Notes for Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

1. Not much is known about the author of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (SGGK), which was written some time in the late 1300s in Middle English. It is commonly accepted that the author of this poem is also the author of Pearl, Patience, and Cleanness, all of which are bound together in one manuscript. For this reason, this author is known as the Gawain Poet or the Pearl Poet.

2. SGGK is written in long stanzas and short, metered, and rhymed couplets called the bob-and-wheel at the end of each verse. That is, the main stanza concludes with five lines that rhyme—ababa. The first line of these five lines, called the “bob,” is usually only two syllables; the “bob” serves as the bridge between the long series of alliterative lines and the concluding four rhyming lines, which are the “wheel.” The bob maintains both the alliteration of the previous lines while it also begins the rhyme scheme of the concluding bob-and-wheel. The alliteration, free from rhyme and rhythm, in the long stanzas is influenced by Old English (think Beowulf), while the bob-and-wheel signifies a Middle English influence.

3. SGGK combines two stories that were well-known to its medieval audiences under the umbrella story of Arthur’s round table and his feud with his half-sister Morgan le Fay. The first story is a beheading tale which becomes the reason for Gawain’s quest. The second is Bertilak’s test of Gawain’s honor. As Gawain completes his adventures and returns home (remember the Hero’s Journey), the audience is led to consider the true measure of a hero.

4. The Green Knight is a mythical representation of nature. Consider his color. The Green Man is a standard figure in medieval works—he can be seen in architecture, paintings, etc. Originally he was an ancient, pagan vegetation spirit. In te late medieval culture, Nature is seen as a force as it concerns the fallen state of the mortal world. In the Middle Ages people would understand the color symbolism and its ties to the duality of nature. Green can symbolize nature’s positive, creative aspects such as renewal, protection, fertility, birth, regeneration, etc. It can also represent its negative, destructive aspects such as the wild, uncontrolled forces of nature which can destroy. Remember what he holds in each hand—in one is the holly bob which represents life and peace, and in the other is the axe which represents death and violence. The Green Knight is a representation of the eniautos daimon, or seasonal woodland deity in this poem, both in its ancient symbol as a fertility deity and in the popular theology of the day. One might read the central message of SGGK as the Christmas/Easter message of Christian theology, that resurrection defeats death and will always do so.

5. SGGK is divided in 4 parts or Fitts.

6. Medieval literature had two functions: to entertain and to teach a lesson. Consider how this poem does both.

7. Note the cyclical aspects of this poem—it starts with a reference to the Trojan war and ends with a reference to the Trojan war. There are 101 stanzas in this poem. The addition of the final stanza suggests the continuation of the cycle. Consider other aspects of a cyclical nature in the poem. For instance, the Pentacle that is inscribed inside Gawain’s shield—it is a five-pointed star that, like a Celtic Knot, can be drawn without lifting the pen from the paper and it has no beginning point or end point. The poem also starts at Christmas time and ends at Christmas time. All of these denote the continuation of things, an endless cycle.

8. SGGK is considered as part of the alliterative revival in British literature. Remember Beowulf? It was written in alliterative verse. However, since there are so few manuscripts that survive from this time, it is equally likely that the alliterative literary tradition continued unbroken since Anglo-Saxon times, complicating the idea of a “revival.”

9. SGGK can be described as a quest romance. Typical of a medieval romance, it has external dangers—the Green Knight, winter, the wilderness. The real dangers, however, are internal or inside—at first, when the Green Knight comes to the court of King Arthur and presents his challenge, and later when Gawain sets out for the Green Chapel and finds himself in the castle, fending off the advances of his host’s wife.

10. Consider also Gawain’s psychological and moral position. In the castle he is the guest of the host and is bound to abide by the rules of courtesy. When the host proposes the game of honestly exchanging each day’s “winnings,” Gawain must stay true to his word that he will do so. The idea of “troth” (also variously spelled “trouthe” and “trouth”) is important in medieval literature. A man is only as good as his word. The first two days Gawain is honest in exchanging his “winnings.” This correlates to the first two feints that the Green Knight gives Gawain when he goes to meet him at the Green Chapel. However, on the third day Gawain does not keep his word; he does not give the green girdle as part of his winnings of the day. Because of this dishonesty, the Green Knight nicks Gawain at the Green Chapel—this is a way of teaching him a lesson for not keeping his word. Gawain completes his external quest—to take himself to the Green Chapel and to meet the Green Knight there—but he learns a valuable lesson through the internal quest—that you should never give your troth lightly and one’s actions and not words are the true measure of one’s worth. It is really important to keep your word and be honest.

11. When Gawain is in the castle and being seduced by the host’s wife, he is sorely tempted. He knows that in just a few days he will make his way to the Green Chapel where he will surely die when he allows the Green Knight to behead him. At this juncture, the instinct and desire for self-preservation are strong in him. One way in which human beings are driven to self-preservation, especially in the face of imminent disaster and death, is to procreate. When the host’s wife relentlessly pursues Gawain (paralleling the host’s hunts outside the castle), he is tempted to have sex with her, not only because she is beautiful and young, but also because she represents life and sex with her will be life-affirming as well as an act of procreation and self-preservation. (Another aspect of dualism in the poem: the host’s young and beautiful wife and the old and ugly crone. Remember the one point in the poem where Gawain is sitting
directly between them? What does this symbolize? His own position between life and death. One mythical element
in this poem is the two aspects of the earth mother. She is symbolized by the old woman, Morgan le Fay, meaning
the tomb and death. She is also symbolized by the host's wife as the resurrection and the womb.

12. Consider the parallels between the hunt outside the castle and the hunt inside it. On the first day the host hunts
deer. The deer is shy and timid. Inside the castle, on the first day, like the deer, Gawain is timid and diffident. He
tries to feign sleep while the host's wife slips inside his chamber. On the second day the host hunts boar, an animal
that is much more dangerous and aggressive. Inside the castle, Gawain is much more confident than he was the day
before, and he decides to face the intruding host's wife instead of trying to wait her out like he did on the previous
day. Finally, on the third day, the host hunts fox, an animal which is crafty and cunning. And like the fox, on the
third day inside the castle, Gawain is crafty when he accepts the host's wife's girdle but does not exchange it as part
of his winnings with the host.

13. According to standard medieval beliefs, after sin and death came into the world after the Fall of Adam and Eve in the
Garden of Eden, Nature defeats death through procreation, making possible the mortal realm in which we live. This
follows the French theologian, Alan of Lille's assertion that Nature is charged by God to preserve the world from
death by means of procreation, which is called lex natura or natural law. Procreation allows creatures to defeat
death by constantly creating life anew. For human beings, however, this law is not enough, since they have rational
minds and immortal souls. For them there is a further law, lex positiva or established law, which gives hope for
defeating death individually by following the revealed laws of God. On the third day in the castle, Gawain is very
tempted by lex natura. He believes that he is going to die, and Lady Bertilak seems to be offering him ample chance
at procreation. However, he must balance this with lex positiva, both in the laws of God (by not committing
adultery) represented to him by the image of the Virgin on his shield, and in the lesser, though for Gawain essential,
rules of knightly courtesy.

14. This poem is a story about how Nature (in the form of the Green Knight) gives Gawain an experience, a knock on the
head to teach him how precarious human understanding really is. One obvious lesson from Nature is that you will
not go on forever, but the fecundity of Nature is greater than your individual life and life goes on through the
renewal of procreation. However, embedded within this simple outlook is a sense of the shallowness of mortal
constructions of meaning.

15. Consider the role of religion in this poem. When Gawain sets out on his quest, he first goes to celebrate mass with
the rest of Arthur's court. As he wanders the wilderness, he is completely alone, away from civilization. In his
isolation, he prays for a place where he can celebrate Christmas with others. At the host's castle he continues to pray
and celebrate mass—a ritual that means much for him, as it is a way for him to acknowledge God and to celebrate a
shared belief system with other people. This is in contrast with the isolation that he experiences while traversing the
wilderness on his journey. As a knight who is sworn to the rules of chivalry (protecting the weak, upholding the
principles of the Church, engaging in "civilized" codes of conduct in battle, etc.), he must also uphold God's laws. He
prays, he has the Virgin on his shield, and he does not fall into temptation in the host's castle.

16. Gawain aspires to all the secular virtues and the virtues of knighthood. The number five (as symbolized by the
Pentangle on his shield) is significant here.
1. He is faultless in his Five Senses (sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell)
2. He does not fail in the strength and ability of his Five Fingers
3. He has faith in the Five Wounds of Christ (one in each hand, one in each foot, and the spear wound in his side)
4. He believes in the Five Joys the Virgin Mary had in Jesus (Annunciation, Nativity, Resurrection, Ascension, and
Assumption)
5. He has the Five Knightly Virtues (generosity, brotherhood, chastity, chivalry, piety)