

Jayde Layne

Professor Eshleman

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### Driven by Darkness

Of all the strange, monstrous, and marvelous creatures in Tolkien's fiction, none has capture the public's attention as much as the crawling, slightly disturbing character of Gollum. He is one of the central characters throughout the second and third novels of *Lord of the Rings*, and arguably the only reason the quest to destroy the ring succeeded at all. It should come as no surprise then, knowing what we do about the influence of Norse mythology in Tolkien's work, that Gollum bears some striking resemblance to the monsters in those texts he so meticulously studied. Most notably of these is the monster Grendel, from the first half of the Norse text *Beowulf*. But it wouldn't be Tolkien unless Gollum also displayed some striking differences, as well.

When one discusses the role of monsters in texts, one must first define how they've been designated as monsters. Gollum toes the line between maintaining his humanity and fully becoming a monster, while Grendel is never given a physical description in *Beowulf*. However, we can identify traits of each that would designate them as monsters for the purposes of this analysis. As for Gollum, he is often described by his appearance, changed after spending five hundred years underneath the Misty Mountains. He's become unnaturally thin and gangly, covered with pale skin, his eyes strangely luminous and little hair on his head. (Tolkien 613). More than this, one of the other characters notes that when he couldn't catch a fish to eat raw, he

would engage in cannibalism by eating goblins. Grendel is never given a full physical description, but in *Beowulf* it is made clear that he also engages in cannibalism, for when he attacks the hall, “he suddenly seized a sleeping man, tore at him ravenously, bit into his bone-locks, drank the blood from his veins, swallowed huge morsels...” (Donaldson 13). By this metric of measuring a monster against social taboos, both characters qualify as monsters, as they both engage in the same monstrous behavior.

Tolkien himself had interesting ideas about what made a monster. As seen in his poem “The Hoard”, each of the downfalls was brought about by unending greed. The king, the dwarf, and the dragon met their ends because of their greed, because of their desire to store and covet more gold and other treasure than they could ever use, just to have it (Tolkien, “The Hoard”). It is unsurprising, then, to find examples of this greed in his monster Gollum, as well as Grendel. Gollum obviously seeks one thing and one thing only: the One Ring. He is consumed for his need for this one object, wrought of gold, which inspires similar greed in many of the other characters who encounter it. Grendel’s brand of greed is not so easily distinguished. When he attacks the hall he doesn’t do so in an attempt to loot it for treasure; rather, he attacks out of hate. But within that hate is a greed of his own-- a greed for family, a desire to be accepted by the race of men instead of being shunned as one of the sons of Cain (Donaldson 3). So while these characters display greed on a different scale than the characters in “The Hoard”, the trait is still present.

Another way a monster is defined is against the hero of the story, as every hero must have a monster to battle. In the case of *Beowulf*, the relationship between the title character and Grendel is simple and impersonal. Beowulf takes on the job of slaying Grendel because it will

win him favor, treasure, and renown. Grendel is merely the first foe in a line of many, only one thing Beowulf will slay in his quest for glory, a way of advancing his position and showing off his legendary strength by fighting him bare handed and displaying his rent limb on the wall of Heorot. By contrast, Gollum's relationship to the hero of *Lord of the Rings*, Frodo, is much more personal. Gollum was once a hobbit, decayed into what he now is by his desire for the One Ring, which Frodo begins to feel more and more strongly throughout the text. When Frodo fights Gollum it's not with a sword or his fists like Beowulf, it is in his mind and soul. As Verlyn Flieger writes, "the battle is psychological, not physical, and the battleground is Frodo himself." (Flieger 143). And when the battle finally ends, it's not Frodo who kills Gollum: it's his own joy at retrieving the Ring, the treasure he'd so desired. The only reason he makes it that far is because Frodo pities him, as Bilbo did; an emotion which never occurred to Beowulf for Grendel.

Another way in which Grendel and Gollum are similar is their connections to the non-monstrous world, that small piece of them that is still human and tugs at the readers sense of pity. As we know Gollum was once a creature similar to a Hobbit, with a large family and friends that cast him out. Grendel, too, has a family in his mother, who loves him enough to enact revenge against Beowulf for killing him. In the text of *Beowulf* it is noted that Grendel despises the other humans for having all the things he cannot have, light and joy, happiness, etc., and as we learned in Lecture 7, Old Norse monsters are often driven to their monstrous behavior by being socially outcast (Class Handout). Both Grendel and Gollum experience the same social ostracization, and it is in part what drives them to the shadows to become the monsters they end up as.

Finally, as noted earlier and in Lecture 6, the hero must slay a monster to resolve the plot (Class Handout). And both Grendel and Gollum wind up dead by the end of the story, their deaths resolving major plot points in the process, though how they died is indicative of their character as well as the stories they are placed in. Grendel is the first monster in the story to die at Beowulf's hand, a demonstration of his prowess, as well as a catalyst for the next part of the story when his mother seeks vengeance. On the other hand, Gollum doesn't die until the end of the story, and it's not a sword that kills him, it's his own desire for the Ring. Not only does his falling into the lava of Mount Doom destroy the Ring and defeat Sauron, it's also a poignant reminder of what could have become of Frodo if Gollum hadn't taken the Ring from him forcefully. In this instance the monster does not bring the hero renown, but instead saves him from a terrible fate, and is slain by his own flaws than by the might of another. This difference is what distinguishes Gollum from many other monsters, both in modern fiction and in the Old Norse texts Tolkien studied so intently.

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