John Gardner's Grendel and the Otherness of Nature

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Introduction

The themes of *Grendel* have been discussed by critics since it was published in 1971. *Grendel* “arguably initiated the trend” of telling a story from a monster’s perspective (Weinstock 277), and in the following decades authors and filmmakers have used that kind of reversed perspective in different ways. In Jeffrey Cohens “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” Cohen argues that a monster is an Other, and as such an embodiment of the fears in a culture. While scholarship often focuses on the human side of Grendel, nature also plays an important role. I use the word Nature meaning it as a concept referring to the part of the world that is not human, and I also highlight the contradictions in how we use the word as we speak of “human nature”. In this essay I aim to further analyze *Grendel* from the perspective of ecocriticism and Nature.

*Grendel* deals with how culture defines itself by making Nature the Other, and in the novel Gardner adopts the perspective of nature, or more specifically the projected image of nature, in the form of a monster, to show how love, hope and art can bridge the gap between culture and nature and create a connection between them. In *Grendel* the monster appears as the Other in relation to humans, and in the analysis part I further investigate the fact that he is turned into a “self” and uses a “cultured” voice. Grendel is the monster that scares Hrothgar, while the dragon and Beowulf are monsters that scare Grendel. The dragon is a nihilist isolated from the world/nature, while The Shaper, the queen and Ork function as symbols of connectedness, showing how art, love and hope may connect culture to nature.

The statement I make in this essay is that in *Grendel* the monster Grendel appears as the Other, a projection of culture’s fear of nature, and through the mind and eyes of the monster is presented the theme of how art, hope and love are connections between civilization and nature.

Background

John Gardner

John Gardner was born in Batavia, New York in 1933. When he was eleven years old his brother was accidentally killed by a two ton cultipacker that was pulled by a tractor that John himself was driving. This was the cause of nightmares throughout Gardner’s life (Howell 12). He worked as a teacher of fiction writing and wrote several novels. *The Sunlight Dialogues* and *Grendel* are among the most famous. He also wrote a biography of Chaucer, children’s stories and a work on literary criticism. He died in a motorcycle accident in Susquehanna.
Pennsylvania in 1982 (Howell 1). *Grendel* was the first book he wrote that garnered national attention in the United States.

**Gardner’s writing**

In “Understanding John Gardner” from 1993 Howell points out that the main characters in Gardner’s novels are like clowns, cartoon-like, and even resemble animals such as bears or moles (5). Howell writes that Gardner had little interest in being a realist. When he was young he was influenced by Charles Dickens. He was also influenced by comics as well as ancient stories like *the epics of Gilgamesh* and *Beowulf* and modernist writers like William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor. Howell claims that Gardner saw nihilism as a threat (12). In *On Moral Fiction* Gardner accused other contemporary writers like Norman Mailer and Joseph Heller of nihilism, but according to Howell he mixed nihilism with cynicism, blurring his own argument (8). Howell claims that Gardner could respond with a kind of “offhandedness” in interviews, and Howell warns the reader not to use Gardner’s answers in interpreting the novels (8). However, literary critics have often used Gardner’s statements about his novels to analyze his novels.

**Grendel**

John Gardner’s *Grendel* was published in 1971 and it is a retelling of the first part of the Old English epic poem *Beowulf* from the perspective of the monster. *Beowulf*, a heroic tale that is set in Scandinavia in the 6th century, was written down sometime between years 700-1000. It is one of the earliest literary works written down in the English language. It tells the tale of how the hall of the Danish king Hrothgar is terrorized by a monster named Grendel, who kills and eats Hrothgar’s thanes in nightly attacks and who is killed by the hero Beowulf. *Grendel* is told with the monster Grendel as the narrator. At the start of the novel Grendel has been in conflict with king Hrothgar and his men for twelve years. Grendel recollects his early years, when he grew up with his monster mother in a cave under water. At one time his foot gets stuck in a tree, and Hrothgar’s men discover him, but they do not know what kind of being he is. When he begins to make noise they are afraid of him. After this incident he begins visiting the hall of Hrothgar at night, killing Hrothgar’s thanes and eating them.

During the years to come he observes how the humans make war on rivaling groups of humans, and how their way of life gradually becomes more structured. In the evenings he sneaks close to the hall to hear the songs of the Shaper, a bard among Hrothgar’s men. Later in the story he encounters the dragon (possibly a figment of Grendel’s imagination), and listens to the dragon as he tells of his grim view of the world. This affects Grendel deeply, as he acquires a sense of doom and futility (75). He also encounters an old priest named Ork and wonders at his expresssions of his faith. During one of his attacks on Hrothgar’s hall Grendel is pathetically attacked by the wannabe-hero Unferth. He mocks Unferth, and refuses to kill him even if he could, laughing at his “heroism”. At the end of the story Grendel is forced by Beowulf to “sing” of the wall against which Beowulf smashes him,
and later Beowulf rips off his arm and he is dying. Grendel himself thinks he is killed by accident.

**Previous research**

**Studies of Grendel**

From an early stage the character of the monster Grendel and his relation to the original monster in *Beowulf*, as well as the structure of the novel, have been discussed by critics. Craig Stromme used Gardner’s statement about how he had structured *Grendel* in twelve chapters “hooked up to astrological signs” (Stromme 1), to conduct an analysis of how the astrological signs in different shapes appear in the twelve chapters of *Grendel*. Fawcett and Jones have based the study “The twelve traps in John Gardner’s Grendel” on Gardner’s own statements on how he wanted to go through the main heroic ideals of Western society in twelve chapters.

Reuben Sanchez in “‘You improve them my boy!’: Insanity and Self-discovery in Gardner’s Grendel” sheds light on what the dragon says – that Grendel helps to improve Hrothgar’s people – and how it is paralleled in the story by the fact that Hrothgar and his people improve Grendel (48). Sanchez suggests one of the reasons for Grendel’s question “Is it joy I feel?” on page 152 might be that he feels he helps to define Hrothgar’s society (49). Sanchez gives several examples of how Grendel dismisses the religion and behavior of the humans as insane, but Grendel also dismisses himself as insane. When Grendel hears the song of the Shaper he begins to believe in a possible meaning or truth: “Even if I must be the outcast, cursed by the rules of his hideous fable” (47).

In “John Gardner’s Grendel and the interpretation of modern fables” Robert Merrill has claimed that many critics have contradicted each other in interpreting *Grendel*. Merrill argues that *Grendel* is not a nihilistic or cynical novel, instead he states that the character Grendel functions as a negative example (166).

**Existentialism in Grendel**

In novels like *Grendel* and in interviews Gardner polemicized against the French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre (Stromme 83). Existentialism refers to a philosophy that states that an individual dealing with the absurdity and irrationality of life should act rationally and create his or her own meaning (Crowell 1). According to Howell, Gardner thought that the kind of self-centered existentialism that Sartre argued for was “solipsistic”, in that it did not take into account the situation of humans in relation to the world around them, but focused mainly on “the self” (11). Gardner thought that this kind of nihilism was tragic, and the characters in his novels struggled to remain “connected” to the world, as opposed to being a nihilist (Howell 5).

**Gardner’s Grendel and ecocriticism**

Dean Swinford has argued that *Grendel* can be read from an ecocritical point of view. Swinford writes that Grendel can be seen as a hybrid creature “stuck between the human and
animal worlds” (327). Swinford points to a number of traits that makes Grendel a part of nature: he talks of nature in possessive terms, the animals he encounters seem to see him as a top predator and he is presented as a “creature of the forest” (329). According to Swinford Hrothgar and his people are described as being a part of nature too, as they are depicted as animals (330). When Hrothgar and his men first encounter Grendel he is entangled in a tree and the men think that he is some kind of “Beastlike fungus” or spirit. Swinford states that “this characterization of a nature that determines the moral code of humanity though it has been misshapen by human activity” is recurring in the Gardner’s works (324).

Theoretical framework

Literature and the environment: Ecocriticism
In the earliest known literature, like the epic of *Gilgamesh* from 2000 BC, as well as in works by the romantic poet Wordsworth in the early 19th century and novels like *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy in the 21st century, nature has been described in different forms. Environmental issues have gradually become highlighted in cultural and political debates in the 19th and 20th centuries, due to the effects of industrialization evident in the 19th century and the species loss, deforestation, air pollution and degradation of nature habitats in the 20th century.

Nature and Culture
The historian Carolyn Merchant has argued that before industrialization human beings lived in an organic relationship with nature. Since antiquity in western civilization, the idea of nature has been described as a living organism in different forms. For example, Plato likened the world to an animal, while Aristotle introduced the idea of the male active principle and the female passive principle (Merchant 10-11). Merchant describes two general aspects of the idea of nature that has dominated western culture historically, both of which see nature as female. The first one is nature as the nurturing mother providing food and shelter for humans. Later as the scientific revolution gradually changed society, the idea of nature as wild, uncontrollable and chaotic became more common. Merchant argues that as the idea of Mother Earth was weakened the ethical strains of human activities like mining (that were associated with that idea), were also made weaker (29). According to Merchant the idea that humans dominate the earth and nature comes in part from Greek Platonic philosophy and later Christianity (28-29). The characters of Grendel’s mother and Grendel reflect the historically different images of nature as nurturing and later as wild and uncontrollable (Merchant 1-41).

In the field of ecocriticism critics such as Raymond Williams and Kate Soper have discussed the contradictions in the use of the word Nature. In “Ideas of Nature” Williams claims that ideas of Nature are “projected ideas” (82). Williams claims that historically the idea of nature as a unified concept developed in parallel with monotheism (69). He goes on to state that after the ideas of evolution and secularism gained ground in Western society, the idea of nature as an object or a machine was prevalent. According to
Williams the ambiguity of the word nature weakened it, and this was used by parts of the aristocracy in Western societies as they exploited nature resources in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (81). He thinks the view of nature as separated from civilization came at this time. Williams thinks we should recognize how varied and variable nature is. We should see it as “the changing conditions of a human world” (85). In Grendel Gardner discusses the question of whether nature is separate from civilization or part of it in a literary format, as the interaction between human civilization and nature is displayed through the eyes of a monster.

In “Is female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” Sherry Ortner regards Nature and Culture as “conceptual categories”. She states that in ritual “every culture asserts that proper relations between human existence and natural forces depend upon culture’s employing its special powers to regulate the overall processes of the world and life.” (71). In analyzing the devaluation of woman in culture Ortner argues that “Every culture, or, generically, ‘culture´, is engaged in the process of generating and sustaining systems of meaningful forms (symbols, artifacts, etc.) by means of which humanity transcends the givens of natural existence, bends them to its purposes, controls them in its interest.” (71). Interestingly, Ortner claims that there is a “polarized ambiguity” in feminine symbolism reflecting the intermediate position between culture and nature (86). When discussing the idea of Nature in Gardner’s Grendel the clarifications of the words Culture and Nature used by Ortner are useful.

The Other, Othering and Otherness

According to Lajos Brons the concept of the Other was first used by Simone de Beauvoir in 1949 as she used it as a concept opposed to (and thereby constructing) “the Self” (69). Simone de Beauvoir made clear that she was influenced by “Master-Slave Dialectic” by Hegel from 1807, which is, according to Brons, an ambiguous text about identification and distantiation in the self and the non-self, from both a political perspective and a psychological perspective (69). While Hegel seemed to describe a phenomenon that he thought occurred in all meetings between intelligible creatures, feminism and post-colonialism has later used the term “othering” meaning it as an inequality between the self and the other, the self being a culture that uses the other in defining what the culture is. Brons delimits three different kinds of othering: 1. the other as another individual mind and body unknowable to the self (elaborated on by Levinas), 2. The other as “a construction in opposition to the self” (Simone de Beauvoir), 3. Something or someone (more abstract) outside of the self, opposed to the self (Lacan) (74). Brons claims there is a major difference between a “crude othering” that alienates and dehumanizes the other, and a “sophisticated othering” that might actually help to improve the relation to the other (86-87).

Nature and otherness

In “The Discourses of Nature” Kate Soper uses the word nature to refer to all that is “not human and distinguished from the work of humanity”. She goes on to state that the idea that nature is “otherness to humanity” is fundamental, since this distinction “remains indispensable” (267). She cites Robert Goodin, who has suggested that a thing that is natural
can be defined as being “human neither in itself nor in its origin” (268). He also states that such things should have a special value, just like an original piece of art has a higher value than a copy (268). Soper points to the difficulty in defining what is natural, since human beings use material from nature to build cathedrals, design nature parks etc. (268). Nature unaffected by humanity is very hard to find on earth today. Soper describes how we consider humanity a part of nature and nature an otherness to humanity - “‘Nature’ is in this sense that which we are not and that which we are within” (270). Soper goes on to discuss the contradiction in talking about nature as an Other and at the same time using the expression “human nature” (270). She sees two different viewpoints within how we talk about nature, where one is the “nature endorsing” that wants to preserve and instigate nature values, and one view that is “nature skepticism” that thinks the former is a dubious move to “circumscribe the possibilities of human culture” (276).

Monsters
In “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen presents a method of studying a culture by analyzing its monsters. He begins by announcing that this is not a product of a “Unified Theory”, but rather the result of many fragments of ideas from different aspects. His theses are as follows: 1. “The monster’s body is a cultural body” – meaning that the monster is a projection of the fears and anxieties of a culture at a specific time and place (4). 2. “The monster always escapes” – it appears in new shapes influenced by the ideas of that specific time, exemplified with the many kinds of vampires that has been presented in literature and film (4). 3. “The monster is a harbinger of category crisis” – it escapes categorization, exemplified by the alien monster (6). 4. “The monster dwells at the gates of difference” – the monster is an “other”, exemplified by how Native Americans were portrayed as savages to justify the attacks on them (7). 5. “The monster polices the border of the possible” – the monster’s “position at the limits of the knowing” is a warning that the border should not be crossed (12). 6. “Fear of the monster is really a kind of desire” – existing near the forbidden the monster is also a temptation (16). 7. “The monsters stand at the threshold of becoming” – the monsters ask us why we have created them! (20). Cohen’s theses are a good start in an analysis of Gardner’s Grendel, as it is important to delineate the functions of the monster Grendel in relation to culture to understand his role in the novel.

Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock argues that there are times of cultural change when there is “a reversal of polarities” - the monster that has been feared actually switches side in that it may represent the “good” opposed to a norm that is rigid and hypocritical (276). He describes the TV-series “True Blood” and how “it is those who refer to others as monsters who themselves are most deserving of the label”. Weinstock also writes about the movie “The Happening”, where in a desolate landscape a small group of people tries to escape a neurotoxin that makes people commit suicide. Apparently this toxin is released by trees, as nature is “aggressively responding to human desecration” (287). This theme is similar to that of Grendel, since nature is indirectly given a “voice” or an attitude in relation to humans.
Analysis

Grendel as the Other

In *Grendel* when the Danes first encounter the monster Grendel they are puzzled and begin discussing what he is: “One of them said – a tall one with a long black beard – ‘It moves independent of the tree.’ They nodded. The tall one said, ‘It’s a growth of some kind, that’s my opinion. Some beastlike fungus’” (15). They associate him with some kind of organism. Notably, the first idea is not that he is an animal, but more generally “nature”. When one of them suggests he (Grendel) wants to eat a pig, Grendel shouts “pig!”, as if to act as the kind of creature they think he is (17). To Hrothgar’s men the monster Grendel is positioned at “the limits of the knowing” (Cohen 12) and he is something other than them – he is the Other, and he is “nature”. When Grendel screams they are frightened and one hurls an axe at him, and it is the start of the monster Grendel’s long conflict with king Hrothgar and his people.

The idea of a division between nature and culture is cultural, it is created by Hrothgar and his people, which makes the theme of nature as the Other a product of that idea. And the division between nature and culture begins with fear. In Hrothgar’s mead hall Grendel, in his own words, is “A respected guest. Eleven years now and going on twelve I have come up this clean-mown central hill, dark shadow out of the woods below, and have knocked politely on the high oak door, bursting its hinges and sending the shock of my greeting inward like a cold blast out of a cave. ‘Grendel!’ they squeak, and I smile like exploding spring” (6). To Hrothgar’s people Grendel is a projection of their fear of the nature outside of themselves and perhaps also the nature within them. After Grendel has withdrawn he listens as the Danes react to his raid: “‘This is some punishment sent us’, I hear them bawling from the hill. My head aches. Morning nails my eyes. ‘Some god is angry’, I hear a woman keen. ‘The people of Scyld and Herogar and Hrothgar are mired in sin’” (6) and Grendel says “The king has lofty theories of his own” (7). In other words, they seem to think that it is their sin, their “human nature” that is the reason behind Grendel’s vicious attack. As the Shaper sings of how the world – “every wonderbright plain and the turning seas” - was created by “the greatest of gods” (35) it appears as if he is presenting a myth that can explain the contradictory use of the idea of nature. Grendel listens to the shaper: “He told of an ancient feud between two brothers which split all the world between darkness and light. And I, Grendel, was the dark side, he said in effect” (35). Even if this may refer to the story of Cain and Abel, it also states that to the Danes the world is nature, and that nature was split in a good and a bad side. And the bad side of nature is Grendel.

If the monster Grendel is a product of the fears of king Hrothgar and his Danes, following the theses Cohen has set up, he is not really the reader’s monster, but the Danes’ monster: he embodies projected fears of the pre-medieval Scandinavians, or more correctly the fears of human culture in general (as Gardner’s novel is not aimed at being a truthful historical novel). And their fear and anxiety are directed toward the unknown side of nature. Culture, in the shape of Hrothgar’s Danes, defines itself by making Nature the Other,
something vague and frightening outside of the community, and Grendel eventually deals with how the Otherness can turn into a connection between Grendel and the Danes. The Danes sense that there is something human about Grendel as well, and some kind of nature within them: “Even now he didn’t know what I was saying, but it was clear to him, I think, that I was speaking words” says Grendel when Unferth first confronts him (58), which indicates that Unferth realizes that Grendel has a voice and is similar to himself. Grendel describes Unferth (who is disappointed over that Grendel does not fight him, thereby denying him the possibility of being a hero) as “a thinking animal stripped naked on former illusions” (74). I think Grendel’s interaction with Unferth illustrates the contradiction between defining nature as that which is not human, and still talk of “human nature”.

In “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture” Ortner argues that in every culture nature is devalued. As Grendel to the Danes is “the dark side”, he is nature devalued, which makes it a case of what Brons calls “crude othering” (86-87). Grendel’s mother appears to be closer to nature than Grendel. When she saves him from Hrothgar’s men, she comes “rolling down like thunder” and “the earth trembled” (27). This mirrors Ortner’s analysis of the female position in culture as being intermediate between culture and nature.

Grendel as an image of nature, as the Other, serves the purpose of defining the culture of Hrothgar’s people. Since a culture uses the Other to define itself, Grendel in his own words is “Grendel the truth-teacher, the phantasm tester!” (78). The dragon says to 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, religion, all that makes them what they are for as long as they last. You are, so to speak, the brute existence by which they learn to define themselves” (51).

The monster Grendel
Describing Gardner’s monster Grendel is not easy. Grendel describes himself in grotesque and contradictory poetic sentences. He describes himself as “a shadow shooter, earth-rim-roamer, walker of the world’s weird wall” (Gardner 2) and as a “pointless, ridiculous monster crouched in the shadows, stinking of dead men, murdered children, martyred cows” (2). As Grendel expresses himself with a dynamic use of language the image of the monster that is evoked is intriguing. He appears as an animal in some parts, but the fact that he uses language makes him seem like a human being. To Grendel it seems clear that he himself is related to men: “they talked in something akin to my language, which meant that we were, incredibly, related” (24). He says “How I myself learned to speak I can’t remember; it was a long, long time ago” (18). On the other hand he continuously uses animal-metaphors when describing himself: “Like a puppy nipping, playfully growling preparing for battle with wolves” (10), describing his youth he says “Crafty-eyed, wicked as an elderly wolf, I would scheme with or stalk my imaginary friends, projecting the self I meant to become into every dark corner of the cave and the woods above” (10). In a fight with one of Hrothgar’s guards he “roared like a bull gone mad” and “reached out fast like a striking snake for his leg” (55). He even uses more general nature-metaphors to describe himself: “At last, heavy as an ice capped
mountain, I rise…” (4). In other words he seems to be associated with nature, but he resembles a human being because he uses language.

Grendel’s elusiveness is reflected in how he has been interpreted by critics. Some critics have focused on whether he is “good” or “bad”. Jay Ruud identifies three sides of Gardner’s monster: “monster, devil and human” (qtd. in Swinford 326). Merrill emphasizes the human side of Grendel and compares him to “modern” characters in works by Beckett and Sartre (165). Merrill also deals with questions of whether Grendel is a “good” character or a bad example – this shows how Grendel as a monster can be placed somewhere along the gradient between good and bad, which is what Weinstock has stated (277). To the Danes he is obviously “bad”, and as Grendel describes how he cold-bloodedly murders humans and eats them, I think most readers would agree that he is “bad”. However, since the whole story is told from Grendel’s perspective, as a reader I tend to sympathize with him. Grendel appears as a fuzzy, raw and violent cartoon-like character tumbling through the world and through whose eyes the reader sees human civilization. Gardner manages to make the reader see civilization from the outside, from the perspective of nature. As a reader I can sympathize with Grendel’s view on the hypocrisy within Hrothgar’s civilization and I can feel for the desperate loneliness in Grendel’s life. On the other hand his evil is obvious and he is disgusting in his disrespect for human life. As a monster he is not a “good” character, at least his deeds are “bad” – since he is killing and eating humans.

Following the theses about monsters written by Cohen, Grendel’s elusiveness is a typical monster characteristic. Monsters escape categorization and monsters are hybrids (Cohen 6). Grendel appears to be nature speaking with a human voice. In the words of Cohen, the monster’s body is a “cultural body” that is a projection of the fears and anxieties of culture in the time the monster has appeared (4). Since Grendel is associated with nature and sees civilization from the outside, as a monster he is the image of nature as it is seen from the perspective of the Danes.

Grendel is an elusive character, as he is human and monster, good and bad, a subject of hate and pity. Grendel really “dwells at the gates of difference”, illustrating how humans handle the unknown side of nature, treating it as an Other. The blurriness of the image of Grendel reflects the blurry image humans have of nature. Hrothgar’s men speculate whether Grendel is fungus, a part of a tree or “an oak-tree spirit” (16). In Grendel the monster as an Other is turned into a “Self”, and Gardner shows the inside of the monster – the mind of the monster.

Nature and Culture: connection and resistance to connection
As the story in Grendel progresses, there is a polarity between on the one hand a force that connects nature (Grendel) and culture (Hrothgar’s civilization) and on the other hand a force that separates nature and culture from each other (illustrated in the dragon’s view on the world). Generalizing the themes of Grendel the Shaper symbolizes art, the queen love or beauty, Ork symbolizes faith, and each of these are part of the force that connects Grendel to culture. The dragon symbolizes nihilism and lack of meaning, and he is a force that separates
nature and culture. Beowulf is a guardian of human ideals and he appears to Grendel to be culture in the shape of a monster, and as such he too separates nature from culture, since he aims to kill Grendel. In the image of Grendel as the Otherness of nature (defined by Hrothgar’s culture), the Shaper, the Queen and Ork are those that connect Grendel to culture, while the dragon isolates him from culture, and Beowulf separates Grendel from culture indefinitely. Art, love and faith are forces that connect Grendel to culture, nihilism is a force that separates Grendel from culture.

When the Shaper plays and sings Grendel describes it like this: “He reshares the world. So his name implies. He stares strange-eyed at the mindless world and turns dry sticks to gold” (34). The song affects Grendel as well, even though he does not rationally believe what the Shaper sings: “…my mind aswim in ringing phrases, magnificent, golden, and all of them, incredibly, lies” (29). On Wealtheow he says: “she tore me apart as once the shaper’s song had done” (72), and “I hung balanced, a creature of two minds; and one of them said – unreasonable, stubborn as the mountains – that she was beautiful” (72). It is notable how the side of him that thinks she is beautiful is stubborn “as the mountains”, which means that the side of his two minds that could be compared to mountains (nature) is the side that finds Wealtheow beautiful. When encountering the old priest Ork, Grendel wonders at the faith Ork shows as he speaks of the God he believes in: “He is an infinite patience, a tender care that nothing in the universe be vain” (95). And as a contrast to the connectedness of these encounters, in Grendel’s life, nihilism leads to futility and loneliness.

In Grendel the dragon symbolizes the opposite of any connection between nature and culture, since his view on Hrothgar’s people and Grendel widens the division between them: “Let me tell you what the Shaper said” says Grendel, and the dragon answers “Spare me, I beg you!”, and eventually Grendel concludes: “In some way that I couldn’t explain, I knew that his scorn of my childish credulity was right” (52). The dragon seems to pull Grendel further into isolation and solitude.

If Grendel is the monster that scares Danes, the dragon is a monster that scares Grendel and perhaps the reader. Curiously, he might actually be imagined by Grendel, since the moment before the meeting is described like this: “I made my mind a blank and fell, sank away like a stone through earth and sea, toward the dragon” (39). In Gardner’s Grendel, the dragon is a nihilist who appears to view the world of humans and monsters as if from an immense distance: “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.” (51). Some of his words are actually quotations from the philosopher Alfred Whitehead, for example the lines on page 58 “Importance is primarily monistic in its reference to the universe. Limited to a finite individual occasion, importance ceases to be important…Expression, however…is founded on the finite occasion.” (48)(Stromme 4). The dragon is actually the character that has the most intelligible use of language (in competition with the shaper) in the story. In his dialogue with Grendel his way of expressing himself sticks out as a modern intellectual
contrasted with the short sentences in Grendel’s monolog, as in this example from page 65: “In all discussions of Nature, we must try to remember the differences of scale, and in particular the differences of time-span” or in this quotation from page 66: “the apparent absence of change in within a second of time says nothing as to the change within a thousand years”. The thoughts of the dragon remain in Grendel’s mind and appear to have an almost physical effect on how Grendel senses the environment.

After having met the dragon Grendel feels a sense of doom and futility: “The stench of the dragon is a staleness on the earth” (99). In fact, Grendel’s viciousness increases after he has met the dragon: “Nothing was changed. Everything was changed, by my having seen the dragon. It’s one thing to listen, full of scorn and doubt, to poets’ versions of time and visions of time to come; it’s another to know, as coldly and simply as my mother knows her pile of bones, what is” (35). The dragon can be regarded as a manifestation of the kind of nihilism Gardner most feared and loathed.

Furthermore, Beowulf in Gardner’s version appears by the end of the novel as another monster-like character, described by Grendel as having “eyes like empty pits” and with a mind “working, stone-cold, grinding like a millwheel” (115). Beowulf describes his remarkable swimming adventures fighting against Breca, and he appears as some kind of fishy water monster (115). Merrill has noted that there is a connection between the dragon and Beowulf as Beowulf cites the dragon when speaking to Grendel (Merrill 169). When he is talking to Grendel Beowulf repeats the dragon’s description of life: “A meaningless swirl in the stream of time…” but it seems that Beowulf argues against the nihilism of the dragon, adding “As you see it (the world) is, while the seeing lasts, dark nightmare history, time-as-coffin; but where the water was rigid there will be fish, and men will survive on their flesh until spring” (121). Compared to the dragon, Beowulf has a more positive view on life. However, he rejects a connection between Nature and as a consequence of the nihilism of the dragon Grendel as Nature kills humans, and Beowulf as the bad side of Culture kills Grendel. Beowulf seems to be a cultural manifestation of meaninglessness, with a blind faith in human culture, and as such intent on killing Grendel.

Since Grendel as nature and the Other is trapped in isolation from culture, Beowulf appears as a human monster to him: “His mouth did not seem to move with his words, and the harder I stared at his gleaming shoulders, the more uncertain I was of their shape. The room was full of a heavy, unpleasant scent I couldn’t place” (117). In a horrific moment for Grendel, Beowulf says “The world will burn green, sperm build again. My promise. Time is the mind, the hand that makes (fingers on harpstrings, hero-swords, the acts, the eyes of queens). By that I kill you.” (121) and forces him to sing, while he beats him in the fight that will lead to Grendel’s death. And as Grendel has been nature as monster to Hrothgar’s people, Beowulf is human as monster to Grendel, he too, like all monsters an elusive hybrid creature.
Grendel and connectedness

Howell has noted how the concept of “connectedness” was essential to Gardner in many of his works (Howell 5). As Grendel talks of the animals he encounters, he observes how they are connected to nature/earth, but men are not: “That is their happiness: they see all life without observing it. They’re buried in it like crabs in the mud. Except men of course” (3).

Merrill writes that Gardner thought “the myth of connectedness” needed to be favored (instead of the myth of nihilism) (Merrill 168).

The monster Grendel is nature as the Other, and in the story he encounters a possible connection between nature and culture that could mean the end to his Otherness (The Shaper, queen and Ork) and he also encounters a view on the world where his Otherness makes him doomed to isolation (the Dragon). As stated earlier, Grendel can be seen as projection of the Danes’ fear and anxiety regarding nature, and the dragon is the monster that scares Grendel (and so does Beowulf). This makes the dragon the monster’s monster, a projection of Grendel’s fear, manifested as another hybrid creature, policing “the border of the possible” (Cohen 12). What scares Grendel is the lack of connection, the nothingness, in the view on the world that the dragon evokes. When Grendel says “Nevertheless, something will come of all this”, the dragon replies ”Nothing, a brief pulsation in the black hole of eternity” (52). The enemy of nature, in Gardner’s view, is nihilism manifested as an “unconnected” disbelief in a meaningful connection to nature.

To Grendel meaning in life appears to be equivalent to feeling connected to the world and to nature. This can be associated to the existentialist questions of meaning vs meaninglessness. At times, though skeptical, Grendel seems to wish to put an end to his Otherness and create a connection to Hrothgar’s culture and make his life meaningful, which is evident from his relation to the Shaper. Even though Grendel can’t escape the feeling that the Christian ideas that Hrothgar’s society is based on are fake, he puts his hope to the art of the Shaper: “It was a cold-blooded lie that a god had lovingly made the world and set out the sun and moon as light 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.” (38). Even if the Shaper’s songs make Grendel relate to culture, it is evident that he still sees it as based on lies: “I knew very well that all he said was ridiculous, not light for their darkness but flattery, illusion, a vortex pulling them from sunlight to heat, a kind of midsummer burgeoning, waltz to the sickle” (33). Throughout the story the monster Grendel continues to struggle to connect to civilization in the form of Hrothgar’s Danes, through art, love and faith.

The idea that a person living in a meaningless world should find an illusion to dedicate him/herself to, is central within existentialism. Gardner indicated that one of the main themes in Grendel is existentialism. Questions about the meaning of life and existence occur frequently in Grendel’s monolog. In the details of the language the poles meaning vs meaninglessness are displayed: “The sun spins mindlessly overhead, the shadows lengthen and shorten as if by plan” (2). In other words the fact that the sun spins mindlessly indicates
that there is no meaning to the world, but the fact that shadows lengthen and shorten as if by plan indicates that there is some kind of meaning, or at least a plan. Grendel has outbursts like: “The world is all pointless accident” (18). However he also speaks of the surrounding world as if it is animate: “The sky ignores me, forever unimpressed. Him too I hate, the same as I hate these brainless budding trees, these rattling birds” (2). As the story evolves it appears Grendel experiences moments of connection to the world and human beings, and that is when he is listening to the music and poetry of the Shaper, and when he sees the beautiful queen. In those moments it is as if the division between Hrothgar’s culture and Grendel the nature-monster is gone and his Otherness potentially evaporates. However, influenced by the dragon Grendel slaughters humans and that increases the gap between him and Hrothgar’s people. As Grendel is being killed by Beowulf he whispers “Poor Grendel’s had an accident, --- So may you all.” (123), and perhaps that is actually the moment where he reaches a kind of connection to the humans.

Grendel himself functions as a connection between culture and nature only in certain moments like when he encounters Ork, since he refrains from killing Ork, and plays along as God, and when he deliberately refrains from killing Unferth, and in doing so perhaps acts less like a monster and more like a human. While Grendel is a projection of the fear of nature, considering how the novel deals with themes of basic human ideas (Stromme 91), Gardner seems to be saying that the big questions in human life that might cause anxiety, are actually connected to how we view nature. In Gardner’s view it is art, love and faith that can bridge the gap between meaning and meaninglessness, between nature and nothingness.

**Conclusion**

Gardner’s *Grendel* deals with the division between nature and culture. As Grendel is an embodiment of the fears and anxieties of Hrothgar’s Danes and is associated with the nature around them, he is also an embodiment of the traditionally contradictory discourse regarding how humans use the word nature, as it is pointed out by Kate Soper and Raymond Williams. Grendel is the “Otherness of nature” in one character, but Gardner turns the Other into a Self, letting the reader see the world through his eyes. All Grendel’s questions and his anxiety regarding meaning and connection are like projections from human civilization through history, and it is continuously connected to how culture sees nature as the Other.

The Otherness of Grendel and his connection to the world are all aspects of the same theme of a division between nature and culture, which is a division created by culture. It appears that Gardner evokes the image of art and love as a way to reach a feeling of connection to the environment and the world, even if this means believing in a myth. Grendel crosses the gap between nature and culture only temporarily, in encounters with art, love and faith. Grendel never really finds the ultimate answer; that would be impossible, since like every other monster he is the question (“why have you created me?”)(Cohen 20).
Works cited


https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/


I have enjoyed writing this essay about John Gardner's Grendel. It has been interesting and I have learnt a lot about John Gardner and his writing.