

# Essay on world literature

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## **Reader Response: Chivalry Tale**

In the 14th century romance Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the story revolves around Sir Gawain, one of Arthur's knights. The romance follows his exploits and attempts to respect the laws concerning chivalry, while overcoming the obstacles and temptations that would prevent him for obeying the laws of the knights' code of conduct. Sir Gawain proves his courage when he dares to strike the Green Knight with an axe, but then he has to pass other tests in order to prove his worth as a knight, his honourable character and his moral value.

It is a story of courage and chivalry, characteristic of the time during which it was created. Chivalry and courtly love were considered paramount virtues in a time marked by wars and violence. The girdle that Sir Gawain is offered by Lady Bertilak has a twofold symbolism: it signifies the knight's failure to resist temptation and to uphold the rules of chivalry, but at the same time it represents the knight's survival.

For Sir Gawain, the girdle is first and foremost a symbol of shame, since he was not able to resist Lady Bertilak's advances. Thus, he failed in his attempt to be a true knight and follow the rules of courtly love. Sir Gawain is attracted by Lady Bertilak and the fact that he accepts the girdle as a gift can be interpreted as his giving in to sin, to temptation. Thus, he fails to abide by the rules that govern the knights' laws of chivalry and courtly love. Temptation is a major theme in the chivalrous romances of the time, and usually the temptress is related to a lord or a king to whom the knight owes respect. This is an extra test, to see if the knight will remain chaste, and also loyal to his lord or king.

The girdle is also a symbol of survival, since Lady Bertilak presents it to Sir Gawain not only as a memento, but also as a magic object meant to protect him from being hurt, to make him invincible. Sir Gawain accepts the gift, symbolizing the fact that his desire to survive surpasses his desire to protect the knights' code of honour. The code of chivalry would require him to protect the code of honour above all else, but his desire to live surpasses his desire to be brave in battle.

He finally passes the test, but only fortuitously, not by inherent merit, and the shame of his choice forces Sir Gawain to promise to wear the girdle forever. It will serve him as a memento of his weakness, of his failure to keep his promise. However, when the other knights adopt it and promise to wear a girdle themselves, it takes on a different meaning and becomes a symbol of honour.

Seen in this light, the girdle's dual symbolism is an image of the complexity of human nature and its representation in the romances of 14th century literature: nature and the impulses of man, inherent in his nature, make it difficult to uphold a perfect code of chivalry and heroism. But it also serves as a reminder for all the knights that they must strive to be virtuous, to do their duty as knights, no matter what dangers and risks they might be forced to face.

The entire text is a code of chivalry disguised in obstacles and hardships that Sir Gawain must face and overcome in order to prove himself a worthy knight. He has to show his loyalty, be brave in battle, be ready to die for his king and also follow the code of chivalrous love. Loyalty and bravery are traits valued in any warrior society, but 14th century medieval romances

also add this last aspect of nobility. Courage and skill in battle are no longer the only attributes necessary for a knight. He has to also prove he can be gentle, noble of soul and ready to protect those in need of protection, and above all be courteous to all, regardless of their social status.

## **Works Cited**

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