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Grendel: A Disfranchised Symbol

The Monster Grendel is an extremely influential antagonist featured in the epic poem Beowulf. Written between 975 and 1025, the poem takes place in 6th century Denmark and describes the exploits of a heroic prince who does battle with a series of three monsters, Grendel being the first mentioned.

In this essay, I shall use the Seamus Heaney translation, which begins to describe Grendel in the 100th line of the poem. Grendel is a demon who haunts the marshland and is a recluse from society. This does not last forever, though, and his isolation is infringed upon by the building of a mead hall nearby. This hall, Heorot hall, is owned by a great lord named Hrothgar, and every night the lord and his people feast and make merry in the hall. Grendel hears this merriment and is angered, with the main problem of the poem beginning when Grendel sneaks into the hall and begins a series of murders during the night. Although described as being "Malignant by nature" (line 137) and never showing remorse, his evil is not without cause. Grendel traces his origins from the bloodline of Cain, the man who murdered his brother in the Bible. Indeed, although Grendel's exact appearance is never described in the work, he is made to sound humanoid and at the crossroads between monster and man. Grendel is perpetually an outcast with his whole bloodline cursed, taking his anger and loneliness out on a joyful hall that eventually becomes as empty as himself. For 12 years, the hall lays empty, and in response to these murders, the hero Beowulf travels to Heorot and offers to slay the demon for lord Hrothgar.

They throw a great feast to lure Grendel, and as the Danes sleep, the monster begins to slaughter. As Grendel approaches Beowulf, the hero pretends to sleep and takes hold of Grendel by surprise. The two wrestle each other unarmed, and as Grendel tries his hardest to flee, Beowulf's hold increasingly strengthens. The encounter climaxes when Beowulf rips Grendel's arm from its socket, causing the creature to run back to its lair and presumably die. In celebration of Beowulf's deed, another feast commences with songs sung about the battle and Hrothgar showering him with gifts. Later in the poem, his death is confirmed in the battle between Beowulf and Grendel's mother, which results in Beowulf severing Grendel's head from his corpse and returning to Heorot with his trophy. (Heaney lines 64-989, 1570-1590)

Though only being mentioned for roughly 200 of the 3,182 lines of the poem, Grendel has a long and far-reaching effect past it. Grendel appears in a variety of film and literature adaptations, most famously the *Grendel* novel by John Gardner and a number of games, tv shows, and music. His name is even given to the 6.5 mm rifle cartridge. Indeed, Grendel seems to be a highly prevalent symbol of western counterculture and the societal minority, with the reason for this directly correlating to the innate meaning behind the monster. To understand this meaning, one must examine the timeframe that Beowulf and Grendel lived in and how this society understood its culture and values. Using this understanding, it is imperative to apply the thesis presented in Jeffery Cohen's *Monster Culture* to master the mechanics behind the monster's effect. In conjunction, Megan Cavell's *Constructing the Monstrous Body in Beowulf*, C.J. Yang's *Humanizing the monsters: A schematic reading of Beowulf*, and Joseph St. John's *The Meaning Behind Beowulf's Beheading of Grendel's Corpse* will all be used to offer a critique and establish a broader understanding of both the Beowulf manuscript and Grendel himself. With all of this groundwork in place, it will be clearly shown how the monster Grendel represents a

society's fear of its fringes; the monster is shunned both culturally and religiously while being able to empathize with.

To understand where Grendel derives from, it is necessary to understand the culture that shunned him. This would be that of medieval Anglo Saxon England, but the mead hall in Beowulf specifically torments Grendel. Therefore, to understand the Anglo Saxons in Beowulf, one must grasp what a mead hall was. As described in *The mead-hall community* by Stephen Pollington, the mead hall was the centerpiece of Dark Age Anglo Saxon settlements, with most of its societal structures revolving around it. (Pollington 20) In the hall, various activities occurred; the first and most prevalent was drinking. A sense of community was built around drinking and feasting, which encouraged solidarity and closeness between a village. A variety of activities occurred in these ceremonies, but none compared to the highlight of storytelling. (Pollington 31) These stories would describe victory over enemies, the discovery of new lands, or the slaying of a monster, but the one unifying concept that bound them all was the concept of honor.

Honor was one of the most essential values to Anglo Saxon culture, and in the Beowulf poem, honor to one's lord. From a basic standpoint, the lord was the community leader, the controller of food, and to eat, one had to obey him. One's bond to their lord ran deeper, though, and young men were specifically close. Like many medieval cultures, masculinity was a paramount value, with young men being encouraged to devote themselves to their leader to enter the warrior social group. (Pollington 22) Trust and loyalty were imperative to survive, and by proving their worth with their service, local lords provided feasts and offered gifts to the worthy. (Pollington 28)

It has been seen how the relationship between a lord and his people was sacred, but it was equally strategic for Anglo Saxons to build ties between neighboring villages or nations. The reasoning for this can be justified strategically; there was no central government in the Dark Age north, and the way to ensure survival was through proving oneself to other peoples and making allies out of them. (Pollington 22) In some ways, Scandinavia was similar to the Mafia; Local lords were bound to each other by codes of honor, and if one were attacked, the others would rally to support him. Like the Mafia, the honor system also created strong familial ties. Like the lord structure, the father was the head of the household and provider of food; to honor him, families adopted his name for their children's last names. The son was to have a strong bond with his father and families tracked their lineage back many generations to maintain ties and provide support. (Stanley, 1)

In this way, one can see the values of the Scandinavians at play in the dark age mead hall, but one should mention that even when the stricter Christian influence infiltrated the Anglo Saxons, the hall remained. Pope Gregory the 1st urged his followers to convert mead halls into churches instead of destroying them, demonstrating the transition between the Germanic world and Christianity. This dichotomy is openly present in *Beowulf*, which, although it takes place many years before the north's conversion to Christianity, openly references and calls upon the faith. (Pollington 25)

Now that the culture that created him has been established, one must examine what makes Grendel an effective monster and why it does. In order to examine his inner workings, one must adopt a particular method of analysis, which is found in Jeffery Cohen's *Monster Culture*. This work provides seven insightful theses as to what influences monsters and why they are effective at scaring us, but the first and fourth are most impactful to Grendel's character. His first

thesis, titled *The Monster's Body Is a Cultural Body*, explains how monsters represent certain societies' fears. With the word monster meaning "that which reveals," monsters embody the fears of a particular place, time, feeling, or cultural moment. (Cohen, 4) In conjunction with thesis 1, thesis 4 offers an explanation for what types of fears this society may have. In *Thesis IV, The monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference*, Cohen offers that monsters are inherently different from the culture they come from, whether that be culturally, racially, religiously, or sexually. Essentially, they violate that culture's sense of normalcy, and the monster's very existence threatens this, allowing the culture to justify persecuting it (Cohen, 8). Keeping these theses in mind, it will be apparent how they operate within Grendel.

When inspecting Grendel, one may feel overwhelmed with the surprising amount of content that covers him. He is very charted territory, with many scholars interpreting his character's meaning through a variety of different vectors; I have found that the physical, cultural, and religious elements have been most covered. Therefore, I have selected three different pieces discussing each one of these aspects, with the first being an academic thesis by Megan Cavell. In her piece, she describes the physical attributes of Grendel compared to manmade objects, such as the sword found in Grendel's Mother's cave, and that the blurred distinction between the body and these objects allows for the creation of an environment that is between both human culture and the natural world (Cavell, 1). In comparison to what is argued in this essay, Cavell determines the meaning of Grendel in his culture through the comparison of tangible objects, whereas I argue there are broader cultural dissimilarities between the monster and Anglo-Saxon culture. A fragment of this idea can be found in the work of Chih-Chiao Joseph Yang, who argues that the barbarous elements of humanity and privileged nature of Beowulf come into direct conflict with the humane elements of monsters, and that the fights in

Beowulf result from an uprising of the underprivileged in human society (Yang, 1). As one can see, Yang does not engage with the physical aspects that Cavell focused so heavily upon, but like myself, agrees that dissimilar elements of Anglo Saxon culture forms the heart of the issue. Also, Yang deeply studies how these elements compare to other monsters and heroes in folk lore, while I examine how they work directly within Grendel. Both the work of Cavell and Yang have been imperative to finding new perspectives on Grendel, with the work of Joseph St. John offering an additional unique view. He interprets Grendel as Christian symbology and specifically analyzes the decapitation moment through the lens of Grendel's decent from Cain. St. John argues Grendel's beheading shows Beowulf's clear misunderstanding of Christianity, and that the defeat of the monster exposes the weakness of Anglo-Saxon society. (St. John, 1) While Cavell compares Grendel to his culture and Yang contrasts his culture from other works, St. John exposes and critiques it. Unlike all these scholars, I examine how Anglo-Saxon society influenced the creation of Grendel, and specifically apply the culture to his character.

At this point, like Beowulf, one is ready to face Grendel. Wearing history and context from the poem as armor, using theory as a shield, and wielding the work of others as a sword, I have given the reader all of the tools required to take on the whole meaning of a monster. Grendel does not subject himself to being so easily labeled, though; he is elusive and sly, and there is no single line that perfectly encapsulates his nature. Therefore, since Grendel won't confront the audience, one must expose his character by analyzing his actions, which is highlighted during the execution of Beowulf's plan of attack.

Heany describes the scene, stating, "He (Grendel) saw many men in the mansion, sleeping, a ranked company of kinsmen and warriors quartered together. And his glee was demonic, picturing the mayhem: before morning he would rip life from limb and devour them

...” (Heaney, lines 728-732) which for an Anglo-Saxon audience must have been horrifying. As previously mentioned, battle honor was indispensable to remain respected in the culture, and the notion that one could be murdered in their sleep without a fight wouldn't just instill primal fear but fear of one's reputation and outcast. Indeed, Grendel is a threat that cannot be seen, and he represents both a fear of the unknown, and the Anglo Saxons anxiety towards their own inclusion.

The story continues and Grendel indulges in a murder spree, but as he reaches Beowulf, the hero grabs him and startles the monster. Heaney lets the audience into Grendel's mind on line 750, describing, "Every bone in his body quailed and recoiled, but he could not escape. He was desperate to flee to his den and hide with the devil's litter, for in all his days, he had never been clamped or cornered like this." (Heaney, lines 750-756)

This passage is important because it exposes Grendel's weakness. He becomes scared and even surprised; he lacks the bravery and confidence of Beowulf and when put to the test, he crumbled and tried to flee. Of course, Beowulf could not let that happen. A man had to stand and fight his foe, for if Beowulf let Grendel retreat, what would stop Grendel from coming back? Indeed, another element of Grendel's monstrous nature is the fear and slyness he possesses. He isn't as dog headed as the Anglo Saxons; unconventional, unpredictable and fighting to preserve himself, Grendel is the kind of monster who is almost impossible to beat using the traditional honor culture of the Anglo Saxons. Only a monster comes back again and again, and for the proud and steadfast Anglo Saxon's, a guerrilla warrior was their worst nightmare.

Indeed, Heaney frames Grendel as an unorthodox opponent, telling the audience that he lives alone in the swamp, a desolate and disgusting place isolated from the community that the reader has become accustomed to (Heaney, lines 102-110). While the reader become comfortable

with the feasts and merriment in the mead hall, Heaney states that, "It harrowed him to hear the din of the loud banquet every day in the hall..." (Heaney, lines 87-90) driving the monster crazy and inspiring murder. (Heaney lines 87-89). Grendel is a jealous creature and cannot let the values and culture of the audience survive; they contradict his very existence. After all, Grendel is selfish; he has no lord to devote himself to. While Beowulf has a culture and community to maintain, Grendel has none of that, no one to protect him, and none to constrict his carnal desires. In the hall, there is family, but Grendel has no kin. Grendel lacks a father, and although he has a mother, the audience is directed not to care. Anglo Saxons believed in the traditional bond between a man and his son, so when we see Grendel without that, we see a broken abomination. The culmination of these traits show that Grendel is an inversion of the establishment; the Monster that Cohen stated would differ from the creator's culture in every way. Grendel's alienation from the people in the mead hall represents a microcosm for his conflict with Anglo Saxon culture at large. An absence of a lord instilled rebellion, a lack of kin invalidated social normality, and his fatherlessness disrupted traditional family values. What makes Grendel such a terrifying monster is that his existence challenged the foundation of Anglo-Saxon beliefs

With this explanation, the audience can understand what makes Grendel a monster and why he is considered one, but the question of how this came to be has still not been answered. Societies do not just produce monsters, and no human or creature acts without just cause. The Epic of Beowulf answers this question by returning to the theme of Cain, the Bible's first murderer, and how this isolated Grendel from the rest of the world.

When we are first introduced, Heaney tells the reader that before living in his grotto, Grendel lived "...for a time in misery among the banished monsters, Cain's clan, whom the

Creator had outlawed and condemned as outcasts." (Heaney, lines 104-107). Right at the start, it seems that Grendel was put at a disadvantage, and the mark of Cain is again seen in lines 166-169 when Grendel tries to Sit on Hrothgar's throne. Heaney narrates, "He took over Heorot, haunted the glittering hall after dark, but the throne itself, the treasure-seat, he was kept from approaching; he was the Lord's outcast." (Heaney, Lines 166-169). When looking at this statement, "Lord's" could be interpreted in two different ways. First, if the lord was Hrothgar, it corroborates that Grendel is an outcast from the Anglo-Saxon society, but if the lord means it is God, Grendel is separated from religion. As previously mentioned, Christianity fulfilled a more significant role in later Anglo-Saxon history, but similar to the work of Joseph St. John, I ask that the religious lens be exclusively used for a moment. This passage insinuates that Grendel is abandoned by God, which has enormous implications for the meaning of Grendel. Religion gives structure, which, when violated, draws a society's morals into question. God should be the highest power in the land, but a creature that defies the ultimate figure would understandably be feared. Indeed, Grendel represents the symbol Christians used to represent their fears of the still largely unfamiliar and unchristian world.

By now, I have spent most of my time investigating the many reasons why Grendel may be seen as monstrous. He does horrible things and is descended from evil, but while reading it is important to mention an odd phenomenon that occurs: humanization. Reading the text through the Anglo Saxon or religious perspective lends no credence to this; after all, Grendel represents everything they stand against. Reading the poem literally also leaves no room for interpretation; It states that Grendel is the antagonist, calling him "Malignant by nature, he never showed remorse." (Heaney, line 137). And yet, the reader cannot help but feel empathy towards him. Returning to his background, one realizes that he never caused his circumstances. He was

descended from Cain and cursed before the time of his birth (Heaney, lines 106-107); did he choose this? Grendel lived in the swamp and was isolated from the rest of the world (Heaney, lines 103-104); was this his own fault? When we examine the traits that Heaney had presented to us in this way, we no longer see Grendel as just a foreign monster. He can no longer be painted as villainous because of his difference, but because we receive an explanation as to why he commits evil, we see him as a genuine character who makes real decisions for a justified reason. When making a monster, this is the worst possible outcome for the culture of its creators. The injustice behind Grendel's character exposes the Anglo Saxons. Ultimately it was the joy in the Mead Hall that harrowed Grendel: were the Anglo Saxon's responsible for Grendel's misery? Were they the ultimate reason why Grendel was forced into isolation? Should Grendel be responsible for the sins of his predecessors? The text allows for these dilemmas to form, and it makes the reader question whether the monster is very monstrous. Grendel's ostracism makes him seem relatable, and in this way, he represents another cultural fear; perhaps society is responsible for creating its own problems. When we look at Grendel, he shows us the worst parts of ourselves, and the guilt that follows this realization is terrifying. Perhaps we were the real monsters.

In order to come to these conclusions, it was essential to examine the Beowulf text by Seamus Heaney while also investigating the culture and values of his Anglo-Saxon forefathers. To better evaluate this data, the work of Jeffery James Cohen was used to understand monster theory. In contrast, the work of various other scholars was used to bring new perspectives to the process.

With that, a sense of finality can be reached with Grendel. Unlike other monsters of his kind, Grendel does not live on in other forms. Part of his purpose is to be struck down again and

again. Grendel will forever be defeated by Beowulf, just like good will always succeed against evil, but Grendel has stood the test of time for more than a millennium because of what he left behind. Indeed, Grendel has reflected the parts of society we often forget; he reminds us of our values and religious beliefs while also calling them into question and causing us to consider the lives of those who do not fit our standards. There is only one copy of the original Beowulf manuscript. One day it will decompose, lost to dust and ashes, and buried in time, but the legacy and ideas Grendel represented will never fade away.