

Enduring love

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



The mystery of love has stumped men and women for ages. Literature, drama, and art have and will always try to understand courting, romance, and passion. So too do they want to understand what happens after love is gone: where it went and how it can ever be rekindled. While love is always shown from different angles, it's long-standing themes are static, consistent, and comforting for generations after who realize that they are grappling with the same heartache as artisans of the past. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, a medieval poem, and Michael Drayton's Sonnet 61 (" Since there's no help, come let us kiss and part,") a poem from the Renaissance, exemplify how the same threads of love are woven through different time periods with different values and social mores. They particularly look at saying good-bye to a lover, either because of falling out of love (internally) or because of external factors. Sir Gawain and Green Knight and Sonnet 61 both suggest that one is always left with the imprint of past love even after love is gone, that two people who were in love always retain an attachment to their former lovers. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, written in the late fourteenth century, cannot be wholly separated from the time period in which it was composed. This truly was an era of knights and their ladies fair, of heroism, gallantry, and chivalry. The respective roles of the sexes were largely ceremonial. From the beginning of the work, for example, the poet sets up a New Year's Eve feast complete with men jousting and otherwise flexing their brawn; women, in turn give the knights gifts (usually kisses) for their bravery (lines 60-70). In addition, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a poem largely set against a Christian background; an emphasis, for instance, is placed on the pentangle which " represents" Sir Gawain – the " sign of

Solomon,” the narrator tells us, “ sagely devised / to be a token a truth” (lines 625-626). In contrast, Sonnet 61 was written during a more secular time period. Though still of a fundamentally religious orientation, the Renaissance witnessed revivals of and advancements in art, literature, and science. This sonnet is separate from Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in that it expects no ties to religion. Thus, if we were categorize these two works, we would distinguish the first as a “ religious-romantic poem” and the second as a “ secular-romantic sonnet;” both are romantic in that they are tales of men and women which end, if not happily, with hope. Time period and genre notwithstanding, these two pieces demonstrate the same theme of enduring love, love that doesn’t end cleanly. The difference is that a longer poem can lead the reader through an often winding journey which shows the progression of one such enduring love; the sonnet sets up a single moment in a relationship, in this case, the breakup, and is a more general commentary on this particular quality of love. Yet, these differences serve not to dispute the commonness of the theme, but to enhance it. Both Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Sonnet 61 start by describing love as an oath or a vow. The entire premise of the former work, in fact, revolves around contracts, most significantly the kissing contract between the Lady and Sir Gawain and the hunting contract between Sir Gawain and the host. The latter agreement, that Sir Gawain gives the host what he has received during the day in return for what the host brings back from the hunt, absolves Sir Gawain of the former. This interlocking nature of the contracts takes on a special meaning when Sir Gawain and the Lady enter into a more binding pact, when Sir Gawain takes the green baldric. “ You would not be

my debtor for so dear a thing / I shall give you my girdle; you gain less thereby" (lines 1828-1829), says the Lady, giving the first hint of later implications which might befall Sir Gawain when he meets the Green Knight. It is the vow that is not absolved; Sir Gawain does not give the equivalent of the baldric to the host as part of the hunting contract. The lover in Sonnet 61 tells his Lady, " Shake hands forever, cancel all our vows" (line 5). It is reasonable, of course, to imagine the more common vows one might make with a lover: vows of fidelity, protection, and everlasting love. This is not entirely foreign from the symbolism of the baldric; the protection offered by the green garment (the vow which was not absolved) becomes proof against the Lady's fidelity to her husband and a sign of her love for Sir Gawain. The relationships in both Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Sonnet 61 end with seemingly good sportsmanship. Upon leaving the bedroom of the Lady for the last time before he will face the Green Knight, Sir Gawain thanks the Lady and accepts three kisses from her before she turns to go. After, he gets dressed in " rich attire" and " then with good cheer to the chapel he goes" (lines 1873-1876). This is compared to the lover in Drayton's sonnet who ends his relationship by saying, " Come let us kiss and part... / And I am glad... / That thus so cleanly I myself can free" (lines 1-4). How these relationships end might lead us to believe that what ensued was the ideal picture of a breakup. Yet, these tear-free, clean good-byes will not last for either couple; Drayton writes, " Be it not seen in either of our brows / That we one jot of former love retain" (lines 7-8). But we see through Sir Gawain that though his love may not be plain on his face, he is wearing the green sash under his clothes. It is then not only as a symbol of protection but

inadvertently as a reminder of nights spent with the Lady. Sonnet 61 most directly paints the picture of love's last stand: Now at the last gasp of love's latest breath, When, his pulse failing, passion speechless lies, When faith is kneeling by his bed of death, And innocence is closing up his eyes.... Lines 9-12 Love that they hope can quietly be forgotten, lingers and dies a slow death. This scene is an allegory for the end of love which is physically played out in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Sir Gawain's passion for fighting the Green Knight is exhausted when the latter reveals that the Lady with whom he has spent his nights is in fact the Green Knight's wife. Sir Gawain gives in to the Green Knight, exposing his neck without flinching for his opponent to strike. In this act of surrender, Sir Gawain loses a sort of innocence, the innocence that has led him to believe that he can never be defeated, he who is the great knight Sir Gawain whose reputation is known far and wide. His innocence – and also his faith in his strength – is lost when he realizes the persistence of his love. The author of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight gives clues to this end; in an ironic moment, Sir Gawain thinks that a token from the Lady will protect him from the Green Knight for no other reason than that she says it will protect him and he is in love with her. Thinks Sir Gawain about her gift, “ It was a pearl for his plight, the peril to come / When he gains the Green Chapel to get his reward / Could he escape unscathed, the scheme were noble” (lines 1856-1857). This token of their love which was supposed to protect him will betray his feelings in front of the Green Knight. The narrator in Sonnet 61 has a last moment of panic when he is describing the death of love. As faith and innocence are witnessing the event which they never believed could happen (that love could die) and thus can no

longer be “faith” and “innocence,” the narrator tells his former lover that only she can revive love from “death to life” (line 14). So that we see that the narrator has, in fact, retained some of his faith and innocence in believing that even when love is dead – unrecoverable, unsalvageable, gone – it still has the enduring possibility of being reawakened. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, though, the author doesn’t even give a hint to Sir Gawain’s distress at leaving the Lady. “They never before had found him / So gracious and so gay” (line 1891-1892), the author remarks about the afternoon after the two have departed. But we learn later how their love endures. The green garment that she gives him – at first a symbol of her desire to protect him from her husband and also a symbol of his naivety that this garment can indeed do what she promises – later becomes a sign that this parting moment is not an end to their love. When Sir Gawain learns that the Lady is married to the Green Knight, he wears the baldric as a symbol of his shame, to remind himself that one cannot just end love without it later resonating in one’s life. Sir Gawain returns to King Arthur’s court embarrassed about what has happened between him and the Lady but is surprised by the support he receives from his fellow knights. They welcome him and decide that they will all wear green baldrics as a symbol of brotherhood, that is, a symbol that everyone has and will be duped by love.