

Sir gawain: the ideal knight

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



J. R. R Tolkien once said, " There is indeed no better medium for moral teaching than the good fairy story" (73). Often when fairy stories are mentioned, people think of gallant knights fighting an evil beast. Knights such as Geoffrey Chaucer's knight in Canterbury Tales or even the nonfictional Richard the Lion Heart are exemplify knights. Determining the definition of ideal, however, determines whether or not a knight is ideal. Ideal in its simplest form means " a standard of excellence. " Many knights, fiction and nonfiction, fit this description; however, one knight in particular lives up to the description. Sir Gawain in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight exemplifies the ideal knight. Sir Gawain exemplifies the ideal knight because he demonstrates courage. First, he demonstrates courage before he departs from the castle. Sir Gawain's courage first reveals itself when Sir Gawain offers himself up to challenge the Green Knight in King Arthur's place and says, "I beseech, before all here, / That this melee may be mine'" (lines 341-42). When Sir Gawain departs from King Arthur's court, he is faced with difficult circumstances—circumstances that would have caused the average person to turn back. From the very beginning of his travelling, Sir Gawain, according to the poet, had no one to travel with but his horse, and the only one " to say his mind to" was God (693-96). The poet delineates all the foes that Sir Gawain fought: " serpents, " " savage wolves, " " wild men of the woods, " " bulls, " " bears, " " boars, " and " giants" (720-23). Sir Gawain also demonstrates courage when " The lord [Bercilak] with all his might / entreats his guest [Sir Gawain] to stay" (1041-42). Bercilak pleads numerous times with Sir Gawain to stay, and each time Sir Gawain has opportunity to succumb to the temptation to forget his debut with the Knight. Instead he

says, "I must set forth to search, as soon as I may; / To be about my business I have but three days / And would as soon sink down dead as desist from my errand'" (1065-67). Sir Gawain also demonstrates courage after he departs from the Castle. As Sir Gawain travels from the castle to the Green Chapel, the man accompanying him gives a speech about the dangers of the Knight. He ends his speech by saying, "And so, good Sir Gawain, let the grim man be; / Go off by some other road, in God's own name! / Leave by some other land, for the love of Christ'" (218-20). Although he had ample opportunity to turn back, Sir Gawain courageously pushes on with these final words to the man accompanying him: "I shall not give way to weeping; / God's will be done, amen! / I commend me to his keeping'" (2157-59). With these words ringing in his ears, Sir Gawain pushes on until he reaches the Green Chapel only to discover that the Green Chapel was nothing but a "prayer-house" which looked "hideous" (2190). With the scene of the prayer-house still dancing before his eyes, Sir Gawain tunes his ears: "then he heard . . . a most barbarous din: / Lord! it clattered in the cliff fit to cleave it in two, / As one upon a grindstone ground a great scythe" (2199-2202). The warning from the accompanying man, the sight of the Green Chapel, and the sound of the Knight sharpening his axe blade were frightening enough that Sir Gawain could have turned back, but one more moment of courage lay before him. Time crescendos into one moment of climax as Sir Gawain prepares for his death blow. The poet says that as he knelt to receive the marked ax blade upon his neck, "Gawain gave no ground, nor glanced up aside, / but stood still as a stone" (2292-93). Finally, Sir Gawain exemplifies the ideal knight because he demonstrates humility. First, he demonstrates

humility before he departs from the castle. The initial moment of humility occurs before Sir Gawain leaves King Arthur's Court. After he volunteers himself to take King Arthur's place in confronting the Knight, he says, "'I am the weakest, well I know, and of wit feeblest; / And the loss of my life would be the least of any'" (354-55). Later, while he is staying at Bercilak's castle, Sir Gawain receives praise from Bercilak's wife. Sir Gawain humbly replies, "'To arrive at such reverence as you recount here / I am one all unworthy, and well do I know it ' " (1243-44). Bercilak's wife's second attempt to prove Sir Gawain's fame is again knocked down by Sir Gawain's humility. He says, "'The praise you report pertains not to me, / But comes of your courtesy and kindness of heart'" (1266-67). Sir Gawain also demonstrates humility after he departs from the castle. First, Sir Gawain demonstrates humility by admitting his sins to the Green Knight. J. F. Kitley describes Sir Gawain's scene with the Green Knight this way: " At the end of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight the reader feels that Gawain has, in all essentials, come triumphantly through his severe testing . . .-and yet Gawain is ashamed" (215). Sir Gawain says to the Green Knight after receiving the cut from the ax, "'Your cut taught me cowardice, care for my life, / And coveting came after'" (2379-80). But Sir Gawain does not stop with admitting his sins. He also admits his guilt. He says, "'I confess, knight, in this place, / Most dire is my misdeed'" (2385-86). The next example of humility occurs when the Green Knight tells Sir Gawain to keep the green girdle, and Sir Gawain's response is that the green girdle should be "'a sign of excess'" (2433), and whenever he looked down, he would be reminded of "'the faults and frailty of the flesh perverse, /[and] how its tenderness entices the foul taint of sin'"

(2435-36). When Sir Gawain returns to King Arthur's court and tells King Arthur about the green girdle, he says, "This is the blazon of the blemish that I bear on my neck (2506), "And I must bear it on my body till I breathe my last" (2510). Considering the deeds of Sir Gawain as recorded in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the evidence proves Sir Gawain to be the epitome of the ideal knight. He displays both courage and humility. But one question arises, and that question has to do with Sir Gawain's faults. J. R. R. Tolkien states that Sir Gawain's faults are a means of enhancing his character, and ultimately in the end " he became a real man, and we can thus really admire his actual virtue" (7). Sir Gawain's virtues make him an ideal knight, but his faults add realism to the idealism. Most often when a standard of excellence is set up, perfections are put in the spotlight while sins are often hidden. Sir Gawain, on the other hand, portrays goodly virtues, and when he does sin, he keeps a token of the sin on himself as a remembrance of his faults.