

## = Sir Gawain and the Green Knight =

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight ( Middle English : Sir Gawayn and þe Grene Knyȝt ) is a late 14th @-@ century Middle English chivalric romance . It is one of the best known Arthurian stories , with its plot combining two types of folklore motifs , the beheading game and the exchange of winnings . The Green Knight is interpreted by some as a representation of the Green Man of folklore and by others as an allusion to Christ . Written in stanzas of alliterative verse , each of which ends in a rhyming bob and wheel , it draws on Welsh , Irish and English stories , as well as the French chivalric tradition . It is an important poem in the romance genre , which typically involves a hero who goes on a quest which tests his prowess , and it remains popular to this day in modern English renderings from J. R. R. Tolkien , Simon Armitage and others , as well as through film and stage adaptations .

It describes how Sir Gawain , a knight of King Arthur 's Round Table , accepts a challenge from a mysterious " Green Knight " who challenges any knight to strike him with his axe if he will take a return blow in a year and a day . Gawain accepts and beheads him with his blow , at which the Green Knight stands up , picks up his head and reminds Gawain of the appointed time . In his struggles to keep his bargain Gawain demonstrates chivalry and loyalty until his honour is called into question by a test involving Lady Bertilak , the lady of the Green Knight 's castle .

The poem survives in a single manuscript , the Cotton Nero A.x. , which also includes three religious narrative poems : Pearl , Purity and Patience . All are thought to have been written by the same unknown author , dubbed the " Pearl Poet " or " Gawain Poet " , since all three are written in a North West Midland dialect of Middle English .

## = = Synopsis = =

In Camelot on New Year 's Day , King Arthur 's court is exchanging gifts and waiting for the feasting to start when the king asks first to see or hear of an exciting adventure . At this a gigantic figure , entirely green in appearance and riding a green horse , rides unexpectedly into the hall . He wears no armour but bears an axe in one hand and a holly bough in the other . Refusing to fight anyone there on the grounds that they are all too weak to take him on , he insists he has come for a friendly " Christmas game " : someone is to strike him once with his axe on condition that the Green Knight may return the blow in a year and a day . The splendid axe will belong to whoever takes him on . Arthur himself is prepared to accept the challenge when it appears no other knight will dare , but Sir Gawain , youngest of Arthur 's knights and his nephew , begs for the honour instead . The giant bends and bares his neck before him and Gawain neatly beheads him in one stroke . However , the Green Knight neither falls nor falters , but instead reaches out , picks up his severed head and remounts , holding up his bleeding head to Queen Guinevere while its writhing lips remind Gawain that the two must meet again at the Green Chapel . He then rides away . Gawain and Arthur admire the axe , hang it up as a trophy and encourage Guinevere to treat the whole matter lightly .

As the date approaches , Sir Gawain sets off to find the Green Chapel and keep his side of the bargain . Many adventures and battles are alluded to ( but not described ) until Gawain comes across a splendid castle where he meets Bertilak de Hautdesert , the lord of the castle , and his beautiful wife , who are pleased to have such a renowned guest . Also present is an old and ugly lady , unnamed but treated with great honour by all . Gawain tells them of his New Year 's appointment at the Green Chapel and that he only has a few days remaining . Bertilak laughs , explains that the Green Chapel is less than two miles away and proposes that Gawain rest at the castle till then . Relieved and grateful , Gawain agrees .

Before going hunting the next day Bertilak proposes a bargain : he will give Gawain whatever he catches on the condition that Gawain give him whatever he might gain during the day . Gawain accepts . After Bertilak leaves , Lady Bertilak visits Gawain 's bedroom and behaves seductively , but despite her best efforts he yields nothing but a single kiss in his unwillingness to offend her . When Bertilak returns and gives Gawain the deer he has killed , his guest gives a kiss to Bertilak without divulging its source . The next day the lady comes again , Gawain again courteously foils her

advances , and later that day there is a similar exchange of a hunted boar for two kisses . She comes once more on the third morning , this time offering Gawain a gold ring as a keepsake . He gently but steadfastly refuses but she pleads that he at least take her belt , a girdle of green and gold silk which , the lady assures him , is charmed and will keep him from all physical harm . Tempted , as he may otherwise die the next day , Gawain accepts it , and they exchange three kisses . That evening , Bertilak returns with a fox , which he exchanges with Gawain for the three kisses ? but Gawain says nothing of the girdle .

The next day , Gawain leaves for the Green Chapel with the girdle wound twice around his waist . He finds the Green Knight sharpening an axe and , as promised , Gawain bends his bared neck to receive his blow . At the first swing Gawain flinches slightly and the Green Knight belittles him for it . Ashamed of himself , at the Green Knight 's next swing Gawain does not flinch ; but again the full force of the blow is withheld . The knight explains he was testing Gawain 's nerve . Angrily Gawain tells him to deliver his blow and so the knight does , causing only a slight wound on Gawain 's neck . The game is over . Gawain seizes his sword , helmet and shield , but the Green Knight , laughing , reveals himself to be the lord of the castle , Bertilak de Hautdesert , transformed by magic . He explains that the entire adventure was a trick of the ' elderly lady ' Gawain saw at the castle , who is actually the sorceress Morgan le Fay , Arthur 's sister , who intended to test Arthur 's knights and frighten Guinevere to death . Gawain is ashamed to have behaved deceitfully but the Green Knight laughs and professes him the most blameless knight in all the land . The two part on cordial terms . Gawain returns to Camelot wearing the girdle as a token of his failure to keep his promise . The Knights of the Round Table absolve him of blame and decide that henceforth that they will wear a green sash in recognition of Gawain 's adventure and as a reminder to be always honest .

= = " Pearl Poet " = =

Though the real name of " The Gawain Poet " ( or poets ) is unknown , some inferences about him or her can be drawn from an informed reading of his or her works . The manuscript of Gawain is known in academic circles as Cotton Nero A.x. , following a naming system used by one of its owners , Robert Cotton , a collector of Medieval English texts . Before the Gawain manuscript came into Cotton 's possession , it was in the library of Henry Savile of Bank in Yorkshire . Little is known about its previous ownership , and until 1824 , when the manuscript was introduced to the academic community in a second edition of Thomas Warton 's History edited by Richard Price , it was almost entirely unknown . Even then , the Gawain poem was not published in its entirety until 1839 . Now held in the British Library , it has been dated to the late 14th century , meaning the poet was a contemporary of Geoffrey Chaucer , author of The Canterbury Tales , though it is unlikely that they ever met . The three other works found in the same manuscript as Gawain ( commonly known as Pearl , Patience , and Purity or Cleanliness ) are often considered to be written by the same author . However , the manuscript containing these poems was transcribed by a copyist and not by the original poet . Although nothing explicitly suggests that all four poems are by the same poet , comparative analysis of dialect , verse form , and diction have pointed towards single authorship .

What is known today about the poet is largely general . As J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon , after reviewing the text 's allusions , style , and themes , concluded in 1925 :

He was a man of serious and devout mind , though not without humour ; he had an interest in theology , and some knowledge of it , though an amateur knowledge perhaps , rather than a professional ; he had Latin and French and was well enough read in French books , both romantic and instructive ; but his home was in the West Midlands of England ; so much his language shows , and his metre , and his scenery .

The most commonly suggested candidate for authorship is John Massey of Cotton , Cheshire . He is known to have lived in the dialect region of the Pearl Poet and is thought to have written the poem St. Erkenwald , which some scholars argue bears stylistic similarities to Gawain . St. Erkenwald , however , has been dated by some scholars to a time outside the Gawain poet 's era . Thus , ascribing authorship to John Massey is still controversial and most critics consider the Gawain poet an unknown .

= = Verse form = =

The 2 @,@ 530 lines and 101 stanzas that make up Sir Gawain and the Green Knight are written in what linguists call the " Alliterative Revival " style typical of the 14th century . Instead of focusing on a metrical syllabic count and rhyme , the alliterative form of this period usually relied on the agreement of a pair of stressed syllables at the beginning of the line and another pair at the end . Each line always includes a pause , called a caesura , at some point after the first two stresses , dividing it into two half @-@ lines . Although he largely follows the form of his day , the Gawain poet was somewhat freer with convention than his or her predecessors . The poet broke the alliterative lines into variable @-@ length groups and ended these nominal stanzas with a rhyming section of five lines known as the bob and wheel , in which the " bob " is a very short line , sometimes of only two syllables , followed by the " wheel " , longer lines with internal rhyme .

= = Similar stories = =

The earliest known story to feature a beheading game is the 8th @-@ century Middle Irish tale Bricriu 's Feast . This story parallels Gawain in that , like the Green Knight , Cú Chulainn 's antagonist feints three blows with the axe before letting his target depart without injury . A beheading exchange also appears in the late 12th @-@ century Life of Caradoc , a Middle French narrative embedded in the anonymous First Continuation of Chrétien de Troyes ' Perceval , the Story of the Grail . A notable difference in this story is that Caradoc 's challenger is his father in disguise , come to test his honour . Lancelot is given a beheading challenge in the early 13th @-@ century Perlesvaus , in which a knight begs him to chop off his head or else put his own in jeopardy . Lancelot reluctantly cuts it off , agreeing to come to the same place in a year to put his head in the same danger . When Lancelot arrives , the people of the town celebrate and announce that they have finally found a true knight , because many others had failed this test of chivalry .

The stories The Girl with the Mule ( alternately titled The Mule Without a Bridle ) and Hunbaut feature Gawain in beheading game situations . In Hunbaut , Gawain cuts off a man 's head and , before he can replace it , removes the magic cloak keeping the man alive , thus killing him . Several stories tell of knights who struggle to stave off the advances of voluptuous women sent by their lords as a test ; these stories include Yder , the Lancelot @-@ Grail , Hunbaut , and The Knight of the Sword . The last two involve Gawain specifically . Usually the temptress is the daughter or wife of a lord to whom the knight owes respect , and the knight is tested to see whether or not he will remain chaste in trying circumstances .

In the first branch of the medieval Welsh collection of tales known as the Mabinogion , Pwyll exchanges places for a year with Arawn , the lord of Annwn ( the Otherworld ) . Despite having his appearance changed to resemble Arawn exactly , Pwyll does not have sexual relations with Arawn 's wife during this time , thus establishing a lasting friendship between the two men . This story may , then , provide a background Gawain 's attempts to resist to the wife of the Green Knight ; thus , the story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight may be seen as a tale which combines elements of the Celtic beheading game and seduction test stories . Additionally , in both stories a year passes before the completion of the conclusion of the challenge or exchange is complete . Some scholars disagree with this interpretation , however , as Arawn seems to have accepted the notion that Pwyll may reciprocate with his wife , making it less of a " seduction test " per se , as seduction tests typically involve a Lord and Lady conspiring to seduce a knight , seemingly against the wishes of the Lord .

After the writing of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight , several similar stories followed . The Greene Knight ( 15th ? 17th century ) is a rhymed retelling of nearly the same tale . In it , the plot is simplified , motives are more fully explained , and some names are changed . Another story , The Turke and Gowin ( 15th century ) , begins with a Turk entering Arthur 's court and asking , " Is there any will , as a brother , To give a buffett and take another ? " At the end of this poem the Turk , rather than buffeting Gawain back , asks the knight to cut off his head , which Gawain does . The

Turk then praises Gawain and showers him with gifts . The Carle of Carlisle ( 17th century ) also resembles Gawain in a scene in which the Carle ( Churl ) , a lord , takes Sir Gawain to a chamber where two swords are hanging and orders Gawain to cut off his head or suffer his own to be cut off . Gawain obliges and strikes , but the Carle rises , laughing and unharmed . Unlike the Gawain poem , no return blow is demanded or given .

= = Themes = =

= = = Temptation and testing = = =

At the heart of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is the test of Gawain 's adherence to the code of chivalry . The typical temptation fable of medieval literature presents a series of tribulations assembled as tests or " proofs " of moral virtue . The stories often describe several individuals ' failures after which the main character is tested . Success in the proofs will often bring immunity or good fortune . Gawain 's ability to pass the tests of his host are of utmost importance to his survival , though he does not know it . It is only by fortuity or " instinctive @-@ courtesy " that Sir Gawain is able to pass his test . There are also hints in the poem that it is really Bertilak who is testing Gawain . ( Fit 67 , Verse 12 ) ( David M. Wright . Memoria Press . Pg.43 )

In addition to the laws of chivalry , Gawain must respect another set of laws concerning courtly love . The knight 's code of honour requires him to do whatever a damsel asks . Gawain must accept the girdle from the Lady , but he must also keep the promise he has made to his host that he will give whatever he gains that day . Gawain chooses to keep the girdle out of fear of death , thus breaking his promise to the host but honouring the lady . Upon learning that the Green Knight is actually his host ( Bertilak ) , he realises that although he has completed his quest , he has failed to be virtuous . This test demonstrates the conflict between honour and knightly duties . In breaking his promise , Gawain believes he has lost his honour and failed in his duties .

= = = Hunting and seduction = = =

Scholars have frequently noted the parallels between the three hunting scenes and the three seduction scenes in Gawain . They are generally agreed that the fox chase has significant parallels to the third seduction scene , in which Gawain accepts the girdle from Bertilak 's wife . Gawain , like the fox , fears for his life and is looking for a way to avoid death from the Green Knight 's axe . Like his counterpart , he resorts to trickery in order to save his skin . The fox uses tactics so unlike the first two animals , and so unexpectedly , that Bertilak has the hardest time hunting it . Similarly , Gawain finds the Lady 's advances in the third seduction scene more unpredictable and challenging to resist than her previous attempts . She changes her evasive language , typical of courtly love relationships , to a more assertive style . Her dress , relatively modest in earlier scenes , is suddenly voluptuous and revealing .

The deer- and boar @-@ hunting scenes are less clearly connected , although scholars have attempted to link each animal to Gawain 's reactions in the parallel seduction scene . Attempts to connect the deer hunt with the first seduction scene have unearthed a few parallels . Deer hunts of the time , like courtship , had to be done according to established rules . Women often favoured suitors who hunted well and skinned their animals , sometimes even watching while a deer was cleaned . The sequence describing the deer hunt is relatively unspecific and nonviolent , with an air of relaxation and exhilaration . The first seduction scene follows in a similar vein , with no overt physical advances and no apparent danger ; the entire exchange is humorously portrayed .

The boar @-@ hunting scene is , in contrast , laden with detail . Boars were ( and are ) much more difficult to hunt than deer ; approaching one with only a sword was akin to challenging a knight to single combat . In the hunting sequence , the boar flees but is cornered before a ravine . He turns to face Bertilak with his back to the ravine , prepared to fight . Bertilak dismounts and in the ensuing fight kills the boar . He removes its head and displays it on a pike . In the seduction scene , Bertilak

's wife , like the boar , is more forward , insisting that Gawain has a romantic reputation and that he must not disappoint her . Gawain , however , is successful in parrying her attacks , saying that surely she knows more than he about love . Both the boar hunt and the seduction scene can be seen as depictions of a moral victory : both Gawain and Bertilak face struggles alone and emerge triumphant .

= = = Nature and chivalry = = =

Some argue that nature represents a chaotic , lawless order which is in direct confrontation with the civilisation of Camelot throughout Sir Gawain and the Green Knight . The green horse and rider that first invade Arthur 's peaceful halls are iconic representations of nature 's disturbance . Nature is presented throughout the poem as rough and indifferent , constantly threatening the order of men and courtly life . Nature invades and disrupts order in the major events of the narrative , both symbolically and through the inner nature of humanity . This element appears first with the disruption caused by the Green Knight , later when Gawain must fight off his natural lust for Bertilak 's wife , and again when Gawain breaks his vow to Bertilak by choosing to keep the green girdle , valuing survival over virtue . Represented by the sin @-@ stained girdle , nature is an underlying force , forever within man and keeping him imperfect ( in a chivalric sense ) . In this view , Gawain is part of a wider conflict between nature and chivalry , an examination of the ability of man 's order to overcome the chaos of nature .

Several critics have made exactly the opposite interpretation , reading the poem as a comic critique of the Christianity of the time , particularly as embodied in the Christian chivalry of Arthur 's court . In its zeal to extirpate all traces of paganism , Christianity had cut itself off from the sources of life in nature and the female . The green girdle represents all the pentangle lacks . The Arthurian enterprise is doomed unless it can acknowledge the unattainability of the ideals of the Round Table , and , for the sake of realism and wholeness , recognize and incorporate the pagan values represented by the Green Knight .

= = = Games = = =

The word gomen ( game ) is found 18 times in Gawain . Its similarity to the word gome ( man ) , which appears 21 times , has led some scholars to see men and games as centrally linked . Games at this time were seen as tests of worthiness , as when the Green Knight challenges the court 's right to its good name in a " Christmas game " . The " game " of exchanging gifts was common in Germanic cultures . If a man received a gift , he was obliged to provide the giver with a better gift or risk losing his honour , almost like an exchange of blows in a fight ( or in a " beheading game " ) . The poem revolves around two games : an exchange of beheading and an exchange of winnings . These appear at first to be unconnected . However , a victory in the first game will lead to a victory in the second . Elements of both games appear in other stories ; however , the linkage of outcomes is unique to Gawain .

= = = Times and seasons = = =

Times , dates , seasons , and cycles within Gawain are often noted by scholars because of their symbolic nature . The story starts on New Year 's Eve with a beheading and culminates on the next New Year 's Day . Gawain leaves Camelot on All Saints Day and arrives at Bertilak 's castle on Christmas Eve . Furthermore , the Green Knight tells Gawain to meet him at the Green Chapel in " a year and a day " ? a period of time seen often in medieval literature . Some scholars interpret the yearly cycles , each beginning and ending in winter , as the poet 's attempt to convey the inevitable fall of all things good and noble in the world . Such a theme is strengthened by the image of Troy , a powerful nation once thought to be invincible which , according to the Aeneid , fell to the Greeks due to pride and ignorance . The Trojan connection shows itself in the presence of two virtually identical descriptions of Troy 's destruction . The poem 's first line reads : " Since the siege and the assault

were ceased at Troy " and the final stanzaic line ( before the bob and wheel ) is " After the siege and the assault were ceased at Troy " .

= = Symbolism = =

= = = Significance of the color green = = =

Given the varied and even contradictory interpretations of the color green , its precise meaning in the poem remains ambiguous . In English folklore and literature , green was traditionally used to symbolise nature and its associated attributes : fertility and rebirth . Stories of the medieval period also used it to allude to love and the base desires of man . Because of its connection with faeries and spirits in early English folklore , green also signified witchcraft , devilry and evil . It can also represent decay and toxicity . When combined with gold , as with the Green Knight and the girdle , green was often seen as representing youth 's passing . In Celtic mythology , green was associated with misfortune and death , and therefore avoided in clothing . The green girdle , originally worn for protection , became a symbol of shame and cowardice ; it is finally adopted as a symbol of honour by the knights of Camelot , signifying a transformation from good to evil and back again ; this displays both the spoiling and regenerative connotations of the color green .

= = = The Green Knight = = =

Scholars have puzzled over the Green Knight 's symbolism since the discovery of the poem . He could be a version of the Green Man , a mythological being connected with nature in medieval art , a Christian symbol , or the Devil himself . British medieval scholar C. S. Lewis said the character was " as vivid and concrete as any image in literature " and J. R. R. Tolkien said he was the " most difficult character " to interpret in Sir Gawain . His major role in Arthurian literature is that of a judge and tester of knights , thus he is at once terrifying , friendly , and mysterious . He appears in only two other poems : The Greene Knight and King Arthur and King Cornwall . Scholars have attempted to connect him to other mythical characters , such as Jack in the green of English tradition and to Al @-@ Khidr , but no definitive connection has yet been established .

However , there is a possibility , as Alice Buchanan has argued , that the colour green is erroneously attributed to the Green Knight due to the poet 's mistranslation or misunderstanding of the Irish word glas , which could either mean grey or green . In the Death of Curoi ( one of the Irish stories from Bricriu 's Feast ) , Curoi stands in for Bercilak , and is often called " the man of the grey mantle " . Though the words usually used for grey in the Death of Curoi are lachtna or odar , roughly meaning milk @-@ coloured and shadowy respectively , in later works featuring a green knight , the word glas is used and may have been the basis of misunderstanding .

= = = Girdle = = =

The girdle 's symbolic meaning , in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight , has been construed in a variety of ways . Interpretations range from sexual in nature to spiritual . Those who argue for the sexual inference view the girdle as a " trophy " . However , it is not entirely clear who the " winner " is : Sir Gawain or Lady Bertilak . The girdle is given to Gawain by Lady Bertilak in order to keep him safe when he confronts the Green Knight . When Lord Bertilak returns home from his hunting trip , Gawain does not reveal the girdle to his host but , instead , hides it . This introduces the spiritual interpretation , that Gawain 's acceptance of the girdle is a sign of his faltering faith in God , at least in the face of death . To some , the Green Knight is Christ , who overcomes death , while Gawain is the Every Christian , who in his struggles to follow Christ faithfully , chooses the easier path . In Sir Gawain , the easier choice is the girdle , which promises what Gawain most desires . Faith in God , alternatively , requires one 's acceptance that what one most desires does not always coincide with what God has planned . It is arguably best to view the girdle not as an either ?

or situation , but as a complex , multi @-@ faceted symbol that acts to test Gawain in more ways than one . While Gawain is able to resist Bertilak ? s wife ? s sexual advances , he is unable to resist the powers of the girdle . Gawain is operating under the laws of chivalry which , evidently , have rules that can contradict each other . In the story of Sir Gawain , Gawain finds himself torn between doing what a damsel asks ( accepting the girdle ) and keeping his promise ( returning anything given to him while his host is away ) .

= = = Pentangle = = =

The pentangle on Gawain 's shield is seen by many critics as signifying Gawain 's perfection and power over evil . The poem contains the only representation of such a symbol on Gawain 's shield in the Gawain literature . What is more , the poet uses a total of 46 lines to describe the meaning of the pentangle ; no other symbol in the poem receives as much attention or is described in such detail . The poem describes the pentangle as a symbol of faithfulness and an " endless knot " . In line 625 , it is described as " a sign by Solomon " . Solomon , the third king of Israel , in the 10th century BC , was said to have the mark of the pentagram on his ring , which he received from the archangel Michael . The pentagram seal on this ring was said to give Solomon power over demons .

Along these lines , some academics link the Gawain pentangle to magical traditions . In Germany , the symbol was called a Drudenfuß and was placed on household objects to keep out evil . The symbol was also associated with magical charms that , if recited or written on a weapon , would call forth magical forces . However , concrete evidence tying the magical pentagram to Gawain 's pentangle is scarce .

Gawain ? s pentangle also symbolises the " phenomenon of physically endless objects signifying a temporally endless quality . " Many poets use the symbol of the circle to show infinity or endlessness , but Gawain ? s poet insisted on using something more complex . In medieval number theory , the number five is considered a " circular number " , since it " reproduces itself in its last digit when raised to its powers " . Furthermore , it replicates itself geometrically ; that is , every pentangle has a smaller pentagon that allows a pentangle to be embedded in it and this " process may be repeated forever with decreasing pentangles " . Thus , by reproducing the number five , which in medieval number symbolism signified incorruptibility , Gawain 's pentangle represents his eternal incorruptibility .

= = = The Lady 's Ring = = =

Gawain 's refusal of the Lady Bertilak 's ring has major implications for the remainder of the story . While the modern student may tend to pay more attention to the girdle as the eminent object offered by the lady , readers in the time of Gawain would have noticed the significance of the offer of the ring as they believed that rings , and especially the embedded gems , had talismanic properties . This is especially true of the lady 's ring as scholars believe it to be a ruby or carbuncle , indicated when the Gawain @-@ Poet describes it as a " brygt sunne " ( line 1819 ) , a " fiery sun . " Given the importance of magic rings in Arthurian romance , this remarkable ring would also have been believed to protect the wearer from harm .

= = = Numbers = = =

The poet highlights number symbolism to add symmetry and meaning to the poem . For example , three kisses are exchanged between Gawain and Bertilak 's wife ; Gawain is tempted by her on three separate days ; Bertilak goes hunting three times , and the Green Knight swings at Gawain three times with his axe . The number two also appears repeatedly , as in the two beheading scenes , two confession scenes , and two castles . The five points of the pentangle , the poet adds , represent Gawain 's virtues , for he is " faithful five ways and five times each " . The poet goes on to list the ways in which Gawain is virtuous : all five of his senses are without fault ; his five fingers never fail him , and he always remembers the five wounds of Christ , as well as the five joys of the

Virgin Mary . The fifth five is Gawain himself , who embodies the five moral virtues of the code of chivalry : " friendship , generosity , chastity , courtesy , and piety " . All of these virtues reside , as the poet says , in the " Endless Knot " of the pentangle , which forever interlinks and is never broken . This intimate relationship between symbol and faith allows for rigorous allegorical interpretation , especially in the physical role that the shield plays in Gawain 's quest . Thus , the poet makes Gawain the epitome of perfection in knighthood through number symbolism .

The number five is also found in the structure of the poem itself . Sir Gawain is 101 stanzas long , traditionally organised into four ' Fits ' of 21 , 24 , 34 , and 22 stanzas . These divisions , however , have since been disputed ; scholars have begun to believe that they are the work of the copyist and not of the poet . The original manuscript features a series of capital letters added after the fact by another scribe , and some scholars argue that these additions were an attempt to restore the original divisions . These letters divide the manuscript into nine parts . The first and last parts are 22 stanzas long . The second and second @-@ to @-@ last parts are only one stanza long , and the middle five parts are eleven stanzas long . The number eleven is associated with transgression in other medieval literature ( being one more than ten , a number associated with the Ten Commandments ) . Thus , this set of five elevens ( 55 stanzas ) creates the perfect mix of transgression and incorruption , suggesting that Gawain is faultless in his faults .

= = = Wounds = = =

At the story 's climax , Gawain is wounded superficially in the neck by the Green Knight 's axe . During the medieval period , the body and the soul were believed to be so intimately connected that wounds were considered an outward sign of inward sin . The neck , specifically , was believed to correlate with the part of the soul related to will , connecting the reasoning part ( the head ) and the courageous part ( the heart ) . Gawain 's sin resulted from using his will to separate reasoning from courage . By accepting the girdle from the lady , he employs reason to do something less than courageous ? evade death in a dishonest way . Gawain 's wound is thus an outward sign of an internal wound . The Green Knight 's series of tests shows Gawain the weakness that has been in him all along : the desire to use his will pridefully for personal gain , rather than submitting his will in humility to God . The Green Knight , by engaging with the greatest knight of Camelot , also reveals the moral weakness of pride in all of Camelot , and therefore all of humanity . However , the wounds of Christ , believed to offer healing to wounded souls and bodies , are mentioned throughout the poem in the hope that this sin of prideful " stiffneckedness " will be healed among fallen mortals .

= = Interpretations = =

= = = Gawain as medieval romance = = =

Many critics argue that Sir Gawain and the Green Knight should be viewed , above all , as a romance . Medieval romances typically recount the marvellous adventures of a chivalrous , heroic knight , often of super @-@ human ability , who abides by chivalry 's strict codes of honour and demeanour , embarks upon a quest and defeats monsters , thereby winning the favour of a lady . Thus , medieval romances focus not on love and sentiment ( as the term " romance " implies today ) , but on adventure .

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

In viewing the poem as a chivalric romance , many scholars see it as intertwining chivalric and



courtly love laws under the English Order of the Garter . The group 's motto , ' honi soit qui mal y pense ' , or " Shamed be he who finds evil here , " is written at the end of the poem . Some critics describe Gawain 's peers wearing girdles of their own as evidence of the origin of the Order of the Garter . However , in the parallel poem The Greene Knight , the lace is white , not green , and is considered the origin of the collar worn by the knights of the Bath , not the Order of the Garter . The motto on the poem was probably written by a copyist and not by the original author . Still , the connection made by the copyist to the Order is not extraordinary .

= = = Christian interpretations = = =

The poem is in many ways deeply Christian , with frequent references to the fall of Adam and Eve and to Jesus Christ . Scholars have debated the depth of the Christian elements within the poem by looking at it in the context of the age in which it was written , coming up with varying views as to what represents a Christian element of the poem and what does not . For example , some critics compare Sir Gawain to the other three poems of the Gawain manuscript . Each has a heavily Christian theme , causing scholars to interpret Gawain similarly . Comparing it to the poem Cleanness ( also known as Purity ) , for example , they see it as a story of the apocalyptic fall of a civilisation , in Gawain 's case , Camelot . In this interpretation , Sir Gawain is like Noah , separated from his society and warned by the Green Knight ( who is seen as God 's representative ) of the coming doom of Camelot . Gawain , judged worthy through his test , is spared the doom of the rest of Camelot . King Arthur and his knights , however , misunderstand Gawain 's experience and wear garters themselves . In Cleanness the men who are saved are similarly helpless in warning their society of impending destruction .

One of the key points stressed in this interpretation is that salvation is an individual experience difficult to communicate to outsiders . In his depiction of Camelot , the poet reveals a concern for his society , whose inevitable fall will bring about the ultimate destruction intended by God . Gawain was written around the time of the Black Death and Peasants ' Revolt , events which convinced many people that their world was coming to an apocalyptic end and this belief was reflected in literature and culture . However , other critics see weaknesses in this view , since the Green Knight is ultimately under the control of Morgan le Fay , usually viewed as a figure of evil in Camelot tales . This makes the knight 's presence as a representative of God problematic .

While the character of the Green Knight is usually not viewed as a representation of Christ in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight , critics do acknowledge a parallel . Lawrence Besserman , a specialist in medieval literature , explains that " the Green Knight is not a figurative representative of Christ . But the idea of Christ 's divine / human nature provides a medieval conceptual framework that supports the poet 's serious / comic account of the Green Knight 's supernatural / human qualities and actions . " This duality exemplifies the influence and importance of Christian teachings and views of Christ in the era of the Gawain Poet .

Furthermore , critics note the Christian reference to Christ 's crown of thorns at the conclusion of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight . After Gawain returns to Camelot and tells his story regarding the newly acquired green sash , the poem concludes with a brief prayer and a reference to " the thorn @-@ crowned God " . Besserman theorises that " with these final words the poet redirects our attention from the circular girdle @-@ turned @-@ sash ( a double image of Gawain 's " yntrawpe / renoun " ) to the circular Crown of Thorns ( a double image of Christ 's humiliation turned triumph ) . "

Throughout the poem , Gawain encounters numerous trials testing his devotion and faith in Christianity . When Gawain sets out on his journey to find the Green Chapel , he finds himself lost , and only after praying to the Virgin Mary does he find his way . As he continues his journey , Gawain once again faces anguish regarding his inevitable encounter with the Green Knight . Instead of praying to Mary , as before , Gawain places his faith in the girdle given to him by Bertilak 's wife . From the Christian perspective , this leads to disastrous and embarrassing consequences for Gawain as he is forced to reevaluate his faith when the Green Knight points out his betrayal . Another interpretation sees the work in terms of the perfection of virtue , with the pentangle

representing the moral perfection of the connected virtues , the Green Knight as Christ exhibiting perfect fortitude , and Gawain as slightly imperfect in fortitude by virtue of flinching when under the threat of death .

An analogy is also made between Gawain 's trial and the Biblical test that Adam encounters in the Garden of Eden . Adam succumbs to Eve just as Gawain surrenders to Bertilak 's wife by accepting the girdle . Although Gawain sins by putting his faith in the girdle and not confessing when he is caught , the Green Knight pardons him , thereby allowing him to become a better Christian by learning from his mistakes . Through the various games played and hardships endured , Gawain finds his place within the Christian world .

= = = Feminist interpretations = = =

Feminist literary critics see the poem as portraying women 's ultimate power over men . Morgan le Fay and Bertilak 's wife , for example , are the most powerful characters in the poem ? Morgan especially , as she begins the game by enchanting the Green Knight . The girdle and Gawain 's scar can be seen as symbols of feminine power , each of them diminishing Gawain 's masculinity . Gawain 's misogynist passage , in which he blames all of his troubles on women and lists the many men who have fallen prey to women 's wiles , further supports the feminist view of ultimate female power in the poem .

In contrast , others argue that the poem focuses mostly on the opinions , actions , and abilities of men . For example , on the surface , it appears that Bertilak 's wife is a strong leading character . By adopting the masculine role , she appears to be an empowered individual , particularly in the bedroom scene . This is not entirely the case , however . While the Lady is being forward and outgoing , Gawain 's feelings and emotions are the focus of the story , and Gawain stands to gain or lose the most . The Lady " makes the first move " , so to speak , but Gawain ultimately decides what is to become of those actions . He , therefore , is in charge of the situation and even the relationship .

In the bedroom scene , both the negative and positive actions of the Lady are motivated by her desire . Her feelings cause her to step out of the typical female role and into that of the male , thus becoming more empowered . At the same time , those same actions make the Lady appear adulterous ; some scholars compare her with Eve in the Bible . By forcing Gawain to take her girdle , i.e. the apple , the pact made with Bertilak ? and therefore the Green Knight ? is broken . In this sense , it is clear that at the hands of the Lady , Gawain is a " good man seduced " .

= = = Postcolonial interpretations = = =

From 1350 to 1400 ? the period in which the poem is thought to have been written ? Wales experienced several raids at the hands of the English , who were attempting to colonise the area . The Gawain poet uses a North West Midlands dialect common on the Welsh ? English border , potentially placing him in the midst of this conflict . Patricia Clare Ingham is credited with first viewing the poem through the lens of postcolonialism , and since then a great deal of dispute has emerged over the extent to which colonial differences play a role in the poem . Most critics agree that gender plays a role , but differ about whether gender supports the colonial ideals or replaces them as English and Welsh cultures interact in the poem .

A large amount of critical debate also surrounds the poem as it relates to the bi @-@ cultural political landscape of the time . Some argue that Bertilak is an example of the hybrid Anglo @-@ Welsh culture found on the Welsh ? English border . They therefore view the poem as a reflection of a hybrid culture that plays strong cultures off one another to create a new set of cultural rules and traditions . Other scholars , however , argue that historically much Welsh blood was shed well into the 14th century , creating a situation far removed from the more friendly hybridisation suggested by Ingham . To support this argument further , it is suggested that the poem creates an " us versus them " scenario contrasting the knowledgeable civilised English with the uncivilised borderlands that are home to Bertilak and the other monsters that Gawain encounters .

In contrast to this perception of the colonial lands , others argue that the land of Hautdesert , Bertilak 's territory , has been misrepresented or ignored in modern criticism . They suggest that it is a land with its own moral agency , one that plays a central role in the story . Bonnie Lander , for example , argues that the denizens of Hautdesert are " intelligently immoral " , choosing to follow certain codes and rejecting others , a position which creates a " distinction ? of moral insight versus moral faith " . Lander thinks that the border dwellers are more sophisticated because they do not unthinkingly embrace the chivalric codes but challenge them in a philosophical , and ? in the case of Bertilak 's appearance at Arthur ? s court ? literal sense . Lander ? s argument about the superiority of the denizens of Hautdesert hinges on the lack of self @-@ awareness present in Camelot , which leads to an unthinking populace that frowns on individualism . In this view , it is not Bertilak and his people , but Arthur and his court , who are the monsters .

= = = Gawain 's journey = = =

Several scholars have attempted to find a real @-@ world correspondence for Gawain 's journey to the Green Chapel . The Anglesey islands , for example , are mentioned in the poem . They exist today as a single island off the coast of Wales . In line 700 , Gawain is said to pass the " Holy Head " , believed by many scholars to be either Holywell or the Cistercian abbey of Poulton in Pulford . Holywell is associated with the beheading of Saint Winifred . As the story goes , Winifred was a virgin who was beheaded by a local leader after she refused his sexual advances . Her uncle , another saint , put her head back in place and healed the wound , leaving only a white scar . The parallels between this story and Gawain 's make this area a likely candidate for the journey .

Gawain 's trek leads him directly into the centre of the Pearl Poet 's dialect region , where the candidates for the locations of the Castle at Hautdesert and the Green Chapel stand . Hautdesert is thought to be in the area of Swythamley in northwest Midland , as it lies in the writer 's dialect area and matches the topographical features described in the poem . The area is also known to have housed all of the animals hunted by Bertilak ( deer , boar , fox ) in the 14th century . The Green Chapel is thought to be in either Lud 's Church or Wetton Mill , as these areas closely match the descriptions given by the author . Ralph Elliott located the chapel ( " two myle henne " v1078 ) from the old manor house at Swythamley Park at the bottom of a valley ( " bothm of the brem valay " v2145 ) on a hillside ( " loke a littel on the launde , on thi lyfte honde " v2147 ) in an enormous fissure ( " an olde caue , / or a creuisse of an olde cragge " v2182 @-@ 83 ) .

= = = Homoerotic interpretations = = =

According to medieval scholar Richard Zeikowitz , the Green Knight represents a threat to homosocial friendship in his medieval world . Zeikowitz argues that the narrator of the poem seems entranced by the Knight 's beauty , homoeroticising him in poetic form . The Green Knight 's attractiveness challenges the homosocial rules of King Arthur 's court and poses a threat to their way of life . Zeikowitz also states that Gawain seems to find Bertilak as attractive as the narrator finds the Green Knight . Bertilak , however , follows the homosocial code and develops a friendship with Gawain . Gawain 's embracing and kissing Bertilak in several scenes thus represents not a homosexual but a homosocial expression . Men of the time often embraced and kissed and this was acceptable under the chivalric code . Nonetheless , the Green Knight blurs the lines between homosociality and homosexuality , representing the difficulty medieval writers sometimes had in separating the two .

Carolyn Dinshaw argues that the poem may have been a response to accusations that Richard II had a male lover ? an attempt to reestablish the idea that heterosexuality was the Christian norm . Around the time the poem was written , the Catholic Church was beginning to express concerns about kissing between males . Many religious figures were trying to make the distinction between strong trust and friendship between males and homosexuality . Still , the Pearl Poet seems to have been simultaneously entranced and repulsed by homosexual desire . In his other poem *Cleanness* , he points out several grievous sins , but spends lengthy passages describing them in minute detail .

His obsession seems to carry into Gawain in his descriptions of the Green Knight .

Beyond this , Dinshaw proposes that Gawain can be read as a woman @-@ like figure . He is the passive one in the advances of Lady Bertilak , as well as in his encounters with Lord Bertilak , where he acts the part of a woman in kissing the man . However , while the poem does have homosexual elements , these elements are brought up by the poet in order to establish heterosexuality as the normal lifestyle of Gawain 's world . The poem does this by making the kisses between Lady Bertilak and Gawain sexual in nature , but rendering the kisses between Gawain and Lord Bertilak " unintelligible " to the medieval reader . In other words , the poet portrays kisses between a man and a woman as having the possibility of leading to sex , while in a heterosexual world kisses between a man and a man are portrayed as having no such possibility .

= = Modern adaptations = =

= = = Books = = =

Though the surviving manuscript dates from the fourteenth century , the first published version of the poem did not appear until as late as 1839 , when Sir Frederic Madden of the British Museum recognized the poem as worth reading . Madden 's scholarly , Middle English edition of the poem was followed in 1898 by the first Modern English translation ? a prose version by literary scholar Jessie L. Weston . In 1925 , J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon published a scholarly edition of the Middle English text of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight ; a revised edition of this text was prepared by Norman Davis and published in 1967 . The book , featuring a text in Middle English with extensive scholarly notes , is frequently confused with the translation into Modern English that Tolkien prepared , along with translations of Pearl and Sir Orfeo , late in his life . Many editions of the latter work , first published in 1975 , shortly after his death , list Tolkien on the cover as author rather than translator .

For students , especially undergraduate students , the text is usually given in translation . Notable translators include Jessie Weston , whose 1898 prose translation and 1907 poetic translation took many liberties with the original ; Theodore Banks , whose 1929 translation was praised for its adaptation of the language to modern usage ; and Marie Borroff , whose imitative translation was first published in 1967 and " entered the academic canon " in 1968 , in the second edition of the Norton Anthology of English Literature . In 2010 , her ( slightly revised ) translation was published as a Norton Critical Edition , with a foreword by Laura Howes . In 2007 , Simon Armitage , who grew up near the Gawain poet 's purported residence , published a translation which attracted attention in the US and the United Kingdom , and was published in the United States by Norton , which replaced Borroff 's translation with Armitage 's for the ninth edition of the Norton Anthology of English Literature . Other modern translations include those by Larry Benson , Brian Stone , James Winny , Helen Cooper , W. S. Merwin , Jacob Rosenberg , William Vantuono , Joseph Glaser , Bernard O 'Donoghue , John Gardner , and Francis Ingledew .

= = = Film and television = = =

The poem has been adapted to film twice , on both occasions by writer @-@ director Stephen Weeks : first as Gawain and the Green Knight in 1973 and again in 1984 as Sword of the Valiant : The Legend of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight , featuring Miles O 'Keeffe as Gawain and Sean Connery as the Green Knight . Both films have been criticised for deviating from the plot . Gawain , for example , has an adventure in the 1973 version which is not a part of the poem between the time he leaves Camelot and the time he arrives at Bertilak 's castle , in which he travels through New Earth to find his parents . Also , Bertilak and the Green Knight are never connected . French / Australian director Martin Beilby directed a short ( 30 ' ) film adaptation in 2014 . There have been at least two television adaptations , Gawain and the Green Knight in 1991 and the animated Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in 2002 . The BBC broadcast a documentary presented by Simon

Armitage in which the journey depicted in the poem is traced , utilising what are believed to be the actual locations .

= = = Theatre = = =

The Tyneside Theatre company presented a stage version of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight at the University Theatre , Newcastle at Christmas 1971 . It was directed by Michael Bogdanov and adapted for the stage from the translation by Brian Stone . The music and lyrics were composed by Iwan Williams using medieval carols , such as the Boar 's Head Carol , as inspiration and folk instruments such as the Northumbrian pipes , whistles and bodhran to create a " rough " feel . Stone had referred Bogdanov to Cuchulain and the Beheading Game , a sequence which is contained in The Grenoside Sword dance . Bogdanov found the pentangle theme to be contained in most sword dances , and so incorporated a long sword dance while Gawain lay tossing uneasily before getting up to go to the Green Chapel . The dancers made the knot of the pentangle around his drowsing head with their swords . The interlacing of the hunting and wooing scenes was achieved by frequent cutting of the action from hunt to bed @-@ chamber and back again , while the locale of both remained on @-@ stage .

In 1992 Simon Corble created an adaptation with medieval songs and music for The Midsommer Actors ' Company. performed as walkabout productions in the summer 1992 at Thurstaston Common and Beeston Castle and in August 1995 at Brimham Rocks , North Yorkshire . Corble later wrote a substantially revised version which was produced indoors at the O 'Reilly Theatre , Oxford in February 2014 .

= = = Opera = = =

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight was first adapted as an opera in 1978 by the composer Richard Blackford on commission from the village of Blewbury , Oxfordshire . The libretto was written for the adaptation by the children 's novelist John Emlyn Edwards . The " Opera in Six Scenes " was subsequently recorded by Decca between March and June 1979 and released on the Argo label in November 1979 .

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight was adapted into an opera called Gawain by Harrison Birtwistle , first performed in 1991 . Birtwistle 's opera was praised for maintaining the complexity of the poem while translating it into lyric , musical form . Another operatic adaptation is Lynne Plowman 's Gwyneth and the Green Knight , first performed in 2002 . This opera uses Sir Gawain as the backdrop but refocuses the story on Gawain 's female squire , Gwyneth , who is trying to become a knight . Plowman 's version was praised for its approachability , as its target is the family audience and young children , but criticised for its use of modern language and occasional preachy nature .