

In Defense of Grendel: The Humanity Behind Evil and Desolation in *Beowulf*

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Loud thunderous crashes and bloodcurdling screams suddenly fill the building as nightmare becomes reality, and the Danish dwellers are left helpless, pulling their children in tighter, squeezing their eyes shut as hard as they can and praying that tonight will not be the night that their lives are cruelly taken away from them. This terror takes place in the grand halls of Heorot every night in *Beowulf*, courtesy of the monstrous menace known as Grendel. Although Grendel's murderous crimes are truly unforgivable, upon closer inspection it becomes clear that he may not be as directly demonic as he first appears, as he is lonely and desperate for any kind of connection, and he is quite like the hero of this tale, demonstrating that evil and alienation play a large role in what it means to be human.

Grendel is arguably the loneliest character in the entirety of this tale. The narrator immediately utilizes diction and syntax that highlights this giant's isolation; he can be found "marauding round the heath and the desolate fens" (*Beowulf* 114), and his war is literally described as "lonely" (116) and "one against all" (115). Grendel is always by himself, drowning in his sorrows, as he has even been deemed an "outcast" (114) by God Himself because of his origins from Cain's evil, which he had no control over whatsoever — he personally could not help that he would be born into damnation. He may be struggling with the inner demons he has been cursed with, and he has absolutely nobody to turn to. Even though "he had dwelt for a time in misery among the banished monsters, Cain's clan" (114), the narrator's tone indicates that there was no sense of camaraderie between these questionable beings. Grendel is left to his own devices and sorrow in the cold dark forests of Denmark, and he hates the warmth of Heorot Hall because that is something he can never have.

Geographically, Denmark can be a hostile environment, especially in the winter, and Heorot is a safe haven where the Danish people happily live together, singing and merrily

drinking the cold nights away in the glowing lamplight. Grendel's attacks are inspired by his jealousy of this community, especially since the primary reason for his violence is that "It harrowed him to hear the din of the loud banquet every day in the hall" (114); his God-given outcast status denies him access to the friendship and safety found among the Danes. If he were *purely* evil, he would not have hesitated before murdering these innocent people – he would have immediately stormed the hall, or at most given himself a day to construct a malicious plan. However, as seen in this last quote, the narrator's phrasing that this happens "every day" implies that Grendel is tortured and taunted by witnessing this forbidden happiness over a lengthy period of time. He does not act immediately. The reader is not provided with too many specifics, but it can be inferred that Grendel, who has lived an entire existence of loneliness, wistfully watches Heorot for a number of days before striking. Something in him snaps and permanently breaks, as he realizes he will never be able to live with the communal contentment the Danes have. He is described as a "God-cursed brute" (115) and physically depicted as a beast, but he is clearly a complex being with a mind much more like that of a person than of an animal.

There is so much joy in finding another human being to truly connect to so that one can feel that the world is a little less lonely and cruel than it had previously seemed. Grendel is never afforded this luxury, and he never finds this joy – the only connections he makes are through his violence. As horrifying and twisted as it is, killing is the only option he has for establishing a relationship with the people at Heorot. It is a negative relationship, but it is nonetheless a relationship, and for someone as desperate and deprived of any interaction as Grendel is, it may be the only thing he can think to do. It may also be the easiest thing to do when living in so much bitterness. Now these murders are completely evil and monstrous, but not in a fantastical sense; Grendel's evil is very real, and it is also very human. He has been cast out by all of society for no

other reason than that he was born from Cain's sin. However, readers often ignore the fact this is *human* sin. Cain was exiled by God because he was jealous of his brother Abel's unexplained favor from God, and that jealousy led to desperate murder. There is no doubt that murder is inexcusable, but unfortunately it is something that humans have literally dealt with since the beginning of our existence according to the Bible. Murder does not only occur in fiction and fairy tales, but also in reality, and this greatly terrible crime is often caused by some sort of overwhelming emotion. That does not mean that it is rational or forgivable, but that can be an underlying explanation.

To ignore Grendel's pain is to ignore his humanity and universal desire to have people to love and rely on; his desperation causes him to transform into the monster that everyone has always expected him to be. The narrator states that Grendel "would never parley or make peace with any Dane nor stop his death-dealing nor pay the death-price" (116), but the question is: why would he? These people have never once cared about him, and if he politely approached Heorot looking to repent, the Danes would most likely take this moment of vulnerability to easily exact revenge on this supposed demon from hell, as daily murder cannot be easily forgiven by a simple apology, or even by a death-price. Like these Danish people, the narrator does not give Grendel a chance to explain himself. As an advocate for our hero Beowulf, he is biased and slightly unreliable. It is remarked that "nobody knows where these reavers from hell roam on their errands" (116) and that is the key – nobody knows. Nobody knows what Grendel's life is really like on an everyday basis, and nobody thinks to acknowledge that he feels the same suffering and despondence of alienation that so many people do. He is judged by his appearance and curse of Cain, but he is a complex individual that is driven to desperation, mad and yearning for any sort of interaction. He has the mind of a man in the body of a shunned demon.

Grendel's humanity is further made evident when comparing his predicament to Beowulf's demise. When fighting the dragon, Beowulf goes in alone, despite his old age. This leads to his downfall, but that is not the point here – when he is losing his battle and needs reinforcements, “No help or backing was to be had then from his highborn comrades; that hand-picked troop broke ranks and ran for their lives to the safety of the wood” (170). The king and champion of the Geats was left to die alone, with the exception of the courageous Wiglaf. This whole troop was sworn to protecting their master, but when real danger arose, only a single man remained true to his word, and it was not enough to keep Beowulf alive. Beowulf is a hero, yet he is only slightly less alone than the condemned Grendel. Even then, when Beowulf was young, “He had been poorly regarded for a long time, was taken by the Geats for less than he was worth...They firmly believed that he lacked force, that the prince was a weakling” (161). It can be argued that Beowulf is looking for his people to love and respect him when he travels to Denmark to fight Grendel, while Grendel is searching for any sort of connection at all. Both are deemed outcasts, and they pit themselves against each other in their desperation. Loneliness is a recurring theme in this story, and it drives both the supposed hero and villain to act as they do. What differentiates them more than anything is that Beowulf is given an opportunity to redeem and prove himself while Grendel's condemnation is never revoked. Grendel commits his evils because he has no other way of coping with his pain, but that is not necessarily demonic – it is the darkness of humanity.

Grendel is a murderer, but his human suffering – not any sort of demonic instinct – led him to this state. He longed to fit into a world in which the narrator, the people, and even God refused to accept him. He became the monster he was expected to be because that was the only way to establish relationships in his desolate universe. However, even though he was greatly

despised by all, it is demonstrated that even a man as beloved as Beowulf is ultimately quite alone. The desire to relate to and connect with other humans is universal, and it is the underlying theme of this work. Had the Danes welcomed Grendel as they welcomed Beowulf, this narrative would be much brighter, and so many lives would be saved. Instead, they judged Grendel on his dark historical origins and his physical appearance, leading to utter tragedy and disaster. He is “insensible to pain and human sorrow” (115), but only because nobody had ever been sensible to his own. Human beings have the potential to do terrible things and succumb to their own inner darkness, and part of the human experience is learning to fight these demons. Like Cain, Grendel fails to overcome his pain in a positive manner, but he is still not the embodiment of pure evil – he is a complex, multi-dimensional, yet broken character that encompasses the reality of the universal longing to be loved and understood.

Works Cited

*Beowulf*. *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, Vol. B. Ed. Peter Simon. Trans. Seamus Heaney. New York: Norton, 2012. 112-182.