



Ecocriticism and the Representation of the Natural World in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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Abstract: Ecocriticism can be considered as the analysis of literary works from an environmental perspective. Its main concern is the representation of nature, animals, plants and human characters in their interaction, reciprocity and intercommunication. The intercourse between nature and men can be challenging, problematic and demanding but also enriching and civilising. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a Middle English romance on chivalry which is analysed in this article from an ecocritical point of view. Its representation of nature and of the relationship between nature and humankind is widely discussed with emphasis on the literary devices used by the poet.

Keywords: *Sir Gawain, Green Knight, nature, environment, ecocriticism*

1. INTRODUCTION

The subject of the natural world has been widely represented in literature since the relationship between humans and nature has been the interest of many writers, poets, playwrights or novelists. In literature, nature and environment have been depicted in different ways: descriptions of landscapes and vegetation, accounts of weather phenomena and tales of animals but an important topic to be evaluated is the interaction of these natural elements with humans. The study of literature in relation to environmental issues is called Ecocriticism (Garrard, 2007-8) and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, from now on mentioned as SGGK, is an example of literary work that examines the relationship between men and nature. In this paper, the literary devices used by the Gawain-poet to represent the natural world in its interaction with human beings are extensively discussed to support the relevance of environmental writing in English literature.

2. THE REPRESENTATION OF NATURE IN SGGK

An eco-critical analysis of SGGK, (George, 2010) significant insights into the representation of nature are provided along with a discussion of the studies of a scholar, John Speirs. For this author, (Speirs, 1949) the character of the Green Knight is a major symbol of nature since the colour of his clothes, its physical appearance and his horse are all extensively described as of bright green and shining gold in the first part or fit of the poem, precisely in lines 135-220. As a matter of fact, the Knight is depicted in all his splendour, appearing as a strong, beautiful, glittering, enormous figure who determines a reaction of wonder and astonishment in all the participants to the banquet. Moreover, the 'green' character also represents the violent, cruel and challenging aspects of the natural world in contrast to those, the humans, who were enjoying the pleasures of the table and of a warm and comfortable place, apparently unconcerned about the outer world. The contrast between nature and men is explained by M.W. George as an opposition between two cultures which are referred as non-human versus human and wild versus habitation/civilization. Similarly, in the scene of the beheading, described in lines 417-443, the character of Sir Gawain is opposed to that of the Green Knight. The Gawain-poet is describing in this passage a scene in which nature is subordinated to the intervention of a man, like in the cutting down of a big tree but, notwithstanding, it survives and continues to be a challenge for humans.

In the second part of SGGK there are other representations of nature that deserve to be discussed. A lecturer from the University of Suceava in Romania (Popescu, 2014) analyses the changes between the seasons that are accurately illustrated in lines 500-533. The emphasis is on the use of imagery

device to represent the fleetingness and fugacity of human life in contrast to the natural world which is fertile, productive and able to overgrow when not appropriately cultivated or domesticated. The description of the natural sequence of seasons from winter to winter is of remarkable beauty and outlines the cyclical and temporal aspects of nature as well as representing the different elements of the environment such as greenery, flowers, bushes, woods, birds, sun, clouds and rain. In addition, the entire scene elicits positive emotions in the reader in contrast to the previous stanzas in which the encounter with nature is rather frightening. In the second fit, from lines 701 to 712, the Gawain-poet describes the wandering of Sir Gawain as an intruder in the land of Wirral, a deserted place where the few inhabitants are depicted as unloving people who live in "...*The Wilderness*". In this stanza, the contrast between the wild natural world and human civilization is represented again, thus confirming the dual or binary opposition mentioned above.

There are other interesting representations of the natural world in the third part of SGGK which are the hunting scenes. The chase and killing of the female deers, the long pursuit and slaughter of the wild boar and the hunting of the fox, are the relevant scenes described in the following passages: lines 1150-1173 and 1319-1365, lines 1421-1467 and 1561-1619, and then lines 1690-1728 and 1893-1921. In the analysis of SGGK, (George, 2010), there are interesting comments about these scenes. First, the deer hunt should be considered not simply as men's control nature but rather as an attentive way of managing the environment. In fact, the deer are the only ones who are chased and killed since the idea of the lord, Bertilak, is that of preserving the species by letting the male deer survive. Such a representation is clearly in contrast with how Gawain interacted with nature in the previous parts of the poem in which indifference is shown towards the environment and such a closeness to animals is not described. The relationship between human and nature is expressed even more in the other two hunting scenes. The boar and the fox are not merely considered as preys hunted for fun or food but are rather depicted as having human qualities and, thus, they are personified and become real characters of the story. As a matter of fact, the boar is old, wild and has a personal story while the fox is smart, has a soul and even a name, "*Sir Reynard*" as shown in line 1916. The literary device used here, personification, makes these animals more similar to men, therefore encouraging a reflection on the ethological differences between the two parts.

The last fit is about the journey of Sir Gawain to the Green chapel. In the first lines of the text, 1998-2005 and then 2077-2088, the description of winter recurs apparently to remind the difficulties the knight will face when approaching the natural world for a second time. The wind blows cold and strong and there are mist and snow as well as a recurring image of desolation which can be compared to how Sir Gawain is represented. The armour is not splendid and powerful as in the previous journey but less glittering, likely resembling a man who is less courageous and more fearful. In fact, the knight is wearing the green girdle, the gift accepted by the lady who tempted him in the third fit, as a sign of weakness, repentance and animal instinct but also expression of the colours of nature. All these aspects undoubtedly reinforce the contrasting images of man and nature in this part of the poem. Interesting at this point is the analysis of SGGK given by Speirs in which he states that the green chapel is to be considered as a sacred and holy place even though it is depicted as a cave, a term likely used here to underline the animal aspect of nature. The sacredness of the place is connected to its representation as an entrance to the underworld that is identified as a source of life. Such a consideration is in contrast with the first impression of Sir Gawain, as shown in lines 2180-2195 in which the cave resembles a devilish place where satanic rites are performed. The description that follows in the text of the meeting between Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a further representation of the binary opposition between nature and man, human and non-human. The encounter is not so dramatic or fatal: Sir Gawain is evidently put to the test but his life is spared. Nature is clement and indulgent towards the knight, as shown in lines 2322-2330, to such a point that the two characters reach an agreement in which tensions between opponents lessen and a final reconciliation is achieved. In the end, the Green Knight, or Nature, does not appear as a brutal character.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning the analysis of another scholar (Woods, 2002) who in his article on the "*Inner Man*" points out more relevant aspects of the poem. He states that the natural world can help the comprehension of the true nature of humans since SGGK explores the inner realities of the main characters in contrast to external appearances. As a matter of fact, there is an interesting comparison between the outer world, represented by the environment, the animals and the same

Green Knight, and the inner world, with reference to Sir Gawain's feelings and instincts and his personal experiences. A clear-cut separation between these two worlds is not possible since subjective aspects and exteriority coexist in the same person, thus confirming the assumption that the nature of men is to live in harmony with themselves and, even more, with the environment. In addition, nature has always existed before men and is part of the human experience while men cannot deny their proximity with the natural world. The affinities and similarities between humans and non-humans are widely represented by the Gawain-poet and, as Woods states, it is very important to consider that the character of Sir Gawain is represented in its real nature, that of a man made of intellect, thoughts and rationality along with a sensual, instinctual part which consists of emotions, impulses and desires.

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