“Heroic Struggle”: A Medieval and Modern Dilemma

WILLIAM A. PARIS

ABSTRACT: In the medieval tale of Sir Gawain and The Green Knight there is a portrait of an archetypal hero who succumbs to the pressures of living up to his reputation by resorting to behavior which compromises the code of ethics of knighthood. The lives of contemporary men and women are much more complex by comparison, though not always quite so dramatic. The pressures we face on a daily basis are cumulatively greater. Choices we make may be determined by our need to filter the realities of our world through a “characterological lie” which we have fashioned in ourselves as a way of protecting a vulnerable psyche from the truths of existence. Events in this fourteenth-century narrative are reexamined in the light of Dr. Ernest Becker's The Denial of Death, which strongly implicates the confrontation between the individual and the environment.

Medieval epics consisting of tales rife with fantastic elements which can not be subject to literal interpretations are didactic narratives intended to provide instruction and information as well as pleasure and entertainment. However, the symbolic content of literature is not always perceived on a conscious level—such stories may have appeal or ring true for the readers or listeners even though they do not know why. This does not presuppose that even the writer is significantly aware of all symbolic contents of his or her narrative; for much of the meaning in our lives has been relegated to the subconscious and does not acquire significance until seen from an objective point of view. Often the objectivity necessary for such insight can only be provided by a close friend, a counselor, a psychotherapist, or the narrator of a story.

The tale of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight comes down to us in Middle English narrative verse, written by an as yet unknown author about the year
It begins with a New Year celebration dinner in the court of King Arthur. The dinner is interrupted by the appearance of a gigantic green man who challenges the court at large to a contest in which he offers to allow whoever takes up the challenge the opportunity to strike the first blow with the Green Knight's own weapon. The knight will then be permitted to counter in like fashion. Gawain comes forward to accept the challenge and promptly lops off the giant's head with the battle-axe. The Green Knight, however, strides forth to reclaim his severed head and announces that Gawain must seek him out to receive his due exactly one year hence.

The next 11 months pass uneventfully; but by November first, it is time for Gawain to take his leave for parts unknown. In preparation for his journey, Gawain attends a mass said in his honor, and his confession is heard by the court priest. His journey takes him beyond familiar territory to a land of rugged terrain, foul weather, and threatening beasts. After what seems like an interminable trek, the traveler is lost, hungry, and despairing. He turns to his guiding light for help: an image of the Virgin Mary adorns the inside of his shield, the obverse side of which bears the design of the pentacle (the five-sided symbol of perfection and fidelity). With the Virgin's image before him, he prays for deliverance. The moment he completes the sign of the cross at the close of his prayer, he becomes aware of a castle in the distance in which he will find sustenance and shelter from the harsh elements of this forbidding realm.

The lord of the castle, one Bertilak the Bod, offers Sir Gawain every creature comfort he could ask for—and then some. In return, Bertilak asks only for the wayward knight's cooperation in a game that they will engage in over the following three days. And on the morning of the fourth day, which will be New Year's Day, he will be shown the route to the Chapel of the Green Knight but a short distance away.

The proposed game revolves around an exchange of winnings, in which Bertilak will spend each day hunting and return the fruits of the hunt to his guest. Gawain may spend his time as he likes in the castle in the company of Bertilak's wife and other inhabitants. And at the close of the day, he must return to Bertilak all that he has gained in that time.

On the first evening Bertilak returns from the hunt with a great number of deer, all of which are presented to his guest, whereupon Gawain gives him a kiss. At the close of the second day the hunter returns with a mighty wild boar, in exchange for which Sir Gawain presents him with two kisses. When asked how he came by these fine gifts, Gawain responds that he will not tell because that was not a condition of the bargain. (The kisses were bestowed by Bertilak's wife as she sought to seduce the young handsome knight in his bedchamber.) While the lord of the castle is off in the woods, Gawain respectfully wards off the woman's advances as best he can by cleverly misconstruing her amorous talk with his own witty repartee. This wordplay eventually exasperates the lady, so that by the third evening she is openly wooing him