“not semly” (SGGK, 348): the Metamorphosis of a Hero’s Idealism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* seems to be associated throughout with high ideals and he is praised by the poet; in fact, he has been said to be “a more perfect knight” than we thought he would be. But Gawain proves to have a flaw, and at the end of the poem he suggests the idea of the individual as a model of behaviour in conflict with the idea of the hero. Therefore it is not so difficult to reveal how human and imperfect even a seemingly perfect knight such as the pentagonal Gawain is. His ideal of the perfection can only be confirmed by the success of the quest which he will undertake. However, Gawain’s more typical action in the course of his trial is just a failure, which hints that Arthur’s court and its hero are less perfect than the ideal which they ardently hope. The poem is nothing but a rich and varied commentary on life. In short, the poem involves not only the relationship between court and nature, but also the individual’s responsibility to “himself” in the modern sense. Seeing from the hero’s position the aim of the poem might lie in the course of the self-awakening. In this essay, the hero’s ambiguous mentality (e.g. “schome,” 2372) and the paradoxes which can be seen throughout the poem would be considered mainly around the motifs in the scenes of the forest, the castle, and the hero’s return to Camelot.

Everyone knows that the adventures of Chrétien knights are not only a series of stories designed to exhibit the capacity of the hero, but also are
steps in the hero’s movement towards a goal. However, later romances in the tradition of Chrétien do not seem to have followed the pattern depicted in the series of adventures pursued by Chrétien’s knights, although the romances of Chrétien apparently contain an original structure. For two hundred years later there appeared such an excellent Middle English romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Admittedly, the account of Gawain’s adventures at the castle of Bercilak de Hautdesert and the Green Chapel is one of the supreme narratives.\(^1\) As Charles Moorman asserts, no one could say why, at the very end of the tradition, such a fine romance appeared in the remote back country of Western England.\(^2\)

There are different criticism about the degree of success with which Gawain meets his test. One critic, for example, insists that Gawain, though he evidently fails in keeping faith with Bercilak, is a “splendid man” and that his actions logically proves “what a perfect knight can do when he is forced to face the unknown.”\(^3\) And another critic asserts that the story is concerned with the irony of Gawain’s “muddled conscience.”\(^4\) Nevertheless, the success of Gawain’s conduct can only rightly be judged when we consider the meaning of the test that involves not only his treatment at the hands of the Green Knight and Bercilak’s lady, but also the whole journey as a result of his acceptance of the Green Knight’s challenge; because Gawain’s whole journey is designed by the poet as moral and spiritual rather than as merely chivalric.

The *Gawain*-poet recounts the adventures of Sir Gawain, the best of Arthur’s knights. Gawain journeys north so that he may keep a bargain he makes on New Year’s Day with the Green Knight. Gawain sets out from Camelot in early November on his “anious uyage” (535), in order to go in search of the Green Knight. He journeys at first through the regions
where hostile creatures confront him and he fights with wolves and
dragons, bears and boars, giants and wodwos, and strange denizens of
forests and high fells. While he is in the north, Gawain spends the days
from Christmas Eve to the morning of New Year's Day in a strange castle,
Hautdesert, as the guest of its lord, Bercilak, and his lovely wife. During
his stay, Gawain makes yet another bargain, this time with his host, to
exchange the winnings from three days' hunts. Bercilak hunts outside the
castle and Gawain does in the castle. And at the end of the first two days,
Gawain exchanges for the host's deer and boar kisses won from his
mistress. On the third day, Gawain fails to mention a green girdle Bercilak's
wife gives him, a girdle that is supposed to preserve him from harm.
When, on New Year's Day, he meets the Green Knight, Gawain learns that
the small wound in his neck he receives is a punishment for the broken
bargain with Bercilak; for Bercilak and the Green Knight are the same.
Gawain acknowledges his failure and returns to Camelot, wearing the
girdle as a token of his untruth.

As Larry Benson has noted, both the possible sources for Sir Gawain and
the legend of Sir Gawain tend towards a theme of self-discovery; because
Sir Gawain was traditionally linked with the journey to self-knowledge,
which is like the experience of rebirth. Before Malory, Gawain was the
hero of most Arthurian romance. And he was described as graphically as
brave and courteous and rode the same horse, Gringolet, that he rides in
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. However, the Gawain-poet, though he
seems to have shown medieval legend and tradition, employs the fantastic
elements of his story to emphasize a specifically fourteenth-century lesson.
Gawain may perform a classic and mythic pattern of death and rebirth,
but the poet relates the pattern to the concerns of his audience by
describing the experiences of an English heroic figure. Therefore, Gawain's
ideals and failure might be related with the concerns of fourteenth-century chivalry in England. It is by reason of this that the Gawain-poet addresses both social and spiritual concerns. Gawain fails in those areas that were considered important to the institution of chivalry; and his failures also provide a model for the spiritual journey which is common to us.

By the way, the ideals of military chivalry were both secular and spiritual. It is said that medieval writers took Roman writers into account particularly when they depicted ideas about military discipline; but they incorporated into Roman theories of military discipline those of Christian spiritual discipline. In short, a medieval knight was not simply a soldier of the secular state, but he was also a representative of the city of God. Just as it was difficult to separate the duties of the secular knight from his spiritual duties, it was equally difficult to separate inner strength from outer fame or might. Medieval writers emphasized the relationship between the strength of the spirit and the strength of the fighting arm.

The hero of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a medieval knight, and so the poet, through the hero, searches for the ideals of chivalry by searching for its temptation. Since the basis for medieval thought is principally Christian and Platonic, outward appearance is eventually guaranteed by inward qualities. In spite of that, the hero of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight fails in the course of the story.

Then what is a hero? It is well known that medieval writers found heroes in both classical and Biblical sources. While figures like Hercules, Hector, David, and Samson were often seen as examples of special bravery or wisdom, they were also indeed seen as examples of moral looseness. The Gawain-poet depicts a hero who is actually heroic, but who, at the same time, has many weaknesses. Incidentally, Hercules, who was seen as a pagan type of Christ, and whose labours and failures resulted in success
and wisdom, illustrated what a hero should be. A hero is not simply a champion fighter or a conqueror, but he is a man who has also attained wisdom through failures. And so a hero learns to govern himself and can start to control the chaotic elements that are around him. It is natural that the process includes failure since failure is an essential part of growth. In a sense, this process may be seen in us. And so the Gawain-poet rightly expresses the realistic features of heroic people in the opening stanzas. Aeneas, a hero of Troy and the symbol of Roman ideals, was both a true man and a traitor:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Fet tulk that trammes of tresoun that wrot } \\
&\text{Watz tried for his tricherie, that trewest on erthe} \ (3-4)
\end{align*}
\]

Romulus is noble, but he is also proud:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Fro riche Romulus to Rome ricchis hym swype,} \\
&\text{With gret bobbaunce that burhe he biges uppon fyrst} \ (8-9)
\end{align*}
\]

Brutus is also a noble warrior, but his knights love fighting:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Bolde bredden perinne, baret that loden} \ (21)
\end{align*}
\]

Arthur shares nobility with his forebears, but he is also “childgered” (“childish”). In each hero, the poet describes a man who is brave, noble, and capable, and he does a man who is also flawed. The poet’s first hero is Aeneas, whose career was seen as a journey from folly to wisdom. Virgil’s account of Aeneas’s flight from Troy, love game with Dido in Carthage, journey to Italy, descent into the underworld, and unification of Italy was
thought to obtain the progression from youth to maturity. Aeneas’s journey ends in his ascent from the underworld, and he is considered as a figure for resurrection, and hence as a figure for the attainment of self-knowledge. Aeneas thus learns the art of ruling himself, and he is worthy to rule others. Finally, he becomes a hero.

Aeneas’s journey from Troy to Italy might lie behind Gawain’s journey to the north and his experience there. Gawain, like Aeneas, is required to leave his own court (the place of civilization) and finds himself in unfamiliar woods; and he finds shelter and hospitality in a strange court which is similar to the court he has left, as a result, he is tempted in conjunction with hunting and gives in to temptation. Aeneas’s return was seen as a symbolic rebirth. Gawain also experiences a sort of death at the hands of the Green Knight, followed by a spiritual renewal.8

Alan Markman may assert that Gawain is a “splendid man,” however I do not always agree with his assertion. For Gawain’s failure lies in the court, the Round Table society; whether or not the Gawain-poet intended the court’s failure to recognize the implications of Gawain’s test. The poem is assuredly about human society, which is both flourishing and decadent; and at the same time, it depicts not only the relationship between civilization and nature but also the relationship between the responsibility to society and the responsibility to himself. Therefore, Gawain is in his own eyes a failure, but in the eyes of his society Gawain appears to be an enormous success. The Gawain-poet’s thoughts on these matters are quite complex and full of ambiguity; in other words, the poem is a rich commentary on human life. And so we could say that there lies the theme of mutability. Incidentally, the theme of decay came to the Middle Ages through two traditions: classical and Biblical. The most significant classical source for the theme of mutability is said to have been Ovid. The first
hundred fifty lines of the *Metamorphoses* describes the ages of the world, which begins with gold and ends with iron. For Ovid, human history begins in a pastoral world and ends in a world of profit, greed, industry, and war. To be sure, the *Gawain*-poet refers to this vision of diminishing time, especially in his portrait of Camelot.

In a stanza in which the *Gawain*-poet records the wealth, fame, and beauty of the court, he says:

> For al watz þis fayre folk in her first age,
> on sille. \(54-55\)

By modifying “age” with “first,” the poet sets this age apart as special. The phrase “first age” implies a second and a third, and, for Camelot, its first age also seems to be suggestive of its last.

> He watz so joly of his joyfnes, and sumquat childgered:
> His lif liked hym lyȝt, he louied þe lasse
> Auþer to longe lye or to longe sitte,
> So bisied him his zonge blod and his brayn wylde. \(86-89\)

Though the lines are thought to praise Arthur’s good spirits, they cast some doubt upon Arthur. The word “childgered” means childishness and thoughtlessness. And it would not have been applied to a king as a form of praise, since the implications of Camelot’s enjoyment of youth and good fortune become clear in his description of the yearly rotation from spring to winter. In the end, Camelot’s potential decay is implicit in the description in the third stanza of the Christmas festivities.

Thus, Camelot’s heedlessness is finally denoted by the poet’s description
of the process of time in lines 498-501 and 534-535:

\[\begin{align*}
A \textit{zere zernes ful zerne, and zeldez neuer lyke,} \\
\text{Pe forme to pe fynisment foldez ful selden.} \\
\text{Forbi pis zol ouerzede, and pe zere after.} \\
\text{And \textit{vche sesoun serlepes sued after oper.} (498-501)} \\
\end{align*}\]

Pen þenkez Gawan ful sone  
\textit{Of his anious uyage.} (534-535)

These lines are suggestive of the mutability of our life and of the swiftness of time. Undoubtedly, the \textit{Gawain}-poet emphasizes the urgency of time, its limits and its diminishing possibilities by allowing winter to dominate the yearly cycle. Unfortunately, Gawain’s year is not so long.

Bryddez busken to bylde, and bremlych syngen  
\textit{For \textit{solace of pe softe somer pat sues perafter} (509-510)}

The poet describes the season with the delight of the soft summer, but the tone becomes less languid and more urgent with the advent of autumn.

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Bot \textit{pen hyzes heruest,} and hardenes hym sone,} \\
\textit{Warnez hym for pe wynter to wax ful rype} (521-522)
\end{align*}\]

With the advent of winter comes another struggle, of winds, or of strengths.

\[\begin{align*}
\textit{Wrope wynde of pe welkyn wrastelez with pe sunne,}
\end{align*}\]
The wind of winter wrestles with the sunlight of autumn, sending the leaves to the ground; what was green becomes gray; and what flourished in spring now ripens and decays. Time itself becomes many yesterdays. The description ends with winter’s triumph. That is, the seasonal cycle reminds us that the court of Camelot exists within a world characterized by mutability.

Now, the imagery of the quest supports the conception of the moral nature of Gawain’s quest. The pentangle on his shield symbolizes the religious virtues which he embodies, and the image of the Blessed Virgin adorns the inner side of the shield. Therefore, Gawain prays to the Blessed Virgin for relief of his journey (737-739). The forests through which he passes are filled with wild beasts and with savages who love neither God nor their fellow men.


Sunday, 7th April

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Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez, and with wulues als,
Sumwhyle wyth wodwos, þat woned in þe knarrez,
Boþe wyth bullez and berez, and borez oberquyle,
And etaynez, þat hym aneled of þe heþe felle; (720-723)
Gawain discovers Bercilak’s castle immediately upon praying “some lodging wherein to hear mass” (755). Gawain himself, moreover, recognizes that he is attempting the quest in obedience to God’s will (2156, 2208) and that his fate is in the hands of God (1967, 2136).

The effect of this quest is to force Gawain to confront the violence and terror of the world outside Arthur’s warm court. In this contrast of civilized court and grim forest, there must be the principal theme of the poem, which is the idea that the primitive and brutal forces of nature make known their demands to all the people, even to those who would take shelter behind the civilized comforts of court life. Second, the quest serves to introduce Gawain to a court which may very well be superior in grace to that of Arthur. By the way, when the knights of the Round Table cringe before him, the Green Knight says:

‘What, is þis Arpures hous;’ quो þe hαþel þenne,
‘Pat al þe rous reennes of þurȝ ryalmes so mony? (309-310)

And, when Gawain resists the advances of Bercilak’s lady, she is amazed that the famous Gawain could be ignorant of proper courtly etiquette.

‘So god as Gawain gaynly is halden
That cortaysye is closed so clene in hymseluen,
_Couth not lyȝly haf lenged so long wyth a lady_,
_Bot he had craued a cosse_, bi his cortaysye,
_Bi sum towch of summe tryfle at sum talez ende,’ (1297-1301)

Finally, when Gawain evades his first stroke, the Green Knight says:
'Pou art not Gawain,' ........................................
..............................................................
And now þou fles for ferde er þou fele harmez!
*Such cowardise of þat knyȝt couȝte I neuer here.* (2270-2273)

Thus the Green Knight and his lady find the chivalry of the Round Table lacking in the fundamentals of courage and courtesy. It seems clear that Gawain fails that part of the test which involves the keeping of faith. In the end, Gawain returns home, overwheled by shame. In Gawain's failure, then, lies that of the whole Round Table society.

Furthermore, Gawain’s view of Bercilak should be noticed because it is based on assumptions, rather than perceptions.

And þuȝt hit a bolde burne þat þe burȝ aȝte,
A hoge hæbel for þe nonez, and of hyghe eldee;
Brode, bryȝt, watz his berde, and al beuer-hwed,
Sturne, stif on þe strypþe on stalworth schonkez,
Felle face as þe fyre, and fre of hys speche;
And wel hym *semèd*, for soþe, as þe segge þuȝt,
To lede a lortschyp in lee of leudez ful gode. (843-849)

Gawain sees that Bercilak is physically attractive. Gawain notices Bercilak’s age, his colouring, his complexion, and his ease of speech. Bercilak’s first impressions conclude with Gawain’s judgment that the man seems like a leader; however, indeed, Gawain’s judgment is nothing but superficial. The fact that Gawain has no real basis for his conclusion is shown, though indirectly, by the poet’s use of “þuȝt” and “semèd,” words that convey ambiguity. Nevertheless, Gawain never questions the assumptions he
draws from his host’s physical appearance, nor does he entertain the possibility that Bercilak might be dangerous to him. We should remember the words which Gawain declared in the court of Camelot.

For me þink hit not semly,¹⁶ as hit is sop knawen.

......................................................................................................................

Pu3 þe 30yrself be talenttyf, to take hit to yourselfen, (348-353)

Here we should bear it in mind that Gawain’s faulty judgment becomes even more pronounced in his conversations with the host. After the second day’s hunt, for example, Bercilak tells Gawain that he is testing Gawain’s good faith and that the third test will prove the first two.

For I haf fraysted þe twys, and faythful I fynde þe.

Now ‘prid tyme þrove best’ þenk on þe morne (1679-1680)

The Green Knight’s final admonition to “þenk on þe morne” should alert Gawain to his peril.

The *Gawain*-poet’s interest in using Sir Gawain’s experience to highlight a general lesson of spiritual chivalry is apparent in his handling of the Green Chapel. As the poet describes it, the Green Chapel has three main characteristics. At first, there appears a churl who guides Gawain to the Chapel.

For he is a mon methles, and mercy non vses.

......................................................................................................................

Hym þynk as queme hym to quelle as quyk go hymseluen (2106-2109)
Second, the Chapel is located in a desolate spot and is surrounded by water. Third, it resembles a cave, or grave, rather than the chapel in general.

*Pe borne blubred perinne* as hit boyled hade. (2174)

And *ouergrown with gresse* in glodes aywhere,
And al watz hol3 inwith, *nobot an olde caue,* (2181-2182)

As soon as Gawain sees it, he calls it a “chapel of messchaunce” (2195). In fact, the poet’s handling of the Green Chapel is intended to suggest the sort of death Gawain will find there.

*Here myȝt aboute mydnyȝt
Pe dele his matynnes telle!* (2187-2188)

Whereas Gawain sees only a devil’s house, the chapel that looks like a cave becomes the site for his spiritual renewal. Here is a kind of the paradox of this story.

By the way, that the girdle earns Gawain a wound is only one of the ironies of Gawain’s experience at the Green Chapel, because the girdle, rather than saving his life, allows him to lose his life and to concentrate on saving his soul. As a symbol, the girdle might have had various associations. In medieval iconography, the girdle signifies avarice, temperance, chastity, and penance. Of Saint John the Baptist’s girdle, Bede writes that it protects the living from death. Consequently, Gawain first wears his girdle to save his mortal body; later, he wears it to save his soul.
Bot *in syngne of my surfet I schal se hit ofte*,
When I ride in renoun, remorde to myseluen
*Pe faut and pe fayntyse of pe flesche crabbed*,
How tender hit is to entyse teches of fylpe;
And þus, quen pryde schal me pryk for prowes of armes.
*Pe loke to þis luf-lace schal lepe my hert.*  (2433-2438)

Gawain here draws a distinction between his identity as a man as a knight. Therefore, Gawain now wears a girdle which betokens the weaknesses of the flesh, rather than a shield which betokens the ideals of chivalry. He defines himself as a man and wishes the remedy for the human condition by wearing what is a memorial token of his failure. By Gawain's new attitude towards the green girdle, the *Gawain*-poet has moved beyond the literal code of chivalry to a recognition of his position.

When Gawain returns to Camelot, the substance of the poet's concern with chivalry becomes explicit. In the northern country, we see Gawain who is clearly alone and in dangerous surroundings. Once Gawain returns to Camelot, it becomes clear that Gawain and his city no longer stand for the same ideals. That is, Camelot's chivalry is nothing but a literal and superficial one, but Gawain's is a chivalry of the inner man. Apparently, the *Gawain*-poet emphasizes the distance between Gawain and Arthur's court by describing what are quite different views about the meaning of the girdle. That appears in the Gawain's confession scene in the court.

‘Lo! lorde,’ quop þe leude, and þe lace honedeled,
‘Þis is þe bende of þis blame I bere in my nek,
Þis is þe laþe and þe losse þat I haf laþt haue
Of *couardise and couetyse* þat I haf caþt þare;
Pis is pe token of vntrawpe þat I am tan inne. (2505-2509)

Certainly, this is an admission of chivalric failure, because Gawain admits to crimes not realizing the ideals of knighthood, particularly as they are proclaimed on his shield. However, the court laughs, just like Chaucerr’s Friar.

Þe kyng comfortez þe knyȝt, and alle þe court als

_Lazen loute þerat, and luȝlyly acorden_ (2513-2514)

We should understand the scenes as the emphasis of the two sharply distinct attitudes towards the green girdle. Unmistakably, the poet stresses Camelot’s frivolousness and its vulnerabilities. In a sense, Camelot remains static, and fixed in a chivalric manners, just as we remain fixed in the innocent civilization.

Gawain, in confronting his human frailties, manifests the realities of true chivalry in the girdle he wears as a sign of his death. In the end, the fact that Gawain can neither detect the ambiguities of his situation at Bercilak’s castle nor withstand the temptation of his wife illuminates the weaknesses of human nature as well as Arthur’s court. _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_ is a romance, to be sure, and contains certain more-or-less standard characteristics: feasts, hunts, tourneys, description of arms, lonely quests, hairbreadth escapes, and supernatural monsters. But the poem is obviously no ordinary romance, because the hero of the poem is newly created by the poet through an English type of experimentalism in later medieval times.
Notes

1. Robert J. Blanch, *Sir Gawain and Pearl: Critical Essays* (Indiana University Press, 1966) p.160. And he emphasizes, “Gawain's success might perhaps be best accounted for because he is not... an ordinary human being, but because he is, on the contrary, either a superhuman or super natural being” (p.160).


4. Richard H. Green, “Gawain’s Shield and the Quest for Perfection,” *English Literary History,* XXIX (1962), 138. It might be very interesting for him to be concerned with the ideal of secular perfection.


8. Lynn S. Johnson, *ibid.,* p.67. The stories about Gawain may be recounted a journey to the “other world,” ending with a sort of rebirth.

9. For Ovid, human history begins in a pastoral world and ends in a world of profit, greed, industry, and war.

10. “The winter journey forms part of that alternation in the poem of indoor and outdoor scenes by means of which the poet creates an effect
of variety and inclusiveness, highlights the qualities of court and country, and provides images which enhance and sharpen one's sense of the tale. For reader and hero the poem's adventurous nature is experienced as a journey into the unknown...” (W. A. Davenport, The Art of the Gawain-Poet, The Athlone Press, 1978, p.147).

11. We should take into consideration that, rather than a shield which betokens the ideals of chivalry, Gawain wears a girdle which betokens the weaknesses of the flesh.

12. Ad Putter asserts, “In Gawain the forest is ‘ful dep,’ while Chrétien variously portrays it as ‘haunte’ (Erec, 3916), or ‘parfonde’ (Yvain, 3338).” (Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and French Arthurian Romance, Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1995, p.18). When Gawain enters into the deep forest, we could visualize the scene clearly. We could imagine the deep vally with its tangle of oaks, hazel, and hawthorn, lined by hills on either side. So that the poet’s visual artistry is conspicuously enhanced by his choice of rare topographical words which add locality to the scenes he describes.


15. Cf. Ad Putter, ibid., pp.171-4. He concludes that Gawain’s heroism consists in maintaining an unconditional allegiance to private
imperatives, however shameful and unpromising the consequences. (Cf. p.171).

16. "Gawain is delicately ambiguous about what is 'not semly'. Gawain's syntax proceeds with a number of subordinate clauses, 'as,' 'þer,' 'þæz,' 'whil,' 'þat,' 'þer,' after any one of which one may stop with a complete meaning, while the next clause picks up the syntax pushing on to a new meaning." (Victor Y. Haines, *The Fortune Fall of Sir Gawain: The Typology of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, University Press of America, 1982, p.111).

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9. Cox, C. S., The Judiac Other in Dante, the Gawain-Poet and Chaucer (U. P. of Florida, 2005)
12. Green, R. H., “Gawain’s Shield and the Quest for Perfection,” ELH 29 (1962)


