

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a Middle English romance poem written by an anonymous West Midlands poet also credited with a lot of other poems written during that time. The protagonist, Sir Gawain, survives two tests: a challenge, which he alone without the assistance of King Arthur's knights accepts, to behead the fearsome Green Knight and to let him retaliate a year later at the distant Green Chapel; and the temptation to commit adultery with the wife of Lord Bercilak--in reality the Green Knight--in whose castle he stays in en route to the chapel. This story is emblematic of life; how it issues tests and challenges and the consequences rendered as a result of failing or succeeding these challenges.

Sir Gawain is a very symbolic character; symbolic in the sense that he represents innocence in life. He was not afraid to accept a challenge because it meant saving the kingdom from the affects of anarchy as a result of not having a king. Sir Gawain accepting the challenge from the Green Knight instantly represented one of the things that knighthood represented, fearlessness. People accept those kind of challenges everyday. This could possibly be where the term "sticking your neck out" could have come from. When people accept challenges, most do not want to accept the consequences as a result of being unsuccessful. Gawain was not like this. When the year passed he gallantly mounted his horse and set off for the Green Chapel. This showed that Gawain was brave. This was preceded by the warning "Beware, Gawain, that you not end a betrayer of your bargain through fear."

Along this journey Gawain faces peril and self-reluctance in the form of the elements and the never-ending search for the chapel respectively. These feeling can be characterized as the inner turmoil suffered as a result of dealing with one's conscience. The journey also tested his faith in the sense that he was constantly in prayer during his journey, and not once did he curse or renounce the name of God. It seems as if the prayers were what kept Gawain sane and focused on the purpose of his journey. Gawain's prayers were answered when he rode along and finally came upon a place that he could petition for possible rest. This castle would be the setting for Gawain's next test. The test builds as he feasts with the court and finds that a certain lady has an interest in knowing Gawain a little better. The lady is later to be known as the wife of Bercilak -aka- the Green Knight. This is shown as temptation. The lady tries to seduce Gawain while Betilak is away on a hunting excursion. Gawain resists every advance made by the lady except a kiss for which he mentions in confession. Gawain is given a sash by the lady

which is said to protect the wearer from harm. Reluctantly he accepts the sash and does not tell Bercilak that he received this from the lady. He does this because he puts his trust in a material item instead of God to protect him from harm. This will prove to be one of Gawain's few downfalls in this story.

Gawain sets out for the Chapel and finds the Green Knight there honing his ax. Gawain bending over for the blow is feinted by the knight. When this happens Gawain flinches and is chastised by the knight for doing so. The knight raises the ax for a second time and feints the blow again. This time Gawain is furious at the knight's playfulness. The Knight raises his ax for a third time and nicks Gawain on the back of the neck. The knight explains that the first two strokes were symbolic of the exchanges at the castle between Gawain and the lady which he resisted, and the final blow was representative of Gawain failing the final exchange and accepting the sash in place of faith in God. The knight says that it could be forgiven and praised him for being one of the most faithful men he has ever seen. The Knight says that "Gawain was polished of that plight and purified" meaning that man, despite faults and differences, can be forgiven. Gawain feels that he has faulted himself and the confidence of others, but is once again forgiven by his peers.

This poem has a lot to do with the way in which man lives his life. Tests and challenges face man everyday, and to be forgiven of these is normal. This story will always be remembered for its intricate poetry in the handling of Gawain, and can be used as a standard in which one can judge himself. Gawain is a man, and men have forgivable faults.

"Life is a Series of Tests and Challenges"
A critical analysis of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
