Lofty Ideals vs. Reality

The author of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight uses the shield and sash to represent two distinct perspectives, as Gawain’s quest transforms his identity and understanding of the world around him. At the onset of his quest Sir Gawain carries his trusty shield as a constant reminder of the many chivalrous ideals which he, as a knight, must aspire to. The shield also represents Gawain’s faith - the Virgin Mary adorns the inner side of his shield as yet another reminder of his obligation to a higher calling. The narrator describes him:

And well may he wear it on his worthy arms

For ever faithful five-fold in five-fold fashion

Was Gawain in good works (631-633)

Here, the narrator prizes Sir Gawain for his diligent adherence to the five principles that the pentangle represents, which include beneficence, brotherly love, purity of mind and manners, and compassion. Gawain has worked to be a faithful Christian and an honorable knight for all of his life, and it is these principles that guide his behaviors and beliefs. In contrast, the sash represents the faults that accompany such a lofty set of ideals, and embodies a far more realistic and sober assessment of the world surrounding. This is because Gawain receives and employs the sash out of fear - though he has sworn to share all that he obtains with his host Bertilak, he keeps the sash a secret, breaking this oath out of the hope that it will deliver him from an impending doom. This act suggests that even the *most* chivalrous and courteous of knights are merely human, and will therefore encounter fear and confusion in the face of death. This fear and deviation from knightly ideals does not indicate weakness, though Gawain struggles to swallow this pill - the society that has created him does not account for such a primal instinct to survive. After undergoing a minor identity crisis Gawain adorns himself with the sash “In betokening of the blame he had borne for his fault” (2488), wearing it as a constant reminder that, while he will continue to strive for chivalry, the reality of a situation may not always allow for such.

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How da symbols different?

The shield is emblazoned with a pentangle, a five-sided star, with each point/line representative of a different value. Given how concealed he is within his armor, the shield substitutes for Gawain’s identity; the five attributes of benifice, fraternity, purity of mind, the utmost courtesy, and compassion comprise not only his appearance as a knight, but the Gawain’s identity as a human being.

What does change from pentangle-sash suggest?

Gawain’s adoption of the sash following his quest is of great importance. While he set out on his journey with his trusty shield in hand, he is ever reminded of the chivalrous qualities which he *must* uphold, embrace, and display. Unfortunately for Gawain, life is often ignorant of an individual’s aspirations (perhaps even irreverent at times), and gladly offers numerous situations in which these lofty ideals are unattainable. The cold hand of death awaits each man and woman at the end of this tumultous journey, and Gawain reveals that even the most courteous and noble of mankind will struggle with this encounter, but that this fear is simply another challenge to overcome.

The tale of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight depicts a transformation of Gawain’s perspective and understanding of the world around him. Such a paradigm stems directly from how he identifies within his society, which is represented in two distinctly different stages before and after his quest by a shield and a sash.