
Grendel: Violent Impulse and Naturally Destructive

"In peaceful times the warlike man sets upon himself." The poem "Beowulf" illustrates the violent, primitive reality of the truth in Nietzsche's aphorism. The monster Grendel plays a symbolic role as the primordial, inalienable instincts that exist on the fringes of human civilization whose existence is ignored and whose presence is desperately barred from entrance into the great and glorious mead-hall. At the same time, Beowulf's battle with Grendel is an affirmation of man's ability not only to conquer and control, but accept, his violent impulses. Beowulf's acceptance of his nature is what truly qualifies him to be a hero, while the heroic feats of strength he achieves are only an unavoidable progression of events after Beowulf first realizes that he is destined for greatness.

While the Spear-Danes were still warlike men, violence reigned supreme. "Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes, a wrecker of mead-benches" (4-5) was praised as a "good king." (11) At this point, the violent expenditure of energy was directed outward and peace within the ranks of the Spear-Danes was possible. However, when Hrothgar "turned to hall-building," (68) the Danes remain warlike men, only without a war. At this point, the warlike civilization turns upon itself. By physically entering apparently peaceful Heorot and tearing human beings and the society they have created apart, Grendel becomes a tangible presence to represent the tendencies of civilized man which are suppressed but impossible to eliminate. By virtue of Grendel's symbolic meaning, Beowulf becomes the antithesis to Grendel. He does, not however, transcend the violence inherent in Grendel's behavior, his violent impulse manifests itself in the form of a desire for glory, to perform great acts and uphold the foundation of Danish society, as opposed to Grendel's impulse to treachery and cowardice. When the two characters in Beowulf take on this significance, their battle takes on the significance not only of a fight between a man and a monster, but an epic battle between glory and decadence, courage and cowardice. Essentially it is a battle of Beowulf's will to ascend and achieve and Grendel's tendency to decline. However, neither opponent is beyond mankind's inherent violence. No matter what the outcome of the battle, the only thing that shall be certainly affirmed is the universal law of violence- the massive expenditure of energy and eternal fluctuation of power that is the only law governing the world of Beowulf and the Spear-Danes.

Grendel's mode of existence and his manner of attack show that his significance has transcended that of one monster, but that he represents all monsters in every form and all of the traits that they may carry, from physical mutation to the treachery of a man in Hrothgar's court. The hall of Heorot in peacetime has come to resemble a war-torn kingdom. "All were endangered; young and old were hunted down by that dark death-shadow." (159-160) He is described as a "fiend out of hell." (100) While these descriptions illustrate the literal threat posed

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by Grendel, and they are essential to establish Grendel's identity, the real core of what Grendel is lies in his creation, not only in his treatment of the Danes. He is described as one of "Cain's clan, whom the creator had outlawed and condemned as outcasts." (106-107) Grendel represents all of the values in man that have been ordained as evil, that men have tried to train out of their character yet have never been truly destroyed. Grendel may be outcast, but he still exists, and while he may dwell in the fringes of civilization, out of sight in the swamps, he strikes right in the mead-hall, the very heart the Danish civilization. However, his attacks are always "after nightfall," (115) implying that he is not seen, in the exact same way that the violent tendencies of man are always repressed and rarely seen, but their effects are always devastating when they are revealed. Until Beowulf's great battle with Grendel, no living Dane has even seen the monster that terrifies them. He is not so much a physical entity as a barely intangible presence that has infiltrated the lives of the Danes and wreaked horrible pain and sorrow on them when they are not looking. Similarly, the failure of conventional weapons of war against Grendel indicate that now the enemy of the Danes is not one so clear-cut as the armies they were accustomed to conquering, but that Grendel is an insidious enemy that can only be defeated with immense personal strength of mind and body.

In addition to the poet's description of Grendel's monstrous nature and his relation to society, he also lays out many acts that Grendel has committed. This is essential because the world of Beowulf is largely centered around acts. While Beowulf is not a hero until he does something heroic, Grendel is likewise not a monster unless he does something monstrous. These acts are also clear manifestations of man's violent impulse in society. For example, after Beowulf became king, one of the traits that outline his good conduct is that he "never cut down a comrade who was drunk." (2179) Meanwhile, Grendel's attacks always come after men have been feasting and they are drunk and vulnerable to Grendel's insatiable appetite. Even more revealing is the fact that Unferth, who is permitted to "crouch at the king's feet" (449) has killed his "own kith and kin." (587) The coincidence between Grendel's arrival at Heorot and the emergence of a kin-killer in the mead hall is too obvious to be ignored. The reason for Grendel's banishment from mankind is the brutal kin killing committed by Cain, an ancestor of Grendel. Cain's fratricide is the first act of violence committed in the bible- it is the original act of hatred committed by a man against another member of the human race. Grendel is what occurs when that primordial act of violence overcomes a man or a society. Heorot's propensity to set upon itself in this manner is even described as "the killer instinct unleashed among in-laws, the blood-lust rampant." (84-85) Similarly, in the digressive poem describing the wedding of Hildeburh and Finn, peace between the two factions is impossible, and a deadly battle breaks out among the wedding guests. Similarly, the endless cycle of vengeance and reparation for murder have become so constant in the world of Beowulf that it has surpassed any real semblance of a cycle and become a permanent state of being. When Hrothgar attempts to remove his people from this state of being and into the mead hall, he does not realize that his men are not peaceful simply because they are at peace. Now that they are civilized and at a loss for an enemy, the

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instinct to violence becomes repressed, not to disappear but stagnate and make a target of its oppressor, civilization itself. Grendel is nothing new to the Danes- he only has a new setting.

Beowulf's epic battle is not so much of an issue of purifying or redeeming Heorot as it is a quest for glory. Beowulf is not bound down by the repression of civilization. Instead of condemning his impulse to violence, he embraces his strength, courage and vitality, and instead of an instinct of violent treachery, he is strong enough to maintain a vision of greatness. His declaration in the mead hall shows that he has full knowledge of his position and the current impotence of the Geats. "[Grendel] knows he can trample down you Danes to his hearts content, humiliate and murder without fear of reprisal. But he will find me different. I will show him how Geats shape to kill." (599-622) At this point, both Grendel the physical entity and the suppressed impulse do as they please, the Danes simply are not strong enough to control either. Hrothgar is a wise king, but he lacks the courage to either defeat Grendel or control the impulses of his men. A symptom of this is that the weapons of civilization created by the Danes have been rendered useless against Grendel. They have essentially become his tools, Unferth's prized sword was probably used to kill his brothers, so how could it be possible that the same sword would be effective against Grendel's mother, the descendant of the first kin-killer? Consequently, Beowulf's choice to fight Grendel without the aid of weapons is not only a testament to his immense strength, but at the same time it is a symbolic gesture of casting off the systems of civilization that are aimed at repressing and denying man's primordial, violent state. As a result of this, Beowulf's strategy leaves him locked in a death grip with Grendel, as close to each other as they could possibly be. Beowulf practically becomes one with Grendel, his violent impulse, and he manages to control it and emerge victorious. By abstaining from the weapons of civilization, Beowulf reduces both sides to their essential, most basic elements. Thus, it is not a fight between civilization and Grendel or Heorot and Grendel, but instead it becomes a battle of will from which Beowulf emerges in the glory of his own greatness. Not only has he defeated Grendel and proven his strength and courage, but he has become stronger as a result of the struggle. His intimate encounter with Grendel, his most primitive impulses, has left him with a better understanding of himself. After all, he kept a piece of Grendel with him, "the whole of Grendel's shoulder and arm, his awesome grasp." (834-835) It could not be more appropriate that Beowulf would keep part of the monster, especially Grendel's deadly arm, his powerful, primitive weapon.

While the existence of Grendel, even as a symbolic impulse to violence, may seem far-off and isolated in the world of the Geats and the Danes, it is quite clear that "Beowulf" bears a universal significance that gets to the very core of human nature. Heorot, it seems, is irredeemable. Even after Grendel was killed, another scourge immediately unleashed itself upon the people. Man's most basic instincts will always torture those who will repress their impulses or let their impulses control them. The Danes suffer from the latter case, and as a result they become warlike men whose impulses form into Grendels in peaceful times when violence is not

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glorified. Beowulf's ability to transcend civilization's repression of the will and achieve a self-affirmation of his basic, instinctively violent state and at the same time acknowledge his strength and greatness is what makes him a hero. While he may not be able to redeem the mead-hall, his ability to conquer his own Grendel and the one that plagues Heorot affirms the greatness of the aspirations and potential of man. Civilizations will rise and fall, mead-halls burn down, but man and his instincts will always exist, and man's capacity for heroism will be the only thing to remain permanent no matter what Grendels lurk in the swamps.

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