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The Twelve Traps in John Gardner's Grendel

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WHEN John Gardner's *Grendel* appeared in 1971 it was greeted by a chorus of praise from reviewers, critics, and readers. Since then diverse interpretations of this fascinating work have been proposed. What indeed are we meant to make of *Grendel*, Gardner's reworking of the monster who, in *Beowulf*, harries King Hrothgar and his thanes for twelve years until overcome by the Geat hero, Beowulf? In various interviews and in his own writings Gardner gave many indications of what he set out to do when writing *Grendel*. On one level *Grendel*, "creature of two minds,"¹ represents conflicting parts of Gardner himself: "I was conscious that what I was about to do (or dramatize, or seek to get clear) was an annoying sometimes painful disharmony in my own mental experience, a conflict between a wish for certainty, a sort of timid and legalistic rationality, on the one hand, and, on the other, an inclination toward childish optimism, what I might now describe as an occasional flickering affirmation of all that was best in my early experience of Christianity."² Here we recognize the basis for *Grendel*'s predicament: his stubborn clinging to skepticism and cold, hard reason, while constantly tempted by belief. In an interview with Joyce Renwick and Howard Smith, Gardner makes the same point while hinting at his structuring of the conflict: "The novel *Grendel*, it seems to me, is about reason and faith. *Grendel* is again and again given the opportunity of believing in something which western civilization has held up as a value."³

On several occasions Gardner enlarged on his structuring of this conflict: "What *Grendel* does is take, one by one, the great

¹ *Grendel* (New York: Ballantine, 1971), p. 95. Further references to this text are given in parentheses.

² *On Becoming a Novelist* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 61.

³ *John Gardner: An Interview* (Dallas: New London Press, 1980), p. 18.

heroic ideals of mankind since the beginning and make a case for these values by setting up alternatives in an ironic set of monster values. I hate existentialism.”⁴ And in another interview with Joe David Bellamy this exchange occurs:

Gardner: In *Grendel* I wanted to go through the main ideas of Western civilization—which seemed to me about . . . twelve?²—and go through them in the voice of the monster with the story already taken care of, with the various philosophical attitudes (though with Sartre in particular) and see what I could do, see if I could break out. That’s what I meant to do.

Bellamy: Do you go through all twelve major ideas in that book?

Gardner: It’s got twelve chapters. They’re all hooked to astrological signs, for instance, and that gives you nice easy clues.⁵

Here it is obvious that Gardner’s intention was to examine one main idea (heroic ideal, value) in each chapter with an astrological sign serving as a focus for the contents of that chapter.

A passage that indicates even more clearly what Gardner means by “main idea” occurs in his *Art of Fiction* when he is discussing the modified picaresque plot: “Instead of the customary picaresque hero, [a writer] might use some monster from the fens—the monster Grendel from *Beowulf*, for instance—and instead of the customary movement through the strata of society, he might choose a list of Great Ideas of Western Civilization (love, heroism, the artistic ideal, piety, and so forth) to which one by one he introduces his skeptical monster. The structuring of plot is likely to be more interesting or less depending on the extent to which the sequence raises questions involving the welfare of the character, each value, for instance, putting increasing pressure on the monster’s skepticism.”⁶

Two questions now arise. First, what specific heroic ideal is the focal point of each chapter? What are the traps that attract and repel the skeptical monster who exclaims, “Twelve is, I hope, a holy number. Number of escapes from traps” (p. 80)? This is a question that has never been tackled. And second, how exactly does the astrological sign in each chapter point to a heroic ideal? This, too, has not been fully explored.

⁴ “Backstage with Esquire,” *Esquire*, October 1971, p. 56.

⁵ *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974), p. 179.

⁶ *The Art of Fiction* (New York: Knopf, 1984), p. 166.

The main problem is that the zodiacal sign taken by itself is not a sufficient clue. David Minugh takes us further by associating each sign with its ruling planet and a house.⁷ Following the older system of seven planets, he bases his schema on Constance's horoscope as given by Walter Curry.⁸ Sign, planet, and house taken together provide a cluster of symbols that point in various directions and relate closely, in various ways, to the contents of the chapter. In the first chapter, for example, we have Aries the Ram (spring season), ruled by Mars (god of war) in the first house, that of life, the individual self and its potential. Here Grendel observes a lascivious ram (emblem of the proliferation of new life), deals out death in his war with Hrothgar, both mocks and pities himself, and faces his potential: his death. He insists that he is caught up in a meaningless cycle of life and death, yet longs for meaning. What is satisfying about Minugh's scheme is the ease with which it fits the text. No straining or guesswork is needed to identify the contents of each chapter within the astrological framework. One is, indeed, left with a sense of wonder at Gardner's ingenuity in his manipulation of these elements, at his artistry in making them serve the narrative flow without calling attention to themselves.

What Minugh fails to do is identify the heroic ideal, the trap that is the focal point of each chapter. Unless this is firmly established, we will be unable to see exactly how Gardner has structured Grendel's story, his progress (rake's? pilgrim's?) around the wheel of the zodiac, and appreciate the exact nature of his conflict. Gardner hinted in the Bellamy interview that the values too are "hooked to astrological signs." And analysis shows that in each chapter the heroic ideal with which Grendel is confronted is indeed drawn from well-known significations of the associated sign, planet, or house. So, in this first chapter it is not enough to recognize that Grendel, while wishing for meaning in life, rejects it as meaningless. It is important to note what heroic ideal he encounters and how he deals with it. That value is life, or more precisely the celebration of the cycle of life and death. Life and death themselves are givens. It requires imagination

⁷ "John Gardner Constructs Grendel's Universe," *Stockholm Studies in English*, 46 (1978), 125-41.

⁸ *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1960), p. 176.

and courage to connect them and celebrate the cycle. What pulls the chapter together is the funeral scene. Hrothgar's people, cremating their dead, the victims of Grendel's war, are celebrants of the cycle. For they raise their voices in a song that begins as a dirge and then "swells, pushes through woods and sky," and drives the "sane" Grendel, raging at such lunacy, back into his cave (p. 9).

In the Bellamy interview Gardner claimed that the twelve astrological signs give "nice easy clues" to his "twelve major ideas." This is particularly true for certain chapters. In chapter 3 the sign is Gemini, the planet Mercury in the house of kindred, journeys, and education. The associated heroic ideal is poetry, art. Mercury as inventor of the lyre points to the Shaper, exponent of the artistic ideal, who gives a sense of nobility and destiny to a band of thieves and rogues, all much alike and so peers, kindred. (Mercury, an ambiguous god, is also the patron of liars and thieves.) In chapter 6 the sign is Virgo, the planet again Mercury, this time in his role as messenger of the gods, in the house of servants, hard work, sickness and health. The value featured here is heroism, to which Unferth, the untried virgin, aspires. Servant of his lord, Hrothgar, he combats the sickness Grendel's raids bring to the kingdom. In chapter 7 the sign is Libra, the planet Venus in the house of marriage, partnership, and, ironically, enemies. Wealtheow, under the aegis of Venus, becomes, by marriage to Hrothgar, a point of balance between enemies, his people and hers, and so is the embodiment of self-sacrificial love. In chapter 9 the sign is Sagittarius, the planet Jupiter in the house of dreams, intellect, and religion. The chapter shows Grendel at grips with organized religion, listening to a priest discourse on the nature of the king of the gods. Grendel himself is haunted by religion of another sort: dreams, omens, and particularly the portent of the archer and the hart. In chapter 11 the sign is Aquarius, the house that of friendship, ideals, and worthy causes. The value is friendship. Two planets are featured here: Saturn, deposed king of the gods, from the older system of seven planets, and Uranus from modern astrology. Beowulf comes over the water in friendship to the Danes, Uranus being the planet of altruism and brotherly love, to herald the passing of the old order, Saturn. And in chapter 12 under the sign of the Fish, a symbol for Christ as savior, Gren-

del encounters Beowulf, champion of faith. Here in the house of private enemies and betrayals Grendel suffers affliction. Here also two planets preside: Jupiter (sky-god) and Neptune (sea-god). After clinging to the oak of Jupiter, while looking “down past stars,” Grendel feels a “dark power [Neptune] moving in him like an ocean current,” and takes the imaginative leap of faith (p. 152).

Here, as can be recognized, we have touched on the most obvious of the “clues.” The others require fuller commentary. Chapter 2 is under the sign of Taurus, ruled by the planet Venus in the house of fortune and possessions. Grendel’s mother is an uncouth Venus fiercely protecting her son, whose fortune, or misfortune, is his existentialist sense of being an alien in the world. But she is not the only creature to care for him. The young Hrothgar presented here is a conservationist, concerned about saving trees and horses and having Grendel fed. And his “hairless skinny” companion “with eyes like two holes” has the insight and imagination to divine quite correctly not only that Grendel eats pig but also that he is in a “period of transition” (pp. 19–20). Love, the value featured in this chapter, is practical, caring love for living things.

The sign Cancer, ruled by the Moon in the house of treasure, the home, one’s roots, points to the value of civilization. In chapter 4 the home, the house of treasure, is Hrothgar’s great meadhall, Hart, built and adorned by craftsmen drawn from far and wide. It is Hart that Cancer the crab symbolizes, for, as Elizabeth Larsen points out, “crab and its home are synonymous and medieval society, too, was synonymous with its hall.”⁹ But Hart is more than a well-appointed hall. It is also “a sign of glory and justice,” the emblem of a great, generous civilization. Here Hrothgar “would sit and give all treasures out, all wealth but the lives of men and the people’s land” (p. 40). But, set under the sign of the inconstant moon, this civilization, like all others, will wane. And it has its own cancer within it: idyllic young lovers’ casual indifference to a man they have murdered in the forest.

⁹ “The Creative Act: An Analysis of Systems in *Grendel*,” in *John Gardner: True Art, Moral Art*, ed. Beatrice Mendez-Egle (Edinburgh, Tex.: Pan American Univ. School of Humanities, 1983), p. 45.

The marvellously horrid dragon, jealously guarding his treasure, appears in the following chapter. The sign is Leo ruled by the Sun in the house of children and childbirth, hobbies, creativity. The value, knowledge, is particularly the illumination acquired from an oracle, seer, or mentor. Like Odysseus and Aeneas, Grendel goes to the underworld for advice but, in a chapter of inversions, returns armored with despair rather than hope. Here he is less monster than bewildered child seeking enlightenment, knowledge. But the sun he encounters is a terrifying nothingness, the "black sun" he sees deep within the dragon's eye. For, though golden and fiery as a lion, the dragon, with his cracked voice and debauched leer, has none of the energy of a true Leo. (As a character, however, he is a wonderful embodiment of evil, the most vivid character Grendel encounters.) A nihilist, claiming omniscience, he sneers at men's "crackpot theories," their systems of philosophy that will never embrace "total reality" (pp. 55–56). All quests for knowledge are meaningless since in the end nothing will remain but a "silent universe" (p. 61). The only advice the dragon can offer is: "Know how much you've got and beware of strangers!"—a cynical distortion of the Delphic oracle's injunction to "know thyself" (p. 63). But how, we may ask in the light, or darkness, of all this, can pursuit of knowledge be seen as a value? The answer lies in the dragon's attempt to impress Grendel with a discourse on Time and Space, which, as Craig J. Stromme points out,¹⁰ consists of lengthy extracts from A. N. Whitehead's *Modes of Thought*.¹¹ These passages emphasize process and connectedness, ideas that the dragon fundamentally dismisses as nonsense. Gardner himself, however, as he told Marshall L. Harvey in an interview, delighted in Whitehead's philosophy and considered him his mentor, though finding his style dry.¹² So, by having his devil quote scripture, he slyly gets in the good word.

The Scorpio episode is another that works both directly and by means of inversion. This sign is ruled by Mars in the older astrology, by Pluto in the modern system. Mars signifies vio-

¹⁰ "The Twelve Chapters of *Grendel*," *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*, 20, No. 1 (1978), 86–87.

¹¹ *Modes of Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), pp. 192–94, 119, 28–30, 40.

¹² "Where Philosophy and Fiction Meet: An Interview with John Gardner," *Chicago Review*, 29 (Spring 1978), 74–75.

lence, while among Pluto's spheres of influence is the will to exercise power and influence the masses. The house is the inauspicious eighth house of fear, death, and inheritances. The value is loyalty. Hrothgar's treacherous nephew Hrothulf, "sweet scorpion" (p. 98), plots to inherit the kingdom by means of violence and demagoguery. In sharp contrast to such treachery is Hrothgar's loyalty to his dangerous ward and Wealtheow's loyalty to Hrothgar.

Hope is the heroic ideal encountered in the depths of winter when Saturn reigns. Ruling the sign Capricorn, the planet moves in the house of kings, career, and conduct of life. A goat, stubbornly continuing to climb toward Grendel's mere though his skull has been split and his mouth smashed by the stones Grendel hurls at him, is, in his perseverance, a vivid symbol of hope. He is also a figure for the Shaper who even in death proves to be an incorrigible visionary—a figure, too, for Hrothgar's kingdom, weakened by Grendel's raids. Saturn signifies that this is the "end of an epoch" (p. 130), while the Shaper's assistant, singing of the careers of past kings, anticipates a new era: "Spring rain drips down through rafters" (p. 129). And, as Hrothgar's people persevere in their daily tasks, an old woman predicts to children the coming of Beowulf and so holds out hope for the future.

It should be emphasized that the preceding skeletal outline can only hint at the varied, complex, and subtle ways in which Gardner deploys the astrological significations in each chapter to indicate and explore a heroic ideal. But Gardner achieves more than a remarkable tour de force. By associating heroic ideals with sun, moon, planets named after gods, and constellations, he gives them an archetypal, mythic, cosmic dimension. For Gardner wants us to apprehend these ideals as pertaining not just to a particular time and place but to all cycles of human life.

With the twelve values or traps established, we are now in a better position to appreciate against what forces Gardner pits his existentialist monster. Since Gardner specifically states to Harvey that he wanted "to present the *Beowulf* monster as Jean-Paul Sartre" and that "everything that Grendel says Sartre in one mood or another has said,"¹³ some comment on Sartrean exis-

¹³ Harvey, p. 75.

tentialism is called for. Basically, Sartre sees the human being as individual consciousness, being-for-itself, separated, by virtue of its consciousness, from being-in-itself, the solid, non-conscious, purely contingent, accidental world in which being-for-itself exists. Aware of this separation, being-for-itself experiences a sense of lack, anguish, but any attempt to deny or disguise the individual's basic alienation by establishing set values and so giving man a place and purpose in the universe is self-delusion, bad faith. Man is condemned to be free to choose his own values. To accept values imposed on him by tradition, force, or persuasion is to allow himself to be sucked into inauthenticity. One individual consciousness encountering another can regard *the other* only as an obstacle: "Hell is others." Humanity has no community. In his lack and anguish what man longs for most is to experience himself as both conscious flow of existence and non-conscious fullness of being. His desire is, as Hazel Barnes explains, "to be at once a Being-in-itself-for-itself." This is, in effect, "the desire to be God," not merely "find an existing God outside ourselves." But this is futile. For "God does not exist. . . . 'Man is a useless passion.'" ¹⁴

Though fascinated by Sartre, Gardner was repelled by his philosophy. In a PBS television documentary produced by Richard O. Moore, he described Sartre's philosophy as "paranoid and loveless and faithless and egoistic."¹⁵ An episode that perfectly exemplifies the tension Gardner creates between existentialist attitudes and heroic ideals occurs early in the novel. Attacked by a bull, the young Grendel makes the basic existentialist discovery: "I understood that I alone exist. All the rest is merely what pushes me, or what I push against, blindly. I create the whole universe, blink by blink" (p. 16). It is shortly after this discovery that Grendel, alone, loveless, and faithless, first meets a community of men, Hrothgar and his band. They, like so-called primitive people, are attentive to the natural world. They can divine a spirit in what looks like fungus and try to take care of it. To Grendel, alienated by his paranoia, this is sheer insanity. Hrothgar interprets his mocking laughter as hostility and responds by flinging an ax at him. What is important in

¹⁴ Sartre (London: Quartet Books, 1974), p. 45.

¹⁵ *The Originals: The Writer in America*, 3 April 1978.

this episode is the contrast between the monster's existentialist egoism and the capacity of human beings, although flawed and limited, to make imaginative connections. Recognizing that Grendel wants pig, the skinny man smiles "as if a holy vision had exploded in his head" (p. 20).

It is this ability to make imaginative connections that is at the core of all twelve of the heroic ideals. For each involves a generous movement beyond the self, the individual consciousness, toward someone or something else. (The medieval self-improvement virtues of chastity, poverty, and obedience, and the puritanical self-improvement virtues of hygiene, thrift, and diligence do not figure in Gardner's list.) Generosity, as we have seen, is a vital element in Hrothgar's dream of a glorious civilization. Hope is an imaginative reaching out toward the future. True knowledge, as exemplified for Gardner by Whitehead's philosophy, emphasizes a connectedness between the world as one and the world as many: "Importance is derived from the immanence of infinitude in the finite" (p. 58). If Unferth is a lesser hero than Beowulf it is because Unferth is concerned about himself, his heroic posture, how he looks to himself as hero, whereas Beowulf is a hero for others. The very essence of artistic endeavor is the making of imaginative connections. Inspiring, sustaining, celebrating all heroic ideals is the Shaper, *Beowulf's* scop, who has a Blakean capacity for holy vision. For he is "moved by something beyond his power," so his "words made a vision without seams, an image of himself yet not himself" (p. 42). It is this vision of connectedness that Grendel, as Sartrean existentialist, thrusting his individual consciousness against the opacity of the world and others, cannot accept.

Grendel, however, is no mere mouthpiece for Sartrean existentialism and certainly not for nihilism. (Here we should note that, in Gardner's view, Sartre's contention that man is a useless passion—and this is the gist of the dragon's message—leads to nihilism.) Though one part of Grendel sees heroic ideals as traps set to catch his individual consciousness, another part of him is stirred by the imaginative vision of the self as connected with something other and larger than the self. This inner conflict is sustained right to the end of the novel. Even after his interview with the dragon, Grendel, in spite of his doubts, continues to be particularly susceptible to Wealtheow and the Shaper. He

does not commit "the ultimate act of nihilism." He does not kill the queen (p. 81). Nor does he kill the Shaper, though growling in retrospect that he should have done so. And he spares the woman the Shaper has loved, an older and less beautiful Wealthew figure. So Grendel leaves love intact. And poetry, as Susan Strehle has shown, he himself begins to practice.¹⁶ All chapters from chapter 7 on, with one exception, contain some example of Grendel's poetic talent. To Strehle's observations might be added the point that "brachiating with a hoot from rhyme to rhyme," Grendel consciously, though with accustomed irony, reaches out to elements in nature that he, as a practicing existentialist, would regard as inanimate:

*O hear me,
rocks and trees, loud waterfalls! You imagine I tell
you these things to hear myself speak? A little
respect there, brothers and sisters! (P. 97)*

His cynicism undercut by desire for belief, Grendel suffers the anguish of being "two-headed" (p. 37). The lines that best exemplify this ambivalence occur at the beginning of chapter 7 (Libra), where, halfway through the zodiacal cycle, halfway through Grendel's narration, midway through the twelfth year of his war, we are at a point of balance. "Balance," he announces, "is everything, riding out time like a helmless sheepboat, keel to hellward, mast upreared to prick out heaven's eye." He follows this with "He he!" to show that he is quite aware that he has tipped the balance in favor of nihilism, then qualifies his cynical cackle with "(Sigh)" (p. 79).

This ambivalence is maintained through every chapter even when Grendel is at his most mocking or vicious. Unferth, the braggart would-be hero, is easy prey, but Grendel suspects even him of being capable of laughing "at the bottomless depths of my stupidity" (p. 76). While viciously rejoicing in Hrothulf's intended treachery, he also, through his compassionate albeit ironic identification of himself with Hrothgar, shows an understanding of loyalty. Though contemptuous of priests as functionaries of organized religion, Grendel experiences a certain awe at old

¹⁶ "John Gardner's Novels: Affirmation and the Alien," *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*, 18, No. 2 (1976), 93.

Ork's depth of feeling as he keens his neo-Platonic utterances. And he himself is aware of things in the external world as signifying something beyond themselves: the angel wings the children make in the snow, the hart's antlers "like wings, filled with otherworldly light" (p. 110). Though he may defy hope by stoning the goat to death, Grendel himself continues to heed dreams and portents, waiting "with restless expectation" for something to happen (p. 130). Intuition, not existentialist awareness, tells him that "the only way out of the dream is down and through it" (p. 109). What he is waiting for is, of course, the encounter with Beowulf, the opportunity to pit his "I alone exist" (p. 138) against the "lunatic vision" of a champion of faith. Finally, defeated by an "accident," as the existentialist in him claims, stubbornly clinging to skepticism, defiantly maintaining that darkness is the only reality he has ever understood, he does, however, at the very point of death, have an imaginative vision of connectedness, experiences himself as himself but also something greater than himself: "I look down, down, into bottomless blackness, feeling the dark power moving in me like an ocean current, some monster inside me, deep sea wonder, dread night monarch astir in his cave, moving me slowly to my voluntary tumble into death" (p. 152).¹⁷ And so, in Gardner's words: "Grendel begins to apprehend the whole universe: life and death, his own death" and becomes the Shaper's "real successor."¹⁸

It is not just at his death, however, that Grendel has a mystical experience. In the first chapter we see him poised above an abyss, screaming defiance at the chasms and startled by his own defiance: "I am terrified at the sound of my own huge voice in the darkness. I stand there shaking from head to foot, moved to the deep-sea depths of my being, like a creature who has been thrown into audience with thunder" (p. 5). Here too he has the imaginative experience of being, paradoxically, himself and more than himself—one thinks of Jehovah, Job, and Leviathan all in one. In Grendel's sense of being both flow of existence and fullness of being, especially in the first passage quoted, we recognize Gardner's response to Sartre's claim as to the impossibility of achieving Being-in-itself-for-itself.

¹⁷ Gardner elaborates on this passage in *On Becoming a Novelist*, pp. 57–60.

¹⁸ Bellamy, pp. 179–80.

If, however, Grendel does not yield to imaginative vision until the moment of his death, it is not only because he, early in life, adopted an existentialist stance and was therefore particularly susceptible to the dragon. It is also because his experience and observation of a cycle of history, the rise and fall of Hrothgar's kingdom, lead him to question heroic ideals. Or, to put it another way, experience and observation make him reluctant to abandon existentialism and nihilism.

Love, he notes, even Wealtheow's self-sacrificial love, may be seen as mere biological instinct imprinted on creatures for the preservation of the species. The bull in chapter 2 attacks Grendel in defense of a calf that may not even be his. And Grendel expressly draws a "grim parallel" between Wealtheow and his mother, "horrible, humpbacked, carp-toothed creature, eyes on fire with useless, mindless love" (p. 88). Also kith and kin may be valued not for themselves but as extensions of the self: "even my mama loves me, not for myself but for my son-ness, my possessedness, my displacement of air as visible proof of her power" (p. 138). Hrothgar's band may initially be conservationists, but it is not long before we see them wantonly and viciously destroying forest and animals. It is by means of such destruction that Hrothgar's civilization is built: "The moors their axes had stripped of trees glowed silver in the moonlight, and the yellow lights of peasant huts were like scattered jewels on the raven-dark cloak of a king" (p. 37). Turning violent deeds to golden phrases, the Shaper indeed lies. And his celebration of Hrothgar's civilization at harvest time is mere complacent jingoism: "Here alone in all the world men were free and heroes were brave and virgins were virgins" (p. 67). Is there any disproving the dragon's contention that all human endeavor is only a "brief pulsation in the black hole of eternity" (p. 63)?

Heroism is arguably all vainglorious strut and posture, concerned with itself rather than the people it purports to serve. By seizing Wealtheow and pulling her legs apart, Grendel exposes her as merely a bare, forked animal, the Sartre in him gloating with disgust over the obscenity of the flesh. Love is just another instinct: sexuality. Hrothulf's main motive for disloyalty may be personal ambition. But surely loyalty can also spell unthinking acceptance of an unjust regime? Religion is mostly empty convention, the preserve of narrow-minded, hypocritical, self-

regarding clerics, or sentimental gush, the "sweet fantasy" of an enthusiast "overflowing with meadbowl joy" (p. 118). Can mindless instinct or habit, the goat's blind determination to climb, people going on with their daily lives be valued as hope? And cannot friendship be mere expediency, the Danes thawing to Beowulf and the Geats out of self-interest? Again and again alliances are depicted as expedient and fragile. In the light of such experiences, Grendel's and ours, faith and celebration of the cycle of life and death are fraught with absurdities. To believe in heroic ideals is to be dishonest, to foster illusion, or, in Sartrean terms, to be guilty of bad faith.

Gardner's verve in presenting traditional ideals as the saving fictions of pattern-making creatures, who hypocritically proclaim allegiance to something larger than themselves when they are actually driven by instinct or greed, is such that *Grendel* has often been read as an attack on the values he wished to affirm. But if finally the novel has validity, it is because Gardner gives full weight to our experience of absurdity and evil. Thus the young priest who squeals: "*The gods made this world for our joy!*" (p. 121) lacks authority because he has not faced up to the sickening historical and daily evidence that challenges his facile optimism. If Grendel finally comes to an understanding of joy in the apprehension of himself as part of something terrible and holy, it is only after experiencing, with good reason, the blackest pessimism.

What Gardner achieves then is to present within the framework of the ever-recurring zodiacal cycle with its mythic resonances the predicament of modern man, conscious of the past. For in *Grendel* allusions abound, pointing to many of the philosophical, religious, and political ideas that have influenced the course of Western history. Witnessing the rise and fall of Hrothgar's kingdom, we think of Greek civilization, the Roman Empire, the British Empire, and the American Republic, and do not always rejoice. Again and again heroic ideals have been betrayed. Such a multitude of sins have been committed in the name of loyalty and religion, in particular, that we have begun to relish cynical nihilism, the debunking of piously preached traditional ideals. Sartrean existentialism, which views these ideals as hypocritical conventions trammelling individual consciousness, and which insists on our freedom to create our own values, appeals

to the individualist in us all. But for all that we cannot deny what Iris Murdoch calls “the power of our inherited collective view of the world.”¹⁹ Somewhere in our cavernous hearts the old heroic ideals continue to haunt and illumine us. Grendel’s conflict, as he holds fast to skepticism yet sways toward vision, turning and twisting between mockery and anguish, poetry and black humor, continually ironizing his ironies, is our own as inhabitants of the twentieth century.

¹⁹ *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (New York: Viking, 1987), p. 128.