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Good and Evil in Grendel by John Gardner

What is the one thing that never leaves you? It is your shadow. However, your shadow cannot exist without the light from the sun. Just as sunlight brightens shadows, in the novel, *Grendel*, the author John Gardner illuminates the origins and the internal conflict of the Twelve-Year War between the beast-like creature named Grendel and human civilization known as the Danes. Upon close examination of the interactions between Grendel and humanity, it can be determined that good and evil must coexist to create harmony because each has characteristics that compliments the other's existence.

Although Grendel initially decides to stop toying with the humans, the dragon scoffs at his thinking and tells him to continue, as Grendel's influence pushes humans to systematically act upon Grendel's actions and thus, overcome barriers. When Grendel conversed with the dragon, the dragon presented him insightful information: "You improve them, my boy! Can't you see that? Yourself? You stimulate them! You make them think and scheme. You drive them to poetry, science, religion, all that makes them what they are for as long as they last.

You are, so to speak, the brute existent by which they learn to define themselves...the mountain." (Gardner 72). Gardner uses the third person term "You" many times to give emphasis on the importance of Grendel's existence and suggest his being is what keeps the peace among humanity and gives their actuality a purpose and meaning. Gardner also uses multiple verbs such as "stimulate", "drive", and "improve" to symbolize that his evilness is what drives and motivates fearful humans to work, strive, think, and overcome their problems. This can also be seen by the phrase: "You are, so to speak, the brute existent by which they learn to define themselves." (Gardner 72) While abstract, in this context, Gardner reveals that Grendel is actually producing good. In short, the dragon is stating that while the humans are defined as "good" and Grendel is labeled as "evil," the only reason they are "good" is due to Grendel's existence.

On the other hand, Gardner manages to also portray that the "evil" Grendel cannot exist without the "good" and moral of the humans. They are both reliant on each other because their opponent's "good" or "evil" qualities shape the other's identity. Grendel's evil characteristics--brutality, rudeness, and lack of empathy--define the good qualities of the Danes: the driven force to strive to survive from Grendel's clutches. It is apparent that good and evil have indivisible, yet also indefinable boundaries, and are two in the same.

While Grendel killing humans is merely for personal satisfaction, it reflects the importance of his role in bringing out the dauntless side of humanity. When Grendel encountered the self-proclaimed hero, Unferth, he observed: "It will be sung," he whispered, then paused again to get wind. 🌀

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