

ETHICAL IDEAS IN LITERATURE

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An ethical question of whether art can make a person better has never lost its topicality since the works of great thinkers have been introduced to the world. Living by the laws of the good and justice was ideal since the religious texts had appeared. Ten Biblical Commandments represent the moral rules of conduct in Christianity. Beneficence, kinship and decency are the key virtues of the Christian ethics. To a greater or lesser extent, these virtues are represented in all religions of the world. It is important to understand the basic principles of Christianity since both poems under study, “Beowulf” in Sean Heaney’s translation, and “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” in Brian Stone’s interpretation, refer to the medieval times. That period was an epoch of the absolute power of the Church. The medieval literature is commonly recognized as influenced by religion and folklore. Mythology as an integral part of the folklore also aimed at reflecting the people’s beliefs concerning the structure and perception of the world. The beliefs concerning the structure and the perception of the world presupposed the reflection of ethical key points and determined the structure of the community and its evolution. All of the aforementioned facts justify the importance of literature for understanding the background and the main tendencies in the certain period of time and reveal a formal linkage between ethics and literature.

The middle ages gave place to the Renaissance, i.e. the times of humanism and humiliation of the clerical censorship. Medieval epic poems have reconsidered the concepts of devotion to a duty, religion, humanity, and all the good. Therefore, it has influenced the people’s lifestyle and has made a ground for the transformation of societies, which means qualitative changes in favor of humanism.

An old English heroic poem “Beowulf” is considered the greatest achievement of the earliest West European vernacular epic (“Beowulf,” n.d.). The poem was given the name of its main protagonist, a Scandi-

navian hero Beowulf, only in the nineteenth century (Snell, n.d.). The poem has passed across the generations. Today, it is impossible to authenticate the authorship of the poem; therefore, it is considered anonymous. The epic “Beowulf” is believed to be written in the eighth century. The events described in the novel are said to date back to the early sixth century (“Beowulf”, n.d.). The ethical issues reflected upon within the poem are as follows: kinship and identity, duty and will, self-abnegation and a general welfare, restoring freedom and peace. The main protagonist, Beowulf, embodies the virtues of a legendary hero: courage, wisdom, power, and a strong belief in his own duty. The poem is split into two parts; each of them is emotionally opposed. The heroic and grandiose is the first part, on the one hand; and a tragic and mournful, on the other hand. John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, the acknowledged expert in the Scandinavian mythology and a literature master, has regarded the poem as an elegy more than an epic, since Beowulf, its hero, has brought the renewal and peace to northern people. (“Beowulf,” n.d.). Reminiscence, grief and suffer endured did not bring joy and happiness to the Scandinavian people. The evil in the poem is dehumanized as the monsters personify all the vices that are condemned by the morals; for example, cruelty, greediness, and no compassion. On the one hand, violence and cruelty breed just the same traits. On the other hand, the balance of forces is a basis for harmony. Therefore, in such a way, the ideas of humanism and dialectics as well as the ambiguity of the world are proclaimed in the poem. The features listed above represent the concept of moral conduct of life viewed from the perspectives of the Middle Ages.

“Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” is a medieval English alliterative poem that dates back to the late fourteenth century (“Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight,” n.d.). The poem was found in the fourteenth century’s manuscript, to which three more poems had been included. Its author is usually regarded to as a “Pearl-poet.” The names of three other poems included to the manuscript are: “Patience”, “Purity” and “Pearl.” The poem is masterful in terms of its structure: the Middle En-

English period was marked by a strong influence of the French language. It is realized in its rich vocabulary and a rhyming technique. According to the legend, Sir Gawain was King Arthur's nephew and his associate. The epic poem introduces the idealized and romanticized knight, a Christian, who had stood the test of arms and temptation. However, he failed to stand up to the test of invulnerability ("Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight," n.d.). Obviously, the poem belongs to the period commonly defined as the High Middle Ages and deals with the epoch's reality. Chivalry and courtesy, knighthood and courtly love were bred by this epoch. The code of honor of the French knights represented itself as a triad: the God, the Sovereign, and the State. Valor, loyalty, self-abnegation and the devotion are the basic principles of chivalry and correspond to the Christian ethics. On the other hand, the concepts of courtly love and the knight's affection for his ladylove, being, as a rule, a married woman, contradict with the morality. Judging from the following characteristics, we may conclude the certain changes in the concept of the moral conduct of life in the High Middle Ages and trace its impact on the modern ethics.

Dark and cruel, unenlightened and hopeless – this is how one may characterize the Middle Ages' period. Nevertheless, someone may object: what a beautiful architecture, what a magnificent work, and what a deep and moving music. Both poems under study, "Beowulf" and "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" have depicted the most typical figures the community had been ready to follow. They are humane; and they are prone to the same virtues and weaknesses incident to the human nature. This means that the protagonists are relatable to community. This is how people had been living and continue living nowadays. Today, we should understand that the art by means of reflection just guides us through our life, teaching us what is good and bad.

References

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