result of his recognition that heroism is partly a false ideal, and that a beautiful queen doesn't really do anything an ugly old hag wouldn't do if she were in the position--Grendel gives up all hope and faith, becoming a mere enemy, a mere brute.

That's why in the end, when Beowulf comes, he's so eager to meet and fight him: perhaps at last he's found someone who can kill him and end his stupid, pointless, and loveless existence.

Beowulf turns out to be all Grendel hoped for and more. Beowulf has not only the physical strength to kill Grendel, he has the intelligence to force Grendel to see his mistake, or at any rate to glimpse it. (Beowulf becomes a kind of *second* dragon--another absolute truth-teller, only this time it's a positive as opposed to negative truth. There's a medieval tradition in which Christ and the devil are both dragons. That's partly what I have in mind. But also, in a simpler, more universal sense, the dragon is always, in every culture from China to Finland, the absolute destroyer. And just as the first dragon in *Grendel* destroyed Grendel's chances by leading him toward materialism and nihilism, so Beowulf destroys Grendel now that he is evil.)

What Beowulf says, in effect, is this: one looks at the world--bangs one's head against it--and one has two choices, to accept it as it is or to transform it, shake it to life by imagination. ("Sing walls," Beowulf says. He means, of course, not just the wall Grendel's head has just banged but *all* life's walls--the walls which lock us away from other people, finally the great walls birth and death.) Grendel has asserted a dead, mechanistic world of brute accident; but by the accident of meeting Beowulf he's forced to discover how accident can be turned into a good, how imagination can reshape and ultimately improve the world--at least for the lifespan of a given civilization.

I don't tell you all this, obviously, because I'm a hell-fire preacher urgently concerned that you understand my meaning in *Grendel*. Art never, if it's true art, belligerently insists on its meaning. One of the most exciting things in a great work of art is that it makes the reader

realize things he didn't know before--about himself and the world--and the joy the reader experiences comes from his seeing it himself, not from his being told it by a teacher or the writer or anybody else. A book like *Grendel* (not that I claim it's a masterpiece) takes experience and sophistication, which means that different readers will find in it different things. Hopefully all readers will enjoy it and recognize the central question, namely: if the world really is meaningless (as it now stands) how should I live? To some readers it will come as news that the world really is meaningless. That is, some readers will never have considered, before, that everything we do--*everything*--eventually comes to nothing. Look at the most ancient civilizations. Think for instance of Stonehenge. All over the British Isles, in Brittany, and as far south as Gaza, we find rings of stones like those at Stonehenge, all made to the same measuring rod, which means that one huge and glorious civilization was able to organize this incredibly difficult project, was able to build the roads it takes for hauling such huge stones, was able to organize the labor force--which must have numbered in the millions--was able to figure out the leverage system, and so on and so on, and all at least a thousand years before Pythagoras! What do we know of this incredible civilization--this nation (or whatever) that controlled more land than did Alexander the Great? We know, precisely nothing. Were they Chinese? Black? Were they giants? Pygmies? Nobody knows. We know they had figured out the movements of the stars, and were more accurate than Ptolemy; but we don't even know if they drew pictures. So it will be, eventually, with all we love in America or France or China or Kenya.

So one reader of *Grendel* will get only this much: that what we value so may not be lasting. Another reader may get much, much more. What the reader gets is not my concern or business. What matters is that I work out the problems with absolute honesty, that I make *Grendel* sympathetic so that the reader will feel *from inside* the importance of the question, What should I do? If the reader decides, as all three papers here decide, that I am advising people to live like *Grendel* and give up values, then the reader is wrong but I have done no harm, because the reader will see--in *spite* of his slight misreading--that somehow it's not good giving up values (which is exactly what I say). We all know that love sometimes dies, that people who at one time love each other truly and deeply may at another time stop loving each other. But as John Barth beautifully points out in *Chimera*, that is no reason for people to stop trying to love each other all their lives. In other words (as both Barth and I have been saying in books) we don't need eternal values to assert and try to live up to eternal values.

Teresa mentions that the dragon expresses "John Gardner's thoughts about God." As you know by now, that's not quite right. As a matter of fact, I sort of incline to the persuasion that there is a God; but that isn't important either; since he never talks to me or writes me a letter I have to get along on my own. What *is* important, is the too innocent way of reading: the dragon is a creature I made up, as a writer, just as I made up *Grendel* (this *Grendel*), the priests, Red Horse, and all the rest. What one ought to do, I think, in working with serious fiction, is assume (at the start anyway) that the writer is not in *any* of his characters; he can only be found in the total effect, the total structure, the *feeling* that comes out of it all--in this case, I hope, the feeling that *Grendel's* story is a sort of tragedy (though by no means a true classic tragedy). Teresa also feels that my handling of the old priest "pokes fun at religion." That's an

understandable reading, but notice that the old priest--if I'm not mistaken--is a lovable and serious-minded creature; even Grendel can't help but sort of like him.

If the reader steps back out of Grendel's mind, he notices an odd thing about that priest. Though he's wrong and may seem to Grendel foolish, he has faith and awe, two qualities Grendel tragically lacks. It's better to be wrong, even foolish, than nihilistic. And another odd thing about the priest is that his thought echoes that of the first dragon--but with the same fundamental information, he finds a positive vision instead of a negative one. So the point is really this: when one works with art, one must think as much with one's emotions as with one's mind.

If one's emotions say that a certain character is good, than chances are he *is* good. Think of Polonius in *Hamlet*. For years critics made fun of him because he's "wrong." Lately critics have begun to notice that wrong as he is, he's a good man. Shakespeare recreated him and went even further with this argument (good-heartedness versus intelligence) in *The Tempest*. Teresa's idea that "the corruption of man comes from society"--a common idea ever since Rousseau, and a doubtful one, really--is an idea legitimately derived from the novel, but if you brood on it a little longer you may begin to feel the novel's position [is] more complicated than that. Society can corrupt, but so can isolation. In the long run, I hope, an imperfect society is better than a solitary monster.

What I'd comment on mainly in David's paper is his comment on man's role as a theory maker. David is of course right that I make fun of man's love of spinning theories, and for good reason, I think: hard and fast theories tend to kill--take for instance Hitler's theory about Jews. But it's also true that man can only learn control of nature and himself by making up theories, and the worst thing one can do is adopt Grendel's position, that all theories are nonsense. (That itself, of course, is a theory--but a completely unproductive one; better a bad theory, since it *may* be true and *may* produce.) David is dead right on this, though: I do suggest that "man must have evil so that he may have good to balance." One can't hunt for good until one's noticed there's something wrong. On the other hand, of course, nothing could be more monstrous than justifying one's behavior because it makes other people better. The notion is common, in fact--it's the ancient role of the Devil's Advocate. It's a method often used by bad teachers (though one can legitimately use it occasionally, just for a moment, as long as one then clarifies). But the chief *dramatic* effect of the dragon's advice to Grendel on this point is that it gives Grendel an excuse not to strive for good. On Unferth, just one point: he fails as a hero--because he's an ordinary man--but notice that he does go on living, he does keep trying, and when he realizes Beowulf is a better man than he is (after Beowulf has cut him apart with words) he *does* become a hero, as even Grendel sees. If Grendel isn't mistaken (and I assume here he's not) Unferth, beaten cruelly by Beowulf, struggles "to make himself hope for the stranger's success, no doubt" (p. 164). Grendel comments: *Inner heroism, that's the trick!* He means, of course, Unferth, who is bravely accepting defeat and hoping for the success of the man who has humiliated him. On the whole, I'd claim *Grendel* is a considerably more optimistic book than *Beowulf*.

Of the three papers, Robin's grapples most directly with my novel, I think. He sees the issues beautifully, but he (she) misses the ironies which undercut the philosophical positions of the characters. Again, the point is, when working with art, one must read as much with one's emotions as with one's mind. Also, of course one must be sure that what is said in one part of the book is not contradicted, expanded, or redefined in another. Robin's judgment of Unferth's "heroism" misses the qualifier later (*Inner heroism*), and the judgment of the dragon's legitimacy misses the contrasting dragon (Beowulf who says some of the same lines but draws out opposite meaning). Always check part against part, character against character. Remember that art is a balancing of opposing points of view, an attempt to zero in on truth without cheating on the argument.

Best Wishes.

[Signed] John Gardner

(This letter may not be downloaded, reproduced, or transmitted without the permission of Georges Borchardt, Inc., 136 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022)

[back to the main Gardner page](#)