Mr. Weiss – World History

**Sir Gawain and the Green Knight:**

***Directions: Read the story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and then summarize the major points of the story by answering the questions below.***

1. What challenge did the Green Knight make to Arthur and his knights? What was the strange event that occurred after Gawain accepted the Green Knight’s challenge?
2. Why did Gawain seek the Green Knight at the end of the year?
3. What acts of chivalry does Gawain perform while at Sir Bertilak’s castle?
4. Why did the Green Knight spare Gawain in the end? Why did the Green Knight nick Gawain’s neck?

**Homework: Do ONE:**

o Write the journal of Sir Gawain, describing at least one incident in the story and how difficult it was to hold himself to the code of chivalry. Write it in first person.

o Write a short essay on “What made Gawain an exceptional knight? How faithfully did he follow the code of chivalry? Give examples from the story to prove your point.”

**Sir Gawain and the Green Knight**

*retold by Cathy S. Mosley*

In a time well past........when Camelot was young ....

King Arthur and his Queen, Guinevere, presided over a New Year's feast; a merry feast for the Knights of the Round Table and their ladies. Yet their King, being young and restless, would not eat until something marvelous happened - something astounding!! And if Arthur would not eat then none in the hall would touch their food, and so they kept themselves amused with jests and courtly conversation.

However, before the food turned cold the doors to the great hall burst open, and coming in with the icy wind rode a proud knight. A great man all of green, riding upon a green horse; he lacked armour, and in one carried a sprig of holly, and in the other he carried a great, green battle axe. "Who presides over this feast?" he bellowed.

King Arthur stood and declared, "I do! If you come in peace you are welcome in this hall....but if you come for battle...."

The Green Knight laughed - a sound that rumbled through the hall, and said, "I come in peace. If I came for battle none of your children would be able to stand against me."

The King turned red with anger, and there was a shuffling of chairs as the knights stood. "Why do you come?! And who are you?!" he demanded.

"I am the Green Knight, and I come to offer you a challenge," the stranger said. He held his battle axe aloft, and continued, "I offer you the chance to swing this axe and take my head. However, in \_one years\_ time you must bow your head to me and let me behead you."

His emerald gaze swept the assembly and he said, "Who takes my offer?"

And beyond the shuffling of bodies no sound was heard.

Again the Green Knights laughter rumbled through the hall, "Children indeed. And cowards to boot!"

"\_I\_ will swing the axe!" King Arthur declared, and he stepped forward to lift the weapon.

>From Queen Guinevere's side Sir Gawain stood; as handsome and fine a knight as any would hope to see. He hurried to his King, dropped to his knee, and said, "Your Highness, please allow me the honor. Your life is too precious to give to this knight."

Arthur shrugged and handed over the axe. "Make the blow count," he told Gawain, and stepped aside.

The young knight rose to his feet and turned to the giant stranger. "Where are you from, Good Sir?"

The Green Knight looked at the young man approvingly and said, "I will tell you once you have struck the blow."

Gawain seemed puzzled, but once the giant had bowed his head the young knight raised the axe. And swung down - hard!

Nose over crown the head, with its green mane, rolled across the hall, making many a lord and lady step back from the grizzly prize. They scattered even further when the massive torso of the strange knight stood. The Green Knight easily found his head and tucked it under his arm.

Then the head spoke, "Meet me in a year's time at the Green Chapel."

The Green Knight swung to his horse - head and all, and rode from the feasting hall; leaving Sir Gawain holding the emerald battle axe.

And whatever King Arthur might have felt at such a display he did not show; instead he said to his Queen, "Do not look downcast, My Lady, such cunning plays well become a Christmas tide." He started to head back to his throne, but stopped and added to Sir Gawain, "Hang up the battle axe. It has hewn enough this day."

Winter swiftly turned to Spring, and Spring with the same speed became Summer, and with equal swiftness Summer turned to Fall. And Sir Gawain knew that now he needed to go seek the Green Chapel, since he knew not what direction it lay. So, on All Souls Day he bid his King And Queen, and all the Knights of the Round Table, farewell and set off on his quest.

The way was hard, and Gawain met with many adventures, but no one he met along the way could tell him where the Green Chapel lay. At last, with the snow piling high, and his horse so tired that it barely could put one hoof before the next, he saw the walls of the castle through the thick trees of the woods. Sir Gawain dismounted and struggled to the gate to ask for hospitality.

The porter swung the great gates open and let the frozen young knight, and his horse, into the courtyard. Servants ran to help the Gawain out of his armour, and to take his steed off to the stable; others ran to alert the lord of the manor. Nor was it long before a splendidly portioned man, with thick russet hair and beard, came to greet the knight and escort him to the hall and the hearth. The owner of the castle introduced himself as Lord Bertilak, and he is delighted when Gawain introduced himself as a Knight of Arthur's Round Table. As they approached the fire of the great hearth they met with Lady Bertilak and an old crone; the older woman was as ugly as the lady of the castle was beautiful. And with all of his knightly grace the young man greeted each lady with great courtesy.

Lord Bertilak invited Sir Gawain to the feast that was to be held that night, and when the time came the Knight was given the place of highest honor at the table. And once they had eaten well, and were comfortably engaged in conversation Lord Bertilak asked, "Why, my friend, do you ride so far into this forest? Few travel this way, and even less in the winter."

"I seek the Green Chapel by the New Year," Sir Gawain answered simply.

"Ah ha!" the Lord laughed, "That is easy enough!! That Chapel is not far from here."

"You would have my deepest gratitude," the young knight said, "If you could show me the way."

"All in good time," Bertilak answered, "It is still four days from the New Year. Rest here and regain your health before following such a rough path into the wilds." He rose and added, "Now is time for bed. Tomorrow I go hunting and must rise before the sun."

"A hunt?" Gawain asked, "May I join you?"

"Nay, nay," said Lord Bertilak, "Sleep in tomorrow." He gestured towards his wife, and added, "And when you rise for food my good Lady can entertain you." His good humor reached his eyes, and the Lord said, "But so you do not feel left out I offer you a small contest."

"Yes?" the young knight asked.

"Whatever I catch, said the Lord of the castle, I will give to you and whatever you gain tomorrow you can give to me."

"Agreed," said Gawain.

Long past the time that Lord Bertilak had gone to hunt deer Sir Gawain awakened to the sound of someone in his room, and a the door bolt being shot. He peered from beneath his covers as the lovely Lady Bertilak came to stand by his bed, and when she did not go he pretended to be just waking.

The Lady offered him many pleasures, but Sir Gawain being an honorable man refused all of her advances as graciously as he could. And at last, so as to not insult the lady, he accepted one kiss from her exquisite lips.

That night Lord Bertilak and his men returned with horses piled high with the meat of the hind, and the Lord of the castle had his share laid at Sir Gawain's feet. "There," Bertilak laughed, "Is what I found this day. And what of you?"

"Only a kiss," My Lord, Sir Gawain said.

"And where did you gain such a pleasant prize?" the Lord of the castle asked.

The young knight laughed and said, "\_That\_, Sir, was not in our bargain."

"True," Bertilak said, clapping the knight on the shoulder.

The next day passed much the same, except that Lord Bertilak brought home the head of a boar, and Sir Gawain had two kisses to exchange.

With the coming of the third day, and the third hunt, Sir Gawain awakened to a gray day; his sleep had been troubled by dreams of the Green Knight. Nor was he pleased to see that Lady Bertilak had again come to his room.

Again she pressed her offer, and when he refused just as adamantly she demanded, "Are you pledged to another Lady?"

"No," he said, "Nor can I be with what awaits me tomorrow."

"Then," she said, "Let me have a token to remember you by."

"I have nothing," Gawain answered, "Only my horse and my armour, and those are needed to take me to the Green Chapel."

She pulled a ring from her finger and held it out to him. "Then remember me with this."

Gawain shook his head, and said, "I have nothing of value to give in return."

Lady Bertilak's lovely brow furrowed in thought, and finally she pulled from her waist a green, silk sash. "This," she said, "Is a trivial. Please take it."

"I cannot," the young knight protested.

"But it has magical properties that will protect you from harm," she murmured as she leaned closer.

He looked at the sash and thought of the fate that awaited him the next day. \_He\_ could not put his head back on his body like the Green Knight did. "Thank you," he said, and did not protest too much when she claimed three kisses from him.

"Promise me, though," she said as she left, "Do not tell my husband of the sash."

"I shall not," Gawain promised. And when she had gone he dressed, and went to the castles chapel to pray and confess.

When evening came, and Lord Bertilak returned with a fox pelt, Sir Gawain hurriedly offered the three kisses - even before the Lord of the castle had said a word about the fox.

On New Year's day Sir Gawain was led by a servant up a cruel, windy trail, and before they reached its peak the servant begged the young knight to reconsider; telling of all the horrible stories about the Green Knight's cruelty. And when the servant offered to lie that Sir Gawain had gone to the Chapel, so that the young man could flee unharmed, the knight angrily sent the man back down the trail.

Alone Gawain rode the remainder of the way; until he came to a desolate mound, with only one opening. Much like a fairy mound. Or maybe it had been a Chapel - sometime in ancient times? As the knight entered the doorway he heard the terrible, echoing sound of the grinding of an axe, and he followed the sound into the heart of the mound. There he found the Green Knight, sitting amongst torches, grinding a new green axe.

"Ah, excellent," he declared, "You've come! Now rid yourself of your cloak and helmet and let us be at our game!!"

"One blow is your only right," Sir Gawain growled, laying his head on the waiting block.

But when the axe was brought down the young man flinched.

"What is this!!?" the Green Knight declared, "Do you so fear the axe that you would pull from it? \_I did not\_ flinch when you struck your blow!!"

"I will not flinch or move again," Sir Gawain said.

The second blow stopped just short of his neck.

"A test," the Green Knight laughed, "To see if your heart was set."

"Strike the blow!" Sir Gawain demanded.

"So I shall," the Green Knight said, and let swing.

Yet the axe only nicked young Gawain's neck, and when he saw the trickle of blood upon the dirt he leapt to his feet. Brandishing his sword. "That was your one blow!!" he cried, "Now we are done!"

"Indeed we are," the Green Knight said, leaning calmly upon his axe. "Much worse could have befallen you, but you proved yourself a worthy knight."

"Who are you?" the young knight demanded.

"I am Lord Bertilak and with the help of my Lady Wife we tested you. I stayed my hand on the first two blows because you refused the temptations that Lady Bertilak offered you. And gave you only a nick because you hid the sash from me, though I could not blame you for wishing to save your own life. But the fact that you came here and laid your head upon the block is what saved your life. A worthy man."

Sir Gawain's cheeks had grown red with shame, and he tore the sash from about his waist. Throwing it to the ground.

"No, no," Lord Bertilak said, "Take it up and wear it to prove that you faced the Green Knight and lived. And that we parted friends."

"Friends ...yes. But I will wear it to remind me not to be too proud in my prowess - that I too am a flawed man," the young knight answered while he picked up the sash. When he straightened he asked, "But why this test?"

"The old woman is Morgan le Fay, and half-sister to King Arthur. She is also your aunt," Lord Bertilak said, "And she laid this enchantment upon me so that Queen Guenevere's heart would be troubled, and so that the Knights of the Round Table could prove their mettle." He held out his great, green hand and said, "Which you have. So come as our friend to our hall and feast in the New Year."

"I thank you," said Sir Gawain, "But now my quest is done I must return to Camelot."

He did return, and told King Arthur and the court of his quest and his trials. And while he wore the green sash to remember humility, the other knights wore green sashes to remember Sir Gawain's bravery.

**COMMENTARY ON SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT**

*by Dr. Boria Sax*

The year with its seasons is probably the ultimate model for every story. Like the year, a story builds to a climax at the end of summer, the autumn equinox, and then draws to a close. In much the same way, a traditional story builds to a moment of greatest tension in the plot, which is followed by a resolution. Technologies, from electric lights to planes and computers, have greatly reduced our dependence on the seasons. We no longer have to worry, for example, that we will go hungry if the local harvest is poor. With the rise of global trade and industrial technology, people have often sought to organize their experience according other models, and several modern works of literature - Joyce's Ulysses, for example - are without a traditional plot.

Written around the end of the fourteenth century, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight stands at the end of the Middle Ages and the very beginning of the modern world. Together with three other works, presumably by the same author, it has come down to us in a single manuscript, and it is written in an English dialect of the Northwest midlands. We know nothing at all about the author beyond what we can learn from the four poems themselves. He was obviously very learned, both in literary and folk culture. He seems to have sensed the spiritual crisis that was approaching. Perhaps as much as any work in world literature, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight returns storytelling to its foundation, by using the year as a framework for his tale.

The mysterious Green Knight who interrupts the Christmas celebration at king Arthur's court is the spirit of the passing year. By taking up his challenge, the young Sir Gawain learns to confront the inevitability of death. In the course of the poem, Sir Gawain goes from the impetuous courage of youth to the wisdom of maturity. The process takes a year, which stands for the life of human being. The stages of his wonderful adventure correspond to points in the agricultural year and the liturgical calendar. In this cosmic perspective, the foibles of Gawain and his friends are easy both to see and to forgive.