

Grendel, a nihilist or existentialist essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Throughout the novel *Grendel* by John Gardner, the monster Grendel has many different encounters that change his view on the world, but it becomes unequivocally clear that his true way of life is through nihilism. Grendel starts out in life as a nihilist where everything is meaningless to him. However, he longs for meaning. His only dilemma is within himself because he cannot see how an animal like him has any true purpose. As Grendel matures and leaves his mother he becomes interested in looking for a meaning in the world and his purpose in it.

Then as the novel progresses Grendel comes upon a familiar evil that is nihilism that becomes his provisional way of life once again. Subsequently, an abomination of nihilism quickly comes to disprove his new found philosophy. Grendel in the beginning of the novel is naive and innocent to the world and really does not know what to believe, leaving many questions. After leaving his mother's cave Grendel's innocence is no longer unblemished and is introduced to an obscure world.

As a shield against the rest of the universe and its many skeptics Grendel tries to derive meaning from the world. Although after he leaves his mother and becomes independent Grendel realizes his mission in life is to disrupt the lives of the humans. During this time Grendel is stuck in profound confusion by how he feels that nothing is truly of significance in the world, and how no matter how many men he kills, he will not break their spirits.

Grendel articulates his emotions toward the men's' reaction when he says, " Meanwhile, up in the shattered hall, the builders are hammering , replacing the door for (it must be) the fiftieth or sixtieth time, industrious and witless

as worker ants- except that they make, small, foolish changes, adding a few more iron pegs, more iron bands, with tireless dogmatism. " (Gardner 14)

The main word to look for in this quote is " dogmatism" which in other words means to be stubborn.

Grendel cannot comprehend why the humans repair the damages when they know he, Grendel, will be back to destroy it once again. A small demonstration of Nihilism on his part, because it angers him that even though he believes that it is meaningless to fix anything; the humans do it with great importance. As Grendel continues his life he realizes that since life is meaningless that his perception of the universe is reality. Like Jean-Paul Sartre, proclaimed, " People have the power and responsibility to create their own identities-a person is born with a " blank slate" that he or she must fill in.

Grendel in a way fits in perfectly because he believes life is a " blank slate" where nothing matters and he can do what he wishes. This leads Grendel to the impression that only he matters, and he can therefore do whatever he wants to everyone else. All of this vague nihilism reaches its climax when Grendel encounters the dragon, who seems to be the ultimate nihilist who knows of " all time, all space". (62-63) The dragon then goes on to tell Grendel that since the universe will end, it, the universe, is meaningless and in other words disproves the possibility of existentialism of being a philosophy.

This brings me to Corneal West (The Corneal West Reader) who once said " Nihilism is a natural consequence of a culture (or civilization) ruled and

regulated by categories that mask manipulation, mastery and domination of peoples and nature. " This quote represents the dragon's manipulation upon Grendel. The final piece of advice that the dragon gives Grendel is to " seek out gold and sit on it". (74) In response, Grendel continues his nihilistic ways with a sense of protection and proceeds as a terrible monster by promoting havoc.

Basically, this can be seen as a foolish effort to reject the insignificance of life by destroying it. These efforts of diminishing meaning are exemplified in diverse ways. Grendel, for example, reduces religion to something that " sits in the stomach like duck eggs" (129). He also even eats the priests. Unferth becomes a victim as well but of embarrassment when Grendel reduces his heroism to a whining man by refusing not to killing him. One last example of reducing meaning would be when Grendel says that killing Wealthow would be as meaningless as letting her live.

As Grendel continues to simplify everything by noting that everything is just meaningless, he realizes just as the dragon said," " You want the world, that's what you've come for. My advice is, don't ask" (62). In other words the present is not important and neither is the future nor the past because in the end the efforts will affect nothing. Unexpectedly, as soon as the " stranger", Beowulf arrives the future becomes interesting. Grendel is intrigued by the stranger and is anxious to meet him, the stranger. When the battle occurs the reader becomes aware of many things.

The one essential thing is that Grendel exemplifies causing meaningless death while the stranger, Beowulf, brings upon death for a reason. Grendel

at the end of chapter 11 finally sums up his true philosophy when he says, “Nihil ex nihilo, I always say” (Gardner 150). That represents the phrase, “life itself is meaningless”. Apart from his apparent death you can see by the end of the book how the author John Gardner used Grendel’s demeanor and emotions throughout the book to be seen as a major demonstration of nihilism.