

What it means to be a monster...

Grendelence

by David Stahler Jr.

In the high school course I teach on English literature, monsters abound. Not in the classroom itself (though in my darker moments, I wonder). Rather, they dot the literary landscape, appearing—to the delight of my adolescent students—in all different shapes and sizes. In fact, the very first character we encounter is a monster of the highest order, one of the oldest kinds around: the boogeyman.

The Anglo-Saxon Grendel is a nasty creature. Brooding and bitter, he chafes at the harpers' songs, the drunken, joyful echoes trickling down into his swamp from Herot and—like a demonic extrapolation of Dr. Seuss's Grinch (at least that old grouch never showed a penchant for Who-flesh)—creeps up in the dark, bursts into the great hall, and proceeds to wolf down as many sleepy Danes as he can get his scaly paws on. And then he comes back, night after night, until a young Geatish warrior finally shows up and puts an end to the nonsense. That's about as monstrous as it gets.

The kids love Grendel. They love that—beyond the fact that he's big, walks upright, and hates harp music—he's never described in any concrete way. Though they would probably never admit it, and who can blame them, I think they also love him because he's a bit of a rebel, an irritable sulker who is clearly annoyed by anyone else's good mood. (Grendelence—how's that for a neologism?) More than a few of them, even the ones who haven't read John Gardner, feel sorry for him when he drags himself, minus an arm, back to the swamps to die; they're indifferent to the notion of what would happen to them if a real Grendel showed up at their house in the middle of the night. Beowulf is a meany. A bully. Grendel is just doing his thing.

And that's what fascinates me: the fact that it's this side of Grendel, the animal in defeat—wounded, vulnerable, afraid—that makes him seem most human, that brings out the humanity in my students. Beowulf is too perfect, too confident. I try to tell them that Beowulf and Grendel are symbols, that they embody both what

we hope for and what we fear. They're okay with that. I tell them that we all have a Grendel lurking inside us, just as we have a Beowulf waiting there to grapple with him. They question their capacity for heroism. But they have no doubts about the Grendel part.

Some of the scariest monsters—rampaging dragons, mutant sharks, gut-sucking aliens—lack a human shape. Others may have a human form but lack any sort of humanity. (Anything to do with zombies terrifies me.) But the best monsters, the ones that stay with us, that engage both our intellect and our emotions, are the ones with at least some bit of soul. And the more soul they have—in other words, the closer they get to reminding us of ourselves—the more we respond. That's why, for me, Shakespeare has the best monsters. Richard III, as shriveled and twisted as he is, as rotten and destructive as he is, never fails to seduce me with his misanthropic charm and self-pity, even as everything is crumbling around him. Macbeth is about as close as you can get to watching a man become a monster without having him grow fangs or sprout horns before your eyes. And then, at the end, he becomes a man again, shattered and alone.

In the end, most monsters suffer, deservedly so, for the suffering they inflict upon others. But the monsters I like the best are the ones who surprise me with their humanity and cause me to wonder about my own. How far away are we from the monsters within? How far away are our monsters from defeat, or even redemption? These are the questions writers must wrestle with when they creep into the dark layers of the soul.