Symbolism In Sir Gawain And The Green Knight Essay, Research Paper

From the first time I read Sir Gawain and the Green Knight I have been troubled by the question of whether or not Sir Gawain was right or wrong in lying in order to keep the girdle and save his life. He was torn between honesty and his own life. The question he was forced to ask himself was “what did he value more: his honesty or his life? Many scholars have struggled with this question for centuries, as well as the questions of why Gawain made the decision that he did, how guilty he “really” felt for his actions, and what the poet is trying to tell the reader through Gawain’s ordeal.

When I was growing up I was told to always be honest. I was only “grounded” twice in my lifetime: once for not telling my mom where I went one afternoon and once for telling her a lie. I was in Kindergarten and broke a candle (don’t ask me why or how). I blamed it on the cat. I couldn’t stand the pressure of my mother’s intense interrogation that consisted of simply asking me how the cat could possibly brake the candle which was surrounded by a hurricane lamp. My guilt was so overwhelming that I broke down and told her the truth. Thus, I was introduced to the concept of “grounding” and the importance of honesty. I was taught at a young age that the foundation of any relationship is honesty and without it, a friendship can only last so long and its roots go go only so deep.

But honesty is not everything. My mother would probably ground me again if I did not lie to someone to save my neck. There is another side to the question about Sir Gawain’s decision to not give Bertilac the green girdle. While honesty should be highly valued, it may be unwise to undervalue life itself. In almost every culture death, as well as Gawains’ culture, death is recognized “as a terrifying thing which men and animals alike try to escape by every device in their power, regardless of dignity or duty” (Burrow, ” The Third Fit” 37). It may be even more difficult to place an overriding significance on the value of honesty in light of life’s alternative: death.

“…images of death permeate the medieval world” (Clien. 55).

A modern reader of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight should gain an understanding of what death means within the “cultural milieu” which surrounded the Gawain writer. Wendy Clein in her book “Concepts of Chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” describes the chivalric approach to death as an uncomfortable and awkward marriage between the warrior’s code on one side and Christianity of the the antithetical side. The warrior code calls for the knight to “defy death in acts of heroism and thereby gain worldly fame” (55). However, the Christian doctrine demands that the knight surrender worldly fame and accept death as a “passage from this imperfect world to eternity” (55).

If knight is to gain fame and fulfill the warrior code that is so deeply engrained into the psyche of a warrior, he must play with death. This is what war and tournaments are all about. It is about looking death in the eye and not flinching. Once a knight can do this he has fulfilled the warrior code of a knight, at least for the moment.

The Christian approach to death is much different from the warrior approach to death. While some parts of the poem may appear be simply “Christian in harmony with pre-Christian nature belief and ritual”, the issue of eternity and how to live life can be quite cacophonous (Speirs. 85). The Christian is called to reject the worldly glory that is offered by the world of the knight. However the knight who gives up worldly glory is not left without any honors or glory. These temporal glories are replaced by the “spiritual rewards” that are enjoyed by the saints.

While it might appear that the two worlds of Christianity and the warrior are mutually exclusive, they can really compliment each other when human logic is applied. If warriors are supposed to beat up people, and Christians are supposed to live their lives for God then logic tells us that we can unite these two lifestyles by beating up people for Jesus. The Crusades were great for these special kind of individuals who desired to maintain their commitment to the Church while engaging in the thrill of violent adventure. This is one of the unique times when the values of medieval Christianity and the medieval warrior really compliment each other: when it is time to beat up foreigners for Jesus.

There are a number of advantages to the spiritual life that Wendy Clein explores. One advantage that the spiritual world has over the warrior world is that it is not of an exclusive nature. In a battle to the death, only one warrior can win, while the other warrior must die. Whereas in the spiritual world, salvation is open to all and achievable by all who embrace the Christian way of life, because it is not of an exclusive nature. Rich and poor, as well as the strong and the weak, can achieve the riches of the spiritual world.

According to Clein the fourteenth century culture points out to that another benefit of joining the Christian club is that it does not offer one of those measly life-time memberships. By joining this club, all members automatically receive an eternal warranty on the human soul at no extra cost. A life-time warranty expires way to early:

Moralists turned various occasions into opportunities to reflect on death. John Mirk’s sermon for the Feast of the Circumcision moves from considering Christ’s mortality to exhorting listeners to think on their own…. Images of decaying flesh provide the most dramatic examples of earthly transience. The corpse as memento mori appears early in a Christian context, transforming the Egyptian and Roman image from a carpe diem exhortation to an admonishment not to sacrifice eternal happiness for the fleeting pleasures of the body. The image pervades the later Middle Ages. (60-61)

In light of this sort of imagery it is understandable how Gawain might have felt the guilt that appears to be extreme to most modern readers of the poem. Gawain’s guilt is extreme when he at the end of the poem he discusses why he wears the band:

This band symbolizes the blame I bear on my neck;

It signifies the sorrowful loss that I have suffered,

Caught by cowardice and covetousness there;

It is a token of the untruthfulness that trapped me,

And I wear it for as long as I may live;

For a man can hide his hurt, but never hurl it away,

Since once it is attached, it will never disappear. (ln 2506-2512)

It was believed that the pleasures of the court threaten men by distracting them from the “truth” that the corpses can now understand.

In the culture of the Gawain poet, just as in our modern culture and every culture in between, there was hypocrisy and conveniently timed changes of heart. After the knights went out into the world to engage in their varied and unholy pleasures of the world, they would condemn knighthood. There is a certain cycle to the human condition that brings relevance to the story of Gawain. Just as the baby boomer parents didn’t like all that rock and roll music their children adored so much, the knights did not want their children to have too much fun. The “Black Prince” becomes humble and rejects the worldly pleasures in writing his epitaph:

…/now I am poor and lowly, laid deep in the earth, / My great beauty is all gone, my flesh is all dissolved. / My house is very narrow and I have nothing but truth. (John Nichols. A Collection of All the Wills of the Kings and Queens of England. Clein p.62)

While his epitaph is quaint and marked by humility, the prince still ordered a grand funeral that was far cry from the humility he professes:

And we wish that at that time our body be led through the town of Canterbury to the priory, that two war horses decked in our arms and two men armed in our arms and our helms attend our said body, namely, one for war in our whole arms quartered, and the other for peace in our badges of ostrich feathers with four banners of the same suit, and that each of those who carry the said banners have on his head a hat of our arms. And that he who is armed for war has an armed man carrying after him a black pennon with ostrich feathers (nichols. p88 CLein p70).

The “truth” of which the Black Prince writes in concluding his epitaph was incredibly important to fourteenth century ethics. The importance of truth is manifested in Gawain’s guilt trip at the end of the poem. He wears the green sash to remind him of his “untruthfulness” (ln. 2509)

Not only was I taken aback by Gawain’s extreme guilt which seems absurd, but I was thrown off by the sins with which he chooses to condemn himself, particularly the Cardinal or capital sin of “covetousness” (ln 2508).

J. A. Burrow dismisses Gawain’s self-conviction of covetousness. The commentator argues that Gawain “is not vain or covetous: he does not wear the lady’s gift ‘for wele’ (lns. 2037,2432). It seems clear… that the ring episode is designed to make the same point-to make sure in advance that the reader does not misunderstand the hero’s motives….It clears the ground. Anyone who refuses such a ring is immune from covetousness at least” (Burrow. 42)

The problem with this interpretation is that the writer defines covetousness too narrowly and more narrowly than the author intended. While it might be easy to say that Gawain just went crazy at the end of the poem this only opens up a whole new set of questions. Why would he want Gawain to go crazy when he has been a symbol of the closest a human can get to perfection? Why would the author make the court which has appeared foolish and weak in the right while Gawain was in the wrong?

D. F. Hills explores why Gawain was correct to accuse himself of covetousness, why Gawains’ response was proper, and how the poet’s use of “covetousness” functions to clarify and emphasize rather than confuse.

It is obvious why Gawain accuses himself of “cowardness” (ln 2508) and “untruthfulness” (ln.2509), but why would he charge himself with “covetousness” (2508)? Hills recognizes that in order to understand why Gawain as well as what the poet is trying to tell us we “must examine the medieval concept of covetousness” (313). Hills quotes St. Thomas Aquinas from Summa Theologiae:

…covetousness can be variously understood. In one sense, it is an excessive desire for riches…. In another sense, it means an excessive desire for any temporal goods whatsoever…. In still another sense, it can mean some inclination of a corrupt nature to excessively desire corruptible goods. And thus they say that covetousness is the root of all sins, by analogy with the root of a tree, which draws its nourishment from the earth, for in the same way all sin grows from the love of temporal things. (314-315)

Gawain reacts as he should if living in the world of Aquinas, because he has tapped into the root of all sin. Gawain senses that his being has been usurped by his sin, and he will begin rotting from the inside out.

Along this same path of medieval thought, covetousness is the “antithesis of charity” (315). It is a love of the world which is not a love directed toward God, but rather covetousness is love directed towards the self:

Covetousness is the element in all sin which is due to loving oneself more than God and seeking…a consolation which has no consolation…. So no matter how much the human soul contains, it is never full unless it can hold God, whom it can always hold. O covetous man, if you wish to be satisfied, cease being covetous, because as long as you are covetous you cannot be satisfied. (318)

Hills states that “It is essentially a spiritual disease” (319) and Gawain freaks out when he accepts that he has contracted the disease.

By defining covetousness in this way we open up a whole new way of looking at the significance of Gawain’s fault. Hills takes the Aquinas definition of covetousness and brings it to fruition by applying it to Sir Gawain’s self-proclaimed sin of covetousness:

Clearly a strict respect for the truth… would require that Gawain should hand over the green girdle to Bertilak or perhaps refuse to accept it in the first place. In not doing so because he loved his life too much he was placing his love for himself above his love for truth and therefore God.(321)

By the poet explicitly naming Gawain’s fault “covetousness” he is clarifying his theme of the water and oil nature of the spiritual world and the the worldly world. He is naming the root of sin. Man valuing this world over the next. Why does it matter if you get your head violently cut off? You are going to die soon anyway, so you should be free of any sin, even the little ones, in order to get on God’s good side. Eternity is a long time.

While Gawain sees himself as this dark evil person the reader joins Arthur, Bertilac, and the Court of Arthur in diluting the significance of Gawain’s offense. Bertilak sees it as “a small flaw, my friend: you lack some faithfulness./ It didn’t arise for an artful object or amorous fling-/ No! You just loved your life! And I blame you the less for it” (ln. 2366-8). This did not serve to comfort him, because it only precipitated a “Shuddering inside himself with a shameful rage” (ln. 2370).

John Burrow argues that covetousness is not so important to understanding the poets intentions. Rather that cowardice is the root of Gawain’s failure. Burrow states that “cowardice led him to commit one of the traditional ‘acts of covetise’” It was only because Gawain was a coward first that he later became covetousness according to Burrows interpretation.

I will fall down on Hills’ side and suggest that the poet is using the fact that Arthur’s court doesn’t condemn Sir Gawain, but in fact laugh at him for making such a big deal out of his sin, to further his motif of the cyclical stupidity of the masses. To add irony to insult the author has the Round Table where the sash as a mark of honor when it is really intended to be a mark of shame. The author is screaming to the reader that the Court with all of their energies focused on this world just do not comprehend what is going on.

When Gawain accepts the lace, he does not understand the nature of the test (Benson. 224). For Gawain’s test is not a test of temporal survival as with what we see with the fox, it is a spiritual test. It is a test of which world Gawain will choose to live in, and he cannot live in both. It is either/or with nothing in between. For Gawain recognizes that in the fourteenth century world that he took the first step, which is not insignificant in theological terms, on that long path to hell.

Bibliography

Benson, Larry. Art and Tradition in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”. New Brunswick: Rutgers Universty Press, 1965.

Burrow, John. “‘Cupiditas’ in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964. Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968.

—”The Third Fit.” A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1965. Twentieth Century Interpretations of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

Clein, Wendy. Concepts of Chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1987.

Hills, David Farley. “Gawain’s Fault in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”. Review of English Studies. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963.

Spiers, John. “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”. Scrutiny. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1949.

35f