

# English paper

Literature, British Literature



The morality play *The Summoning of Everyman* and the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are two popular works from Middle English literature that people have been reading and enjoying for centuries. Both of the main characters, Everyman and Sir Gawain, have a journey to death; however, each character endures their journey differently. Gawain accepts his passage to a certain death while Everyman is surprised by Death's appearance and begs for more years of life rather than go on the pilgrimage he is commanded to take. Another similarity between Everyman and Gawain is that they confessed their sins in order to receive penance. Both characters displayed contrition and remorse for their previous actions, confessed their sins, and received penance and absolution. Although both experienced the same four elements of the Sacrament of Penance, Everyman and Gawain were seeking absolution for different reasons and had different reactions after absolution. Everyman and Gawain's journeys to death both appeared unexpectedly and were guaranteed to be long and brutal. On New Year's Day, a giant green knight dressed entirely in green and gold on a green horse approached King Arthur's court in hopes of finding someone to accept his challenge that if one struck him with an axe, in a year and one day the green knight may strike that person in return. When seeing that King Arthur was flustered, Gawain bravely stood up to the challenge saying that "such a foolish affair is unfitting for a king". After he strikes at the green knight and is reminded once more of the pact he agreed to, Gawain and the people of Arthur's court continue to dine, drink, and enjoy their holiday. Not until Christmas Eve (with roughly a week left to find the green knight at the green chapel) do we see Sir Gawain start to become distressed, "praying with a

heavy heart". After his stay at Bertilak de Hautdesert's, Gawain once again displays confidence towards his journey of certain death against the green knight's axe. After his guide to the green chapel flees, Gawain courageously says, " By Christ, I will not cry, or groan, but find my fortune by the grace of God alone. " Even when he hears the terrifying sound of the axe being sharpened, Gawain boldly calls out to the green knight to meet him and honor their pact. Although Sir Gawain was guilty of flinching when the green knight took a stroke at his neck, Gawain's attitude was much more accepting towards death than Everyman's was. On the other hand, Everyman's journey was commanded to him by God's messenger Death. Because God was displeased with how people of the world were living on the Earth, Death demands his account book of deeds from Everyman and tells him about the long journey he must take to stand before God and be judged. Clearly, Everyman is caught off guard and unprepared. " O Death, thou comest when I had thee least in mind". Instead of facing the inevitable journey we all take to death, he bargains with Death and says " A thousand pound shalt thou have and defer this matter till another day" and " For all unready is my book of reckoning but twelve year and I might have a biding. My counting-book I would make so clear that my reckoning I should not need to fear". Once Death makes it clear that Everyman cannot escape his pilgrimage to death, he calls on his companions to accompany him on his journey. This is quite the opposite of Sir Gawain, who goes about his journey alone. Throughout his journey, the companions Everyman calls for help forsake him and leave him, except for Good Deeds who descend into the grave with him at the conclusion of Everyman's journey. This is also substantially different than Sir

Gawain's story; while Sir Gawain returns to Camelot to discuss what happened during his time away, Everyman is received by angels to welcome his soul to Heaven. The other important similarity between Sir Gawain and Everyman is the significance they placed on receiving penance for their sins. Once Gawain has received the blow of the green knight's axe for not being truthful about keeping the girdle from the lord's wife, Gawain is embarrassed, ashamed, and furious at himself. He flings the girdle at the green knight out of frustration and cries out that he forgot the true character of a knight and confesses that he made a terrible mistake. Gawain pleads with the green knight and says " But tell me what it takes to clear my clouded name. " Because Sir Gawain confessed his wrong doing, the green knight replies, " By confessing your failings you are free from fault and have openly paid penance at the point of my axe. I declare you purged, as polished and as pure as the day you were born, without blemish or blame". Everyman also receives his penance through confession. Knowledge, the sister of Good Deeds, brings Everyman to Confession at the house of salvation so that he may help his weak Good Deeds and obtain satisfaction from his sins. Everyman is told by Confession " Ask God mercy and he will grant, truly" and with Knowledge's counsel Everyman is prays for mercy and to be saved from hell. To make his reckoning sure, Everyman also undergoes the scourge of penance and his Good Deeds are restored. After this, Good Deeds is joyful and says " For thee is preparate the eternal glory. Ye have me made whole and sound, therefore I will bide by thee in every stound. "

There are two important differences between these two characters receiving penance. First, Everyman and Sir Gawain have different reactions after the

absolution of their sins; Gawain still views himself with shame and disgrace, while Everyman is light-hearted and rejoices. Even though the green knight gave him absolution, Gawain still sees the girdle as a symbol of his failure and cowardice and showed the scar on the side of his neck while he would writhe in rage. When speaking to members of King Arthur's court after his return Sir Gawain says, " For man's crimes can be covered but never made clean; once sin is entwined it is attached for all time. " Unfortunately, the absolution Gawain received was not enough to clear Gawain's conscience. Everyman's reaction to the freedom he received from his sins was the complete opposite from Gawain's. After Good Deeds is delivered from her sickness and woe, Everyman says, " My heart is light, and shall be evermore. How will I smite faster than I did before" and weeps out of love for the restoration of Good Deeds. The other significant difference about Everyman and Sir Gawain is the reason why each one wanted absolution from their sins. After the green knight strikes Sir Gawain, he explains that he was the lord who showed Gawain courtesy the past few days and he had sent his wife after Gawain to test him. He continues to say that he struck him with the ax because he was aware that Gawain was in possession of his wife's girdle. Upon hearing this Gawain immediately becomes ashamed of his cowardly behavior and curses at himself. Because his actions were so unlike that of a knight's, he confesses his sins and asks how he can clear his name; thus the green lord declares that Gawain is without blemish. Regrettably, Everyman had a different and dangerous reason forcing him to ask for absolution. Throughout his life he valued fellowship, kindred, and goods above good deeds, causing his good deeds to be weak and in need of restoration. Without Good Deeds,

Everyman would have been sentenced to purgatory or Hell, causing him to ask for absolution. At first glance, the stories of Sir Gawain and Everyman may not seem very similar at all; however, both of these stories share some of the same elements. They both follow their main characters on dangerous, long journeys to death (or almost certain death). While Sir Gawain bravely chooses his journey and does so alone, Everyman attempts to run from his death and calls upon many companions to escort him. Another thing these characters have in common is their search of absolution from their sins. Sir Gawain and Everyman have different reasoning and reactions for their absolution; Sir Gawain wishes to clear his name from his behavior unlike a knight yet still has regret after receiving absolution. Everyman is forced to confess his sins to avoid being condemned to Hell but is joyful after he receives absolution.