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Human Psychology in “The Knight’s Tale” and “Gawain and the Green Knight”

When thinking about the medieval times, our thoughts are full of images of knights in gold armor on adventures, fighting to the death for love, sacrificing themselves for the king, and riding through fields on horseback with perfect courage and honor. This code of behavior is something we are aware of through history, literature and art. This was a very real behavior in the medieval times but it is also depicted to an extreme in the literature produced. Looking back, we are very aware of the chivalric romance, honor, adventure, and courage that takes the up most priority of those living in this time. The literature from the medieval times includes just these qualities in the characters in most, if not all, works. It is important to look deeper at the characters in order to understand why this code of behavior is held so high in people’s, or most importantly knight’s, lives. Two works in particular are important to look at when it comes to human psychology tied to this chivalric code of honor. Both “Gawain and The Green Knight” and Chaucer’s “The Knight Tale” from his “Canterbury Tales” will be the focus of analysis of the mind and drive that these knights carry with them. This behavior is not natural by any means, so how did they become the way they are? Their minds are tortured by this code of behavior ending them sometimes with honor, or other times, a tragic end. Through “The Knight’s Tale” and “Gawain and the Green Knight” we are getting two sides of knighthood; the chivalric love side and the honor and code of perfection on the other. In “The Knight’s Tale” we are able to view human psychology through the characters of Arcite and Palamon and their psychological struggle between will and intellect when it comes to chivalric love. In “Gawain and The Green Knight”, human psychology is evident through certain symbols that represent the

inner psychology of Gawain as well as King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table and their obsessive need for perfection.

The Canterbury tales is Chaucer's collection of different tales told by people on a pilgrimage to Canterbury during the medieval times. The tales are second hand and re-told by the narrator who was on the pilgrimage and listening to this story telling contest. The tales go deep into the inner psyche of those on this religious path to Canterbury and the tale teller's stories reflect a lot about them and their character. "The Knight's Tale" is significant to analyze because of his title and the meaning behind it. His tale of two knights in battle for love is significant because they are not portraying the image of how an honorable knight should be when it comes to brotherly knighthood, but are when it comes to chivalrous love. Chaucer wrote these tales to give a variety of views on the different types of people living in the medieval times from Franklins, Millers, Nuns, Cooks, Physicians and more. The tales give us the opportunity to understand medieval society and how it was not just full of knights, maidens in distress or peasants. For our means, together with "Gawain and the Green Knight", Chaucer's "Knights Tale" will help us to understand the human psychology behind knights in particular. The two knights, Arcite and Palamon, make choices based on either intellect or emotion in this tale. This psychological struggle between the mind and the heart is the focus of the tale and we are able to decide for ourselves whose was the "rightly ordered love"(Roney 877). Louis Roney's article, "Chaucer's Knight's Tale and Theories of Scholastic Psychology" touches on three acts of the mind; apprehension, judgment, and inference (Roney 878). These three acts are what drive both Arcite and Palamon throughout the tale in their difficult decision-making. In The Knight's Tale, the psychology behind Arcite is focused on intellect and Palamon's reflect a side of Knighthood that is focused on chivalric love.

The intellect side of the story, Arcite, is given a choice to either stay in prison where he can see Emelye everyday but still be locked up or be banished from Athens but free at the same time and not see his love. It is decided that he will be freed and banished where he will no longer see his love, which is why he represents the intellect view in this situation. When it comes to chivalric love, using intellect when making decisions about love is un-knightly and does not follow the code of courtly love. Arcite's judgement by the duke represents inference because of the logical decision to be freed from prison. Even though he has his freedom, he is miserable being away from his love. His lovesickness causes him to dream that he should return to Athens. In his mind, his banishment and rebellious return is chivalric together with courageous when put to fight with Palamon. Palamon's Judgement represents apprehension because he is pleased to stay in prison due to his deep desire and love for Emelye. He does not think about the consequences that come with staying in jail and gives up his freedom. After a while, he begins to think that Arcite will come back and take Emelye by force. Being that he is locked up in jail, he would not be able to stop him. On the surface, Palamon seems to deserve her love because he stayed locked up for love. On the other hand though, if he were set free, he would have the opportunity to courageously break back into Athens in a knightly way and get his love for himself. He is helpless in jail. When he decides to escape and runs into Arcite, their fight for who deserves Emelye occurs. Before the battle, Palamon prays to Venus, the goddess of love, asking to be murdered if he does not get to marry Emelye. His prayer to Venus is significant because it matches perfectly with his emotional and psyche.

It is extremely difficult to judge who deserves Emelye at this point. It is important to analyze the psyche of each. According to the article, "The Medieval Theory of Inner Senses" by Kemp and Fletcher, there are two components to the mind during the Middle Ages, universal

knowledge and particular knowledge. "In The Knight's Tale", Arcite would represent universal knowledge and Palamon particular knowledge. The judgment act of the mind, mentioned previously, is represented by Theseus and the Duke Perotheus who allow Arcite to go free and keep Palamon in jail. They represent the part of the mind that we cannot control, just like the prisoners have no control whether they are forced to take on the apprehension act of the mind or the inference. These three acts of the mind are parts of human psychology that we cannot control and they are represented by certain characters that form "The Knight's Tale". More importantly though, the gods in the tale such as Venus, Mars and Pluto represent the real judgment when answering Arcite, Palamon and Emelye's prayers based off of what their psyche reflects. Palamon's prayer to the goddess of love tells us that his mind is fully in his heart where Arcite's prayer to Mars tells us that he is more focused on winning. When Emelye prays that she wants to marry the man who wants her most, Palamon is the clear choice and all prayers are answered. Arcite's death and Palamon's fulfilled love was decided by their inner psychology from the very beginning. Analyzing this tale on a closer scale, I came to see Chaucer as using this tale in order to send the message that no matter what, our mind and inner psychology and senses are uncontrollable and take our life where it is meant and supposed to go. Sometimes our judgment is not always correct but it is driven by our own individual psyche and mind when we make choices. The prisoners had no choice where their fate led them, but each of their situations represented a type of human psychology, whether it is focused on universal knowledge and intellect or particular knowledge and emotion. At the end of The Knight's Tale, Palamon and Arcite fight for Emelye's hand in marriage where Palamon rightly wins due to his never ending chivalric love.

Chivalric love is one characteristic when it comes to knights of the medieval times, but another is the obsession with perfection. In *Gawain and the Green Knight*, we have King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. Arthur and his knights are known for their upmost honor and perfection when it comes to everything about them especially fearlessness and courage. When reading about King Arthur, on the surface he seems like a standup king who has an honorable group of knights. In reality though after taking a closer look at his inner psychology based on his needs and behaviors, Arthur is actually childish and insecure. He is always doing something to make sure he knows his knights are the best and becomes restless easily, always needing reaffirmation. His façade of a great and brave king hides his insecurities. One game used for reaffirmation is exemplified in the poem “*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” where we have access to the inner psychology of Arthur, his knights, and most importantly, Gawain himself. There are three important symbols in the poem that represent the human psychology in *Gawain and Arthur’s Round Table* which include the pentangle, Gawain’s gold armor and the green girdle. Each of these symbols provides us with a deeper knowledge of the psychology of our characters as well as medieval knighthood as a whole. According to the article “*Sin, Psychology and the Structure of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”*”, Gawain’s human psychology is found through the three tests based off of courage, soundness of mind and chastity. These tests “suggest man’s confrontation with mortality, ignorance of mind, and concupiscence of the flesh- the three punishments imposed on mankind for the sin of Adam”(Blenkner 357). These three things are tested and supported by the symbols of gold armor, the pentangle and the green girdle to come to the conclusion that Gawain is not perfect but is human and suffers all that goes along with the nature of the human mind.

At the beginning of the poem, the Green Knight enters King Arthur's Camelot requesting a brave knight to participate in his game in order to test the court's reputation of virtue and courage. The Green Knight says whoever participates in this game is able to strike him on the spot and in one-year time, he will return the blow. For this beheading game, it is Gawain who stands up for the quest in place of the king representing perfect knighthood and bravery. This is where Gawain's test of courage and "wound of mortality" takes place. He strikes the Green Knight cutting his head off. The Green Knight picks up his head, places it back on, and carries on out of Camelot making sure Gawain knows he is to receive the same blow in a year following. Gawain is given golden armor with the important symbol of a pentangle on it. This pentangle represents absolute perfection. At this point, Gawain is still prideful in himself and thinks he has done a noble thing but he does not realize that it was the Green Knight's goal to do the exact opposite; to take away his and Arthur's pride. Gawain dresses himself in gold armor to go out for his quest, which is not necessary because all he is doing is getting a blow to the neck. Why does he need the gold armor? Gawain is the one who chose his fate because when he decided to strike the Green Knight, it was his choice to aim for the neck. Gawain could have struck him anywhere else that would not have been a fatal blow, but his inner psychology and knighthood told him to take the extreme and aim for the head. On the spot, Gawain was not thinking clearly and didn't understand the consequences of his decision. He forgets that he is mortal and cannot just pick up his head like The Green Knight did. This shows his unintelligence, which therefore represents Arthur's court as such. The gold armor is a significant symbol because it shows the outer vanity of medieval knighthood which conceals the insecure flaws beneath it. This armor doesn't even protect him from the winter weather making him vulnerable. The gold armor does nothing but further provide proof that Arthur is in need for

this Round Table to look perfect and be perfect. Wearing this golden armor diminishes Gawain's courage because it is completely unnecessary for the situation at hand. His mind is too focused on the image of perfection rather than the task that is to be done, which is to receive a blow to the neck.

The pentangle as a symbol of perfection is significant because it represents what the ideal chivalric knight or medieval individual should be. What the Knights of Arthur's court don't understand is that perfection cannot be reached no matter how hard they try. According to the article, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection", "The chivalric ideal, however modified and tarnished by practice and human imperfection, was the imitation of Christ, the effort to realize in the individual and in society the perfection to which human nature aided by grace could aspire"(Green 122). When Gawain arrives finally to receive his blow to the neck, he flinches as the axe is about to fall upon him. This slight movement was an outrage to the Green Knight because it went against all that Arthur's court stands for. Gawain should have stayed still with courage, but his basic human instinct made him quiver at the blow. Here the Green Knight proves Gawain's imperfection, removing a part of the pentangle making it imperfect. When the pentangle is made no longer perfect, the symbol now reflects true humanity. The pentangle is a "sign or token of inner virtue"(Green 132). The poet takes the pentangle as a magical symbol and transforms it "into an emblem of perfection to achieve the simultaneous suggestion of greatness and potential failure"(Green 132). According to Green's article, the symbol of the pentagon is supposed to stand for the five human senses that are supposed to be used to serve God (Green 133). As Christian as Gawain appears to be, he falls short in many occasions, which is natural. When we think about Gawain as a sort of Christ figure, the pentangle then would be

hi crown of thorns. Gawain's mental state though is still engrained in how he is supposed to be perfect but human psychology and human nature does not allow perfection.

Evidence of Gawain's real psychological struggle occurs when he is staying at the host's, later realized the Green Knight's, castle. The series of games the host plays with Gawain, called the exchange game, occurs over the days he stays in the castle just before he is about to meet the Green Knight for his blow. This is where Gawain's mind is "wounded by ignorance" and his chastity and concupiscence is challenged (Blenkner 361). The host went out to hunt three times and told Gawain that he would exchange what he hunted for whatever he received while he was gone. Every time the host went out, his wife would sneak in to Gawain's bedchambers and tempt him for a kiss. His honorable and Christian knighthood guided him to resist the temptation but by the last night, he fell to his human instincts and gave into the host's wife. The first two nights, he receives kisses from the host's wife and in exchange gives them back to the host. On the third night, Gawain accepts the green girdle that the wife says will protect him from death. Here his knightly psychology leaves him entirely when he accepts it. As an honorable knight, he is supposed to courageously face his blow, but instead he is cowardly and wears the girdle for protection. His five senses are tempted by the host's wife, which breaks the perfection of his pentangle. In place of his pentangle, he is forced to wear the green girdle to remember his cowardice that took place during the exchange game with the Green Knight. This green girdle is not only a symbol for Gawain but also for Arthur and his knights.

In "Gawain and the Green Knight", we see human psychology in vanity of the gold armor, obsession with perfection in the pentangle and natural human fear in the green girdle. Arthur's court and the middle age's mentality at the time about chivalry, bravery and perfect knighthood cause a mental struggle between being a human and attempting to be god-like. After

closer analysis of the poem, the poet uses The Green Knight's game as a way to send the message that just like Christ wasn't perfect, neither is Gawain. Arthur's Round Table focuses on this supernatural perfection they are supposed to achieve. With the other themes of courage, sound of mind, and chastity, we can tie the symbols in together with them to understand the human psychology behind what the poet of "Gawain and The Green Knight" was trying to say. We see human psychology in "The Knight's Tale" through the apprehension, inference and judgmental acts of the mind. Their struggle between emotion and intellect when it comes to chivalrous love takes over their lives and those judging them decide their fate. The literature from medieval times has many hidden meanings and symbols behind human psychology. The medieval knight's code of chivalry is one that is hard to follow being that it goes against human nature. The mind tells them to act one way while their society tells them to act another way. This psychological struggle is represented in different ways in both "The Knight's Tale" and "Gawain and the Green Knight" where we can see the basic humanity shine through the chivalric codes of honor and love.

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