

## Son of Cain or Son of Sam? The Monster as Serial Killer in Beowulf

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The monster Grendel's final assault on the meadhall is often called the most terrifying scene in Beowulf. Three separate passages describe the killer striding from the moors toward Heorot. In each he grows closer and larger, until finally, his eyes burning in the darkness, he bursts into the room where the warriors sleep and where Beowulf-and we-await him. A critic has called the effect of these passages cinematic; visual details are precisely rendered as a long shot progressively becomes a close up (Beowulf 306). But if this scene chills us, there may be another reason, one that has less to do with precision of art than with its ambiguity. Throughout the telling of the Grendel story, the poet makes it difficult for us to name precisely the terror that is coming and to distance ourselves from it. Sometimes Grendel is called a fiend and sometimes a man; sometimes a monster and sometimes a warrior. At times he kills with claws, at other times with hands. Perhaps we are meant also to wonder in that dark room whether those fierce eyes are inhuman or human. Perhaps we stand closer than we think to this creature whom the poet calls "bereft of joys" and who lives only to kill. Should he be one of us, then of course our terror is greater and this dark poem, darker.

If thoughts like these unnerve us, there are critics anxious to put us at ease. The introduction to Beowulf in a major college anthology assures us that we "can safely assume" that Grendel is only a "fabulous [monster] of the night" (Kermode 1, 23). This solicitude is charming, though we may hear in it the briefest of hints that if we cannot assume so we may not be entirely safe. W. P. Ker, in his classic study *Epic and Romance*, finds "nothing particularly interesting" in Beowulf's struggle against Grendel (165). The monster is nothing more than a common folk motif on yet another rampage, as if Grendel is less to be feared because there are many of him instead of one. Indeed, quite understandably, in such ways is Beowulf often read: as an epic and artifact of the dark ages, its ethic the mores of Anglo-Saxon warrior culture, its monsters the products of Germanic and Biblical mythology. But I wish to examine the possibility that the raging hatred and repulsive crimes of Grendel may owe less to fiction than we think. The Grendel episode may represent the articulation of a horror so real and so much in need of the language of psychopathology to define it that it could be expressed by myth alone, the only clinical language available to poets of the dark ages. For if Grendel terrifies us, it is because both we and the poet know that his murders flow not from conventions of folklore but from the state of his mind. And we recognize in the profound hatred of that mind something that is not bestial but dysfunctionally human, and thus still with us. This paper will argue that the Beowulf poet intended to portray the kind of terror caused by serial murder for the following reasons, each one progressively more compelling than the other: because of the way Grendel acts, because of the way he thinks, because of the way he is represented in folklore, and because of the way he is transformed by myth.

The easiest part of this task, though the least convincing, is to identify the traits Grendel shares with modern serial killers. Consider the following examples: His mind is twisted by envy and hatred, "crazed with evil anger." He is profoundly anhedonic and depressive-"deprived of joys" (Beowulf 91). "He [grieves] not at all for his wicked deeds," and is therefore sociopathic. He is isolated from humanity, anomalous, "one against many" (57). His murders spring from fantasies in which he nurses his anger and plans his crimes. He is called a "moor stalker" and "a dark walker" because he prowls a particular territory, stalks his victims, peers into their rooms at night, and ambushes them when they

are vulnerable (55;89). Evading capture, he is never satisfied and kills repeatedly for "the space of twelve winters" (57). He prefers a certain type of victim: warriors who, unlike him, are as happily bonded with their society as the sorority women Ted Bundy bludgeoned to death. And strangely, although these men are strong, they still share a characteristic with victims of modern serial killers. Like trusting coeds, like prostitutes who enter strangers' cars, these warriors have a weakness, a vulnerability the murderer exploits. Every night they drink themselves insensible and when Grendel comes they lie as passive before him as any dozing victim of Richard Ramirez or young male handcuffed by Wayne Gacy. Further, Grendel murders for the sake of murder; he is "at feud with God," a feud which cannot be stopped by the paying of wergild, the Anglo-Saxon technique for curbing the murder rate (95). When he murders, he enjoys inflicting humiliation and pain, violating the human body by gutting and eating it; like Jeffrey Dahmer and his brother-in-fiction Hannibal Lector, he likes a good bit of flesh, but prefers blood to Amarone. Grendel keeps trophies, taking "plunder" back to his lair (57). Finally, like Albert DeSalvo, he has a bizarre reverence for the people he kills and the places where he kills them. He wanders in Heorot, in a kind of daze, wanting something in that place he can never have, figuratively or literally: the "gift-throne," the king's treasure, the symbol of bonding among the warriors he kills.

These similarities are undeniable but perhaps coincidental. If we focus on the motivation of Grendel, the possibility that he represents the most terrible of murderers becomes stronger. He is angry, depressed, and paranoid; he lives on the fringes of normal society. Spying on the warriors at night, he especially hates the symbolic ring-giving, as well as the joyful sounds of community, the music of the harp, and the alliterative Anglo-Saxon poetic line, itself created by a kind of bonding. For these reasons (and no others) he enters the hall in a murderous rage, smashing as many bodies as he can. Purely by chance, the scene recalls Ted Bundy's assault on the Chi Omega sorority house after he drank in a college bar and watched students dance, a healthy ritual of joy from which we know he felt forever exiled. His rage grew at last uncontrollable and savage. Out of the darkness he entered the sorority house, a place where women bond, and where, like Grendel, he smashed skulls and savaged bodies with his teeth.

It may not be pure chance, however, that Grendel's state of mind mirrors that of modern serial killers as described by those who study them, seeking clues to the etiology of this pathological condition. Eric Hickey, for example, reports that "the underlying pathology of serial killers typically is frustration, anger, hostility, feelings of inadequacy, and low self-esteem," and he concludes that "these feelings may be manifested in many ways, but the source or underlying pathology appears as a common denominator" (51). Statistically the most common form of childhood trauma among serial killers is not physical or sexual abuse, but early rejection and other problems more related to bonding and social class than to witnessing or being the object of unusual violence (Hickey 154). Elliott Leyton in his thoughtful book on the causes of multiple murder argues that "serial and mass murderers are overwhelmed with a profound sense of alienation and frustration stemming from their feelings that . . . no matter what they might do, they could not achieve the place in society to which they aspired." And even though Leyton argues that serial murder is a very late development of our culture, springing from growing tensions of class division, the cultural divisions he claims produce serial murderers actually parallel closely the strong class structure of Anglo-Saxon society which Grendel attacks. For Leyton, modern serial murderers "are among the most class conscious people in America.... their truncated sense of self and identity ... pushes them toward finding their identity and their personal fulfillment in the killings." He points out what we have already noted is true of Grendel: "Typically, their victims are drawn from a single social type or category . . . members . . . of a specific social class, most often one or two narrow social bands above the killer." These murderers "select members of that social class whom they find beautiful" (30). In this context it is interesting to recall that Grendel is called an "evil warrior." Those whom he resents are indeed like him, for they

too kill serially in feuds. And it is their beauty-of-body, of poetry, of friendship -that he hates.

Still, as Professor Ker rightly reminds us, Grendel is a monster, a creature of folklore, a common and appropriately labeled folk motif, a fact this essay cannot ignore. Is there something about the way this poet shapes what he inherits from Germanic and Scandinavian folklore that might reveal to us, not simply characteristics Grendel shares with our kind of murderer, but that an emphasis on Grendel's humanity as he murders was in fact the intention of the poet?

We of course still call savage killers monsters, but no form of this latinate word appears in *Beowulf*. The class of monster from which Grendel springs is that of the Germanic eotenas, man-eating giants, and orc-neas, walking dead men, very irritable zombies who attack the living in folktales and sagas, and who walk among us still in George Romero films. Also, as we would expect from a Christian poet, Grendel is called "a fiend from hell," another appellation which suggests that his evil is not of this world. But the way this poet uses language should keep us from making too easy assumptions about how unlike us Grendel may be. When it suits the poet, for example, the phrase "fiend from hell" is applied to human beings who carry on feuds. Moreover, the Grendel of the poem is far more complex than his humble folkloric origins suggest, for the language of the poem is rich and often intentionally ambiguous. At times, the presumption that Grendel is more a creature of the night than one of us can justify less than precise translations as when the Old English word "hand" meaning "hands" is translated as "claws" (*Beowulf* 92). As in *Paradise Lost* or *Finnegan's Wake*, there are thematic puns. Studying the original, one is surprised at the number of times Grendel is called a man; the poet, in fact, at various points uses virtually every Anglo-Saxon synonym for man to do so. But when the poet uses the ancestor of our word man, he puns, for in Anglo-Saxon, man with a long "a" meant "evil," with a short "a," "man." Thus when Grendel is called a "man-scatha" or "evil harmer," the compound is rich with several other meanings, one of which is that he is a man who harms others (*Beowulf* 307). Such elaborate craft we expect from a scop. Rather like Joyce, this poet brings several realities at once into the space of a single word. Thus the poet builds one of the bridges by which Grendel passes from the world of folklore to that of fact. As one translator has noted, "Grendel is often called 'man' or 'warrior'; he lives exiled from the joys of men; and the poet treats him ironically as a hapless retainer" (*Beowulf* 307). Thus Grendel is a man because the poet at times intends him to be one; and the man he is resembles the criminal personality we are discussing.

There is also a natural affinity between folklore and savage crime, and perhaps more importantly, between traditional images of folklore and the narcissism of real murderers. Serial murder is so innately horrible and so apparently inexplicable that the criminals who commit it have been associated with supernatural forces. Hickey has noted that "some of the early European serial killers who were thought to have been vampires or other 'creatures of the night' in reality were nothing more than depraved murderers." Thus Gilles de Rais, who drank the blood of murdered children in fifteenth century France, was thought a vampire (23). The culture's intention in so doing is not to fictionalize the crime, but to lessen the threat such irrationality poses to a belief in an ordered world. In a universe of angels, devils, and human beings, all overseen by an omnipotent god, vampires are far less disturbing than a real Ted Bundy.

Of more importance, however, particularly as we approach the mythic dimension of *Beowulf*, is the serial murderer's eagerness to play at creating metaphor by reciprocating his culture's desire for bestial and satanic comparisons that will convey the inhumanity of the crime, an eagerness shared by the media. David Berkowitz, before he invented the possibly disingenuous name "Son of Sam," signed his first note, "Mr. Monster." The Los Angeles Times helped to turn Richard Ramirez into "The Night Stalker." Ramirez, like Berkowitz, took his supernatural role seriously and, when caught, issued ominous satanic bulletins in courtroom appearances. Hickey quotes a poem composed by a

murderer about his impulse to kill that sounds quite like something Grendel might say if he had ever addressed us in the first person: "Like a beast I overcome him / ... utterly destroy him / And I cut out his heart and eat it / And I guzzle his blood like nectar" (53-54). If imaginary monsters come to us from folklore, real murderers travel in the other direction. And if Berkowitz can find a mirror in metaphors of folklore, why not any killer in any period? In a primitive society, a story-teller's frightening tale of a monster's violence, full of bestial images, might well seem a plan of action to the one among them who, for whatever reason of genetics or nurture, is predisposed toward the same savage violence.

And thus it is precisely in the area of symbol and metaphor that we see an affinity between the mind of a serial murderer and the mind of a poet. Each is unusually sensitive to the metaphors that convey unspeakable violence, and each believes passionately that literal truth must lie at the heart of figures of speech. In terms of imagination, murderer and poet may be more closely allied than is the poet with his merely ordinary audience. And nowhere is this strange alliance more important than on the level of myth. For serial murderers crave a mythic significance at least as much as poets wish to give it to them. For this reason, before the invention of clinical terms of psychiatry, the language of myth was the only language adequate to convey the nature and imagination of such a bizarre criminal mind.

Myths are rooted in action as much as imagination; they remain only if they are acted out, literally or ceremonially. Myth by its very nature is fed by the world of actuality. When Milton in *Paradise Lost* created his Satan, so important to the later development of the eighteenth century sublime, with its love of the vast, the terrifying, and the deadly, he gave him not only a standard issue human mind, but also modeled him in part on Charles II. It seems unlikely that Charles could have fathered the sublime by himself; he had to be transformed, by mythic exaggeration, into an archetype. Thus it is that we in our century are able to see in that Restoration Satan the narcissism, the disordered urges, the self-destructiveness of a mind like that of Hitler or of Stalin. Milton was no prophet; he simply understood the tyrannical mind, a continually recurring pathology. And because myths are manifested in human behavior, they are always in a state of becoming.

In primitive cultures, as Mircea Eliade has pointed out, myth precedes objective history and "just as modern man considers himself to be constituted by History, the man of the archaic societies declares that he is the result of a certain number of mythical events" (12). This does not mean, however, that primitive societies accept all their stories as true; Eliade points out that they "carefully distinguish myths-'true stories'-from fables or tales, which they call 'false stories.'" Now "'true stories' . . . include . . . those which deal with the beginnings of the world," and the reason 'creation stories are real' is that they account for what undeniably exists" (8). Therefore, "the cosmogonic myth is 'true' because the existence of the world is there to prove it" (6). Myths, more than folklore, explain what we actually see happening around us. Beowulf, of course, is a poem of a primitive tribal culture which had in its store of wisdom precisely the sorts of tales and myths of which Eliade speaks. And very early in this poem, in one of its most famous passages, a poet recites the creation hymn, which in a few joyful lines retells the cosmogonic myth of Anglo-Saxon Christian culture. It lifts the gloom of the poem, but only briefly. For it is at precisely this point that the murderer Grendel first appears, wishing to reverse creation and to kill those whose hymn it is:

*[The Almighty] victory creative,  
set out the brightness of sun and moon as lamps for earth-dwellers,  
adorned the green fields, the earth, with branches,  
shoots, and green leaves; and life He created,  
in each of the species which live and move.*

*Thus the brave warriors lived in hall-Joys,  
blissfully prospering until a certain one  
began to do evil ...  
That murderous spirit was named Grendel,  
huge moor-stalker who held the wasteland,  
fens and marshes; unblest, unhappy . . . (Beowulf 55)*

By introducing Grendel when he does, the poet attaches him for all time to the creation myth, a sign perhaps that he thought a mind such as Grendel's to be as real as the earth and the sun and, like those other realities, in need of explanation.

If Eliade's observations about primitive cultures are correct, this passage best reveals the poet's intention in characterizing the crimes of Grendel, and a number of important consequences flow from it. First, as Tolkien noted long ago, if Grendel is a kinsman of Cain, he is also a kinsman of Adam (89); he is as human, therefore, as he is monstrous. In his very first appearance in the poem, therefore, he ceases to be a fiction drawn from folklore and becomes, for the poet, a fact of Christian myth. And, surprisingly, when the poet so transforms him, he reverses the chronology of Genesis. Grendel the murderer is named before Cain, the original of murderers. Why? Is the threat represented by Grendel the murderer so immediate and his kind of murder so much worse than Cain's that the culture demands a new archetype? Is a revision of the cosmogonic myth necessary to account for a new reality—the murder not of one brother but of many strangers?

We modern readers think of both Cain and Grendel as equally legendary. The poet of course could not have thought that. The allusions to Cain in the poem are meant not only to be rhetorically effective and theologically orthodox, but also psychologically analytical and thus of practical importance, rather like Freud's appeal to the myth of Narcissus, or Jung's insistence that we see our ordinary selves in terms of archetypes. The poet invokes Cain to make Grendel's murders as real as possible and also to account for the dysfunction of his very human mind. For, as Eliade points out, "Judeo-Christianity put the stamp of falsehood and 'illusion' on whatever was not justified or validated by the two Testaments" (2). Grendel, to be actual, must cease to be a creature of the night and become a creature of the sixth day of creation. And thus when Hrothgar the king, desperate to be rid of the horror of Grendel, prays to the old pagan gods, the poet considers him foolish; the old gods are fictions; they cannot defeat a murderer as real as Grendel.

In his famous chronicle of the early Middle Ages, *The History of the Franks*, Gregory of Tours recounts the murder of his brother Peter, who was speared by an assassin. He says of the murderer, "Because of the crime which he had committed, he became a wanderer, with no fixed place of abode . . . the innocent blood which he had shed cried unto God from the ground" (Gregory of Tours 261). This murder occurred in a European street in 574 AD, but the language is straight from Genesis, and so inevitably echoes descriptions of Grendel, the exile, composed centuries later. Gregory did not wish to impart a sense of antiquity to his brother's murder, but to heighten its reality. The murderer of Peter is a contemporary but he is also Cain; the real murderer and his archetype forever share the same language and fate. Thus Gregory gives the myth new life because he has witnessed its reenactment.

Finally, as was the case with folklore, a terrifying attraction exists between the imagination of the serial killer and the ceremonies and language of myth. And, as a corollary of this, there is a necessary correspondence between the mind of this murderer and the mind of the poet who must represent him. It is on the field of myth that poet and murderer meet to do battle over their fundamentally opposed visions of the world, the murderer assaulting, the poet defending the frontier between life and death.

To tell truly the extreme perversity and pathology of Grendel's human mind, the poet must represent him in mythic terms. For, like Grendel, serial killers attack creation itself; their purpose is to annihilate, to commit not a murder, but ultimate murder. Their crimes are as symbolic as they are literal, and not infrequently they parody their culture's central myths and rituals. It was Ted Bundy who said he wished "to master life and death" (qtd. in Leyton 107), assigning himself the epic task of heroes from Gilgamesh to Christ. And the real horror of murderers assuming mythic roles lies in the fact that they are such terrifying literalists. The thrill for them comes from actualizing the symbol. Consider Jeffrey Dahmer's plan for an altar of bones on which to worship, like the Grail, the remains of those he has sacrificed (Masters qtd. in Highsmith 5). Consider Edmund Kemper, whose first victim became a sort of patron saint of his murderous career, and the ravine where he threw her a place of pilgrimage. Consider Berkowitz's messianic obedience to Sam; Ramiriz's Faustian service to the powers of darkness; DeSalvo's parody of religious holidays when he leaves a Happy New Year card propped against the toe of his hideously postured last victim. All of these in a sense wish to master life and death, to shatter the barriers of the physical world in ways we dare to do only symbolically. Communion becomes cannibalism; beatific union, necrophilia; the ineffable, the unspeakable. Through his sacrificial victims, the serial killer gains entry at last to the land of the dead, where, in the hatred that passes all understanding, he finds the joyless stasis he seeks, and where, a walking dead man, he remakes others in his own image. It is the murderer's pathology that makes him undertake this morbid journey to his own underworld, and the poet's imagination has no choice but to follow where the murderer goes and to describe the visions they both see.

We have of course found clinical terms for these crimes and scientific explanations. But our language will never abandon the old metaphors and myths. They belong to the murderers who are driven to act them out, and to the writers who seek figures to express the unspeakable. Because of the mind of its writer, because of the mind of its murderer, *Beowulf*, like all enduring literature, is contemporary.

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