Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
Background

The Poet

– Called “Pearl Poet”
– No known name
– Contemporary of Geoffrey Chaucer
– Wrote in an older form of English
  • Called Middle English [Slide 4]
– Probably male

– Language of the poem places him in NW England
  • Cheshire suggested as his home [Slide 3]
– Well educated
  • Understood both French and Latin
– Training to become a member of the clergy(?)
– Displays details of aristocratic life
  • Weapons
  • Feasting
  • Hunting
  • Indicate: Either a nobleman or attached to a noble house in some way
Bifel that, in that seson on a day,
In Southwerke, at the Tabard as I lay
Redy to wenden on my pilgrimage
To Caunterbury with ful devout corage,
At night was come in-to that hostelryc
Wel nyne and twenty in a companye,
Of sondry folk, by aventure y-falle
In felawshippe, and pilgrims were they alle,
That toward Caunterbury wolden ryde;
The chambres and the stables weren wyde,
And wel we weren esed atte beste.
And shortly, whan the sonne was to reste,
So hadde I spoken with hem everichon,
That I was of hir felawshippe anon,
And made forward erly for to ryse,
To take our wey, ther as I yow devyse.
The Manuscript

• Dates around 1400
  – Poem itself believed to have been written 1350-1400

• Poem survived in a single manuscript
  – Fell into the hands of a book collector (Sir Robert Cotton)
  – Later donated to the British Museum

• Belongs to the movement known as the Alliterative Revival
Alliterative Revival

• Alliteration Slide 7
  – Repetition of sounds at the beginning of words
  – Used to provide structure
• Extremely old Anglo-Saxon poetic form
  – Beowulf also written in this form
• All written by well educated poets
• Include distinguishing features such as
  – rich descriptions of natural settings
  – Use of vivid realistic detail
Alliteration

“There I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping...”

The Raven—
Edgar Allan Poe
The Poem

• Genre
  – Romance
    • Refers to the languages derived from Latin (the language of the Roman Empire)
    • “Romance” became applied to popular tales written in the Romance languages
      – French (**)
      – Spanish
      – Portuguese
      – Italian
      – Romanian
(Medieval) Romance and Legends

Romances
• A tale of adventure
• Involves knight(s) or king(s) on a quest/battle
• Elements of fantasy and magic
• Damsels in distress
• Doomed love

Legends
• Anonymous stories about the past that may be based in fact
  – Typically feature
    • Heroic figures
    • Memorable deeds
    • Quests, Contests, Tests
    • Patterned events
      – Often repeated in sets of 3
        » Christian belief
          • Father
          • Son
          • Holy Ghost
The Layout of a Romance

• Typically begins at a noble court
• A knight receives a challenge
• Knight sets out on a journey
  – Encounters hardships
  – Battles enemy
• Knight returns home
  – Tells their tale
More Romance Info

• Arthurian Romance
  – King Arthur
  – Camelot
  – Knights of the Round Table
Chivalry

- A knight’s code of conduct (brave warriors and virtuous Christians who selflessly fight for justice)
  - Bravery
  - Loyal
  - Honorable
  - Protect the Weak
  - Behave nobly toward women
  - Display piety and respect for the Church
  - Highest prowess in combat
    - Distinguished bravery
    - Extraordinary ability
Courtly Love

• A knight’s behavior toward women
  – Devotes himself to the service of his beloved lady
  – Makes himself her servant
  – Dedicated all brave deeds to her (if a knight)
  – Kept secret
  – Sometimes exchange gifts
    • Ring
    • Glove
    • Girdle
Sir Gawain

• Main character
• Bravest of Arthur’s knights
• Famed for his “courtesy”
• Takes on the Green Knight’s challenge
The Green Knight

- Creature of fantasy
- Appears at King Arthur’s feast
- Makes the challenge
Bertilak of Hautdesert

- Gawain’s host
- Goes on 3 hunts
Lady of Hautdesert

- Wife of Bertilak of Hautdesert
- Spends 3 days trying to seduce and tempt Gawain
Other Characters

- King Arthur
  - Gawain’s uncle
- Morgan le Fay
  - Sorceress
- Guinevere
  - Arthur’s wife
- The Guide
  - Bertilak’s servant
  - Leads Gawain to the Green Chapel
Symbolism

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
Symbols

• Symbol
  – Person, object, or event that suggests more than a literal meaning
  – Types
    • Literary
    • Conventional
Literary

• Traditional meanings
• Conventional meanings
• Public meanings
• Also may be established by the context in which it appears
• Can be a
  – setting
  – character
  – action
  – object
  – name
  – anything else in a work that maintains its literal significance while suggesting other meanings
Conventional

• Symbols that are widely recognized by a society or a culture
  – The Christian Cross
  – Star of David
  – A nation’s flag
  – The “Golden Arches”
  – Santa Claus
  – Meanings all understood by a large group of people
• Experiences also have traditional meanings
• May be used to reinforce meanings
  – Kate Chopin employs setting in “The Story of an Hour” : spring setting symbol of the renewal Mrs. Mallard feels after being “freed” from her husband
Color Green

- Traditionally been used to symbolize
  - nature and its embodied attributes
    - fertility
    - rebirth
  - love and the base, natural desires of man
  - witchcraft, devilry and evil for its association with faeries and spirits of early English folklore
  - decay and toxicity
  - when combined with gold
    - Green Knight and the girdle
      - representing the fading away of youth.
The Green Knight

- Nature, Weakness, Envy, Fall From Pride
- Manifestation of the Green Man figure common in medieval art
- Incarnation of the Devil
  - Green Knight, as the "Lord of Hades," has come to challenge the noble knights of King Arthur's court
  - Sir Gawain, the bravest of the knights, therefore proves himself the equal to Hercules in challenging the Knight, tying the story to ancient Greek mythology.
The Green Knight Cout.

- Fusion of two deities
  - representing both good and evil
  - life and death as self-proliferating cycles
  - embraces the positive and negative attributes of the color green and ties in with the enigmatic motif of the poem
The Green Knight’s Stuff

Metal Ax
- Iron
  - Decline or fall

Olive Branch
- Peace
The Game

• Severing the head from one’s body
  – Separation of reason from instinct
The Pentangle

• According to the Pearl Poet
  – Originally designed by King Solomon as his magic seal
• Symbol of truth
• 5 Points that link and lock
  – Form the endless knot
The Pentangle Cout.

- Symbolizes
  - Faultless in 5 senses
  - Never fail in his 5 fingers
  - Faithful to 5 wounds
    Christ received on cross
  - Strengthened by 5 joys
    of Virgin Mary
  - Possess beneficence,
    brotherly love, pure
    mind, manners,
    compassion
The Pentangle Cout.

- Colors
  - Red and Gold
    - Red: Blood
    - Gold: Purity and Goodness
- There will be bloodshed in his purity
- Gawain’s description of “perfection” with the shield is proven wrong as Gawain is imperfect
The Green Girdle

- Girdle = Belt
- Notions of the image of the girdle as a "sexual symbol," however, should not be confused with modern notions of a girdle as "underwear". A girdle in the days of the Pearl-Poet was, "a belt worn around the waist, used for fastening clothes or for carrying a sword, purse, etc."
- Meaning changes over course of narrative
The Girdle Cout.

• Made of green silk and gold thread  
  — Link to Green Knight
• Has NO magical properties
• Becomes a symbol of cowardice and love of mortal life
• Is worn as a badge of sinfulness
• Critics who see the poem through a Christian lens see Gawain's trust in the girdle as a replacement for his trust in God to save him from the axe-wound.