

Symmetry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Introduction

King Arthur, Camelot, Gawain, a bold challenge, a perilous journey, a beheading, an enchantment, and a shape-shifter are the ingredients of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. For the modern reader, Sir Gawain's tale is riveting even without understanding its symmetry or cultural and historical context. Viewed through the lens of the medieval thinker, reading this Arthurian tale becomes a rich, multi-layered experience.

Gawain and the Green Knight, written in Middle English in the late 1300s, combines two stories familiar to contemporary audiences under the overarching story of Arthur's round table and his feud with his half-sister Morgan le Fay. The first is a beheading tale, which becomes the impetus behind Gawain's quest and frames the second tale, Bertilak's test of Gawain's honor. As Gawain completes his adventures and returns home, the audience is led to consider the true measure of a hero.

This lesson plan explores symmetry in the structure and themes of *Gawain*, delving into the antagonist's representation of the "duality of nature." In examining knightly virtues, students will measure Gawain's strength as the poem's hero. The lesson explains background information that every medieval thinker listening to a performance of the poem would know, in an effort to put the student into the mindset of the medieval audience, providing a deeper appreciation and understanding of the work.

Guiding Questions

- How does examining the symmetry of form and content in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* illuminate its meaning for the modern reader?
- What do Gawain's adventures reveal about knightly virtues?

Learning Objectives

- Identify the bob-and-wheel poetic form.
- Understand the symmetry within the poem.
- Explore color symbolism in the *Green Knight*.
- Connect the cyclical shape of the pentangle with other cyclical aspects of the poem.
- Understand the symbolism of Medieval Animals.
- Compare Bertilak's hunts to Gawain's temptations.
- Explore the poem's approach to the concept of knightly virtue.

Preparing to Teach this Lesson

- Review the lesson plan. Locate and bookmark suggested materials and other useful websites. Download and print out documents (available in PDF format) that you will use and duplicate copies as necessary for student viewing.