

Barbarians and Chivalry: How Beowulf and Sir Gawain are similar characters chiefly because of shared overlapping Christian themes

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Beowulf, “the oldest of the great long poems in English”, (Nortan, 29) is based heavily on the historical context of its times and the Anglo-Saxon warrior culture. For those who are unfamiliar with the poem, the plot involves the incredibly heroic, brave, and powerful Beowulf, and his quest to rid his land of three terrifying monsters plaguing the lands of his people. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a poem both “highly sophisticated and well acquainted both with the international culture of the high Middle-Ages and with ancient traditions” is also a story heavily rooted in the historical context in which it takes place. *Sir Gawain*’s plot involves the eponymous hero volunteering for what’s known as a “Beheading Game”, in which a supernatural Knight clothed all in Green trades blows with him. Gawain is forced to find the Green Knight by next Christmas and allow his neck to be chopped off if he wishes to remain honorable. The next 90% of the poem is concerned not with mythic battles and dangerous sword fights, but with Gawain’s attempt to resist the seduction of a married woman in a castle that has offered him shelter. He eventually succumbs, although not to her seduction, but rather the temptation to cheat the Green Knight out of his death. Gawain confronts the Green Knight and has his trickery revealed, but the story ends happily as the whole contest was merely a test by Morgan La Fey to gauge the worthiness of King Arthur’s Knights.

The Hero with a Thousand Faces

In Joseph Campbell’s seminal work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he declared that many stories follow “a monomyth”, a story that featured a “Departure, where the hero leaves his comfortable and familiar world and ventures into the darkness of the unknown; Initiation, where the hero is subjected to a series of tests in which he must prove his character; and Return, in which the hero brings the boon of his quest back for the benefit of his people”¹. While both

¹ Uebelhor, Anthony. "The Hero with a Thousand Faces." *The Hero's Journey Defined*.

Beowulf and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* follow these general outlines, in one of the more specific rules that Campbell lays out, such as “The hero often times is of lowly birth, but may secretly have special powers or a high birthright he is unaware of”, the parallel is broken, as both Gawain and Beowulf are aware of their physical prowess and birthright. However, the two characters have a powerful self-knowledge that becomes a key point in their roles as Christ figures, as Jesus was definitely aware of his own birthright for one, and not merely the protagonist of a monomyth. Sir Gawain, although he introduces himself as being “the weakest... and of wit feeblest” (Line 354), does this only to stay true to the humility of courtly values, and in fact, this false humility will play a large role in the trials that Sir Gawain eventually faces. So too, is Beowulf keenly aware of his own skills in battle, as he introduces himself to one of Hrothgar’s guards with the powerful statement that only he “can show the wise Hrothgar a way/ to defeat his enemy and find respite... [he] can calm the turmoil and terror in his mind” (Lines 279-281). As to Beowulf’s birthright, he has no illusions about his lineage; rather, he knows that “[his] father was a famous man/ a noble warrior-lord named Ecgtheow” (262-263). In this way, Beowulf’s entrance in to his eponymous story is presented as merely a continuation of his life. He has already kept “sailors... safe, [as] the deep-sea raids [of the] sea-brutes [were] over for good” (568-569). He is already known to have “the strength of thirty/ in the grip of each hand” (380-381). Although a reader’s first glimpse of Beowulf comes from his quest to slay Grendel, it is clear that he had already proved himself a great warrior many times over. Sir Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is also aware of his birthright. He is “Arthur’s sister’s son”, and is well aware of it. In addition, regardless of Sir Gawain’s courtly humility, his ease at dispatching “serpents... savage wolves... wild men of the woods... bulls and with bears, and with boars besides/ and giants” (720-723), and most of all, his obvious reputation, finally shown to the reader when Lady Bertilak tells Sir Gawain “you are the noblest knight known in your time/ no household under heaven but has heard of your fame” (1520-1521). Although the reader was unaware of it, Sir Gawain is not a rookie knight; rather he is much more famous and well-regarded than the reader had known. In both poems, the protagonists are clearly aware of both their respective history, and their respective combative prowess. In this way, their stories revolve less around their discovery of their inner hero, a quality that Joseph Campbell requires for his monomyth, and more around their shared Christian undertones and their roles as imperfect Christ figures.

The central theme that connects the two stories is the Christian themes and imagery that pervades both the stories. Although Christian themes are believed to have been layered into the core story, (a story that was most likely told orally, and only later written down by a Christian scribe) the end result of the transmogrification of *Beowulf*'s themes to fit with Christian ideals allows for a smoother connection to the likewise pervasive Christian themes found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In addition, both heroes are extremely pious, giving thanks to God frequently, both before and after battle. Because of the era in which *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was written, (the late 14th century played host to quite a few religiously skewed events, such as John Wyclif's message of the importance of Christian belief and practice, as well as Jon Hus's beliefs in self-worship¹. Suffice to say, Christianity was incredibly wide-spread at the time of this poem's creation) Sir Gawain is "measured against a moral and Christian ideal of chivalry" (161). In *Beowulf*, the eponymous hero fights both Grendel and his mother, who are described in the text as being "grim demon[s]/ haunting the marshes... [of] Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed and condemned as outcasts" (103-106). The reference to Cain comes from the book of Genesis, wherein God tells Cain "you killed Abel and made his blood run out on the ground... From now on, you'll be without a home, and you'll spend the rest of your life wandering from place to place."² In *Beowulf*, God's cursing of Cain led to the springing of "ogres and elves and evil phantoms" (112). Beowulf, in a mix between Christian and Anglo-Saxon ideals, is accomplishing a fundamental Christian belief (the righteous destruction of Cain's brethren) with Anglo-Saxon means (a giant fight involving a sword). In addition, there are continuous references to the importance of God's blessings in order to defeat an enemy. Before Beowulf fights Grendel, the narrator mentions that "the Lord was weaving/ a victory on His war-loom for the Weather-Geats (beowulf's clan)" (696-697). Finally, Beowulf's death at the hands (or rather, claws) of a mighty dragon is packed with Christian imagery. His final blow, "a stabbing knife... stuck... deep within the dragon's flank" (2702-2704) is likely a reference to the Archangel Michael slaying the devil transformed into a dragon. Not to mention, the obvious

² United Bible Societies, Genesis 4.9-12

connection to Jesus Christ, seeing as how Beowulf dies to save his people, while Jesus died to redeem mankind. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is no less connected to Christian themes, in fact, because of the time period in which it was written, the poem is even more tied to the ideals of Christianity than *Beowulf*. Sir Gawain's quest comes chiefly as a result of his own false humility, when accepting the Green Knight's challenge. As the later examples of his own skill show, there is little doubt that Sir Gawain does not actually believe that the "loss of [his] life would be the least of any" (355), nor would he believe that "[his] body, but for [King Arthur's] blood, is barren of worth" (357). Rather, Sir Gawain is obeying the rules of courtly conduct, while maneuvering himself to receive the glory of beating the Green Knight. However, this false humility, deceit that goes against one of the founding tenets upon which the Christian faith is founded, is the exact impetus for Sir Gawain's trials.

The Humanizing Failure

Finally, as Sir Gawain confronts the Green Knight, whom, with his deception, and supernatural manipulative illusions effectively acts as a proxy for Satan, wherein Sir Gawain would be Jesus), the Green Knight tests Sir Gawain's purity. However, the metaphor ends there, as Sir Gawain proves to have not entirely been devoid of sin. His false modesty and bravado have led him to take the "magic girdle" that Lady Bertilak offered him in the hope that it would spare his life. But, this small act of cowardice and deceit is ultimately the redemption of Sir Gawain, as it reaffirms his overall humanity; proving this, Sir Gawain wears "the badge of false faith... for the cowardice and coveting that I came to there (Lord Bertilak's castle)... and I must bear it on my body till I breathe my last" (2506-2508). In this way, Sir Gawain achieves redemption, as he accepts his limitations, and ultimately, becomes truly humble as opposed to his more sinful beginnings. Thus, the story can be interpreted to be a metaphor of baptism, or even more accurately, the reaffirming of the true Christian faith, because Sir Gawain believes himself to be good (again, regardless of his opening speech), and it is only after his humiliation does he achieve true humility.

Most intrinsic to both characters, however, is their humanity. Despite the omnipresent Christian themes and symbols found in both texts, while Beowulf and Sir Gawain may sometimes seem like a metaphor for Jesus, they are intrinsically human characters. Beowulf, for all his herculean strength and lust for battle, perishes in his battle against the dragon; more importantly, because of his unending desire to “prove [himself] with a proud deed” (637), he never fathered an heir, and as a result, his lineage dies with him. Beowulf, for all his noble and commendable qualities, is ultimately unable to fulfill the most important task that a warrior can complete in that society: father an heir to continue the family lineage. This failure, perhaps even greater than his physical success over the monsters in *Beowulf*, prove him to be flawed and human. Sir Gawain too, fails at the end of his story; he was not able to go to his death a just and honorable man, and instead chose a deceitful life, rather than a righteous death. In addition, his failure is a complete failing of the Christian faith, as a true chivalric knight would gladly die and be allowed to enter the kingdom of heaven. Beowulf and Sir Gawain’s respective failures allow them to have a complete character arc, as opposed to merely being analogues for Christ. Because Beowulf and Sir Gawain are not perfect, their respective stories can reveal more about the mindset of their cultures, and their half comparisons to Christ allow for a more well rounded character.

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