

Sir gawain and the green knight critique essay

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The Theme of Games in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight The theme of games plays a very important role in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. In fact, much of the action that takes place in this story revolves around the playing of various " games. " When one thinks of the word " games," there are several thoughts that may come to mind. Sports, board games, and card games are all types of games that society today might be familiar with. The author of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight uses different kinds of games than the ones mentioned above.

In the time of Sir Arthur and his court, the word " game" wasn't as strongly associated with something pleasurable as it was meant to test one's worthiness. When the Green Knight enters Arthur's court and announces that he has come to ask " a Christmas game," he has not come to play cards or scrabble, but instead has come to test the worthiness of someone in the court. " The " game" of exchanging gifts was very common in Germanic culture. If a man received a gift, he was obliged to provide the giver with a better gift or risk losing his honor, almost like an exchange of blows in a fight, or in a " beheading game" (Harwood).

Many other games are involved in the plot of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Throughout the third section of the poem for example, we see Gawain's host's wife play games with Gawain. Gawain views his arrangement of trading with his host as a game (line 1380). Even from the beginning, the Knight plays a game of sorts with Arthur's court by criticizing and almost taunting the court for failing to live up to its reputation: " What, is this Arthur's house," said that horseman then, " Whose fame is so fair in far realms and wide? Where is now your arrogance and your awesome deeds,

our valor and your victories and your vaunting words? " (lines 308-311) Eventually the reader discovers all of the events of the story are a game of Arthur's sister, Morgan Le Fay. Throughout the telling of the story it becomes evident that the author is playing a game with the mind of the reader. This essay will explore the theme of games in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as well as how they might be connected. The foundation of the entire plot of the story begins with the " Christmas game" that the Green Knight has come to play with Arthur's court. The court initially believes that the mysterious knight has come for " contest bare" (line 277). When the Green Knight reveals that he will exchange one blow for another, it seems like it would be an easy victory for an opponent, seeing that no one expects the knight to survive after being beheaded with his own axe. Surprisingly, the knight picks up his severed head and leaves. This severely heightens the seriousness of Gawain's promise to let the knight have a blow at his own head in exactly one year. Arthur clearly downplays the importance of this promise, saying, " Now, sir, hang up your axe, and return to the feast" (Line 477).

Arthur clearly tries to write off the importance of the contest before Gawain beheads the knight with his own axe, as if he foresees Gawain's eventual success: " Keep, cousin," said the king, " what you cut with this day And if you rule it aright, then readily, I know, You shall stand the stroke it will strike after" (Lines 371-374). While neither Gawain nor the reader is aware of the game that is already occurring throughout the plot of the poem, this same game continues to unfold as Gawain arrives at the castle on Christmas Eve.

Bercilak, who plays " host" to Gawain, continues to trick Gawain by not revealing that he is the Green Knight from Arthur's castle. He allows Gawain

to stay at his castle, on the condition that anything acquired throughout the day as a result of staying there would be given to Bercilak as a gift. In return, anything that Bercilak acquired while hunting would be gifted to Gawain. We see another representation of Games within hunting, as hunting is sometimes viewed as a game in itself.

Gawain sees this mutual exchange of things won over the course of the day as a game, although Bercilak describes this arrangement as a " covenant" (Line 1384). It also becomes apparent that the hosts' wife is playing her own games with Gawain by sneaking into his quarters and trying to seduce him. It is at this point in the story in which Gawain breaks a major rule of the game by not telling Bercilak about the girdle, which supposedly holds magical powers that would prevent any harm from coming to Gawain.

Gawain does not fail because he accepts the girdle, but rather because he fails to gift the girdle to Bercilak as something won throughout the course of the day. Since Gawain believes that the girdle would give him the power to survive the blow of the Green Knights' axe, he fails to hand over his relic to his host. Before Gawain goes to bed on this third night of his stay, Bercilak reminds Gawain, " Every promise on my part shall be fully performed" (Line 1970).

This is a hint to the reader that the host is already aware of the fact that Gawain decided not to share this girdle that was gifted to him. When Gawain finally leaves the castle and finds the Green Knight waiting to hold up his end of the bargain, the Green knight continues to play games with Gawain by " teasing" him with the axe. He stops at first after Gawain flinches and taunts him for moving. Once Gawain remains still and the Knight deals his blow,

only scratching the neck of Gawain, the Green Knight reveals his true identity, as well as the identity of Morgan Le Fay.

It is at this point the reader realizes that almost everything that has happened up to this point is just a part of an elaborate game. This game was designed at the hands of Morgan Le Fay to teach Gawain, as well as the other knights of Arthur's court, that even the most noble of knights are human and subject to failure at the hands of temptation. As Gawain returns still wearing the green girdle around his arm, it is evident that this game has also taught him another valuable lesson: the lesson of humility (Bennett).

Gawain returns to Arthur's court, still wearing the girdle in shame as a reminder to always follow the rules of the game. After Sir Gawain shares his tales of deceit and trickery, the other knights deem it appropriate to also wear green sashes as a reminder of the adventure that Gawain had. Finally, there are at least two more games that the author plays with the reader throughout Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The first and most obvious game is the fact that the author hides important information from the reader until the end, and then reveals this information.

Such information includes but is not limited to the host's true identity, the reason for the "Christmas game," and the fact that Gawain's aunt, Morgan Le Fay, originated the game. While concealing this information is critical to the progression of the story, it still represents a more subtle game that is being played by the author. "A much more subtle game played by the author, however, is the way that the author sneaks moral instruction into a poem which, up until about the last three hundred lines, is almost purely entertainment" (Putter).

The author clearly expresses to the reader that even Gawain, the noblest of knights, is human and subject to failings. Whether in the fourteenth century or today, the author's message holds significant meaning. It is apparent that we are in fact all human, and at some point or another, subject to some type of failure. I believe that this is the message that the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* wanted to pass along to the reader. In conclusion, the theme of games is demonstrated in many different ways throughout *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

It is seen in the actions of the Green Knight and Morgan Le Fay towards Gawain. It is also evident that similar games are played between the author and the reader. All of these games tie together significantly to reveal what I believe is the key message of this poem: Regardless of social status, we are all human, we are all subject to temptation, and most importantly, we are all, at some point, almost certainly subject to failure.

Works Cited

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