

# **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Book Notes**

## **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight**

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## Author/Context

The author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an anonymous genius. Though several academics have made guesses as to the poet's identity since the poem's rediscovery in 1839, no concrete evidence of the man's identity has ever been uncovered. A few things are clear: the man knew French and French poetry well, lived in or came from a northwest English province, and placed great import on his Christianity and his knowledge thereof. Heralded as one of the great medieval English masterworks, equal in many respects to the works of Chaucer, *Gawain* was written in a particularly difficult and opaque northern dialect of English, the exact nature of which is still unknown and indecipherable. While Chaucer's work was done in a London dialect of English that was the direct antecedent of modern English, thus making him a famous partly because of his accessibility to readers then and now, the *Gawain*-poet's dialect died out, and faded into obscurity for several centuries. Only one manuscript of *Gawain* has survived to modern times, and it is a typical hand-written and error-riddled product of a medieval scriptorium, the "corrections" for which have been generally agreed upon by scholars. Although all attempts to pinpoint a date are mostly speculation, evidence from the handwriting points to a manuscript date between 1350 and 1400, placing the *Gawain*-poet as a direct contemporary of Chaucer's. The surviving manuscript includes three other poems, including *The Pearl*, over which scholars still debate whether or not to assign authorship to the *Gawain*-poet.

Stylistically, *Gawain* is part of the movement termed the "Alliterative Revival," because it marked a period in English literature that hearkened back to the poetic style of the great Old-English works, including *Beowulf*. Once the French conquered England in 1066, the Old-English poetic style (and even the use of the English language for literature) was phased out (or went underground) in favor of French language and French poetic style. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, however, the English language had regained enough favor to come back into literary use, a move that *Gawain* represents. *Gawain* is written so that each line is set up around matched series of alliterations - a poetic form particularly suited for accompaniment on an instrument, particularly stringed instruments. In addition, *Gawain* takes on a larger form that is different from the traditional English form through the centuries, that of iambic tetrameter and A A B B rhyme schemes. *Gawain* is written in a newer form for the time, known as the "bob and wheel," in which each strophe of verse ends with a five line rhymed tag, which is also alliterative in its structure.

Although freely interpreted in its choice of detail, the substance of its characters in *Gawain* follow in a long tradition borne of the Celtic myths of great antiquity, out of which the Arthurian tradition sprouted. Literary evidence for Arthurian legend goes back to poetry from Welsh sources, the earliest dating back to 600AD.

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## Plot Summary

It is Christmas time in Camelot, and King Arthur and his court are in the midst of a fifteen-day celebration. Arthur is a young king, and refuses to sit down and eat until something amazing has happened. All of a sudden, the door to the hall bursts open and an enormous Green Knight rides in on his horse. He does not mean harm, for he is not wearing armor, but he is carrying a huge steel battle-axe in his hand. The Green Knight dismounts and challenges the court to a "Christmas sport." He declares that one knight in Arthur's court must agree to accept one blow of his axe, after having the chance to give one to the Green Knight. None of Arthur's knights volunteer, and the Green Knight taunts the court until Arthur himself volunteers. As Arthur readies himself to cut through the Green Knight's neck, Sir Gawain, another of Arthur's knights, volunteers in his stead. Gawain takes up the axe, and at his bidding chops off the Green Knight's head. The headless knight then stands up, retrieves his head, and mounts his horse. Turning the severed head toward the court, the headless man declares that Gawain must agree to accept the axe-blow from him in exactly one year, but also that Gawain must seek the Green Knight at his home at the green chapel, although he will not tell Gawain where it is located.

A year passes quickly, and soon Gawain remembers his pledge to the Green Knight. He readies his horse and his armor and rides off to find the green chapel. After much fruitless searching and bitter-cold nights alone, Gawain finally reaches a castle, where he is taken in warmly by the resident lord. He is introduced to the lord's wife and another old woman of the lord's house. Gawain spends several days making merry in the lord's house, and finally asks the lord if he knows the whereabouts of the green chapel, where the Green Knight resides. The lord says he knows it well and it is not far; Gawain should stay for longer and rest. In addition, he proposes a game between Gawain and himself: Gawain is to stay in the castle and rest, while the lord goes out hunting with his hounds and men. At the end of the day, each man is to make a gift of what they won that day to the other, whatever it happens to be. Gawain agrees, and the two men go to bed.

On the first day, the lord rises before dawn with his men and his hounds and goes deer hunting. All day they shoot down deer with their arrows, and by sunset they have an enormous pile of venison. Gawain, for his part, is visited by the lord's wife, with whom he had been exchanging courteous words for the previous few days. She keeps him in bed by not leaving his room so that he can dress--they talk all morning, exchanging courtly language back and forth. At the end of the morning she kisses him and then leaves. Gawain dresses, then spends the day with her and the old lady. At the end of the day, the lord gives Gawain the gift of venison, and Gawain gives the lord his kiss, although he neglects to tell the lord that it is from the lord's wife.

On the second day, the lord and his men chase a huge wild boar all day long. Finally, after it evades them all day and kills several men and dogs, the lord has a showdown with the beast in a river. He kills it by plunging his sword into its heart through its throat; the boar's head is put on a stake and paraded home as a gift for Gawain. Gawain is visited by the lord's wife again; they exchange courtly words again all morning, Gawain



parries her ever more forward advances. She ends up kissing Gawain twice before leaving him. At the end of the day, the boar's head is given to Gawain, and Gawain gives the lord two kisses. That night, Gawain tries to convince the lord that he has to leave in the morning to seek the green chapel, but the lord insists that he stay.

The third morning, the lord goes out on the trail of a fox with his men and his hounds. Again, they chase it all day, and it outwits them, until finally the lord takes a swing at it with his sword and holds it up long enough for a hound to grab it. The fox pelt is taken back to Gawain as a prize. Gawain is again visited by the lord's wife, who acts incredulous at the fact that Gawain has not yet submitted to her advances. But Gawain refuses her still, and although angry, she asks Gawain for a gift so she can remember him. Gawain refuses, saying he has nothing worthy of her beauty. Then she begs him to take a present from her. She offers him a gold ring, but he refuses it, saying it is too rich. Then she offers him a green belt, which Gawain refuses until the lady assures him that it is magical, and will make Gawain invincible, unable to die. Gawain accepts the belt, thinking of his destined meeting with the Green Knight. The lady kisses Gawain three times before leaving him. That night, when the lord returns, he gives Gawain the fox pelt, and Gawain gives the lord three kisses. The lord declares Gawain to have received the best gifts, for kisses always beat fox pelts.

The next day, Gawain dresses early and makes sure to put on the supposedly magic green belt. He sets out from the castle with a guide, who shows him the way to a valley where the green chapel is. The guide warns Gawain not to go, but he goes anyway, steadfast. In the valley, Gawain finds a grass-covered mound with holes in it, which he presumes to be the green chapel. Suddenly the Green Knight appears, and calls on Gawain to keep his end of their agreement without flinching. Gawain agrees, but is scared. As the Green Knight raises his axe, Gawain flinches, and the Green Knight mocks him. Again the Green Knight raises his axe, but just to see if Gawain will flinch. He does not, so he raises the axe again and nicks Gawain's neck. Seeing that he is not dead, Gawain leaps away, shouting that the Green Knight has had his one blow, and the agreement is sealed. The Green Knight smiles, and explains that he had done what he did on purpose - he is in fact the same lord, Bercilak de Hautdesert, that he had taken Gawain in on his journey. It was his wife who he had kissed. He, in fact, had put her up to it, to test Gawain's knightly resolve. In addition, the green belt that Gawain wore belonged to the Green Knight - it was not really magic at all, but it was a sign of Gawain's moral weakness that he had accepted and believed in it. The Green Knight says he was sent to Camelot by Morgana le Fay, Arthur's half-sister and a witch, who wanted to test the pride and fame of Gawain and his fellow knights.

Gawain returns home, ashamed that he had given in to such sin. Back at Arthur's court, he tells his story and all of the Knights of the Round Table commiserate with him, and offer to wear green belts themselves, as constant reminders that the possibility of sinning is always close at hand.



# Major Characters

**King Arthur:** Semi-mythical and perhaps the most famous English king of antiquity. Although his historical existence is still debated, Arthur is said to have lived during the 6th century as ruler of the Britons, in southern Wales, the son of Uther Pendragon and Ygraine of Cornwall. His justness and military victories against invading Germanic tribes gave rise to an intricate network of legend surrounding his life that grew throughout the centuries and spread to all of western Europe. Sir Gawain is Arthur's nephew and one of his chief knights, and many stories of Arthurian legend revolve around Gawain and his relationship to Arthur.

**Gawain the Good:** Gawain is Arthur's nephew and the main focus of this poem. He is the son of Lot of Orkney and Morgause, and according to legend, once his father dies he becomes the head of the Orkney clan. In French versions of Arthurian legend, Gawain often has adventures that parallel but do not overshadow the adventures of the main hero, usually either Lancelot or Perceval. In the English tradition, however, Gawain is often the focus of the tale, and sometimes presented as the archetype of knightly chivalry and honor, though the extent to which that presentation holds in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is open to debate.

**The Green Knight (Bercilak de Hautdesert, or 'The Lord' of the castle):** The Green Knight is Sir Gawain's main opposition in the poem and the catalyst for Gawain's adventure. He is an enormous and richly decorated knight who has green skin and hair, and is invincible, and thus is presented to Arthur's court as a monster. Although the Green Knight ostensibly works alone in the story, we come to find out in the end that he is in fact the very noble Bercilak de Hautdesert, who takes Gawain into his castle for the Christmas holiday. He was sent by Morgana le Fay, a witch who lives with the Green Knight, in order to test the will and honor of Knights of the Round Table. In Arthurian legend, Morgana le Fay is also the mother of Ywain, one of Arthur's most trusted knights, and also Gawain's cousin.

## Minor Characters

**Guenevere the Gay:** Guenevere is Arthur's wife and queen, renown as the one of the most beautiful women in the world. She is said to be the daughter of Leodegrance of Camelard in late medieval romance. In the grand scheme of Arthurian legend, Guenevere is important because she has an affair with Sir Lancelot, one of Arthur's chief knights, that eventually causes the downfall of Camelot. She is thus traditionally identified with sinfulness and adultery.

**Agravaine of the Hard Hands:** One of Arthur's chief knights, who is Gawain's cousin and Arthur's nephew.

**Ywain:** Ywain is Gawain's cousin and the son of Morgana le Fay and Uriens. He is the center of several Arthurian tales in many languages, under different names such as Yvain, Owain, Iwein, and Ewain. In one tale, he is propelled to adventure by Sir Gawain,



and saves a lion from a serpent and is later befriended by the lion. Arthur banishes Ywain from his court because of his mother's attempts to kill Arthur, and Gawain rides with him and has many adventures.

**Sir Lancelot:** Although only mentioned briefly in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Lancelot is considered the greatest of Arthur's knights, and is the focus of many of the important events surrounding Arthurian legend. Lancelot is the son of King Ban of Benwick, and is known as Lancelot of the Lake because he was raised by the Lady of the Lake. He is also the father of Galahad, born from his union with Elaine, daughter of King Pellès, who tricked him into sleeping with her. Lancelot's love for Guenevere, Arthur's wife, causes the eventual downfall of Camelot.

**The lord (Bercilak de Hautdesert)'s wife, or 'The Lady' of the castle:** Each of the three nights that Gawain spends in the castle before going to meet the Green Knight, he is visited by the Lord's wife, who tries to tempt him into giving in to her. Each day, Gawain refuses her love, accepting only kisses in return. It later turns out that the lord (whose name is Bercilak de Hautdesert - this man is also the Green Knight) had sent his wife to tempt Gawain into sinning, which Gawain did not do. This is all part of the master plan of Morgana le Fay, the witch, to expose the weaknesses of Gawain and the Knights of the Round Table.

**Old Woman:** The lord Bercilak de Hautdesert's wife is, except during her morning visits to Gawain's bed, never without her companion, an old woman. Gawain spends time with her during the day even though he finds her repulsive; she has obviously been honored by the hand of many worthy knights in her day.

**Guide:** The lord assigns a guide to show Gawain the way to the green chapel. The guide warns Gawain of the coming danger and mortal peril at the chapel, trying to dissuade him from his mission once and for all. But Gawain remains steadfast, and rides on alone to keep his bargain with the Green Knight.

**Morgana le Fay:** Morgana lives in the castle with the Green Knight. She is a witch, and sent the Green Knight on his journey to Camelot. She intended both to test the truth of the fame of Gawain and the other Knights of the Round Table, and to frighten Guenevere, whom she dislikes because, in traditional Arthurian legend, Guenevere put an end to her affair with Guenevere's cousin, Guiomar. In Arthurian legend, Morgana is Arthur's half-sister, daughter of Arthur's mother Igraine and the Duke of Cornwall. She is mainly presented as an adversary of Arthur's, in medieval literature. She married King Uriens, and is also the mother of Ywain, one of Arthur's chief knights.

**Merlin:** Merlin is presented in many incarnations throughout the forms of Arthurian legend, but always as a magician, seer, and protector/counselor of the young King Arthur. In *Gawain*, he is said to have taught Morgana le Fay magic. The earliest literary sources have Merlin as a wonder child, born of an incubus (a male demon), and a Welsh nun. Later, he is presented as a warrior who lost his reason in battle, or, later still, as an old magician marked with the great deeds of a long life behind him.



## Objects/Places

**Camelot:** The mythical home of King Arthur and his court; the historical Arthur is said to have held his court at Caerleon-upon-Usk, on the border of southern Wales. Modern depictions of Camelot have characterized it as an ideal place. Attempts at actually finding Camelot have placed Arthur's court in Cadbury castle, citing archeological evidence from excavations carried out in the late 1960's.

**Green Chapel:** The green chapel is the supposed abode of the Green Knight, and the place to which Gawain is sent to keep his end of the bargain with the Green Knight. The green chapel, it turns out, is nothing more than a strange mound covered in grass, all part of Morgana le Fay's attempt to prove Gawain's cowardice with the challenge of the Green Knight.

**Gringolet:** Sir Gawain's horse, who is always beside him on his journey and his only consistent companion on his journeys.

**Shield:** Gawain's shield is the center of his protective gear, and a perfect symbol of knightly ideals. It represents at once the idea of protection from earthly harm, and with the pentangle symbol, the profound Christianity (and thus heavenly protection) that was necessary to knights' culture. It is also a reflection of the profound Christianity of the poet, for he explicitly takes time out from the story to describe in detail the shield's symbol - five blended triangles symbolizing truth and known in England as the 'infinite knot.'

**Wirral Forest:** The Wirral peninsula is located in Northwestern England, centering on the modern-day city of Liverpool.

**Deer:** On the first day of the game between Gawain and the lord (Bercilak de Hautdesert, also the Green Knight), the lord hunts for deer, while Gawain receives one kiss from the lord's wife.

**Boar:** On the second day of the contest between Gawain and de Hautdesert, the lord spends all day tracking, chasing and killing an enormous wild boar, which he finally kills and brings home triumphantly. For his day's work, Gawain receives two kisses from the lord's wife.

**Fox:** On the third and final day of the 'contest' between Gawain and de Hautdesert, the lord brings home a fox, while Gawain received three kisses from the lord's wife.

**Golden Ring:** After Gawain refuses both the lord's wife's proposals and her request for a gift, Gawain also refuses to accept a golden ring from her, saying that he could never accept a gift with nothing to give in return.

**Green Belt :** In lieu of the ring, the lord's wife insists that Gawain accept her green belt as a gift. Gawain refuses until she assures him that it is magic and as long as he wears



it he cannot be killed. Gawain takes it, thinking of his meeting with the Green Knight. The belt proves to be Gawain's moral downfall, because he wears the belt out of fear of death. Later, he learns that it has all been a setup by the Green Knight (who is also the lord) and his wife. The belt is not really magic, and when the Green Knight points that out, Gawain is ashamed of himself and returns home dejected at his imperfection. Arthur and the other knights of the round table offer to wear green belts at all times when Gawain tells them his story, as reminders of the possibility of imperfection.



## Quotes

Quote 1: "And those who were standing watched, and walked  
Carefully near him, not knowing what he'd do -  
They'd all seen wonders, but nothing like this.  
And some said he was witchcraft, a phantom,  
And were afraid to answer him, then gasped at his voice  
And trembled, sitting motionless in that noble  
Hall, silent as stones, as corpses;  
All speech was swept away as if sleep  
Had dropped  
From the sky - but some  
Surely stopped  
Their tongues in courtesy, to do honor  
To Arthur, whose words should come first." Part 1, lines 237-249

Quote 2: "'Hah! Is this Arthur's house, hailed  
Across the world, the fabled court?  
Where have your conquests gone to, and your pride,  
Where is your anger, and those awesome boasts?  
And now the round table's fame and its feasting  
Are done, thrown down at the sound of one man's  
Words - and you sit there shaking - at words!  
And he laughed so loud that Arthur winced,  
His fair face flooded hot with shame,  
And his cheeks;  
He flared as angry as wind,  
And all his people  
Burned." Part 1, lines 309-322

Quote 3: "'Think of your bold knights,  
Bursting to fight, as ready and willing  
As men can be: defer to their needs.  
And I am the slightest, the dullest of them all;  
My life the least, my death no loss  
- My only worth is you, my royal  
Uncle, all my virtue is through you.  
And this foolish business fits my station,  
Not yours: let me play this green man's game.  
If I ask too boldly, may this court declare me  
At fault.'  
The knights whispered, buzzed,  
Then all  
In a voice said it was  
For Gawain; the king should halt." Part 1, lines 351-365



Quote 4: "And now, Gawain: think.  
Danger is yours to overcome  
And this game brings you  
Danger. Can this game be won?" Part 1, lines 487-490

Quote 5: "And all these fives met in one man,  
Joined to each other, each without end,  
Set in five perfect points  
Wholly distinct, yet part of one whole  
And closed, wherever it end or begin.  
And so the pentangle glowed on his shield,  
Bright red gold across bright red stripes,  
The holy pentangle, as careful scholars  
Call it." Part 2, lines 656-665

Quote 6: "And the knights in that castle shouted with pleasure,  
Proud to stand in his presence - Gawain,  
Eternally praised, bearer of excellence,  
Most able, most knightly, best on earth,  
Most famous, most honored of men. And each of them  
Whispered to his fellow: 'How sweet it will be  
To see such easy, virtuous skill!  
What lessons we will learn in noble speech,  
What marvelous words, what practiced methods  
Of converse, now that we welcome this model  
Of perfect breeding! God has been good,  
Truly, to grant us a guest like Gawain,  
In this season when men sing and rejoice  
In His birth.  
This knight will lead us to the meaning  
Of manners, will work  
Miracles for us to see  
In the soothing of lovers' hurts'" Part 2, lines 910-927

Quote 7: "'Lord!' said Gawain. 'How lucky I am,  
Lady, not to be the knight you speak of:  
To take that kind of honor on my own  
Would be sinful; I know myself too well.  
By God, I'd be glad, if it pleased you, to offer you  
Some different service, in word or deed  
To serve such excellence would be endless delight.'" Part 3, lines 1241-1247

Quote 8: "And seeing how beautiful she was,  
And how dressed, and her face, and her body, and her flesh,  
So white, joy swelled in his heart.  
With gentle smiles they started to talk,  
And their talk was of joyful things, they spoke only



Of bliss.  
Words came flowing free,  
Each was pleased  
With the other; and only Mary  
Could Save him from this.  
That beautiful princess pressed him so hard,  
Urged him so near the limit, he needed  
Either to take her love or boorishly  
Turn her away. To offend like a boor  
Was bad enough; to fall into sin  
Would be worse, betraying the lord of the house.  
'God willing,' he thought, 'it will not happen!'" Part 3, lines 1760-1776

Quote 9: "Gawain hesitated, his heart  
Reached for protection, like a thief for a gem:  
He could come to that chapel, and take that stroke,  
And with this glorious device walk off  
Unharméd." Part 3, lines 1855-1859

Quote 10: "But whether he slept or not I dare not  
Say; he could have remembered many  
Things.  
Yet let him lie as he will,  
His adventure ringing  
In his ears. Sit still  
A moment more, and I'll sing it." Part 3, lines 1991-1997

Quote 11: "'I'm grateful, fellow, for all your good wishes;  
I believe you'd keep it a secret, I believe you.  
But however loyally you lied, if I rode  
Away, fled for fear, as you tell me,  
I'd be a coward no knight could excuse.  
Whatever comes, I'm going to that chapel,  
And I'll meet that wild man: however it happens  
It will happen, for evil or good, as fate  
Decides  
However wild  
He may be,  
God can see,  
God can save.'" Part 4, lines 2127-2139

Quote 12: "'Gawain? You can't be Gawain, his name  
Is too noble, he's never afraid, nowhere  
On earth - and you, you flinch in advance!  
I've heard nothing about Gawain the coward.  
And I, did I flinch, fellow, when you swung  
At my neck? I never spoke a word.



My head fell, and I never flinched.  
And you, before it can happen your heart  
Is quaking. Who doubts I'm the better  
Man?'  
'I flinched,' said Gawain,  
'I won't again.  
And this much is plain:  
My head, if it falls, won't talk in my hands.'" Part 4, lines 2270-2283

Quote 13: "Perhaps, if my hands were quicker, I could have  
Dealt you a better blow, and done harm.  
I pretended one stroke, a threat, a joke,  
But left you whole; I had the right,  
Because of our other agreement, in my castle;  
You kept it faithfully, performed like an honest  
Man, gave me everything you got.  
Except that you kissed my wife: I swung  
For that reason - but you gave me back her kisses.  
So all you got, for that, was a puff  
Of air.  
An honest man  
Need never fear.  
But still, the third day, there  
In my castle, you failed - and you felt that here.  
'That belt you're wearing: it's mine, my wife  
Gave it to you - I know it all, knight,  
The kisses you took, and gave, and all  
You did, and how she tempted you: everything.  
For I planned it all, to test you - and truly,  
Not many better man have walked  
This earth, been worth as much - like a pearl  
To a pea, compared to other knights.  
But you failed a little, lost good faith -  
Not for a beautiful belt, or in lust,  
But for love of your life. I can hardly blame you.'" Part 4, lines 2343-2368

Quote 14: "'I'm false, now, forever afraid  
Of bad faith and treachery: may trouble, may sorrow  
Come to them!  
Oh knight: I humbly confess  
My faults: bless me  
With the chance to atone.  
I'll try to sin less.'" Part 4, lines 2382-2388

Quote 15: "'My lord,' said Gawain, lifting the belt,  
'This band and the nick on my neck are one  
And the same, the blame and the loss I suffered



For the cowardice, the greed, that came to my soul.  
This sign of bad faith is the mark of my sin:  
I'll wear it on my waist as long as I live,  
For a man may hide an injury to his soul,  
But he'll never be rid of it, it's fastened forever.'  
The king consoled him, and all that court,  
And they laughed and resolved, then and there,  
That lords and ladies of Arthur's table  
Would each of them wear a slanted belt  
Around their waists, woven of green,  
To keep company with their well-loved Gawain." Part 4, lines 2505-2518

Quote 16: "And so in Arthur's time this adventure  
Took place, as the book of Brutus bears witness,  
After that bold Brutus appeared  
In Britain, when the siege and assault had done  
For Troy;  
And other adventures as well,  
Of great and loyal  
Knights. Now may the royal  
King of the world keep us from Hell!" Part 4, lines 2522-2530

Quote 17: "HONY SOYT QUI MAL PENCE [shame to him who finds evil here]" Part 4,  
Inscription



# Topic Tracking: Chivalry

## Part 1, lines 250-490

Chivalry 1: *Sir Gawain* presents an interesting human portrait of how a people might react to certain strenuous situations. However, this is always investigated in relation to an *ideal*, here the notion of chivalry, or how a medieval knight is *supposed* to act. According to the ideals of bravery and service to their lord, the knights should have leapt at the chance to give their life for their lord, in battle or in sport. There are several places in the text, such as here, where that ideal seems unattainable, even by a group of knights billed as the greatest ever known. The knights are ashamed because they cannot seem to live up to the ideal they have set before themselves; human nature is perhaps at odds with the ideals of "perfection" which it sets as a standard for itself.

Chivalry 2: This passage said by Gawain is full of chivalrous idealism, and most pertinently the idea that the vassal should subject himself to his lord. There is another antagonistic force playing at the same time, for even while Gawain says what everyone wants to hear at the prodding of the Green Knight, whether he truly believes what he is saying is questionable, as is the motivation of the other knights' agreement that he should undergo the ordeal. Do they agree with what he says, or are they relieved that they themselves do not have to receive an axe blow from the Green Knight?

## Part 2, lines 491-810

Chivalry 3: The Knights of the Round Table are portrayed as feeling something like shame in the wake of the incident with the Green Knight. Perhaps they are disappointed at their apparent inability to live up to the ideal of what a knight should be; perhaps they are not the men they had convinced themselves (and the world), that they were.

Chivalry 4: Again, there is a separation that the poet points out between what is felt in the heart and what is said out loud in the spirit of expectation, and the possible disunity between the two.

Chivalry 5: Although the poet has taken to singing Gawain's knightly praises once again, we have seen that the Knights of the Round Table are not impervious to failure from the ideal. Indeed, it is exactly these virtues that will be tested in Gawain during the coming journey, and he, too, proves that he is not incapable of sin.

## Part 2, lines 811-1125

Chivalry 6: There is inconsistency between the language used by the knights in the court to describe Gawain and the coming events that are meant, as is revealed in the end, to test the very knightly virtues that Gawain is assumed to already possess. Again, the ideals of knighthood and expectation are placed next to human reality in this passage, which could be explicitly ironic foreshadowing, or simply deliberately inconsistent.

**Part 3, lines 1126-1557**

Chivalry 7: The exchanges between Gawain and Bercilak de Hautdesert's wife are full of what could be considered "knightly courtesy," or "courtly speech." In fact, it is made plain that all these two are doing is "juggling words" (l. 1217) in their talks. It becomes clear, however, that what is really passing between them are untruths: Gawain repeatedly pretends certain things (like feigning sleep), and rarely says what he actually thinks. The lady, as it later becomes clear, is pretending everything, for her husband put her up to seducing Gawain. "Chivalry" becomes synonymous here with deceit and pretension, a kind of wall behind which the truth is never uttered.

Chivalry 8: Even though chivalry seems to be presented somewhat ironically by the poet in the exchanges between Gawain and de Hautdesert's lady, it is nevertheless held up as an ideal. When the Green Knight is recounting Gawain successes and failures at the end of the poem, he applauds Gawain for refusing his wife in the way that he does here, and repeatedly does afterward.

Chivalry 9: Part of the key to the "chivalric" discourse presented in the poem is the game of words that goes on between the participants, a sort of intellectual besting process, as if the men and women are fencing with language. Much of the story surrounds the idea of language duels, holding up the notion of courtly goodness and virtue with those who can speak eloquently. It is always pointed out when someone is intimidated by words, or when they are not, such as when the Green Knight first appears in Arthur's court. In addition, any time a person is not capable of speaking (such as when Gawain gets drunk), the poet points it out. Here, there is an example of this give-and-take game: Gawain greets the lord's wife with a "warm welcome," and she gives it back to him "as good as she got" (l. 1477-1478).

**Part 3, lines 1558-1997**

Chivalry 10: Here is a case in point example of Sir Gawain's internal struggle against an ideal that becomes the center of the story as the poem progresses. What he *should* do according to the code of knightly conduct is not clear; he is left in the middle, between offending the lord and offending the lady (he thinks - for in the end it is all clear the this was a setup to test his will). Gawain becomes decidedly human in this passage - the poet leaves the façade of chivalric sparring aside and in that act, Gawain changes from a hero on a quest in the name of honor to a complex character struggling with his own morality and the expectations that peers have placed upon him to be "good" and "courteous."

**Part 4, lines 2309-2530**

Chivalry 11: While its ideals were in question at points, and the voice of the poet point toward ironic overtones, it is clear in the end that the ideals of chivalry are meant to be upheld. Gawain is forced into perfecting his notion of the chivalric code, and Gawain's brothers at the Round Table are brothers in courtesy, offering to share the burden of Gawain's perceived sin.



# Topic Tracking: Courage

## Part 1, lines 250-490

Courage 1: Even while all of the knights in the court are presented as quaking with fear at the sight of the Green Knight, Arthur is presented as standing quietly by and handling adversity coolly and calmly, mythical hero that he is.

Courage 2: The Green Knight shows here for the first time his absolute steadfastness in the face of physical danger - a fact that will become important later as Gawain struggles to live up to the same ideal in the face of the knight himself. The Green Knight is an imposing ideal, and Gawain is asked to live up to mythical standards; there is an important juxtaposition here with the reaction of the Knights of the Round Table (see Fear 3).

Courage 3: The first part of the poem ends with an almost palpable challenge, not from the Arthurian knights, or even the Green Knight, but from the poet writing the story. In creating this legend, he has placed the ideals and assumption of knightly chivalry in jeopardy with such a difficult test of will. The gravity of the test and the doubt of the supposedly steadfast hero to succeed is brought home with this break in voice and narrative distance.

## Part 2, lines 491-810

Courage 4: This is the only explicit reference in the poem to Gawain's fighting skills, and it is condensed into a very small space (lines 715-726), odd for a poem which is, if only on the surface, a traditional courtly romance. Nevertheless, Gawain is presented here as steadfastly overcoming terrible odds and terrible foes with his powers of strength, faith, and justice.

## Part 3, lines 1126-1557

Courage 5: Each day that the lord Bercilak goes out hunting, his absolute courage (and thus knightly worthiness) is applauded. Here on the first day of hunting, this is presented as the ease with which the lord kills deer, and the sheer joy he takes in the act of killing.

## Part 3, lines 1558-1997

Courage 6: The scene is set so that the lord becomes the undisputed winner of the day, and in several ways. Not only does he kill the boar single-handed, he defends his courage in the face of insurmountable odds, for all of the other men there were cringing with fear at the boar.

## Part 4, lines 1998-2308

Courage 7: Although Gawain seems to have quite a laid back attitude about fate here, he nevertheless has taken great pains to convince himself of his own invincibility without



the help of God or divine justification. To take his words without a grain of irony would be circumspect, even if he truly believes what he says. Actions speak louder than words, and the poet knows this.

**Part 4, lines 2309-2530**

Courage 8: There is a sort of implicit reversal here from the assumed identities of hero/villain. The supposed super-hero, as we have seen, takes on the role of imperfect man on a moral quest, and the supposed villain becomes (and has been all along) his mentor in that quest. Gawain recognizes this and accepts it at this point; he acknowledges his imperfections and also the fact that this man, the Green Knight, is superior to himself and is capable of teaching him to become better.



# Topic Tracking: Fear

## Part 1, lines 1-249

Fear 1: *Sir Gawain* presents an interesting twist on the archetype of chivalrous knightly culture and the associated notions of gallantry. This is the first scene in the poem having to do with the Knights of the Round Table, a scene that establishes their credibility. They are portrayed not as dashing defenders of right, but as quaking children scared of supposed witchcraft. This is right after the poet has built them up as the pinnacle of their profession.

## Part 1, lines 250-490

Fear 2: Here it seems that the Green Knight has called Arthur and his knights' bluff - they do not seem as courageous as their renown. However, the poet himself has built up Arthur and his followers as brave and fair knights, deserving of their fame - the greatest example of knights in the world. Even in the act of creating a legend, the poet mollifies the notion of creating a super-hero and a super-villain, and thus keeps the reader within the human sphere of experience even in the context of the fantastic. The poet's characters remain profoundly human even while they are fantastic and strange.

Fear 3: The knights seem almost desperately scared here - as the Green Knight's head comes off, they kick at it to get it away. This is a far cry from the idyllic image of dashing knights in shining armor unfazed by any danger. The knights are characterized as "afraid" when presented with the image of the headless Green Man sitting on his horse.

## Part 2, lines 491-810

Fear 4: Here fear is put into a more traditionally acceptable framework - Gawain is not afraid for himself (except in a detached way in relation to religion), but instead fears that he will not get a chance to consummate his faith on Christmas. This is a virtuous portrayal, and a sign (from the poet), that faith is perhaps infallible, even as he portrays humanity and human ideals as weak and imperfect.

## Part 3, lines 1558-1997

Fear 5: The hordes of hunters around the lord are characterized as too scared to fight the boar when it hides. This provides a startling contrast with the lord himself, who becomes the fearless savior of the day.

Fear 6: This is the first concrete instance where we see Gawain's humanity; to this point his has been built up repeatedly as the embodiment of perfection, a hero for the ages. But here Gawain's faults begin to show through, and the reader is called on to question the validity of the hero ideal. Perhaps the poet cannot be trusted as a wholly truthful narrator, or perhaps the poet built up the image just to tear it down in the end, twisting the hero myth with his irony. Nevertheless, Gawain becomes a complex and divided



character, with his own inner demons to face, in how he should act both in the face of death and how the code of knightly conduct generally applies to himself.

Fear 7: This is Gawain's great blunder, and the display of weakness that proves the downfall of his ego. In accepting the green belt, Gawain shows that he fears for his life, a feeling directly at cross-purposes with the knightly "should." He becomes not a hero on his own terms, but a faulty man in need of external support.

**Part 4, lines 1998-2308**

Fear 8: Again, Sir Gawain's inner resolve and his sense of expectation of how he should act are put at odds when he tries to be brave in the face of the axe. The Green Knight, however, is the first person, perhaps in the poem, to speak the truth outright, when he calls Gawain's bluff of courage. All of the other intellectual-sparring that has covered up the truth to this point is cast aside for a moment, even if Gawain and the Green Knight do go on to spar in their own way. And even as the Green Knight tells the truth, he himself is not what he seems, and does not explain himself until later in the poem.

**Part 4, lines 2309-2530**

Fear 9: Here all of the truth is revealed, including the fact that the Green Knight, also the lord of the castle, could see through Gawain's actions all the time. And even though he upholds how Gawain acts, he reveals how transparent the values are. No one, not even the celebrated Gawain, can be perfect, and he has taught Gawain to recognize that in himself.



## Part 1, lines 1-249

The poem begins with a summary, recapping the most noble of mythical events that have passed throughout the ages of man, bringing civilization into existence and to the point where the story is about to be told. The story is placed into the context of these great, heroic, and history-defining events. The poet mentions the high points of Greek legend, including the siege of Troy, the exile of Aeneas for concealing Achilles' killer, Romulus' building of Rome, and the founding of lands by Tirrus and the Lombards. Finally, he describes how Brutus sailed from France to England to found new towns that grew rich and gave rise to knights who often battled and sometimes brought pain to their people. The poet goes on to say that of all the glory England has known, King Arthur is the most glorious, and has inspired the strangest tales. The poet says that he is about to relate the strangest of those tales, if only the reader would like to sit and listen.

It was Christmas at Arthur's court in Camelot, and all of the gracious lords and worthy, noble knights had gathered for a fifteen day Christmas celebration, complete with jousting tourneys, singing, dancing, and feasting. Everyone was rejoicing, for Arthur's feasts were the best in the world, and all of the most famous warriors of Christ, the loveliest ladies, and Arthur, the noblest of kings, were on hand to witness it.

It was close to the new year, so after the guests heard mass they ran and shouted "Noël!" and passed out presents until dinner time, when they washed and sat down to a double-feast. The guests were arranged in order; those considered the most noble were seated near Arthur, who sat near his queen, Guenevere. The table was fringed with silk - silk hung over their heads, and velvet carpets and embroidered rugs hung behind them.

Arthur was a young, restless king and acted boisterously; he refused to eat until the others were served. He had vowed never to sit down to a holiday banquet until he had heard some grand tale of adventure, or something fantastic had happened, or one of his knights had vowed to ride into combat and give his life. It was a custom Arthur kept now, and he waited to eat, and stood talking and laughing in front of the table, until he might be satisfied in his need for adventure. Seated next to Guenevere was Sir Gawain on one side, and Agravaine on the other. Bishop Bowdune sat to the King's right, and Ywain along with him. The lesser knights sat around them in rows. At the sound of trumpets, the feast began, and there was an overflowing abundance of venison and other platters, as well as beer and wine.

Just as the trumpets and drums stopped and the first platters were laid out, a ghastly Green Knight sprang through the door on an enormous green stallion. He was so huge that he seemed to be a giant or an ogre, the biggest creature in the world, but also fit and good looking, with a thin waist, a flat belly, and an elegant and graceful face. Everything on him was green - his hands, his face, his armor, and his shirt. He had long, flowing green hair and a long, brambly beard, wore a tight tunic, and had a mantle that was sewn with the finest white ermine fur. His striped, tight stockings were green, and



he was barefoot, save the golden spurs on his heels. His clothes were carefully woven with silk designs of butterflies in green and gold. The saddle, armor, and bit of his horse were green as well, and each of the green strands of the horse's mane, forelock, and tail was braided with a gold thread and a string of golden bells. The knight wore no armor, but carried a sprig of holly in one hand, and an enormous axe in the other - four feet wide and hammered of green and golden steel.

The knight came into the hall, unafraid, and, greeting no one, said that he wished to know who the lord of the company was. The knights in the hall simply stared in bewilderment at the strange sight of the green man.

*"And those who were standing watched, and walked  
Carefully near him, not knowing what he'd do -  
They'd all seen wonders, but nothing like this.  
And some said he was witchcraft, a phantom,  
And were afraid to answer him, then gasped at his voice  
And trembled, sitting motionless in that noble  
Hall, silent as stones, as corpses;  
All speech was swept away as if sleep  
Had dropped  
From the sky - but some  
Surely stopped  
Their tongues in courtesy, to do honor  
To Arthur, whose words should come first." Part 1, lines 237-249*

Topic Tracking: Fear 1



## Part 1, lines 250-490

Arthur stood by solemnly and watched the Green Knight ride into the hall, for he knew nothing of fear, and asked the knight to step down off his horse and join them at their feast - whatever he had come for could wait until later.

Topic Tracking: Courage 1

The Green Knight responded by exclaiming that he had no intention of lingering; he recounted that the men in the room were reputed to be the proudest, boldest, and bravest warriors in all the land. He had come, he said, to see if this were true. He had come in peace, he said, for he carried a sprig of holly and wore no armor. Arthur said that nevertheless, if it were a fight he was looking for, the men would not hesitate to leap to battle. The Green Knight insisted he intended no harm, for even if they fought him they would lose, for there was no muscle in the room to match him. He had come only to propose a game to Arthur's knights, in the spirit of Christmas, to test their supposed bravery. Any one of the knights had only to rise and give the Green Knight one blow with his axe, the agreement being that afterward he would have to submit to one axe blow from the Green Knight. The knight that chose to accept would give his axe blow now, and the Green Knight would return the blow not that day, but a year and a day later.

The Knights of the Round Table sat even stiller now, and the Green Knight's eyes glowed red as he reared back and laughed at them:

*"Hah! Is this Arthur's house, hailed  
Across the world, the fabled court?  
Where have your conquests gone to, and your pride,  
Where is your anger, and those awesome boasts?  
And now the round table's fame and its feasting  
Are done, thrown down at the sound of one man's  
Words - and you sit there shaking - at words!  
And he laughed so loud that Arthur winced,  
His fair face flooded hot with shame,  
And his cheeks;  
He flared as angry as wind,  
And all his people  
Burned." Part 1, lines 309-322*

Topic Tracking: Fear 2

Topic Tracking: Chivalry 1

Arthur exclaimed that the Green Knight was being foolish, but if it was folly he wanted, it was folly he would get: he would do the honor himself. The Green Knight dismounted, and Arthur took up the axe and prepared to swing it. The Green Knight acted indifferent toward Arthur, and stood stroking his beard. Suddenly Sir Gawain leaned forward from his seat at the table and pleaded with Arthur to let this challenge be his.



*"Think of your bold knights,  
Bursting to fight, as ready and willing  
As men can be: defer to their needs.  
And I am the slightest, the dullest of them all;  
My life the least, my death no loss  
- My only worth is you, my royal  
Uncle, all my virtue is through you.  
And this foolish business fits my station,  
Not yours: let me play this green man's game.  
If I ask too boldly, may this court declare me  
At fault.'  
The knights whispered, buzzed,  
Then all  
In a voice said it was  
For Gawain; the king should halt." Part 1, lines 351-365*

Topic Tracking: Chivalry 2

Arthur ordered Gawain to rise and accept the axe, which he did, as Arthur commanded his heart and hand to be steady and strong. Arthur reminded Gawain to strike but once and do as the Green Knight bid. As he approached, the Green Knight asked Gawain to speak his name, to make everything clear. Gawain obliged, and pledged to accept the stroke from the Green Knight in exactly a year. The Green Knight said he was pleased, and then asked that Gawain not accept the axe stroke in King Arthur's court, but instead seek out the Green Knight at his castle and accept it there. Gawain asked where that would be, since he knew neither the Green Knight's name or his home; the Green Knight said there would be time enough for such information after Gawain had swung the axe. Or perhaps he would say nothing, which would be better for Gawain, for it would not oblige him to hunt the man out.

The Green Knight bowed down and bared his neck; Gawain hefted the axe and brought it down. The blade cut through bones and skin and flesh, and slashed the ground as it cut through. The Green Knight's head came off and rolled on the floor, and the surrounding knights kicked at it with their feet.

Topic Tracking: Courage 2

Topic Tracking: Fear 3

The Green Knight's body spurted blood, but his body stood up straight and dashed toward the thrashing feet of the knights, and retrieved his head. He carried it to his horse and mounted, holding his head by its long green hair. He twisted his bloody stump, then turned the face toward Arthur and Gawain, and said to Gawain that he should ride to find him as he had promised, in a year - that he should seek the green chapel, of which many men knew, or he would be called a coward forever. Then, the Green Knight wheeled around on his horse and galloped from the hall. Arthur and Gawain grinned at the joke and laughed at the Green Man, for they knew miracles had been sent.



Arthur was amazed in wonder, but did not show it. He turned to his wife, Guenevere, and reassured her that such events were right and proper for Christmas. He added that now, according to his custom, he could sit down and dine; the marvel he awaited had come. Arthur told Gawain to hang up his axe, for it had cut enough. The axe was hung as a trophy on the wall, and the knights and ladies returned to their tables, and Gawain and Arthur were served double portions, according to their rank.

The first part of the poem thus ends:

*"And now, Gawain: think.  
Danger is yours to overcome  
And this game brings you  
Danger. Can this game be won?"* Part 1, lines 487-490

Topic Tracking: Courage 3



## Part 2, lines 491-810

The poet says that the Green Knight began Arthur's New Year the way he liked it: with marvelous things. The Knights of the Round Table, however, sat silent and grim at their food after the Green Knight had left.

Topic Tracking: Chivalry 3

The poet then relates the passing of the next year. Each season raced one after the other, he says: after Christmas came and uncomfortable Lent of simple food and fish, then the passing of winter into the warm showers and blossoming flowers of spring, then the birds singing like angels for the coming of summer. And summer gives way to the harvest and the winds of autumn, and the leaves lie dead on the ground and the fruit ripens and rots, and finally the winter winds return, reminding Sir Gawain of his promise to the Green Knight.

Gawain stayed in Arthur's court until All-Saints day, when Arthur held a feast in Gawain's honor in preparation for his journey. The Knights and Ladies of the Round Table laughed and drank to Gawain, while all the while deep in their hearts they felt gray and cold. And Gawain, at the end of the feast, approached Arthur and begged his leave of the court. The best of Arthur's knights came to Gawain to counsel him with heavy hearts - Iwain, Eric, Sir Dodinel de Sauvage, the Duke of Clarence, Lancelot, Lionel, Lucan the Good, Sir Bors, Sir Bedivere, and Mador de la Port. And although they lamented that so good a man as Gawain should have to bow to such a request, Gawain smiled at them, saying that he should not waste his time with fear, for it was time for fate to take its course.

Topic Tracking: Chivalry 4

Gawain slept that night and rose at dawn the next morning and called for his armor, which was laid out for him gleaming of a rich red rug. Over a doublet of Tharsia silk, tied at the hood, he fastened a hood lined with fur. Steel shoes were put on his feet, legs were wrapped in hinged metal with polished knee plates, thick thigh plates were fastened, and a mail shirt, woven like silk, was put on his chest. Then arm pieces, with bent elbow joints, and steel gloves, golden spurs, a good sword, and a sash completed the outfit. In his armor, Gawain stood for mass, then took leave of the lords and ladies. He walked to Gringolet, his horse, which stood gleaming in its armor, and he lifted his lined helmet and kissed it. Clashed behind the helmet on the neckband was delicately embroidered silk, decorated with jewels and parrots stitched between painted purple flowers. Around the helmet on top was a ring of diamonds in a magic knot. Gawain's shield was carried in, striped with bright red. A pentangle star was painted in gold at its center, five triangles enfolding one another, known in England as the "infinite knot," and symbolizing truth. Gawain, the poet says, wears this symbol by right, for he is a noble knight, and pure as gold. Just like the pentangle, Gawain's five senses were free of sin, his five fingers never failed him, and all of his earthly hope was contained in Christ's five wounds on the cross. And when he was faced with battle, Gawain's mind was fixed on the five joys which Mary had of Jesus, and thus he had her face painted on the inside of



the shield, to keep his mind on heaven's queen. The poet says that Gawain possessed five virtues that made him a noble knight - love and friendship for other men, freedom from sin, courtesy that never failed, and pity.

*"And all these fives met in one man,  
Joined to each other, each without end,  
Set in five perfect points  
Wholly distinct, yet part of one whole  
And closed, wherever it end or begin.  
And so the pentangle glowed on his shield,  
Bright red gold across bright red stripes,  
The holy pentangle, as careful scholars  
Call it." Part 2, lines 656-665*

Topic Tracking: Chivalry 5

Gawain, ready, spurred his horse and rode away. Arthur's court watched and sighed, as all of Camelot was sad at his fate and lamented what they assumed to be his coming death.

Gawain rode through England on God's behalf, and he met with many perils. He was often alone at night, and saw no one but his horse in the day, until he reached northern Wales. There he landed in the Wirral Forest, where the poet says that few good men lived. But he asked all he saw if they knew of the Green knight, or the Green Chapel, and everyone he asked said that no, they had never heard of such a man. At every stream Gawain found foul enemies with whom he was forced to fight. He found dragons, and wolves, and satyrs, and forest trolls, and bulls, and bears, and boars, and giant ogres. And Gawain was save from them by his strength, his courage, and his faith in God. He slept in his armor, in the frozen rain, exposed on open rock. And Gawain rode until Christmas eve, when he prayed to Mary to grant him reprieve.

Topic Tracking: Courage 4

In the morning he rode down into a wild oak forest, suddenly afraid that he would not be able to hear a Christmas mass to honor Jesus' birth. He prayed to God and to Mary that he would find some lodging, and hear mass. And as he rode, he prayed and wept for his misdeeds, and three times made the shape of the cross, calling out to Christ.

Topic Tracking: Fear 4

Suddenly, on a hill, Gawain saw a castle, the loveliest he had ever seen. He removed his helmet and gave thanks to Jesus and Julian, the patron of travelers. He spurred Gringolet and approached the castle bridge. He called, and a porter appeared, standing on the castle wall and greeted the knight.



## Part 2, lines 811-1125

Sir Gawain asked the castle porter to carry his words to the lord of the castle and ask him for shelter. The porter replied that he already knew what the lord would say, and that he was welcome in that house for as long as Gawain pleased. The porter arrived at the door with several men and they dropped the drawbridge, coming out and courteously kneeling before the knight and welcoming him. They begged Gawain to enter, then helped him to dismount and ran to stable his horse. Squires and knights swarmed Gawain and escorted him into the castle, and took his helmet, sword, and shield from him. Gawain greeted them all in turn as he was led into a hall where a huge fire crackled. The lord came out and said that everything that was his was free for Gawain to use; the knight replied with thanks, and asked Christ to reward his host. The two kissed and embraced like brothers.

Gawain approved of his host, who was tall and strong, and in the prime of life. He had a heavy, brown beard, a red face, and thick legs, but his words were courtly. Gawain was led to a glorious bed in a noble room, hung with silk and trimmed with gold. A man told to serve Gawain removed the knight's armor and brought him rich robes, which Gawain wore. All at once Gawain thought it to be spring: his face shone and his robe glistened as he walked through the knights of that castle, who approved of him as a great warrior.

Back in the hall, Gawain sat in front of the fireplace in a covered chair, and a fur cloak was thrown about his shoulders. A table, covered in white cloth and silver spoons was set in front of him, and he went to his meat. He was brought double-portions of stews, broths, baked, breaded, and grilled fish and spiced fish soups. Gawain called the meal a feast, but his hosts brushed off the compliment, saying the next meal would be better. Gawain laughed with them and drank until he stuttered.

Gawain's hosts asked him discreetly of his origins; he replied that he had rode from noble Arthur's court, and that his name was Gawain. The lord of the castle later laughed with delight upon hearing that Gawain was with him, and the castle's knights did the same.

*"And the knights in that castle shouted with pleasure,  
Proud to stand in his presence - Gawain,  
Eternally praised, bearer of excellence,  
Most able, most knightly, best on earth,  
Most famous, most honored of men. And each of them  
Whispered to his fellow: 'How sweet it will be  
To see such easy, virtuous skill!  
What lessons we will learn in noble speech,  
What marvelous words, what practiced methods  
Of converse, now that we welcome this model  
Of perfect breeding! God has been good,  
Truly, to grant us a guest like Gawain,  
In this season when men sing and rejoice*



*In His birth.*

*This knight will lead us to the meaning*

*Of manners, will work*

*Miracles for us to see*

*In the soothing of lovers' hurts"" Part 2, lines 910-927*

Topic Tracking: Chivalry 6

After his dinner it was nearly night, and Gawain rose and found the lord and his wife, she in a pew, busy at prayer. The lord greeted him, told him that no one could be more welcome, and they embraced and sat together for mass. After the service, the lord's wife approached, surrounded by her ladies. Gawain thought her to be lovelier than Guenevere. A second lady, an old woman, led the lord's wife by the left hand. She was a startling contrast to the red cheeks and white skin of the young woman; she was stumpy, short, and faded yellow, with wrinkled jowls, a black chin hidden in white veils, and a broad buttocks. Gawain greeted the old woman courteously, but wrapped his arms around the young one and exchanged kisses and chivalric words with her. Each lady took one of Gawain's arms and together led him to a room with a fire, and ordered wine and platters of spice-cakes. In the room, the lord urged Gawain and the ladies to mirth, then pulled a spear from the wall and challenged Gawain in the spirit of Christmas to get it away from him. He kept Gawain entertained with jokes until he called for the lights to be put out and they retired to bed.

The next morning was Christmas morning, and everyone in the castle celebrated Christ's birth with dishes of sweets at meals. At dinnertime the old woman sat to the lord's right, and Gawain was seated with the young lady. When everyone was seated there was meat and drink and much joy passed around the table. Gawain and the lord's wife were the gayest of all the guests, relishing each other's laughter.

The party went on that day and the next; the day after that was the feast of Saint John, and the guests danced and guzzled wine until the morning came and they slowly stumbled home. Gawain said goodnight to his host, who thanked him for blessing the castle with his presence during such a holy time. Gawain, in return, explained his debt of gratitude to the lord. The lord tried to tempt him into staying, but Gawain knew he could not, remembering his duty to the Green Knight.

The lord asked Gawain what had driven him away from Arthur's court at such a time in the year; Gawain explained that duty bound him to find the green chapel by New Year's morning, which was just three days away. He asked the lord if he'd heard of such a place. The lord replied that he knew the green chapel, and it was close by. If he left in the morning on New Year's day he'd be there by noon. He thus implored Gawain to stay, and Gawain, gleeful, accepted. The lord set Gawain down and called for his ladies, then for everyone to rejoice. The lord babbled, almost incoherent in his love for Gawain, then suddenly shouted to Gawain to accept his next request; Gawain said he was duty bound to accept it. The lord said that rest was what Gawain needed, therefore he was to stay in bed until mass the next morning, and to make company with his wife during the day. As for the lord, he would rise at dawn and spend the day hunting with his hounds.



Furthermore, they were to play a game: whatever the lord got in the woods was to belong to Gawain, and whatever Gawain earned in the castle would belong to the lord. Gawain said that he liked the game and would oblige. Then they drank together and talked merrily, and then said goodnight softly, exchanging courteous kisses. Then each one was led to their beds by a crowd of servants carrying torches high.



## Part 3, lines 1126-1557

Most everyone in the castle woke before dawn, the Christmas guests packing and calling for their horses. The lord of the castle was awake as well, and not the last to be ready to ride. After mass and a hasty breakfast, he and his men, one hundred in all, gathered their hounds and set off to the hunt, bugles blaring. Wild animals shook at the sound of the hounds; deer bolted for the hills. The male deer were allowed to pass; the lord had decreed according to the law of the season that no male deer be killed. Does, however, were driven into valleys and shot through with arrows. Deer that escaped the arrows were caught and cut down by keeper, whose greyhounds were so huge that they could catch a deer at a run and tear it right down. And thus the lord rode and yelled until darkness, frantic with delight.

All the while Gawain lay in his lovely bed, until long after the sun rose. Sleeping, he suddenly heard the door to his room open; he raised his head and looked. It was the lady of the castle, approaching his bed. Gawain, embarrassed, dropped to his pillow and pretended to sleep, keeping the lady waiting as she opened the curtain surrounding his bed and sat down at the bed's edge. Gawain wondered why she had come, then thought to himself that it would be better to ask and find out then pretend to sleep. So he tossed and turned, pretending to awaken, then feigned surprise at seeing the lady of the castle upon opening his eyes.

Topic Tracking: Chivalry 7

The lady told Gawain that his sleep was innocent; anyone could catch him, and catch him she had. She teased that she would tie him to his bed. Gawain assured her that he would be her servant, but he requested that she leave him for a moment so he could dress and get out of bed. But she declined, saying she had better plans; she would lock him where he lay so she could talk to this knight she'd caught. For she knew who he was, Gawain himself, honored the world over for his perfect chivalry. And her lord was away in the woods, and the rest of the castle was asleep, and his door was locked with a bolt, and she would not lose her chance to be with a man so loved. And Gawain replied:

*"Lord!" said Gawain. 'How lucky I am,  
Lady, not to be the knight you speak of:  
To take that kind of honor on my own  
Would be sinful; I know myself too well.  
By God, I'd be glad, if it pleased you, to offer you  
Some different service, in word or deed  
To serve such excellence would be endless delight."* Part 3, lines 1241-1247

Topic Tracking: Chivalry 8

The lady replied that any self-respecting woman of good breeding would want to hold Gawain captive in her castle, just as she herself did now. Gawain praised her "noble



words;" again he denied their truth and his worthiness as a knight, saying that such perfection could only be assigned to her. Back and forth they went all morning, talking of many things, the lady pretending to love him and Gawain speaking to her with care and tact. Then, knowing it was time, she took her leave. But before she left, she looked back at Gawain, saying that he was obliged to repay her. Gawain asked her what for. She said that if Gawain's heart were truly lined with courtly virtue, he never would have gone so long and not kissed her. Gawain responded that he would kiss her as she wished; she need not ask again. The lady thus walked to the bed, bent down to his face, wound her arms around him, and kissed him. Then, bidding each other farewell, the lady left. Gawain swiftly rose, called for his clothes, dressed, went happily to mass, ate a worthy meal, then spent the day making merry with the lord's wife and the old woman.

In the woods, the lord reveled in his own brand of pleasure, killing so many deer before sundown that no one could count them. Huntsmen and keepers came together and piled up the bodies. Knights took the best deer for themselves, and ordered them quartered and carved. The throat was cut, then the gullet scraped and tied. The legs were cut and skinned, then the belly was broken open and the intestines pulled out. Carving the shoulder bone loose, they pulled it through a small slit, keeping the hide whole. Then the breast was halved, the carcass ripped from the throat to the fork in the front legs, then cut along the backbone to the haunch. The head and neck were cut off, and the flanks carved away from the spine. The inedible parts were thrown to the ravens as a hole was pushed through the ribs so that each carcass could be hung. Each man in the hunting party took pieces of the kill, according to his rank. Then the livers, the lungs, and the tripe were placed on a fresh-flayed skin with blood-soaked bread and fed to the hounds. The hunters returned home with their kill, their bugles again blaring.

#### Topic Tracking: Courage 5

When the party returned to the castle, the lord found Gawain sitting quietly by a bright fire. They greeted each other with delight, and the lord invited everyone in the castle into the hall. Then he commanded that his venison be brought to him, and asked Gawain to note how noble the deer were that he had killed. He asked Gawain if he had won his admiration; Gawain said it was the best game he had seen in seven winters. The lord then gave Gawain the venison, because according to the agreement in their game it was his. Gawain announced that he would do the same for the lord; he wrapped his arms around the lord's neck and kissed him courteously, saying that the kiss was all he had won that day. The lord was pleased, and said that Gawain's winnings were better than his. He asked Gawain just where he had gotten that prize, but Gawain said he would have none of that; their agreement demanded only that they report the winnings, not their source. Then the men laughed, and sat down to supper.

After dinner they sat by a fire drinking the best of wines, and agreed to make the same bargain to exchange their daily winnings on the next day. Then they took their leave and went to bed. The lord was up the next morning once the cock had crowed three times, and he and his men heard mass, ate breakfast, and were gone with their hounds before dawn. Quickly the pack of hounds caught a scent, and hurried to the chase, baying so



loudly that the rocks and cliffs rang. The hunters urged them to the chase, through forests and rocks, until the animal they chased was trapped. Then suddenly the animal came crashing out of the underbrush at a line of men: it was an enormous boar, which though it had been driven from its herd from old age, was the hoariest, fiercest, biggest boar in the world. The boar drove three men to the ground and kept on running, though the men yelled at it. The men gave chase, but the boar often turned and sliced open a hound with his snout or routed the men. The hunters rained arrows upon it, which did nothing to pierce his steel-like skin. Through all of this, the lord galloped behind the boar, fearless, calling to his hunters.

And all the while Gawain lay peaceful in his bed, until early in the morning when the lord's wife came to visit him again in his room, looking for him to chase his mind. They exchanged courteous good mornings.

Topic Tracking: Chivalry 9

The lady lamented, rather ironically, that she had spent all the previous day teaching Gawain a lesson, and he had already forgotten it. He asked her what lesson that was, and apologized to her. She said the lesson had been one of kissing; whenever a lady's looks ask for it, a knight had to claim his prize. Gawain said he would be loathe to seek an unwanted kiss; the lady was incredulous, and said he was far too strong to accept a "no" from a lady. Gawain responded, saying that force and threats are indecent with friends, and unwilling gifts are gifts in vain. But he offered her his lips to kiss, and she kissed him well.

The lady asked Gawain just how, as a knight known so far and wide as he, and, being that a knight's reputation rests on his loyalty to love, he could find a woman like herself at his bedside not once but twice and still not reveal to her one word of love. A knight such as himself should easily open himself to such an innocent girl, and teach her the skill of love; anything less would suggest him to be unknightly. She thus begged Gawain to let her study "love's high game" with him. Gawain responded that even if he taught her all he knew, and recited romances to her, she was already a hundred times more versed in love than he. But the lady insisted on tempting him still, and Gawain remained gracefully evasive to her advances. At the end of the morning, she offered him a courtly kiss, and left him.



## Part 3, lines 1558-1997

Sir Gawain rose from bed, made ready for mass, then sat down to a meal. He spent the day sporting with the lady of the castle and the old woman, while the lord of the castle was out hunting the enormous boar. The boar broke the backs of his best hounds, but was spurred to exhaustion by the hunters' arrows, where it took refuge in a rocky hole over a river, sharpening his tusks and waiting. The hunters wanted to root him out but they were too tired and afraid - so many men had been gored by the boar that they were held in fear for their lives.

Topic Tracking: Fear 5

The lord rode up, saw the scene, jumped lightly from his horse, and drew his sword. The boar saw the sword and his hackles rose; the hunters feared for their lord's life. The boar lunged from his hole and into the river just as the lord was fording it, and the two met in frothing white water. But the lord had timed the charge and aimed his sword so that it plunged into the boar's neck, and down into its heart. The boar fell, and as he did the hounds and the men fell to him biting and pulling.

Topic Tracking: Courage 6

The mens' horns sounded in triumph, and the master of hounds set his dogs baying. A man trained in the art set about carving up the boar. He cut off the head and mounted it on a post, then cut deep along the backbone and hauled out the intestines. These were broiled on coals and fed to the dogs dressed with bread. Then the meat was carved out, as were the edible guts, and the whole thing was lashed to a heavy rod. The carcass was carried home, and the head, high on its pole, was paraded in front of the lord. To him the trip back home to Gawain seemed longer than the hunt itself.

At the sight of the knight, the lord laughed and gave a loud greeting; the lords and ladies of the castle came running. The lord told them all of the day's travails, and Gawain gave him the praise he deserved as he examined the enormous head. And the lord gave the head to Gawain, saying it was his according to their bargain. To keep his end of the bargain, Gawain threw his arms around the lord and kissed him twice, saying their bond had been kept. The lord replied that he could not compete; Gawain had won the day again. The two men sat down to cloth covered tables and laughed together while servant bustled around them, serving meat. They sang Christmas songs, and were as cheerful as men could be; and all the while, the lord's lady sat beside Gawain, giving him an endless stream of loving glances and winks. Gawain was stunned and angry with himself, though he kept his gracious and kind, regardless of how he felt. Later, after dinner, the two men sat together by a fire in a private chamber. The lord wanted to play their game for another day, but Gawain said he had to leave, to make his way to the green chapel. But the lord insisted that the green chapel was not far; he need not leave until New Year's day. He told Gawain to rest another day in his castle, while he hunted again.



So the next morning, while Gawain slept peacefully, the lord set out to the woods once again. They released their hounds by a wood, and soon the dogs had picked up the trail of a fox; a beagle sounded the alarm and the rest of the dogs came running, keeping the trail fresh. Seeing the fox, the dogs chased him through the underbrush, but he evaded them at all turns. He led the lord and his men on a chase all the way through midday, hiding in the wood, swift and clever.

And while Gawain slept, the lord's wife denied herself sleep and went to Gawain's chamber for the third time. She wore a beautiful mantle, and a jeweled net for her hair. Her face and throat were bare, and she wore a dress deliberately cut very low both in front and in back. She called Gawain awake, scolding him softly for sleeping so long. Gawain had been deep in a miserable dream, but he awoke at the speech. He had tossed and turned all night with a troubled mind, remembering his fate at the green chapel; how he had to take a blow from the Green Knight without fighting back.

Topic Tracking: Fear 6

Gawain gathered his wits and struggled awake. She laughed and bent to him, giving him a graceful kiss.

*"And seeing how beautiful she was,  
And how dressed, and her face, and her body, and her flesh,  
So white, joy swelled in his heart.  
With gentle smiles they started to talk,  
And their talk was of joyful things, they spoke only  
Of bliss.  
Words came flowing free,  
Each was pleased  
With the other; and only Mary  
Could Save him from this.  
That beautiful princess pressed him so hard,  
Urged him so near the limit, he needed  
Either to take her love or boorishly  
Turn her away. To offend like a boor  
Was bad enough; to fall into sin  
Would be worse, betraying the lord of the house.  
'God willing,' he thought, 'it will not happen!'"* Part 3, lines 1760-1776

Topic Tracking: Chivalry 10

The lady told Gawain that shame was all he deserved for refusing a lady sitting in his bed with her heart laid open for him; unless, of course he was refusing her for another love which he already had. Gawain responded once and for all that he had no lover, "and none will have for now" (l. 1791). The lady said those were ugly words, for they were the truth, and the truth had hurt her; she would take her leave. She kissed him, then asked Gawain at least to give her some gift so that she could remember him. Gawain said he had nothing to give her, no trifle he could give her would be worthy of



her beauty and honor; he had come alone on a pilgrimage, and he had no porters with gifts. She responded by saying that if she would have nothing from him, she would at least give him her golden ring. The ring was set with stones, and dazzling enough to be a king's ransom. But Gawain declined, saying he would not accept a one-way gift.

Then the lady insisted that he take her belt instead; it was not as costly. It was green silk, embroidered with gold, and woven with stones. Gawain refused, saying he could not touch treasure or gold until his pilgrimage was complete. But the lady continued to press the belt upon him. She told him that although it seemed a trifle, it was a magic belt, and any man who wore it could never be hurt or killed in any way.

*"Gawain hesitated, his heart  
Reached for protection, like a thief for a gem:  
He could come to that chapel, and take that stroke,  
And with this glorious device walk off  
Unharm'd."* Part 3, lines 1855-1859

Topic Tracking: Fear 7

Gawain allowed her to push the belt on him, and he accepted it as her gift on her condition that he hide the gift from her husband. Gawain thanked her, gracious as never before, and she tapped three kisses on his cheek before leaving. After she was gone, Gawain dressed and hid the belt carefully so he could find it later. Then he walked to the castle chapel and sought a priest to have his confession heard. And he confessed all his sins, and prayed to God, and begged the priest for absolution. At the end, his soul was so clean that he would have welcomed the Day of Judgment. He spent the rest of the day making merry with the lord's wife and the old woman as never before.

In the fields, the lord was still hunting the fox. The lord spied the fox cutting across a grove; he waited, drew his sword, and swung. The fox dodged the blow, but pulled back long enough as it did to be caught by a hound that chased it. A horde of dogs fell on the fox, and bit him to death. The lord dismounted and lifted the fox above his head to keep it from the dogs. The hunters ran up, and bellowed and cheered for the kill. The party headed home in the twilight, and finally arrived at the castle, where Gawain sat at ease by a fire. When he greeted the lord, he said he had to keep his end of their bargain first; he threw his arms around the lord and vigorously kissed him three times. The lord replied that all he had in return to give was a miserable fox skin; three kisses were as good as a dozen bedraggled hides.

The story of the hunt was told, and the two men sang and ate together. They drank to the ladies, and exchanged jests, and Gawain took a humble and courtly farewell of the lord, and asked him for a guide to take him to the green chapel. The lord said he would have anything he wanted, and assigned a servant to guide him through the hills. Then Gawain thanked him, and exchanged kisses sadly with the two ladies. Every man regretted his going, lamenting the departure of his honor. But Gawain was led to his room to sleep.



*"But whether he slept or not I dare not  
Say; he could have remembered many  
Things.*

*Yet let him lie as he will,  
His adventure ringing  
In his ears. Sit still*

*A moment more, and I'll sing it." Part 3, lines 1991-1997*



## Part 4, lines 1998-2308

The next morning was New Year's day, and the dawn brought with it terrible storms, carrying driving snow. Gawain heard it all - he was in bed with his eyes closed, but he slept little. Just before dawn he rose, dressing by lamplight, and ordered his groom to bring his mail shirt and Gringolet's saddle. Gawain was made ready, magnificent in all his armor. Underneath it all he wore a layer of wool against the cold, then the rest of his armor, polished as well as when he had arrived. And with a glorious fur-lined velvet vest, mounted in jewels, Gawain wore the green silk belt, the present from the lord's wife, aware of his best interests. He was determined to save his neck from the threat of the Green Knight.

Gawain took leave of the noble folk in the castle. Gringolet was made ready; the horse had been well groomed and fed, and Gawain sang the praises of the caretakers in the castle. Gawain mounted and spurred his horse, commending those within to Christ, once and for all. The castle gates swung open and Gawain crossed himself as he passed through. A guide had been assigned to him, and he followed the guide's lead. The trees were bare and the cliffs frozen along the way. A misty drizzle settled on the land and melted on the mountains. At the top of a hill, the guide stopped and Gawain pulled up alongside. He asked to speak freely to Gawain, as someone who loved and cared for him. He said that Gawain should go no further: the wild man who lived there was the most horrible creature on earth, bigger than four of Arthur's knights, and loved to kill anyone - peasants, priests, monks, or abbots - at a whim. He then swore to Gawain that if he were to turn back he would tell no one of it, and lie for him always on the matter. Gawain stood firm:

*"I'm grateful, fellow, for all your good wishes;  
I believe you'd keep it a secret, I believe you.  
But however loyally you lied, if I rode  
Away, fled for fear, as you tell me,  
I'd be a coward no knight could excuse.  
Whatever comes, I'm going to that chapel,  
And I'll meet that wild man: however it happens  
It will happen, for evil or good, as fate  
Decides  
However wild  
He may be,  
God can see,  
God can save."* Part 4, lines 2127-2139

Topic Tracking: Courage 7

The guide told him he was courageous; courageous enough to voluntarily lose his life, it appeared. The green chapel was ahead, along the road in the upcoming valley. The guide swung around and raced off, leaving Gawain alone. The knight remained where he was, gathering strength by appealing to God, then spurred Gringolet down the path.



Down in the valley, Gawain saw nothing but hills and rocky crags. The only strange thing was a queer kind of mound, in a glade by the bank of a stream. The water in the brook bubbled as though it were boiling. Gawain dismounted, and tied his horse to a lime tree. The knoll had holes at the end and at the sides, and patches of grass grew everywhere; he saw nothing inside but an old crevice-like cave. Gawain commented on the ugliness of the place, cursed it, and said to himself that this challenge with the Green Knight must have been the work of Satan.

Climbing on the roof, Gawain suddenly heard a violent noise, clattering off the cliff like a grindstone on a scythe. He called out, pronouncing his name. A voice replied from over his head, telling him to wait; what he came for he'd get right quick. A figure, grinding a weapon to a sharp blade stopped and came down through a hole, whirling an enormous long-bladed battle-axe. It was the Green Knight, and he looked as he had a year before, his skin, beard, and face green. But now he skipped like a dancer, leaping along and using his axe handle to hold him up as he approached Gawain, who stood grim as if on a battlefield. The Green Knight watched Gawain bow to him, then said that he knew he could trust Gawain now, for he had come to the green chapel. He continued that even though Gawain had made a difficult journey, it was time for him to pay his due and submit to an axe-stroke. Gawain asked him only to keep his bargain and swing only once, and he would oblige. Gawain bent his neck and leaned forward. He tried to seem fearless, but his knees were weak. The Green Knight hefted the axe above his head and pretended to strike. Had he done so, Gawain would have been dead forever. But as the Green Knight brought up the axe, Gawain looked to the side and caught a glimpse of the glimmering blade. He jerked his shoulders back just a bit as he saw this, and the Green Knight jerked the blade away. He said:

*"Gawain? You can't be Gawain, his name  
Is too noble, he's never afraid, nowhere  
On earth - and you, you flinch in advance!  
I've heard nothing about Gawain the coward.  
And I, did I flinch, fellow, when you swung  
At my neck? I never spoke a word.  
My head fell, and I never flinched.  
And you, before it can happen your heart  
Is quaking. Who doubts I'm the better  
Man?"*  
*'I flinched,' said Gawain,  
'I won't again.  
And this much is plain:  
My head, if it falls, won't talk in my hands.'"* Part 4, lines 2270-2283

Topic Tracking: Fear 8

Gawain then promised to stand his ground; the Green Knight hefted the axe again. He swung it down, but stopped the blade short of Gawain's neck before it could hurt him; Gawain stood his ground like a rooted stump, and the Green Knight laughed and said Gawain now seemed ready for the blow. Gawain was angry and ashamed, and told the



Green Knight that he talked too much and perhaps had scared himself with his threats. The Green Knight mockingly told him how brave he was, and lifted the axe once again. Gawain though his chances this time of living was scant.



## Part 4, lines 2309-2530

The Green Knight swung his axe up, then down toward Gawain's neck. The Green Knight hit him hard, but left only a nick that snipped Gawain's skin. Blood shot from the wound, but as soon as Gawain recognized it he leapt forward and jerked his helmet and shield into place. He felt suddenly happier than he had ever felt, and yelled at the Green Knight to stop, for he had taken the one swing and would accept no more. The Green Knight stood, leaning on his axe and watching, and liked how brave Sir Gawain seemed. He calmed Gawain, telling him he would strike no more, for their bargain was sealed.

*"Perhaps, if my hands were quicker, I could have  
Dealt you a better blow, and done harm.  
I pretended one stroke, a threat, a joke,  
But left you whole; I had the right,  
Because of our other agreement, in my castle;  
You kept it faithfully, performed like an honest  
Man, gave me everything you got.  
Except that you kissed my wife: I swung  
For that reason - but you gave me back her kisses.  
So all you got, for that, was a puff  
Of air.  
An honest man  
Need never fear.  
But still, the third day, there  
In my castle, you failed - and you felt that here.  
'That belt you're wearing: it's mine, my wife  
Gave it to you - I know it all, knight,  
The kisses you took, and gave, and all  
You did, and how she tempted you: everything.  
For I planned it all, to test you - and truly,  
Not many better man have walked  
This earth, been worth as much - like a pearl  
To a pea, compared to other knights.  
But you failed a little, lost good faith -  
Not for a beautiful belt, or in lust,  
But for love of your life. I can hardly blame you."* Part 4, lines 2343-2368

Topic Tracking: Fear 9

Gawain was so burdened with grief that his heart shuddered. He cursed cowardice and greed, then unfastened the green belt and threw it to the lord. He cursed it to rot. He said that he had now learned the meaning of cowardice through the fear of the axe-blow. He said:



*"I'm false, now, forever afraid  
Of bad faith and treachery: may trouble, may sorrow  
Come to them!  
Oh knight: I humbly confess  
My faults: bless me  
With the chance to atone.  
I'll try to sin less."* Part 4, lines 2382-2388

Topic Tracking: Courage 8

The Green Knight laughed, and said that the damage done was gone; he held Gawain cleansed and henceforth pure of heart. He gave the green belt back to Gawain, and said that he did so for him to remember, and for other chivalrous men to know his adventure at the green chapel. Then he invited Gawain back to his castle, saying that he could now befriend his wife for real, and not have her pretend any longer. But Gawain declined courteously, and said he'd lingered long enough. He told the lord to give his regards to his wife, and to tell her that she had tricked him well. He consoled himself by saying that many famous biblical men had been tricked by women: Adam by Eve, Solomon, Samson by Delilah, and David by Bathsheba. Then Gawain said he would gladly accept the Green Knight's belt - not for its beauty, but as a remembrance of his sin. He wanted, he said, to remember just how easily the flesh can be inflicted with sin.

Gawain continued, saying he had but one question: the Green Knight's name. The Green Knight replied that his name was Bercilak de Hautdesert. He had been sent to King Arthur's court by a woman who lives in his castle, Morgana le Fay, a famous witch taught magic by Merlin. Morgana sent him, the Green Knight said, to test the pride and fame of Gawain and the Knights of the Round Table. She had wanted his lopped-off head to addle the knights' brains, and also scare Guenevere, Arthur's wife. Morgana was also Gawain's aunt; the Green Knight begged Gawain to go back with him to see her, for he was well loved in that castle. But Gawain refused again, and bid farewell to the Green Knight, and left on Gringolet, his horse.

Gawain rode home to Camelot, and had many adventures on the trip home. The nick in his neck from the axe-blow healed, but always he wore the gleaming green belt slanted across his tunic, as a token of his sin. He finally arrived at Arthur's court safe and sound. Arthur was delighted he was home; he called to his knights and both he and his queen kissed Gawain and asked of his adventures. He never concealed a thing, but told them of the chapel, the Green Knight, the lord's wife, and of the green belt. He showed them the faint scar on the back of his neck from the axe, and as he told his story, he groaned in shame at his admissions.

*"My lord,' said Gawain, lifting the belt,  
'This band and the nick on my neck are one  
And the same, the blame and the loss I suffered  
For the cowardice, the greed, that came to my soul.  
This sign of bad faith is the mark of my sin:*



*I'll wear it on my waist as long as I live,  
For a man may hide an injury to his soul,  
But he'll never be rid of it, it's fastened forever.'  
The king consoled him, and all that court,  
And they laughed and resolved, then and there,  
That lords and ladies of Arthur's table  
Would each of them wear a slanted belt  
Around their waists, woven of green,  
To keep company with their well-loved Gawain."* Part 4, lines 2505-2518

Topic Tracking: Chivalry 11

From that day forward the Knights of the Round Table wore green belts, and it was a sign of their glory, as all the romances tell.

*"And so in Arthur's time this adventure  
Took place, as the book of Brutus bears witness,  
After that bold Brutus appeared  
In Britain, when the siege and assault had done  
For Troy;  
And other adventures as well,  
Of great and loyal  
Knights. Now may the royal  
King of the world keep us from Hell!"* Part 4, lines 2522-2530

The poem ends with the following inscription, in Latin (translated beneath):

*"HONY SOYT QUI MAL PENCE [shame to him who finds evil here]"* Part 4, Inscription