

Module 3: Exploring Good, Evil, and Noble Sacrifice
Topic 4 Content: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – Fytte One Excerpts
Translated by Kenneth G. T. Webster and W. A. Neilson

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight begins during a Christmas feast being held by King Arthur. In addition to Queen Guinevere, all of the Knights of the Round Table have come together to celebrate the holiday. Sir Gawain is one of King Arthur's bravest and most noble knights. As they are celebrating a large man enters the hall. He is completely green and dressed in magnificent garb. His horse is also large and green.

This hero was splendidly dressed in green;
and the hair of his head matched that of his horse;
fair flowing locks enfolded his shoulders;
a beard as big as a bush hung over his breast;
and it, together with his splendid hair that reached from his head,
was trimmed evenly all round above his elbows,
so that half his arms were caught thereunder
in the manner of a king's hood,
that covers his neck.
The mane of that great horse was much like it,
very curly and combed,
with knots full many folded in with gold wire about the fair green,
— always one knot of the hair, another of gold.
The tail and the forelock¹ were twined in the same way,
and both bound with a band of bright green,
set with full precious stones the whole length of the dock²,
and then tied up with a thong in a tight knot;
where rang many bells full bright of burnished gold.
Such a steed in the world,
such a hero as rides him,
was never beheld in that hall before that time.
His glances were like bright lightning,
so said all that saw him.
It seemed as if no man could endure under his blows.
He had neither helm nor hauberk,
nor gorget, armour nor breastplate,
nor shaft nor shield to guard or to smite;
but in his one hand he had a holly twig,
that is greenest when groves are bare,
and an axe in his other,
a huge and prodigious one,
a weapon merciless almost beyond description;

¹ a lock of hair above the forehead

² part of the horse's tail

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the head had the vast length of an ellyard³,
the blade all of green steel and of beaten gold;
the bit brightly burnished, with a broad edge,
as well shaped for cutting as sharp razors.

After entering the hall and disrupting the dinner, the Green Knight rides around the hall without addressing any specific person. King Arthur and his guests are staring at him.

Then Arthur before the high dais⁴ beheld that adventure,
and saluted the stranger properly,
for never was he afraid, and said,
“Sir, welcome indeed to this place.
I am called Arthur, the head of this hostel.
Light courteously down and tarry⁵, I pray thee;
and whatso thy will is we shall wit after.”
“Nay, so help me he that sits on high,” quoth the hero.
“To dwell any time in this house was not my errand;
but because the fame of this people is lifted up so high,
and thy town and thy men are held the best,
the stoutest in steel gear on steeds to ride,
the bravest and the worthiest of the world’s kind,
and proved opponents in other proper sports;
and here courtesy is known, as I have heard tell,
— it is this that has enticed me hither certainly at this time.
You may be sure by this branch that I bear here
that I pass in peace and seek no quarrel;
for if I had set out with a company in fighting fashion,
I have a hauberk⁶ at home and a helm both,
a shield and a sharp spear shining bright,
and other weapons to wield, I ween well also;
but since I wished no war, my weeds are softer.
Now if thou be as bold as all men tell,
thou wilt grant me graciously the game that I ask.”
Arthur knew how to answer,
and said: “Sir courteous knight,
if it is battle that thou cravest,
thou shalt not fail of a fight here.”

⁴ a table that sits higher than other tables in a room; usually for royalty

⁵ without delay

⁶ a type of armor that is like chain mail

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“Nay, I demand no fight; in faith I tell thee
there are but beardless children⁷ about on this bench.
If I were hasped in arms on a high steed
there is no man here to match me,
their might is so weak.
Therefore I crave in this court a Christmas game,
for it is Yule and New Year,
and here are many gallants.
If there be a man in this house who holds himself so hardy,
is so bold in his blood, so rash in his head,
that he dares stiffly strike one stroke for another,
I shall give him as my gift this rich gisarm⁸,
this axe, that is heavy enough, to handle as he likes;
and I shall abide the first blow as bare as I sit.
If any warrior be wight⁹ enough to try what I propose,
let him leap lightly to me and take this weapon —
I quit-claim it forever, let him keep it as his own —
and I shall stand him a stroke firmly on this floor.
At another time, by our Lady,
thou wilt grant me the boon of dealing him another blow;
I will give him respite of a twelvemonth and a day.
Now hie, and let us see quickly
if any herein dare say aught.”
If he had astonished them at first,
stiller were then all the retainers in hall,
the high and the low.
The warrior on his steed settled himself in his saddle,
and fiercely his red eyes he reeled about;
bent his thick brows, shining green;
and waved his beard, awaiting whoso would rise.
When none would answer him he coughed aloud,
stretched himself haughtily and began to speak;
“What! Is this Arthur’s house,” said the hero then,
“that is famous through so many realms?
Where is now your pride and your conquests,
your fierceness, and your wrath and your great words?
Now is the revel and the renown of the Round Table
overcome by the word of a single man;
for all tremble for dread without a blow shown.”

⁷ the Green Knight is suggesting that King Arthur’s men are childlike and not tough

⁸ the Green Knight’s axe

⁹ brave

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With this he laughed so loud that the lord grieved;
the blood shot for shame into his fair face.
He waxed as wroth as the wind;
and so did all that were there.
The king so keen of mood
then stood near that proud man.
“Sir,” said he, “by heaven thy asking is foolish;
and as thou hast demanded folly,
it behooves thee to find it.
I know no man that is aghast of thy great words.
Give me now this gisarm, for God’s sake,
and I will grant thy boon that thou has bidden.”
Quickly he leaped to him and caught at his hand;
and the other alights fiercely on foot.
Now Arthur has his axe, and grips the helve;
he whirles it sternly about as if he meant to strife with it.
The bold stranger stood upright before him,
higher than any in the house by a head and more;
with stern cheer he stood there, stroked his beard,
and with cool countenance drew down his coat,
no more afraid or dismayed for Arthur’s great strokes
than if some one had brought him a drink of wine upon the bench.
Gawain, that sat by the queen, turned to the king:
“I beseech now with all courtesy
that this affair might be mine.”
~~“Would ye, worthy lord,” quoth Gawain to the king,~~
“bid me step from this bench and stand by you there,
— that I without rudeness might leave this table
and that my liege lady liked it not ill —
I would come to your help before your rich court;
for methinks it is obviously unseemly that such an asking
is made so much of in your hall,
even though ye yourself be willing to take it upon you,
while so many bold ones sit about you on the bench;
than whom, I ween¹⁰,
none under heaven are higher of spirit,
nor more mighty on the field where strike is reared.
I am the weakest, I know, and feeblest of wit;
and to tell the truth there would be the least loss in my life.
I am only to praise forasmuch as ye are my uncle;
no other nobility than your blood know I in my body.

¹⁰ to think

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And since this adventure is so foolish,
it belongs not to you;
I have asked it of you first; give it to me.
Let this great court decide if I have not spoken well.”
The heroes took counsel together
and they all gave the same advice, —
to free the crowned king
and give the game to Gawain.
Then the king commanded Gawain to rise from the table;
and he right quickly stood up and made himself ready,
kneeled down before the king and took the weapon;
and Arthur lovingly left it to him,
lifted up his hand and gave him God’s blessing,
and gladly bade him be hardy both of heart and of hand.
“Take care, cousin,” quoth the king,
“that thou give him a cut;
and if thou handle him properly,
I readily believe that thou shalt endure
the blow which he shall give after.”
Gawain goes to the man with gisarm in hand;
and he boldly awaits him,
shrinking never a whit.
Then speaks to Sir Gawain the knight in the green;
“Rehearse we our agreement before we go farther.
First, I conjure thee,
hero, how thou art called,
that thou tell me it truly,
so that I may believe it.”
“In good faith,” quoth the knight, “Gawain am I called,
who give you this buffet, whatever befalls after;
and at this time twelvemonth I am to take from thee another
with whatever weapon thou wilt, and from no wight else alive.”
The other answers again, “Sir Gawain,
so thrive I as I am heartily glad
that thou shalt give this blow.”
“By Gog,” quoth the green knight, “Sir Gawain,
it delights me that I am to get at thy fist
what I have requested here;
and thou hast readily and truly rehearsed
the whole of the covenant that I asked of the king,
save that thou shalt assure me, sir, by thy troth,
that thou wilt seek me thyself wheresoever thou thinkest
I may be found upon the earth,

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and fetch for thyself such wages as thou dealest me today
before this rich company.”
“Where should I seek thee?” quoth Gawain. “Where is thy place?
I know never where thou livest,
by him that wrought me;
nor do I know thee, knight, thy court, nor thy name.
But tell me truly the way and how thou art called,
and I will use all my wit to win my way thither, —
and that I swear thee, for a sooth¹¹, and by my sure troth¹².”
“New Year will suffice for that; no more is needed now,”
quoth the man in green to Gawain the courteous.
“To tell the truth, after I have received thy tap,
and thou hast smitten me well, I shall promptly inform thee
of my house and my home and mine own name.
Then thou mayest inquire about my journey and hold promise;
and if I speak no speech, then thou speedest the better,
for thou mayest linger at ease in thy land and seek no further.
Take now thy grim tool to thee and let us see how thou knockest.”
“Gladly, sir, for sooth,” quoth Gawain as he strokes his axe.
The green knight on the ground prepared himself properly.
With the head a little bowed he disclosed the flesh.
His long, lovely locks he laid over his crown,
and let the naked nape of his neck show for the blow.
Gawain gripped his axe and gathered it on high;
the left foot he set before on the ground,
and let the axe light smartly down on the naked flesh,
so that the sharp edge severed the giant’s bones,
and shrank through the clear flesh and sheared it in twain,
till the edge of the brown steel bit into the ground.
The fair head fell from the neck to the earth,
and many pushed it with their feet where it rolled forth.
The blood burst from the body and glistened on the green.
Yet never faltered nor fell the hero for all that;
but stoutly he started up with firm steps,
and fiercely he rushed forth where the heroes stood,
caught his lovely head, and lifted it up straightaway.
Then he turned to his steed, seized the bridle,
stepped into the steel bow and strode aloft,
holding the head in his hand by the hair;

¹¹ truth

¹² loyalty

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and as soberly the man sat in his saddle
as if no mishap had ailed him,
though he was headless on the spot.
He turned his trunk about —
that ugly body that bled.
Many a one of them thought
that he had lost his reason.
For he held the head straight up in his hand;
turned the face toward the highest on the dais;
and it lifted up the eyelids and looked straight out,
and spoke thus much with his mouth,
as ye may now hear: “Look Gawain,
that thou be ready to go as thou has promised,
and seek loyally, hero, till thou find me;
as thou has promised in this hall in the hearing of these knights.
To the green chapel go thou, I charge thee,
to receive such a blow as thou has dealt.
Thou deservest to be promptly paid on New Year’s morn.
As the knight of the green chapel many men know me;
therefore, if thou strivest to find me, thou shalt never fail.
And so come, or it behooves thee to be called recreant¹³.”
With a wild rush he turned the reins,
and flew out at the hall door — his head in his hand —
so that the fire of the flint flew from the foal’s hoofs.
To what country he vanished knew none there;
no more than they wist whence he was come.
The king and Gawain roared with laughter at that green man;
but this adventure was reckoned
a marvel among men.
Though the courteous king wondered in his heart,
he let no semblance be seen,
but said aloud to the comely queen with courteous speech,
“Dear dame, today be never dismayed;
well becoming are such tricks at Christmas,
in lack of entertainment, to laugh and sing about
among these pleasant carols of knights and ladies.
Nevertheless I may well go to my meat,
for I cannot deny that I have seen a marvel.”

¹³ cowardly

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He glanced at Sir Gawain and said cheerfully,
“Now, sir, hang up thine axe;
it has hewn enough.” And it was put above the dais
to hang on the tapestry where all men might marvel at it,
and by it avouch the wonderful happening.
Then they turned to the board, these heroes together —
the king and the good knight —
and the keen men served them double of all dainties¹⁴,
as was most fitting;
with all manner of meat, and minstrelsy both.
They spent that day in joy until it came to an end.
Now take care, Sir Gawain, that thou blench¹⁵ not
for the pain to prosecute this adventure
that thou has taken on hand.

¹⁴ sweet treats

¹⁵ to flinch or shrink back