

# A summary of the poem sir gawain and the green knight by pearl poet

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Philosophers and theologians have contemplated morality and its role in the lives of men for centuries. It is hard to define what constitutes a moral life and an amoral life when the very definition of those words are subjective; being moral is often compared to being virtuous or simply "good". Often what is called moral is what mimics societal standards. This is an issue that has been tackled in a plethora of ways, from the establishment of religion all the way to the bed-time stories repeated to us as children. Defining morality is difficult to do because of the vast range of human action and thought, which also makes it very difficult to decide if people can truly change or develop a new moral code. Stories and tales are often used to describe the trials humanity undergoes in an effort to explain morality, and whether the human condition does let men learn and grow from their experiences. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain's knightly virtue and fidelity are tested throughout the course of his journey, and it is questionable if he learned anything from his experiences. His failure at the end of the poem sparks the more general question of whether it is possible for a man to live a perfectly chivalrous life, which is something humanity has strove to answer for centuries. What makes Sir Gawain's trials and the issue of whether he learns note-worthy is the well established reputation he has at the start of the story. Our first impression of him takes place in lines 343-361 where Gawain persuades Arthur to let him undertake the Green Knight's challenge. By doing this he not only restores the round table's reputation, but he willingly puts himself in harms way to protect King Arthur. As Gawain prepares for his journey, he is depicted as "devoid of all vice" (634), as well as "fairest-spoken" (639) among the knights of Arthur's round table. These descriptions

are especially significant because of Gawain's social status; he is "reputed as virtuous" (633) among the most elite knights of the land. He is considered the best of the best. His shield serves as a strong symbol of his fidelity and virtue: it is a pentangle with five knots and has a picture of Saint Mary on the back: "For it is a figure consisting of five points... Was generosity and love... purity and courtesy... and surpassing the others, compassion" (627-654). Throughout the story Gawain has each of his virtues tested, and fails in nearly every regard. In Fitt 2 Sir Gawain accepts the hospitality offered to him at Bertilak's castle. He very quickly becomes a celebrity among the house once his identity is revealed: "To make the acquaintance quickly then of the man to whom all excellence and valour belongs... now we shall enjoy seeing displays of good manners..." (910-916). This is an important description of Gawain as his reputation is established outside his own territory; it becomes clear that the way he interacts with people have led to him being a respected knight. During his stay, Lady Bertilak attempts to seduce Gawain several times. Gawain manages to withstand Lady Bertilak's advances, and even manages to compliment his host in the process: "...you have chosen much better, but I am proud of the esteem that you hold me in" (1276-1277). Gawain is consistent in upholding his virtue on the second day as he continues to refuse the Lady: "...made trial of him, tempting him many times to have led him into mischief, whatever her purpose; but he defended himself so skillfully that no fault appeared" (1549-1551). Gawain's consistency is important in this passage because it shows his struggle. It is important to note how much effort he puts into upholding his virtue: he does try to live up to his reputation as the fairest knight of the land and is

successful to a degree. However, on the third day Gawain falters. He attempts to remain true to Bertilak by refusing his wife's advances, yet he accepts the gift of the green girdle without returning it: "As long as it is tightly fastened about him there is no man on earth who can strike him down, for he cannot be killed by any trick in the world" (1851-1853). Because he does not tell Bertilak about this gift, he has betrayed his host and his own standards. He accepts a gift that would allow him to cheat out of his commitment to the Green Knight, making him a coward. Gawain does not uphold his courtesy to his host as a knight and above all is looking for a loophole in a challenge he placed his knighthood on. The next test Gawain faces is put forth by his guide. He is offered a chance to escape his inevitable doom at the hands of the Green Knight without losing his honor or standing in the realm. He declines however, again living up to his famous courage and fidelity: "His faithful servants God knows well how to defend" (2138-2139). Although he does not accept this offer, making him seem courageous, it is unlikely Gawain was trying to uphold his honor. He believes he owns a magical girdle that makes him impervious to harm, so by accepting his fate at the hands of the Green Knight and then actually coming out triumphantly Gawain's standing would increase even more. Gawain finally arrives at the Green Chapel, marking the final moments of his life. After the Green Knight mocks Gawain's cowardice flinching he explains that he is Lord Bertilak and has been testing Gawain the whole time. This is hard for Gawain to accept, because even though the Green Knight has cleared him of all debts and faults he inwardly feels as if he has failed: "So mortified and crushed that he inwardly squirmed... for fear of your blow taught me cowardice... be false to

my nature" (2370-2380). Despite Gawain's display of anger, at the end of the tale he seems to have benefited from his failure. His failure becomes a symbol of honor and represents the Round Table after he explains how he will wear the sash forever to show his cowardice and lack of credibility as a knight: "...that lords and ladies who belong to the Table... should wear a belt... and that became part of the renown of the Round Table... it was always honoured" (2515-2520) It appears as if Gawain has lost no standing at all among the knights, considering how he admitted his mistakes. This makes it seem like the knights of the Round Table and elsewhere have lowered their standards of what constitutes a fair and worthy knight, only because of Gawain's failure. For his failure to be accepted so enthusiastically removes all doubt that Gawain truly did have the reputation as the best knight. It seems as if Gawain did not learn from his experiences with the Green Knight at all. Rather than attempt to better himself or his fellow knights, they all accept his shame and defeat as proof that no one can be perfect. Not once does Gawain comment on how this journey has taught him a lesson or that he will strive to correct the error of his ways. He simply admits his defeat to everyone, and that is the end of Gawain's tale. While it may be the healthier realization for Gawain to accept his faults, it does not seem conducive that the knights would simply accept defeat in such a manner. Stories typically consist of heroes overcoming challenges and honing their skills, not admitting that they cannot improve themselves or that a trial is insurmountable. It seems as if the poet who wrote Sir Gawain was instead trying to demonstrate that perfection is not possible. This begs the question of whether a perfect knight, a man who leads a completely

chivalrous life, is possible. After examining Sir Gawain's story it appears that it is not. In order to live a chivalrous life it seems as if that person must be perfect. As shown by Gawain's dealings with the Bertilaks, he was trapped between either breaking his chastity with Lady Bertilak or lying to his host by taking the belt. While it may be hard to replicate such a scenario for every knight, the paradox this represents is not totally uncommon. Upholding the knightly virtues is essentially asking for moral perfection in life. Being courteous and chaste are "good" qualities to have and people who do not subscribe to such agendas are not considered moral people. No matter what the specific details are, the underlying issue of perfection remains. Perfection is something that humanity has strived to achieve for centuries, but remains ever elusive. When somebody examines what makes a person perfect they would often list off qualities that we have seen portrayed in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Not only is perfection, moral or not, subjective, but it also appears silly to consider it attainable. The human condition would make it too difficult to maintain moral perfection because of interactions with different cultures: upon encountering a foreigner, the perfect one could be judged imperfect. So truly perfection is a subjective quality that can theoretically be achieved but only if one disregards the thoughts and judgments of others. Ultimately I would consider this to mean that perfection is not possible. There are also times in life when the moral and ethical solutions are not applicable to the problem. This would explain why Gawain is a knight; he belongs to a profession meant to defend a way of life when all other forms of diplomacy have been exhausted. Not every issue can be solved by reason: violence is the ultimate authority from which other forms

of authority are derived. Judging by his descriptions, Gawain is a highly skilled combatant with no equal in the land. However, he is defined by human limitations such as exhaustion and death. Despite the Green Knight being characterized as devilish (and thus imperfect due to the subjective quality of what defines a moral person), there is no doubt that he is closer to perfection than Gawain will ever be. The Green Knight appears as the perfect warrior: impervious to damage and more physically defined than any other man. So not only does Gawain have physical (and thus absolute) limitations but he also has moral failures. Lastly, the overlap between Gawain's profession and moral character raises a question: if Gawain was the perfect negotiator, wouldn't there be no need for his skills in combat, and vice versa? He could be recognized for his talents in both, but that would be unnecessary. If he was recognized for both then he would have to make a decision on when it would be better to kill someone as opposed to talking to them: under what criteria would he judge the value of someone's life? I believe perfection simply has too many variables for it to be plausible in human life. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is more than a simple tale of heroism and conflict. After reading through it only once it becomes obvious that Gawain is a dynamic character who cannot be interpreted as a black and white hero. It is interesting that a story written hundreds of years ago could question and deny that perfection is achievable, especially considering its use of a then contemporary hierarchical position as an example. While at first the story seems like a literal examination of a fictional character, after contemplating the end of Gawain's adventure it becomes apparent that the story is actually an examination of human potential. A recurring theme in

history is the desire to push the limits of human potential, and this was no different when Sir Gawain was written. The Middle Ages were a religiously charged time where people were compelled to do everything in their power to reach Heaven - the Christian concept of paradise: land of the perfect. I suppose there shouldn't be amazement that a poem was written about such a topic. Works Cited Sir Gawain and The Green Knight. Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 1992