

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Ca. 1375-1400)¹

- A General Introduction
 - Author
 - Alliterative Revival
 - Language

¹ Greenblatt, Stephen, et al., eds. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 8th ed. New York: Norton, 2006.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

- Genre: romance
- Romance & Epic
- Elements of History in Medieval Romance

Lines 1-7, Part 1

Since the siege and the assault was ceased at Troy,
The walls breached and burnt down to brands and ashes,
The knight that had knotted the nets of deceit
Was impeached for his perfidy, proven most true,
It was high-born Aeneas and his haughty race
That since prevailed over provinces, and proudly reigned
Over well-nigh all the wealth of the West Isles.

Lines 8-15, Part 1

Great Romulus to Rome repairs in haste:

With boast and with bravery builds he that city

And names it with his own name, that it now bears.

Ticius to Tuscany, and towers raises Langobard in Lombardy
lays out homes,

And far over the French Sea, Felix Brutus

On many broad hills and high Britain he sets,

most fair.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Question 1.

- Why does the Gawain poet relate the beginning of Britain to Troy?

Lines 25-32, Part 1

... of British kings,
King Arthur was counted most courteous of all,
Wherefore an adventure I aim to unfold,
That a marvel of might some men think it,
And one unmatched among Arthur's wonders.
If you will listen to my lay but a little while,
As I heard it in hall, I shall hasten to tell
anew.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Question 2.

- The evidence of the oral tradition is obvious here. In your opinion, why does the Gawain poet pretend that this romance is an oral poem?

Lines 37-40, Part 1

This king lay at Camelot at Christmastide;
Many good knights and gay his guests were there,
Arrayed of the Round Table rightful brothers,
With feasting and fellowship and carefree mirth.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Question 3.

- What do you know about King Arthur? In which way does your picture of him fit or does not fit that of a good **Christian** king? Also, in your opinion, what ought a good Christian king to be like?

Lines 85-93, Part 1

But Arthur would not eat till all were served;
So light was his lordly hearts, and a little boyish;
His life he liked lively—the less he cared
To be lying for long, or long to sit,
So busy his young blood, his brain so wild.
And also a point of pride pricked him in heart,
For he nobly had willed, he would never eat
On so high a holiday, till he had heard first
Of some fair feat or fray some far-bourne tale,

Lines 109-111, Part 1

There Gawain the good knight by Guenevere sits,
With Agravain á la dure main on his other side,
Both knights of renown, and nephews of the king.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Question 4.

- Can you tell us something about Gawain, Guenevere, and Agravain?

Lines 133-151, Part 1

For scarce were the sweet strains still in the hall,
And the first course come to that company fair,
There hurtles in at the hall-door an unknown rider,
One the greatest on ground in growth of his frame:
From broad neck to buttocks so bulky and thick,
And his loins and his legs so long and so great,
Half a giant on earth I hold him to be,
But believe him no less than the largest of men,
And that the seemliest in his stature to see, as he rides,
For in back and in breast though his body was grim,
His waist in its width was worthily small,
And formed with every feature in fair accord
was he.

Great wonder grew in hall

At his hue most strange to see.

For man and gear and all

Were green as green could be.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Question 5.

- What does the green knight's appearance signify, in your opinion? Why?

Lines 279-300, Part 1

“Nay, to fight, in good faith, is far from my thought;
There are about on these benches but beardless children,

And so I call in this court for a Christmas game,

If any in this house such hardihood claims,
Be so bold in his blood, his brain so wild,
As stoutly to strike one stroke for another,
I shall give him as my gift this gisarme noble,

And I shall bide the first blow, as bare as I sit,

In a twelvemonth and a day
He shall have of me the same;
Now be it seen straight way
Who dares take up the game.”

Lines 314-322, Part 1

With this he laughs so loud that the lord grieved:
The blood for sheer shame shot to his face,
And pride.

With rage his face flushed red,
Then the king as bold man bred
Toward the stranger took a stride.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Question 6.

- So Arthur goes forth to take the bet. Is he foolish? What ought he to do instead?

Lines 339-342, Part 1

Gawain by Guenevere

Toward the king doth now incline:

“I beseech, before all here,

That this melee may be mine.”

Lines 417-452, Part 1

Gawain cuts off the knight's head, and the green knight
picks up his own head.

For the head in his hand he holds right up:

Toward the first on the dais directs he the face,

And it lifted up its lids, and looked with wide eyes, and
said as much with its mouth as now you may hear:

“Sir Gawain, forget now to go as agreed,

To the Green Chapel come, I charge you, to Take care,
Such a dint as you have dealt

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Question 7.

- Is it a virtue not to eat one's words?
Ought Gawain to keep his word, in your opinion?

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Question 8.

- To understand a literary work, one ought to grasp its historical background. Can you help us with more information on the historical background of this romance?

Lines 566-589, Part 2

He dwelt there all that day, and dressed in the morning;
Asked early for his arms, and all were brought.

First a carpet of rare cost was cast on the
floor

Where much goodly gear gleamed golden
bright;

He takes his place promptly and picks up the steel,
Attired in a tight coat of Turkestan silk
And a kingly

The broadsword at his side.

Lines 619-630, 641-654, Part 2

Then they showed forth the shield, that shone all red,
With the pentangle portrayed in purest gold

It is a sign by Solomon sagely devised
To be a token of truth, by its title of old,
For it is a figure formed of five points,
And each line is linked and locked with the next
For ever and ever, and hence it is called
In all England, as I hear, the endless knot.

And first, he was faultless in his five senses,
Nor found ever to fail in his five fingers,
And all his fealty was fixed upon the five wounds
That Christ got on the cross, as the creed tells;

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Question 9.

- It seems that Gawain's shield with the pentangle will play some role when he later undertakes test at the Green Knight's place. What role might the pentangle play?

Lines 674-683, Part 2

“Ill fortune it is
That you, man, must be marred, that most are worthy!
His equal on this earth can hardly be found;
To have dealt more discreetly had done less harm,
And have dubbed him a duke, with all due honor.
A great leader of lords he was like to become,
And better so to have been than battered to bits,
Beheaded by an elf-man, for empty pride!
Who would credit that a king could be counseled so,
And caught in a cavil in a Christmas game?”

Lines 753-764, Part 2

And therefore sighing he said, “I beseech of Thee, Lord,
And Mary, thou mildest mother so dear,
Some harborage where haply I might hear mass
And Thy matins tomorrow—meekly I ask it

He crosses himself, and cries
On Christ in his great need.

No sooner had Sir Gawain signed himself thrice
Than he was ware, in the wood, of a wondrous dwelling

Lines 1105-1111, Part 2

“And Gawain,” said the good host, “agree now to this:
Whatever I win in the woods I will give you at eve,
And all you have earned you must offer to me:
Swear now, sweet friend, to swap as I say,
Whether hands, in the end, be empty or better.”
“By God,” said Sir Gawain, “I grant it forthwith!

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Question 10.

- Do you see any parallel between Gawain and King Arthur?

So the lord in the linden-wood leads the hunt
And Gawain the good knight in gay bed lies,
Lingered late alone, till daylight gleamed,
Under coverlet costly, curtained about.
And as he slips into slumber, slyly there comes
A little din at his door, and the latch lifted,
And he holds up his heavy head out of the clothes;
A corner of the curtain he caught back a little
And waited there warily, to see what befell.
Lo! It was the lady, loveliest to behold,
That drew the door behind her deftly and still
And was bound for his bed—abashed was the knight,
And laid his head low again in likeness of sleep;
And she stepped stealthily, and stole to his bed,
Cast aside the curtain and came within,
And set herself softly on the bedside there,
And lingered at her leisure, to look on his waking.
The fair knight lay feigning for a long while,
Conning in his conscience what his case might
Mean or amount to—a marvel he thought it.

Lines 1178-97, Part 3

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Question 11.

- While the lord of the castle is hunting a deer, Gawain is hunted by the lord's lady. In which way is Gawain like a deer?

Lines 1121-1130, Part 3

I should quit this couch and accouter me better,
And be clad in more comfort for converse here.”
“Nay, not so, sweet sir,” said the smiling lady;
“You shall not rise from your bed; I direct you better:
I shall hem and hold you on either hand,
And keep company awhile with my captive knight.
For as certain as I sit here, Sir Gawain you are,
Whom all the world worships, whereso you ride:
Your honor, your courtesy are highest acclaimed
By lords and by ladies, by all living men;
And lo! We are alone here, and left to ourselves

Lines 1296-1304, Part 3

But she held up her hand, and made answer thus:

“So good a knight as Gawain is given out to be,
And the model of fair demeanor and manners pure,
Had he lain so long at a lady’s side,
Would have claimed a kiss, by his courtesy,
Through some touch or trick of phrase at some tale’s
end.”

Said Gawain, “Good lady, I grant it at once!

I shall kiss at your command, as becomes a knight,
And more, lest you mislike, so let be, I pray.”

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Question 12.

- Can you explain how the lady tries to seduce Gawain the first day?

Lines 1379-1389, Part 3

“What think you, sir, of this? Have I thriven well?

“In good earnest,” said Gawain, “this game is the finest
I have seen in seven years in the season of winter.”

“And I give it to you, Gawain,” said the godly host,

“For according to our covenant, you claim it as your own.”

“That is so,” said Sir Gawain, “the same say I:

What I worthily have won within these fair walls,
Herewith I as willingly award it to you.”

He embraces his broad neck with both his arms,
And confers on him a kiss in the comeliest style.

Lines 1476-1534, Part 3

She comes to the curtain and coyly peeps in;
Gawain thought it good to greet her at once,
And she richly repays him with her ready words,
Settles softly at his side, and suddenly she laughs,
And with a gracious glance, she begins on him thus:
“Sir, if you be Gawain, it seems a great wonder—
A man so well-meaning, and mannerly disposed,
And cannot act in company as courtesy bids

-

(next page)

Lines 1476-1534, Part 3

And here by your side I have sat for two days
Yet never has a fair phrase fallen from your lips
Of the language of love, not one little word!
And you, that with sweet vows sway women's hearts,
Should show your winsome ways, and woo a young thing,
And teach by some tokens the craft of true love.
How! Are you artless, whom all men praise?
Or do you deem me so dull, or deaf to such words?

Fie! Fie!

In hope of pastimes new
I have come where none can spy:
Instruct me a little, do,
While my husband is not nearby.”

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Question 13.

- The second day the lord of the castle gets a boar. Can you see in which way Gawain is like a boar? Also, how does the lady seduce Gawain the second day?

Lines 1750-58, 1776-78 Part 3

Deep in his dreams he darkly mutters
As a man may that mourns, with many grim thoughts
Of that day when destiny shall deal him his doom
When he greets his grim host at the Green Chapel
And must bow to his buffet, bating all strife.
But when he sees her at his side he summons his wits,
Breaks from the black dreams, and blithely answers.
That lovely lady comes laughing sweet,
Sinks down at his side, and salutes him with a kiss.

“God forbid!” said the bold knight. “That shall not befall!”
With a little fond laughter he lightly let pass
All the words of special weight that were sped his way;

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Question 14.

- The third day the lord of the castle gets a fox. Now in which way Gawain is like a fox?

Lines 1779-1854, Part 3

“I find you much at fault,” the fair one said,

“Who can be cold toward a creature so close by your side

-

Unless you have a sweetheart, one you hold dearer,

And allegiance to that lady so loyally knit

-

Kiss me now kingly: I can but go hence

To lament my life long like a maid lovelorn.”

She inclines her head quickly and kisses the knight,

Then straightens with a sign, and says as she stands

Lines 1779-1854, Part 3

“Now does my present displease you,” she promptly inquired,
“Because it seems in your sight so simple a thing?
And belike, as it is little, it is less to praise,
But if the virtue that invests it were verily known,
It would be held, I hope, in higher esteem.
For the man that possesses this piece of silk,
If he bore it on his body, belted about,
There is no hand under heaven that could hew him down,
For he could not be killed by any craft on earth.”

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Question 15.

- On the third day the lady continues her attack. Can you analyze her strategy?

Lines 2143-50, 2170-74, Part 3

“Marry,” said the man, “since you tell me so much,
And I see you are set to seek your own harm,
If you crave a quick death, let me keep you no longer

And you will soon see before you that self-same Chapel

For all the world’s wealth I would not stay here

But no such place appeared, which puzzled him sore,
Yet he saw some way off what seemed like a mound,
A hillock high and broad, hard by the water,
Where the stream fell in foam down the face of the steep
And bubbled as if it boiled on its bed below.

Lines 2190-2205, Part 3

This prayer-house is hideous, half-covered with grass!
Well may the grim man mantled in green
Hold here his orisons, in hell's own style!
Now I feel it is the Fiend, in my five wits,
That has tempted me to this tryst, to take my life;
This is a Chapel of mischance, may the mischief take it!
As accursed a country church as I came upon ever!"
With his helm on his head, his lance in his hand,
He stalks toward the steep wall of that strange house.
Then he heard, on the hill, behind a hard rock,
Beyond the brook, from the bank, a most barbarous din:
Lord! it clattered in the cliff fit to cleave it in two,
As one upon a grindstone ground a great scythe!
Lord! it whirred like a mill-wheel whirling about!
Lord! it echoed loud and long, lamentable to hear!

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Question 16.

- The description of the Green Chapel seems terrifying and pagan. In your opinion, what is the function of this part?

Lines 2259-2269, Part 3

Then the grim man in green gathers his strength,
Heaves high the heavy ax to hit him the blow.
With all the force in his frame he fetches it aloft,
With a grimace as grim as he would grind him to bits;
Had the blow he bestowed been as big as he threatened,
A good knight and gallant had gone to his grave.
But Gawain at the great ax glanced up aside,
As down it descended with death-dealing force,
And his shoulders shrank a little from the sharp iron.
Abruptly the brawny man breaks off the stroke,
And then reproved with proud words that prince among knights.

Lines 2358-2363, Part 3

“For that is my belt about you, that same braided girdle,
My wife it was that wore it; I know well the tale,
And the count of your kisses and your conduct too,
And the wooing of my wife—it was all my scheme!
She made trial of a man most faultless by far
Of all that ever walked over the wide earth;

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Question 17.

- In a Christian context, what could be the moral of Gawain's failure?

Lines 2429-2437, Part 3

“But your girdle, God love you! I gladly shall take
And be pleased to possess, not for the pure gold,
Nor the bright belt itself, nor the beauteous pendants,
Nor for wealth, nor worldly state, nor workmanship fine,
But a sign of excess it shall seem oftentimes
When I ride in renown, and remember with shame
The faults and the frailty of the flesh perverse,
How its tenderness entices the foul taint of sin;
And so when praise and high prowess have pleased my heart,
A look at this love-lace will lower my pride.

Lines 2444-2458, Part 3

“That shall I give you gladly,” said the Green Knight then;

“Bertilak de Hortdesert, this barony I hold.

Through the might of Morgan le Faye, that lodges at my house,

By subtleties of science and sorcerers’ arts,

The mistress of Merlin, she has caught many a man,

For sweet love in secret she shared sometime

With that wizard, that knows well each one of your knights

And you.

“She guided me in this guise to your glorious hall,

To assay, if such it were, the surfeit of pride

That is rumored of the retinue of the Round Table.

Lines 2513-2518, Part 3

The king comforts the knight, and the court all together
Agree with gay laughter and gracious intent
That the lords and the ladies belonging to the Table,
Each brother of that band, a baldric should have,
A belt borne oblique, of a bright green,
To be worn with one accord for that worthy's sake.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Question 18.

- Some critics claim that Arthur has not learned from Gawain's lesson. If it is so, what can the Gawain poet's purpose be?