

Courtesy of the Green Knight: Spirituality and Religious Ritual in Sir Gawain and the
Green Knight

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Spring 2007

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Seminar 30 April 2007

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In a world of people divided by religions and denominations within, many find themselves, by default, as being members of whichever belief system surrounds them. Rituals are set to keep the members within guidelines of moral attitudes and obligations. These collective religious systems leave little room for a truly personal way in which to connect with a system of spirituality more adept for each personal soul. This is a potential problem with Christianity that became a reality over hundreds of years by which corruption in the church and among the clergy took hold. Recognizing this as a potential fallacy in spirituality lead to people progressing from the organization of church to each individual's personal obligations, specifically in fourteenth century Western Europe. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a piece of this century, and it is a depiction of the clash between a Christian ritualistic ideology, and a non-Christian system of folk thought in the fourteenth century. Sir Gawain, in performing different rituals throughout the epic poem, represents where Christianity was at the time. The Green Knight, in both of his characters, represents a non-Christian structure by which to make decisions. His code proves to logically and practically overtake Gawain's ritualistic efforts.

* Lines used from translation by Burton Raffel, 1970.

Before drawing the conclusion that non-Christian morals, in this case, are able to show flaws in what Christianity had become in the fourteenth century, it is best to explain first that Gawain is indeed a weak knight in spite of the general consensus among critics throughout the twentieth century. He is capable of giving up the upper hand in the story for the majority of the events that occur, especially in the climactic end. The Green Knight, overall is the wiser of the two main characters, and ultimately teaches that Gawain is wrong in thinking that his rituals are the sole connection to the divine, or the most effective ways in which to succeed in times of tension. The poem, comprised of four parts, is acclaimed in the symmetrical way that it was written. It also is parallel to the historical context from which it was written. This poem represents a time of conflict between organized religion and individual spirituality, and the action within the poem shows the progression inward as a more fulfilling means of reaching the intended essence. Sir Gawain's evident vulnerability in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight serves as a forum for lessons from the Green Knight to reflect the medieval conflict between the organization of Christianity and Individual spirituality.

The Sir Gawain character existed in many tales prior to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as part of the Arthurian tradition. In addition, this tradition is covered in the literature of different nations. Much criticism can be found regarding his reputation in the French tradition as well as the English tradition. He is established as being the nephew of King Arthur years before he faced the Green Knight. In fact, King Arthur mandated most of Gawain's previous appearances in literature in efforts to prove his nephew's strength and honor. His introduction to Arthur, in early accounts, came with much conflict stemming from Arthur's fear of a reputedly stronger knight in his newfound nephew.

Raymond Thompson's article, "Gawain Against Arthur: The Impact of a Mythological Pattern Upon Arthurian Tradition in Accounts of the Birth of Gawain," traces the continuing conflict between Arthur and Gawain, specifically focusing on the French tradition. The end of the conflict occurs when Arthur sends pursuers after Gawain who "Single-handed[ly] defeated them] and thus earn[ed] the public recognition of his uncle" (Thompson 118). The conflict is portrayed in the beginning of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Gawain does have his strengths that put him in a position far above the common man. Therefore, it is not necessary to say that he is a weak man, in general. A knight who is vulnerable in his ability to make decisions, as described in many shaky accounts over his history and, specifically, in this particular poem. In many cases, characters in the story praise his adherence to the knightly code of chivalry, and critics, for the most part, would agree that he fits well within the constructs of a knightly tale. Of course, alongside chivalry and camaraderie, a knight is to regulate his conduct in the presence of women, as they are unable to be knights and serve an entirely different purpose on earth that is to be respected and admired appropriately. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, however, is not traditional within its genre, meaning that it is not a simple case of good overcoming evil in which any lessons are given through the knights.

Traditionally, Arthurian tales are sources of entertainment, and this one even opens with King Arthur requesting to be entertained before a feast of the Christmas and New Years season with "tournaments many [...] carol-dancing [...] chanting [...] and gathering] gaily, hand-gifts to make" (41-66). Dean Loganbill addresses the combination of the different medieval traditions that are represented in the poem in his article, "The Medieval Mind in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." He agrees that it was written in a

transitional period of time, that the piece is a reflection of the time, and that it is set apart from the knightly tales preceding it. One of the most common attractions to critics of the poem is its symmetrical structure on which he states "Such attention to structure certainly argues for a well-defined purpose which goes far beyond the repetition of a traditional tale or the mere entertainment of an audience" (125). Loganbill's indicator is the actual structural make-up of the poem, and this would include the symmetry as well as the constant symbolic references, both to the Bible and to natural spiritual practice. The structure is essential to the Gawain character because most critics assume that he is, by definition, "great" in their analysis of the poem, and they celebrate his good judgment by default and expectation. The "well-defined" purpose that Loganbill mentions does not come from Gawain in this story; it comes from the games provided by the Green Knight, and the lessons therein. It is symbolic that the entrance of the Green Knight is an interruption of a post-Christmas feast, and it is symmetric to the ending at which Gawain's flawed nature is exposed and reproached with the Green Knight's own wisdom. The Green Knight's clothing and his skin are the colors of the green earth with ornamentation colored like the gold sun. His obvious symbolic adherence to changing seasons and regeneration are presented first at a celebratory feast in the New Year's season. He represents something new and different, while Gawain represents what was the standard ritualistic Christian practice of the fourteenth century.

Part of the ritual of Christianity is confession of sins, and John Burrow, in his examination of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, concentrates on the two confession scenes in the story. These scenes are located in the ending of the poem. The first is between Gawain and a priest before he is to meet with the Green Knight. The second

confession is Gawain and the Green Knight, during which, Gawain is in fear for his life under the Green Knight's axe. "Walk[ing] happily to mass," after kissing the host's wife, the traditional confession ritual is merely implied with little or no feeling (1311).

However, "In the scene with the Green Knight, the emphasis lies on Gawain's [...] desire to make restitution and his resolve to sin no more" (Burrow 76). Not many would hold this comparison as strong allegiance to Gawain's faith, nor does it show the courage that is often characteristic of the knights from the many tales. As the Green Knight took part in one of these confessions, Burrow believes that "Both Bercilak and the knights of Arthur's court, of course, accept the Christian values for which Gawain stands and admire him as an exemplary representative of these values" (78). This statement comes from the conception that the game introduced to Arthur's court of "the best/ Stoutest under steel-gear on steeds to ride,/ worthiest of their works.../ and peerless to prove in passage of arms," is of reverence to the court (259-62). Later he refers to them as "beardless children," rendering his previous comments about them as likely mockery. He does not respect them, nor does he even know which one is Gawain, as far as he lets on to the knights. From the beginning, the poet does not allot to Gawain the credibility of the knight that some may have thought he was, which is one way this poem is unique from other tales of Arthur's knights. Also, the poem makes use of Gawain as an impressionable character that is able to be subject to much change during the course of actions in the poem.

Though critics may disagree, there are scholars who see past the fact that Gawain does sit at the round table, and that he is from the bloodline of King Arthur, which is often viewed as a symbol of his esteemed status. In many counts of Gawain's

appearances in literature prior to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, indiscretion can be witnessed in his judgment. Raymond Thompson cites instances in his article entitled "The Perils of Good Advice: The Effect of Wise Counselor upon the Conduct of Gawain." From a variety of Arthurian tales that involve Gawain, who generally seems to be able to come out on top of the conflict, but not without the meticulous influence of the "wise counselor" Gawain is often awarded more credit than his discretion would deserve by others in the stories as well as scholars. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight follows this Gawain tradition, and takes it to the extreme. Not only is his ultimate lesson taught by the wisdom of the Green Knight, his life is spared as well by the Green Knight. Without being unfair, the Green Knight could have decapitated Gawain at the end. Gawain decapitated him, and assumed that this obviously supernatural being would not be able to regenerate a head. The decapitation is consistent with Thompson's concept of Sir Gawain, in that he does not always think things through, and the lack of foresight can lead to difficulty triumphing over whatever forces he may encounter. This is where the wise counselor enters the picture. In one case, Thompson uses Merlin as an example from another story to illustrate that "Gawain throws discretion to the wind ... when he encounters the figure of the wise counselor" (72). This statement is applicable to a number of his confrontations with the Green Knight as Gawain is always vulnerable to learning a lesson.

Beyond his humanly impulsive nature, many of his indiscretions did involve not controlling his urges towards women in a characteristic manner of a knight. It is interesting that while there is criticism that praises his demeanor, the criticism that is supported by examples can show many holes in his tactfulness. Albert Friedman goes as

far as to say that "Gawain may well have had a reputation as a lecher in fourteenth century England" (265). He uses the example of Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, and explains that Gawain took his wife by force. While this does not seem like the action of the Gawain from Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, he does not exactly fit the role of Friedman's "Champion of Chastity."

One of Gawain's major tests occurs after he makes it to the castle of Bercilak, involving Bercilak's wife. Similar to the blow-for-a-blow game presented at the beginning, Gawain is required to give everything that he receives to the host in return for hospitality and food. This game is more implicit upon Bercilak's agreement; "Whatever I win in the woods I will give you at eve,/ and all you have earned you must offer to me" (2016). The food comes from the host's three daily hunts that are described side by side with Gawain's days of rest. While they are hunting, Bercilak's wife tries to seduce Gawain while he lays in bed resting. The game that Bercilak and his men hunt are symmetrical to the ways in which the lady of the castle tries to seduce Gawain. The first day, her approach, like the deer being hunted, gets her a kiss from Gawain. He in turn passes it on to Bercilak. He found the loophole consisting of Bercilak not needing to know whom he had kissed, for that was not part of the agreement. A loophole is a very clever means to not upset his host and the lady, but it does not reflect living under a God that is omniscient. While the game that he agreed upon with his host conflicts with his alleged duty to this lady, that she outlines in her statement "If Gawain were as good as his name, with every/ courtly value lining his heart,/ he'd never have stayed so long with a lady and left her unknissed" (1297-99). Her convincing rhetoric earned her a kiss from Gawain, but it really is nothing more than clever words. It is never appropriate to kiss

another man's wife under any code. His worries are worldly and are completely limited to the judgment of him on earth. The following day Bercilak and his men hunt wild pigs. Bercilak's wife bursts into Gawain's room with her breast exposed. She is more aggressive than anything else. The wife's attempt the next day is sly like the foxes being hunted. She receives another kiss from Gawain. It is at this point that Gawain's unwise indiscretion is displayed.

Beyond the partially successful attempted seduction, the wife gives Gawain a green girdle and explains that it has supernatural powers that can keep him from harm; "the man that possesses this piece of silk,/...could not be killed by any craft on earth" (1851-4). Gawain accepts this token, which, needless to say, goes against any faith that any man may have in God as outlined in the Christian Bible. He does not even show the token to his host, which is in direct defiance of their agreement. His confession to the priest includes no repentance of his obvious bad judgment. John Burrow is also able to see the hollowness of the confession after accepting the girdle; "In agreeing to conceal the gift of the girdle... he neither makes restitution by returning the girdle nor resolves to sin no more" (75). Gawain gave and received the simple pleasure of a kiss to and from a married woman, and his only time of real apology was when the Green Knight exposed the whole plot. Donald Howard, in his article "Structure and Symmetry in Sir Gawain," focuses on the organization of the symbols that the poet includes. Furthermore, Gawain's crutch-like use of the symbolic girdle, which is often compared symmetrically to his shield, makes him guilty "not because he desires to [save himself], but because in order to do so he uses worldly means in the wrong way," as Howard states (428).

Simply being the nephew of King Arthur, in the history of Sir Gawain, gave him many chances to prove himself as a righteous knight of the round table. These occurrences took place in literature over many years before Gawain's existence in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Some scholars, such as Alan Markman, state that "He is given [...] the highest position; he is Arthur's nephew," which is carried out in "his willingness to accept the monstrous challenge of the Green Knight" (577-8). As a blood relative of the King, Gawain is allotted an automatic positive reputation without the utilization of additional context, and while this additional context does exist, as mentioned before, the contextual clues that are actually in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight lead many analysts to the premature assumption that Gawain is unanimously "great." Others do not believe that his pedigree is anything but an unnecessary boost of a possibly unworthy man's image. Gawain sits at the round table next to Guinevere, but why would Arthur give a knight known for his "suave amorousness" a seat next to his wife? Either he trusts Gawain to the utmost extent, or he feels no threat from him. His acceptance of the Green Knight's challenge comes after Arthur has already agreed upon it. He steps up in an attempt to relieve his uncle of the duty, but also he feels the need to prove himself, which is one of the negative indications of his negative or less than stellar character. These aspects are also signs of why Gawain was chosen by the Green Knight for this allegorical message. He is a contemplative character that is vulnerable, and he is not as attuned to his instincts as are the other knights.

By definition, the protagonist is the leading character with the role directed at achieving the resolution. Also in the definition is that the protagonist is the leading advocate of the primary cause against evil. What is first considered to be the evil force in

this story is eventually overturned as the leading advocate of the positive cause. The only evil instance in the entirety of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is actually Gawain's initial reaction to the presentation of the game. He decapitates the Green Knight at first attention of his presented game, without hesitation. This beheading is a reference to an ancient Celtic beheading game as a part of the annual harvest celebration. The crops grow back each year, as did the Green Knight's head in this case. Hypothetically, Gawain could have shaken the Green Knight's hand and expected a handshake in return a year later. The Green Knight and his alternate human identity, Bercilak, show good cheer throughout the poem. His only degrading comments come about directed at the round table in retaliation for their collective lack of bravery when they hesitate to step up to his challenge. This is hardly evil. The Green Knight is unlike anything that the knights had ever encountered up to that point in the fourteenth century, not only in his supernatural presence, but in his positive output. He is not strictly antagonistic. He did give Gawain the first blow as well as a year in which to prepare for the retaliation. While the knights project outward an image of chivalric values and individual magnitudes much greater than the average man, William Woods believes that "the great green horse and rider who invade Arthur's haven of polite cheer are icons of a world-out-of-doors, and a journey inward" (209). Woods advocates this more positive role of the Green Knight in his article "Nature and the Inner Man in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." He also poses the stance that the story represents an inner spirituality taught to Gawain as a replacement of his outwardly projected ritualistic religious practice. Proof of this is the consistency of Gawain's blindness to the plot that surrounds him. At no point during this poem is Gawain described as having control of the elements. While he is clever in his trickery

over the seduction tactics of Bercilak's wife and over Bercilak himself, the reader can be resolved in knowing that the Green Knight is continually aware of every move made by Gawain.

On the tactfulness of the Green Knight, Raymond Thompson wrote another article entitled "The Perils of Good Advice: The Effect of the Wise Counsellor Upon the Conduct of Gawain." The Green Knight's omniscience, established early with the poet's vivid description of him, lends to his ultimate role as the "the wise counselor who gives sound advice to the obtuse [who] is a familiar figure in folklore" (Thompson 74). While Gawain believes to have found a loophole in his agreement to Bercilak, his attempts are turned around on him with an axe to his neck. Since the events in the poem are actually run by the Green Knight, the accounts of Christian rituals, performed by Gawain, are not the prominently effective means of decision making in the poem, and the Pagan compilation of natural symbols is introduced. John Burrow agrees that "theological terms are no longer appropriate, for the Green Knight is a figure from the world not of theology but of public myth" (76). The description of the Green Knight is the one of very few detailed descriptions in the poem, and it can instantly be related to his symbolic relation to the earth and regeneration.

If one is familiar with the mythical figure that the Green Knight most closely resembles, then the harvest can be added to the list of his symbolic references. His symbolic value is important, on the surface, because it allows the ability to walk away from his own decapitation and grow back a head in its place, as would any plant after being harvested. Also his superhuman presence is able to draw, in the end, a more vulnerable and genuine confession from Gawain than Gawain had previously provided to

the priest. In the terms of Clark that contribute to the case of spirituality over religion, "Gawain's confession to the priest is not as efficacious as his secular confession to the Green Knight" (15). At this point it is important to add that religion, as presented in the poem, does not seem to have negative intentions. The difference between outward projection of one's religious principles for their own personal guidance, and consumption of the spiritual nature of the Earth for inner advancement is made distinct by the Green Knight in the case of this poem. The underlying lessons of the "secular" world could easily be applied to the spiritual connection. The words of the Green Knight are an example of that fact. Neither of his two personalities is overly harsh in his confrontations with Gawain or the Round Table, therefore, no real aggression can be observed. The Green Knight is observed as being objectively fair, though he is not a representative of Christianity, which leaves one wondering what his motives were for the implementation of the games.

Many literary scholars explain the conflict as being commissioned by Morgan la Faye, but a cheerful Knight like the Green one is no advocate for evil, and this force behind the games is actually brushed off by some critics. Concentrating on Morgan le Fay's contribution, Albert Friedman points out the specifics of her role in his article "Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." In reference to the alleged motive of Morgan le Fay to expend attention and testing upon the Knights of the Round Table, Friedman mentions the tension mentioned in the poem of Morgan le Fay towards Guinevere. In the poem it is written; "She (Morgan le Fay) put this shape upon me to puzzle your wits/ To afflict the fair queen and frighten her to death" (2459-60). There is not much description of Guinevere's reaction to the Green Knight's entrance in Arthur's

court, though Friedman suggests that in explaining Morgan le Fay's scare tactic intentions, Bercilak might be being "Hyperbolic." And in the initial scene where the Green Knight enters the court, with Arthur's "cheerful style he adopts, it is plain that he is not dealing with a woman in a state of shock" (263). These assumptions of the force behind the playful action in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight do not count Morgan le Fay out, but the lack of emphasis throughout the poem on her makes it a likely cause of the poet to concentrate on the other sources of tension in the poem. It is possible that the poet added her to throw off the reader, or she was added as a last minute addition of a motive. In this case for example, if the poet meant to have the audience concentrate on Morgan le Fay as being the antagonist, then more lines would have covered Guinevere's reaction to the Green Knight's abrupt entrance.

The lack of a completely defined antagonist, in the grand scheme at least, leads to the big question of why these games were presented in the first place. However, in singling out Morgan le Fay as much more than a historical reference in this story, more emphasis can be placed on the Green Knight as the advocate of the games and also the results of his actions.

The games are targeted at Sir Gawain, obviously, so the tensions within him are the prominent tensions with which the reader will sequentially identify. These tensions include the standards: man against nature, himself, and other men. Gawain's being a knight, however, brings about special circumstances in addition to the conflicts. He is forced to prove himself as a knight and Arthur's nephew, who upholds the code of chivalry. Most ordinary men would never be able to undertake the hardships presented to Gawain in the journey that started at his home and brought him to Bercilak's castle. This

journey comprises the second part. One indicative set of lines explains the Green Knight's plot as being "guided in th[e] guise.../ To assay, if such it were, the surfeit of pride/ That is rumored of the retinue of the round table" (2456-8). If these lines are taken literally, then Gawain is in turn the representative of the round table. The only distinction to be made within that statement by Bercilak is that rather than a conflict between the knights and their collective reputation with Gawain as their self appointed representative, the conflict could be simplified to Gawain being the representative of what principles knights in general are supposed to embody. Taking this idea further, Dean Loganbill describes conflict between Gawain and his other contemporary knights. He reads a competitive sense of the nature behind this conflict as well. In his article he states; "Gawain's test may be to determine who will be the foremost hero of the round table" (123). Some may find his taking initiative with the Green Knight's challenge leading to Loganbill's conclusion, but there are certainly other possibilities.

After basically being called a group of cowards, and Arthur is the only one who stands up to the challenge, other knights could have felt a certain spiteful motivation to step up. They should have felt a little truth in the Green Knight's comment, or they could have just been reluctant to invite interruption into their dinner. The challenge itself, however, when examined from the side that does not know that the Green Knight can pick up his severed head and walk out of the door, would seem like a very quick and easy way to display bravery. Gawain, in thoughtlessly decapitating the Green Knight, probably did not think that he would be returning to face him again a year later even though that was outlined in the deal. Alan Markman sees major significance in this conflict between Gawain and the supernatural as a possible purpose for the entire poem. He says, "its

intent seems to be to discover, by pitting a real man against a marvelous, unnatural man, what a perfect knight can do when he is forced to face the unknown" (575).

Markman's statement would not cover the second and third books as Gawain is tested in ways pertaining to worldly powers, such as hail and seduction, during these two. In the second one he is tested against the harsh elements of nature. It is when he desperately prays to his symbolic Virgin Mary that the castle of Bercilak appears. The question within that sequence is whether the reader is meant to believe that his prayer was answered theologically, by his God, or supernaturally, by the elements of the Green Knight's magic. It is another question of how omniscient the Green Knight is, or if changing shapes is the extent of his power.

In the third book Gawain is tested for his cunning skills with the likes of a seductive mistress. Though this situation is physically demanding in a different way all together than his actual journey on foot, the mental process by which he tricks his way out of what he thought was stealing his host's wife was equally strenuous. His tricks are a display of quick decision-making that is characteristic of Gawain. Markman's assumption of Gawain as a "perfect knight" could be replaced by Gawain's reputation that precedes him which includes many conflicts with women and controlling himself. It is also characteristic of Gawain to be a victim of not thinking things through all the way before making decisions for himself and others. Also when bringing the supernatural into the picture, the unknown becomes another factor with which conflict is evident.

Multiple measures are taken to portray the Green Knight as a seeming figment of nature, though obviously he is not realistic outside of the context of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. To accomplish this, the poet used a lot of imagery in describing his more

human qualities. For instance while he is described as "half a giant on earth," he is still "no less than the largest of men" (140-1). Instead of being completely set apart from the knights in magnitude and assumed ability, he is approachable enough to obtain an adversary in his game, worthy or not. This is not to say that his supernatural side isn't ever prominent. As the story progresses the level of his omniscience becomes evident though his alter ego Bercilak partially is present to play the role of a balancing counterpart. While the reader does not become aware that Bercilak is the Green Knight's alternate identity until the end, they both offer games that are parallel to each other in the rules and, eventually, moral value. Basically, he has a huge entrance, slightly subdued by vivid humanlike description, followed by his emergence under his alternate ego, Bercilak. Finally he returns to the form of the Green Knight before ending the story as Bercilak.

The Green Knight's progression between his two identities during Gawain's journey is significant. First, he reaches Gawain with similar messages on two different levels; one supernaturally omniscient, and the other human common sense. Second, he is able to continue observing Gawain with the help of his many associates between the points in time of Gawain's two encounters with the Green Knight. Last, it makes for a much more climactic installment of Gawain's flaws with his own confession and the revealing of the fact that Bercilak and the Green Knight are one in the same. These factors are significant in the distinction between spirituality and religious ritual in that they simply blur the lines. Each situation in the poem is handled differently in the spectrum between spiritual connection and religious practice, and one of the ultimate messages is that consistency may have saved Gawain from his slightly shameful incident under the Green Knight's axe.

Bringing back the symbolically referenced number three, the Green Knight swings his axe at Gawain's neck three times. On the first swing Gawain flinched, and the second time the Green Knight swung without hitting him in order to make sure that he would not flinch again. The third swing, in retaliation and summation for all that Gawain has undergone in his journey, the Green Knight swings and only nicks the back of Gawain's neck, and "a little blood lightly leapt to the Earth" (2314). The Green Knight's compassion in this situation supports his role as "wise counselor." The fact that Gawain flinched at the first strike at his neck is a reminder of a few things. Flinching is definitely below the standard of any Knight, especially one that is constantly referred to as a "perfect knight," though it is a human reaction. In addition, he did not trust that the supernatural girdle given to him by the lady of the castle was effective enough to, in fact, save his life. This girdle, in many interpretations, is symmetrical to the religious pentangle on his shield that he no longer had with him. Gawain is inconsistent, and that is the reason he is the knight used for the Green Knight's games. Inconsistency is the flaw with ritual that the people in this period of history were soon discovering for themselves, because when it comes down to life or death situations, the whole heart cannot be placed in habitual practices, but a genuine belief that God has a plan.

The medieval period was one transitional time in which people were progressing from Christian practices that Gawain was used to, and bringing faith inward as a personal and private relationship between a person and his or her spiritual roots. The key lesson within this progression, as exemplified in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, is that this more personal relationship would stand for the common good in turn. While religion is an ever-changing forum, the transition experienced in the Middle Ages was hugely

significant in that it pretty much removed the clergy as a middleman, and reduced their authority to more of an informant level. Of course there were examples of clergy members taking advantage of being the middleman and implementing their agendas. The subsequent distrust in the clergy led to the changes such as the reformation, and it was a step in the right direction for many people.

In the context of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the Green Knight could be the secular counterpart to Gawain. This would make sense, to bring back the theme of symmetry, in that Gawain's rituals, including prayer to the Virgin Mary, worshipping of symbolic idols, confessing to a priest, and attending mass, are described in a less than heart-felt way. On a more superficial level, the Green Knight undoubtedly stands for the elements of nature and its progression from season to season as does the story as a whole. The second part of the poem describes the seasons falling into one another gracefully, and only brings a harsh turn to Gawain's journey when winter brings severe weather its way; "Near slain by sleet he sleeps in his irons/ more nights than enough, among naked rocks" (729-30). This is the only small section of his travel that is anything but pleasant, and nature is his only adversary. Not to jump to conclusions, but a strong knight would probably have encountered a tougher ordeal in order for the poet to display a strong physical ability. Gawain may not have survived the worst conditions that the poet could have included. It is in this brief encounter with harsh winter that he barely hesitates to call upon his ritualistic crutch for help as "He prays with all his might/ That Mary may be his guide/ till a dwelling comes in sight" (737-9). Directly after this prayer, the castle that would be the setting for the third part of the poem appears. The progression of religion surrounding this time period in history would be more supportive of praying for strength

rather than a magically appearing answer, because the progression of religion reflects a progression of the mind which would find value in learning from a strenuous journey instead of getting out of danger at the instance of prayer. Of course this distinction would not have been the motive of the people to change the format of Christianity, but it was a realization. S.L. Clark describes this transition in reference to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in his apocalyptic reading of the poem; "salvation had become the business of the individual, especially when the institution for salvation, the Church, showed such visible signs of corruption" (9). Clark takes personal accountability to the most extreme measure, which is attempting at salvation, and the church is generally the cause of reform, especially in this case. To connect that statement with Gawain's use of religion as a crutch, the poet makes a light-hearted description of these instances to make them a less realistic part of the action whereas instances such as when Gawain's head is literally on the chopping block are all too real, and it is in these instances where Gawain does not have his symbols to remind him of what he is supposed to focus on in troubling times.

The emergence of the castle in answer to his prayer to the Virgin Mary, for example, is purposefully unrealistic, and these tense moments of pressure are abundant, incurring either practical or illusionary results. Dean Loganbill connects the historical context and the events in the story; "The transitional nature of the medieval mind accounts in at least in part for the peculiar mixture of myth legend, and history in earlier English histories" (119). It is a statement made by the poet, and as the hidden elements of the story are gradually revealed, the distinction becomes apparent, on one plane, between the two sides that make up "his soul." As Loganbill elaborates, "his soul, that is his very existence in the otherworld, is at stake and the dual nature of the test and the reward seem

more apparent" (123). The dual nature that Loganbill speaks of can describe any number of concepts in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The tests and rewards include Gawain's many struggles against, self, man, nature, and the unknown. His rewards include keeping his life above all, and the girdle becomes his to keep forever as a reminder of the dangers of deception putting too much trust in a symbol. The dual nature can also refer to the Green Knight as the shape changed Bercilak, and the parallel games set forth by both. Combining all of the elements coming from secular, human nature, and Christian traditions, the poet, as Alan Hardman states, "repeatedly allows the reader to be aware of popular 'magical' pious practices using charms, invocations, images, and other material objects, alongside approved conventional religious observances" (Hardman 255). The value of this combination is in the portrayal of each tradition as an internal system of checks and balances.

At first, it would be expected to finish a piece such as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight with a clear idea of a positive force overcoming an evil force, which is not the case. Gawain, the weakly portrayed knight is the representative of the round table who is used by the Green Knight's games to teach a lesson to all who encounter his story. There was a religious conflict of the medieval period in which people gradually would lose trust in the organization of Christianity and begin to worship individually. This conflict is reflected in the poem through Gawain's folly and the Green Knight's wisdom.

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