

Was Grendel the Inspiration for Tolkien's Gollum?

Diane (Xenia) Moos  
Beowulf through Tolkien  
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Was the character Gollum in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy based on the monster Grendel from the poem *Beowulf*? Are they similar enough that one can suspect one provides inspiration for the other? In an attempt to compare Grendel and Gollum one immediately confronts the central problem of comparing characters from three very different legendariums. *Beowulf* is a poem that has both historical and fairy tale elements; Grendel's ancestor Cain is a character from the Old Testament and Tolkien's Gollum is wholly invented. This is a mixture of history and fantasy which makes comparisons problematical.

The *Beowulf* poet provides some information about the ancestry of Grendel and his mother. They descend from Cain, Adam's first son, infamous for killing his brother Abel. The Genesis account tells how Cain was given a mark and sent away from his family where he found a wife. "Who was Cain's wife?" is the common question of the skeptic. The simplest answer is that Adam and Eve had many children and Cain married his own sister. There is nothing in the Genesis account to suggest an alternative answer and no evidence to suggest he married a non-human.

When "the sons of God saw the daughters of men...they took them [as] wives."<sup>1</sup> These marriages produced giants. If the "sons of God" were the godly descendants of Adam's son Seth and the "sons of men" were the ungodly descendants of Cain—all human persons—how are the abnormally gigantic offspring accounted for? Yet this explanation has the virtue of keeping everyone in the human race. We can only observe that something unusual happened to human DNA at this time which angered God.

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1 Gen 6:2 KJV

Noah was “perfect in his generations,”<sup>2</sup> which could mean he did not have any Cainish / giant DNA. Noah, his sons and their wives boarded the Ark and the rest of humanity, giants and all, perished in the flood. Or did they? Later on in the Scriptures we read of the persistence of gigantic people, such as the Anakim.<sup>3</sup> How did this happen? One possibility is that while Noah’s bloodline was pure, the wives may have had some giants in their family trees. It is possible that the Grendel family descended from intermarriages between those descendants of Noah who exhibited the most abnormal characteristics, that is, the strongest bloodline from Cain? Therefore, the Grendel family is entirely human but estranged from the rest of the human family because of the curse on their ancestor. This is a plausible explanation for Grendel’s descent from Cain.

How did the *Beowulf* poet think of Grendel? Labeling him a descendent of Cain limits the possibilities: he must be a member of the human race. He is given names and descriptions which suggest a demonic, supernatural nature. Many epithets, such as “accursed thing,” “fiend from hell” and “demon”<sup>4</sup> may be pejoratives and not indicative of origin.

What manner of creature is Sméagol, who is also called Gollum? While it is not stated in Tolkien’s fiction, it has been suggested<sup>5</sup> that hobbits are a type of man, which they most closely resemble. Gollum’s origin story explains that his people were related to the Stoors, one of the

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2 Gen 6:9 KJV

3 Num 12:33 KJV

4 Tolkien, Christopher, ed., *J.R.R. Tolkien: Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2014), 16.

5 *Tolkien Gateway*, “Hobbits,” <http://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Hobbit> (accessed February 14, 2018).

three breeds of hobbits. If hobbits were created at the same time as men then they are also the younger children of Ilúvatar. There is no evidence that Gollum's family tree contained any aberrations so we can conclude that Sméagol was just as human as Aragorn himself.

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Therefore, Grendel and Gollum are both completely human.

Grendel and Gollum have many characteristics in common. They are both cannibals. This is obvious with Grendel but this description of Gollum is sometimes overlooked:

The Woodmen said that there was some new terror abroad, a ghost that drank blood. It climbed trees to find nests, it crept into holes to find the young; it slipped through windows to find cradles.<sup>6</sup>

Both are associated with watery homes, both live on the margins of society and eschew the company of men. They are both *wreccan*, in the "outcast" and "wretched" senses of the word. Both have glowing or fiery eyes, both have great strength and both are creatures of the night. Both had strong mother figures: Grendel, of course, has his fierce mother and Sméagol's family was ruled by a matriarch. Apart from glowing eyes, which even a house cat might have, Sméagol is physically no different from a hobbit. There is nothing supernatural about him. In contrast, Grendel has nail-like claws and a body that cannot be harmed by weapons of metal. Are these peculiarities natural traits acquired by his family over the millennia or are they the result of a supernatural spell? The human Beowulf has some astonishing characteristics as well, such as the ability to swim for five days.

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<sup>6</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballantine, 1994), 63-4.

Grendel is doomed by his ancestry. The wrath of God is upon him.<sup>7</sup> He overhears the men of Hereot praising the same God who cast out his forefather Cain and his resentment is easy to understand. Likewise, Sméagol is doomed after he acquires the Ring. Before he became Gollum,

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Sméagol already seemed a vicious character as judged by his readiness to murder his cousin. Unless Gollum was *predestined* to acquire the Ring, which is a possibility, he always had the ability to choose good over evil until the Ring took control. He didn't need a curse upon his ancestry for this to happen because it happened to Isildur as well, he of pristine Numenorian blood. Gollum chose evil whereas Grendel's wickedness was fated by the family curse.

Did Tolkien base Gollum on the character of Grendel? I am inclined to think he gave Gollum many of Grendel's traits, although not in the original 1937 edition of *The Hobbit*.<sup>8</sup> Later revisions of *The Hobbit* made Gollum much more sinister. The original Gollum was revised in later editions when Tolkien needed to make the "Riddles in the Dark" chapter comport with the *Lord of the Rings* plot that emphasized the baleful effect the Ring had on its bearers. *The Fellowship of the Rings* Gollum is out of his cave, rampaging about the countryside in a very Grendel-esque way, terrorizing the population and stealing babies from their cribs. The original Gollum was an odd riddle-loving little fellow who was quite willing to uphold his end of the bargain with Bilbo.

In conclusion, the characters of Grendel and Gollum have significant similarities and

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<sup>7</sup> Tolkien, J. R. R., Christopher Tolkien, J. R. R. Tolkien, J. R. R. Tolkien, and J. R. R. Tolkien. *Beowulf*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 33.

<sup>8</sup> Olsen, Corey. *Exploring J.R.R. Tolkiens The hobbit*. (Boston: Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013),10.

differences. The dissemblance is largely due to the origins given to them by the authors of their stories. Fate dealt Grendel an evil hand in this regard: one cannot choose one's ancestors.

Gollum's free will, assuming he had any, was corrupted by the Ring. Their similar characteristics are the same kind one finds in any story featuring a scary swamp monster: night-lurking, stealing adults and babies from their beds, reclusive, great strength, glowing eyes, and so forth. It is my conjecture that the original Gollum from the first edition of *The Hobbit* was not based on

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Grendel but as Tolkien made revisions to emphasize the significance of the Ring to the plot of *The Lord of the Rings*, Gollum became more Grendel-like and I believe it's possible that the Professor drew on his familiarity with Grendel to embellish Gollum's monstrous persona.

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