

1965

Structure and character in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Robert L. Johnstone
Lehigh University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://preserve.lehigh.edu/etd>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Johnstone, Robert L., "Structure and character in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" (1965). *Theses and Dissertations*. 3377.
<https://preserve.lehigh.edu/etd/3377>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Lehigh Preserve. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Lehigh Preserve. For more information, please contact preserve@lehigh.edu.

VITA

Robert L. Johnstone, born January 19, 1940, in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Richard K. Johnstone. He attended the Bloomsburg public schools and Bloomsburg State College. He was graduated from Bloomsburg State College in June, 1961, with a degree of Bachelor of Science in Education. During the academic year 1961-1962, he taught French at the Atlantic City High School, Atlantic City, New Jersey. In September, 1962, he began graduate work at Lehigh University.

Essay in Interpretation. The Cooper Monographs on
English and American Literature, No. 6. Bern, 1961.

Silverstein, Theodore. "The Art of Sir Gawain and the
Green Knight," UTQ, XXXIII (1963), 258-278.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. ed. Sir Israel Gollancz.
London, 1940.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. ed. J. R. R. Tolkien
and E. V. Gordon. London, 1925.

Smithers, G. V. - "What Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
Is About," MAE, XXXII (1963), 171-189.

Whiting, B. J. "Gawain, His Reputation, His Courtesy
and His Appearance in Chaucer's Squire's Tale,"
MedStud, IX (1947), 189-234.

- Kittredge, George Lyman. A Study of "Gawain and the Green Knight." Cambridge, Mass., 1916.
- Loomis, Roger Sherman. "More Celtic Elements in Gawain and the Green Knight," JEGP, XLII (1943), 149-184.
- Malarkey, Stoddard and J. Barre Toelken. "Gawain and the Green Girdle," JEGP, LXIII (1964), 14-20.
- Markman, Alan M. "The Meaning of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," PMLA, LXXII (1957), 574-586.
- Moorman, Charles. "Myth and Medieval Literature: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MedStud, XVIII (1956), 158-172.
- Pearsall, Derek. "A Rhetorical 'Descriptio' in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MLR, L (1955), 129-134.
- Randall, Dale B. J. "A Note on Structure in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MLN, LXXII (1957), 161-163.
- "Was the Green Knight a Fiend?"
SP, LVII (1960), 479-491.
- Savage, Henry Lyttleton. The "Gawain"-Poet: Studies in His Personality and Background. Chapel Hill, 1956.
- Schnyder, Hans. "Aspects of Kingship in Sir Gawain,"
ES, XL (1959), 289-294.
- "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight": An

- Cook, Robert G. "The Play-Element in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," TSE, XIII (1963), 5-31.
- Englehardt, George J. "The Predicament of Gawain," MLQ, XVI (1955), 218-225.
- Everett, Dorothy. Essays on Middle English Literature. London, 1955.
- Friedman, Albert B. "Morgan Le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Spec, XXXV (1960), 260-274.
- Green, Richard H. "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," ELH, XXIX (1962), 121-139.
- Hills, D. Farley. "Gawain's Fault in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," RES, XIV (1963), 124-131.
- Howard, Donald R. "Structure and Symmetry in Sir Gawain," Spec, XXXIX (1964), 425-433.
- Hulbert, J. R. "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MP, XIII (1915/16), 433-462, 689-730.
- Kiteley, J. F. "The De Arte Honeste Amandi of Andreas Cappelanus and the Concept of Courtesy in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Anglia, LXXIX (1961), 7-16.
- "The Knight Who Cared For His Life," Anglia, LXXIX (1962), 131-137.

Bibliography

- Barnet, Sylvan. "A Note on the Structure of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MLN, LXXI (1956), 319.
- Baughan, Denver Ewing. "The Role of Morgan Le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," ELH, XVII (1950), 241-251.
- Bercovitch, Sacvan. "Romance and Anti-Romance in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," PQ, XLVI (January 1965), 30-37.
- Bloomfield, Morton W. "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal," PMLA, LXXVI (1961), 7-19.
- Borroff, Marie. "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight": A Stylistic and Metrical Study. New Haven, 1962.
- Bowers, R. H. "Gawain and the Green Knight as Entertainment," MLQ, XXIV (1963), 333-341.
- Burrow, John. "The Two Confession Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MP, LVII (1959), 73-79.
- Carson, Mother Angela. "Morgain La Fée as the Principle of Unity in Gawain and the Green Knight," MLQ, XXIII (1962), 3-16.
- "The Green Chapel: Its Meaning and Function," SP, LX (1963), 598-605.

humor of the poem at the expense of its seriousness. R. H. Bowers, "Gawain and the Green Knight as Entertainment," MLQ, XXIV (1963), 333-341, in stressing that the function of the romance is to entertain, argues that the main actions of the poem, the decapitation and the temptation, are essentially practical jokes, and that the whole story is a mere tale of magic. He sees Sir Gawain as a wholly secular poem which only genuflects to Christianity, "although it properly adds enough moralizing or sentiment to give a poem ballast and protect it against a puritan charge that it lacks utilitas" (340-341). Mr. Bowers' view ignores the obvious importance of such Christian elements of the poem as the pentangle and the emphasis that the structural arrangement places on such scenes as the two confessions. The other critic, Robert G. Cook, "The Play-Element in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," TSE, XIII (1963), 5-31, contends that the whole poem shows the poet's realization of the importance of games to a civilized life, the necessity of being able to create a small world of order in a large world of chaos. Such a reading makes the poem into a modern sociological tract rather than a fourteenth-century romance.

roff, pp. 100-120. The quotation is from p. 120.

65 Burrow, 78; Howard, 433.

66 Green, 138-139.

67 Schnyder, p. 73.

68 Hulbert, 454.

69 Kittredge, pp. 132-133.

70 Loomis, 181-183.

71 Baughan, 241-251. The quotations are from 251.

72 Carson, "Morgain La Fée," 3-16.

73 Friedman, 266-267.

74 Friedman, 269-271. The quotation is from 271.

75 Still another critic who sees Morgan as indispensable to the plot is Bercovitch, who says that she is "a caricature of the romance mode" (35). She is, of course, not well enough developed to be a caricature of anything.

76 Morton W. Bloomfield, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal," PMLA, LXXVI (1961), 15.

77 Two recent critics have chosen to emphasize the

"less biased."

- 52 Kittredge, pp. 115-118.
- 53 Randall, "A Note on Structure," 162.
- 54 Marie Borroff, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight":
A Stylistic and Metrical Study (New Haven, 1962), pp.
 110-113.
- 55 Hulbert, 455-458.
- 56 Dale B. J. Randall, "Was the Green Knight a
 Fiend?" SP, LVII (1960), 479-491.
- 57 Tolkien and Gordon, p. 131.
- 58 Borroff, pp. 110-114.
- 59 Randall, "Was the Green Knight a Fiend?" 481.
- 60 Roger Sherman Loomis, "More Celtic Elements in
Gawain and the Green Knight," JEGP, XLII (1943), 170-181.
- 61 Smithers, 184.
- 62 Baughan, 251; Carson, "Morgain La Fée," 15.
- 63 Schnyder, pp. 39-41. Schnyder develops the same
 idea in "Aspects of Kingship in Sir Gawain," ES, XL (1959),
 289-294.
- 64 The above four paragraphs are a summary of Bor-

in Arthurian romance would come away from no other work with as clear and concentrated an impression of Gawain's courtesy as he would have after putting down Gawain" (234).

44 Everett, p. 88.

45 John Burrow, "The Two Confession Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MP, LVII (1959), 75.

46 Howard, 429, and Englehardt, 222. Burrow, 75-76, makes up a confession for Gawain and decides what he did and did not confess. The author simply says that Gawain was "clene" (1883).

47 Burrow, 75-76.

48 Tolkien and Gordon, p. 115, note to 2445.

49 Mother Angela Carson, "The Green Chapel: Its Meaning and Function," SP, LX (1963), 598-605, argues in the opposite direction. She contends that the Gawain-poet is using the word chapel in a sense derived from the twelfth-century French chapeler, "to cut down." She then argues that chapel here must mean "a place of slaughter." That the poet would devise a form of an already archaic word and expect his audience to understand him is unlikely.

50 Smithers, 171-174, 177-179.

51 Everett, p. 79, calls the Green Knight's view

Tolkien and Gordon, p. 113, translate it as "(measured) by that lace."

³⁶ J. F. Kiteley, "The Knight Who Cared for His Life," Anglia, LXXIX (1962), 131-137, describes four other romances in which Gawain is shown as caring for his life and remarks that a medieval audience would not be shocked by Gawain's cowardice.

³⁷ Kittredge, p. 8; Day, p. xxi; and Smithers, 182.

³⁸ D. F. Hills, "Gawain's Fault in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," RES, XIV (1963), 124-131.

³⁹ Smithers, 175.

⁴⁰ Smithers, 176.

⁴¹ Smithers, 176.

⁴² The above paragraph is a summary of Smithers, 176-177, 179-189.

⁴³ Smithers, 183. That there can be little doubt that Gawain is genuinely courteous has been demonstrated by B. J. Whiting, "Gawain, His Courtesy and His Appearance in Chaucer's Squire's Tale," MedStud, IX (1947), 189-234. He shows that in Sir Gawain the number of references to Gawain's courtesy exceeds proportionately that of any other Middle English romance. "Even one who read widely

duction to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. Sir Israel Gollancz (London, 1940), pp. xx-xxi.

30 Kittredge, p. 8.

31 G. V. Smithers, "What Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is About," MAE, XXXII (1963), 180-181.

32 Smithers, 179.

33 Howard, 430-431. Howard's account of the second arming is not quite right. It does not, as he says, end with the description of the girdle, but the emphasis that the poet puts on the girdle and its function in the second description warrants seeing it as parallel to the shield. It is unnecessary to emphasize, as Howard does, that self-preservation is a necessary knightly value in order to prove that Gawain is nothing but a sheer hypocrite for expecting to be protected by God while he wears the girdle. Self-preservation is obviously a necessary human value, and by this point in the poem we certainly regard Gawain as human. Neither of these is a justification, which is why Gawain is punished, but the second explanation is as satisfying as the first.

34 The definition is from Tolkien and Gordon, p. 169.

35 Stoddard Malarkey and J. Barre Toelken, "Gawain and the Green Girdle," JEGP, LXIII (1964), 14-20.

20 The above three paragraphs are a summary of Savage, pp. 31-48.

21 J. F. Kiteley, "The De Arte Honeste Amandi of Andreas Capellanus and the Concept of Courtesy in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Anglia, LXXIX (1961), 10-15.

22 Everett, p. 80. Tolkien and Gordon explain the significance of the singular and plural second-person pronouns, p. 131.

23 Schnyder, pp. 60-63.

24 Englehardt, 222-223.

25 Richard H. Green, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," ELH, XXIX (1962), 121-139.

26 Denver Ewing Baughan, "The Role of Morgan Le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," ELH, XVII (1950), 249-251, and Mother Angela Carson, "Morgain La Fée as the Principle of Unity in Gawain and the Green Knight," MLQ, XXIII (1962), 14.

27 Hulbert, 694.

28 Albert B. Friedman, "Morgan Le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Spec, XXV (1960), 265.

29 Tolkien and Gordon, p. xi, and Mabel Day, intro-

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MedStud, XVIII (1956), 164.

¹⁰ Alan M. Markman, "The Meaning of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," PMLA, LXXII (1957), 583-585.

¹¹ Sacvan Bercovitch, "Romance and Anti-Romance in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," PQ, XLIV (1965), 30-37.

¹² George J. Englehardt, "The Predicament of Gawain," MLQ, XVI (1955), 218-225.

¹³ Hans Schnyder, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight": An Essay in Interpretation, The Cooper Monographs on English and American Literature, No. 6 (Bern, 1961), pp. 32-36, and Moorman, 164-172.

¹⁴ Everett, p. 83.

¹⁵ Everett, p. 79.

¹⁶ Theodore Silverstein, "The Art of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," UTQ, XXXIII (1963), 275-277.

¹⁷ Derek Pearsall, "A Rhetorical 'Descriptio' in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MLR, L (1955), 132-133.

¹⁸ Donald R. Howard, "Structure and Symmetry in Sir Gawain," Spec, XXXIX (1964), 431.

¹⁹ Barnet, 319.

Footnotes

- 1 George Lyman Kittredge, A Study of "Gawain and the Green Knight" (Cambridge, Mass., 1916), pp. 1-9, 107-143.
- 2 J. R. Hulbert, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MP, XIII (1916), 433-462.
- 3 Kittredge, p. 8.
- 4 Dorothy Everett, Essays on Middle English Literature (London, 1955), pp. 83-84.
- 5 Sylvan Barnet, "A Note on the Structure of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MLN, LXXI (1956), 319, and Dale B. J. Randall, "A Note on Structure in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MLN, LXXII (1957), 161-163, have both developed this idea briefly.
- 6 Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon (London, 1925), ll. 372-374, p. 12. All further quotations are from this edition, and citations will be included in the text.
- 7 Henry Lyttleton Savage, The "Gawain"-Poet: Studies in His Personality and Background (Chapel Hill, 1956), pp. 32-36.
- 8 Everett, p. 84.
- 9 Charles Moorman, "Myth and Medieval Literature:

and greatness in life. In his ability to see the diverse elements of life and combine them harmoniously in a literary work, he has few equals among medieval English poets.

about ourselves. The poet presents the best of men as flawed, undeniably, but not deserving of sententious fingerwagging or sly, ironic assaults on his pride in his perfection. Gawain is indeed "On þe faultlest freke þat euer on fote 3ede" (2363), and although he is not perfect, he deserves our applause. Such an examination also clarifies some other attitudes expressed in the poem. Gawain is certainly an exemplar of Christian virtue, but the virtues stressed most heavily in the poem are secular as well as Christian. Morton Bloomfield is correct in saying that the poem is "fairly and squarely Christian."⁷⁶ This does not, however, preclude the expression in the poem of a profound appreciation of the value of the joys and difficulties of life in this world. The poem's seriousness never overshadows its good humor. The repetitive structure creates many ironies; the character of Bercilak, who, despite his demonic and otherworldly origins, happily and justly serves the ends of Christianity, is one of the largest. Others are smaller, but no less significant. In accepting the challenge, Gawain says, "I am . . . lest lur of my lyf" (354-355), and Bercilak later attributes Gawain's flaws to his love of life (2368). The temptation scenes, among the most suspenseful in the poem, have also their comic side because of the reversal of courtly-love roles.⁷⁷ The Gawain-poet saw much humor, as well as grimness, irony,

game, the denouement of the poem. This leaves Morgan accountable for only the initial action, the Green Knight's visit to Arthur's court, which, although an important enough action, could have been given a hundred other satisfactory motivations, could even have been handled with the same explanation given for the temptations.⁷⁵

* * *

Structure and character, then, are successfully and artistically fused in Sir Gawain. Through his handling of parallel episodes the poet has created the happily ambivalent character of Bercilak, the rhythmic alternation of moods of celebration, fear, wonder, despair, and, by means of these, called forth from Gawain such a variety of reactions that he emerges not only as a triumphant romance hero, but also as a fully developed and admirable human character. The poem, like the hero, has its flaws, but like the hero's flaws, these are few and detract from the work hardly at all. My treatment of interpretations dealing with character and structure has shown that these elements cannot be considered separately or partially. Any interpretation of the poem must take into account the reciprocal influence of character and structure and must examine the entire poem.

When such an analysis is made, the meaning of the poem becomes quite clear. Its purpose is to show us what an excellent man Gawain is and thereby to tell us something

Morgan for many reasons is the inevitable choice for the role of enchantress. Her hatred for Arthur and Guinevere was notorious. The woods of Arthurian romance are thick with Morguenetes and filleules de Morgain and fearsome knights on embassies to Arthur's hall to stir up trouble or to entice heroes on doubtful adventures. It is not only in the horn and mantle pieces that Morgan plays the goddess of discord. Since the poet was altering the conclusion that folklore and popular story had conditioned his readers to expect, it was wise that the substituted motive and character accorded so well with the related body of lore on which his story depended, the Arthurian legend.⁷⁴

Although Friedman's hypothesis is the most acceptable to date, until more information on the immediate background of Sir Gawain is discovered it will remain impossible to be quite sure why Morgan is in the poem. It is clear, however, that her role is of no artistic value and has little real connection with the action of the story. Bercilak himself points to this conclusion when he says of the testing: "Now know I wel by cosses, and by costes als,/ And þe wowyng of my wyf: I wro3t hit myseluen./ I sende hir to asay þe" (2360-2362). By taking upon himself the motivation for the temptations, he also assumes responsibility for the result of the beheading

Friedman has also offered the most plausible explanation for Morgan's presence in the poem. Using Kit-tredge's study as the basis of his argument, he notes that all the stories which appear to stand in the immediate background of Sir Gawain are disenchantment stories, and in most of them the denouement is a second beheading of the giant challenger which unspells him and restores his normal shape. Friedman conjectures that the Gawain-poet, or one of his predecessors, rejected this conclusion because in combining the motifs of the Temptation and the Challenge he made one very significant change. The tester was no longer a bespelled ogre, but a shapeshifter who could by his own will become either the monstrous Green Knight or the genial Bercilak. The poet who combined the plots was probably obliged to do so in order to allow Bercilak to appear in normal human form at his castle, which was necessary to prevent Gawain and the reader from realizing the extent to which Gawain was being tested. By making the challenger a shapeshifter, the author destroyed any climactic value that the usual final decapitation and unspelling might have. The loss of the disenchantment required an adjustment in the motivation of the action, and Morgan was chosen as a dea ex machina.

The poet's solution was to make the Green Knight the servant of an enchantress determined to undermine the reputation of Arthur's court, and

In an effort to save Morgan from her detractors, two more recent critics have argued that Bercilak's explanation is absolutely correct and that Morgan's plan does, in fact, motivate all the action of the story. Denver E. Baughan says that Bercilak's intent to test the chastity of Arthur and his court was imposed upon him by Morgan, whose "fame as a healer" caused her to send him "to purge and heal the court of its moral corruptness."⁷¹ Mother Angela Carson agrees with Baughan in essentials, except that she does not see Morgan as a healer, but rather as a malign fee who is frustrated in her intent to reveal Guinevere's infidelity with Lancelot. Mother Carson identifies both the old woman in the castle and Bercilak's wife with Morgan, and Bercilak with Urien, Morgan's fairy lover, to explain her association with Bercilak in the poem.⁷² Neither of these arguments has any textual authority, and the main contentions which underlie them, that the beheading game is a chastity test and that the court is corrupt, have already been refuted. As for Morgan's fame as a healer, Albert B. Friedman, who attacks Baughan's argument in every way possible, shows that her characterization as perpetrator of malign schemes against Arthur is much more firmly embedded in tradition than her role as a healer and that her ugliness, which the Gawain-poet describes in detail (946-969), is traditionally associated with her wickedness.⁷³

Whatever motive she might have had thus becomes quite unclear. Hulbert concludes that she was probably added by a late redactor who was familiar with Morgan's role in other works of the Arthurian cycle.⁶⁸ Kittredge's view of her presence is similar to Hulbert's, for he too notes that her plan is a failure and is not well worked into the story and adds that it is strange that Bercilak and Gawain should part on such friendly terms after Bercilak's blunt statement of the evil purpose of his mission. He suggests that she may be a substitution for the no doubt nameless enchantress who controlled the action of the story which the Gawain-poet used as his source. Since the poet shows in the first and last stanzas a desire to connect his narrative to "the orthodox Arthur saga," his making Morgan Le Fay the motivation of the whole plot is probably another means to this end. But if Bercilak and Morgan were to be collaborators, then the traditional reason for Bercilak's visit to Arthur's court, his disenchantment, had to be discarded. The poet then found another excuse for Bercilak's visit in Morgan's traditional hatred of Guinevere.⁶⁹ Another explanation for her presence comes from Roger Sherman Loomis, who suggests that the poet knew her in the Welsh story of Pwyll and Arawn, the wild huntsman and lover of Morgan Le Fay. Loomis does not, however, contend that Morgan is in any way essential to the plot.⁷⁰

a genuine flaw. The character least integrated into the structure of the poem, she is undeveloped except for the description which contrasts her ugliness to the beauty of Bercilak's lady (947-969). She is not even identified by name when we see her, and her visible participation in the plot is nil. For these reasons most critics have questioned the logic and artistic merit of Bercilak's explanation that it was she who brought about the action of the entire poem:

Morgne þe goddes . . .

Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wynne halle
 For to assay þe surquidré, 3if hit soth were
 Þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table;
 Ho wayned me þis wonder your wytte3 to reue,
 For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dy3e
 With glopnyng of þat ilke gome þat gostlych speked
 With his hede in his honde bifore þe hy3e table.

(2452, 2456-62)

J. R. Hulbert finds Bercilak's explanation "inherently unreasonable" because Morgan's plan does not achieve her intentions at all. Through her testing, Gawain and Arthur's court win greater glory, and there is no reason to believe that any harm came to Guinevere. Although she seems to have been inspired by enmity, Morgan is perfectly just in her testing, and, being an enchantress, she should be able to foresee the result of her plan.

by the fact that Gawain is, after all, a hero to them. They, as they all know, are lesser knights than he, and they might well see little ignominy in wearing a symbol of an imperfection far less than their own. What would be most important to them would be Gawain's achievement, not his failure, for in their estimation he did not fail. He succeeded just by returning alive, contrary to their expectation.

If such an explanation of the final scene of the poem is not wholly satisfying, it is still, I think, preferable to the others mentioned because it takes into account the fact that there is a definite connection between structure and characterization. I have tried to show that the poet is generally very successful in uniting structure and character, but it is possible that in this instance he was not, that his desire for structural balance, to keep the mood of the court the same at beginning and end, got the better of his great ability for natural characterization. Such a view does no harsh injustice to the poem, for it need not be perfect to be one of the very best. I also prefer this explanation of the final action of the poem because it places emphasis on the good side of Gawain's character, where it belongs.

If the Gawain-poet's depiction of the court may be said to lack a little, then his use of Morgan Le Fay as the rationale for the action of the poem may be called

Carande for þat comly: 'Bi Kryst, hit is scape
þat pou, leude, schal be lost þat art of lyf noble!'

(672-675)

Since at the beginning of his journey all their concern is for Gawain's safety, his return, particularly to a group so given to merriment, would be an occasion for great happiness and celebration. The poet makes it clear that this is the reason for their high spirits: "þer wakned wele in þat wone when wyst þe grete/þat gode Gawyn wat3 commen" (2490-2491).

The experience which Gawain undergoes is intensely personal, and one would not necessarily expect the court to understand and feel it as he does, since they are not personally involved in what he considers to be his shame. Indeed, the readers of the poem, who do accompany Gawain in his adventure and do become personally involved, have never been able to agree upon a satisfactory explanation of the nature of the experience or of its meaning for Gawain or themselves. Moreover, far from needing to take Gawain's tale as a warning against their own pride and folly, the court has good reason to laugh at parts of it, notably at the temptation scenes, which are genuinely humorous. As for their assumption of the green girdle, Gawain's symbol of untruth, as a badge of honor, they would not feel so intensely as Gawain the shame he attributes to it. The honor attached to it may be explained

being childgered explains such a reaction to Gawain's experience, and the moral implications of the adventure may be a reason for us not to expect them to laugh, but it does not explain why they do. As has been shown, there is no particular reason to suspect their morality. If Gawain's repentance is extravagant, laughing at him with no explanation does not seem a very suitable way of correcting him.

There are other explanations for their conduct, none of which is completely satisfying esthetically. First of all, the poet was obviously motivated at least partially to depict the court at the end as he did in order to preserve the careful parallelism of the structure of the poem. The action ends where it began, in Arthur's court, and the festive mood is the same in either case. Further, to take into account the characterization of the court at the beginning of the poem, Gawain's return is a reversal of their expectations. They fully anticipated that they would never see him again. On Gawain's day of departure,

Pere wat3 much derue doel driuen in þe sale,
 þat so worthé as Wawan schulde wende on þat ernde,
 To dry3e a delful dynt, and dele no more
 wyth bronde.

(558-561)

As Gawain left the castle,

Al þat se3 þat semly syked in hert,
 And sayde sobly al same segges til oper,

him, and for that reason is undeniably brave. Gawain, in requesting the challenge, shows himself still braver.

The characterization of Arthur and the court at the beginning of the poem can be satisfactorily explained, but this is more difficult for their appearance at the end of the poem, where their joyful mood corresponds to their mirth at the beginning. When Gawain tells them of his adventure, they "lazen loude perat" (2514), and decide that each knight should wear a band of green in Gawain's honor (2516-2518). Laughter seems an inappropriate reaction to an adventure as intense and difficult as Gawain's, and the taking of the green girdle, which Gawain specifically tells them is a "token of vntrawpe" (2509), as a symbol of honor seems just as strange. The explanations which critics have offered so far have been too vague to be satisfactory. John Burrow and Donald R. Howard see the court's reaction to Gawain's adventure as a restoration of some kind of emotional equilibrium, which serves as a corrective to Gawain's extravagant penitence.⁶⁵ Richard H. Green says that they laugh because they are childgered and proud, and that their laughter represents their failure to learn any moral lesson from Gawain's experience.⁶⁶ Hans Schnyder contends that they take the girdle because they acknowledge their former corruption,⁶⁷ but he does not mention their laughter, which certainly seems incongruous with the former notion and with any idea of penitence. Neither pride nor

The narrator of Gawain, we may safely say, is richly conscious of the disparity between the reputation for valor and warlike prowess of Arthur's knights and what actually takes place when the Green Knight thrusts himself upon them. But this does not imply that his attitude toward them involves either hostility or contempt. Because he has avoided emphasis on material luxury and worldly power in his depiction of the life of the court, the Challenge Episode is not seen as a rebuke to arrogance or sensual self-indulgence. Arthur and his knights are charmingly youthful and joyous; their pleasures are innocent.⁶⁴

It might be objected that an argument based on what is missing from the poem, in this instance the emphasis on the material wealth of the court, is not very strong. Granted, but the emphasis that the poet places on the joyous innocence of the members of the court does indicate that we are not to condemn them completely. Certainly Arthur and his knights fall short of the chivalric ideal, Gawain, but this does not mean that they are bad as much as it means that Gawain is good. Since Gawain emerges as the bravest in the court, he stands out not only by contrast to the other knights, who are afraid, but also by comparison with Arthur. Although Arthur is disconcerted by the Green Knight, he can summon the courage to face

to leave the table is a justification of this assumption (343-346). Arthur does not take an exceptionally long time to answer the Green Knight's first question or the challenge, given the circumstances, and when he does, he is always courteous and brave:

'Wyȝe, welcum iwys to þis place,
 þe hede of þis ostel Arthour I hat;
 Liȝt luflych adoun and lenge, I þe praye,
 And quat-so þy wylle is we schal wyt after.'

(252-255)

His hesitation in accepting the challenge is explainable in that although he was hoping for an adventure or marvelous tale, the challenge which the Green Knight offers is completely outside Arthur's experience as a knightly combatant. Arthur is willing to engage in man-to-man combat (276-278), but he considers the Green Knight's request foolish (323-324). Arthur, however, does accept the challenge, and he shows more confidence than Gawain about the outcome of the whole affair (372-374).

Although the challenge is met successfully, the episode is a humiliation for the court, but a comic rather than a serious one. The Green Knight, because his actions and words have dominated the scene, departs the psychological victor. Borroff concisely summarizes the narrator's attitude toward the court at the beginning of the poem:

not through characterizing the court as cowards, but through a shift of descriptive technique. While the court is shown in idealized terms and no one there but Guinevere (74-84) receives much specific description at all, the Green Knight is presented realistically in a minutely detailed description of sixty-six lines (136-202). The result is that the audience feels the presence of the Green Knight much more keenly than the presence of the court. Because of the dramatic handling of the Green Knight's entrance, and because the narrator reports his speeches and actions in a factual and detailed manner, the effect of his presence is startling and frightening, although not necessarily awesome or terrifying. The stunned silence of the court is a natural reaction to both the sudden entrance of the huge, green stranger and to the unusual challenge which he flings at them. Their reaction is further explained by the fact that the Green Knight's dress and bearing do not indicate that he is a knight or that he might have a particular mission. The narrator does not call him a kny3t until line 377, and the court's trouble in identifying him is shown when Arthur addresses him simply as "wy3e" (252). Moreover, the narrator says explicitly, although not very emphatically, that the silence may not be due entirely to fear: "I deme hit not al for doute,/ Bot sum for cortaysye" (246-247). Gawain's later speech asking for permission

place but standing "Talkkande bifore þe hyȝe table of trifles ful hende" (108), and waiting for "sum auentures þyng an vncoupe tale,/ Of sum mayn meruayle" (93-94). Thus, when the Green Knight asks for "þe gouernour of þis gyng" (225), he is not intentionally ignoring Arthur; he simply does not know which one he is. The king's refusal to take his seat at the table is, of course, traditionally an act of self-denial, but the Gawain-poet gives two reasons for it. The first and more emphasized explanation specifically attributes Arthur's conduct to his boyishness:

Bot Arthure wolde not ete til al were serued,
 He watȝ so joly of his joyfnes, and sumquat childgered;
 His lif liked hym lyȝt, he louied þe lasse
 Auper to longe lye or to longe sitte,
 So bisied him his ȝonge blod and his brayn wyld.

(85-89)

The second and traditional explanation is given less importance and is carefully distinguished from the first: "And also an oper maner meued him eke/ þ at he purȝ nobelay had nomen" (90-91; italics added). The Green Knight's unintentional slighting of Arthur, then, is presented as a result of and perhaps a rebuke to his boyish behavior, not his immorality or cowardice.

The narrator achieves the Green Knight's domination of the scene in the court from the moment of his entrance

(42), Lorde (49), each referring to all the members of the same group, shows the spirit of brotherhood of the knights of the Round Table and the noble qualities which they all share. Despite the celebration in progress, the emphasis of the description, which occupies only fourteen lines (116-129), is not placed on the material aspects of the moment, but on the goodness, innocence, and joy of their lives. "With alle þe wele of the worlde þay woned þer samen" (50) means that they lived not with all the goods of the world, but with all the joy, or all that is good.

At the same time, however, the poet undercuts this attitude somewhat in the rest of the scene. He does this occasionally through his choice of words, as in line 59, where he describes Arthur's knights as "So hardy a here on hille." The proper place for knights to demonstrate their hardihood is not "on hille," that is, in the castle, but in the field. The same technique is used again when Arthur is described as sitting "stif in stalle" (104). The word stif, when combined with "in stalle," in his place, connotes woodenness rather than bravery. Further, the poet emphasizes the restlessness of the youthful spirit of the court, and particularly of Arthur, and it is this quality, not cowardice, which makes the Green Knight's first discomfiture of the court possible. When the Green Knight enters, Arthur is not sitting at his

Gawain's. Further, the quotation is part of a speech by the members of the court which is simply reported as fact by the narrator. The speech shows the court's opinion of Arthur at that particular moment, but it need not and, in fact, does not represent the narrator's attitude toward Arthur, which is more complex and objective than the court's. Schnyder's argument about mortal combat ignores the fact that the poem is set solidly in the past previous to 1179 and would have the poet ignore a great part of the subject matter of Arthurian legend.

These critics try to emphasize Gawain's virtue at the expense of Arthur and the court. Certainly Gawain is the best of knights, but it is unnecessary to degrade Arthur and his court to prove this. Marie Borroff, in her stylistic analysis of the first part of the poem, proves that the character of Arthur and the court is almost the antithesis of what the critics mentioned take it to be. She shows that the initial description of the court (37-59) is conventionally idealized and that, although the style of the passage as far as diction and metrics are concerned is quite traditional, its effect is one of elevation and dignity. This results from the fact that most of the content of the passage is subjective idealization, expressed with intensity and conviction, rather than factual statement. The use of such terms as lede3 (38), breber (39), tulkes (41), kni3tes

as "sumquat childgered" (86) and the mention of "his brayn wylde" (89), see him as a foolish and even corrupt figure, and because neither he nor the court respond instantly to the Green Knight's challenge, they consider the whole court, with the exception of Gawain, to be cowards. Denver Baughan and Mother Angela Carson accuse Arthur of moral looseness because of the tradition of Guinevere's infidelity to Arthur, despite the poet's statement that the entire court was "in her first age" (54).⁶² Hans Schnyder not only agrees with Baughan and Carson, but further indicts him for pride and for sending Gawain into mortal combat, since the church had outlawed such combat in 1179. He then argues that, because according to the theory of medieval kingship a bad king has an adverse effect upon his subjects and the subjects in turn reciprocate this pernicious influence to the king, the court is also corrupt.⁶³ Schnyder's contention that Arthur is a bad king rests entirely upon his belief that Arthur is excessively proud, which he supports by citing lines 679-682:

"A lowande leder of lede3 in londe hym wel seme3,
 And so had better haf ben pen britned to no3t,
 Hadet wyth an aluisch mon, for angarde3 pryde.
 Who knew euer any kyng such counsel to take
 As kny3te3 in cauelacioun3 on Crystmasse gomme3!"

These lines, however, do not make it clear that it is Arthur's pride that is referred to; it may well be

agreeable. And through the pleasing ambivalence of Bercilak's character he has made the supernatural element in the poem serve Christian ends.⁶¹

Bercilak's character may be said to depend more heavily upon the structure in a mechanical sense than Gawain's. That is, the development of his character is not so much a naturally portrayed human response to the structure as it is a requirement for the success of the story. His characterization is more a part of the structure than a reaction to any part of it. The poet uses him to create situations rather than to give them meaning through his response to them.

A similar relationship between structure and character is immediately apparent in the poet's handling of the characterization of Arthur and his court, which serves as a frame for Gawain's entire adventure. The festive mood at beginning and end forms a contrast to the events which occur within the frame. In both instances the purpose of the court is to create a background against which Gawain can act and to reflect meaningfully upon his actions through their opinions of him and through the implicit comparison of his actions with theirs. The respectful opinion that they hold of Gawain is quite clear, but their own characters, the basis of any comparison with Gawain, are less so.

Some critics, seizing upon the description of Arthur

846). Although he is not insolent, the host's manner is, like the Green Knight's, rough and hearty. We are told that he is "fre of hys speche" (847). Perhaps another clue would have been given to a medieval audience by the host's ferocious zeal for hunting. Randall points out that green is traditionally a hunter's color,⁵⁹ and Roger Sherman Loomis has shown that it is a tradition well embedded in Welsh and Arthurian legend that the figure who invites the hero to stay in his castle in the analogues to Sir Gawain is a hunter and is frequently involved in some way in a ritual combat, the two parts of which are separated by a year.⁶⁰ At any rate, the attributes which the host and the Green Knight share and which make the identification possible are, for the most part, human ones.

In his third appearance, Bercilak is once again the formidable challenger, but since we have seen both sides of his character, the change, although surprising, is believable when it occurs. We, like Gawain, are eager at this point for an explanation and are willing to accept the one Bercilak gives. In short, the poet has been able to give Bercilak two different characters in keeping with the structure of the poem, and through suspense and magic, but mainly through careful characterization, he has made the final revelation that the Green Knight and the host are one and the same person not only believable, but

be folk þere hit demed" (240). And the idea is carried out later by Gawain's assessment of the Green Chapel. The Green Knight is also insolent. He immediately addresses Arthur with the familiar bou (258),⁵⁷ and when none of the knights rises to accept the challenge, he mocks them for their fear (309-315). But if the Gawain-poet is careful to make the Green Knight a frightening adversary, he also takes care, as Marie Borroff shows, not to make him inhumanly repellent. The long description emphasizes his comeliness of form, and the poet tells us that although he is huge, he is only "Half etayn," and stresses that he is simply "mon most" (140-141). The Green Knight's humanity here makes his dual characterization, which is important to the unification of the challenge and temptation episode, credible.⁵⁸

During Gawain's stay at Bercilak's castle, we are not told that the host and the Green Knight are the same character, but the poet is careful to furnish clues that this may be so. When Gawain first meets his host, we discover that he is a "hoge hapel" (844), and like the Green Knight (182) he has a bushy beard (845). One of the most noticeable characteristics of the description of the Green Knight is the emphasis on the brightness of his appearance; the word "bry3t" is used there at least eight times. The host's beard is "bry3t" (845), and he has a "Felle face as þe fyre" (847). Both men are described as "sturne" (143,

rest of his character, which is an important unifying element in the poem.

Bercilak has essentially two characters, and his alternation from the Green Knight, to the host, to the Green Knight echoes the triple rhythm found in many parts of the structure.⁵³ In the first scene at Arthur's court, Bercilak is a genuinely menacing character. Marie Borroff demonstrates that from the moment of his entrance, he is made to dominate the scene through the long and detailed description of his actions and appearance. The line which tells of his entrance, "þer hales in at þe halle dor an aghlich mayster" (136), suggests through its diction a powerfully moving (hales), fearsome (aghlich), and dominating (mayster) force. The description goes on to emphasize his huge stature, his greenness, and his splendid appearance (136-220).⁵⁴ That the poet intends to make him a fearsome creature is evident:

He loked as layt so ly3t,
 So sayd al þat hym sy3e;
 Hit semed as no mon my3t
 Vnder his dyntte3 dry3e.

(199-202)

J. R. Hulbert and Dale B. J. Randall show that the Green Knight's color gives him otherworldly⁵⁵ and possibly even demoniac associations.⁵⁶ The court's initial fear of the Green Knight confirms this: "Forþi for fantoum and fayry3e

freke þat euer on fote 3ede" (2363). After Gawain has proved himself both human and good by almost withstanding the temptations, we cannot help but applaud him. It would be unlike Gawain, however, whose humility is apparent from the beginning, to explain his goodness. Thus the Green Knight obligingly ceases his menace and reassumes the character, although not the form, of the genial Bercilak de Hautdesert in order to praise Gawain. The sudden change is artistically necessary and artistically motivated. Since Gawain is obviously a better man than he claims to be, the author must put a sound opinion of him in someone's mouth.⁵¹ But however sudden the change, it is not unduly surprising, and not in the least disturbing, because the author has taken some care to prepare us for it. As Kittredge has shown, the challenger in the analogues, who corresponds to the Green Knight in this poem, is traditionally an enchanted person, and his change to a more human character at the end is the result of a despending brought about through a second beheading. Bercilak's final change of character is probably a vestige of this form of the beheading story. The poet, or one of his predecessors, has eliminated the second beheading and with it any reason for a change in Bercilak's form. He has, however, kept the change in manner,⁵² and by preparing the reader for it and by working it into the structure of the poem, has made it as credible as the

incongruous, the poet has a good reason to do so. It would have been impossible to introduce economically another character, a hermit, to hear Gawain's confession at the climax of the narrative. Instead, the poet hit upon the much better idea of having Gawain confess to the person against whom he actually transgressed, Bercilak. The chapel turns out, of course, not to be a chapel at all, but a mound whose aspect is so sinister that "Here my3te aboute mydny3t/þe dele his matynnes telle!" (2187-2188) It is, in fact, an inversion of the orthodox idea of a Christian chapel which makes the Green Chapel express both the demonic and the Christian elements in the Green Knight's character.⁵⁰

After his self-accusation, Gawain goes on to attribute his fall to the wiles of woman and compares himself to Adam, Solomon, Samson, and David (2414-2428). His rationalization is not without humor or truth, but it does not mean that Gawain excuses himself from guilt. He still intends to wear the green girdle "in sygne of my surfet" (2433). At this point, although we agree with Gawain that he has shown his imperfection, and although we sympathize with him fully, we do not accept his assessment of the seriousness of his flaw. We do not emphasize the fact that he is "fawty and falce" (2382), but now, strangely enough, we agree with Bercilak, our hero's chief tormentor, that Gawain is "On þe faultlest

to priests, and the last, which is certainly valid, is made to Bercilak.⁴⁷

It is in this part of the poem that Bercilak becomes a rather surprising character. Despite the fact that he has not up to this point been given anything resembling priestly characteristics, he hears what amounts to a full and valid confession from Gawain and then grants him absolution. Further, the poem does not state explicitly why the Green Knight appoints a chapel as the meeting place for the final part of the beheading game. Smithers has convincingly demonstrated that the poet has combined Bercilak's role as the challenger of the beheading game at the end of the poem with that of a hermit. One of the important functions of the hermits in the stories of the Arthurian cycle was to hear the confessions of wandering knights. A person associated with a chapel would normally be expected to be a hermit, and this explains why Bercilak has been given the name "de Hautdesert" (2445), which means "of the high hermitage."⁴⁸ The foregoing also indicates that it was the confession rather than the beheading game that the poet had in mind when early in the poem (451) he had the Green Knight make the Green Chapel their final meeting place.⁴⁹ Yet it is obvious that the Green Knight, considering his other characteristics, cannot possibly be a genuine hermit. Although the attribution of eremitical characteristics to Bercilak may at first seem

1635-1647), the third time, Gawain brings the matter up (1934-1935) and rather curtly cuts off further comment about it: "'Ino3,' quop Sir Gawayn,/ 'I ponk yow, bi be rode'" (1948-1949).⁴⁵

Several critics cast doubt on the validity of Gawain's confession.⁴⁶ The author does not tell exactly what Gawain confesses, but we are, I suppose, entitled to wonder, since whether or not Gawain's confession makes him "clene" in God's sight, it obviously does not make him so in Bercilak's. As John Burrow shows, Gawain's guilt culminates in another and parallel confession, the third of the poem, after the three strokes of the ax (2378-2388). Here Gawain confesses what was really making him feel guilty to the person he had actually offended. That this is actually a confession is shown by Bercilak's speech:

Pou art confessed so clene, beknowen of þy mysses,
 And hat3 þe penaunce apert of þe poynt of myn egge,
 I halde þe polysed of þat ply3t and pured as clene
 As pou hade3 neuer forfeled syþen þou wat3 fyrst
 borne;

(2391-2394)

The similarity of lines 1883 and 2393 strengthens the parallelism. Bercilak's treating this as a formal confession is another instance of variation within an established pattern. Gawain's first two confessions are made

as lapses from Christian virtue. But at the same time, the virtues from which these faults are deviations, bravery and loyalty, are also secular virtues. If the Gawain-poet is concerned with anything resembling chevalerie celestiel, it is probably safe to say that his interest is not exclusive. The weakest part of Smithers' argument, however, is his admission that the conflict never is made explicit in the poem.⁴³

After Gawain's failure to withstand completely the third temptation, an interesting variation occurs on the pattern established in the first two scenes. After all three temptations, Gawain arises and makes religious observance. In the first two scenes he withstands all temptation and afterward goes to mass. After the third he goes to confession. Perhaps no significance or great irony need be attached to this, since the next day is that appointed for the meeting at the Green Chapel, and Gawain would naturally want to be shriven beforehand. Yet there are further indications that Gawain may have a guilty conscience. His conduct toward Bercilak while at the castle is always genial and hearty. Dorothy Everett calls it affected,⁴⁴ but it is never more affected than after the third temptation. Whereas in the pattern of the exchange of the day's winnings established in the first two scenes Bercilak mentions the matter first and makes ambiguous comments afterward (1379-1394,

same poet may well have written the poem Purity. Just as there is no conflict here between Christianity and courtesy, there is no inconsistency in Gawain's character before and during the temptations. Near the end of fitt two, where Gawain is indeed extremely attentive to Bercilak's lady, the poet describes their conversation, using the same terms just mentioned, as "clene cortays carp closed fro fylpe, / þat hor play wat3 passande vche prynce gomen, / in vayres" (1013-1014). Thus, it is quite credible that Gawain should show himself eager to talk to an attractive lady and still resist her attempts to seduce him, for never during the temptations does he show any great reluctance to talk. The Gawain-poet's attitude toward courtesy is thoroughly Christian. The explanation of the symbolism of the pentangle, which includes the five wounds of Christ and the five joys of the Virgin, makes clear enough that Gawain is adhering to a Christian code from the beginning, and that the function of the temptation scenes is to test Gawain's ability to adhere to his code of conduct rather than to question the code itself, with which the poet obviously agrees. The humorous inversion of courtly-love procedures in the temptations shows that the poet does not take the Gallic conception of courtoisie at all seriously. Gawain's virtues are certainly Christian virtues, and his flaws, fear for his life and a slight lack of loyalty, can be represented

his characterization shortly after his arrival at Bercilak's castle, when he gives a great deal of attention to Bercilak's wife, and his characterization during the temptations, when he rejects her advances. Finally, because Bercilak's name and his role as confessor at the end of Sir Gawain resemble closely a similar episode in La Queste del saint Graal, Smithers concludes that the Gawain-poet, like the poet of the Queste, is opposing the values of earthly knighthood to those of chevalerie celestiel in order to show the superiority of the latter.⁴²

Smithers' argument is interesting, but not convincing. The Gawain-poet apparently does not feel that the disparity between Christian virtue and courtesy is as great as Smithers does. One of the five virtues which correspond to the fifth point in the symbolic explanation of Gawain's pentangle is courtesy:

Þe fyft fyue þat I finde þat þe frek vsed
 Wat3 fraunchyse and fela3schyp forbe al þyng,
 His clannes and cortaysye croked were neuer,
 And pité, þat passe3 alle poynte3, þyse pure fyue
 Were harder happed on þat hapel þen on any oper.

(651-655)

That he mentions courtesy in the same line with "clannes" and then refers to the whole group as "þyse pure fyue" shows clearly that he considers it a virtue, an idea which gains weight when one takes into account that the

qualified one. However, we must remember that if Gawain lacks loyalty, he lacks, as Bercilak says, only "a lyttel," and if he seems not so brave as he ought, we should also remember that he does keep his promise to receive the return blow, despite his lack of confidence in the girdle's power to save his life.

Smithers sees further implications for the meaning of the poem in Gawain's flaw. He contends that there is in the poem, at least potentially, a clash between the secular and the Christian values of knighthood. He argues as follows. First of all, the poet is obviously interested in the spiritual side of the action. Chastity is a Christian virtue, and loyalty to one's pledge, the focal point of the poem, should probably be considered as one also, since the poet uses the words "trawpe" (626), "faythful" (631), and "trwe" (638) in describing the pentangle and thus connects fidelity with Gawain's devotion to Christ and to the Blessed Virgin. Further, if Gawain is chaste, he cannot possibly be courteous. "If courtoisie meant what it said, and was not a hollow fiction devised for the purpose of a polite literature, a knight who was a paragon of courtoisie, as Gawain is declared to be (e.g. 1297-1301), might have been expected to conform to one of its main requirements, which was that love was necessarily adulterous or extra-marital."⁴¹ The poet, by representing Gawain as both chaste and courteous, introduces an inconsistency between

Smithers, however, has proposed an explanation which does more to clarify the text. He suggests "that cowardice led Gawain into a breach of lewté, and that couetyse is the antitheses of larges, 'liberality, a generous disposition.' The latter was a vital quality in a knight, since it originally distinguished him from the vilain or 'churl'; and vy lany is said in l. 2375 to be (along with vyse) the implication of couetyse and cowarddyse."³⁹

But, the only fault, of all those of which Gawain accuses himself, that the Green Knight recognizes as such is lack of loyalty.⁴⁰ "Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, Sir, and lewté yow wonted" (2366). He does recognize Gawain's fear for his life, but more as a reason or an excuse than as a fault: "Bot for 3e lufed your lyf; þe lasse I yow blame" (2368). Just as Gawain's emphasis in describing his lapse falls on cowardice (2374, 2379), so Bercilak stresses loyalty in keeping with the terms of the beheading game and the temptation. Since it is Bercilak who originates these terms, it is bound to be his opinion of Gawain's fulfillment of them that counts, and he makes it quite clear that Gawain is a success: "and sothly me þynkke3/ On þe faultlest freke þat euer on fote 3ede;/ As perle bi þe quite pese is of prys more,/ So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi oper gay kny3te3" (2362-2365). As they part, Bercilak commends Gawain for his "grete traube" (2470). Gawain's success is, of course, a slightly

(2338-2357), made the outcome of the beheading game depend upon the result of the temptation and thus increased the unity he had already given by making the temptation a test of loyalty.

Immediately after the Green Knight's explanation of the three strokes of the ax, Gawain accuses himself of a number of faults:

Corsed worth cowarddyse and couetyse bope !

In yow is vylany and vyse þat vertue disstryeþ . . .

For care of þy knokke cowardyse me taþt

To accorde me with couetyse, my kynde to forsake

þat is larges and lewté þat longeþ to knyþteþ.

Now I am fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer

of trecherye and vntrawþe: bope bityde sorþe

and care!

(2374-2375, 2379-2384)

Since the poet has expressly denied any motive other than self-preservation for Gawain's accepting the girdle (2036-2042), it seems strange that Gawain should here twice accuse himself of covetousness. D. F. Hills has suggested that "couetyse" should be read in the theological sense as the equivalent of cupiditas, the desire for any worldly good which would cause one's self-love to take precedence over his love of God.³⁸ If interpreted in this way, couetyse could be understood to mean Gawain's care for his life, which caused him to deflect from his honesty.

lasse bi þat lace þat lemed ful bryzt." If the line is translated as Malarkey and Toelken quite plausibly suggest -- "It [the ax] was no smaller by reason of that lace (the girdle, which Gawain is wearing over his surcoat) which gleamed so brightly" -- it shows that even the girdle which Gawain accepted to save his life has not given him complete confidence.³⁵ His shrinking from the first stroke of the ax is, of course, another indication that he is afraid. That Gawain's fear for his life humanizes his characterization hardly needs saying, and although we might not really expect it of him, we are hardly shocked.³⁶

The implications of Gawain's fear for his life, however, do not stop there, for, as Kittredge, Day, and Smithers all point out, the host's bargain, or exchange of winnings, is the chief means of unifying the challenge and the temptation because it makes the temptation, like the challenge, a test of Gawain's loyalty to his pledged word.³⁷ Thus, most of the testing in the poem bears upon the theme of fidelity. In the beheading game Gawain must keep his oath to visit the Green Chapel to receive the return blow from the Green Knight, which, as far as Gawain knows, will mean his death. In the temptation Gawain is pledged to exchange what he obtains at the castle with Bercilak for whatever animal is killed in the hunt. The poet, by having the three strokes of the ax and Bercilak's explanation of them correspond to the three temptations

Howard points out a structural parallel not yet noted that reinforces this idea. In lines 536-669 there is a description of Gawain's arming, which ends with a description of the shield. In lines 2011-2041 there is another and briefer description of Gawain's arming, this time for his second journey. The same general order is followed both times, the description of the clothes and the armor (2015-2029), the mention of Gringolet (2047), and the giving of the shield (2061). This time it is the green girdle that receives most attention (2033-2039). In lines 2040-2042, the poet says that the function of the girdle is to protect Gawain from blows. This is, of course, also the function of Gawain's shield.³³ The shield is the symbol of Gawain's character, his perfection, and when Gawain confesses to the Green Knight, he throws the girdle away and laments forsaking mainly through cowardice his "kynde" (2380), his "natural character."³⁴ This view of the hero's failing is strengthened by the fact that on the second journey to the Green Chapel the temptation the guide offers is to flee and save his life (2091-2125). Further, Gawain is fearful when he arrives at the Green Chapel. He describes the sinister aspect of the chapel to himself (2185-2196), and after hearing the sound of an ax being sharpened, he resolves not to be afraid. The depiction of his state of mind culminates with the description of the ax the Green Knight carries when he arrives in line 2226, "Hit wat3 no

poem make it clear enough that he has failed in something.

Another analysis of Gawain's fault and of the structural unity of the temptation scenes with the rest of the poem has been advanced by Donald R. Howard, who shows that both outright statement and parallel structure of episodes indicate that Gawain's initial misstep, and his major fault as far as he is concerned, is wanting to save his life. The poet reveals Gawain's reason for accepting the girdle first by showing us his thoughts as he takes it:

þen kest þe knyȝt, and hit come to his hert,
 Hit were a juel for þe jopardé þat hym iugged were,
 When he acheued to þe chapel his chek for to fech;
 Myȝt he haf slypped to be vnslayn, þe sleȝt were noble.

(1855-1858)

Then the poet tells us that it was not for the beauty or the value of the gold that Gawain wore the girdle, "Bot to sauen himself" (2040). Finally, the Green Knight analyzes Gawain's conduct: "Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, Sir, and lewté yow wonted;/ Bot þat watȝ for no wylyde werke, ne wowyng nauper,/ Bot for ȝe lufed your lyf; þe lasse I yow blame" (2366-2368). Note that Bercilak specifically rules out unchastity (wowyng) and deceit (wylyde werke) as the reasons for Gawain's lack of loyalty. The Green Knight punishes Gawain for breaking his oath, but Gawain's first fault, which prompts him to conceal the girdle, is what he says it is, fear for his life (2379).

says that Gawain is tested for his fidelity to his host and for his loyalty to the chivalric ideal of truth.³⁰ In the analogues which Kittredge translates neither the beheading game nor the temptation is specifically a chastity test. They are, rather, usually a condition for the disenchantment of the one beheaded or part of the theme of the Imperious Host, in which the visiting knight is forced to obey his host in order to preserve his life, win the hand of the host's daughter, and so on. G. V. Smithers examines briefly three of the closest analogues to the temptation, Hunbaut, Le Chevalier a l'Epée, and Yder, and shows that there Gawain's courtliness does not imply chastity at all. It is only in the last of these stories that the hero rebuffs the lady's advances, and he does so in order to win a prize from the lady's husband.³¹ Yet, as Smithers admits, chastity is one of Gawain's virtues, and if chastity is not in question in the story in its original form, the Gawain-poet has made it "to some extent a live issue."³² For, as I have shown previously, the characterization of Gawain and of Bercilak's wife, and the narrative comment in line 1768 create some doubt in the audience whether or not he will give in. The temptations then may quite legitimately be seen as chastity tests, and, although Gawain cannot be said to have failed this test, to have been unchaste in any meaningful sense of the word, the last several scenes of the

to a softening of his moral fiber. For Green the poem is a humorously serious warning that failure and corruption lurk beneath the most attractive ideals.²⁵

Some critics contend that the temptations test only Gawain's chastity. Denver E. Baughan and Mother Angela Carson argue that both the beheading game and the temptations are chastity tests because Bercilak's intent, imposed on him by Morgan Le Fay, was to demonstrate that Arthur's court was unchaste and that for this reason Arthur failed to behead Bercilak, despite his "mayn dinte₃" (336), at the beginning of the poem. Gawain, on the other hand, is able to decapitate Bercilak and withstand the temptations and hardships of the rest of the poem because he is chaste.²⁶ Baughan's and Carson's arguments, which differ only in the motivation attributed to Morgan, have no textual authority at all. Other critics, however, argue in a completely opposite direction. J. R. Hulbert, reasoning from the tests in the analogues, states flatly that chastity is not being tested at all, but that loyalty is.²⁷ Albert B. Friedman, arguing from a similar basis, doubts that chastity is being tested at all.²⁸ The editors of the two most prominent editions of the poem, Tolkien and Gordon and Mabel Day, agree that the temptation is a test of both loyalty and chastity, although they do not specify what Gawain's flaw is.²⁹

Kittredge, although he does not say how Gawain fails,

or what his failure means. Hans Schnyder, on the basis of an exegetical interpretation, contends that each temptation is a different kind of test. He says that the first, because the lady simply offers Gawain her body, is a test for greed and that the second, because she praises his reputation, is a test for vainglory. The third temptation, he says, is a test for avarice, which Gawain fails because he has been so weakened by the previous temptations that he accepts the green girdle with a "lying rationalization" that it will save his life.²³ Schnyder's interpretation ignores the fact that in all three temptations the lady is quite obviously trying to seduce Gawain. And as I shall show presently, Gawain's reason for accepting the green girdle is not exactly a rationalization.

Two similar interpretations of Gawain's flaw have been advanced by George J. Englehardt and Richard H. Green. According to Englehardt, Gawain is an exemplary, supposedly perfect knight who, being tested for courtesy, piety, and valor, is found deficient in the last two qualities because he puts his faith in a magic talisman, the green girdle, to save his life. As a result, Englehardt says, Gawain's goodness is more apparent than real.²⁴ Green sees the poem as a test of the whole fourteenth-century chivalric way of life in the person of Gawain. He argues that Gawain fails because he puts his faith in a magic girdle while he talks of God. His self-deception leads

replies seem elaborate and labored, he gradually becomes so at ease that on the third day he even addresses the lady with the familiar second-person-singular form (1802), which she frequently uses throughout the scenes.²²

The poet strikes a balance in these scenes between the peril and the humor of the situation. The same sort of equilibrium is expressed in the narrative comment in lines 1768-1769, where the poet emphasizes the danger in one line and diminishes it in the next: "Gret perile bitwen hem stod,/ Nif Maré of hir kny3t mynne." It also appears in the fact that although Bercilak makes it quite clear that Gawain is being tested for his fidelity to his word (1679), the only motive explicitly ascribed to the lady for tempting Gawain is love (1734). The purpose of this balance is to help make the relative importance of these scenes clear -- in effect, to keep the temptation from becoming the whole poem. Although we must take these scenes seriously, we must not take them too seriously. The temptation is essential to the poem in that it brings out Gawain's flaw, his most human side. But it does not show those sides of his character which the poet emphasizes most at the end of the poem, his goodness and his bravery.

With Gawain's acceptance of the green girdle, we come to the crux of his character, for it is at this point, if at any, that Gawain can be said to have failed. Although most would agree to this, few agree on exactly how he fails,

Felle ouer his fayre face, and fetly hym kyssed;

He welcume₃ hir worpily with a wale chere.

He se₃ hir so glorious and gayly atyred,

So fautles of hir fetures and of so fyne hewes,

Wi₃t wallande joye warned his hert.

With smobe smylyng and smolt þay smeten into merþe,

þat al wat₃ blis and bonchef þat breke hem bitwene,

and wyne.

(1757-1765)

But if the poet makes Gawain's predicament seem very acute in one way, he tempers the anxiety the audience feels for Gawain in another. As J. F. Kiteley shows, her manner of temptation varies each day, and all of the temptations are either contrary to, or are inversions of, courtly love. On the first day, she simply offers him her body, an offer which is not in keeping with courtly tradition. The most direct approach possible having failed, she assumes on the second and third days the role of the aspiring lover, which is usually assigned to the male. On the second day, she asks Gawain to teach her the art of true love (1516), and on the third she asks for a token of his regard (1799). Her aggressiveness places the brave Gawain in the role of the reluctant female and makes the whole proceeding rather ridiculous.²¹ Further humor arises from the fact that Gawain, particularly on the first day, is noticeably uncomfortable in his situation. And, although at first his

In the third temptation, Gawain breaks his covenant with his host by accepting from the lady a green girdle and agreeing to conceal it from her husband, and thus becomes false and deceitful himself. His fear for his life makes him, like the fox, take a false turn. For, just as the fox is caught by one of the hounds in jumping aside to avoid Bercilak's blow (1900-1905), Gawain is unknowingly caught in trying to avoid the expected consequences of blows which, although he does not yet know it, will also be dealt by Bercilak. Savage points out that the fox's movement of avoidance is paralleled not only by Gawain's acceptance of the girdle, but also by his shrinking from the first stroke of the ax (2267).²⁰

Other qualities of characters are also developed in this part of the poem. These scenes are all we see of Bercilak's wife, but the way in which she is characterized makes the temptation more credible and Gawain's situation more precarious. The poet emphasizes her attractiveness when she first appears by describing her beauty and her dress, and by comparing her to Guinevere and to the old woman who accompanies her (943-956). The poet continues to stress the allure of the lady's beauty and its effect on Gawain, particularly in the third temptation, when the likelihood that Gawain will succumb to her advances seems greatest:

þe lady luflych com lazande swete,

At sa3e oper at seruyce þat I sette my3t

To þe pleasaunce of your prys -- hit were a pure ioye.

(1244-1247)

The parallelism between the hunt and the temptation of the second day is similar. The boar was also considered a noble animal and was associated in heraldry with resolution, directness, and boldness, since when pressed it would turn and face its attacker. For that reason it was thought a dangerous adversary. The temptress is again unsuccessful, and Gawain's replies to her advances, although still quite courteous, are somewhat more direct. He does not feign sleep, but "Sir Wawen her welcomed worþy on fyrst" (1477). When she goes so far as to suggest that Gawain is strong enough to force her to submit to his will, he replies simply, "'3e, be God,' quop Gawayn, 'good is your speche,/ Bot prete is unpriuande in þede þer I lende,/ And vche gift þat is geuen not with goud wylle'" (1498-1500). His directness and a bit of uncourtliness show when he announces point blank that it would be folly on his part to undertake to teach anything of love to her (1540-1545).

On the third day, Bercilak runs down a fox, an animal not prominent in medieval heraldry because it was generally considered little better than a vermin. Its outstanding characteristics were craft and duplicity, and the medieval attitude toward it is apparent in Bercilak's description of it: "no3t haf I geten/ Bot þis foule fox felle" (1943-1944).

between the hunts and the temptations reinforces through the heraldic associations with the animals hunted the development of Gawain's character and emphasizes the meaning of his reactions to the lady's attempts to seduce him. On the first day, Bercilak chases and kills a deer, an animal which in medieval times was respected as noble game. Noted for its caution, speed, and its tendency to lie low under cover, the hart was associated in medieval heraldry with the qualities of tact, caution, and discrimination. While Bercilak is pursuing noble game in the field, his wife is also pursuing noble game at the castle, although she is unsuccessful. Her first speech makes it obvious that she too has a chase in mind:

'God moroun, Sir Gawayn,' sayde þat gay lady,
 '3e ar a sleper unsly3e, þat mon man slyde hider;
 Now ar 3e tan astyt! Bot true vus may schape,
 I schal bynde 3e in your bedde, þat be 3e trayst.'

(1208-1211)

The qualities which Gawain discloses on this day are those attributed to the hart. When the lady first enters the room, Gawain lies low "and let as he slepte" (1190). He spends the rest of the interview lightheartedly parrying the lady's invitation. His refusal of her advances is extremely tactful:

I am wy3e vnworpy, I wot wel myseluen.
 Bi God, I were glad, and yow god þo3t,

are internal. The hero must fight off not a wild animal or the weather, but his own natural impulses. Men have always had a multitude of reasons for enduring bad weather and for slaying dragons and giants. There are, I think, fewer plausible explanations for a handsome young bachelor's extending his courtesy and tact to the utmost to keep an importunate and beautiful lady out of his bed, and certainly still fewer for his walking almost unflinchingly into a situation which he knows will bring about his death. Yet Gawain is not superhuman. He does flinch somewhat, and that is what is most important about these scenes.

The three temptations make up slightly more than half the entire poem, and in them we see perhaps the greatest influence of structure on Gawain's character. The author's juxtaposition of scenes adds in a very subtle way to our understanding of the hero's character, which in turn gives to the incidents themselves greater meaning. The episode has a triple structure. There are three hunts, each of which is split into two parts and encloses a temptation, giving a structure which one critic has compared to a triptych.¹⁹ After each temptation, Gawain arises and makes religious observance. At the end of each hunt, there are courtly festivities, and Gawain and the host exchange the day's winnings.

As Henry L. Savage shows, the structural parallelism

tempts him to flee to save his life and agrees to tell no one.¹⁸ Gawain faces this test with the same hardihood and resolution that enabled him to endure the first journey without any real hope of returning alive:

Bot I wyl to þe chapel, for chaunce þat may falle,
 And talk wyth þat ilk tulk þe tale þat me lyste,
 Worþe hit wele oper wo, as þe wyrde lykeþ
 hit hafe.

(2132-2135)

These two scenes, both of which emphasize the danger in which Gawain is placed and his ability to withstand both physical and moral peril, form an admirable frame for the temptation scenes, the artistic and moral center of the poem. In the first part of the poem, Gawain is made human enough in his demonstration of the typical knightly virtues that we would expect of him. We see him there as a courteous, hardy, loyal, brave, humble, in short, ideal medieval knight, and all of these qualities are carefully and humanly shown. But in the temptation scenes, and in those that follow, Gawain emerges as more fully human than in any other part of the poem. Most of the same knightly, Christian virtues that are delineated before are tested here, but they are tested in a way that reaches more deeply into the roots of human conduct than before. Until this point, all of Gawain's conflicts are external, but in the temptation scenes they

scription of the same trees as "schyr oke₃" (772)¹⁷
 Gawain's tendency to despair about his own shortcomings, which is to be prominent at the end of the poem, appears here as he "cryed for his mysdede" (760), and the change in his mood is carried out in the description of the bright, shining castle.

Fitt four, whose first major action is the second parallel journey to the Green Chapel, also opens with a description of nature which again emphasizes winter and the passing of time:

Now ne_{3e3} be Nw _{3ere}, and be ny_{3t} passe₃,
 Þe day dryue₃ to be derk, as dry_{3tyn} bidde₃;
 Bot wylde wedere₃ of þe worlde wakned þeroute,
 Clowdes kesten kenly þe colde to be erþe,

(1998-2001)

These lines certainly recall the mood of the description at the beginning of fitt two, and Gawain's sleeplessness (2007) shows that he again looks forward to danger. While the second journey has its obvious parallels with the first, it also has some differences. Since the Green Chapel is closer this time, the journey is much shorter, and Gawain has a guide to lead him there. On both journeys he is beset by difficulties. On the first, the dangers are great enough, but still rather conventional, and any good hero of a romance would overcome them. On the second, however, Gawain's peril is not physical, but moral, for the guide

Now þenk wel, Sir Gawan,
 For wope þat þou ne wonde
 Þis auenture for to frayn
 Þat þou hat3 tan on honde.

(486-490)

Gawan wat3 glad to beginne þose gomne3 in halle,
 Bot þa3 þe ende be heuy, haf 3e no wonder.

(495-496)¹⁶

This attitude toward the impending adventure is sustained by the mood of the members of the court, who all fear for Gawain's life (557-560, 674-686).

The journey which follows is the first of three parallel journeys, the intended destination of the first two of which is the Green Chapel. On the first journey, which takes Gawain to Bercilak's castle, our expectations of danger are fulfilled. He meets and overcomes dragons, wolves, forest trolls, bulls, bears, boars, and giants (720-723). The weather is frigid, and Gawain is "nearly slain with the sleet" (729). The despair that the journey creates in Gawain is revealed in his sighing prayer for lodgings for the night (753-762), and also, as Derek Pearsall shows, by the poet's choice of words in his descriptions of Gawain's surroundings. As Gawain rides unhappily into the forest where he is to find Bercilak's castle, the trees are described as "hore oke3" (743). His relief at seeing the castle is mirrored in the de-

of the poem, Gawain, convinced that his death is near, is more direct, almost abrupt with the Green Knight: "'Wy! presch on, pou pro mon, pou prete3 to longe'" (2300). Gawain's humility comes out again here after he learns why he was tempted and why the Green Knight spares his life (2369-2442). Given the situations, all of Gawain's reactions seem quite natural. Because by the last scene we know of Gawain's attempt to save his life through deception, and because the Green Knight reveals the temptation and the challenge to be tests of his character, Gawain's remorseful humility is much more meaningful.

There are several other parallels whose influence on Gawain's character, although less obvious at first, are just as important. After the first part of the beheading challenge, Gawain has a year to find the Green Chapel, where he must once again meet his opponent. The second fitt opens with the famous description of the passing of the year, which brings Gawain to the point at which he must prepare to set out on his journey to find the Green Knight. As Theodore Silverstein has shown through an examination of the rhetoric, this passage is important in establishing the audience's expectation of peril and death for the hero through its emphasis on the inevitable passing of time and on the traditionally harsh qualities of summer and winter, particularly when considered in the light of the author's warnings:

makes him sensitive to the differences in the situations, and his reactions are never quite the same. By calling forth varied reactions, the framework also exercises some control over Gawain's character. Further, the author's manipulation and conjoining of events also serve to give information about the hero and thus broaden his character.

The influence of the parallel episodes on Gawain's character is most easily observable in his reactions to the two parts of the beheading challenge. In the first fitt, wishing to preserve the threatened dignity of the king and the court, he is extremely courteous in addressing Arthur:

'Wolde 3e, worbilych lorde,' quop Wawan to þe kyng,
 'Bid me bo3e fro þis benche, and stonde by yow pere,
 þat I wythoute vylanye my3t voyde þis table,
 And þat my legge lady lyked not ille,
 I wolde com to your counseyl bifore your cort ryche.
 For me þink hit not semly, as hit is sop knawen,
 þer such an askyng is heuened so hy3e in your sale,
 þa3 3e 3ourselþ be talenttyf to take hit to yourseluen.

(343-350)

He also shows great humility when he says, "I am þe wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest, / And lest lur of my lyf . . ." (354-355). In the first episode his conduct toward the Green Knight is matter of fact, though courteous and restrained (398-403). In the parallel episode near the end

to extricate himself more or less unsuccessfully. He argues that such a reading explains the graphic symbolism of the pentangle, since each predicament tests a separate virtue.¹² Such approaches as these may be helpful in examining certain portions or elements of the poem, but the problem with them is that one cannot explain the entire poem by looking at only a single part or aspect of it. Two other critics, Hans Schnyder and Charles Moorman, describe the structure as the Pilgrimage-of-Life motif. This may be fine for pigeonholing the story according to its type in folklore, but it is too vague to explain much of the characterization and leads to no understanding of the Gawain-poet's method of handling his narrative.¹³

Dorothy Everett has described those aspects of the structure which have so far been discussed -- that is, the symmetrical arrangement of the narrative -- as an "external order," but she points out that there is an "internal order" as well, the character of Gawain.¹⁴ But the two are not really easily separable. As she shows, Gawain is characterized in several ways, through description, such as that of the pentangle on the shield (619-665), through the comments of other characters about him (the court, 674-675; Bercilak, 2470), but most of all dramatically, through his own speech and actions.¹⁵ He reacts naturally to the events within the parallel framework, and his actions give meaning to the structure of the story. Yet the author

so far as to adopt the green girdle, which Gawain calls a "token of vntrawpe" (2509), as a badge of honor. In many instances, then, a similarity of episode makes the episodes obvious parallels, and yet a dissimilarity within the incidents serves not only for variety, but also for complication of plot and development of character.⁸ Further, the parallelism of events keeps the tone of the poem, which alternates regularly between the gaiety of the court scenes and the hardship and fear of the journeys and the visit to the Green Chapel, consistent.⁹

Some critics see the structure in terms of elements other than those of the narrative. Alan M. Markman describes it as "attraction" and "deflection." In the first instance, attraction, the unknown in the form of the Green Knight comes to Gawain, and in the second, Gawain is "deflected" to the adventure in Bercilak's castle without his knowledge. Markman uses these terms to analyze the role of the supernatural, which he finds to be dominant in the poem.¹⁰ Sacvan Bercovitch, in order to stress the humorous side of the poem, views the structure as the regular alternation of romance and anti-romance elements. He contends that the poet carefully balances stock, and supposedly serious, romance situations against comic situations in order to make the poem a caricature of the romance style.¹¹ George J. Englehardt regards the poem as a series of five predicaments from which Gawain tries

challenge scene of the first fitt is so managed that the audience expects another beheading scene later as a fulfillment of the first. When the third hunting scene begins, the audience naturally anticipates a third temptation.

Described so barely, the story of the poem no doubt sounds repetitious to the point of monotony. Such a judgment is far from accurate, for, although the pattern of expectation created by the structure is fulfilled in every case, it is frequently fulfilled in an unexpected manner. Because of the conditions of the beheading bargain, and because of the warnings of the author (486-490, 496, 535), the audience anticipates the worst for Gawain in the final beheading scene, although the actual result is foreshadowed by Arthur early in the poem: "'Kepe þe, cosyn,' quop þe kyng, 'þat þou on kyrf sette, / And if þou redeþ him ryȝt, redly I trowe / Þat þou schal byden þe bur þat he schal bede after.'"⁶ After the first two temptation scenes, one might well expect Gawain to withstand a third temptation. He does, but not completely, and this is adumbrated in the animal that Bercilak hunts that day, the fox, a creature of duplicity.⁷ When, at the end of the poem, the hero returns to Arthur's court, we naturally expect the members of the court, who feared for his safety (676-685), to sympathize with him. Not only do they sympathize with him, but they also laugh at him, and even go

so that the hero is made to emerge unharmed from the dangers of the Challenge because he has stood the test imposed by the Temptation."³ Kittredge also gave translations of many of the analogues, most of which seem fairly artless by comparison to Sir Gawain and which point up the Gawain-poet's great ability to develop his characters.

In the past several years critics have become more concerned with the artistic effects of the structure of the poem. As many of them have noted, the events of the poem are ordered into a nearly symmetrical pattern through the repetition of parallel incidents.⁴ Similar elements in different parts of the poem are paired with one another, such as the first and last stanzas with their reference to Troy and the founding of Britain, the scenes in Arthur's court, and the two beheading scenes. Within the structure of paired elements there is also a three-fold structure, which sets the rhythm of the frame of the entire poem: the challenge, the temptation, and the completion of the challenge. This pattern is repeated in the three temptation scenes, each of which is enclosed by a description of a hunt, giving the same triple rhythm as the frame, hunt -- temptation -- hunt; and it is echoed by Gawain's three winter journeys, by the three kisses, and by the three strokes of the ax.⁵ The manner in which this repetition is established creates a constant pattern of foreshadowing. For instance, the beheading in the

adventure has greater meaning in human terms than do most romances. This view of the hero disagrees with that of most critics, who emphasize Gawain's flaws at the expense of his goodness. Such consideration will also show that, although always good humored and often funny, the poem is morally earnest and not a game or a joke.

In order to support this view a brief description of the structure of the poem and a summary of pertinent scholarly opinion regarding it will be helpful at this point. Although critics have almost always been concerned with the structure in one way or another, until fairly recently they have concentrated their energy upon attempts to discover the source of the poem and to trace the ultimate derivation of the present form of the story. J. R. Hulbert's view, published in 1915, that the present form of the story had its roots in a type of folktale in which the hero was tested for his worthiness to become the lover of a fairy mistress was superseded by Kittredge's elaborate study of the genealogy of the story, which showed that the poem is a combination of the Challenge and the Temptation, two common folk motifs.² Throughout his study Kittredge stressed the extraordinary unity which the Gawain-poet, or one of his predecessors, gave to the tale by showing that the poet made the temptation a part of the challenge: "In the structure of the romance . . . the combination is very skilfully worked,

a character who develops within the framework of a series of closely related situations. The poet's juxtaposing and paralleling of elements of the narrative often add dimension to Gawain's character, and, in turn, Gawain's reactions to the circumstances in which he finds himself give meaning to the events themselves. The hero's developing character is one of the chief devices used to unify the episodes in the poem. Some of the characterization, however, particularly in the minor figures, is not so finely balanced against the structure. Occasionally, the poet's desire to preserve the integrity and balance of his narrative structure seems to take precedence over his ability to make his characters react in a natural and human way, and in one instance the poet completely fails to motivate a character.

I hope to show that any examination of the characters in Sir Gawain must also deal with the structure of the poem, for so completely has the poet woven together these elements of his work that the significance of neither is very clear unless the other is taken into account. When, moreover, the reciprocal influence of structure and character is given consideration, one can justifiably see Gawain as a character who, despite his fault, thoroughly deserves not our criticism or sly condemnation, but our full approval and applause. Gawain is thus not a completely exceptional romance hero, but the story of his

The main concern of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is the character of its hero, Gawain. Throughout the adventure, the reader shares Gawain's hope, fear, despair, and, perhaps most of all, his confusion. His appeal is that he is amazingly human. It is not the character of Gawain alone, however, that absorbs us, for practically all of the characterization in the poem is fine and subtle. Bercilak, his wife, King Arthur and his court all involve the reader in the poem in different ways because they react to the events of the story in a manner that is human and usually understandable. Most critics who have written about the poem have praised not only the subtlety and richness of characterization, but also the unity and structure of the poem. In 1916, Kittredge, working mainly with sources, showed that Sir Gawain was an uncommonly elaborate and skillful fusion of two separate plots.¹ Since Kittredge, critics have turned increasingly to examination of the structure of the poem in efforts to explain the great appeal that the story and the characters of the poem have for its audience.

The relationship between characterization and structure in this poem is for the most part quite delicate, particularly in the case of Gawain. Unlike many heroes of romances Gawain is not a simple, static figure who gallops victoriously from one adventure to another, but

precedence over his ability to make his characters react in a natural and human way, and in one instance the poet completely fails to motivate a character.

Any examination of the characters must also deal with the structure, for so completely has the poet woven together these elements of his work that the significance of neither is very clear unless the other is taken into account. When the reciprocal influence of structure and character is considered, one can see Gawain as a character who, despite his fault, deserves not condemnation, but applause. Gawain is thus not a completely exceptional romance hero, but the story of his adventure has greater meaning in human terms than do most romances. This view of the hero disagrees with that of many critics, who emphasize Gawain's flaws at the expense of his goodness. Such consideration will also show that, although always good humored and often funny, the poem is morally earnest and not a game or a joke.

STRUCTURE AND CHARACTER IN
SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

by
Robert L. Johnstone

ABSTRACT

Two of the qualities of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight which critics single out for praise are the fine characterization and the unity given to the poem through the parallel structure of episodes. The relationship between characterization and structure in this poem is for the most part quite delicate, particularly in the case of Gawain. Unlike many heroes of romances Gawain is not a static figure who goes victoriously from one adventure to the next, but a character who develops within a series of closely related situations. The poet's juxtaposing and paralleling of elements of the narrative add depth to Gawain's character, and Gawain's reactions to the circumstances in which he finds himself give meaning to the events themselves. The hero's developing character is one of the chief unifying devices in the poem.

It is not only Gawain's character, however, that absorbs the audience, for almost all of the characterization in the poem is fine and subtle. The other characters all involve the reader in different ways because they react to the events of the story in a manner that is human and usually understandable. Some of the characterization, however, is not so well balanced against the structure. Occasionally, the poet's desire to preserve the integrity of his narrative seems to take

STRUCTURE AND CHARACTER IN
SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

by
Robert L. Johnstone

ABSTRACT

Two of the qualities of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight which critics single out for praise are the fine characterization and the unity given to the poem through the parallel structure of episodes. The relationship between characterization and structure in this poem is for the most part quite delicate, particularly in the case of Gawain. Unlike many heroes of romances Gawain is not a static figure who goes victoriously from one adventure to the next, but a character who develops within a series of closely related situations. The poet's juxtaposing and paralleling of elements of the narrative add depth to Gawain's character, and Gawain's reactions to the circumstances in which he finds himself give meaning to the events themselves. The hero's developing character is one of the chief unifying devices in the poem.

It is not only Gawain's character, however, that absorbs the audience, for almost all of the characterization in the poem is fine and subtle. The other characters all involve the reader in different ways because they react to the events of the story in a manner that is human and usually understandable. Some of the characterization, however, is not so well balanced against the structure. Occasionally, the poet's desire to preserve the integrity of his narrative seems to take

CONTENTS

Abstract 1

Structure and Character in Sir Gawain
and the Green Knight. 3

Footnotes. 60

Bibliography 69

Vita 73

This thesis is accepted and approved
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts.

J. Burke Seaver
Professor in Charge

Jan. 17, 1966
Date

J. Burke Seaver
Head of the Department of English

STRUCTURE AND CHARACTER IN
SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

by

Robert L. Johnstone

A THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Faculty

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

Department of English

Lehigh University

1965