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Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Comparative Analysis between *Sir Gawain  
and the Green Knight* and *The Lord of the  
Rings:*

A Thematic Comparison

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## Abstract

This project attempts to show the thematic relation which exists between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (15<sup>th</sup> Century) and *The Lord of the Rings* (20<sup>th</sup> Century). Even though both pieces are five centuries far from each other, they share different themes with their similarities and their differences. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* could be seen as the most representative work in which we can learn quite about knights, their traditions, and their time in England. Meanwhile, *The Lord of the Rings* can be considered the perfect trilogy where we can find, apart from knights, different races and different problems which knights and everybody else will have to face in Middle-Earth. Only three main themes will be discussed and analysed in which we will be able to see their similarities in both stories, and their differences about how the same theme can be explored from different perspectives.

Key words: Knight, knightly behaviour, temptation, failure, fate, One Ring, green girdle.

Este Trabajo de Fin de Grado trata de mostrar la relación temática que existe entre *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Siglo XV) y *The Lord of the Rings* (Siglo XX). A pesar de ser obras que están separadas por cinco siglos comparten diferentes temas con sus semejanzas y sus diferencias. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* podría ser visto como el trabajo más representativo en el cual podemos aprender bastante sobre caballeros, sus tradiciones y su tiempo en Inglaterra. Mientras tanto, *The Lord of the Rings* puede ser considerada la perfecta trilogía donde podemos encontrar, además de caballeros, diferentes razas y diferentes problemas que caballeros y todos los demás deberán hacer frente en la Tierra Media. Solamente tres temas principales serán discutidos y analizados en los cuales seremos capaces de ver sus semejanzas en ambas historias y sus diferencias, sobre cómo el mismo tema puede ser explorado desde diferentes perspectivas.

Palabras clave: Caballero, caballeroso, tentación, caída, destino, Anillo Único, cinturón verde.

## 1. Introduction

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is one of the main important poems in Middle-English written around 1400. Its author is unknown, though many people consider him as one of the greatest poets in the Middle Ages. Everything we know about him is because of a manuscript, which contains his four poems: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Patience*, *Pearl* and *Purity*. One of the things we know about this poet is that he lived in the North of West-Midlands in England because of the English dialect he utilized when writing his poems. Nowadays, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is known as one of the classics of English literature. (Deane) The *Lord of the Rings*, divided into three parts, was written by J. R. R. Tolkien in different years after the Second World War. J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973) was a British writer with African origins. He was philologist and published different essays and translations about the Gawain Poet's works. He became more famous due to his books of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. ("John Ronald Reuel Tolkien") Both *Sir Gawain* and *The Lord of the Rings* try to display different themes as lessons for daily life, even though they are incorporated in the fantasy genre. Despite the fact that every story was written and published in different time, they share similar messages and similar purposes. The aim of this project is to display the relationship between these two stories through the selection and the analysis of the most important themes, with their similarities and differences. This relation will be only from a thematic perspective. In order to get this, three main themes will be compared so as to observe how they are alike and how they are not: how to portrait the ideal knight, how weakness toward temptation affects, and finally, how fate plays its role.

## 2. The Search for the Ideal Knight in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Lord of the Rings*

Firstly, we should know a little bit more about the characters of the two stories. The first two knights are from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The first character is Sir Gawain; Gawain is known as the nephew of Arthur and knight of the Round Table (Joe). The second character is Sir Bercilak: another knight with his own court in the country of Britain. The next characters are from *The Lord of the Rings*. The first one is Aragorn; Aragorn is the last heir of Isildur, king of Gondor, one of the most important and powerful kingdoms of Middle-Earth. Finally, the last character is Boromir, son of Denethor, administrator of Gondor, and knight of the kingdom.

### 2.1. Comparison between Sir Gawain and Sir Bercilak

Now that we know the characters and have situated them in their contexts we can begin to compare them. Comparisons will be done between the two knights from each of the different stories to assess their quality as knights. In each story there is a knight who represents the Ideal Knight and one who represents a failed example of the Ideal Knight. The first comparison is between Sir Gawain and Sir Bercilak. The romance of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* deals with the world of knights; indeed, the world of King Arthur and the Round Table, the most admirable order of knights:

In this domain more marvels have by men been seen

than in any other that I know of since that olden time;

but of all that here abode in Britain as kings

ever was Arthur most honoured, as I have Heard men tell. (I, 2, 4-8)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> All quotations are from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo*, translated by Tolkien. (London, 1979)

As Markman points out, this romance tries to “show what a splendid man Gawain is.” (575) As was said previously, Sir Gawain is Arthur’s nephew, someone who has to maintain the reputation which knights have. He belongs to the Round Table, and this means that he, as knight, must be and set example to follow. As a knight, he attempts to display different values and qualities such as frankness, fellowship, cleanliness, courtesy and pity. Furthermore, all these qualities are represented by the pentangle in his shield. (Morgan 770)

Then they brought him his blazon that was of brilliant gules

with the pentangle depicted in pure hue of gold.

By the baldric he caught it and about his neck cast it:

right well and worthily it went with the knight. (II, 27, 1-4)

According to this information, we could define the Ideal Knight in *Sir Gawain* as the Pentangle Knight. The problem arises when Sir Gawain is not able to show all these values. Sir Gawain does not show frankness and fellowship towards Sir Bercilak, he fails on their game when Gawain is tempted by a lady of Bercilak’s court and decides not to give Bercilak what he received from the lady, a green girdle. Because of this lack of loyalty toward other knight, Sir Bercilak, Sir Gawain should not be considered as a good knight and an example for others. Knights must reject temptation no matter what happens, even if their lives are at risk. This is what Sir Gawain does not accomplish, which does not make him the ideal and perfect knight. However, Sir Bercilak is the opposite of Sir Gawain, just as Martin Puhvel refers to him as “Gawain’s antagonist.” (13) In this particular case, Sir Bercilak represents what Sir Gawain should have been, the Ideal Knight. Sir Bercilak obeys the pact which Sir Gawain and he have established. He gives Sir Gawain everything he gets during the hunt as he promised. It is true that Sir Bercilak does not appear frequently throughout the whole poem but with his actions that are displayed we can see an honourable knight. For instance, he allows Sir Gawain stay in

his castle and also provides him whatever he needs in order to achieve his mission that is search for the Green Knight at the Green Chapel. Finally, we discover that the Green Knight is Sir Bercilak, a tool to test Sir Gawain's values as knight, and prove that he is not good enough.

## 2.2. Comparison between Aragorn and Boromir

The second comparison is between Aragorn and Boromir. Aragorn is the last of the Dúnedain, and the heir of Isildur, Old King of Gondor. ("Aragorn"). He first appears in *The Fellowship of the Ring* when he meets Frodo at The Prancing Pony. Auden describes Aragorn as an expression "of the natural vocation of talent ... a great warrior and the rightful heir to the throne." (55) Aragorn may not be considered as a Pentagle Knight in *The Lord of the Rings* which has to provide five values, even though he also displays different types of values such as courtesy, fellowship, bravery, etc. Therefore, we have to analyse carefully Aragorn's actions in order to identify him as the Ideal Knight. The problem for Aragorn is that men failed in the past and lost their standing, as we will see in next chapter, so he must demonstrate his position as man and give men back their reputation. As was said before, Aragorn shows different values throughout the trilogy, he always acts as a good knight, fighting for the great good and never giving up. Aragorn helps the wizard Gandalf the Grey, the Elves, the kingdoms of Rohan and Gondor as much as he can in order to resist the enemy, Sauron, and maintain the free will of the people in Middle-Earth. Aragorn volunteers to protect Frodo's life and his mission of destroying the One Ring: "I am Aragorn son of Arathorn; and if by life or death I can save you, I will." (I, 187)<sup>2</sup> This can be considered as truly knightly behaviour in that he maintains this promise until the end. Also, he becomes the leader of the fellowship when Gandalf does not pass the darkness of Khâzad-Dûm. Moreover, he never tries to possess the Ring, and never allows temptation control him. Therefore, Aragorn can be seen as the Ideal Knight, similar to Sir Bercilak. Contrastingly, Boromir is the opposite of Aragorn and similar to Sir Gawain. He is the son of Denethor, who manages the throne of Gondor in absence of the King, and a warrior

<sup>2</sup> All quotations are from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings: Part I, The Fellowship of the Ring; Part II, The Two Towers; Part III, The Return of the King*, 1 vol. (London, 1969)



from this kingdom. As Bradley explains, Boromir is a valiant and strong man but he is continuously trying to take Aragorn's place, and do things his own way. (110) Not only does he try to occupy Aragorn's leadership role, but also he tries to steal and get the Ring from Frodo. He is completely tempted by the Ring's power and wishes to have it: "If any mortals have claim to the Ring, it is the men of Númenor, and not Halflings. It is not yours, you have it by unhappy chance. It might have been mine. It should be mine. Give it to me!" (I, 419) Thus, these facts do not contribute to good effect to proclaim Boromir as the Ideal Knight; he fails as Sir Gawain does.

Another interesting fact related to knightly behaviour is at the end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, all the knights decide to wear a green badge so as to remember Gawain's fail, and to support him as part of the united order of knights. Something similar occurs in *The Fellowship of the Ring* when the characters are found by the Elves in Lórien. The Elves do not get along with the Dwarves; thus they want Gimli to put on a blindfold so he cannot see any part of their kingdom. Aragorn decides that every member of the fellowship must put the same on their eyes in order not to hurt the dwarf's pride.

### 3. Temptation and Failure in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Lord of the Rings*

Temptation is a main theme in both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Lord of the Rings*; this issue is seen from similar perspectives in both stories but also with some differences. The attraction toward temptation will lead to the failure for the different characters throughout the two stories.

#### 3.1. Temptation and Failure in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: Sir Gawain

The character who is tempted in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is Sir Gawain. The temptation takes effect when a lady from Bercilak's court offers a green girdle to Sir Gawain.

He accepts it, but temptation and his own desires take over him in the moment he refuses to give the girdle to Sir Bercilak due to the words that the lady told Sir Gawain about the girdle:

For whoever goes girdled with this green riband,  
 while he keeps it well clasped closely about him,  
 there is none so hard under heaven that to hew him were able;  
 for he could not be killed by any cunning of hand. (III, 74, 6-9)

Before knowing this, the green girdle was merely a worthless object which becomes very important and relevant for Sir Gawain when the lady explains to him its magic abilities. (Mills 629) Therefore, the pact, which consisted of giving each other what they obtained, that Sir Gawain and Sir Bercilak established was betrayed by Sir Gawain. His status as knight was lost because of this failure. The ideal knight Gawain would have taken the girdle, but also would have given it to Sir Bercilak as they agreed at the beginning. A knight's oath loses its value without facts, and consequently, this makes the knight lose his status. Sir Gawain fears being hurt or killed by the Green Knight, and that fear makes him vulnerable toward his own wishes, and he forgets his duties. This failure is the proof that Sir Gawain, like perhaps other knights, can be corrupted by fear and own desires and Arthur's men are not perfect. It is a failure that creates bad reputation for men, something similar to what happens in *The Lord of the Rings*.

### 3.2. Temptation and Failure in *The Lord of the Rings*: Boromir and Saruman

Temptation in *The Lord of the Rings* is displayed by a similar way. What we are going to analyse of this piece is those characters whose failure provoked by temptation has very negative effects for the rest of good characters: these characters are Boromir and Saruman the White. But first, let us talk about temptation; temptation in this story is represented by means of a ring, not an ordinary ring, but the One Ring. The Ring attributes power to its carrier and this is what

is quite dangerous. Nelson asserts that “the power in the Ring works on the major flaw of all characters and by this means attempts to turn them to evil.” (83) Therefore, this Ring gives power but its cost is very high, so high that it can destroy a person completely. As was explained in the previous section, Boromir succumbs to the desire of having the Ring. His desire is so strong that he would be capable of killing Frodo, its carrier, in order to get the object:

‘Why are you so unfriendly?’ said Boromir. ‘I am a true man, neither thief nor tracker. I need your Ring: that you know now; but I give you my word that I do not desire to keep it. Will you not at least let me make trial of my plan? Lend me the Ring!’ (I, 419)

These words are probably full of lies and tricks, for Boromir wishes to have that power that the Ring promises, that power that Boromir thinks will save his people. And in these words can his failure be noticed. A true man would not try to steal the Ring from its carrier, a true man would not try to utilise the Ring’s power to face the enemy. As member of the Fellowship, he does not accomplish his mission correctly, and this failure could have led into a bigger disaster unless Boromir had regretted his actions before doing something else. Moreover, his mission as knight has failed as well. As was explained before, a knight must not look for his own desires and cannot succumb to temptation, even if that power he wants to “control” may help his people and other kingdoms. Finally, he regrets about what he did and said to Frodo, but dies in battle trying to defend Merry and Pippin from the Saruman’s orcs. Boromir’s failure is one of the reasons why most of the people do not trust men in Middle-Earth; his weakness corrupts men’s reputation as what happens in *Sir Gawain*. Further, the character of Saruman the White could be a big example of corruption. Saruman, in the beginnings, is a good character. He is the leader of the Order of Wizards (together with Gandalf the Grey, Radagast the Brown and two more Blue wizards) sent to Middle-Earth in order to fight Sauron. But Saruman’s beliefs change when he wishes to have the Ring. He forgets about his mission in Middle-Earth and the only thing he

lives for is to control power. Even he joins Sauron in order to get the Ring, and tries to destroy the kingdom of Rohan when he is one of the most important protectors of all the life. Saruman provides the main case histories “of the gradual destructive effect of willing submission to evil wills, ... pride and the lust for power destroy him.” (Spacks 92-93) Saruman’s treachery changes everything; he is not an ally anymore; he has become a new enemy that must be faced. Saruman’s purpose and mission have failed; he has succumbed to the power of the Ring and his own desires forgetting about his task of helping against Sauron and helping to destroy the evil of the Ring. He was one of the most powerful characters that Good could count on. Therefore, Saruman loses his position as wise man and leader of the order of wizards, he cannot be considered the man who once was. His will has not been strong enough against the evil and temptation of the Ring. Finally, Saruman tries to show false remorse, but he is punished for his treachery:

‘I did not give you leave to go,’ said Gandalf sternly ... ‘You have become a fool, Saruman, and yet pitiable. You might still have turned away from folly and evil, and have been of service ... You have no colour now, and I cast you from the order and from the Council.’ (II, 606-607)

#### 4. The Role of Fate in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Lord of the Rings*

Destiny is the last theme which will be compared between these two stories. Its importance will vary and change depending on the story and the characters. Destiny can be the guide that plans the path the characters must follow, or, characters can follow their own path creating thus their own destiny. This is what will be examined in this new section using both stories.

#### 4.1. Fate in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Firstly, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* can be considered a simpler work than *The Lord of the Rings*; therefore, it is easier to see here how destiny works. Before analysing the destiny's role in this story we must ask ourselves what causes Gawain's adventure. It is Morgan's magic what creates the Green Knight in order to challenge the Round Table:

Bertilak de Hautdesert hereabouts I am called,  
 [who thus have been enchanted and changed in my hue]  
 by the might of Morgan le Fay in my mansion dwelleth,  
 and by cunning of lore and crafts well learned. (IV, 98, 17-20)

Therefore, we have Morgan as the trigger of the whole adventure, who manipulates everything so the knight who accepts the challenge follows the plans she has prepared. Morgan is just the beginning, we do not know what is going to happen in the ending, we only know that Sir Gawain must face one challenge and one adventure, but the final results are unknown. We must remember that "Gawain's test may be to determine who will be the foremost hero of the Round Table" (Loganbill 123), and this means that the final outcome will entirely depend on what he does. That is the reason why he is tested in Bertilak's castle. The actions he chooses to take determine his destiny. Therefore, Gawain through his elections originates his fate, he is one step below Morgan because she was who created the challenge world. The Green Knight punished his choices as discussed in the previous two sections. Another ending would have been possible if other choices were made.

#### 4.2. Fate in *The Lord of the Rings*

This theme has a development much more complex in *The Lord of the Rings*; not only will fate depend on the own decisions of a character, but on every single character. That is to

say that every character will supply different decisions which will have an impact upon other characters. There will be no fate that makes character choose one decision or another; like in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* characters will be able to decide themselves what to do, when to do, and how to do, and this will have its importance for the ending of the story. Here, there is no a higher piece like Morgan who will unleash the whole adventure. Every character will make their own decisions which will affect other characters. Dubs (38) affirms that Tolkien allows his characters “for both freedom and fate, and in such a way that each seems to depend upon the other.” This quote is the main idea of this theory, everyone is the owner of her/his fate, but there will be no higher piece which controls everybody’s fate. The fate and decisions of every character will interact with the others’. The best example of this theory is the fact that Frodo Baggins gets the One Ring. One of the smallest and insignificant person in the world has the weapon that can decide the future of everyone in Middle-Earth, but how can this be possible? Why does he have the One Ring if he makes his own decisions? The answer is simple, it is because of the decisions that his uncle, Bilbo Baggins, made. In the next passage we can see this reflexion; we have Gandalf and Frodo talking. They are talking about how Bilbo got the One Ring, he took it from Gollum, but Bilbo did not kill it. In the present, Gollum has revealed to the enemy where the One Ring is, and Frodo thinks that Bilbo should have killed Gollum time ago because he deserves death. Gandalf replies:

‘Deserves it! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement ... [Gollum] is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many, yours not least. (I, 73)

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, this project has attempted to display the existing thematic relationship between the two pieces *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by the Gawain Poet and *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, including their similarities and their differences. This relation has been shown by focusing on three main themes which both stories share: the image that is presented of the perfect and ideal knight together with his antithesis, the temptation which will lead to failure, and finally, how fate is characterised in both stories and the role it has for the development of their plots. The evidence from this analysis suggests that there has probably been an influence of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* upon Tolkien's work. Finally, only three themes have been compared which are three of the most important in the stories, but there are also other themes and ideas that are shared in the two stories and that can be analysed in order to find their relationship.

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