

Don't Be [In]different: Deign to be Human

With increasing rates of terrorist attacks since the rise of Islamist extremist groups in the 21st century, studying the origins of an amoral perspective become ever more relevant. From where does such an uncaring, insane behavior originate?

In her essay “Language and Thought,” Susanne Langer makes one important distinction between animalistic beasts and humans: that humans are distinctively elevated because of their ability to interpret subjective “symbols” as well as objective “signs,” while all other intelligent animals are separated by their ability to recognize and react solely to signs. Humans too follow this development, beginning by recognizing signs until symbols have meaning to them.

An exemplar in the growth of a criminal lies in that of a monster. John Gardner does this in his novel *Grendel* by examining the growth of Grendel, a monster with human intelligence that follows the evolution of signs to symbols that Langer delineates. As a child devoid of language, he learns to *categorize* and develop expression by himself. By that time, he has reached the level of intelligence of the humans he observes. At that point, his advanced understanding and pattern-analysis skills lead him to subscribe to *nihilism*—the belief that existence is without meaning, as view that is often attributed to modern-day sociopaths and criminals. Thus, Gardner’s story provides evidence that the developmental gap between usage of signs and symbols almost certainly predicts the most likely avenue from human intelligence. In Grendel’s case, his recurrent *contrasting* of himself to others in his formative stage—between the understanding of purely signs to symbols—causes him to become a nihilistic, spiteful monster.

The flashbacks in *Grendel* are characterized by a predictably judgment-free life. He describes this youthful lack of intense thought as a “spell” (Gardner 16): playful, carefree, “cautiously darting from tree to tree challenging the terrible forces of night on tiptoe” (Gardner 16). These are the signs, the ability to explore and react to surroundings and the “essence of rational behavior” (Langer 1) that Langer mentions. At this point, Grendel is at a stage of simply absorbing rational information about the new aboveground world around him, without taking any time to interpret or infer. At this developmental stage, Grendel’s mind is composed almost completely of material images, without judgment or language; the basic human necessity of conception of symbolic ideas and expression do not yet exist. Little from this stage affects the outcome of Grendel’s personality.

On the other point, Grendel’s present voice is one that sounds remarkably similar to that of a human. He yells at animals and the sky, judges and hates animals and humans he encounters, expresses himself poetically, learns the art of deceit. He cries fake tears, smiles a “terrible, sycophantish smile” (Gardner 7), describes himself as a “disfigured son of lunatics” (Gardner 7). He even develops anthropocentrism when he gazes down on other organisms as “below complexity” (Gardner 7), a concept limited to human thought. He has already learned the importance of subtleties and gestures, symbolism for ideas. By this time, his attitude is strictly accusatory of the world, lacking in the youthful color of many years ago.

The difference between these two version of Grendel is very apparent, as great as the difference between a human child and a full-grown adult. The transition is not so obvious.

By the time Grendel encounters the humans, he is already in a state of transition. He begins to form ideas for himself, so that he can understand the *presence* of the language that the humans use. However, while Grendel recognizes the humans’ sounds as language, he could not express himself: “nothing would come out” (Gardner 26) when his mouth moved, or he would just howl and moan. However, in the lack of language, Grendel was already discovering how to *categorize* and *generalize* the humans’ behavior. He discovered that they were “thinking creatures, pattern makers, the most dangerous things [he’s] ever met” (Gardner 27) based on the fact that they had developed the expression of language and the use of fire. Even though Grendel too had the conveniences of language and fire, there was a different connotation about it: the humans’ fire was “pungent, painful as thistles to the nose” (Gardner 23), and their language is as if “made by brittle sticks, dried spindles, flaking bits of shale” (Gardner 23). Or when the bull charges at him,

he learns that the bull “fought by instinct, blind mechanism ages old ... the same way against an earthquake or an eagle: I had nothing to fear from his wrath but that twisting horn” (21). In this case, he generalizes the motions of the bull into a pattern, as with other animals. However, what makes this action remarkable is Grendel’s emotional response of a bold “nothing to fear” about the bull, the ability to inject a subjective thought spurred on by a rational series of observations.

This is the same process described by Lisel Mueller in her poem “Things,” in which humans personify objects to give them life (clock, chairs, shoes) or to make them more human and less formidable (country, storm, cave). In essence, the ability to personify can be broken up into two simpler steps: classifying an object by its humanlike attributes and then generalizing that human attribute to all parts of that object. Giving “the storm an eye” (Mueller 18) is no different than Grendel stating that “the wars began, and the war songs, and the weapon making” (Gardner 34). People categorize other items by their likeness to humans so that they are more comfortable with the idea of those items; likewise, Grendel categorizes humans and nature by their differences to him in order to more easily comprehend them. Humans are wasteful, warring, and weaponized, which is easily distinguishable from Grendel, who steals their waste, watches their wars, and attacks without planning or weapons. And while nature is beautiful and unthinking, Grendel is unsightly and logical. Before developing more complex thoughts that include mixed connotations about an object, there is a period of decisive generalizations, of contrasting himself with others to find more meaning.

By the time Grendel reaches the twelfth year of his war on Hrothgar, he is very intelligent. The satirical manner in which he laughs at the peoples’ vain attempts to “replac[e] the door [to the meadhall] for ... the fiftieth or sixtieth time” (Gardner 14) indicates that he is perhaps *even smarter* than the humans, who are unable to stop him despite the regularity and repetitiveness of his intrusions.

In fact, this demeaning of human beings is regular enough to cause Grendel to become so irreparably separated from them that his life becomes an obsession with their demise. Even when the Shaper left Grendel’s mind “aswim in ringing phrases, magnificent, golden” (Gardner 43), Grendel cannot bear the sudden beauty of these human beings. What was so great in this poetry that could leave such a monster terrifying as Grendel “crawling, whimpering, streaming tears ... [like] a baffled, indifferent ewe” (Gardner 44)? What mystic force turned around his toughness in the face of man?

In the words of Christopher Nelson, Grendel is a *barnacle*, “stuck where [he was] years ago, who [has] lost the will and imagination required to seek happiness” (Nelson 1); he “begins the twelfth year of [his] idiotic war” (Gardner 1) against the humans with nothing less than scorn, sardonicism, and satire. And he doesn’t care. This manifestation of existential nihilism—the belief that nothing in life has any meaning—comes naturally to Grendel. Years of considering the actions of humans disgusting and pathetic have molded Grendel into a rigid cynicism that “cannot come to understand how much more is possible, how spacious and open life can be” (Nelson 1). Thus he cannot even begin to comprehend the Shaper’s words, cannot fathom the shape or color of the beauty within.

This manifests so naturally for Grendel because of his childhood habit of comparing himself *against* the humans, rather than *with* them. While human beings compare other items to themselves, Grendel often sees himself as a “disfigured son of lunatics” (Gardner 7) and a monster, so outcasted that he cannot compare himself even to the human beings he so bitterly criticizes. This aligns with Nelson’s claim that a positive liberal education requires “like-minded and generous companions with whom to study” (Nelson 2): instead of growing up in a supportive, similarly-minded community of intellectuals, Grendel constantly antithesizes himself against the humans and thus becomes stuck in a redundant, nihilistic, barnacle-like gloom.

Without a supporting circle of family and friends, Grendel becomes the indifferent beast he thinks he is. Contrast is a useful complement to comparison, but its excess leads to self-destructive carelessness. From differences, to envy, to apathy, to hatred.

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