

Critical analysis - sir gawain and the green knight

Literature



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Symbolism is a key literary device used throughout the story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The beheading game, the green girdle and the timing of the events relative to the seasons all have deep symbolic meaning when examined in proper context within the story. However, no symbol is more powerful at conveying the values Sir Gawain sought to epitomize than that of the Pentacle, or five pointed star. The personally held beliefs and values of Sir Gawain are crucial to the story surrounding his interactions with the Green Knight because it is the upholding or failure to uphold these specific personal values that gives the poem a plotline.

The author made much of this particular symbol, taking a goodly portion of the story to convey its importance to the reader. The Pentacle, it is explained, was originally designed by none other than King Solomon himself after being inspired to produce it after a visit from the archangel Michael. It was designed with the intent to hinting at things eternal, celestial and spiritual. The five points of the Pentacle came to represent the bulk of what is considered to be the code of Christian chivalry as lived by the knights who supped at King Arthur's table. These five virtues are to be faultless in his five senses; never to fail in his five fingers (physical ability to defend and fight); to be faithful to the five wounds that Christ received on the cross; to be strengthened by the five joys that the Virgin Mary had in Jesus, and to possess brotherly love, courtesy, piety, and chastity.

While the first four virtues represented by the Pentacle are each unique and obviously important for a knight of Camelot to possess, it is clear that the personal attributes of possessing brotherly kindness, courtesy, piety and chastity are the key values Sir Gawain displays in this story.

A display of brotherly kindness set the story in motion. The Green Knight
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originally threatened Arthur on that remarkable New Year's Day. Sir Gawain, taking Arthur's position as king in mind and wanting to protect him from the obvious yet unknown trickery the Green Knight had in store, humbly offered to take the Green Knight's challenge instead of letting Arthur do so. This kindness and concern for his brother/king sent Sir Gawain upon his adventure.

The courtesy of Sir Gawain is on display even as the Lady of the Green Church is attempting to seduce him. She being a Lady, he had no mind to cause her pain by rejecting her advances. At the same time, he valued his chastity above all else. These deeply held values caused Sir Gawain to engage in a precarious balancing act for he had to consider the desires of the Lady (though those desires were fraught with wickedness) and the retention of his own chastity on the other. By exchanging chaste kisses with the Lady and then exchanging the same chaste, brotherly kisses with the Green Knight upon his return from hunting each day, Sir Gawain was able to satisfy his desire to be courteous and chaste.

Only in failing to surrender the green girdle did Sir Gawain fail during the course of his quest. In his own mind, his lack of piety and his desires to possess the things of the world caused him to retain the girdle and to flinch at the blow from the Green Knight. For this action, Sir Gawain bore a scar back to Camelot with him as do we all when we forfeit the values that we hold dear. His return to Camelot may have been of concern to him for fear of appearing weak and scarred after his failure but nothing could be farther from the truth for indeed, the other knights adopted the green girdle as a symbol of honor so that the memory of Sir Gawain's adventure would always remain with them.

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