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### The Cycle of the Zodiac in John Gardener's *Grendel*

#### Abstract

Examines the structure of the 12 chapters of *Grendel* as following the pattern of the zodiac and its signs. Notes the conflict between Grendel's nihilistic and chaotic view of the universe with the belief in mythic order by Beowulf and the Scyldings.

#### Additional Keywords

Gardner, John. *Grendel*—Structure; Zodiac in *Grendel*

# The Cycle of the Zodiac

## in John Gardner's *Grendel*

Craig Payne

"The twelve zodiacal constellations, or those through which the sun passes in its annual apparent path, are: the Ram (Aries), the Bull, (Taurus), the Twins (Gemini), the Crab (Cancer), the Lion (Leo), the Virgin (Virgo), the Balance (Libra), the Scorpion (Scorpius), the Archer (Sagittarius), the Goat (Capricornius), the Water Bearer (Aquarius), and the Fishes (Pisces)."

(*The Lincoln Library of Essential Information*, p.1599)

The title character of *Grendel*, John Gardner's revisionist retelling of the Beowulf epic from the monster's point of view, creates a reign of terror over the mead-hall of King Hrothgar for twelve years until the coming of Beowulf the Deliverer. Before this coming, however, many of Hrothgar's thanes seek to destroy the monster, notably the flawed, but powerful figure of Unferth the brother-slayer. Grendel mocks Unferth verbally: "I've never seen a live hero before. I thought they were only in poetry" (84); then, as Unferth attacks him, Grendel humiliates him in front of the other thanes in a unique manner:

He lifted up his sword to make a run at me, and I laughed — howled — and threw an apple at him. He dodged, and then his mouth dropped open. I laughed harder, threw another. He dodged again.

"Hey!" he yelled. A forgivable lapse.

And now I was raining apples at him and laughing myself weak. He covered his head, roaring at me. He tried to charge through the barrage, but he couldn't make three feet. I slammed one straight into his pock-marked nose, and blood spurted out like joining rivers. I made the floor slippery, and he went down. *Clang!* I bent double with laughter. (85)

Grendel feels that he has sufficiently exposed the thane's pretensions to nobility and heroism; he has had enough dealings with Hrothgar's men to know that their mead-hall boasts against him rarely translate into action. But Unferth represents a new type of thane, the type that is driven to pursue the evil to its source and destroy it:

I was sure, going back to my cave (it was nearly dawn), that he wouldn't follow. They never did. But I was wrong; he was a new kind of Scylding. He must have started tracking me that same morning. A driven man, a maniac. (86)

What has occurred during the twelve years of terror to produce such a "driven" man? What are his origins? Why is Unferth willing to sacrifice his life in battle with Grendel in pursuit of his heroic aspirations, which reach far beyond the mere security of the mead-hall?

The answer lies in the creative power of redemptive

myth-making. Within this twelve-year span, the Shaper has come to dwell in Hrothgar's kingdom. The Shaper is a blind bard who comes to the 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 himself, as he puts it, is "tempted to belief" after hearing the Shaper sing, even though he has personally witnessed the brutal battles and deeds of which the Shaper has made such pleasing poetry. Though the monster repeatedly repudiates the mythic vision of the bard, he can never really shake off the Shaper's spell of words and images, the words and images which mold the heroic ideal and so produce such thanes as Unferth, and, eventually, Beowulf. As one writer puts it:

Gardner expects his reader to see that the real savior of his people and confounder of their nemesis is the artist, or collective artist, who shapes the heroic ideal that produces a Beowulf.... A real Beowulf may once have lived, but men would long have forgotten him had he not found his memorial in art — art like that which doubtless shaped his heroism, provided him with values and ideals" (Coward 55).

Unferth is a believer in the pattern and meaning imposed by the Shaper; Grendel, on the other hand, rejects any such meaning in life. He is a believer in the chaotic nature of reality and personal existence; as he says, "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" (22). So the real conflict is not that of Unferth and Grendel, or even that of Beowulf and Grendel. Further, in this view, it is not Beowulf who is the sole destroyer of Grendel. The real conflict is a conflict of visions; it is the vision of mythic reality against the vision of life's meaninglessness. Therefore, the real destroyer of Grendel is the Shaper, the shaper of the myth, the creator of the heroic ideal who imposes pattern upon life's monstrous and apparent irrationality.

Gardner himself assumes this shaping stance by imposing a cyclical pattern on the novel, which is, after all, a work of art. The book covers, in twelve chapters, the final twelve months of the twelfth year of Grendel's onslaught on the mead-hall. Within these twelve chapters Gardner traces the mythic cycle of the zodiac, the cycle of rebirth and renewal, the cycle of hope and promise of resurrec-

tion. By this structuring of the book around the number twelve, he incorporates the resonant zodiacal pattern (which dates back to at least ancient Sumer), each sign covers thirty degrees of arc in their traversal of the 360-degree circle encompassing the heavens, and also covering about one month or one lunar cycle.

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 recognized by Grendel (or by anything in nature except man), but are put forward by the work of the author, the artistic Order-Giver who is imposing pattern on the chaos of fictive action. Life finds meaning only in the order of renewal symbolized by, among many other patterns, the pattern of the zodiac — the pattern brought out by whatever artist first looked at the randomly scattered stars and saw pictures; however, Gardner, of course, is not blind to the problems of belief and disbelief brought forth by such patterning. The book opens in the month of April, in the sign of Aries the ram, which immediately alerts the reader to the presence both of Chaucer (the believer in order) and the early T.S. Eliot (the disbeliever):

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)

Chaucer's faith in order and life's meaning enables him to write of this "season" as that in which "...Aprill with his shoures soote/The droghte of March hath perced to the verte,/ And bathed every veyne in swich licour/Of which vertu engendered is the flour" (Chaucer 3). On the other hand, Eliot, surveying the "waste land" of post-Christian modernity, writes of the same season, "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/Memory and desire, stirring/Dull roots with spring rain" (Eliot 51). Gardner is alive to this ambiguity. This forms, in fact, the central conflict of the book. To Grendel, the hopeless existentialist, even the very idea of the yearly resurgence of life is repugnant. "The pain of it! The stupidity!" he exclaims (5). Referring again to the ram, he says:

His hindparts shiver with the usual joyful, mindless ache to mount whatever happens near.... "Why can't these creatures discover a little dignity?" I ask the sky. The sky says nothing, predictably. I make a face, uplift a defiant middle finger, and give an obscene little kick. The sky ignores me, forever unimpressed. Him too I hate, the same as I hate these brainless budding trees, these bratling birds. (6)

To Grendel as to Eliot, April is "the cruellest month."

But Gardner, as Cowart points out, is "mediating between Chaucer's world-view and Eliot's." (Cowart 46) His plan is ambitious: he desires to slay the existentialist monstrosity characterizing the twentieth century and to impose upon it the older view of the world as a world of order and meaning. He desires that *Grendel* should do nothing less for modernity than *Beowulf* did for the dark, chaotic time of the early Britons. Though he stops short of embracing Christianity as Eliot embraced it, as treatment for modernity's sense of moral disease, he points to the absolute necessity of the acceptance of the mythic patterns of renewal and redemption brought out in the book's cyclical structure.

Ironically, even as Gardner puts forth this structure, Grendel rejects it, for his aforementioned epiphany regarding the world as "mechanical chaos" occurs in the book's second chapter as he is attacked by a bull (Taurus):

Then, some thirty feet away, there was a bull. Hestood looking at me with his head lowered, and the world snapped into position around him, as if in league with him. (19)

So early on, even as Grendel formulates his nihilistic philosophy, he recognizes that the world appears to come "into position... as if in league" with those finding their places within the mythic structure. There is almost a sense of providential care for those accepting the world as a place of order rather than resisting this order by perceiving the countless varied details of existence as "chaos."

The narrative in Chapter 3 moves into summer, into June, into the sign of Gemini the twins:

It was late spring. Food was plentiful. Every sheep and goat had its wobbly twins, the forest was teeming, and the first crops of the hillsides were coming into fruit. (33)

The world at this point is "teeming" with life; it is the pastoral time, the time of the apotheosis of nature, the fruitfulness of all things. At this time, during the fullness of life, the pull of the Shaper's images is strongest upon Grendel. In the fourth chapter, the monster lurks in the darkness, not seeking the death of thanes, but listening to the harpist's songs:

I listened, felt myself swept up. I knew very well that all he said was ridiculous, not light for their darkness but flattery, illusion, a vortex pulling them from the sunlight to heat, a kind of midsummer burgeoning, waltz to the sickle. (48)

Yet even as Grendel resists the pull of the living forces informing the myths of the Shaper, he himself becomes a part of that cyclical force, by becoming the personification of the sign of Cancer the crab:

I backed away, crablike, further into darkness — like a crab retreating in pain when you strike two stones at the mouth of his underwater den. I backed away till the honeysweet lure of the harp no longer mocked me. Yet even now my mind was tormented by images. (48)

Grendel feels himself torn apart as he gazes first upon

the blank, idiot face of the world as he knows it to be, and then upon the mythic patterns created by the Shaper. He faces a crisis of decision as he realizes that he desires the patterns be true, even though it means personal rejection:

It was a cold-blooded lie that a god had lovingly made the world and set out the sun and moon as lights to land-dwellers, that brothers had fought, that one of the races was saved, the other cursed. Yet he, the old Shaper, might make it true, by the sweetness of his harp, his cunning trickery. It came to me with a fierce jolt that I wanted it. As they did too, though vicious animals, cunning, cracked with theories. I wanted it, yes! Even if I must be outcast, cursed by the rules of his hideous fable. (55)

In desperation, seeking guidance, Grendel moves out of the sign of Cancer into that of Leo as he visits the ancient dragon, a mentor more suited to his own vision of the chaos at the heart of reality. "No use of a growl, a whoop, a roar, in the presence of that beast! Vast, red-golden, huge tail coiled..." he comments. (57) The renewing life-force pulling at Grendel is sarcastically dismissed by the dragon as transitory and meaningless:

"A swirl in the stream of time. A temporary gathering of bits, a few random dust specks...." He shrugged. "Complexities: green dust as well as the regular kind. Purple dust. Gold. Additional refinements: sensitive dust, copulating dust, *worshipful dust!*" He laughed, hollow as the cave around him. (70-71)

The dragon renews Grendel's existentialism. As Adam and Eve fell by means of fruit (usually mentioned as an apple), so, in Chapter 6, Grendel "exposes" the "meaninglessness" of the heroic ideal in the episode involving Unferth and the apples. He confirms himself in his nihilism. To Grendel, Unferth is Virgo, the virgin:

"Ah, ah, it must be a terrible burden, though, being a hero — glory reaper, harvester of monsters! Everybody always watching you, weighing you, seeing if you're still heroic. You know how it is — hee hee! Sooner or later the harvest virgin will make her mistake in the haystack." I laughed. (84)

Grendel downs Unferth with the apples, then comments, "He was crying, only a boy, famous hero or not: a poor miserable virgin" (85). After a subsequent battle in which Grendel again denies Unferth's desire for a heroic death, he says, "...I roll on the floor with laughter. So much for heroism. So much for the harvest-virgin" (90). Unferth is a "virgin" because his belief in the Shaper's myths has never been challenged by one whose disbelief is even stronger; his failure within the terms of his chosen myths embitters him, though he remains within the mead-hall and even occasionally tries again to kill Grendel. What Grendel does not see, however, is that Unferth's myths still holds out the possibility of redemption, even for a failed "harvest virgin," while Grendel has closed himself off from that possibility.

The scales even out again in the next chapter, as Unferth's redemption comes to him in the form of the

forgiveness and graciousness of Hrothgar's queen, Wealtheow. "Balance is everything," says Grendel in the chapter's opening sentence. The narrative moves into the zodiacal sign of Libra, the scales of balance as the myth, in the person of the queen, and once again pulls at Grendel's heart. He says she "tore me apart as once the Shaper's song had done." (100) However, he 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, how this: the idea of a queen!" (108) Once again, Grendel rejects the mythic structure, though he says, "I hung balanced, a creature of two minds" (110); thus, even in rejecting any thought of meaning to life, he still becomes a part of its imposed meaning as symbolized in the zodiacal pattern.

But now, as winter approaches and the force of life begins to ebb, Hrothgar's fortunes also begin to wane. November comes, the time of Scorpius, and Hrothgar takes in his nephew Hrothulf, "quiet as the moon, sweet scorpion." (113) Hrothulf desires to take the throne of Hrothgar by force and to kill his cousins, the legitimate heirs; Grendel says, "I watched the idea of violence growing in him, and apprehension in all of them" (116). In this, Hrothulf is encouraged by an old anarchist named Red Horse (one of Gardner's philosophical jokes: a "red horse" is a "sorrel," and thus Red Horse transmutes into George Sorel). The darkness has come upon Hrothgar as he ages in an unsatisfactory reign:

He had in his youth the strength of seven men. Not now. He has nothing left but the power of his mind — and no pleasure there: a case of knives. The civilization he meant to build has transmogrified to a forest thick with traps. (121)

Grendel, therefore, thinks his philosophical nihilism justified as he sees the decay of the one celebrated by the Shaper. Even so, as he muses on the deadness of winter, he is strangely uneasy: "December, approaching the year's darkest night.... The trees are dead.... The creeks are frozen.... Something is coming, strange as spring. I am afraid" (125-126). He can still sense the timeless life-force upholding, through life and through death, those within the pattern, as the year passes through the time of Sagittarius the Archer:

I watch one of Hrothgar's bowmen pursue a hart.... He moves up a thickly wooded hill, and at the crest of it, standing as if waiting for him, he finds the hart.... Neither the hart nor the hunter moves. Time is inside them, transferred from chamber to chamber like sand in an hourglass; it can no more get outside than sand in the lower chamber can rise to the upper without a hand to turn stiff nature on its head.... Suddenly time is a rush for the hart: his head flicks, he jerks, his front legs buckling, and he's dead.... The image clings to my mind like a growth. I sense some riddle in it. (126-127)

Since Grendel's philosophical presuppositions cause him to see only the decay and entropy inherent in all reality, he cannot understand this eternal "riddle": that

just as life passes into death, so out of death comes life. This pattern of rebirth is doubly shown in the figure of the hart, for not only is it "standing as if waiting" for the hunter, but it also contains within itself a yearly cycle of renewal, the shedding and regrowing of its antlers. However, though Grendel can sense the "riddle" of the event, he cannot catch its meaning; only its bare facticity, its "image," remains in his mind.

Therefore, Grendel also cannot understand what happens next, in the time of Capricornus the Goat. This time is in itself fraught with symbolic overtones. In Christian belief, it is the time of the light piercing the darkness, of the birth of the great Light, of the beginning of what C.S. Lewis calls "the True Myth." It is the time of the turning of the year and of the first month of the year, when nature begins its long climb out of death into new life: "I watched a great horned goat ascend the rocks toward my mere," says Grendel. "I have half a mind to admire his bottomless stupidity." He tries to frighten the goat away by hurling boulders and trees at it; however, "He keeps on coming. I am suddenly annoyed, no longer amused by his stupidity.... He keeps on climbing, mindless, mechanical.... He keeps on climbing" (139). Enraged, Grendel decides to kill the goat, but discovers it is no easy task:

He finds his feet the same instant that my second stone hits. It splits his skull, and blood sprays out past his dangling brains, yet he doesn't fall.... It's not easy to kill a mountain goat.... I smile, threatened by an animal already dead, still climbing. I snatch up a stone and hurl it. It smashes his mouth, spraying out teeth, and penetrates to the jugular. He drops to his knees, gets up again. The air is sweet with the scent of his blood. Death shakes his body the way high wind shakes trees. He climbs toward me. I snatch up a stone. (140)

Grendel seeks to strip the meaning of the seasonal cycle of returning life which seems to contradict his own philosophy of life's meaninglessness; he speaks of the goat's "bottomless stupidity" as it refuses to turn aside from its climb up the mountainside. Even after Grendel has virtually destroyed it, the goat tenaciously continues upward, even as life continues its upward surge though blanketed by deadly winter. Life, as one writer has it, eternally fights its way "towards the vernal efflorescence." (Coward 49) In fact, Gardner does not actually show the death of the goat; the passage ends as quoted above. The upward climb of life continues; later Grendel says, "I awaken with a start and imagine I hear the goat still picking at the cliffwall, climbing to the mere" (149)

The zodiacal cycle continues as well, into the sign of Aquarius the Water Bearer; however, the sign is twisted somewhat, for here it is the water, symbol of new life, which is the bearer:

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.... (151)

"They" are, of course, the Geats, with Beowulf leading

them. Grendel has already, in a mystical dream, heard the words, "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 the cycle turns to Pisces the fish (and also the *Ichthus*, symbol of the Christ-hero, the coming deliverer) as Grendel looks upon 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)

As Beowulf speaks with the Scylding guarding the coast where the Geats have landed, Grendel admits, "I found myself not listening, merely looking at his mouth... as if the body of the 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 and undergirds the Beowulfs of the world and helps bring them into existence. Beowulf, to Grendel, has become the ultimate test of the mythos, the means by which Grendel will finally prove to himself that his disbelief is justified. The fall of the ichthyological Christ-hero will shatter, once and for all, the lies of the Shaper. 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." And Beowulf (and behind him, the Shaper) emerges victorious.

The stripping off of Grendel's arm by Beowulf in their climactic battle has more behind it than his mere dismemberment. The arm is a "limb," and all through the book Grendel is described in vegetative terms. In his first encounter with men, for instance, as he hangs upside down in an oak tree, Grendel is at first taken for a "growth" or "fungus" (24). Here, in the book's last chapter, he is still a parasitical growth; he has become the Golden Bough (thought by Frazer to be the parasitic mistletoe), immune to the blades of weapons, whose limb, as the Sibyl tells Aeneas, "must be plucked, and only by one smiled on by fate" (Coward 50). Aeneas strips off a branch of the Golden Bough and hangs it on the walls of Elyium; Beowulf strips off one of Grendel's limbs and hangs it on the walls of Hrothgar's mead-hall. In the Aristotelian classification of the soul's development borrowed by Dante for his three levels of the afterlife, Grendel thus remains at the Vegetable level of the damned souls, as compared with the kinetic upward striving of the *Purgatorio* and the Rational level of the *Paradiso*, in which the soul contemplates the vision of God. Grendel never reaches this vision; in fact, even as he watches the kinetic striving of the mead-hall during its time of expansion, he does so from his vegetative perch: "I was safe in my tree" (36). Though, as previously discussed, he senses a "riddle" in the slaying of the hart, he cannot solve it; however, the image clings to his mind "like a growth" (127). Precisely: like to like, vegetable

image clinging to vegetable soul; and since Grendel cannot rise to higher vision, cannot solve the "riddle" of mythic renewal, he is consigned by Dante's artistic ordering to the Inferno.

Despite the fact that Beowulf has torn off his arm and that he is dying, Grendel clings to his view of the world as chaos: "...It was by accident that he got my arm behind me. He penetrated no mysteries. He was lucky." (172) But Grendel himself completes the mythic pattern and brings the narrative back to where it begins. As he dies in the woods, animals gather around him, symbolic both of the zodiacal pattern of renewal and of the brute life-force upholding those within the mythos, and he says, "I give them what I hope will appear a sheepish smile." (173) Thus, in his invocation of a sheepy aspect, he brings the cycle back to Aries. His rejection of meaning has brought him to death, even in the midst of life, even as he reinforces pattern and hence meaning.

"Poor Grendel's had an accident," he says. (174) But we, perceiving his death in a way which he cannot, receive his destruction as the affirmation of pattern and order, not as the result of the chaos he represents. Though we sympathize with the monster, we move on with Gardner and Chaucer, on the path traveled before us by Eliot as well, into the ordered world. ♀



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