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**Sir Gawain and the Green Knight**

Introductory Material

**Authorship: The Gawain Poet**

Though the real name of "The Gawain Poet" is unknown, some inferences about him can be drawn from an informed reading of his works. The manuscript of Gawain is known in academic circles as Cotton Nero A.x, following a naming system used by one of its owners, Robert Cotton, a collector of Medieval English texts. It was almost entirely unknown. Now held in the British Library, it has been dated to the late 14th century, so the poet was a contemporary of Geoffrey Chaucer, author of The Canterbury Tales.

What is known today about the poet is largely general, as J. R. R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, after reviewing the text’s allusions, style, and themes, concluded in 1925: “He was a man of serious and devout mind, though not without humour; he had an interest in theology, and some knowledge of it, though an amateur knowledge perhaps, rather than a professional; he had Latin and French and was well enough read in French books, both romantic and instructive; but his home was in the West Midlands of England; so much his language shows, and his metre, and his scenery.”

**Genre: Chivalric Romance**

The literary genre of chivalric romance refers to a style of heroic prose and verse narrative that was particularly current in aristocratic literature of Medieval and Early Modern Europe. Many medieval romances recount the marvelous adventures of a chivalrous, heroic knight, often of super-human ability, who, abiding chivalry's strict codes of honor and demeanor, goes on a quest, and fights and defeats monsters and giants, thereby winning favor with a lady. The story of the medieval romance focuses not upon love and sentiment, but upon adventure.

Romances often reworked legends and fairy tales and traditional tales about Charlemagne and Roland or King Arthur. A related tradition existed in Northern Europe, and comes down to us in the form of epics, such as Beowulf, which were deeply imbued with dreamlike and magical elements foreign to the classical epics. The first romances heavily drew on the legends and fairy tales to supply their characters with marvelous powers. The tale of Sir Launfal features a fairy bride from folklore, and Sir Orfeo's wife is kidnapped by the fairy king, and Sir Orfeo frees her from there. These marvelous abilities subside with the development of the genre; fairy women such as Morgana le Fay become enchantresses, and knights lose magical abilities.

In later romances, particularly those of French origin, there is a marked tendency to emphasize themes of courtly love, such as faithfulness in adversity. From around the year 1800 the connotations of "romance" moved from the magical and fantastic to somewhat eerie “Gothic” adventure narratives such as Jane Eyre.
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**Code of Chivalry**

1. Nobility in service
2. Death before dishonor
3. Enterprise in obedience to rule
4. Respect for all worthy people
5. Honor all those above your station
6. Command obedience through respect
7. Scorn those who are ignoble
8. Protect the innocent
9. Punish the guilty
10. Courtesy to all ladies
11. Battle is the test of manhood
12. Combat is glory
13. Defend your charge unto death
14. War is the flowering of chivalry
15. Death to all who oppose the cause
16. Anger blinds, a cool head wins

**Knightly Virtues**

- **Liberality:** generosity
- **Glory:** great honor, popular praise
- **Courtesy:** formal politeness
- **Honor:** high merit
- **Unselfishness:** caring for others
- **Bravery:** fearlessness; courage
- **Good faith:** trust upon word alone
- **Pride:** a proper feeling of esteem
- **Loyalty:** faithfulness to country, duty

**Arthurian Romance**

King Arthur has been an important figure in English literature since singers and story-tellers first described his great exploits in the 6th-century. Of course, the legend of King Arthur has been appropriated by many story-tellers and poets, who have embellished upon the first, most modest tales. Part of the intrigue of the stories, which became part of Arthurian romance, though, is the mixture of myth, adventure, love, enchantment, and tragedy. The magic and intrigue of these stories invites even more far-fetched and elaborate interpretations.

Defined as “narrative, written in prose or verse and concerned with adventure, courtly love and chivalry,” Arthurian romance derived the narrative verse form from 12th-century France. The anonymous 14th-century English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the most widely recognized example of Arthurian romance. Although little is known about this poet, the poem seems fairly typical of Arthurian Romance. Here, a magical creature (the Green Knight) has challenged a noble knight to a seemingly impossible task, in the pursuit of which he meets the temptation of a beautiful woman. Of course, the young knight Gawain displays courage, skill and chivalric courtesy in overcoming his foe.

Gawain’s function, as medieval scholar Alan Markman says, “is the function of the romance hero ... to stand as the champion of the human race, and by submitting to strange and severe tests, to demonstrate human capabilities for good or bad action.” Through Gawain’s adventure, it becomes clear that he is merely human. The reader becomes attached to this human view in the midst of the poem’s romanticism, relating to Gawain’s humanity.
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while respecting his knightly qualities. Gawain "shows us what moral conduct is. We shall probably not equal his behaviour, but we admire him for pointing out the way."

Alliterative Verse
The 2,530 lines and 101 stanzas that make up Sir Gawain and the Green Knight are written in a dialect of Middle English that links it with Britain’s Northwest Midlands, probably the county of Cheshire or Lancashire. The English provinces of the late fourteenth century, although they did not have London’s economic, political, and artistic centrality, were not necessarily less culturally active than London, where Geoffrey Chaucer and William Langland were writing at the time. In fact, the works of the Gawain-poet belong to a type of literature traditionally known as the Alliterative Revival, usually associated with northern England. Contrary to what the name of the movement suggests, the alliterative meter of Old English had not actually disappeared and therefore did not need reviving. Nevertheless, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight exists as a testament that the style continued well into the fourteenth century, if not in London, then in the provinces.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’s adapted Old English meter tends to connect the two halves of each poetic line through alliteration, or repetition of consonants. The poem also uses rhyme to structure its stanzas, and each group of long alliterative lines concludes with a word or phrase containing two syllables and a quatrain—known together as the “bob and wheel.” The phrase “bob and wheel” derives from a technique used when spinning cloth—the bobs and wheels in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight help to spin the plot and narrative together in intricate ways. They provide commentaries on what has just happened, create or fulfill moments of suspense, and serve as transitions to the next scene or idea.

The Gawain-poet uses the “bob and wheel” as a transition or pivot between his alliterative verse and a summary/counterpoint rhyming verse, as in this example from the first stanza of the poem:

If you’d like to listen to the poem I’ll read,

\text{Spun}

\text{Out of ancient stories}
\text{Set down by honest men}
\text{With bold words}
\text{And faithful pens}

Bob-and-Wheel
All of the alliterative revival poets used this style in their poetry, but the author of Sir Gawain also incorporates a bob-and-wheel at the end of his stanzas. The “bob” is a short connecting line, sometimes only two syllables in length that connects a four-line ABAB rhyming section in iambic trimeter to the rest of the stanza. Here’s an example:

\text{The fole that he ferkkes on fyn of that ilke,}
(The horse that he rides entirely of that color,)
\text{sertayn.}
(in truth.)
\text{A grene hors gret and thikke,}
(A green horse huge and strong,)
\text{A stede ful stif to strayne,}
(A proud steed to restrain,)
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In brawden brydel quik:
(Spirited under bridle,)

To the gome he watz ful gayn.
(But obedient to the man.)
(173-178)

Here, the "bob" is sertayn. It connects the "wheel" – whose rhyme scheme with thikke (A) / strayne (B) / quik (A) / gayn (B) is ABAB – to the rest of the stanza. The meter of the wheel, three instances of stressed /unstressed syllable pairs, is iambic trimeter (which makes the sound da DUM da DUM da DUM).

The matter of the bob and wheel varies, but, generally, it functions as a refrain or, at least as often, a summary or ironic counterpoint to the stanza that preceded it. Both the Anglo-Saxon use of litotes and the French-inspired refrain show up in the bob and wheel.

Litotes is a form of understatement in which, rather than making a certain statement directly, a speaker expresses it even more effectively, or achieves emphasis, by denying its opposite. For example, rather than merely saying that a person is very attractive, one might say that he or she is “not unattractive,” or saying “no ordinary city” to mean “a very impressive [extraordinary] city.” By its nature, litotes is always deliberate and with the intention of subtle emphasis.

Told in four “fitts,” or parts, Sir Gawain weaves together at least three separate narrative strings commonly found in medieval folklore and romance. The first plot, the beheading game, appears in ancient folklore and may derive from pagan myths related to the agricultural cycles of planting and harvesting crops. The second and third plots concern the exchange of winnings and the hero’s temptation; both of these plots derive from medieval romances and dramatize tests of the hero’s honesty, loyalty, and chastity. As the story unfolds, we discover that the three apparently separate plotlines intersect in surprising ways.

A larger story that frames the narrative is that of Morgan le Faye’s traditional hatred for Arthur and his court, called Camelot. Morgan, Arthur’s half-sister and a powerful sorceress, usually appears in legend as an enemy of the Round Table. Indeed, medieval readers knew of Morgan’s role in the destined fall of Camelot, the perfect world depicted in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

The poem’s second frame is a historical one. The poem begins and ends with references to the myth of Britain’s lineage from the ancient city of Troy, by way of Britain’s Trojan founder, Brutus. These references root the Arthurian romance in the tradition of epic literature, older and more elevated than the tradition of courtly literature, and link fourteenth-century England to Rome, which was also founded by a Trojan (Aeneas). Thus, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight presents us with a version of translatio imperii—a Latin phrase referring to the transfer of culture from one civilization (classical antiquity, in this case) to another (medieval England). The Gawain-poet at times adopts an ironic tone, but he also displays a deep investment in elevating his country’s legends, history, and literary forms—especially Arthurian romance—by relating them directly to classical antiquity.

Middle English
The following are the first 19 lines of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in its original Middle English:

1 siþen þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at troye
2 þe bor brittened and brent to brondez and askez
3 þe tulk þat þe trammes of tresoun þer wrot
4 watz tried for his tricherie þe trewest on erþe
5 hit watz ennirie þe athel and his highe kynde
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6 þat siþen depreced prouinces and patrounes bicom
7 welnee of al be wele in be west iles
8 fro riche romulus to rome ricchis hym swybe
9 with gret bobbaunce þat bur3e he biges vpon fyrst
10 and neuenes hit his aune nome as hit now hat
11 ticius to tuskan and teldes bigynnes
12 langaberde in lumbardie lyftes vp homes
13 and fer over þe french flod felix brutus
14 on mony bonkkes ful brode bretayn he settez
15 wyth wynne
16 where werre and wrake and wonder
17 bi sybez hatz wont þerinne
18 and oft boþe blysse and blunder
19 ful skete hatz skyfted synne

Sir Gawain – A Biographical Sketch
Gawain, the son of King Lot of Orkney and Arthur’s sister Morgana, is one of the most pervasive figures of the Arthurian tradition. He appears in nearly all of the major Arthurian stories, medieval and modern, and plays a central role in many. There are, in fact, more medieval romances devoted to Gawain’s exploits than to those of any other of Arthur’s knights, including Lancelot, Tristan, and Galahad. Even in romances not specifically devoted to his adventures, Gawain often plays a strong supporting role. In Chretien’s Perceval, for example, more than half of the narrative focuses on Gawain rather than the title character, and in Malory’s, Gawain figures prominently throughout, and plays key supporting roles in both the Grail quest and in the Morte d’Arthur. His demeanor and personality vary a bit from story to story, but even if Gawain does not always rank as the best of Arthur’s knights, he is still one of the most important.

Gawain’s importance in the Arthurian world stems in part from his familial relationship to Arthur, which is established in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s History of the Kings of Britain. Though the names of Gawain’s parents may change in later works, this nephew-uncle connection generally remains. As the eldest son of Arthur’s sister, Gawain is the nearest male relative of the king and thus enjoys a particularly close and privileged relationship with the usually childless Arthur. He is not the prince, however, and does not bear princely responsibility, which means that, though Gawain is very much a part of the courtly inner circle, he is not bound to the court itself, and can thus exercise significant freedom of action. In the History, where Arthur is a very active and martial figure, this freedom of action is somewhat less apparent, but in later romances, where Arthur is more notably bound to throne and court and the narratives themselves focus more on knight-errantry, Gawain seems as comfortable on a quest as in the court. As Arthur’s nephew, he can be, without apparent contradiction, both the counselor and warrior of the chronicle tradition and the knight-errant (a medieval knight wandering in search of chivalrous adventures) of the romances, and it is this very elasticity of character which seems to have made Gawain such an attractive subject for so many storytellers.
Some Questions to Consider While Reading

1. **Trojan War**: Why would the Gawain-poet frame the tale with the Trojan War? How do the characters relate?
2. **The Supernatural**: What is the role of magic? How is the supernatural important to this tale?
3. **Chivalry**: How does Sir Gawain exemplify the code? How does he fail the code?
4. **Castles**: How do the descriptions of Camelot compare to the descriptions of Sir Bercilak's castle? How does King Arthur compare to Sir Bercilak?
5. **Role of Women**: Why are women blamed for all the problems? And why do they, in the end, seem to wield so much power?
6. **Celebrations**: Why is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* set around the Christmas and New Year celebrations? What do these holidays represent in the poem?
7. **Sin and Punishment**: How does Sir Gawain sin? What is his punishment? How do the other characters react to his failure?
8. **Symbolism**: How are numbers (doubling, tripling, etc.) and colors important?
9. **Allegory**: How might this narrative be considered an allegory (an extended metaphor)?
10. **Emblems**: What is the literary significance of each of the following emblems/symbols?
    - Pentangle
    - Green Girdle
    - Hunted Animals
    - Gawain's journey
    - The Green Chapel
    - King Arthur's Court
11. **Green**: And, why on earth is the knight green?