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## Evildoer

The Beowulf monster is a thousand years old, but his bad old tricks continue to resonate in the modern world  
By Matthew Gurewitsch  
Smithsonian magazine, April 2006. [Subscribe](#)

What a giant Grendel must be. For supper he scoops up sleeping warriors 30 at a crack. Imagine the width of his jaws. Yet Beowulf the Avenger brings him down in single combat. Stripped of armor, Beowulf rips the monster's arm off at the shoulder with his bare hands. Yet the hero is just a human being. Where does he get the leverage?

As invoked in the untitled, thousand-year-old manuscript from which we know him, Grendel has a voice to scream with, but no language; a presence to strike the heart with dread, but no clear form; a lineage going back to Cain, but no place in the fellowship of man. Dying, he escapes into the night. Later, it takes four straining warriors to carry his severed head. The blade that struck the blow melts like an icicle in Grendel's boiling blood. His reign of terror has lasted a dozen years.

Who weeps for Grendel? Not the Old English bard who composed *Beowulf* around the eighth century, two centuries or so before two West Saxon scribes set it down. (The dates are hotly disputed.) The moral universe of the age was black and white. But to John Gardner, a novelist in the 20th century, it was natural to view the ogre with some empathy. After Shakespeare's Richard III, Macbeth and Caliban; after Milton's Satan; after the Monster of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Gardner's attitude was hardly outlandish. After Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, to say nothing of Dr. Freud of Vienna, moral relativism is the air we breathe. Beneath the glamour of the Alien or the transgressive romance of the Villain lurks someone we need to know. In the immortal words of Walt Kelly, creator of *Pogo*: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

And in *Beowulf* we keep on meeting him, again and again. Lately, a rock opera and some puppet shows have been adapted from the poem. A study guide for a paperback edition suggests classroom skits of the hero's exploits. Hollywood has adapted the material repeatedly, and is doing so again. Now, a grand opera is on its way. For all its years, this titanic struggle between good and evil is still very much of this moment.

Gardner wrote *Grendel* in the voice of the monster as existentialist: the enemy who is us. The 1971 book goes into his heart and mind, laying bare a soul-deep yearning for all the objects of human desire—and the disillusionment when they prove hollow. Read along with *Beowulf*. Gardner's prose version seems to tease out things the poet left unsaid. And this is done in English that is fleet and colloquial, while marked with an alliterative, allusive poetry that recalls the Old English of Grendel's origins: "Such are the tiresome memories of a shadow-shooter, earth-rim-roamer, walker of the world's weird wall."

In Gardner's *Grendel*, composer Elliot Goldenthal and his partner, director Julie Taymor, hear a hero crying out for a home in grand opera. They got to work on the project after their chamber-scale *Juan Darién: A Carnival Mass*, nearly 20 years ago. The novel had the Wagnerian sweep they were looking for. What's more, it shared with *Juan Darién* their favored theme of the outsider or the outcast: Juan, the jaguar cub raised as a boy; Grendel, the monster drawn to human society by the power of art. "The outsider, the detested one, ultimately he's the most human of all," says Taymor, a twofold Tony Award winner for *The Lion King*. "Shakespeare always gives the monsters the best poetry."

Goldenthal (an Academy Award winner for the score for *Frida*) went ahead with the opening scene: a monumental aria for the title character followed by a choral lament in Old English. "My original thought," Goldenthal says, "was that the title role would be a great vehicle for a bass baritone, working within a lexicon of vast contrasts."

Over the years, a recording of the opening scene circulated among influential conductors and impresarios, generating much encouragement. But not until 2003, when a joint commission from the Los Angeles Opera and the Lincoln Center fell into place (and with it needed funding), could Goldenthal devote himself to the project in earnest. Along the way, the poet J. D. McClatchy had signed on as Taymor's co-librettist.

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