

Yellow in the Face of the Green Knight

“Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” serves as one of the most famous Arthurian tales, and therefore, an exemplification of the character of Sir Gawain as well as the chivalry he cherishes so greatly. However, Gawain displays a moment of unknighly cowardice when he accepts a girdle from Lady Bertilak he believes will guard him from his future deadly blow from the Green Knight. At first glance, this seems uncharacteristic of any knight, let alone one of the most well known of the Round Table. However, as revered as knights are for their chivalry, and as unachievable some of their deeds may seem to the audience, Gawain acting off his fear of death in his “fall from grace” serves to convey the humanity of knights often overlooked in Arthurian depictions.

Ever since the Green Knight nonchalantly reattached his head after Gawain cut it off, promising to return the favour, Gawain felt the dread and fear of his impending doom in the year that passed. However, this fear did not stop his determination to fulfill his end of the deal as he ventured off in time to seek out the Green Knight. As he initially sets out, forbidding his own fear to result in outward cowardice, he is associated with Jesus and the Virgin Mary on the inside of his shield, with God seemingly guiding him as he finds Lord Bertilak’s castle as soon as he prays for assistance. At this point of the story, he is still an exemplary knight, even being granted a certain inhuman, holy divinity with his religious associations.

However, Gawain’s knightly honour begins to decline when Lady Bertilak offers him the girdle to save his life, asking him to keep it secret from her husband, which would violate his deal with the Lord to swap their gains each day. He accepts the gift, an action Jesus would never commit, and thus begins his dissociation from the image of Christian perfection. His immediate awareness of how his actions are dishonourable and unchivalrous are evident by him promptly heading to the chapel to confess his sins to the priest (1876-1884). Though even as Gawain acknowledges the immorality of his actions, he refuses to give the girdle to the Lord in fear for his own life.

Despite this surety for his safety, Gawain shows yet another form of cowardice when he kneels to receive his blow from the Green Knight. He assures the knight that he “will stand still and not resist whatever it pleases [the knight] to do at all,” “seeming unafraid” and steeling himself so that “he would not shrink in fear” (2252-2258). Yet when the knight swings, Gawain flinches, causing the knight to cease his swing and retreat, condemning his actions and questioning whether he is the real Gawain famed in legends. Knights risk their lives in battle without hesitation, Sir Gawain included, often in Arthurian legends, yet few must march forth into a guaranteed loss of life where their combat ability will be of no use against their fate. This powerlessness Gawain is presented with elicits such a strong force of fear that not only does Gawain lie against his morals, he flinches even when he has been told he will live, an unexpectedly weak, yet explicitly human, reaction.

Sir Gawain’s fear of death is further exemplified after the Green Knight’s non lethal strike. He immediately springs forward and arms himself, threatening to strike back if the Green Knight tries to ensue another blow at his neck (2315-2330). In a medieval world driven by

honour, including the act of keeping verbal agreements, Gawain's distrust of the Green Knight implies that he believes the Knight is dishonourable even when he has shown no clear signs of being so. This presumed malice is unwarranted, as even the Green Knight himself points out after, and unprecedented for Gawain, conveying more ways his fear of death has affected his character, even more so now since the blade actually drew blood. He realises in this moment that the green girdle promised to protect him is false, and that the threat of death is no longer just a psychological hurdle, but a very physical one. His behaviour here is not that expected of knights by any means, especially those revered as part of King Arthur's court, but it is realistic for a man fearing his end.

The Green Knight and Gawain acknowledge this afterwards as the Knight proclaims that Gawain "fell short a little," but because it was due to him "want[ing] to live," as opposed to wants of "craftsmanship, nor wooing," "[the Knight] blame[s] [Gawain] less" (2366-2368). This statement portrays that Gawain's motives for immorality was human fear rather than human greed, meaning that he had little control over them, much like any common man. When Gawain learns that the Knight and the Lord of the castle are one and the same, he is aghast and ashamed and frustrated at his own actions, declaring that "fear of [the Green Knight's] blow taught [him] cowardice," and that he is now "false and unworthy," entreating Lord Bertilak to allow Gawain a chance to repent and regain his trust (2379-2387). He does this even after he confessed to the priest back when he initially accepted the girdle, expressing how beneath his fear of death, his shame at this fear never once retreated. And acknowledging that he cannot change the past, or the harm done by himself upon his name, he seeks any means of reconciliation in a desperate attempt to rebuild the morals and honour he had forsaken.

As Gawain laments over his actions and the ways he was deceived by both his honour, and women, a clear contrast is drawn between Gawain now, and him at the start of his venture. Whereas he was surrounded with associations to Jesus at the beginning of his journey, he now professes his likeness to Adam, Solomon, Samson, and David (2416-2419). He is no longer the image of perfection, but an ordinary human with human flaws, exposing a vulnerability in the inhumanly perfect image of knights. And though Gawain abhors this side of him, he is forced to acknowledge it, and despite his broken pride, refuses to conceal his shame to not further tarnish his personal honour with more deception.

He displays the belt as he returns to Arthur's court and immediately relays the tale as accurately as he can, even as he is consumed by humiliation and expects reproach for his cowardice in response. However, King Arthur, as well as the rest of his court, laughs cheerfully at his tale, with Arthur even declaring that every knight "should wear such a belt," "similar to Sir Gawain's and worn for his sake," "and whoever afterwards wore it was always honoured" (2516-2520). By the knights not only wearing a similar symbol of "cowardice," but being honoured for it signifies that they, and Arthur, should honour the human sides of themselves rather than considering them as sole sources of weakness. Though cowardice should not typically prohibit a knight's actions, they must all remember that it is not an unforgivable sin. The fear of

death is a sincerely human part of Gawain, as well as every knight, that ties them to both each other and all those that they risk their lives for every day.