

**Title:** The Analogical Mere: Landscape and Terror in *Beowulf*

**Author(s):** Richard Butts

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[(essay date 1987) In the following excerpt, Butts maintains that the *Beowulf* poet's description of Grendel's mere, or pool, is meant to be nightmarish rather than realistic.]

The description of Grendel's mere in Hrothgar's speech to Beowulf (1345a-1379b) is an extended metaphor for terror. [The text of *Beowulf* used throughout this paper is that of Friedrich Klaeber's edition, *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd. ed. (Lexington, Mass., 1950).] The difficulty of reconciling all the features of the landscape surrounding the mere into a realistic picture has been noted by previous commentators. But to take an unsympathetic view of the poet's accomplishment here and read the description as an unsuccessful attempt to accurately and realistically render a natural landscape is to misread it. The poet gives us Hrothgar's description not so as to present a natural landscape but in order to point to the realm of the supernatural. The supernatural, thus evoked, allows for a mode of language and thought which is ideally suited for expressing the poet's prime concern: the collective terror of men in the face of the unknown. The purpose of the poet is less to describe a particular topography than it is to communicate some sense of men's imaginative and psychological response to Grendel.

Even the most cursory examination of the principal imagery associated with Grendel's mere reveals the highly unnatural character of the landscape. The morning after the attack of Grendel's mother on Heorot, Hrothgar tells Beowulf of the two "ellorgastas" (1349a) and the place from which they come in a speech which, although detailed, is also highly elusive. That Grendel represents something beyond the experience of the Danes—something beyond the limits of the natural and social order with which they are familiar—is reinforced by an imagery which suggests that the monster is part of a world which is both temporally and physically distinct from the world of contemporary men. From Hrothgar, we learn that "þone on geardagum Grendel nemdon / foldbuende" (1354a-1355a). The phrase "on geardagum" recalls a legendary time, existing at the extreme edge of human memory. Hrothgar's knowledge of it is fragmentary and tentative; it is a time so far removed from the understanding of contemporary men that knowledge of it is preserved only in the songs of the scop, of "se þe cupe / frumsceaft fira feorran reccan" (90b-91b). From this dark and mysterious time, Grendel has come to terrorize the Danes. Figuratively, this earlier time is a time of darkness; it signals a dark prehistory before the dawning of the Danish civilization which culminates in Hrothgar's reign and the building of Heorot, the "beahsele beorhta" (1177a). Grendel is consistently characterized as a creature of the darkness. The first reference to him in *Beowulf* describes him as "se þe in þystrum bad" (87b). Grendel is the "deorc deapscua" (160a) who lives in a darkness quite literally beyond the understanding of men:

[Grendel] sinnihte heold  
 mistige moras; men ne cunnon,  
 hwyder helrunan hwyrftum scriþaþ.  
 (161b-163b)

Consonant with the temporal alienation of Grendel from the world of the Danes is the physical separation of his territory from the haunts of men. Hrothgar tells Beowulf that Grendel and his mother are 'micle mearcstapan' who 'moras healdan' (1348). The severity of the terrain over which Hrothgar leads Beowulf and his retainers in order to reach Grendel's lair further underlines this separation of the world of monsters from the world of men; the men travel by:

steap stanhliþo, stige nearwe,  
 enge anþapas, uncuþ gelad,  
 neowle nassas, nicorhusa fela.  
 (1409a-1411b)

The technical challenge which the *Beowulf* poet must overcome in relation to the mere is the inadequacy of language to convey a complex and subtle state of mind, in this case, the psychological mood of men toward Grendel and all the greater unknown which he represents. The principal difficulty encountered in describing a psychological mood is that it resists most forms of univocal description. The linguistic problem points to a deeper epistemological one. Hrothgar tells Beowulf: 'No þas frod leofaþ / gumena bearna, þat þone grund wite' (1366b-1367b). The Dane's reference to the bottom of Grendel's mere is as much a figurative emblem of the limits of what can be known and said by men as it is an allusion to the depth of a body of water. Rendering a psychological mood poses a similar problem of description for the poet insofar as a state of mind or psychological mood is not as readily an object of sense as is, say, a 'sincfat' or a 'gupsweord geatolic'. When the mind is turned inward to focus on a psychological mood as an object of knowledge, the mind must perceive it more intimately and less through the medium of sense; the process is more intuitive than it is empirical. Yet in spite of this rather formidable obstacle to communication, the poet does succeed in offering to his readers an understanding of a dominant psychological mood which is simply too exquisite to be contained within the conventional conceptual dimension of language. He communicates this mood through an analogical mode of thinking and description in which details of the physical landscape are consciously manipulated to evoke a psychological landscape.

Hrothgar calls the land in which Grendel and his mother live the 'dygel lond' (1357b). The dominant chord struck by the landscape description is one of otherworldliness, an intimation of the supernatural conveyed by the threatening images of the

[ . . . ] wulfhleopu, windige nassas,  
 frecne fengelad, þar fyrgenstream  
 under nassa genipu niþer gewiteþ,  
 flod under foldan.  
 (1358a-1361a)

The image of the 'wulfhleopu' mediates between the natural and supernatural resonances of the landscape. Wolves do move in the natural landscape with which Hrothgar and Beowulf would be familiar, but these animals are also traditionally associated with death and the horrors of the battlefield where warriors pass from the world they know to the unknown beyond. The disappearance of the 'flod under foldan', with the 'fyrgenstream' flowing under the darkness of the headlands—foreshadowing Beowulf's descent into the water to do battle with Grendel's mother—is also emblematic on a more general level of this passage from light and the natural world to the mysterious darkness of whatever lies beyond it. The supernatural character of Grendel's mere is enhanced by the 'hrinde bearwas, / wudu wyrftum fast' (1363a-1364b) which overshadow the water and the eerie spectacle which may be seen there each night, the 'niþwundor' (1365b) of the 'fyr on flode' (1366a). Perhaps the most powerful evocation of the supernatural, almost magical mood associated with Grendel's mere comes at the climax of Hrothgar's speech where the old king, in his attempt to impress upon Beowulf the very fearful and unnatural aspect

of the place, tells the young Geat the story of the 'heorot hornum trum' (1369a), the extraordinary hart which gives up its life to the hounds rather than brave Grendel's mere.

I have suggested that the poet's manipulation of details to evoke a supernatural landscape is supported by an analogical mode of thinking and description. The poet's interest in the supernatural signals, I believe, a concurrent interest in the psychological: the landscape which the poet has offered us with his description of Grendel's mere is, in effect, the landscape of dreams. For example, the odd combination of frost and fire—the frost of the 'hrinde bearwas' (1363b) and the fire of the 'fyr on flode' (1366a)—juxtaposed in the same scene seems inappropriate to what we would expect of a natural landscape. But such phenomena might easily be combined by the associative logic of dreams or visionary experiences. In fact, such a juxtaposition of elemental symbolism, and particularly the oxymoronic figure of the 'fyr on flode', is highly characteristic of the surrealistic heightening of consciousness that we associate with dreaming.

A similar combining of disparate images distinguishes the poet's description of the mere itself. Overshadowed by the 'wudu wyrstum fast' (1364a) and fed by the falling 'fyrgenstream' (1359b), the mere has been described by some commentators as an inland lake. Influenced by the corresponding scene in the *Grettissaga*, Klaeber remarks that the 'outlines' of Grendel's mere are 'fairly well understood' as a 'pool surrounded by cliffs and overhung with trees, a stream descending into it, and a large cave behind the fall'. But the 'windige nassas' (1358b) and 'nassa' (1360a) are more suggestive of formations along the seacoast than they are of inland hills. And the closing imagery of Hrothgar's speech, the turbulent images of the 'ypgeblond' (1373a) of Grendel's mere which 'up astigeþ / won to wolcnum, þonne wind styreþ / laþ gewidru' (1373b-1375a) seems less appropriate to the site of an inland pool than it does to the open ocean. Later, when Hrothgar, Beowulf, and their retainers visit Grendel's mere, they find the water populated with fierce *sea* creatures:

Gesawon þa after watere wyrmcynnes fela,  
 sellice sadracan sund cunnian,  
 swylce on nashleopum nicras licgean,  
 þa on undernmal oft bewitigaþ  
 sorhfulne siþ on segrade,  
 wyrmas ond wildeor.  
 (1425a-1430a)

The poet's conflation of lake and sea imagery thwarts any clear picture of Grendel's mere; each cluster of imagery undermines the signifying power of the other. Details of the description of Grendel's mere are manipulated by the poet to produce a subversive rhetoric, subversive to the extent that it militates against its own cognitive content. The poet is quite capable of describing a scene closely and realistically when he chooses to do so, but here, in spite of the accumulation of realistic details built into Hrothgar's speech, we are left with what is, I think, an intentionally contradictory picture. And this is not an undesirable feature of the description. Because the cumulative and overwhelming force of this tension between conflicting clusters of images inhibits any single cognitive perception of the scene, it necessitates a non-intellectual, almost emotional response in the reader; the reader is left with the impression of having submitted to a subtle sensual experience rather than to a carefully marshalled description of a body of water. Such a poetic strategy is quite consistent with the kind of appeal the poet wishes his description to make: it recreates the appeal of the elusive yet symbolic landscapes of the dreams which embody our most profound and primal fears. It is morning when Hrothgar delivers this speech to Beowulf; traditionally the time in Old English poetry of misery without consolation, it is of course also the time when the night's dreams are remembered.

The scenic confusion of the lake and sea imagery also functions to render Grendel's mere more terrifying. The sea represents a source of the hostile unknown; it is a place from which come 'niceras' (422a), the 'wedera cealdost' (546b) and invading 'searohabbendra / byrnum werede' (237a-238b). To the extent that it is bound up with the imagery of an inland lake, the sea is brought closer to home, and consequently, made more threatening. Symbolically, the sea and what it represents is internalized: as this source of terror is associated with an inland

lake, it is seen to have invaded the terrestrial home of the 'foldbuende' (1355a). The figurative entry of the sea into the land parallels the narrative action of Grendel's nightly raids on Heorot. Hrothgar's beguilingly simple statement to Beowulf 'Nis þat feor heonon / milgemeances, þat se mere standeþ' (1361b-1362b), underlines just how much the very source of terror lies within the literal and the psychological domains of men.

Hrothgar's story of the 'hapstapa' (1368a), the hart which surrenders to the hounds rather than escape by entering Grendel's mere, is an elegiac testimony to the fear all creatures have of Grendel:

peah þe hapstapa hundum geswenced,  
 heorot hornum trum holtwudu sece,  
 feorran geflymed, ar he feorh seleþ,  
 aldor on ofre, ar he in wille,  
 hafelan [beorgan].  
 (1368a-1372a)

In a characteristic understatement, Hrothgar adds 'nis þat heoru stow' (1372b). It is significant that the poet has chosen to designate his fugitive animal a 'heorot' (1369a); 'heorot' is, of course, the eponym for Hrothgar's great hall, the symbol of the prosperity and security of the Danish kingdom. The poet was no doubt sensible of the figurative and poetic overtones of such a word here at the climax of Hrothgar's speech, especially as this is the only occurrence of 'heorot' as a common noun in *Beowulf*. The noun allows the poet to sum up the collective fear of the Danes into the vivid metonymy of the fleeing hart. This metonymic shrinking of men's fear into the image of the fugitive hart has the typical function of condensation in dreams: there is conveyed an intensity of impression that could not have been achieved by the mere statement that all creatures, including men, fear Grendel. Hence, Hrothgar's elegy for the hart is as much an elegy for Heorot, the 'healarna mast' (78a), and the people whom it represents. In the death of the hounded hart, we may even find a metonymic prophecy of the fall of Heorot itself in the Heatho-Bard conflict.

A recurrent theme in Hrothgar's speech is the ability, or the inability, of men to know. Hrothgar's 'seleradende' (1346a) describe the appearance of Grendel and his mother 'þas þe hie gewislicost gewitan meahton' (1350). The poet underlines just how little knowledge the 'foldbuende' (1355a) possess about the monsters: 'no hie fader cunnon, / hwaper him anig was ar acenned / dynnra gasta' (1355b-1357a). With respect to Grendel's mere itself, 'No þas frod leofaþ / gumena bearna, þat þone grund wite' (1366b-1367b). And Hrothgar warns Beowulf 'Eard git ne const, / frecne stowe, þar au findan miht / sinnigne secg' (1377b-1379a). Clearly linguistic features of the description of Grendel's mere are bound up with epistemological features. And underlying the organization of the description is the simple proposition that phenomena begin to elude verbal expression the more they approach the limits of human knowledge. But the striking corollary to such a proposition is that phenomena beyond the limits of human knowledge are beyond *most* forms of verbal expression. (Practically speaking, from the historical perspective of the Danes, Grendel and his mother come from some preternatural realm outside the bounds of human knowledge.) Such phenomena are accessible, however, through an analogical mode of expression. The poet's mode of description in Hrothgar's speech corresponds to a form of analogical language which Northrop Frye, in *The Great Code*, calls the metonymic mode. Although the term 'metonymic' carries several meanings, Frye primarily uses it to denote a form of language in which 'the verbal expression is "put for" something that by definition transcends adequate verbal expression'. In Hrothgar's speech, aspects of the landscape are 'put for' the collective and psychological response of the Danes to Grendel. It is not surprising that Hrothgar's ironic understatement 'nis þat heoru stow' (1372b) is cast as a negative construction. Because of the preternatural character of the place he is describing, it is much easier for him to say what it is not than what it is.

The poet offers several very specific clues in the text to indicate that he is working within the sphere of analogy and that he is describing no ordinary landscape but rather the landscape of the soul. Of some interest is his use of the verb *reotan* in the clause 'roderas reotaþ' (1376a). The verb *reotan*, 'to weep', would seem more appropriate to a human agent, but here, as it is used to describe the action of the skies over Grendel's mere, it suggests an analogical mode of thought: it intimates that features of the landscape bear an analogical relationship to things

human. The diffuse light at the mere contributes to the analogue of the melancholy mood by creating a dark and shadowy atmosphere. While the skies pour rain down on the mere, the air becomes gloomy ('lyft drysmap'—1375b). Like the 'weeping' of the personified skies, the narrative event of the air becoming gloomy has emotional overtones, introducing a melancholy, despairing quality, even as it suggests, from a visual perspective, the darkening of the landscape. Earlier, Hrothgar has told Beowulf that trees overshadow the mere ('water oferhelmap'—1364b). This imagery of shadows and darkness associated with the mere has a subtle affinity with a corresponding human darkness, perhaps even a terrifying and unexplored darkness within the soul. We can read the progress of the 'fyrgenstream' (1359b) under the 'nassa genipu' (1360a) in this context of analogy as a symbolic entry into the dark interior of the souls of men.

The most substantial indication the poet offers of this analogical mode—an indication so obvious as to be perhaps overlooked—is that Grendel and his mother, the two 'ellorgastas' (1349a), are cast in almost-human forms. According to what Hrothgar has been told, Grendel's mother 'was . . . idese onlicnes' (1349b-1351a). And Grendel himself 'on weres wastmum wraclastas trad, / nafne he was mara þonne anig man oþer' (1352a-1353b). While there are very few explicit similes in *Beowulf*, the poet is quite sensitive to the nuances of analogical thought. He likens Grendel to a man 'nafne he was mara' (1353a) not simply as a device to aid his reader to visualize the monster (although the comparison does serve that function) but as part of his sophisticated program to intimate that while the monster may move through the exterior landscape, it also inhabits the human—the psychological—landscape. Grendel and his mother represent a horrific and primitive force, something far below the level of the conscious mind; yet the effect of the poet's description is to identify the monsters intimately with men.

Earlier the poet offered a somewhat sympathetic description of Grendel's mother after the death of her son. Highly understandable in human terms, her motive for attack on Heorot is maternal vengeance: 'Ond his modor þa gyt/gifre ond galgmod gegan wolde / sorhfulne sip, sunu deoþ wrecan' (1276b-1278b). But what is particularly striking about this portrait of Grendel's mother is that it seems like a demonic parody of maternal love, coming as it does less than one hundred lines after Wealhtheow publicly presents Beowulf with the Brosings' necklace and asks him to act as a protector to her sons, Hrethric and Hrothmund: 'ond þyssum cnyhtum wes / lara liþe! Ic þe þas lean geman' (1219b-1220b). And some one hundred lines previous to Wealhtheow's appeal, Hrothgar's scop tells of the conflict with the Frisians and of how, among other things, the Danish Hildeburh, a symbol of victimized and grieving maternity, loses her son (as well as her brother Hnaf and her husband Finn) in the ensuing battles:

unsynnum wearþ  
beloren leofum at þam lindplegan  
bearnum ond broþrum; hie on gebyrd hruron  
gare wunde; þat was geomuru ides!  
(1072b-1075b)

This close succession of maternal figures either solicitous for or grieving for their sons, first Hildeburh (1071a-1080a; 1114a-1118b), then Wealhtheow (1180b-1191b; 1219b-1220b; 1226b-1227b) and finally Grendel's mother (1276b-1278b), serves to draw attention to the suggestive affinities between the mothers of warriors and the mothers of monsters.

This association of the human and the demonic is nowhere more succinctly captured than in Hrothgar's final challenge to Beowulf: 'sec gif þu dyrre!' (1379b) says Hrothgar of the dangerous place where Beowulf may find the 'sinnigne secg' (1379a). Although Old English poetry is renowned for its litotes, the *Beowulf* poet does have a more than adequate vocabulary at his disposal with which to describe Grendel's mother as a monster, demon, or some such other fitting adversary for Beowulf, for example, 'aglaca' (wretch, monster, demon, or fiend), 'laþ' (hostile or hateful one), 'manscapa' (wicked ravager or evildoer), 'bana' (slayer or murderer), and 'feond' (enemy or fiend) to name only a few. It might then appear as something of a disappointment that he has designated her with the neutral and rather common 'secg'. Certainly we have come to expect a more colourful language at such dramatically crucial moments. Yet if we are sensitive to the nuances which the poet is manipulating in Hrothgar's speech, we will find that he has made a particularly apposite choice of words. The noun 'secg' in most contexts

means 'man'. But as it refers in this instance to the monster, it economically captures the weird and intimate affinity of the human and the demonic in the single image of the 'sinnigne secg' (1379a). Such an otherwise slight noun is freighted with sinister connotations by virtue of its local context; it adds an even more disturbing and ominous subtext to Hrothgar's challenge to 'sec gif þu dyrrre' (1379b), hinting at the possibility—a possibility of which Hrothgar himself may be unaware—that the fiend which Beowulf must face is as much within as it is without.

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