

Interpreting *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

In your studies, try to identify not only key themes and topics, but also key critical positions and disagreements. Which critics have most influenced how a text is read, and why? Who has challenged or disagreed with them? And (most importantly!) where do YOU stand in the critical debate?

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight has been read in many different ways. Here are just a few influential readings:

A parable on the relation between *nature* and *culture*

In his essay 'Green and the Gold: The Major Theme of *Gawain and the Green Knight*', William Goldhurst argued that the *Gawain* poet

believes that the primitive forces of nature represent a factor that must be reckoned with, contended against somehow, and if possible mastered. (65)

1. Can you see any problems with this argument? How could you challenge it?

Earlier in his argument, Goldhurst puts his case a little more cautiously:

the major theme of *Gawain and the Green Knight* is the idea that the primitive and sometimes brutal forces of nature make known their demands to all men, even to those who would take shelter behind the civilized comforts of court life. [...] the poem suggests that at best life is but a truce between natural impulses and allegiances to the virtues which civilized creatures are pledged to uphold (61, 64)

2. Does this seem persuasive to you?

More recently, William Woods has made a different argument about the relationship of man and nature in the poem. For Woods, nature - the outer - reveals the human "inner man" of *Gawain*. The contrast between outer and inner

turns inward upon itself: outer and inner turn out to be versions of each other, suggesting that man is always already in nature, and nature, forever in him. (209)

3. How do you think Woods supports his claim? Do you find Woods or Goldhurst more convincing?

In an influential essay, Lynn White Jr. claimed that the Judeo-Christian tradition is at the root (but not the *cause*) of our current ecological crisis. In particular, White argues that the biblical creation story sets man above nature. The key text is *Genesis*, the first book of the Bible:

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." (*Genesis* 1.26)

4. How might this idea change your reading of *Gawain*, if at all?

5. How would *you* describe the relationship between nature and culture, the natural world and man, in *Gawain*? Does the poem have anything to teach us or to remind us of?

As romance

The great formalist critic, Northrop Frye, defines romance as a literature of wish fulfilment or utopian fantasy. In his *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), he writes:

the quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality (*Anatomy of Criticism*, p.193)

6. What "anxieties of reality" might *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* be addressing? Think about both the historical context of the time, and the ways the poem still feels relevant today. What do you think an audience around 1400 felt anxious about? How does the poem "save" or "deliver" Gawain/the poet/us from those realities? In what ways does it "still contain that reality"?

7. How helpful is Frye's definition of romance in finding new ways of thinking about *Sir Gawain*?

Fredric Jameson, an influential Marxist critic, claims that "Romance as a form [...] expresses a transitional moment, yet one of a very special type: its contemporaries must feel their society torn between past and future in such a way that the alternatives are grasped as hostile but somehow unrelated worlds".

8. Does this offer us an interesting way of thinking about *Gawain*?

In terms of gender

9. Some critics have argued that *Sir Gawain* shows a world in which women, not men, hold the real power. To what extent would you agree?

In relation to chivalry

The critic Bonnie Lander suggests that *Gawain* is critical of the unthinking chivalry of Camelot, and presents an attractive alternative in Bertilak and the world of Hautdesert, who are seen as 'intelligently immoral' - they do not unthinkingly embrace the chivalric codes, but challenge them, in a philosophical and (as the Green Knight) literal sense. In encountering the Green Knight and the world of Hautdesert, Gawain learns to become a thinking individual.

10. How persuasive do you find this reading? Are there any problems with it?

And finally...

What other important themes and issues has this brief list omitted? What else do you think is important and interesting in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*?