

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Analysis

Upon the word “romance”, many think of modern day romantic novels or stories and/or TV shows: a connection affiliated with love. In the medieval period, romances were not regarded in this way, and the word “romance” simply referred to a story. A typical medieval romance had the characteristics of courtly love, lightheartedness, the code of chivalry, mystery, fantasy, disguising oneself, and heroism of a knight. A story from the genre is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and is based on the beheading game between Sir Gawain—one of King Arthur’s knight and his nephew—and the peculiar Green Knight. The story is a great example of a medieval romance as it exhibits the characteristics of the genre like mystery and fantasy, falling in love with another’s wife, and emphasizing the importance of the code of chivalry.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, mystery and supernatural elements are introduced right away at the beginning of the story. While the knights, King Arthur, and the queen were having a feast in Camelot, an unidentifiable knight interrupts them, and he is described as “half a giant on earth I hold him to be, but believe him no less than the largest of man...in guise all of green, the gear and the man.” The characteristics given to the Green Knight makes the audience or readers wonder who the knight is, and why he is green because no human is green, creating mystery. When the Green Knight challenges the knights of the round table to a beheading game, Gawain volunteers to play the game with success in beheading the Green Knight, who in turn reacts in this way: “for the head in his hand he holds right up; toward the first on the dais directs he the face, and it lifted up its lids, and looked with wide eyes.” As described, the beheaded knight picks up his head and holds it for the rest to see, creating a supernatural element because one would have lost their life yet the Green Knight still stands. Mystery and supernatural elements are common in medieval romances and are the basis of the beginning of the story.

Courtly love is the love between a knight and someone else's wife and is based on sexual attraction. As part of the beheading game, it is Gawain's turn to be beheaded and he goes to look for the Green Chapel, the Green Knight's location. When Gawain goes to look for the chapel, he encounters a castle and the lord of castle invites him to stay yet, during his stay, he falls in love with the lord's wife upon first sight. The lord's wife seduces Gawain and Gawain says to the lord's wife, "Be it with me as you will; I am well content! For I surrender myself, and sue for your grace..." Gawain flirts with the lord's wife because he is attracted to her physical beauty and he admits this to her. He eventually accepts a girdle or belt from the lady to protect himself against physical harm, which shows his trust in her. Sir Gawain does not mind being involved in this courtly love despite the fact that she was a married woman.

Chivalry was a code followed by medieval knights and the codes were: to serve with loyalty to the knight's lord, to be good in battle as well as morally, and to respect the ladies. During Gawain's stay at the castle, the lord bargains to give what he is able to hunt in return for what Gawain earns, which applies to the girdle Gawain accepted without telling. Gawain receives three swings from the Green Knight's weapon after finding him. The Green Knight explains he is Baron Bertilak, the lord of the castle, and he knows Gawain violated the bargain, displaying his disloyalty to lord, and his cowardness via his acceptance of the girdle for his own protection. Upon request from Baron to keep the girdle, Gawain said, "...your girdle...I gladly shall take, and be pleased to possess, not for the pure gold...nor workmanship fine but a sign of excess it shall seem oftentimes when I ride in renown, and remember with shame." Through the experience, Gawain learns to be aware of his own actions that misrepresents the ideals of chivalry, and to better himself as a knight, he is happy to keep the belt in remembrance of his weaknesses. Chivalry was a medieval knight's code to live by and the values are stressed by Sir Gawain and Baron Bertilak.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight fits well into the genre of medieval romances because it contains characteristics such as mystery and fantasy, courtly love and chivalry. Mystery and fantasy are seen at the beginning of the story when the Green Knight enters the scene in all green, including his own skin, and when the Green Knight spoke to the knights of the round table with his head in hand after Gawain beheads him. Courtly love is apparent when Gawain falls in love with Baron Bertilak's wife at the castle, and engages in romantic gestures with her. Lastly, the code of chivalry is evident when Gawain admits to his breaking of the codes, and he kept the girdle as a symbol to better himself as a knight. The story is not limited to those aspects as it also includes the disguise of oneself, as seen by Bertilak who was impersonating as the Green Knight, and a triumphant knight, who was Sir Gawain. These characteristics of the story help categorize it as a piece of literature in the medieval romance genre.

Sources:

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