

# Engaging Monsters in Some Literary Pieces and Their Human Aspects: A Re-assessment

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## Abstract

*Many monsters appear prominently in English literature. They are of great value and are immensely popular with the reader. Despite their large, frightening, powerful presence, readers are always drawn to them as they are interesting as well as educative. Most of them vary in physical features and live in different places. Some are cave-dwelling. Some live in dark, isolated places. We get fire-breathing, blood-sucking, treasure- hoarding monsters that create conflict with protagonists. Similarly, human beings put them to troubles to show the vulnerability of the demons to outer forces. Although they are supernatural beings, they have some characteristics of human beings. In many cases they are strong, memorable than passive and villainous characters. Like mortals, they evoke different emotions of sorrow, greed, jealousy, ambition, affection for child and attitude. Although they have supernatural power, massive strength and speed, they are alone and vulnerable. Their huge power also ends. Earlier, they were considered God's punishment for sinners and Romans saw them as warnings of imminent calamity. We see them as means for education and entertainment who can also deliver unforgettable speeches in literature. At times, they can teach us some good things. Although they have a lot to dislike them, we cannot hate them. In fact, they symbolize human nature. Sometimes we feel sympathy for them as they do not pose threats until they are disturbed. The list of monsters covers those from religion, theology, demonology and literature of Greece, Rome, Scandinavia and England. The famous ones are many but our discussion will be limited to Caliban of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *Grendel*, his mother and the Dragon of *Beowulf*. These four monsters appear in drama and in epic of two different periods. This article looks into the good and bad human sides of these distinguished supernatural beings through whom we can know that they have feelings and are not external threats to society unless situations demand. At the same time, it aims to show that despite human characteristics, monsters can never be compared with humans who will always be superior to supernatural characters.*

Key terms: Monsters; mortals and monsters; Caliban; *The Tempest*

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The famous monsters of English literature are many and readers have likeness for them. These charismatic monsters are varied and we cannot forget them. Asma (2009) explains in *On Monsters*, "Monster derives from the Latin word *monstrum*., which in turns derives from the root *monere* (to warn). According to the Oxford Dictionary of English, a monster is "a large, ugly and frightening imaginary creature." This article exposes the human characteristics of these terrifying monsters. Like mortals they are powerful as well as weak and are the personification of greed, jealousy, arrogance, brutality, cowardliness, falsity, meanness, wickedness, gullibility, rage, affection etc. In fact, they have attributes of human beings and at different points they embody different human characteristics. Undoubtedly they are popular with the reader since their appearance in the literary world. They are primarily for entertainment purpose. At the same time, we can get insights from them. They are not major characters all the time but are important to the plots and strike us as wonderful creations despite their ugly appearances. They are frequently represented in English literature and have been subjects to multiple interpretations of varied periods but to the best of the researchers' knowledge, none of them, yet seem to make a thesis of the proposed topic. It is therefore timely for the researcher to produce a research which will find out that monsters are charismatic to the reader for some of their human aspects but these sides cannot make them equal to human characters.

The researchers have found limited works which are closely related to their work. Olsen (1997) makes a key observation and states:

...that Grendel's Mother merely resembles a grieving human mother and insists on her presence in the poem as an avenging monster, antitype of Hildeburh and Wealhtheow, without considering that she simply represents a wronged, exiled woman taking on the only role left for her, that of a man.

Chance (1986) goes even further in confirming the nobility of Grendel's mother by comparing her to the Virgin Mary, stating that "her vengefulness as a mother invites implicit comparison with the love and mercy of the Virgin". While the parallel drawn between Grendel's mother and the Virgin Mary, Chance tries to prove how Grendel's Mother, a primitive female fought for the existence without a male authority.

According to Kiernan (1984), "a devil's advocate can find plenty of evidence for defending Grendel's mother as a heroic figure. Because she is a monster . . .". She is, as Schrader (1983) remarks, "a victim, an exile, a woman who has lost male protection".. Purvey (1969) points out that she " . . ., acts in accordance with the standard Germanic code of blood-revenge; furthermore, her own domain is invaded; for these reasons a measure of sympathy on the author's part is due to her . . .".

In Steinberger's (2013) paper "What Makes a Monster and What Makes a Man? Exploring the Relationship between the Creator and the Creation in Three Gothic Novels", the monsters fail to assimilate into the world and eventually fail to survive, thus generally failing as creations.

In the words of Vaughn (1985) "Caliban, the monster, is his most frequent sobriquet" and he is known as "servant monster", "poor monster", "man monster". In fact, Caliban "possesses many human characteristics including the sense of moral obligation" (Petry, 1980-81). Chand (2013) also says:

"The reason that the post colonial critics quote for Caliban's attempt to rape Miranda is his being a black male. Mithuhell (1950) considers cowardice his "another human characteristic. Miranda is the only woman around Caliban and it is but natural for Caliban to get attracted towards her". Christiana (2015) discusses binary oppositions and extremes of monsters. In the words of Cohen (1996) the monster Dracula crosses moral and physical borders.

From the brief review of literature it is evident that most of the previous research has focused on the monstrous aspects of these characters and their humanlike traits have not been addressed properly. Hence, the prior works give uniqueness to the writers' choice of topic to reject the view that only human beings suffer and monsters have no human attributes. Thus the proposed work will address the research gap.

It is envisaged that this study will make a significant contribution to the field of monster articles. On a personal level, however, the study is very important to the writers as human beings can learn important lessons from the demonic creatures. Moreover, people will benefit from the discussion because although the world has developed greatly materialistically and technically, it is still seeing disturbed persons for losing children, noise pollution, usurpation of hoards, land etc. and thrive to find ways to come out of the traps as there is no universally effective methods for solving these problems.

In order to answer the research questions, the thesis will employ close readings of original texts and secondary sources.

The discussion of our monsters are not from horror novels and Caliban of *The Tempest*, Grendel, Grendel's mother, the Dragon of Beowulf top our list for discussion who create conflict with important literary characters. Our analysis will start from *Beowulf* as the monsters of this masterpiece appear first.

**Grendel:** The horrific, man-eating monster is an immortal creation in one of the oldest

existing poems *Beowulf* and is never physically described. He becomes engaged by the people's loud carousing every night in the mead hall of Heorot. The merriment of the people of the magnificent building torments him. In fact, he is jealous of the pleasures of mankind. He continued his attacks for twelve years. It has attitude and immense power which also end reminding the reader of the brevity of human power. Despite having evil, it has several human characteristics. It is like those people who spread fear in the minds of people. As Grendel is guided by human emotions, it swells with rage, gets jealous and shows power. Like endangered mortals, it realizes that he is in trouble and wants to escape from the predicament when is attacked by the hero:

He was desperate to flee to his den and hide  
With devil's litter, for in all his days  
He had never been clamped or cornered like this. (Heaney: 553-55)

Grendel repeatedly reveals that human beings and monsters are not very far away in similarities. When the bad natures of human beings supersede the marks, they turn into monsters not physically but mentally. It proves that both mortals and human beings are controlled by good and evil sides. Both show goodness as well as monstrosity according to situation. In the realm of monsters, they are always treated as good, carrying optimal goddesses those are carried by the human beings. They can hardly go out of the set rules of God. Although they are not interested to follow God, they fear God. Grendel never violates the rules set by God even if he was punished for the crime of his forefather Cain. He is prohibited to come out during the day and he never breaks it. For twelve years he ruled the magnificent hall of King Hrothgar Heorot but he never comes except night and never touches the god's seat, the royal chair:

He took over Heorot,  
Haunted the glittering hall after dark,  
But the throne itself, the treasure- seat,  
He was kept from approaching; he was the Lord's outcast.  
(Heaney:166-69)

Still God has the abomination and partial love for man as they are the best creations of this universe although they are not always flawless. This seems excruciating to Grendel which makes him jealous.

When Beowulf, Hrothger, Shield, Finn or other human heroes are fighting and killing people for greed or power's sake we do not treat them as monsters. Only for giant figures and ugly faces and some primitive temperament Grendel or his Mother or the Dragon are being treated as monsters. Unfortunately the behavior of human power seekers is uglier than the faces of these monsters. So, Grendel is a pitiful monster: The poet of *Beowulf* comments:

Oh, cursed is he  
who in time of trouble has thrust his soul  
in the fire's embrace, forfeiting help;  
he has nowhere to turn (Heaney:183-186)!

It is true that Grendel's physical appearance and strength are parts of his monstrosity. He is able to carry away thirty warriors at a time. He has a grotesque form and is greedy for human flesh. However, despite this, Grendel is guided by human emotions and whims and his aggression is due to jealousy and loneliness as he never experienced God's love. He did not have the tendency to become a leader but he could not quit from his idea of becoming a hero or to possess something superb. As a cannibal he should search human flesh in bothies, instead he targets Heorot, the highest building which remains empty most of the nights. Surely he was guided by a human force in him that led him to own something great, to be the owner of something highest. This force is nothing but pride. Just like human being his pride also goes before his destruction:

So Grendel ruled in defiance of right,  
One against all, until the greatest house  
In the world stood empty, a deserted wall stead. (Heaney: 144-46)

Grendel did not come before Hrothgar's building Heorot without reason. The laughter comes out of the building makes him sick at heart. He desires to be the loved child of God but was punished and the clan of Abel enjoyed the world boundlessly. His loneliness pricked him extremely, so he wants to take revenge on the disturbing people. The monsters prove that they never attack unless they are disturbed.

Grendel is more reformed than Beowulf, Unferth or other human characters. Beowulf and Unferth were too much talkative. They boastfully tried to establish their power, wanted to be famous, killed sea monsters, rioted against other tribes, massacred among human races but we refuse to consider them atrocious and gruesome. Nonetheless when Grendel kills he turns into a monster as the reader are not of his own kinfolk. Thirty men's killing power in one hand made Grendel giant whereas, same killing power in both hands turned Beowulf into a hero. Grendel really got injustice.

**Grendel's mother:** Grendel's mother is the renowned she-monster who fights treacherously with the hero Beowulf to take revenge on him for losing her child. She is more moderate, more humane than the hero. She attacks only for provocation and her desire to take revenge. Here we see her affection to her son who can do anything for him; whereas the human hero. Beowulf left his uncle Hygeluc's dead body and all the dead soldiers in the enemy land when he lost the battle. But he did not forget to

bring thirty shields to prove his strength. His fame, greed for name surpassed his love for the dead uncle. On the other hand Grendel's mother could not even tolerate the broken hands of Grendel on the wall of Heorot. She carried those after taking the revenge. Her motherhood and dignity never allowed her to leave the bruised hands remain in the enemy house:

She has snatched their trophy,  
Grendel's bloodied hand. It was a fresh blow  
To the afflicted bawn. (Heaney: 1302-04)

We cannot set apart the feelings of Grendel's mother from that of Hildeburh. Hildeburh is a queen but a mother, so sad lays are sung to commemorate her dedication and sacrifice for her son's death. But when the semi human is showing same feelings we cannot accept it. We take it as vicious and monstrous.

In short, although it is viewed in an explicitly heroic context, Hildeburh's plight is the same as Grendel's Mother's.

Unlike Hildeburh, the princess, Grendel's mother shows no interest in the role of woman as a peace-weaver, instead opts for the male code of revenge. Grendel's mother wants to live like a queen in her own realm. Her juniors attend her all the time. Even some of them like octopus fights with Beowulf only to save her:

Then once she touched bottom, that wolfish swimmer  
Carried the ring-mailed prince to her court  
So that for all his courage he could never use  
The weapon he carried, and a bewildering horde  
Came at him from the depths, droves of sea beasts  
Who attacked with tusks and tore at his chain-mail  
In a ghastly onslaught." (Heaney-1506-12)

Her controlling power, her desires to live a life of a special one, keeping special weapons and treasures in her chamber - all direct us to her love for gorgeous life.

Beowulf's fight, his victory, his speech, his sacrifice- as a hero hardly touches the hearts of the reader when they discover his hankered soul for glory, name and fame.

Anglo-Saxon society itself was a combatant society. Killing people for the expansion of territory, shedding blood under the shade of religion, making massacre in the name of restoring peace were the daily routine of the royal people. If fratricide, genocide, suicide can be treated as pardonable human crime than why Grendel's mother's revenge will be on courtyard?



**The Dragon:** The Dragon is one of the three prominent monsters of the great epic Beowulf. This fire-breathing monster is fiercer than either Grendel or his mother. His presence is very horrifying for the hero Beowulf. It was about three hundred years that the Dragon lived in Geatland but it never attacked before its hoard is raped by the thief. Hoarding treasure, keeping treasure, loving treasure, counting treasure and fighting for treasure are very common nature of any man. The Dragon possesses this spirit in it. In Beowulf, this monster maintains a positive role granted to dragons traditionally: it takes care of a hoard which the last survivor in an extinguished tribe had laid on a cave. In returning the treasure to the earth, the warrior intended all the knowledge and power of his dying tribe to rest protected forever by this creature.

**Caliban:** It is an integral part of the plot of William Shakespeare's classic *The Tempest* and has intrigued a lot of critics. It inhabits on the island where the actions of the drama take place. He is a difficult and contradictory character and is:

"Legged like a man; and his fins like arms."(II.II:28).

Like Grendel or his mother he was also a humanoid. Initially, the figure of Caliban was read as the symbol of primitive humanity, a degenerated character exhibiting greed, lawlessness and lust. He is born of the union of a witch and the devil. Hence he is deformed. It is the only native on this island. We are sometimes repulsed by its monstrous behavior and sometimes we get impressed by his beautiful speeches in the play. His affectionate loyalty to the drunkard Trinculo, his love of natural beauty and feeling for music and poetry, his hatred for his task-master Prospero, his love for mother, his simple attempt at revenge and escape-all are aspects of human beings. In his first speech he complains that Prospero, the father of the shipwrecked heroine Miranda, stole his land which he has rightfully inherited it from his mother Sycorax:

This island's mine, by Sycorax  
Which thou takest from me. (III, II: 483-84)

At the same time, he reveals to the usurper Prospero;  
All the qualities of the isle" (I,II: 337) in return for kindness to him.  
He describes the beauty and the wonders of the island which is the setting of the renowned play:

Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,  
Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not  
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
Will hum about mine ears, and sometimes voices  
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,  
Will make me sleep again (III.II:148-53)

It also shows Prospero survival technique for living on an island.

(...) I pitied thee  
took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour (I.II:324-6)

After getting rid of Trinculo in destroying Prospero, he decides to repay Stephano by being his servant and by acquainting him with the wonders of his island:

I prithee thee, let me bring thee where crabs grow;  
And I with my long nails will dig thee pig nuts;  
Show thee a jay's nest and instruct thee how  
To snare the nimble marmoset; I'll bring thee  
To clustering filberts, and sometimes I'll get thee  
Young scamels from the rock. . . . (II, II: 171-76)

When the drunken butler Stephano first meets Caliban and gives him a few drinks from a bottle of wine, Caliban gets impressed. As he is gullible, kneels in homage to Stephano and his heavenly liquor. The jester Trinculo ridicules him for this:

By this good light; this is a very shallow monster  
A most ridiculous monster; to make a  
Wonderful of a poor drunkard! (II, II: 147-50, 169-70)

He is also one of the powerless antagonists in the drama *The Tempest* who receives torture from Prospero in various ways. Prospero's behavior against this semi human crosses the limit occasionally which evokes sympathy in the readers' minds.

He is hopeful about freedom which is a very important necessity to human beings. He wants to be free from Prospero's tyranny as nobody even a monster does not want to be enslaved. Though his body is entirely under the control of Prospero, his mind remains free to hate the master who controls that body. Like a mortal Caliban's sole power under the circumstances of his slave condition is his power to hate and his desire to kill his master. Therefore, he is Prospero's slave physically, and is never his emotional slave.

Thou, malice?  
If thou neglect'st, or dost unwillingly  
What I command. I'll rack thee with old cramps,  
Fill all thy bones with aches. Make thee roar,  
That beasts shall tremble at thy din. (I, II: 366-70).

It is this "malice," which is motivated by rage, rebelliousness, hatred, or resistance that marks Prospero's failure to transform Caliban into a docile slave.



Caliban's anger keeps him to desire to resist, to fight, and to kill Prospero as the later one has seized his ownership of the land: he refuses to accept his social death by insisting that Prospero has stolen his birthright and by attempting to recover it. His memory keeps alive an instinct for familial identity. The passion that prompts him to clamor for "justice" gives him the desire for freedom that has generated the many identifications of Caliban with oppressed peoples of the world.

Caliban responds to passions and is accused to deflower Miranda by Prospero. He also curses variously over Prospero. He demands the island and is not regretful of his behavior to Prospero. He curses Prospero by the language he (Prospero) had taught Caliban for the ease of communication. Language is an important tool to fight back and to represent the self and own race. The language in which Prospero commands Caliban is also used by Caliban to fight and show resistance verbally. Later, Caliban strongly presents his premise of rejecting Prospero's order. He complains against the taskmaster Prospero to Stephano for inflicting all kinds of punishment on him. Here we find him as a typical complaining slave who hates his master and hates "all service". At the same time, he is useful to Prospero as he fetches wood for him, makes fire.

The heroine Miranda ranks him with a man when she tells the hero Ferdinand that she has seen two men in her life-her father Prospero and the deformed Caliban. Although he curses Prospero, he manifestly fears him and it is this fear which keeps him enslaved:

He retreats before Prospero's threat. (I.II.372)

Caliban finally repents for his rebelliousness and promises to always follow Prospero's guidance like an obedient human being.

Grendel, his mother, the Dragon, Caliban are monsters in the story of *Beowulf* and *The Tempest*. Monsters in Christian society came from abnormality or the unusual, those outcasts from society, feared and hated alike. Cain, as the first real Christian monster, created this pariah world of feared creatures far away from normal and moral human beings. That is why monsters live in a world afar from human contact and human socialization and would never be accepted by mortals. In fact, they are forces of evil and enemies to God and humans. In the end, we can say that although we encounter some instances of their good sides in two literary pieces, monsters are doomed for their abnormalities. Their charisma and substantial portion of humanity will never make them equal to humans and they will always be seen as monsters and outcasts to human society. Likewise, human beings can prove themselves monsters occasionally, but will never be considered supernatural beings and will consider the monsters terrifying, ugly and unworthy of becoming humans. But the monsters will remain immortal creations

of literature to the reader for their ambivalent human traits and be fascinated to them.

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