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Grendel and the Grinch

by William Alexander



I've just had an idea. An awful idea. I've just had a wonderful, awful idea.

How the Grinch Stole Christmas is a *Beowulf* retelling.

I should be posting this in December. June is hardly the month for thinking about the mythic origins of the Grinch. But I can't wait for winter. This notion must be expressed immediately. If I delay, then I might have time to notice how ridiculous this idea is, and that must not be. Onward!

We begin with the most obvious parallels. Grinch and Grendel live in caves, well outside of town. Both of them are driven mad by joyous noise from this neighboring settlement.



Grendel Illustration by Chris Rahn

"Oh the Noise! Noise! Noise! Noise!" the Grinch complains. John Gardner's [version of the monster Grendel](#) is horrified by a Shaper (bard, scop) and this entertainer's ability to remake history with beautiful words and a harp. The [recently animated](#)

[Grendel](#) just gets a headache whenever there's a party in the mead hall. These antisocial monsters do not enjoy singing.



Both of them sneak into town at night, bringing mischief. The Grinch does so by masquerading as Santa Claus and stealing Christmas. Grendel does so by dismembering people while they sleep. Here the two tellings diverge a bit, it's true. And while I could probably make a case for Cindy Lou Who as *Beowulf* himself, let's move on to more serious scholarship.

(Here they are, both animated, both bewildered.)

The definitive lecture on *Beowulf*, the one that completely

transformed how and why we read the thing, is "The Monsters and the Critics" by J.R.R. Tolkien. He gave it in 1936. He had written [The Hobbit](#) by then, but was only just getting around to publishing it.

Before Tolkien's lecture, scholars thought of *Beowulf* as a Christian transcription of an oral, pagan saga, resulting in a fragmentary and unreadable mess. Filled with old monsters and new prayers, the story properly belonged to neither world. But Tolkien argued that this blend of worlds and world-views isn't a mistake, that the bards who sang and the monks who wrote down those songs didn't fail to "keep Scandinavian bogies and Scriptures separate in their puzzled brains... I think we may observe not confusion, a half hearted or muddled business, but a fusion that



has occurred at a given point of contact between old and new, a product of thought and deep emotion.” More recently, Seamus Heaney [translated the saga](#) and agreed with Tolkien in the introduction: “*Beowulf* perfectly answers the early modern conception of a work of creative imagination as one in which conflicting realities find accommodation within a new order.”

Both the *Beowulf* poem and the one penned by Dr. Seuss have a strange and strained relationship to Christianity. Christmas is a Christian holiday, after all. It insists very loudly that it’s a Christian holiday, with “Christ” right there in the name. But decorating trees with lights and celebrating community in the depths of midwinter is a much older tradition. Santa Claus is said to be All-Father Odin in a new costume. Odin was the one who convinced the sun to come back after its long winter retreat, so he was the one all the good little Norse children appealed to at solstice time. Christmas itself is a confusion of old and new traditions.

When the Grinch learns what Christmas means, he doesn’t get a Charlie Brown sermon.



Instead the Grinch gets a song sung by all the Whos in Whoville, and learns about community in the face of a harsh winter morning without gifts. And then his heart grows three sizes. Conflicting realities find accommodation within a new order. He carves the roast beast.

So the Grinch *does* dismember something in the mead hall. See? See? It all fits...

I leave you with the following quote:

The significance of a myth is not easily to be pinned on paper by analytical reasoning. It is at its best when it is presented by a poet who feels rather than makes explicit what his theme portends; who presents it incarnate in the world of history and geography, as our poet has done. Its defender is thus at a disadvantage: unless he is careful, and speaks in parables, he will kill what he is studying by vivisection, and he will be left with a formal or mechanical allegory, and, what is more, probably with one that will not work. – J.R.R. Tolkien, “The Monsters and the Critics”

From: <http://www.willalex.net/2012/06/grendel-and-the-grinch/>

GRENDEL AS GRINCH

2012/12/22

Every Scylding in Heorot liked mead a lot,
But Grendel the beast, roaring outside did not.

Grendel hated Scyldings, the whole Danish clan.
Can I say why? I don't think I can.

He spied on the Scyldings, he fumed and he wailed.
He watched as in Heorot they drank mead and drank
ale.

“How can I hurt them, the king and his thanes?”
Alone in his barrow, it drove him insane.

Then he got an idea! An awful idea!
Grendel got a horrible, awful idea!

That fiendish old monster was up to no good.
He decided to kill them and gorge on their blood.

Outside the mead-hall, Cain-spawn raged and he roared,
And with his great strength he broke down the door.

The Scyldings lined up, their swords in a row.
“You warriors,” cried Grendel, “are the first ones to go.”

He slaughtered the Danes, ripped many apart.
He crunched on their bones and then ate their hearts.

He did the same thing the very next night,
And for twelve years more he continued to fight.



Every night he appeared, that hellbeast, that troll,
He'd kill some more Scyldings and retreat to his hole.

Of Hrothgar's dilemma the news would soon spread,
And Beowulf in Geatland heard tales of the dead.

When word of the monster reached the valiant Swede's ears,
He promised to save them and calm all their fears.

So he loaded his ship – fourteen brave men
Sailed to Daneland to serve Hrothgar the king.

Beowulf's welcomed, though Unfurth's suspicious,
“You're young and you're strong, but this creature is vicious.”

The warrior responded, “I see that you're shaken,
But last time I went swimming, I dispatched nine kraken.”

“I'm here for the glory. If God's will be granted,
I'll kill off this fiend and I'll do it bare-handed.”

That very night, Grendel stormed in from the moor,
The mead-hall's entrance was destroyed with a roar.

He snatched up a Scylding and started to eat him,
When Beowulf bounded right up to meet him.

The two joined in battle, throwing benches and chairs.
Amidst all the chaos — the fiend was caught unawares.

The monster was fierce but suffered great harm,
When Beowulf grabbed him and ripped off his arm.

The pain tore through Grendel, it hurt like none other,
So he turned tail and ran back home to his mother.

The Danes gave a cheer, the ale started to flow,
“Hail Beowulf, a most righteous bro.”

The king gave a speech and handed out treasure,
Armbands, halberds, and gold without measure.

After a night of carousing, all were fêted and fed,
The queen blessed them all, “Now safely to bed.”

But out in the moor a dark phantom howled,
To revenge her dead son, Grendel’s mom prowled.

That fey creature too, stormed the king’s hall,
That uncanny wight grabbed a Scylding to maul.

In the darkness she vanished with carrion prey,
And the Danes set to mourning at the break of the day.

“Beowulf, help us,” the stricken king cried,
“A new monster plagues us. So many have died.”

So the Geat girded his armor and took Hrunting, his sword,
And followed the blood trail down to a fjord.

Beneath the dark waters the she-devil had fled,
And the horrified court shivered with dread.

“Send my gold to my father if I do not return,”
And Beowulf dove into waters that churned.

To an undersea lair the creature retreated,
And Beowulf followed, his quest uncompleted.

For nine solid days, a fierce battle raged,
The warrior determined, the monster enraged.

Beowulf slew her, and claimed as his prize,
The head of fierce Grendel, whose dead body lies

In the cave where he fled, now pale like his mother,
Beowulf’s lucky there’s no sister or brother.

Back on the land, Hrothgar’s men start to grieve,
Thinking Beowulf dead, and they’re ready to leave,

When suddenly, splashing his way to the shore
The warrior appears, covered in gore.

Spotting the fighter, the knights give a cheer,
“Our soldier, our valiant, a man without peer.”

Finally with victory, Daneland’s at peace,
The living can party, all battles have ceased.

Upon Beowulf’s shoulders more treasures are placed,
Our hero’s reward for the dangers he’s faced.

The queen gives him thanks, hurrahs fill the streets,
Beowulf returns to the land of the Geats.

He’s met with acclaim and amidst all the cheers,
The Swedes make him their king, he reigns fifty years.

(At the end of his life, one more adventure there’d be,
He died fighting a dragon and was buried at sea.)

From:

<https://hereticmirror.wordpress.com/2012/12/22/how-grendel-stole-christmas-twelve-of-them/>

A COMPLETE RANKING OF INSULTS IN “YOU’RE A MEAN ONE, MR. GRINCH”

BY EMILY Y. WEINSTROM



How the Grinch Stole Christmas is a holiday staple in my family, in all of its glorious forms. I adore Dr. Seuss, so the book is an absolute must, while the classic cartoon version brings the spirit of that book to life with child-like whimsy. And though I’m not generally a Jim Carey fan, the way the more modern adaptation brings the Whos to life is fun, and if I find a channel running it in December, it’s impossible to flip away.

And, of course, “You’re a Mean One, Mr. Grinch” is a prominent feature on my holiday playlist, in numerous varied renditions.

Because deep down, I am still 6, I guess. But hey, it’s a classic.

Dr. Seuss may not have written the song himself (that would be Albert Hague) but it definitely captures the Seuss’s signature wacky twist to language that I adore.

Of course, this song is the Grinchiest of all Christmas songs. It is full of insults. It’s awful. With this kind of language flying around, it is no wonder this Grinch was so very *Grinch-y*. But they are *awfully* creative.



Here is a listing of every insult in the song, ranked by creativity, from least to greatest.

You really are a heel

Starting off pretty light here. A heel? Okay.

You’re a foul one, Mr. Grinch

Foul? What is this, a dad joke?



You’re a monster, Mr. Grinch

Now here is a proper insult. Monster! But, alas, no real creative flair to this one.

You’re as charming as an eel

Having never met an eel, I cannot testify to the accuracy of this particular insult, but the tone is clear in its implications.



Your brain is full of spiders

This just makes me squirm, without delivering a clear criticism.

You're as cuddly as a cactus

Definitely offers a vivid mental image. Cringe.

Your heart's an empty hole

Okay now, this is getting a bit graphic for a children's story.

You've got garlic in your soul

God, are we eating him? This insult brings new meaning to the phrase "roast beast."

You're a three-decker sauerkraut and toadstool sandwich, with arsenic sauce!

Arsenic sauce: For all your home murdering needs. (And yes, the exclamation point is part of the original lyrics.)

Your heart is full of unwashed socks

Gross.

Your soul is full of gunk

Grosser.

You're a bad banana with a greasy black peel.

So. Very. Specific. Grossest.



You're a nasty, wastly skunk.

Rhyming = double meanness points.

You're a crooked jerky jockey and you drive a crooked horse.

Tweet: "Crooked Grinch stole all those Who's presents! Not nice!"

You nauseate me, Mr Grinch with a noxious super nos.

What is that, Latin? Put-downs sting extra when you don't even know what they mean.

The three words that best describe you, are, and I quote: "Stink. Stank. Stunk."

Not only is this the most memorable line of the

song, but it indicates not just present stinking, but also stink as a permanent state, indefinitely into the past. Ouch.

From: <https://bookriot.com/2016/12/06/complete-ranking-insults-youre-mean-one-mr-grinch>