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Spiritual Battles

18 October, 2024

Midterm Reflection: *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*

Over the course of our discussions on spiritual battles, I found the text *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to be one of the most engaging. Because of the love my friend has for this text, as well as the stage adaptation that I am partaking in, I ended up spending a lot of time with this book. It is fundamentally a Christian story, and it was very enlightening on the issues of temptation and human fallenness. The titular character Gawain is spoken about as a faithful knight and Christian. In fact, he is described as the noblest of men. Despite his purity and skill in resisting temptation, Gawain is only human. In the end he succumbs to temptation through the taking of Lady Bertilak's belt for fear of his own life. This text reveals that even the most pious Christians and chivalrous knights can fall short. No matter how pure you are, human fallensess is still within you. The story ends with all of Arthur's knights wearing green belts in solidarity with Gawain. The belt serves as a reminder of his sin, but with all of the knights choosing to take on that burden, it brings together the fact that we all have sinned and fallen short.

The Green Knight might be one of the most interesting monsters discussed in class. There are many different interpretations of what he may represent or embody. According to scholar David Beauregard, the Green Knight could be "a representation of the Green Man, as a personification of death, as the devil, as an otherworldly creature, and as the word of God." Regardless of the many interpretations on who he is, the Green Knight comes into a place of celebration and disrupts it, as evil tends to do. He is an immortal being who taunts the court,

insults their honor, and challenges them to live up to their reputation. The Green Knight serves as a spiritual tester, set out to see if the knights are truly good and chivalrous as their reputation claims they are.

The main character who must face off against the Green Knight is Gawain, a Knight of the Round Table who is described throughout the text as one of the most honorable and courteous knights to ever walk the earth. Not only is he supposedly a perfectly chivalrous knight, he is also a devout Christian. The interior of his shield is decorated with a painting of the Virgin Mary. On the outside of the shield is a pentangle, which represents the five virtues, as well as the five wounds of Christ. He is a “good character” in the sense that while he is still human, he is a pious and courteous knight. He is tempted throughout the course of the story, both to give in to sexual temptation and to break his oath to the Green Knight by running away from the fight.

To better understand the spiritual battle in *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*, the knightly culture of the time period must be understood. Courtesy was of the highest importance, and cowardice was one of the worst offenses a knight could commit. This culture is also strongly founded on honor and duty. To break an oath would be shameful, which is why Gawain is specifically tempted to run away and leave the Green Chapel behind before he enters it. How could he call himself an honest and courteous knight if he abandoned his word? As this text is also a Christmas story, it must be understood what Christmas was in that time period. It was not just a time of celebration, where people spend time with their family and exchange gifts. It was Advent, a season of preparation for Jesus’ coming as well as a dangerous time spiritually. This is one of the reasons the Green Knight coming at Christmas is so important. The knights were celebrating and overindulging in food and wine, not guarding themselves spiritually or thinking

of their fellow man. The spiritual battle in *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* hinges not only on the knightly culture it is set in, but also *when* it was set.

The monster that the Green Knight is tells us a lot about the culture's theological and spiritual beliefs. His planning of temptation as well as the supernatural aspects to him seems to position him as a judge. Someone who is there to determine if, when tempted, a person will hold fast or fall into sin. The culture at the time was a Christian one, so the beliefs on theology were at the very least similar to the Christian culture I grew up in, even if there is much more emphasis on the actual supernatural threats than what is presented currently. There is also the supernatural threat of the Green Knight coming when people are not prepared. It seems that in this time period people had to be constantly on guard against evil and temptation, as you never know when it will come.

Ephesians 6:12 states: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* is not about the physical battles with dragons or goblins that Sir Gawain slayed along the way, but instead the spiritual battle Gawain faces against temptation. His biggest struggle is not in the forest with the beasts, but in the castle with forces put specifically there to tempt him. This text lends itself extremely well to the message in Ephesians. It puts this verse into practice and perspective. As I work through the stage adaptation and continue to engage with the text, the more I see how much of a spiritual battle against temptation it is. *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* (and it's connection with the verse) helps me actually acknowledge the fact that spiritual battles are very real, and need to be thought about more often.