

The Space of Monstrosity in Gardner's *Grendel: A Novel*

Josephine Mariea

John Gardner's *Grendel* explores how space, time, and monstrosity mutually constitute each other, demonstrated through Grendel's movement from liminal individual monster to a complex hybridity of the space of individuality and community. I read monstrosity in *Grendel* as a showing forth of the interactions of hæcceity and alterity through the space and time of developing civilization, using DuBois's "double consciousness," Nancy's shared spatiality in *Being Singular Plural*, and Deleuze and Guattari's "stratigraphic time" to consider the interpenetrations of identity, space, and temporality.

Using the two "horrible and holy propositions" articulated by the priest—that "things fade" and "alternatives exclude"—to launch my investigation of the necessity of alterity in the formation and continuance of civilizations, I find that the role Grendel simultaneously plays and resists is one that is necessary for a community's self-identification. As community inclusion is made meaningful through a coincident exclusion, the origin and continuance of civilization is dependent upon designating elements that divide and define, and in so doing, are set outside the space of community while still being included in the total defining structure of that community. Grendel, however, questions both the validity of this exclusion as well as his subjection to it, while he simultaneously and paradoxically accepts the inherent truth of his defining difference. I consider this paradox through the way Grendel examines the validity of the space of possessed land and borders while also approaching his relationship with human civilization as a continual violation of their space, thereby granting authority to those presumptions of legitimacy. In doing so, he accepts an inherent and violent duality within his own conception of his identity: from this "double-consciousness" stems the violence of Grendel's life and death and his resultant manifest monstrosity.

Key Words: Gardner, Grendel, Stratigraphic Time, Concept, Identity, Social Narrative, Space, Boundary.

In chapter 9 of John Gardner's *Grendel: A Novel*, Grendel speaks to an old priest who presents two holy propositions that epitomize the nature of evil. These propositions - that "things fade" and "alternatives exclude" - articulate the elemental role and process that becomes Grendel's existence. These propositions are not so much concerned with the movement of time and space through multiplicity, but rather the necessity of alterity for human civilizations by spatio-temporal modes of definition and displacement. As the priest states: "The ultimate evil is that Time is perpetual perishing, and being actual involves elimination.... beauty requires contrast, and that discord is fundamental to the creation of new intensities of feeling"ⁱ These vague statements, in conjunction with the two holy propositions, cohere the recognition of Time's inevitable movement toward oblivion. To sustain an actuality of being is to instigate an inherently violent challenge to the inevitability of this movement. It is out of this violence, however, that novel concepts of identity capable of transforming this movement of time are forged.

In this novel, Grendel interacts with and becomes a part of the civilization that emerges around him by being denied a place within it. He is assigned the role of that necessary element of contrast and fundamental discord required, according to the old priest, for Hrothgar's civilization to assert an actuality of being. Grendel's role is bitter, but necessary: bringing order through civilization is dependent upon the parallel creation of elements that divide, define, and are thus excluded. It is not his alterity, however, that constitutes the monstrosity that emerges, but rather Grendel's increasing dispute with his subjection to Hrothgar's civilizing social narrative, which is manifested through his kingdom. As the novel progresses, Grendel comes to recognize not only the role assigned to him in this narrative, but also his own distinct identity and power to subvert that role and its supporting narrative, even as he also continues acquiescence to it. Thus, he simultaneously accepts and rejects Hrothgar's social narrative, and it is through this violent duality of identification that monstrosity is manifested through Grendel.

Concepts establish order. As discussed above, concepts transform the movement of time, just as the movement of time is a necessary element for the origination of concepts. According to Deleuze and Guattari in *What Is Philosophy?*, each concept is based upon an "image of thought," or way of thinking, in this case specifically regarding the identifying self in relation to others.ⁱⁱ Deleuze and Guattari also discuss a framing of temporality that orders the movement of time not by a sequential flow of measured increments but rather by the relationship and development of these "images of thought." They articulate this framework as "stratigraphic time," which is a layering of ways of thinking that subordinate the chronological order of events to the images of thought from which those events emerged, in which "'before' and 'after' indicate only an order of superimpositions."ⁱⁱⁱ

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Movements over these layers of time are prompted by “changes of orientation” in which the sociohistorical problems of an age shift, and the ways of thinking about the self in relation to others is transformed. Stratigraphic time reflects the sedimentation of divergent totalizing temporalities that emerge from the singular positioning of a self within a greater spatial and historical context: here, a social narrative. These temporalities build on and through each other, coexist, and superimpose themselves into each other in an ever-changing “stratigraphic order,” engaging one another in ways that alter or even displace each other.

Hrothgar's civilization of the land and its people marks a concept of himself in relation to others. Hrothgar, through the songs of the Shaper, engenders a narrative that establishes a conceptual foundation not only of his own primacy in this developing civilization, but also the complex networks of relationships that expand Hrothgar's concept of identity cognitively and spatially. As Hrothgar's subjects begin to tame the wilderness and construct the geographic and architectural foundation of the kingdom, Hrothgar thereby asserts a concept of identity across space and time.^{iv} His drive to civilize the land and its people expands his concept across others, by which Hrothgar's totalizing temporality, especially as it shapes a social order, expands as well. In doing so, this spatial movement concurrently produces a meaningful narrative that connects various concepts of selfhood into one fundamental image of thought. As Jean-Luc Nancy discusses the space that conveys meaning in his book *Being Singular Plural*, he states that the space between, over which one reaches toward another, “has neither a consistency nor continuity of its own.... The ‘between’ is the stretching out ... and distance opened by the singular as such, as its spacing of meaning.”^v Thus, it is the “between” space surrounding the self that reaches out to connect a plurality with meaning and, in doing so, also expands temporally. It is this expansion that establishes a civilizing order by creating a continuity from the past into the future - a narrative - that coheres different self- and other-identifications into one totalizing temporality.

As Hrothgar's kingdom and influence expands, so does the formation of roads within and extending out from his kingdom. These roads mark the reconception of the space, functioning now as a form of inscribing Hrothgar's concept. They serve to connect space and people, thereby structuring the civilization through movement across identities, a movement that is propelled by Hrothgar's social narrative. Thus, through this narrative conveyed by Hrothgar's dominant concept of identity, the people who inhabit that space begin to think differently of it and of themselves within it. Their reconceptualization becomes aligned with Hrothgar's concept of identity, and their revised self-identification locates them within the spatio-temporal landscape of Hrothgar's social narrative. Therefore, the space and the social order together form a coherent stratum of temporality.

Grendel, on the other hand, does not assert a concept of his own identity either within or outside the mere he shares with his mother and the firebrakes. Until Unferth enters this mere, which I will return to later, Grendel does not see it as being his, but only as a shared space he inhabits. Outside the mere, he only aspires to assert an identity separate from Hrothgar's concept, stating in the beginning of the novel: "I would scheme with or stalk my imaginary friends, projecting the self I meant to become into every dark corner of the cave and woods above."^{vi} As can be seen by this excerpt, prior to his first contact with humans Grendel's concept of identity is unformed and, as his cognitive interaction occurs with creatures of his own imagination, his perception of others cannot be delineated from himself, which thus remains nascent. Grendel, with a confused sense of self, struggles to understand Hrothgar's civilizing expansion, and because of this insecurity, unwittingly but resentfully believes the concept of identity it inscribes upon him. Consequently, Grendel accepts a role of contradistinction in the conceptual narrative produced by the human civilization. As a result, he is limited by the space allotted him by this role. As a place of opposition and boundary, his role defines; according to this social narrative, then, unlike Hrothgar, Grendel should not be expansive.

Furthermore, being a conceptual place of definitive boundary, Grendel serves as the necessary stimulus that maintains and strengthens the order. As the dragon told him:

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 existent by which they learn to define
 themselves.^{vii}

As the defining other, then, Grendel marks the liminal position between the engulfing chaos and the expanding order. He does not simply stand between conceptual realities, however, but rather is a hybrid. Being identified as neither as well as both order and chaos, Grendel is rather a figure of *disorder*. As Hrothgar's concept of identity continues to expand, Grendel serves as the necessary force hemming that in and, thus, maintaining the order. Hrothgar's kingdom must be balanced by a certain disorder so as to prevent his expansion from degenerating back into chaos.

As the boundary that defines humans' self-conception and -identification, Grendel comes to embody all that is rejected from that conception. The bitterness from this rejection prompts Grendel to mount a war on Hrothgar's meadhall, thus demanding their recognition of him as an intrinsic element in their self-identifying concept. By doing so, however, he

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also refuses to accept his place as the boundary. Instead, by repeatedly and violently entering the geographic and conceptual space of Hrothgar's kingdom, Grendel not only threatens the order it establishes, but also the narrative and totalizing temporality that coheres its social order and assigns him that very role for which he seeks recognition.

Just as space and others can be transformed by an expansive concept of identity, so too can a conception of self be transformed by the surrounding space and others. By physically entering and unsettling the space of Hrothgar's kingdom, Grendel not only deviates from his role assigned by the social narrative formed by Hrothgar's concept of identity, he also defies the veracity of the image of thought supporting its temporality. If Grendel were to maintain his position at the edges of civilization, he would be no more than a defining other, but by violently entering and disrupting the conceptual foundation, he becomes the monster. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen explains in "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" that "[b]y revealing that difference is arbitrary and potentially free-floating, mutable rather than essential, the monster threatens to destroy not just individual members of a society, but the very cultural apparatus through which individuality is constituted and allowed."^{viii} Thus, by violently displacing the space of Hrothgar's kingdom, Grendel questions the very social narrative that that space helps constitute. Grendel questions not only his inherent alterity but also Hrothgar's concept of identity.

As his intrusions become increasingly violent and penetrate ever-deeper into the seat of power - culminating with his invasion of Hrothgar's bedchamber and self-stifled attack on the queen - Grendel experiments with his ability to challenge Hrothgar's concept of identity through his own choices. By doing so, Hrothgar's need for Grendel's destruction multiplies as does Grendel's development of a distinct concept of his own identity. His displacement of the space of Hrothgar's kingdom destabilizes the totalizing temporality of the narrative that emerges from Hrothgar's concept of identity, allowing Grendel the opportunity to reposition himself within an alternative spatio-temporal landscape.

Although at the beginning of the novel Grendel does not have a concept of self developed enough for him to be capable of asserting his identity into a spatio-temporal location, as the text progresses Grendel becomes increasingly able to do so. Prior to encountering humans, Grendel battles for even the most arbitrary and seemingly unimportant space, ordering a ram to "Scat!" and then proceeding to stamp and hammer the ground, hurling stones, howling, and shaking his fists in the air.^{ix} As discussed, "his mere" is not even unequivocally his, but rather is shared with his mother and the fire-drakes. As the narrative progresses, however, Grendel begins to conceive of himself within a larger social order and questions the problems and hypocrisies of the human civilizations, thereby beginning the

development of a concept of a distinct identity. When Unferth enters the mere in order to attain the role of the hero in this social conceptual narrative by either killing “the monster” or being killed during a valiant effort, by refusing to kill Unferth, Grendel is able to assert an alternate concept that undermines the primacy of the narrative as he also conceptually expands that alternate concept to the space of the mere. Instead, when Unferth falls asleep, Grendel “picked him up gently and carried him home,” “laid him at the door of Hrothgar’s meadhall, still asleep,” and then “killed the two guards so” he “wouldn’t be misunderstood.”^x In killing the guards, Grendel allows himself to be identified according to the humans’ designation of him, but in returning Unferth unharmed, he challenges the validity of their designation as well as the social narrative that supports it.

Furthermore, to kill Unferth in Grendel’s own space - a space untouched by Hrothgar’s kingdom and concept of identity - Grendel would extend the spatial reach of Hrothgar’s narrative into his own home, and would thus be inundated by its totalization. But by denying within the space of the mere Hrothgar’s designation of him as monster, Grendel asserts his own concept of identity within that space, thus creating an adjacent and competing spatio-temporal landscape, which constitutes another layer of stratigraphic time. Additionally, when he then carries this alternate narrative outside the mere and into Hrothgar’s own bedchamber, attacking but deciding against killing the queen, Grendel publicly disputes the validity of the primacy of Hrothgar’s concept of identity and, thus, his very kingdom.^{xi} Although Grendel’s transformation is not absolute - he still struggles with a perception of himself within the scope of Hrothgar’s social narrative - by asserting even a fledgling sense of self separate from Hrothgar’s, Grendel becomes an even more dangerous threat than he had been when he only invaded and killed.

Grendel simultaneously upholds and internalizes those roles designated to him by Hrothgar’s civilization while he also challenges the fundamental concepts out of which those roles emerge. He refuses to sit at the edges of civilization as a defining wall, but instead violates its space and challenges the ways of thinking that give it structure and coherence. In this way, Grendel is not the other against which humans define themselves but rather the monster that threatens to dissolve the spatio-temporal landscape that construct their self-identifications. Grendel embodies a social discord manifested through his acceptance and disputation of differing concepts of identity. He states: “I hung balanced, a creature of two minds.”^{xii} Grendel holds together two images of thought, two layers of temporality within his singular consciousness.

In accepting and nurturing alternate concepts of identity, Grendel also accepts an inherent and violent duality in his own conception of identity. W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* describes a similar duality:

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It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness... two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.^{xiii}

This inclusion of Du Bois is not to equate the African American with monstrosity, but rather to illuminate the duality that becomes embodied in those individuals burdened with the designation of being the cultural and conceptual boundary for a dominant civilization's self-identification. It is through the violence of maintaining this duality that monstrosity may emerge.

Thus, monstrosity is constructed out of a mutual facing of identities across space and time in which there lacks a mutual recognition of different possibilities of identification. These two concepts of identity interpolate into each other, creating a palimpsest of expanding and contracting narratives and temporalities. From this mutual facing and self-identification, the concepts of civilization and monstrosity are concurrently and inextricably constituted. Although Grendel is designated as the monster, he alone does not comprise monstrosity; he embodies and manifests it. As the vanguard that displaces the hegemony of a social narrative, Grendel asserts the creation of a possibility of divergence as he also stands as a harbinger of destruction of the standing order. It is this double consciousness that dooms Grendel to a life and death of violence, not only because of how it affects him internally, but also because of the threat his burgeoning sense of self poses to the dominant social order.

As the embodiment of a challenge to the established order, Grendel's self-conception creates an internal violence that manifests itself in his actions, and his death is marked by the fury provoked by Grendel's refusal to adhere to his assigned role. Toward the end of the text when Beowulf is beating Grendel, he forces him to come face to face (quite literally) with himself as a wall, demanding: "*Grendel, Grendel! You make the world by whispers... Feel the wall: is it not hard?... Now sing of the walls! Sing!*"^{xiv} Throughout this scene, Grendel struggles against Beowulf's words, attempting to maintain his sense of self, "I will not listen. I continue whispering. As long as I whisper myself I need not hear."^{xv} Although Beowulf's insistence that Grendel sing of walls serves as a violent and final reminder of Grendel's role as boundary within Hrothgar's social order, Grendel's death, like his life, is an amalgamation of submission and assertion, of resignation and fury. Grendel's destruction temporarily upholds

the dominant social order, but as he realizes his eminent mortality, he takes a “voluntary tumble into death,” and in this way also maintains his fragmentary concept of self.^{xvi}

Notes

- ⁱ J Gardner, *Grendel*, Vintage, New York, 1989, pp. 132-3.
ⁱⁱ G Deleuze and F Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, H Tomlinson and G Burchell (trans), Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, p. 37.
ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.*, p. 58. For the discussion of stratigraphic time, see pp. 58-60.
^{iv} Gardner, ch. 3.
^v J-L Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, R Richardson and A O’Byrne (trans), Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, p. 5.
^{vi} Gardner, p. 17.
^{vii} *ibid.*, p. 73.
^{viii} J Cohen, ‘Monster Culture (Seven Theses)’ in J Cohen (ed), *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996, p. 12.
^{ix} Gardner, p. 5.
^x *ibid.*, p. 90.
^{xi} *ibid.*, pp. 108-10.
^{xii} *ibid.*, p. 110.
^{xiii} W Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Dover, New York, 1994, p. 2.
^{xiv} Gardner, p. 171.
^{xv} *ibid.*, p. 170.
^{xvi} *ibid.*, p. 173.

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Josephine Mariea is currently a Masters student at SUNY at Buffalo. She works primarily on intersections of identity in twentieth-century literature.