The representation of the natural world in "sir gawain and the green knight”

Literature, British Literature

In his 1959 translation of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the literary critic Brian Stone writes of “ a Romance both magical and human, powerful in dramatic incident, and full of descriptive and philosophic beauty”. Indeed, this late medieval poem exhibits a rich supply of symbolism and natural imagery throughout, inducing a vast degree of intrigue and confusion in the reader. The Gawain-poet’s ambiguous depiction of the natural world – personified through the formidable figure of the Green Knight – has particularly been a source of critical discussion, with its enigmatic imagery and supernatural overtones creating a daunting, multi-layered impression of the wilderness. On the surface, these primitive aspects of nature appear threatening and foreign, serving to establish a stark disparity between the cultured existence of the knights and the wild, undomesticated world beyond the castle gates. However, the Gawain-poet does not simply intend to characterise the natural world as a sinister opponent to chivalry; instead, nature has other significations within the poem. Several parallels exist between the “ courtly” lifestyle of Sir Gawain and the mutability of the natural world, suggesting the existence of a certain affinity between man and nature. Passages detailing the changing of the seasons and the finely-crafted hunting scenes, in particular, highlight the similarity between innate human emotions and the forces of nature, thus implying that the two worlds are not wholly separate. The reader’s first encounter with nature’s wildness occurs with the entrance of the Green Knight into Camelot, an event which immediately halts the knights’ festivities and transforms the celebratory mood of the scene into one of suspense and apprehension. A startling figure attired in green, the giant “ hales in at the halle dor”, viciously tearing down

the man-made divide between the primitive natural world and the sanctuary of King Arthur’s decorous court. The poet subsequently embarks on an elaborate description of an “ aghlich mayster”, whose abnormal height and stature makes him “ the molde on mesure hyghe”. His terrifying size is augmented by the poet’s use of alliteration – “ And his lyndes and his lymes so longe and so grete” – thus constructing both an image of hideous engorgement and a disquieting sense of the supernatural. Furthermore, the imposter’s uncultivated, organic physical features, namely his massive beard “ as a busk” and grass-green complexion, explicitly displays the giant’s association with the untamed natural world. When juxtaposed with the untroubled buoyancy and hierarchical formation of the knights’ festive celebrations (“ The best burne ay abof, as hit best semed”), the Green Knight’s appearance and conduct seems to present a stark antithesis to civilised human existence. Therefore, the deep sense of trepidation and obscurity associated with the giant’s entrance has led some to characterise the Green Knight, and, by extension, nature itself, as “ the natural foe of Camelot and the knighthood it represents.” In any case, the Gawain-poet’s varying, often contradictory, description of the Green Knight in this passage exposes the hues and ambiguities of the natural world. After initially presenting the reader with a portrait of a grotesque monster, he proceeds by outlining more favourable aspects of the stranger, endowing him with handsome traits which would have earned respect amongst Gawain’s contemporaries: “ For of his bak and his brest al were his bodi sturne, / Both his wombe and his wast were worthily smale”. Despite the Gawain-poet’s descriptive lines being parallel in structure throughout the passage, the

reader's impression of the Green Knight is continually changing, and the striking depiction of the most " myriest of men" conjures an attractive image of strength and youthful virility. The giant's multifaceted connection with the natural world therefore calls the significance of the colour green into question, a point of debate which has been the focus of much critical discussion. While Heinrich Zimmer associates his greenness with death and corpses, other critics have highlighted the positive connotations of the colour, suggesting a connection with fruitfulness and natural vitality. Indeed, it has been claimed that similar green-clad figures can be found throughout fourteenth-century literature, usually symbolising the dynamism of youth. In the light of these ambiguities, it would be wrong to dismiss the Green Knight as a mere " stock enemy" of knighthood, as the Gawain-poet skilfully juxtaposes the character's primitive aspects with more noble elements of sophistication. This uncertainty is most starkly illustrated by the Green Knight's possession of a holly-branch in one hand and an axe in another, both striking symbols of peace and violence, fertility and artifice, thus foreshadowing Bertilak's dual role as ominous challenger and hospitable host. Nevertheless, despite the giant's more admirable features, the poet's description of the mystifying stranger creates an impression of foreignness and volatility, with the Green Knight's balance of beauty and terror stunning the knights into a " petrified" silence. The dread that the giant instils into others only serves to enhance his arresting wildness, consequently making the knights' courtly posturing appear impotent and futile. Nature's power to overwhelm and belittle man is reinforced during Sir Gawain's journey to Bertilak's castle, where he encounters the unforgiving, malevolent aspects of

the wilderness:“ Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez, and with wolves als, Sumwhyle wyth wodwos that woned in the knarrez, Bothe wyth bullez and berez, and borez otherquyle, And etaynez that hym anelede of the heghe felle.” (Lines 720-3)In a sharp contrast to his sheltered, courtly existence in Camelot, Gawain is forced to confront the perils of nature, facing dangerous beasts and giants in harsh, wintry conditions. This disparity is further heightened by the poet’s ironic, elaborately crafted description of Gawain’s armour, most notably the “ endeles knot” of the pentangle on his shield. In spite of the great moral and religious significance bestowed upon the armour by his fellow knights, its worth is limited when pitted against the forces of nature, suggesting that chivalry places importance on decorative symbols over the reality of human risk and mortality. Furthermore, the poet’s inclusion of fantastical creatures such as dragons and ogres in this passage adds a supernatural layer to the already hostile natural landscape, thus reinforcing the danger and magnitude of Gawain’s plight. As a result of his grisly pledge to the Green Knight, Gawain is entering the daunting realm of the unknown, a challenge for which the confined splendour of courtly life has left him ill-equipped. However, over the course of the text, the reader is made aware of an intrinsic connection between human existence and the natural world. An alternative perception of nature is offered by the passage detailing the passing of the year at the beginning of Fitt Two, with its seasonal imagery providing a clear analogy with human life. For example, the progression from the beautiful “ solace of the softe somer” to the destruction of the winter months (“ The levez lancen fro the lynde and lighten on the grounde, / And al grayes the gres that grene watz ere”)

corresponds to both Gawain’s deteriorating mood and the life-cycle of man. It is perhaps unsurprising that the winter period induces uneasy thoughts of his imminent “ anious voyage” in Gawain, as the passing of the year is inescapably linked with notions of human mortality and uncertainty. Although some may interpret this passage as an example of the destructive, superior power of the natural world, a poignant similarity exists between nature’s ability to restore and regenerate itself and the continuation of the human race over time. The cyclical shape of the poem (the Gawain-poet’s repeated allusion to the siege at Troy brings the text full-circle) serves to reinforce the constant and regenerative movement of natural life “ as the worlde askez”. As a consequence, the poem uses natural imagery to explore the themes of birth, death and rebirth, with the Gawain-poet’s evocative description of the changing seasons suggesting a sense of harmony between man and nature – two entities united by their transience and mortality. Thus, behind the safe, orderly façade of courtly life lurks the enduring threat of violence and death. This communion between mankind and nature is vividly displayed during the three “ hunting scenes”, where the poet parallels Bertilak’s attempts to catch his prey and his wife’s erotic hunting of Gawain. The alternation of the hunting scenes and the bedroom scenes allows the poet to juxtapose the knight’s moral temptation with the slaughtering of animals. Most strikingly, Gawain’s crucial failure in accepting the lady’s green girdle occurs simultaneously with the capture and killing of a fox: “ Now hym lenge in that lee, ther luf hym bityde! / Yet is the lorde on the launde ledande his gomnes”. In doing so, the Gawain-poet explores the animalistic, primal aspects of human behaviour, thereby subtly undermining

the courtly values of duty and dignity. The literary critic Denton Fox develops this resemblance further by highlighting the unconventional practice of fox hunting in the romances, especially following to the more accepted, “ noble” activity of pursuing deer and boars. Indeed, the fact that the poet should “ resort to a “ foul fox” for his third and final quarry” exposes the artificial nature of chivalric constructions through its implication that human beings are merely base products of nature, much like “ verminous” foxes. Despite the court’s best efforts to contain and control it, nature constantly intrudes into civilised life, thus demonstrating how courteous posturing can often shatter under the pressure of human emotions such as fear or lust. It is interesting to consider Sir Gawain’s second journey to the Green Chapel, the location in which he will offer his neck to Bertilak’s axe. Fox identifies a significant distinction between the two winter journeys undertaken by Gawain with regard to the perils faced by the protagonist. While the first journey to Bertilak’s castle is laden with explicit physical danger in the form of beasts and giants, Gawain experiences a different, spiritual danger during his journey to the Green Knight’s lair. The poet’s depiction of misty moors and barren rock-faces (“ Thay clomben bi clyffez ther clengez the colde”) creates an ominous atmosphere of uncertainty, culminating in his companion’s tempting offer for Gawain to turn back without confronting the Green Knight – “ goude Sir Gawayn, let the gome one, / And gotz away sum other gate, upon Goddez halve!” Gawain’s spiritual and psychological turmoil in this section differs from the more overt perils of earlier passages, and it is possible that the knight is finally acknowledging the more primal, base aspects of his character, such as humankind’s inherent fear of death.

Furthermore, the poet’s use of pathetic fallacy in the stanza depicting Gawain’s final night at the castle signifies the apprehension of the protagonist and the gravity of his final voyage:“ Clowdes kesten kenly the colde to the erthe, Whyth nyghe innogue of the northe the naked to tene. The snawe sintered ful snart, that snayped the wylde; The werbelande wynde wapped fro the hyghe, And drof uche dale ful of dryftes ful grete.” (Lines 2001-5)The turbulence of the snowstorm reflects Gawain’s anxious state of mind, while the weather’s personification of malice and spite may serve to reinforce the bond between human emotion and forces of nature. It is this distinct lack of a firm boundary between mankind and nature that has led some to claim that chivalric culture makes a fundamental mistake in excluding the natural world from its equations. When the codes and ideals of civilised life are stripped away from an individual, they are simply products of nature with untamed emotions, desires and shortcomings, an essential parallel that exposes the innate communion between man and nature. In conclusion, the poet invests heavily in symbolism throughout Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, constantly engaging the reader’s attention and providing an impetus for critical debate. Principally, the poem expresses the interplay between humanity and the natural world through the Green Knight, the harsh winter landscape, sexual desire and Gawain’s own fear of mortality. This unity is perhaps most aptly demonstrated through the figure of the Green Knight, an intriguing man of contradictions whose combination of primitive horror and noble courtliness personifies the ambiguous ties between man and the natural world. By interlinking the seemingly disparate worlds of humanity and nature, therefore, the poem gently demonstrates the

artificiality of chivalric values and affirms the power of the renewable, unyielding forces of nature.