Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

BACKGROUND INFO

AUTHOR BIO
Full Name: Anonymous, but some people refer to the author as the Gawain-poet or the Pearl-poet, after Pearl, another poem thought to have been written by the same author.
Date of Birth: Sometime in the 14th century
Place of Birth: Probably the West Midlands in England
Date of Death: Unknown
Brief Life Story: We don’t know exactly who the poet was, though some historians have estimated some guesses about the poet from carefully reading the text itself, such as that the author probably was interested in theology and probably was inspired by the landscapes of the Midlands. There are also theories that the poet could have been John Donne or an English gentleman named John Massey. The debate still continues, and the question of who wrote Gawain appears unlikely ever to be definitively answered.

KEY FACTS
Full Title: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
Genre: Epic poetry, Romance, Adventure, Arthurian Legend
Setting: The court of Camelot, then across the wilderness of Britain to Bertilak’s castle and environs
Climax: Gawain’s long-awaited meeting with the Green Knight at the Green Chapel, where he expects to lose his life but, after much suspense, is spared
Antagonist: Initially, it seems that the Green Knight, who destroys the court’s revelry and forces Gawain to face his own death, is the antagonist of the poem. But by the end, it becomes evident that the real conflict is between Gawain’s desire to adhere to the knightly code of virtues and his more natural desire to stay alive.
Point of View: An omniscient, third person narrator. This narrator follows Gawain for most of his journey, and of all the characters comes closest to Gawain’s internal world, occasionally noting his thoughts and feelings.

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT
When Written: Sometime between 1340 and 1400
Where Written: West Midlands, England
Literary Period: Medieval Romance Literature
Related Literary Works: The Arthurian characters of Gawain appear in many other stories, including Ywain and Gawain and The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle. Gawain and the Green Knight even inspired off-stories such as The Greene Knight, which was written around 1500 and uses rhyme to make the story more recitable. Works like Beowulf and The Canterbury Tales share Gawain’s are also Old English texts written in verse and include some of the same themes of religion and the natural world. Most scholars believe that The Pearl, another medieval text, was written by the same author as Gawain. A number of more modern works of romantic and adventure literature resemble Gawain in plot and theme. J.R.R Tolkien’s works, for example, contain strains that echo the lessons learned by Gawain as well as his journeying plot.
Related Historical Events: Many of the characters found in Arthurian tales can be traced to historical figures and seem to go beyond myth and legend. The historical authenticity of King Arthur has been especially debated, some believing he actually ruled in around the 5th century. The poem also seems to be faithful to the landscape and concerns of the time in which it was written, including a preoccupation with Christian rituals.

EXTRA CREDIT
All that Alliteration. When Sir Gawain was written, verse was primarily written in ways that were quite different from the rhyming patterns that are best known today. Alliteration, the repetition of the initial consonant sounds of nearby words, was the major poetic device of the time, pre-dating rhyme. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is the model of an Old English alliterative poem, using an alliterative phrase on nearly every single line of verse.
The Beheading Game. While Sir Gawain and the Green Knight has a legacy of spin-off tales, it has also inspired a brand of adventure plots cutely nicknamed The Beheading Game, in which two characters engage in a beheading challenge. In fact, though, Gawain, did not originate this literary idea, as it was passed down from even earlier Irish myths like The Feast of Bricriu.

PLOT SUMMARY
The court of King Arthur is celebrating New Year’s Eve, but at the height of the festivities, a massive green figure bursts in, terrifying them. This Green Knight tells the court that he desires their participation in a game, in which he and one of the knights present will trade axe blows. The chosen knight will take the first strike, and then he must wait a whole year to receive a strike in return from the Green Knight.
The knights make no answer, but when their visitor mocks them for cowardice, Arthur steps up and offers himself as the contender. Just as the king readies himself to take his strike with the axe, Sir Gawain stops him and offers himself instead. Gawain strikes at the calmly standing Green Knight, and cuts the knight’s head off. The court is astonished when the knight then picks up his head from the floor and instructs Gawain to find him at the Green Chapel before riding away.
After that strange event, the court goes back to normal. The seasons pass until Michelmas in early autumn, when Gawain must depart for his trial. Wearing the court’s finest armor, including a shield decorated with a symbolic Christian pennangle, Gawain nervously sets off. He journeys through wild country, facing danger after danger. Finally, on Christmas day, when he is freezing and almost losing hope, Gawain prays to Mary for guidance and a castle appears in the distance.
At the castle, he is welcomed heartily by its lord, who introduces him to two ladies, his beautiful wife and an old maid. The lord invites Gawain to play a game. Each day the lord will go out to hunt while Gawain rests in the court, and by the end of the day, they will swap whatever they have won. It soon becomes clear that what there is to be won at court is the host’s beautiful wife. She steals in to Gawain’s chamber when her husband has gone and woos Gawain, who strains to be chivalrous and charming without succumbing to desire. Their playful conversation is alternated with descriptions of the hunting, connecting the acts of sport and courtship.
On the first day, the lord hunts a deer, and the lady gives Gawain one kiss. When the men meet for dinner, the lord presents Gawain with the meat and, befitting the deal, Gawain exchanges it for the kiss he has received. On the second day, the lord exchanges a boar for two kisses. On the third day, the lord kills a fox and the lady kisses Gawain three times. Furthermore, she asks for a love token from Gawain. When he claims he has nothing to give, she starts offering him tokens of her own. He refuses, until she offers him a green girdle, which she explains will protect the wearer from death. Hopeful that the girdle might protect him from the Green Knight, Gawain accepts. He hides it under his clothes to keep it a secret from the lord.
The next day, Gawain anxiously leaves his new friends to go and face the Green Knight at the Green Chapel. The lord sends a servant with him to show him the way and the pair soon arrive at a forest, where the servant tries to dissuade Gawain from facing the Green Knight. But Gawain doesn’t want to be a coward. He goes on alone. The terrain becomes strange, tall rocks...
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Characters

Sir Gawain – The protagonist of the poem. He is King Arthur’s nephew and establishes himself as the very model of chivalry when he sacrifices himself to spare his uncle in the Green Knight’s beheading game. He is reputed to be one of the most virtuous knights of the realm and personifies the five Christian virtues of the symbolic pentangle painted on his shield. Throughout the course of the poem, Gawain journeys through the land, overcoming physical and spiritual trials. He shows himself to be fallible as he experiences anxiety and doubt, traits that a good knight isn’t really supposed to have. When he gives in to temptation and deceives his host Bertilak in order to protect his own life, he is exposed as not quite always perfect but still worthy of being spared from death, and returns to Camelot a more humble but wiser hero.

The Green Knight – A massive, masculine, otherworldly figure that appears at Arthur’s hall and challenges any of the Knights of the Round Table to a strange “beheading game.” He has supernatural qualities, most visibly his pure green complexion. His head is chopped off by Gawain but this doesn’t stop him. He just picks it up from the floor and speaks from his now disembodied head. He aligns the rules of his game and his own regeneration with the natural seasons, and so becomes symbolic of both the supernatural and the natural world. A year later, Gawain finds the knight as promised and the Green Knight admits that he is also lord Bertilak, and has been testing Gawain’s virtues. He reveals that he acquired his supernatural powers from a sorceress named Morgan Le Faye. Ultimately, the Green Knight’s actions, both his challenge to Arthur’s court and to Gawain in particular, and his ultimate choice to wound but not kill Gawain, serves as a critical corrective to the formulaic code of Christian chivalry that Camelot lives under.

King Arthur – The king of Camelot and husband of Guinevere. He is the model of a good knight and the uncle of Sir Gawain. At the outset of the poem, he is compared to the noble, mythological Trojan founders of Britain and is described as the most youthful, healthy, and bold of men. He is a true believer in chivalry, and he is loving to his nephew Gawain, who risks his own life to spare his king. When Gawain returns at the end, Arthur recognizes his heroism and the wisdom he has earned and orders the entire court to wear green bands in recognition of their own humility.

Queen Guinevere – King Arthur’s wife, is an object of elegance and beauty in the Camelot court. She sits among the Knights of the Round Table at the seasonal feasts, next to Gawain. She is a symbol of royalty, youth, beauty, and womanhood.

Bertilak of Hautdesert – The noble lord of the castle where Gawain seeks refuge on his travels. He is described as being even more strong and knightly than King Arthur, and he reigns over a court that is less artificial and earthier than Camelot. His wife is quite a beauty. Bertilak kindly offers Gawain hospitality and engages him in a three-day game, exchanging his winnings from hunting with Gawain’s winnings in the court. At the end of the poem it is revealed that he is actually the Green Knight is disguise and his game was a test of Gawain’s honesty.

Bertilak’s Wife – A beautiful lady who tempts Gawain on the three days that Bertilak is out at the hunt. She comes to his bedroom each day and procures kisses, using her wit to manipulate Gawain. It is later revealed that she acted under her husband’s and the old sorceress Morgan Le Faye’s instructions.

Morgan Le Faye – An old woman at Bertilak’s court. The poet compares her with Bertilak’s beautiful young wife, showing how extreme natural changes can be over time. It is later revealed that she is a sorceress - she was once a pupil of the famous wizard Merlin and is also related to King Arthur and Gawain. She is the one that has been controlling the whole operation.

Gringelot – Gawain’s horse. He is a noble steed and goes with Gawain throughout his journey.

Themes

Chivalry

King Arthur’s court at Camelot is defined by a chivalrous code, in which fighting spirit, bravery and courtesy are vital to a man’s character and standing, and cowardice is looked down upon as a severe defect. The Green Knight’s challenge is thus a challenge not just to each individual knight but to the entire Arthurian chivalric code, and that code is shown to be hollow when none of the knights accept the challenge until Gawain, who identifies himself as the weakest of the knights, finally does. The terms of the Green Knight’s game then force Gawain to seek out the Green Knight somewhere in the wilderness of Britain. As such, the quest presents another test of both Gawain and the chivalric code outside the confines of Arthur’s court. Over the course of this quest, it becomes clear that the highly formalized and by-the-book set of rules for living inherent in the chivalric code of Camelot does not stand up in the wilds of the real world.

The chivalric code is full of glitter and symbolic decorations, just as Gawain is dressed for his challenge with diamonds and a shield representing the values he is supposed to embody. But these values are merely painted on, they are all surface, revealing the lack of certainty that the men beneath the armor actually hold in their chivalry—Gawain chooses to hide the green girdle from Bertilak rather than reveal it as promised, all because he fears for his life. Gawain’s trials also reveal how the chivalric codes are themselves contradictory: Gawain is faced with the need to be chivalric need to be honorable toward his host Bertilak while also showing the utmost courtesy and charm to Bertilak’s wife, even as she seems intent on trying to seduce Gawain. Here the chivalric codes are set against each other.

Gawain navigates these impossible situations as best he can, but ultimately fails to adhere to the rules of the game he agreed upon with Bertilak (he does not reveal the girdle). Yet Bertilak/the Green Knight ultimately spares Gawain with no more than a nicked neck, while it was in his right to chop off Gawain’s head. Bertilak’s honor does not depend on a formalized chivalric code that completely defines him. He and his men still have their rituals, but they put on less of a show. They have more individual strength, are more adaptable, and can therefore be more merciful when they feel the situation warrants it. In short, there’s a way of being that better operates in the real world. The green girdle Gawain wears becomes a symbol of this difference, less formulaic way of being.

The Natural and the Supernatural

When the strangely green being enters the hall, his hue is so extreme and is so thoroughly described with so many decorations and layers that he seems to be of different breed than the men at court, made of nature like a tree or the seasons themselves. Yet his being is also beyond nature. It is supernatural – he can pick up his severed head after it’s been chopped off and still speak through that disembodied head to deliver instructions for the next part of the game. The supernatural properties of green things continue throughout Gawain’s trial, like the green girdle. But the supernatural world does not supersede the natural world. In fact, it seems to be allied with the natural world, to make that natural world more powerful.

Morgan Le Faye and the Green Knight’s magic is tied to the seasons and a cycle of natural regeneration that allows the Green Knight to heal after his beheading, for example. And when Morgan Le Faye appears it is to highlight nature rather than wizardry – Gawain meets her alongside Bertilak’s young and beautiful wife and the contrast in the pair shows him very obviously the
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path of life from youth to decline. Gawain's quest is similarly ordered by the seasons, which freeze and warm him, tempering the pace of his journey. They also mark an internal journey for Gawain, from innocence in the safe rituals of a knight at court to the pursuit of real heroism outside the court limits.

The poem sets this combined natural/supernatural power, which orders and defines men’s lives through a cycle of growth, death, and rebirth, against the more artificial world of Camelot. In doing so, it suggests that the Arthurian chivalric code exists in a kind of vacuum, separated from the real nature of things. The green girdle that originally seemed to offer a defense against the magic of the Green Knight, changes in significance by the end of the poem, when Gawain realizes that it as a symbol of his own failings, of the inherent failings of human nature that no chivalric code can overcome. In embracing the green girdle, Gawain embraces that natural world, the natural facts of human nature, and in doing so tempers and makes less rigid the strict artificial structures of Arthurian chivalry.

**LEGEND, FAME, AND REPUTATION**

The poem begins with a history of famous founders of countries out of Greek and Roman myth, and explicitly connects and compares King Arthur to those heroes. In doing so, the poem establishes the theme of reputation and begins to explore its impact on those who achieve it. For Gawain, when he takes his armor to Bertilak, the green girdle is a symbol of his potential goodness, but also a symbol of his potential failure, for it is the attire of a knight. As such, it is a symbol of both promise and anxiety. Gawain becomes a symbol of Camelot’s bravery, and therefore must hide his own real self.

The knights of Arthur’s court are ordered in a hierarchy based on fame and reputation. But this method of ordering men is contrasted by what Gawain finds when he reaches Bertilak’s court in the wildness—there he encounters a similar set of men and women, but they are described and valued for their physical attributes rather than by their reputations, and somehow they seem more earthly, more real. They do not hide behind their reputations. They are their true selves. Ultimately, in his failure to reveal the green girdle to Bertilak and his subsequent showdown with The Green Knight, Gawain recognizes the dangers of acting in such a way as to protect one’s reputation at all costs—it leads to dishonorable action. And by then insisting upon wearing the green girdle upon his armor, Gawain is making clear that he failed in his quest, is embracing the imperfections beneath his reputation, and becomes all the stronger for it.

**GAMES, RULES, AND ORDER**

The world of Gawain and the Green Knight is full of, even defined by, all sorts of games, rules, and order. The knights of Arthur’s court must sit in a particular order and be served according to their fame. The court is also full of revelry and games, and even when the time for battle arrives on New Year’s Eve, it comes in the form of a game. Further, the knightly chivalric code that creates Gawain as a hero inside the court is tightly, rigidly ordered into five points, making a pentangle. This structure is put to the test in the wilderness, where Gawain faces unordered, deceptive visions, and the chivalry embodied in the symbol of the pentangle is shown to be less stable than it appears to be in Arthur’s court. Yet nature, also, is defined by rhythms and order, in the form of the seasons and of life, death, and regeneration.

Of course, the plot of the play is also driven by the “beheading game” that is created by the Green Knight and in which Gawain is caught up. This game leads to other, and, unbeknownst to Gawain, related games—Gawain’s game with Bertilak to exchange the spoils each wins each day; the game in which Gawain must both charm Bertilak’s wife while evading her attempted seduction of him; and the rituals of the hunt (which are interspersed with Bertilak’s wife’s “hunting” of Gawain). Each day of the hunt, something is killed, and Gawain is kissed—though these events are neatly numbered in a set of three and seem like games themselves, they are a source of trauma in Gawain’s mind and he tries to put the experience in order himself by confessing at mass.

And yet, Gawain breaks the rules of Bertilak’s game by hiding the green girdle, and does not confess it. When at last Gawain faces The Green Knight, then, it seems like by the rules of the game—the original beheading game and the game of exchanging gifts—Gawain must die. And yet The Green Knight spares him, striking with his axe and yet giving Gawain little more than a nick on the neck. In so doing, The Green Knight places mercy above the rules of the “game”—the beheading game, the exchange of spoils, and even the rules of life and death—and in this way suggests that the Christian ideas of mercy and divine love offer a way out of the rules that define life, whether those rules are made by man or nature.

**CHRISTIANITY**

Christianity, and Christian ideas, appear everywhere in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Arthurian chivalry is founded in Christian ideals, as is symbolized by the pentangle painted onto Gawain’s shield, with the face of Mary in its center. The timeline of events are dotted at significant moments by Christian holidays (Christmas, Michelsons). Gawain, on the verge of despair during his quest, prays to Mary and suddenly comes upon Bertilak’s castle, and he attends confession daily in the midst of Bertilak’s wife’s attempted seduction.

In addition, the climax of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, when Gawain presents himself to face the Green Knight’s axe-trike, takes place not at a castle but at a chapel. And it is at this chapel that the theme of Christianity itself comes to a sort of climax. While Gawain has attended confession each day as he feended off the advances of Bertilak’s wife, he did not confess everything—he kept secret the green girdle that he hoped would protect his life. The revelation after the Green Knight spares Gawain’s life that Bertilak is the Green Knight and knew about the girdle all along leads Gawain to truly embrace his flaws and humility for the first time and in so doing to find atonement and a more stable base for Christian behavior than the rule-based chivalry of Arthur’s court. Finally, the showdown at the chapel highlights the tension between the biblical Pharisees and Jesus, mirrored in the contrast between Camelot and Bertilak’s court, between man-made law and Christian divine love and mercy, with Bertilak’s mercy toward Gawain ultimately revealing the poem’s contention on the primacy of mercy rather than law as the foundation of true Christian behavior.

**SYMBOLS**

**THE COLOR GREEN**

Colors are very important markers in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. When the figure of the Green Knight first intrudes upon Arthur’s court, his green complexion immediately marks him as a supernatural character, and his magical ability to survive beheading thus seems to somehow come from or be connected to his greeness. But green also is a traditional reminder of the natural world. As the poet describes the seasons, the weather, and images of hunting, the color green reappears as a symbol of nature, unbound by the rules of the court but with its own order of death and regeneration, predator and prey. With this double meaning of green as a symbol of both the supernatural and the natural in place, the poet plants a lot of green symbols into the plot. These symbols can be read in various ways over the course of the poem. Like the green girdle that Bertilak’s wife gives to Gawain, which at first represents protection from danger but comes to stand for Gawain’s failure. Tassel or battle-field baton, where the climax of Gawain’s moral journey takes place, and is the meeting place of the supernatural, religious, and natural forces that impose on Gawain.

**THE PENTANGLE**

The court of King Arthur is full of costumes and rituals. The prize piece of Gawain’s magnificent armor is a shield decorated with a five-pointed star, or pentangle. The pentangle is said to have illustrious origins – the shape was supposedly designed by the great biblical King Solomon. Each point of the pentangle stands for a list of virtues or vits, including the five joys of Mary and the five wounds of Christ. All of these virtues are encompassed in the star and the points are connected by one unbroken line, which itself stands for eternity. Altogether, the pentangle is a symbol of endless truth. As is true in the poem as a whole, figures of Christianity always occupy a central thematic place, and that is also true of the pentangle: in its center is a portrait of Mary. Yet despite
the elaborate message of this symbol and its perceived protective power, it is also a mere costume, painted on to Gawain's shield. The failing of the knightly code that follows reveals the pentangle to be a shallow symbol, out of touch with the reality of human life, and as such it indicates that the very formulaic practice of religion and chivalry at play in King Arthur's court is artificial and fragile, unable to survive in the real world, as opposed to Bertilak and his court's earthier existence that is nonetheless animated by a deeper mercy.

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**QUOTES**

**LINES 20-23**

And when this Britain was built by this baron rich, bold men were bred therein, of battle beloved, in many a troubled time turmoil that wrought.

—Narrator

**LINES 31-36**

I'll tell it straight, as I in town heard it, with tongue;
as it was said and spoken in story staunch and strong, with linked letters loaded, as in this land so long.

—Narrator

**LINES 140-146**

half giant on earth I think now that he was; but the most of man anyway I mean him to be, and that the finest in his greatness that might ride, for of back and breast though his body was strong, both his belly and waist were worthy small, and his features all followed his form made and clean.

—Narrator

**LINES 237-243**

All studied that steed, and stalked him near, with all the wonder of the world at what he might do. for marvels had they seen but such never before; and so of phantom and fairie the folk there it deemed. Therefore to answer was many a knight afraid, and all stunned at his shout and sat stock-still in a sudden silence through the rich hall

—Narrator

**LINES 279-283**

Nay, follow I no fight, in faith I thee tell. About on these benches are but beardless children; if I were clasped in armor on a high steed, here is no man to match me, his might so weak. From thee I crave in this court a Christmas gift

—The Green Knight

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**LINES 339-342**

Gawain, that sat by the queen, to the king he did incline:
'I beseech in plain speech that this mêlée be mine'

—Narrator, Gawain

**LINES 427-433**

The fair head from the frame fell to the earth, that folk flailed it with their feet, where it forth rolled; the blood burst from the body, the bright on the green. Yet nevertheless neither falters nor falls the fellow, but stoutly he started forth on strong shanks, and roughly he reached out, where the ranks stood, latched onto his lovely head, and lifted it so

—Narrator

**LINES 495-501**

Gawain was glad to begin those games in hall, yet if the end be heavy, have you no wonder; though men be merry in mind when they have strong ale, a year turns full turn, and yields never a like; the form of its finish foretold full seldom. For this Yuletide passed by, and the year after, and each season slips by pursuing another

—Narrator

**LINES 631-639**

For so it accords with this knight and his bright arms, forever faithful in five ways, and five times so, Gawain was for good known, and, as purified gold, void of every villainy, with virtues adorned all, so. And thus the pentangle new he bore on shield and coat, as title of trust most true and gentlest knight of note.

—Narrator

**LINES 709-712**

The knight took pathways strange by many a bank un-green; his cheerfulness would change, ere might that chapel be seen.

—Narrator

**LINES 767-772**

a castle the comeliest that ever knight owned, perched on a plain, a park all about, with a pointed palisade, planted full thick, encircling many trees in more than two miles. The hold on the one side the knight assessed, as it shimmered and shone through the shining oaks.
At the first call of the quest quaked the wild; deer drove for the dales, darting for dread, hied to the high ground, but swiftly they were stayed by the beaters, with their stout cries. They let the harts with high branched heads have way, the brave bucks also with their broad antlers; for the noble lord had bidden that in close season no man there should meddle with those male deer.

Both the head and the neck they hewed off then, and after sundered the sides swift from the chine, and the ravens' fee they cast into a grove. Then they skewered each thick flank by the ribs, and hung each up by the hocks of the haunches, every fellow taking his fee as it fell to him.

Both in telling those tales of the truest of knights, all the title and text of their works is taken from how lords hazard their lives for loyal love, endured for that duty's sake dreadful trials

And so go lie in your room and take your ease, and I shall hunt in the holt and hold to the covenant, exchanging what has chanced, when I spur hither; for I have tested you twice, and faithful I find you. Now: "third time pays all," think on that tomorrow

Now nears the New Year and the night passes, the day drives away dark, as the Deity bids. But wild weather awoke in the world outside, clouds cast cold keenly down to the earth, with wind enough from the north, to flail the flesh.

And then he gazed all about, and wild it seemed, and saw no sign of shelter anywhere near, but high banks and steep upon either side, and rough rugged crags with gnarled stones: so the sky seemed to be grazed by their barbs.

'You are not Gawain,' quoth the man, 'held so great, that was never afraid of the host by hill or by vale, for now you flinch for fear ere you feel harm, Such cowardice of that knight have I never heard. I neither flinched nor fled, friend, when you let fly, nor cast forth any quibble in King Arthur's house.

But it is no wonder for a fool to run mad and through wiles of woman be won to sorrow. For so was Adam on earth with one beguiled, and Solomon with many such, Samson too

'Lo, Lord!' quoth the knight, and handled the lace, 'This is the belt of blame I bear at my neck, this is the hurt and the harm that I have learned through the cowardice and covetousness I caught there. This is the token of the untruth I am taken in, and I must needs it wear while I may last.

Since Brutus, the bold baron, first bent hither, after the siege and assault had ceased at Troy, there is, many an adventure born befallen such, ere this. Now who bears the crown of thorn, May He bring us to his bliss! AMEN.
The poet describes the heroic lineage of King Arthur. From the fall of Troy, to the founding of Britain by Brutus, the country has risen from conquest and war, led by bold men. And of all the strange, wondrous events that Britain has seen, the story to follow is one of the most strange. The poet vows to tell it as he has heard it told and as it is known throughout the land.

At the beginning of the tale, it is Christmas time, and the court is in revelry. King Arthur is in his hall, surrounded by the many knights of the Round Table, feasting, singing and playing games. This carries on for fifteen days and on New Year’s Day, the court enjoys a ritual of gift giving and game playing. When it is time to eat, the company are seated in order of importance, with King Arthur at the head and Queen Guinevere, dressed in rich costume, and Sir Gawain, Arthur’s nephew, in the midst.

In such a state of excitement, Arthur insists he won’t eat until he hears some adventure story, or finds a jousting partner willing to risk his life, or experiences some other wonder. Then the food is served, each course accompanied by ceremonial fanfares and game playing. When it is time to eat, the company are seated in order of importance, with King Arthur at the head and Queen Guinevere, dressed in rich costume, and Sir Gawain, Arthur’s nephew, in the midst.

The opening connects British history and the story in the poem to the great Greek and Roman stories, creating an interesting parallel between the story and Gawain. Just as Gawain must live up to all these ancient heroes, the opening ensures that the story’s reputation precedes it’s telling, which is the very problem that Gawain faces later.

The poet’s descriptions of the feast and the rituals of eating are extensive. The Christmas period is completely devoted to carefree pursuits and though later the poem describes how the virtues of chivalry include things like boldness and courage, we see here that being able to revel with the best of them is also a requirement. This is the first mention of Sir Gawain. Being seated among the most legendary figures of the table suggests that some potential for greatness or foreboding is being suggested by the poet.

The knights of the round table seem to have a very happy life. Since King Arthur has to request his knights to risk their lives for entertainment, it implies that there’s no war or threat to warrant actual combat. The pomp of their meal covers this disappointing lack of adventure.

What’s interesting about the Green Knight is that despite his supernatural complexion, he is not monstrous in appearance like you’d expect of an intruding antagonist. He is, rather, a larger, exaggerated version of the knightly model that King Arthur is said to embody.

The knights are stunned and don’t answer, and the Green Knight laughs at them, insulting their supposed fame and fierceness. King Arthur’s pride is wounded and he jumps into action, calling the Green Knight’s words foolish. He offers to give the blow that has been requested. Arthur immediately sets himself up to strike with the knight’s own axe and the knight stands tall and calm to receive the blow. But just then Gawain interrupts, wishing to save Arthur from the game. He claims that it would be much more fitting for himself, as the least worthy knight in the court, to take on the challenge, because the loss would be least great. The court discusses his proposal and agrees.

So, Gawain kneels before the King, who gives a loving blessing and hands him the axe. Gawain boldly approaches the Green Knight, but the knight asks him first to introduce himself and recite the rules of the game. Gawain does so, showing that he understands what he is undertaking, and the knight politely thanks him for his daring. Gawain asks to know the knight’s name and dwelling, but the knight delays, promising to give up the information after he has been struck.

The knights and attendees of the feast are astonished into silence by the sight, thinking that the Green Knight must be some kind of phantom or magical thing. But Arthur introduces himself, and shows the proper courtesy to the knight, as if he were one of the company, and asks him to delay explanations until he has made himself comfortable. But the knight does not want to stay. He explains that he has come to the court having heard of the fame of its knights’ bravery and sportsmanship. He comes in peace but wishes the men to entertain a certain game he has in mind. Arthur assures him that his knights are always up for a battle.

The Green Knight does not propose battle but instead what he calls a Christmas game. He offers up his axe as a prize to any man who is brave enough to trade blows with him. The conditions will be that he, the Green Knight, will receive the first strike now, and then the challenger knight must agree to submit himself to receive one in exactly a year and a day. After explaining the rules, the knight waits for a contender to come forward.

Since the Green Knight has sworn peacefulness, there might not be any harm in refusing to play the game, but reputation is everything in Arthur’s court, and Arthur cannot allow the pride and reputation of the court to be stained. Though the fact that Arthur has to step forward at all suggests that the other knight’s do lack the courage their reputation would suggest—their fear is stronger than their pride. The knight’s approval of Gawain’s reason for stepping forward indicates they think he is stepping into likely death—a death they themselves don’t want to face.

The rules are very important to the Green Knight and the numerous recitations of the game’s structure suggest that the Green Knight sees himself and Gawain entering into a kind of contract. Yet the Green Knight is also wily, and does not include revealing his own name or where he lives as part of that contract.
The Green Knight bows and bares his neck for Gawain. Gawain strikes and cuts the knight’s head clean off so that it falls and rolls, bloody, across the hall of the floor. Despite losing his head, the Green Knight does not lose his footing. Instead he picks up the head and gets back on his horse, then aims the head toward them, and tells Gawain to find him a year’s hence in the Green Chapel. And as suddenly as he arrived, the knight is gone.

King Arthur laughs and says that you can expect this kind of trickery around Christmas time, but admits that he has seen the marvel that he asked for, and so he begins to eat. They hang the Green Knight’s now-famous axe above the dais, in pride of place, and the court resumes its revelry.

On Allhallows day near the end of autumn, the Green Knight arrives and prophesies that he is ready for the dangers of winter, that he is ready for the time when he must set out on his journey to find the lord. The Green Knight announces that he is going to challenge Gawain to find him a year’s hence. The Green Knight’s prophecy seems more than just a threat, for the court is shocked, and Gawain is worried and doubtful.

On the morrow, Gawain feels doubt and worry. His journey to find the Green Knight will force him to make a speech to Arthur, assuring him that he is ready for the dangers of this adventure. The poet comments that the wonder Gawain feels is justified: Arthur’s lively mind does not dwell long on the serious consequences for Gawain. Instead the court focuses on the symbolic act of placing the axe, revealing a certain pettiness in the chivalric conventions—placing honor and revelry over compassion and concern.

In the morning, Gawain is prepared for his quest, dressed in magnificent pieces of armor. The poet describes in detail the particular symbols of chivalry that decorate the armor, especially the five-pointed star, the pentangle, which decorates Gawain’s shield. The pentangle stands for pure, unending truth, and its five points symbolize the five wounds of Christ and the full score of knightly wits and virtues that Gawain has shown. In the center of the pentangle is an image of Mary the mother of Christ, who, the poet comments, should be the joy and motivation for Gawain’s journey.

Covered in his symbol-decorated armor, Gawain races out of the court on his horse Gringolet. As he disappears, the knights mourn for the loss of such a noble comrade, who could have been a leader of men had he not been sent off for the sake of a Christmas game. The Green Knight displays all the virtues that Gawain has shown. In the center of the pentangle is an image of Mary the mother of Christ, who, the poet comments, should be the joy and motivation for Gawain’s journey.

Gawain’s first travels towards North Wales, and is soon in low spirits as he must sleep in dark places with only animals for company. He travels on, into the wilderness, described as Godless country, unable to find any sign of the Green Knight. He battles with beasts and serpents and in the height of winter nearly freezes as he sleeps in his armor. It seems that feasts and partying are the only way the court knows how to deal with anything. The Christmas game has turned into a strict covenant, forcing Gawain to face his own mortality, but human emotions like fear are not allowed to be shown at court. Reputation, and preserving it, comes first.

Having endured until Christmas Eve, Gawain, near despair, finally turns to Mary. He rides through a strange forest and, among the trees, he prays to find shelter and to be blessed. As he crosses himself, he becomes aware of a castle ahead, beautiful and shimmering. Gawain thanks his protectors, and rides on Gringolet right up to the walls of the dwelling, which are surrounded by a deep moat. He admires the height and complexity of the castle’s towers and, when a porter comes to greet him, Gawain asks for the lord of the house. The porter assures him he is welcome and that he has been invited to a feast. Gawain asks to be let in, and the porter assures him that he is welcome and that he has been invited to a feast. Gawain asks to be let in.

On Allhallow’s Day, the Green Knight turns up unexpectedly and gives Gawain a strange prophecy: he will lose his head and then be given it back, and must bring back his head to the court. The poet comments that the wonder Gawain feels is justified: Arthur’s lively mind does not dwell long on the serious consequences for Gawain. Instead the court focuses on the symbolic act of placing the axe, revealing a certain pettiness in the chivalric conventions—placing honor and revelry over compassion and concern.

The poem’s descriptions of the changes in nature across the seasons is long and elaborate. By providing such detail of the natural cycles of the year the poet is able to make that time seem long, beautiful, and inexorable—time will keep on passing, and Gawain will have to face his doom. In this way, Gawain can be seen to symbolize all mortal men or women, living their long lives across the seasons, but with death always stepping closer. The Green Knight’s game gets connected to nature’s “game” of passing, and Gawain will have to face his mortality. Though Gawain doesn’t seem to dwell long on the serious consequences for Gawain, he arrives, the knight is gone.

It’s ironic that the knights talk of Gawain’s lost potential just as he is heading off on the first real test of his virtues. It is unlikely, if Gawain had gone on living a carefree life at court, that he would have acquired this reputation. Only by leaving this world that is so focused on reputation, by taking action in the real world, can one actually gain reputation. But once that reputation is gained, the knight’s seem unwilling to risk it again.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

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The poet comments that the wonder of that night had pleased the merry King Arthur, but that the revelry was soon over, and what followed was a long year and the natural course of the seasons. The poet vividly describes how the country changes from Winter to Lent, the lifting of the clouds and the blooming of flowers in Spring. The Greek god of wind Zephyrus blows on the seeds and the harvest comes. And by these natural turns of the seasons, Michelmas arrives and Gawain anxiously awaits the time when he must set out on his challenge.

In the real world, can one actually gain reputation? But once that reputation is gained, the knight’s seem unwilling to risk it again.

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The elaborately described pentangle represents the exhausting level of pattern and symbol and superstition in the court of King Arthur. The knights spend hours decorating Gawain in these pictures but don’t prepare him in a practical or emotional way, or even ask how he’s feeling. The court’s intense, rigid belief in symbols is itself a sign of the way the court has prioritized symbols above life. The poet comments that Mary, who is herself miraculous, should be the joy and motivation of Gawain’s quest, but it’s not clear that she really is; he seems to be pushed by reputation.

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Summary & Analysis

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The welcoming warmth of the castle seems like the perfect sanctuary for Gawain, but it is a little too perfect to be believed. It is so similar to the poem's opening scenes of feasting rituals and material goods at Arthur's court, which is uncanny and unnerving. At the same time, as the "beaver-hued" beards suggest, the men of this court have something more authentic and animal about them. They seem less distant from nature.

Secondly, we are learning to be wary of reputations, which seem to lock their bearers into actions that preserve that reputation above all else, and the fact that this new court has heard of Gawain and base their whole reception of him on that reputation should give some cause for suspicion.

The two women Gawain is introduced to are symbols of youth and age. Just as Guinevere was appreciated in court for her beauty, these women are objects of nature, and show how the passage of time affects even beauty. Note how the lord brings Gawain into a more private, domestic area of the castle, away from the public court life of the feast, and from this point on, Gawain's trial becomes more domestic, more moral.

So, for the three days remaining until the New Year, Gawain agrees to stay, and to the lord's suggestion that he sleep late the next day and eat with the lady of the castle, while the lord and knights hunt. Furthermore, the host suggests a game – whatever he wins in the hunt in the next three days, he will exchange with whatever fortune Gawain wins at court. Gawain agrees. The men drink and kiss and repeat the bargain before going to bed.

Gawain has put himself into another set of rules in this game. There are connections being made in this section between the new host and King Arthur, as he is described as bold and energetic and obviously loves court life, but he's also reminiscent of the antagonist, the Green Knight, because he is rougher and beardier (to coin a term), and seemingly closer to nature than Arthur. Further, the game puts the Arthurian knight (Gawain) squarely in the court, while the lord himself will go to wrestle with nature through the hunt.

LINES 1126-1997

Before sunrise, the knights and the lord go to mass and then ready themselves for the hunt. The hounds are released and with three calls of a bugle, they're off. The hunt moves through the forest and the hunters drive and herd the female deer away from the bucks. Hundreds of arrows are fired and the deer are shot left and right and pulled down by the dogs.

The courtly games turn out to be bloody and mimic the skills of battle. The hunters visit mass before they hunt, as a daily ritual but they definitely put more energy into the bloody sport of hunting deer. The descriptions of the deer's movements show their natural herding behavior, whereas the pack of hunters moves according to more organized, ritualized battle.

The way the poet juxtaposes the hunting scene and Gawain's meeting with the lady suggests a connection and makes a hunting ground of the bedroom. This is where Gawain's honor will be won or lost.

Just as the Green Knight tied Gawain up in the contract of the beheading game, the lady of the house uses her language to manipulate and contract Gawain. She also preys on his desire to keep up his knightly reputation. Gawain treads a fineistance, as if Gawain needed more pressure, this situation presses on his conscience and shows us how rigid the chivalrous life is— he must remain honorable, but he also must be charming.
The lady says that if she could choose a husband again, she would choose Gawain. Gawain thanks her humbly, and offers himself as her knight. Eventually she goes to leave, but tarries and accuses Gawain of not being the knight she thought he was. She explains that the real Gawain would not have stayed with her so long without asking for a kiss. Gawain gives in and kisses her, and she leaves. He dresses, goes to mass, and then spends the day merrily with the host’s wife and the old lady.

The poet shifts the narrative back to the hunt, and describes how the lords butter the deer they’ve caught, taking out the guts and removing the meat from the bones. They give the remains to the hounds and bring the prize meat back to the hall to Gawain. In front of the whole court, the host presents his winnings. Gawain keeps his side of the bargain to return anything won in the court and presents the lord with a kiss. The lord wonders where he won such a thing, but Gawain won’t tell, as that was not part of the bargain. The men agree to play the same game the next day.

Three cries of the cockerel signal the beginning of the next hunting day, and the knights head off as before. This time, they find a giant boar and after much battling, and many injured hounds, the knights fire at it. The beast is hit but does not go down, so the lord boldly rides after it. Meanwhile, Gawain begins his day in bed as before and the lady visits him. She teases him again, asking him to remember what he learnt about kissing. He says he will only kiss on her command, so she kisses him then of her own accord.

They talk at length about love. The lady wonders how such a knight as Gawain never talks about love, it being the most important sport of all. She claims that such a knight should be teaching her about love. Gawain is courteous and humble, saying he has no special knowledge, but again offers himself as her servant and they kiss for a second time.

At the hunt, the men have run the beast into a trap. None but the lord himself has the courage to approach. The lord wrestles the boar with his bare hands and kills him with his sword. The boar is carved up and the hunters travel back to the hall and again show the spoils to Gawain, who exchanges them for the two kisses he won from the lady. The company feasts and Gawain enjoys the company of the lady, neither completely indulging nor reproaching her. The host suggests that they repeat the game on New Year’s eve, and though Gawain is weary of his coming trial with the Green Knight, he is persuaded to play one more round.

The next morning after mass, the hunt goes ahead, this time following a fox. The fox is wily and for a long time evades capture, but is eventually pulled down by the lord and his hounds. Meanwhile, the lady wakes Gawain from nightmares about the Green Knight. She kisses him and they talk happily, but the danger presses on Gawain as the lady comes closer than ever and seems to force him to either surrender or reject her.

As the poem alternates between hunting scene and bedroom scene, the poet uses a lot of patterns, including the three bugle blows and cockerel cries. But though these constant patterning rituals give order to the hunt and to the game, there are certain things that have entered Gawain’s world that can’t be ordered, like feelings of love or the thought of his own death, which we are constantly reminded of with the hunting imagery.

They manage to capture the fox, which is persuaded to play one more round. He wins it. The huntsmen present their winnings. Gawain keeps his side of the bargain to return anything won in the court and presents the lord with his own chivalric honor. Yet Gawain accepts it, not out of love, but out of fear—he hopes it will protect him from the Green Knight.

The extensive, gory description the poet gives of the hunted deer being butchered by the hunters is a bit of a metaphor for the taking apart of Gawain’s character. As in the battlefield-like hunting ground the animals are reduced to their most natural parts, this is sort of what the poem is doing to Gawain, trying to shed the armor and chivalry.

The symbol of protection has gone from being displayed proudly on Gawain’s shield to being hidden from sight – Gawain’s fear of death has made him do something he considers shameful. Just as he prayed to be saved when he was in physical peril, now prays for the sake of his heart and mind.
Having killed and skinned the fox, the host returns and this time Gawain offers first three kisses. The host says the fox is mealy compensation compared to these gifts, but Gawain accepts it and the pair eat and drink merrily once more. The host assigns a servant to help Gawain find the chapel the next day, and with fond farewells and anxious thoughts, Gawain goes to bed.

The whole poem's structure and Gawain's trial is based on balance and symmetry. The cycle of the seasons keeps the momentum going and the fair exchange of gifts ensures an honest relationship between Gawain and his host. But now Gawain does not turn over the green girdle to the lord—he keeps it hidden, secretly staining his own chivalric honor because he hopes to escape death.

As Gawain waits, he hears the sharpening of a blade, which he knows is the sound of his own doom. The next moment, the Green Knight appears, wielding a huge new Danish axe. Gawain greets the knight with a bow and the knight welcomes him and praises him for his timeliness. The Green Knight then announces that the time has come for the exchange to be completed. Gawain bares his neck just as the Green Knight had done a year ago.

The Green Knight makes ready to strike, raising the axe high, but as it descends, Gawain flinches slightly and the knight withdraws his weapon. He accuses Gawain of not living up to his reputation and boasts of superior bravery. Gawain assures him there will be no more flinching but says to strike swiftly so that he can meet his destiny, because, unlike the Green Knight, he will not be able to pick his head from the floor and walk away.

The Green Knight raises the axe again but this time halts its descent to praise Gawain for his lack of flinching. Gawain fiercely urges him to stop delaying and strike.

Just as the contract with the Green Knight has brought him misery, now the contract frees Gawain—it is only now, after the structure of the game has been fulfilled and the return stroke completed that Gawain finds the bravery to stand up to the knight, knowing that within the rules of the game, he can now defend himself.

Now alone, Gawain steels his courage and continues on into the wilderness. He can see no chapel, only high banks of rock and cliffs that cast shadows on his path. He sees a grassy mound ahead but when he gets closer, he realizes that it is hollow like a cave. He thinks that if this is the chapel, it is a chapel that is home to the devil. He begins to believe the place is fitting for the Green Knight's dwelling. Gawain readies himself with his sword and climbs to the top of the mound.

Suddenly there is a loud noise. Gawain assumes it is the Green Knight. He summons his courage and announces himself, saying he has come to fulfill the agreement. A voice calls back that he will appear in good time.

The servant brings him close to the Green Chapel but stops before reaching it, saying that he will not accompany Gawain to the doomed destination. He warns Gawain of the giant he will find at the chapel, of his superhuman strength, and says he will be surely killed if he chooses to go. The servant reminds him that he must show in court.

Gawain’s anxiety is mirrored by nature. The storm of the outside world gives insight into Gawain’s true, “natural” feelings beneath the calm and shining exterior that his reputation demands that he must show in court.

The plot gives Gawain many chances to back out of the final journey to the chapel but in the end even certain death and all the reputation that the Knight has built up over the course of the year can’t defeat Gawain’s will to not be a coward. It is also an important moment in Gawain’s individual journey, now left alone, we have the opportunity to observe Gawain’s will away from the confines of either court. His reputation is safe no matter how he acts, and he acts courageously.

Clarity and truth are difficult to find in the poem and the landscape around Gawain personifies this. Examples of obstacles, shadows and illusions fill this part of the poem, showing that Gawain’s journey has reached its peak and neither order nor religion seem to be there to help him now. When the expected signs of the typical Christian chapel do not appear, Gawain deals with it by assigning the mound to a hell-like category.

Gawain shows himself to be a human being by physically reacting to his fear of the axe stroke. His response to the Green Knight’s mockery is an effort to protect his reputation—act brave. But he does not see in himself the possibility of the miraculous or supernatural that is so evident in the Green Knight.

The Green Knight continues to treat this meeting like the fulfillment of a contract (and you could argue that each man has a contract with nature—to die).

Lines 1998-2531

As Gawain lies in bed on New Year’s morning, the wind wails outside and snow threatens. He gets ready while it’s still dark. Despite his worries, he dresses in armor that is shined as brightly as it was when he left Camelot, and he wraps the green girdle around his waist. He mounts Gringelot, thanks and blesses the court and rides out with his accompanying servant, across mountains and brooks, a long weary way before sunrise.

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The Green Knight leans on his axe, states his admiration for Gawain’s courage, and refuses the offer to fight. He explains how he has spared Gawain, saving him from the first two strokes in accordance with Gawain’s honest exchange of the lady’s kisses on the first two days of the hunt. The Knight explains that on the third day, Gawain was deceptive and hid the green girdle from his host, so received one nick from the axe. Gawain is shocked to realize that the Green Knight was in fact Gawain’s host from the castle and that his wife had been in on the game, tempting Gawain and reporting back to the Green Knight.

Gawain refuses the invitation but sends his wishes to both the old and the young ladies. He curses the deceitfulness of women, listing the important men of history that have been tricked by women, such as Adam, Samson, Solomon, and David, and comments that if those heroes could be tricked by women then he can forgive himself for being similarly tricked. Gawain does accept the green girdle, not for its material value, but to remind him of his weakness.

Gawain asks to know the real name of the Green Knight. The knight tells him it is Bertilak of Hautdesert. He explains that he has learned his supernatural skills from Morgan Le Fay, the old woman who dwelt at the castle with him. It was this sorceress who sent Bertilak to Camelot. Her reasons were to test the reputation of Arthur’s knights and to scare Guinevere to death with the gory axe stroke. Bertilak then tells Gawain that Le Fay is actually his aunt, Arthur’s half-sister. Bertilak once again invites Gawain to join him for the New Year’s feast, but Gawain again declines, and the men kiss and part.

Gawain re-enters Camelot, that bastion of reputation, wearing the green girdle, the symbol of his failure and humility, for all to see. Put another way; Gawain has embraced his failure, he holds tight to his humility, because these are the things that make him human. And in so doing the Arthurian court rallies around him, showing a degree of compassion that was not evident earlier, and universally embracing this symbol of humility to temper their emphasis solely on following the “rules” of Christian chivalry. The green girdle has been added to the symbols of the pentangle, marrying the rigidity of the code with the more flexible and “real” virtue of humility.

The poem sticks with its patterns and symmetry as it ends with an echo of its beginning. Talk of legends and fame frames the tale, though similar to Gawain’s embrace of humility the poem ends wit an embrace of Christ.