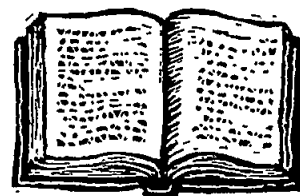


Grendel

John Gardner

1971

Completed in 1970 and published the following year, *Grendel* was the first of John Gardner's novels to bring him not just critical but popular success. The novel was praised as a literary *tour de force* and named a book of the year by *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines. As a professor of English specializing in medieval literature, Gardner had been teaching *Beowulf*, the source of inspiration for *Grendel*, for many years at various colleges. A relatively minor character in *Beowulf*, Grendel is a symbol for "darkness, chaos, and death," according to critic John M. Howell in *Understanding John Gardner*. In Gardner's version, however, Grendel becomes a three-dimensional character with, in Howell's words, "a sense of humor and a gift for language." Grendel even has a weakness for poetry. As a would-be artist, Grendel strives, however comically, to escape from his baseness. Such is the power of art, Gardner seems to be saying, that even a monster can be affected by it. Gardner also develops the theme of heroism as another moral force that enables society to advance by elevating Unferth, a minor character in the original poem, to a major character and foil for Grendel. Similarly, Gardner builds up the role of Grendel's mother to emphasize, through her inarticulateness, the importance of language in the development of civilization. Gardner also creates a relationship between Grendel and the dragon (another minor character in the original epic) in order to expand the concept of nihilism—the belief that there is no purpose to existence. Through these changes, Gardner



is able to develop themes that recur not only in *Grendel* but throughout his other works: the struggle between good and evil, the clash between order and disorder, the hero's sacrifice and achievement of immortality, and the importance of art and the artist as a means of affirming the moral meaning of life.

Author Biography

Grendel reflects two of Gardner's major interests: his belief in fiction as a moral force for good, and his passion for the medieval period in history. Gardner was born in 1933 and grew up in Batavia, New York. His mother was an English teacher and his father a farmer and lay preacher, so it is perhaps not surprising that Gardner was eventually drawn to the medieval period, when society was largely agricultural and the Church played a central role in life. As a boy he was attracted not only to language but also to music and chemistry. His father's passion for opera rubbed off on young John, who sang in various choirs as a boy and later wrote several opera libretti on medieval subjects. Having decided that English was his field because he did well at it, Gardner attended DePauw University from 1951 to 1953. The latter year he also married Joan Louise Patterson, with whom he had two children. Transferring to Washington University in St. Louis, Gardner received his A.B. in 1955. He also took an M.A. at the State University of Iowa in 1956 and a Ph.D. in 1958. As his doctoral dissertation, Gardner wrote an unpublished novel, *The Old Men*.

After receiving his Ph.D., Gardner pursued a teaching career while continuing his writing. He held positions at a number of colleges and universities before settling at Southern Illinois University from 1965 to 1974. His first published novel, *The Resurrection*, was published in 1966, though it attracted little notice, and his second, *The Wreckage of Agathon*, appeared in 1970. Gardner had been writing fiction fairly steadily from an early age, and he described *Grendel* (1971) as a "late work" in an interview in 1974. Though *The Sunlight Dialogues* (1972) and *October Light* (1976) were published after *Grendel*, both were actually written prior to it. *Grendel* was the first book to bring Gardner widespread recognition. The novel was named one of the ten best books of 1971 by *Time* and *Newsweek*.

During this period the author also published (with Lennis Dunlap) a textbook, *The Forms of Fic-*



John Gardner

tion (1961); a translation, *The Complete Works of the Gawain-Poet* (1965); *Jason and Medea* (1972), a novel in verse; the collection *The King's Indian: Stories and Tales* (1974); and other scholarly works on medieval literary subjects.

Both *The Sunlight Dialogues* and *Nickel Mountain* (1973) were well received by the popular press. *October Light* won the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction and was named one of the best books of 1976 by both *Time* and the *New York Times*. Gardner's reputation went down, however, after the publication of *On Moral Fiction* in 1978. While stating his own philosophy of moral affirmation eloquently, to many critics the book seemed arrogant and dismissive of many of Gardner's contemporaries.

From 1974 to 1978, Gardner held several short-term appointments in New York and New England colleges. During this period and the following four years, Gardner also published poetry, scholarly and children's books, a novel titled *Mickelsson's Ghosts* (1982), and a collection of stories. In 1978, he founded the writing program at the State University of New York at Binghamton. He served as its director until the time of his death, in a motorcycle accident, in 1982.

Plot Summary

Background: The Epic Beowulf

John Gardner's *Grendel* is a retelling of the first part of the Anglo-Saxon epic, *Beowulf*, with an important difference. In *Grendel*, the monster gets to tell the story. Because this is a retelling, however, Gardner assumes that his reader is familiar with the story of *Beowulf*. Indeed, without such familiarity the reader would be lost. Accordingly, the following is a very brief summary of the Anglo-Saxon story.

Beowulf is the oldest long poem in English, written as early as perhaps the seventh century A.D., with the only manuscript version dating to around 1000 A.D. The Danish King, Hrothgar, has built a fabulous meadhall, Heorot, for himself and his retainers. However, Heorot is not safe: each night the monster Grendel attacks the hall and kills Hrothgar's men. Beowulf, a Geat, hears of Hrothgar's distress and travels the land of the Danes to help rid Heorot of the monster and to garner fame for himself.

Beowulf fights with Grendel when the monster attacks the hall. He rips off Grendel's arm, and the monster flees, dying. Grendel's mother later attacks Hrothgar's men in retaliation for her son's death. Beowulf also fights Grendel's mother and kills her.

In the last section of *Beowulf*, set some fifty years later, old Beowulf, now king of the Geats, does battle with a gold-hoarding dragon who has been savaging the Geats. In this final battle, Beowulf and the dragon kill each other.

Chapters 1-4: Grendel and the World

Gardner's *Grendel* is a book of twelve chapters, the number recalling Grendel's twelve-year battle with Hrothgar, the months of the year, and the signs of the zodiac. The book, however, is not in straight chronological order. Rather, Gardner uses devices such as flashbacks, allusions, and foreshadowing to help relate the story. The present tense passages of the book move the reader chronologically through the twelve months of the twelfth year of Grendel's war with Hrothgar. Interspersed among the present tense passages are past tense passages telling of the years leading up to the present. Throughout, as the first person narrator of his own story, Grendel grows in his understanding of the nature of language and its power to create and destroy worlds.

The book opens in April, the month of the ram. It is in the present tense with Grendel observing the world around him, watching a ram on a mountain. Immediately his concern with language becomes evident: "Talking, talking. Spinning a web of words, pale walls of dreams, between myself and all I see."

Grendel lives in a cave under a burning lake with his mother, a mute, beast-like creature who cares for and protects him. There are other "shadowy shapes" in the cave, but Grendel alone can speak. In Chapter 2, Grendel recalls an important moment: trapped in a tree, crying for his mother, Grendel encounters men for the first time. The most important thing about the encounter is that the men speak words that Grendel understands, although the men do not understand Grendel's words.

After his rescue from the tree by his mother, Grendel begins watching the men and their actions. The third chapter is a summary of what he sees throughout the years as the Danes slowly develop human civilization. Hrothgar becomes the most powerful of the kings, because, Grendel tells the reader, he has a theory about the purpose of war that makes his battles effective.

About this time a blind poet arrives at Hrothgar's hall. The poet is called the Shaper. The Shaper does more than make poetry, according to Grendel. Through his retelling of Hrothgar's history, "The man had changed the world, had torn up the past by its thick, gnarled roots and had transmuted it, and they who knew the truth remembered it his way—and so did I." The Shaper's arrival is particularly significant for Grendel. In his songs, he names Grendel as one of the race of Cain, a representative of all that is dark and evil. For Hrothgar's men and for Grendel himself, this is what he becomes.

Chapters 5-7: The Dragon, Unferth, and Wealthew

Grendel, unhinged by the Shaper's words, visits the dragon to find answers to his questions about order, language, and truth. (This is the same dragon who will kill and be killed by Beowulf in the Anglo-Saxon epic.) The dragon tells him that the Shaper's words are an "illusion of reality," and that they only serve to make the men think that there is meaning in the universe. According to the dragon, the men's religion, ritual, and songs are nothing more than nonsense whose only purpose it to make them believe that life is not random accident. The

dragon denies the existence of God and meaning, advising Grendel to "seek out gold and sit on it."

Grendel discovers after leaving the dragon that the dragon has put a curse on him: he cannot be injured by the men's weapons. He begins raiding Hrothgar's meadhall, killing and eating men. On one occasion, he encounters Unferth, who stands up to him with bold words of heroism. Unferth's goal is to make his reputation by either killing or being killed by the monster. Grendel, instead of fighting, answers in words, and Unferth is shaken to realize that Grendel has language. Grendel engages in banter until Unferth, in frustration, says, "No more talk!" and rushes him with his sword. Uninjured, Grendel responds by throwing apples at him. By behaving in this unexpected way, Grendel completely humiliates Unferth. As a further insult, Grendel does not kill Unferth, but leaves him to his shame. Later, Unferth tracks Grendel to his lair and there confronts him on the meaning of heroism. Grendel demonstrates to Unferth that life is indeed meaningless by refusing to engage him in combat. Instead, he returns Unferth to the hall, kills two guards, and in future raids, spares Unferth's life. As Grendel reports, "So much for heroism."

In the next chapter, Grendel reveals in flashback the circumstances of the arrival of Wealtheow, the Queen at Hrothgar's court, during the second year of his raiding. At that time, Hrothgar was at war with the Helmings, Wealtheow's people. Her brother offered her to Hrothgar as a means of weaving a peace. Wealtheow's name means "holy servant of common good," and her role in *Beowulf* as well as *Grendel* is clearly that. Grendel attacks the hall and the Queen, but decides not to kill her.

Chapters 8-12: Grendel's End

In the eighth chapter, Grendel relates how Hrothgar's nephew, Hrothulf, arrived at the meadhall after the murder of his father. His resentful attitude and desire for power gives Grendel the opportunity to consider "the idea of violence" which grows in the young man. The following chapter features Grendel's encounter with a priest, which leads to several observations on the nature of religion. In the tenth chapter, Grendel feels tormented by boredom, and observes the death of the old poet Shaper. Meanwhile, his mother has become strangely protective of him and tries to prevent Grendel from leaving the lair.

In the next-to-last chapter, strangers arrive by sea. This is the unnamed hero that the reader knows to be Beowulf. Grendel is strangely excited by the presence of the strangers. He attacks the hall late

at night and makes a fatal error: he allows Beowulf to grab him by the wrist. Beowulf tells him about the cycles of existence. Although everything in this world will be destroyed, something will remain and will grow again. Although Grendel cannot be harmed by steel weapons, he is killed by the strength of Beowulf's grip. Beowulf rips off Grendel's arm at the shoulder socket. Grendel screams again for his mother, then staggers to edge of his cliff. To the end, he attributes his death to random accident. As he falls into death and over the cliff, he says to the animals watching him, "Poor Grendel's had an accident." The last words of the novel are enigmatic: "*So may you all.*" Whether this is curse or a prediction is unclear. Grendel, however, dies.

Characters

Beowulf

Beowulf is the hero with the "strength of thirty thanes" (Chapter 10) who finally slays Grendel and brings peace to the land of the Scyldings. Significantly, Beowulf's coming is not only prophesied by the old woman who speaks of a "giant across the sea" but is also alluded to in the dying words of the Shaper: "I see a time when the Danes once again—." Beowulf's arrival is also foretold by the lengthening of the days, which is a traditional sign of hope and new life. When Beowulf, the son of Ecgtheow, lands among the Danes, he introduces himself and his party as Geats who are "hearth-companions of King Hygilac" (Chapter 11). Beowulf has come specifically to kill Grendel, but Hrothgar's court realizes, of course, that whoever slays the monster will no doubt soon have a fair claim to the land of the Scyldings and Helmings as well. When Beowulf finally confronts Grendel, he tricks the monster into thinking he is asleep with the other thanes (warriors) in the mead hall. Beowulf then grabs Grendel's arm and twists it behind the monster, which slips in a pool of blood he himself has created in slaughtering weaker thanes. After forcing Grendel to acknowledge his own mortality by commanding him to "sing of walls" (Chapter 12), Beowulf rips off Grendel's arm, and the monster dies from loss of blood. While carrying out this deed, Beowulf intones these lines: "*Though you murder the world ... strong searching roots will crack your cave and rain will cleanse it: The world will burn green, sperm build again. My promise. Time is the mind, the hand that makes (fingers on harpstrings, hero-swords, the acts, the*

eyes of queens). By that I kill you." Thus does Beowulf catalogue all the acts that he believes are stronger than the forces of evil, alluding to all the characters in the story who have acted in the common good—including the Shaper, Unferth, and Wealtheow.

Dragon

The Dragon, who first appears in Chapter 5, may be real or just another figment of Grendel's imagination. Nevertheless, it plays an important role in the story as an exemplar of a philosophy of nihilism (the idea that existence is meaningless), solipsism (the idea that only the self exists), and chaos. The dragon's advice to Grendel—"Seek out gold—but not my gold—and guard it!" (stated twice in the chapter)—only begins to suggest his cynical view of the world. For the dragon, there is no real meaning in life, only accidental incidents, each one a "foolish flicker-flash in the long dull fall of eternity." While the Dragon himself claims to be able to see all space and time (however weary he is of the sight), ordinary mortals must struggle along with their illusions of connection, meaning, and reality. Nevertheless, the Dragon's power is such that after meeting him, Grendel is impervious to the weapons of men (Chapter 6).

First priest

The high priest Ork's company includes four other priests who serve under him. The first priest focuses on the words of the gospel, not the philosophy behind them. He is especially fond of quoting scripture to support every thought and action. Thus, when Ork says that he has seen Grendel—"The Great Destroyer"—the first priest replies: "Blasphemy! It is written, 'Ye shall not see my face'" (Chapter 9).

Fourth priest

Only the fourth priest, who is younger than the others, seems genuinely moved by Ork's responses to Grendel's questions about the nature of the "king of the Gods" and the meaning of life. Somewhat comically, the younger man exclaims, "The rhythm is re-established! Merely rational thought . . . leaves the mind incurably crippled.... But now at last, sweet fantasy has found root in your blessed soul!" (Chapter 9) and "*The gods made this world for our joy!*" (Chapter 10).

Freawaru

She is Hrothgar's daughter by "a woman who'd died" (Chapter 8). Hrothulf blushes when

Media Adaptations



- *Grendel* was adapted as an animated cartoon titled *Grendel, Grendel, Grendel* by Alexander Stitt in 1981. Sir Peter Ustinov was featured as the voice of Grendel.

ever she speaks to him, indicating a fondness for her. Hrothgar, however, plans to marry her off to the ruler of another rival fiefdom.

Grendel

While the monster Grendel was a less important character than Beowulf in the Old English epic on which Gardner's novel is based, as the title character here he has become the star attraction. Grendel is violent, cruel, cynical, and degenerate—in short, monstrous. Yet, like the humans who speak a similar language to his, Grendel has feelings, too. Like any mother's child, he cries when he is caught in the tree trunk (Chapter 2). Most important, he is moved by the words of the Shaper—the human poet whose words, though they no doubt embellish the truth, yet live through time to change the world and inspire the Scyldings to do great deeds (Chapter 3). Grendel is a monster, yet uses language as humans do, to try to define and explore his world.

As narrator, Grendel recounts the story of his life from birth to death. His search for meaning in his existence takes him to the home of the dragon and drives him to spy on the meadhall of Hrothgar. But when Grendel, inspired by the Shaper, tries to join the human race by leaving the "dark side" to which he believes he has been banished, he is misunderstood and turned on by fearful men. As a result, Grendel reverts to his former nihilism—believing there is no purpose to existence. He becomes vengeful, though remaining haunted by the Shaper's words.

Grendel is the author of numerous acts of violence and cruelty. By telling events from his point of view, however, the monster is still able to elicit sympathy from the reader. This sympathy has led some critics and readers to consider Grendel as the

“hero” of the novel. Careful consideration of the entire text, however, allows for a different interpretation.

Grendel's mother

She has no name, and may be only a dim memory in Grendel's mind rather than an actual living character in the story. Yet Grendel's mother plays an important role as the monster's comforter and savior. She also serves to highlight the importance of language in the novel. Grendel's mother communicates only in inarticulate sounds that even Grendel cannot understand—although he often says, and then denies, that her sounds might mean something. The shadowy cave where Grendel's mother dwells represents her ignorance. Similarly, the bone pile she is constantly picking through suggests that those without the ability to communicate are left to scraps of others. Although Grendel's mother does not possess language, unlike her son she seems to have found some purpose in life: as Grendel says, “I was, in her eyes, some meaning I could never know and might not care to know” (Chapter 2).

Halga the Good

The younger brother of Hrothgar, Halga the Good is murdered, leaving his son Hrothulf to reside as an orphan in Hrothgar's court.

Herogar

The king of a neighboring fiefdom to that of Hrothgar (Chapter 1).

Holy servant of common good

See *Wealtheow*

Hrothgar

King of the Scyldings, he first appears in the story as a tall man in a long black beard who inspects the tree in which Grendel is trapped (Chapter 2). When Grendel shouts at Hrothgar and his men, Hrothgar throws an ax at the monster, who is finally saved by his mother. Hrothgar gradually learns that the secret to power is not killing your neighbors but collecting tribute from them and making them your allies. He also is smart enough to build roads to connect his fiefdoms and bring peace and order to formerly warring bands. Finally, when threatened by Hymgod of the Helmings, neighbors who are potentially more powerful than he, Hrothgar realizes that the solution to his problem is to accept Hymgod's offer of his sister, *Wealtheow*, as his bride. In the twilight of his rule,

Hrothgar is subjected to the trials of various forms of political philosophy—from the traditional heroism of the feudalistic age, seen in his Hrothgar's subject Unferth, to the Machiavellian beliefs and anarchism of his young nephew Hrothulf and his mentor Red Horse (a pun on the name of the radical French philosopher Georges Sorel).

Hrothulf

One of Halga the Good's two sons, Hrothulf comes at the age of fourteen to live at Hrothgar's mead hall after the death of his father. He is sullen and brooding: “already a God-damned pretender,” Grendel observes (Chapter 8). Though exposed to the philosophy of anarchism by his mentor, Red Horse, Hrothulf is not totally taken in by the old man's violent beliefs. “Nobody in his right mind would praise violence for its own sake, regardless of its ends,” says Hrothulf (Chapter 8). Perhaps more telling, Hrothulf remains kind to his young cousins, the children of Hrothgar and *Wealtheow*, though they stand ahead of him in line to the kingship.

Hygmod

Hrothgar's challenger from a neighboring fiefdom is a young king whose power is symbolized by the bear he leads on a chain (Chapter 7). Rather than wait for Hygmod to grow in strength and challenge him, Hrothgar takes his army to Hygmod. Hrothgar is wise enough to know that Hygmod's offer of gifts will not be sufficient to buy peace between the two rivals. But by the same token, Hygmod is smart enough to realize that his ultimate offer—the gift of his own sister, *Wealtheow*, as Hrothgar's bride—will not be refused. Hrothgar realizes that despite his current advantage, his kingdom is on the decline and that this new alliance may be the only way to save it.

King of the Scyldings

See *Hrothgar*

Lord of the Helmings

See *Hygmod*

Ork

The “eldest and wisest” of Hrothgar's priests by his own description, Ork is a blind prophet who encounters Grendel in Chapter 9. Ork takes his name from a recurring character in William Blake's poetry who seems to represent, at different times, Prometheus, Christ, or, in the words of critic Northrop Frye, the “dying and reviving god of

[Blake's] mythology" (Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, as quoted in Howell, *Understanding John Gardner*). Ork's eloquent and heartfelt descriptions of the principles of his philosophy puzzle Grendel. His expectations defied, the monster hesitates to murder the priest as he had planned. Among Ork's memorable descriptions of his philosophy is his description of God's purpose ("the evocation of novel intensities. He is the *lure for our feeling*") and the ultimate Evil ("'Things fade' and 'Alternatives exclude'").

Red Horse

Red Horse is the old peasant who is young Hrothulf's counselor. Red Horse delivers almost verbatim the anarchistic philosophy of the French thinker Georges Sorel, as written in his *Reflections on Violence* (1908). "The total ruin of institutions and morals is an act of creation. A *religious* act. Murder and mayhem are the life and soul of revolution" (Chapter 8). While Hrothulf finds some of the old man's ideas attractive, he is not completely convinced.

Scyld Shefing

Scyld Shefing is the ancient Danish King who, according to a legend, was found as a castaway by the "first men." Scyld Shefing grew up to win the "glory of men," uniting a kingdom that had been "lordless" for many years. His great deeds are still sung by the Shaper (Chapter 3).

Second priest

The second priest's main concern seems to be physical, not spiritual. He believes that he and his fellow priests should follow a strict physical regimen so that they can each put their best efforts into their daily work. Thus he scolds Ork for being outdoors at night with snow falling on him. "A man should try to be more regular," he exclaims (Chapter 9).

Shaper

The Shaper is the name the author gives to the king's poet-musician-historian, for he can shape reality just with his words. The poet is a special person in the court, who through words and music alone makes the great deeds of humanity seem even greater, thus inspiring people to take risks for what they believe in. When the blind harper in Hrothgar's court sings of the deeds of the great Scyld Shefing, "men wept like children: children sat stunned" (Chapter 3). The Shaper may manipulate the truth as much as the politician, Gardner seems

to be saying. Yet the Shaper's ability to capture the emotions of his listeners and harness their energies, so that they may live their lives in service to the highest ideals, make him higher than others in the pantheon of human heroes. When the blind singer gets old and dies, his last thought, though unfinished, suggests hope "I see a time when the Danes once again—" (Chapter 10).

Son of Ecglaf

See Unferth

Third priest

The main concern of the third priest is with appearances, not spirituality. He worries about how Ork's behavior will affect the perception of priests by people in general. The third priest says of Ork: "Lunatic priests are bad business. They give people the willies. One man like him can turn us all to paupers" (Chapter 9).

Unferth

The bravest of the thanes in Hrothgar's court, Unferth challenges Grendel on one of his invasions of the meadhall. The monster mocks the hero's brave words, and shocks Unferth when he reveals he can speak. Instead of dignifying Unferth with combat, he throws apples at the man before leaving the hall. To Grendel's surprise, Unferth follows him home and swims through the pool above Grendel's cave to challenge his power with the hope of dying a hero. Unferth, despite his brutish side, represents the author's philosophy that "except in the life of a hero, the whole world's meaningless. The hero sees values beyond what's possible" (Chapter 6). Grendel humiliates Unferth by carrying him back to Hrothgar's meadhall alive and intact. Later in the story (Chapter 7), it is revealed that Unferth apparently murdered his brothers, an event which moved him to "put on the Shaper's idea of a hero like a merry mask." His bitter demeanor is healed by the queen's forgiveness. Despite his unresolved conflict with Grendel, Unferth remains "top man in Hrothgar's hall" (Chapter 11) until Beowulf appears. Unferth challenges the newcomer by mocking his reputation, but Beowulf refutes the story convincingly and then puts Unferth in his place by referring to his bloody past.

Wealtheow

As her description, "holy servant of common good" (Chapter 7), suggests, Wealtheow has given up her personal life for the sake of keeping peace between the Helmings and Scyldings. Though she

occasionally longs for her childhood home, she never lets these feelings show to the Scyldings. In offering to sacrifice herself for the good of all, Wealtheow is a true heroine in Gardner's terms. As such, she arouses mixed feelings of love and hatred in Grendel. He resolves to kill her, but at the last moment decides against it because it would be "as meaningless as letting her live."

Themes

Artists and Society

The artist in *Grendel* is the Shaper, the court harper. His singing of great men's deeds, no matter how embellished or even falsified, renders both men and deeds immortal. Individual artists may come and go as others with greater gifts appear: this happens when the old harper in Hrothgar's hall is displaced by the Shaper, a newer and more talented bard (Chapter 3). Nevertheless, the power of art remains. While it is kings who unite countries politically, Gardner seems to be saying that they could not do so without the courage and selflessness of individuals who are inspired by the Shaper to accomplish great deeds. Such is the power of the poet that he affects even Grendel. After hearing the blind harper "sing the glory of Hrothgar's line," Grendel flees the scene, a "ridiculous hairy creature torn apart by poetry." Even though Grendel ultimately rejects the Shaper's fable, Grendel himself is still driven back to poetry in his quest to be understood. Having destroyed Hrothgar's meadhall in Chapter 6, Grendel realizes now that "as never before, I was alone." In his new role as "Wrecker of Kings," he is nothing once he runs out of kings to wreck, because "physical destruction is finite," as Howell notes. Thus later, when Grendel wants to punish Hrothgar, instead of planning some physical act of destruction, he thinks of insinuating into the king's sleep a bad dream about a "heavy blade in flight" (Chapter 8). These words (which are actually a quote from Thomas Kinsella's poem "Wormwood") are meant to evoke in the old king a nightmarish recollection of the moment he threw an ax at Grendel and began their war.

Death

There is a marked contrast in attitudes toward death between the various monsters and Beowulf and the thanes (warriors), especially Unferth. With this contrast, Gardner makes the point that personal death is insignificant to the hero if it brings a chance

for immortality. For Grendel, the solipsist (one who believes nothing exists but the self), killing others means nothing. When Grendel himself faces even the slightest threat of physical harm, however, it is enough to send him wailing to his mother (Chapters 2, 12). Although Gardner embellishes the character of the dragon considerably, he does not include the scene from the original epic in which the dragon kills Beowulf. Instead, Beowulf lives to preach a gospel of death and rebirth: "The world will burn green, sperm build again. My promise. Time is the mind, the hand that makes (fingers on harpstrings, hero-swords, the acts, the eyes of queens). By that I kill you" (Chapter 12). In other words, it is through creation, imagination, and inspiration that one may kill evil and achieve immortality—even if heroic acts only live on through poetry and song

Language and Meaning

According to Gardner, art—and especially poetry—is the only thing that gives meaning to an otherwise meaningless universe. Language is the only way that humans can break through the wall that isolates them from other humans and from the world of meaning. The wall is a recurring image in *Grendel* (see, for example, Chapters 2, 3, 8, and 12). The importance of language in *Grendel* in breaking through this wall is signaled not only by the significance of the Shaper's character but by the degree to which language plays a part in several other major characters. Most significant of these is Grendel himself, who begins the story as an inarticulate character like his mother but who rises at different points in the story to new levels of poetic intensity, however misunderstood by humans. (See, for example, Chapters 7, 8, 9, and 12.) Perhaps the most pathetic character in the story is Grendel's mother, who speaks no language at all, and who cannot even be understood by her own son. Though she does venture out of her cave at least once, to rescue her son, for the most part she is confined to a dark cave that symbolizes her total linguistic isolation.

Morals and Morality

The struggle in *Grendel* can be characterized as one between the forces of good and evil, morality and immorality. This struggle can be seen both within a single person, such as Grendel, and between individuals. Grendel, no matter how he may despise himself or seek to change, can be seen as representing the forces of evil. This would make Wealtheow and Beowulf, as well as Hrothgar and

Topics For Further Study



- Comment on Grendel's progress as a poet, under the influence of the Shaper, by evaluating the style and poetic effects of the doggerel he produces in Chapter 7; the verse play in Chapter 8; the free verse at the end of Chapter 9; and finally the poem in Chapter 12.
- Research the antiwar movement during the U.S. war in Vietnam, during which time *Grendel* was written. Relate the struggle between good and evil as depicted in *Grendel* to the struggle between different sectors of American society.
- Compare the philosophy of William Blake, as expressed in his poem *The Mental Traveller* and in the character of Ork, with the anarchistic philosophy of Georges Sorel, as expressed in his book *Reflections on Violence* and in the character of Red Horse, whom Gardner based on Sorel.
- Gardner added references to the twelve astrological signs to *Grendel*, focusing on one sign in each of the twelve chapters. Analyze how Gardner uses the meaning and symbolism of each astrological sign to lend unity to his overall story.
- In *Grendel*, Gardner has taken his point of departure from the classic Old English poem *Beowulf*. Compare and contrast the two stories. How are they the same? In what ways are they different?
- In *Grendel* we can see the contrast of two philosophies of government. Compare the feudal system represented by Unferth and Wealtheow in the kingdom of Hrothgar to the anarchism propounded by Red Horse, counselor to the young Hrothulf.

Unferth (despite their sometimes cynical or comical appearances), represent the forces of morality. Critics Helen B. Ellis and Warren U. Ober suggest in *John Gardner: Critical Perspectives* that Gardner is like the poet William Blake by implying that "the case for a particular set of values can best be made by positing an 'ironic set' of contrary values." As even Grendel recognizes, "balance is everything" (Chapter 7). Thus Hrothgar, despite his cold-blooded attempts to hold onto his throne, represents the forces of society against the threat of anarchy. We see another form of goodness in Wealtheow's comforting of the aged king, to whom she has sacrificed all personal comfort for the sake of keeping peace between potentially warring kingdoms. And of course Beowulf's slaying of Grendel at the end represents the ultimate triumph of good over evil. For Grendel, for all his artistic attempts, at the end still remains a person who believes there is no purpose in existence: a nihilist who insists that the result of his fatal fight was just an "accident" (Chapter 12) in a world with no real meaning.

Style

Point of View

Grendel is told in the first person ("I") from the point of view of the title character. Grendel is a monster with poetic aspirations whose every attempt to communicate with ordinary humans is met with misunderstanding and hostility. By focusing on the monster, the author elicits some sympathy for an otherwise thoroughly repulsive character who eats humans for pleasure. Because the point of view is that of Grendel, instead of the omniscient narrator of the original poem, the reader must deduce the story's theme from the monster's limited perspective. Fortunately Grendel is not just an aspiring poet but a good writer. In this respect he resembles Gardner's philosophical nemesis, Jean-Paul Sartre, whose philosophy of existentialism Gardner despised. Gardner told interviewer Marshall L. Harvey in *Chicago Review* that he wished "to present the *Beowulf* monster as Jean-Paul Sartre." According to Sartre, human beings are basically isolated individuals in an accidental world

where God does not exist. Man must therefore create his own values, even though these values have no meaning outside the individual consciousness. Thus, when Grendel is attacked by the bull while trapped in a tree, he realizes that "the world was nothing: a mechanical chaos of casual, brute enmity.... I understood that, finally and absolutely, I alone exist" (Chapter 2). From that moment until the end of the story, in which Grendel describes his fatal wound as an "accident" (Chapter 12), the monster articulates Sartre's bleak philosophy.

Structure

The story begins in the "twelfth year of my idiotic war" against Hrothgar (Chapter 1) and uses the technique of flashback to tell the story of the monster's life. Grendel's long reminiscence covers from "when I was young" (Chapter 2) to the moment when he lies dying from Beowulf's fatal attack (Chapter 12). Within that frame, Gardner has ambitiously structured his tale around the twelve years of Grendel's war (one for each of the twelve chapters). He has also given each chapter an event associated with one of the twelve signs of the zodiac and their associated ruling planets and houses. (In an *American Literature* article, Barry Fawcett and Elizabeth Jones explicate each of these items.) For example, Chapter 1 opens with Aries the ram, representing Spring. Aries is associated with the planet Mars, the god of war—hence the references to Grendel's war with Hrothgar. Aries also corresponds to the first house in astrology, that of life—hence the funeral scene in which Hrothgar celebrates the life of the victims of that war. Beowulf's inspiring speech in Chapter 12, with its images of spring ("strong searching roots will crack your cave and rain will cleanse it: The world will burn green ...") recalls the Spring imagery of Chapter 1. In this way the author is suggesting a cyclical pattern, which reinforces Beowulf's words of rebirth. As Kathryn VanSpanckeren has analyzed at length (in *John Gardner: Critical Perspectives*), Gardner used such "embedded structures" as the narrative frame in all of his novels except *Nickel Mountain*.

Other critics, such as Craig J. Stromme in *Critique*, have noted that each chapter is designed to highlight a different school of philosophy. After Gardner's introduction to the astrological idea of endless cyclical repetition in Chapter 1, Grendel begins as a solipsist in Chapter 2—"I exist, nothing else." In Chapter 3, Grendel is exposed to the sophistry of the Shaper, who can by the power of his words make his hearers believe anything. In Chapter 4, the Shaper articulates the theology of

the Old Testament, in which the children of light are contrasted to the descendants of Cain, the children of darkness. In Chapter 5, the dragon expresses English philosopher Alfred Whitehead's philosophy of the fundamental connection of all things, but Grendel can't understand it. In Chapter 6, Grendel emerges as a skeptic who, in Stromme's words, "accepts that beings other than himself exist, but ... has postulated them all as enemies." Similarly, Grendel is exposed to Christianity by Wealtheow in Chapter 7, Machiavellian statecraft by Hrothulf in Chapter 8, the hypocrisy of the young priests in Chapter 9, the pessimism of Nietzsche in Chapter 10, and the nihilism of Sartre in Chapter 11. Thus *Grendel* is structured as a survey of philosophical ideas.

Parody

In Gardner's hands *Grendel* is a parody that is used both to imitate and to ridicule or admire specific pieces and forms of literature and specific authors. Most obviously, *Grendel* is a respectful tribute to its source of inspiration, the Old English classic *Beowulf*. Gardner borrows most of the plot and characters directly from the original poem. Where the author has expanded the role of a character, as in the case of Grendel or the dragon, it is generally to ridicule or act as a foil for specific philosophers and their works. For example, Grendel represents a "case history of a bad artist" whose words are constantly misunderstood by others, according to David Cowart in *Arches and Light: The Fiction of John Gardner*. He inspires only acts of violence, whereas the Shaper's words inspire hearers to do great deeds. Thus we see Grendel, inspired by the Shaper, try his own hand at poetry, which at first results in ridiculous doggerel (Chapter 7). This awkward attempt gives way to somewhat better rhymed verse (opening of Chapter 8); still more creative and metrically freer verse (end of Chapter 8); and lastly, truly inspired, alliterative verse (Chapter 12), albeit composed as Beowulf smashes Grendel against a wall. Similarly, by ridiculing the Shaper's lack of a "total vision, total system" (Chapter 5), the dragon seems to be advocating Whitehead's philosophy of connectedness, though as Howell notes, the dragon's "sneering tone seems to undercut the validity of Whitehead's vision as well as the Shaper's." Gardner, however, is using both Grendel and the dragon in a parodic manner to bring out the prominent points of contrasting philosophies.



A young protestor confronts the National Guard during a 1968 demonstration in Chicago.

Historical Context

American Society in the Late 1960s

The heady days of the early 1960s, with their promise of peace abroad, political change in Washington, and economic boom throughout the country, had given way by the end of the decade to a series of gloomy developments. The prospect of an unwinnable war in Vietnam was compounded by numerous protests that often ended in violence. Disillusion with the American political system was symbolized by several assassinations: first, that of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, then the 1965 murder of Black Muslim leader Malcolm X, then those of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. Early advances in civil rights stood in contrast to riots by urban blacks, whose expectations had been raised but not met by President Johnson's promises of a "Great Society." Economic uncertainty was reflected in a stagnant and inflationary economy that was unable to support both the war in Vietnam and the needs of President Johnson's domestic agenda.

Protests and Politics

The 1960s saw numerous protests, particularly over issues concerning civil rights and U.S. in-

volvement in the Vietnam War. By 1968, dissatisfaction with the Johnson administration's responses to these concerns led to a record number of protests, particularly on college campuses. Although President Lyndon Johnson declined to run for reelection in 1968, the Democratic National Convention was seen by many groups as the ideal protest forum, one which could gain them a wider audience. Several antiwar protest groups, as well as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the civil-rights group once led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., showed up in Chicago to protest. This led to several conflicts with Chicago police, who had been instructed by law-and-order mayor Richard Daley to stop any such protests. One legal rally led to violence when a group of police attacked not only protesters but innocent bystanders and members of the media who were covering the event. The whole conflict was captured by television cameras and broadcast nationally. In the aftermath, several leaders of activist groups—the "Chicago Seven"—were charged by the U.S. Attorney General with conspiracy to riot, even though most of them had never met before the convention.

Richard Nixon was elected president in 1968, in part aided by his "law and order" platform and his promises to bring an "honorable end" to the Vietnam War. In 1970, however, Nixon announced

Compare & Contrast

- **Sixth-century A.D. Scandinavia:** Using Scandinavian chronicles and sagas, it is possible to date the historical events in the original *Beowulf*, the basis for *Grendel*, to this time and place. The basic political conflict in *Beowulf* is between the Danes (represented by Hrothgar's house) and the Geats (represented by Beowulf and his visiting party). Similarly, the rivalry between Hrothgar and Hrothulf over what would happen to the throne when Hrothgar died are also recounted in the Scandinavian analogues.

1960s-1970s United States: Political turmoil in the United States reaches a peak with students protesting the Vietnam War at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968. The Chicago police, under Democratic Mayor Richard Daley, repress the demonstrations with great force, leading to disillusionment not only in the Democratic Party (whose candidate, Hubert Humphrey, eventually lost the presidential election to Richard Nixon) but also in the whole democratic process.

Today: Widespread disillusionment with the political process continues, with record numbers of eligible voters not voting and widespread cynicism among both politicians and voters about the effectiveness of the democratic process. Today, cynicism feeds on the controversy surrounding the ways in which political campaigns and candidates are financed. Cynicism also flourishes because of the decrease in bipartisan spirit on many issues between the two major political parties. Nevertheless, there is agreement that the U.S. system of government still seems to work as well or better than any system others have been able to devise.

- **Sixth-century A.D. Scandinavia:** The political tribes of the area have little interaction with cultures outside of Europe; the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 A.D., while creating new political realities throughout Europe, is scarcely felt in Scandinavia (which had never been a part of

the Roman Empire) either politically or economically.

1960s-1970s United States: This period sees the beginning of an increasingly inflationary economy (where prices rise quickly). The high inflation of this stagnant economy, combined with the oil embargo by Arab nations, produces a serious economic recession in 1973 and 1974.

Today: Fueled by low inflation and interest rates, the steady growth of the U.S. economy leads to a period of economic prosperity and optimism unequaled since the early 1960s. In 1997 the influence of a worldwide economy can be seen in a sudden drop in the U.S. stock market, caused by economic downturns in Asian countries.

- **Sixth-century A.D. Scandinavia:** Power rests on wealth from raids and trading, although trading eastward is cut off during this period by the Huns and Avars. Society consists of a landed aristocracy and farmer tenants and a local court system.

1960s-1970s United States: Young people, particularly students, challenge the authority of those who govern at all levels. There is a general questioning of the right of a power elite, composed largely of white males, to make policy for an increasingly younger and more diverse citizenry. Civil rights groups continue to fight for the rights of minorities, while others focus on equal rights for women and homosexuals.

Today: There is a greater representation of women and minorities in various areas of life, including government and the workforce. Nevertheless, some inequalities remain, particularly economic ones, and racial issues are prominent in politics. A country containing individuals of diverse social, sexual, and ethnic identities, the United States remains more a "salad bowl" of many separate ingredients rather than a "melting pot" containing one definition of "American."

that U.S. military forces had invaded Cambodia, another Southeast Asian country, in order to find and destroy enemy Vietcong bases. This triggered massive demonstrations on college campuses and often rioting. The Ohio National Guard was called to quell unrest on the campus of Kent State University, and on May 4, shots were fired into a crowd, killing four students and injuring nine others, including some students who had not even participated in the protest. Investigations later showed that, contrary to official claims, none of the victims had been physically threatening the Guards, or even been closer than sixty feet. A similar situation occurred at Jackson State University in Mississippi eleven days later, leaving two women dead. The result of these two incidents was a student strike that shut down over two hundred colleges and universities nationwide, and a country embroiled in conflict over political protest.

Literature of the 1960s

As befitted an era of conflict and protest, much of the literature of the 1960s was concerned with political issues. Socially conscious artists saw their work as a means to communicate their ideas, criticisms, and protests. Black humor, such as that found in the antiwar novels *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut or *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, was often employed to satirize issues of the day. Writers also experimented with form, trying new and different techniques to push the boundaries of traditional fiction. These more literary works often ended up on best-seller lists, adopted by a reading public open to new literary possibilities and new ideas. By the end of the 1960s, however, many artists became frustrated with what they felt was a lack of effectiveness in using art to achieve social reform. They adopted a nihilistic viewpoint—that existence is pointless. Literary works reflected this view either by focusing only on a work's form, not its content, or by using absurdity to deal with the hopelessness of life.

Gardner's *Grendel*, written at the tail end of this era, attempted to refute this nihilistic viewpoint. While the twelve-chapter structure is an important part of the novel, this form serves to highlight and support the content, not replace it. Gardner also makes an argument for the importance of the artist in society. Through the character of the Shaper, the author points out the positive influence an artist may have on those around him. In this way, Gardner's work reflects the spirit of many other literary novels of the day, and achieved similar success.

Critical Overview

Gardner's first two published novels, *The Resurrection* (1966) and *The Wreckage of Agathon* (1970) generated little response, although Geoffrey Wolff did praise the latter in *Newsweek*. With *Grendel* (1971), however, as David Cowart noted in *Arches and Light*, "the critical tide of caution began to turn. Reviewers were charmed, and *Time* and *Newsweek* cited it among the year's best novels. After a first printing of 7500 copies, it went through nine hardback and thirteen paperback printings in this country and England by the end of 1977. It had also, by then, been translated into French, Spanish, and Swedish." No doubt some of this attention was due to readers' familiarity with Grendel's literary source, the classic epic poem *Beowulf*, known especially to high school and college English students and their professors. Academics in particular respected the author, who was already an established scholar in medieval studies, having edited four books and translated two other works in this field.

But critics generally also felt, as David Cowart wrote in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, that in *Grendel* Gardner "burnishes the classic at the same time that he creates a new masterpiece." Academic critics in particular responded to Gardner's scholarship in drawing not only on medieval sources but also poets from William Blake to Thomas Kinsella and philosophers from Plato to Whitehead and Sartre. Critics also relished unravelling the novel's structure, with its allusions to the signs of the zodiac and various school of philosophical thought. The character of Grendel received special attention, with a lively debate ensuing over whether that monster, who is certainly the central character in the story, is not also its real hero. Like the Shaper, Grendel is engaged in a struggle to create poetry. (As these critics noted, *Beowulf*, the ostensible hero of the novel, makes only a relatively brief appearance toward the end.) Some critics went as far as to consider Grendel an absurd hero whose violent nihilism is the only sane reaction to the chaos of modern society.

Gardner himself lent insight into this debate in his treatise *On Moral Fiction*. In this 1978 work (which according to *New York Times Magazine* contributor Stephen Singular was actually written in 1965), Gardner criticized contemporary novelists like Saul Bellow, John Barth, John Updike, and Thomas Pynchon for not practicing "moral art." By this term he meant art which "in its high-

est form holds up models of virtue, whether they be heroic models like Homer's Achilles or models of quiet endurance like the coal miners . . . in the photographs of W. Eugene Smith." In a similar vein, a year earlier Gardner had told *Atlantic Monthly* interviewers Don Edwards and Carol Polsgrove that "if we celebrate bad values in our arts, we're going to have a bad society. If we celebrate values which make you healthier, which make life better, we're going to have a better world." These statements would seem to indicate the author's intent lay in rebuking Grendel's nihilist viewpoints. That the work has been interpreted in exactly the opposite fashion is, according to various critics, either a testament to Gardner's ability to invent a powerful and sympathetic protagonist or an indication of his problems in clearly presenting his ideas.

Despite the fervency and highmindedness of such views, *On Modern Fiction* elicited mostly negative reactions from both reviewers and fellow writers, as summarized by Cowart in *Arches and Light*. Not surprisingly, the novelists who were attacked in the essay fought back in print in widely read forums like the *New York Times*. And since Gardner had boldly and unapologetically set a high standard for artists, his own novels, especially his later ones, were soon being judged by this same standard and found wanting. Critic John Romano, for example, claimed in the *New York Times Book Review* that *Freddy's Book* (1980) wasn't moral since its exuberance threatened to "slip over into immorality at any turn" and that Gardner's moral aesthetic contradicted his medievalist love for "the fabulous, the enchanted."

Thus far, however, Gardner's *Grendel* has, for the most part, escaped such criticism. As Fawcett and Jones stated in *American Literature*, "Somewhere in our cavernous hearts the old heroic ideals continue to haunt and illumine us. Grendel's conflict, as he holds fast to skepticism yet sways toward vision, turning and twisting between mockery and anguish, poetry and black humor, continually ironizing his ironies, is our own as inhabitants of the twentieth century."

Criticism

Diane Andrews Henningfeld

Henningfeld is an English professor at Adrian College and has written for a wide variety of academic journals and educational publishers. In the

following essay, she reads Grendel from a feminist perspective, demonstrating the importance of language and gender to the text.

Grendel, John Gardner's retelling of the first part of *Beowulf*, offers the reader a host of interpretive possibilities. As an Anglo-Saxonist scholar and as a post-modernist writer, Gardner's work is both allusive and complex. Nonetheless, Gardner, known for his experimental fiction as well as his poetry and philosophical writings, left behind a raft of interviews and articles regarding his fiction when he died unexpectedly in 1982 as the result of a motorcycle accident. Consequently, critics can find ample support for a variety of readings.

Critical approaches to *Grendel* are thus varied and wide-ranging. Some critics choose to concentrate on Gardner's sources for his novel. Gardner weaves in allusions to such writers as Chaucer, Browning, and even Kurt Vonnegut. The strongest connection between his novel and another work is William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. A number of critics focus on Blake's phrase, "the contraries of existence" to demonstrate that Grendel's vision is not coincidental with Gardner's. Blake, writing at the close of the eighteenth century, stated "Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human Existence." In addition, these critics posit Grendel's ultimate failure on his rejection of life's contradictory meanings. For Grendel, life has meaning, or not. For Grendel, the absolutist, contradictory elements cannot exist simultaneously.

Other critics choose to examine Gardner's structuring of the novel. Most obviously, the novel is structured around the signs of the zodiac. Each of the twelve chapters contains a controlling image connecting the chapter to its sign. For example, when the book opens, Grendel is observing a ram, and "the first grim stirrings of springtime come." From this the reader can determine that it is April, the month of Aries the ram. (Additionally, such an opening ironically recalls Chaucer's first lines of the *Canterbury Tales*.) When the unnamed hero (whom the reader knows to be Beowulf) finally arrives by boat, it is in the eleventh chapter, the month of February, under the sign of Aquarius, the Water Bearer. Such symbolism offers the reader a rich range of possibilities.

Finally, still other critics concentrate on the philosophic ideas underpinning Gardner's work. Certainly, *Grendel* is nothing if not a novel of ideas. Gardner seems particularly concerned with exam-

What Do I Read Next?



- *Beowulf* is the oldest epic narrative in any modern European language. As the major inspiration for Gardner's *Grendel*, it will be of great interest to any reader who enjoyed Gardner's version. One of several good translations is that by Charles W. Kennedy (Oxford University Press, 1940). It also contains a helpful introduction with sections on historical background, the history of the manuscript itself, and the influence of the classical epic and various folk sources
- Gardner's best-known nonfiction work, *On Moral Fiction* (1978), is concerned with the purpose and craft of fiction and is basically a statement of Gardner's philosophy. Passionate, blunt in tone, and sometimes contradictory, it found favor with those who agreed with the author about the essential humanity of great literature. Nevertheless, Gardner riled some critics who felt that his judgments on some of his fellow contemporary novelists were too harsh.
- Gardner's *The Sunlight Dialogues* (1972) explores on a massive scale the theme of order versus chaos, with eighty characters and an intricate plot set in Gardner's hometown of Batavia, New York. In this novel, described by David Cowart in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* as "possibly his finest," Gardner sets in opposition the Sunlight Man, a mercurial and mysterious criminal who represents absolute freedom, and Fred Clumly, a local police officer who espouses law and order.
- *The Legacy of Heorot* (1987) is a science-fiction version of the first part of *Beowulf* that is set on Earth's first stellar colony. The spot seems like paradise, until dogs and cattle begin to disappear, devoured by a monster. Authors Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle, and Steven Barnes have combined forces to create a frighteningly realistic horror story à la Stephen King.

ining existentialism, a twentieth-century philosophy which suggests that there is nothing more to human life than existence itself. No larger meanings or order control human destiny, and it is human duty to choose how life will be lived. For the existentialist, even not choosing represents a choice. That Gardner explicitly connects *Grendel* with existentialist thought and specifically with John Paul Sartre, the French existentialist, is clear from a 1978 interview with Marshall Harvey:

I use Sartre a lot. What happened in *Grendel* was that I got the idea of presenting the *Beowulf* monster as John Paul Sartre, and everything that Grendel says Sartre in one mood or another has said, so that my love of Sartre kind of comes through as my love of the monster, though monsters are still monsters—I hope.

There is, however, yet another way to read *Grendel*. In recent years, feminist critics have begun to reread the canon of Anglo-Saxon poetry, including *Beowulf*. In spite of the dearth of female characters, there is much to be learned by reexam-

ining the Anglo-Saxon epic through this lens. Likewise, *Grendel* can be read from a feminist perspective, concentrating on Grendel's mother, Wealtheow, and the role language plays in ordering a culture.

French feminists in particular have used the theories of psychoanalytic philosopher Jacques Lacan to explain the ways language creates and maintains the patriarchal power structures of a society. What we call "language" is public discourse, a male construction that maintains the hierarchies of a culture. That is, the very language a culture uses serves invisibly to preserve and protect the power systems of the culture. For example, in English, the masculine pronoun has always been considered the correct form in sentences such as this: "Does everyone have his book?" Further, the word "man" stands in for the human race as the normative term. Likewise, while we may speak of "women writers," we rarely speak of "male writers."

Further, Lacan maintains that children "fall" into language at about the same time that they rec-

ognize themselves as separate beings from their mothers. Certainly, the second chapter of *Grendel* illustrates graphically both Grendel's separation anxiety and his growing awareness of the function of language. When he speaks of his understanding of himself and his mother early in the chapter, he reports, "We were one thing, like the wall and the rock growing out from it." Later, however, Grendel finds himself trapped in a tree, unable to remove himself. Immediately he screams for his mother, who does not appear. It is in this moment that he states, "I understood that, finally and absolutely, I alone exist." A bit later he describes himself as "an alien, the rock broken free from the wall." These are clear signs of his separation from his mother. Significantly, it is at this moment of separation that Grendel hears men speaking for the first time. "The sounds were foreign at first, but when I calmed myself, concentrating, I found I understood them: it was my own language, but spoken in a strange way."

Lacan further suggests that the male child will begin to identify himself with his father as spokesman of cultural values at about the same time that the child learns language and separates from the mother. For Grendel, however, there is no father. Into this absence, then, steps Hrothgar. Grendel attempts to identify with the king and with his men. On the night that he first hears the Shaper, Grendel tries to join Hrothgar's band with disastrous consequences: "Drunken men rushed me with battle axes. I sank to my knees, crying, 'Friend! Friend!' They hacked at me, yipping like dogs." Although Grendel understands his language to be the same as the men's, they do not understand his speech. Thus, he is an outsider to their community and a threat. For Grendel, the identification with a father, and thus with a culture, remains incomplete.

Further, it is also possible to explain Grendel's fascination with Wealtheow by considering his separation from his mother. French feminists argue that male language is the language of desire. Further, they suggest that male language idealizes and fantasizes about the feminine. This idealization and fantasy is caused by the absence of the mother. The separation from the mother causes an emotional lack in the male child. That Grendel feels an emotional lack is clear as he contemplates his mother, and the separation between them; he says explicitly, "I am a lack." Further, Grendel idealizes and fantasizes about the Queen, Wealtheow. In his eyes, she is all beauty, and offers some hope for meaning in the world. His understanding of Wealtheow, however, is conditioned by the Shaper's songs,

more male language. It is not the woman Wealtheow that Grendel wants, but rather the ideal created by the language of the Shaper. Grendel observes that the ultimate act of nihilism would be to kill the Queen. Yet he is unable to contemplate this until he raids the hall and pulls her legs apart. He decides to kill her because of "the ugly hole between her legs." His confrontation with her body destroys his notion of the ideal, but not entirely. Ultimately, he chooses not to kill her, in spite of her body and the sexuality that both fascinates him and repels him. And yet he still finds one of his two minds insisting, "she was beautiful."

In *Grendel*, language is repeatedly shown to be the province of men. All speakers are masculine. The Dragon, the Shaper, Hrothgar, Unferth, and finally Beowulf each offer Grendel a system for understanding the universe and his place in it. The dragon is a nihilist. That is, he believes there is no meaning to life and that all events are nothing more than random accident. The Shaper is a poet. He creates meaning in the world through his songs; the world becomes what he sings. His is the voice of art. Hrothgar is a politician. His world is constructed by the words of treaties and oaths of fealty. His words reveal to Grendel a world of plots and counterplots, devoid of morality. Unferth is a hero. He argues that only in heroism does the world have meaning. The words that constitute a hero's reputation and fame construct his vision of the world. Finally, at the very end of the tale, Beowulf explains to Grendel the cycles of existence: life has meaning because it continues, in spite of death and destruction. (Tellingly, Beowulf speaks of sperm, not ova.) What these voices all have in common is their masculinity. In each case, their words construct and maintain the power system. What none of these voices includes is room for feminine language or for feminine understanding of the world.

Grendel chooses to look for answers in these systems, ultimately rejecting all but the dragon's view. He clearly sees himself as a superior creature to his mother, primarily because he is a maker of words, someone who possesses language. He walks on two legs; she walks on all four. Yet care should be taken to distinguish Grendel's position on this from Gardner's. Gardner seems to suggest that the language of Grendel's is somehow primeval and pre-existent, outside the system of male language. Grendel states, "She'd forgotten all language long ago, or maybe had never known any. (How I myself learned to speak I can't remember; it was a long, long time ago.)" Grendel, trying to find meaning through masculine language, fails to

recognize that his mother finds meaning in her own creation, even as he states, "I was, in her eyes, some meaning I could never know and might not care to know." Further, Grendel's mother's language is bound up in her body. Her response to Grendel's despair is to clasp him to her breast, offering nurture and sustenance.

Wealtheow, for her part, has little to say in either *Beowulf* or *Grendel*. She finds meaning not through the masculine language of politics, treaties and war, but rather through her feminine role as peace-weaver and mother. She creates a truce between her people and her husband's people. Further, as the mother of Hrothgar's children, she engenders new life, opening the possibility of meaning in the world. Because Grendel is repelled by the "ugly hole between her legs," he overlooks the pun that the phrase implies: the "whole" is indeed between her legs. Through her body, Wealtheow weaves together the whole world, at least while she lives. It can thus be argued that the feminine creates and sustains life while the masculine creates words.

It can be argued that Grendel's ultimate failure to find his place in the world springs first, from his separation and longing for his mother; and second, from his incomplete identification with a father figure. He never fully learns to use the language of men in such a way that he can be understood. Instead, he remains suspended between the dark, pre-verbal cave of his mother and the world-as-text of the masculine characters, ultimately falling from the cliff, a fall that mirrors his earlier "fall" into language.

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1998

Robert Merrill

In the following excerpt, Merrill argues that many of the critics who see *Grendel* as an absurdist novel with the monster as hero are supporting an interpretation that is contrary to the author's intentions. Instead, the critic suggests, Gardner meant to present the character of Grendel as a negative example: the creature's "nihilistic rationalism is what Gardner wants to caution us against."

Nothing has become more unfashionable in the last ten years than *explication du texte*. No doubt in reaction against the New Critics, we have tended to stress "broader" considerations, whether historical, psychological, or philosophical. Sometimes, however, questions of textual interpretation must

be faced if we are to avoid the most basic misunderstandings about the works we read and teach. A case in point is John Gardner's *Grendel* (1971). Gardner is one of our more respected contemporary writers, and *Grendel* is his most popular work, yet I think this book is usually read in such a way as literally to reverse Gardner's intended meaning. Insofar as *Grendel* deserves its emerging status, the interpretive problem is unfavorable....

"If the traditional hero is insane, then, who becomes the modern hero? As John Gardner realizes, it *must* be Grendel—the monster who rejects all traditional values of his world needs only a few slight alterations to become a perfect absurd hero. Gardner's novel fits neatly into the category of contemporary absurdist literature."

Jay Ruud ["Gardner's *Grendel* and *Beowulf*: Humanizing the Monster," *Thoth*, Spring-Fall, 1974]

"What *Grendel* does is take, one by one, the great heroic ideals of mankind since the beginning and make a case for these values by setting up alternatives in an ironic set of monster values. I hate existentialism."

John Gardner ["Backstage with *Esquire*," *Esquire*, Oct., 1971]

As these two quotations suggest, there is disagreement as to Gardner's meaning in *Grendel*. Indeed, the quarrel between Gardner and his critics is nearly absolute. Robert Detweiler has written [in *Contemporary Literature*, Winter, 1976] that "*Grendel* is a retelling of the Beowulf legend from the monster's point of view that depicts him as a relatively sympathetic character and Beowulf as a psychopath." W. P. Fitzpatrick [in *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, January, 1977] has seen Grendel as an "absurdist hero," comparable to Camus' Caligula, with the following results: "Not only does *Grendel* challenge our perspective of medieval heroism, but it destroys whatever wisp of the 19th century visionary gleams might remain." And [in *Critique*, Vol. 23, 1981] Michael Ackland has summarized the experience of most readers: "... by the end of the narrative, the reader shares the deterministic insight that marked Grendel's opening reference to life as being 'Locked in the deadly progression of moon and stars.'" These and other critics have agreed with Bruce Allen's assertion [in *Sewanee Review*, Summer, 1977] that "the meaning is existential," whereas Gardner has said that he hates existentialism. How are we to account for such a drastic difference of opinion?

At this point it is customary to do one of two things. Either one quotes Lawrence's famous

dictum that we should trust the tale and not the teller, or one dismisses the many quoted critics as wrongheaded or somehow lacking that crucial insight which will clarify everything. I would prefer to do neither. I happen to think that Gardner's version of *Grendel* is more reliable than that of his critics....

The standard reading of *Grendel* assumes that Gardner chose to retell the story of *Beowulf* because he wanted to champion Grendel's "modern" point of view. In the first chapter, as if to emphasize the point, Gardner has Grendel repeatedly express his haunting sense of life's meaninglessness. Grendel believes that life is a mechanistic process in which "The sun spins mindlessly overhead, the shadows lengthen and shorten as if by plan," although there is no plan, no order, no organizer: "The sky says nothing, predictably.... The sky ignores me, forever unimpressed." It is one of Grendel's central arguments that mankind imposes its hopes and fears on mindless reality, thus establishing an artificial order by means of what Grendel calls "some lunatic theory." Grendel himself is a theorizer, but the difference between him and others is that he *knows* there is no connection between theory and reality—the heroic ideals that we associate with *Beowulf* are no more than whistlings in the dark designed to conceal the fact that "The world is all pointless accident."

In this reading Gardner establishes Grendel as a dark but poetic witness in order to comment on man's pretensions to civilization. Grendel has observed Hrothgar's rise to power, for instance, so he offers a sardonic account of how roving bands evolved into savage tribes. Here Grendel's point of view is in dramatic contrast to that of Hrothgar's scop, the Shaper. Where Grendel sees "crafty-witted killers that worked in teams," the Shaper commemorates "the glorious deeds of dead kings ... his harp mimicking the rush of swords, clanging boldly with the noble speeches, sighing behind the heroes' dying words." Grendel is contemptuous of the Shaper's influence on Hrothgar's men ("Did they murder each other more gently because in the woods sweet songbirds sang?"), yet he concedes that even he is "swept up" by the Shaper's music. Grendel's observations on the Shaper are thus thought to point up the dangerous allure of art (the Danes are said to have "gone mad on art"), or, in broader terms, to expose the irrepressible human tendency to substitute consolatory myths for unpleasant realities.

As Grendel reports other attempts to explain or justify the Scyldings' travails, we come to see that what the Shaper does so artfully is indeed a universal practice. The episodes involving Unferth, Wealthew, Hrothulf, and Ork illustrate this widespread desire to rationalize life's apparent evils by means of saving fictions: that the life of the hero "makes the whole struggle of humanity worthwhile" (Unferth); that "Meaning as quality" is a viable philosophy despite life's quantifiable futility (Wealthew); that revolution is a religious activity, amply justified as a visionary alternative to corrupt social norms (Hrothulf); that religion is a "sweet fantasy" which offers relief from the crippling structures of "merely rational thought" (Ork). Grendel's role is to qualify or undermine these efforts to establish objective values in a meaningless world. Therefore Grendel humiliates Unferth, nearly kills Wealthew, remarks Hrothulf's swinish conspiracy with an anarchist, and dismisses Ork and the other priests as lacking any real conviction. In this way Gardner "inverts the perspective of the heroic *Beowulf*" [according to Fitzpatrick]—an inversion climaxed by his ironic treatment of Beowulf's victory over Grendel. For most readers, Gardner's Beowulf is a moral cipher: a "cold-blooded fanatic," "strangely mechanical, even mad," a "hired mercenary" who is in reality "a moral monster." Beowulf triumphs over Grendel only because the monster slips—a mere accident, as Grendel argues. The point is that the legendary Beowulf is for us an unbelievable, certainly an unsympathetic character. The true hero, as we suspected all along, is Grendel himself.

Two crucial assumptions inform this reading of *Grendel*. The second, that Grendel is a sympathetic and reliable narrator, follows naturally from the first: that Gardner is a "modern" who shares the vision of such writers as Beckett and Sartre. In fact, however, Gardner has said that Beckett is "wrong" and that Sartre is "a handy symbol of what has gone wrong in modern thinking." The most relevant of Gardner's pronouncements appear in his recent book on contemporary writing, *On Moral Fiction* (1978). Throughout this treatise Gardner keeps up a running attack on the very writers with whom he has been associated in most readings of *Grendel*. He berates "the cult of cynicism and despair," arguing that an "art which tends toward destruction, the art of nihilists, cynics, and merdistes, is not properly art at all." Nor does he refer to minor, unrepresentative figures—Mailer, Vonnegut, Heller, and Pynchon are among

the many recent writers who are condemned. Such judgments follow from Gardner's belief that "Great art celebrates life's potential, offering a vision unmistakably and unsentimentally rooted in love." As this would suggest, Gardner's literary credo is unabashedly traditional; for him art is good "when it has a clear positive moral effect, presenting valid models for imitation, eternal verities worth keeping in mind, and a benevolent vision of the possible which can inspire and incite human beings toward virtue." For this reason, among others, Gardner insists that "again and again the ancient poets seem right, and 'modern sensibility' seems a fool's illusion."

Everything Gardner has written makes it clear that the "nihilistic" reading of *Grendel* is improbable, but we do not have to rely on general remarks to determine Gardner's intentions. In a review [in *American Scholar*, Winter, 1974-75] of Gardner's critical study of the Wakefield Cycle, Martin Stevens objected to "Gardner's apparent low esteem for the medieval consciousness," a view he also found in *Grendel*, "justly praised .. as a 'revisionist' fiction for its bold, inventive, and keenly humorous perspective of the Anglo-Saxon heroic ideals." Gardner was sufficiently unhappy to respond in the next issue [Spring, 1975] of *American Scholar*: "Those who have read *Grendel* will recognize, I hope, that [Stevens] is quite wrong about the book. My monstrous central character, Grendel, will believe in nothing he cannot logically justify. Scorning the Anglo-Saxon *scop* who reshapes reality into noble ideals, scorning the great Anglo-Saxon values, he grows more and more vicious, more and more helpless, more and more existential until he commits a kind of suicide ... I have been as faithful as possible to the Christian spirit of the epic." We should now see what kind of sense the book makes if it is read as Gardner intended.

At the time of the first chapter Grendel has been at war with Hrothgar for twelve years, so the ensuing narrative is an extended flashback designed to explain how Grendel came to believe that the world is all pointless accident. The crucial episode is Grendel's visit to the dragon in chapter five. Gardner's dragon is a remarkable character, given to quoting Sartre, Heidegger, and Whitehead (without acknowledgment), and certain of one basic truth: that ultimately nothing matters. The dragon "knows" this because he is able to see all time at once, rather like Vonnegut's Tralfamadorians. And what he sees is no cause for celebration. His credo is "Ashes to ashes and slime to slime, amen"; life,

he argues, is "a brief pulsation in the black hole of eternity." So much for human aspirations! The youthful Grendel is drawn to the Shaper's ideals, so he protests: "Why shouldn't one change one's ways, improve one's character?" But the dragon will not take the question seriously "Why? Why? Ridiculous question! Why anything?" The dragon's influence on Grendel is decisive, for after visiting his cave Grendel finds that "Futility, doom, became a smell in the air, pervasive and acrid as the dead smell after a forest fire." Grendel's war with Hrothgar follows, inspired by the monster's now firm conviction that human values are insubstantial myths designed to get us through the night. The Grendel we meet in chapter one is the product of this encounter, where "the old dragon, calm as winter, unveiled the truth."

For Gardner, however, the dragon's "truth" is despicable. "The Dragon looks like an oracle," Gardner has said, "but he doesn't lay down truth.... He tells the truth as it appears to a dragon—that nothing in the world is connected with anything. It's all meaningless and stupid, and since nothing is connected with anything the highest value in life is to seek out gold and sit on it. . . My view is that this is a dragonish way to behave, and it ain't the truth. The Shaper tells the truth, although he lies" Grendel makes the wrong choice, then, when confronted with "the alternative visions of blind old poets and dragons." The dragon despises mankind for living according to consoling myths, but Gardner believes that "Real art creates myths a society can live instead of die by, and clearly our society is in need of such myths." Indeed, Gardner has insisted that we should deny "the myth of blind mechanics" in favor of "the myth of connectedness" If the choice is ours why choose chilly visions of an abandoned world and skies which are forever unimpressed? Why not choose such "myths" as love and courage?

Having made his fatal choice, Grendel proceeds to mock Unferth's belief in heroism, Wealtheow's personal integrity, and Ork's religious theory that good comes from evil. These actions do not so much expose man's predilection for comforting illusions as they reveal the disastrous consequences of accepting the dragon's point of view. When he dies, for example, the Shaper is mourned by a female admirer who presents what is obviously a superb image of human dignity. Grendel's response is to regret never having physically abused the poet: "I should have cracked his skull midsong and sent his blood spraying out wet through the meadhall like a

shocking change of key." Grendel should have done this to "prove" that the dragon was right—everything is arbitrary, all values are fictional, nothing matters. In fact, of course, he would only have proven how pernicious the dragon's influence had been. From his encounter with the dragon to his death at the hands of Beowulf, Grendel acts very much like one of those contemporary writers Gardner has condemned for celebrating ugliness and futility.

Gardner has characterized the Grendel of *Beowulf* as a "cosmic outlaw," "a creature of *sinnichte*, perpetual night." Of the poem itself he has said, "It is just as clearly, on one level, a celebration of the best possible human being living by the best possible human—perhaps divinely inspired—code." If we recall that Gardner wanted to be as faithful as possible to the Christian spirit of the epic, we can only conclude that Beowulf is the novel's true hero. Once again Gardner has been admirably clear about his aims [in *Papers on Language and Literature*, Summer, 1970]: "So I write a book in which there is a dragon who says everything a nihilist would say, everything the Marquis de Sade would say; and then at the end of the book there is a dragon who says all the opposite things. He says everything that William Blake would say. Blake says a wonderful thing: 'I look upon the dark satanic mills; I shake my head; they vanish.' That's it. That's right. You *redeem* the world by acts of imagination every time you pick up a baby." The dragon who says all the opposite things is of course Beowulf, whose superiority is not an accident or a matter of physical strength, as Grendel supposes, but rather his commitment to that healthy life of faith which Gardner has so explicitly praised.

The connection between Beowulf and the dragon is made by Beowulf himself as he takes physical control of Grendel. His first words are an exact repetition of the dragon's despairing description of life as a random movement of atoms: "A meaningless swirl in the stream of time, a temporary gathering of bits, a few random specks ... Additional refinements: sensitive dust, copulating dust..." This startling parallel suggests that Beowulf's long speech to Grendel is a conscious refutation of the dragon's beliefs:

As you see it (the world) is, while the seeing lasts, dark nightmare-history, time-as-coffin, but where the water was rigid there will be fish, and men will survive on their flesh until spring. It's coming, my brother. Believe it or not. Though you murder the world, turn plains to stone, transmogrify life into I

and it, strong searching roots will crack your cave and rain will cleanse it: The world will burn green, sperm build again. My promise. Time is the mund, the hand that makes (fingers on harpstrings, hero-swords, the acts, the eyes of queens) By that I kill you.

In this eloquent speech Beowulf accuses Grendel of "murdering" the world by denying his own deep but non-rational connections with it. Beowulf's "promise" is that spring will indeed come again, so long as the human mind (imagination) keeps faith with itself, as it has in the exemplary acts of the Shaper ("fingers on harpstrings"), Unferth ("hero-swords"), and Wealthew ("the acts, the eyes of queens"). Grendel's denial of life's "strong searching roots" has produced that very rigidity he mistakenly perceived as inevitable.

Beowulf's message is indeed Blakean, which should surprise no one familiar with Gardner's other writings. Gardner's Blake is a poet who stands for the redemptive power of the imagination—Gardner's own theme, as he once told John Howell. Blake's message, as Gardner and many others have understood it, demands that we reject the dictates of pure reason (Urizen) and heed instead the creative impulses of the imagination (Los or Orc). Grendel, however, "will believe in nothing he cannot logically justify." This is to say that Grendel accepts the Urizen-like authority of the dragon. It should now be apparent that this nihilistic rationalism is what Gardner wants to caution us *against* by means of Grendel's negative example. Indeed, Gardner's point is that the logical and despairing Grendel is all too representative. Though we may protest (like Grendel himself), we moderns have become monstrous precisely to the extent that our assumptions parallel those of the *Beowulf*-poet's—and John Gardner's—Grendel.

Source: Robert Merrill, "John Gardner's Grendel and the Interpretation of Modern Fables," in *American Literature*, Vol. 56, No. 2, May, 1984, pp. 162-80.

Craig J. Stromme

In the following excerpt, Stromme examines how Gardner uses each chapter of *Grendel* to illustrate a different philosophical principle. The critic suggests that the circular nature of the novel's astrological motif is mirrored in Grendel's philosophical experience, as he travels from believing that only he exists to accepting that all external things he experiences also exist.

In an interview [in *The New Fiction* by Joe David Bellamy, 1974] John Gardner says of *Grendel* that he "wanted to go through the main ideas of Western Civilization .. and go through them in the voice of the monster, with the story already taken care of, with the various philosophical attitudes (though with Sartre in particular), and see what I could do." Gardner goes even further to explain the organization of the novel: "It's got twelve chapters. They're all hooked up to astrological signs, for instance, and that gives you nice easy clues." These statements seem to be an instant explication of the novel, but they really only add up to a clue. The problem with the "nice easy clues" is that no two astrologers agree on anything. For example, one tells us that Arians are "outgoing," another that they "like to live in the mind," and a third that they are "originators" and "sympathetic." It is difficult to see how one could blend these traits into a coherent whole, but even more difficult to see how the whole would point inexorably to some main idea of Western Civilization.

In examining each of the twelve chapters, we shall attempt to discern the philosophical center of each. By studying the philosophical discussions that occur between characters and in the musings of Grendel, we should be able to arrive at conclusions at least as reliable as those suggested by astrological charts. The first thing we need to do is to forget everything about *Beowulf* except its basic plot. True, *Grendel* is based on *Beowulf* and the dramatic action is very similar, but the motivation for actions in *Grendel* is completely different. In *Beowulf* the focus is always on heroic action and beastly malfeasance; in *Grendel* the focus is on philosophical ways of living in the world. Grendel dies in each work, but the meaning of his death is radically different....

In *Grendel* philosophical ideas are always linked to ways of living in the world: a character does not simply describe an idea, he lives it.

Grendel is the arbiter of twenty-five centuries of philosophy because he is not human. Grendel has no vested interest in any one philosophy; he is searching for the best way to live in the world. The ideas that Grendel judges are not presented in a uniform format. Some of the ideas Grendel himself lives for a time; some of the ideas other characters live; and some of the ideas are so subtle that they need to be explained to us. If Grendel completely changed philosophies every chapter, the novel would be as much a story of character as philosophy, but if he never changed character at all, the

novel would not show philosophy as having any real effects on action. The mixture of Grendel's action and observation, his mastery over others and others' mastery over him, then, allows us to see a history of philosophy in action.

Aries begins the astrological block and also begins the first chapter of *Grendel*: "The old ram stands looking down over rockslides." The symbolic importance of Aries is that it marks the beginning of a new cycle just like the cycle that has ended. Grendel tells us he is in "the twelfth year of my idiotic war," and this year appears that it will be substantially the same as the last. The ram acts the same way he did "last year at this time, and the year before, and the year before that." Grendel realizes that he is caught in the same endless pattern: "So it goes with me day by day and age by age.... Locked in the deadly progression of moon and stars." He will go down the hill and attack Hrothgar's village again, and after he has broken down their door they will build a new one to replace it "for (it must be) the fiftieth or sixtieth time." All has happened before; all will happen again. Grendel and his world are trapped in the "progression of moon and stars," the cycle of astrology. Grendel presents us in this chapter with the theory of the world as repetition and endless cycles, a philosophy, one of the oldest in the West, first presented by the Orphic sages.

Chapter Two, a flashback to Grendel's youth, begins Grendel's journey into the world of men. He leaves the cave of ignorance and enters the world of sunlight for the first time (an obvious reference to Plato's parable of the cave). Because the sunlight blinds him, Grendel always returns to the cave at daybreak. One night, he catches his foot in the crotch of a tree and is unable to free himself. When he accepts that his mother will not come from the cave to rescue him and that he is alone against the world (represented by a bull—this is the chapter of Taurus—charging him), Grendel concludes "that the world was nothing: a mechanical chaos of casual, brute enmity on which we stupidly impose our hopes and fears. I understood that I alone exist.... I create the universe blink by blink." When men arrive at the tree and begin to torture him, in order to determine what manner of beast he is, his shrieks of pain bring his mother to save him from the men. Safe in the cave, he repeats, "The world is all pointless accident.... I exist, nothing else." From these statements, Grendel clearly begins his life in the world as a solipsist. His claim of unique existence is the fundamental basis for that philosophy....

Grendel's solipsism is challenged when the Shaper, a poet-minstrel, arrives in Hrothgar's village. Shaper brings history to the village and forces Grendel to acknowledge exterior reality. Shaper creates a better world with his songs, an order untainted by the unpleasantness of certain facts of existence. He creates an order out of the pointless accident, and Grendel confesses that "even to me, incredibly, he had made it all seem true and very fine." Shaper's visions transform the grubby little village into a growing city-state, merely by changing the villagers' perceptions about themselves, their past, and Grendel. Shaper "had torn up the past by its thick, gnarled roots and transmuted it, and they, who knew the truth, remembered it his way—and so did I." Geminis, symbolized by the "wobbly twins" Grendel sees, are supposed to be versatile, superficial, and inventive—all part of their dual-nature. Shaper is all these things, as were the Sophists, who were so skilled at argument that they could argue any side of any question and win. They remade the world with their arguments just as Shaper does with his songs. All who hear Shaper's visionary history believe in it, even though they remember what actually happened. Grendel wants to believe in it but cries out, "Lost!" because he cannot let the dream replace the reality of his experience.

Chapter Four, Cancer the nourisher, shows us the growth of the religion that will nourish the new world Shaper has made Hrothgar's villagers see.

[Shaper] told of how the earth was first built, long ago said that the greatest of gods made the world, every wonder-bright plain and the turning seas, and set out as signs of his victory the sun and moon . . . and gave life to the every creature that moves on land

The harp turned solemn. He told of an ancient feud between two brothers which split all the world between darkness and light And I, Grendel, was the dark side.... The terrible race God cursed

God created all things in the world and all was good, but an evil force arose that divided the world into good and evil. The man who follows the good shall go to heaven and "find peace in his father's embrace," but the evil man shall burn forever—basic Old Testament theology. Grendel, the recognized evil of creation, is symbolized as brute nature—not really intelligent at all, merely a force that attempts to draw the villagers into evil. The vision is so compelling that Grendel desires it even if he "must be the outcast, cursed by the rules of this hideous fable." Grendel even rushes into the midst of the villagers and asks for their forgiveness for his role in the fable, but they simply hack at

him with swords. Grendel wants the vision to be true because it gives some order and purpose to the world, even if the order demands the vilification of his image.

In Chapter Five, the chapter of Leo the dramatizer, Grendel learns what his role will be in the new order Shaper has provided. Grendel goes to a dragon to ask about his part in this world and meets a metaphysician who explains everything's place in the world. Gardner says that the dragon is "nasty" and "says all the things that a nihilist would say." Much of the dragon's advice is nihilistic and much is materialistic, but the most important part comes from [Alfred North] Whitehead. The dragon begins his explanation of Grendel's place in the world by describing the fundamental connectedness of things and deploring the common-sense notions of reality. He then tells Grendel that:

Importance is primarily monistic in its reference to the universe. Limited to a finite individual occasion, importance ceases to be important. . Expression, however, . . is founded on the finite occasion.

The dragon is explaining the way in which eternal objects are expressed in actual entities, taking his explanation directly from Whitehead [*Modes of Thought*, 1938]:

Importance is primarily monistic in its reference to the universe Importance, limited to a finite individual occasion, ceases to be important. .

But expression is founded on the finite occasion.

The dragon uses Whitehead's metaphysics to explain an ordering of the world even more comprehensible and sensible than the one Shaper provides. The problem is that Grendel can understand Shaper, but not the dragon. The dragon needs to stoop to particulars:

You improve them, my boy! Can't you see that yourself? You stimulate them! You make them think and scheme. You drive them to poetry, science, religion, all that makes them what they are for as long as they last.... You *are* mankind, or man's condition

The dragon prevents Grendel from accepting the simplified theological world-view offered by Shaper—"What god? Where? Life force, you mean? The principle of process?"—and helps Grendel recognize a more complex order in the world.

In Chapter Six Grendel finds his role in this order:

I was transformed I was a new focus for the clutter of space I stood in . I had become, myself, the mama I'd searched the cliffs for once in vain . I had become something, as if born again. I had hung be-

tween possibilities before, between the cold truths I knew and the heart-sucking conjuring tricks of the Shaper, now that was passed: I was Grendel, Ruiner of Meadhalls, Wrecker of Kings!

The most familiar formulation in existentialist thought is "existence precedes essence." This phrase means that people exist as things long before they create themselves as entities capable of acting coherently in the world. Before his realization, Grendel had possessed no real sense of himself: he accepted the images others had of him (his mother's image of him as "son," the villagers' image of him as "monster," and Shaper's image of him as "devil") for his self-image. Thus, Grendel is reborn but reborn into scepticism. He accepts that beings other than himself exist, but he has postulated them all as enemies. Grendel is a sceptic, one who doubts everything with moral fervor, and has decided that his new role is to be the destroyer of all the hypocritical orders men have created. Grendel feels that all orders blind men to the truth: "So much for heroism. So much for the harvest-virgin. So much, also, for the alternative visions of blind old poets and dragons."

Chapter Seven is the story of Wealthow, "holy servant of the common good" She is given to Hrothgar by her brother as a tribute to Hrothgar's power. She brings such a great sense of peace and has a faith so deep that she protects the village from Grendel's ravages. Libra is the sign of conciliators, and Wealthow brings harmony not only between the two peoples, but within the village as well. Chapters Six and Seven are the heart of the novel just as Virgo and Libra are the center of the astrological year. What we have is the scepticism of Grendel balanced by the faith of Wealthow. He is willing to sacrifice nothing; she "would give, had given her life for those she loved" and has "lain aside her happiness for theirs." He is a sceptic; she is the closest thing we see to a Christian in *Grendel*. Shaper brought the Old Testament to the village, but Wealthow brings the New Testament ideals with her. At the center of the novel, then, we have the two contrasting ways of viewing the world: Grendel's belief in chaos and futility balanced by Wealthow's belief in order and purpose.

The first seven chapters have transformed Grendel from a frightened solipsistic child into an angry sceptical monster. The village has evolved from a small collection of huts into a city-state. Everything necessary for Beowulf's arrival has been given to us, but Beowulf does not arrive for four more chapters. The plot has been developed;

the next four chapters develop philosophical ideas Gardner is interested in. Gardner says that "at about Chapter 8 there is a section in which you are no longer advancing in terms of the momentum toward the end.... it's just the wheels spinning. That is *not* novelistic form; it's lyrical form." Gardner stretches *Grendel* to elucidate certain ideas about philosophy and the growth of society, not to add convolutions to the traditional plot. These chapters should reveal just how different *Grendel* is from a more traditional novel, for its underlying purpose is to explore philosophies, not character.

The purpose is made clear in Chapter Eight when Machievelli's ideas enter the village. Hrothulf, the "sweet scorpion," learns statecraft from Red Horse:

"Public force is the life and soul of every state . . . The state is an organization of violence, a monopoly in what it is pleased to call *legitimate* violence... All systems are evil All governments are evil Not just a trifle evil. *Monstrously* evil. . . If you want me to help you destroy a government, I'm here to serve. But as for Universal Justice—" He laughed

Hrothgar's village has arrived at the age of nation-states and all that matters during such an age is the maintenance of power, or, for the disenfranchised, the achievement of power. Hrothulf is an orphaned nephew adopted by Hrothgar and Wealthow, but sentiments and obligations play no part in Machievellian statecraft. With the replacement of Wealthow's love and charity by Hrothulf's scheming, we enter the modern age.

Chapter Nine shows us another indication that the village has entered the modern age. We saw the village's religion begin in Shaper's passionated delineation between the powers of good and evil, but we see now that the church has evolved into a pallid study of Whitehead's idea of process. Grendel hides among their idols one night and convinces an old priest to tell him the nature of the village's god. The priest tells Grendel,

The King of Gods is not concrete, but He is the ground for concrete actuality No reason can be given for the nature of God, because that nature is the reason for rationality . . . The King of the Gods is the actual entity in virtue of which the entire multiplicity of eternal objects obtains its graded relevance to each stage of concrescence Apart from Him, there can be no relevant novelty

When the old priest tries to tell the other priests of his interview with "The Great Destroyer," as he had assumed Grendel to be, they laugh at him and his theories of god. The last great

metaphysician speaks and no one will listen to him. Their religion has fallen from Shaper's dualism to Whitehead's process to hypocrisy—the young priests worry that “Lunatic priests are bad business.... One man like him can turn us all to paupers.” Grendel is so disturbed by the sight of the younger priests ridiculing the old priest who still has faith that he leaves them all alone. He cannot understand that the young priests are able to preach what they do not believe.

In Chapter Ten we see Grendel once more puzzled by man's insensitivity. Just as Grendel was the only listener moved by the old priest's explanations, so he is the only one truly moved by the Shaper's death. Capricorns are supposed to be pessimistic—and in this chapter Grendel develops a Nietzschean philosophy. Because Shaper is dead, Grendel feels that “we're on our own again. Abandoned.” They are alone because only Shaper's art made their world real. Shaper molded their reality and infused it with actuality. When Grendel says, “*Nihil ex nihilo*, I always say,” he is recognizing the emptiness of their world without its creator. All of Grendel's despair and the conclusions he draws from his despair are parallel to Nietzsche's writings when he faced the death of god.

Grendel's journey thus far, then, has been from solipsist to sceptic to nihilist. He has listened to the great metaphysicians explain their systems, but he could never believe that an order corresponded to what they described. As Nietzsche is traditionally seen as a predecessor of Sartre, Chapter Eleven gives us the most succinct version of Sartre's thought in the novel. After Grendel sees Beowulf for the first time, he retires to his cave and meditates on his being:

All order, I've come to understand, is theoretical, unreal—a harmless, sensible, smiling mask men slide between the two great, dark realities, the self and the world.... “Am I not free?” .. I have seen—I embody—the vision of the dragon: absolute, final waste. I saw long ago the whole universe as not-my-mother, and I glimpsed my place in it, a hole. *Yet I exist*, I knew. *Then I alone exist*, I said. *It's me or it* What glee, that glorious recognition! For even my mama loves me not for myself, my holy specialness ... but for my son-ness, my possessedness.

“All order ... is theoretical, unreal” is Grendel's explicit rejection of the dragon, the priests, and Shaper. Because “I alone exist,” he feels that he must create his own order centered around himself and his perceptions of the world. He posits himself as the center of the world and arranges it accordingly: “For the world is divided, experience

teaches, into two parts: things to be murdered, and things that would hinder the murder of things.” The ideas Grendel expresses of freedom, existence, and possessedness are all Sartre's ideas, all central to existentialism. In this chapter we can truly say that Grendel has become an existentialist. God (Shaper) is dead, and after his initial despair, Grendel has built a new world and new order without Him. Grendel's chosen essence, “absolute, final waste,” does not seem very different from what it was before—the important thing is that now he moves beyond a received definition of himself and defines the world in his own terms.

Chapter Twelve, the chapter of Pisces, the end of the astrological cycle, shows us the battle between Grendel and Beowulf. Beowulf has come to Hrothgar's village to kill the monster and bring a new age to its people. Grendel wants to kill Beowulf in order to maintain the village as his fiefdom. Grendel creeps into the sleeping hall, hoping to kill Beowulf by surprise, but Beowulf, instead, tricks Grendel and seizes him. Beowulf twists Grendel's arm behind his back and forces him to listen:

Though you murder the world, turn plans into stone,
transmogrify life into I and it, strong searching roots
crack your cave and rain will cleanse it. The world
will burn green, sperm build again. My promise
Time is the mund, the hand that makes. .. By that I
kill you. Grendel, Grendel! You make the world
by whispers, second by second Are you blind to that?
Whether you make it a grave or a garden of roses is
not the point. Feel the wall is it not hard? *He smashes
me against it, breaks open my forehead* Hard, yes!
Observe the hardness, write it down in careful runes
Now sing of walls! Sing!

Beowulf beats Grendel until he produces his first poem; satisfied with the poem, he lets Grendel wander off to bleed to death. As Grendel dies, he says, “Poor Grendel's had an accident.... *So may you all.*”

About the last chapter Gardner says, “Grendel begins to apprehend the universe. Poetry is an accident, the novel says, but it's a great one.” Grendel can no longer say “Only I exist” after he has sung of the beauty of walls. Beowulf forces Grendel to discard his existentialism and view the world without a screen. Beowulf beats Grendel against reality and turns him into an empiricist. Out of such contact comes poetry. Grendel can only understand that all knowledge, all truth, all art grows out of the contact with reality after he has been forced to give up his old philosophy. Grendel does not merely imagine the wall and posit that it is not-

Grendel; he has his head smashed against it until he rejects everything but experience.

Grendel's philosophical journey is almost circular, just as the cycle of astrology is circular. He begins with solipsism, "Only I exist," and ends with empiricism, for which only objects of experience are real. The major difference between the two is that empiricism accepts the existence of other objects while solipsism denies other objects concrete existence. These two schools are closely related historically and often difficult to tell apart in certain philosophers, Hume, for example. Once the empiricist questions the existence of external objects, he becomes a solipsist. The cycle of astrology, then, is important as a symbol for Grendel's philosophical development as well as for some clues in the chapters. Grendel's first teacher, the dragon, reveals the beauties of metaphysics and his final teacher, Beowulf, reveals the hard truths of empiricism. Grendel's awareness of the flaws of the former and the limits of the latter allow him to create poetry, a new way of ordering the world.

Grendel's journey is not the only important one in the novel. The village of Hrothgar's people is almost a main character itself, and its journey is also circular: from an unimportant village to the prosperous years of Shaper and Hrothgar, and finally into a decline with neither a great poet nor a great leader. Shaper "sang of a glorious mead-hall whose light would shine to the end of the ragged world." He sang of something that will happen in the future and then helped to bring it about. Grendel sings that "these towns shall be called the shining towns." Shaper's prophecy came true, but its time of truth is already over. The Shaper heralds the village's growth; Grendel's poem signals its decline. Moreover, Grendel's death destroys the last, great symbol of the village's struggle over adversity. Statecraft and religion had already been cheapened, and when Grendel dies even brute nature is gone. *Grendel* shows in all ways the passing of one age and the birth of the next, and so the novel becomes a complete history of man's progress.

Source: Craig J. Stromme, "The Twelve Chapters of Grendel," in *Critique. Studies in Modern Fiction*, Vol. XX, No. 1, 1978, pp. 83-92.

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For Further Study

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Jerome Klinkowitz, "John Gardner's 'Grendel,'" in *John Gardner. Critical Perspectives*, edited by Robert A. Morace and Kathryn VanSpanckeren, Southern Illinois University Press, 1982, pp. 62-67.

Characterizes the work as a product of its times and faults it for being Gardner's personal experiment instead of addressing its real audience.

Dean McWilliams, "Grendel," in his *John Gardner*, Twayne, 1990, pp 29-41.

McWilliams reads *Grendel* as an exploration of the role of dialogue in the creation of the self and the world.

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