

## Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (from SparksNotes)

### Key Facts

**full title** · *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

**author** · Anonymous; referred to as the Gawain-poet or the Pearl-poet

**type of work** · Alliterative poem

**genre** · Romance, Arthurian legend

**language** · Middle English (translated into modern English)

**time and place written** · Ca. 1340–1400, West Midlands, England

**publisher** · The original work circulated for an unknown length of time in manuscript format. Many different modern English and original-language editions exist.

**narrator** · Third person omniscient

**point of view** · The Gawain-poet tells the story mainly from Gawain's point of view. However, he also occasionally narrates moments that happen outside the scope of Gawain's direct experience, most notably the host's daily hunts.

**tone** · The narrator's tone toward Gawain's story hovers between straightforward praise and irony-tinted ambivalence. He occasionally refuses to give a straightforward account of characters' motives, leaving it ambiguous whether he approves or disapproves of the codes of courtly behavior and ethics that he describes. At times his tone can be nostalgic for the mythical past, but at other times he verges on criticizing a former age that is neither innocent nor pure. He often achieves this level of ambiguity through the use of signs and symbols with undefined meanings.

**tense** · Past; some commentaries on the action in the present tense

**setting (time)** · The mythical past of King Arthur's court (sometime after Rome's fall, but before recorded history)

**settings (place)** · Camelot; the wilderness; Bertilak's castle; the Green Chapel

**protagonist** · Sir Gawain

**major conflict** · The major conflict is largely Gawain's struggle to decide whether his knightly virtues are more important than his life. Before he knows that the Green Knight has supernatural abilities, Gawain accepts the Green Knight's challenge to an exchange of blows. Once the Green Knight survives the blow, Gawain has a year and a day before he must seek out the Green Knight to receive the return blow, which will almost surely mean his own death. Once he has found the castle of a host who promises to show him the way to the Green Chapel, he struggles to protect and maintain his knightly virtues while remaining courteous to his host's wife, and he struggles to keep his pacts with the Green Knight and his host, despite his fear of death.

**rising action** · Gawain accepts the Green Knight's covenant and chops off the Green Knight's head, but he survives the blow. Two months before he is due to meet the knight for his own decapitation, Gawain sets out through the wilderness in search of the Green Chapel. He happens upon a castle, where he stays until he must leave for his challenge. At the castle, Gawain's courtesy, chastity, and honesty are all tempted. Gawain then journeys to confront the Green Knight at the Green Chapel.

**climax** · Gawain encounters the Green Knight at the Green Chapel. After feinting with his axe twice, the Green Knight strikes Gawain on the third swing, but only nicks his neck.

**falling action** · The Green Knight explains all the mysteries of the story. He and Gawain's host at the castle are the same man, named Bertilak. Morgan le Faye, the old woman at the castle, is actually behind all the events of the story. Gawain admits his breach of contract in having kept the green girdle and promises to wear the girdle as a banner of his weakness.

**themes** · The nature of chivalry; the letter of the law

**motifs** · The seasons; games

**symbols** · The pentangle; the green girdle

**foreshadowing** · The Green Knight's reiteration of Gawain's promise as he leaves Camelot foreshadows Gawain's eventual encounter with the knight. The description of the changing seasons at

the beginning of Part 2 foreshadows Gawain's emotional development in the following parts. The strange, hallucinatory appearance of Bertilak's castle foreshadows the untrustworthy nature of its inhabitants. The lady's offer of a green girdle foreshadows Gawain's ability to cheat death.

### Character List

**Sir Gawain** - The story's protagonist, Arthur's nephew and one of his most loyal knights. Although he modestly disclaims it, Gawain has the reputation of being a great knight and courtly lover. He prides himself on his observance of the five points of chivalry in every aspect of his life. Gawain is a pinnacle of humility, piety, integrity, loyalty, and honesty. His only flaw proves to be that he loves his own life so much that he will lie in order to protect himself. Gawain leaves the Green Chapel penitent and changed.

**Green Knight** - A mysterious visitor to Camelot. The Green Knight's huge stature, wild appearance, and green complexion set him apart from the beardless knights and beautiful ladies of Arthur's Camelot. He is an ambiguous figure: he says that he comes in friendship, not wanting to fight, but the friendly game he proposes is quite deadly. He attaches great importance to verbal contracts, expecting Sir Gawain to go to great lengths to hold up his end of their bargain. The Green Knight shows himself to be a supernatural being when he picks up his own severed head and rides out of Arthur's court, still speaking. At the same time, he seems to symbolize the natural world, in that he is killed and reborn as part of a cycle. At the poem's end, we discover that the Green Knight is also Bertilak, Gawain's host, and one of Morgan le Faye's minions.

**Bertilak of Hautdesert** - The sturdy, good-natured lord of the castle where Gawain spends Christmas. We only learn Bertilak's name at the end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The poem associates Bertilak with the natural world—his beard resembles a beaver, his face a fire—but also with the courtly behavior of an aristocratic host. Boisterous, powerful, brave, and generous, Lord Bertilak provides an interesting foil to King Arthur. At the end of the poem we learn that Bertilak and the Green Knight are the same person, magically enchanted by Morgan le Faye for her own designs.

**Bertilak's wife** - Bertilak's wife attempts to seduce Gawain on a daily basis during his stay at the castle. Though the poem presents her to the reader as no more than a beautiful young woman, Bertilak's wife is an amazingly clever debater and an astute reader of Gawain's responses as she argues her way through three attempted seductions. Flirtatious and intelligent, Bertilak's wife ultimately turns out to be another pawn in Morgan le Faye's plot.

**Morgan le Faye** - The Arthurian tradition typically portrays Morgan as a powerful sorceress, trained by Merlin, as well as the half sister of King Arthur. Not until the last one hundred lines do we discover that the old woman at the castle is Morgan le Faye and that she has controlled the poem's entire action from beginning to end. As she often does in Arthurian literature, Morgan appears as an enemy of Camelot, one who aims to cause as much trouble for her half brother and his followers as she can.

**King Arthur** - The king of Camelot. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Arthur is young and beardless, and his court is in its golden age. Arthur's refusal to eat until he hears a fantastic tale shows the petulance of youth, as does Arthur's initial stunned response to the Green Knight's challenge. However, like a good king, Arthur soon steps forward to take on the challenge. At the story's end, Arthur joins his nephew in wearing a green girdle on his arm, showing that Gawain's trial has taught him about his own fallibility.

**Queen Guinevere** - Arthur's wife. The beautiful young Guinevere of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* seems to have little in common with the one of later Arthurian legend. She sits next to Gawain at the New Year's feast and remains a silent, objectified presence in the midst of the knights of the Round Table.

**Gringolet** - Gawain's horse.