

Crucial theme in sir gawain and the green knight

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Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, like the other allegorical poems ascribed to the Gawain poet, may be read as an allegorical tale of sin and redemption in Christian terms. That the poem has strong Christian underpinnings is beyond doubt, especially in view of the elaborate use of Christian symbols like the pentangle, Christian oaths, benedictions, and frequent references to Christ, Mary, various saints, Christmas and other feasts.

The Gawain poet uses the Romance material subversively to foreground the broader reality of human fallibility and the need for redemption through repentance. Gawain allegorically represents Everyman in so far as he undergoes the very real conflict within man between normal human weaknesses and the strict moral values he is called upon to follow and uphold, and finally proves his human dignity by acknowledging the reality of his human condition rather than the superhuman image projected in tales of Romance.

The world of Arthurian Romance is governed by the ideals of chivalry derived from the Christian concept of morality. These ideals are brought together in Gawain's symbolic shield, with the pentangle representing the five virtues of knights: friendship, generosity, chastity, courtesy, and piety; the five wounds that Christ received on the cross; the five joys that the Virgin Mary had in Jesus (the Annunciation, Nativity, Resurrection, Ascension, and Assumption). The side of the shield facing Gawain contains an image of the Virgin Mary to make sure that Gawain never loses heart.

At Camelot on New Year's Day, the Feast of the Circumcision, Arthur waits for a marvel or marvelous story. He and his courtiers ironically appear to be

overlooking the miraculous events of the season and are caught up in the splendor of festivities that seem only faintly related to the religious motive that should inspire them -when the Green Knight suddenly appears, as if to play out an inversion of the Easter phase of Jesus's ministry, a violent death and resurrection that threatens to bring death without hope of redemption or resurrection to Gawain. The Green Knight's intrusion upon the court is sufficiently motivated by the conventions of the poet's chosen genre- because Arthur waits for a marvel, and Sir Gawain is a romance, a marvel will occur. But the Green Knight's intrusion has a very strong Christian motivation as well: a lapse from piety into materialism and pride is followed at once by a supernatural rebuke, a deadly challenge and grotesque death and resurrection. Later, when Gawain suddenly and unexpectedly comes upon the castle of the Green Knight/Bertilak, the event is similarly overdetermined: the romance genre allows for, even requires that, a knight wandering in the forest will "happen" upon the castle where a quest awaits him; yet the fact that Gawain has invoked Jesus and Mary for aid in finding lodgings so that he will be able to celebrate Christmas Mass, has prayed, lamented his sins, and crossed himself three times, when suddenly the castle appears, once again makes our sense of religious motivation very strong indeed.

At Sir Bertilak's castle Gawain is offered a second game to play on top of his game with the Green Knight. Every night Gawain must give what he receives that day to Bertilak and in return will receive the spoils of the hunt in the forest from Bertilak. While Bertilak is in the forest, Gawain has to face seductive advances of Bertilak's wife. According to the chivalric code he

must oblige her, but what happens if her demands conflict with his other obligations to his host? It is this conflict of absolutes which is ultimately to be the undoing of Gawain. Although he adroitly parries the lady's lovemaking without rejecting her outright, the difficulty of his situation serves to show up the absurdity of the idea of infallibility envisioned in Romance tales.

The impossibility of Gawain's position reaches a climax when the lady offers him her green silk girdle which she promises would save his life. His great crime, however, is not in accepting the gift, but in failing to surrender it up to his host, thereby breaking his word of honour to the host, and, therefore, the chivalric code, in order to live.

He finds himself, clearly, in an impossible situation, but help, of a kind, is at hand, since he immediately goes, on leaving the lady, to the chapel where he confesses his sin to the priest and is duly absolved.

But that confession must have been in bad faith, otherwise he would not need to confess to the Green Knight. He not only makes a true and sincere confession of his faults, but resolves not to repeat them. Despite his association with witchcraft, the Green Knight is also a more useful, indeed more genuine, confessor than the ordained priest to whom Gawain first confessed. It might even be argued that the Green Knight is standing in for the figure of Christ himself for he tempers justice with mercy in delivering his all-seeing judgment upon the hero.

The Green Knight, in his Christ-like role, knows precisely where, when and how Gawain has sinned, and is thus able to help him, not through any special

powers of absolution, but through the simple, and human, expedient of revealing to Gawain where his faults lie. Gawain's punishment is self-knowledge, the realisation that he is not, and cannot be, perfect -confession and retribution are effectively internalised.

Though the Green Knight refers to his challenge as a game, he uses the language of the law to bind Gawain into an agreement with him. He repeatedly uses the word "covenant", meaning a set of laws, a word that evokes the two covenants represented by the Old and the New Testaments. The Old Testament details the covenant made between God and the people of Israel through Abraham, but the New Testament replaces the old covenant with a new covenant between Christ and his followers. In the New Testament, Paul writes that Christ has "a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life". The "letter" to which Paul refers here is the legal system of the Old Testament. From this statement comes the Christian belief that the literal enforcement of the law is less important than serving its spirit, a spirit tempered by mercy.

Throughout most of the poem, the covenant between Gawain and the Green Knight evokes the literal kind of legal enforcement that medieval Europeans might have associated with the Old Testament. The Green Knight at first seems concerned solely with the letter of the law. Even though he has tricked Gawain into their covenant, he expects Gawain to follow through on the agreement. And Gawain, though he knows that following the letter of the law means death, is determined to see his agreement through to the end because he sees this as his knightly duty. At the poem's end, the covenant

takes on a new meaning and resembles the less literal, more merciful New Testament covenant between Christ and his Church. In a decidedly Christian gesture, the Green Knight, who is actually Gawain's host, Bertilak, absolves Gawain because Gawain has confessed his faults. To remind Gawain of his weakness, the Green Knight gives him a penance, in the form of the wound on his neck and the girdle.

Thus the Christian theme of sin and redemption is enacted through the Romance tale of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight