

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 4, April 2019

www.ijellh.com

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Grendel as the eternal other: Monster culture in John Gardner's *Grendel*

Abstract

Monsters have been playing a vital role in literatures from time immemorial. The term 'monster' has been used in historical, geographical and ideological contexts to eliminate and demonise what is considered to be marginal, deviant and degraded. Monster narratives aid in realising our fears and anxieties from wars and other disasters to political situations. Monsters are cultural constructs of the terrible, what we are insisted to hate or reject. Monster theory is thus an influential tool for analysing the unease of a certain culture. The paper puts into question the rationality or coherence of life and how monsters are constructed socially as well as culturally with latent objectives and who takes genuine interest in creating them.

Nevertheless, in *Grendel*, Gardner has presented the monster in a different scenario, altering the setting by giving the narrative authority to the monster, Grendel. The novel is a retelling of the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, narrating from the point of view of the monster or Grendel himself and is given the power of articulation and reasoning, to think and understand the society around him. Grendel is not an embodiment of goodness, but the question of how he becomes a monster gets evident through the narration from the monster's own point of view.

Key words: Monster, Monstrosity, Culture, Othering, Stereotyping

Monsters are horrendous creatures which often pose as a threat to other beings with an increasing chance of assault without any provocation. They are senseless, inarticulate beings whose sole purpose is to devour other living things and create havoc. In the traditional texts, monster plays the role of an obstacle to the hero, and defeating it heightens the hero's valor. However, the novel *Grendel* by John Gardner presents the monster in a slightly deviated setting giving the narrative authority to Grendel. It is a retelling of the Old English epic *Beowulf*, narrating from the point of view of the monster or Grendel himself. Here, Gardner has elevated the stature of Grendel by giving 'him,' the ability to think intellectually and comprehend the society around him. Though Grendel is not an embodiment of virtues, the question of how he became a monster is evident.

Cultural Studies explores a wide range of powers including gender, race, class, colonialism, etc. It also tries to analyse the connection between these forms of powers in order to develop ways of thinking about culture and power, thereby aiding the agents who are in the pursuit of change. It raises questions regarding how the world is socially constructed and reconstructed and also represented to us and by us in meaningful ways. However, the central aspect of Cultural Studies remains the study of culture as a signifying practice of representation. It is an interdisciplinary field in which perspectives from other disciplines are

drawn in order to examine the relations of culture and power. It is concerned with all those practices and systems of classification through which particular values, beliefs and ideas are inculcated in people.

The concept of monster theory is often ambiguous, and is a semantic field which is extremely hard to circumscribe. When it comes to monster theory, one of the prominent proponents is Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. He is particularly interested in “monsters, misfits, foreigners, refugees, inhuman forces and objects,” (Cohen) and is widely published in the areas of monster theory, post humanism, medieval studies and ecocriticism. The major works in his oeuvre include *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters and the Middle Ages*, *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, *Thinking the Limits of the Body*, *Medieval Identity Machines*, *Hybridity*, *Identity and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain: Of Difficult Middles*, etc. Cohen’s theses explain that monsters in narratives, myths and chronicles exist to be read as texts. Reading the monster in this context aids in analysing how monsters are emerged in the past cultures and unveils the artificiality in the concept of monsters which hammers home the idea that monstrosity is a label given to those who are marginalised or ‘othered’.

The usage of first person narrative in *Grendel* lends a personal touch as well as instills in us a sense of sympathy, irrespective of his brutish acts. A well-known fiend and an adversary of humankind, Grendel appears unorthodox as a narrator and protagonist and the autobiographical first-person narration by a very traditional, famous monster is a subversive step away from the conventions of traditional, omniscient, and third-person narration. The titular character leads us through his dolorous, desolate and enigmatic subsistence in the fringes of an eventually rising human civilisation. In *Beowulf*, Grendel is given only a physical appearance whereas in *Grendel*, a glimpse of his psyche is also offered. When the title of the Old English epic is *Beowulf* emphasising the power of the hero Beowulf, here

Gardner gives the title *Grendel*, passing over the significance to the monster in the epic. Thus the novel subverts the traditional notion of a heroic story, giving authority to the 'other' or a typical antagonist. One is able to see a transparent transfer in focus from the obsession of hero in the original epic *Beowulf* toward an amiable approach of the monstrous villain Grendel. He is a monster who represents the repressed desires of the 'othered,' who are sidelined by the culture of the hero. Gardner, by giving Grendel the power of articulation helps him narrate his part and allows us to enter deep into his psyche.

The novel explicates the twelve years war between Grendel and Danes and the gradual rise of Hrothgar's kingdom. From Grendel's descriptions we can see that he has been doomed to an eternal solitude since he cannot be defeated by any weapon. The question of how Grendel became a monster remains elusive. It may turn out that he is born to kill people but as an underlying fact there is also a possibility of accusing the people for abusing him and provoking him to follow such a path. The looming question of Grendel's origin is guaranteed by the Shaper, whose sweet words describe in detail about Grendel's descent. An apparent subversion of oral history happens here when we are provided with an eye witness to the truth against the Shaper who presents his own version of history in a frenzy to please Hrothgar and the thanes. What pours out of the Shaper's mouth are naught but flattery and illusion, which delight everyone and also yield to his own benefit in the form of appreciation and gifts from the king. Grendel gives the name "Shaper" to the minstrel, assuming his job of "reshaping" the history. "He reshapes the world. He stares strange-eyed at the mindless world and turns dry sticks to gold" (Gardner 49). Shaper's role is indeed a significant one in modeling Grendel into a heinous one. "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, he said in effect. The terrible race God cursed" (Gardner 51). The Shaper abides in singing accolades of their men who fight the monstrous Grendel and the worthiness of God

who saves them from perils. He also sings about the genesis and how God created the world but to Grendel, it is nothing but “a cold-blooded lie” everything from the creation to the accusation that his is the cursed race, though the Shaper with the effect of his words makes it true, “his cunning trickery” (Gardner 55).

Culture differs in every possible realm of the society, and when it comes to monsters, they too have a certain typicality which demarcates them from the rest of the cultures. This distinction may either be affirmative as in the case of super heroes, or negative in the case of gigantic monsters that are forced to live in the periphery and get destroyed by the valorous heroes. Nevertheless Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in his distinguished work *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)* has attempted to make a genuine understanding of monster’s culture through the pronouncement of seven theses. However, an in-depth reading of John Gardner’s *Grendel* juxtaposing it with Cohen’s seven theses will expose the vigorous culture of Grendel, arrogant and daring at the same time sympathetic and sensitive. A Post-colonial reading of the same will offer a clear picture of how Grendel falls as a victim of colonisation, thereby justifying his inhuman ravages and violence.

The monster is always seen as a manifestation of situations that ensue certain cultural moments and it embodies fear, anxiety, even desires, which make its body pure culture, as Cohen says (4). The term “monstrum” etymologically means “that which reveals”, “that which warns” and “like a letter on a page, the monster signifies something other than itself” (Cohen 4). A monster often times reflects a culture, the brutish, and vicious, or the barbaric nature of that particular culture. The monsters in mythologies, chronicles and narratives exist as texts to be read. Reading these monsters sheds light on the past cultures, and the artificiality of the concept of monstrous. Even though monsters are associated with anomaly, the crux of being a monster is not based on mental or physical deformity but the specificity of their culture which threatens the existence of others’ cultures. It is evident that Grendel’s race

gets “accursed” not because of something that he or his mother has done but because some blind man promulgates so. Since the monster represents something other than itself, here Grendel can be seen as a symbol of their persistent fear of war between clans and races. The violence of the clans is no less horrifying than that of Grendel’s and, in an uncontrollable zeal for amassing territories, death and destruction is not something rare. They employ violence equivalent to that of Grendel’s, but only after putting a façade on. The Danes kill each other, loot and rape but Grendel alone becomes the monster. To Grendel, humans are not naïve and innocent creatures like animals, but are “thinking creatures, pattern makers, the most dangerous things” (Gardner 27) that he has ever met.

Monsters must be explored amidst matrix of relations especially cultural, historical, social, etc. that generate them. Prior to the argument that monster’s body is a cultural body, the second thesis also unfurls in a subtle manner how monsters and their monstrosity exhibit a cultural anxiety rampant in a particular era or time period in a particular place. The manifestation of monster may indicate something else often a warning or awareness to the people. Grendel is interpreted sometimes “as a bear, and again as the malaria of the marsh lands” (Longman 17). According to Longman’s interpretation, Beowulf’s fight with Grendel is considered as “the overcoming of the overwhelming danger of the sea” (17). Thus Grendel cannot be seen merely as a monster but as a cultural entity that reflects human condition and cultural tensions.

Cohen in his third thesis: “The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis” says “they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration” (6). Inherent in a society is the tendency to assign roles and thereby attributing certain categories on the basis of their differences. Monsters do not fit into a particular category and cannot be confined in simple descriptions and any attempts to do so only create crisis, chaos and distress. Also this inability to categorise monster instills

fear in us who have a strong inclination towards binaries for the sake of a smooth living. The question of whether monster is human or inhuman often provides an ambiguous reply since monster manifests both human and inhuman traits which clearly defies the logic of categorising it into one box. Monsters thus are precarious beings which recklessly smash the age old distinctions. However, Grendel is described as an enormous giant with immense strength but he can never be categorised into a particular box. He and his mother possess hybrid bodies and their forms exist precariously on the boundaries of the monstrous and the human. On killing Abel, Cain and his race are damned forevermore. Even though the aforesaid beings are declared monsters, Cain and Abel were twins. Therefore, the descendents of Cain have human bloodlines, irrespective of external appearance at the current time in each text. Grendel, being included in Cain's ancestry, thus is also part human. Gardner humanises Grendel to the extent of speech and thought, separating him from the other descendants of Cain and even his own mother had lost these human characteristics. Being of human descent, sharing similar recognizable qualities as men, and possessing cognitions above those of animals but having animalistic attacks, Grendel is placed neither in the human category nor in the animal category. What makes him turn "abnormal" or "inhuman" is a grave question. There are evident traits of humanistic feelings in Grendel though due to constant attacks he himself has transformed into a beast. When the novel starts, Grendel is seen yelling at a ram and using terms which mark him superior to animals. However, when he sees humans for the first time, he understands that there are some similarities between him and the men. This equation helps in polarising him from the animals and finding kinship with humans. It gets evident that due to constant pressure and characterisation by someone, the personality can undergo drastic changes transforming oneself into a monster.

Monsters often demand a solemn rethinking of boundaries and normality and resist any classification built on hierarchies. The monster's body violates the already set principles of science and it defies any classification built on hierarchies or binaries. It always allows us to perceive things differently and think out of the box. It can be said that monster defies any logic and rationality and the scientific principles crumble in front of it. Grendel is a loner with no one to keep him company except his mother who does not even make comprehensible utterances. They are doomed to live in the cave much away the social circle. Grendel's mother in the course of time has accepted her fate though Grendel finds it difficult to come to terms with that. Grendel wanders the borders of Hrothgar's kingdom, living at the outskirts of the community both spatially and socially while his mother does not come out of the cave, except to save her dear son from hazardous situations.

Epitomising a particular culture as monstrous vindicates the act of its deracination or eradication by rendering it heroic. Culturally, a monster stands out especially on the basis of language, communication and its lifestyle. Monsters may not have a proper language to communicate in and it often lands them in trouble because the inability to express what they intend always makes them perplexed and forces them to appear as a behemoth to everyone. In *Beowulf* Grendel is merely a beast having no power of articulation. But in *Grendel*, Gardner attributes the power of speaking to Grendel which he uses wisely in circumstances. "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" (Henningfeld). It is said that Grendel's mother does not utter a single word but only makes unintelligible sounds and rumbles. Since she does not say anything, Grendel also finds it difficult to speak but he catches words, especially abusive words, and gradually uses it against them. Language and its expressive potential are problematised, as Grendel observes the deficiency of language as the

mediator of meaning. Even when his final endeavor to be in consort with thanes goes in vain, the fury within rises and he says:

I ran to the center of the forest and fell down panting. My mind was wild. My mind was wild. "Pity," I moaned, "O pity! pity!" I wept—strong monster with teeth like a shark's—and I slammed the earth with such force that a seam split open twelve feet long. "Bastards!" I roared. "Sons of bitches! Fuckers!"

Words I pick up from men in their rags. (Gardner 52)

Grendel ruminates that though they are called the accursed race, they do not even have words for swearing in. In every aspect Grendel is marginalised by the thanes and they contribute their evil nature to him. With the passage of time, Grendel excels in using poetic language and he indulges in banter with Unferth until the latter becomes frustrated and yells, "no more talks!" (Gardner 85). The ideal monstrous text then would be one, where the monster has the power of articulation.

The notion of cultural identification in relation to the hero-monster relationship is significant in postcolonial readings of monstrous texts. Postcolonial theory explores and interrogates the situation of colonised peoples both during and after colonisation, and as such often discusses matters close to the discussion of monsters, such as marginality and the "other." The sympathetic yet still "othered" monster represents any marginalised people, who are suppressed by the cultural standards of the domineering hero. Monsters are often associated with marginality; they dwell in a distant place on civilisation's periphery and are connected with perverse sexuality, excessive appetite and raucousness. Monstrosity is interlocked with the perennial concept of "norms" and "otherness." The fantastic beasts often represent the "other" yet they are fascinating. The limits of the order of things and the adversity of transgression have always been represented by the monsters who are the denizens of the border. The culture identifies with the virtues represented by the hero and

fails to recognize in itself the shortcomings, represented by the monster. Monsters are seen as depictions of demonised foreigners and the hero's quest to slay the monster is read as a symbolic justification for the oppression of the 'other' culture. Grendel is described in terms of humanity and monstrosity. Grendel's mother does not even have a name of her own and is known through her maternal identity. She has exceptional qualities of a mother and is there for her son at any point of crisis.

Monsters are deliberately created in order to be negatively different. They are judged and derogated in support of what people see and speculate about them. The abnormal features of the monsters make it the absolute "other" and help us creating a "self" by presenting a binary opposite to this. "The colonized subject is outlined as 'other' through discourses such as primitivism and cannibalism as a means of establishing the binary separation of the colonizer and colonized and asserting the naturalness and supremacy of the colonizing culture and world view" (Ashcroft 169). The place where Hrothgar built the mead hall was earlier the dwelling place of Grendel, where he lived peacefully predated on small animals. With the advent of Hrothgar and his thanes, life becomes miserable and the hullabaloo arising from the construction area annoys him to the core. Grendel makes attempts to change the stable notion about him from the minds of the thanes. Each time after the Shaper sings of Grendel as the cursed, evil monster, Grendel cries and begs for mercy to forgive the unknown crime his ancestors must have done, to liberate himself from tethering to sin. "'Mercy! Peace!' The harper broke off, the people screamed... Drunken men rushed me with battle-axes. I sank to my knees, crying, 'Friend! Friend!'" (Gardner 51-52). Grendel is in search of a community where he too can mingle with everyone without having the label of a monster. He desperately tries to fit in a community, but always ends up as an outsider. Even as the monsters are defined by their absence from human society, they are pulled into an oppositional relationship with it precisely through the perception of their outsider status in societal terms. From a

distance, he would observe human behavior and is apparently fascinated by their civilisation and culture. He is jealous of the Shaper because he has “people to talk to” (Gardner 53) and everyone blindly believes his words.

Grendel’s constant efforts to befriend people fail utterly and it can be said that Grendel only tries to defend himself from the attacks of thanes. “I’d meant them no harm, but they’d attacked me again, as always” (Gardner 79). He strives to be accepted among the human society, but is unwelcomed because of the aberrations Grendel accommodates. Even if Grendel goes there politely, he will not be accepted into the human society because of his enormous physical form. Eventually, he himself declares to be the monstrous one, with no other choice but to mould himself into the being which the Shaper always sings about.

There is an urgency in creating stereotypes in order to label those who are different from the norms as inferiors in every possible realm, thus gaining an upper hand in the social scenarios and, the adequacy of acquiring power bestows one with the capability to determine who belongs and who does not belong to the social, cultural or national order. It could be also put in such a way that, the exercise of power in a certain culture would be efficaciously done by looking closely at the ways in which monsters are created. Individuals are identified themselves as or labeled as marginalised due to the dual structure of various kinds of dormant discourses such as patriarchy, imperialism which directly imposes that certain experiences are peripheral. The term also describes those who are denied access to resources or participation in social life. It is from staunch marginalisation that resistance stems out and it also implies that power is a function of centrality and the only way for the marginalised to acquire power is through replacing the center or decentering. Marginalisation occurs in different levels ranging from people to cultures.

Cohen argues that monsters manifest the predicament of the historical moment and provide insight into the culture they come from. Monster lies far removed from the societal

norms and dwells in the fringes of moral cultural values, serving as a caution sign for the exploration of ideas that should not be delved into. It incorporates all those norms and ideas which a particular culture considers as taboo or morally inadmissible. Thus it remains outside of the status quo and indicates something which should not be repeated or looked into by anyone within that particular culture. It is an admonition against potential exploration that hampers free mobility and constrains the societal space in which humans can move. It influences the collective behavior of the society by being prohibitive. It is transgressive and breaks laws, and embodies all that should be exiled or repressed but it returns no matter how hard it is pushed away. The monster's transgressive traits are used in order to normalise and establish those values that are seen proper by the society. Since it does not conform to the rules set by the society, it will be characterised as aberrant and abnormal. Monster acts as a warning which abstains people from exploring the unexplored thereby appeasing the curiosity. Every monster raises the question of how it came into being and what purpose it serves. In Cohen's words, "The monster of prohibition exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot—must not—be crossed" (13).

The monster prevents curiosity and confines people inside the set boundary or rather keeping "normal" people into place. It can also be interpreted in a different way, that is, the monster is never allowed to get inside the boundary in which the so-called normal people dwell, and it is prevented from being a part of the society. It threatens not just individual members of the society but also the very cultural apparatus through which individuality is established and approved. The creation of Grendel as a monster too has latent motives which may or may not contain people to a certain extent. There is no way of reaching where Grendel dwells. It is not only under a deadly cliff but also, in order to reach there, one has to cross a lake brimming with fire snakes. It is an act of harnessing the rising inquisitiveness to

cross the borders by generating a monster figure. Since they connect Grendel with Cain, people believe what the supreme authority tells them. The maneuvers to venture into the unknown realms get subdued by the monster. As there is an imminent threat of invaders, the promulgation of such a myth always helps. The Dragon in the novel is yet another sort of creation which guards untold riches from enemies and intruders. Any projection of deviance from the societal norms by anyone will be labeled as monster and will be forced to remain outside of it.

Grendel is a fear generating icon whose appearance itself petrifies humans or animals. From a small deer to Hrothgar, Grendel is a terror and no one except Unferth and the forthcoming “stranger” show courage to confront the horrifying monster. Though everyone faints at the sight of Grendel, he is a manifestation of all the repressed desires of the people inside and outside the novel. He is not tethered to any poles. In fact he is able to roam around day and night, is invincible and has powers beyond human imagination. In short, Grendel is everything which a normal human being is not, but wishes to be, in the repressed mind. When Cohen says fear of the monster is really “a kind of desire,” he implies that we let out our fears and desires through a medium, by creating a monster that possesses all those features which we secretly wish to have. It manifests social and sexual concerns and anxieties, while they simultaneously represent illicit desires and prohibited practices. The monster is a projection of some repressed part of the “self.” The limitation to organise control over the order of things and the adversity of transgression are represented by monsters, who are the denizens of the borderland.

What is exactly the purpose of creating monsters within a particular culture gives the answer that the society needs a scapegoat in order to relieve itself from the abnormalities. The monster functions as a scapegoat and all those unwanted aspects of a culture get transferred into the body of monster, as it “ritually destroys in the course of some official narrative,

purging community by eliminating its sins” (Cohen 18). That is, cultures can also project onto the monster, those aspects of itself which it rejects and forbids and the elimination of these monsters acts as an exorcism. If these narratives are retold and promoted, they can even function as catechisms. A society can be understood by its monsters, since what is considered monstrous explains which qualities are not appreciated in a particular society in a particular time period. Grendel becomes the scapegoat in order to save the skin of the so-called civilised culture of Hrothgar and the Danes. Monstrosity is attributed to him and he is gradually molded into one, where he exposes anomaly and deformity on contrary to the other culture. Hrothgar is left with no choice in the beginning times as he resorts to violence during his desperate times. Gardner condemns this violence by illustrating how Grendel’s violence is analogous to Hrothgar’s violence. The cyclical pattern emerging from the constant battles has no end but to more violence, but the next creature is not welcomed into the society. Eradicating Grendel from the phase of earth acts as an exorcism, where their culture stays pure and pristine.

In the final thesis, “The Monster Stand at the Threshold . . . of Becoming”, he makes the remarkable statement that “Monsters are our children” (Cohen 20) and it is we who out of fear, desire, anxiety and fantasy create them. They can be pushed to the periphery, in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return. They ask us how we perceive and misinterpret the world and demand us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, etc and most importantly, they ask the question why we have created them. The statement “Monsters are our children” (Cohen 20) conspicuously applies in the case of Grendel because he is turned into a monstrous being due to the inflictions that Hrothgar and his people put on him. The Shaper’s role is no less in shaping and moulding Grendel’s character likewise. The culture of Scyldings is marked by the damned culture of Grendel and his mother. Grendel is offered no distinct answer for characterising him as the evil one.

Grendel is unable to kill indiscriminately in Hrothgar's mead hall as his life is interdependent with them. It is this which intertwines with the monster's life and which instills in him both admiration as well as resentment towards humans. Without mankind, Grendel does not possess a living. Men define him by discovering contrastive characters, which is often derogatory at the same proves them the supreme authority. Yet this is much better than being forced to live without any identity at all.

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