

Philosophy in John Gardner's *Grendel*

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Abstract

John Gardner's *Grendel* is a celebrated example of the ontological postmodernist fiction. Along with a discovery of self with which Grendel the narrator of the novel is concerned, grand narratives such as philosophy are questioned. *Grendel* denies the external objective reality and generously allows the legitimacy of fantastic and non-realistic methods by using "life-affirming fabulous art" as its major technique. Art becomes the central issue related to the question of ontology; it is both presented as the only mediator giving meaning to the futility of life or yet another grand illusion. Philosophical questions are elaborated in the novel through the seminal technique of the amalgamation of a medieval setting with modern concerns (the rewriting of an old English epic). The paper is an attempt to shed some light on the philosophical turn of John Gardner's novel which, it is argued, is its central postmodern aspect.

Key words: *John Gardner, Grendel, postmodernist fiction, philosophy, art*

1. Introduction

John Gardner's *Grendel* is an eminent novel of the postmodern era. The techniques used in the novel are apparently those of postmodernist fiction, although the story is the old English epic *Beowulf* rewritten. *Grendel* is very much concerned with the question of philosophy, a feature it shares with many other postmodernist novels. This paper is an attempt to explore the philosophical issues raised in the novel.

Philosophy has been both a prime site for debate about postmodernism and a source of many of the theories of what constitutes postmodernism (Crowther, 2003; Sim, 2001). One of the best Ways of describing postmodernism as a philosophical movement would be as a form of skepticism, an essentially negative form of philosophy, which sets out to undermine other philosophical theories claiming to be in possession of ultimate truth (ibid.). Skepticism leads to a number of questions about the self and the world. It is not only skepticism that *Grendel* is concerned about but it also hinges on philosophic notions such as ontology, nihilism, death, order in opposition to disorder, time and space and law of the excluded middle which are elaborated separately in the following pages.

2. Ontological questions

To begin, the notion of ontology is central in the novel. In his book *postmodernist fiction*, Brian McHale proposes that the dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological whereas that of Modernist fiction is epistemological, that is, postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like the ones Dick Higgins calls “post-cognitive” (McHale, 1987, p. 7). Epistemological questions are related to the question of knowledge - knowledge of the world - while ontological questions refer to the world itself--what the world is and what kinds of worlds there exist. In postmodernist texts, of course, ontology is foregrounded at the expense of epistemology being put into the background (p. 11).

2.1 Definition of ontology

Postmodernism is characterized in terms of its ontological indeterminacy and instability. In *Grendel* this indeterminacy is pictured as a given experience of the universe. Ontology is perceived as the study of the world, but it is appropriate to give a full definition of it:

An ontology, writes Thomas Pavel, is “a theoretical description of a universe.” This definition should lay to rest the objections of those who find the coupling of “postmodernist” with “ontology” in itself oxymoronic and self-contradictory on the grounds that postmodernist discourse is precisely the discourse that denies the possibility of ontological grounding. An ontology is a description of a universe, not of *the* universe. That is, it may describe any universe, potentially a plurality of universes.

(McHale, 1987, p. 27)

2.2 *Ontological indeterminacy in Grendel*

McHale believes that a text belongs to the fantastic proper only as long as it hesitates between natural and supernatural explanations, between the uncanny and the marvelous. He states that the deep structure of the fantastic is ontological rather than epistemological (pp. 74-5). In *Grendel* the fluctuation between natural and supernatural leads to a number of ontological questions that are to be addressed by the end of the novel.

Grendel, the main character in Gardner's novel *Grendel*, is obsessed with the ontological questions. He finds himself trapped and isolated in a mechanical world where all living things exist by design and meaning is unattainable (Butterfly, 2007). The story is narrated through the eyes of Grendel and the anarchy of human world is shown to the reader by the technique of defamiliarization, by means of which Grendel puts a distance between men as readers and Grendel as a monster narrator.

The first experience of the world machine takes place when Grendel as a child encounters a bull in the forest while he (Grendel) is held captive by a pair of old tree trunks. The bull keeps slamming into the tree to protect a calf to which Grendel has been standing too close but the attacks have no result; He fights with Grendel as "he would have fought against an earthquake or an eagle" (Gardner, 1989, p. 21). This is the time Grendel learns that the bull fights by instinct and in this world there remains no place for emotion or purpose; there only exists predestined routine. He is tired of eleven years of war against all beings around him and in the beginning of the twelfth, he says:

And so begins the twelfth year of my idiotic war...the pain of it! The stupidity! (p. 5)

I understood that the world was nothing, a mechanical chaos of casual brute enmity on which we stupidly impose our hopes and fears. (p. 22)

This is an ontological quotation; Grendel's world has always been in war. He wants to know what all this violence is for, mirroring the postmodern man who is entangled in the world of devilish war and hostility that is made by him. When he comes to the idea that "the world is nothing", he turns into a nihilist.

2.3 *Harp, Grendel and ontology*

The biggest change in Grendel's life occurs when he hears the harper singing of man's heroism and evilness of Grendel. Previously, he had very

limited knowledge of himself but after hearing the harper's songs, he comes to realize what he has always been thought of in the world of men. The harp is metonymic of art and art functions as a mediator in the postmodern world (as it is a source of knowledge). From then on, Grendel turns into a pilgrim who is after the truth of life. His mother does not do much to help him; therefore, he sets out to see the dragon. The dragon is a different character in the novel. He seems to be the wisest of all; he is a god-like philosopher concerned about the meaningfulness of life and the question of time and space. In comparison to him Grendel is the postmodern man after the philosophy of life. The dragon believes that Grendel has an "illusion" of the harper as human beings who harbor the illusion of art.

The dragon is dominant over space and time as he says. He knows "the beginning, the present, the end" exactly like a god whereas Grendel only sees "the past and the present" like a human. When Dragon speaks in the novel, there appears a more colorful ontology along with epistemological notions; in other words, some issues are raised regarding the world and the knowledge of the world. He speaks of the cause of knowledge (p. 63) and there is a reference to free will and intercession. When asked of the truth of life, he replies:

Things come and go, that's the gist of it. (p. 70)

Grendel tries to have an optimistic view towards life but the dragon that is wiser and more experienced, and of course more skeptic, tries to show him something else. In a very famous passage he tells Grendel:

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, and 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... you are mankind, or man's condition...if man's the irrelevance that interests you, stick with him! Scare him to glory! It's all the same in the end, matter and motion, simple or complex. No difference, finally death, transfiguration. Ashes to ashes and slime to slime, amen (p. 72).

The dragon believes that Grendel is the only one who gives meaning to the life of human beings since he is the "unknown fear". He is the source of art, poetry, and religion. People attain heroism when fighting Grendel and the contrary is also possible; Grendel's life is also defined by the existence of human beings; they interest him, therefore, they make his life meaningful. He

becomes the source of art and creation for them while he himself is filled with enthusiasm by their art.

Reuben Sanchez observes that as Grendel begins to discover the possibility of order in the world, the dragon points out that the ordered world of man is actually insane: “They’d map out roads through Hell with their crackpot theories, their here-to-the-moon-and-back lists of paltry facts. Insanity –the simplest insanity ever devised!” But the dragon adds that it is Grendel himself who gives meaning and therefore value to that insane world (p. 48).

2.4 Skepticism and nihilism

Once Grendel has heard the Shaper’s song about the creation of Cain and Abel and God as the omnipotent creator, he accepts to play the role of Cain, for it would mean that he does have a place in the world, an identity that gives meaning to his life. But later on, when he talks of how the Shaper let on that “the greatest gods made the world” to the dragon, his vision of the song is totally shattered. The dragon assails:

Ridiculous! What god? Where? Life force, you mean? The principle of process? God as history of Chance? (p. 74)

This quotation from the dragon shows the extreme nihilism he believes in. The idea of “God as history of Chance” is a modern issue discussed in western philosophy. The dragon is the Nietzsche of the novel, an issue indicating the importance of intertextuality which is one of the hallmarks of postmodern fiction.

Before meeting the dragon Grendel has tried to get a positive grasp of the world and the purpose of life and his own creation while the dragon’s view of life makes him see things in a new way. From then on, art-the Shaper’s song--enrages him: “It no longer filled me with doubt and distress, loneliness, shame. It enraged me” (p. 77).

The dragon opens Grendel’s eyes to the vileness of the human kind. He has already found out that human civilization is motored by greed and the will to power; he has seen their “shooting”, “stealing” or “killing” one another and, just like the postmodern man, he feels depressed about the foulness of life. But when the dragon becomes the clearinghouse for all his experienced feelings of human life, he is filled with contempt. Art used to neutralize his distress, but now that it has been called “ridiculous”, he finds nothing else to cling to except for “heroism”, hence the end of his life is determined by this very notion.

That is how Grendel is led towards the thought of “the pastness of the past”; he says: “I think of the pastness of the past: how the moment I am alive in, prisoned in, moves like a tumbling form through darkness (p. 146)”. Since life has no new dimension to present, Grendel begins to observe it in retrospect. It seems to be the same idea of postmodernist writers that “everything has already been written”; there exist only the remnants of the past owing to the fact that human beings are all prisoners of time and the prisoners are all being led to the darkness of death. The sentence quoted above from the book is the condition of the postmodern man. What Grendel says here is intensified by his later words: “Nihil ex nihilo” as making up the end of his contemplation of life and his decision of a heroic suicide; Gardner (as cited in Farrell, 2008) explains:

My monstrous central character, Grendel, will believe in nothing he cannot logically justify. Scorning the Anglo-Saxon scop who reshapes reality into noble ideals, scorning the great Anglo-Saxon values, he grows more and more vicious, more and more helpless, more and more existential until he commits a kind of suicide.

3. Philosophy and Death

McHale (1987, p. 228) states that in postmodernist novel, Death is more typically functional: it sets stories going or brings them to an end. Death often marks the limits of representation. There are important expectations to this when death itself becomes the object of representation. Postmodernists bring (death) into foreground (while in modernism, death is more or less in the background).

Death is the one ontological boundary that we are all certain to experience; the only one we shall all inevitably have to cross. In a sense, every ontological boundary is an analogue or metaphor of death; so foregrounding ontological boundaries is a means of foregrounding death, of making death, the unthinkable, available to imagination (McHale, 1987, p. 231). Thus, in *Grendel* the ontological issues are highlighted in order to shed light on “death” as the only unthinkable idea. Grendel is obsessed with life since he believes if there remains nothing to wreck in Hrothgar’s land, then the wrecker will be wrecked himself and in order to stop this wreckage, he chooses to die heroically by making Beowulf the hero of the story. Sanchez (2007) says:

Of course Hrothgar -wrecker is wrecked at novel’s end. As Beowulf has Grendel in his deathgrip, Grendel must (heroically)

keep from being overwhelmed by the illusion associated with Beowulf: “I jerk my head trying to drive out illusion[...] Grendel, Grendel, hold fast to all things; hold fast that which is good”. Through the auspices of the dragon, as well as his own observations of and interactions with society, Grendel has learnt the truth. (p. 49)

McHale adds that postmodernist writing models or stimulates death; it produces simulacra of death by way of confrontations between worlds, by means of transgressions of ontological levels or boundaries, or via vacillation between different kinds and degrees of “reality”.

Hence, postmodernist writing may after all meet John Gardner’s criteria for moral fiction: “the moral fiction is a laboratory experiment too difficult and dangerous to try in the world but safe and important in the mirror image of reality in the writer’s mind.” Certainly death must be the example par excellence of something too difficult and dangerous to try in the world,” which makes fictional “laboratory experiments” with death perhaps the most important and valuable of all. Postmodernist writing enables us to experiment by imagining our own deaths, to *rehearse* our own deaths (p. 232). In *Grendel* we do have a moral fiction since all the natural and supernatural experiences of Grendel are concretized in the reader’s mind; the nothingness he feels in life, the foulness of human instinct and the crave for truth. The reader even sympathizes with him when he decides to commit suicide in order to give meaning to his life. The final words of Grendel are: “Poor Grendel’s had an accident,” I whisper. “*So may you all!*” (p. 174).

Grendel’s death is called “an accident”; this statement overshadows the previous nihilistic idea espoused by the dragon that “life is an accident”. Therefore life and death are both considered to be accidents and there remains no purpose for human beings to live for. Grendel expects that the accident of death may happen to everyone; through fictional imagination, or “hyperreal”, the reader does experience death.

4. Order in opposition to disorder

The notion of order is one of the important issues emphasized in the novel. In postmodernist fiction human beings are depicted as being enchained by the order they have imposed on their own lives; which is why they try to set themselves free of it. In *Poetics of Postmodernism* Linda Hutcheon argues that Postmodernism is to be defined as anarchic, in complicity with chaos, accepting of uncertainty and confusion (p.50). Postmodern skepticism is presented as the refutation and rejection of modernism’s heroism. Grendel

finally realizes that:

All order, I've come to understand, is theoretical, unreal--a harmless, sensible, smiling mask men slide between the two great, dark realities, the self and the world-- two snakepits. (p. 157)

Grendel ends with the "unreality of order". Order changes into a smiling mask for him and the question of "the real thing" arises. Hutcheon calls these questions the impact of Baudrillard's "Simulacrum". "The real thing" has, however, had a problematic reaction to art ever since Plato. What postmodernism questions, then, is not just liberal humanism's assertion of the real but the apocalyptic murder of the real (p. 229).

Breathing his last, Grendel realizes that Beowulf's victory does not symbolize order over disorder. Indeed, Grendel has learnt that order and disorder are interdependent. Instead Beowulf's victory "was an accident, blind, mindless, mechanical. Mere logic of chance" (Gardner, 1989, p. 152). This is the absurd logic of accident, for it is by accident that Grendel discovers the truth he has been seeking but knew all along. One must strive toward the truth in a world gone insane, even after one confirms the world's insanity and, therefore the accidental character of life (Sanchez, 2007, p. 49).

5. Philosophy and art

As mentioned in the beginning of the article, "Art" as mediator in *Grendel* is of great importance. Before going through the passages that show this significance, it is appropriate to quote McHale's (1987) idea about Gardner's views on art:

Gardner grants a certain legitimacy to art that is not realistic. Fabulous art, he tells us, can be morally as good as realistic art, as long as it stands by its (fantastic) premises and proceeds honestly from them. Obviously such a stipulation has to be made, otherwise Gardner would be in the position of having to condemn all of the world's life-affirming fabulous art--not least of all his fabulous fictions, such as his celebrated first novel, *Grendel*. (p. 220)

He expresses that postmodernist fiction is illusion-breaking art; it systematically disturbs the air of reality by foregrounding the ontological structure of texts and of fictional worlds as it does happen in *Grendel*; things happening in this novel are all related to the fantastic world: a monster who kills human beings and a dragon with a philosophical mind. But the issues transferred to the reader by means of fictional art are so well-matched to the postmodernist era that the reader believes them all to be real.

The art of the writer to create this fantastic world finds its parallel in the matter of “Harp”-- the symbol of primitive art-- and Grendel whose life changes through this mediator. The Shaper sings of heroism of man and the battles fought. He realizes that “man had changed the world, had torn up the past by its think, gnarled roots and had transmuted it” (p. 43). The Shaper turns into the moral creator and whatever he sings becomes the truth: “the power of his songs: created with casual words its grave mor(t)ality (p. 47)”.

“Mor(t)ality” may refer to the morality principle in creation of art in Gardner’s view. “The Shaper may yet improve men’s minds” (p. 53) and mortality is the tragic creation of the Shaper. Grendel believes his own evil in view of the songs of the shaper, yet, he knows that human beings have also abused “art”:

It was a cold-blooded lie that a god had lovingly made the world and set out the sun and moon as lights to land dwellers, that brothers had fought, that one of the races was saved, the other cursed. Yet he, the old shaper, might make it true, by the sweetness of his harp, the cunning trickery. (p. 55)

It is not only Grendel who has become aware of the power of art but also the dragon. He knows that people get this feeling of “living by nonsense” every now and then. He is aware of man’s apprehensions of the existence of God and what he supposes as solution to this feeling is the Shaper. The Shaper “provides an illusion of reality--puts together all their facts with a gluey whine of connectedness” (p. 65). Hence, as Baudrillard has proposed, art functions as a “hyperreal” trying to hide the illusions of reality in order to free man from the futility of life.

6. Intertextuality and grand narratives

One of the other features of postmodernist fiction is the notion of intertextuality in relation to the grand narratives (Butler, 2002; Luntley, 1995). In *Grendel*, grand narratives such as philosophy, religion and literary criticism are questioned. To start off, let us focus on the impact of philosophy on postmodernist literature.

According to Vattimo (1998), in order to examine the question of postmodernism in philosophy in a way that avoids a rhapsodic comparison between contemporary philosophy and the apparent traits of post-modernity in other fields we must turn to Heidegger and Nietzsche.

Nietzsche was the greatest skeptic of all philosophers in the new era; he had little tolerance for enlightenment values such as reason, universality,

morality or progress. He saw the world as the dance of the destructively creative and creatively destructive god Dionysus- the dance of will to power. He proposed death of God as well as death of Christian morality and metaphysics. Nietzsche deprived western culture of a center (Christian God and morality) and replaced it by the idea of superman and also art beyond good and evil (Lee, 2003).

So dies God, slain by the religiosity and by the will to truth which believers had always had and which now leads them to recognize God himself as an error which one can do without (Vattimo, 1998, p. 407). All this features in *Grendel*. The monster is after truth, which according to Nietzsche-dragon does not exist. The dragon de-centers all the beliefs Grendel is persuaded to hold through the Shaper's song.

The insignificance of the origin increases when the origin becomes known. For Grendel, art functions as the origin of all his thoughts about the source of creation but when the dragon mitigates the significance of the Shaper and his art, the notion of origin becomes nonsensical.

There are passages in the text where religion is presented as a grand narrative to be questioned:

The king of gods is the ultimate limitation...and his existence is the ultimate irrationality...no reason can be given for the nature of God. (p. 131)

Along with the matter of center, the existence of God is questioned. The priests, who consider God as the source of all novelty, are condemned by Grendel. He says "Him too I hate", like a postmodern atheist. Apart from that there exists the parody of the parables through the story which can be considered another mockery of religion:

Why can't these creatures discover a little dignity? (p. 6)

The notion of intertextuality in the novel embraces many direct quotations from Genesis about the creation of man (51) or Peacock's theory of art and Bakhtin's theory of novel (p. 40). Nietzsche's notion of Will to Power ("the will to power resides among the stalactites of the heart" (p. 128)) in Grendel's thoughts is yet another issue. There are also references to Lacanian view of psychology: "I saw long ago the whole universe as not-my-mother" (p. 158). Thus the novel is rich in new ideas and theories of the time which are also parodied as grand narratives.

7. Language and communication

The notion of language is one of the focal features of postmodernist fiction. Wittgenstein's famous theory of 'language games' is also taken on board in the novel. The idea that there are many language games that we play (Praying, singing, gossiping, swearing or taking a vow are some examples (Powell, 1998, p. 36)) simply is irresistible for a philosophically-minded novelist such as Gardner.

Grendel is articulate; he speaks the language of human beings: "It was my own language but spoken in a strange way" (p. 23). Caliban-like, he uses the language of human beings to curse them; he has learnt the curses from these very people: "words I had picked up from these people in their rages" (p. 52) but he does not remember how he learnt to speak since he does not remember his mother speaking let alone teaching any language to him. Like Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, he suffers because he cannot enjoy communication: human beings, like animals, are frightened of anything which is different from them. Grendel tries to communicate with them but they fail to respond, like the time they misunderstand his prayers to their god and attack him. His language game does not correspond to the grim world of human reality. This condition the monster shares with the postmodern man who shares the language of people but cannot communicate with them, hence his radical existential loneliness.

8. Law of the excluded middle

In Grendel's narration of the story, there exists a kind of self-erasure which is considered to be a philosophical notion negating the law of the excluded middle. Postmodernist fiction includes the middle; that is to say, there is a third alternative to the polarity of true and false, a mode of being between existence and non-existence (McHale, 1987). The famous example is "of course it happened; Of course it didn't happen." in *Gravity's Rainbow* by Pynchon (p. 738). In this novel, this postmodernist aspect is reflected in the words of Grendel:

I observe myself observing what I observe... It startles me, then I am not that which observes! (p. 29)

I exist, nothing else. (p. 28)

I am lack. (p. 29)

Nothing was changed, everything was changed. (p. 75)

Having seen the dragon, Grendel finds a change in his life that may not

be a real change, which is a contradiction. Or what he says about the beautiful queen:

Alone and never alone (p. 75)

It would be meaningless, killing her. As meaningless as letting her live (p. 110)

These contradictions detect the chaos of the human mind; like the image of webs, spider webs of language, thought or vision. Man is entangled in these traps and he is looking for the truth of life. Grendel, a fictional monster, becomes a pilgrim looking for the purpose of life. Science fiction is not primarily concerned with distant times and supernatural events, but instead uses the unusual settings and characters to provide fresh perspectives from which to view the author's (or the reader's) time and place; in a way, it is written for the purpose of social criticism (Booker, 2001, p. 27).

9. Conclusion

To conclude, *Grendel* is the study of the universes, calling into question all kinds of ontological notions. The bitter naturalism of the 20th century novel turns into the comic skepticism presented through the strong characterization of Grendel from whose point of view the story is narrated. He is not the evil Grendel in *Beowulf* but a contemporary of us--a man who is after his identity.

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