

## ***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Its Biblical References**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The Bible was an integral part of the Medieval world. This unit will look at how Medieval authors incorporated biblical allegories into literary texts, enriching their content and meaning for the Medieval reader, in the four levels of meaning common to such compositions. It will help students learn to read such texts in their different layers of meaning, and acquaint them with the centrality of the Bible to Medieval culture—and to our literary culture today. This unit will educate students more generally in the skills of interpreting and uncovering the hidden messages of Medieval texts, which they may then apply to further reading of Medieval and modern texts.

### **The Bible**

Since the Bible is at the heart of Western civilization, it should be a subject of study in our public schools. The Bible is one of the central works of literature in Western Civilization. It provided the West with a “unique sense of universal order and its understanding of God” (Romans 13). Ideas of the Bible developed Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Political order of Europe was based on the Bible. Using the Biblical story of God anointing David king of Israel, the kings of Europe claimed to be anointed by God to rule. Conflicts about the meaning of the Bible, translations of the Bible, and the legacy of the Bible engendered numerous quarrels. Religious conflicts about Biblical interpretation and Biblical authority led to the development of the separation of church and state. In order to live in peace, Protestants and Catholics eventually agreed to remove, in theory, religion from politics. Today, about 2500 or so years after many of the books of the Bible were recorded, its words influence American politics, education, and culture. When one examines the syllabi of Western Civilization courses in our universities, one usually sees the Bible on the list of required books.

The Bible is one of the foundations of Western Culture. The Bible’s ideas of monotheism and ethics have been a great influence on Western philosophy and theology. Many of the greatest philosophers of the West, such as Augustine, Aquinas, Hegel, Pascal, Descartes, and Kierkegaard, were deeply involved in their church, and the Bible greatly influenced their thinking. Western science, for many years, had been based on the Bible. Genesis was not just a theological work; it was considered a work of science. The West was certain that the universe was created in six days and that the earth was the center of the universe because the Bible stated it. Ironically, two of the West’s most important scientists, Copernicus and Mendel, were clergymen devoted to the Bible. When Western scientists began using the scientific method and came up with evidence and conclusions that contradicted Biblical accounts, storms of outrage and conflict rose and still rise today.

The Bible is the most influential work of art. Some of the greatest works of Western art, such as DaVinci’s *Last Supper*, Michelangelo’s *The Pieta*, El Greco’s *The Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane*, depict characters and scenes of the Bible. Biblical themes such as the meaning of suffering, fratricide, adultery, son rebelling against father, and man’s evil nature are themes of the great works of Western literature. Some of the greatest works of Western literatures, such as *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost* are based on the Bible. Other great works of literature, such as

*Don Quixote*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *Hamlet* make allusions to the Bible. Modern literature as well makes allusions to the Bible: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Beloved*, and *Joseph and His Brothers*.

Study of the Bible as literature is supported by the United States Department of Education, which has asserted that studying the Bible as literature is fully appropriate. However, using the Bible to advocate one's religious point of view violates the separation of church and state and the freedom of religion. Therefore, when teachers use the Bible in their classroom, they must be careful that it is done scholastically, analyzing it as literature and not as advocating their religious beliefs or their students' beliefs.

For an English teacher, the Bible is the most efficacious work to use. Allusions are made to the Bible more than any other work in Western literature. To understand Western literature, students must be familiar with the prominent Biblical characters and stories. Further, teachers will find that using the Bible to study allusion is most effective because students are more familiar with that text than any other works of literature that are subject of allusions. When a writer makes an allusion to Greek or Roman mythology, all but very few students can analyze the allusion. However, the Bible is another matter. Most students know the general outline of "The Fall," "Abraham and Isaac," "The Temptation of Christ," and "The Passion."

### **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight**

The Arthurian legends are an essential part of our Western civilization, too. The tales focus on the individual, his quest, his challenges, his moral conflict, his tragedy, and his victory. The importance of the individual shaped in the Arthurian tales cultivated the importance of the individual in the West expressed in the Middle Ages, Renaissance, the Age of Reason, Romanticism, Existentialism, and Modernism.

The Arthurian tales played a foundational role in the development of representative government in the West by their focus on the individual. Individuality conflicted with the monarchical form of government. Eventually a system was worked out by Hobbes, Locke, and others whereby the individual was regarded as having specific, inalienable rights and the foundation of the state was an agreement with individuals whereby they surrendered some of their rights in order to create an organized, cooperative society.

Like the Bible, the Arthurian tales have spawned numerous works of Western art. Many writers have adapted the stories of Arthur and his knights Edmund Spenser used Arthur as the perfect knight in "The Faerie Queene." Mark Twain, in *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court*, put an American of New England in the medieval society of King Arthur. In the twentieth century, T.H. White wrote *The Once and Future King*, a modern version of the Arthurian. Richard Wagner used the Arthurian tales to compose the opera *Parsifal*. In 1960, Broadway produced *Camelot*.

### **SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT**

#### **About the Work**

Scholars estimate that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* dates around 1470. The poet is unknown, but he has become known as the "Pearl Poet." since he also wrote "The Pearl." He was probably a member of a court since he is so familiar with court life, costumes, and entertainments. The Pearl Poet wrote in a Northwest Midland's dialect (Miller and Chance ix). Most likely, the author read the French romances, and read a similar tale, just as Shakespeare used to do, and adapted it into his *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Speirs 81).

The tale follows a common Medieval motif, called a *peregrinatio*, which means pilgrimage. *Peregrinatio* refers to a journey to spiritual enlightenment. Dante used *peregrinatio* in the *Divine*



and by not giving Bertilak the green girdle when he returned from the hunt. However, Gawain failed miserably by not facing the ax with faith. He depended on the green girdle to save him from death. Gawain repents his failure and wears the green girdle on his arm as a reminder of his failure. When Gawain returns to King Arthur's court and tells them his story, all the knights join Gawain in wearing a green girdle on their arm.

### **Interpreting the Text**

Medieval writers packed their writing with four layers of meaning to create a strong impact on their audience, intellectual as well as spiritual. Augustine explains that when readers and listeners work hard to unpack a text, its meaning reverberates within them. He writes, "Although we learn things which are said clearly and openly in other places, when these things are dug out of secret places, they are renewed in our comprehension, and being renewed, become more attractive" (quoted in Clein 135).

The four levels of meaning are: 1) the literal sense. 2) the allegorical sense—extended metaphor in which characters and events are equated with meanings that lie outside the text. 3) the moral sense—what the text teaches us about how to live. 4) the anagogical sense—what the text teaches us about death, final judgment, heaven, and hell (Schwartz).

In the literal sense, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a fantastical story of Green Knight who rides off with his head in his hand and Gawain who follows him a year later to fulfill his pledge to take a blow from the ax. In the allegorical sense, the Green Knight is like Christ; he overcomes death. Gawain is the Christian. He struggles to follow Christ. In the moral sense, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* teaches us to live and face death with faith. In the anagogical sense, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* teaches us that death is not the final end; we in our temporal world consider death the end, and we see it with horror and sorrow.

### **SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT AND THE CHRISTIAN STORY**

#### **Part I: The Green Knight as Christ; Gawain as a Disciple**

One of the most basic tenets of Christianity is that the human family is estranged from God and Christ came into the world to reconcile humanity to God. We see parallels in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The Green Knight is a Christ like figure, and Sir Gawain is a Christian disciple figure. The Green Knight voluntarily gives himself to death, just as Christ did, and like Christ, he does not die. After his head is cut off, he rides away with it, but before he leaves, he tells Gawain he must follow him within a year and allow his head to be cut off. Christ, after his death and resurrection, ascends into heaven and instructs his disciples to follow his example.

To get my students to ponder these parallels, I will use passages of the Bible from [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com). This web site will find any passage in the Bible and a teacher can copy a passage and paste it on Microsoft Word.

After we read Part I, I will have the students read some passages in the Gospel of Mark. In Chapter 8:31-38, Jesus tells his disciples that he must be put to death, and then he says:

If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. What gain, then, is it for anyone to win the whole world and forfeit his life?

In a similar way, the Green Knight comes to King Arthur's court and tells them he voluntarily gives himself to death, and he challenges one of them to do the same, but first he must follow him—find the way to his Green Chapel and there give himself to death as he did.

The knights in King Arthur's court express astonishment at the Green Knight, both when he arrives and after his head is chopped off. The people in the Gospel of Mark express astonishment at Jesus, both when he was alive and at the crucifixion. After witnessing him curing a demoniac, Mark says:

The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee. (1:27-28)

When Jesus calms a storm, the apostles exclaim:

He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" (4:40-41)

Witnesses of the crucifixion and the resurrection express amazement too. I will have the class read Mark 15:33-16:8. This narrates the death and resurrection of Christ. We will point out note the amazement of his followers, the apparent death and apparent life of Christ, and Christ's message to the disciples that he is going ahead to Galilee and they must seek him there. All of these are paralleled in Part I.

## **Part II: The Journey**

Gawain's journey to the Green Chapel is similar to the Israelites' journey across the wilderness to Mount Sinai as narrated in Exodus 15:22-17:7. When Gawain begins his journey, he does not know where to go. He rides through the wilderness, pausing to ask people if they have heard of the Green Knight or the Green Chapel. No one has. Gawain goes through many hardships trying to find it. He has to endure freezing rain, climb cliffs, go without the food he loved, and has to fight serpents, savage wolves, bulls, bears, boars, and giants. On Christmas Eve, he becomes desperate and starts praying, and almost immediately he sees a beautiful castle. The lord of the castle welcomes him and the next day, Christmas, he eats a lavish feast. Gawain's Promised Land is overcoming death, which he can gain by enduring the trial at the Green Chapel with faith.

The Israelites' Promised Land is Canaan. To reach it, they first must go to Mt. Sinai where they make a covenant with Yahweh. After crossing the Sea of Reeds they travel for three days without water. They come to Marah, which has bitter water, but after complaining to Moses, he appeals to Yahweh, who instructs him to throw a certain piece of wood into the water and when he does, the water becomes sweet. They travel on, and the hardships, especially the lack of food, are so great, the people angrily complain to Moses asking him why he has led them out of Egypt. Again, Moses appeals to Yahweh who makes quails fly in during the evening, which the Israelites kill and eat, and, in the morning, Yahweh causes manna to fall on the ground. The Israelites continue their journey and come to Rephidim where there is no water. The Israelites complain again, and, again, Moses appeals to Yahweh, who instructs Moses to hit a rock with his staff, which he does, and water comes pouring out.

In both stories, the characters are searching for a special place, they endure hardships, they appeal to God, and God answers their appeal with food and water. The Israelites are journeying to a land of milk and honey; Gawain is journeying to overcoming death. The Israelites follow Moses; Gawain follows the Green Knight. The Israelites make a covenant with Yahweh; Gawain makes a deal with Bertilak, "Whatever I win in the woods I will give you at eve, / And all you have earned you must offer me" (2.1106-1105).

### **Part III: Temptation and Glory**

The temptations Gawain faces correspond to the temptation in the book of Genesis 2:15-17 and 3:19. Yahweh places the man and the woman in the Garden. Gawain is placed in the castle by Bertilak. The text describes the beauty of the castle and makes it seem like a paradise. Yahweh orders the man and woman not to eat from the tree of good and evil, and he leaves him alone with his wife. Bertilak does not tell him to keep his hands off of his wife, but it is implied; for by giving him hospitality, Gawain must be respectful to Bertilak. Bertilak's wife tempts Gawain, like the serpent tempted the woman. Bertilak told his wife to tempt Gawain. This brings up an interesting point about the Fall: Did Yahweh tell the serpent to tempt the man and woman? Yahweh created the serpent and, as God, he knew what the serpent would do. The knight's wife is beautiful and comes to him in his bedroom in an attractive gown. In the Garden of Eden, the man and the woman saw the fruit was good to eat. While God is away, the serpent successfully tempts the woman to eat the forbidden fruit, and she successfully persuades Adam to eat it. While Bertilak is away hunting, his wife tempts Gawain. She is successful. He kisses her once on the first day and two times on the second day, and three times on the third day. Also Gawain accepts the green girdle from the knight's wife. She says it will protect him from death. The serpent tempts Eve by telling her that if she eats the fruit, she will become like "God" who is eternal, and after the Fall, God evicts the man and woman from the garden so they will not eat from the Tree of Life and live forever.

The temptations also correspond to the temptations of Christ. I will use Matthew 4:1-11. The three temptations of Christ deal with wealth, power, and egoism. Gawain's three temptations deal with violating a man's trust, a man who gave him hospitality and trusted him with his wife. The devil tempts Christ to jump off the parapet of the temple, quoting him scripture that states that God's angels will protect him from harm. Jesus resists this temptation to use his power to overcome death. The knight's wife tempts Gawain to accept a green girdle, which, she says, will protect him against death. Gawain wears the girdle when he faces the ax of the Green Knight, and, therefore, does not honestly face the Green Knight's ax.

Another Biblical passage that corresponds to Part III, is Luke 22:39-46. Christ is in a garden, like Adam and Eve were in a garden. He is tempted to escape his death. He asks the Father "if you are willing, take this cup away from me" (22:42). The Green Knight tries to avoid facing death too by wearing the green girdle. Christ, though, does not try to cheat death. He says, "Nevertheless, let your will be done, not mine (22:44). And he goes on and faces his crucifixion like a man, suffering all the pain of a man. Gawain failed to reach the level of Christ. He could not face death; he needed something that would protect him. Further, when the Green Knight wielded the ax the first time, Gawain flinched.

After Gawain faces the ax, he believes he won a victory over the Green Knight. However, he discovers it was all a ruse—the temptations and the wielding of the ax. He really was not going to die. Similarly, in Christian thinking, human beings believe death is real, but it has lost its sting—we appear to die but we don't.

Another lesson is: when Gawain sought to preserve his life by accepting the green girdle and flinching, he failed, but when he was willing to lose his life, he found it—exemplifying the saying found in Mark 8:34-38, that we used in Part I (Fox 12).

Although Gawain failed to withstand the Green Knight's temptations and courageously face death, Gawain is not punished, as Adam and Eve were, losing Paradise. He is forgiven and wears the green girdle as a sign of his trial. The ending demonstrates the important Christian theme of forgiveness. Although Gawain failed, he was forgiven.

After Gawain's confession of guilt and the Green Knight's forgiveness, the green girdle becomes something good. Gawain and the other knights wear the green girdle as a badge of honor, similar to how the Crusader knights wore the cross on their shields. The green girdle became a sign of Gawain's fall and redemption. The cross to Christians represents Christ's redemption of the human family from their fall.

## **READING THE TEXT**

In many ways *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a difficult text. Students will get frustrated with the text, but with the teacher guiding them, they will get immersed in the tale and become enchanted by it. When students can comprehend a sophisticated text, they feel good about themselves and discuss the work with pride.

I prefer the text to be read aloud. It was written with that purpose in mind. But I will do it in two ways. We will read it aloud as a class, and as we read, we will pause and I will ask questions about certain passages and lines, leading the students to notate the main points of the text so that they understand it. I will be certain to choose outstanding readers, for as they read, the class will hear the alliteration and the rhythm and come to appreciate the text.

Before class starts, I will place the students in groups. After we read a few pages aloud as a class and highlight and notate it, I will have the students in their groups read it to themselves and highlight and notate it. The students will read the passage in chunks; I will instruct them where to stop. Reading the text in chunks will help the students understand it. When they finish a chunk of text, we will pause and I will lead them in analyzing the passage, focusing on the main idea and the figurative language. Another strategy I will use is to assign certain groups to lead the class in analyzing the chunk of text that we just read.

After the students finish one part of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, they will read the particular parallel Biblical passage, focusing on ways it corresponds with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This will be done with the strategy used in reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: I will lead them as a class in reading, highlighting, and notating and then I will have them do it in groups so that they can master critical reading. After identifying the parallels, I will lead the students in creating an outline that sketches the parallels in the two texts.

The students will critically read most of Part II and Part III of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by themselves. I will circulate among the groups, giving assistance to those who are struggling. It is important that the groups are arranged with at least one sharp student in each group, so that he or she can guide the others.

## **WRITING THE LITERARY ANALYSIS PAPER**

### **Topic of Paper: The Biblical Parallels in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***

After the students complete the outline of each specific part of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the Biblical passages, they will write an elaborate paragraph explaining the parallels between the two texts. This will not be an essay with an introduction and a closing; it will be a piece of writing that states that the specific part parallels the certain Biblical story and then it will narrate quotes, paraphrase, and summarize the parallels in the two texts. It will be written this way because it will become part of the body of the future literary analysis paper.

This will be done for each part of the tale. After we have completed the work, the students will have written several paragraphs about the parallels between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and particular Bible passages. These paragraphs will serve as rough drafts for a literary analysis paper that explains how *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* makes allusions to certain Biblical passages to express its themes of facing death with faith and God's forgiveness of human spiritual failure. The students will have to add an introduction and thesis, a commentary that ties

all their details together—a closing argument that explains their paper’s theme, and a closing. Further they must elaborate and revise their rough draft paragraphs. I will emphasize elaborating and revising their drafts. Many students have gotten in the habit of copying a rough draft for the final draft. I will tell them that I am going to compare their rough draft paragraphs with their final draft. I will suggest that they write the body and then write the introduction. I have found that students are better able to write an introduction after completing the body. The students will also have to add a commentary that ties all their details together—a closing argument explaining their paper’s theme. This will be followed by a closing. They will use the Internet to find a quote that pertains to their theme. Besides writing the paragraphs, the students will learn how to document the quotes.

I will enhance their literary analysis papers by providing four criticism texts from the Bibliography of this unit. I will copy the particular criticism texts. I will lead the students in skimming and reading two of the texts and underlining what is pertinent to their paper’s theme. Then, in groups, they will do the same with two other criticism texts. They will make reference to these texts or quote from them in their paper. I will instruct them how to document the sources and how to write the bibliography.

The writing will take place in a computer lab. I will circulate and browse what they have written and give instruction. In our computer lab, all of the monitors face toward the center of the room, so I can see what everyone is doing. I go from student to student, clarifying, encouraging, and assisting. My students are not experienced writers of literary analysis papers, so I must lead them through. After this assignment, my goal is that they understand the overall process, get experience in doing it, and develop their writing ability, especially narrating quotes from a text and paraphrasing and summarizing.

After completing the paper, the students have completed the unit. They have read a sophisticated piece of literature, analyzed it, compared it to Biblical texts, outlined parallels, and written a documented literary analysis paper that explained how *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* uses Biblical allusions to express the themes of facing death with faith and God’s forgiveness for human spiritual failings. This is the type of work they will do in college, and having experience doing this in high school will prepare them well for college.

## **LESSON PLANS**

### **Lesson Plan 1: Reading and Notating**

#### ***Objective***

The students will read and analyze the text through highlighting, notation, and discussion. Students will interpret the text and support their interpretation with details from the text.

#### ***Activity***

I will lead the students in reading certain passages of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. As we read I will lead them in highlighting, notating, and discussing the text. Then in groups of four, the students will read certain passages and highlight and notate what is pertinent. The reading will be done in chunks. After reading each chunk, I will lead discussion of the text, leading them to analyze the deeper meaning of the text. As the students have more experience doing this, I will have individual groups lead discussion of the chunks of writing.

## Lesson Plan 2: Outlining and Writing

### *Objectives*

Using two pieces of literature, the students will synthesize highlighted passages and their notations and create an outline that sketches a common motif in these passages. They will use this outline to write paragraphs that explain how the two texts parallel each other.

### *Activity*

In a previous class, the students will have read two passages and highlighted and notated them. In this class, the students, with the assistance of the teacher using the blackboard, will outline a comparison of the two passages. Then they will use this outline to write a composition that compares the two passages. As the students have more experience doing this, I will have individual groups do it together with little or no assistance from me.

## Lesson Plan 3: Writing a Literary Analysis Paper

### *Objectives*

The students will integrate their writings about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and create a paper that states a theme about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and argue in support of it by narrating quotes, summarizing, paraphrasing, and reasoning.

### *Activity*

Throughout the reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the students have been highlighting, notating, outlining, and writing compositions about ways the work parallels Bible stories. I will have checked all of these, and on this day, I will return them to the students. They will use these compositions with my comments to write a paper analyzing how *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* parallels stories from the Bible to elaborate its themes of facing death with courage and faith and God's forgiveness for our spiritual failings. In addition to these compositions, the students will have to compose an introduction to the paper, a commentary at the end that ties up the details—synthesizing them and explaining what the details demonstrate, namely the two themes I just mentioned. To write the closing, they will search the Internet for an appropriate quote, and incorporate it into the closing in an eloquent way.

The work will be done in the computer lab, using Microsoft Word. As they work, I will circulate around, checking their progress, assisting them.

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