

The main theme of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* seems to be dealing with the frailty of human nature in contrast with courage and fidelity expected of knights. Sir Gawain is presented as an aspiring and indeed great, yet still imperfect example of these qualities.

There is a frame of a poet telling the tale, as there is with most older English stories, although unlike *The Dream of the Rood*, there is no “internal” narrator. But like with *The Dream of the Rood*, I appreciate the translator’s choice to retain the alliterative form as much as possible.

Telling a story in the way it is originally meant to be told goes a long way as far as immersion and engaging with it are concerned.

The fact that the majority of the narrative takes place around Christmas is interesting to me, as it is usually thought of as a time of celebrating birth, not suffering. Yet, as the poem itself points out, Christ was born that he may die, and the inclusion of that phrase may reflect Sir Gawain’s frame of thought at that time. A preparedness to meet death is a central part of historic Christian spirituality, and here Gawain’s knighthood is upheld as the epitome of that way of thinking.

The significance of the five-pointed star on Gawain’s shield stands out to me. I had heard of the star symbolizing the five wounds of Christ, but had not know its connection to the “five joys of Mary” (only two of which are part of the joyful mysteries of the rosary; the latter three are part of the glorious mysteries), nor its connection to Solomon. Speaking of Mary, she seems to be deeply woven into the story; she is invoked at the beginning of Gawain’s journey, he has an icon of her inside his shield (similar to King Arthur having an image of Mary painted on his shield elsewhere in the Arthurian mythos), and he makes references to her throughout his conversations with Bertilak’s wife. It seems to me that he calls her to mind to have her as a lens through which to view the woman who is testing his chivalry and chastity; by having in mind the

woman who is the highest and holiest standard of womanhood, he is better able to deal with the temptress before him.

Speaking of chivalry, another running theme is Gawain's character throughout the challenges that he faces. Where he does act well, his nobility is pointed out, and his knighthood is emphasized. Where he does not hold up, his human frailty comes into view. While his youth is not emphasized in this part of the narrative, I think it is an element at play here. The ending inclines me to think that, given Gawain's overall character, there was not much at stake, and this whole adventure served more as a coming-of-age story (if such modern categories can be applied to such ancient stories).

All in all, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a good example of the English storytelling tradition. Christian in basis, drawing in some pre-Christian elements, and now incorporating aspects of medieval thoughts and culture, it is a small wonder that this story (and the larger set of legends it fits into) have been so popular in the Anglophone world.