

# Appearance of honesty over action

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



In the poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain's acceptance of the green girdle shows his hidden character of self-absorption and fear of mortality. Gawain's real character is not represented by his pentangle, but rather by the green girdle. Gawain goes against his chivalric and Christian standards of honesty, courage and faith, and allows his animalistic instincts for survival to dictate his behavior.

Gawain acts upon his animalistic instincts when he accepts the green girdle from his seducer as a supposed "love token." In reality, he is only concerned with the girdle's special powers and its ability to possibly save his life.

Gawain outwardly refuses to accept such a gift when he is first presented with the lady's girdle. It is only after the lady explains that the seemingly simple piece of silk is actually a "prize" that is "praiseworthy, precious, and fine," (1850) that Gawain consents to keeping the gift. Gawain constantly dwells on his fate: "In the deepest of dreams, Gawain drowsily spoke- / As a man who's in mourning, with many sad thoughts- / Of the day that his destiny deigned that he must / At the Green Chapel greet the fierce Green Knight?" (1750-1753). In his dream, Gawain's subconscious, true and innermost thoughts are revealed. It is only out of Gawain's concern for survival that he accepts the gift, not out of his love for his seducer or out of his remembrance of her. He fails to demonstrate his courage when he accepts the girdle in an effort to save himself from harm. When faced with the reality of his decapitation, Gawain's survival instincts take over his façade of courage and piety, represented by his pentangle symbol. His desire to circumvent his certain death leads him to accept the girdle and to knowingly violate the Exchange of Winnings agreement with his lord to trade

all his “wins” of the day. Gawain’s total disregard to honor his agreement violates honesty, part of the code of chivalry.

By accepting the lady’s girdle, Gawain places greater value on his own survival than on his chivalric values. He says, “He was sorely concerned should his chivalry fail, / But he feared more his fate if he falsely should sin” (1773-1774). The pentangle symbol on his shield represents the high qualities and standards Gawain strives to embody. Instead of being guided by an internal strength of character and honor to commitment, Gawain takes the cowardly course and places his faith in the magical power of an inanimate object to save himself from harm. As a member of King Arthur’s Round Table, Gawain is supposed to exemplify the highest qualities of chivalry, which include bravery and honesty. When he chooses to accept the girdle, Gawain demonstrates his cowardice and his lack of chivalrous character. Gawain faces a difficult decision: he can either give into temptation and commit a sin or refuse the lady and violate his chivalric courtesy. He chooses to violate the code of chivalry and puts more importance on his life.

The actual placement of the girdle and the pentangle, drawn on his shield, is most revealing of Gawain’s character. While the shield is boldly placed in front of his chest and is easily visible, Gawain places the green girdle on his waist, a less noticeable part of the body. It is important to notice that Gawain chooses to place the girdle “about his smooth hips” (2032) and not across his chest. At the end of the poem, The King and the rest of the court decided to wear a girdle similar to Gawain’s; but instead of wearing the girdles

around their waists, they wear the piece of cloth as it were a sash: “ Even lady and lord who belonged to the Table- / That a baldric be borned by the brothergood’s men, A silk band wrapped about of bright, glowing green” (2515-2517). In the Oxford English dictionary, a “ baldric” is worn from one shoulder across the breast and under the opposite arm. Compared to the people in King Arthur’s Court, Gawain choose to wear the girdle on a less noticeable part of the body. Gawain appears to be virtuous and chivalric, as represented by his shield, but his true, hidden character is less noticeable and obvious, like the girdle. There is also a stark contrast between the colors of the two objects; the girdle is green whereas the pentangle is gold. The green color represents something sinister and wicked, while the gold color suggests something holy and precious. The quotation contrasts the symbolism behind the pentangle and the girdle. Gawain’s weak character, symbolized by his keeping of the girdle, falls short of the high virtues of chivalry, represented by the pentangle.

It is easy for Gawain to claim chivalry by wearing the pentangle symbol for all to see, but it is far more difficult for him to demonstrate bravery and honor through his actions in the face of death. Although Gawain defeats his foes and keeps his promise to meet the Green Knight, he partially fails the test of bravery and honor and reveals his cowardice and lack of chivalry. A person may put forth an appearance of honesty, integrity and courage in the way he outwardly presents himself to others, but the true measure of a person’s character is through his action and behavior in the face of adversity and temptation.