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# A Character Of Sir Gawain in The Sir Gawain and The Green Knight

## The Justification of Sir Gawain the Mortal Man

Though Arthur's legendary knights may have gathered at the round table as equals, one knight stands out today. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, scholars debate whether Sir Gawain is or is not an ideal knight under the Pentangle. While scholars cannot reach a unanimous verdict, they can agree that he is an imperfect man matched against an unattainable standard of perfection. During life-threatening situations throughout the game of blows, Gawain's human nature and its tendencies dictate his reactions, and his mortality is directly connected to his morality. Gawain has no choice but to obey his human nature, and he is justified because his reactions are motivated by the natural desire for self-preservation rather than hate or malice.

Gawain's first response to mortality is his intercession to take Arthur's place in the game of blows. Arthur declares he will not eat until "some chancer ha[s] challenged his chosen knight, dared him, with a lance, to lay life on the line, to stare death face-to-face and accept defeat should fortune or fate smile more favorably on his foe" (*Sir Gawain* 188). He views death lightly, and he would willingly sacrifice one of his own knights lives for the sake of entertainment. In spite of all this, Gawain humbly volunteers to take Arthur's place in the game of blows. He claims that King Arthur's life was too valuable to lose, and it would not matter if his life were lost because he was weak and unintelligent (*Sir Gawain* 193). He is willing to sacrifice his life in his uncle's place, and Arthur unhesitatingly lets him. Arthur is careless, but Gawain is selfless.

Gawain's selflessness is quickly forgotten when he is placed in this unpredictable situation. As he goes to take Arthur's position, Arthur advises him to "catch [the Green Knight] cleanly" and "use full-blooded force" (*Sir Gawain* 193). Logically, if Gawain kills the Green Knight first, the Green Knight cannot kill him. Gawain follows Arthur's advice, cutting through the Green Knight's spinal cord and decapitating him. The seemingly immortal Green Knight, however, does not die. The Green Knight remains a threat to Gawain's safety, and Gawain has reason to fear a fatal blow in return.

Gawain's decision to decapitate the Green knight causes a division in scholarly judgements about Gawain. Scholar Victoria Weiss acknowledges that Arthur's court takes pride in "knightly valor [and] aggressiveness" but does not believe that upholding this pride is enough to justify Gawain of his "lack of concern for human life" (363). Scholar Bryant Bachman, Jr. counters, however, that Gawain is appropriately adhering to social order (500). He argues that ceremonialized violence in activities like jousting was a fundamental way in which "society impose[d] order on impulse, or channel[ed] instinct into modes of behavior that do not threaten it. Thus, jousting orders aggression...Nothing is out of place here. All is ordered and controlled." (Bachman 499) According to Bachman's reasoning, Gawain's breeding causes him to respond in this way. Being raised with the morals of his society, he was taught to believe this behavior was socially acceptable and had no way of knowing otherwise.

This section of the story is often referred to as the Beheading Game, but the Green Knight never details what type of strike it must be (Weiss 361). He makes vague, misleading

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statements—such as “the axe shall be his to handle how he likes” and “show your striking style”—and red flags pop up when he claims the terms are “crystal clear” (Sir Gawain 192 & 194). Gawain, influenced by Arthur’s advice, misinterprets strike to be synonymous with beheading. He could have chosen a different type of blow, but he did not know the challenge could be fulfilled by a nonfatal blow. He also did not know the Green Knight’s intent, perceived him to be a threat, and acted in self-defense. Arthur again carelessly diminishes another life or death moment by breaking the silence with “at least I’m allowed to eat at last”, but silent and somber Gawain reflects seriously on his decision (Sir Gawain 195). He does not take his actions or his consequences lightly.

At the end of the game of blows, Gawain inevitably approaches his death just as death inevitably approaches all people. He survived his quest’s dangerous trek through the wilderness, prolonging his life, but he finds himself at the Green Knight’s chapel, having brought himself one step closer to the return blow of the Green Knight and his death (Bachman 509-510). If he had attempted to avoid the Green Knight and death, he would continue being vulnerable to threat of the Green Knight and would live in constant fear. By confronting the Green Knight and death, his fear increases as he realizes death will become a reality. The more he tries to distance himself from death the closer it seems.

Although Gawain realizes he will certainly die, he has not fully accepted this fate. He loves his life and demonstrates his desire to live by wearing the green girdle, claimed to be enlaced with magical powers that could save his life (Sir Gawain 228). Gawain has no idea if the girdle truly has these powers. The idea that a green girdle contains magical powers in and of itself seems illogical and foolish, but it provides hope. Gawain desperately clings to this thin ray of hope as he confronts the Green Knight.

Gawain displays a spectrum of reactions over the course of the Green Knight’s three blows. As a parallel to the Green Knight in the beginning of the game, Sir Gawain lays his neck bare, and he makes himself vulnerable for the promised return blow. Unlike the Green Knight, he instinctively flinches in fear just before the blade hits because he “sens[es] its sharpness” (Sir Gawain 228). He does not flinch at the second attempted blow and seems to have unwillingly accepted his fate as there is nothing else he can do. The Green Knight then delivers his third and final blow, but the blow is merely wounding. It is “far from being fatal...just skimming the skin and finely snicking the fat of the flesh...” (Sir Gawain 233). Shocked with the disbelief that he is still alive, Sir Gawain jumps up and warns the Green Knight he will fight if provoked (Sir Gawain 233-234). Gawain intends to defend himself. He values his fragile life even more now that it was nearly taken from him.

Much like at the beginning of the game, Gawain seems to be lacking information and makes incorrect interpretations about the Green Knight and his intent. Leaning on the head of his axe, the Green Knight explains that he possesses the strength and ability to kill Gawain at close range, but he instead chose to fulfill the challenge was a nonfatal blow (Sir Gawain 234). In addition to being wrong about the type of blow the Green Knight had originally intended to give him, he also incorrectly assumed that the Green Knight’s returning blow would match the blow he dealt (Weiss 364-365). To Gawain’s amazement and shame, the Green Knight is fully aware that he is wearing the green girdle because the Green Knight is none other than Lord Bertilak himself—Sir Gawain’s generous host, new found friend, and Lady Bertilak’s husband (Sir Gawain 234). He might have reached a different decision if he had known this information and had been able to consider it. Regardless, Gawain takes responsibility for his decisions and

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acknowledges his blame, and even the Green Knight believes he is justified.

Gawain is a knight, but underneath “the suit of armour” he is first and foremost a man (Hollis 276). Being mortal, he is bound to act according to human nature. From the beginning of the game of blows until the end, he is vulnerable to physical pain, harm, and death. When placed in situations where his life or the lives of loved ones are in danger of a real or perceived threat, Gawain becomes defensive of the life he values and fears death. When he has any ability to control the situation, he is unwilling to die and fights to live. As death closes in and desperation increases, extenuating circumstances cause Gawain to react in atypical ways. His decision-making process changes as his decision becomes more and more critical to his survival, and mortality takes precedence over morality. He weighs his options seriously, makes the best decision he can based on what he already knows and the little information he receives, and must deal with the emotional consequences of that decision because he holds himself accountable. Obedient to human instinct and motivated by self-preservation rather than hate or malice, Gawain does everything in his physical power to balance mortality and morality. He reacts how humans are expected to react, exceeding expectations when he offers to sacrifice his life for Arthur, and in light of this, his actions become noble and just as he attempts to transcend human nature.

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