

Sir gawain: a uniquely tragic christian hero

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



Three codes of conduct suffuse “ Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”: chivalry, honor, and Christian faith. As his mystical pentangle attests, Gawain begins his quest under the auspicious perfection of all three; however, after endeavoring through ineffable adversity and countless trials, he is exposed to be strikingly human. The faults laid bare- though few- haunt him terribly and the consolation offered by the Green Knight and King Arthur’s court is of no comfort. In fact, their responses to Gawain’s failings are so disconnected from the protagonist’s own sentiments that they elucidate a misunderstanding of the true nature and depth of his remorse. Gawain’s intense shame is not founded on chivalric faults or promissory dishonor; rather, it is based on the Christian concept of original sin. By accepting the green girdle, Gawain commits the sin of pride and is forced to realize that he will never be able to reach the state of prelapsarian perfection for which he strives. Gawain’s own description shows that his iniquity stems from the undue weight he placed on his own life. In his desperation to preserve himself from almost certain decapitation at the axe of the Green Knight, he sacrifices faith for self-preservation and takes the green girdle. He confesses, “ The faults and the frailty of the flesh perverse, / How its tenderness entices the foul taint of sin” (lines 2435-2436). He is guilty of pride: holding his own life in an improper position towards God; by valuing his own flesh too greatly, he attempts to act outside the will of God and embraces the false idol of the belt. This interpretation of Gawain’s shame is supported by his explanation that the girdle is a “ badge of false faith” and he will continue to wear it as a sign of “ the cowardice and coveting that [he] came to” (2509, 2508). Though “ coveting” is obviously the sin of greedily desiring the false, god-like

power attributed to the girdle, “ cowardice” is less clear. One might think Gawain is confessing to a spineless lack of courage, yet he clarifies it earlier in the poem as “ care for my life” (2379). Gawain’s words show that he judges his sin of overvaluing his own life according to a Christian code of conduct and also provide a template to assess the other reactions in the poem. King Arthur’s court lauds Gawain and cheerfully consoles his woes because they evaluate him in accordance to a sense of chivalry, not faith. In the opening scene of the epic, Arthur is portrayed as “ a little boyish,” requiring “ some far-borne tale” or “ some marvel of might, that he might trust, / By champions of chivalry achieved in arms” before he begins his meal and, from Gawain’s homecoming, it seems little has changed: “ How it chanced at the chapel, what cheer made the knight, / The love of the lady, the green lace at last” (86, 93-94, 2496-2497). The court is too absorbed by his chivalric tale to see the moral implications of the story. Their reaction prompts him to “ naked[ly] display” the “ nick on his neck” and “ with rage in [his] heart” launch into a fevered confession of his “ blemish” and “ sore loss” (2498, 2501, 2506, 2507). But the Table still doesn’t understand or give the proper weight to his shame; “ the court all together / Agree with gay laughter and gracious intent” that everyone should wear a similar belt, and “ he [be] honored that had it, evermore after” (2513-2514, 2520). That the court takes up the girdle only as a way to “ accord for that worthy’s sake,” (referring to him as “ worthy” when Gawain has just attested otherwise,) and twists the symbol to a sign of honor is further proof that, in their eyes, Gawain has done no real wrong- if any at all (2518). Gawain has returned with a grand tale of chivalry and that is good enough. Sadly, though Gawain

has learned the trappings of pride, the lesson learned through the Green Knight's challenge does not trickle down through the court; they are as obsessed with image, reputation, and chivalric grandeur as before. Though the Green Knight was sent to " assay, if such it were, the surfeit of pride / That is rumored of the retinue of the Round Table," his forgiveness of Gawain ignores this original mission and instead is based on the protagonist's overall successful adherence to a code of honor (2457-2458). Like Gawain, the Green Knight points to the green belt as the source of his wrongdoing; however, his language shows that it was Gawain's disloyalty to his host in not presenting it as part of his earnings at the end of the third day- not the sins implicit with accepting the belt- that required the penance of his blade. The Green Knight describes the grievance: " Yet you lacked, sir, a little in loyalty there, / But the cause was not cunning, nor courtship either, / But that you loved your own life; the less, then, to blame" (2366-2368). His use of " loyalty" cannot be understated; though the word may seem to suggest a fidelity to God, it actually refers to a " faithful adherence to one's promise, oath, word of honour, etc" and thus can only be applied to his wrong against the host. Furthermore, the fact that the Green Knight cites Gawain's love of his life as an excuse for his wrongdoing- when it is self-professed to be the root of his sinning- also shows that the Green Knight is judging Gawain on a code of loyalty or promissory honor and not Christian morals. Perhaps he is not aware of Gawain's sin, but more likely he feels no need to go farther than his duty: Morgan le Faye sent him to " assay" the court's " surfeit of pride," not pass judgment. King Arthur's court and the Green Knight react to Gawain's story with amiable consolation, indicating that they judge him

according to chivalry and honor, not Christian ethics; yet, the question remains: why does Gawain take the sin of self-preservation so seriously? After all, no one else seems to recognize its egregiousness, and right after it is committed a priest “absolve[s] him of his sins as safe and as clean / As if the day of Doom were to Dawn on the morrow” (1883-1884). The only answer lies in Gawain’s identity as a tragic hero. In the wake of all that he has achieved in the realms of chivalry and honor, he is tormented by an impossible perfection. And not only does he strive for something he cannot achieve, but in seeking perfection beyond original sin, he only ends up sinning more. He is noble, suffers more than he deserves, and is doomed from the start- but his story isn’t one of despair. As the final wheel suggests, Gawain’s journey, like Jesus’, is meant to rouse empathy and encourage people to find their place in faith: Many such, ere were born, Have befallen here, ere this. May He that was crowned with thorn Bring all men to His bliss! Amen. (2527-2530) For what matters not is that men fall- for that happened long ago- but that, with the grace of God, they attempt to pull themselves up. Works Cited” Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” in The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Eighth edition, Vol. A, ed. Simpson, David. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2000, 160-213.