

A Transformation of Gawain: A Human Experience

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Reactions to unexpected moments help form a person's self throughout their life. Sir Gawain is a noble character in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, successfully written by an unknown author around the year 1400. Gawain asks for the challenge the Green Knight offers in the beginning of the poem because he wishes to take the place of King Arthur, win himself honor, and accomplish greater tasks than are expected of him. Whether he lives or dies during the journey is clearly of no consequence to him until the moment he must face the Green Knight draws near. The lengthy and arduous journey Gawain takes on serves several ideal purposes of making a name for himself, protecting his king, and showing what a noble knight is capable of when placed in increasingly strange and strenuous situations. From a structuralist's point of view, Gawain reacts to the entire journey through learned experience of the world beyond the court of King Arthur. Learning to adapt, gather knowledge of his enemy, as well as himself, and confronting life or death problems uniquely defines this knight through his chivalrous acts. The major decisions Gawain makes move him along his way to meet his fate at the Green Chapel with the mischievously playful Green Knight.

As a young knight, Gawain is eager to prove himself worthy for reputation's sake. Taking the place of his king in a dangerous journey is what called him to action for the quest. This call to action begins his quest for self-fulfillment. The Green Knight confronts the court of King Arthur asking for a knight to take part in a beheading game. Arthur engages the knight first and accepts the challenge until Gawain steps into the picture and takes hold of his new fate. In response to Arthur's initial move, Gawain asks him, "I beg you, most fervently, / to let me take this on" (341-42), wishing to take the place of Arthur and claim

glory because he feels he is the least important individual present in the court. Gawain's actions may be interpreted in several ways. Through the lens of structuralism, Gawain is embarking upon an adventure that will expose him to lands far beyond what he encountered before. This exposure to cultural phenomena is expected of a man who wishes to be a well-rounded and experienced knight. William G. Doty explains, "The benefits of structuralist analysis are that the methodology exposes tensions and underlying patterns in myths and rites that seem accessible only through just such a process of decomposition and coding" ("The Enframing Prime-time" 281). Opening one's eyes to the small and underlying details in this poem will reveal a richer comprehension of cultural traditions and ceremonies within this poem. Using a structuralist approach illuminates Gawain's character development as more apparent through the recognition of how, why, and in what way he grows as a knight.

Gawain acts nobly at the start of the poem, as well as throughout, making his first major choice by taking Arthur's place. By sacrificing himself to protect someone he sees as indispensable, he is consciously recognizing his time to take part in a quest. Gawain continues in his plea with Arthur saying, "I'm the weakest, I know, and the feeblest of spirit, / so my life would be the least loss, it is simply true. / My only worth is that you are my uncle; / my body's sole value that your blood runs through it" (354-57). By taking on this responsibility, the eager Gawain is explaining that he needs to make his own name worth something and able to stand alone outside of Arthur's shadow. Many tales of knights, heroes, and heroines start with this initial call to action and it is Arthur who is called, yet Gawain takes the challenge head on.

Gawain is ready to prove that he is the one who should be taking this journey to meet the Green Knight at the Green Chapel. The Gawain-poet elegantly paints the picture of the

encounter with the Green Knight as ominous and daunting. If Gawain noticed the overly confident attitude the Green Knight had, there would be no adventure and no accomplishment. Gawain's commonsense should have picked up on the confidence the Green Knight possessed. When a person knows they will win, their nature is to bet everything and put it all on the line. The Green Knight is only too happy to take a gamble by placing his neck underneath his own ax. This should have been Gawain's first clue the task would be a difficult one. The mystical nature and curious allure of the Green Knight also should have given away the mysterious game in which Gawain was to begin. Gawain might have noticed the absurd request the Green Knight had presented and discarded it because he felt it was the right course of action. He chose to participate in the strange game to see what would happen. Curiosity and a challenge to prove himself enticed Gawain to participate in the strange game. Despite this possible interpretation of Gawain not going on his journey, he says, "I'll do my best to make my way there. / I solemnly swear it, on my word of honour" (402-03). He puts his honor to the test and this is repeatedly brought up through the embedded patterns dispersed throughout the tale. These moments appear from his encounters with Bertilak de Hautdesert's wife and when he is at the Green Chapel. The Gawain-poet provides cautionary oratory in the beginning of this adventure by writing "Now take care, Sir Gawain, / not to shrink from danger. / This is quite an ordeal that you have taken on" (487-90). Gawain has indeed taken on a monstrous task of involving himself in a contest that is too good to be true. By accepting this deeply experience-oriented quest, Gawain learns more about himself and the demand of honor, glory, shame, and redemption.

As Gawain journeys to the Green Chapel towards the end of the year, he comes across an estate where he stays for three nights to regain his strength, enjoy the company of

welcoming people, and learn about where he must venture forth after he has rested. This is also the location in which he makes his second major decision upon a meeting with the wife of Bertilak. When relaxing and speaking with Bertilak, Gawain is offered a second game to play on top of his game with the Green Knight. Every night Gawain stays at the castle, he must give what he receives that day to Bertilak and in return will receive the spoils of the hunt in the forest from Bertilak. While Bertilak is in the forest, Gawain's virtue is at stake during the three days of temptation from Bertilak's wife. Gawain resists her tantalizing seductions for three days. However, he finally gives in when he is offered a way to save his life, so Gawain makes the conscious choice of being dishonest in order to live. This decision is a negative moment for Gawain because he has acted on a selfish impulse unbecoming of a knight. A second poor choice of shying away from the Green Knight's ax the next day pushes him further away from the honor he so longingly desires. In *Gawain, Knight of the Goddess: Restoring an Archetype*, John Matthews explains, "Gawain has passed the test with only one failure, that he accepted the Green Girdle" (65). To Matthews, Gawain only made one mistake, when in reality Gawain makes his second mistake when pulling his neck back from the ax the Green Knight yielded. Gawain's character feels that his moment of weakness is when he accepts the gift of life, the girdle that will protect him, because he has reached the point of utter hopelessness. Gawain becomes singularly concerned about his mortality and contemplates the reality of life and death because he is, of course, only human. Claude Levi-Strauss's concept of binary opposites is clearly present in this moment of Gawain's mind as he weighs his options. He gives into the pressure of the desire to live and shames his reputation further when he avoids the first swing of the ax from the Green Knight. Gawain is

unflinching in his penance for his two unsavory acts, but the Green Knight absolves him of any misdoings.

Gawain's encounter with the unfortunate side of the Green Knight's ax was an unpleasant but necessary experience for individual growth. During the moment his life is in jeopardy, Gawain "pretended to be fearless, / afraid to show his dread" (2257-58). Coming this far just to give up is not a worthy action of a knight. Gawain was afraid to admit aloud that he feared death. The Gawain-poet writes, "Gawain glanced sideways at that war-axe / as it came speeding groundwards as if to destroy him, / and with his shoulders recoiled from the steel" (2265-67). To be fearful for one's life is a normal human condition that is not considered during some readings of this tale. The Gawain-poet evinces pathos for Gawain by writing, "It's no wonder Gawain disliked it, / with no hope of escape" (2307-08) because Gawain was afraid when he saw the ax dropping down. In *Myth* by Laurence Coupe, Claude Levi-Strauss's structuralist approach is explained in useful detail. Coupe states that when "interpreting myth, we are not to attend to the single symbol, but to the overall structure; not to what it may or may not mean to the individual, but to the communal logic which is implicit" (138). In Gawain's case, he is scared of dying, a fear all humans have. Although the logical way to react in this situation is to feel fear, Gawain is ashamed that he has not acted according to what a knight should have done. In a typical community, this pulling back would be expected and also judged. Gawain is simply bridging that link between the realm of knighthood and normal human reactive behaviors.

Gawain makes a third major decision of accepting his shame through his defeat both morally and physically. By demanding this burden of bearing his shame, he is not only cleansed of his wrongdoings, he is accepted back into Arthur's court and seen as a majestic

warrior who has worked with his fate. In *The Arthurian Legends: An Illustrated Anthology*, Gawain is referred to as "an idealized hero who makes one error that cannot be redeemed, although not fatal" (115). The act of cowardice is not what makes a good knight. However, Gawain does redeem himself because he accepts the shame and makes it a point to explain why he took on such disgrace by wearing the girdle that tempted him. The anthology goes on to envision the journey of Gawain to be interpreted that "by breaking his word in concealing the girdle, he had dishonoured the order of knighthood" (115). Whether he dishonored himself or not, he did not shy away from the disgrace and did not leave himself open to additional ridicule by turning his back on his shame. He wholeheartedly assumes the responsibility through shaming himself publicly. Gawain performs a noble act with this burden and declares that "Though a man may hide his crime, if it's not exposed, / once it is there it will never be gone" (2511-12). Although Gawain dishonors himself before and during the final rounds of the beheading game, he does not follow the same course after the near death experience. The Green Knight's enchanted world is what Gawain is unfamiliar with and this encounter with death at the Green Chapel, a uniquely magical place, has changed him. His exposure to it has given him wisdom and newly found courage, especially when taking responsibility for his actions. This is his turning point in which he learns a lesson about the repercussions of selfish actions. Gawain is able to show his accumulation of knowledge through the wearing of the green girdle, which assisted in his escape from death.

Gawain goes through several temptations with Bertilak's wife and gives in the moment he is presented with a way to preserve his life. It is said, "Some writers have seen *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a poem with a didactic moral; but it is rather a moral reflection on human weakness" (*The Arthurian Legends* 115). Gawain was not weak when it

came to the flesh of a beautiful woman. He instead becomes weak only because he is concerned for himself. Although the reader of the poem sees the momentary weakness of a hero, the reality of taking on the disgrace should be recognized at the end of the poem and seen as a great accomplishment for the knight. It is expected of any person in any culture to wish to survive. The lack of knightly behavior Gawain momentarily experiences is an example of what can happen to even the most noble-seeming person. Gawain is not perfect. This is the reality of Gawain and an underlying theme of the poem that should be considered in a structuralist point of view. The Green Knight explains to Gawain that he does not hold him at fault and tells him, "But there you fell short a bit and failed in fidelity, / not from love of artwork or libidinous urges, / but because you like being alive" (2366-68). The primal human urge to live is a clear theme in this poem. Gawain gave into the survival instinct he has in the depths of his being and tainted his honor. The Green Knight tells Gawain that he acted as a knight should around the temptations of an attractive woman and that accepting and hiding the girdle is not something to be ashamed of even though Gawain "shrank with shame" (2372). The Green Knight ignores the horror Gawain is experiencing and says, "I sent her to tempt you, and honestly I think / you're as faultless a man as ever drew breath" (2362-63). Gawain resisted the temptation of the wife's body, but gave into the desires to protect his own body. Gawain holds onto his suitable courtly behavior by acting like a gentleman despite the consistent seductive attempts by Bertilak's wife.

Gawain successfully resists Bertilak's wife, but accepts the girdle against his knightly nature. The Green Knight initially says he is sure that this man standing in front of him is not Gawain because he has "never heard such cowardice ascribed to him" (2273) as Gawain moves away from the quickly dropping ax. These words are said to Gawain before the ax is

finally brought down upon his neck for the second and then third time. After the event takes place, the Green Knight commends Gawain for going through with his promise. The Green Knight explains this to Gawain and says, "I declare you absolved of that guilt" (2393) because he did not set out to hurt Gawain, but to simply play a game and test a member of Arthur's court under orders from Morgan Le Fay. This is the instant of the poem in which Gawain musters all that he has learned in his quest and replies by saying, "Now I am false and at fault-I who always have / dreaded / treachery and lies" (2383-85). His value for his own life is what convinced him to lie. Gawain easily took the place of Arthur's life in the beginning of the poem, but when the time came to give his life to the Green Knight, he hesitated and quickly recognized that he had acted foolishly. Gawain goes on to say that the girdle is now "a sign of my sinfulness: that's how I'll see it / as I ride out in glory, as a reminder to me / of the frailty and weakness of the treacherous flesh" (2433-35). Gawain speaks of his own flesh that is treacherous, not giving into the woman's flesh. The woman was not his downfall. Valuing his life was his downfall. Gawain speaks in a misogynistic way, but does so in an angry state that is not becoming of what a knight should say about a lady. After the discussion of his shame, Gawain leaves to go home and show his personal failure to everyone and is ready to accept whatever way they may act towards him.

King Arthur and his men welcome Gawain back into their homes and hearts because they are so happy he has survived his quest. The acceptance of warriors back into a community shows the cohesion that is expected and valued in such a moment. In the short essay *Transforming Warriors*, Arthur Egendorff writes, "Communities that suffer an absence of spirit will be roused not by condemning, repressing, or banishing the most exuberant human energies, but by directing those energies to a dignifying and ennobling purpose"

(168). Many warriors throughout history have been celebrated upon their return from war. Gawain's journey was no different than a soldier returning home from a difficult place. The Gawain-poet writes about the welcoming Arthur and his court have for Gawain by illustrating what they do in honor of his accomplishments. The Gawain-poet writes, "For it was reckoned to be to the Round Table's credit, / and the man who would wear it honoured for ever" (2519-20). The Gawain-poet speaks of the green girdle that reveals Gawain's shameful act. The court honors Gawain for his noble actions, not for his shameful mistake. Even though he has acted against what is expected of a knight, the court is ready to honor him by wearing his symbol of shame uniformly.

Gawain's travels in this poem lead him to strange places where he gains knowledge, honor, and shame. Gawain's development as a character is due in part to the multiple patterns of games that arise from the Green Knight/Bertilak and Bertilak's wife. Gawain exemplifies the ideal knight because he is not perfect. Only through imperfection is the beauty and truth found of a person who is going to be highly valued despite the innate flaws human nature consistently possesses. When he made the mistake of wishing to preserve his life, he shows what anyone may have done in a similar situation. Even though Gawain puts his life first, he does not put someone else's life on the line. Thus, Gawain represents the nobility of humans who accept their fate in an undisclosed manner for all to see. Through a structuralist approach of unpacking the meanings surrounding Gawain's reactions, a clearer view of both a particular character and society is within reach.

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