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## ZADÁNÍ BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE

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### Zásady pro vypracování:

Pedmětem práce je návrat soudobých spisovatelů k dílům klasické literatury. Autorka se bude zabývat srovnáním anglosaského hrdinského eposu Beowulf s románem Grendel od současného prozaika Johna Gardnera. V úvodní části autorka nastíní trend souasných autorů navazovat na již existující díla. Jádrem práce bude tvořit detailní analýza obou příběhů s důrazem na křesťanskou a obecně náboženskou tematiku. Práce ukáže důsledky spojitosti mezi vyprávěním a povahou příběhu i jeho mocí nad ním (Grendel lze vnímat jako příběh Beowulfa podaný právě postavou Grendela). Práci uzavře kapitola shrnující výsledky předchozích úvah a zjištění.

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**Faculty of Arts and Philosophy**

**Béowulf Today: Rewriting of the Epic in John Gardner's Grendel**  
**Veronika Dvořáková**

**Bachelor Paper**

**2010**

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Souhlasím s prezenčním zpřístupněním své práce v Univerzitní knihovně Univerzity Pardubice.

V Pardubicích dne 29. 06. 2010

Veronika Dvořáková

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## **ABSTRACT**

This bachelor paper deals with the recent tendency of rewriting works of classic literature. It is divided into three parts. The first one is theoretical and it explains the postmodern tendency and the context of Gardner's novel *Grendel*, as well as the process of creation of the old Anglo-Saxon heroic epic *Béowulf* and its time. The second part analyses the same issues in both works such as fate, vengeance etc., and shows the differences made by the different points of view of the narrator in *Grendel* and by the strong religious influence in *Béowulf*. The third chapter is fully dedicated to the character of Grendel and his picture in the novel and epos.

## **KEYWORDS**

*Béowulf*, *Grendel*, Anglo-Saxon literature, postmodernism, rewriting of classic works, loneliness, postmodern hero

## **ABSTRAKT**

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá současnou tendencí navracet se k dílům klasické literatury. Je rozdělena do tří kapitol. První je část teoretická, vysvětluje termín *postmodernismus* a zasazuje Gardnerův román *Grendel* do kontextu doby, popisuje vznik a nastiňuje pozadí eposu *Béowulf*. Druhá část rozebírá obě díla z hlediska pohledu na zásadní témata jako je odvaha, láska, pomsta, atd. Ukazuje, jak pohled vypravěče v *Grendlovi* a náboženský vliv v *Béowulfovi* může ovlivnit vyznění celého příběhu. Na konci práce je zařazeno shrnutí.

## **KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA**

*Béowulf*, *Grendel*, Anglosaská literatura, postmodernismus, návrat ke klasickým dílům, postmoderní hrdina

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

The heroic epic *Béowulf* is without any doubts one of the most important works of the entire Anglo-Saxon literature. Those 3000 lines influenced many of the following generations of writers. It not only shows the level of Anglo-Saxon literature, but it is also a valuable source of information on the life of Anglo-Saxons; about their way of thinking, their culture and many other things.

This unique poem brings an inspiration up to contemporary times. Especially at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the increase of national feelings and the re-discovering of classic pieces of national literature, and later with the postmodern tendency of rewriting classic pieces, it became very appealing for the recent authors. For example, according to *J.R.R. Tolkien encyclopedia: scholarship and critical assessment*, J. R. R. Tolkien, while being a professor at The University of Leeds, translated Sir Gawain and Sir Orfeo. Later, in 1930's, he dedicated a few lessons to *Béowulf* and it meant a breakthrough for later critics, because he pointed out its poetic value and not only the linguistic one. He translated the complete prose and also some poetic parts of the epic. The incomplete translation was issued in "*On Translating Béowulf*", *J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator* and *Beowulf and the Critics*. The examples of his translation were displayed at the Tolkien Centenary Conference by Bodleian Library, but they still have not been published. (Drout, 2007, p. 61) He represents the academic group, interested in old literature, whose purpose was to do new translations and analyses.

With the postmodernism, there appeared a new approach to the old classic pieces. Authors were trying to show them in a new light, from different points of view. They either ridiculed the whole story – for example the group Monty Python – which was something unprecedented or they re-told the story by one of the characters and turned it upside down. That is the case of John Gardner, an American writer, author of the novel *Grendel*. The

novel re-tells the epic *Béowulf* but with Grendel the beast as the narrator. Gardner gives him a personality, a very human way thinking and superior intelligence. He is telling his story with a great sense of humor and even with irony, which makes him a more developed being than the people he was fighting. He wanted to belong to their society but they, absurdly, thought he was just an animal who wanted to kill them, so they attacked him. That made him more hard and cynical and he – after a long inner fight – accepted the role of the killer they gave him.

This work is divided into three sections. The first one is theoretical, because the author of this paper considers necessary to explain the background of both *Grendel* and *Béowulf*, since they are both somehow typical for their eras. It describes the time when *Béowulf* was recorded and the process of Christianization because that is crucial for the final form of the epos. Furthermore, it explains the term *postmodernism* and the way postmodernists see the world and the recent society.

The second part analyses certain issues like vengeance, fate and fame. In *Béowulf* they are influenced by early Christianity and the persisting heathenism, which is demonstrated on chosen extracts. In Gardner's novel, they are seen through Grendel's eyes and commented by his very suggestive voice. It is very interesting how he sees it. For him, humans are just absurd creatures, blind to the purpose of their existence. And in this light their actions – such as the heroic fight – look just ridiculous. This section compares the way those issues are pictured in both works. At the end of this part, there is a subchapter on how the religion is seen and depicted in *Grendel*.

The third part is dedicated to Grendel and the comparison of his character in *Béowulf* and the novel. It is divided into a few subchapters, each of them describing a certain area that demonstrates Gardner's postmodern approach most significantly. The first subchapter analyzes the character and the personality of Grendel. The

second subchapter “Encounter with the Dragon” is included in this work because it is the most postmodernist part of the text and it is very important factor for changing Grendel’s behavior. The third subchapter is dedicated to Grendel’s extraordinary ability of speech, because that distinguishes him from everyone else and it makes the feeling of his exclusion even more prominent. The last subchapter focuses on his relationship with his mother. She is the nearest being for him, but she is completely different and he is very conscious about it. He is not even sure if she truly loves him or if it is just an animal instinct that makes her to protect him.

At the end of the thesis a conclusion is presented as a final summary for this analysis.

## **2. THEORETICAL PART**

### **2.1 POSTMODERNISM**

In the past, there were always unified art tendencies that were corresponding with the way of life and way of thinking at the same time. For example in the Baroque period, all the buildings were built at the same style – with oval shaped windows and extensive golden decorations, the dominant institution in the world was the Church and so the churches were built in an overwhelming style that was supposed to show the wealth as well as the superiority of God above men. In the Renaissance the main stream was to look to the past – to the admired Antique period. That also applied for architecture, for literature and all the kinds of arts and the general way of living as well. Postmodernism is not possible to define in the same way.

The term *postmodern* may first have been coined in 1930s to refer to a major historical transition already under way and as the designation for certain developments in the arts. But postmodernism did not gain widespread attention until the 1970s. First it denoted a new style of architecture. Then it invaded academic circles, originally as a label for theories

expounded in university English and philosophy departments. Eventually it surfaced as the description for a broader cultural phenomenon. (Grenz, 1996, p. 2)

In general it is possible to say that postmodernism is a reaction to modernism and it denies all the values and systems that were used in the past. It even argues that there are no values and sometimes it's very close to nihilism as it doubts the system of the world as we know it.

This trend is also reflected in the postmodern literature. As S. J. Grenz says, the stories are closely tighten with the author's voice, in fact, the story would not exist without it – therefore the author has a huge power above the story and it can even change the whole sense. Often there are two worlds facing each other, but divided and the main character is captured between them, not belonging to any of it. This character is confused and trying to identify itself with one of those worlds, but he is usually denied by its members. The postmodernist books are written not only to describe the reality, but also to evocate the feeling of the real world – where contradictions exist next to each other, where is really hard to say what is the truth from what is only an illusion. This is achieved by keeping the readers in the same confusion and same doubts that is experienced by author or the narrator. (Grenz, 1996)

The current postmodernist trend is to go back to the classic works of world literature and re-write them in some surprising way, in completely different points of view. For example the group Monty Python from Great Britain, takes some old story that everyone knows (for instance from the Bible) and remakes it, in their case in a parodic, ridiculing way. Also in this respect, the postmodernism is implied not only by content but also by form – they are using collages, animated features in the movies. An example of a postmodern writer would be John Gardner, whose novel *Grendel* is the subject of this thesis. He is rewriting the old Anglo-Saxon epic *Béowulf* but the narrator is the beast Grendel. He is also using different forms, there are parts

written as a dramatic piece, there are songs. Sometimes he is even using alliteration – a very old poetic device used in postmodernist text. In many places of the novel it is really difficult to decide whether the text describes the reality of the book or just Grendel's thoughts and dreams. He created the whole inner world for the Grendel, but nothing is clear and simple. While in *Béowulf* Grendel is just pure evil, Gardner reveals some facts - and above all Grendel's inner monologues – which make the division of 'good' and 'evil' world not so clear anymore. And the reader doubts till the end, exactly like Grendel himself.

## **2.2 *BÉOWULF* AND ITS TIME**

*Béowulf* is the most important Anglo-Saxon heroic epic that has been later named after its main character. Anglo - Saxon literature is dated usually between 650 – 1066 AD (according to the server [classclit.about.com](http://classclit.about.com)) and it is *Béowulf* that is considered to be the most emblematic of that period. According to Sam Newton, the manuscript was created probably between 750 – 950 AD but was recorded much later – around 1000 AD in the Nowell Codex. Even after more than two hundred years of philological, literary and historical analyzing we are no closer to discover who the author was, who the author of the manuscript was or what the history of this text is. It is sure that the 3182 verses were recorded by two scribes – and they were certainly Christian monks since the monasteries were the main (or the only) centers of knowledge and education at that time. (Newton, 1993) Previous to that time it was maintained by oral tradition for hundreds of years by English scopes and bards so it went through many changes for sure. The poem contains some historical events and characters like for example King Hrothgar and the Scyldings that are most probably based on real people in 6<sup>th</sup> century Scandinavia.

From what scientists know based on the archeological findings, early Christian churches and chapels were often built at the places of ancient heathen temples and sacred places. Also some of the church feasts – such as Easter – are said to be set on the time of the year when pagans had their celebration of spring equinox. According to the server etymonline.com for instance even the word “Easter” has pagan origins. In Norse mythology there is a goddess called Eostare, in Anglo-Saxon spelling Eostre. She was the goddess of the sunrise and spring. The purpose of taking-over these pre-Christian traditions and sacred places is quite clear – to make Christianity as natural as possible for the Anglo-Saxons, so the conversion is smooth and spontaneous.

The Church had a very important role in society. At that time, England was a heptarchy and the church was the only thing or institution that unified the seven kingdoms. The early monasteries in Northumbria were centers of education and also of the arts. Church education was very important because it was almost the only forum of literacy and learning. Many Latin works were translated by monks and also some Anglo-Saxon epics were recorded, such as *Béowulf*.

### **3. COMPARISON OF BOTH WORKS**

#### **3.1 FAME**

For Anglo-Saxons the world was a dark, hostile and unfriendly place. Mankind was troubled by many diseases that they were not able to cure, by wars that seemed endless. The only light and safe places were their mead-halls. They provided protection and they were always full of food, gifts and celebrations. The mead-halls were places where the warriors were rewarded by their lords for brave services and loyalty. Because of the nature of their time and world where everything was just temporary, not long-lasting, they

valued things that actually lasted long. It could have been a sword after the ancestors, mead hall that stood for generations at the same place or fame.

The central mead-hall in *Béowulf* is called Héoroth and it was the seat of Danish king Hrothgar:

The fortunes of war favoured Hrothgar.  
Friends and kinsmen flocked to his ranks,  
young followers, a force that grew  
to a mighty army. So his mind turned  
to hall-building: he handed down orders  
for men to work on a great mead-hall  
meant to be wonder of the world for ever;  
it would be his throne-room and there he would dispense  
his God-given goods to young and old –  
but not the common land or people's lives.  
Far and wide through the world, I have heard,  
orders for work to adorn that wallstead  
were sent to many peoples. And soon it stood there,  
finished and ready, in full view,  
the hall of halls. Héoroth was the name  
he had settled on it, whose utterance was law. (Heaney, 1999,  
line 65 – 80)

From what we know, they did not have any complex concept of afterlife. Their way to gain immortality was through fame. For Béowulf and his fellows, the secure way to get fame was by being brave and loyal to their king. The most certain way to become truly “immortal” was to die in a fight for the king and his people or while defending the mead-hall, basically – while accomplishing a heroic task. He decides to go and fight against a creature called Grendel, which is attacking Héoroth and killing the thanes of king Hrothgar. He would either kill Grendel or die in a fight. At the end he wounded Grendel so badly that the monster later died and Hrothgar tells him:

I have often honoured smaller achievements,  
recognized warriors not nearly as worthy,  
lavished rewards on the less deserving.



But u have made yourself immortal  
by your glorious action. May the God of Ages  
continue to keep and requite you well. (Heaney, 1999, lines 950  
– 955)

That is how the pre-Christian concept of fame was acquired in *Béowulf* and yet Béowulf is undoubtedly a Christian character, he clearly appreciates heathen values as well.

In Gardner's novel *Grendel*, the concept of fame and immortality is seen through the eyes of the beast Grendel. He does not share those pagan values because he did not grow up in their society and so he sees it in a completely different angle. For example when he is in Héoroth, one of the thanes, Unferth, decides to fight him and either win (and gain fame) or die in the fight (and gain fame by heroic death): "Tell them in Hell that Unferth, son of Ecglaf sent you, known far and wide in these Scanian lands as a hero amongst Scyldings. (Gardner, 1973, p. 56)" Grendel makes fun of him and humiliates him in front of all the people in Héoroth:

'I'm impressed,' I said. 'I've never seen a live hero before. I thought they were only in poetry. Ah, ah, it must be a terrible burden, though, being a hero – glory reaper, harvester of monsters! Everybody always watching you ... you know how it is – he he! Sooner or later the harvest virgin will make her mistake in the haystack.' I laughed.(Gardner, 1973, p. 57)

Then he teases him in an even worse manner – saying that he can imagine how hard it is to be a hero, who always needs to use proper language and behave in a noble way. But then he says these all has big advantages too, like lot of women around and the feeling of superiority. Unferth tries to finally fight with him, but all Grendel does is to throw apples at him and Unferth is not able to come closer to him because of that, which makes Grendel laugh even more.

He screamed and thrashed, trying to get me and at the same time trying to see if others were watching. He was crying, only a boy, famous hero or not: a poor miserable virgin. 'Such is life,' I said, and mocked a sigh. 'Such is dignity!' Then I left him. I got

more pleasure from that apple fight than from any other battle in my life. (Gardner, 1973, p. 58)

From his last comment, it is clear that he is aware of the fact that he could kill Unferth – and that would be what everyone expected. The beast killing the hero. But Grendel decided to leave him alive, which proves his intelligence. By showing him mercy, he makes clear that he does not consider Unferth to be a serious threat (which has a devastating impact on the hero) and it demonstrates his power even more – only powerful man can afford to leave his enemies alive. He also proves his sense of humor by using the apples as a weapon.

The author of the novel goes even further in ridiculing the whole concept of heroism in a next passage of the book, when he has Unferth following Grendel to his burrow. The hero comes to look for the fight and for almost certain heroic death as he says:

Except in the life of a hero the whole world is meaningless. The hero sees the values beyond what's possible. That's the nature of a hero. It kills him, of course, ultimately. But it makes the while struggle of humanity worthwhile. (Gardner, 1973, p. 61)

But Grendel sees the entire scene as it is – Unferth following him to his den, now lying in the dark, in the mud, not capable of a real fight. And so when Unferth tells him finally that one of them is going to die that night, he decides to do something unexpected once again:

'It's not true,' I said. 'A few minutes from now I'm going to carry you back to Hrothgar, safe and sound. So much for poetry.'  
'I'll kill myself,' he whispered. He shook violently now. 'Up to you,' I answered reasonably, 'but you'll admit it may seem at least a trifle cowardly to some. (Gardner, 1999, p. 61)

Gardner shows here how relative the human picture of heroism is. Because what could be more brave? To face the misery of Grendel's attacks and try constantly to fight them and also try to stay alive or just die in a battle with Grendel, which at the end doesn't solve anything. From Unferth's words is

clear that he is no longer interested in killing Grendel – and in saving the people of Héoroth – but he is selfishly focused on being a hero. And he is even willing to “cheat”, to kill himself, because he knows it would look like Grendel killed him and that would bring him fame. On the contrary with people, Grendel can see all of this and how absurd it all became. When Unferth fell asleep tired in his cave, he carried him to Héoroth, laid him at the door carefully, killed two guards and left. He comments at the end:

He lives on, bitter, feebly challenging my midnight raids from time to time... crazy with shame that he alone is always spared, and furiously jealous of the dead. I laugh when I see him. He throws himself to me, or he cunningly sneaks up behind, sometimes in disguise – a goat, a dog, a sickly old woman – and I roll on the floor with laughter. So much for heroism. So much for the harvest virgin. (Heaney, 1999, p. 61-62)

### **3.2 FATE**

Anglo-Saxons had a strong belief in fate which is quite understandable when we look at the world they inhabited and sometimes it was the only way how to explain or excuse what happened, especially when someone died or some natural disaster stroke. The Anglo-Saxon world was a gloomy, dangerous place where men were left exposed to the forces of nature that could not influence. This element has an irreplaceable role in *Béowulf* as well. The references to fate can be found throughout the poem in a quite big number. For example – and this one is especially interesting because it is a speech of the narrator:

She moved then to her place. Men were drinking wine  
at that rare feast; how could they know fate,  
the grim shape of things to come,  
the threat looming over many thanes  
as night approached and King Hrothgar prepared  
to retire to his quarters? Retainers in great numbers  
were posted for guard as so often in the past.  
Benches were pushed back, bedding-gear and bolsters  
spread across the floor, and one man

lay down to his rest, already marked for death. (Heaney, 1999, lines 1233 – 42)

He talks about how the thanes sleeping in Héoroth after Grendel was killed. They did not know that his mother will come to take vengeance on them. In another place of the story – when Béowulf is talking about the battle with a dragon, he resigns to fate and says that the fate is the master of all and it will decide everything. This is a very obvious remain of pagan concept, as he resigns to something higher than man yet there is no mention of God. But in another point of the poem, there are implied some Christian references such as in a Hrothgar's speech where he gives thanks for the relief of Héoroth, he is pointing out:

First and foremost, let the Almighty Father  
be thanked for this sight. I suffered a long  
harrowing by Grendel. But the Heavenly Shepherd  
can work His wonders always and everywhere. (Heaney, 1999,  
lines 927 – 930)

The author – through Hrothgar's speech – appeals back to God here. He is showing a big respect to the pre-Christian version of the poem – instead of replacing all the references to fate from the epic, he chose few points of the story to imply the reference to God. So he admits the role of the fate but at the same time he puts everything to the hands of God – he is the fate, he is what Anglo-Saxon pagans called fate. There is a passage of the book where Béowulf says about his upcoming fight with Grendel:

... No weapons therefore,  
for either this night: unarmed he shall face me  
if face me he dares. And may the Divine Lord  
in His wisdom grant the glory of victory  
to whichever side He sees fit. (Heaney, 1999, lines 684 – 688)

In one passage there are references to both – to God and to the fate as well, because the last line basically says whatever has to happen will happen. He calls it God's will but it might be as well called fate.

Gardner's story talks about fate as well, even that it is not pronounced clearly. It is seen through Grendel's eyes when he wonders why he lives as an outcast when inside he is as human as Danes. But while human would just call it 'fate' and reconcile to it, he is trying to find out the reason, the cause of his miserable position. From this point of view there is one very important scene and that is a meeting with the dragon which will be further analyzed in a following section of this paper.

### 3.3 VENGEANCE

Vengeance was playing a very important role in the Anglo-Saxon life. As Čermák says in his preface of *Béowulf* whenever someone was killed, his relatives or his lord were obliged to avenge him. That could have been done in two ways – either to kill the murderer or to claim some financial compensation. However, we can suppose that thanks to vendetta, many potential killers changed their mind because they knew they will be punished somehow. Also on the other hand, the mourners often preferred the financial compensation to another murder. Paradoxically, vendetta had sometimes peacemaking results and that is maybe why it lasted in a law system of England for so long, practically until the arrival of Normans.

This concept of vengeance is very important in *Béowulf*; it is in fact the motive power of the whole story. Very clear is the scene when Hrothgar laments for his counselor that was killed by Grendel's mother:

Rest? What is rest? Sorrow has returned.  
Alas for the Danes! Aeschere is dead.  
He was Yrmenlaf's elder brother  
and a soul-mate to me, a true mentor,  
my right-hand man  
...  
Aeschere was everything  
the world admires in a wise man and friend. (Heaney, 1999,  
lines 1322 – 1329)

Béowulf responds to him:

Wise sir, do not grieve. It is always better  
to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning. (Heaney,  
1999, lines 1385 – 1386)

Of course that the revenge is in contrast with the Christian belief in forgiving the enemy even if it is a murderer of a family. However, after those words of *Béowulf*, the narrator says that:

With that the old lord sprang to his feet  
and praised God for *Béowulf*'s pledge. (Heaney, 1999, lines  
1398 – 1399)

He is trying to moderate what *Béowulf* said – which may sound like a blasphemy to a Christian reader – by stating that it is an intention of God. *Hrothgar* is happy about *Béowulf*'s speech and about his willingness to avenge his people and he is thanking God for that.

The same motive leads to the battle with the dragon. Even the author himself says:

Then *Beowulf* was given bad news,  
a hard truth: his own home,  
the best buildings, had been burnt to a cinder,  
the throne-room of the Geats. It threw the hero  
into a deep anguish and darkened his mood:  
the wise man thought he must thwarted  
ancient ordinance of the eternal Lord,  
broken His commandment. His mind was in turmoil,  
unaccustomed anxiety and gloom  
confused his brain: the fire dragon  
had rased the coastal region and reduced  
forts and earthworks to dust and ashes,  
so the war-king planned and plotted his revenge. (Heaney,  
1999, lines 2324 – 2336)

Although *Béowulf* was seeking vengeance because the dragon destroyed the fortress of the Geats, the scribe is saying that his first thought was that he did something against God, that he broke his commandments.

This part of the poem probably reflects the most on the real state of that society. Although it was already mostly Christian, the pre-Christian

values were still living amongst people and vengeance was very common, even from the side of Christian kings of England. People were already afraid of God, they were following the commandments and if something bad happened to them their thoughts already were Christian – they did something bad and God is punishing them. But at the same time they felt a strong need to go and take revenge (for example on a murderer of their family members), to calm down their conscience. It was time when both values – Christian and Anglo-Saxon - were mixing and alive.

In the novel *Grendel* the motif of vengeance is not very important. In fact – there are many opportunities for which Grendel could take a revenge on people but he usually had different motivations for his attacks – such as frustration or just for simple instinct. Again, this will be further analyzed in a following chapter.

### **3.4 RELIGION IN *GRENDL***

The religion plays a very important role in *Béowulf*. It was recorded in – from this point – a very unstable period. With this epic, also the mixture of Christianity and paganism was depicted and it is very interesting to analyze the poem from that point of view as well. However, the subject of this paper is to compare both works and that is why the author of this thesis included this particular subchapter.

As postmodernism denied all the certainties that humankind had, religion was no exception.

... the postmodernism is characterized by the loss of the modern belief in (i) the moral progress of humankind in history, a (ii) conception of reason as ushering in universal agreement, or certainty, and (iii) a grand narrative account of being created human (assuming human sameness, not differences). This threefold loss has had a decisive impact upon twenty-first-century religion. In the extreme case,

postmodernism undermines the very essence, or any definition, or religion as literally *religio*: **bond**. (Sim, 2005, p. 45)

Gardner in his novel keeps the balance between heathen and the Christian religion and so it is possible to find references to both of them. Grendel is living as an outcast because of the old Biblical murder also in the postmodernist piece. He is questioning that, and he denies accepting it as a constant truth - but that is one of the issues analyzed in following section. Next to those Christian elements, there are a few that show that the Danes are keeping pagan habits as well.

For instance when the blind singer Shaper died, Grendel decided to attend his funeral.

The people listen silent and solemn to the old Shaper's song on the young man's lips, and the pyre where the old man lies stands waiting for the fire. The dead arms are crossed, the features are stiff and blue, as if frozen. ... Men light the pyre. ... It flames high at once, as if hungry for the coarse, lean meat. The priests walk slowly around the pyre, saying antique prayers, and the crowd, all in black, ignoring the black priests, keens. (Gardner, 1973, p. 103)

Although he does not perceive it as a religious act, it is clear from his description that the funeral follows the heathen way. Christians would not bury their dead on the pyre with their possession and also the words "antique prayer" reference to pre-Christian epoch. It is not the only place in the book where Gardner describes pagan funerals.

There is also one passage that is truly postmodernist - it belittles the institution of religion, as explained in this chapter earlier, it is not clear if Christianity or heathenism. This part of the text is the only one written as a play. It is when Grendel, out of being bored, goes and destroys a few statues of gods. He describes the reaction of the people when they find out, but basically only the priests seem to be bothered by that. The others do not care and after a few days they start to be annoyed by the priest's laments. But during the whole book, it is clear that the Danes do devote to their gods and



they fear them. Gardner reveals the hypocrisy here, no respect to the institute of the church and to the priests, but still the society not only tolerates them, but they even include them to their every-day lives. They accept them only because of the tradition, but their role as an intermediary between humans and gods is completely redundant.

One day Grendel went to the place where the priests were praying. An old priest comes there and Grendel makes fun of him, pretending that he is one of the gods.

An old priest, palsied, walking with a cane of ash. He thinks it has magic in it. 'Who's there?' he pipes... 'It is I,' I say. 'The Destroyer.' ... Then, suddenly impish – at times I cannot resist these things: 'Tel us what you know of the King of the Gods.' 'The King?' he says. 'The King.' I do not giggle. (Gardner, 1973, p. 91)

He plays with him like this for a little bit longer and when he is deciding whether to eat him or not, the other priests come. When the old monk tells them, they do not believe him that he heard "the voice of Destroyer" because he is senile.

THIRD PRIEST: Senility. I've been telling you the old fool's gone senile.  
ORK: Brothers, I've talked to Great Destroyer.  
THIRD PRIEST: Blasphemy! It is written: 'Ye shall not see my face.'  
SECOND PRIEST: Think what shape you'll be in for your morning devotions!  
ORK: He stood as near to me as you are!  
FIRST PRIEST: 'Worship is the work of priests. What the gods do is the business of gods.' You know the text.  
THIRD PRIEST: He's a blamed fool. If a man hankers for visions, he should do it in public, where it does us some good. (Gardner, 1973, p. 93)

The religion on *Grendel* is depicted very disapprovingly. First of all, Grendel does not believe that he is cursed by God because of his ancestor's sin. And when he decides to accept that position it is not because he would

believe it, but because more or less he does not have any other option how to belong to society. And secondly, the priests are pictured in a very ridiculous way, just like drunk and useless people, surviving on the basics of tradition and hypocrisy.

## 4. CHARACTER OF GRENDEL

This chapter is dedicated to the character of Grendel. It analyzes its picture in *Béowulf* where he is a beast, animal-like and he represents the opposite to the hero Béowulf and in Gardner's novel *Grendel*, where he is a highly self-conscious and intelligent being and his separation from the human kind gives him the possibility for making ironic comments on their society.

Grendel in *Béowulf* is a symbol of death and darkness, of chaos in the pre-Christianized world. He lives with his mother, outside of human society and outside of their "world". The only contact he has with them is in the occasions when he goes to Héoroth and kills Hrothgar's thanes. He cannot speak, so the only way how the readers get to know Grendel is through the voice of the narrator who introduces him as:

Grendel was the name of this grim demon  
haunting the marches, marauding round the heath  
and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time  
in misery among the banished monsters,  
Cain's clan, whom the creator had outlawed  
and condemned as outcast. For the killing of Abel  
the Eternal Lord had exacted a price:  
Cain got no good from committing that murder ... (Heaney,  
1999, lines 102 - 109)

According to the narrator, Grendel and his mother are the only living descendants of biblical Cain and as such, they represent pure evil in the

Christian minds and in the mind of *Béowulf* who – on the contrary with Grendel – is presented as a virtuous Christian hero.

The space given to Grendel in *Béowulf* is approximately 760 lines – from the moment when *Béowulf* arrives to Héoroth (and Grendel is introduced) to the fight where the monster is killed. The Gardner's novel retells this part of the epic from Grendel's point of view. And Gardner – as a postmodern writer – makes his Grendel a completely different being compared to the one from *Béowulf* and he even makes him a narrator of the book. Through Grendel's comments he is making everything that was given in *Béowulf* as a constant truth (the black and white division to the “good ones” and the “evil ones”) very relative.

Gardner's Grendel is a self-conscious creature, with a great gift for language with a very powerful voice. The reader can never be sure about Grendel's opinions and feelings. He often negates or doubts his own words – and everything even in one sentence. He can be ironic about himself too:

The sky ignores me, forever unimpressed. Him too I hate, the same I hate these brainless, budding trees, these brattling birds. Not, of course, that I fool myself with thoughts that I'm more noble. Pointless, ridiculous monster crouched in the shadows, stinking of dead men, murdered children, martyred cows. (I am neither proud nor ashamed, understand. One more dull victim, leering at seasons that never meant to be observed.) 'Ah, sad one, poor old freak!' I cry, and hug myself, and laugh, letting out salt tears, he he! till I fall down and gasping and sobbing. (It's mostly fake)." (Gardner, 1973, p.2)

Unlike in *Béowulf*, Grendel in Gardner's novel is not purely and mindlessly evil, he is interested in the human world and their civilization and he even has a sense of humor and irony. For example when he goes to Héoroth to fight *Béowulf*, he finds the mead-hall full of sleeping thanes and he starts to kill them, he ties a napkin around his neck before eating them – as to keep the proper manners.

They're all asleep, the whole company! I can hardly believe my luck, and my wild heart laughs ... I'm blazing, half-crazy with joy. For pure, mad prank, I snatch a cloth from the nearest table and tie it around my neck to make a napkin. I delay no longer. I seize up a sleeping man, tear at him hungrily, bite through his bone-locks and suck hot slippery blood. (Gardner, 1973, p. 116-117)

He is spending his life by observing the Danes in Héoroth and commenting on their actions. There is a man in Héoroth that fascinates him the most – the blind singer Shaper. His poetry glorifies some of Hrothgar's actions, for example wars, putting them to better light and making him look like a wise king. Because of his separation from the Danes society Grendel is actually more objective and he can see how absurd human actions sometimes are. And also – how they like to “change” the past so they always look better, how they love to idealize their world. That is why Shaper fascinates him so much – he always sings better stories than were the real ones and Grendel is caught in a conflict between the truth and the nicer, more welcoming and more attractive world that Shaper created in his songs.

'I listened, huddled in the darkness, tormented, mistrustful. I knew them, had watched them; yet the things he said seemed true. ... 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. Yet I was swept up. ... My heart was light with Hrothgar's goodness, and leaden with grief at my own bloodthirsty ways...' (Gardner, 1973, p. 31)

It shows how much Grendel suffers by the alienation from the humans. He does not understand why he cannot belong to their society when he has the same (perhaps bigger) intelligence and speak the same language. Once he listens to Shaper's singing and he finally finds out why he is living as an outcast. He learns from his song that he is a descendant of Cain who killed his own brother and for that he was cursed, doomed to live as an outcast, on the dark side. When he heard that he burst into tears, which makes him very

human and very emotional. It even drives him to a crazy and desperate attempt to reconcile with the Danes, to come closer to them and maybe to convince them that he is nothing to be afraid of:

I staggered out into open and up towards the hall with my burden, groaning out, 'Mercy! Peace!' The harper broke off, the people screamed. (They have their own versions, but this is the truth.) Drunken man rushed me with battle-axes. I sank to my knees, crying, 'Friend! Friend!' They hacked me, yipping like dogs. I held up the body for protection. Their spears came through it and one of them nicked me, a tiny scratch high on my left breast, but I knew by the sting it had venom on it and I understood, as shocked as I'd been the first time, that they could kill me – eventually *would* if I gave them a chance. (Gardner, 1973, p. 34)

This passage is very important. Gardner shows here how fragile everything in the world is and how few is enough to change it. Because the part of the original poem that this scene reflects makes totally different impression, not only it shows the whole scene as a brutal raid with only one intention – to kill. It also says that Grendel had no feelings, no emotions.

So, after nightfall, Grendel set out  
...  
and there he came upon them, a company of the best  
asleep from their feasting, insensible to pain  
and human sorrow. Suddenly then  
the God-cursed brute was creating havoc:  
greedy and grim, he grabbed thirty men  
from their resting places and rushed to his lair.... (Heaney,  
1999, lines 115 – 123)

There can be many 'if' raising from this scene – what if Grendel was living in a forest not interested at all in human society, what if he did not pay attention to Shaper's songs, what if he did not desire to belong somewhere and finally – what if people would listen to him and accept him. If the latter would happen, Grendel would be peacefully living with the Danes and they would never have a problem with a 'killing' monster. So they established their own fate by denying him. Who is guilty here? The monster or the ones that made

him? From their reaction he understood that they will never adopt him, even that he came with good intention – he did not want to kill anybody - that was just in self-defense. Because he is really troubled by him not belonging anywhere, he decides – at least for a moment - to accept the only role that humans are able to see him in – the beast, the killing monster. Because only like that he will actually belong to their community even if it means being ‘the outsider’.

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, the brothers had fought, that one of the races was saved, the other cursed. Yet, the old Shaper might make it true, by the sweetness of his harp, his cunning trickery. It came to me with a fierce of jolt that I wanted it. As they did too, though vicious animals, cunning, cracked with theories. I wanted it, yes! Even if I must be the outcast, cursed by the rules of his hideous fable. (Gardner, 1973, p. 36)

As John Michael Howell says in *The Understanding John Gardner*: “Like Dr. Frankenstein’s sensitive monster (who also inspired a poem and libretto by Gardner), Grendel is portrayed as an alienated being who feels despair and rage, and who displaces these feelings with violent acts. (Howell, 1993, p. 63)

#### **4.1 THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE DRAGON**

This subchapter will analyze one of the most important events in the novel *Grendel*. In the original epic the dragon appears long after Grendel’s death. He is woken up by a thief that goes to his den and steals a goblet from a treasure that the dragon guards.

... the wide kingdom  
reverted to Beowulf. He ruled it well  
for fifty winters, grew old and wise  
as warden of the land  
until one began

to dominate the dark a dragon on the prowl  
from the steep vaults of a stone-roofed barrow  
where guarded a hoard; ...  
he had outwitted  
the sleeping dragon and driven him to a fury,  
as the people of that country would soon discover. (Heaney,  
1999, lines 2207 – 2020)

After that he is devastating the country until *Béowulf* decides to fight him and the dragon mortally wounds him – he is the last beast the hero fights.

The dragon plays a very important role in Gardner's book where he represents some kind of a counterbalance to the blind singer Shaper who is singing about an idealized world. Grendel listens to him and he desires such a dreamy world (even though he has the role of a beast in Shaper's songs), but he is aware of the fact that the reality is different and he still finds some difficulties to accept the role of the 'cursed one'. He knows that he did not choose to be a beast and he could live with people if they accepted him. These thoughts are following him all the time, so he decides to go to find a dragon.

Gardner makes his dragon to be more than just an animal. He is very wise, basically he seems to know everything, all the mysteries of the world and the universal truth – he is that kind of dragon that it is possible to find in Asian mythology, as he is very long-lived and able to speak. When Grendel finds him in his den, the only thing that the dragon seems to care is about his treasure. When Grendel lifts one of the emeralds, the dragon gets angry and emotional – the only time in of all the meeting. That is without a doubt Gardner's way of how to connect this dragon with the one from *Béowulf*.

He already knows why Grendel came. He was even awaiting him: "His mouth opened slightly. Bits of flame escaped. 'Ah, Grendel!' he said. 'You've come.' ... 'We've been expecting you,' he said." (Gardner, 1973, p. 40-41). He knows that he came to ask about Shaper and he tells him that those are just theories that people make to deal with the chaos of the universe. Also, he

appears very nihilistic, which is understandable in consideration of his situation.

'Things come and go,' he said. 'That's the gist of it. In billion billion years, everything will have come and gone several times, in various forms. Even I will be gone. A certain man will absurdly kill me. A terrible pity – loss of a remarkable form of life. Conservationists will howl. ... Meaningless, however. These jugs and pebbles, everything, these too will go....' 'You don't know that!' I said. He smiled, showing all his teeth, and I knew he knew it. (Gardner, 1973, p. 47)

At the end he tells Grendel to accept the role of the 'brute', because humans would eventually find another one anyway. He told that he – Grendel – is a way how the society defines itself – through an outcast. And if he is so interested in humans he should seize the opportunity to be an important part of their lives: 'If man's the irrelevance that interests you, stick with him! Scare him to glory!' (Gardner, 1973, p.49).

It would not be a postmodern novel though, if there were not some hints that the entire situation is not as clear as it seems. Grendel is constantly in doubt whether the dragon is lying or telling the truth; if he is just making fun of him or if he is serious. The last advice the dragon gives to Grendel is: "My advice to you, my violent friend, is to seek gold and sit on it.' (Gardner, 1973, p. 50)" It is even said in several places of the text that he is sure that the dragon is lying and in the next sentence he contradicts himself. Gardner is playing like this with the readers who feel the same (and are also confused) as the main character Grendel – at the end of the chapter, there is no clear conclusion on what the encounter with the dragon meant to Grendel and what it means in general. The beginning of the next chapter is the following:

Nothing was changed. Everything was changed, by my having seen the dragon. It's one thing to listen, full of scorn and doubt, to poet's version of time past and visions of time to come; it's another to know coldly and simply ... what is. (Gardner, 1973, p. 51)



The only thing that objectively changes is a very ironic one: Grendel went to see the dragon because he suffers from not-belonging to society, because he was different. But after this encounter, he finds out that the dragon put a spell on him – the spell protects him against human weapons, so he is practically woundless. Of course, that seems good at first, but then it's starting to be clear that it alienated him from people even more. And the reader can only guess if it is the spell itself that estranged him even further or the encounter with something beyond human understanding – the dragon. As Grendel felt more alone than ever before, he indeed started to raid Héoroth and he became the killer, "Ruiner of Mead-halls, Wrecker of Kings" as he called himself.

I could walk up to the mead-hall whenever I pleased, and they were powerless. My heart became darker because of that. Though I scorned them, sometimes hated them, there had been something between myself and men we could fight. Now, invulnerable, I was as solitary as one live tree in a vast landscape of coal. (Gardner, 1973, p. 51)

Ever since, there are some remarks in the book referencing to the dragon, especially when Grendel behaves and feels as fatalistic as the dragon appeared. They might either highlight the incredible power of the dragon, his everlasting presence or they might also be a hint to something else. The whole Grendel's trip could have been just mental, in his mind. And the voice of the dragon could be the darker side of him speaking loud. That would explain why there are those references to the dragon when Grendel "feels" he is being the beast people are expecting him to be. For example in this extract when he is mocking one of the thanes, Unferth: "The dragon-scent in the room grew stronger, as if my teasing were bringing the old beast near." (Gardner, 1973, p. 57) In that case, the "spell" could be just simply the change that happened with Grendel that changed his point of view of the people and their world.

## 4.2 THE ABILITY OF SPEECH

In the original epic *Béowulf*, Grendel is just an animal-like monster, as referred many times before. He does not have an ability neither to speak nor to understand the humans and so the speech does not play a big role there. John Gardner, though, gave this ability to his Grendel and he even lets him speak in a very complicated, metaphorical language; not just some primitive simple sentences. Speech here is something that divides animals from humans, clearly, but Grendel is trapped in between. He loves to speak, he loves to hear the speech, he also has a very rich inner world but he cannot share it with anybody because there is no one who would understand him. That situation only highlights his loneliness:

‘Dark chasms!’ I scream from the cliff edge, ‘seize me! Seize me to your foul, black bowels and crush my bones!’ I am terrified at the sound of my own huge voice in the darkness. ... At the same time, I am secretly unfooled. The uproar is only my own shriek, and chasm are, like all things vast, inanimate. (Gardner, 1973, p. 4)

As Grendel explains, he does not remember when he has learnt to speak or how, because his mother does not speak and neither understands him. He is compensating that by talking mostly to himself and also to inanimate things, like trees, stones, even the sky: “‘Why can’t I have someone to talk to?’ I said. The stars said nothing but I pretended to ignore the rudeness. (Gardner, 1973, p.35)”

The previous chapter also analyzed the situation where Grendel decides to let one of Hrothgar’s thanes, Unferth, alive, probably the main reason for that, is that he understands how humiliating for a hero is to be left alive while others die in a fight. But another reason also could be that Unferth

seems to be the only man who can understand Grendel and also who talks back to him. When they first encountered, Unferth was just one of the many warriors Grendel has killed. But then when he speaks to him and Grendel replies he somehow seems to understand:

He frowned, trying to puzzle out my speech. I said it again, louder and slower, and a startled look came over him. Even now, he didn't know what I was saying, but it was clear to him, I think, that I was speaking a words. He got a cunning look ... the look men have when they fight with men instead of poor stupid animals. (Gardner, 1973, p. 56)

Unferth is the only one of all humans who is not thinking of him just like of an animal: "His eyebrows shot up. He'd understand me; no doubt of it now. 'You can talk!' he said. (Gardner, 1973, p. 57)" If Grendel would kill him, then again there would be nobody to talk to, nobody who would understand his words. And so he leaves him alive, despite the fact that Unferth is constantly trying to kill him or at least to get eventually killed in a fight with him. Grendel goes even so far that he is careful not to kill him!

John Gardner is supporting the importance of the ability of speech by using different language styles. Grendel is speaking in literary language and his sentences are complex and rich.

Talking, talking, spinning like a spell, pale skin of words that closes me like a coffin. ... Rushing, degenerate mutter of noises I send out before me wherever I creep, like a dragon burning his way through vines and fog. I used to play games when I was young – it might as well a thousand years ago. Explored our far-flung underground world in an endless war-game of leaps on to nothing ingenious twists into freedom of new perplexity, quick whispered plotting with invisible friends, wild cackles when vengeance was mine. (Gardner, 1973, p. 8)

In Grendel's inner monologues there is even alliteration sometimes – undoubtedly as a reference to the original epic where alliteration is one of the most important poetic devices: "...brainless, budding trees, these brattling

birds..." (Gardner, 1973, p.2), which makes Grendel speak in even higher literal style.

In contrast to his beautiful language, the other characters speak in simple sentences with poor vocabulary. The only exception is the blind singer Shaper but even he does not reach the quality of Grendel's style. For example, *Béowulf*, the hero from the Anglo-Saxon poem, is introduced here as a kind of a brainless warrior, whose only purpose is to kill without feeling any emotions.

I understood at last the look in his eyes. He was insane. ... Solemn, humourless despite the slightly ironic smile, he suddenly cut deep – yet with the same mildness, the same almost inhuman indifference except for the pale flash of fire in his eyes. ... Old king Hrothgar, for one, was pleased. The madman's single-mindedness would be useful in a monster fight. (Gardner, 1973, p. 112 – 113)

Also the death of Grendel is pictured in a different light than in *Béowulf*, where he is killed in the heroic fight.

Then he who had harrowed the hearts of men  
with pain and affliction in former times  
and had given offence also to God  
found that his bodily powers failed him.  
Hygelac's kinsman kept him helplessly  
locked in a handgrip. As long as either lived,  
he was hateful to the other. The monster's whole  
body was in pain, a tremendous wound  
appeared on his shoulder.

...  
Beowulf was granted  
The glory of winning; Grendel was driven  
under the fen-banks, fatally hurt,  
to his desolate lair" (Heaney, 1999, lines 808 – 820)

In Gardner's novel, he is killed more or less by an accident (or at least he believes so) when he slips with the blood on the floor and *Béowulf* tears his arm apart. He then escapes to the woods and he is describing how he feels and again that makes him very human. From the shock of death being so

close, to remembering his mother and to the mixture of a terrible fear from the unknown to a relief and also – at the end – some kind of joy, which surprises him:

They watch with mindless, indifferent eyes, as calm and midnight black as the chasm below me. *Is it joy I feel?* They watch on, evil, incredibly stupid, enjoying my destruction. (Gardner, 1973, p. 120)

Grendel keeps on repeating that he got wounded by an accident and Béowulf was just lucky in the fight. He is wondering what would happen if he knew about the blood, if he would escape Béowulf's grip. So it was just a pure accident that decided about his life or death. The beast Grendel is dying convinced that it all happened just by an accident of his chaotic – postmodern – world. When the animals are watching him dying, he tells his last words: "Poor Grendel's had an accident, ' I whisper. '*So may you all.*'" (Gardner, 1973, p. 120)

#### **4.3 GRENDEL'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS MOTHER**

In *Béowulf*, there is no direct description of the relationship between Grendel and his mother. The narrator of the epic makes no difference between them; he sees them like they were the same animal-like beings.

Grendel's mother,  
monstrous hell-bride, brooded on her wrongs.  
She had been forced down into fearful waters,  
the cold depths, after Cain had killed  
his father's son, felled his own  
brother with a sword.

...  
Broken and bowed,  
outcast from all sweetness, the enemy of mankind  
made for his death-den. But now his mother  
had sallied forth on a savage journey,  
grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge. (Heaney,  
1999, lines 1259 – 1310)

Through her is projected the guilt, the Christian guilt of fratricide when Cain killed Abel. It explains the reason why also Grendel is living as an outcast. It does not say anything about the depth of the mother-son relationship, but she went to take a revenge on Béowulf for killing her son. So it is clear that she felt sad and desperate because she lost her son and therefore there must have been some affection for him. If it was just a protective instinct, she would not go to Héoroth to kill Béowulf.

In Gardner's novel, the only relationship Grendel more or less keeps is the one with his mother. But as anything in the novel, neither this is black or white. Grendel himself is a much more developed character than in the Anglo-Saxon poem. As described in this chapter, he is a higher, more human being than just a ruthless killer. But that is not the case of his mother, that is in the novel described more or less the same like in the original epic.

When he was young, he did not realize that difference between them. She was protecting him in the same way the animals protect their young ones. She was the nearest being he had and he did not doubt it, because he wanted to believe it.

Of all the creatures I knew, in those days, only my mother really looked at me. – Stared at me as if to consume me, like a troll. She loved me, in some mysterious sense I understood without her speaking it. I was her creation. We were one thing, like the wall and the rock growing out from it. – Or so I ardently, desperately affirmed. (Gardner, 1973, p. 9)

When he was growing up, there was an accident that showed him how he still relied on his mother. He went out of their cave and stayed out later than usual. By accident he got trapped and he was hanging down from a tree, caught by his foot. He thought he would die, because some animal could kill him. And his thoughts in this situation belonged to his mother: “Mama! Waa! Waaa! ... I'm going to die,' I wailed. 'Poor Grendel! Poor old Mama!” (Gardner, 1973, p. 10). He was calling her, but apparently he was too far so she could

not hear him. But at the end she came to save him in the last moment before the people that had found him in the meantime had a chance to kill him. It is not clear if she went to look for him out of love, because she missed him in the cave, or just because her instinct, subconscious, forced her to leave their burrow. He is very happy to see her, obviously, but then when he wakes up back in the cave, he wants to tell her everything, how did it happen and how did he feel, what was he thinking about. And in that moment it strikes him that she is different.

When she heard me stir, she turned, wrinkling her forehead, and looked at me. ... I tried to tell her all that had happened, all that I'd come to understand: the meaningless objectness of the world, the universal bruteness. She only stared, troubled at my noise. She'd forgotten all language long ago, or maybe had never known any. I'd never heard her speak to the other shapes. (How I myself learned to speak I can't remember; it was a long, long time ago. (Gardner, 1973, p.17)

From that moment he tried to question their position in the society and his own position towards his mother. He knew that she does not understand anything, that she is more or less living like an animal, unable of deeper thoughts. He started to be more on his own and that brought him to start observing Héoroth. As was already explained in this paper, the observing of Danish society generated in him the desire to belong there. When he went to the mead-hall, people did not understand his true intention and they attacked him out of fear. He became obsessed by people, by trying to understand them and by trying to define his role in the world.

After the encounter with the Dragon, he went through an inner change and something new appeared in his relationship to his mother – contempt. He sees her in a different light.

My mother no longer shows any sign of sanity, hurrying back and forth, wall to wall, sometimes on two legs, sometimes on four, dark forehead furrowed like a new-ploughed field, her

eyes glittering and crazy as a captured eagle's. ... When I sleep, she presses me close to me, half buries me under her thistly fur and fat. 'Dool-dool,' she moans. She drools and weeps. 'Warrovish,' she whimpers and tears at herself. Hanks of fur come away in her claws. I see grey hide. I study her, cool and objective in my corner... (Gardner, 1973, p. 101)

Gardner is using Grendel's relationship with his mother to highlight his feeling of loneliness and of alienation from everybody. From the beginning when he does not realize it, he has nice feelings for his mother and he believes it is the same from her side. But as he is starting to see the injustice of the world, the unfairness of his exclusion from society because of an ancient murder he did not commit, he is getting emotionally distant from his own mother. He sees her objectively and realizes that he has nothing in common with her anymore – he is left completely on his own.

But over all that, he still has a sense of her being his mother. He is aware of the fact that she still is the only one who is showing some kind affection to him, however questionable her motivations are. When he is fighting with Béowulf and is mortally wounded, he is thinking about her again: "‘Mama!’ I below. ‘Mama, Mama! I’m dying!’ But her love is history." (Gardner, 1973, p. 120) He does not know what the readers know – that his mother is not indifferent to his death and she goes to avenge her son. He is dying completely lonely in the woods.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper was to compare the Anglo-Saxon heroic epic *Béowulf* with the postmodernist novel *Grendel* written by John Gardner. The latter is the rewritten story from *Béowulf* but from the beast's point of view



and so it depicts only the part of the Anglo-Saxon piece until the death of Grendel.

The thesis was divided into three main sections. The first one provided a little bit of the theory and the background of both *Grendel* and *Béowulf* as well as explaining the term postmodernism.

The second chapter was dedicated to the comparison of both works. There were a few issues analyzed and how they were approached in both books. It showed the influence of religion – paganism and Christianity - in *Béowulf* and the picture of religion in *Grendel*, where it is described through Grendel's eyes in very ridiculing way.

The third chapter was fully dedicated to the character of Grendel as it is the most significant difference and connection at the same time between both works. Grendel the beast in the original piece, is just an animal-like creature and a non-thinking killer. In Gardner's novel he is the narrator of the whole story and the power of his voice is very strong. He uses a very elevated and sophisticated language and he has a very rich inner world. Through his ironic comments on the Danish society and the world in general, the reader finds himself taking Grendel's side. Thanks to this method, Gardner is turning the story from *Béowulf* upside down and shows that every story has two sides and it depends on the narrator which one is revealed.

## 6. RESUMÉ

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá hrdinským eposem *Béowulf* a postmodernistickým románem *Grendel* od Johna Gardnera. *Béowulf* je považován za nejdůležitější dílo anglosaské literatury a jako takové ovlivnilo celou řadu pozdějších tvůrců. Ve své práci se autorka zaměřila na román amerického spisovatele Johna Gardnera *Grendel*, kterým se v 70. letech 20. století k tomuto dílu vrátil. Jedná se vlastně o převyprávěný příběh z *Béowulfa*, ale viděný očima Grendela, který je vypravěčem.

Práce je rozdělena do tří celků a dále na podkapitoly. První část je teoretická, protože autorka této práce považovala za důležité alespoň nastínit pozadí vzniku *Béowulfa* i *Grendela*. *Béowulf* byl zaznamenán někdy kolem roku 1000 n.l. v Nowell Codex, ale samotná legenda je mnohem starší. Předtím, než ji křesťanští mniši zapsali, byla po staletí předávána pouze ústně, a proto se do její konečné podoby promítly i změny, jimiž tehdejší společnost procházela. V básni je možné nalézt jak křesťanské prvky, které tam byly přidány písaři, tak i pohanská témata tvořící jádro příběhu.

Román *Grendel* se řadí mezi soudobou prózu a jedná se o typický postmodernistický román. Jedním z rysů postmodernismu je návrat autorů k dílům klasické literatury, která nějakým způsobem zpracovávají. Buď jako J.R.R. Tolkien, který přeložil celou řadu textů staroanglické i anglosaské literatury, ta díla v podstatě vědecky zkoumal a nechal se jimi inspirovat i pro vlastní tvorbu. Anebo jako členové skupiny Monty Python, kteří klasické kusy ve své tvorbě znevažují a dovádějí až do absurdity. Američan John Gardner patří spíše k druhé skupině, ačkoliv jeho román *Béowulfa* nezesměšňuje. Ze starého eposu si vypůjčil postavu netvora Grendela, celý příběh převyprávěl jeho očima a z Grendela učinil naprosto odlišnou bytost, než byla ta původní.

Druhá část obsahuje srovnání obou děl, především pojetí vybraných témat jako je osud, sláva a pomsta. V případě *Béowulfa* je ukázáno, jak tyto otázky ovlivnilo míchání křesťanských a pohanských prvků a hodnot, jak jsou křesťanští hrdinové motivováni pohanskou touhou po pomstě a slávě. Zvolené ukázky z Gardnerova románu ilustrují, jak na stejné záležitosti pohlíží Grendel a jak pouze vypravěčův hlas může změnit vyznění celého příběhu. Na konci této části je také zařazena podkapitola o náboženství v *Grendelovi*, kde jsou mniši zobrazeni velmi směšným způsobem. Ve společnosti nemají žádnou úctu, ani oni sami si sebe neváží. Grendel sám v nic nevěří, naopak zpochybňuje, v co věří lidé, a jeho postoj má velmi blízko k nihilismu.

Třetí část je celá věnována postavě Grendela. Vždyť právě on je hlavní postavou v postmodernistickém románu, a tvoří tedy hlavní spojnici mezi oběma díly, ačkoli je v obou zobrazen velmi odlišně. Jedná se o klíčovou část celé práce, protože ukazuje Grendela jako typického postmodernistického hrdinu. I tato část je rozdělena na podkapitoly.

První podkapitola této sekce se zaměřuje na osobnost Grendela a jeho charakter jako takový. V původním eposu je jedním z netvorů, s kterými musí *Béowulf* bojovat, a je mu věnováno pouze pár řádků, kde je popsáno, proč žije jako vyvrženec společnosti. V Gardnerově románu je ale velmi složitou postavou, s vysokou inteligencí a bohatým vnitřním světem. Tím, že žije mimo společnost, má možnost nezaujatých komentářů, které občas odhalují absurdnost lidského jednání. Z jeho vnitřních monologů je jasné, že je schopen hlubších úvah a je mnohem vyspělejší bytostí než lidé. Je velmi ironický, i vzhledem k sobě, a postupně se stává cynickým. Trpí vyloučením ze společnosti a touží se do ní zařadit. Z písní barda Shapera, příkrášlujících skutečnost a opěvujících hrdinské skutky, se Grendel dozví, že spolu s matkou údajně pyká za biblickou bratrovraždu, kterou spáchal jeho předek Kain. To ale odmítá, považuje za absurdní, aby trpěl za něco, co nespáchal. Proto se rozhodne jít na Héoroth a pokusí se o smířčí kontakt s lidmi. Ti ho

ale považují za příšeru, a tak jeho příchod chápou jako útok a brání se. Zklamaný Grendel uprchne zpět do lesů a zahořkne.

Druhá podkapitola je nazvaná Setkání s drakem a rozebírá jednu z nejdůležitějších událostí v celém románu. Grendel, zmítaný pochybnostmi o určení svého místa na světě, se rozhodne jít za drakem, velmi starým a moudrým, a čeká, že mu vše objasní. Drak ho ale ještě více zmate, protože celou dobu jejich rozhovoru není jasné, zda si dělá legraci, nebo svoje slova myslí vážně. Nakonec mu ale poradí, aby roli netvora přijal, protože jen tak se do společnosti vlastně začlení. Řekne mu, že lidé definují sami sebe i tím, že existují bytosti, které mezi sebe nepřijmou. Grendel se tedy rozhodne, že v útocích na Héoroth a v zabíjení lidí bude pokračovat, protože paradoxně tak najde své místo ve společnosti. Grendel však odchází od draka s týmiž pochybami o spravedlnosti svého údelu a později zjistí, že drak má velmi ironický smysl pro humor. Uvalil na něj zaklínadlo, které ho učinilo odolným proti lidským zbraním, čímž se od nich vzdálil ještě víc. Od té chvíle se v knize objevují zmínky o drakovi vždy, když Grendel podlehne svojí zlé stránce a moci, jakou nad lidmi má. Celou epizodu je však možné chápat i jako Grendelův duševní přerod a drakův hlas může být pouze jiný hlas Grendelova vědomí - to ale Gardner nechává na čtenáři, udržuje ho tím ve stejných pochybách, v jakých je sám Grendel.

Třetí podkapitola se zabývá Grendelovou schopností řeči. Mluví bohatým jazykem, a Gardner ho dokonce občas nechává používat aliteraci – velmi starý anglosaský básnický prostředek, čímž zároveň odkazuje na *Béowulfa*. Z lidí Grendelovi ale nikdo nerozumí, ačkoliv mluví stejným jazykem jako oni – zůstává tak chycen mezi lidským světem a světem zvířat. Cítí, že nepatří ani do jednoho. Jediný, kdo s ním komunikuje, je rytíř Unferth, což je jeden z důvodů, proč ho Grendel nechává naživu. Schopnost řeči je zde něco, co Grendela spojuje s lidmi a zároveň vyděluje od jeho vlastního druhu.

Čtvrtá podkapitola rozebírá Grendelův vztah s vlastní matkou. Ona je nejbližší bytost, kterou Grendel má, ale přesto jsou si velmi vzdálení. Grendel si ani není jistý, zda ho skutečně miluje, anebo zda se v jejím případě jedná o nějaký zvířecí instinkt, kterým ho chrání. Jeho matka mluvit nedokáže a chová se skutečně jako pouhé zvíře, a tak s ní Grendel nemůže sdílet nic ze svých zážitků a ze svých pochyb a hledání sama sebe. Na konci románu, když Grendel umírá po střetnutí s Béoulfem, patří jeho myšlenky právě jí. Ironií je, že umírá sám v lese, ve společnosti zvířat, kterými pohrdá a neví, co vědí čtenáři z *Béowulfa* – že jeho matka ho skutečně vroucně miluje, protože jinak by ho nešla pomstít.

V závěru práce autorka shrnuje poznatky, které získala při srovnávání obou děl.

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