

## **GRENDEL THE FIEND: Why Do We Love the Outcast?**

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Fierce, cunning, and inhumanly strong, *Beowulf*'s Grendel is the bane of mankind and a destroyer of civilization. He attacks Heorot, where good men dwell in company, and haunts the land for twelve years, breaking apart the order of society, until Beowulf the Geat comes to rescue the Danes from his brutality. Grendel is a demon outcast from hell, yet when we read the story of his demise, we the readers cannot help but sympathize with him. Though he decimates the ranks of Hrothgar's men for over a decade, we pity his lonely life. He rules the countryside with pure villainy, striking fear into the hearts of all men, but when Beowulf beats him in fair combat, we weep to see him return to his underwater cave to die. Although Grendel is the antithesis of order and civilization, we sympathize with him, partly because his strength and power evoke a certain admiration from us, and partly because we pity him in his isolation from society.

We see from the Danes' first encounter with him that Grendel is cursed and a destroyer of society. He is, the poet tells us, "a fiend out of hell" (line 100), who

*dwelt for a time*

*in misery among the banished monsters,*

*Cain's clan, who the Creator had outlawed*

*and condemned as outcasts...* (lines 104-107)

Grendel lived with the banished monsters because he was cursed by the Creator, and has no role in society. He must live separate from mankind, because he cannot fit into the order and structure demanded for relations to men. Hrothgar says of Grendel and his dam that "they dwell apart" (line 1357), again voicing the idea that Grendel is not of the race of men – he is an outcast,

banished. His isolation from humanity leads him to act destructively towards it. When Beowulf came to rescue the Geats, “the God-cursed brute [Grendel] was creating havoc” (line 121) with the structure of society. Grendel is a maker of chaos, which means he is inherently detrimental to society. As linguist and translator John Ronald Reuel Tolkien says, “Grendel remains primarily an ogre, a physical monster, whose main function is hostility to humanity (and its frail efforts at order and art upon earth)” (Nicholson 51). Mr. Tolkien points out that Grendel destroys civilization by ransacking Heorot. Heorot is unusual in that it is a bastion of civilization, where men can dwell together in trust of one another; the world at large is not a safe place. The Danes are trying to create a society in Heorot, and by destroying it with his nightly raids, Grendel is attacking society itself. He is indeed “not of the race of men” (line 712), for, unchecked, his actions could cause the doom of society.

Despite Grendel’s anti-social actions, we admire him for his strength and battle prowess. Until Beowulf comes onto the scene, the monster’s mastery of the Danes is undisputed; as the poet says,

*So Grendel ruled in defiance of right,*

*one against all... (line 144-145)*

The reader finds this independence and autonomy appealing; Grendel has complete power over the Danes. He needs no help in using fear to control the land – his brute strength is enough. Even Beowulf, the hero among heroes, acknowledges the creature’s superiority. Before his fight with the monster, Beowulf says that Grendel

*does possess*

*a wild strength... (line 682-683)*

As readers of the poem, Grendel's physical ability impresses us, and, like Beowulf, we have a healthy respect for the monster. Beowulf scholar William Witherle Lawrence says that the monster's "...attributes embodied what men most feared in the world... the ambition of the slayer was to possess qualities as terrible as those of the beasts that he overcame..." (Lawrence 161-162) This means that even while Beowulf was attempting to defeat Grendel, he admired the creature's brute strength and abilities. We share this admiration when we read the poem, and part of our sympathy with Grendel comes from the fact that we respect his strength and near invincibility.

Our fear and envy of the monster's strength is combined with an appreciation for his cunning. The poet relates how Grendel comes to Heorot:

*...then out of the night  
came the shadow-stalker, stealthy and swift (line 703-704).*

This passage conveys the silent, dark strength of the monster. He is alone – he needs no aid. He reminds us of death itself, coming silently in the night to take the lives of Hrothgar's best men. He waits until the men are asleep to make his attack, then in the darkness takes them by surprise. In all the twelve years of his attacks on Heorot, he has never been outwitted, until Beowulf comes to the aid of the Danes. Grendel's practical intelligence in his war with the Danes illicit our esteem and respect. We admire Grendel's cunning as well as his strength.

Accompanying our esteem for Grendel is a sense of pity for him as an outcast, alone and set apart from mankind. He was cursed by God before he was born; he is "spurning and joyless" (line 720). The first thing that draws our sympathies to Grendel is his twelve-year war on the Danes; "so Grendel waged his lonely war" (line 164), the poet tells us. For more than a decade,

Grendel endured long, lonely nights in a solitary battle, trudging through dark moors at night to attack the fortress. To remain the master of the country, he must be alone - but that loneliness evokes our pity. He is unloved, without family or kin. American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow says that Grendel is a “grim and monstrous giant”(Shippey 224); in his natural state, Grendel is not something any human could be expected to love. He is a hideous thing, a cursed being from hell. He lives alone, fights alone, and after his battle with Beowulf, he crawls off to die alone. When he receives his dying wound, the Danes hear

*a God-cursed scream of catastrophe,  
the howl of the loser, the lament of the hell-serf  
keening his wound... (lines 785-787)*

At long last Beowulf defeats the monster and frees Heorot. Yet we would rather weep for Grendel’s death than rejoice for Heorot’s freedom. The one thing the creature had was his strength, and Beowulf has defeated him in battle, taking even that. We therefore cannot help but pity the dying giant.

Grendel, despite his destructiveness to society, appeals to us as we read *Beowulf*. Outcast from society without friend or kin, he turns to the only activity he knows - battle. He attempts to destroy the society he cannot be a part of, and although we know that Grendel’s actions are detrimental to humanity, and he must die if we are to endure, we lament him when he dies. Beowulf must defeat him if civilization is to survive, yet we wish there were another fate for him. His solitary war on mankind brings pity instead of anger to our hearts. Grendel does nothing but attempt to destroy society, yet we sympathize with him because we respect his strength, independence, and cunning, and we pity him in his loneliness.

(1179 words)

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