Logan Wheeler

HUM 211 10:30

John Muenzberg

1 May 2011

Sir Gawain: Knight in Shining Armor?

“It’s a bird! It’s a plane! No! It’s Superman!” Figures such as Superman and other fictional characters have been glamorized as what we like to call “superheroes.” Firefighters, policemen, and soldiers have been made known as our “everyday heroes.” But what really gives someone the title of “hero?” Does it require courage, bravery, honor, humility, and determination? Absolutely. Does it require fearlessness? No. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* presents a situation where Sir Gawain is put a series of challenges in which he must respond heroically or cowardly. With chivalrous intent and the strength of perseverance, Sir Gawain combats these challenges heroically in order to defend the name of himself, but of his king, King Arthur. No matter the task, he conducts himself as a true knight of King Arthur’s Round Table and does the right thing, even when doing the right thing may be harder than doing what is wrong. Does he complete every task perfectly? Absolutely not, but who’s perfect? A hero is not defined as a perfect person; a hero is defined as someone who is remarkably brave, someone who is exceptional, and somebody to be admired. “Half a giant on earth I hold him to be, But believe him no less than the largest of men…Great wonder grew in hall, At his hue most strange to see, For man and gear and all Were green as green could be” (Thalmann, 1646. Lines 140-150). Combating a formidable opponent such as the Green Knight brought out the courage, bravery, and humility in Sir Gawain, and that is why Gawain’s actions should be considered heroic.

The quality of being brave and what is found in order to do something you might be afraid to do is defined as courage. The quality of bravery is essential when looking at a hero and what makes a hero. However, fearlessness is not one of those determining factors that deciphers between what is heroic and what is not. “You don’t get very far in life without having to be brave an awful lot. Because we all have our frightening moments and difficult trials and we don’t have much of a choice but to get through ‘em, and it takes a lot of bravery to do that. The most important thing about bravery is this — It’s not about not being scared — it’s about being scared and doing it anyway — that’s bravery” were the words spoken by Ysabella Brave, which really expresses how fearlessness does not take away from someone’s heroics. Even the bravest of warriors throughout the years and through all their glory and conquest, they still admit that they were scared at some point. An example of this is when the Green Knight bursts into the festival and challenges someone to partake in the beheading game; Sir Gawain volunteers to defend his king and his honor. Some may say that he was just trying to look good in front of the king and would have never done it if he had known what was to follow. Whatever his initial motivation was, that quickly transformed into courage when he follows through with the terms of the bout. When Gawain beheads the Green Knight, the stellar giant simply grabs his head and says to meet him in one year and a day to complete the second half of their bout. Most men would either 1) flee from all society or 2) simply disregard the challenge as if it never happened, hoping that the once hunter does not turn into the hunted. Tremendous honor was shown by Gawain by sticking to his word and agree to embark on this seemed to be fatal quest. A similar story that I can relate to Gawain and the Green Knight’s encounter and showing of bravery and honor is the story of the physically superior Goliath and the smaller, more courageous David of Israel. Goliath challenges the army of the Israelites to battle, and even though he knows he is substantially smaller and less equipped than Goliath, David takes up the challenge from the challenger in order to save his country. Without the courage of a hero, neither David nor Gawain would have been able to stand up to their nemesis.

Another example of his heroics is when Gawain is first tested at the castle of Bertilak de Hautdesert. Gawain’s morals and beliefs are truly tested here for he faced with three challenges over a three-day span. Once Gawain is here he is truly tested on what his morals and beliefs are. When he arrives at the castle and is granted an extra three-day stay before his departure to meet the Green Knight, Bertilak and Gawain make a deal to where whatever each other receives from that day that they exchange that night when Bertilak returns. Gawain wakes on the first day of the three-day span to find Lady Bertilak sitting next to him on his bed and tries to seduce Gawain. Showing that he is true to his morals and has his mind set on the task at hand, Gawain turns her down receiving only a kiss. Gawain knows what is right and is tested by Lady Bertilak to show that he lacks morality and determination for his journey. Gawain shows bravery by having the courage to turn down the lady of the king whom you’re receiving shelter from for anything, let alone a request like the one she offered. When Bertilak returns that night, they exchange venison and the kiss, which is deemed acceptable. Gawain wakes up on the second day to the same scenario with Lady Bertilak and again sticks to his morals and turns her away. However, instead of leaving him with just one kiss, she leaves him with two, which gets exchanged that night for the boar. On the third day of his extended stay, Lady Bertilak wakes up Gawain again and they go through the same routine as the previous two days by giving Gawain kisses. However, this time Lady Bertilak offers him gold ring and a green belt. This is where Gawain shows that he is both a chivalrous knight, but also human. He refuses the ring because he’s not looking to benefit himself on this journey, only to accept enough to stay alive. I recount those three days to show that Gawain is a man of morals and shows great determination by turning these things down. However, Gawain shows vulnerability and accepts the belt because it is said with that belt, he could not be killed, even by the Green Knight. Gawain proves time and time again that he is courageous and willing to complete the second part of the beheading game with the Green Knight, but shows that he is human. People say that a quality of being a hero is showing no fear, but I say that everyone shows fear in some way or form; it is normal to show fear, that’s why I don’t deem fearlessness a quality of being a hero.

Along with the two previously mentioned incidences, probably the greatest showing of Gawain’s heroics is when he finally meets with the Green Knight. Knowing that his death is imminent after this meeting, Gawain still follows through with his end of the bargain and meets with the Green Knight. Being told to get on your knees to receive a fatal blow from an axe would alarm anyone, hero or not. Gawain sets him self for this blow with honor and prestige while the Green Knight prepares for the swing. The first time he goes to strike Gawain’s head he flinches, and asks him why he would flinch if he knew he was going to die. Gawain shows that he is human again by flinching, but I don’t fault him for doing it because of the circumstance. The second time he goes to strike, the Green Knight stops inches from his head. Gawain does not flinch, showing tremendous courage, which the Green Knight prides him for. The third time he goes to strike, he barely leaves a scratch on Gawain. Now we can interpret this in many different ways. A possible interpretation is that the Green Knight felt sympathy for young Gawain and did not want to end his life this early or this way. Another might be that the belt had actually worked and he was saved from the blow form the Green Knight. I believe the reason the Green Knight didn’t execute Gawain was because of what Gawain had proved to him at the castle three days earlier. On day one he was faithful to King Bertilak by exchanging one kiss for the deer. So for the first blow from the Green Knight would not harm him. The second day he was also faithful to the King by exchanging his two kisses for the boars they hunted that day. So for the second blow he would not harm him either. On the third day, however, he received three kisses and the green belt, where he only gave one to King Bertilak and kept the belt for his protection against the Green Knight. Thus, the Green Knight decides to spare his life because of the heroics he had shown earlier at Arthur’s Round Table and at the castle, but leaves the cut on his neck to not only remind him that the Green Knight has spared him, but also to remember that where he had faltered. Along with the scar to remember, Gawain takes the belt so that he will never forget what had happened. This act shows great humility because he’ll carry that with him the rest of his life, and I find humility a huge trait of a hero.

Furthermore, Gawain exhibits several times what it is to be a hero. Between the showing of courage at the first encounter with the Green Knight, the morality he has when he is tempted by Lady Bertilak, and the bravery and humility he shows at the culmination of the beheading game with the Green Knight, Gawain shows that he is a true knight to King Arthur. A hero isn’t perfect, and Gawain is a prime example of that when he takes the belt and also flinches during the game. Hero or not, nobody is perfect. So between the showing of courage, bravery, morality, and humility, Gawain shows that he is indeed a hero. Even though he can’t fly or have superhuman strength like the heroes depicted in comic books, Gawain shows what it truly means to hold the title of hero.

Works Cited

Thalmann, William, G. “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.” *The Norton Anthology, Western Literature*. Ed. Peter Simon. New York: W.W. Norton Company, Inc, 2006. 1646. Print.