

The conscience of green

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



Arthurian legends served as a means to centralize the Celtic culture and provide the Celtic people with their own myth in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries CE. One such Celtic myth of the late fourteenth century CE is Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Many interpretations have explained the Green Knight as a symbol of the spring season and a Christ-like figure. The tale does indeed portray several significant myths, such as those of Christ and a quasi spring deity, for the European people. The Green Knight and Bertilak, however, are a better representation of not a transcending conception but of a mortal essence: Sir Gawain's conscience. The symbolism of the Green Knight and Bertilak as Sir Gawain's conscience provides a cyclical development of Sir Gawain's character by juxtaposing the characters of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, juxtaposing the characters of Sir Gawain and Bertilak, and initiating Gawain's repentance for his sinful pride. The symbolism of the characters the Green Knight and Bertilak as the conscience of Sir Gawain is first introduced with the juxtaposition of the Green Knight and Sir Gawain. In the beginning of the tale, Sir Gawain is established as a good, righteous knight without any faults, through the dialogue and narration in the Arthurian court. He is the only knight who challenges the goliath Green Knight as King Arthur's replacement. The Green Knight is described as lacking armor yet carries a battleaxe, which he does not intend to use, when he challenges the Arthurian court. Once Gawain accepts the Green Knight's challenge. Gawain is interested in protecting his king and the court, whereas the Green Knight wants to harm the court. Gawain's Christian faith in God appears to be the source of his courage and confidence against the Green Knight. As Gawain departs on his journey, King Arthur speaks of Gawain's

integrity as Gawain may have spoken with the words, “ In destinies sad or merry, true men can but try” (ll. 564-565, pp. 1471). The Green Knight serves as a part of a test of virtues in the beginning of the tale and therefore as the criticalness of Gawain’s conscience. Sir Gawain continues his pilgrimage to the Green Chapel in hopes of finding the Green Knight and, ultimately, his true self. Sir Gawain and Bertilak are juxtaposed secondly to further the symbolism of Bertilak and the Green Knight as Sir Gawain’s conscience. In Gawain’s moment of desperation and need of rest, the vision of the castle of Hautdesert provides hope for Gawain. The hope restored in Gawain with his vision of Bertilak’s white castle conveys the castle as a safe haven and Bertilak as a savior. Once Gawain meets Bertilak, he examines him studiously, as if he knows him. The familiarity of Bertilak suggests that Gawain recognizes certain characteristics that remind him of the Green Knight, or rather characteristics that remind him of his self. His amazement in the presence of Bertilak is expressed in the lines, “ So comely a mortal never Christ made as he. Whatever his place of birth, it seemed he well might be without a peer on earth in martial rivalry” (ll. 869-874, pp. 1479). Bertilak is seemingly interested in being hospitable and honest to his guest. The agreement between Bertilak and Gawain is to trade whatever each one receives during the three days. The three days of Bertilak’s hunting signify Gawain’s journey and his nearing future vividly. Bertilak is relentless and merciless in hunting the helpless animals, as Gawain is restless in his search for the Green Knight. During the hunt, Bertilak symbolizes the pureness of Gawain’s conscience while the animals represent Gawain during the hunt. The animals are resilient and sly in escaping the dangers of the king, yet are

ultimately doomed, as Gawain is. Gawain's own conscience is awaiting his downfall to advantageously slaughter him and teach him of his mistakes. The castle, ironically, leads to Gawain's acceptance of temptation and his demise from perfection and virtuousness. The juxtaposition of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Bertilak is continued in the gloomy woods at the Green Chapel and, there in the woods, Gawain's conscience causes him to repent for his pride. The armoring of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, once again, in the forest convey a significant representation of Gawain's consciousness. The Green Knight has no defensive arms except the battleaxe. However, Gawain, who agreed to not defend himself from the Green Knight's blow, has elaborate though worthless defensive paraphernalia. The bejeweled and elaborately decorated weaponry and his shield and diamond-encrusted helmet would intimidate any warrior except the one he has chosen to fight. As additional protection, Gawain accepts the sash from Lady Bertilak in hopes of preserving his life, which suggests his lack of faith in God to protect him. His fear and guilt accumulate as he waits to be decapitated by the Green Knight-he knows that the sash is not going to protect his life now. After three strikes with the axe, the Green Knight only leaves a nick on Gawain's neck. The Green Knight reveals his true identity as Bertilak and reprimands Sir Gawain for conceding to the temptation of the sash with the words, "' Accursed be a cowardly and covetous heart! In you is villainy and vice, and virtue laid low'" (ll. 2374-2375, pp. 1508). Sir Gawain realizes that his guarded conscience was infiltrated easily by the seductiveness of Lady Bertilak's sash and was overwhelm with pride. Gawain responds to the reprimand, " I confess, knight, in this place, most dire is my misdeed; let me

gain back your good grace, and thereafter I shall take heed" (ll. 2385-2388, pp. 1509). Gawain also realizes that the acceptance of the sash fetters his own virtuousness. In conclusion, the Green Knight and Bertilak as a part of Sir Gawain's conscience rectify the mistake and sinful nature of Gawain's actions. Bertilak and the Green Knight serve as a catalyst in Sir Gawain's own consciousness to evaluate his actions and pride and to experience humility for the first time. The evilness of the Green Knight and goodness of Bertilak recoil on themselves and ultimately lead to Sir Gawain's realization of his prideful nature. His pilgrimage to find the Green Chapel is necessary to assess his own faithfulness and virtuousness. His confession and faithfulness, specifically his disinterested piety at the beginning of the tale, are conveyed as the whole of his virtuousness. Faith and virtue, furthermore, are nothing if they are not tested. One's own test of faith and virtue leads to better discernment for the conscience. The evilness and goodness of Sir Gawain are reconciled at the end of the tale into one being to provide the stability and security of his tested virtues.