

### Lecture 3: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

SITHEN the sege and the assaut was sesed at Troye,  
The borgh **brittened** and brent to brondes and askes,  
*destroyed*

The **tulk** that the **trammes** of tresoun ther wrought  
*man plots*

Was tried for his tricherie, the **trewest** on erthe:  
*truest?*

Hit was Ennias the **athel**, and his highe **kynde**,  
*noble kin*

That sithen **depreced** prouinces, and **patrounes** bicomme  
*conquered princes [over]*

**Welneghe** of al the **wele** in the west iles.  
*nearly wealth*

Fro **riche** Romulus to Rome **ricchis** hym swythe,  
*When noble Romulus to Rome makes way swiftly*  
With gret **bobbaunce** that burghe he **biges** vpon fyrst,  
*pride builds*

And **neuenes** hit his **aune** nome, as hit now **hat**;  
*names own has*

Tirus to Tuskan and **teldes bigynnes**,  
*dwellings builds*

Langaberde in Lumbardie lyftes vp homes,  
And fer ouer the French flod **Felix Brutus**

*Happy B. [Albion]*



This stylistic tension between older and newer poetic styles is reflected also, thematically, in the structure of the poem as a whole.

HOW?

3 Ways of looking at structural/thematic question, by observing tensions between

1. Old (Celtic) Folklore  
and New (French) Romance (of Chivalry)
2. Nature and Culture/Civilization/Art
3. Pagan and Christian

What are some of the folkloric elements in the poem?

What is natural and what is artificial? To which world does the Green Knight belong?

What are some of the pagan elements in the poem?

What are some of the Christian elements in the poem?

So who is that Jolly Green Giant anyway?

- (1) A creature of folklore & the supernatural
- (2) A nature spirit—a seasonal “deity,” like the Spirit of Christmas Present in Dickens’ *Christmas Carol*
- (3) A pagan—APPARENTLY

In this poem, nothing is ever quite what it SEEMS to be on the surface. The Green Knight is also (really?) Sir Bercelak de Haute Desert, a conventional, Christian member of the lesser nobility.

In these terms Gawain would (**seem to**) represent

- (1) A “civilized” human who encounters the “spooky,” unaccountable forces of “spiritual” life that civilization struggles to control or repress.
- (2) Artifice and cultivation—what we call “civilized.”
- (3) A Christian—Mary’s Knight, in fact.

Let’s look at how some of these thematic tensions work themselves out in the narrative of the poem.

“This [boyish] king lay at Camelot at Christmastide. . . .  
While the New Year was new, but yesternight come,  
This fair folk at feast two-fold was served. . . .  
[And] he stands there in state, the stout young king,  
Talking before the high table of trifles fair.  
There Gawain the good knight by Guenevere sits.”

(A163-64:37, 61-62, 107-09)

The festivities are disrupted by the entrance of “an unknown rider, / One the greatest on ground”:

“Great wonder grew in hall  
At his hue most strange to see,  
For man and gear and all  
Were green as green could be.” (A165:136-37, 147-50)

He swaggers around, asking “So whose in charge here?”

He is obviously unimpressed by the spectacle of lords and ladies engaging in their trivial pursuits; he has come to enliven the festivities by issuing a challenge—in effect, giving Arthur what he has recklessly asked for, a strange adventure. The Giant wants to play a game, an exchange of blows: ‘Your champion will take a crack at me; then, a year from now, I’ll get my shot at him.’

After an embarrassing silence, Sir Gawain steps up to the plate, bravely taking up the challenge. He probably, quite reasonably, expects that if he does the job right, there won’t be any “exchange.”

He gets an unpleasant surprise when the Giant picks up his head and it speaks:

“Sir Gawain, forget not to go as agreed,  
And cease not to seek till me, sir, you find,  
As you promised in the presence of these proud knights.  
To the Green Chapel come, I charge you, to take  
Such a dint as you have dealt.” (A171:448-52)

That is the obvious challenge that Gawain must face, but the more serious challenge—to his integrity and his intelligence as well as to his courage—remains hidden from him until the end, until he has failed.



After traveling for many weeks (All through Advent: from All Saints day, November 1, until Christmas Eve), Gawain comes upon a ferly castle, where he agrees to rest until he must set forth on his adventure again.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> section of the poem narrates three days of hunting and being hunted. After the questing knight has rested for three days, Gawain says he must resume his fearful quest.

The Green Chapel? No problem, says the host:

“Tarry till the fourth day

And ride on the first of the year.

We shall set you on your way;

It is not two miles from here.” (A184:1075-78)

To while away the interim, host and guest agree to an exchange of gifts. The host will hunt while Gawain rests.

1<sup>st</sup> day: Host kills and gives Gawain a deer.

Gawain gives him a kiss.

2<sup>nd</sup> day: Host gives Gawain a wild boar.

Gawain kisses him twice.

3<sup>rd</sup> day: Host corners fox; Lady corners Gawain.

She asks for a gift; Gawain says no.

She offers a ring; Gawain says no.

She offers her green girdle; he accepts.

Host gives Gawain only a scrawny fox  
Gawain gives the Host three kisses.  
But not the Green Girdle.

And so, in the 4<sup>th</sup> Fit, the Green Knight takes three swings with his axe at Gawain's neck, nicking him slightly the third time:

*“I owed you a hit and you have it; be happy therewith!  
The rest of my rights here I freely resign. . . .  
First I flourished with a feint, in frolicsome mood,  
And left your hide unhurt—and there I did well  
By the fair terms we fixed on the first night;  
And fully and faithfully you followed accord:  
Gave over all your gains as a good man should.  
A second feint, sir, I assigned for the morning  
You kissed my comely wife—each kiss you restored.  
For both of these there behooved but two feigned blows  
by right.*

*True men pay what they owe;  
No danger then in sight.  
You failed at the third throw,  
So take my tap, sir knight.  
For that is my belt about you, the same braided girdle,  
My wife it was that wore it.”*

(A209-210:2341-42, 2345-59)

Gawain is humiliated, confesses to cowardice and greed, and asks forgiveness, which Sir Bercilak graciously grants him—more graciously than Gawain receives it. How easy it is to forgive; how hard to be forgiven.

So Gawain fails his test. Or does he? What does “failure” mean if one HAS to fail/fall in order to succeed?

Earlier, I tried to suggest and illustrate some patterns for you to think about, defined by dynamic tensions between

1. Old (Celtic) Folklore  
and New (French) Romance (of Chivalry)
2. Nature and Culture/Civilization/Art
3. Pagan and Christian

I would like to end with another pattern, woven out of the three I have glanced at, but not identical to any of them.

This pattern is also a paradox.

Let me state the matter this way:

Gawain fails to measure up. BUT in order to succeed in his quest, he MUST fail. His failure is therefore fortunate.

His good fortune—*if* he has the grace to receive it—is that he becomes a fully human being, not the child-like perfect knight he believed he was, but an imperfect, fallible *human* being.

## NOTE

1] this 4-part structure, beginning and ending with the New Year, reflects the cycle of seasons:

*A year passes apace, and proves ever new:  
First things and final conform but seldom.  
And so this Yule to the young year yielded place,  
And each season ensued at its set time;  
After Christmas there came the cold cheer of Lent,  
When with fish and plainer fare our flesh we reprove;  
But then the world's weather with winter contends:  
The keen cold lessens, the low clouds lift;  
Fresh falls the rain in fostering showers  
On the face of the fields; flowers appear.  
The ground and the groves wear gowns of green;  
Birds build their nests, and blithely sing  
That solace of all sorrow with summer comes  
ere long.*

*And blossoms day by day  
Bloom rich and rife in throng;  
Then every grove so gay  
Of the greenwood rings with song.*

*And then the season of summer with the soft winds,  
When Zephyr sighs low over seeds and shoots;  
Glad is the green plant growing abroad,  
When the dew at dawn drops from the leaves,  
To get a gracious glance from the golden sun.  
But harvest with harsher winds follows hard after,  
Warns him to ripen well ere winter comes;  
Drives forth the dust in the droughty season,  
From the face of the fields to fly high in air.  
Wroth winds in the welkin wrestle with the sun,  
The leaves launch from the linden and light  
on the ground,  
And the grass turns to gray, that once grew green.  
Then all ripens and rots that rose up at first,  
And so the year moves on in yesterdays many,  
And winter once more, by the world's law,  
draws nigh.*

(A172-73:498-531)

This famous passage is, in one of its dimensions, a re-enactment on a macrocosmic scale of the conflicts played out in the human microcosm, as the hero confronts the forces of primal nature—as well as the subtler forces, natural and artificial, at work within his own nature. —

**What do the terms “microcosm” and “macrocosm” mean?**