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Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Anonymous · *late 14th century · Jessie L. Weston (1898) modern prose*

At Christmas in Arthur's hall a green knight offers a beheading game, and Gawain takes the blow that must be returned in a year. Weston's 1898 prose retelling, the text hosted here, keeps the covenant, the three hunts, the lady's lace, and the nick on the neck: a test of courage, courtesy, and truth.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can a knight keep his word, his courtesy, and his life—or will the wish to save himself make a liar of him?

"this is the bond of the blame that I bear in my neck, this is the harm and the loss I have suffered, the cowardice and covetousness in which I was caught, the token of my covenant in which I was taken."
Sir Gawain · Part IV

Gawain stands the return blow, but he hid the girdle to save his life, and he calls that failure by its right names. The Green Knight spares him; the court wears the lace in his honor. The poem (here in Weston's prose) treats the fault as real, and mercy as real too.

KEY CHARACTERS

Sir Gawain
Arthur's nephew; courteous, brave, and hard on himself when he fails

The Green Knight (Bertilak)
The challenger and the host; a tester who can also show mercy

The Lady of the Castle
A skilled temptress whose last gift, the lace, is the real snare

King Arthur
Young king at the Christmas feast, who would have taken the axe himself

Queen Guinevere
Seated beside Gawain when he claims the venture

Morgan le Fay
Named at the end as the mind behind the test of Arthur's court (Weston follows the poem here)

A FAULT THAT CANNOT BE HIDDEN

> *"this is the bond of the blame that I bear in my neck, this is the harm and the loss I have suffered, the cowardice and covetousness in which I was caught, the token of my covenant in which I was taken."*
> **Sir Gawain** · Part IV

> *"I am the weakest, I wot, and the feeblest of wit, and it will be the less loss of my life if ye seek sooth."*
> **Sir Gawain** · Part I

Grades 9–10
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01 The Green Challenge

PART I

A stranger in green offers a stroke for a stroke, to be repaid in a year.

- Arthur keeps Christmas at Camelot; a huge green knight rides in, axe in hand, and asks for a game
- Gawain, sitting by the queen, claims the venture: he is the king's nephew, and will take the risk
- He beheads the stranger; the Green Knight picks up his head and names the Green Chapel in a twelvemonth
- The court has its marvel, and Gawain has a covenant he must keep

> *"I am the weakest, I wot, and the feeblest of wit, and it will be the less loss of my life if ye seek sooth."*
> **Sir Gawain** · Part I

02 The Journey North

PART II

Armor, a pentangle, and a long winter road toward the unknown chapel.

- Gawain is armed; the pentangle on his shield marks five fives—senses, fingers, wounds of Christ, joys of Mary, and knightly virtues
- He rides through wild country, hungry and cold, asking the way to the Green Chapel
- On Christmas Eve he comes to a great castle and is welcomed with honor
- His host will hunt on each of three days; Gawain will rest, and they will exchange their winnings at night

03 The Exchange of Winnings

PART III

Three hunts outside, three temptations within, and one gift hidden.

- Each morning the lady of the castle comes to Gawain's bed and tests his courtesy
- He grants kisses, which he pays to the host as winnings, and refuses further dishonor
- On the third day she offers a green lace or girdle that will save the wearer from death
- Gawain takes the lace and does not give it to the host—the first break in the bargain

04 The Green Chapel

PART IV

The return blow falls, and it measures more than courage.

- A guide offers to let Gawain flee; he will not, and comes to a mound that is the Green Chapel
- The Green Knight feints twice; at the third stroke he nicks Gawain's neck
- He is the host, Bertilak; the two feints were for the true exchanges, the nick for the hidden lace
- He praises Gawain as a pearl among knights, and blames him only for loving his life too well

> *"Thou art not Gawain ... who is held so valiant, that never feared he man by hill or vale, but thou shrinkest for fear ere thou feelest hurt."*
> **The Green Knight** · Part IV

05 The Lace Worn Home

PART IV, CLOSE

Shame is named, and the court turns it into a badge.

- Gawain rides home with the girdle bound as a baldric, in token that he was taken in a fault
- He confesses the cowardice and covetousness in which he was caught, and says he must wear the lace while he lives
- Arthur comforts him; the Round Table agrees that each will wear a baldric of bright green for his sake
- The tale ends with a prayer: "May He that bare the crown of thorn / Bring us unto His bliss."

> *"And I must needs wear it so long as I live, for none may hide his harm, but undone it may not be, for if it hath clung to thee once, it may never be severed."*
> **Sir Gawain** · Part IV

Truth and Covenant · Courage · Courtesy · Temptation · Confession · Mercy

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–10

1. The hosted text is Jessie L. Weston's 1898 modern prose, not the Middle English alliterative poem. Cite Weston; do not treat this wording as the original stanza and bob-and-wheel.
2. The three hunts (deer, boar, fox) run in parallel with the three bedroom scenes. The fox and the hidden lace belong together.
3. Gawain hides the girdle to save his life. He himself names the fault "cowardice and covetousness." The Green Knight is more merciful than Gawain is to himself.
4. The court's laughter and the green baldric can be read as honor or as a softening of shame. The book lets both stand.
5. The pentangle is explained at length in Part II: a sign of completeness. Watch what happens when one point, truth, is nicked.

Quotations are verbatim from the Jessie L. Weston (1898) modern prose, Project Gutenberg #66084, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/sir-gawain-and-the-green-knight/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.