

## DECONSTRUCTION OF EPIC BEOWULF IN JOHN GARDENER'S NOVEL GREDEL

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### Abstract

This article presents an analysis of the epic Beowulf, and the novel Grendel under the light of deconstruction theory. It also compares and contrasts the two works in terms of plot, characterization, and theme. The epic Beowulf is an influential text in English Literature and has been reinterpreted variously by different writers. John Gardner in his novel Grendel reinterprets the events taking place in the epic. This novel adaptation of the epic, which displays the contents of the epic from a different point of view, reconstructs the epic. The reconstructions include crucial changes in the epic although the main events remain the same in both works.

The term "deconstruction" gains importance at this point. "Deconstruction" is a complex concept and is not defined by its initiator Jacques Derrida. However, when Derrida's works are analyzed closely, we see that he gives some signposts about how to "deconstruct" a literary work. The present article claims that the novel Grendel deconstructs the epic Beowulf and provides a larger and more complete account of the events in the epic: first, it tries to define the term "deconstruction" in some works of Derrida and other writers. Then, it shows how the novel deconstructs the epic.

**Key Words:** *Beowulf, Grendel, Deconstruction, Epic, Novel.*

## BEOWULF DESTANININ JOHN GARDENER 'IN GREDEL ROMANINDAKİ YAPI-SÖKÜMÜ

### Özet

Bu makale Beowulf Destanı'nın Grendel romanında yapı söküm tekniği ile yapılan bir analizini sunmaktadır. Makale aynı zaman iki yapıtı konu, olay örgüsü ve karakterler açısından karşılaştırmaktadır. Beowulf destanı İngiliz Edebiyatında etkili bir eser olmuş ve farklı yazarlar tarafından farklı şekillerde tekrar yorumlanmıştır. John Gardner Grendel romanında destandaki olayları yeniden yorumlar. Destanın içeriğini farklı bir bakış açısıyla sunan bu uyarlama, destanı yeniden oluşturur. Bu yeni oluşum destandaki asıl olayları değiştirmese de bazı önemli değişiklikleri içermektedir.

"Yapı söküm" terimi bu noktada önem kazanır. "Yapı söküm" karmaşık bir tekniktir ve bu kavramın başlatıcısı olan Jacques Derrida tarafından tanımlanmamıştır. Fakat, Derrida'nın eserleri yakından incelendiğinde edebi bir eserin nasıl yapı sökümü uğratılacağı hakkında bazı işaretler verdiği görülmektedir. Bu makale Grendel romanının Beowulf destanını yapı sökümü uğrattığını ve destandaki olaylar hakkında daha iyi ve bütüncül bir anlatım sunduğunu iddia eder. İlk olarak, Derrida ve diğer yazarların eserlerinden faydalanarak "Yapı söküm" kavramını tanımlamaya çalışır. Sonrada, romanın destanı nasıl yapı sökümü uğrattığını gösterir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Beowulf, Grendel, Yapı Söküm, Destan, Roman.*

### a) Deconstruction

The term "deconstruction" has influenced many disciplines, from philosophy to literature and history, from film studies to law, architecture, political theory, and anthropology. The term was introduced by Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher, after publication of his *Of Grammatology* in 1967. Although Derrida does not define the

term explicitly both in *Of Grammatology* and other works, he gives important clues about how to deconstruct a text, which can help critics define the term. M.A.R. Habib writes that deconstruction is "a way of reading, a mode of writing, and, above all, a way of challenging interpretations of texts based upon conventional notions of the stability of the human self, the external world, and of language and meaning" (649).

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In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida claims that Western philosophy and thought have always had a “desire” to search for a center, a meaning, or a “transcendental signified” (49). Derrida calls this desire for a center “logocentrism” or “phonocentrism” (Of 11). According to Derrida, all Western thought from Plato to the present has tried to ground its basis on a meaning, “presence,” or “existence” (*Writing* 353):

We already have a foreboding that phonocentrism merges with the historical determination of the meaning of being in general as presence, with all the subdeterminations which depend on this general form and which organize within it their system and their historical sequence (presence of the thing to the sight as eidos, presence as substance / essence / existence [ousia], temporal presence as point [stigma] of the now or of the moment [nun] , the self-presence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity, the co-presence of the other and of the self, intersubjectivity as the intentional phenomenon of the ego, and so forth). Logocentrism would thus support the determination of the being of the entity as presence. (Of 12)

“Deconstruction” is the name that Derrida gives to the activity of “destruction” and “desedimentation of all the significations that have their source in that of the logos” (Of 10). In other words, deconstruction is an attempt to deconstruct this center in “logos”. However, this “destruction” does not mean to destroy. “Rather than destroying” writes Derrida, “it was also necessary to understand how a “whole” was constituted and to reconstruct it to this end” (*Psyche* 3). That is, deconstruction is an attempt to reconstruct and to “dismantle” logocentrism which is “the most constantly dominant force” (Derrida, *Positions* 1981). It is also the “destabilization...on the move in the things themselves” (Derrida, *Limited* 147). However, this “destabilization” is not something negative since Derrida believes that “Destabilization is required for ‘progress’ as well” (*Limited* 147). Therefore, while deconstruction destabilizes the texts and logocentrism, it also leads to progress.

According to Derrida, “The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures

from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim....” Deconstruction should “necessarily” operate “from the inside” (Of 24). There are two ways to operate from inside of the text. One is to point to the neglected parts in the texts and to question them and find their inconsistencies; the other is to deal with the binary oppositions that are included in texts. Derrida gives an analogy about the neglected parts of the texts and how to deconstruct them. He compares the text to architectonic structures and writes that in some texts there are “neglected” or “defective” corner stones which need to be levered in order to be deconstructed (*Memoires* 72). In other words, if someone wants to deconstruct a text, he should find some important “corner stones” or important parts that are neglected or ignored and question these parts from different perspectives to create alternative meanings.

Derrida also claims that in Western thought there has always been an opposition between two concepts and one of these concepts always “governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand” (*Positions* 41). These binary oppositions have a certain tension between them. To deconstruct these oppositions one needs to overturn or reverse them so that they can be neutral, which gives both sides of the opposition the right to represent themselves. Jonathan Culler regards this reversion of the oppositions as one of the basic steps of deconstruction:

Deconstruction is most simply defined as a critique of the hierarchical oppositions that have structured Western thought: inside-outside, mind-body, literal-metaphorical, speech-writing, presence-absence, nature-culture, form-meaning. To deconstruct an opposition is to show that it is not natural and inevitable but a construction, produced by discourses that rely on it, and to show that it is a construction in a work of deconstruction that seeks to dismantle it and reinscribe it – that is, not destroy it but give it a different structure and functioning. (120)

That this reversal of the oppositions should not immediately pass to “neutralizing the binary oppositions of metaphysics and simply residing within the closed field of

these oppositions" (*Positions* 41). Reversing the oppositions and giving superiority to the suppressed concept does not mean to deconstruct it because the suppressed concept would have the upper hand and thus it would mean to stay "within the closed field of these oppositions".

In order to get out of the closed fields of the binary oppositions, Derrida adds that "it must, through a double gesture, a double science, a double writing [reading]-put into practice a reversal of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system. It is on that condition alone that deconstruction will provide the means of intervening in the field of oppositions it criticizes..." (*Limited* 21). This "displacement" and intervention creates a new text and context. That is why Derrida states that "deconstruction" is also a "recontextualization" (*Limited* 136). The recontextualization creates new meanings and interpretations of the original text by suggesting possibilities and alternatives inherent in the original text. Therefore, every text that repeats the original text in a new context creates a new text which is a new creation. This new creation is different from the original text in some points and shows the iteration of the text. Derrida claims that iteration, the characteristic of repetition of a text, alters the original text so that "something new takes place" (*Limited* 40).

#### **b) *Beowulf's* deconstruction in *Grendel***

John Gardner's *Grendel* was published in 1971 and is one of his most well-known novels. *Grendel* is the retelling of the events in *Beowulf* from the monster Grendel's viewpoint. However, the retelling is not just a repetition of the events in the epic, but the novel includes some basic qualities of deconstruction. Deconstruction, according to Gardner, is "the practice of taking language apart, or taking works of art apart, to discover their unacknowledged inner workings" (*The Art* 88). *Grendel* focuses on some of *Beowulf's* unacknowledged parts.

Gardner also writes that "all great literature has a deconstructive impulse" (*The Art* 89). When we read the novel *Grendel*, we see that Gardner deliberately deconstructs

*Beowulf*, the great work of English literature, because Gardner thinks that *Beowulf* is a constructive text which fuses "all that was best in the old pagan and the new Christian vision" (*The Art* 89). Gardner also believes that "the deconstruction" of literary works can "achieve greater emotional power" and adds that deconstructing the story of *Beowulf* by retelling it from Grendel's view point can provide readers information and insights about the personal tragedy of Grendel (*The Art* 90). Therefore, Gardner's deconstruction of *Beowulf* in *Grendel* fills in the gaps of the epic and presents a more complete picture of the narration, themes, characters, and plot.

John Gardner starts his deconstruction of *Beowulf* by changing the narrative mode. He writes that when one reads a great work of literature, one can see "the grand old forms of Western civilization revealed as rather shoddy, certainly manipulative and tyrannical" (Gardner *The Art* 90). Gardner also classifies *Beowulf* among the authoritarian texts which try to shape its readers' or listeners' ideas and viewpoints in an authoritarian manner (*The Art* 83). Gardner's views of Western civilization and its literature seem to comply with Derridean "logocentrism," whereby Western civilization has always searched for a center to place itself in an authoritarian way. When the epic *Beowulf* is analyzed its narration is authoritarian and manipulative against Grendel. By naming the epic "*Beowulf*" the author subordinates Grendel from the start. The epic is narrated from the third person omniscient point of view. The narrator favors Danish history, *Beowulf* and at times Christianity by glorifying god. The narrator aligns himself with the hero of the epic, *Beowulf*. Grendel is silenced and the reader does not hear him in the epic. Therefore, the narration in *Beowulf* is not objective and all inclusive, and does not let the reader know the other side of the story.

*Beowulf* is a rich text with foreshadowings, flashbacks, flashforwards, allusions, and kennings. However, although there are interpolated tales, the narration of the main events in *Beowulf* is straightforward and chronological. The events start with the founding of a dynasty in the prologue (Tharaud 3) and finish with the death and funeral of *Beowulf* at the end (Tharaud 125).

The language is highly elevated, rhetorical, and appropriate for an epic. There are different epithets and kennings like “the gray haired giver of treasure”, “The ring adorned queen” (Tharald 26, 27) and alliterations like “broad-beamed, bound” (Heaney 21, 23).

John Gardner deconstructs both the narration and language of the epic in his novel because he believes that deconstruction is about the language we use, which can carry meanings and values we do not intend (*The Art* 88). Therefore, the language used in any text can have more than one meaning, and its narrative mode can reveal authoritarian aspects. To deconstruct the narration of *Beowulf*, Gardner first reverses the binary oppositions between the names Beowulf and Grendel. According to Derrida, Western thought is based on binary oppositions in which the first concept always governs the second (*Positions* 41). For example, in male-female opposition, the concept “male” is superior to “female” and it governs the “female” concept. To deconstruct such oppositions, one must reverse these traditional binary oppositions by giving superiority to the second concept over the first one (Derrida, *Limited* 21). Gardner chooses the name *Grendel* for his novel. By naming the novel as *Grendel*, Gardner reverses the traditional binary opposition “Beowulf and Grendel” to “Grendel and Beowulf”, giving superiority to Grendel.

The narrative mode in *Grendel* is also different as it is first person point of view rather than third person omniscient point of view. According to Gardner, deconstructive narration “tells the story from the other side or from some queer angle that casts doubt on the generally accepted values handed down by legend” (*The Art* 88). In *Grendel*, the reader sees everything through Grendel’s eyes, which provides the reader another angle from which to look at the epic, and thus the novel gives a deeper understanding of the character Grendel. Gardner tells us that he made Grendel sympathetic so that readers can see the question of the novel from inside (*A Letter*). Robert Merrill also claims that the first person point of view narration in *Grendel* makes the reader associate himself with the character Grendel during the first 150 pages, even though he is the antagonist (178). By

changing the narration from third person point of view to first person point of view, Gardner provides readers with new insights into the epic and “casts doubt” on the credibility of the narration of the epic.

The narration of the main events in the novel does not take place in a chronological order as they do in *Beowulf*. Although *Beowulf* also includes some flash-forwards and different stories, the main events seem to not change their order. We witness many flashbacks and experimental writing in the narration of *Grendel*, including play scripts, film scripts, and poetry. When Grendel tells us about his first encounter with Wealhtheow, he makes use of a writing style used in film scripts to separate the scenes (Gardner, *Grendel* 94). When Hrothulf presents his soliloquies in the yard and the woods, the prose narration of the novel changes into the style of a play (Gardner, *Grendel* 113-14). Grendel’s narration from simple prose narrative into complex and non-linear narration shows us how Grendel’s storytelling improves during the course of the novel. It also gives us an idea of what Grendel feels. It shows that Gardner prefers to alternate the relatively straightforward narrative style of the epic with a more complex narration from Grendel’s point of view. In other words, Gardner deconstructs the epic mode of narration throughout the novel.

The language of the novel is also different from the language of the epic. *Grendel* is less elevated and rhetorical than *Beowulf*. Joseph Milosh and John Gardner write that *Grendel* is a “parody of rhetoric” (56). Gardner parodies the rhetorical language of the epic with mock epic epithets and alliterative phrases (*Grendel* 167). What is more, Gardner changes the ornamented language of the epic into foul language in some parts of the novel. For example, he uses the word “fu\*\*\*\*\*” in the novel (Gardner, *Grendel* 171). This shows that although Gardner may include epic techniques, he changes the language to serve his aim of deconstructing the narrative style of *Beowulf*.

Apart from its narration, John Gardner also deconstructs the themes of *Beowulf* in *Grendel*. Gardner thinks that introducing the great ideas of Western civilization such as



heroism, love, artistic ideals and religion to the skeptical monster Grendel can be more interesting (*The Art* 166). When we read *Grendel*, we see that Gardner deconstructs the themes of heroism, religion, and the role of art and beauty. For example, the theme of heroism is an important component of the epic *Beowulf*: the epic mainly deals with the heroic deeds of its main character. Although the epic presents the dangers of the heroic ethos, including greed and uncontrolled violence within the Anglo-Saxon society, the representation of heroism in the epic is almost always positive. The beginning of the epic, which mentions the founding of the Scylding Dynasty, is full of the heroic actions of Scyld Scefing and his success as a warrior king (Tharaud 3). The warfare and heroic actions of Scyld Scefing's grandson, King Hrothgar, are also mentioned (Tharaud 9). Beowulf's heroic boasts before King Hrothgar (Tharaud 19), his narration of his encounter with Breca and his slaying of sea monsters (Tharaud 23, 25), his victorious fight with Grendel and his mother (Tharaud 34, 65), and finally his last heroic boast and fall before the dragon (Tharaud 102, 114) display the importance of heroism as a theme. J.D.A. Ogilvy and Donald C. Baker state that all the heroic events that Beowulf experiences lead him to a heroic death at the end: "The young, successful prince becomes the king confronted with an enemy whom he did not seek and over whom he can win only a partial victory. It crowns a heroic life with a heroic death" (Ogilvy and Baker 85). Beowulf follows the heroic code from beginning to end of the epic.

The narrator of the epic also seems to give special importance to heroism and heroic deeds as he introduces different sagas throughout the epic that either glorify the heroic actions of the main characters or despise their non-heroic deeds. The Saga of Sigemund is an example that includes examples of both heroic and non-heroic actions. While the narrator praises Sigemund as he performs the heroic act of slaying a dragon alone, he disapproves of the non-heroic actions of King Heremod, who ignores his warriors and people (Tharaud 38).

John Gardner also includes the theme of heroism in his novel *Grendel*. However, his

approach to heroism is quite different from that of *Beowulf*. By reversing the ideas about heroism, Gardner displays another perspective to evaluate the value of heroism. While heroism in *Beowulf* becomes one of the most important themes of the epic and is praised by the narrator, it is deconstructed, mocked, and questioned in different ways in *Grendel*. In the novel, Gardner's narrator, Grendel, presents the concept of heroism in different situations. First, he deconstructs the heroic boasts that are commonly included in the epic. Grendel finds the boastings of the thanes foolish and calls the boasting warriors "Damned pompous fools" (Gardner, *Grendel* 80). Grendel laughs at their heroic boasting since they die at Grendel's hands after they attack him (Gardner, *Grendel* 81). Thus, the heroic boasts that are one of the basic components of the epic *Beowulf* become a means of mockery in *Grendel*.

Gardner's depiction of Grendel's encounter with Unferth clearly reflects Gardner's sarcastic and deconstructive approach to heroism. Grendel unmasks Unferth's heroic ideals by mocking them throughout the novel. In one of his attacks on the mead hall, Grendel speaks with Unferth and tells him that being a hero must be a terrible burden as he must always maintain the heroic qualities; then he makes fun of Unferth when he speaks and boasts heroically (Gardner, *Grendel* 84). Grendel's provocation angers Unferth, who attacks Grendel. However, instead of starting a serious fight, Grendel begins to throw apples at Unferth, who cannot protect himself from the apples and is injured. Grendel sees Unferth's miserable situation and says "He was crying, only a boy, famous hero or not: a poor miserable virgin" (Gardner, *Grendel* 85). Grendel mocks both heroic speeches and actions in this episode.

In addition, Grendel does not kill Unferth during his attacks and leaves him alive, which makes Unferth more angry:

He lives on, bitter, feebly challenging my midnight raids from time to time (three times this summer), crazy with shame that he alone is always spared, and furiously jealous of the dead. I laugh when I see him. He throws himself at me, or he cunningly sneaks up behind, sometimes in disguise -a goat, a

dog, a sickly old woman and I roll on the floor with laughter. So much for heroism. So much for the harvest virgin. So much, also, for the alternative visions of blind old poets and dragons. (Gardner, *Grendel* 90)

Gardner's cynicism and choice of vocabulary to describe Unferth make Unferth and the concept of heroism ridiculous. Unferth's attacks on Grendel are hilarious rather than heroic. Grendel's speeches and actions devastate Unferth, who has based his life on the heroic code. Grendel sees that the merry mask of heroism that the Shaper has put on Unferth's face has been torn away, which makes Unferth "a thinking animal stripped naked of former illusions" (Gardner, *Grendel* 105). By displaying Unferth in this way, Gardner creates a mock hero and suggests an alternative vision of heroism which does not praise heroism, but deconstructs and mocks heroism.

Grendel's fight with Beowulf is another example which shows Gardner's cynical approach to heroism. Beowulf's fight with Grendel in *Beowulf*, in which Beowulf tears off Grendel's arm, forms one of the great actions episodes of the epic. Beowulf's strength and heroic actions in beating Grendel without weapons is heroically described in the epic (Heaney 53-54). In *Grendel*, however, Gardner changes the narrative mode of this episode by retelling it from Grendel's mouth. Grendel tells that he slips on blood and falls, which provides Beowulf with an advantage (Gardner, *Grendel* 169). Therefore, Beowulf's victory is not the result of his heroic abilities, but an accident: "He was lucky. If I'd known he was awake, if I'd known there was blood on the floor when I gave him that kick..." (Gardner, *Grendel* 172). He later repeats that everything that happened was just an "accident" (Gardner, *Grendel* 173-74). By presenting all events taking place in Grendel's fight with Beowulf as an accident, Gardner strips Beowulf of his heroic ability. Thus, Gardner suggests that Beowulf's encounter with Grendel should be seen from another perspective in which chance rather than intention and heroic deeds plays an important role in defining Beowulf's heroism.

The second theme that Gardner deconstructs in *Grendel* is religion and ritual. Religion is an important issue in both *Beowulf* and *Grendel*. However, John Gardner's approach to religion through his narrator Grendel is quite different from that of *Beowulf*. Religious ritual and concepts are widely made use of in *Beowulf*. The epic includes both Christian and pagan elements. Gardner writes that *Beowulf* has hints of Christianity (Gardner *A letter*). The Christian elements in the epic have caused some critics to name the epic as a Christian poem (Bloom vii). When we read the epic, we encounter some characteristics of Christianity: for example, Grendel is a descendant of Cain (Tharaud 10), there is a reference to the Great Flood (Tharaud 70), and different parts of the epic the Christian god is referred to. After his fight with Grendel's mother, Beowulf retells the events in Heorot and says that he won the glory with the help of God (Tharaud 69-70). Later in the passage, Hrothgar tells Beowulf that even the status of king is achieved through the grace of God (Tharaud 72).

Apart from Christian elements, *Beowulf* also includes some pagan rituals. Scyld Scefing's funeral is described in the beginning of the epic, where Scyld Scefing is put into a ship and sent out to sea (Tharaud 4). Later in the epic, it is written that the Danes go to heathen temples and make sacrifices to get rid of Grendel (Tharaud 12). At the end of the epic, the narrator describes Beowulf's pagan funeral in which the Geats burn Beowulf and then build a huge mound that can be seen from far away (Tharaud 124). When we analyze both Christian and pagan elements in *Beowulf*, we see that both belief systems are mentioned with high reverence. Although the narrator favors Christianity over paganism, he does not relate any negative thoughts or feelings against either form of religion. He favors Christian beliefs over pagan ones, but he does not insult or mock the pagan beliefs. In fact, in his descriptions of Scyld Scefing's and Beowulf's funerals the reader can witness the esteem the narrator feels for pagan rituals.

In *Grendel*, John Gardner does not make any distinction between Christianity and paganism. He does not mention any belief

systems in particular. He reflects his views about religion and rituals in general through the character of Grendel, who does not understand religious rituals such as funerals. At one funeral he finds it meaningless to burn a dead body with the treasure around it: "And now, by some lunatic theory, they throw on golden rings, old swords, and braided helmets" (Gardner, *Grendel* 14). He sees this religious ceremony as a "lunatic theory". If we compare Grendel's approach to funeral rites in Gardner's novel with the narrator of *Beowulf*, it is clear that Grendel has a negative attitude toward funerals and religion. Gardner's Grendel does not believe in any religion and thinks that "religion is sick" (Gardner, *Grendel* 128). Grendel regards priests, who are supposed to be spiritual men, as "showman" rather than men of spirituality. Grendel ruins the temple and the statues of gods and reports that no one really cares about them, except the priests (Gardner, *Grendel* 129). Grendel implies that the priests care about religion because it is the only institution in which priests are valued and given respect and material gain. Grendel asserts that although the people do not really believe in the gods sincerely, religion is necessary for reasons of personal interests (Gardner, *Grendel* 129). However, he does not explain why it is necessary for the community. He implies that religion is only an artificial way of controlling people as a community. Grendel mocks Ork, the blind priest, by telling him that Grendel is "The Destroyer", the chief god, and makes fun of him by asking some questions (Gardner, *Grendel* 130-33). After listening to Ork's theory of religion, Grendel understands that religion is not as heavenly as people think it is.

Grendel's approach to religion is destabilizing: Instead of approaching religion as a heavenly institution inspired by God, he presents religion as an institution formed by priests to sooth the anxieties of people living in a community. Deconstructing the role of religion in community life in this way, Gardner questions the credibility of religion as a source that gives meaning to life.

A third theme that Gardner deconstructs in *Grendel* is beauty and art. The impact of art and beauty on Grendel is widely mentioned in John Gardner's *Grendel*. In *Beowulf*, we do not

have any special emphasis on these themes. However, Whealhtheow and the bard (scop) are presented as embodiments of beauty and art in both *Beowulf* and *Grendel*. The bard in *Beowulf* is a man "whose memory was well stored with songs" and who creates tales "in skillfully wrought words" (Tharaud 37). He plays his harp and sings songs to entertain people in the mead hall (Tharaud 44).

In *Grendel*, Gardner names his bard "The Shaper" and plays on his ability to create tales. The name "shaper" suggests someone who can shape things and events. The Shaper is a skillful story teller who influences Grendel. Grendel sees the shaper as a man he "cannot help but admire" (Gardner, *Grendel* 12). Grendel's admiration stems from the Shaper's ability to change history and present an alternative version. Grendel witnesses the development of human kind and knows how they kill each other for gold or food; he always witnesses of man's greed and savagery. However, when the Shaper sings the same story, he changes everything by glorifying the Danes and Hrothgar (Gardner, *Grendel* 42). He has the ability to change the world and make everyone believe him, including Grendel. Grendel, who lived and experienced the truth, remembers things the way the Shaper describes them (Gardner, *Grendel* 43). Grendel even lets the shaper form Grendel's identity. He defines himself through the Shaper's terms: "I was Grendel, Ruiner of Meadhalls, Wrecker of Kings" (Gardner, *Grendel* 80). The Shaper has the power to make everyone believe his stories through his art (Gardner, *Grendel* 51).

Gardner's presentation of the Shaper as someone who changes history with his songs and stories implies that the things the Shaper sings may be untrue. This approach deconstructs the idea of the bard or scop in *Beowulf*. The reality of the stories sung in *Beowulf* and the bard who narrates them are not usually questioned by listeners. Gardner, on the other hand, questions the credibility of bards and shows the ability of art to create illusions to change reality. Hence Grendel says that everything the Shaper tells is an illusion and a lie (Gardner, *Grendel* 48, 108). Through *Grendel*, Gardner implies that the epic *Beowulf* might be the result of an illusionary creation of a bard, because Grendel hears the Shaper

singing the original prologue of *Beowulf* in the novel (*Grendel* 41-42). Gardner clearly shows how the Shaper and poets in general lie about history in his letter to his students: he writes that poets always lie about history and adds that the Shaper lies about "Hrothgar's court, a foul, bestial, savage place" by glorifying it and Hrothgar's actions (Gardner, *A Letter*). This approach overturns the idea of an ideal bard who reliably mediates between reality and its presentation. It also deconstructs the approach of the *Beowulf* poet.

Queen Wealtheow is presented as the embodiment of beauty and elegance in different parts of *Beowulf* (Tharaud 27, 49, 82). In *Grendel*, when Grendel first sees her, she is presented in the same manner as well. The arrival of Wealtheow has a great influence on everyone in the mead hall including King Hrothgar, his thanes, and the Shaper (Gardner, *Grendel* 101-2). Grendel is also greatly influenced by Wealtheow, and her beauty tears him apart (Gardner, *Grendel* 100). He cannot stand the idea of a beautiful queen because queenliness, love, and beauty are theories of humans, like the theory of heroism. Grendel, who became a nihilist after facing the dragon, cannot stand the idea that humans might be right in their theories of beauty and love. Therefore he decides to kill the queen in a brutal way (Gardner, *Grendel* 108-9). According to Grendel, killing the queen would be "the ultimate act of nihilism" (Gardner, *Grendel* 93). However, he gives up the idea at the last moment and states that he "had wrecked another theory" of people about him (Gardner, *Grendel* 110).

The idealization of Queen Wealtheow as an ideal embodiment of beauty and love is deconstructed by Gardner through Grendel's character. Gardner transforms the idea of beauty from an ideal concept into something with physical existence in the material world. Wealtheow's existence as an ideal queen creates an atmosphere in which everyone, even Grendel, believes in the ideal power of beauty. However, when Grendel attacks the queen and grabs her in his hands physically, the idea of beauty as an ideal is shattered as Grendel now understands that Queen Wealtheow is also a human being with blood, flesh, and an "ugly hole between her legs"

(Gardner, *Grendel* 109). Perceiving the queen in this manner leads Grendel to plan a brutal death for the Queen. However, when he realizes that this is what people would expect from him because he is a monster, he changes his mind and spares the queen. Grendel's act wrecks people's theory that Grendel is a human-eating monster (Gardner, *Grendel* 110). After wrecking their theory of heroism, Grendel wrecks their theory of love and beauty as well. Thus John Gardner deconstructs basic themes of the epic and Western civilization by displaying them from Grendel's perspective.

The main characters -Beowulf, Grendel, and King Hrothgar- are also reinterpreted and deconstructed in *Grendel*. In *Beowulf*, Beowulf exemplifies the perfect hero. The poem shows his heroism through three separate difficult conflicts with Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon. We can view these three encounters as expressions of the heroic code. When we analyze these encounters we see that Beowulf as a hero changes through the epic. In his youth, Beowulf is depicted as an ideal hero, whose basic characteristics are physical power, boastful expressions, loyalty, and courtesy. His retelling of his contest with Breca and his speeches about how he is going to fight Grendel are full of boastful expressions (Tharaud 26-29). After killing Grendel and Grendel's mother, Beowulf establishes himself as a hero. When he goes back to Geatland, he loyally serves Hygelac and then Hygelac's son. Finally, when he becomes an aged king, we see a different Beowulf who has turned into a mature and wise man. In the final episode, Beowulf encounters the dragon for the good of the people and not just for his own glory. After his death, his people build a mound like the one Beowulf asked for, which shows that his people really love him. Through all his heroic deeds in *Beowulf*, Beowulf is depicted as a perfect hero who is faultless. His heroic deeds are flawless. The *Beowulf* poet confirms Beowulf's perfection by ending the epic with phrases such as "the mildest and most gentle, the kindest and most eager for fame" (Tharaud 125).

In *Grendel*, Gardner's depiction of Beowulf is quite different from the epic poet's depiction in *Beowulf*. First, Gardner never uses the name Beowulf in the novel. Instead, he uses phrases



to describe him. This un-naming of Beowulf hints about Gardner's approach to Beowulf's heroism: a hero without a name cannot have a reputation, by leaving Beowulf nameless in *Grendel*, Gardner questions the heroic name of Beowulf in the epic.

Before Beowulf comes, an old woman tells that a warrior with the power of thirty thanes will come, which Grendel regards as a lie (Gardner, *Grendel* 140-41). Grendel does not believe that a man can be as powerful as thirty thanes. This approach suggests that the description of Beowulf as a man with the strength of thirty warriors in the epic is either a lie or an exaggeration. Grendel's undermining of Beowulf continues until his final encounter with him. When Grendel sees Beowulf for the first time, his impression is that he is as big as a mountain (Gardner, *Grendel* 153). As the novel continues, Grendel witnesses Beowulf's answer to Unferth's taunts. At this point, Grendel's description of Beowulf becomes negative. Grendel says, "I could see his mind working, stone-cold, grinding like a millwheel" (Gardner, *Grendel* 161). This description implies that Beowulf is more like a machine than a human being. As Beowulf describes his defeating of nine sea monsters, Grendel thinks that Beowulf is "insane" (Gardner, *Grendel* 162). The negative description of Beowulf culminates in his battle with Grendel. Grendel depicts Beowulf as a sly character. When Beowulf finally confronts Grendel, he tricks the monster into thinking he is asleep with the other warriors in the mead hall (Gardner, *Grendel* 168). Beowulf even lets Grendel eat one of his warriors just to learn how Grendel acts. Grendel says Beowulf takes advantage of Grendel's fall when Grendel slips in the blood on the floor. What is more, he makes Grendel "sing of walls," which shows Beowulf is "crazy" (Gardner, *Grendel* 171). Beowulf's heroic characteristics are displayed from Grendel's point of view in the novel. However, instead of approving Beowulf as a heroic figure as in the epic, Gardner displays him as a machine-like creature that can be irrational or even crazy at times. This depiction discredits the epic hero Beowulf.

In *Beowulf*, Grendel is one of the three monsters that Beowulf encounters. Grendel is depicted negatively as a character who is evil

and descended from Cain. Grendel does not have any depth and acts mechanically each time he attacks Heorot. Although the reason for Grendel's attacks is not clearly stated in the epic, the poet implies that he is jealous of people's rejoicing. Grendel's loneliness is also hinted by the poet as he describes Grendel as a creature walking alone (Tharaud 9, 10-11). The epic gives no information about Grendel's inner world which makes him a static character who does not develop throughout the epic.

In *Grendel*, John Gardner deconstructs Grendel and recreates him as the main character of the novel, which presents a different perspective from the *Beowulf* poet. Gardner depicts Grendel as a character who thinks that "all life is brute mechanics, all poetic vision a cynical falsehood" and "optimism is cowardice" (*On Becoming* 58). Grendel is monstrous, cynical, and violent. However, he has human qualities such as feelings and human language. He is much more complex than the Grendel in *Beowulf*, and he develops throughout the novel. He is influenced by beauty and poetry (Gardner, *Grendel* 146). He wants to know the reason of his existence and searches for the meaning of life. When Grendel hears the story of good and evil from the shaper, he wants to leave the "dark side" and join the good side. Gardner writes that Grendel "longs to be friends with" human beings (*On Becoming* 141). However, he is misunderstood and attacked by the people in the mead hall (Gardner, *Grendel* 51-52). His rejection by human beings makes him a vengeful creature who attacks human beings. Grendel is the perpetrator of many violent and cruel acts in the novel, but all his brutal actions seem to stem from his hatred toward people's greed and their rejection of him. By presenting Grendel's inner world in details, Gardner focuses on the neglected parts of the epic concerning Grendel since the narrator of *Beowulf* gives no information about Grendel's inner world. In this way, Gardner presents a view that changes the reader's perception of the epic.

King Hrothgar is also mentioned in different parts of *Beowulf* and *Grendel*. He is presented as an ideal king in the beginning of *Beowulf* (Tharaud 9). He is described with positive epithets such as "the mighty lord" (Tharaud

16), "protector of Scyldings" (18), "the gray-haired giver of treasure" (26), and "protector of thanes" (43). In *Grendel*, Grendel describes King Hrothgar differently. In his first encounter with King Hrothgar, Grendel describes Hrothgar and his men as "crazy" people and "pattern makers" (Gardner, *Grendel* 27). Grendel says that King Hrothgar is "more to be feared than a tree or snake" (Gardner, *Grendel* 30). King Hrothgar is depicted as a cunning person who forms plans to maintain his absolute power. The idea of a perfect king that is presented in *Beowulf* is questioned, because King Hrothgar is depicted as someone greedy for power and treasure.

In conclusion, when we analyze John Gardner's deconstruction of *Beowulf* in *Grendel*, we see that Gardner especially focuses on narration, theme, and characterization to show another side of the story. Since deconstruction

requires focusing on the other side of the story in its first step in order to reverse the binary oppositions, Gardner presents the themes and characters from an opposite point of view. In this way, he questions the credibility of the events and narration in the epic. This approach discredits the story told in *Beowulf* as "deconstructive fiction retells the story in such a way that the old version loses credit" (*The Art* 88). John Michael Howell focuses on the same point by stating that "Gardner deconstructs the original epic's characters and actions (and many of its lines) by placing them in an ironic context which implicitly questions the vision of the original work while saluting its literary power" (61-62). In *Grendel*, John Gardner reinterprets the actions of the epic from a new point of view that changes the reader's perception of the events and characters in the original epic, *Beowulf*.

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