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The Green Knight Game

**Introduction**

‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Game’ are a set of poems that represent the alliterative poetry of the Middle English Literature during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The scholars believe that the poems might have been written in the remote northwest Midlands, as the dialect of these poems indicates. The story revolves around Sir Gawain’s life incidents during which he encounters various games being played with him having different motives behind their origin. These games interlink with each other and construct most of the action presented in the story. The protagonist confronts different games during his course and the reader can identify a particular theme associated with each game.

**Discussion**

There are stressed syllables as well as unstressed ones in each line. With each line in the original Middle English, there is given a translation of that verse. The poem is divided into three parts. The first part entails the entrance of a stranger, the Green Knight, to Arthur’s court where he challenges Camelot for its bravery and Gawain displays his willingness to answer his challenge eventually. The second part describes Gawain’s departure to meet the Green Knight, his staying at Bertilak’s castle and involvement in the game of exchange. The third part of the poem deals with the seductive games of his host’s wife and the final encounter of him with the Green Knight revealing the secrets of the story.

The main games of the story are ‘the beheading game’ and ‘the exchange game. Gawain has to play the former with the Green Knight in Camelot and at the Green Chapel, and the latter with Bertilak during his stay at his castle. The Green Knight plays the ‘Christmas game’ at Camelot. At the end, all the incidents of the story appear to be a pre-planned game of Arthur’s sister, Morgan Le Fay. The author of the poem also plays a mental game with the reader. All these games are interconnected to compel Gawain to show his nerve, integrity, and righteousness. It is Arthur’s sister who set the stage for all the games.

The Green Knight implies that he is dressed completely in green. When he comes to the King’s court, he says he only have come there to play a game. The rule of the game says that whoever admits to play the game will have a chance for striking the head of the Green Knight. If the Green Knight survives, he will secure a chance for striking a return below in a year and a day. The game seems to be a death warrant for anyone who seeks to play it. Therefore, nobody comes forward with a willing attitude. On seeing this, the Green Knight calls them to be the beardless children (Gawain 280). When the King sees the situation, he agrees to play the game to sustain the dignity of his court. When Gawain observes the scene, he finds himself convinced by his inner-self to protect the King, and announces that he’ll fight. Gawain persuades the King to withdraw by saying that the King has much more worth as compare to him; and, therefore, he deserves to be protected by his subordinates (Gawain 357). At the commencement of game, Gawain hits the intruder with his axe and separates his head from his trunk. However, the Knight does not die. He takes his head and restore it on his shoulders. He is then confirmed to face the Green knight in a year for receiving his blow.

Sir Gawain heads toward the Green Chapel when time to play comes near. On his way, he is received by Lord Bertilak at his castle and he has to stay there for some days to play a game. Both are supposed to exchange the spoils in their daily hunt. Gawain cannot understand the implications of the game rules.

“Whatever I win in the woods I will give you at eve,

And all you have earned you must offer to me;

Swear now, sweet friend, to swap as I say,

Whether hands, in the end, be empty or better.” (Gawain 1106-1109).

Gawain gives what he finds in the first two days. However, on the third day, Gawain fails to return to Bertilak what he has. He finds a green girdle, which he believes will defend him against death and help him to resist the Lady’s temptations (Heng 507). Accepting the girdle displays Gawain’s weakness. Bertilak wins at the end but does not reveal it to Gawain. Gawain is practicing his religion and, by accepting the girdle, he has betrayed God.

On reaching the Green Chapel, Gawain faces the Green Knight. Though he has displayed weakness of his character, yet he is the only Knight alive who can face the Green Knight. As the Green Knight remarks about him that he has all the good characteristics that have been demonstrated by the Knights ever (Markman 576). He survives the game and returns to Camelot with the girdle. He returns with a sense of regret on his mistake in retaining the girdle with him.

The games that Gawain has to play test his endurance, integrity, and adherence to the Chivalry’s code of conduct. At Camelot, he was tested for loyalty, bravery, and sincerity. At Bertilak’s castle, he has to prove his modesty, honesty, and gratitude to his host. The Lady tries to tempt him for physical intimacy but he somehow manages to get rid of her intentions. He succeeds in both. He fails, however, when it comes to saving his life, and he hides the green girdle from Bertilak. He again succeeds when he complete his journey to the Green Chapel that he has been true in his intentions.

The poet has played a mental game with the reader by engaging the reader in the story’s plot and hiding the cause of the story till the end. Bertilak proves to be the Green Knight at the end of the story. Further, all the games come up to have originated from the mind of Arthur’s sister. This shows the logically reverse narration of the events. The reader gets surprised at the end on disclosure of multiple unexpected endings. The reader assumes at the early stages that the story is going to be a kind of ghost story with a tragic ending. However, it turns out to be very optimistic and encouraging on revealing the favorable attitudes of the Green Knight and Arthur’s sister.

**Conclusion**

The poem is a representative of the Middle English literature and displays the poet’s knowledge of the particular civilization and the regional culture related to the setting of the poem. It is an account of a knight, named Sir Gawain, with the best qualities of that time who strives for the honor of his people. The poem reflects on the virtues of this gentleman, and identifies the inner weakness as well. He is tested for the moral fiber through games that has been designed by the King’s sister and played by the Green Knight and Sir Gawain. He proves himself true to bring honor to his country. The most important games are the beheading game and the exchange of winnings. The games are varied and linked together in their purpose and origin. The poet also plays a mental game with the reader.

References

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