

Justin Osborne

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Christian Morals in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Tempest*

There are many different morals and themes in the Middle English Arthurian romance of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the more modern play by William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*. While each story has nothing, dealing with the plot, in common, there are a few similarities between how each handles certain themes, namely forgiveness. Being as each poem was written in another period in time from the other, and the fact that there is only one source for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Gawain 201), it is sufficient to say that Shakespeare probably did not receive any literary ideas from it when writing *The Tempest*. Furthermore, *The Tempest* is not considered by most to be a Christian play, and strictly it isn't. It was written during a time when Christianity heavily influenced European society, however. On the other hand, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is considered to be a Christian poem, or it was at the least heavily influenced by Christianity. Some of the Christian symbolism is unclear in a first reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, while being exceptionally well hidden in *The Tempest*. The theme which dominates each text is that of forgiveness and the recourse thereof, this being the main Christian moral. While not being specific in the use of Christian concepts and ideas, each use extensive symbolism and allegory to derive the concepts and ideas of Christianity.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight's use of Christian morals is sometimes concealed. In *Modern Language Quarterly* in an article titled *Grace Versus Merit in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Larry S. Champion states that, "while *Gawain* is not [...] overtly didactic in tone, it is deeply imbued with Christian moral values and matters of contemporary Christian concern"

(413). Everything from the green girdle that Gawain accepts as a gift from the lady at the castle, to the axe that Gawain used to chop off the Green Knight's head and the Green Knight uses on Sir Gawain, to the different seasons of the poem have a hidden meaning that can open up extensive possibilities to the moral underlying of the poem. In the end, there is more to the story that the writer wants its readers to take from it than just the plot.

The main characters in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* can be thought of as allegorical. There are the literal characters and objects, but these can be taken a step further in what they can be interpreted to represent. Sir Gawain is a great knight, in many ways, he is like any ordinary person. Reasons to arrive at this conclusion is that he is obviously afraid of death, goes through many trials until he reaches Bertilak's castle, and is tempted by Bertilak's wife who tells him "my body will you welcome be" (Gawain line 1238).

The Green Knight could symbolize many things, such as "a demon of vegetation, the devil, Providence, God, the Anti-Christ, [and] death" (Champion 424). While it has been argued that the Green Knight could stand for any of these things, in the end it is he who brings Sir Gawain to the full realization of his failures. The Green Knight, has become arguably symbolic for being the Word of God (Schnyder qtd. in Champion 414). The Green Knight *shows* Sir Gawain his failure, whereas before he had not realized he had a point of failure, which is similar to how the Word of God points out sinful things in one's life. To further this point, Sir Gawain had to trust that even though he had failed, the Green Knight would pardon him (similar to how Christ forgave humanity) – and the Green Knight does this by first humbling Sir Gawain.

The Green Knight could also be symbolic for Christ, the forgiver:

Thou hast *confessed* thee so clean and acknowledged thine errors,
and hast the penance plain to see from the point of my blade,

that I hold thee *purged of that debt*, made as *pure and as clean*
 as hadst thou done *no ill deed since the day thou wert born*. (Gawain 2392-5; emphasis
 added)

Similar to how Christ forgave humanity, The Green Knight forgave Sir Gawain as though he did nothing wrong from the day he was born. Sir Gawain was cleansed “as pure and as clean” of the debt he was to pay simply because he had confessed his wrong to The Green Knight (Gawain 2394). From all appearances the Green Knight and Sir Gawain had not met each other prior to the year before the event at the Green Chapel, which would seem “the day thou wert born” (Gawain 2395).

The green girdle is elusive in what exactly it means symbolically to the story. It is ultimately the cause of Gawain’s downfall; however, how is it that this single item causes Gawain’s downfall? Sir Gawain clearly does not take the girdle for its monetary value because Bertilak’s wife offered Gawain a ring that he firmly refused, among also being told that the girdle was worth nothing monetarily as well; it is more on the value of his life that he takes it. David Hills states in *Gawain’s Fault in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, found in *Review of English Studies*, that in the time *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was written, loving oneself more than God was considered covetous, and thus one of the “seven deadly sins” (126). To further understand the meaning, Hills states:

There are thus in medieval theology two distinct uses of the word avarice (covetousness): in a special sense to denote love of riches, and in a general sense to denote any turning away from God’s love. (126)

Therefore, Sir Gawain put “worry about the things of this world” above his “trust in God’s providence” where it should have belonged (Hills 128). The reason Sir Gawain takes the green girdle is definitively because he does not want to risk losing his life:

The knight then took note, and thought now in his heart,

‘twould be a prize in that peril that was appointed him.

When he gained the Green Chapel to get there his sentence,

If by some sleight he were not slain, ‘twould be a sovereign device. (1256-9)

In addition, Gawain looks to this as something that can save him, when in times prior he had looked to the inside of his shield, which had an inscription of Christ’s mother, Mary, on it. Gawain thus places his trust in the green girdle instead of looking to God to be his protector. Hills believes that since “Gawain shows a sense of guilt”, that he is “coming as near as is humanly possible to the ideal of Christian knighthood” (131). Thus this sets the stage for what the poem is all about: “the basic teaching [...] is that man, in order to receive God’s grace, must grow selfless and resign himself to the will of his liege lord” (Champion 418). In the end Gawain realizes this, and he is humbled by it. Sir Gawain’s humility led to his repentance, in a similar way the characters in *The Tempest* had to learn humility in order to learn the art of repentance.

The Tempest is not considered a Christian play, although it was written in a time in European history, the Reformation, when Christianity heavily influenced daily life. Therefore, given the situation, there must be Christian morals, to some extent, that can be taken from it. Clearly, some are not as visible as others. Seeing a Christian symbolism link between the characters, in any way is, to a varying degree, difficult. The way Prospero treats Caliban, the purity that Prospero speaks of towards Miranda and Ferdinand, and the way Prospero forgives

his wrong-doers in the final act of the play seems to suggest that Shakespeare does portray Christian morals.

The Tempest, like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, has an interesting story line that is easy to follow, while providing an allegorical element with the characters. Richard Henze, in his article, *The Tempest: Rejection of a Vanity*, found in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, argues that three main characters, Prospero, Ariel, and Caliban, stand for the soul, spirit, and flesh respectively:

Caliban works as an allegorical figure representing the flesh that, without conjunction with spirit, can be filthy and malicious. Ariel represents spirit, that portion of man that is in likeness unto God. The third part of man, soul is represented by Prospero himself. As he, soul controls Caliban, flesh, and frees Ariel, spirit, he achieves the highest expression; he becomes kind, merciful, and wise. (335-336)

Though this interpretation of the text is somewhat liberal, it is valuable. For example, Caliban is, to some extent, a reflection of worldliness and evil. Throughout the play this fact is made known, especially when he laments of the reason for his slavery to Prospero:

Thou most lying slave,
Whom stripes may move, not kindness! I have used thee,
Filth as thou art, with humane care, and lodged thee
In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate
The honor of my child. (1.2.336-40)

Caliban essentially, as John Cox, author of the article *Recovering Something Christian about The Tempest* found in *Christianity & Literature*, says “symbolizes the bestial, the depraved, and the degenerate in human nature and in human society, elements that can only be controlled, because they are inherently destructive but that can never be expected to change, at least for the better”

(364). Furthermore, Caliban, as Prospero says, was mothered by a witch whose father was the devil. Ariel, of course *is* a spirit; though he as an entity in the play is more of a body that Prospero can use, and in a sense, play a god.

Prospero and Ariel can, to a large extent, be thought of as one being. In the play, Ariel wouldn't exist in the form that he does without Prospero, nor would Prospero be able to exist in the way he is. Ariel is more of the *action* to Prospero's *wants*, largely due in part to him being enslaved to Prospero for rescuing him. It is through Ariel that Prospero can become who he is, and the means by which he accomplishes his plan to the other characters of the play. Ariel, pushes Prospero to forgiveness of the ones who had wronged him, and also he also pushes Prospero to forgive Ariel's debt to him. Cox believes:

Prospero's forgiveness of his penitent enemies is undoubtedly an expression of the Christian story in *The Tempest*, and it is rendered even clearer and more striking by his forgiveness of Antonio, whom he knows to be unrepentant. (336)

Cox backs his belief up with the scripture found in Matthew 5:43 and 44 that instructs people to love their enemies, which Prospero did. Prospero's enemies turned to and asked for forgiveness, which lead Prospero towards forgiveness.

The Tempest and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, though different in genre, time period, and plot, feature Christian ideas about forgiveness; forgiveness is the central theme that allowed for the resolution of the problem. Had not Sir Gawain been forgiven, he would have died by the axe of the Green Knight, as he deserved death; in the same sense, Alonso and many of the others in *The Tempest* did not deserve to be forgiven, and in a true worldly sense, would have been condemned to some extent – whether by death or simply by imprisonment. In the same way, without forgiveness none would have had freedom. When Prospero tells Ariel, “Be

free, and fare thou well!” he forgives him of the debt he owed, and in the same way Alonzo and the others from the shipwreck are freed after Prospero extends his forgiveness to them (315). In the same way, Sir Gawain would have to show the freedom the Green Knight bestowed upon him when he spared his life.

Comparatively speaking, the fact that they both speak of some form of forgiveness, with Prospero forgiving his enemies and the Green Knight forgiving Gawain, shows that each share a universal position of forgiveness. Only when the main characters learn the art of true repentance can each story come to its conclusion. So while there is one specifically Christian romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *The Tempest* possibly influenced by Christianity, each provide a Christian moral example of the act of true repentance and forgiveness.

Works Cited

- Champion, Larry S. "Grace Versus Merit in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." Modern Language Quarterly 28 (1967): 413-425.
- Cox, John D. "Recovering Something Christian About The Tempest." Shakespearean Criticism 72 (2003): 363-371.
- Henze, Richard. "The Tempest: Rejection of a Vanity." Shakespearean Criticism 72 (2003): 334-342.
- Hills, David F. "Gawain's Fault in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." Review of English Studies: a Quarterly Journal of English Literature and the English Language 14 (1963): 124-131.
- "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." J.R.R. Tolkien, trans. The Longman Anthology of British Literature. Damrosch, David, and Kevin J. H. Dettmar, eds. New York: Pearson Longman, 2006. 202-258.
- "The Tempest." William Shakespeare. The Longman Anthology of British Literature. Damrosch, David, and Kevin J. H. Dettmar, eds. New York: Pearson Longman, 2006. 1347-1399.

Annotated Bibliography

Champion, Larry S. "Grace Versus Merit in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." Modern Language Quarterly 28 (1967): 413-425.

Larry S. Champion cites extensively from outside resources, helping justify his interpretation of the romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This article proves to be well written, while also expanding on the thoughts and ideas of others, while displaying an exuberant knowledge of the text. Champion explains, in detail, how each of the various characters stood for various symbolic characters within a Christian morality view. Also, as the title suggest, Champion explains how Sir Gawain found he needed God's grace to save him.

Cox, John D. "Recovering Something Christian About The Tempest." Shakespearean Criticism 72 (2003): 363-371.

John D. Cox writes a very interesting article on the Christian themes and morals found inside of *The Tempest*. This is a recent article, written in 2000, explaining how various different interpretations of the text can be presented and understood, while also providing an insightful view on the author's personal take. The author makes note of both the idealist and the materialist interpretations of *The Tempest*, which provides for a clearer understanding of the how the story can be related and how it has been taken apart by the two groups. The author also makes good note of the fact that over the years, as times have changed and current societies have changed, so has the interpretation; Cox tries to put things into perspective of the time in which it was written, while also providing perspective for how the play can relate to people today.

Henze, Richard. "The Tempest: Rejection of a Vanity." Shakespearean Criticism 72 (2003): 334-342.

Richard Henze's article on *The Tempest* provided an extremely useful understanding of what the three Characters, Caliban, Ariel, and Prospero may have stood for. The author cites many sources, one being the *Enchiridion*, a book that Henze says was widely known at the time the play was written. The citation he uses explains how certain elements were a part of man (soul, flesh, and spirit). While to a large extent these ideas appear to a bit of an open-minded interpretation of the play, there are key elements that are useful and help provide a better insight into the time period the play was written and the various inspirations and beliefs Shakespeare may have had while writing *The Tempest*.

Hills, David F. "Gawain's Fault in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." Review of English Studies: a Quarterly Journal of English Literature and the English Language 14 (1963): 124-131.

Author David F. Hills makes the case for what exactly Sir Gawain's fault is in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Hills goes into lengthy explanations about what various words and ideas of the particular time in history provided, such as what the word "covetousness" meant in Sir Gawain's time period. Also, Hills makes references to the other poems that were found alongside *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* that he believes further explains the meanings of Sir Gawain's tale.