

Loyalty, courage, honor, purity, and courtesy are all attributes of a knight that displays chivalry. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is truly a story of the test of these attributes. In order to have a true test of these attributes, there must first be a knight worthy of being tested, meaning that the knight must possess chivalric attributes to begin with. Sir Gawain is self admittedly not the best knight around. He says "I am the weakest, well I know, and of wit feeblest; / and the loss of my life [will] be least of any" (Sir Gawain, l. 354-355). To continue on testing a knight that does not seem worthy certainly will not result in much of a story, or in establishing a theme. Through the use of symbols, the author of Sir Gawain is able to show that Gawain possesses the necessary attributes to make him worthy of being tested. He also uses symbols throughout the tests of each individual attribute, and in revealing where Gawain's fault lies. The effective use of these symbols enables the author to integrate the test of each individual attribute into a central theme, or rather one overall test, the test of chivalry.

To establish the knight as worthy, the author first shows Gawain's loyalty to his king. The Green Knight challenges anyone in the hall to the beheading game and no one takes him up on it. Arthur, angered by the Green Knight's taunting, is about to accept the challenge himself when Gawain steps in saying "would you grant me this grace" (Sir Gawain, l. 343), and takes the ax from Arthur. This is a very convenient way for the author to introduce Gawain and also to show Gawain's loyalty to Arthur, but it seems almost too convenient. There is an entire hall full of knights, why does Gawain alone step up? Why is it that a superior knight such as Lancelot does not step up? The Green Knight is big and of course he is green, which might explain some of the delay in acceptance of the challenge, but these knights are warriors. The color green is not a frightening enough color, even combined with the Green Knight's size, to scare a true warrior. The possible reason for the hesitation by the knights could lie in the description of the Green Knight's eyes. The author points them out in line 304, "and roisterously his red eyes he [rolls] all about" (Sir Gawain). The critic Robert B. White Jr. says that "one need not look far to discover the general symbolic significance of red when it appears in early literature; it [is] generally associated with blood, cruelty, and violence" (224). The Green Knight's eyes display just how sinister he is and provide the reason that the other knights are hesitant to accept the challenge. Gawain's willingness to accept definitely sets him apart from the other knights. The author uses this symbol to reveal that Gawain is not only loyal, but also courageous, and worthy to have his attributes put to the test.

The author goes on to reveal yet another very important attribute of the loyal knight, his moral goodness. This is done in the description of the shield that Gawain arms himself with to undertake his journey to the Green Chapel. The shield is adorned "with [a] pentangle portrayed in purest gold" (Sir Gawain, l. 620). This pentangle symbolizes Gawain's "faith in the five wounds of Christ and the five joys of the Virgin [Mary], and his possession of the five knightly virtues. . ." (Howard 47). This display of Gawain's moral perfection, or purity, reinforces his worthiness to undergo the test of his chivalric attributes.

Honor is another very important attribute that a knight must possess. Gawain has given his word while accepting the beheading challenge that he will meet the Green Knight at the Green Chapel in one year's time. This journey is not an easy task by any means. The author tells us "many a cliff must he climb in country wild; / far off from all his friends, forlorn must he ride" (Sir Gawain, l. 713-714). This journey is also taking place in winter and "near slain by the sleet [Gawain] sleeps in his irons / more nights than enough, among the naked rocks" (Sir Gawain, l. 729-730). The author's vivid description of what Gawain must go through to get to the Green Chapel is symbolic in testing Gawain's honor. It would be very easy to not search out the Green Knight and stay home where he can be warmed by a fire and sheltered from the harsh environment. Gawain, however, has given his word and he is bound and determined to follow through with his end of the bargain, thus proving that he is indeed an honorable knight.

Gawain's arrival at the castle of Bercilak begins the test of Gawain's purity and courtesy, two more very important knightly attributes, as well as continues the test of honor. Bercilak is going hunting three days in a row while Gawain remains at the castle and rests. He makes a deal with Gawain saying "whatever I win in the woods I will give you at eve, / and all you have earned you must offer to me" (Sir Gawain, l. 1106-1107). Gawain accepts and each day while Bercilak is hunting, Gawain is tempted by Bercilak's wife. Gawain is torn between his purity (he must not commit adultery), and his courtesy (he cannot offend a lady by not honoring her request). The author sets up a very interesting parallel in his description of each day of Bercilak's hunt and each day of Gawain's temptation by Bercilak's wife. The animal killed on each day of the hunt is symbolic of what happens in the bedroom between Gawain and the lady. The animal hunted on the first day is a deer which can be described as "noble game- wise, politic, tactful, quick to foreknow his hazards and adroit in avoiding embarrassing situations. These are precisely the qualities Sir Gawain displays in the face of his temptation on the first day. Anticipating trouble, he pretends to be asleep; and when he finally is engaged by his hostess in conversation, the tone is gay, delicate, and bantering" (Zesmer 157). The second day Bercilak hunts a boar, which "is renowned for boldness and ferocity in conflict. Gawain, like the boar, faces his pursuer directly on the second day. He abandons his pretense of sleep and discards his light tone, preferring to speak more resolutely and to resist more directly" (Zesmer 157). The third day the fox is hunted. The fox is an animal known for its slyness. This slyness "[bears] close [affinity] with Gawain's sly, fear-inspired behavior of the third day" (Zesmer 157). The first two nights Gawain lives up to his end of the deal with Bercilak by kissing him, which is what he gains in the castle from Bercilak's wife. The third night, however, Gawain kisses Bercilak but he does not give up everything he earned in the castle that day. Bercilak's wife has given Gawain a green girdle as a gift for use in saving his life, and asked that he not let Bercilak know about it. Bercilak's wife was not able to get Gawain to fail in his test of purity or courtesy to her, for he did not sleep with her and he was at all times courteous while avoiding her advances. She did, however, succeed in setting him up to fail in his honor and courtesy to Bercilak. Gawain did not reveal that he had received the girdle and did not give it to Bercilak in keeping his end of the deal. The green girdle thus becomes a symbol of Gawain's lack of honor and courtesy.

The green girdle is not just used as a symbol of Gawain's dishonesty to Bercilak. It is also symbolic of what Gawain chooses to put his faith in. Donald R. Howard explains "Gawain has taken the girdle, then, not to own it for its value or wear it for its beauty, but simply to save his life. It is as worldly an object, and used for as worldly an end as the shield; but unlike the shield, it is magical, it is used solely for a selfish reason. . . . He is guilty not because he desires [to save his own life] but because in order to do so he uses worldly means in the wrong way" (49). The shield that Gawain arms himself with as he sets out on his journey is symbolic of his faith in God ("The five wounds of Christ and the five joys of the Virgin [Mary]" (Howard 47) mentioned previously). The girdle, which he "arms" himself with when he leaves Bercilak's castle for the Green Chapel, is "a convenient symbol for worldliness" (Howard 48). Gawain puts his faith in the girdle, instead of God, to save his life. This faith that he placed in a worldly object to spare his life is where Gawain fails the test of his knightly attributes.

Gawain's fault is not actually revealed until he meets the Green Knight at the Green Chapel. At Gawain's arrival to the Green Chapel he hears a noise "as one upon a grindstone [grinds] a great scythe" (Sir Gawain, l. 2202). We find out that what is being ground is actually an ax, but the mention of a scythe is symbolic in that a scythe is a harvesting tool. This can be related to the harvest of the earth which is mentioned in the Bible. "So he that was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested" (Rev. 14.16), is a passage that occurs just prior to the Judgment Day. Judgment is precisely what Gawain undergoes at the Green Chapel with the Green Knight as the judge. It is this

judgment that reveals to us that the test of Gawain's attributes was all the Green Knight's scheme. It also reveals that Gawain's true flaw is in his desire for "self preservation, the central, involuntary worldliness of fallen man, through which even the best is easily tempted" (Howard 50).

Gawain is placed in many different situations in which he must demonstrate that he does, in fact, possess the attributes of a worthy knight. Though Gawain is not flawless, he does prove that he is an exemplary knight. The author relies heavily on the use of symbols throughout the entire work in showing just how exemplary Gawain is. These symbols show that Gawain is in fact loyal, courageous, honorable, pure, and courteous, but also human and, therefore, imperfect. The knightly attributes of loyalty, courage, honor, purity, and courtesy are all components of the term chivalry. The author skillfully puts the individual tests of these attributes together into one central theme, or overall test, the test of chivalry.

#### Outline

Introduction: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a story of a test of one knight's chivalric attributes. To establish Gawain as a knight that is worthy of undergoing this test, the author uses many symbols. These symbols are also used throughout the tests and continue to the end.

Thesis Statement: Through the use of symbols, the author of Sir Gawain is able to show that Gawain possesses the necessary attributes to make him worthy of being tested. He also uses symbols throughout the tests of each individual attribute, and in revealing where Gawain's fault lies. The effective use of these symbols enables the author to integrate the test of each individual attribute into a central theme, or rather one overall test, the test of chivalry.

I. To establish Gawain as a worthy knight, the author must first display Gawain's loyalty and courage.

A. Gawain takes the place of Arthur in the beheading challenge, displaying loyalty.  
B. The Green Knight's red eyes contribute greatly to the display of Gawain's courage.

II. The author reinforces Gawain's worthiness in his description of the shield.

A. The shield is symbolic of Gawain's faith in God.  
B. The shield also displays Gawain's moral goodness.

III. Honor is another very important attribute that a knight must possess.

A. The journey to the Green Chapel is by no means an easy one.  
1. It would be tempting to just remain at home sheltered from the harsh winter environment.  
B. Gawain has given his word that he will go, and he does, regardless of the difficulty, proving that he is honorable.

IV. Gawain's purity and courtesy are tested at Bercilak's castle.

A. While Bercilak is hunting, Gawain is being tempted by Bercilak's wife.  
B. The animal killed each day in the hunt is symbolic of what occurs in the bedroom at the castle.  
1. This sets up a very interesting parallel.  
C. Gawain does not fail in his purity or courtesy to Bercilak's wife, but he does fail in his honor and courtesy to Bercilak.

V. The green girdle is more than just a symbol of Gawain's dishonesty to Bercilak.

A. The girdle is also symbolic of Gawain's faith in a worldly object.  
B. Gawain fails in this test of his attributes by relying on the girdle to save his life.

VI. Gawain's fault is not actually revealed until he is at the Green Chapel.

A. Upon his arriving he hears what is apparently a scythe being ground.  
1. The scythe is a harvesting tool.  
2. This can be related to the harvest of the earth just prior to the Judgment Day.

- B. The test is revealed to be the Green Knight's scheme.
  - C. Gawain's true flaw is his desire for self preservation.
- VII. Gawain is placed in many different situations in which he must demonstrate that he does, in fact, possess the attributes of a worthy knight.
- A. The author uses symbols to place Gawain in these different situations and as a means to show he is exemplary.
  - B. Loyalty, courage, honor, purity, and courtesy are all components of the term chivalry.
  - C. When the individual tests of these attributes are put together, the result is one overall test- the test of chivalry.

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