The Post-Modern Legacy of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: A Discourse on Current Cultural and Literary Figures Derived from the Knight of the Green Chapel

In recent years, a number of well-founded, but under-developed theories have been formulated concerning the effects the Green Knight, as a literary character, has had on post-modern culture and literature. This discourse shall attempt to present and argue three of these theories in an effort to solidify their plausibility and encourage their discussion in scholarly literary circles.

The first and, arguably, the most prominent theory on this subject concerns a post-modern cultural interpretation of the Green Knight based on his appearance and strange inhuman abilities. According to the Arthurian poet, the Green Knight is not so-called solely for the color of the armor he wears, but because his skin and hair share the same hue. Beyond this oddity, the author comments extensively on the sheer massive size and stature of this being, likening him to a giant. This description initially confuses the reader, as his green appearance and imposing size would naturally be attributed to a giant; however, his gentlemanly looks and seeming civility match the expected characteristics of a man. The poet continues to reveal yet more confusing aspects of this visitor: the giant proposes a game in which he will allow one of Arthur’s knights to
behead him, provided he will then be allowed the same privilege upon the knight one year later. After accepting the challenge, Sir Gawain beheads the giant only to find that the Green Knight picks up his head, replaces it on his shoulders and leaves. The ability to survive without one’s head is not a luxury afforded to humans, thus leading many scholars to believe that the Green Knight is in fact, a vegetable. Textual support of this theory is provided in the poet’s description of the green hue of his body being like that of the grass; and the knight’s hair, too, supports this vegetable theory, as he would most likely have resembled a gargantuan broccoli stalk in King Arthur’s banquet hall.

This vegetable-man theory does have its obvious flaws in reasoning, but these are discredited when one adopts the theory that the Green Knight was in fact an embodiment of the Phrygian god of vegetation, Attis. Even more convincing, Attis was also the god of life, death, and rebirth, a characteristic that may further explain the Green Knight’s ability to survive a beheading. When modern culture is compared to the Arthurian tale, one figure stands as a sharp parallel to this giant green god of vegetation and rebirth. This being is the figure colloquially known as “The Jolly Green Giant.” While this modern day jovial marketing icon may seem a far cry from his medieval predecessor, the similarities are striking. The color, stature, and ‘vegetableness’ of both figures coincide perfectly, leading one to question whether or not this “Jolly Giant” was a blatant rip-off of an Arthurian legend. Historically, the “Jolly Green Giant” was introduced to American commercial venues in 1928 by Leo Burnett as a marketing ploy for the Green Giant Food Co. The name was originally attributed to the larger-than-normal peas that the company sold. Beyond the likeness of the figure and the name, the giant peas the company sold – the trademark of the “Jolly Green Giant” – could easily be symbolize a
disembodied green head – the trademark of the Green Knight. This may literally be food for thought.

A second purported theory relies heavily upon the Green Knight’s physical characteristics, but also analyzes the personality traits he exhibits. When fully revealed, it will be shown that the Green Knight has spawned a modern literary figure that eclipses “The Jolly Green Giant” and has achieved notoriety even greater than that of the Green Knight himself. That figure is none other than the token Theodor Geisel antagonist: The Grinch. Similar to the “Jolly Green Giant,” the Grinch takes his basic appearance from the Green Knight, but also seems to exhibit certain similar motives to his medieval counterpart. The most obvious connection is in the seasonal appearance of each. The Green Knight enters King Arthur’s court during the Christmas feast, interrupting the celebration in an enormously rude gesture. Even upon being invited to join the festivities, the Green Knight declines and continues with his personal agenda. Similarly, the Grinch appears during Christmas festivities in Who-ville and is actually said to ‘steal’ the holiday. The Whos, much like Arthur, explain after the fact, that they would have accepted the Grinch in their festivities, had he only been more polite. An interesting detail in the Grinch’s physical description by Dr. Seuss is that his temperament may have stemmed from the fact that “his head wasn’t screwed on quite right.” This statement is an obvious parallel to the Green Knight’s ability to be beheaded and survive – the two characters seem to suffer from the same inhuman ability. In addition, the stories themselves are similar in literary form: poetry. Dr. Seuss painstakingly wrote “How the Grinch Stole Christmas” in rhyming couplets, matching the manner in which the poet of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” finished each stanza of his tale. Overall, the
likenesses shared by the two figures encompass not only physical similarities, but personality, temperament and situational parallels, too. Thus, the evidence suggesting the Grinch has become a post-modern interpretation of the Green Knight is not only plausible, but probable.

The final theory this discourse shall present for edification will identify yet another post-modern literary figure drawing upon concepts originally seen in the Green Knight. This final example I personally have termed “The Sir Robert Banner and the Green Hulk Theory.” As the title suggests, this theory presents The Incredible Hulk as another post-modern incarnation of the Green Knight, but this theory takes much more from the original tale than both the “Jolly Green Giant” theory, and “The Grinch” theory. Principally, the “Sir Robert Banner and the Green Hulk Theory” actually attempts to explain the roles of Sir Gawain as well as the Green Knight in the characters of Dr. Robert Banner and the Incredible Hulk, respectively.

Sir Gawain and Dr. Banner represent the underdogs in their respective stories. They encompass the human element in their tales, are the symbol of intelligence and civility in their times, and are both men that embark on a ‘journey’ to face their respective green foes. The principle difference between the stories is that while the Green Knight is in fact a separate entity from Sir Gawain, the Hulk is actually the alter-ego of Dr. Banner. Even so, the Hulk and the Green Knight both exhibit concurrent themes in their tales. When the Green Knight first appears, he is not dressed for battle, and he holds in one hand, a branch of holly. This presents an image of peace; however, the giant holds in his other hand a huge axe, symbolizing an agenda of violence. This ambiguous dichotomy of good and evil is present in the Hulk as well. While the Hulk is
often depicted as a destructive, uncontrollable villain, the reader realizes that the Hulk is ultimately misunderstood by society – much like the Green Knight – and over time, the Hulk proves himself not evil, but ultimately much like his alter-ego, Dr. Banner. Similarly, we find that, in the end, the Green Knight does not kill Sir Gawain, but only chastises him for his encounters with a lady, drawing blood with one of three blows upon his neck. So while both characters are eventually resolved to the heroes in each tale, the heroes are scarred in the end. As with the “Jolly Green Giant,” and the “Grinch” theories, the “Sir Robert Banner and the Green Hulk” theory capitalizes on the many similarities the characters have in common, but delves into the personal themes surrounding the Green Knight’s motives, thus proving to be the most plausible of the three theories.

Overall, it is very apparent that the Green Knight is still prevalent as a literary figure today, and in fact, has spawned a number of similar cultural and literary icons in our present society. Whether that figure is a vegetable company icon, a children’s story villain, or a comic book superhero, all three theories prove the monumental effect that “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” has had in our post-modern world.