

# Resist the Abyss

## Why the Dragon in *Grendel* is Wrong (and Why It Matters)

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He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.

Friedrich Nietzsche  
*Beyond Good and Evil* (1886)

The dragon in *Grendel* personifies hedonistic nihilism — the bleak mindset that says we have nothing worth living for except the mere satisfaction of our own selfish pleasure. He knows all and sees all. (Or so he says.) This, of course, is “what makes [him] so sick and old and tired” (61). He is forever “unimpressed” (61); he derides everything around him, especially the “lower minds” trapped in the “Dark Ages” (67), a phrase he himself believes to be meaningless. He barks at Grendel to “BE STILL!” (62, original capitalization), even when the poor “monster” merely asks why guarding gold is a worthwhile goal.

Worst of all, he recognizes Grendel’s feeble state of mind and nurtures the despair. His eye becomes Nietzsche’s abyss. On page 61 Grendel says: “I felt as if I were tumbling down into it—dropping endlessly down through a soundless void. He let me fall, down and down toward a black sun and spiders, though he knew I was beginning to die.” The spiders on the black sun return at the end of chapter nine, bookending “[a] void boundless as a nether sky” (137). Soon afterward Grendel succumbs, relieved, to the man with “blinding white wings [who] breathes out fire” (172); it is Beowulf, death manifest in dragon form.

The dragon’s rejection of meaning and Grendel’s embrace of death are inextricably linked. In his landmark 1942 essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus begins with this: “*Il n’y a qu’un problème philosophique vraiment sérieux : c’est le suicide.*” (“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.”) Whether Grendel actually commits suicide is open for debate, but for now we’ll accept “voluntary tumble into death” (173) as evidence enough. Without a clear purpose, or various forms of meaning to which we may align ourselves, a person’s existence becomes as capricious as flipping a coin. “I therefore conclude,” Camus decides, “that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions” (4).

From his earliest moments of conscious thought, Grendel attacks these questions. Alas, the only person he can ask — aside from the “large old shapes with smouldering eyes” (16) — is his mother. And

when he does, “[h]er fat lips shake. ‘Don’t ask!’ her wiggling claws implore. (She never speaks.)” (11) In true existentialist form, then, Grendel is left alone and adrift in an unfathomable universe, forced to make his own sense of the “meaningful patterns that do not exist” (11) and ascertain, if he can, what meaning there might be for his continued existence.

His predicament is bad enough, but it’s made even worse by the humans he observes. “It was their confidence, maybe,” he explains on page 77, “their blissful, swinish ignorance, their bumptious self-satisfaction, and, worst of all, their *hope*.” (original emphasis) Nothing is more odious to a person without hope than observing someone who has it.

By the end, it’s clear that Grendel has lost all hope, and decides he can never find any. This question of hope, then, is key to assessing the value of meaning, and therefore rescuing souls of despair from the nightmare of self-harm and self-obliteration. Because the dragon so gleefully burns hope out of Grendel like an acidic parasite, he is public enemy number one in this matter. While I respect the dragon’s macrocosmic perspective, I wage endless war against his cynicism and despair, for the sake of humanity.

Before proceeding, allow me to be clear: This matter is intensely personal for me. I have lost good friends to suicide, and I feel a crushing kinship to those humans of all backgrounds who have traveled to the deadly caverns of nihilism. I’ve been there, and I have breathed deeply that foul stench. Climbing out is painful and difficult, but it’s worth doing. As they say, it gets better.

### **Phony Observation and Crackpot Theories**

Like Monsieur Caulfield in JD Salinger’s 1951 novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, Grendel is disgusted by the world around him. Both characters are driven by a passion for truth and authenticity, and find nothing but shallow dishonesty around every corner. The world is “full of phonies”, as Caulfield says (131).

For Grendel the problem is more basic: The world around him is brain-dead, moving without thought like the sun which “spins mindlessly overhead” (7). The ram, the bull, the stars — they are machinistic, as predictable and autonomic as clocks. Zombies, robots. The same is true about Grendel’s mother; she is protective, yes, but driven solely by her instincts. Even the humans, he decides, are viral forms, insects: Hrothgar’s warriors are “hornets” (40) who slavishly obey “orders the king has forgotten to cancel” (141).

Most people live in this shallow machinistic world; they are unable or unwilling to explore the depths of our existential predicament. If we wish to be generous, we might say they are like the deer: they “can make [...] no delicate distinctions”, which becomes “their happiness” (8). Perhaps they are chained in Plato’s cave, ignorant to the truth and filled with bliss as a result. Perhaps they have tried wading into the waters of philosophy in the past, but find the torrents too terrifying.

Or perhaps we should quote Henry David Thoreau, who writes in *Walden* that “[t]he mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation”. Perhaps their lives are so difficult that digging into Nietzsche’s abyss is

simply unthinkable. If we wish to be less generous, we can call them cowardly — willfully ignorant of the painful truths around them. Perhaps, like the soma addicts of Huxley's *Brave New World*, they choose a life of fleeting pleasures to the hard work of reality (which torments and tears at John in that text).

Whatever the cause, a huge majority of people live in this mechanistic mindset, and they offer no worthwhile discourse to Grendel (or any of us). They are the ones who accuse us of “thinking too much” and tell us constantly to “lighten up”. (In a rare moment of ego, I will point out they are the ones who read two paragraphs of this essay and discard it with a shriek of “TLDR”.) They flee from reality with the help of drugs like cannabis, alcohol, television (ironically, sometimes with so-called “reality” television), and soma. Like the deer, they “see all life without observing it” (8), making no distinction between a child dying slowly of starvation and a blooming flower in the garden.

The rest, Grendel quickly learns, are fanatically attached to “crackpot theories” (64). They throw themselves into spinning webs of “magnificent, golden [...] lies” (43, referring to poetry), or they fiddle with the “fiction of consent” for “a monopoly in [...] legitimate violence” (118-119, as in state politics). They search for “sweet fantasy [in a] blessed soul” (135, religious devotion), or they dive headfirst into the abyss with a lifelong examination of philosophical minutiae, such as Kant's deontological ethics (whatever those are, and regardless of the fact they could never explain them to a normal person in a million years, much less apply them to any human's life).

The Brotherhood of Crackpot Theories wants to obtain The Truth because they believe it will provide The Answer to the questions of life, the universe, and everything. (Much like the computer in Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* insists The Answer is “42”.) Therefore it is not enough to use such theories for purposes of exploration or dialectic; these theories must become — as Arthur Miller says in *The Crucible* — “the candle that would light the world” (5).

Thus we find Grendel, trapped between a horde of robots on one side and swarms of theory-loving crackpots on the other. I know how he feels, because I experienced a deep crisis of despair myself when I reached my early 20s. Having spent years learning about the depths of global human misery, I was stunned to see so many people indifferent to those horrors. Did they not know, or did they not care? Even worse, I began to think I could never have any impact on the world. Which crackpot theory might prevent genocides like the Nazi Holocaust, or the African Slave Trade?

So it's good for Grendel to ask these questions, and — like us — he must find his own meaning, his own answers. As Chinua Achebe writes in his 1987 novel *Anthills of the Savannah*: “[W]hatever you are is never enough; you must find a way to accept something, however small, from the other to make you whole and to save you from the mortal sin of righteousness and extremism.” Grendel's quest for answers is beautiful.

The great sadness is that he has no one but the dragon with whom to speak.

## A Fire-Breathing Scornful Leer

The dragon avoids the mistakes of mindless mechanism. He sees everything *and* observes it. No shallow brute moving like a robot, he has wrestled with all of Grendel's questions and many others as well. Even better, he recognizes *and rejects* the crackpot theories of the humans, amused endlessly by their pathetic attempts to impose an absurd order on their stochastic lives. As a result he has become "infinitely weary, sick of Time" (62), jaded and exhausted by the foolish stumblings of "lower minds" (67).

Although he clearly sees Grendel as a lower mind ("Nothing interests you but excitement, violence!" he cries on page 67), he offers to reveal the truth "about Time and Space" (65) from his supposedly omniscient perspective. He runs through a half-hearted litany of points made by philosophers like Lao-Tzu (64, on connectedness), Ludwig Wittgenstein (66, "a limited set of various types of things"), Socrates (67, on frustrating established order), and Baruch Spinoza (68, on importance and monism). At the end of it, he reaches this edifying conclusion: "Meaningless, however. These jugs and pebbles, everything, these too will go. Poof! Boobies, hemorrhoids, boils, slaver ..." (70).

The dragon, therefore, is an embodiment of late-20th-century rationalist fundamentalism. There's no point to any of it; we're all doomed. If nuclear war doesn't obliterate us all, then climate change will. If we start terraforming other planets, then religious extremists will find a way to exterminate everyone. And then we'll all be dead, just a cloud of ashes drifting in a cold, indifferent universe. As a result, the constant echo Grendel hears of "Why not?" — as on pages 48, 50, 61, and 122 — make perfect sense. If there's no point, then why *not* smash the faces of one's enemies? Why *not* engage in fraud on Wall Street in order to line one's pockets with the life savings of elderly women? Why *not* dump toxic waste into the oceans? Why *not* live in perfect luxury now, satisfying every hedonistic desire, regardless of how it's done? Why *not* take "the most criminal acts" and convince the world they are "heroic and meritorious deeds" (117)? Why bother with trying to live a good life?

Indeed, when Grendel makes his one furtive attempt to take a moral stance — "Let them find some other 'brute existent', whatever that is," he says on page 73. "I refuse." — the dragon mocks him with acerbic contempt. "'Do!' he said leering scornfully. 'Do something else, by all means!'" In other words, it's a pitiful game, nothing more than a "challenge" (73), like gathering rare stamps (or, in the dragon's case, finding gold and sitting on it). His advice on page 62 is the same as the advice from Grendel's mother on page 11: "Don't ask!"

The dragon's attitude is identical to that of The Architect in *The Matrix*. Both characters personify a worldview that pretends to the crown of omniscience. Both claim to know everything and, therefore, declare the actions of their counterparts as meaningless. Like Creon in *Antigone*, like Macbeth in the Scottish play, like Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, like Mustapha Mond in *Brave New World*, the dragon's ego is shuffling constantly to balance a supposed omniscience with a supposed omnipotence. And as with most of those texts,

the worst tragedy befalls someone else.

## Why the Dragon is Wrong

First of all, the dragon is himself attached (though perhaps not fanatically) to a “crackpot theory” of his own — sitting on gold is as meaningless as anything else, and yet he clearly cares very much about it: “Never never *never* touch my things.” (60, original emphasis) Well, why not? (The only answer we get is on page 62: “BE STILL!”)

More to the point: **The dragon is wrong about the meaninglessness of all life because such a claim is an objective assessment, and (according to his *own* statements) there’s no value in such statements.** If the dragon is correct (as I believe he is) that “there is no absolute standard of magnitude” (66), then how can one assume to call anything meaningless? Meaningless to whom? Meaningless by what standard? If knowledge is relative, then how can anyone discuss meaning objectively?

I don’t have an answer for Grendel (or anyone else) to the question “Why are we here?” that is objectively true, because I don’t believe in an objective truth. (If you do, based on religious or Ayn-Randian doctrine, I respect you and envy you a little. But I disagree with you.) I can’t give you *The* truth.

Nevertheless, I have *a* truth, which is at violent odds with the dragon. In the years since my early-20s moral crisis, I have come to find deep meaning in my own existence, and the existence of others. I will share it here, in the hope that it might help others find their way out of the deadly caverns of nihilism.

My truth is this, in the words of Alice Walker: **Resistance is the secret of joy (and meaning).** I languished in my youthful cauldron of angst and despair because I didn’t yet understand and appreciate the incredible significance of courageous people — working alone and together — who have changed our world for the better. I didn’t realize I could be one of those courageous people. I believed the absolute standard of magnitude was focused squarely on the overpowering potency of evil, and that no force could ever match it (much less overcome it). And like the dragon, I was wrong.

My truth is the story of Harriet Tubman, a black woman born into the apocalyptic horrors of chattel slavery in the United States. She was whipped when the white baby under her care cried, and she was not allowed to spend time with her own mother, who worked in “the big house”. Her head was smashed apart when she was a child by a white-supremacist man trying to injure another slave. Still she endured, and found the incredible courage to escape her bonds. However, she quickly realized she was not free while her family was still enslaved. So she found even more incredible courage and returned thirteen times to rescue 70 other slaves. (For more information I recommend the Featured Article on Wikipedia about Ms. Tubman, the majority of which was written by myself.)

My truth is the story of Treblinka, a death camp established by the Nazis and dedicated to the eradication of Jewish people from the Earth. Instead, a group of Jewish prisoners revolted, set the camp

ablaze, killed the guards, and secured escape for a lucky few. (Fittingly for this discussion, the first thing they had to do was prevent their fellow prisoners from committing suicide, which was common, since the time and manner of their death was the one thing over which prisoners had any control. For more information I recommend Jean-François Steiner's 1967 book *Treblinka*.)

My truth is the story of East Timor, which for 25 years suffered under a murderous occupation by the armed forces of Indonesia — supported economically, diplomatically, and militarily by the United States. I have been fortunate to be involved personally in that nation's victorious struggle for peace and self-determination, and the strength I have drawn from their courage now overwhelms any piddling shadows of evil or despair from my heart. (For more information I recommend the Good Article on Wikipedia entitled "Indonesian Occupation of East Timor", the majority of which was written by myself.)

My truth goes on and on, through the centuries of human history and including examples from every nation, every race of people, every gender and sexuality. People like Harvey Milk, Mohandas Gandhi, Steve Biko, Dorothy Day, Mother Jones, Subcommandante Marcos, Emmeline Pankhurst, Winona LaDuke, Judi Bari, and countless others have shown us a path of hope, based on neither mechanistic mindlessness nor crackpot theories of any kind. If we summon the courage to follow in their footsteps, we can find meaning for ourselves and others.

Two questions are really at play here:

1. Can we make things better for humanity?
2. What role will I play?

As to the first: I believe we can, but I recognize this as a leap of faith (even though I base it on historical evidence). My belief clashes with the words of Red Horse, but that's okay. (We need not align ourselves with a cranky Machiavellian. He'd get along well with Henry Kissinger.) The Universal Justice he mocks on page 120 is vivified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, defended by Amnesty International and countless others.

Joseph Asagai in Lorraine Hansberry's beautiful 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun* says it better than I ever could. When Beneatha insists that "there isn't any real progress, Asagai, there is only one large circle that we march in", he explains that history is, in fact, a line:

It is simply a long line — as in geometry, you know — one that curves into infinity. And because we cannot see the end, we also cannot see how it — changes. And it is very odd, but those who *see* the changes — who dream, who will not give up — are called idealists ... and those who see *only* the circle — they call each other the "realists"! (134)

Call me what you like. I see the line.

As for the second question: This is where Grendel's refusal on page 73 to be the brute existent for the humans is a beautiful moment of hope. (Alas, the dragon snuffs it out with all speed.) This moment — like Neo's choice to stand up and continue fighting in *The Matrix* — is the anomalous victory of the human spirit

over the void of nihilism. It may very well be “meaningless” in the “grand scheme of things”. But that’s irrelevant. It’s meaningful to *us*. And it can provide powerful opportunities to make change happen.

If and when the dragon disagrees, that’s his choice. But it *is* a choice, and a sad one at that. He therefore receives my compassion and pity. (The 17th century zen master Bankei said: “The true human ideal is to forgive those who are foolish, and help those who are evil.”)

In conclusion, Mr. Dragon, I will thank you to stop leering scornfully at those who stand up for their own good judgment, stop hollering at people who ask “why”, and stop infesting others with your crackpot theories about being still and sitting on gold.

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