The Dragon as a Figure and Symbol in English Literature

By

Kathryn Denise Buys, B.A.

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This thesis has been accepted on behalf of the Department of English by their supervisory committee:

Dr. Charles MacQuarrie
Committee Chair

Dr. Andy Troup
Committee Member

Dr. Carol Dell’Amico
Committee Member
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Kathryn Denise Buys

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Abstract

This thesis explores the use and portrayal of dragons in English literature and how their inspirations and influences. The first chapter is an introduction defining the dragon and reviewing the literature that will be covered. The second chapter discusses the inspirations for the dragon in *Beowulf* and the roles he plays in the epic poem. The third chapter explores the dragon and serpent references and symbolism in the works of William Shakespeare and their importance to Shakespeare’s works and to societal views of dragons, serpents, and other reptilian creatures. The fourth chapter covers Smaug from J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Middle-Earth* novel *The Hobbit* and Eustace Scrubb’s transformation into a dragon in C. S. Lewis’s third *Chronicles of Narnia* novel *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, as well as their mythological inspirations and influence in modern fantasy and modern English literature. And finally, the fifth chapter will discuss the role and the influence of the dragon in John Gardner’s novel *Grendel*, a retelling of *Beowulf*. 
Dedication

To my family and friends for all their love and support, and to Professor MacQuarrie, Dr. Troup, and Dr. Dell’Amico for helping me in this process.
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Chapter I: Introduction to the Dragon as a Figure and a Monster

Dragons and dragon-like creatures have been central to world mythos, legends, and literature for millennia – in fact, they are part of the oldest human stories. While they were generally revered and respected in Eastern myth and literature, they were feared and condemned in most Western mythologies and literatures, especially after the Christianization of Europe. Much of Indo-European mythology portrayed dragons as monstrous serpents who needed to be slain by a hero. Calvert Watkins states that the hero slays the dragon because “The dragon symbolizes Chaos, in the largest sense, and killing the dragon represents the ultimate victory of Cosmic Truth and Order over Chaos” (Watkins 299). Furthermore, the dragon represents particular kinds of chaos in various cultures, including chaos that blocks “life-giving forces” in Indo-Iranian cultures and anti-hierarchical and anti-hospitality chaos in the cultures of ancient Ireland, Anatolia, and Greece (300). This fear and condemnation carried over into English folklore, and later English literature. For over a thousand years, dragons have commonly appeared in English literature as forces of nature, villainous figures within the worlds of various works, and symbols of both great power and great evil. Over time, the Dragon in English literature has evolved into not only a bestial force and a symbol of power or vice, but a character in and of itself with personal drives and influences over other characters.

The word “dragon,” derived from the Latin *dracōn-em* and the Greek ὅρακων, has several definitions (“dragon, n.”). One of them is a general term for a “huge serpent or snake; a python,” which is obsolete now in the twenty-first century (“dragon, n.”). The most used and best understood definition is the following:

A mythical monster, represented as a huge and terrible reptile, usually combining ophidian and crocodilian structure, with strong claws, like a beast or bird of prey, and a
scaly skin; it is generally represented with wings, and sometimes as breathing out fire.

The heraldic dragon combines reptilian and mammalian form with the addition of wings. (“dragon, n.”)

There is also another popular definition: “Hence frequent allusions to ancient and medieval tales of dragons, as those which watchfully guarded the Gardens of the Hesperides, those which drew the chariot of Cynthia or the moon, those fought and slain by Beowulf, St. George, and other champions” (“dragon, n.”). This paper will focus primarily on the Dragon’s role in English literature as a physical and or symbolic Monster and its evolution. A “monster” according to the Oxford English Dictionary, was originally defined as “a mythical creature which is part animal and part human, or combines elements of two or more animal forms, and is frequently of great size and ferocious appearance. Later, more generally: any imaginary creature that is large, ugly, and frightening” (“monster, n., adv., and adj.”). This is the definition on which this paper will use for the Monster as it is the one that defines the physical and symbolic nature of the Dragon in English literature.

In the late Middle Ages, the epic poem *Beowulf* was written. Seamus Heaney translates *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, which chronicles the titular hero’s slaying of the beast Grendel and ultimately leads up to his confrontation with a monstrous dragon, who acts a villainous opponent for Beowulf in the climax. Though Beowulf is able to slay the dragon, its poisonous blood results in his tragic death.

During the late English Renaissance, Shakespeare used many references to dragons and other serpents as both literal creatures and beasts of evil and power, and as symbols of power and vice. These works are *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Cymbeline*, *Henry VI, Part 1*, *Henry VI, Part 2*, *Henry VI, Part 3*, *King John*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Measure for Measure*, *The
Merchant of Venice, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Othello, Pericles, Richard II, Richard III, and Timon of Athens. Thomas Firminger Thiselton-Dyer wrote on animal and bestiary references and symbolism, among other folklore elements in Shakespeare, including dragons, serpents, and other reptiles in his 1906 book Folk-lore of Shakespeare. This book establishes how much folklore and legend Shakespeare incorporated into his works, however momentary and subtle they might be. In Millar MacLure’s article “Shakespeare and the Lonely Dragon,” he argues that Coriolanus and Menenius both undergo transformations into symbolic dragons, corrupted by pride, vengefulness, and envy. Meredith Skura’s article “Dragon Fathers and Unnatural Children: Warring Generations in King Lear and Its Sources” discusses the symbolism of King Lear as a “dragon” and how this draconic nature contributes to the conflicts and deaths between the families and characters in King Lear. Dragons take on a more symbolic role in Shakespeare’s works, but are still significant in understanding the worlds and character dynamics in his plays and portraying the complexity of his characters.

J. R. R. Tolkien’s 1937 novel The Hobbit features the dragon Smaug as a central antagonist who is not only a force of nature and an evil beast for Bilbo and the Company from whom to take Erebor’s treasure back, but also a complex, dark villain who knows and revels in the pain and destruction he brings and whose arrogance and greed results in his death. In his book J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century, Tom Shippey connects Smaug from The Hobbit with the dragon from Beowulf and shows how he inspired Smaug’s character. He also connects Smaug with Fafnir from the Völunga Saga in Norse mythology. He is compared similarly to the dragon in Stuart D. Lee and Elizabeth Solopova’s book The Keys of Middle-earth: Discovering Medieval Literature Through the Fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien. Anna Hyla also suggests that Smaug is inspired by the dragon from Beowulf in her article “The Image of Dragon in Literature.
Pedagogical Perspective on the Basis of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien’s Hobbit.” She states how like the dragon in Beowulf, greed causes him to attack others and how he is defeated by a strong warrior. She also argues that he has a lasting corrupting influence on those who interact with him and his gold. In Tolkien’s own book Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics, he states that the dragon in Beowulf is too abstract and more of a dragon in symbolism than in nature. Felicia Jean Steele affirms this statement in her article “Dreaming of Dragons: Tolkien’s Impact on Heaney’s Beowulf” and states that Tolkien made Smaug less of an abstract dragon and a more natural dragon with the mind and understanding of a dragon, removing the allegorical nature from his character.

In C. S. Lewis’s third The Chronicles of Narnia book The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, published in 1952, Lucy and Edmund Pevensie’s cousin Eustace Scrubb puts on a cursed gold bracelet and falls asleep in a dragon’s den, waking up to find himself transformed into a dragon. Due to his greed, he has been cursed and only through becoming more generous, caring, and helpful and going through a painful transformation is he able to change back into a human. Thomas L. Martin’s article “Seven for Seven: ‘The Voyage of the Dawn Treader’ and the Literary Tradition” notes the dragon-ness inside Eustace that transforms him and the spiritual transformation he must undergo in order to become human again, highlighting his need for Aslan’s redemptive power to help him.

Finally, in John Gardner’s 1971 novel Grendel, the dragon from Beowulf makes an appearance as an evil mentor for Grendel, who is able to speak and preaches materialism and nihilism to Grendel. He encourages Grendel to become the villain for the humans and terrorize King Hrothgar’s meadhall, eventually resulting in his death at the hands of Beowulf. Robert Merrill mentions the Dragon’s nihilism coming from his knowledge of the timeline in his article
“John Gardner's Grendel and the Interpretation of Modern Fables.” However, John Gardner states that the Dragon’s knowledge and philosophy is flawed and limited in his book *On Fiction*, a statement which Joe David Bellamy and John M. Howell relay in their works *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers* and *John Gardner: A Bibliographical Profile*, respectively. Jeff Henderson also agrees that the Dragon’s nihilistic logic is flawed and sets Grendel on a destructive path in his article “The Avenues of Mundane Salvation: Time and Change in the Fiction of John Gardner.” In their article “The Twelve Traps in John Gardner's Grendel,” Barry Fawcett and Elizabeth Jones argue that in each of the twelve chapters of Grendel there is a creature or person that represent the signs of the Zodiac. The Dragon in Chapter 5 represents Leo, being an evil version of the mentor figure who gives Grendel dark knowledge and heads him toward a path of villainy rather than heroism. Marie Nelson emphasizes the importance of linguistics in Grendel for understanding Grendel’s connections with mythology and Beowulf, the work on which it is based, and understanding Dragon’s antipathy towards others, especially the humans and Grendel in her article “John Gardner's ‘Grendel’: A Story Retold and Transformed in the Process.” Moufida Zaidi and Samira Al-Khawaldeh’s article “The Anti-hero as a Critic in John Gardner's Grendel” argues that the Dragon’s materialism is drawn from capitalism and corrupts Grendel into caring only about his own individual gain and desires over anyone else’s, leading him to become like the Dragon and ultimately meet his demise. Craig Payne’s article also asserts that Grendel channels the Dragon when he attacks people and adopts the Dragon’s sense of pointlessness no matter what choice he makes. The Dragon’s influence over Grendel ultimately leads to Grendel’s death, as well as his own.

My reason for writing this thesis is to explore the significance of physical and symbolic dragons in English literature such as *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit*, and their relationships with
mythology, narrative, and morality. As someone who has taken great interest in the fantasy genre and dragons as mythological beings from an early age, I wanted to learn more about the use of dragons in English literature and how they influenced the portrayal of dragons in other English-language literature and media.

I wanted to explore the implications of being a dragon or dragon-like in English literature and how it reflects the views of the authors and of past and present peoples in Western Europe on dragons. Though there are many studies on the Dragon in *Beowulf*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* and their mythological roots, I wanted to further explore dragons’ connection with religion, especially in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. I also wanted to explore dragon symbolism in English literature, especially in William Shakespeare’s works, on which I did not see many scholarly articles.

I plan to investigate the Dragon as a physical and symbolic figure in English literature by exploring dragons in five different areas. First, I will discuss the Dragon’s role in *Beowulf*. Then, I will cover the references and symbolism of dragons and serpents in Shakespeare’s works and how they connect with the Monster figure in English literature. Afterwards, I will cover the use of dragons and the inspirations of dragon mythology in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, primarily *The Hobbit* and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. And finally, I will discuss the Dragon’s nihilism, materialism, and cruelty in John Gardner’s *Grendel*, and how his dark mentorship feeds Grendel’s own nihilism, materialism, and cruelty.
Chapter II: “When the dragon awoke”: The Dragon as an Archetypal Germanic Dragon, Embodiment of Evil, and Bringer of Death in Beowulf

The Anglo-Saxon epic poem Beowulf is foundational in the development of the epic poetry and high fantasy genres in English literature. The epic poem tells the story of the Geat prince Beowulf, who must fight several formidable monsters throughout the poem in order to bring peace to both Hrothgar’s kingdom and his own. After many years of reigning over the Geats following his victories over Grendel and his mother and the death of Hygelac, Beowulf confronts a dragon awoken and enraged by a thief who stole his goblet. The dragon is a cataclysmic figure in Beowulf in that while Beowulf manages to slay him and avenge those he killed, he dies from the dragon’s venomous bite. The dragon from Beowulf is such an archetypal figure that it has impacted the way that English literature portrays dragons, from Smaug in J. R. R. Tolkien’s The Hobbit and Lord Octesian and Eustace Scrubb in C. S. Lewis’s The Voyage of the Dawn Treader. The dragon in Beowulf plays three central roles in Beowulf. First, he is an archetypal dragon of Germanic mythology. Second, he is the embodiment of evil, greed, and hatred. And third, he is the harbinger of death for the people of Geatland and, ultimately, for Beowulf, marking the end of Beowulf’s heroic journey.

The first role of the dragon in Beowulf is the archetypal dragon that one could find in Germanic mythology and folklore. As a medieval epic poem originally written in Old English and set in Germanic Europe, Beowulf takes its dragon from the dragons of Germanic mythology and folklore, especially Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian mythology. The dragon’s ties to Scandinavian mythology are confirmed in Beowulf’s retelling of Sigemund killing Fafnir. Paul Sorrell notes, however, that though Sigmund was a hero in the Völsunga Saga, it is his son
Sigurd who fights and slays the cursed dragon Fafnir (70). After killing Grendel, Beowulf tells the men at Hrothgar’s hall stories about the exploits of the Norse hero Sigemund:

After his death

Sigemund’s glory grew and grew
because of his courage when he killed the dragon,
the guardian of the hoard. Under grey stone
he had dared to enter all by himself
to face the worst without Fitela.
But it came to pass that his sword plunged
right through those radiant scales
and drove into the wall. The dragon died of it.
His daring had given him total possession
of the treasure hoard, his to dispose of
however he liked. He loaded a boat:
Waels’s son weighted her hold
with dazzling spoils. The hot dragon melted. (Beowulf ll. 884b–96)

This story of Sigemund slaying the dragon and claiming his treasure foreshadows Beowulf’s fight with and slaying of the dragon, as well as his claiming of the dragon’s treasure and his decision to have the treasure be given to the people of Geatland. The dragon’s anatomy is based on that of Germanic dragons as well. He has slick skin, the ability to breathe both fire and poison, sharp fangs, “enamelled scales,” and a fifty-foot-long body (ll. 2273, 2312, 2577, 2692, 2839, 3042). He is also described as a “sky-winger” (2315), being able to fly like many dragons in Scandinavian mythology, such as Niðhöggr in the Völuspá (Keller 220). Furthermore, the
dragon has a mostly hard and impenetrable head and back, but a soft underbelly that serves as his one weak spot, much like with the dragons killed by Sigurd and Frotho in Scandinavian mythology (Sisam 134).

There is also evidence of the dragon’s Scandinavian inspirations outside of the poem itself. In his 1982 article, Michael Lapidge traces the “origin and transmission” of Beowulf to early Wessex and links Beowulf “to the circle of Aldhelm, the scholarly bishop of Sherborne who died ca. 709” (Sorrell 57). He points out similarities between Aldhelm’s dragons and the dragon in Beowulf (57). For example, the dragons in both Beowulf and Aldhelm’s work on heroic virginity “are conceived of as the enemy of an entire people, implacably hostile to mankind, a mighty adversary for a heroic deliverer” (57). Sorrell notes that the portrayals of dragons in these works are similar and it is plausible that Beowulf in linked to Aldhelm (57). However, Sorrell also notes that they differ in their portrayals of the relationships between the hero/saint and the people, as well as those between the dragon and its environment (57–8). He explains, “Anglo-Saxon thought posits an essential relationship between an animal and the typical habitat in which it carries on the activity that is characteristic of it” (58). The poet focuses on the dragon’s “affinity with fire,” animosity towards humanity, and “mastery of the air” in its violent abandon and expansive destruction, and focuses on the dragon’s loss of his faculties and abilities when Beowulf kills him (59–60). This focus on the dragon’s physical abilities highlights “the conventional nature of the features attributed to dragons in Anglo-Saxon thought” (59). The dragons in Aldhelm’s work, however, are focused on more as serpents and symbols of the peoples’ old pagan religions (61–3). While the dragons in Aldhelm’s work are largely inspired by Greco-Roman dragon-slaying hero myths, Beowulf’s dragon is inspired more by Germanic mythology (66, 68). Sorrell also suggests a parallel between the dragon in Beowulf and the three
dragon battles in Saxo Grammaticus’s *History of the Danes*, in which three kings Frothi I, Fridlef II, and Regner Lothbrog must fight venomous, serpentine dragons (69). They also must dodge fire and venom, attack the top parts of the dragons with no luck, and are only able to kill the dragons upon stabbing them in their weak spot – their soft underbellies (69). On the other hand, Sorrell argues that Scandinavian dragons are “perhaps closer to the venomous, scaly serpent-dragons of Aldhelm than the winged, fiery-breathed monster of the Old English poem” (69–70). He does not deny, however, that the dragon in *Beowulf* possesses many of the serpentine traits common in Scandinavian dragons (Sorrell 70). After all, the dragon is described as having coils (*Beowulf* ll. 2567–9). This shows that the dragon is more serpentine than crocodilian (Sisam 134). The dragon also unquestionably resembles Scandinavian dragons, and other Germanic dragons, in his antipathy and violent behavior towards mankind and his destined death at the hands of a hero.

The second role of the dragon in *Beowulf* is as a bestial embodiment of evil, greed, wrath, hatred, death, and destruction. As is common among dragons in Western folklore, the Dragon is hostile towards humans altogether, having a disdain for them that is worsened by the theft of his goblet. Adrien Bonjour argues that “the monsters, whether they be *thyrs* or dragon, are maleficent (even relatively harmless nicors are not in odor of sanctity with our poet), and they are maleficent to mankind rather than to individual characters, parties, or tribes” (308). The dragon attacks and kills people indiscriminately and only stops once he either finds his treasure, his rage is satisfied, or he is finally slain. The dragon, unlike Grendel (who is immoral), is an amoral monster who has transcended good and evil, making him an even more evil monster and an even more dangerous foe for Beowulf (Keller 220). T. M. Gang asserts, “Certainly we can call the dragon 'evil'-but in a very different sense of the word; an impersonal, amoral sense:
rather as we might think of a disease as an evil" (6–7). This amorality would later shape the
dragon’s character in John Gardner’s novel *Grendel*, which this study will cover later in Chapter
V. In his essay *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, J. R. R. Tolkien argues that the dragon’s
ever is too otherworldly and fantastical to be truly based on his draconic nature, stating the
following:

Beowulf’s dragon, if one wishes really to criticize, is not to be blamed for being a dragon,
but rather for not being dragon enough, plain pure fairy-story dragon. There are in the
poem some vivid touches of the right kind — *as þa se wyrm onwoc, wroht wæs geniwad; stonc æfter stane* [when the dragon awoke, strife was renewed; he then moved quickly
along by the rock], 2285—in which this dragon is real worm, with a bestial life and
thought of his own, but the conception, nonetheless, approaches draconitas [dragon-ness]
rather than draco [dragon]: a personification of malice, greed, destruction (the evil side of
heroic life), and of the undiscriminating cruelty of fortune that distinguishes not good or
bad (the evil aspect of all life). (16–7)

The dragon’s status as a scourge of the people marks him as a monstrous threat along
with Grendel (Bonjour 310), as well as his pattern of attacking at night and his horrific
terrorization of the Geats (311). Bonjour argues that the dragon’s greed, hatred for mankind, his
horrific violence towards the Geats and monstrous form indicate that he embodies evil and
hatred:

Be that as it may, when we remember how the dragon delighted in his feud with
mankind, “compassed the land with flame of fire” and meant “to leave there nothing
alive,” is it wide of the mark to see in that coiled creature a personification of malice,
greed, and destruction? (312).
The dragon’s greed is what begins his destruction of Geatland and his murder of the Geats. The theft of his goblet by the slave draws his ire and because he cannot find the thief, he decides to go out and take his greedy jealousy and rage out on his old enemy: mankind. The narrator poet criticizes the dragon saying, “He is driven to hunt out / hoards under ground, to guard heathen gold / through age-long vigils, though to little avail” (*Beowulf* ll. 2275–2277). The narrator also says that “What came about brought to nothing / the hopes of the one who had wrongly hidden / riches under the rock-face” (ll. 3058–60). The dragon idolizes his gold wastefully and as Alvin A. Lee asserts, the dragon does not truly benefit from this hoard of gold but rather is corrupt for taking possession of and hoarding the treasure (200). The dragon’s greed and hatred ultimately turn him into an embodiment of not only evil, but of death and destruction as well. Bonjour explains:

Is it not precisely because he embodies malice in its most destructive aspect that the dragon has also been made into an instrument of the cruelty of fate—an inexorable fate which ultimately destroys the Geatish king and the Geatish people? Was he not perfectly suited for that purpose, and why should that confer a “most ambiguous significance” on him? (Bonjour 312).

The dragon brings death and destruction to the Geatish people through his greed and wrath. His destruction of the kingdom and his slaughter of the Geatish people forces Beowulf to confront him as an old man and to, therefore, confront his own mortality. Beowulf’s showdown with the dragon completes Beowulf’s journey from a courageous, proud Prince to a courageous, proud, and sacrificial King prepared to meet God. The dragon is the barrier between Beowulf and death.
The third role the dragon plays in *Beowulf* is as the bringer of death and destruction for the Geats and Beowulf. The dragon often targets those who steal his treasure, but often kills and destroys indiscriminately. He also gives Beowulf a good fight, and though Beowulf slays him, he manages to kill Beowulf with his poison. The dragon as a bringer and embodiment of death and destruction originates within the association of dragons with death and the dead in Scandinavian mythology. Thomas L. Keller states that the dragon’s habit of sleeping in a barrow and guarding a hoard of treasure is a “very common attribute for Scandinavian dragons; they guard treasure in funeral mounds” and that “they seem to have an image of <<devouring death>>” (219). This is similar to the “corpse-eater” dragon Níðhöggr from the Völuspá in Norse mythology (Keller 219). This further suggests that the dragon is associated with death and embodies death and destruction for both the Geatish people and Beowulf. Lee also affirms this in regards to the dragon’s destruction of Beowulf’s hall:

As the mythos of widespread destruction unfolds, there is a massing of images and themes of blood-feuding, social disintegration, and death. It is as if all the hatreds and hostilities of many years of existence have suddenly coalesced into one monstrous, objective form, the fiery, vengeful dragon, and his long pent-up rage has been unleashed in a wild orgy of destruction. (143)

The dragon is not merely an enemy in the poem but a force of nature. He is the manifestation of hatred against humanity and the violent, extreme destruction of life. Judith Garde also explains the important role the dragon plays as a bringer of death within the poem and within myth and folklore:

The dragon tale is preoccupied with the topic of death, notably that of the same mighty hero who, although blessed with an incredible gift of strength to destroy God's infamous
enemies, was destined to succumb in extreme old age to the venomous bite of a dragon. Death of the doomed man occurs in various ways, repeatedly in the course of bloody tribal warfare, but the Christian poet's reworking of the folkloric medium is not immediately apparent here, as it is in the earlier story. Old Beowulf must confront his own mortality in Part II, apparently in accordance with a folkloric convention that the hero may encounter a third adversary, possibly a destructive dragon, and not only will not survive the conflict, but will die in the presence of a 'helper'. The poet must at the same time resolve and affirm eschatological and other concerns that were raised in Hrothgar’s address. (332–3)

The dragon’s destiny as Beowulf’s killer is first implied with Beowulf’s distress at the dragon’s attacks and his caution about confronting the dragon. Lee compares Beowulf’s conflict with the dragon in the poem’s climax to the story of Job from the Old Testament of the Bible (200). He compares the flames from the dragon’s breath to the “‘fire of God’ that falls on Job’s possessions” (Lee 200; Job 1:16). Like Job, Beowulf suffers a great loss as a result of the dragon’s attacks despite being a virtuous man (Lee 201). Beowulf, like Job, wonders what he might have done for this to happen (201). The narrator states, “the wise man thought he must have thwarted / ancient ordinance of the eternal Lord, / broken his commandment” (Beowulf ll. 2329–31). Kenneth Sisam argues that this is because Beowulf “regarded the dragon as one of those natural forces–flood, tempest, fire – which from time to time wake and rage to destroy men and their works” (133). Beowulf’s fate, however, is stated to be in the Wielder’s hands, which he does not know; this is similar to Job’s lack of knowledge of God’s allowance of Satan to “bring destruction down on him” (Lee 201). Unlike Job, though, Beowulf does not have to be reminded to fulfill the role God gave him and to be the man and leader he needs to be, but rather takes the
initiative and goes to do battle with the dragon (202). Beowulf fulfills his role as a hero and a leader to his people and goes to fight the dragon of his own volition.

Beowulf’s first two attacks against the dragon are unsuccessful. The third time, Wiglaf helps him and they manage to stab the dragon in his weak spot (*Beowulf* ll. 2705–6). The dragon does manage, however, to bite Beowulf on the neck (ll. 2690–4), and after he slays the dragon, Beowulf succumbs to his wound. In his book *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics*, Calvert Watkins states the instance of a hero/slayer or someone else being slain by the serpent rather than, or along with in Beowulf’s case, the hero/slayer slaying the serpent is a “real or potential danger” in mythology and folklore (324). Besides Beowulf, this case of the serpent bringing death upon the hero also appears in the Hittite myth of the *illuyankas* and in the mythical battle between Thor and the Midgard Serpent (324–5). Watkins connects the dragon with the Midgard Serpent, who is slain by Thor at Ragnarok and whose poison kills Thor (424). He states that this event of the hero dying after slaying the serpent and the linguistic effects shown in Germanic poetry stem from the “pessimistic Germanic view of ‘final things’” (Watkins 424). Due to this pessimistic view, the Germanic dragon is not only a vile, greedy monster that must be fought for the hero’s glory or the safety of his people, but sometimes, unfortunately, the sign and bringer of the hero’s death.

The dragon that Beowulf fights in the climax of *Beowulf* is one of the earliest and most significant dragons in English literature. Taking inspiration from Germanic dragons such as Fafnir, Niðhögr, and the Midgard Serpent, Jörmungandr, the poet of Beowulf has created an Anglo-Saxon dragon with a serpentine body and potent venom. The dragon’s presence is foreshadowed in the tale of Sigemund and Fafnir that Beowulf tells and reveals the dragon’s ties to Scandinavian culture and myth. The dragon’s greed and hatred, much like Fafnir’s, leads to
the deaths of many, including the hero and the dragon himself. The dragon is a personification of
greed and hatred of humanity, which ultimately leads to destruction and tragedy, but also an
agent of fate as well, working well within the will of the Maker and only allowed to go as far as
he is destined. The dragon and Beowulf fight as they are destined to in the hero and serpent
myth, and he brings Beowulf’s death as much as Beowulf brings his death. The dragon is such a
compelling and terrifying creature that it has inspired dragons in other works of English
literature, including *The Hobbit*’s greedy, violent, and malicious dragon antagonist Smaug. The
dragon also makes an appearance as Grendel’s mentor in John Gardner’s 1971 novel *Grendel*, a
prequel and retelling of *Beowulf* in the monster Grendel’s perspective, which this paper will
cover in Chapter V. The dragon remains an important aspect of the poem and an example of
serpents in the hero-serpent myth and creatures medieval Europeans feared and hoped to avoid.
The dragon in Beowulf shapes the physical and symbolic image dragons hold in English
literature today.
Chapter III: “Come not between the dragon and his wrath”: Dragons, Serpents and Other Reptilian Monsters in Shakespeare’s Plays

One of the symbols or figures that dragons frequently represent in English literature is the monster. The monster is a bestial opponent, common in epic literature, who frequently embodies both human and supernatural evil and must be defeated by the protagonist if the protagonist is a hero. Though if the protagonist is an anti-hero, tragic hero, or villain protagonist, the protagonist may have the monster as a mentor figure, or even be or become the monster him/herself. For this particular chapter and paper, we will focus on reptilian monsters, primarily dragons, serpents, and other reptilian beasts that are either reviled for their immorality and danger or revered for their immense power. The dragon as the monster is mentioned largely by William Shakespeare both as literally and metaphorically/symbolically.

The monster and variations of it have provoked fear and self-reflection in audiences from prehistoric times to today. The monster was frequently referred to as simply a monster, but also often took the form of many other menacing creatures. For the sake of this paper, we will cover reptilian monsters, including serpents, worms, basilisks, and, most famously and notably, dragons. In William Shakespeare’s works, these monsters are mentioned several times. They may refer to literal monsters that threaten the protagonists and the world around them, or to figurative monsters that represent monstrous attributes a character possesses. These monsters are important in setting the stage of Shakespeare’s works, whether they involve characterization, worldbuilding, or historical context.

The monster, as a generalized creature appears many times in Shakespeare’s works. Formidable, dangerous, hideous, envious, greedy, and or vain, the monster can be both literal and symbolic. In *Richard III*, for example, the bastard tells Austria,
Sirrah, were I at home
At your den, sirrah, with your lioness,
I would set an ox head to your lion’s hide
And make a monster of you. (Shakespeare, Richard III, II.i.)

In King Lear, Lear mentions monsters twice. First, he says, “Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend, / More hideous when thou show’st thee in a child / Than the sea monster!” (Shakespeare, King Lear, I.iv.). He compares Goneril’s ungratefulness to the hideous form of a sea monster. Later he says, “Humanity must perforce prey on itself, / Like monsters of the deep” (Shakespeare, King Lear, IV.ii.). That Lear makes references to a monster of the sea twice shows the prevalence of sea and water-based monsters in English mythology, and European mythology as a whole. Sea monsters are mentioned again in Merchant of Venice, where Portia alludes to the story of Alcides saving the virgin from the sea monster (Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, III.ii.).

The monster as a symbolic being also appears in the tragedy Othello. In Act III, Scene III, the villain Iago warns Othello,

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss
Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger;
But O, what damnèd minutes tells he o’er
Who dotes, yet doubts; suspects, yet strongly loves! (Shakespeare, Othello, III.iii.)
The “green-eyed monster” that Iago warns Othello not to become clearly represents envy. The “green-eyed monster” is a possessive being that wants something or someone all to its self and will go to great lengths, even violence, to hold onto it, or to avenge itself. This warning serves as a prophecy, with Othello becoming “the green-eyed monster” and accidentally killing his wife Desdemona in his anger and his jealousy over her. Though the “green-eyed” monster does not generally refer to a dragon, it is plausible that the monster would be draconian due to the sin of envy being largely associated with serpents and dragons. Envy is a possessive desire that can consume one and make them become serpentine or dragonish.

Another reptilian monster, the Lizard, is referenced twice in Shakespeare’s works. The witches use lizard’s leg as an ingredient in Macbeth (Shakespeare, Macbeth, IV.i.). In Suffolk’s monologue in Act III, Scene II of Henry VI, Part 2, he curses his enemies, saying that “Their softest touch as smart as lizards’ sting!” (Shakespeare, Henry VI, Part 2, III.ii.). Later in Henry VI, Part 3, Queen Margaret also refers to “lizards’ dreadful stings” (Shakespeare, Henry VI, Part 3, II.ii.). While lizards are not necessarily seen by modern readers as monstrous or dangerous, in Shakespeare’s time, lizards were distrusted and feared. In his nonfiction book Folk-lore of Shakespeare, Thomas Firminger Thiselton-Dyer explains, “It was a common superstition in the time of Shakespeare that lizards were venomous,” which is why the leg of lizard would have been considered a “suitable ingredient” for the witches in Macbeth (Thiselton-Dyer 253-254). This superstition and association of the lizard with the monster is one of many examples of how humanity distrusts and fears reptiles and sees them as venomous, predatory, and inherently evil.

The blind-worm is another reptile that was falsely believed to be venomous (Thiselton-Dyer 255). They are mentioned in A Midsummer Night’s Dream where the fairies sing to Queen Titania and one of the fairies warns blind-worms and other creatures to “Come not near our fairy
“Queen” (Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, II.ii.). Additionally, in *Timon of Athens*, the titular protagonist refers to an “eyeless venom’d worm,” alluding to the blind-worm’s small eyes and perceived venomousness (Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*, IV.iii; Thiselton-Dyer 255). “Blind-worm’s sting” appears as another ingredient in the witches’ brew in *Macbeth* (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, IV.i.). Blind-worms were believed to be poisonous like many other serpents.

Serpents have long been used in Western European folklore and literature to indicate evil monsters and evil spirits that sought to corrupt and destroy humans. One of the ingredients the witches include in their brew is the “fillet of a fenny snake,” indicating humans’ natural repulsion by snakes (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, IV.i.). In the past, people erroneously believed it was serpents’ forked tongues that made them dangerous, rather than their teeth or fangs (Thiselton-Dyer 255). “Adder’s fork” is also an ingredient in the witches’ brew in *Macbeth*, and in *Measure for Measure*, Duke Vincentio tells Claudio, “Thou’rt by no means valiant; / For thou dost fear the soft and tender fork / Of a poor worm” (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, IV.i.; Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, III.i.). Humans have such a fear of reptiles and what they do not know about them, that they have misunderstood and continue to misunderstand them.

“Worm” is another name used to refer to serpents. This is “a term used by our old writers to signify a serpent” and “still found in the north of England in the same sense” (Thiselton-Dyer 254). A serpent is referred to a worm in the aforementioned quote by Duke Vincentio, as well as in *Antony and Cleopatra*, which references the “pretty worm of Nilus there, / That kills and pains not?” (Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, III.i.; Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, V.ii.). The second quote refers to the idea that the serpent can kill without inflicting pain, which a popular belief (Thiselton-Dyer 256). In *Richard II*, Thomas Mowbray refers to “slander’s venomed
spear,” which can only be cured by “his heart-blood / Which breathed this poison” (Shakespeare, *Richard II*, I.i.). This alludes to an old popular belief that venomous snake bites could be cured by the blood of the viper who delivered the bite (Thiselton-Dyer 256). The references from *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Richard II* suggest that serpent venom has unique physiological qualities. Humans’ beliefs in the special and abnormal nature of serpents also appear in another quote from *Richard II*, where King Richard says,

> Now for our Irish wars:
> We must supplant those rough rug-headed kerns,
> Which live like venom, where no venom else,
> But only they, hath privilege to live. (Shakespeare, *Richard II*, II.i.)

According to Thiselton-Dyer, King Richard is referring to St. Patrick’s exile of the venomous serpents, in which he used drums to supernaturally banish them into the sea (Thiselton-Dyer 257).

Besides using references to serpents to reflect humans’ distrust and fear of serpents, Shakespeare also used serpents as a symbol for human evil, sinfulness, and ungratefulness. In *King Lear*, Act II, Scene IV, Lear refers to Goneril as having “struck me with her tongue” and being “Most serpent-like, upon the very heart,” before he wishes that “All the stor’d vengeances of heaven fall / On her ingrateful top!” (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, II.iv.). This comparison of Goneril to a serpent shows not only how angry and betrayed Lear feels at Goneril’s behavior towards him, but also how manipulative and ungrateful Goneril truly is. This connection between serpents and ungratefulness and selfishness further shows humans’ association of serpents with general human corruption, including manipulation and betrayal.
Another such example of the serpent as a symbolic figure of familial betrayal and power-hunger is in the tragedy *Hamlet*. When the ghost of the dead king approaches Hamlet, he tells him:

’Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,
A serpent stung me. So the whole ear of Denmark
Is by a forgèd process of my death
Rankly abused. But know, thou noble youth,
The serpent that did sting thy father’s life
Now wears his crown. (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.v.)

The deceased King Hamlet refers to his brother Claudius as a serpent, indicating that Claudius, like a serpent, used trickery and cunning to murder his brother and greedily usurp his throne. It is this serpentine greed, along with pride and envy, that Claudius possesses and that drives him to murder his own brother for his crown, and then attempt to murder his own nephew, leading to his own demise. Serpents embody all these human evils and, thus, provoke natural distrust and fear in humans.

Shakespeare also refers to another monstrous creature – the basilisk. In European mythology, Basilisks are serpent-like monsters with the ability to kill anyone who looks into their eyes. *Henry V* has a quote in which the Queen of France mentions “The fatal balls of murdering basilisks” and “The venom of such looks” (Shakespeare, *Henry V*, V.ii.). In *Henry VI, Part 2*, when the Duke of Suffolk comes to King Henry and offers him comfort after Gloucester’s murder, King Henry tells him:

Thou baleful messenger, out of my sight!
Upon thy eyeballs, murderous Tyranny.
Sits in grim majesty to fright the world.

Look not upon me, for thine eyes are wounding.

Yet do not go away. Come, basilisk,

And kill the innocent gazer with thy sight;

For in the shade of death I shall find joy,

In life but double death, now Gloucester’s dead. (Shakespeare, Henry VI, Part 2, III.ii.)

Henry compares Suffolk to a basilisk, indicating his reluctance to have him there, but also desiring peace after his beloved uncle’s death. Later in the scene, the Duke of Suffolk refers to his enemies’ “chiefest prospect” as “murd’ring basilisks” (Shakespeare, Henry VI, Part 2, III.ii.). In Henry VI, Part 3, Gloucester states that he will “slay more gazers than the basilisk,” further alluding to the legend about basilisks killing people with their gaze (Shakespeare, Henry VI, Part 3, III.ii.). In Richard III, Richard tells Anne, “Thine eyes, sweet lady, have infected mine,” she replies, “Would they were basilisks’ to strike thee dead” (Shakespeare, Richard III, I.ii.). The basilisk’s killing gaze makes it a fear-inducing monster and a fitting symbol for characters who are untrustworthy and dangerous or have a striking or compelling gaze.

While many monsters are notable for their terrible ferocity, dispositions, and symbolism, in legendary status and symbolism of human evils, few rival the Dragon. In Shakespeare, dragons are both literal and figurative monsters. Thiselton-Dyer states that the Dragon is “the type and embodiment of the spirit of evil” and “the hideous and powerful monster against whom the Christian soldier is called to fight,” as depicted in the myth of St. George and the Dragon (184). In King John, the bastard refers to an illustration of St. George in his conversation with King John, King Philip, Austria, and the citizen: “St. George, that swunged the dragon, and e’er since, / Sits on his horseback at mine hostess’s door” (Shakespeare, King John, II.i.). In Richard
III, King Richard calls, “Our ancient word of courage, fair St. George, / Inspire us with the spleen of fiery dragons” (Shakespeare, *Richard III*, V.iii.). These two references to St. George indicate him as a national symbol while the dragon represents England’s enemies and the forces of evil, but also indicates that the power of the dragon can be appropriated by heroes to do good.

Shakespeare also makes other references to dragons in his plays. In *Macbeth*, one of the ingredients the witches use is “scale of dragon” (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, IV.i.). Thiselton-Dyer asserts that the use of this ingredient is “alluding to the horror in which this mythical being was held” (185). In *Cymbeline*, Iachimo makes a reference to “dragons of the night,” and in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Robin also mentions “night’s swift dragons” (Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, II.ii.; Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, III.ii.). In *Pericles of Athens*, Antiochus refers to “deathlike dragons” (Shakespeare, *Pericles*, I.i.). These references all show the importance dragons have in English folklore.

In many of Shakespeare’s works, dragons are symbolic for power, might, wrath, pride, greed, and envy. In *Henry VI, Part 1*, Gloucester praises the deceased Henry V, at one point stating that “His arms spread wider than a dragon’s wings” (Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part 1*, I.i.). This comparison between the arms of Henry V and a dragon’s wings emphasizes Henry V’s power, intimidating appearance, and physical might. It also reinforces the dragon’s legendary status in English folklore as a majestic and powerful force of nature.

Dragon symbolism becomes even more significant in the play *Coriolanus*. Coriolanus states, “I go alone, / Like a lonely dragon that his fen / Makes feared and talked of more than seen” (Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, IV.i.). Millar MacLure argues that after his banishment, he becomes a monster, calling himself a dragon in his “grotesque pride” and is “lost in his bloody vision of revenge” (117). His pride and wrath had transformed him into a figurative dragon. And
later in the play, Menenius states, “This Martius is grown from man to dragon. He has wings; he’s more than a creeping thing” (Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, V.iv.). This is a symbolic form of the dragon-transformation that men undergo when consumed by pride, greed, envy, and wrath.

As noted earlier, dragon symbolism appears in *King Lear* as well, Lear begins to show his ruthlessness and narcissism. When Kent tries to inform Lear that Cordelia loves him more than his other two daughters do, he warns him, “Come not between the dragon and his wrath” (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, I.i.). Proud and stubborn, Lear will not listen to Cordelia or Kent and has no patience for anyone who questions him or calls him out. Meredith Skura describes Lear as “rash, tyrannically possessive, and vindictive to everyone” and states that he is a greedy and proud man who sees himself as the victim in his conflict with Cordelia and wants her to himself (124-5). His “dragon rage” eventually leads to the death of his beloved daughter Cordelia, as well as the deaths of most of the other characters in the play (Skura 125). Like literal dragons, figurative dragons, with their pride, greed, wrath, and envy, bring devastating destruction to those they target and those who get in their way, making them one of the ultimate and most legendary monsters in literature, including Shakespeare’s works.

Shakespeare’s works are rich with references to English and other European folklore. One prominent creature of folklore being the Monster. Monsters can be generalized, giving them ambiguity that fills the reader with distrust, repulsion, and terror and emphasizing the monstrous traits within the human mind, heart, and soul. Monsters may also appear in specific, usually reptilian forms, such as misunderstood creatures the modern reader understands to be harmless like the lizard and the blind-worm, or more dangerous creatures like serpents. Serpentine creatures from mythology such as the basilisk and the dragon also provide both literary and figurative meaning, showing the danger of those creatures and the danger of human corruption
from pride, greed, envy, and wrath. Even when not prevalent subjects or characters in Shakespeare’s works, monsters still serve as important markers of English history and folklore and as symbols for humanity’s darker traits.
IV. Greed Becomes You: The Dragon in Tolkien and Lewis

As scholars who took great interest in and studied mythology, Tolkien and Lewis incorporated many different creatures in their fantasy works. One notable and popular creature they used to drive the stories and convey various themes was the Dragon. Throughout history, the Dragon had been a symbol and manifestation of immense power that people in various cultures both revered and feared. In the Western world, through the influence of Christianity, the Dragon had become a symbol of pride, greed, cruelty, and hatred for humanity. The Dragon appears in Tolkien and Lewis’s works primarily in the forms of Smaug from Tolkien’s novel *The Hobbit* and Eustace Scrubb from Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia* novel *The Voyage of The Dawn Treader*.

Smaug is one of the most well-known dragons in literature. He is one of the central antagonists and obstacles standing in the way of Bilbo and Thorin’s company in *The Hobbit*. And though he only appears in two chapters, he has a strong presence and leaves a lasting impression with both the characters and the readers. He is known in Middle-Earth for being the invader who slaughtered the majority of the dwarves and men in Dale and forced Thorin Oakenshield and his company to flee, leaving his grandfather’s throne behind. He also, despite being much older during the events of the novel, remains a ferocious opponent who eats most of the parties’ ponies, burns off part of Bilbo’s hair, and destroys much of Esgaroth with little trouble. Like the archetypal dragon, he is extremely greedy, destructive, and hostile to all other beings. He also sleeps on the dwarves’ gold as if it were a bed. Besides being a ferocious and greedy monster, however, Smaug is also a villain in his own right: both a literal dragon and a symbolic dragon in the Western European tradition. He is arrogant, being easily flattered and “absurdly pleased” by Bilbo’s compliments and declaring himself “the real King under the
Mountain” because he was able to take the throne from Thror, Thorin’s grandfather (Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 224-6, 232). His arrogance rises to a point of folly when he decides to show off his “diamond waistcoat” to Bilbo, allowing Bilbo and the thrush to learn about his weak spot on his left breast, the latter of whom tells Bard the Bowman (224-6, 250). This expression of vanity ultimately leads to Smaug’s demise.

In many ways, Tolkien takes Smaug’s role as the Dragon a step further by making Smaug not only greedy and vain, but a villain who possesses narcissistic and sociopathic tendencies. Like many narcissists and sociopaths, he is able to charm others to an extent and is described by the narrator as having “an overwhelming personality” that effectively influences the “inexperienced Bilbo” (225). The narrator explains that “dragon-talk” is able to manipulate and influence the “inexperienced,” displaying the Dragon or Serpent’s role in Western mythologies as a cunning deceiver whose manipulative speech can lead to immense trouble and destruction (225). He attempts to psychologically torment Bilbo and disrupt the party’s plan to take back the mountain by sowing distrust into Bilbo’s mind, feeding into his already existing doubts about Thorin and Company’s true loyalty and concern towards him. He tells Bilbo the following:

“I don’t know if it has occurred to you that, even if you could steal the gold bit by bit – a matter of a hundred years or so – you could not get it very far? Not much use on the mountain side? Not much use in the forest? Bless me! Had you never thought of the catch? A fourteenth share, I suppose, or something like it, those were the terms, eh? But what about delivery? What about cartage? What about armed guards and tolls?” (255)

This causes Bilbo to suspect that the dwarves were laughing at him, though he quickly comes to his senses and defends them to Smaug (225-6). Besides using manipulation to achieve his ends,
Smaug also lacks a conscience, having no qualms with murdering and delighting in the thought of driving the men to starvation through fear:

Soon all the town would be deserted and burned down to the surface of the lake.

That was the dragon’s hope. They could all get into boats for all he cared. There he could have fine sport hunting them, or they could stop till they starved. Let them try to get to land and he would be ready. Soon he would set all the shoreland woods ablaze and wither every field and pasture. Just now he was enjoying the sport of town-baiting more than he had enjoyed anything for years. (250)

Smaug takes pleasure in the destruction and death he brings and kills for sport, thus taking the form of a bloodthirsty conqueror and mass murderer. Smaug’s evil contempt for others, along with his greed and vanity, result in Bard the Bowman using the black arrow to kill him.

Smaug also leaves a lasting impact after his death. His contact with the dwarves’ gold has left it corrupted and contaminated with “dragon sickness.” The greed of King Thror attracts Smaug to Erebor in the first place, whose greed for treasure drives him to kill Thror and take his throne and treasure (Hyla 213). This sickness later ends up infecting Thorin Oakenshield, causing him to become greedy and willing to go to great lengths to get his treasure back and hold onto it. Smaug’s influence over the treasure causes Thorin to become an internal dragon similar to Fafnir (213). Unlike Smaug and Fafnir, however, he is able to overcome his greed by joining the dwarves in battle and dying honorably as a hero (213). The complex villainy and corruption of Smaug as the Dragon in The Hobbit highlights how much of role mythology and literature played in inspiring Tolkien to create Smaug.

For the creation of Smaug, J. R. R. Tolkien was inspired by two mythological and literary dragons, the Dragon in the epic poem *Beowulf* and Fafnir in the *Völsunga Saga* in Norse
mythology. Like the dragon in *Beowulf*, Smaug has an immense hoard of gold and jewels and becomes violent when anything from his hoard is stolen, attacks at night, is an aggressive opponent, and causes the treasure he takes to become cursed and corrupting towards the men and dwarves who take it (Lee, and Solopova 109-11). He also, like the dragon in *Beowulf*, is woken up and aroused to anger when Bilbo takes a golden cup from his hoard as proof for his employers (Hyla 210). Additionally, Smaug is also killed by a hero, Bard the Bowman, near the end, just as the Dragon in *Beowulf* was killed by titular hero (210). Tolkien Studies researcher John D. Rateliff, however, suggests that Bard the Bowman was inspired by the warrior Wiglaf, and not *Beowulf* (210). Like Wiglaf, Bard is a man of noble birth who wants a simple life and is the only one of the men who has the courage to confront and slay the dragon (210). Tolkien states his inspiration from the dragon in *Beowulf* and his critique that the dragon in *Beowulf* is too abstract in his dragon-ness:

> Beowulf’s dragon, if one wishes really to criticize, is not to be blamed for being a dragon, but rather for not being dragon enough, plain pure fairy-story dragon. There are in the poem some vivid touches of the right kind — *as þa se wyrm onwoc, wroht was geniwad*; *stone after stane* [when the dragon awoke, strife was renewed; he then moved quickly along by the rock], 2285—in which this dragon is real worm, with a bestial life and thought of his own, but the conception, nonetheless, approaches draconitas [dragon-ness] rather than draco [dragon]: a personification of malice, greed, destruction (the evil side of heroic life), and of the undiscriminating cruelty of fortune that distinguishes not good or bad (the evil aspect of all life). (Tolkien, *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, 16-7)

According to Felicia Jean Steele, Tolkien de-allegorized the dragon in *The Hobbit* by making Smaug’s inner life a natural, draconic one rather than one of an abstract, allegorical
symbolism (140). She states that the dream Smaug has before he awakes is attached to his experience and knowledge as a dragon and not a foreshadowing of his coming death at the hands of Bard (Steele 142). This is but one of many ways Tolkien uses and subverts the mythologies he uses in his creation of Smaug.

Tolkien was a scholar of Norse mythology as well, and took noticeable inspiration from the dragon Fafnir. Like Fafnir, Smaug is able to speak and possesses great intelligence, enjoys riddles, tries to manipulate the protagonist, possesses a weak spot in his chest area that a hero uses to slay him, Bard the Bowman in The Hobbit and Sigurd in the Völsunga Saga, and is eventually killed by the hero with the help of communication with birds (Shippey 36-7). Interestingly though, in the Völsunga Saga, Fafnir’s blood gives Sigurd the ability to communicate with birds, while Bard, as a man of Dale, was born with the ability to communicate with birds, allowing the thrush to tell him about Smaug’s weak spot, allowing him to kill Smaug (Hyla, pp. 210-211). It is important to note, however, that besides slaying Smaug and becoming the new King of Dale, Bard does not have many other achievements (211). Thorin Oakenshield, though being a candidate to slay Smaug due to his warrior nature and being the grandson of the king of Erebor, succumbs to dragon greed before redeeming himself (212-3). Furthermore, Bilbo, despite being a hobbit who has lived a simple life and not a legendary hero, knows to flatter Smaug and treat him with riddles, and though he ends up making Smaug angry, he is able to spot the Arkenstone and Smaug’s weak spot, which the thrust, and ultimately, Bard the Bowman learn about as well (214-5). These subversions of typical mythological dragon-slayer stories allow Bilbo, Thorin, and Bard to be complex characters who all contribute to the confrontation with and the slaying of Smaug the dragon in The Hobbit. By using, playing with, and subverting the deeply ingrained and ancient stories of Beowulf and the Völsunga Saga,
Tolkien made Smaug a memorable and epic antagonist for Bilbo and the dwarves, and a memorable and fascinating dragon for the ages.

While Smaug is still a formidable dragon, the other dragons mentioned in Tolkien’s Middle-Earth universe are even more mythical and dangerous. Anna Hyla notes, “Smaug represents the end of mythical times in Middle-earth. Smaug may be threatening, but he is nothing compared to Glaurung or Ancalagon. He is much smaller, possesses only a fraction of power the old beasts had and is not able to use the dragon hypnosis like Glaurung” (215). That being said, he is still a formidable and powerful dragon who is able to lay waste to Dale and Esgaroth with ease. And like other dragons in mythology, Smaug and the other dragons in Tolkien’s Middle-earth universe are killed by notable heroes and the ancestors and descendants of kings (211). Smaug is slain by Bard the Bowman, “descendant of the Lords of Dale,” Ancalagon is slain by the Great Eagles and Eärendil, “a half-elven ancestor of the kings of Gondor,” Scatha is slain by “Fram, the king of Rohirrims,” and Glaurung is slain by Turin Turambar, who is “one of the most important human heroes” in Middle-earth (210-1). In Western mythologies, the dragon is a powerful, significant monster that requires a powerful, significant slayer.

In his first appearance in the Chronicles of Narnia series, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, published in 1952, Lucy and Edmund Pevensie’s cousin Eustace Scrubb joins them on their journey. When first introduced, Eustace is an unpleasant, unimaginative, and highly rationalist boy who acts sullen during the first part of their voyage. During a trip to one of the islands, Eustace takes some treasure from a dead dragon’s lair and falls asleep. When he wakes up, he discovers that he had been transformed into a dragon due to “Sleeping on a dragon’s hoard with greedy, dragonish thoughts in his heart” (Lewis 466). Thomas L. Martin states, “As Lewis
describes this kind of literature elsewhere, his inside has become his outside” (55). Eustace’s inflated sense of self-importance and superiority and his taste for gold have taken on a physical manifestation that he is only able to see once he is transformed and sees himself in the mirror (Martin 55). After his transformation, Eustace becomes a better person, helping the ship’s crew and becoming friends with the mouse Reepicheep, with whom he previously quarreled.

Eventually, when they reach another island, Aslan takes Eustace to free him from his dragon curse. The process is painful for Eustace, who must tear the dragon scales off of his body, but he is able to be turned back into a boy, and he is a much better and wiser person in the rest of the novel and the series. Even though Eustace works to become a better person after his transformation into a dragon, it is only after Aslan appears that Eustace is “really able to change his nature” and “emerges from a deep skinning and transformational cleansing as a new boy” (56). Eustace was given the dragon’s curse in the same way Lord Octesian did, but while Eustace was able to overcome his dragon curse through humbling himself and receiving help from Aslan, Lord Octesian succumbed to his dragon curse and met his end, leaving only his diamond-studded arm-ring (56). Like in much of the series, Eustace is punished and suffers as a result of his pride and greed (his sins) and only through Aslan’s help (the redemptive power of Jesus Christ) could Eustace become a new boy (born again). In Eustace and Lord Octesian’s cases, the Dragon is a symbol of all-consuming and corrupting pride and greed, which can and will destroy a person unless they learn and are remorseful of their wrongdoings and undergo purification.

Like Smaug, Eustace’s dragon self was inspired by the Norse dragon Fafnir, as was Lord Octesian. Eustace, Lord Octesian, and Fafnir were different species before, Eustace and Lord Octesian being humans and Fafnir being a dwarf, who were transformed into dragons due to greed and a desire for dragon treasure. Unlike Fafnir, though, Eustace is not able to speak after
his transformation, only being able to growl and roar, further trapping Eustace in his curse and making it even more miserable. Furthermore, Eustace learns that his sullen, narrow-minded, arrogant, and greedy behavior was wrong and works to become a better person, leading Aslan to transform him back into a human, while Lord Octesian is unable to change his ways and perishes, and Fafnir is overcome by his greed and inner darkness and is consequently slain by Sigurd.

The Dragon has been a prominent physical and symbolic figure in folklore and literature for thousands of years. In their studies of mythology and folklore, J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis both adopted and played with the Dragon archetype in their Middle-earth and Narnia universes, respectively, and created unique, memorable, and conversation-starting dragons in the form of Smaug and Eustace, with Glaurung, Ancalagon, and Lord Octesian as smaller examples as well. Smaug is not only a bestial, greedy, and vain dragon, but also a manipulative and sadistic villain who uses his charm and might to achieve his ends and attempt to destroy his opponents, leading to his slaying by Bard the Bowman. Eustace, on the other hand, is a boy who is transformed into a dragon by greed and pride, and through humbling, work on himself, and help from Aslan, learns to overcome and slay his inner dragon, averting the disastrous downfall that befell Lord Octesian, Eustace’s dragon inspiration Fafnir, and Tolkien’s dragons, including Smaug. The Dragon in Tolkien and Lewis’s works is a mythical beast that exudes the power and brutality of external and internal nature and a violent and greedy creature that ultimately must be purified or destroyed in order for good to prevail.
V. “Ashes to Ashes”: The Dragon’s Role and Influence in John Gardner’s *Grendel*

In John Gardner’s 1971 novel *Grendel*, the titular anti-hero visits an old dragon, implied by the novel and believed by some literary critics and readers to be the dragon from *Beowulf*. Grendel consults him when he is struggling with his desire to relate to the humans around him and his knowledge of the humans’ futile thoughts and ideas. The Dragon assures him that nothing in the world matters, including Grendel’s role in it. Though the Dragon only appears in one chapter, he remains a constant influence in Grendel’s life throughout the novel. The Dragon takes the form of a dark mentor and oracle who holds cynical knowledge of a pointless universe, a greedy miser who only loves his treasure, and a contemptuous sadist takes pleasure in others’ misery. The Dragon also acts as a mentor who teaches Grendel his nihilism, materialism, and contempt. These things ultimately lead to the destruction of both at the hands of Beowulf.

The Dragon’s nihilism is apparent in his interactions with Grendel and his influence on Grendel’s decision to be a monster. He believes the universe and life is “Nothing…A brief pulsation in the black hole of eternity” and that, eventually, everything will end, including him (Gardner, *Grendel*, 74). He states to Grendel at one point, “Things come and go…That’s the gist of it. In a billion billion billion years, everything will have come and gone several times, in various forms. Even I will be gone. A certain man will absurdly kill me. A terrible pity – loss of a remarkable form of life” (70). His voice and age seem to further indicate his long life and the exhaustion and cynicism he has developed over time. Grendel describes his voice as one “that might have come from an old, old man. Louder, of course, but not much louder” and his eyes as “heavy-lidded, minutely veined, wrinkled like an elderly mead-drinker’s” (58). The Dragon’s old and tired disposition is a reflection of his nihilism, caused by his long life as a dragon and his
omniscience. The following quote describes the Dragon telling Grendel about his omniscience and the Dragon’s exhaustion and cynicism as a result:

“Illusion,” he said. He half smiled, then let it go as if infinitely weary, sick of Time. “I know everything, you see,” the old voice wheedled. “The beginning, the present, the end. Everything. You now, you see the past and the present, like other low creatures: no higher faculties than memory and perception. But dragons, my boy, have a whole different kind of mind.” He stretched his mouth in a kind of smile, no trace of pleasure in it. “We see from the mountaintop: all time, all space. We see in one instant the passionate vision and the blowout. Not that we cause things to fail, you understand.” (62-3)

He further explains that while he sees the future, this does not mean that he causes it, and he expresses a deterministic, fatalistic worldview (Gardner, *Grendel*, 63). This further drives his role as an old mentor/guide figure for Grendel, but one leading the protagonist on a path to villainy rather than heroism. Robert Merrill asserts that because the Dragon is “able to see all time at once,” he sees the world’s pointlessness (167).

The Dragon’s nihilism, however, is not necessarily the truth, and his John Gardner, the author of the novel, has stated this:

“The Dragon looks like an oracle…but he doesn’t lay down truth…He tells truth as it appears to a dragon – that nothing in the world is connected with anything. It’s all meaningless and stupid, and since nothing is connected with anything the highest value in life is to seek out gold and sit on it…My view is that this is a dragonish way to behave, and it ain’t the truth. The Shaper tells the truth, although he lies” (Bellamy 179).

Gardner sees the Dragon’s view of the world as incorrect and contrary to his own views on myth and the meaning of life. This is further shown as the dragon despises the humans for clinging to
myths and stories, which he sees as meaningless efforts to comfort themselves, but Gardner argues that, “Real art creates myths a society can live instead of die by, and clearly our society is in need of such myths” (*On Moral Function*, 126). Additionally, he argues that societies need “the myth of connectedness” rather than “the myth of blind mechanics” (Howell 89). Jeff Henderson also argues that the dragon’s mindset is not actually correct, stating that in relation to Grendel’s and Ork’s mindsets on actuality is “blinded, by his vision, to the possibility of any such ground” and is “physically bound to the present, in spite of his claim to see beyond it” (618). The dragon takes on the role of dark oracle and knowledge-bearer, but his “knowledge” is flawed and distorted.

In their analysis of the connection between the twelve chapters of *Grendel* and the Western Zodiac signs, Barry Fawcett and Elizabeth Jones connect Chapter 5, the chapter in which the dragon appears, with the fifth Zodiac sign Leo (639). The sign Leo “is ruled by the Sun in the house of children and childbirth, hobbies, creativity” (Fawcett and Jones 639). Another value is knowledge, which Grendel, like Odysseus and Aeneas, seeks from a mentor, or “sun” (Fawcett and Jones 639). In this case, however, the sun that the dragon takes the form of is a “terrifying nothingness” who provides Grendel with no deeper meaning or purpose in life; and “though golden and fiery as a lion, the dragon, with his cracked voice and debauched leer, has none of the energy of a true Leo” (639). Fawcett and Jones compare the inside of the dragon’s eye to a “black sun” and call him a “wonderful embodiment of evil, the most vivid character Grendel encounters” (639). And unlike a conventional mentor, the dragon has contempt for human “knowledge,” only giving Grendel “a cynical distortion of the Delphic oracle’s injunction to “know thyself” and “a discourse of Time and Space, which as Craig J. Stromme points out, consists of lengthy extracts from A. N. Whitehead’s *Modes of Thought*” (639).
He confirms Grendel’s own nihilistic ideas and distrust of the humans’ promises of love, nobility, honor, and beauty by telling Grendel that it does not truly matter what Grendel chooses to do with the humans around him. He tells him this:

“You are, so to speak, the brute existent by which they learn to define themselves. The exile, captivity, death they shrink from – the blunt facts of their mortality, their abandonment - that's what you make them recognize, embrace! You are mankind, or man's condition: inseparable as the mountain-climber and the mountain. If you withdraw, you'll instantly be replaced. Brute existents, you know, are a dime a dozen. No sentimental trash, then. If man's the irrelevance that interests you, stick with him! Scare him to glory! It's all the same in the end, matter and motion, simple or complex. No difference, finally. Death, transfiguration. Ashes to ashes and slime to slime, amen”

(Gardner, *Grendel*, 73).

What Grendel does will not matter in the end, because he will still die, time will continue, and everything will come to an end. In the Dragon’s point of view, if Grendel wants to pursue materialistic pleasures, he can. And he intends to use this freedom to count his many treasures.

The Dragon is a greedy miser who tries to convert Grendel to his individual worship of gold and material gain. Grendel describes him with “his limbs sprawled over his treasure hoard” and the floor of his dwelling as covered with “things of gold, gems, jewels, silver vessels the color of blood in the undulant, dragon-red light” (57). Grendel even cleverly compares the Dragon to a “miser caught at his counting” when he arrives in his dwelling (58). The Dragon’s treasure is the only thing he cares about and the one thing he chooses to give his life individual meaning. Before Grendel leaves, the Dragon tells Grendel to do what he wants to do with his life, and then says, “Personally…my great ambition is to count all this…and possibly sort it into
buys 39

piles,” as he waves around his treasure hoard (Gardner, Grendel, 73). The advice the Dragon gives reflects his own self-interest and focus: “My advice to you, my violent friend, is to seek out gold and sit on it.” (74).

Like the dragon in Beowulf and Smaug in J. R. R. Tolkien’s The Hobbit, the Dragon in Grendel is so greedy, that he becomes violent whenever a single piece of his treasure is taken. When Grendel picks up an emerald from his hoard and attempts to throw it at him after he laughs at his fear, the dragon angrily tells him to “Put it down!” and then tells him, “Don’t touch…Never never never touch my things,” before he breathes out flames and burns the hair on Grendel’s belly and legs (60). The Dragon’s nihilism and love of money makes him both apathetic and antipathetic to all others, including Grendel.

The Dragon embodies serpentine contempt and hatred for others. Because the Dragon is cynically and arrogantly convinced that his nihilistic and materialistic worldview is the correct one, he looks down upon the humans. He despises the humans for their “absurdity,” “crackpot theories,” and “here-to-the-moon-and-back lists of paltry facts” (64). The linguistic choices Gardner uses in the novel accentuate the Dragon’s selfish disregard and contempt for all others. For example, when Grendel expresses sympathy for the humans, the Dragon replies, “Fiddlesticks,” and uses “f” alliteration, similarly to how another contemptuous character, Hrothulf, uses “f” alliteration later in the novel (Nelson 346). Besides “Fiddlesticks,” the dragon says, “I know you’re sorry. For right now, that is,” and “For this frail, foolish, flicker-flash in the long dull fall of eternity. I’m unimpressed” (Gardner, Grendel, 61).

The Dragon, especially, acts with contempt and malice towards Grendel. When he smiles and laughs, he is “hardly hiding his malice” and he takes sadistic pleasure in Grendel’s initial fear of him (58-9). He smiles and tells Grendel, “Now you know how they feel when they see
you, eh? Scared enough to pee in their pants! He he!” (59). He then laughs hysterically at Grendel’s scared face, saying, “Like a rabbit!...Nye he he he! When you’re scared, you look-nyee he he he-exactly…(gasp!) exactly…” (59-60). And when Grendel grabs one of his gems to throw at him, he burns Grendel’s belly and legs (60). He also is easily annoyed by Grendel, asking him, “Why did you come here? Why do you bother me? – Don’t answer!” (60-1). He finds Grendel a burden and an irritating interruption of his money counting, and is quick to turn his cruelty on him when provoked. The Dragon’s cruelty makes Grendel doubt whether he is telling him the truth and worsens his struggle with himself throughout the novel. When Grendel gets his advice, he thinks, “I was sure he was lying. Or anyway half-sure. Flattering me into tormenting them because he, in his sullen hole, loved viciousness” (73). Despite the dragon’s cruelty, Grendel soon sees truth in the Dragon’s words and decides to follow his advice of becoming the kingdom’s villain.

The Dragon’s advice changes Grendel’s life for the duration of the novel and pushes him to deeper into his nihilism and inner darkness. He explains in the following chapter:

Nothing was changed, everything was changed, by my having seen the dragon. It’s one thing to listen, full of scorn and doubt, to poets’ versions of time past and visions of time to come; it’s another to know, as coldly and simply as my mother knows her pile of bones, what is. Whatever I may have understood or misunderstood in the dragon's talk, something much deeper stayed with me, became my aura. Futility, doom, became a smell in the air, pervasive and acrid as the dead smell after a forest fire – my scent and the world's, the scent of trees, rocks, waterways wherever I went. (75)

Grendel sees the Dragon’s words as enlightenment and, earlier in the Chapter 1, he states that “the old dragon, calm as winter, unveiled the truth” (12). As afraid of him and angry with him
Grendel often is, he still looks up to the Dragon as a mentor figure, even though he is unsure of whether he is truthful or not.

Moufida Zaidi and Samira Al-Khawaldeh explain that because dragons traditionally are “legendary creatures that stand for horror, mystery, and power” and the Dragon “showcases the mental and physical strength that impresses Grendel,” Grendel believes the things that the Dragon tells him (207). The Dragon’s power and seeming omniscience successfully convince Grendel that nothing in the world matters and that he can do whatever he wants with what the pointless universe gives him, and nothing will make a difference in the end, just like the Dragon who has dedicated his own life to material desires, particularly wealth.

According to Moufida Zaidi and Samira Al-Khawaldeh, Gardner uses the Dragon “to portray the economic inadequacy of the materialistic spirit that is manifested in his hunger for gold” (207). They connect the Dragon’s greed to capitalism and materialism and capitalists’ tendency to value individual success at most or all costs (Zaidi and Al-Khawaldeh 207-8). The Dragon teaches Grendel the capitalistic and materialistic aspect of individual wealth and prosperity, seeing it as a way of making his life meaningful in an innately meaningless world (208). Zaidi and Al-Khawaldeh argue that, while Grendel has no interest in material wealth, he has the “infectious materialistic spirit,” which focuses on what a man has, rather than who he is (208). If nothing truly matters, a person can build their own individual prosperity all while bringing harm and terror upon others. Grendel learns the Dragon’s individualistic, materialistic mindset well and uses this to play his role as the villain against the humans of the kingdoms. When Grendel leaves and discovers that the Dragon put a charm on him that makes him immune to human weapons, he decides to take advantage of it. With his own individual materialistic wants in mind,
Grendel, like the Dragon, soon develops a contempt and disregard for most others, especially those who he deems self-deceptive, foolish, and “too good and pure.”

Grendel delights in attacking and killing King Hrothgar’s men with his new invulnerability, developing the same sadistic contempt for humans as the Dragon. He states, “I could walk up to the meadhall whenever I pleased, and they were powerless. My heart became darker because of that” (Gardner, *Grendel*, 76). Soon, however, he gets bored of attacking and killing men, and decides to play mind games with and manipulate the wannabe-hero Unferth (Payne 14). Just as the Dragon manipulated Grendel and turned him to a path of despair and darkness, Grendel becomes like the Dragon and destroys Unferth’s hope in becoming a hero and his hope of a meaningful life, turning him into a despaired, broken man. Craig Payne states, however, that while the argument between Unferth and Grendel parallels the one between Grendel and the Dragon, the Dragon fully and successfully convinces Grendel of life’s meaninglessness, but Unferth still holds onto hope for renewal and redemption due to his refusal to renounce the mythic structure, which Grendel refuses to accept (Payne 15). Grendel has accepted the Dragon into himself and has become the cruel manipulator who seeks to ruin and disillusion the humans around him.

The Dragon’s influence over Grendel is present when he senses the Dragon and feels like the Dragon as he attacks the men and plays mind games with them. For example, he states that while waiting to terrorize the meadhall, “All around their bubble of stupidity I could feel the brume of the dragon” (Gardner, *Grendel*, 77). He also recalls seeing the dragon when he thinks about the absurdity of the Wealtheow’s romanticization and idealization by the Shaper and the men: “Whatever their excuse might be, I knew: I had seen the dragon. Ashes to ashes. And yet I was teased – tortured by the red of her hair and the set of her chin and the white of her shoulders..."
– teased toward disbelief in the dragon’s truths” (108). Ashamed of Wealtheow’s influence on him, Grendel decides to make sure he proves to himself and the men that there is no meaning, with as much cruelty as he can muster.

Grendel’s cruelty and sadism comes to a head, greatly, when he decides to attack the good, beautiful queen Wealhtheow. He intends to show the meaninglessness of life by destroying the woman that the men love and idealize as a foundation of feminine beauty and love in the world. He intends to prove the dragon’s theory correct by showing her as an ordinary, destructible human woman (Payne 15). He describes his attack:

I slammed into the bedroom. She sat up screaming, and I laughed. I snatched her foot, and now her unearthly shrieks were deafening, exactly like the squeals of a pig... I caught the other foot and pulled her naked legs apart as if to split her. "Gods, gods!" she screamed. I waited to see if the gods would come, but not a sign of them. I laughed. She called to her brother, then Unferth. They hung back. I decided to kill her. I firmly committed myself to killing her, slowly, horribly. I would begin by holding her over the fire and cooking the ugly hole between her legs. I laughed harder at that... I would kill her, yes! I would squeeze out her feces between my fists. So much for meaning as quality of life! I would kill her and teach them reality. Grendel the truth-teacher, phantasm-tester! It was what I would be from this day forward — my commitment, my character as long as I lived—and nothing alive or dead could change my mind! I changed my mind. It would be meaningless, killing her. As meaningless as letting her live. It would be, for me, mere pointless pleasure, an illusion of order for this one frail, foolish flicker-flash in the long dull fall of eternity. (End quote.) (Gardner, Grendel, 109-10)
Grendel’s decision to quote the Dragon at the end of this quotation highlights how much he has become like the Dragon, thinking about the pointlessness of murdering a woman and cooking her vagina, as well as the pointlessness of not following through.

He clings to the Dragon’s nihilism, materialism, and contempt, but continues trying to find things that will bring meaning into his life. This leads to his curiosity, fear, and excitement about Beowulf, the Geat who arrives towards the end of the novel. Grendel’s descent into evil and his fascination with Beowulf as a way to provide him a sense of individual meaning in his life ultimately leads to his death. Grendel decides to attack the meadhall once again, gaining sadistic pleasure and a sense of meaning from killing the men, but when he encounters Beowulf, he tricks Grendel and rips off his arm. Grendel then runs into the forest and succumbs his wounds, but not before telling the animals witnessing, “Poor Grendel’s had an accident…So may you all” (Gardner, Grendel, 174).

Grendel’s decision to listen to the dragon results in Beowulf killing him for the violence he inflicted, as it happens in Beowulf. Because Grendel denies “pointless” things such as hope and redemption, he is mutilated and left to die (Payne 16). Later in the epic, the dragon, who the Dragon in Grendel is implied to be or is at least based off of and whose greed and contempt has brought disastrous harm to others, also fights Beowulf and is killed, which also results in the death of Beowulf himself. The Dragon’s dark mentorship and influence over Grendel brings disaster to Grendel, and possibly to the Dragon himself, as well.

In Grendel, the Dragon takes three roles and instills them, in certain ways, into Grendel. First, the Dragon is a dark oracle who sees a world of nothingness and insignificance aside from whatever one might want there to be in his or her own mind. As a result, he encourages Grendel to take on the role of the villain, saying that it will not matter whatever Grendel decides to do as
the world has no meaning. Second, the Dragon is also a greedy miser who, in legendary Western
dragon fashion, prizes gold and jewels over anything or anyone, to the point of violence and
abuse, and encourages Grendel to pursue gold and materialistic desires. And third, the Dragon is
a contemptuous sadist who takes pleasure in the suffering of others, looks down on them, and
enjoys inflicting pain on and emotionally manipulating them, including and especially, Grendel.
Grendel takes these lessons to heart and develops the Dragon’s nihilism, materialism, and
contempt, with which he seeks to become the monster in the humans’ stories while also seeking
individual pleasure and meaning in his own life. This pursuit of evil ultimately leads to his
destruction at the hands of Beowulf, as well as the possible destruction of his evil teacher, the
Dragon.
Conclusion

Of the monsters in folklore, literature, and other forms of media, dragons are one of the most prominent, impactful, and influential. Dragons and other fantastical serpents have enriched folklore and literature as reflections of humanity’s deepest values, hopes, fears, and prejudices. In European folklore, dragons have been both revered as wise, mighty beings who demand respect and feared as uncontrollable forces of nature and malevolent beasts who sought the destruction of humanity and everything else in their paths. Following the Christianization of Europe, dragons’ depictions became more negative, emphasizing not only their untamable nature and their supposed evil minds, but also associating them with the Christian Devil and the fires of Hell. This attitude towards dragons was carried into the start of written works of fiction, including English literature. Over the centuries, the Dragon has evolved as a figure and symbol, retaining many of the aspects associated with it while introducing various forms of characterization, symbolism, and exterior contexts such as philosophy.

The medieval Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*, originally written in the early-mid Middle Ages in Old English, features a greedy, malicious dragon who attacks Geatland after a slave steals a goblet from him. Following the attack, Beowulf, now the King of the Weather Geats and an old man, goes to battle the Dragon in three attacks. After failing to injure the Dragon the first two times, he finally slays the Dragon the third time, but is mortally wounded by the Dragon’s venom. The Dragon takes on three major roles in the poem. The first role of the Dragon is as an archetypal Germanic dragon who possesses origins within the Völsunga Saga, the Völuspá, and *History of the Danes*, and who the poet endows with traits that could be found in dragons from ancient and medieval Germanic mythology. These include a slithering, coiled body, a venomous bite that can kill a grown man within minutes, nearly impenetrable scales
contrasted with a soft underbelly that makes him vulnerable to the hero’s weapon, and the ability to breathe fire and poison.\textsuperscript{[1]} The Dragon’s second role in the poem is as a symbol of greed, malice, and hatred. The dragon is inarguably evil. He takes possession of treasures he does not need, or even use, and loves them over all things. When a single thing of his is taken from him and he cannot find the thief, he becomes enraged and commits horrific violence against the people of the land, destroying everything in his wake. He hates all of humanity and he is an embodiment of what horrors such deep, unadulterated hatred can wreak. All of his greed and malice makes him a destructive force whose only fruit is death. The third role the Dragon plays is as a bringer of death and destruction to others, especially the hero Beowulf. Though Beowulf initially blames himself for the Dragon’s slaughter and destruction, the poem suggests that the Dragon is an agent of fate and a force of nature that the Creator allows to kill and destroy only to a point. During his fight with the Dragon, Beowulf is mortally wounded, but before he dies, he gives the Geats the Dragon’s treasure. This conclusion in which the hero slays the dragon and gives treasure back to his people, but is slain in the process, is characteristic of many hero-serpent myths. The Dragon only appears in the climax of the poem, but is one of the most important figures in the poem because of his ties to Germanic mythology and the epic battle of good and evil. The Dragon in Beowulf has also shaped how dragons are perceived in English literature and other forms of fantasy media. The Dragon in Beowulf has also inspired countless dragons in English literature, including the greedy and homicidal Smaug in The Hobbit. The Dragon also appears in numerous modern adaptations of Beowulf, as well as John Gardner’s 1971 novel Grendel, in which he plays the role of a mentor for the titular protagonist. The Dragon continues to be a fascinating monster and topic of discussion for English literary scholars and fantasy fans alike.
Dragon folklore and myths continued to circulate in English literature as the Medieval era passed and the English Renaissance emerged. Though renowned English playwright William Shakespeare never wrote a play which included actual dragons, he filled his plays with multiple references to and symbols of dragons, serpents, and other reptilian monsters. In parts of his plays, the dragon, serpent, and other forms of reptilian monster symbolized positive traits such as power, might, and wisdom, as with the description of the posthumous Henry V as dragon-like in *Henry VI*. They also symbolized dangerous traits like greed, envy, and wrath in characters like King Claudius in *Hamlet* and Othello in *Othello*. Dragon metaphors for wrath are essential in emphasizing the negative character transformations of King Lear and Coriolanus, whose wrath, loneliness, and pride make them more draconic inside. References to dragon myths also point to the mythos of England and how dragons, serpents, and other reptiles are perceived. The reference to the dragon St. George fought in *King John* and the numerous reptile-related ingredients in the witches’ brew in *Macbeth* show the Renaissance understandings of dragons and other reptiles and the extent to which people distrusted and vilified reptiles as a result. The dragon and reptile references and symbolism in Shakespeare’s works show that the Dragon was still mostly distrusted and seen as a powerful but dangerous creature full of all of humanity’s vices and was to be avoided.

Another major work of fiction which includes the Dragon is J. R. R. Tolkien’s 1937 novel *The Hobbit*. Part of Tolkien’s expansive Middle-Earth Universe and the precursor to *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *The Hobbit* features the dragon Smaug, who decades ago, invaded the dwarves’ kingdom of Erebor, killed their king, and took the throne and treasure for himself. Bilbo and Thorin’s company of dwarves travel to the Lonely Mountain to steal the treasure and take back Erebor. He tries to thwart the party before leaving to Esgaroth, where he destroys and
terrorizes the town before being slain by Bard the Bowman. Though he only appears briefly in
the novel, he has a compelling presence and personality and lasting influence. He is an
archetypal Germanic dragon in that he is exceedingly greedy, destructive, and hateful. He
becomes enraged upon having his treasure stolen and kills others out of spite. Tolkien takes his
characterization further by making him not only a deadly monster, but also a cruel, self-
interested, and sadistic villain who plays mind games with Bilbo and gleefully imagines the
people of Esgaroth starving to death or allowing him to kill them. Tolkien also evolves the
Western European dragon archetype by making Smaug’s nature less symbolic and more
naturally draconic. Smaug is also arrogant and vain, which ultimately leads to his downfall.
Though he is slain, the dragon influences Thorin by means of the treasure, which is cursed with
dragon-sickness, though Thorin does, in time, overcome this influence. Tolkien, a medieval
scholar, took inspiration for Smaug from the dragon in *Beowulf*, who also attacks people after
having his treasure stolen and is killed via a weak spot. He was also inspired by Fafnir from the
*Völsunga Saga*, who was greedy, could speak, and was killed by the hero with the help of birds.
Smaug, who was a product of Tolkien’s deep research into draconic mythology, influenced many
of the dragons in later works and has remained a topic of discussion among literary scholars and
fantasy fans.

Another important Dragon is the transformed Eustace Scrubb in C. S. Lewis’s 1952 novel
*The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Eustace appears in the third *Chronicles of Narnia* book as
Lucy and Edmund’s cousin who accompanies them on their journey to Narnia after accidentally
travelling with them. During a visit on an island, Eustace tries on a bracelet and falls asleep in a
dragon’s den. When he wakes up, he finds that his greedy thoughts have led him to be
transformed into a dragon. Cursed with the bracelet stuck on his now enormous front leg, he
begins to change from a sullen, disagreeable, and arrogant boy to a much more helpful, friendly, and generous person. As their journey continues, Eustace finally transforms back into a human with the help of Aslan, though the process is painful because he must remove the dragon scales from his body. He returns to his ordinary human self but is much wiser, more open-minded and imaginative, and kinder than he was before. Eustace’s transformation into a dragon is based largely on Fafnir from the Völsunga Saga, a dwarf whose greed transformed him into a dragon as well. Unlike Fafnir, though, he could not talk in his dragon form and while Fafnir’s greed consumes him and leads to him being slain by Sigurd, Eustace learns to be a better person and is saved by Aslan. Eustace’s story in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* adapts Fafnir’s story and the greedy dragon archetype in Western European myth and turns it into a Christian redemption story in which the dragon is able to change. This shows the evolution of the Western European dragon myth in modern English literature and illustrates that dragon lore can be innovative as well as conservative.

In John Gardner’s 1971 novel *Grendel*, which tells the *Beowulf* story from the monster’s perspective, Grendel consults the dragon about the humans, the Shaper, and his purpose in life. In contrast to his antagonist role in *Beowulf*, the dragon plays the role of mentor for Grendel. In contrast to the heroic and romantic notions of the Shaper, the dragon teaches Grendel that nothing in life matters, and urges him to simply play the role of the monster for the humans. The dragon is as greedy as ever, being more than willing to harm Grendel when he touches even one of his treasures. His goal in life is to hoard gold and gems, and to spend his time counting them. He is also sadistic and enjoys Grendel’s pain and confusion, even as he gifts Grendel with invulnerability to human weapons. Grendel adopts the dragon’s philosophy and becomes the monster the humans already see him as. He mentions the dragon even after the end of the
episode, and begins to act quite dragonish; this clearly illustrates the dragon’s influence over him and the role the dragon plays in Grendel’s inevitable downfall at the hands of Beowulf. The dragon in this prequel and retelling of *Beowulf* is able to speak, has adopted the philosophy of nihilism, and clearly has a friendship, as vitriolic as it might be, with Grendel. In this novel, the dragon’s role is expanded and two monsters are closely connected. In this way, the dragon’s role is expanded. This shows that while the dragon in English literature is still portrayed as a violent and dangerous creature not meant to be trusted, the roles of the dragon have expanded and become more complex. The dragon, already rich in symbolism, has become even more complex, as it becomes more of a character in its own right and plays larger roles in its stories. As time passes, we will no doubt see the dragon continue to evolve in English literature and to appear in increasingly various and divergent forms, playing with and challenging the archetypes and tropes common to dragon myth in the Western European tradition and beyond.
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This depends on the myth, as not all Germanic dragon myths included fire breath as a dragon ability.