

## Of Little Mirth – *The Green Knight* Review

By Aurelio De Leon, Jr.

Muted and lifeless. Those are the immediate thoughts that lingered on my mind directly after seeing *The Green Knight*. For all of its luster in its cinematography and shot composition, this film offers little more than that for this adaptation of the famous Arthurian tale. This is not to say that this film is completely lacking in every other facet; the vision of director David Lowery definitely shines through, it just may not have aligned with what I had envisioned for this chivalric poem. There's something to be said about the enigmatic nature of symbolism and its interpretations, and for those even vaguely familiar with the source material, know it is swarming with symbols. However, there comes a point when symbolism either ventures into heavy-handedness or becomes so confounded that it drags the pacing to a crawl, leaving the viewer very little to cling to to ground themselves. I feel as if this film teeters the scale on both of these fronts with sparse moments of meaningful symbolism sprinkled in and to great effect. I often found myself painfully aware of certain scenes that lingered in purposeless silence for seconds too long, hanging on beautiful camera work with no feeling or payoff.

The cast is amazing but it's unfortunate that most of them have little to work with other than Dev Patel who gets moments to shine as Gawain. When I said lifeless, that's in reference to a majority of the characters. Now whether or not it was Lowery's intent to portray a grim version of Camelot with a hollowed out King Arthur played by Sean Harris or a sunken and sullen Queen Guinevere played by Kate Dickie, I have to say that it doesn't make for convincing characters with some aspect, good or bad to latch onto. As I said, Patel has a few areas of the film where he does great physical acting, showcasing Gawain's uncertainty and inner turmoil through facial expressions and body language, but whenever he was with someone, I couldn't feel a connection between the characters. Interactions with the king or the love interest, Essel (Alicia Vikander), fell flat and fizzled out rather quickly which didn't give anyone a chance to play off of each other in any way that was grounded or allowed them a modicum of chemistry or sexual tension. Each character felt like empty vessels necessary to push the film into the next chapter. Ralph Ineson as the titular green knight was excellent casting as his thunderous voice and impressive stature hold true to the likeness of the character and prove to be impactful whenever onscreen, but again for me, he didn't have enough to do. The scene could have worked even better if the court was actually celebrating in merriment instead of shallow whispers, only to have the stark contrast as the green knight booms into the room silencing the excitement with his chilling presence.

Speaking of the green knight, due to the color grading of the film, the most prominent feature of this character doesn't even come across as the knight is barely even green and is instead a stony grey tree-like figure in this interpretation. In fact, there is barely any green in the entire film as most shades of it seem to be washed out or muted with this dark filter cast over it, which in itself could be the director's allusion to the death of the natural world that just didn't seem to mesh with me. Being that the color of the knight's attire, skin, and horse were so crucial to the original

poem, I felt that it was an aspect that should be highlighted in some way in any adaptation. And furthermore, for how much detail goes into describing the wardrobe in the text, I felt that the costuming was severely uninspired and underutilized to the point where it felt completely absent or almost an afterthought. There was no flare to the cloth belt or the axe in their supposed green color or design so much so that this emptiness in the film just kept repeating itself. At the very least, these important symbols could have been more memorable than the stale dark green and stone colors put on screen, but again everyone has their preference in interpretation and visualization.

Adaptations will undoubtedly be compared to the original works they were inspired by but of course I'm not saying that someone has to adapt the material line for line and shot for shot; to the contrary, some of my favorite scenes in the film were the departures from the work. One instance in particular pits our hero against some bandits in which he is beaten, tied up, and robbed of all his possessions; this is followed by an interesting circular swivel shot of Gawain's tied up body transitioning into a skeleton corpse. And in this moment I thought, what if Gawain never completed his journey and what are the implications of that? What a refreshing turn of events that would have been, having our hero die mid-film only to follow someone else in the story, but it did not explore those possibilities in full, although it serves as a nice foreshadowing of a later 'what if' scenario in Gawain's mind that I also thoroughly enjoyed. Not to spoil too much of that latter scene, but for me that's where the film found its footing in Patel's subtle performance and in its fluid pacing during that sequence of events. It ultimately makes the ending all the more impactful in Gawain's resolve and growth but I also wouldn't have minded sticking with that alternate version of events to solidify this film's own voice.

As far as some of the other visuals and story elements when it came to the adventure sequences, I wasn't too engrossed by the effects or storytelling as it meandered unapologetically plot wise and in its overt ambiguity, sometimes bordering on pretension. I would have preferred a more defined voice coming from the director, possibly one in which we see these bleaker components mixed with a dry dark comedy or maybe focusing on strong themes of chivalry and sexual desire to better utilize its R rating. Overall it's a strong visual spectacle that had little tangible weight for me in its execution and I feel as if it will leave a lot of audiences divided; I know this is true for me still. No one should be going into this film with expectations of an epic fantasy adventure but more of a slow artistic reimagining, however, just one that did not meet my expectations in tone, character depth, interesting dialogue, or storytelling. With no disrespect towards David Lowery, I think something like this helmed by a director like Robert Eggers with a more defined voice would have better served the film, but as it is now I can't fully endorse every part of it. Perhaps if you're truly curious like I was, give it a watch through, although I can't see myself wanting to see it again any time soon, it probably does benefit from multiple viewings.