

# Journey of Test and Self-discovery

## ----Chivalric Virtues and Human Nature in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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**ABSTRACT:** *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a fourteen-century poem and generally regarded as the best poem of the Medieval Arthurian literature, featuring its beautiful language, breathtaking plots and subtle and refined characterization. It tells the story of Sir Gawain, one of the best King Arthur's knights who answers the Green Knight's beheading challenge and stands tests from the latter. This paper will interpret Gawain's adventure as a journey of test as well as a journey of self-discovery by textual analysis and elaborate the humanism as well as chivalric virtues the poem reflects.

**KEYWORD:** Chivalric virtues; Human nature; Test; Self-discovery

### 1 INTRODUCTION

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a fourteen-century poem, which tells the story of Sir Gawain, one of the best King Arthur's knights, who answers the Green Knight's beheading challenge and stands the test from the latter. The poem is generally regarded as the best poem of the Medieval Arthurian literature, featuring its beautiful language, breathtaking plots and subtle and refined characterization. It's not difficult to find that chivalric virtues like courage, loyalty and honor are widely and highly sung in medieval romance. For example, Roland's courage and loyalty in *Song of Roland* who fights to death for his king, Lancelot's faith in *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart*. Gawain-poem, like the previous ballads or epic poems, praises the glorious chivalry. What's more, its concern of humanity is fresh and striking as well. The paper elaborates the humanism as well as chivalric virtues it reflects.

### 2 THE BEHEADING PLOT

The Gawain-poem has four parts. The first part tells the Green Knight, with a huge axe in one hand, comes to Camelot where King Arthur, the queen and the Round Table knights are celebrating New Year. He challenges any knight of the Round Table to come forward and cut his head off on the condition that he will return his blow 12 months later. Gawain answers the challenge courageously and strikes off

the Green Knight's head. The supernatural Green Knight picks up his head and leaves, claiming his challenge again. In the second part, Gawain sets off to search for the Green Chapel as he has promised. His determination never falters despite of harsh natural environment and the solitude in the adventure. In the woods, he is warmly welcomed by Lord Bertilak in his castle and agrees to stay till the upcoming New Year since he is told the Green Chapel is nearby. They also agree to exchange what they get each day every night. In part three, Lord Bertilak goes hunting while Gawain stays in the castle. Gawain is sexually tempted by the beautiful Lady Bertilak in consecutive three days. He refuses her temptation with courtesy and respect, but accepts her gift, a green girdle, which is believed to have a magic power to protect the bearer from any attack. The final confrontation between Gawain and the Green Knight is the forth part. Gawain bears three strikes from the Green Knight and at the third time gets a little injured. The truth gets cleared in the end that the Green knight is the Lord Bertilak, who is sent by Morgan to test the Round Table knights. The injury is kind of punishment for Gawain's betray of their covenant. Gawain feels ashamed of his cowardice and decides to wear the green girdle as a sign since.

The beheading plot as a test has existed in the previous literature forms before the Gawain-poem. In a story about the most famous knight Lancelot, he is challenged by a young knight, who challenges that Lancelot cuts his head off and will give Lancelot a blow in return one year later. But when Lancelot

keeps his words to answer the challenge at the designated castle one year later, he is not cut finally. The truth is the castle is doomed to misfortune and only brave knight who dares to answer the challenge and keeps his words to come back and receive the return blow can undo the curse. Lancelot stands the test and is proved a real knight. Beheading game in the Gawain-poem, from this view, is also a test put on Gawain. The difference is that before the journey, Gawain thinks he is a perfect pentagon knight. In the end of the poem, Gawain realizes his human nature and imperfection. Gawain's adventure, in the sense, is a journey of test on the surface and a journey of self-discovery implied beneath.

### 3 JOURNEY OF TEST

Bravery, honor, loyalty, honesty, courtesy and sacrifice are common virtues of chivalry in medieval romance. Gawain's chivalry is tested in his answering the Green Knight's challenge, his quest for the Green Knight and his final confrontation with the Green Knight.

#### 3.1 *Courage and fidelity*

When the Green Knight suddenly appears in Arthur's New Year banquet and poses his beheading challenge to Arthur's court, nobody dare to accord with him. The Green Knight teases the weakness of the well-known Arthur's knights. It is Gawain who comes forward to save the reputation of Arthur's court.

'In good faith,' said the knight, 'Gawain is my name,

And whatever happens after, I offer you this blow,

And in twelve months' time I shall take the return blow

With whatever weapon you wish, and with no one else

Shall I strive.' (381-5)

And as he has promised, Gawain is bound to set off to his journey to search for the green Knight, although the foreseeable danger and unpredictable fortune ahead. His fellowmen are all grieved for him, but in his mind, "in destinies sad or merry, true men can but try". (644-5)

His courage and fidelity are undoubtedly tested by the harsh environment and loneliness of being apart. Gawain climbs many a cliff, passes streams, through many a marsh and mire (749), fights monstrous animals, confronts with bad weathers. But his determination never falters.

He faltered not nor feared,  
But quickly went his way;  
His road was rough and weird,  
Or so the stories say. (688-91)

And when Gawain leaves Bertilak's castle to the Green Chapel, in face of the guide's lure of escaping, Gawain insists to keep his words instead of begging for life and stopping the game.

#### 3.2 *Courtesy and loyalty*

Gawain's courtesy and loyalty are completely reflected when the Green Knight comes to challenge. Gawain chooses his most courteous words to release King Arthur from this predicament and restores the reputation of the Round Table knights.

I am the weakest, well I know, and of wit feeblest;

And the loss of my life would be least of any;

That I have you for uncle is my only praise;

My body, but your blood, is barren of worth;

And for that this folly befits not king,

And'tis I that have asked it, it ought to mine,

And if my claim be not comely let all this court judge, in sight." (343-361)

These words clearly show his respect and his loyalty to King Arthur. And in the face of Lady Bertilak's sexual temptation in Gawain's first morning in the castle, He acts cautiously and manages to neither offend her nor accept her offer. On the first day, Gawain responds that "You are bound to a better man, yet I prize the praise you have proffered me here" (1276-77). On the second day,

"Thus she tested his temper and tried many a time,

Whatever her true intent, to entice him to sin,

But so fair was his defense that no fault appeared". (1549-1551)

Although sometimes Gawain is almost at his wits' end, when his stout heart is stirred with Lady's sweet stolen glances (1660), he does his best to be courteous to Lady Bertilak and loyal to Lord Bertilak.

#### 3.3 *Symbol of pentagon*

The pentagon on the shield in this poem, or five – pointed star, held by him to ward off evil is kind of symbol of Gawain. The Gawain-poet uses many sentences to describe the emblem and explain the meaning it contains.

It is symbol which Solomon conceives once

To token holy truth, by its intrinsic right,

For it is a figure which has five points,

And each line overlaps and is locked with another;

And it is endless everywhere, and the English call it,

In all the land, I hear, the Endless Knot. (625-30)

The "Endless Knot" is a mystic symbol of perfection, and the five points means the "five wits" which are liberality, love of fellow men, purity of mind and spirit, courtesy, and compassion. It is

“portrayed in purest gold” (620), “each line is linked and locked with the next” (628), the fivenesses--- five wits and five fingers; the five wounds of Christ and the five joys of the virgin. And the “pure five” virtues (652-4) (Brain Stone, 131) merge with each other and form the “endless knot”. As “a token of truth”, it “is proper to that peerless prince” (623). Apparently the pentangle here is the symbol of perfect virtues that Gawain holds and tries to embody.

His courage in answering the Green Knight’s challenge, his loyalty in keeping his promise, his courtesy in saving King Arthur’s reputation and his chastity of spirit in front of sexual temptation correspond with the symbolic meaning of the pentagon. His widespread fame further affirms his virtues. In the remote Bertilak’s castle, people are overjoyed that the guest is Gawain of King Arthur’s court, praising that he has “courage ever-constant and custom pure”(912). He is “the father of fine manners” and his “displays of deportment” will dazzle the eyes. In Gawain’s mind, too, he is a perfect knight as the pentagon represents. Nevertheless his weakness as a human unfolds to readers as he keeps Lady Bertilak’s girdle, betrays his promise to Lord Bertilak and flinches from the Green Knight’s first strike.

#### 4 JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY

If the story goes as the pentagon symbolizes, Gawain would be a flawless saint under the direction of his rational virtues. While his betrayal of Bertilak by concealing the girdle causes his fall but makes him more human.

The turning point is the third day of the bargain in the castle. The lady asks Gawain for a love token and when she learns that Gawain has nothing to give her, she asks him to accept a rich ring. Gawain courteously rejects. Finally the lady offers a magic girdle by telling him “no hand under heaven that could hew him down, for he could not be killed by any craft on earth”(1853-54). He accepts it, in this test Gawain fails. When the Lady Bertilak asks him to hide the gift from her husband (1862-1863), Gawain must be reminded of his pledge with the host and his duty of maintaining his fidelity with the host. Anyhow, he chooses to conceal the gift from Bertilak in the end. Here his love of life defeats his high virtue standard that he has been living up to. It is also the love of life that directly leads to his flinch when Green Knight feints the first time in the Green Chapel (Brain Stone, 135). When Gawain gets the truth that the real test is the lady’s three temptations, he accuses himself of cowardice and covetousness.

Now I am faulty and false and found fearful always.

In the train of treachery and untruth go woe

And shame.

I acknowledge, knight, how ill

I behaved, and take the blame. (2382-6)

Comparatively the supernatural Green Knight gives Gawain a high assessment and treats Gawain’s shortcoming quite minor (Brain Stone, 135).

“As pearls to white peas, more precious and prized...”

Yet you lack, sir, a little in loyalty there,

But the cause was not cunning, nor courtship either,

But that you loved your own life; the less, then, to blame.” (2364-8)

To some extent, his fall awakes him to his nature as a human being. The poem brings a high-up-there hero back to a flesh-and-blood human.

An amount of description of nature in the poem also corresponds with the complex of human nature. Nature shown in the poem goes in the form of seasons in turn, desolate wilderness and the hunted wild animals. In the second part before Gawain’s journey, the earth persistently undergoes the bleakness of winter with “gray plain” and “low clouds”; the hope of spring with “gowns of green” and “blithely singing birds”; the happiness of summer with “rich blossom” and “soft wind”; the harvest of autumn with “harsher winds follows after” and “launched leaves”. That is the nature, like human nature, whichever brightness, coldness, warmth or darkness belonging to it.

Gawain returns to Arthur’s court with the girdle. After confessing all his discomfitures including “the love of the lady, the green lace, the nick on the neck, the judgment in the Green Chapel”(2495-8), he is going to keep the girdle as a reminder of his sin. He knows his limitations but does not give up his pursuit. With the girdle as a reminder he finds his best position.

#### 5 FINAL WORDS

The journey Gawain takes starts from the court to the bedroom and ends with the judgment in the Green Chapel. The court is a place with ethical standards, while the bedroom is a place for release from restraint. With the places changing from the civilized society to the isolation, the tests change from the known to the unknown, and inner nature takes its emergence after the demonstration of outer reason gradually. In the battle of reason and nature, Gawain’s loyalty, courage, faith, humility and chastity are demonstrated, so is his frailty. In the Green Chapel he is confronted with his innermost part and is clear of his true self---flawless chivalry is divine and imperfection is human. Imperfection is a kind of perfect state for mankind to understand life and on the basis of understanding human nature can human better pursue. Gawain’s adventure, in a

sense, is as a journey of test as well as a journey of self-discovery and the humanism and chivalric virtues are equally honored in the poem.

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