

“Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”

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It is not known who wrote the alliterative four-part poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, but it was likely written in the fourteenth century. Situated in King Arthur's court in medieval England, this poem tells the tale of Sir Gawain, Arthur's nephew and most loyal knight, and his adventures with the supernatural Green Knight. Not only a story full of quests, game-playing, feasting, and romance; this poem tells the tale of Gawain's modest chivalry, his commitment to duty, and his ultimate bravery and selflessness.

Our story begins on New Year's Day in Camelot, King Arthur's court. All the Knights of the Round Table are there, as is Queen Guinevere, Arthur's wife, and Sir Gawain, Arthur's nephew. There is much festivity and laughter in preparation for what is sure to be an enormous feast. For kings, Arthur is young and somewhat immature, and, as is his habit before large banquets, he refuses to eat until some sort of game or contest has been announced or a fantastic tale has been told. After a long while of waiting, and just when it seems that this feast will have to begin without such a marvel, the doors to the palace fly open to reveal the largest, greenest, and strongest man anyone in the court has ever seen.

The giant, dressed all in green with braided gold thread and clutching a sprig of holly in one hand and a shining axe in the other, is of enormous stature and has a long, wiry green beard. Despite these characteristics that will normally make a person unattractive, all the members of the court think to themselves how handsome he is. He steps off his horse, which is also huge and green, and states eloquently that he means no harm, that he only wishes to witness the bravery and honesty of the men of this court he has heard rumor of all across the land.

Furthermore, the knight continues, he would like to propose a game to test the boldness of the knights. In an exchange of blows, of sorts, a knight of the King's court will take a swing at the Green Knight, and one year later will search out the Green Chapel so the Green Knight can have his turn. There is silence in Arthur's court, no one dares to move. As the Green Knight begins to mock their cowardice, King Arthur himself steps forward to accept the

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challenge. As he takes the unwieldy axe from the Green Knight, Sir Gawain insists that he be the one to perform the test.

Sir Gawain is by far the bravest and most noble of all the knights in King Arthur's court, yet his modesty shadows his sense of duty and chivalry. As he steps up to his opponent, axe in hand, the Green Knight makes sure the verbal agreement is understood by all. Gawain must come find the Green Knight in exactly one year to receive his own due. Gawain agrees, and taking the axe high above his head, cuts swiftly through the giant's green-veined neck, cleanly slicing off his entire head, and watches as it rolls about the feet of the other guests.

Gawain's relief at having killed the Green Knight is short-lived, for the knight, squirting blood from his headless torso, gets up and takes his severed head in his hands. He gets back up onto his horse still holding his head, which laughs, and gallops away shouting at Gawain to remember their pact and to seek the Green Chapel in one year. The court is speechless, but soon merriment and growling stomachs take precedence to the strange green giant, and the festivities continue long into the night.

Slowly, the seasons change and Sir Gawain finds himself one year older and on the verge of a quest that may very well cost him his life. He knows it is his duty to go, however, for he gave the Green Knight his word. He bids farewell to Arthur and his court, and all are sad to see him go for they know he may never return. Gawain mounts his trusty horse Gringolet, and with his shield showing the pentangle star, a symbol of truth, marked upon it, he rides off in search of the Green Chapel.

Gawain's journey takes him far over the lands of Arthur's kingdom, and he meets with many foul enemies like dragons, wolves, satyrs, forest trolls, bulls, bears, boars, and giant ogres. He bravely continues on, however, until finally he prays that a castle appear before him so he can rest. When he lifts his head from prayer, he sees a splendid castle and rides to it. Upon entering the castle, he is treated with utmost respect and hospitality. The lord of the castle, a tall, powerful man with a long beard, offers Gawain

everything and anything he needs. The lord is followed by two women; one very crotchety with deep wrinkles and a bent back, and the other very young and beautiful. Gawain learns that the beautiful one is the lady of the castle.

The next day, the lord learns Gawain's name, and all the court is impressed and honored that so brave a knight should be staying with them. Upon hearing of Gawain's quest, the lord reassures him that the Green Chapel is not far, and that he can therefore rest for three more days before continuing. He also offers up a game. During the day, Gawain will rest at the castle while the lord goes hunting, and when he returns, they will exchange everything they have received on that day. This seems like an enjoyable diversion, and Gawain agrees.

The first day of the game, the lord wakes very early and departs with his huntsmen and hounds. Gawain slumbers peacefully into the morning until he hears the door to his chamber open. Feigning sleep and peering out from half-closed eyes, he sees it is the lady of the castle. When she opens the curtains and sits next to him on his bed, he pretends to just be waking up. Yawning, he acts surprised to see her. The lady of the house, it seems, has taken quite a liking to Gawain and refuses to leave without a kiss. For hours, she lavishes Gawain with attention and admiration, yet he refuses all her advances. He, after all, is a chivalrous knight of King Arthur's house. Finally, worried that he will offend if he doesn't submit to at least part of her request, he accepts a kiss from her.

When the lord returns from his hunt laden with rich venison, he finds Gawain near the fireplace. He offers his kill to Gawain, as was their agreement, and Gawain in turn offers the lord a kiss. The lord laughs, saying that Gawain's winnings are much better than his, and asks where he received such a gift. Gawain reminds him jokingly that they never agreed to divulge the source of their winnings, only the winnings themselves.

The next day, a similar thing happens. When the lord returns from his hunt, Gawain offers him two kisses in exchange for a large

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boar. The third day, however, when the lady of the castle comes into Gawain's chamber, she demands he give her a small trinket or love token. Gawain claims he has nothing to give, and the lady states that if he will not give her anything, the least he can do is accept something from her. Gawain refuses a gift of her golden ring, but when she offers her green belt embossed with gold which she tells him will protect him from death, he is tempted.

Gawain has found himself in a bit of a chivalric quandary. To submit to the lady of the castle would mean he break his chastity, yet to refuse the advances of a lady who is of a higher rank than he means he break his knightly duty to be chivalrous. In the end, Gawain accepts the gift of the magic belt and receives the lady's three kisses. When the lord returns that evening, he gives Gawain the fox he has hunted, and Gawain in turn gives him the three kisses that he received that day. He keeps the belt a secret, however.

The next morning, New Year's Day, is the day Gawain must continue to the Green Chapel to finally uphold his end of the bargain and meet his fate. He bids goodbye to the castle, thanking them for their generous hospitality, and the lord offers him a guide to lead him to his destination. With the help of this guide, Gawain reaches the Green Chapel swiftly and without incident. Before the guide turns to go, however, he offers Gawain the chance to escape, promising not to tell a soul. Gawain refuses, stating he made a verbal agreement with the Green Knight and will fulfill his duty as a valiant knight, even if it means his death. The guide leaves him then, and Gawain approaches the chapel. He first hears the Green Knight sharpening his axe, and then sees him practically scampering down the hill to greet him. The giant is pleased that Gawain has come, and says that he trusts him completely now that he came through on his promise of one year ago. Gawain, afraid but refusing to be a coward, greets the Green Knight and obligingly bends his neck out and leans forward to accept his fate.

As the Green Knight's axe begins to fall, Gawain flinches. The Green Knight stops and scolds Gawain for being a coward in the face of death. Gawain then promises to be strong, and does not flinch as the knight's axe nearly chops off his head. The Green Knight has stopped short of Gawain's neck and, laughing, starts to swing again. The third time he swings, Gawain believes that his life is certainly over. However, as the axe comes down, it merely nicks his neck, drawing a thin line of blood. Gawain stands up and gleefully challenges the Green Knight to a fight, saying that he has swung three times which was already twice too many.

The Green Knight then reveals why he hasn't killed Gawain. He says that the first swing was for the first day, when Gawain accepted the kiss from the lady and returned it to the lord. The second swing was for the second day, when Gawain accepted two kisses from the lady and returned them both to the lord. The third swing, and resulting cut, was for the third day when he received and returned the three kisses but kept the magic belt a secret.

Gawain is ashamed to learn that the lord of the castle was actually the Green Knight in disguise, yet also relieved that the punishment for this treason is only a small scratch. He also learns that the old gnarled woman is actually Morgan le Faye, Arthur's half-sister who constantly hatches evil plots to cause trouble for Arthur and his followers. Gawain bids goodbye to the Green Knight, yet continues to be burdened with grief. Upon returning to King Arthur's court he vows to wear the green belt as a reminder of the sins he committed, and in a show of unity and respect, the court promises to do the same.

