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The Redemption of Cain in John Gardner's *Grendel*

Abstract

Examines Gardner's *Grendel* in terms of the clash of the title character's world-view versus that of the Men in the story. Pays particular attention to Grendel's position as a descendant of Cain.

Additional Keywords

Cain (myth)—Symbolism; Existentialism; Gardner, John. *Grendel*

The Redemption of Cain

in John Gardner's *Grendel*

Craig Payne

For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.

Not as Cain, who was of the wicked one, and slew his brother....

We know that we have passed from death into life, because we love the brethren. He that loves not his brother abides in death.

Whoever hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

1 John 3:11-15

On April 4, 1945, at the age of eleven, John Gardner accidentally killed his younger brother Gilbert on their family's farm. The two boys had been on a tractor pulling a two-ton soil-packer, with John driving; the tractor ran out of gas and sputtered to a halt, throwing Gilbert backwards under the packer. Though it seems obvious that the accident could not have been his fault, Gardner blamed himself for his brother's death; as he writes in *On Becoming A Novelist*:

A psychological wound is helpful, if it can be kept in partial control, to keep the novelist driven. Some fatal childhood accident for which one feels responsible and can never fully forgive oneself....(62)

Gardner's mother sought to comfort him: "You can't stop a big roller coming down a hill.... Nobody could stop that. No human power could do it, and God doesn't work that way" (Howell 2). But Gardner tormented himself with questions: Had he had a choice in the matter? Could a paralysis of will have slowed his reflexes in stopping the tractor? Or was the death entirely a matter of blind chance? He fluctuated between accepting the death as pure accident and believing that purposeful action could have prevented it. "In short," as Howell says, "Gardner's consciousness became a battleground for the classic duel between determinism and free will, and he would spend the rest of his life trying to reconcile these competing forces" (2).

It does not seem too far-fetched to say that, like Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, Gardner sought his redemption through the telling of the tale again and again. Especially this can be seen as one traces the mythic symbol of the brother-slayer in Gardner's most popular work, his revisionist novel *Grendel*.

The brother-slayer is reviled and despised throughout myth and history; for example, Claudius's "foul and most unnatural murder" of his kingly brother, Hamlet's father, has "subverted the divinely ordained laws of nature and of kingly succession," according to Guerin, who goes on

to say, "The disruption is intensified by the blood kinship between victim and murderer" (Guerin 129). The murder is a stain upon all of Denmark, and can only be expunged by the deaths of all involved. The most prototypical of Western culture's brother-slayers is Cain, who in the Biblical account struck down his brother, Abel, and afterward discounted his responsibility (Genesis 4:8-9). According to the epic poem *Beowulf* (from which Gardner's novel is drawn), Grendel the monstrous killer of heroic thanes, is a direct descendant of Cain and partakes of his villainous nature:

They called him Grendel, a demon grim Haunting the fen-lands, holding the moors, Ranging the wastes, where the wretched wight Made his lair with the monster kin; He bore the curse of the seed of Cain, Whereby God punished the grievous guilt of Abel's murder. Nor ever had Cain Cause to boast of that deed of blood; God banished him far from the fields of men; Of his blood was begotten an evil brood, Marauding monsters and menacing trolls, Goblins and giants who battled with God A long time. Grimly He gave them reward! (Kennedy 17)

However, Gardner's Grendel is a rather more sympathetic character than the epic monster. In his youth, he lacks knowledge of his "curse": "I lived those years, as do all young things, in a spell. Like a puppy nipping, playfully growling, preparing himself for battle with wolves" (Gardner, *Grendel* 16). But, as in classical tragic characters, he also live unaware of his essential moral flaw: he fails to perceive, as he grows in understanding, that all humans share the bestial, raiding instinct which he embodies; because he is isolated and fearful and willfully misreads human responses to him, he does not see that all humans apart from a grace of spirit belong to the race of Cain as he does, and "share his feelings of isolation, fear, and guilt" (Butts 91). If myths are "the symbolic projections of a people's hopes, values, fears, and aspirations" (Guerin 117), then Grendel may be seen as humanity's fear of the chaos and irrationality it senses lurking within itself. No one wants to be guilty of "raising Cain." So the real difference between man and Grendel is not the difference between humanity and monstrosity, for the difference is slight; the real difference is between those willing to find this "grace of spirit" in the terms of a redemptive mythos, and the outsider who is not willing to do so. The real conflict is between a celebration of imposed pattern and a denial of pattern's reality in life's seemingly chaotic nature.

Grendel, as he hangs upside down in a tree, trapped by his foot, is a believer in chaos:

I understood that the world was nothing: a mechanical chaos of casual, brutal enmity on which we stupidly impose our hopes and fears. All the rest, I saw, is merely what pushes me, or what I push against, blindly — as blindly as all that is not myself pushes back. I create the whole universe, blink by blink. — An ugly god pitifully dying in a tree! (11)

The death of Christ on a "tree" brings about a new order and meaning to life; Grendel's "crucifixion" on a tree is parallel, but exactly reversed. Because of his "upside-down" view of reality, this "ugly god" perceives only the "brutal enmity" and "mechanical chaos" inherent in life; he finds no purpose or meaning in the occurrence of any particular event.

As he hangs, after being attacked by a wild bull, Grendel has his first encounter with men:

They all began shouting at each other. One of the horses neighed and reared up, and for some crazy reason they took it as a sign. The king snatched an axe from the man beside him and, without any warning, he hurled it at me. I twisted, letting out a howl, and it shot past my shoulder, just barely touching my skin. Blood trickled out.

"You're all crazy," I tried to yell, but it came out a moan. I bellowed for my mother.

"Surround him!" the king yelled. "Save the horses!" — and suddenly I knew that I was dealing with no dull mechanical bull but with thinking creatures, pattern makers, the most dangerous things I'd ever met. I shrieked at them, trying to scare them off, but they merely ducked behind bushes and took long sticks from the saddles of their horses, bows and javelins. "You're all crazy," I bellowed, "you're all insane!" (27)

Grendel thinks humans "insane" (a label which will recur later) because they are out of line with his view of the world's meaninglessness. The human mind, even when faced with seeming chaos, continues organizing, creating, orchestrating; as Grendel himself says, the "whole universe" is created "blink by blink." The difference is that humans believe in the universe thus created, while Grendel does not; he is a Sartrean existentialist, believing only in the reality of what occurs, who therefore thinks that those finding pattern and order in a self-imposed mythos are "crazy." Though he may be correct, Grendel's moral flaw lies in not perceiving the power and potentialities inherent in such an act of artistry and imagination; he is a disbeliever in metaphorical reality.

Gardner himself assumes the stance of the all-powerful Order-Giver by imposing a cyclical pattern on the novel, which is, after all, a work of art. By structuring the book around the number twelve, he incorporates the resonant mythic symbol (dating back to at least ancient Sumer) of the zodiacal cycle, the signs of which each cover thirty degrees of arc in their traversal of the 360-degree circle encompassing the heavens, and which also each cover about one month or one lunar cycle. The book opens in the sign of Aries the ram, and covers, in twelve chapters, the final months of the twelfth year of Grendel's onslaught on the mead-hall:

The old ram stands looking down over rockslides, stupidly triumphant. I blink. I stare in horror. "Scat!" I hiss. "Go back to your cave, go back to your cowshed — whatever." He cocks his head like an elderly, slow-witted king, considers the angles, decides to ignore me. I stamp. I hammer the ground with my fists. I hurl a skull-size stone at him. He will not budge. I shake my two hairy fists at the sky and I let out a howl so unspeakable that the water at my feet turns sudden ice and even I myself am left uneasy. But the ram stays; the season is upon us. (5)

Each chapter of the book contains at least one reference to a zodiacal sign, ending with Pisces the fish (and also Ichthus, the fish-symbol of the Christ-hero) as Grendel views the coming of Beowulf:

He had a strange face that, little by little, grew unsettling to me: it was a face, or so it seemed for an instant, from a dream I had almost forgotten. The eyes slanted downward, never blinking... He had no more beard than a fish. (154)

This cyclical pattern, that of a world of order renewing itself year by year, seems to repudiate Grendel's vision of a world of chaos. However, it is important to remember that these zodiacal symbols are not put forward by Grendel, but by the author of the work, the artistic Order-Giver who is imposing pattern on the chaos of fictive action. So Grendel's problem is also put squarely before the reader: Does the reader believe in the meaninglessness of existence or in the meaning given by mythic patterning? Does the reader believe in what C. S. Lewis calls "the True Myth," in the idea that "the pattern is there in Nature because it was first there in God" (Lewis 116)? In other words, does the reality behind the patterning transcend the fictions devised by the patterners? Grendel says no; in this specific example, for instance, he rejects looking to the stars for "meaningful patterns that do not exist" (11). But only in the mythic order of renewal can the children of Cain find redemption.

In this view, it is not Beowulf who actually destroys Grendel; rather, it is Beowulf who acts in faith on the mythos of the thanes who is the heroic champion and who ends the life of the monster. The real conflict is not between Beowulf and Grendel; the real conflict is between mythic reality and the denial thereof. So the real destroyer of Grendel is the shaper of the myth, who in Gardner's novel, is appropriately named the Shaper.

The Shaper is a blind bard who comes to Hrothgar's mead-hall in its unpolished state of barbarity and, by his artistic weaving of songs glorifying Hrothgar's achievements, imposes pattern and meaning on the indiscriminate slaughter characterizing Hrothgar's early consolidation of reign. Grendel, as he puts it, is "tempted to belief" after hearing the Shaper sing, even though he has personally witnessed the brutal battle of which the Shaper, the transmitter of culture, has made such pleasing poetry:

I too crept away, my mind aswim in ringing phrases, magnificent, golden, and all of them, incredibly, lies.

What was he? The man had changed the world, had torn up the past by its thick, gnarled roots and had transmuted it, and they, who knew the truth, remembered it his way and so did I....

Thus I fled, ridiculous hairy creature torn apart by poetry crawling, whimpering streaming tears, across the world like a two-headed beast, like mixed-up lamb and kid at the tail of a baffled, indifferent ewe and I gnashed my teeth and clutched the sides of my head as if to heal the split, but I couldn't. (43-44)

Grendel, a child of dark nature like Browning's and Shakespeare's Caliban (anagramitized, by the way, forward and backward as Cain/Abl), is split by the contradiction between the truth of the indifferent world as he knows it and the truth created by the Shaper's work of art. He even comes to a sort of conversion:

I listened, huddled in the darkness, tormented, mistrustful, I knew them, had watched them; yet the things he said seemed true.... I listened, felt myself swept up. I knew very well that all he said was ridiculous.... Yet I was swept up. "Ridiculous!" ... But I couldn't bring out a wicked cackle, as I'd meant to do. My heart was light with Hrothgar's goodness, and leaden with grief at my own bloodthirsty ways....

"He reshapes the world," I whispered, belligerent. "So his name implies. He stares strange-eyed at the mindless world and turns dry sticks to gold...."

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.

I believed him. Such was the power of the Shaper's harp! Stood wriggling by face, letting tears down my nose, grinding my fists into my streaming eyes.... "Waaa!" I bawled.

Oh what a conversion! (47-51)

Grendel's conversion, of course, is immediately rejected by the warrior circle into which he staggers. Though Grendel, frustrated, still comes to listen to the songs which simultaneously move and infuriate him, he shortly finds a new mentor, one more suited to his own temperament and vision of the chaos at the heart of things: an ancient, evil dragon who also rejects the Shaper's myths:

"Man," he said, then left a long pause, letting scorn build up in the cave like the venom in his breath. "I can see you understand them. Counters, measurers, theory-makers.... They'd map out roads through Hell with their crackpot theories, their here-to-the-moon-and-back lists of paltry facts. Insanity — the simplest insanity ever devised! Simple facts in isolation, and facts to connect them.... But there are no such facts.... That's where the Shaper saves them. Provides an illusion of reality — puts together all their facts with a gluey whine of connectedness. Mere tripe, believe me. Mere sleight of wits.... It keeps them going — for what that's worth. As for myself, I can hardly bear to look." (64-65)

The acidic disbelief of the dragon becomes Grendel's guiding light; he says,

Nothing was changed, everything was changed, by my having seen the dragon. It's one thing to listen, full of scorn and doubt, to poets' versions of time past and visions of time to come: it's another to know, as coldly and simply as my mother knows her pile of bones, what is.... Futility, doom, became a smell in the air, pervasive and acrid as the dead smell after a forest fire — my scent and the world's (75).

To the dragon, Grendel's "conversion" to the Shaper's vision is merely self-deception, a retreat from the reality of what it is to be of the race of Cain. The dragon renews Grendel's Existentialism. If the monster cannot be man's friend or even equal, he can at least reduce the human's pretensions down to the piles of meat their bodies become in his hands. The dragon gives Grendel a purpose in life, a purpose which, paradoxically, is to drive the humans further into their "meaningless" mythos:

You improve them, my boy! Can't you see that yourself? You stimulate them! You make them think and scheme. You drive them to poetry, science, religion, all that makes them what they are for as long as they last. You are, so to speak, the brute-existent by which they learn to define themselves. (62)

What Grendel fails to see is that the dragon, though professing a truth greater than that of the Shaper, lies; as Gardner has said, "The Dragon looks like an oracle, but he doesn't lay down truth. He's just a nasty dragon. He tells the truth as it appears to a dragon.... That is the materialistic point of view.... The Shaper tells the truth, although he lies" (Bellamy 179). The dragon speaks for an aspect of human nature which should not be ignored but which also should not be trusted. The Shaper, on the other hand, tells the lies which the Truth has revealed to him and commanded him to tell; and who is he to disobey God?

After his conversation with the dragon, Grendel soon becomes bored with merely terrorizing the mead hall and begins playing games with some of the thanes who truly believe in the Shaper's mythos, especially a flawed hero named Unferth. Unferth is a true Cain-figure, having killed his brothers in anger, and so does not have the respect of such as Beowulf: "...I don't recall hearing of any glorious deeds of yours, except that you murdered your brothers. You'll prowl the stalagmites of hell for that, friend Unferth — clever though you are" (162). However, Unferth, emulating the heroic model, dives down to Grendel's underwater lair. The lair is farther down than Unferth has imagined, and so he ends up gasping for air while lying on the floor of Grendel's cavern:

"You talk of heroism as noble language, dignity. It's more than that, as my coming here has proved. No man above us will ever know whether Unferth died here or fled to the hills like a coward. Only you and I and God will know the truth. That's inner heroism."

"Hmm," I said....

"Go ahead, scoff," he said, petulant. "Except in the life of a hero, the world's meaningless. The hero sees values beyond what's possible. That's the nature of a hero. It kills

him, of course, ultimately. But it makes the whole struggle of humanity worthwhile." (88-89)

But Grendel refuses to kill Unferth; not only does he deny him a heroic death, but he also humiliates him in front of the other thanes by depositing him unhurt at the door of the mead-hall:

I laid him at the door of Hrothgar's meadhall, still asleep, killed the two guards so I wouldn't be misunderstood, and left... So much for heroism... So much, also, for the alternative visions of blind old poets and dragons. (90)

However, Unferth, continues to endure life within the mead-hall. His descent and argument with Grendel parallel Grendel's descent and argument with the Dragon, the difference being that the Dragon convinces Grendel of life's lack of meaning, while Grendel does not quite convince the thane. Unferth continues to believe that renewal or redemption is possible but only for those who accept the life-giving patterns of renewal imposed by mythic structures on the countless varied details of the world. Grendel, by his refusal to accept the mythic structure, places himself out of the reach of those life-giving patterns; Unferth, by his refusal to renounce the mythic structure, has left himself open to the possibility of redemption and new life free from the stigma of his brother's murders. And Unferth's faith is, eventually, rewarded.

For the vision of the Shaper goes beyond the rough-hewn heroics of the thanes; he also glorifies the softer feminine wisdom which has produced such an one as Hrothgar's queen, Wealtheow (her name, though literally meaning "abducted servant from Wales," also a play on *weal theow/weal thou*, "the Welfare of God"). She represents another opportunity for Grendel to accept the mythos: he says she "tore me apart as once the Shaper's song had done" (100). However, Grendel resents the proffering of this opportunity: "How many times must a creature be dragged down the same ridiculous road? The Shaper's lies, the hero's self-delusion, now this: the idea of a queen!" (108) Her beauty and grace of spirit reconcile conflicts between Hrothgar's thanes and cause the gathering at the mead-hall to take on even more symbolic import. In fact, in the case of Unferth, Wealtheow takes on the attributes of the Mother Goddess/Transformer who changes the dead past into a living future:

Down the table a man made bold by mead said, "Men have been known to kill their brothers when they've had too much mead. Har, har."

A few men laughed.

Unferth stiffened. The queen's face paled. Once again Unferth glanced up at the queen, then away.... As if defiantly, Unferth, murderer of brothers, again raised his eyes to the queen's, and this time didn't look down. Scorn? Shame?

The queen smiled. Impossibly, like roses blooming in the heart of December, she said, "That's past." And it was. The demon was exorcised. I saw his hands unclench,

relax, and — torn between tears and a bellow of scorn — I crept back to my cave. (103-104)

But Grendel, determined to prove the dragon's philosophy correct, tries to "expose" Wealtheow, both literally and figuratively, to prove that, after all, she is but flesh:

I slammed into the bedroom. She sat up screaming, and I laughed. I snatched her foot, and now her unearthly shrieks were deafening, exactly like the squeals of a pig.... I caught the other foot and pulled her naked legs apart as if to split her. "Gods, gods!" she screamed. I waited to see if the gods would come, but not a sign of them. I laughed. She called to her brother, then Unferth. They hung back. I decided to kill her. I firmly committed myself to killing her, slowly, horribly. I would begin by holding her over the fire and cooking the ugly hole between her legs. I laughed harder at that... I would kill her, yes! I would squeeze out her feces between my fists. So much for meaning as quality of life! I would kill her and teach them reality. Grendel the truth-teaser, phantasm-tester! It was what I would be from this day forward — my commitment, my character as long as I lived — and nothing alive or dead could change my mind!

I changed my mind. It would be meaningless, killing her. As meaningless as letting her live.... I'd cured myself. (109-110)

Grendel thinks he has "cured" himself by his nihilistic denial of everything Wealtheow, Unferth, and the Shaper represent, by his refusal to grant any order or meaning to existence. But he has yet to encounter the ultimate manifestation of the Shaper's mythos, the pinnacle of the heroic pattern: Beowulf.

In a mystical dream, Grendel hears words which he can neither understand nor forget: "*Beware the fish*" (149). He senses an approaching revelation: "I could feel them coming as I lay in the dark of my cave. I stirred, baffled by the strange sensation.... It drew me as the mind of the dragon did once. '*It's coming!*'" (151-152) Now he is seized by a mysterious ecstasy as he watches the Geats arrive:

I am mad with joy. — At least I think it's joy. Strangers have come, and it's a whole new game. I kiss the ice on the frozen creeks, I press my ear to it, honoring the water that rattles below, for by water they came.... O happy Grendel! (151)

He is puzzled yet thrilled by the sight of Beowulf:

His chest was as wide as an oven. His arms were like beams. "Come ahead," I whispered. "Make your play. Do your worst." But I was less sure of myself than I pretended. Staring at his grotesquely muscled shoulders — stooped, naked despite the cold, sleek as the belly of a shark and as rippled with power as the shoulders of a horse — I found my mind wandering. If I let myself, I could fall into a trance just looking at those shoulders. He was dangerous. And yet I was excited, suddenly alive. He talked on. I found myself not listening, merely looking at his mouth... as if the body of a stranger were a ruse, a disguise for something infinitely more terrible. (155)

This "something infinitely more terrible" which Grendel

senses is the mythic pattern itself, that which lies behind the Beowulfs and Wealths of the world and helps bring them into existence. Beowulf, in a way, has become Grendel's "brute existent"; Beowulf is the ultimate test of the mythos, the means by which Grendel will finally prove to himself that his disbelief is justified, that, just as Wealths has been "exposed," so this ichthyological Christ-hero will also prove to be a mere mortal. As previously pointed out, Grendel's final battle is not only with Beowulf; it has become a conflict of visions between Grendel and the Shaper, between "facts" and "truth."

Curiously, Beowulf and Grendel are related, Beowulf being descended from Abel. Grendel recognizes this kinship as the two collide in the final chapter of the book:

Now he's out of his bed, his hand still closed like a dragon's jaws on mine. Nowhere on middle-earth, I realize, have I encountered a grip like his. My whole arm's on fire, incredible, searing pain — it's as if his crushing fingers are charged like fangs with poison. I scream, facing him, grotesquely shaking hands — dear long-lost brother, kinsman-thane — and the timbered hall screams back at me. (168-169)

Grendel slips on the blood of the man he has just killed, but insists that his fall is "by accident" (169). Beowulf, however, will have none of it; as the two grapple, he whispers to Grendel of the power which has brought them to this place:

"As you see it is, while the seeing lasts, dark nightmare-history, time-as-coffin; but where the water was rigid there will be fish, and men will survive on their flesh till spring. It's coming, my brother. Believe it or not. Though you murder the world, turn plains to stone, transmogrify life into I and it, strong searching roots will crack your cave and rain will cleanse it: The world will burn green, sperm build again. My promise. Time is the mind, the hand that makes (fingers on harpsstrings, hero-swords, the acts, the eyes of queens). By that I kill you." (170)

Grendel panics at this affirmation; he holds to his belief in the meaninglessness of life as his only chance against the redemptive myth sustaining Beowulf: "If you win, it's by mindless chance. Make no mistake. First you tricked me, and then I slipped. Accident" (171).

Much earlier, in his first encounter with "insane" men, Grendel has expressed the terrifying nothingness of the world with his words, "I create the whole universe, blink by blink" (22). Now he likewise labels Beowulf as a "lunatic" as Beowulf actually agrees with him, but points out to him the secret power of that act of creation:

"Grendel, Grendel! You make the world by whispers, second by second. Are you blind to that? Whether you make it a grave or a garden of roses is not the point. Feel the wall: is it not hard?" He smashes me against it, breaks open my forehead. "Hard, yes! Observe the hardness, write it down in careful runs. Now sing of walls! Sing!" (171)

And Grendel, forced by Beowulf's arm-twisting methods, suddenly and in spite of himself becomes a Shaper, sings of walls in a pessimistic, fact-based manner which nevertheless ends on a note of affirmation:

The wall will fall to the wind as the windy hill will fall, and all things thought in former times: Nothing made remains, nor man remembers. And these towns shall be called the shining towns! (172)

Immediately after this artistic act of creation, Grendel reverts to his old ways:

He's crazy. I understand him all right, make no mistake.... Nevertheless, it was by accident that he got my arm behind me. He penetrated no mysteries. He was lucky.... "Blind, mindless, mechanical. Mere logic of chance.... Accident," I whisper (172-173).

Beowulf suddenly tears off Grendel's arm, forcing Grendel to the realization of his own imminent death; still, as Grendel flees into the woods, he clings to his argument: "His whispering follows me into the woods, though I've outrun him. 'It was an accident,' I bellow back. I will cling to what is true" (173).

As Grendel dies in the woods, animals gather around him, symbolic both of the zodiacal pattern of renewal which he has rejected and of the brute life-force upholding those within the mythos. His last words, meant as a curse, thus become a sort of blessing: "Poor Grendel's had an accident," I whisper. "So may you all" (174). Grendel's "accident" moves the reader closer to an appreciation of the world order created by the shaping artist. We experience the "accident" along with our fellow child of Cain, but because we understand it in a way Grendel cannot, we receive his destruction as an affirmation of pattern, not as a result of chaos or chance.

Though perceiving its effect and feeling its strength, Grendel chooses to deny the redemptive power of the creative spirit. We, therefore, like Unferth accepting our places in the mythic structure, move on, as did Dante, out of the dark forest of the lost soul; and we leave Grendel there, to die.

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