

# An evil pagani

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The tale of Sir Gawain and his encounter with the Green Knight is a tale that weaves itself through deceit and trickery by characters who do not hold the same values that Sir Gawain does. His moral standing both as a knight and a Christian is tested several times by seemingly evil people. However, there could be a deeper root to this evil that is not directly addressed within the story. Although the role of the villain can be placed upon many characters within Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the true villain within the poem is Paganism.

Paganism, which is an umbrella term coined by Christians to define pre-Christian religions, makes its appearance in Sir Gawain's tale in several forms (Stone, para 1). But before getting to that, it needs to be explained how these recurring Pagan acts and behaviors do play the villain and therefore ensue conflict for Sir Gawain. Firstly, Paganism doesn't abide by Christian rules. First and foremost, Pagans are polytheistic, which directly contradicts the Christian belief that there is only one, supreme God. A second difference that plays a large role in this story is Pagans' belief and use of magic to get things done. One could even argue that it is the belief in the individual that disagrees with the Christian belief that all faith and power be placed in God alone. The Bible itself even warns against turning to magic and witchcraft by stating, "Do not turn to mediums or necromancers; do not seek them out, and so make yourselves unclean by them. I am the Lord, your God" (Leviticus 19: 31). So, knowing this, it is easier to understand the fear and awe that befell Sir Gawain's knights when this immeasurably tall and large man on horseback came into the Great Hall during their feast (Gawain, pg 6). During this exchange, the Green Knight proposes a challenge to the

King, as well as the entire hall of knights, in which he calls upon the bravest a day” said person must find the Green Knight and be dealt the same blow from the same axe by the Green Knight’s hands (Gawain, pg. 11). This is all a ploy, however, and it’s the catalyst that really begins the story. Sir Gawain, one of King Arthur’s knights, takes the challenge in Arthur’s place and actually beheads the Green Knight. And to the amazement of the entire hall, the knight picks up his severed head, rides off into the sunset, and reminds Sir Gawain of his end of the bargain (Gawain, pg. 15). This is the first villainous act of Paganism and the trouble that dealing with non-Christians cause. And so Sir Gawain’s battle begins, one in which he has to fight the temptation and trickery of a religion that is not his own, one that he knows nothing about and has no connection to. It could be compared with trying to win a game that you’ve never played before, one where everyone else knows the rules but you. And Pagan games like this are the ones that shake Sir Gawain in his virtue both as a knight and as a Christian.

Sir Gawain, as a knight, was privy to the virtues that came along with that title, and was described by the narrator as such. “ Good was he, pure as refined gold, void of all villainy, virtue did him enfold, and grace...” (Sir Gawain, pg. 22). These virtues, however, were tested again and again by Pagan acts and people. It is seen again in another game in Book Two. It was almost a year and a day later, and Sir Gawain prepares to set off to go and find the Green Knight around the time of All Hallows Eve. After months of travel in which he had to battle starvation, animal attacks, and oncoming winter, he prays to the Virgin Mary that he finds a castle so that he could go somewhere for Christmas mass. A glimmering castle does appear to Sir

Gawain, and believing that his prayers were being answered, he seeks shelter within it and is greeted by a large, bearded host who all too eagerly welcomes him inside (Sir Gawain, pg. 24-29). Sir Gawain is invited to the feast of the large host in which he asks him to stay awhile to rest. He states, "Thou shalt lie long in bed, and, lingering, take thine ease at morn, nor rise for mass..." (Sir Gawain, pg. 37). This should have been a red flag to Gawain. What upstanding, Christian man would advise his guest to not rise for mass and have morning worship? But, to Gawain, the invitation of a few good nights' rest and free food allowed him to overlook that statement. Another red flag should've been his host's next statement about how he would allow his wife, his good-looking wife, to keep him company while he went out hunting every day (Sir Gawain, pg 37). For what reason would he leave his beautiful wife alone with another man, knight or not?

Then comes the pact between Sir Gawain and the host, in which he says that he will give whatever he has hunted that day to Sir Gawain in exchange for whatever Sir Gawain has received that day as well (Sir Gawain, pg. 37). So here is the beginning of yet another ploy by those following Paganism to weaken Sir Gawain in both his virtue as a knight and his faith as a Christian. The wife of the host most definitely keeps Sir Gawain company; but only in effort to seduce him. For three days she tried, only able to gain kisses for her efforts. Most notably, on the third day, she gives the knight three kisses and is also able to convince him to accept her girdle, which she says has a protection power. The lure of the Lady's lace was so powerful that Sir Gawain even lied about gaining it when it came time to exchange his gifts with his host on page 64. He is faltering here, in both of the most important aspects

of his life. His virtue as a knight was compromised when he agreed to a pact and lied during it for personal gain, and his chastity and virtue as a Christian was compromised when he allowed the Lady of the castle to kiss him and accept her girdle. Paganism had a hand in all of this, and that is especially seen toward the end of the poem, after Sir Gawain finds the Green Knight, is not beheaded by him, and the Green Knight explains everything. It turns out that Morgan la Faye, the sorceress, has planned all of this, changing the host, whose name is Bertilak, into the Green Knight by changing his appearance and sending him to Camelot to propose the initial jest that caused all of the events following it (Sir Gawain, pg. 80). It was Paganism that allowed these events to take place and made Sir Gawain slip in his moral character. Had Pagan followers like Morgan la Faye, the Green Knight and his wife not begun to resort to trickery and sin to meet their ends, Sir Gawain would have remained upright in his faith and continued to live peacefully in Camelot.

Paganism's use of trickery and magic are not the only things that would make it evil in this story. The overwhelmingly evil part of it is that Paganism allows for supernatural beings to exist; ones that exhibit powers that only God should wield. Firstly, the Green Knight, who was, in fact, green in color and was able to have his head cut off and survive the blow (Sir Gawain, pg. 6). Then you have the Green Knight's or Bertilak's wife, who lacks a supernatural power, but does use her power of seduction several times to get the better of Sir Gawain. She also is the one to present this "magic" girdle to Sir Gawain (Sir Gawain, pg. 60). Finally, there's the mastermind, Morgan la Faye, who possesses the most power. But she is not mentioned

until the end of the story. She is briefly met in Book Two, where she is described as an ugly old woman. But she is, in fact the puppet master with all of this, she changed Bertilak's appearance so that he'd appear as the Green Knight and she sent him into Camelot. This was all a test of Sir Gawain's knightly pride. This was the root of the evil; the idea that a being other than the one true God could test a man's virtue. It is made all the worse that she was a woman. All of these characters exhibit a great sin against God as well, whether it be Lust or Pride or greed. These characters allowed Paganism to be their belief center and they all acted against Christian teachings and tried to take Sir Gawain down that same path.

Though Paganism may not be evil on its own, it did present a threat and evil to people who were trying to live a good, Christian lifestyle. It is easy to blame the characters for their misdeeds, but it is also necessary to take a deeper look into what made these characters commit the villainous and dishonest acts that they did. This could also serve as a cautionary tale to good Christians everywhere, warning them about trickery and like this and efforts that could be made to sway them from their faith. Luckily, in the end, Sir Gawain was able to overcome the forces posed against him.