The Point of It All: Part II of Final

I was wrong and you were right: such humiliating words to utter, such gratifying words to hear. However, I am proud to type them now. I cannot say that I am disappointed to have been wrong in my expectations of this class. I thought that it would provide entertainment, and not much else. However, Folklore 3226 has left me with more life lessons and wisdom than I could have ever foreseen, a slew of important concepts that, when combined, create a vision that contested (and ultimately dethroned) my recent set of beliefs. Folklore manages to slip these lessons to us in a very casual and nonchalant manner that makes them a delight to discover, while the author remains free from scrutiny, allowing them to pass over controversial topics without being directly responsible for their presence. They’re just stories, after all, but the vision they present is a vivid and inspiring one. This folkloric vision contains three essential components. It encourages each individual to be the best human being that he or she is capable of, to incessantly strive to excel. This diligent path is not only honorable, but also allows the individual to overcome future obstacles of a similar nature, and perhaps others. Being able to rip the helpful knowledge from a dire situation is an essential ability that humans should strive for. However, this does not mean that information should be drunk in blindly; one must also learn to assess the source of information, and understand that words and appearances are ripe for manipulation. In addition to this, one must be mindful of the powerful effects emotions can have when analyzing a situation, and be careful of making rash, reactive decisions. Finally, one must remember that all humans are faced with this difficult task of existence, and be mindful of the needs, worries, and desires of others. Fear not: By keeping a malleable perspective, and remaining steadfast in the face of life’s cruel mannerisms, there is little that the human being cannot overcome.

The self lies at the center of the bizarre journey through life, and therefore, must be addressed first. At times, it can seem as if the entire universe is working to make an individual life exceptionally unpleasant. Boethius was once the target of this universal bombardment, and uses his book to relay his utter despair as he awaits his impending death, which he does not deserve, and struggles to understand *why* this has happened to him. Lady Philosophy descends to offer him consolation in his dark time, reminding him of the many exceptional feats he has accomplished, the good he will leave behind, and that truly, he should have seen this coming. Expectations play a huge role in determining how the individual reacts to a situation, and Boethius needed to learn the valuable lesson that we must all expect hardships and unfairness; to be ignorant of these is foolish, and will only make them all the more unbearable when they rear their ugly heads. Boethius shows that even in the face of immediate death, we must not lose sight of the silver lining, and continue trying to gain what insight we can from a seemingly hopeless situation. Being able to understand the self is an important component of this process, and *The Prioress’ Tale* relays an essential lesson in relation to this. Through her extremely disturbing tale, it is implicitly shown that one must be able to identify the self in definition, not in opposition. It is far too easy to point out the unpleasantries (or merely what we dislike) in others, if only to make ourselves feel better for not possessing them. The Prioress appeals to this dichotomy of the self and “Other” and fails, unable to sway her audience with her lunatic contrasting of Christians and Jews. Ironically, despite her unfounded bias and failed teaching, she still offers important food for thought. The self must be respected and loved for its own qualities, not built-up through the tearing-down of others. If one’s introspection reveals a disappointing or unsatisfactory result, it is then up to the individual to pursue greatness, to undo this mediocre state. Beowulf shines as an example of this; throughout the epic poem, he constantly pushes himself to perform better and better, and to outdo his past accomplishments, despite rarely having companions by his side to encourage him. *Beowulf*’s structure inherently relays this in his progression from fighting Grendel, to Grendel’s mother, and finally, a ferocious dragon. The first task is almost effortless, with Beowulf ripping off limbs in herculean fashion, and tidying up neatly and succinctly after the casual task. The encounter with Grendel’s mother is more difficult, introducing uncertainty and danger to the equation, as Beowulf must defeat not only this vile matriarch in her own realm, but a swarm of her minions. Even still, Beowulf succeeds, returning to the jeering company of his own men who are supportive, if not entirely helpful. Lastly, the battle with the dragon is Beowulf’s ultimate challenge; he is an old and frail King, having lived many long years in comfort, but still chooses to stand up and face the threat, as nobody else will. Beowulf ascends to this task not only to prove himself one last time, but to protect those who depend upon him. He never backs down in the face of danger, always ready to take things to the next level, even if it means sacrificing himself to save those that he serves. Beowulf’s unnatural courage is unlikely to be shared by most humans, however. In *The Greene Knight*, Sir Gawain struggles to escape fear’s grip as he faces an impending execution, finding himself in a situation somewhat similar to Boethius’. His code of chivalry has trained him to be honorable, diligent, and courageous to the very end, and yet, he cannot shake the nervousness of facing the Green Knight. Ultimately Gawain ends up compromising some of his ideals in order to save his own hide, and is *still* welcomed back with open arms by his companions, who are grateful that he lives at all. The tale of *The Green Knight* shows that one’s identity need not be permanently grounded in ideals; life is full of situations that will destabilize their practicality, and in such conditions, it is merely human to keep one’s own interests in mind. We must all realize that, while these noble methods can be aspired to, it is not sinful to fear death, and morph one’s identity to evade it. That being said, the modern man (and woman) would do well to keep these lessons in mind. The “Others” should not be written-off, ignored, or belittled, as they, too, are merely humans attempting to survive, and have more in common with us than we know. As for the self, Boethius, Beowulf, and Gawain show that we must become comfortable in our own skins, if not proud and radiant. If each member of society were to seek this level of self-acceptance and self-improvement, surely, society as a whole would excel, not *fully* emancipated from their natural fears but, at the very least, ready to meet them in battle.

With life offering such battles every step of the way, it would be nice to believe that we, as a species, are generally capable of being mindful and empathetic towards one another. However, this is simply not the case. Even after thousands of years of co-existing, people are still drawn to ignorance and belligerence, stepping on each other’s toes or purposefully inciting disagreements, sowing discord. Their conflicts are usually accompanied by these unpleasant things called emotions, which escape rationality, and seem intrinsically bound to induce more problems. Sometimes, even seemingly beneficial or benign emotions can present problematic distractions. In *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, Chanticleer, the greatest rooster ever to roost, is at the brink of understanding an ominous dream which foreshadows his demise. However, at the cusp of understanding, he is called out for his non-masculinity (fear) by his primary hen, Pertelote, who demands he prove his sexual roosterly prowess right then and there. This distraction, combined with his own hubris, allows him to be tricked by a devious fox. However, Chanticleer makes use of his recently-attained knowledge, and manages to counter-trick the fox into setting him free. He is able to dismiss emotion when the going gets rough, and escape his death through rational application of knowledge. Some emotions, however, are more difficult to suppress than others. The tale of *Sir Lanval/Lanfaul* depicts how unbridled anger will lead to impetuous decision-making, which often results in further unpleasantness. In his indignance, Lanval/Launfal shouts down the Queen of his realm, addressing a few of her many faults, and unintentionally breaking his oath to his lover in the process. Things go downhill from here, as Lanval/Lanfaul loses not only the love of his life, but any shred of respect that once accompanied his social position as Knight. Though he nearly loses his life, it is merely by the grace of the faerie queen that he lives. Her acceptance and consideration of Lanval/Lanfaul depicts the final, essential component of this folkloric vision. Though Lanval/Lanfaul has certainly bumbled in his action, she offers him a second chance, acknowledging his human faults and noble intentions that combined to create his messy situation. This extension of grace and liberty parallels the lessons imparted by *The Wife of Bath, The Manciple’s Tale,* and *Dame Ragnell*. The Wife of Bath is vulgar and lewd, but her long life of experience has shown her the “truth” that one cannot expect a relationship to flourish when limitations and expectations are imposed. She verifies this claim with her own vast experience, which outshines any amount of “knowledge” that can be pulled from a text. When grace, kindness, and acceptance are extended to another, the two, as a whole, will become greater than the sum of the parts. *The Manciple’s tale* directly shows what happens when such niceties are *not* expressed; the man ends up heartbroken and alone, having murdered his wife, who cheated on him simply to escape his iron clasp. By caging his wife and treating her more like property than a human being, unable to see her need to be “free”, Phoebus sews the seeds that will eventually create his own unpleasant situation. Dame Ragnell, while wretched and noxious in form, is still recognized a human being, and is quite aware that she deserves to be treated as such. While most judge or belittle her for her less-than-appealing attributes, Gawain treats her with respect and consideration, allowing her to be herself, and make her own decisions. He does not impose his own beliefs upon her, nor spurn her. Ultimately he is rewarded beyond his wildest dreams for this simple human kindness. Though it is unlikely that unattractive young women or men will metamorphosize into impeccable butterflies upon being treated with kindness, it should be kept in mind that appearance is simply an external factor, and rarely *indicative* of a person’s true, internal form. This unfortunate fact remains especially applicable to modern society, which places beauty on a pedestal for all to see. If we as a species were able to suppress our base human desires, and recognize that beautiful people are quite capable of having “ugly”, selfish, and conceited souls, perhaps there would be far fewer depressed young men and women out there, who cement their identities in the clothes that they wear, the size of their breasts and muscles, and the clearness of their complexion. We must learn to look beyond this surface level, and assess a person based on his or her deeds, not his or her face.

That being said, life can be a bit tricky. It’s certainly not easy. In fact, it's often extremely difficult, rife with all sorts of difficulties, challenges, and the occasional crippling bit of bad news. With all of these external factors dumping chaos into a human life, persisting in existing can become a tiresome affair. Despite this, billions of souls have already come to this Earth, lived long and successful lives, and left behind the most vital lessons for others to discover. One of these lessons address the most universal problem of them all: existence. It is the lesson of hope, that mankind should not give up in the face of such daunting troubles, but instead, use these challenges as opportunities to assess, learn, and ultimately grow stronger. With these vital lessons at hand, one can equip the mind in “armor that would prove an invincible defence”, should it not be cast off in a moment of weakness. By retaining a calm demeanor in the face of adversity, assessing the situation and information from a neutral perspective, and helping fellow humans along the way, there is little that cannot be overcome. That is, of course, until death.