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Redefining Religion: Tom Bombadil and The Green Knight

When thinking about fantasy, maybe Dungeons and Dragons comes to mind, or perhaps fairies and wizards do. But to some, fantastical elements, or the supernatural, is the bridge between their beliefs and the physical world: religion. Religion is many people's reality—fantastical elements such as angels and omnipotent beings become an essential part of their lives. This was especially true in the 14th century when *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* was written by an anonymous poet. Moreover, even in the 20th century when J.R.R Tolkien wrote *Lord of The Rings*, religion remained a vital aspect of many people's lives. In these two books, religious undertones may be present, but a force that overpowers any possible allusions is the one of nature. The Green Knight, in the case of *SGGK*, and Tom Bombadil in the *LOTR*, both possess magical powers that stem through the motif of nature and serve as a manifestation of a more fundamental force, one that transcends organized religion. Rather than the representation of a conventional god, both Tom Bombadil and The Green Knight transcend the traditional binaries of religion and embody powers that are rooted in the force of nature. Though Tom Bombadil and The Green Knight do not use their powers in the same way, nor do they have the same goals, the elemental essence of the beings are nonetheless related. Thus, both characters use the force of nature as a representation of the ultimate divine presence, redefining the traditional sense of organized religion.

To begin, we dive into the world of *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*, specifically one of the opening scenes. The reader is introduced to The Green Knight, the author saying that “green all over he glowed” (pg. 29), riding on a “green horse” whilst “shoeless” (pg. 30). These descriptions are in place to create an image for The Green Knight as a force of nature, entering powerfully, suggesting a strong elemental energy. However, the descriptions are also used to present him as a god-like figure, saying that he is the “mightiest on the middle-earth in the measure of height” with “handsome hair” and his glance is “lightning bright” (pg. 31). Together, these descriptions create an image of a very powerful, god-like man. Yet, he is “brilliant green” (pg. 31)--the repetition of his color and appearance descriptions are used to emphasize his role as a wielder of nature’s power. This raises the question: why is the author of *SGGK* so insistent on vivid, repetitive descriptions? Moreover, how do the descriptions of the nature-like characteristics work side by side with the god-like descriptions of The Green Knight to create an image of an omnipotent being? More specifically, a being whose power is derived through nature rather than organized religion. The author uses these descriptions purposefully--the over-emphasis of his description paints a picture of nature as a leading source of power in the book, setting the audience up to see The Green Knight as the embodiment of nature, but also suggesting a mode of religion. Whilst he is not meant to be seen as a god in a traditional sense, his description is meant to suggest a god-like persona that is dominated by nature.

To continue, *LOTR* presents Tom Bombadil, yet another figure that uses nature to suggest a parallel to a mode of higher, divine power. Though we do not get a clear physical description of Tom Bombadil, he has the spirit of nature that is comparable to The Green Knight. The Old Forest is an eerie and “queer” (pg. 110) location that Frodo and his friends trek through, one that tricks and traps strangers. As Frodo and the others get in trouble, screaming “help! help! help!”

(pg. 118), the tone is extremely tense, not only for Merry who was stuck in a tree, but for the trees too, which were now sending “ripples of anger that ran out over the whole forest” (pg. 118). Yet, suddenly we are introduced to Tom Bombadil, who is simply skipping through the woods, quickly shifting the mood from anxiety-inducing to a tranquil tone, singing, “*Hey dol! merry dol! ring a dong dillo! Ring a dong! hop along! fal lal the willow! Tom Bom, jolly Tom, Tom Bombadillo!*” (pg. 119). Like The Green Knight, this introduction, though not a physical one, sets up the reader to see Tom Bombadil as spiritual and elemental. This becomes more apparent as the scene goes on, and the forest that once “pass[ed] news and plots along in an unintelligible language” (pg. 109), listens to Tom Bombadil’s request to free Merry, instantly complying. When the crew asks Bombadil for help, he says that he “know[s] the tune for him. Old grey Willow-man!” (pg. 120). Not only is Tom Bombadil making it obvious he has connections to an angry forest, but he is also on a first name basis! With this in mind, we can restate the questions posed earlier: How does J.R.R Tolkien use the change of mood before and after Bombadil’s arrival, alongside his powers, to show that nature is the ultimate manifestation of “religion”? When looking at The Green Knight, the descriptions of his appearance are what set the tone for this argument. In Tom Bombadil’s case, his powers are harmonious with nature, his words implying a form of prayer, easily shifting the tone and communicating with the angry trees. The sudden mood change puts the characters and the forest at ease, demonstrating the internal authority that he possesses, redefining the traditional views of religion through his effortless ability to command nature. Clearly, nature is untamed—The Green Knight’s Chapel is “overgrown” with “green patches all over” (pg. 97) and the Old Forest is “writhing and interlacing roots” and “watchful” (pg. 111); yet it is not chaos, but rather one fundamental, raw

force that The Green Knight and Tom Bombadil work alongside with to transcend the binaries of traditional religion.

As we traverse beyond their introductions, both Tom Bombadil and The Green Knight reinforce their supernatural characteristics through resistance to forces that other beings would otherwise be affected by. The Green Knight's introduction in *SGGK* is quickly followed by a beheading by Sir Gawain. However, after he was beheaded he simply "upraised it" and "hastened it to his horse" (pg. 39). His immunity to the beheading not only shows his resistance to human concepts, such as death, but also parallels nature's unrelenting force. During the beheading, the author paints an image of The Green Knight for the reader, saying that "blood burst from the body, bright on the greenness" (pg. 39). The contrast of the bright, mortal blood, against the vivid, nature-driven descriptions of the Green Knight's skin, draws a fascinating comparison between mortality and the unstoppable force of nature. This image suggests a strong parallel between the act of being human, such as "blood burst[ing]" and dying from a beheading, to the stark contrast of the "greenness" and surviving the blow, an implication of a religious-like force beyond human capabilities ruled by the divine power of nature.

A similar, supernatural force of nature drives Tom Bombadil, leaving him unaffected by the power of The One Ring. In the *LOTR*, The Ring is a great source of evil power, affecting everyone who comes into contact with it. Gandalf, regardless of his position as one of the most powerful wizards in the universe, is still extremely wary of even touching the ring, saying "With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me The Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly" (pg. 61). Thus, the reader can conclude that the ring is a hazard and will affect anyone who touches it. Yet, when Bombadil requests to touch it, Tom "put The Ring round the end of his little finger and held it up to the candlelight" and the Hobbits saw

that “There was no sign of Tom disappearing!” (pg 133). Not only this, but when Frodo slips the ring on and starts walking away while invisible, Tom Bombadil says that he is “not as blind as that yet”, and to “Take off [his] golden ring!” (pg. 133). Bombadil implies that his powers are still strong and he has not become an ordinary perceiver of The Ring and fallen victim to its tricks, further suggesting his power as a higher supernatural being. Moreover, the reader is aware that thus in the book, no one has been immune to the ring, not even the servants of The Ring’s owner, or Gandalf. Yet, not only is Tom immune, he also has powers that allow him to see through the Ring’s power. Like a traditional god, able to see all and have superpowers that transcend other religious beings, a parallel is now being drawn between Tom Bombadil and the force of a higher being. However, Bombadil has no interest in being a god, saying he does not own the forest (pg. 124); rather, he is a divine being that transcends the idea of a traditional god. Instead of being a direct parallel, Bombadil redefines the book's meaning of religion to a force more natural, one that is ruled by his harmony with nature.

Throughout the two novels, the force of nature dominates the overall tone of the pieces. We can see nature being manifested through characters and locations, such as Tom Bombadil and the Old Forest, as well as The Green Knight and his Green Chapel. In *SGGK*, The Green Chapel can suggest a parallel to a place of worship, such as a Church. When Sir Gawain sins, his method of redemption is through The Green Knight who resides in the Green Chapel. Gawain asks for forgiveness from the Green Knight (pg. 103), and the Green Knight cleanses him of his sin, saying “Thou hast confessed thee so clean and acknowledges thine errors...I hold thee purged of that debt, made as pure and as clean as hadst thou done no ill deed...” (pg. 104). Not only does the Green Knight suggest a god-like power that can purge people of sins, but the Green Chapel itself, surrounded by nature with “hillsides”, “a flood that was flowing down”, located on a

“marge of green” is now a place of redemption for those who have sinned. The elemental connotation plays hand in hand with the religious ones, suggesting a shift in perspective from traditional religion to a more divine source of power, such as nature. Though The Green Knight does not claim to be god, people (like Sir Gawain) trust him as a power that can cleanse sins. Similarly, though Tom Bombadil does not claim to own the forest, Golderry still says that “He has no fear. Tom Bombadil is master.” He does not own the trees, yet he lives in a harmonious relationship with them with no fear, living as their master. With this in mind, Tom Bombadil and The Green Knight are able to act as characters who may suggest an alternative to a traditional sense of religion, using the divine force of nature as the dominant leader, redefining what religion may mean to readers.

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