Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANONYMOUS

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.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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 as written, including a preoccupation with Christian rituals.

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 spin-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* 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.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*
- **When Written:** Sometime between 1340 and 1400
- **Where Written:** West Midlands, England
- **Literary Period:** Medieval Romance Literature
- **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.

EXTRA CREDIT

All that Alliteration. When *Sir Gawain* was written, verse was primarily written in ways that were quite different animal 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 **pentangle**, 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 obscure his view, but eventually he finds a grass-covered cave. He hears the Knight sharpening his weapon inside and prepares himself.

The Knight emerges and makes two false strikes, the first because Gawain flinches from fear and the second to praise him for not flinching. The third strike lands, but it only wounds Gawain. It is then that the Green Knight reveals that his name is actually Bertilak, that he is the lord of the castle where Gawain has been staying, and that he has been testing Gawain. He explains that he has punished Gawain with this third strike for his dishonesty in hiding the green girdle on the third day of the hunt. He also explains that the old woman at the castle is Morgan Le Faye, a wizardess, who is the power behind the whole game "beheading game" and who wanted to test Arthur's court. An embarrassed Gawain, with the green girdle on his arm as a sign of his failure, returns to Camelot, where a hero's welcome awaits. When he confesses his sins, King Arthur admires his humility and orders the court to wear symbolic green bands in solidarity.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR 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 Christ-like 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.

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.

MINOR CHARACTERS

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.

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

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

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 wildness 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, theirs is a way of being that better operates in the real world. The green girdle Gawain wears becomes a symbol of this different, 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 La 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 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 king's place and faces The Green Knight, he suddenly transforms himself in the eyes of the court from one of the weakest of the knights to its champion in bravery. He is dressed with an elaborate costume of battle and rituals are arranged for him before his journey begins, but none of these things eliminate his pure human fear about the ordeal he faces on his quest. Fame and reputation almost seem to separate a man from his true self, to transform him in the eyes of others, but that transformation only goes skin deep. And yet, that reputation makes it impossible for Gawain to voice his true fears or 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 wilderness—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 story 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, Michelmas). 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 or battle-field 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 fended 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

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

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 greenness. 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. There's also the Green Chapel, 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 wits, 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.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the W. W. Norton & Company edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* published in 2008.

Lines 1-490 Quotes

❝ After Britain was built by this founding father,
a bold race bred there, battle-happy men
causing trouble and torment in turbulent times.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20-23

Explanation and Analysis

The opening lines of the poem describe the lineage of King Arthur, who was supposedly descended from Brutus the Roman. The connection between Britain and Brutus is intriguing because it suggests a Greco-Roman morality in the court of King Arthur: an environment characterized by violence, bloodshed, and glorious combat. Sure enough, the poet praises the English kings for their propensity for war--they're not mindlessly violent, but rather "battle happy." The poem will study the contrasts and tensions between two competing moralities: that of the Romans (i.e., characterized by violence and battle-happiness) and that of the Christians, characterized by mercy and kindness.

> And I'll tell it as it's told in the town where it trips from, the tongue;
> and as it has been inked
> in stories bold and strong,
> through letters, which, once linked,
> have lasted loud and long.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31-36

Explanation and Analysis

The passage describes the nature of the story we're about to here--a story that, the poet insists, has been repeated many times already and repeated throughout the land. The passage is intriguing because it singles out stories and letters in place of songs and words--in other words, it focuses on written language, rather than spoken language (unlike many earlier epic tales, such as Homer's *Iliad*, which was designed to be performed and spoken, not just written). The poem celebrates *itself* for having survived for so long, and for having been written down and recorded for future generations to enjoy. The heroes of King Arthur's court, it's suggested, deserve to be remembered forever, in stories and performances. (This passage is also a good example of alliteration--a series of words starting with the same letter or sound--which is the dominant poetic device of the story.)

> I should genuinely judge him to be a half-giant, or a most massive man, the mightiest of mortals.
> But handsome, too, like any horseman worth his horse,
> for despite the bulk and brawn of his body
> his stomach and waist were slender and sleek.
> In fact in all features he was finely formed
> it seemed.

Related Characters: The Green Knight

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 140-146

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we're introduced to the mysterious Green Knight. The Knight, one would think, would be an intimidating, scary figure--big, loud, ugly, etc. But although the Green Knight is massive, he's not an ogre (another typical figure in English fantasy stories). Instead, the Knight is well-dressed, handsome-looking, and well-proportioned. in other words, he's basically a normal knight, who just so happens to be a giant, and green.

The Knight is both familiar and unfamiliar--his body is normal, but large and green. The ambiguous nature of the Knight's appearance reflects his ambiguous moral status in the poem; we're not sure if we can trust him or not, and he is a representative of both the supernatural (in his size and strange color) and the natural (in his handsomeness and tree-like color).

> Some stood and stared then stepped a little closer, drawn near to the knight to know his next move;
> they'd seen some sights, but this was something special,
> a miracle or magic, or so they imagined.
> Yet several of the lords were like statues in their seats,
> left speechless and rigid, not risking a response.
> The hall fell hushed, as if all who were present
> had slipped into sleep or some trancelike state.

Related Characters: The Green Knight

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 237-244

Explanation and Analysis

Understandably, most of the knights and lords in the court of King Arthur are very frightened of the Green Knight--he's so big, supernatural-seeming, and intimidating that he could presumably kill any one of them. The Knight walks through the halls, staring at the guests in King Arthur's court, and nobody greets him; they're just too frightened.

Who's in the wrong here, the Knight or Arthur's guests? While the Green Knight is portrayed as a somewhat frightening figure, we should keep in mind that the poem is set during Christmas time. By refusing to greet the Green Knight politely and offer him food and shelter, the guests at the court are betraying their Christian, chivalric, and courtly duties.

I'm spoiling for no scrap, I swear. Besides,
the bodies on these benches are just bum-fluffed bairns.
If I'd ridden to your castle rigged out for a ruck
these lightweight adolescents wouldn't last a minute.
But it's Yuletine – a time of youthfulness, yes?
So at Christmas in this court I lay down a challenge:
if a person here present, within these premises,
is big or bold or red blooded enough
to strike me one stroke and be struck in return,
I shall give him as a gift this gigantic cleaver
and the axe shall be his to handle how he likes.

Related Characters: The Green Knight (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 279-289

Explanation and Analysis

After Arthur greets the Green Knight (showing the hospitality that none of his guests would), the Green Knight explains what he wants. He wants to play a "game" with the bravest members of King Arthur's court: he and his opponent will trade one blow each. Interestingly, the Green Knight reminds everyone that it's Christmas, and therefore a good time for games. He seems oblivious to (or else darkly alluding to) the fact that this particular "game" is lethal, and not exactly a good Christmas activity.

The poem sets up an interesting contrast between Christianity and chivalry, then--between the religion of mercy and the knightly code of violence and warfare. At this point, it seems that the Green Knight himself sees no real contrast between the two systems of behavior--but his challenge immediately sets up a contradiction in "courtly" values.

By Guenivere, Gawain
now to his king inclines
and says, "I stake my claim.
This moment must be mine.

Related Characters: Sir Gawain (speaker), Sir Gawain, Queen Guinevere, King Arthur

Related Themes:

Page Number: 339-342

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sir Gawain, the young nephew of King Arthur, offers himself as a participant in the game with the Green Knight. King Arthur has just volunteered himself for the challenge, but just as the game is about to begin, Gawain volunteers to replace his king.

Why does Gawain volunteer? One could say that he's trying to save his king from the pain of being hurt or killed by the Green Knight; i.e., he's sure that whoever plays the Green Knight's game will lose, horribly. Therefore, Gawain might be sacrificing himself because he's one of the youngest and least valuable people at the court, and therefore not much of a loss (whereas Arthur's death would throw the whole kingdom into turmoil). Of course, Gawain is also trying to prove his worth in battle--standing up to the Green Knight is an excellent way to gain fame and a reputation for bravery.

The handsome head tumbles onto the earth
and the king's men kick it as it clatters past.
Blood gutters brightly against his green gown,
yet the man doesn't shudder or stagger or sink
but trudges towards them on those tree-trunk legs
and rummages around, reaches at their feet
and cops hold of his head and hoists it high
and strides to his steed, snatches the bridle,
steps into the stirrup and swings into the saddle
still gripping his head by a handful of hair.

Related Characters: The Green Knight

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 427-436

Explanation and Analysis

Sir Gawain strikes at the Green Knight, decapitating him, and his head flies to the floor. To everyone's surprise, the Green Knight's headless body then simply walks after its own head, picks it up, and rides away. The scene is gruesome, and somewhat comic (like something out of a Looney Tunes cartoon)--the casual way that the Knight trudges after its head and rummages around on the floor suggests that he's had to do so many times before.

The fine line between horror and comedy is a fixture of the poem--Gawain faces a series of terrifying, supernatural challenges, of which the Knight's challenge is only the first, and yet each challenge is somewhat mitigated by humor.

Lines 491-1125 Quotes

> And Gawain had been glad to begin the game
> but don't be so shocked should the plot turn pear-shaped
> for men might be merry when addled with mead
> but each year, short lived, is unlike the last
> and rarely resolves in the style it arrived.
> So the festival finishes and a new year follows
> in eternal sequence, season by season.

Related Characters: Sir Gawain

Related Themes:

Page Number: 495-501

Explanation and Analysis

In this lyrical passage, the narrator describes how, in the aftermath of the Green Knight's confrontation with Sir Gawain, the knights of King Arthur's court began to eat and feast. Then, afterwards, the new year came, and eventually it grew steadily shorter and shorter. Years are strange things--their beginnings are rarely like their endings, and yet they repeat, over and over. Such is the cycle of time, the narrator notes wisely: the years repeat again and again, eternally. On a plot level, the dwindling year also suggests that Gawain is running out of time to fulfill his oath and find the Green Knight--it seems that his certain death is rapidly drawing near.

Passages like this one convey a sense of nature's beauty and harmony. At many times, the Green Knight is associated with the power and wonder of nature, and--much like the passage of the years described here--he's both supernatural and natural, frightening and alluring.

> So it suits this soldier in his spotless armor,
> fully faithful in five ways five times over.
> For Gawain was as good as the purest gold –
> devoid of vices but virtuous, loyal
> and kind,
> so bore that badge on both
> his shawl and shield alike.
> A prince who talked the truth.
> A notable. A knight.

Related Characters: Sir Gawain

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 631-639

Explanation and Analysis

Here the narrator describes the elaborate armor that Sir Gawain wore when he set out to find the Green Knight. Gawain's armor blends chivalric and Christian traditions together into one. Gawain's armor is decorated with pentangles, symbolizing the five wounds of Christ, among other things. In general, Gawain is praised for his virtue and honesty, not his strength--appropriately for his quest, which requires honesty as well as military might. One could argue that the poem wants to depict Gawain as a distinctly Christian kind of hero--a hero who knows how to fight and kill, but also one who knows how to keep his word, obey authorities, and respect the rules.

> He trails through bleak terrain.
> His mood and manner change
> at every twist or turn
> towards that chosen church.

Related Characters: Sir Gawain

Related Themes:

Page Number: 709-712

Explanation and Analysis

Sir Gawain now journeys through the wilderness to find the Green Knight. His quest is interesting because he could easily give up at any time--no material reward awaits him when he finds the Green Knight; only the promise of death. Gawain's journey to track down the Knight is truly motivated by honor and honor alone. Gawain is a man of his

word, more respectful of virtue than his own life.

The narrator conveys the extent of Gawain's ordeal in psychological terms. It's not just that Gawain endures a lot of danger along the way to the Knight; it's that there's no rational reason for him to endure such danger. Gawain's changing moods foreshadow the temptations he'll endure later on in the poem.

He rides the path and prays,
dismayed by his misdeeds,
and signs Christ's cross and says,
"be near me in my need."

No sooner had he signed himself three times
than he became aware, in those woods, of high walls
in a moat, on a mound, bordered by the boughs
of thick-trunked timber which trimmed the water.
The most commanding castle a knight ever kept,

Related Themes:

Page Number: 759-767

Explanation and Analysis

It's Sir Gawain's humility and trust in Christianity that leads him to food and shelter. He prays to Mary and makes the sign of the cross three times--immediately afterwards, a mysterious moat and castle appear out of nowhere, suggesting a clear link between the castle and the prayer--and also between Christianity and the supernatural.

The passage underscores one of the key themes of the poem: bravery and valor aren't enough to be a true knight. The true knight--Sir Gawain--will trust in God as well as his own physical strength. At the end of the day, it isn't Gawain's bravery that leads him to the castle; it's his reliance on God.

Lines 1126-1997 Quotes

As the cry went up the wild creatures quaked.
The deer in the dale, quivering with dread
hurtled to high ground, but were headed off
by the ring of beaters who bawled and roared.
The stags of the herd with their high-branched heads
and the broad-horned bucks were allowed to pass by,
for the lord of the land had laid down a law
that man should not maim the male in close season

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1150-1157

Explanation and Analysis

In this witty scene, the lords and knights of the kingdom go hunting while Sir Gawain gets to know the lord's wife. Sir Gawain's budding relationship with the wife is contrasted with the lords' hunting exploits, which are cast in subtly sexual terms. Here for example, we're told that during this particular hunting season, only females are "fair game"--the knights, a bunch of men, are hunting for females. As we'll soon see, Sir Gawain's relationship with the lady is also a kind of gendered "hunt," in which Gawain is tempted to "chase" after an elusive, attractive woman.

Then the heads and necks of the hinds were hewn off,
and the choice meat of the flanks chopped away from the chine,
and a fee for the crows was cast into the copse.
Then each side was skewered, stabbed through the ribs
and heaved up high, hung by its hocks,
and every person was paid with appropriate portions.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1353-1358

Explanation and Analysis

In this gory scene, the lord and knights go about dividing up the animals they've hunted. After a long day, they've succeeded in slaying a vast number of animals, including many hinds. One by one, the hinds are ripped apart, skewered, and distributed among the hunters.

Note the sexualized imagery of penetration in this passage, and also the language that connotes justice and equality. One could that justice and sex are the two themes of the poem: the justice that leads Gawain to return to the Green Knight to receive his axe-blow, and the sexuality that tempts Gawain into sin. The language of the passage is unmistakably violent, further reinforcing a connection between the two themes: Gawain's desire for women has an unmistakably violent character (as is often the case in literary descriptions of male sexuality), and his punishment at the Green Knight's hands is of course going to be intensely violent.

"And I will give it all to you, Gawain," said the master,
"for according to our contract it is yours to claim."
"Just so," said Gawain, "and I'll say the same,
for whatever I've won within these walls
such gains will be graciously given to you."
So he held out his arms and hugged the lord
and kissed him in the kindliest way he could.

Related Characters: Sir Gawain, Bertilak of Hautdesert (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1383-1389

Explanation and Analysis

In this amusing passage, Sir Gawain and Bertliak honor their arrangement and exchange their gifts. Bertilak gives Gawain everything he's won during the day (the prize meat from the deer he's killed), and Gawain returns to Bertilak everything that *he* has "won" during his day inside: Gawain then kisses Bertilak (since, of course, he's kissed the lady). Bertilak doesn't catch on, making the passage especially hilarious for it's readers. The passage further underscores the relationship between hunting and sexuality: it's as if Bertilak's felled animals are equivalent to Gawain's beautiful lady, suggesting that--in the poem's point of view--women are a form of "property."

for when tales of truthful knights are told
in both title and text the topic they describe
is how lords have laid down their lives for love,
endured for many days love's dreadful ordeal
then vented their feelings with avenging valor
by bringing great bliss to a lady's bedroom –
and you the most notable of all noble knights,
whose fame goes before him ... yes, how can it follow
that twice I have taken this seat at your side
yet you have not spoken the smallest syllable
which belongs to love or anything like it.

Related Characters: Bertilak's Wife (speaker), Sir Gawain

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1514-1524

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage,the mysterious Lady Bertilak talks to Sir Gawain. Not for the first time, the Lady and Gawain are alone--Bertilak is outside, leaving Gawain to his own devices. The Lady seems to be flirting with Sir Gawain pretty heavily: she teases him about being such a famous, renowned knight (not really true, as a matter of fact), and yet knowing nothing of love. It's as if the Lady, having tried straightforward seduction, is now trying to goad Gawain into kissing her by questioning his heroism and his manhood.The middle section of the poem is all about temptation: it would be so easy for Gawain to give into his obvious desire for the Lady, and yet he doesn't, at least not entirely.

"As an honest soul I swear on my heart,
you shall find the Green Chapel to finalize your affairs
long before dawn on New Year's Day.
So lie in your room and laze at your leisure
while i ride my estate, and, as our terms dictate
we'll trade our trophies when the hunt returns
I have tested you twice and found you truthful.
But think tomorrow *third time throw best*.

Related Characters: Bertilak of Hautdesert (speaker), Sir Gawain

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1673-1680

Explanation and Analysis

Bertilak is still seemingly oblivious to Gawain's relationship with his wife--as far as he's concerned, Gawain is a great guy, and totally trustworthy. Bertilak knows that Gawain is going to face off against the Green Knight very soon, but he suggests that they play one more round of their game: Gawain and Bertilak will trade their earnings at the end of the day.

It's worth noticing that Gawain's friendship with Bertilak has a familiar three-part structure, as in so many fairy tales. Moreover, Bertilak's fondness for games and play is highly reminiscent of the Green Knight's, foreshadowing the connection between the two characters. (Also note that the place where Gawain is to meet the Green Knight is a chapel, not a castle or battlefield--another link between the seemingly contradictory ideals of Christianity and chivalry.)

Lines 1998-2531 Quotes

Now night passes and the New Year draws near,
drawing off darkness as our Deity decrees.
But wild-looking weather was about in the world:
clouds decanted their cold rain earthwards,
the nithering north needled man's very nature;
creatures were scattered by the stinging sleet.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1998-2003

Explanation and Analysis

Once again, there's an interesting similarity between Sir Gawain's fear and anxiety and the natural world. On the night before Gawain's encounter with the Green Knight, it's dark and wild outside, supposedly exposing mankind's secret, hidden nature. Gawain has been putting on a brave face throughout the poem, but here, it's as if the prospect of dying at the Green Knight's hands is too much for Gawain to handle.

The poem praises the beauty of nature, but also shows the natural world to be frightening and chaotic. By the same token, *man's* nature is both beautiful and deeply flawed--we see so via Sir Gawain's character. Gawain tries to be a good man, but he's tempted again and again, suggesting his secret sinful (or merely instinctual) nature. The descriptions of nature here reinforce the connection between Gawain's flawed spirit and the world itself.

Where he wonders and watches – it looks a wild place:
no sign of a settlement anywhere to be seen
but heady heights to both halves of the valley
and set with saber-toothed stones of such sharpness
no cloud in the sky could escape unscathed.

Related Characters: Sir Gawain

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2163-2167

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sir Gawain comes to the place where he thinks he's going to die: the Green Knight's "chapel." The description of the chapel is a good example of the Green Knight's dualistic nature, his blend of natural and supernatural, Christianity and violence. It's a wild, chaotic place, surrounded on all sides by sharp stones, suggesting that Gawain is imprisoned in the Green Knight's lair, helpless. At the same time, it's also presumably a place where God is worshipped.

The passage builds suspense by reinforcing the point that Gawain can't run away from the Green Knight any longer. He came to the Green Knight's chapel because of his strong sense of honesty and integrity--but now that he's here, it doesn't matter whether he tries to run or not; he's stuck.

"Call yourself good Sir Gawain?" he goaded,
"who faced down every foe in the field of battle
but now flinches with fear at the foretaste of harm.
Never have I known such a namby-pamby knight.
Did I budge or even blink when you aimed the axe,
or carp or quibble in King Arthur's castle?

Related Characters: The Green Knight (speaker), Sir Gawain, King Arthur

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2270-2275

Explanation and Analysis

The Green Knight is about to strike Sir Gawain's neck with his axe. But instead of striking, he stops and makes fun of Sir Gawain for flinching. Gawain has pretended to be a good, strong knight--but, according to the Green Knight, he's just a coward, the same as his peers in King Arthur's court. The Green Knight uses the moment to praise himself for his own courage and fortitude in the previous year: he didn't flinch when Sir Gawain struck him, so Gawain shouldn't flinch when the Green Knight strikes him. (Of course, the Green Knight must have known that he'd be fine even with his head on the floor, making his competition with Sir Gawain pretty unfair.) The passage has the effect of humanizing both Gawain and the Knight: they're both flawed--Gawain because he's frightened, and the Green Knight because he loves to gloat.

But no wonder if a fool should fall for a female
and be wiped of his wits by womanly guile –
it's the way of the world. Adam fell for a woman
and Solomon for several, and as for Samson,
Delilah was his downfall, and afterwards David
was bamboozled by Bathsheba and bore the grief.

Related Characters: Sir Gawain (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2414-2419

Explanation and Analysis

Sir Gawain has emerged from his encounter with the Green Knight alive, and with only a slight neck wound. Furthermore, he's learned that his encounter with Bertilak and the lady was a test of his virtue: the lady was tempting him into sexual impropriety in order to test his worth as a knight. Gawain has passed the test--barely. Here, he curses women for tempting men again and again over the centuries; the history of humanity going all the way back to Adam, he claims, is a history of women leading men to ruin.

Gawain's account of history is important because it depicts men as the standard-bearers of virtue and uprightness, while women are sinful and useful only for testing men's virtues. The greatest men in history, one can assume from Gawain's speech, are those who successfully rise above temptation by appealing to their sense of honor and loyalty. Gawain, then, hasn't *quite* become a great knight, since he was tempted by the lady (who also tempted him to place his own survival over total honesty). Nevertheless, he's in good company: Adam, Samson, and David gave in to temptation, too. (It goes without saying that this entire passage is a classically sexist argument and view of history.)

> "Regard," said Gawain, grabbing the girdle,
> "through this I suffered a scar to my skin –
> for my loss of faith I was physically defaced;
> what a coveting coward I became it would seem.
> I was tainted by untruth and this, its token,
> I will drape across my chest till the day I die.

Related Characters: Sir Gawain (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2505-2510

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gawain decides to wear the green garter forever as a sign of his weakness and humility. The garter becomes an explicit symbol in the poem: once supposed to render Gawain invincible, the knight now acknowledges it as a symbol of his weakness. Interestingly, the garter has become a distinctly Christian kind of symbol, designed to remind humanity of its limitations, rather than its greatness.

Sir Gawain isn't a great knight by the standards of chivalry--he gave in to temptation by kissing the Lady and hiding the girdle from Sir Bertilak. And yet by the end of the poem we get the sense that he's become a wiser, more confident man. He realizes that chivalry isn't all it's cracked up to be: humility, intelligence, and instinct are equally important. There's more to being a knight than volunteering to die: self-control and self-awareness (i.e., awareness of one's limitations) are required, too.

> Since fearless Brutus first set foot
> on these shores, once the siege and assault at Troy had ceased
> our coffers have been crammed
> with stories such as these.
> Now let our Lord, thorn-crowned,
> bring us to perfect peace. AMEN.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2524-2530

Explanation and Analysis

The poem ends with a repetition of the history of England, which stretches all the way back to the time of Brutus and the ancient Romans. Brutus, a great warrior (and not the same one famous for betraying Julius Caesar), was supposedly one of the founders of England, an ancestor of King Arthur. Yet as we've seen, there's more to life than Brutus's fearsomeness, important as it is. A true Christian will be humble and modest, not just brave. In such a way, the English tradition is founded on a combination of Christian *and* Roman values: a combination of valor and humility that, in theory, makes for very impressive knights like Sir Gawain.Appropriately enough, the final lines of the poem sum up the history of England as a steady progression from Rome to Christianity, or from valor to humility.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LINES 1-490

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.

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.*

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.

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.

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 the knights begin to dine. But just at the height of the feast, a huge figure bursts into the hall, giving Arthur exactly what he hoped for.

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.*

The intruding man is handsome and well-proportioned, despite his massive size, and he is completely green in color. Every piece of his elaborate costume is **green**, with gold details. He holds two props, a holly branch and an axe, and he is riding a huge green horse. The Green Knight looks with powerful glances around the hall, and asks to speak to the leader of the company.

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 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.

A strange meeting of violence and courtesy occurs here when both polite manners and readiness to battle are demanded by the chivalric code. The knights of the Round Table, whose reputation alone has brought the Green Knight here, are not showing themselves to be worthy of that reputation. Arthur speaks for them when he says they're battle-hungry, as if he's pushing a shy child into the limelight.

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.

The suddenly revealed life and death stakes of the Green Knight's "game" exposes the revelries of the court as true, empty games. The Green Knight's game is one requiring true courage—to enter into what seems to be a life and death contest with a supernatural being for no reason other than pride.

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.

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.*

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 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 clear 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.

The Green Knight displays all the courtesy of the model knight but seems superhuman in his lack of fear and seeming immortality. The fact that the Green Knight seems to possess even greater traits of chivalry than any of the other knights—and combines those traits with supernatural powers—suggests that he brings with him revelations or challenges not just to the knights of Arthur's court but to their chivalric code.

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.

Even after the miraculous event just witnessed, 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.

LINES 491-1125

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.

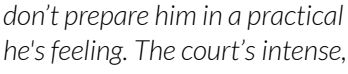
The poem's descriptions of the changes in nature across the seasons is long and elaborate. By providing such detail of the natural cycles of the year the poet is able to make that time seem long, beautiful, and inexorable—time will keep on passing, and Gawain will have to face his doom. In this way, 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 in this way to nature's "game" of mortality.

On Allhallows day near the end of autumn, the King throws a feast for Gawain, who is now a hero. The knights and ladies of the court mourn for his departure, but disguise their sadness with joy and music. Gawain makes a speech to Arthur assuring him that he is ready for the dangers of his journey to find the Green Knight. But despite his outward courage, Gawain feels doubt and worry.

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.

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.

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.



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.

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.

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.

Gawain's journey into the wilderness is a journey out of the confines of the court's moral code. There are no rules here, no order, and the games of the court have turned into very serious survival tests. It's interesting, then, that the orderless country is described as Godless, as if God is order.

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 Gringelot 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 rushes to find the lord.

Again the story is marked by Christian holidays, this one ensuring that the story will come full circle and Gawain's visit to the castle will echo the Christmas feast of King Arthur's court. The season's cycle, and each cycle brings man closer to his doom. Though Gawain doesn't seem to notice the danger, the poet portrays the sudden vision of the castle as a kind of unsteady mirage, making us think that maybe it shouldn't be so easily trusted. Though it is of course also significant that Gawain only finds the castle when he ceases to trust in himself and his own strength and puts himself in Mary's hands, suggesting that true Christian virtues may not be the boastful courage and reputation prized in Arthur's court but something more humble.

The people of the castle extend the drawbridge to Gawain, and kneel before him, somehow knowing his heroic status. They lead him inside, to a fire-lit hall, where he meets the lord, who tells him to use the castle as his own and embraces him. Gawain studies his new host and finds his sturdy, mature appearance imposing, just right for a leader of men. He notices that the men of *this* court are more rugged and masculine than the men of the Round Table, that they have beards that are "beaver-hued."

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.

The lord instructs his court to make Gawain welcome, and they shower him with rich bedding and robes. When dressed, he is beheld by the whole court as a Prince. He is seated by the fire and served with a wonderful meal. In response to the court's inquiries, Gawain admits his identity as an Arthurian Knight. The knights are full of greater admiration because of Gawain's reputation. They believe he has the power to teach them his chivalrous virtues.

Secondly, we are learning to be weary 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.

His host leads Gawain into a private chamber. The host's wife, the lady of the house, desires to look at Gawain, and comes out of her quarters, followed by other maidens. She is beautiful, even more beautiful than Guinevere, and Gawain notices her complexion, her figure, and many other fair details. An old lady stands beside her, completely the opposite in appearance to the young woman, with a stocky body and ugly features. Gawain bows courteously to the elder, and greets the younger with a kiss. As the lords and ladies continue the celebration, the host entertains Gawain with games.

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.

On Christmas day, the court enjoys more festivities, very like the ones at King Arthur's court, with music and meals served in order of importance. Gawain particularly enjoys the company of the lady of the house. This holiday spirit carries on for three days. On the last night of their feasting together, the lord takes Gawain aside and thanks and compliments him. He offers him a longer stay but Gawain refuses, saying he must journey on to the **Green Chapel** and complete his challenge. The lord is pleased to explain that he knows exactly where the Chapel is and will show Gawain when the time comes.

The similarity of this court to Arthur's which was bound in the code of chivalry alerts us to the fact that there is something to learn here, some contrast to discover, plus the fact that the lord of the castle is familiar with the Green Chapel and has perhaps been there before creates a connection between this too-good-to-be-true court and the supernatural quest and the coming showdown with the Green Knight looming over Gawain.

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.

As the day passes bloodily at the hunt, Gawain keeps his promise at the court. He dozes in bed in the morning, until he hears a noise at door. It is the lady of the house. She enters and comes towards him. He feigns sleep, but when she sits down on the bed, he thinks that he should find out her purpose and pretends to wake.

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.

The lady teases Gawain for sleeping so deeply and when he asks permission to rise and more suitably dress himself, she refuses and again teases him, saying she will tie him up and keep him captive, since the opportunity has arisen that she is alone with the most famous knight of the realm. She offers herself up to him as his servant. Gawain denies being such a worthy knight, but he gives in and the two banter and exchange compliments happily.

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 fine line between pure duty and romance by being respectful but succumbing a little to the lady – 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 territory becomes more and more dangerous to Gawain's moral code as the hunt gets bloodier and the lady gets closer and closer to staining Gawain's virtues. The lady's comment about the "real Gawain" is particularly important. Gawain has pretended and hidden so many things, including his real fear, that we are not sure who he really is at all. He seems to exist in terms of his reputation.

The poet shifts the narrative back to the hunt, and describes how the lords butcher 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.

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.

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.

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 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.

We've never really seen love talked about in the poem, apart from when Arthur treats Gawain lovingly in the earliest scenes, but that was a love out of gratitude and admiration. Yet Gawain hides behind his chivalric behavior to escape the topic—again suggesting that chivalry offers a kind of armor to escape the messiness (and humanness) of the real world. And the pattern of the game continues.

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 host shows himself to be a strong hunter and goes beyond the traditional chase-and-shoot boundaries of the hunt by actually facing off with the boar. As the pattern of hunting and kissing goes further and starts to threaten the established boundaries of each game, Gawain's motivations and the sureness of his virtues and qualities become clouded. Note how Gawain's stay at the castle seems like a diversion or a delay to him, but many of the trials and rules he is facing echo the form of the Green Knight's covenant.

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.

The finality of the final day of hunting pushes Gawain further from the glittering mirage of his reputation and closer to the real bodily danger of Bertilak's wife's seduction. The order of the game and the time pressure of the passing season pushes both the hunting and the sexual stories to their limits

The lady asks if Gawain has a sweetheart but he denies it. She takes another kiss and finally asks him for a love token. Gawain says he has no possession worthy of her so she gives him a love token instead. At first she offers a ring, but when he refuses, she offers a less expensive keepsake, a **green girdle**. When she tells Gawain that the magic of the girdle ensures the wearer protection from death, his fear of the Green Knight persuades him to take it. The lady asks him not to tell the lord about token, and he promises not to. The lady kisses Gawain for the third time that day and leaves him.

Gawain has given the lady's kisses to the lord each evening as their game demands, but not revealed the kisses' source. Taking a love token is a different thing, and breaks some of Gawain's rules of chivalry—taking it threatens the lady's honor (it is a tangible thing that could be discovered), and therefore threatens Gawain's 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.

Gawain dresses, hiding the **girdle** underneath his clothes. He goes to the chapel to confess his sins and, having been absolved, enjoys the final festivities of the season.

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 his three kisses. The host says the fox is measly 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.

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.

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 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 super human strength, and says he will be surely killed if he chooses to go. He begs Gawain to turn back, and says that he will not tell anyone if Gawain runs. But Gawain explains that he cannot bear to be a coward and must go on. The servant reminds him that facing the Green Knight is certain death, and hurries away.

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.

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.

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.

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.

As Gawain waits for what seems like certain death approaching—first the sharpening blade, then the Green Knight himself—the connection to every man's eventual natural death once again becomes clear. All people must face this moment. Gawain does not run. And 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).

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.

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—to 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 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.

The Green Knight mocks Gawain's courage, as if that courage, so prized in chivalry, is not all it's cracked up to be.

The Green Knight is impressed by this ferocity and takes aim again, this time bringing the axe right down on Gawain's neck. But the strike only nicks Gawain on the neck, and does not behead him. Seeing his own blood hit the snow but feeling himself alive, Gawain stands up to the Green Knight and defends himself with his shield. He says that he has fairly taken the promised stroke and that he will defend himself from any further attack, and invites the knight to fight.

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.

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.

The Green Knight suddenly becomes non-threatening, almost avuncular, now that the game is over. Yet note that by the strict rules of the game, the Green Knight could have killed Gawain. Gawain both agreed to the rules of the beheading game, and broke the rules of the exchange of gifts. Yet the Green Knight, who throughout the poem had become connected also to natural death, did not kill Gawain. Instead, he acted with mercy, he did not follow the letter of the law, but rather gave Gawain the penalty he deserved *for his failure—a mere nick. The Green Knight's actions here suggest that there* is *a miraculous force that can protect men from the pernicious effects of reputation (which is what made Gawain hide the fact that he was relying on the green girdle) and even from natural death: mercy, or divine love. The story can itself be read as a kind of endorsement of divine love, as opposed to the strict rules of divine law that are embodied in the complicated codes of chivalry. And not just any mercy or divine love—Christ's divine love. And, in fact, Christianity itself is often contrasted to Judaism, from which it emerged, as an evolution from a religion based on divine law to one based on divine love.*

The Green Knight again praises Gawain, calling him the best and bravest of Arthur's knights. Gawain, ashamed at his failure to return the **green girdle** to his host, rushes to untie it from his waist and offers it to the knight. But the knight tells him that there is nothing left to repent – he has made an honest confession. Furthermore, the Knight tells Gawain to keep the green girdle as a token of their adventure, and to come feast with him the following New Year and reconcile with the lady who had tricked him.

The recognition of the mercy that has been extended to him makes Gawain ashamed, makes him truly repent of his sins in a way that his daily trips to confession never did. Gawain has now become in the eyes of his supernatural judge the bravest of knights, because he is the only one who has actually faced a real trial, in the real world. And while he did not necessarily overcome it cleanly, the value of confession and atonement for his sin is greater than his failings.

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.

Continuing the poem's religious metaphors, the secret importance of women in the masculine world of the court is compared to Adam's fall from grace because of Eve's betrayal. The symbol of the green girdle has changed now, and is the first symbol with genuine meaning behind it—it becomes a symbol of Gawain's humility resulting from recognition of his own human failings, which has replaced his former reliance on reputation.

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 Faye, 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 gore of the axe stroke. Bertilak then tells Gawain that Le Faye 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.

The revelations here connect the story more deeply to the traditional Arthurian legends, with the rivalry between Morgan Le Faye and Guinevere and the tangled blood relations. Yet Morgan Le Faye's goal was also explicitly to test the reputations of Arthur's knights, to see what was real beneath the reputation, and Gawain faced the test, even if (like any human) he did not pass it perfectly.

Gawain rides back across the wilderness and woods to Camelot, overcoming many adventures on the way. His neck wound heals and he enters Arthur's court wearing the **green girdle** like a sash. He is greeted with joy and love. He confesses the whole tale and shows them his neck, pained by his shame in his own failure. He announces that he will wear the girdle forever, as the symbol of his failure. The king comforts Gawain and suggests that everyone in the court wears a **band of green** to show their love for him.

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 poet concludes by once again referencing the historic heroes that preceded the tale, reminding the reader that the story of Gawain and the Green Knight is one of the most marvelous in Arthurian times and recorded in the book of Brutus. The poet ends the list of heroes, and the poem, by praising Christ.

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.

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