

A Comparative Study of Structure and Theme in *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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This paper will discuss how the structure and theme develop and compare between the *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is generally considered as the finest of the English romances. The striking feature of this poem is its tight and organized structure, whereas most of the romances are loose in structure. This poem is composed of four fits containing traditional elements of romance: the Beheading Game; the Temptation and Hunting; the Exchange of Winnings; Returning. This process is linked together systematically, and as it goes on, certain external elements of romance come into view. There are heroic ideal, Christian humiliation and chastity, so the two themes or motifs are combined to produce a work of impressive organic unity.

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Beowulf is famous as the only Old English epic, but is the greatest of the surviving epics composed by the Germanic peoples. There are many pagan and Christian materials, because a Christian poet has put the old

Germanic legend into the epic form. The poem reflects a Christian tradition, especially the Old Testament; Grendel is described as a descendent of Cain, the story of the race of giants and their destruction by flood is described on the sword, etc.... The motif of this poem is the heroic ideal and christian love of neighbor. It is organized well with the alliterative tradition of Old English.

Frye said, "the structure is the theme"(77). That is, to identify the structure is to describe the theme. In studying the structure, I will adopt the mythological approach based on the theory of Frye:

What is called myth in literature, then, is not the study of a certain kind on aspect of literature, much less a patented critical methodology, but the study of the structural principles of literature itself, more particularly its conventions, its genres, and its archetypes or recurring images. (40)

I think, according to Frye's theory of nature-myth (Frye 429), that the inner structure of four parts in the *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* reflects the seasonal cycle of the year, and the organic cycle of human life. So I will describe these four parts referring to the myth, symbols and meaning. In *Beowulf*, the structure of the poem is paralleled with its long line between youth and age; Hrothgar's age, Beowulf's youth, Beowulf's age, Wiglaf's youth. The hero should be young in the one part and old in the other. The change in his age must be shown to change his ability to fight monsters, since these fights make the main plot (Sisam 115).

There are many parallels of structure between *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. There is an appearance of devil; Grendel and Green Knight and hero; Beowulf and Sir Gawain. Both Sir Gawain and Beowulf have the heroic and christian ideal to remove their devils in the first part. At first, they have more pagan heroic ideal than the christian

love of neighboring relationship. They should serve for the whole people; i.e. individual vs. group. Sir Gawain must undergo the severe stroke of Green Knight on behalf of the whole court, while Beowulf must fight with Grendel for the Danish people,

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Beheading Game happens on New Year's day in the first fit. According to Frye, this season is a 'mid-winter spring', and there is a birth of a hero in order to remove the devil (Frye 429). Here Sir Gawain strikes the Green Knight's head, which symbolizes the devil, or growth. But, the motif of the green man's decapitation may have originated in a vegetation myth in which the beheading would have been a ritual death that insured the return of spring to the earth and the regrowth of the corps (Frye 429).

In *Beowulf*, as I described, there is the co-existence of eternal salvation and earthly glory as the goals of human life, because Beowulf behaves wisely and bravely according to both codes; that is, the "judgment of the righteous" and earthly "praise, fame, glory" (Kaske 123). Beowulf is represented from beginning to end as the fighter with monsters in order to quest the Holy Grail which means these codes. In poems, it is appeared as the dragon's "precious drinking vessel". The golden cup is beautiful and symbolized all the satisfactions the world can offer to every man.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain becomes protagonist and the Green Knight an antagonist. The characterization of Gawain and the Green Knight is the main pole of the story. Eagan proposes color symbolism: "Green is the color of preternatural being, hope and life. There is little doubt that the Green Knight hints to Gawain that he can hope for success in the quest and save his life" (68). I think this theory emphasizes only his symbolic meaning toward Gawain's duty of Knight. There is at the first point of a hero's quest for the Holy Grail, which means the chivalry and courtly love, but after all, processes toward the

Christian chastity. There are many sieges and combats and tournaments in the quest-process, though their meanings have become allegorized into the spiritual conflicts of the soul against temptation and evil. Externally, the Green Knight is described as a man of physical power and supernatural being. He makes a challenge with Gawain and is pleased that Gawain is his opponent; "By God", the Green Knight cried, "Sir Gawain, I am glad. / That it shall de a blow of yours my bare neck shall bear" (391-2). But Gawain as a representative Knight of the Round Table, who wears the pentangle of his shield, and is tested by the temptations of the lady in Part 2 and Part 3.

II

In the second part of both works, I can say there is a summer and a triumph phase. Beowulf removes Grendel and her son, and Gawain receives temptations from the hostess of the Green Castle. But he denies all temptation except her girdle, which is related to the strokes of Green Knight. I will discuss about this defeat of Gawain at the last part of this paper.

In the Temptation and Hunting scenes, Gawain wears tarnished armor decorated with gold, silk, and fur. All these ornaments are polished to perfection is a pentangle on his shield. But several different kinds of perfections are explained in the Catholic Encyclopedia: absolute and substantial perfection, and relative and accidental perfection (123). The former means religious perfection, and the latter applies to worldly perfection which can be achieved after making a mistake and compensation for it. From these definitions, when Gawain is called a perfect knight, perfection is limited to the realm of the world, though he tries to expand to religious perfection. I can find the proofs of perfection in the description of the pentangle on his shield:

And first, he was faultless in his five senses,
Nor found ever to fail in his five fingers,
And all his fealty was fixed upon the five wounds
That Christ got on the cross, as the creed tells;
And wherever this man in melee took part,
His one thought was of this, past all things else,
That all his force was founded on the five joys
That the high Queen of heaven had in her child.

(*Norton Anthology* ll. 640-7)

Thus Gawain represents both the temporal and the spiritual ideal virtues: frankness, love of his fellowmen, cleanness, courtesy, pity or piety. He becomes not only the representative of English chivalry, but also of Christian soldiery. His shield symbolizes this integrity. When he is tested by the temptress, the complete set of his religious and natural virtues are tested. This definition of his perfection is reinforced on the day when he starts his journey toward the Green Chapel.

Gawain meets the two tests in the following parts of the story: one is the temptation of the lady, the other is the return blows from the supernatural Green Knight. There are the supernatural confrontations and physical hardness:

Many a cliff must he climb in country wild;
Far off from all his friends, forlorn must he ride;
At each strand or stream where the stalwart passed
'Twere a marvel if he met not some monstrous foe,

(*N.A.* ll. 713-6)

But Gawain's real difficulty lies in his isolation. According to the Frye's nature-myth, this scene is an autumn, and there are myths of the isolation (Frye 429). The more crucial test is not the physical confrontation of the Green Knight, but the temptations of the lady who

pricks his inner world, because fame or reputation is the first concern of Gawain. Thus, the temptation test is not only the chastity test, nor the courtesy test.

As I have mentioned before, the five points of the pentangle are inseparable, which is called a sign set by Solomon as a token of truth. Solomon is a figure of Christ, the exemplar of wisdom and kingship, of power over demons (Green 186). This explanation of Gawain's pentangle reminds us that he is a chivalric hero as well as a christian soldier. Further, I find that the entire form of the temptation scenes is very similar to that of Christ in the desert. The numbers of the temptations are three both in the case of Jesus and Gawain. The method of enticing of the devil is that of the lady. But Jesus and Gawain evade the temptations also depending on scripture and on Courtesy.

While seducing Gawain, the lady makes it clear that courtesy is Gawain's main reputation as a knight. It is the courtesy test. Though he resists the lady's two temptation, he accepts the green girdle as a means of arbitration in his crucial dilemma. It is clear that his dilemma is only between courtesy and chastity, because the green girdle is the love token. Therefore, he fails to transform the symbolic virtue into the substantial virtue. He is no longer a perfect knight described in Part I and Part II. He breaks frankness, fellowship, and implicitly chastity by being a lady's man.

III

In *Beowulf*, a young Beowulf becomes old, and there is a sunset of his young and stout life. Though he reigns the common people, he feels his isolation. He receives a traitor of a fire dragon, but he removes it with the aid of his kinsman, Wiglaf. There is some sort of conscious analogy between Beowulf and Christ in certain respects. Beowulf is a descendent

of Cain and a knight of righteousness who fights with the monsters which are symbols of evil. Further, he is the savior of common people in spite of sacrificing his life fighting with the dragon in order to defend his people. He reminds us of the Christ who became the sacrifice of the Cross to pardon the sin of people. This shows to me that those two poems are originated with original myth as a hero or god; i.e. the theory of a mono-myth. Especially, N. Frye emphasizes the journey or quest-myth as primary significance (Grebstein 316).

The Beheading game in Part IV of the *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a symbolic reflection of the Temptation. The green knight specially tells him what he in fact received from his axe is directly related to his two successes and his one failure in the three day's temptation:

A second feint, sir, I assigned for the morning
You kissed my comely wife—each kiss you restored.
For both of these there behooved but two feigned blows by right.
True men pay what they owe;
No danger then in sight.
You failed at the third throw,
So take my tap, sir knight.

(N.A. ll. 2350-7)

Eventually, the shield symbolizes his virtue and victory, and the girdle, his failure. So that Gawain falls in the Temptation is limited to his failure in the Beheading game. I think his defect is the same sin as the original sin.

Therefore, it needs for Sir Gawain to have penance. At the first blow, Gawain is timid, so he flinches. He is passive and meek under the Green Knight's axe just as he is meek and evasive on the first day of the Temptation. At the second stroke, he receives his stability. The Green Knight nicks the skin of Gawain's neck on the third stroke. This scene

is the winter-scene, which means the dissolution phase and myths of the defect of the hero (Frye 429). Beowulf dies from the fight with the fire dragon.

Finally, Sir Gawain proclaims that he will wear the girdle throughout his life as a symbol of shame. Though the wound on his neck is healed, the fact that he receives the nick remains:

“Behold, sir,” said he, and handles the belt,
 “This is the blazon of the blemish that I bear on my neck;
 This is the sign of sore loss that I have suffered there
 For the cowardice and coveting that I came to there;
 This is the badge of false faith that I was found in there,
 And I must bear it on my body till I breathe my last.

(N.A. 2505-10)

Gawain regards himself as an unpardonable sinner, while the Green Knight absolves Gawain's sin as if he were a priest. Through this scene, he wins the absolute spiritual perfection. He is the knight of the pentangle which demands worldly chivalric as well as spiritual christian virtue. Also he is a man seeking perfection as much as a human being can. He is the representative of aspiration of heroic ideal and christian chastity in the limits of the earthly world.

In *Beowulf*, according to Father McNamee's article "Beowulf—An Allegory of Salvation?", Beowulf's three major combats allegorize various aspects of the Redemption: the fight with Grendel reflects the essential story of salvation; the descent to the mere echoes the regenerative symbolism of baptism, as well as Harrowing of Hell; the fight with the dragon allegories the death of the savior (Kaske 120).

As he is dying he regrets that he has no son and heir; he gives his personal possessions to Wiglaf; to whom he uses the affectionate form of address "beloved Wiglaf". So the young Wiglaf becomes the descendent of

the Old Beowulf, which shows the cycle of life to us. That is, Beowulf has defeated physically, he has achieved immortality of his heroic ideal through poetry.

Finally, Sir Gawain and Beowulf becomes a quest-myth hero and the perfect knight through many dangerous adventure. And these two poems have the good organic structure and theme according to the phase of this adventure. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Beowulf* is the most splendid and representative epic and romance in English Literature.

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