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What do you think about when you hear satire? There are several examples of satire that offer commentary about modern media and problems. However, it is very rare for a satirical piece to oppose a popular, classical epic. This is the case with *Grendel*, by John Gardner, a comedic parody of the widely-renowned tale of Beowulf. The language and satirical devices employed throughout this novel create a humorous critique through its reversal of the classic hero-villain dichotomy and ironic portrayal of human nature, challenging conventionally idealized narratives and prompting a deeper examination of the morality of human society.

First, the most notable difference between the stories of *Beowulf* and *Grendel* is the complete reversal of protagonists by which Gardner intends to highlight the unsound mentality of Beowulf and the unexpectedly sensible nature of Grendel. In Grendel's first encounter with Beowulf, Gardner uses imagery to start painting a disquieting image of the traditional hero, deviating from his typical glorified portrayal. According to Grendel, "He had a strange face that, little by little, grew unsettling to me... The eyes slanted downward, never blinking, unfeeling as a snake's" (135 Gardner). Descriptions such as "unsettling," and "unfeeling as a snake's" mock the traditional glorification of epic heroes by introducing a sense of ominous and malevolence. In his later fight with Beowulf, Gardner uses exaggerated depictions of the hero to twist his original impression. In Grendel's panic, he describes, "He has wings. Is it possible? And yet it's true: out of his shoulders come terrible fiery wings" (169 Gardner). In this quote, the author uses hyperbolic imagery to depict Beowulf with an almost devil-like appearance, marked by "terrible fiery wings." This vivid and exaggerated illustration mirrors the way the thanes originally viewed Grendel as a monstrous figure. This demonstrates a reversal of roles, where Grendel, once the villain, is now positioned as a victim in the face of a demonic Beowulf. Some may

argue that Grendel is still the real villain in this situation since he has eaten and killed humans; however, this is not the case. Because Grendel is neither explicitly human nor animal, he takes an unbiased stance when valuing life. When he witnesses the humans' atrocities against themselves and other animals (33 Gardner), he uses them as justification to retaliate against their cruel behavior. Overall, this reversal demonstrates how describing a character and their actions in a different light can completely alter how they are perceived, prompting readers to take a more neutral stance when considering popular narratives.

One of the main focuses of Gardner's parody of the conventional epic is the usage of satirical elements such as irony to criticize the hypocrisy and violent nature of Anglo-Saxon society. When Hrothgar rises to power, the protagonist notices the increasingly ostentatious and wild activities of the Danes. Over the course of these events, Grendel develops an understanding of the men's routine endeavors. He recounts, "They would listen to each other at the meadhall tables, their pinched, cunning rat's faces picking like needles at the boaster's words... Now and then some trivial argument would break out, and one of them would kill another one" (32 Gardner). The author highlights the irony of human society by painting a scene of vivid and animalistic imagery. The description of the thanes in the mead hall with "pinched, cunning rat's faces" and their behavior reduced to "raving threats" and drunken boasts sharply contrasts with the idealized view of noble warriors in traditional heroic tales. The supposedly civilized men behave as savagely as the animals and monsters they condemn, ironically revealing a hypocrisy in human society's values and behavior. When Grendel witnesses the shaper for the first time, he is struck with awe. With the shaper's abilities, every mind could be swayed and every story rewritten, as even Grendel describes, "My heart was light with Hrothgar's goodness, and leaden with grief at my own bloodthirsty ways" (48 Gardner). This passage characterizes the deception

of man and their tendency to manipulate the past for their own advantage. The irony is in how those noble, good people manipulate history to glorify violence and ruthlessness, often at the expense of a more nuanced understanding of the past.

John Gardner's critique of Anglo-Saxon heroes and society is evident in *Grendel*, where he implements satiric devices such as reversal and irony to highlight their issues. Oftentimes, valiant tales like *Beowulf* are glorified to the extent that their true nature and drawbacks are overshadowed. Accordingly, it is important to recognize these flaws for a more holistic and accurate comprehension of the story.

Works Cited

Gardner, John, and Emil Antonucci. *Grendel*. New York City, Alfred A. Knopf, 1971.