To study a prolific contemporary novelist who concurrently modernizes medieval poetry and publishes substantial, significant criticism on Anglo-Saxon and medieval literature invites certain questions about medieval and modern artistry. Whether they deal with the universality of a literary type or the enriched reading that sources and analogues can contribute to a particular text, such questions are especially appropriate for John Gardner’s Grendel, an intriguing work very deliberately and overtly relying on earlier literary traditions. A gloss on Grendel might well begin with the liberties Gardner takes with his most obvious source.

The plot of Grendel is based on that of the Old English poem Beowulf, though not in an especially straightforward way. The main action of Beowulf breaks into four parts: the Grendel episode, about 1,250 lines including the celebration and entertainment following the mortal wounding of the monster; the subsequent battle with Grendel’s mother, about 625 lines including the departure of the victorious Beowulf; the return voyage, about 300 lines; and the dragon fight, about 1,000 lines including Beowulf’s funeral. In the original, each major conflict concludes before the next begins, and a fifty-year successful reign by Beowulf separates his fight with the dragon from his conquest of Grendel and his mother. Gardner’s novel opens with Grendel ravaging Hrothgar’s meadhall and men, and ends immediately after the fight with Beowulf, Grendel’s death being imminent: this episode represents only about one-fourth of the Anglo-Saxon poem. Both Grendel’s mother and the dragon appear, but Gardner assigns them new functions, as well as departing from the chronology of the original.

Gardner’s restructuring of the Anglo-Saxon original, which strikingly alters the epic material, points to further literary sources, but the advice of a medieval author, Hugh of St. Victor, should be taken: “Do not strike into a lot of by-ways until you know the main
roads: you will go along securely when you are not under the fear of going astray.” 1 Concentrating on Gardner’s alterations in character, theme, and rhetoric will provide a structure for beginning the task of explicating the art of Grendel. Byways are left to the interested reader.

In Beowulf, the character Grendel is static. He enters as an evil force, enraged by the music of men and associated with Cain. Like many a pagan in later medieval romance, he appears to require little motivation for his malicious activity. Once on the scene, he is predictable: he will return regularly to find his human dinner, his strength and intent will be invariable so that there is no hope of overpowering him or stirring his pity, and his horrendous deeds will become increasingly terrible in the minds of men because of their repetition. When he enters Heorot for his final meal, immediately before his struggle with Beowulf, Grendel evinces his never-tiring ferocity in a graphic communion scene just as horrible as any of those preceding: “bat banloca, blod edrum dranc, / synsnaedum swealh [he bit the body, drank blood from the veins, swallowed huge morsels].” 2 The original Grendel is affected only by death.

Gardner’s Grendel, on the other hand, is anything but a static character. He grows, passing through several initiations, evolving more than many a modern hero. Grendel begins as an unseen observer of men, reporting their actions and difficulties and threats. He comes into contact with them because he is forced to, and he then seeks to proceed from observation to communication and understanding:

I staggered out into the open and up toward the hall with my burden, groaning out, “Mercy! Peace!” The harper broke off, the people screamed. (They have their own versions, but this is the truth.) Drunken men rushed me with battle-axes. I sank to my knees, crying, “Friend! Friend!” They hacked at me, yipping like dogs. I held up the body for protection. Their spears came through it and one of them nicked me, a tiny scratch high on my left breast, but I knew by the sting it had venom on it and I understood, as shocked as I’d been the first time, that they could kill me—eventually would if I gave them a chance. 3

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2Beowulf, ed. Friedrich Klaeber (Boston: Heath, 1950), 11. 742-43. Translations are mine.
Grendel’s response to their violence results in the quick retreat of his attackers and, for the monster, an increasing awareness of his power, particularly his ability to toy with men. The joy which Grendel feels in the destruction of men is itself another indication of his growth and understanding. Ravaging is not merely a vendetta, as it is for Grendel’s mother in the original poem. It brings awareness: “I had become something, as if born again. I had hung between possibilities before, between the cold truths I knew and the heart-sucking conjuring tricks of the Shaper; now that was passed: I was Grendel, Ruiner of Meadhalls, Wrecker of Kings!” (p. 80). This bloody baptism, intensified by the reference to the reversal of Christian tradition, marks spiritual development just as surely as does the orthodox sacrament it parodies. Grendel is searching for truth, however, so that one step climbed leads but to another on his ladder of imperfection. The sight of visitors to Heorot “fat as cows” (p. 151), even discussions with the philosopher-dragon provide at best momentary satisfactions, and ultimately “tedium is the worst pain” (p. 157). At the final hour, for all Grendel’s seeking and experience and philosophy and change, he is no closer to knowing what his death means: “Is it joy I feel?” (p. 173). Despite the suggestion of possible relief, the question is unanswered.

In his searching and changing Gardner’s Grendel is very like man, again in contrast to the original. His initial contacts with Hrothgar’s followers stem from pity for exiles or a desire for friendship (p. 33), and poetry brings out his tenderness (p. 44). He knows fear and trembles before the teachings of the dragon (p. 58), and he responds to beauty with a passion akin to love (p. 100). He takes pleasure in small things as well as great:

I will count my numberless blessings one by one.

I. My teeth are sound.
I. The roof of my cave is sound.
I. I have not committed the ultimate act of nihilism: I have not killed the queen.
I. Yet. (p. 93)

The humanizing of Grendel is necessary to Gardner’s portrayal of the absurdity of war. In the original poem, struggle is inevitable, but noble and glorious as well. In Beowulf, drinking, boasting, swearing of oaths to serve, and ringgiving are the meadhall
counterparts to courage and loyalty on the modern battlefield: reciprocity strengthens. Conversely, in Grendel war loses its nobility and contaminates whatever is associated with it. Clashes between small groups of hunters in the winter are only distracting and foolish brawls in the face of hunger: “Ice clung to their eyebrows and beards and eyelashes, and I’d hear them whining and groaning as they walked. When two hunters from different bands came together in the woods, they would fight until the snow was slushy with blood, then crawl back, gasping and crying, to their separate camps to tell wild tales of what happened” (p. 31). Similarly, the speech of Hrothgar in the meadhall, on the surface noble and dignified, also suffers from ignoble contamination: “The hall became quiet, and after a moment Hrothgar spoke, tones low and measured—of necessity, from too much shouting on midnight raids” (p. 41). To Grendel, war is “idiotic”: “The pain of it! The stupidity!” (p. 5). For Unferth, war creates the necessity of heroism, “always having to stand erect, always having to find a noble language!” (p. 84). After forcing Unferth into the heroic stance, war strips him of his façade of nobility, with the monster pitching at the unfortunate hero, amusement-park style:

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. It made the floor slippery, and he went down. Clang! I bent double with laughter. Poor Jangler—Unferth—tried to take advantage of it, charging at me on all fours, snatching at my ankles, but I jumped back and tipped over the table on him, half burying him in apples as red and innocent as smiles. He screamed and thrashed, trying to get at me and at the same time trying to see if the others were watching. He was crying, only a boy, famous hero or not: a poor miserable virgin. (p. 85)

The reduction of the hero to tears is one indignity, and the use of apples to do it, another. The scene precludes respect, and Grendel’s laughter lacks the pomp of glorious victory. In J. R. R. Tolkien’s words, the poem Beowulf “stands amid but above the petty wars of princes.”4 Gardner’s Grendel may rise to those petty wars, but certainly never above them.

Accompanying the humanizing of the monster and the antiheroic war theme is a comment on the poet’s role. In Anglo-Saxon society, the scop held a place of honor, bringing dignity to a lord’s meadhall. Poems about the scop, like “Widsith” and “Deor,” attest to the knowledge of the scop, and his need for a lord. Beowulf itself stands as a monument to the Anglo-Saxon poet and his domain, the heritage and actions of great men.

Grendel is an altogether different literary monument. The scop or “Shaper” here is indeed skillful, so skillful that Grendel himself is moved: “His manner of speaking was infecting me, making me pompous” (p. 49). But the skill is a technical one only, and even then so entirely a product of tradition and convention that the scop himself merits little credit: “If the ideas of art were beautiful, that was art’s fault, not the Shaper’s. A blind selector, almost mindless: a bird” (p. 49). The motivation of the scop is belittled as much as his conscious artistry. Instead of participating in a lord-retainer relationship with reciprocal benefits and dignity, the scop works simply “for a price” (p. 42), “for pay, for the praise of women—one in particular—and for the honor of a famous king’s hand on his arm” (p. 49). When he ceases to please or is displaced, the scop acts like any other entertainer out of work and looks for “refuge in the hall of some lesser marauder” (p. 43). The superficiality of such motivation produces an expected result: he lies. “He reshapes the world” (p. 49) to give courage before battle, to give praise after, to flatter a lord, or simply because, as the philosopher-dragon says, “It keeps them going—for what that’s worth” (p. 65). Whatever the purpose, however, the technique is distortion and deception and the result, as Grendel observes, is “Bullshit!” (p. 54). The only validity lies in the appropriateness of such a result for a singer “inspired by winds (or whatever you please)” (p. 47).

The changed character of Grendel, the treatment of the theme of war, and the small worth of the poet’s art are sufficient indicators of the changes John Gardner has made. The original Beowulf has been classified in many terms, all serious, including Tolkien’s “heroic-elegiac.”5 Grendel is hardly susceptible to those classifications, precisely because it is much more than “the Beowulf legend retold from the monster’s point of view,” to crib from the cover of the paperback edition.6 Presented with Gardner’s creation,

5Ibid., p. 85.
critics have responded variously—understandably enough. Gardner has been judged "a man with a message," with "the mouths of crack-brained seers, monsters, madmen" conveying what he prefers not to state directly. Grendel is a monster whose "loss of innocence is both touching and funny," a monster whose humanity teaches us love and whose dying action affirms that "there is no despair that cannot be overcome." He is "an Existentialist, in fact, anguished by what he now calls 'my idiotic war' yet bound to pursue that war to its awful end." "Grendel is sin personified," consciously "serving as a sort of natural therapy for mankind"; at the same time, in literary-historical terms, the hero helps make Grendel "another fierce blow struck against the realistic novel, the dead novel." Perhaps the creature demands our understanding "in terms of childhood deprivation, social rejection on account of physical deformity, horrible smell," or the like, while he suggests kinship with Caliban, Milton's Lucifer, and King Kong. For Gardner's Grendel all of these are fruitful analogies to explore, growing honestly from the suggestiveness of the text rather than critical ingenuity.

Still other interpretative roads are possible. One might investigate Grendel as an "anti-romance," as defined by Maurice Z. Shroder, or perhaps a parody of that genre. In another direction, one might determine how well Grendel contributes to the "serious literature in our time," using Leslie Fiedler's description of it as presenting "man learning that it is the struggle itself which is his definition": very much like Fiedler's "professional answer men" offering only "cheats and delusions carefully rehearsed before the show is put on the air," the court poet and the dragon in Grendel

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serve, with their particular brands of wisdom, only to distract the monster from his, and man's, crucial question.\textsuperscript{14} In yet another direction, if the sharing of the knowledge explaining man's unhappy state is Gardner's primary concern, Grendel's dictum may be a significant clue: "Tedium is the worst pain" (p. 157). Our perceived similarity to the indelicate monster demands that we also confess to that "worst pain," just as surely as Baudelaire requires us to admit his "monstre delicat" as the worst among our monstrous vices, that "ennui" that inescapably binds poet and reader.\textsuperscript{15} If answers rather than human conditions are sought, perhaps the critic needs to look beyond what Grendel can achieve, beyond the reasoned and thus the finite, keeping in mind the observation of Ira Progoff in an introduction to a medieval mystical treatise: "But, underneath the seemingly vast differences between the medieval and modern images of the universe, we find an underlying sameness of searching and experience that can significantly enlarge our areas of awareness."\textsuperscript{16} Perhaps the allegorizing of Grendel should lead to the rejection of that quintessentially human pride in man's remaking of the world according to his own limitations, and to the recognition that reason is finite, with spirituality alone offering a next step.

Attempting to resolve, or at least to put into perspective, such diverse critical possibilities, a reader might well want to consider what kind of source or analogue provides a framework that can bear all that Gardner achieves and suggests. With a novelist-scholar like John Gardner, looking to the Middle Ages might be productive. Grendel is in many ways more like a medieval exemplum than anything else. But that label also says too little, for the contrasts already analyzed are complemented by a certain tone, a tone inconsistent with the simple and serious morality of a typical exemplum. This tone makes Grendel a work that eludes categorization. In tone and effect Grendel is like a later and very different medieval work, an elusive masterpiece itself, Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale.

The story of Chauntecleer and Pertelote, the fable of the cock whose prideful singing leads him into the fox's mouth, is merely the core for the exercise of Chaucer's high art of embellishment. The

satire of traditional wisdom in the discussion of dreams, dreamlore, and Pertelote’s prescription of a laxative for a bad dream; the absurdity of pride in a vulnerable rooster; and the limitation of a world view drawn not from Boethius but from a barnyard—all function together to jest with and undercut the seriousness with which man seeks to understand himself. Garden’s Grendel jests with the same seriousness in much the same way. Traditional wisdom, whether presented pretentiously by the poet or uttered ironically by the dragon, does not help the inquiring Grendel, for it turns out to be neither consistent with reality nor wise. Grendel’s struggle to understand this wisdom, judge it, and reject it indeed causes him pain, but it is the pain of a monster who insists upon knowing as truth what was constantly disputed by medieval clerks. The reader can sympathize, but always from a distance, which permits a concurrent smile. So too with the scop, or poet. Like Chaucer’s Chauntecleer, Gardner’s scop wants to sing with a sense of nobility and dignity, but like Chauntecleer he produces only the sonorous and evanescent, not truth—not even for himself. Further, the scop’s desire “for the praise of women—one in particular” (p. 49) is as overtly sexual as Chauntecleer’s, and the scop’s female audience is remarkably similar to Chauntecleer’s entourage of seven admiring and willing hens and his love of one in particular, Pertelote. Finally, the barnyard setting which contains and constrains all this in Chaucer has a direct analogue in Grendel. When the monster ponders Hrothgar with amazement, he remarks, “His power overran the world,” a questionable enough extrapolation for the greatest of kings, even without the rest of Gardner’s sentence: “from the foot of my cliff to the northern sea to the impenetrable forests south and east” (p. 40). Boethian limitations on worldly glory become delightfully amusing, though not necessarily less serious, when transformed into a few square miles of actual terrain and the naïveté of the untraveled observer. Not as strong as flat disrespect or as

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17 Most recently, Patrick Gallacher has argued that Chaucer suggests a world view and somewhat ambiguous solution for coping with it by his terminology for purgation, arriving finally at wonder instead of certain †Food, Laxatives, and Catharsis in Chaucer’s Nun’s Priest’s Tale,” Speculum, 51 (1976), 49-68.

18 This theme pervading The Consolation of Philosophy is at one point expressed in terms of which Grendel’s observation is especially reminiscent: Aut quid habeat amplus magnificumque gloria tam angustis exiguisque limitibus artata? [But what great or heroical matter can that glory have, which is pent up in so small and narrow bounds?] Book II, prose 7, ed. H. F. Stewart (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1953), pp. 214-15.
critical and incisive as satire, the effect of such toying with traditional wisdom is a slightly skeptical questioning.

A second aspect of the tone of Grendel grows from Gardner’s self-conscious parody of rhetoric. The literary play in Grendel demands attention, but with an appreciative grin—unlike the serious rhetoric of the original poem, but very much like the overblown debate rhetoric, the mock-epic epithets, and the incongruous courtly descriptive detail in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale. In Grendel, alliterative phrases like “fire-forged” (p. 167) and “squeal and screech” (p. 12), etymological reconstructions like “bone-fire” instead of “bonfire” (p. 14), and litotes like “I am no stranger here,” referring to Grendel’s eleven years of devastating visits to the meadhall (p. 12), contribute to the rhetorical density and Anglo-Saxon atmosphere of the work. But juxtaposed against the rhetoric are a reminder of the ignoble work it inflates and a confession of conscious artifice: “No more the rumble of Hrothgar’s horsemen, riding at midnight, chain-mail jangling in the whistling wind, cloaks flying out like wimping wings, to rescue petty tribute-givers. (O listen to me, hills!)” (p. 94; Gardner’s italics). Intensifying the allusive richness of the lines is the reminiscence of Chaucer’s “gynglen in a whistlynge wynd”19 from the portrait of the superficially attractive Monk, which serves to heighten the contrast between the splendid rhetoric and the self-gratification it admits. The same kind of self-conscious rhetoric undercuts the process of Grendel’s learning. At one point he decides to kill the queen for pedagogical purposes, but reconsiders: “I changed my mind. It would be meaningless, killing her. As meaningless as letting her live. It would be, for me, mere pointless pleasure, an illusion of order for this one frail, foolish flicker-flash in the long dull fall of eternity. (End quote.)” (p. 110). Occasionally proud, yet humorous admissions of conscious artistry force the reader to query the tone of all the embellishment in Grendel, and consequently to rethink what and how it modifies.

The skepticism resulting from the undercutting of traditional wisdom and from the self-conscious rhetoric, the questing character of Grendel, the antiheroic war theme, and the deception practiced by the poet are of a piece. Questions about truth arise and remain, since answers are at best temporary, but humor keeps despair in abeyance even to Gardner’s masterful last chapter.

Grendel’s fastidious decision to wear a napkin around his neck

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for what will be his final meal, his humiliating struggle with a
Beowulf who demands songs from the monster tantamount to the
schoolyard surrender of “enough,” and Grendel’s consciousness of
dying in full view of animals “evil, incredibly stupid, enjoying my
destruction” (p. 174) are Gardner’s additions to the Anglo-Saxon
original. These scenes provide the background for Grendel’s final
assessment of his experience, the last lines of the book: “‘Poor
Grendel’s had an accident,’ I whisper. ‘So may you all’” (p. 174;
Gardner’s italics). Death without nobility, in fact with little more
than a whimper, and evidently the result of the capricious goddess
Fortuna, provides no answers for the inquiring monster. The curse,
understated as it is, gives the reader nothing concrete to fear.
Perhaps the final sentence is not a curse at all, but a Boethian
observation meant to remind man that he is not in control. Whatever
the case, the offhand presentation of this serious lack of resolution is
striking. Yet it is perfectly consistent with what Gardner has created,
even in the lack of an explicit moral, of clear “sentence.” In its final
evasive words, Grendel is again like Chaucer’s masterpiece The
Nun’s Priest’s Tale. After the playful telling of the cock-fox story,
with its attention to fortune and free will, the Nun’s Priest advises,
“Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille.”
But Chaucer’s tale
and its embellishments have been jests, and so may be the directive
to find truth there. We do not know for sure. John Gardner’s
Grendel, very much a Chaucerian achievement in narrative manner,
humor, and rhetorical technique, leaves us in the same quandary—
whether to delight in the literary art and not concern ourselves with
the ambiguous and elusive morality, or to see our own inquiring
minds through Grendel’s. Perhaps the very quandary is the curse:
“So may you all.” The answer may be significant.

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20Ibid., p. 205, 1. 3443.
21Gardner’s own medieval criticism frequently provides corroborating
parallels. For example, in a discussion of The Owl and the Nightingale, after
examining the striking techniques of the debating birds, he proceeds to characterize
the Owl’s intellectual stance within the rhetorically rich comic poem: “It is partly
her absolute belief in all she says that makes the Owl comic, and like Chanticleer, a
burlesque of the hero as thinker.” The Alliterative Morte Arthure, The Owl and the
Nightingale, and Five Other Middle English Poems, in a Modernized Version with
Comments on the Poems and Notes by John Gardner (Carbondale: Southern
contrasts with previous serious allegorizations of The Owl and provides again the
basis for ultimate ambiguity.

GARDNER | 57