

Evil to the Point of Good: Grendel Dragon Encounter Chapters 4-6 Analysis

Grendel goes to the dragon because he feels purposeless and confused. All of his well-intentioned previous interactions with humans always had left him feeling desolate, frustrated, as if he were the aggressor and not the humans. Furthermore, he is devastated by the fact that he will always be seen as “the dark side ... the terrible race God cursed” (Gardner 51) to humans, so that he can never be accepted into the beauty of the humans and blissful illusion of the Shaper’s songs.

The dragon has a solution, treasure worth more to Grendel than gold or silver, that could not be obtained elsewhere: perspective. An answer to his futile struggles with the humans, a life purpose.

The moment Grendel enters the dragon’s lair, the dragon is characterized by its eyes, “not firey but cold as the memory of family deaths” (57). Grendel had not previously met something so evil, “sly, hardly hiding his malice” (58) — the only encounters he had had with intelligent animals were with his mother and with the self-righteous humans. He had never encountered a being as evil as he saw himself, never “kn[e]w how [*the humans*] feel when *they* see [Grendel]” (59). At that point, Grendel realizes that how he viewed the humans was never mutual— no matter how intelligent or well-meaning he was, finishing their waste, trying to speak to them, they could never see him as an equal. The dragon is the human society’s mirror on Grendel: he sees unconditionally the monster in the dragon, old and obscene, that the humans see in him.

But the analogy doesn’t end with the humans’ view of Grendel: the dragon’s condescension on Grendel and his farsightedness also impress on Grendel, who acts the the same toward the humans. The same way that Grendel feels old and wise watching the human civilizations evolve and predicting their patterns, the dragon “see[s] from the mountaintop: all time, all space” (63), implying that Grendel’s view is very limited. This causes Grendel not only to expand his thinking to accommodate the fright of the humans, but also to consider the larger scheme of the fight: to what ultimate end does his interaction with the humans have? What do his conflicts entail, from the present to the end of time?

From this the dragon’s advice to “seek out gold and sit on it” (74) makes sense. The dragon claims that continuing to steal from and kill the humans will “improve them ... stimulate them ... make them think and scheme ... drive them to poetry, science, religion, all that makes them what they are for as long as they last” (72-3). This is a clear purpose in life that Grendel can strive to achieve— create a reign of terror that results in the benefit of the humans! The dragon doesn’t care about the loss of any individual— which to him is just “a temporary gathering of bits, a few random dust specks” (70) that have little meaning— but rather the progress of the universe as a whole. Sitting on gold is just one simple, concrete way for Grendel to achieve this goal of universal progress, and it can symbolize any method of frustrating, prodding, motivating the humans to improve upon themselves. In Joseph Campbell’s words, “in [saving himself], [a person] saves the world ... The influence of a vital person vitalizes” (Campbell). Grendel is the vitality of the humans, the evil juxtaposition of mankind that *causes* themselves to be righteous. In other words, the people cannot exist as they are without monsters like Grendel. And that gives Grendel a worthwhile motive to plague humans to the point of change.

This solution also solves his discord with humans, claiming that his contribution to the betterment of the human race will make Grendel “mankind, or man’s condition” (Gardner 73) — that his place as the evil in the Shaper’s song is something to embrace rather than a shame. The dragon even declares that Grendel will “scare [humans] to glory!” (73) and sweep himself along in their glory. While glory is not one of Grendel’s motives, the pride of the humans in their song of their achievements was the only thing that brought Grendel to tears— confused but happy tears.