

# Death and the green knight: closer than they appear

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



“Everyman” and “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” are without doubt two of the best-known works of medieval English literature. The stories demonstrate the epitome of the Christian themes of salvation, mortality, and truth that resonate throughout the genre. In this light, Death and the Green Knight both perform the same allegorical duties, though they exhibit drastically different personalities. Clearly, the two characters would not be hard to discern between to a casual observer. The Green Knight is simply not bound by the formalities of civilization; instead, he is ever rude and arrogant. He is first introduced entering Arthur’s hall: “There hurtles in at the door an unknown rider” (136). The Green Knight doesn’t knock, nor does he ask permission to enter—no, he “hurtles” into the fine, formal hall on his horse, arrogantly challenging the king and his court: “But if you be so bold as all men believe, / You will graciously grant the game that I ask by right” (272-4). After boasting of his powerful weapons and skill, the Knight asserts that it is his right to fight and demand proof of the king’s power. The Green Knight is apparently afraid of no one, and he wants everybody to know. On the other hand, Death takes an entirely different approach to dealing with civilization (in this case, Everyman). While the Knight boasts of his power, Death takes a more passive stance as a courteous, humble servant. For instance, when God summons Death, Death replies, “Almighty God, I am here at your will, / Your commandment to fulfill” (64-5). Throughout the text, Death truly exhibits signs of a loyal servant. Though he states that he fears no man, Death humbly accepts and acknowledges his great power over all men as simply a gift of God: I am Death that [fears no man], For every man I ‘rest, and no man spareth. For it is God’s commandment That all to me should be

obedient (115-15) Hence, Death is as unpretentious as the Knight is proud. Furthermore, Death and the Knight differ in their dependence and relevance to the material world. The Green Knight is obviously wealthy. The narrator purposely elaborates on the exquisite nature of the Knight's dress: "Of furs cut and fitted—the fabric was noble . . . and gold spurs under [his calves] . . . and footgear well-fashioned" (151-60). The storyteller continues to detail the physical appearance of the rich knight, placing much emphasis on the clothing that would have astonished even King Arthur's court. Later, the reader discovers that the Green Knight is even wealthier than supposed when the Knight reveals that he is none other than the Lord Bercilak de Hautdesert. The Knight is thus the quintessence of nobility and worldly riches in Gawain's time. In yet another sharp contrast, Death shuns all of the earthly possessions that the Knight is so involved with. In accord with one of the major ideas in "Everyman," Death makes clear that goods are immaterial to him: I set [nothing] by gold, silver, nor riches, Nor by pope, emperor, king, duke, nor princes, For, and I would receive gifts great, All the world I might get (125-28). Death does not only denounce material possessions; he rejects both the secular and non-secular positions of power valued by most mortals, such as the barony of the Green Knight. Therefore, Death is completely unattached to the ways of man, whereas the Knight is absorbed with typical human ideals. Death and the Green Knight undeniably have major personality disparities<sup>2E</sup> However, if one examines both characters on a deeper level, he or she will realize that both are driven by the same intrinsic ideals. Subtle references to honor and justice resound continually through each characters' mannerisms. For instance, the Green

Knight's sole concern is to ensure that Gawain keeps his word. In Part One of the story, he exclaims: " Sir Gawain, forget not to go as agreed, And cease not to seek till me, sir, you find, As you promised in the presence of these proud knights. To the Green Chapel come . . . . . or else be counted a recreant knight" (448-56). The Knight emphasizes the importance of Sir Gawain keeping his word, reminding Gawain that he would be a " recreant knight"; in other words, he would be an infamous coward, the worst bane of knighthood. When Gawain finally reaches the Green Chapel, the Knight will make certain that justice is carried out by fulfilling his part of the contract (perhaps an allusion to the Biblical covenant), whether he personally desires to hurt Gawain or not. The Knight must submit to the absolute truth of justice, understanding it as an unalterable aspect of life. Likewise, Death also abides by the rigorous moral code of justice and honor. He tells Everyman in response to his bribe offer, "[If I wanted] all the world I might get. / But my custom is clean contrary" (128-30). In his role as the server of justice, Death is merely a means towards an end—he has no say in the matters themselves. This idea is concomitant with the usual idea of justice as fair and morally right. Consequently, Death becomes akin to a court of law, which is neither biased nor able to change the rules. Another example occurs in lines 144-45, when Death explains, " And in the world each living creature / for Adam's sin must die of nature." Finally, the concept of justice as it relates to humanity itself is expressed explicitly: death (unpersonified) is basically just a consequence of Adam's sin—sin that permitted justice to rule the world. Once the motive of justice as the link between the two characters is established, the reader can ultimately discover the essence of these

medieval personalities – mortality. Both represent mankind's own transience; the Green Knight is just not as explicitly symbolic as Death. Upon close examination, nonetheless, the Knight materializes as a test, even a major threat, to Gawain and humanity in general. Upon approaching the Green Chapel, he realizes that he will die, uttering snippets to himself such as “ to take my life (2194)” and “ forfeit my life may be (2210).” Still, he journeys on to face the inevitable hardship that faces him. However, in sudden revelation, the Knight finds that he is not to die yet; he was merely being tested and judged by the lord to determine if he was honorable. Like Everyman, Gawain finds that the test he must go through is not necessarily evil in itself, as long as he has girded himself well with the tools of salvation. Death comes only as a messenger of God's moral and infallible impartiality.