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## John Gardner's Grendel: The Importance of Community in Making Moral Art

Catherine C. Cooper  
*University of New Orleans*, [ccooper@igc.org](mailto:ccooper@igc.org)

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John Gardner's Grendel: The Importance of Community in Making Moral Art

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
English

by

Catherine C. Cooper

B.A. Loyola University, 1993

J.D. New England School of Law, 1997

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## Abstract

John Gardner's *Grendel* examines the ways in which humans make meaning out of their lives. By changing the original *Beowulf* monster into a creature who constantly questions the conflicting narratives set before him, Gardner encourages us to confront these tensions also. However, his emphasis on Grendel's alienation helps us realize that community is essential to creating meaning. Most obviously, community creates relationships that foster a sense of moral obligation between its members, even in the face of the type of uncertainty felt by Grendel. Moreover, community cannot exist without dialogue, which perpetually stimulates the imagination to respond to the tensions contained in a plurality of viewpoints. Gardner encourages us to question narratives which no longer serve us and to use our imagination to tell new stories that cultivate positive ideals such as love and hope.

Keywords: Grendel; community; language; story; moral art; imagination; social constructionism.

*“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.”—Beowulf*

## **Introduction**

John Gardner’s *Grendel* is a novel about a monster, but one far different than the monster portrayed in *Beowulf*. In the Old English tale, Grendel is the epitome of evil, the darkness that lay beyond the fires of the meadhall. The line between monster and hero was well-defined, and society rested easier because of this line. No one could mistake the original Grendel for a hero. Gardner’s Grendel, however, in telling his own story, is often funny and likeable and appears more human than monster at times. He confronts the same questions humanity has always faced: How do we find meaning and purpose in our lives, knowing we are going to die? How do we overcome the baser instincts of human nature? How can we choose to be hopeful when faced with evidence of humanity’s ignorance and cruelty? To answer these questions, all societies have created myths—stories that give guidance about how to make meaningful choices and give one’s life purpose. People in such societies have a code to live by. These codes vary from culture to culture, some in complete opposition to others. Grendel, as what some scholars call a “modern hero,”<sup>1</sup> faces a question the bards of old never needed to consider: how do we respond to the vast array of contrasting narratives that are supposed to give our lives meaning without becoming disillusioned? Throughout the novel, Grendel desperately tries to discover a narrative that provides a purpose for his own existence, but in the end, he makes destructive, nihilistic choices that many would define as monstrous. The question Gardner wants readers to ask is, when we are faced with the questions Grendel faces, how can we avoid becoming monsters ourselves?

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<sup>1</sup> See Milosh and Ruud.

Gardner's novel demonstrates that language, community and art are equally necessary for us to make meaningful, life-affirming choices. Community, or a group of individuals with a common history and shared interests, is built on language, and without community, language is pointless. Gardner shows us the ways in which art—specifically story—arises from the combination of community and language. The feedback we receive through engagement with others feeds our imagination while providing a collective moral guidance outside ourselves based on commitment and relationship to others. Grendel has two great disadvantages: outside of his limited experience, he has no story of his own, and even if he could somehow craft his experience into a narrative, he has no one to share it with. His mother is silent, along with all the other creatures in his cave; he knows nothing of his own origins, nor how he himself learned to speak. He is unable to form an identity for himself in silence. Without a community with a shared mythology, Grendel must collect scraps of narrative from other communities, all of which see him as outsider. His own experience tells one story. The stories he hears from other characters are completely different from each other; moreover, each has obvious limitations. By including so many competing narratives, Gardner illustrates that while stories are powerful mechanisms for making sense of and even changing the world, without engagement with and accountability to others—a sense of community—they become meaningless.

Gardner encourages us to question the stories we tell ourselves and view them realistically. If a story is unsatisfying or destructive on some level, he encourages us to tell new stories that cultivate positive ideals such as love and hope by making imaginative connections using the evidence in front of us. Grendel is exposed to so many competing narratives that he, along with the reader, must question whether *any* story can be relied upon. At the end of his life, he assumes that all stories are lies and that belief in them is lunacy. Yet our monster-defeating hero,

Beowulf, insists “*you make the world by whispers*” (G 171)<sup>2</sup>, indicating that language and stories are actually the most important tools to transform society, or indeed, to construct it in the first place. For the most part, Grendel chooses the dragon’s story over the Shaper’s, thereby creating a horrific reality not only for Hrothgar’s kingdom but for himself. Grendel arrives at this mindset because his lack of affirmative community prevents him from imagining a life of love and hope. Without a stable social structure and communal feedback to give him a productive purpose, Grendel is unable to find positive meaning in his life. While the humans he encounters are certainly not perfect, their intimate relationships help them to live more balanced lives that allow for both sorrow and joy in the midst of a chaotic world, primarily by imagining stories to guide them through it. Gardner clearly believes that stories are bridges between people and over the abyss, but we have choices about which stories we tell. Only in community are we able to choose stories that affirm life.

### **Grendel *in Media Res*: “And so begins the twelfth year of my idiotic war”**

When we first meet Grendel, he appears to be in the firm grip of nihilism, which he has learned from the dragon. He declares, “And so begins the twelfth year of my idiotic war” (G 5), not only revealing his state of mind but orienting us to the temporal setting. The novel begins *in media res*, twelve years after he began terrorizing Hrothgar’s kingdom and just before he hears news of Beowulf’s arrival on the shores of Denmark. He calls himself a “pointless, ridiculous monster” (6) and a “disfigured son of lunatics” (7). He comments on the “cold mechanics of the stars” (9), and his mantra is “No matter, no matter” (7). Though it is springtime, he feels only desolation. David Cowart remarks that “only an entity excluded absolutely and by its very nature from the communion of all living things, could loathe the season of renewal as Grendel does”

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<sup>2</sup> Gardner’s works will be cited parenthetically as follows: *Grendel*: G; *On Moral Fiction*: OMF.



(49). He has all but convinced himself that nature is simply pointless repetition—that humans do not matter, that he does not matter, and that the crimes he has committed do not matter either. He describes them with glee: “While they squeal and screech and bump into each other, I silently sack up my dead and withdraw to the wood. I eat and laugh and eat until I can barely walk, my chest-hair matted with dribbled blood” (*G* 12). To the outside observer, he is categorically monstrous.

Underneath his apparent merriment, however, is a longing for connection. He observes the animals and objects around him, assigning them human attributes. The ram is “stupidly triumphant,” a “slow-witted king” who, upon seeing Grendel, “considers the angles, decides to ignore [him]” (5). Grendel wishes for community but cannot have it with animals or even nature: “the sky ignores [him], forever unimpressed” (6). With every object he encounters, he attempts to communicate. To the rutting ram, he hisses, “Scat!” (5). To the sky, he shakes his fists and howls, then asks it, “Why can’t these creatures discover a little dignity?” (5-6). He smashes trees, but then, with a “sycophantish smile” tells them, “No offense” (7). His incessant ranting, often poetic, suggests a fascination with language, yet no one hears him, much less understands him, and he feels this acutely. When a doe runs from him in fright, he bawls, “Blind prejudice!” (he has never eaten a deer), and complains of “the unfairness of everything” (7-8). He knows he is an outsider, “muttering darkly on shaded paths, holding conversation with the only friend and comfort this world affords, [his] shadow” (8). After his merry raid of the meadhall, he sees the dawn and is “filled with gloom again” (13). Kenneth Mason aptly explains, “The word that perhaps best describes Grendel’s state of mind in the book is *estranged*. He feels himself alone in the universe, lacking a connection or sense of relation to the rest of nature” (102). Still, our protagonist insists on “[t]alking, talking. Spinning a web of words, pale walls of dreams, between myself and all I see” (*G* 8). Dean McWilliams calls Grendel a “monologist, for this monster, our

narrator, talks incessantly and to no other audience but himself. . . . [He is] an individual who desperately wishes for dialogue but for whom this wish is always frustrated” (29). In this chapter, as in much of the novel, Grendel simultaneously denies the existence of meaning in the world but longs for it with every attempted communication. In the same sentence, he describes the stars both logically, “spattered out through lifeless nights,” and poetically, “jewels scattered in a dead king’s grave, teas[ing], torment[ing him] toward meaningful patterns that do not exist” (*G* 11). Therefore, when he claims that “the world is abandoned” (9), the reader is inclined to ask, by whom? Grendel’s lingering sense that there might be something outside himself that gives meaning to the world makes him a compelling and even sympathetic character.

Gardner had no doubt about his character’s charm, maintaining, “Everybody falls in love with the monster” (Chavkin 199). Scholars have considered a variety of reasons that this “monster” is so appealing to readers. John Howell calls him “a tragicomic poet” and sympathizes with his suffering notwithstanding his monstrous choices (61). Joseph Milosh acknowledges his similarity to humans in his desire for friendship, his love of poetry, his fear of the dragon’s message, and his response to beauty (50). Helen Ellis and Warren Ober contend that his is “infinitely more capable of appreciating music, beauty, harmony and poetry than the men he devours” (55). Dean McWilliams agrees that “Grendel, the putative monster, seems, in many ways, more honest, sensitive, and reflective than his human adversaries” (37). Of course, readers cannot know anything about humans with much certainty because we only hear about them from Grendel’s first-person perspective. Gardner expects readers to identify with such a troubled character: “Grendel is a monster, and living in the first person, because we’re all in some sense monsters, trapped in our own language and habits of emotion. Grendel expresses feelings we all feel—enormous hostility, frustration, disbelief” (Chavkin 148).

The first-person narration of the novel lures us into sympathy with Grendel, but it also

accentuates his alienation and warns us against cultivating our own isolation. Leonard Butts argues that because Grendel has no meaningful relationships, being almost a species unto himself, “the reliance on first person narration can only mean doom” (88). This remark raises a compound question: was Grendel doomed from the beginning to be such a destructive force, or could he have made a different choice at any point? Grendel was certainly hindered by the lack of language in his mysterious family of origin. We only know that he lived in a cave with his mother and various other bestial, mute figures “separate, isolated, muttering forever like underground rivers, each in his private, inviolable gloom” (*G* 21). Butts points out that in his early years, like most of us, Grendel “was unsure about what the world held for him and wondered at his own existence” (87). He was unsure because he had no feedback from his community. His mother shows her love to Grendel on an instinctual level, clutching him to her breast and rescuing him from danger, but she remains silent. When Grendel asks her, ““Why are we here? . . . Why do we stand this putrid, stinking hole?” she responds by trembling, wordlessly imploring him not to ask (*G* 11). Kathryn VanSpanckeren observes that because Grendel is allowed language while his mother is not, “the only language he speaks is private, for he does not commune with anyone at all” (117). This lack of linguistic exchange in his early years is the beginning of his downfall.

### **Grendel’s Early Years: Social Construction of Identity**

Psychologist Merlin Donald has written extensively on the development of the modern mind. He describes how critical a stable cultural foundation is for an infant to begin the complex process of finding meaning: “Shortly after birth, the infant is wedded to a specific culture . . . [in which] surrogates, such as parents, family, tribal customs, institutions, and so on [are] the front lines of the infant’s encounter with vast collective forces that it never sees and whose existence

even the surrogates may not suspect” (*A Mind* 211). These surrogates assist the child in what Donald calls enculturation: “parsing the cultural landscape, discovering its hidden secrets, and overcoming many obstacles to understanding. This cannot be done before someone reveals, directly or indirectly, where the codes are located. These codes can be found only if early experience prepares the brain for the task” (255). He also emphasizes the importance of early enculturation, remarking that “if these [codes] are not programmed into the brain early enough, the system will later become impossible to train” (255). Grendel would be just as untrainable since, except for the inexplicable fear and trembling of his mother, he is taught no cultural codes, and he suffers accordingly. In order for a child to learn these codes, there must be “the interlocking of two or more conscious minds” (206). Significantly, this connection must include some sort of feedback, not only to learn the sounds of language but also to understand the “complexities of cultural survival” (256-257). While Donald acknowledges that “reciprocal eye contact, or gaze, is one of the channels through which this develops” (255), he places a higher emphasis on language: “Words allow the sharing of highly specific information, the rapid collection of new knowledge, and the regulation of all aspects of behavior” (*Origins* 211).

According to many scholars, language and culture have a symbiotic relationship, and each is vital to the formation of an identity that gives meaning to one’s life. Donald contends that “neither would make sense in isolation; they were part of a larger pattern of adaptation” (*Origins* 201). Unlike other species, humans “have broken out of one of the most critical limitations of traditional nervous systems—their loneliness, or solipsism” (*A Mind* xiii). We create identity through language—by talking with others, trying out ideas, listening to feedback, and constantly adjusting. Relying on the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin, McWilliams explains that the “language we use to articulate our notions of ourselves is a social product: we receive it from others and learn to use it by interacting with them. Perhaps more important, we can never test, adapt, and

strengthen our subjective perspectives on our own” (29). According to David Maines, audience response is critical to constructing meaning: “If the audience cannot respond, then it can be said that a meaningful transaction has not occurred” (578). Social constructionist John Shotter claims that the conversations we have with others over time ultimately allow us “to depict or describe a unique state of affairs (whether real or not), as we please, independently of the influences of our surroundings” (6). In other words, we can use our “contingent flow of continuous communicative interaction” to socially construct our identity and find meaning almost through trial and error (7). In his cave community Grendel cannot have these conversations, and without them he is unlikely to develop such independence.

If we apply these ideas to Grendel’s experience, we see that he is bound for massive challenges in forming his own identity. He is born into a community, but it is a nonverbal one. Grendel has evolved beyond his cave-mates, though he does not know how or why, and he demonstrates tremendous facility with language, at least in his own thoughts. His mother can only respond using gesture, eye contact and an occasional grunt. Her limited communication is inadequate to respond to Grendel’s linguistic overtures. He states very simply, “She told me nothing” (*G* 11). McWilliams expounds on Grendel’s potential limitations: “Denied a community, Grendel has only his own voices from which to construct his dialogue. These include . . . a multiplicity of personal voices. Indeed, one of his most serious disabilities is the fact that he has no single, stable personal voice with which to respond to the voices of others” (34). Unfulfilled, the young Grendel begins to explore his surroundings. On one such adventure, Hrothgar comes across him while his foot is caught in a cleft between two tree trunks. Before the humans approach, Grendel has reached an existential despair worthy of Sartre. He is stuck, he is alone, and because of his lack of formative language and feedback, he has no way of making sense of the world. He laments, “I understood that the world was nothing: a mechanical chaos of

casual, brute enmity on which we stupidly impose our hopes and fear. I understood that, finally and absolutely, I alone exist” (*G* 21-22). As the humans begin speaking, however, Grendel finds he can understand them and attempts conversation for the first time. Unfortunately, the humans are unable to understand him: “Thus he is trapped in one-way communication, where others have a right to impose their meaning on him but where he has no chance for an effective response” (McWilliams 29-30).

### **Hrothgar’s Community: Fearful Pattern-Makers**

The humans try many different labels on Grendel—a “beastlike fungus,” an “oak-tree spirit,” a hungry creature that eats pig, an angry spirit, a creature “in a period of transition” (25-26)—but the label that finally sticks is “monster.” This initial interaction is significant because though the humans do not understand Grendel, he understands them and they stimulate his imagination. When one of the men suggests that he is hungry and they try to find him some food, he feels understood and responds with joyful laughter. His laughter does not effect the intended response; the humans, fearful of what they do not understand, immediately attack him. Still, Grendel is transformed by the experience. Robert Child contends that “Grendel’s new-found philosophy—‘I alone exist’—has been destroyed through language. The ‘hairless one,’ [Hrothgar], even though he has misunderstood Grendel’s attempt to speak and confused it with hunger, has managed to instill a thought, through the medium of language, in Grendel’s mind” (115). He returns to his cave with his mother where he “tried to tell her all that had happened, all that [he]’d come to understand” (*G* 28). After watching the humans converse with each other and ultimately come to a meaningful conclusion (however flawed), he becomes excited by the potential of two-way communication. At the same time, he is deeply frustrated, having been rejected by the only creatures as yet who could possibly understand and respond to him.

As the humans observe, Grendel “*is* in a period of transition—he is faced with the dilemma of remaining in the dark, underground, non-language world of his mother . . . or stepping forward into the aboveground world of ideas and language” (Child 114). Keeping his distance, Grendel steps forward gingerly, watching the humans in bafflement while one band slaughters another for pride and greed, stealing their gold and leaving corpses to rot in the snow—“no wolf was so vicious to other wolves,” he says (*G* 32). They would banish one of their own for killing another, and Grendel would try “to befriend the exile . . . but they were treacherous. In the end, [he] had to eat them” (33). However, treacherous exiles were not likely the most virtuous samples of humanity, possibly made monstrous themselves because of their alienation. A closer look at Hrothgar’s community might reveal integrity invisible to Grendel. He does not fully understand what he witnesses from the outside. For instance, he tells us of the alliance Hrothgar makes with his neighbors:

He’d worked out a theory about what he was fighting for. . . . He’d shown them the strength of his organization, and now, instead of making war on them, he sent men to them every three months or so, with heavy wagons and back-slings, to gather their tribute to his greatness. They piled his wagons high with gold and leather and weapons, and they kneeled to his messengers and made long speeches and promised to defend him against any foolhardy outlaw that dared attack him. Hrothgar’s messengers answered with friendly praise of the man they’d just plundered, as if the whole thing were his idea. (37)

Grendel misinterprets what he sees. Jay Ruud explains that “the Anglo-Saxon world was harsh and threatening, and survival was a community project. . . . [People] united for the purpose of mutual protection from disaster.” A strong lord would gather subjects to strengthen the community (*cynn*) and in exchange for their loyalty he vowed to protect them, for “outside the warm glow of the mead-hall, the darkness was pregnant with unknown horrors—conquerable in

the companionship of the cynn, devastating in the loneliness or exile” (Ruud). In other words, “reciprocity strengthens” (Milosh 50-51). Never having reciprocated with anyone in such a sophisticated way, Grendel could not possibly recognize the art of negotiation that comes with two-way communication. He listens to their language without being able to contribute through dialogue to the meaning they impose on their world. From his isolated position, Grendel sees only savagery, greed, and hypocrisy, until one day, he hears poetry.

### **The Shaper’s Effect Within and Without the Community: The Power of Narrative**

To an extent, Grendel’s fascination with the Shaper echoes the original tale of *Beowulf*, in which the monster is characterized simplistically but not without some sensitivity. Though the poet consistently draws him as a “powerful demon,” Grendel is “grieved” and “harrowed” by the noise of the meadhall. The poem emphasizes the monster’s alienation: “he had dwelt for a time / in misery among the banished monsters, / Cain’s clan, whom the Creator had outlawed / and condemned as outcasts” (*Beowulf*9). Many scholars have noted that in the novel, Grendel’s misery as an outsider mirrors the common human experience of alienation.<sup>3</sup> He feels his exclusion all the more deeply when he hears the Shaper’s songs describing honorable behavior. He has witnessed the cruelty within this particular community and would argue that he is more honorable than the hypocritical humans he has observed. Butts concedes that “[c]ertainly, the humans in *Grendel* are not the most admirable of creatures, . . . but with the Shaper’s arrival at Hrothgar’s Hall, human beings for short periods of time seem able to rise above their ‘monstrous’ behavior” (91). Grendel is similarly inspired. After hearing the Shaper for the first time, his “mind aswim in ringing phrases, magnificent, golden, and all of them, incredibly, lies,” he is fascinated by the effect of the narrative on both himself and on Hrothgar’s people. He asks,

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<sup>3</sup> See Nelson, Howell, Strehle.



“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” (*G* 43).

In his memoirs, John Updike recognizes, “Perspectives are altered by the fact of being drawn; description solidifies the past and creates a gravitational body that wasn’t there before” (xiv). Gardner also recognizes the role of narrative in the creation of new realities by elevating the character of the Shaper, whom Grendel admires despite his resentful disbelief: “He reshapes the world. . . . So his name implies. He stares strange-eyed at the mindless world and turns dry sticks to gold” (*G* 49). The Shaper creates meaning for the community by capturing its collective memory and shaping it into art that gives them a positive purpose or goal. Mark Freeman explains that narrative is inescapable in human life, but that we can only make sense of every day experience through the “*revelatory* power of memory—that is, its capacity to yield insight and understanding of the sort that could not, indeed that cannot, occur in the immediacy of the present moment” (272). Grendel understands the necessity of memory in improving one’s reality. In chapter one (after his experiences with the Shaper, the dragon, and various members of Hrothgar’s community) Grendel observes the bull, who would “always strike too low” because he is unable to learn from his mistakes (*G* 21), and the rutting ram, “with the same unrest that made him suffer last year at this time, and the year before, and the year before that. (He’s forgotten them all)” (6). He differentiates himself from them because of their lack of memory, asking, “why can’t these creatures discover a little dignity?” (6). For him, dignity requires more than just blind instinct; it also requires a narrative. Grendel is frustrated because although he has language and memory, he is denied a community to share them with or feedback that would help him create a narrative that gives him purpose. Strehle notes the irony of Grendel’s story being told in the first person: “the epic is humorously inverted, for Gardner takes the limited viewpoint

of the monster, who cannot see the larger meaning of the events he narrates because he lacks an epic perspective” (95). An epic perspective can only come from a community with its own stories “sedimented” into the culture because they have been “produced, maintained, and changed through interpretive processes” (Maines 577). Shotter similarly explains that members of a community share cultural ideals by “testing and checking each other’s talk, . . . questioning and challenging it, reformulating and elaborating it” (1). Grendel has no way to accomplish this.

Storytellers like the Shaper raise ordinary narrative to an art form, often in response to a cultural need. The Shaper’s community has a need to understand the world, particularly when Grendel appears and begins to attack the meadhall, so he tells a story that will help them make sense of it. As Freeman observes: “poets strive neither for a mimetic re-presentation of the world nor a fictive rendition of it. Rather, what they seek to do is rewrite the world through the imagination, such that we, readers, can see or feel or learn something about it that might otherwise have gone unnoticed or undisclosed” (275). The creation of mythic narrative is an inevitable and constantly evolving part of human culture, which, “in its most basic manifestations, is an integrated pattern of adaptation, a complete survival strategy” (Donald *Origins* 201). Hrothgar’s community is no different from others in its need to understand its place in the world and control its environment. Myth emerges out of the convergence of language and community: “Group narrative skills lead to a collective version of reality [and] the narrative is almost always public” (257). Because myths are solidified by years of cultural processing, they perform what Jerome Klinkowitz calls a “God-like function, organizing our values and expressing our best hope for moral behavior” (63). Without going so far as to reference God, Shotter acknowledges that meanings shaped by myths, since they are “neither ‘mine’ nor ‘yours’, . . . constitute an Otherness that is ‘ours’, our own peculiar form of

Otherness” (9). The songs of the Shaper provide the Danes with a sense of something greater than themselves that guides their actions and has the potential to create a nobler reality.

The Shaper’s stories rework the past, highlighting glorious achievements while ignoring uglier truths, causing his listeners to aspire to be the best versions of themselves. Butts demonstrates the Shaper’s importance: “the evenings spent under his spell at Hrothgar’s Hall are the important gatherings of *Grendel* during which impasses are broken, decisions are made, and history is changed” (91). Even Grendel admits that Hart (Heorot) was primarily the Shaper’s creation:

Inspired by winds (or whatever you please), the old man sang of a glorious meadhall whose light would shine to the ends of the ragged world. The thought took seed in Hrothgar’s mind. It grew. He called all his people together and told them of his daring scheme. He would build a magnificent meadhall high on a hill, with a view of the western sea, a victory-seat . . . to stand forever as a sign of the glory and justice of Hrothgar’s Danes. (*G* 47)

Craig Stomme explains that the “Shaper’s visions transform the grubby little village into a growing city-state, merely by changing the villagers’ perceptions about themselves, their past, and Grendel” (85). Though his reach exceeds his grasp, Hrothgar, inspired by the Shaper’s art, does build a meadhall that is glorious, at least for a time. In establishing the power of narrative, Gardner echoes Oscar Wilde’s famous adage, “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life.” Grendel, because of his community’s lack of language, has no art to imitate. Up to this point he has only the Shaper’s art, but he is not allowed to participate in the process that makes it.

### **An Outsider’s Attempt to Engage: The Darker Side of Narrative**

Eventually Grendel hears his own story as interpreted by the Shaper, learning of “an

ancient feud between two brothers which split all the world between darkness and light” (*G* 51). Instead of being horrified and outraged, Grendel is at first captivated because for once in his life, he is part of someone’s story. Although he must walk over the corpse of a man killed by another man, “proof that both of us were cursed, or neither,” Grendel once again steps forward into the world of humans and tries to communicate, begging “Mercy! Peace!” (51). Even after they attack him, he cries “Friend!” and “Pity!” (52). Milosh describes his journey: “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 then seeks to proceed from observation to communication and understanding” (49). He fails in this endeavor because his role as monster is fixed in their mythology and they refuse to imagine a different reality, causing Grendel to feel his alienation all the more deeply.

Gardner adds complexity to our understanding of the power of narrative by highlighting its ability to inspire both enlightened progress and cruel exclusivity. According to Donald, myths “not only can spell out the project of a life but can provide a sense of group identification that drives people to attempt almost anything” (*A Mind* 296). As demonstrated, the Danes’ mythology inspires the creation of a meadhall symbolic of much more than the sum of its parts, but it also inspires them to commit troubling acts in the name of their ideals. For example, an epic narrative like the Shaper’s is deeply intertwined with the ideal of heroism. Cowart argues that “Unferth, not to mention Beowulf—is . . . a ‘creation,’ in every sense of the word, of poetry” (55). Unferth confesses as much when he meets Grendel in the mere: “You think me deluded. Tricked by my own walking fairytale. . . . The hero sees values beyond what is possible. That’s the *nature* of a hero. It kills him, of course, ultimately. But it makes the whole struggle of humanity worthwhile” (*G* 89). Unferth is aware of the narrative—his fairytale—and its effect on his behavior and aspirations. Grendel labels him “a new kind of Scylding” (86) because he

attempts something no other thane has attempted before, inspired by the poetic ideal of heroism. On the surface, heroism appears noble. It is hard to take Unferth seriously because he is made ridiculous by Grendel in the novel and even by Beowulf in the original poem, but his words ring true. However, Gardner once stated in an interview, “The hero is a guy who kills a lot of people and grabs a lot of gold. These are Bad Guys” (Chavkin 3). This notion of heroism is most evident in the humans’ initial treatment of Grendel when he has never so much as threatened to attack them. Their narrative is so limited that they can only see him as a monster, and in fact, as their narrative develops, a monster is created. According to Shotter, “the construction of a narrative account quite often distorts what the character of the situation was in actual practice: it falsely completes what was an open and unfinalized circumstance” (14-15). By prematurely labeling Grendel a member of “the terrible race God cursed” (*G* 51) they have conferred an identity on him that was not there before and call themselves “heroes” for attacking him. McWilliams recognizes that “our patterns, to contain, must also exclude, and [this novel] shows us the monster-making consequences of such exclusion” (41). By the time Unferth comes to him, Grendel has embraced his identity of monster, but the culpability for his crimes is shared by the humans who cannot see past their own xenophobic narrative.

In giving us the perspective of the outsider, Gardner demonstrates the limitations of cultural narrative, and he is supported by modern sociology. As Donald points out, community may offer some level of meaning or identity, but it can also “threaten our intellectual autonomy” (*A Mind* xiv). Shotter adds that when a member of a community begins to think independently, the stability of the community is threatened (4). It is difficult to imagine anyone in Hrothgar’s kingdom arguing on Grendel’s behalf because he or she would be ostracized almost as much as Grendel himself. The survival of the group was more important than individual thought. According to Bakhtin, there are two contrasting tendencies of literature. In the first, there is a

single value system and “[t]he hero has only to follow his code: the answers are ready, latent in the norms of the culture, before the questions are posed.” Conversely, in the second type, “meaning explodes outward into a multiplicity of contending worldviews” (McWilliams 7). While the Shaper’s tales conform to the first type of literature, Gardner’s novel is a prime example of the second, which is one reason *Beowulf* and *Grendel* are so interesting to study side by side. In Ruud’s view, “The modern world no longer provides an unquestioned set of values. We have no longer a closely-knit society in which one can find comfort in the mutual bond of loyalty and protection from the darkness and absurdity outside. All the gods are dead.” Gardner would likely disagree with the extreme position of this characterization, but he would acknowledge the difficulties faced by modern man, “adrift in a world without certainties, rejecting religion, absolutist science and technology, even Communism, or any other system which purports to have the ‘answers’” (Ruud). However, instead of categorically rejecting all systems, Gardner, a devotee of William Blake, believed it was possible to test one set of values “by positing an ‘ironic set’ of contrary values . . . [because] ‘Without Contraries is no progression’” (Ellis and Over 47, quoting Blake). Gardner posits several sets of values in the novel, many of which are contradictory. Grendel puzzles over these contrasting principles because he has no cultural touchstones to guide him. His nonverbal community does not have the language to provide a mythology comparable to that of the Danes.

### **Meeting the Dragon: Engagement with Nihilism**

For a time, Grendel broods on his predicament. When he thinks about the possibility that the Shaper might actually “improve men’s minds,” he allows himself hope, but it is quickly overridden by anger at being unjustly labeled a villain. More than anything, he wants to be part of a story: “I wanted it, yes! Even if I must be the outcast, cursed by the rules of his hideous

fable” (G 55). On some level Grendel understands that his suffering originates with his lack of community. In what is possibly the most poignant line of the novel, he plaintively asks, “Why can’t I have someone to talk to?” (53). Almost immediately, as if some deity has heard him, his wish is granted and he meets the dragon. Upon greeting Grendel, the dragon warns him to stand to the side, saying, “I get a cough sometimes, and it’s terrible straight out front” (58). Howell argues that “this is the only concern for Grendel he shows” (69), and this may be a fair statement, but it is important to remember that this is the first conversation Grendel has ever had with another living being. The dragon’s engagement with Grendel is the most consideration anyone has ever shown to him. He is given feedback and guidance (though appalling even to Grendel) for the first time. Strangely enough, the dragon’s first lesson to Grendel is empathy. When Grendel is unable to speak out of fear, the dragon remarks, “Now you know how *they* feel when they see *you*, eh?” (59). The dragon’s words instill a line of thought in Grendel’s mind. Later in the chapter, he revisits this idea and thinks, “He had a point. From now on I’d stay clear of them. It was one thing to eat one from time to time . . . but it was another thing to scare them, give them heart attacks, fill their nights with nightmares, just for sport” (61). Of course, the dragon then begins to teach a very different lesson: disconnection and nihilism. McWilliams contends that he talks “*To*, not *with* [Grendel], for genuine dialogue is not possible here. The dragon claims a superior intellect and a broader vision; the best he can manage for Grendel is a brief, patronizing lecture” (31). However, even if the dragon were Grendel’s intellectual superior, which is debatable, conversation does not only exist between intellectual equals. According to Ronald Nutter, this relationship more resembles that of mentor-mentee (67). Butts affirms that “the dragon encourages the despairing Grendel” and that, ironically enough “[a]fter his talk with the dragon, Grendel feels a greater sense of purpose” (92).

The dragon does not intend to fill Grendel with a sense of purpose—quite the opposite. Gardner modeled the character after what he saw as the most troubling aspects of Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism. Always loathe to be too one-sided, he explained, “Existentialism, of course, is a very fine thing, but it can be self-pitying. Like, you can choose the best of Jean-Paul Sartre and it’s very optimistic and brave, very noble. Or you can choose the worst of Jean Paul Sartre and it’s stupid” (Chavkin 29). Sartre believed that “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 [or] bad faith” (Fawcett and Jones 641). Mason explains that according to Sartre, “‘bad faith,’ . . . is simply self-deception, or more exactly, a flight from the truth of what it is to be human—a nothingness. The Sartrean cure for bad faith is honest, acute self-scrutiny, until, realizing one’s nothingness and radical freedom, one chooses to act upon it” (105-06). Howell notes Gardner’s ambivalence to the philosopher: while he “was offended by Sartre’s assertion that since God is dead, it follows that humanity is totally free, and all actions therefore permitted” (11), he “often sound[ed] like his favorite antagonist . . . in his ultimate rejection of all systems of thought” (9).

Gardner acknowledged that Sartre’s ideas were tempting to the modern, skeptical mind, but taken to their logical conclusion, they would result in the type of nihilism exemplified by the dragon, which goes beyond Sartre’s existentialism. The dragon claims to “see” more than other creatures, “from the mountaintop: all time, all space. We see in one instant the passionate vision and the blowout” (*G* 63). He labels the present moment “one frail, foolish flicker-flash in the long dull fall of eternity” (61), but he appears to feel no anguish, unlike Sartre’s “existential man peering into the abyss of nothingness and contemplating the suicide that will free him” (Howell 66). Butts observes that he “sacrifices nothing and sees only what he wants to see” (92), a significant point indicating that the dragon has no obligation to any community for whom he



would sacrifice. We know little about the dragon except that he is eventually killed by Beowulf, but we can imagine that he has even less of a community than Grendel, or perhaps he has rejected what little he had in favor of nihilism. Perhaps nihilism *is* the narrative of the dragon community—it is certainly the narrative of this dragon. He remains focused on destruction until his death. Grendel’s community lacks that degree of nihilism because even without language, Grendel’s mother recognizes an obligation to protect and rescue her son. In addition, Grendel himself has demonstrated a concern for his fellow creatures. VanSpanckeren stresses that in Gardner’s fiction, “[o]nly the language of relatedness and obligation makes for freedom” (117). The dragon is as trapped by his solipsism as the Danes are by their mythology. The dragon defines language as “the simplest insanity ever devised” (*G* 64), but even he tells himself (and Grendel) a story in an attempt to make sense of his experience: “‘Know thyself,’ that’s my dictum. Know how much you’ve got, and beware of strangers” (74). Like Sartre, he sees “*the other* only as an obstacle” (Fawcett and Jones 641).

The dragon delivers a message of futility, meaninglessness, and disconnection that at first sounds very logical and believable. He sets himself up as the ultimate authority. Deeming humans incapable of comprehending eternity or the universe’s ultimate doom, he ridicules their attempts to use “crackpot theories” to “rush across chasms on spiderwebs” (*G* 64) and dismisses the Shaper’s stories as facts held together “with a gluey whine of connectedness” that creates “an illusion of reality” (65). His effect on Grendel is dramatic. He validates thoughts Grendel has already had—particularly his suspicion that the Shaper’s stories are simply lies. Further, the dragon compliments Grendel on being “very attentive and thoughtful” (65), an apparent kindness that goes farther than any act of heroism or storytelling toward swaying Grendel. As much as the dragon claims to see, however, he does not see everything. He says to Grendel, “Nothing interests you but excitement, violence,” to which Grendel exclaims, “That’s not true!” (67).

Readers know this is not true. Grendel has shown interest in his fellow creatures and wonders about the purpose of his life. He is critical of the humans' treatment of each other. He is capable of great violence but has not chosen to exercise this power except in his own defense or for food. If we have not doubted the reliability of the dragon before this moment, we must begin. The dragon has made a choice. He sees both the "passionate vision and the blowout," creation *and* destruction, but he chooses to focus only on the latter. When Grendel asks, "Why shouldn't one change one's ways, improve one's character?" the dragon answers: "'Why? Why?' Ridiculous question! Why anything?" (*G* 72). His most influential advice to Grendel is the following:

"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. The exile, captivity, death they shrink from—the blunt facts of their mortality, their abandonment—that's what you make them recognize, embrace! You *are* mankind, or man's condition: inseparable as the mountain-climber and the mountain. If you withdraw, you'll instantly be replaced. . . . If man's the irrelevance that interests you, stick with them. Scare them to glory!" (73)

Grendel follows this advice, choosing to be a destructive force in Hrothgar's kingdom. Ironically, he becomes part of the community by being that destructive force. He is, in fact, just as involved in the creation of their "glory" as in the destruction of their meadhall and the murder of their thanes. As the dragon points out, if Grendel chooses not to attack, something else will, and that menace would be the subject of the Shaper's stories. Grendel would be left out again, and he refuses to risk that.

### **A Community of Monsters: Is Resistance Possible?**

Moved as he was by the Shaper's mythology, Grendel resists the dragon's message. "Wait and see," he says (*G* 74). As Donald explains, "In conquering a rival society, the first act of the conquerors is to impose their myth on the conquered. And the strongest instinct of the conquered is to resist this pressure; the loss of one's myth involves a profoundly disorienting loss of identity" (*Origins* 258). Grendel is doubly disoriented. He has, in effect, been "conquered" twice—once by the Shaper who enchants him into accepting a new mythology, and once by the dragon who sways him with what seems unassailable logic. Grendel is more influenced by the dragon's story at this point for several reasons. First, only the dragon has given Grendel the courtesy of listening to his opinion and offering feedback, if only to challenge Grendel's lingering hope that "something will come of all this" (*G* 74). The dragon has become Grendel's de facto community. Meanwhile, as appealing as the Shaper's story is in making sense of the world, the humans have purposefully alienated Grendel by determining his identity without his participation. Moreover, as far as Grendel can tell, the dragon is telling the "truth" while the humans are making up stories. Grendel cannot refute the dragon's apocalyptic vision; consequently, "[f]utility, doom, became a smell in the air, pervasive and acrid as the dead smell after a forest fire" (*G* 75). The more he observes humans, the more he sees "a race of madmen and fools, a world of pattern-weavers" (Morris 56). Who is to contradict him?

As Merrill observes, "Grendel's war with Hrothgar follows, inspired by the monster's now firm conviction that human values are insubstantial myths designed to get us through the night" (167). After his conversation with the dragon, he becomes aware of a multitude of narratives interpreting what Gardner calls the "main ideas of Western civilization" (Chavkin 10). Various scholars have contemplated what these ideologies might be. According to Strehle, "Each chapter presents a spokesman for one of the ideas, which include imperialism, mysticism, materialism, solipsism, and anarchism. As single-minded claims to truth, these ideas appear

limited and are meant to be rejected” (94). Fawcett and Jones examine each of the chapters and identify the following twelve ideals, in chapter order: (1) the cycle of life (the ram and the Danes’ burial ritual), (2) physical nurturing (Grendel’s mother), (3) poetry/art (the Shaper), (4) civilization (Heorot), (5) knowledge (the dragon), (6) heroism (Unferth), (7) marriage, balance, and compromise (Wealtheow), (8) loyalty (Hrothulf), (9) organized religion (Ork), (10) hope (the goat’s perseverance and Grendel’s uncertain restlessness), (11) friendship and alliance (Beowulf’s arrival), and (12) faith (Beowulf’s message to Grendel). Grendel dismantles each of them with cold, cynical logic, exposing the showmanship of heroism, the crude humanity beneath the queen’s grandeur, the inevitability of betrayal, the irrationality of religion, and so forth. According to Fawcett and Jones, Grendel’s skepticism epitomizes “the predicament of modern man . . . [and] gives full weight to our experience of absurdity and evil” (646). However, Gardner cautions us to realize that “Grendel is symbolic of the rational soul gone perverse” (Chavkin 193). We must beware of what Blake calls “the Reasoning Power, / An Abstract objecting power that Negatives every thing” (qtd. in Ellis and Ober 52).

### **After the Dragon: “The Rational Soul Gone Perverse”**

Under the influence of the dragon, Grendel attempts to excise his burgeoning faith in the Shaper’s mythology in favor of “objective” truth, at least as the dragon sees it. As Donald explains, “The meaning of ‘objectivity’ is precisely this: a process of demythologization” (*Origins* 275). The preference for objectivity requires an assumption that our immediate (less mediated) experience of any moment is “somehow purer, less tarnished by the sundry designs and desires we bring to the world upon looking backward and trying to make sense of it all” (Freeman 272). The dragon attempts objectivity by mocking the humans’ narrative drive and concerning himself only with facts in isolation, refusing to connect them to each other: “While

narrative and myth attribute *significances*, theory is not concerned with significance in the same sense at all. Rather than modeling events by infusing them with meaning and linking them by analogy, theory dissects, analyzes, states laws and formulas” (Donald *Origins* 274). When we attempt to see the world with pure objectivity, no one object matters any more than another. Either everything matters equally, or everything is an “irrelevance,” as it is to the dragon (*G* 73). However, one of Gardner’s favorite philosophers, Alfred Whitehead, refutes this idea:

A single fact in isolation is the primary myth required for finite thought, that is to say, for thought unable to embrace totality.

This mythological character arises because there is no such fact. Connectedness is of the essence of types, that they be connected. . . . No fact is merely itself. (12-13).

The dragon’s perversion of Whitehead’s ideas discredits him and illustrates Gardner’s statement that “[t]he 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 nothing in the world is connected with anything. It’s all meaningless, [and] . . . the highest value in life is to seek out gold and sit on it” (Chavkin 11).

The dragon’s enterprise of counting his gold and sorting it into piles evokes the type of impersonal objectivity that Whitehead and Gardner, along with many sociologists, challenged. Shotter argues that “the task of understanding the *background* to our lives cannot be done within the confines of any kind of systematic *theory*” (11). If the dragon was truly objective, he would equally regard the creative force and the destructive force. Grendel does not yet have enough experience with the creative force to understand its power, so he is disproportionately influenced by the dragon. Gardner shows that systematic thinking is useful to a point, but as Whitehead states, “we should keep our systems open. In other words, we should be sensitive to their limitations” (8). Gardner believes that art should be used to fill in the gaps left by rational

thought by assigning meaning and importance to certain things and giving our lives purpose: “Life is all conjunctions, one damn thing after another, cows *and* wars *and* chewing gum *and* mountains; art—the best, most important art—is all subordination: guilt *because of* sin *because of* pain” (*OMF* 6). The dragon’s cold rationality pretends to be disinterested but he places *importance* on his own skewed, destructive rationality over creativity and mythology. Every time we attach more importance to one object or idea over another, we are no longer acting objectively. Freeman argues that the act of narration—that is, reflection and subordination—can be “a vehicle for correcting the shortsightedness, or even blindness, that frequently befalls present experience. . . . [Within] the process of telling stories [is] the possibility of telling the truth—indeed a deeper and more capacious truth than the one generally operative in much of contemporary thought, especially in the sciences” (269).

Grendel has never been taught to subordinate. Maines tells us that “constructs (definitions, ideas, values, beliefs) are inseparable from and mutually constitutive of social conditions” (578). Grendel assigns importance to objects or ideas as they relate to his experience alone. He struggles with the Shaper’s narrative because it incorporates meanings and values that he, as an outsider with no accountability to anyone, has yet to understand. The simplicity of the dragon’s message is appealing because Grendel does not have a community to help him arrange importance according to any moral code. According to Freeman, the creation of one’s own narrative “is suffused with conventions, with schematic, even stereotypical, renditions of the personal past, derived from countless sources, many of which are external to one’s own personal experience” (265). Through his observance of the Danes, Grendel begins to imagine communal responsibility; in fact, Ellis and Ober observe that Grendel “recognizes the civilizing influence of the Shaper on the men of Hart, the value of the heroic concept to Unferth, the peace and harmony the queen brings to all those around her. . . . [T]he very fact that Grendel can comprehend, can

desire, these ‘illusions’ gives evidence of his own need for them” (Ellis and Ober 58). However, his assigned status as monster fills him with rage and “hinder[s] any chance for redemption or reintegration” (Butts 88). He takes up his self-proclaimed titles of “Truth-teacher” and “Phantasm Tester” (*G* 110), purposefully terrorizing the Danes, purportedly in order to expose their lies but also because of his anguish over his alienation. Had they conversed with him as the dragon did, perhaps his choices would have been different.

### **Embracing the Dragon’s Message: Monstrous Choices**

Before he meets the dragon, Grendel does not choose to attack the Danes on a large scale, although he would “eat one from time to time—that was only natural: kept them from overpopulating, maybe starving to death” (60). However, the next time he goes to the meadhall, he finds that the dragon has made him invulnerable to weapons. This is a turning point for Grendel because it is the first time he makes a truly monstrous choice. At the moment he realizes his invincibility, he is being attacked, first by a guard and then by the rest of the thanes as he dangles the guard from his hand. When they realize they cannot harm him, they simply stare, and Grendel realizes that he has options. He could kill them all and validate the Shaper’s mythology. He could put the guard down and walk away. In the past, he might have used this power to befriend the Danes, patiently persuading them that he was not dangerous and slowly assimilating into the community. In light of the Danes’ rejection and villainization of Grendel, this choice would have required a great deal of imagination and optimism that no one ever modeled for him, but the option was there in theory. Instead, Grendel tells us, “I held up the guard to taunt them, then held him still higher and leered into his face. He went silent, looking at me upside-down in horror, suddenly knowing what I planned. As if casually, in plain sight of them all, I bit his head off” (*G* 79). No longer is Grendel an endearing, misunderstood creature. When faced with the

duality of his own nature, at least at this moment, he chooses darkness: “I had hung between possibilities before, . . . now that was passed: I was Grendel, Ruiner of Meadhalls, Wrecker of Kings!” (80). Merrill argues that Gardner’s intention is “first to seduce us into identification with Grendel, then to reveal the terrible consequences of believing what Grendel believes. He wants to surprise us into virtue, or at least self-examination” (171). We lose much of our sympathy with Grendel, though we may still hope for some type of redemption.

Grendel’s newfound power proves to be a double-edged sword. As much as he claims to adhere to the dragon’s message of meaninglessness, Grendel still longs to be a part of a community but has not learned how. One way that we learn to be a part of community as children is through “games that inspire our mutual exploration of the possible and our collaborative extension of the boundaries of subjective awareness” (Donald *A Mind* 276). Children often make mistakes when testing the boundaries put before them and are usually forgiven and given the opportunity to make a different choice. As Ober and Ellis observe, Grendel has several chances to “define himself as other than a ‘brute existent’” and he is not necessarily doomed to failure (55). First, he is tempted by the Shaper’s tales, but the dragon effectively counteracts the bard’s influence. After his meeting with the dragon, however, he interacts personally with Unferth, Wealtheow, and Ork, toying with each of them. Grendel’s dealings with the Danes could be seen as “game-playing” (Butts 93). During these games he learns more about what is appropriate behavior and about his own identity. Each of these characters has lessons to teach, if Grendel will only listen.

One of Grendel’s favorite targets for amusement is Unferth, who provides Grendel with another set of choices. The potential for constructive dialogue exists with Unferth because he is the first human who understands and responds to Grendel’s language. Unfortunately, Grendel is so determined to expose the flaws in Unferth’s narrative that he ignores this possibility. Child



illustrates the way in which Gardner mocks the heroic ideal: “Unferth’s brand of heroism is heroism for glory—heroism for heroism’s sake” (116). His greatest hope is to be the subject of the Shaper’s next song: “It will be sung year on year and age on age that Unferth went down through the burning lake . . . and gave his life in battle with the world-rim monster” (*G* 87). Unferth’s narrow understanding of heroism “posits a morally unambiguous world, a world in which life’s most important questions can be settled by reference to a simple code. Unfortunately, the world that Grendel—and the modern reader—inhabits does not respond to prepackaged solutions. Unferth, unprepared, cannot adapt and collapses pathetically” (McWilliams 39). He is certainly an inferior hero next to Beowulf, but his actions have value to his community that Grendel ignores. He is willing to give his life in pursuit of the monster that threatens it, even while desiring fame or redemption. Mixed motives do not necessarily cancel each other out. Grendel mocks Unferth, telling us, “He had glimpsed a glorious ideal, had struggled toward it and seized it and come to understand it, and was disappointed. One could sympathize” (*G* 90). Rather than kill Unferth, Grendel chooses to humiliate him to disrupt the cultural narrative: “the brother-killer had put on the Shaper’s idea of the hero like a merry mask, had seen it torn away, and was now reduced to what he was: a thinking animal stripped naked of former illusions” (104). However, Grendel also has mixed motives. Grendel has not formulated any such glorious ideal for himself. Without community, what would he struggle for? Some part of him still clings to the hope of the Shaper’s stories and wishes he could participate in the dialogue that creates their values. He chooses not to kill the one thane that communicates with him. If we view this as a childish game, this choice could demonstrate an embryonic understanding of the value of dialogue. Weinberg asserts that “the nature of our rights and needs as human beings evolve and cannot be fully established in advance of our actual interactions with one another. They can be fully established only in and through those interactions” (112).

Grendel is finally interacting with others, and the choice he makes affirms life in the smallest way because “by continuing to live in the shadow of the darker vision represented by Grendel, . . . Unferth endures” (Butts 93-94).

Another choice presents itself to Grendel in the character of Queen Wealtheow. Early in the seventh chapter he contemplates his options: “I have not committed the ultimate act of nihilism: I have not killed the queen. . . . Yet” (93). Then, ironically enough, he reflects on his changing feelings about the queen with the very thing he is struggling to disavow, a *narrative*. He tells the story of a princess given to Hrothgar as a peace offering from a warring tribe. She “represents everything that is dignified and hopeful in mankind. Wealtheow brings peace and mediates men’s fury, and she nearly redeems the sinking Grendel” (Morris 62). Grendel ridicules the tribal negotiation but finds he is unable to mock her, declaring, “she was beautiful and she surrendered herself with the dignity of a sacrificial virgin. . . . She tore me apart as once the Shaper’s song had done” (*G* 100). She has a similar effect on everyone. Once Wealtheow becomes a part of Hrothgar’s community, “the Shaper [sings] things that had never crossed his mind before: comfort, beauty, a wisdom softer, more permanent, than Hrothgar’s” (103). Grendel is particularly unsettled by the absolution she gives to Unferth. After a moment of tension when his fellow thanes taunt him about the murder of his brother, “[t]he queen smiled. Impossibly, like roses blooming in the heart of December, she said, ‘That’s past.’ And it was” (104). Wealtheow’s unselfishness and her power to resurrect Unferth causes Grendel to be “teased toward disbelief in the dragon’s truths” (93). Her very existence threatens his commitment to his path of death and destruction because Wealtheow is “a life force, a sort of White Goddess whose energy is indestructible and irreducible. Grendel, the awesome devastator, is shown up by the queen’s rich vitality” (Morris 63).

Annoyed by her challenge to his roles as truth-teller and destroyer, Grendel looks for a

way to disturb the glamour surrounding her, “determining how much is queen and how much queenly radiation” (*G* 94). It is “the idea of a queen” that bothers him, the fact that she is held up as the feminine ideal when underneath, she is a stranger to them all: “She stood strange-eyed, as if looking out from another world and time. Who can say what she understood?” (104). He concludes that by exposing her sexuality, “spreading the queen’s legs for all the world to see, . . . he [will] ‘reveal[]’ the illusion of her power—she is after all only flesh” (Butts 94). Of course, this is not a surprise to the humans. It is Grendel who has no understanding of human intimacy; the only sexuality he has witnessed is that of beasts in heat like the ram whose “hindparts shiver with the usual joyful, mindless ache to mount whatever happens near—the storm piling up black towers to the west, some rotting, docile stump, some spraddle-legged ewe” (*G* 6). He is still an ignorant child playing games. Ellis and Ober argue that Grendel “is trapped by an evolutionary dead end: it is perhaps possible for men to accept both the queen’s sexuality and the ideal of the queen, but Grendel . . . has only known one female, his mother” (59). For the Danes, Wealtheow’s fertility is part of her power: she represents the obvious fact that “the world is rich and forceful and fertile” (Morris 63). Grendel’s experience with Wealtheow presents an opportunity for Grendel to recognize and value this life force, and he *does* decide not to kill her in the end, but this is a small accommodation. Neither Grendel nor the dragon grasp that the humans are perfectly aware that death awaits them all, but they choose to focus on the creative force, whether in sexuality or in art, to give their lives meaning.

Grendel’s creative power is stunted because of his lack of engagement. According to Weinberg, forming one’s own identity is a creative endeavor “dependent on the complicity of our associates. Without their help, our presentations of self become highly vulnerable to spoilage, stigmatization, and embarrassment” (106). We need feedback from others to encourage us shape an identity that will help us contribute to our community. The Danes do not allow

Grendel to enter into a dialogue with them, so he must engage in a fervent inner dialogue based on his own experience and the narratives he is exposed to. Just as the Danes exclude Grendel from any input into how they see the world, particularly regarding himself, Grendel no longer allows them to influence his views. Shotter illustrates the danger of such exclusion:

if I am to have a sense of belonging in a social reality, then it is not enough for me merely to have a 'place' within it; I must also myself be able to play an unrestrained part in constituting and sustaining it as my own kind of 'social reality', as not 'their' reality, but as of me and my kind, as 'our' reality. If I am unable to play such a part, then I will not see myself as fully belonging to it; I *will* feel that I am living in a reality not my own, a reality that others have more right to than me. (15)

The now mutual exclusivity between Grendel and the Danes inhibits the growth of both sides and causes Grendel to force his destructive power on the humans while refusing to acknowledge their creative power.

### **Grendel as Emerging Artist: "Alternatives Exclude"**

Regardless of Grendel's conscious resistance to creativity and narrative, many scholars believe that he is an emerging artist. Strehle contends that his gradual artistic development springing from his experiences over the years affirms "time as a creative process" (94). McWilliams applauds the "stunning range of voices in [Chapter 1]: we hear a brutal killer and a sensitive crocus lover, a master of epic alliteration and a bawling crybaby, a tree-smashing rebel and a grinning sycophant" (35). Cowart argues that Grendel rivals the Shaper in a "contest of art. The story ultimately concerns the triumph of good art over bad" (38). Grendel mimics the Shaper in form, but his message is pure dragon. In this way, Grendel is reminiscent of Sartre, at least in the eyes of Gardner: "Sartre writes like an angel . . . [but] he's a horror intellectually,

figuratively, and morally” (Chavkin 86). For Gardner, real art was not only form but function. The message was just as important as the poetic language: “Real art creates myths a society can live instead of die by, and clearly our society is in need of such myths. What I claim is that such myths are not mere hopeful fairy tales but the products of careful and disciplined thought; that a properly built myth is worthy of belief, at least tentatively” (*OMF* 126). Under this definition, neither the Shaper nor Grendel achieves real artistry. The Shaper’s narratives are not “products of disciplined thought” while Grendel’s narrative is not “worthy of belief.” The Shaper ignores the possibility of Grendel’s goodness while Grendel attempts to deny the power of imagination. Neither embraces the “dialogical process of *moral* testing and checking” that can shape communal ideals and values (Shotter 11).

In consistently embracing the dragon’s ideas, Grendel prioritizes rational thought over imagination. Even though he has several opportunities to engage with humans on a more constructive level, he repeatedly refuses to imagine the values they have to offer. As McWilliams points out, “an artist cannot start out with an unalterable conception of the meaning that his fiction will eventually yield. The artist discovers that meaning by placing ideas and values in a dramatic context, setting them against other ideas and values, and testing them all in action” (6). Grendel fails as an artist because he becomes stuck in his own system of thought. In “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” Blake warns, “The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, & breeds reptiles of the mind” (qtd. in Howell 76). Grendel is unaware of his self-imposed restrictions even after he witnesses the conversation of Red Horse and Hrothulf, an obvious recreation of the scene between Grendel and the dragon in which Red Horse is similarly stuck in his own system of thought. Red Horse encourages Hrothulf to overthrow Hrothgar not because Hrothgar is necessarily a bad leader but because revolution is a “*religious* act” in response to the state as “an organization of violence” (118-19). Hrothulf objects (just as Grendel

objected to the reasoning of the dragon), but Red Horse insists, “All systems are evil. All governments are evil. Not just a trifle evil. Monstrously evil” (120). Red Horse, being stuck in his own ideas, refuses to acknowledge the validity of Hrothulf’s challenges. Similarly, Grendel has yet to acknowledge that there are positive aspects to being part of a community even if it is flawed. He proclaims that civilization is evil and, “in a manner that is every bit as systematized as humankind’s, wreaks destruction” (Morris 61). In his continual myopia, Grendel represents the darkness of not only a “bestial, raging id but also a limited intellectual and imaginative vision” (Butts 88).

In discussing the evolution of the human mind, Donald describes two types of imaginative thought: “Narrative imagination constructs stories and historical accounts of events. Paradigmatic imagination seeks logical truth” (*Origins* 256). Grendel has eschewed the former in favor of the latter, believing reason to be the culmination of our evolutionary capacity and far superior to imagination. Here he has set up a false dichotomy. He does not have to choose one over another. Gardner is trying to show us that the best art incorporates both. In his “Defence of Poetry” Percy Shelley describes the relationship between reason and imagination: “Reason is the enumeration of quantities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those quantities, both separately and as a whole. Reason respects the differences, and imagination the similitude of things. Reason is to the imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance.” As Shelley articulates, one cannot exist without the other; the imagination must be grounded in reason but embrace possibilities not yet in existence. Ork, one of the Danish priests, states the concept in another way: “Alternatives exclude” (*G* 133). Grendel is beginning to make imaginative connections, but they are exclusively selfish and destructive, precluding the possibility of goodness. Quoting the poetry of Blake, Ellis and Ober contend that Grendel fails because he does not accept the “contraries of existence”: “Without

Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence'. . . . Choosing to be, literally, only Devourer, he denies even the possibility of becoming Prolific" (54, 57). For Gardner, the creative "progression" arising from the tension between reason and imagination is the goal.

While watching the humans, Grendel is exposed to several value systems corresponding with the twelve heroic ideals in each chapter. From a purely logical standpoint, Gardner demonstrates the danger in unconditional reliance on any of these ideals because they are essentially social constructs without inherent meaning outside a particular culture. The author certainly wants readers to question each of these systems, but he does not expect us to reject them out of hand like our protagonist does. Grendel's conclusions are as limited as the narratives he rejects because he lacks the experience of real community that is the "core of all twelve heroic ideals. Each involves a generous movement beyond the self" (Fawcett and Jones 642). As Donald explains, "Although purpose is anchored in consciousness, it can never be truly attributed to a single conscious mind, in isolation. . . . [H]uman purpose always has a cultural dimension" (*A Mind* 324). What is Grendel's purpose? The identity he inherits from his mother is that of a beast cowering in a cave with no apparent *raison d'être*. The humans confer monster status on him as the cursed descendant of Cain. After his conversation with the dragon, he identifies himself as "Ruiner of Meadhalls, Wrecker of Kings" (*G* 79). However, McWilliams notes, "By his seeming act of self-creation, Grendel has, in fact, accepted and reinforced the signification that the Shaper earlier assigned him. This meaning admirably serves human needs . . . but it does little for Grendel: he is trapped in a static, negative identity that denies him any chance for growth and that ensures his status as a permanent outsider" (33). Having no stable cultural dimension of his own—no obligation to anyone besides himself and no affectionate intimacy with another being—he has yet to form an identity as a contributing member of society,

except, perhaps, as Destroyer.

While sitting in the Danes' circle of stone gods, Grendel has the third conversation of his life with the blind old priest, Ork. He pretends to be the Destroyer god, encouraging Ork to expound upon his beliefs so that later he can mock him and ultimately "paint the images with the old man's steaming blood" (130). Grendel does not expect to be moved by Ork's words, but his pretense triggers an authentic spiritual experience in the priest. Before he falls prostrate before Grendel (as the Destroyer), the priest says, "Ultimate wisdom, I have come to perceive, lies in the perception that the solemnity and grandeur of the universe rise through the slow process of unification in which the diversities of existence are utilized, and nothing, *nothing* is lost" (133). Grendel is not sure how to react. As he watches three other priests deny his experience as blasphemy, an embarrassment, or lunacy, Grendel is even more confused because priests are the people who are supposed to believe. The fourth priest supports Ork and drives home the novel's most powerful message:

Merely rational thought leaves the mind incurably crippled in a closed and ossified system, it can only extrapolate from the past. But now at last, sweet fantasy has found root in your blessed soul! The absurd, the uncanny, the awesome, the terrifying . . . Can't you grasp it brothers? Both blood and sperm are explosive, irregular, feeling-pitched, messy—and inexplicably fascinating! They transcend! They leap the gap! (135-36)

Here Gardner emphasizes the beauty of mystery and the transcendental nature of the inexplicable. Unfortunately, his champion, the fourth priest, is drunk and therefore easy to dismiss, at least for Grendel. However, he is affected by participating, although under false pretenses, in such a profound experience: "Even a monster's blood-lust can be stifled by such talk" (136).

### **The Moral Artist: Cautious Optimism**



Grendel does not kill Ork, once again sparing the life of a person who engages him and sparks his imagination. The fourth priest's words stay with him. He longs for the company of the dragon because he finds himself lured once again into believing in something that logic does not support. Gardner wants us to acknowledge, as Donald does, that "theories that may appear absolutely crazy to common sense, or much too speculative, may turn out to be true" (*A Mind* xi). Henderson argues that "this very uncertainty, the openness of possibility, is part of the ground for Gardner's cautiously optimistic message. . . . Nothing is certain, nothing final" (612). We must use imagination to incorporate the "facts" in front of us into a narrative that makes life worth living. VanSpanckeren describes the artist as "part magician, part storyteller—who purposely manipulates reality and therefore may either enhance or violate it" (114). The choice Grendel faces is not between imagination and reason but between faith and despair.

In Gardner's view, it is not enough to be an artist. One must be a moral artist. Grendel's artistry does not meet this standard because it is "corrupting rather than redemptive" (Howell 83). Though a community does not guarantee positive moral choices, without it they are nearly impossible. Donald explains, "The ultimate irony of human existence is that we are supreme individualists, whose individualism depends almost entirely on culture for its realization. It came at the price of giving up the isolationism, or cognitive solipsism, of all other species and entering into a collective mind" (*A Mind* 12). Community is the primary shaper of meaning and purpose, and without it, Grendel is doomed to the solipsism Donald describes. To understand the importance of community in *Grendel*, we need not look any further than Chapter 1. Grendel has just sacked the meadhall. As the Danes bury their dead and throw golden ornaments on the funeral pyre, "their faces shine with sweat and something that looks like joy. The song swells, pushes through woods and sky, and they're singing now as if by some lunatic theory they had won" (*G* 14). These communal rituals are a matter of survival for Hrothgar's kingdom. Grendel

mocks their “lunatic” beliefs—to him, belief in anything other than direct experience is lunacy—but the humans are the ones shining with joy even in the face of Grendel’s destruction. They know that there is still hope because of their relationships, which require them to develop “[t]he ability to be patient, to be tolerant, to try to understand and empathize,” which Gardner calls “the highest kind of imagination” (Chavkin 23). They face disappointment and tragedy often enough to comprehend that there are some things they do not understand, but their life affirming values endure.

The dialogue inherent in community will inevitably lead to clashing ideas. An ideal community has the best interest of its members at heart and determines meaning by engaging in a “continuous, non-eliminative, inclusionary, multi-voiced conversation” (Shotter 9). In *Grendel*, Gardner works through opposing ideas in both form and subject matter. Ideologically, “the medieval and the modern, the epic and the existential, exist side by side” (McWilliams 40). Further, conflicts develop not only between the dragon and the Shaper but also between various humans. *Grendel* is what Sharon Spencer calls an “open novel,” “embody[ing] multiple perspectives, some of which are actually contradictory, whose purpose is to expose the subject from as many angles as possible—ideally with an impression of simultaneity” (qtd. in VanSpanckeren 125). Gardner is able to embrace multiple, even contradictory, perspectives simultaneously and encourages us to do the same. Though *Grendel* often reminds us that Hrothgar’s kingdom is no utopia, its members manage conflict through communication and negotiation with one another. Grendel, on the other hand, converses with only three beings, and none have his best interest at heart. Still, with each conversation he takes baby steps toward affirming life. Perhaps with more practice at dialogue, Grendel might have begun behaving differently.

Gardner manages to give us a variety of ideas even without a community through

Grendel's oscillating interior monologue. After his triumph in humiliating Wealtheow, he demonstrates his ambivalence: "I hung balanced, a creature of two minds; and one of them said—unreasonable, stubborn as the mountains—that she was beautiful. I resolved, absolutely and finally, to kill myself. . . . But the next instant, for no particular reason, I changed my mind (*G* 110). When the Shaper dies, Grendel feels what he paradoxically calls "some meaningless anguish" (*G* 143) and alternately sympathizes with and considers killing the woman who grieves him (145). Because of his limited opportunity for engagement with others, Grendel has not been able to develop a "sympathetic imagination" to the extent some humans have, but with each interaction involving language, Grendel demonstrates growth—however stunted—toward moral artistry that encourages hope and affirms life. He uses imaginative reasoning in his decisions not to kill Unferth, Wealtheow and Ork. Observing his surroundings, he characteristically focuses on dead wolves and dead trees, but is also "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'" (Fawcett and Jones 644, *G* 126). Grendel is tormented because he cannot accept that both points of view are valid. The poetry he composes mid-novel, merging "poor Hrothgar" and "poor Grendel" into "poor Grengar, Hrothdel's foe!" illustrates his subconscious need to blend these contradictory realities (Nelson, *G* 92). Unfortunately, without any mutually beneficial relationships he does not yet have the capacity to fully satisfy these subconscious needs.

### **Beowulf: Blending Old and New**

By Chapter 11, Grendel finds himself, once again, in a period of transition. Unable to turn to the dragon for affirmation of his destructive behavior, he is left to consider the humans' irrational beliefs. After the Shaper dies, he begins to sense, or perhaps hope, that something new

is on its way. In an unprecedented attempt at communication, his mother warns him, “Warovvish,” which he understands as *Beware the fish*, causing Grendel to be “filled with restless expectation” (G 149). The fish represents both Beowulf, who comes by sea and, we learn later, is “stronger in the ocean than any man alive” (161), and also faith, reminiscent of the fish symbol of Christianity<sup>4</sup>. When the strangers arrive, he is “mad with joy,” realizing that they represent “a whole new game” (151). The Shaper has died, and with him, the past; a new order is emerging. The new Shaper sings, “Frost shall freeze . . . but the fetters of frost shall also fail” (165). Beowulf is an unknown entity who appears to threaten not only Grendel but the honor and belief system of the Danes. Grendel decides that it is his job to kill Beowulf, “for old times’ sake, for the old priest’s honor, . . . for the honor of Hrothgar’s thanes” (G 159). However, as Grendel watches him interact with Unferth, he finds that Beowulf is a new kind of hero. He can cut as easily with words as with a sword: “no thane in the hall would attack him again and risk the slash of that mild, coolly murderous tongue” (163). Where Grendel still believes that “[v]iolence is truth” (157), Beowulf’s new vision blends destruction with creation, violence with language. Minugh notes that “the old order still reigns, but Grendel has already discovered that he cannot keep his own view of reality stable when looking at Beowulf. He rejects this fluidity, moves to rigidity, and redefines his role as that of preserver of the status quo. . . . He has in a sense finally become an obedient thane at last!” (137).

When Grendel actually confronts Beowulf, however, his perspective is altered. He begins to see Beowulf as a “dear long-lost brother, kinsman-thane” because the stranger’s superhuman strength and trickery make them equals (169). Grendel also connects him with the dragon, seeing

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<sup>4</sup> Each chapter in the novel is associated with not only a “great idea” of civilization but also with a sign of the Zodiac, beginning with Aries in Chapter 1 and ending with Pisces in Chapter 12. The graphic for Pisces (the fish) is similar to the ancient sign of Christianity, and Pisces is often associated with imagination, compassion, and faith.

wings sprout from his shoulders, though readers may envision an angel foreshadowed by the children's angel wings in the snow. This sense of kinship combined with the memory of his engagement with the dragon allows Grendel to once again feel a sense of community, much as he resists it. Beowulf begins to whisper, but Grendel says, "I will not listen. I continue whispering. As long as I whisper myself I need not hear" (170). This refusal to engage can only harm Grendel. Beowulf whispers: "*As you see it it is, while the seeing lasts, dark nightmare-history, time-as-coffin; but where the water was rigid there will be fish. . . . 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*" (170). He shames Grendel for his determination to embrace only destruction and insists that Grendel open his mind to creativity, imagination, and renewal. McWilliams notes that both the dragon and Beowulf recognize a "pattern [that] includes both birth and decay, but where the dragon chose to emphasize decay, Beowulf emphasizes the rebirth that always follows it" (36).

Unlike Grendel, Beowulf has chosen to be a moral artist. Instead of dismissing language as "Fiddlesticks" like the dragon does, he embraces the creative connections made by imagination. Child argues that he "connects the great ideas through language" when he tells Grendel, "*Time is of the mind, the hand that makes (fingers on harp-strings, hero-swords, the acts, the eyes of queens)*" (120, G 170). Beowulf commands Grendel to "*Sing walls*" (171), affirming that language creates not only gossamer spiderwebs but walls support community. Gardner believed that "[a]rt builds temporary walls against life's leveling force, the ruin of what is splendidly unnatural in us, consciousness, the state in which not all atoms are equal. . . . Art rediscovers, generation by generation, what is necessary to humanness (*OMF* 6). Using language as his most potent weapon, Beowulf tries to train Grendel to use language to create a better world. He uses both language and violence, knocking Grendel's head into the wall. Grendel

responds with the following attempt: “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). According to Strehle, “Not only has Grendel achieved a successful poetic form, but he has arrived at a vision of time as both destructive and creative. His poem is about time’s destruction of the walls of Hrothgar’s hall and their simultaneous survival through the creative process of art” (93).

### **Accident: Blessing or Curse?**

It is hard to say what Grendel has learned by the time of his death. His final words are, “Poor Grendel’s had an accident. . . . *So may you all*” (G 174). Scholars have pondered whether this statement is a curse or a benediction. According to Morris, “Beowulf goads Grendel to the madness that is art. Grendel’s song is his hymn to the Shaper, who he replaces; the world is indeed accidental and one of its finest accidents is the making of the artist. . . . He learns that creation invests the world with meaning and that it is better to make a noble lie than a depraved one” (69). Henderson argues that Grendel “move[s] past the dragon’s nihilism, and he finds what salvation he finds in kinship with his fellow creatures” (“The Avenues” 618). He appears to learn that the combination of art and community stimulates the imagination to create meaning in the world and faith in its constant renewal. It also breeds unpredictability, and, in a sense, accident. With limited opportunities for meaningful communication, Grendel has not fully developed as an artist and is destined to become a tragic figure. As Butts observes, “Grendel sees only danger in the unpredictable nature of human action motivated sometimes by intellect, sometimes by feeling, and sometimes by both, but Gardner wants us to realize that this very unpredictability allows for the possibility of a more interesting and hopeful existence” (89). Imagination is unlimited, but, as Donald writes, “[i]t is a rare idea, thought, hypothesis, or archetype that has not

already been conceived and modified a thousand times. The best an individual can hope for is a small collision of ideas or conjoining vectors on thoughts that have never before been brought together” (*A Mind* 299). This blending together of randomly joined thoughts is just the kind of accident Gardner had in mind when he said, “Poetry is an accident . . . but it’s a great one. May it happen to all of us” (Chavkin 15).

*Grendel* teaches us that every choice we make contributes to the narrative of the world, and we must always be open to dialogue in order to make positive choices by integrating reason and imagination. Gardner highlights the weaknesses of any closed system of thought and illustrates our freedom to constantly edit and recreate based on the value system that we choose. He encourages us to choose a system that, although imperfect as all systems are, will do its best to affirm life and offer hope. In this novel, characters tell stories and enact rituals in order to “seek both a sense of identity in the midst of chaos and change, as well as a sense of transcendent, often mystical, interconnectedness with nature and other people” (Nutter 60). Through the monster’s isolation, we understand that such transcendence is impossible without connectedness. Gardner once remarked, “You *redeem* the world by acts of imagination every time you pick up a baby” (Chavkin 13-14). Hope resides in community, and community stimulates the imagination. As Morris tells us, “[Grendel] sees too late the miraculous power of lunatic art, lunatic religion, lunatic heroism of the soul” (70). But it is not too late for us. As humans, we always have the opportunity to reach out and share a story.

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## Vita

The author obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and a minor in music from Loyola University of New Orleans in 1993, and a Juris Doctor from New England School of Law in 1997. After practicing law for several years, she changed careers to begin teaching English at the high school level. In 2016 she enrolled at the University of New Orleans to pursue a Masters degree in English with a double concentration in British literature and pedagogy. She resides in New Orleans and will continue her teaching career after graduation.