

from Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Romance by the Gawain Poet

Translated by John Gardner

Is HONOR worth dying for?

This would have been an easy question for a medieval knight to answer. Knights were sworn to follow a code of behavior known as chivalry. This code required knights to defend their church, their king, and their country courageously. Today, however, many people have doubts about whether an abstract concept such as honor is worth dying for.

DISCUSS Get together with classmates to discuss the similarities and differences between what being honorable means today with what it meant to a medieval knight. Use the notebook at the left to record your ideas. Discuss how the idea of honor has changed, and whether any individuals today could be called modern-day knights.

Text Analysis: Medieval Romance

A **medieval romance** can be a dramatic verse or a prose narrative. It typically includes the following elements:

- larger-than-life characters
- an adventurous hero who faces a severe challenge
- idealized love involving a noble lady
- exotic settings
- supernatural elements
- hidden or mistaken identity

Many of the best-known medieval romances celebrate the legendary King Arthur and his knights. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is considered one of the finest Arthurian romances. As you read the following excerpt from it, look for the characteristics of medieval romance listed above.

Today vs. Medieval Times

Similarities

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Differences

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Reading Skill: Make Inferences

When you **make inferences**, you make logical guesses about a text or character based on your own experience and the evidence or clues you find in the text. Making inferences is sometimes called “reading between the lines” because you come to understand something in the text that the author has not explicitly stated. For example, you can infer from these lines that Arthur and his knights might be frightened by the Green Knight’s challenge.

*If they were like stone before, they were stiller now,
Every last lord in the hall, both the high and the low;*

The following chart illustrates how you can use text details presented in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to make an inference.

Details from the Text	Inferences
<i>The Green Knight’s horse had threads of gold woven into its mane.</i>	<i>The Green Knight is wealthy, and he values his horse highly.</i>

As you read the excerpt from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, activities in the margins will ask you to use text details to make inferences about characters and other story elements.

SET A PURPOSE FOR READING

Read *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to learn what honor meant in medieval times.

Sir Gawain AND THE Green Knight

Romance by **THE GAWAIN POET**

Translated by **JOHN GARDNER**



BACKGROUND The identity of the Gawain Poet is unknown. His portrayal of Sir Gawain—a nephew of the legendary King Arthur—is considered the representation of the ideal knight. Although real knights were far from perfect, legendary knights such as Sir Gawain obeyed a code of chivalry that included faith, modesty, loyalty, courtesy, bravery, and honor. Perhaps the most important virtue was called *trawthe*, which is a Middle English word translated as “truth,” “devotion,” or “fidelity.” **A**

A ROMANCE

Reread the Background note. Underline the virtues that a knight who followed a code of chivalry must display. Circle the most important virtue.

As the poem begins, Arthur and his knights are gathered to celebrate Christmas and the new year with feasting and revelry. In the midst of their festivities, an enormous man—who is entirely green—bounds through the door.

Splendid that knight errant stood in a splay¹ of green,
And green, too, was the mane of his mighty destrier;²
Fair fanning tresses enveloped the fighting man's shoulders,
And over his breast hung a beard as big as a bush;
5 The beard and the huge mane burgeoning³ forth from his head
Were clipped off clean in a straight line over his elbows,
And the upper half of each arm was hidden underneath
As if covered by a king's chaperon,⁴ closed round the neck.
The mane of the marvelous horse was much the same,

-
1. **knight errant** (ēr'ənt): a knight who wanders about, searching for adventure in order to prove his chivalry; **splay**: display
 2. **destrier** (dēs'trē-ər): war horse.
 3. **burgeoning** (bûr'jə-nĭng): growing.
 4. **chaperon** (shăp'ə-rŏn'): hood.



- 10 Well crisped and combed and carefully pranked with knots,⁵
Threads of gold interwoven with the glorious green,
Now a thread of hair, now another thread of gold;
The tail of the horse and the forelock⁶ were tricked the same way,
And both were bound up with a band of brilliant green
15 Adorned with glittering jewels the length of the dock,⁷
Then caught up tight with a thong in a criss-cross knot
Where many a bell tinkled brightly, all burnished gold.
So monstrous a mount, so mighty a man in the saddle
Was never once encountered on all this earth
till then; **B**
20 His eyes, like lightning, flashed,
And it seemed to many a man,
That any man who clashed
With him would not long stand. **C**

- But the huge man came unarmed, without helmet or hauberk,⁸
25 No breastplate or gorget or iron cleats⁹ on his arms;
He brought neither shield nor spearshaft to shove or to smite,
But instead he held in one hand a bough of the holly
That grows most green when all the groves are bare
And held in the other an ax, immense and unwieldy,
30 A pitiless battleblade terrible to tell of. . . .

King Arthur stared down at the stranger before the high dais¹⁰
And greeted him nobly, for nothing on earth frightened him.
And he said to him, "Sir, you are welcome in this place;¹¹
I am the head of this court. They call me Arthur.

-
5. **pranked with knots:** decorated with bows.
6. **forelock:** the part of a horse's mane that falls between the ears.
7. **dock:** the fleshy part of an animal's tail.
8. **hauberk** (hō'bærk): a coat of chain mail (a type of armor).
9. **breastplate or gorget** (gôr'jīt) **or iron cleats:** armor for the chest, the throat, or the shoulders and elbows.
10. **dais** (dā'is): a raised platform where honored guests are seated.
11. **this place:** Camelot, Arthur's favorite castle and the site of his court of the Round Table.

B MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 18–19. Then complete the diagram by **making an inference** based on these lines.

Details from the Text

"So monstrous a mount,
so mighty a man in the
saddle/ Was never once
encountered on all this
earth/ till then;"

**Inference****C ROMANCE**

Review lines 1–23. Underline details about the Green Knight that make him a larger-than-life figure.

Reread lines 31–36. Based on these lines, what inference can you make about King Arthur?

[illegible]

15. **hasped:** fastened.

E MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 80–100. Circle details that show the Green Knight taunting the knights of Camelot. What does the Green Knight hope to achieve by his taunts?

Overwhelmed by a word out of one man's mouth!
You shiver and blanch before a blow's been shown!"

95 And with that he laughed so loud that the lord was distressed;
In chagrin, his blood shot up in his face and limbs
so fair;

More angry he was than the wind,
And likewise each man there;
And Arthur, bravest of men,
100 Decided now to draw near. **E**

And he said, "By heaven, sir, your request is strange;
But since you have come here for folly,¹⁸ you may as well find it.
I know no one here who's aghast of your great words.

Give me your gisarme, then, for the love of God,

105 And gladly I'll grant you the gift you have asked to be given."
Lightly the King leaped down and clutched it in his hand;
Then quickly that other lord alighted on his feet.
Arthur lay hold of the ax, he gripped it by the handle,
And he swung it up over him sternly, as if to strike.

110 The stranger stood before him, in stature higher
By a head or more than any man here in the house;
Sober and thoughtful he stood there and stroked his beard,
And with patience like a priest's he pulled down his collar,
No more unmanned¹⁹ or dismayed by Arthur's might

115 Than he'd be if some baron on the bench had brought him a glass
of wine.

Then Gawain, at Guinevere's²⁰ side,
Made to the King a sign:
"I beseech you, Sire," he said,
"Let this game be mine.

120 "Now if you, my worthy lord," said Gawain to the King,

18. **folly**: dangerous and foolish activity.

19. **unmanned**: deprived of manly courage.

20. **Guinevere**: King Arthur's wife.



“Would command me to step from the dais and stand with you there,

That I might without bad manners move down from my place
(Though I couldn’t, of course, if my liege lady²¹ disliked it)
I’d be deeply honored to advise you before all the court;

- 125 For I think it unseemly, if I understand the matter,
That challenges such as this churl²² has chosen to offer
Be met by Your Majesty—much as it may amuse you—
When so many bold-hearted barons sit about the bench:
No men under Heaven, I am sure, are more hardy in will
130 Or better in body on the fields where battles are fought;
I myself am the weakest, of course, and in wit the most feeble;
My life would be least missed, if we let out the truth.
Only as you are my uncle have I any honor,
For excepting your blood, I bear in my body slight virtue.
135 And since this affair that’s befallen us here is so foolish,
And since I have asked for it first, let it fall to me.
If I’ve reasoned incorrectly, let all the court say,
without blame.”

The nobles gather round
And all advise the same:

- 140 “Let the King step down
And give Sir Gawain the game!” . . . F

Arthur grants Gawain’s request to take on the Green Knight’s challenge. The Green Knight asks Gawain to identify himself, and the two agree on their pact. Gawain then prepares to strike his blow against the Green Knight.

On the ground, the Green Knight got himself into position,
His head bent forward a little, the bare flesh showing,
His long and lovely locks laid over his crown

21. **liege** (lēj) **lady**: a lady to whom one owes loyalty and service; here used by Gawain to refer to Queen Guinevere.

22. **churl**: rude, uncouth person.

F ROMANCE

Reread lines 120–141. Underline details in Gawain’s response that show him to be a chivalrous knight.

🔗 ROMANCE

Reread lines 146–167. Which of the following characteristics of medieval romance are represented in these lines?

- ☐ adventurous heroes
- ☐ idealized love
- ☐ exotic settings
- ☐ supernatural elements
- ☐ hidden identity

- 145 So that any man there might note the naked neck.
 Sir Gawain laid hold of the ax and he hefted it high,
 His pivot foot thrown forward before him on the floor,
 And then, swiftly, he slashed at the naked neck;
 The sharp of the battleblade shattered asunder²³ the bones
- 150 And sank through the shining fat and slit it in two,
 And the bit of the bright steel buried itself in the ground.
 The fair head fell from the neck to the floor of the hall
 And the people all kicked it away as it came near their feet.
 The blood splashed up from the body and glistened on the green,
- 155 But he never faltered or fell for all of that,
 But swiftly he started forth upon stout shanks²⁴
 And rushed to reach out, where the King's retainers²⁵ stood,
 Caught hold of the lovely head, and lifted it up,
 And leaped to his steed and snatched up the reins of the bridle,
- 160 Stepped into stirrups of steel and, striding aloft,
 He held his head by the hair, high, in his hand;
 And the stranger sat there as steadily in his saddle
 As a man entirely unharmed, although he was headless
 on his steed.
- He turned his trunk about,
 165 That baleful body that bled,²⁶
 And many were faint with fright
 When all his say was said. 🔗

He held his head in his hand up high before him,
 Addressing the face to the dearest of all on the dais;

170 And the eyelids lifted wide, and the eyes looked out,
 And the mouth said just this much, as you may now hear:
 "Look that you go, Sir Gawain, as good as your word,
 And seek till you find me, as loyally, my friend,

23. **asunder**: into pieces.

24. **shanks**: legs.

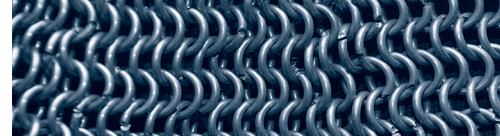
25. **retainers**: servants or attendants.

26. **baleful**: threatening evil; sinister.

Reread lines 190–216. What characteristics of medieval romance do you find in these lines? Explain.

[illegible]

28. **tunic . . . mantle:** shirtlike garment worn under a sleeveless cloak.



Might place a better price on it, perchance.

For the man who goes to battle in this green lace,

As long as he keeps it looped around him,

225 No man under Heaven can hurt him, whoever may try,

For nothing on earth, however uncanny, can kill him.”

The knight cast about in distress, and it came to his heart

This might be a treasure indeed when the time came to take

The blow he had bargained to suffer beside the Green Chapel.

230 If the gift meant remaining alive, it might well be worth it;

So he listened in silence and suffered the lady to speak,

And she pressed the sash upon him and begged him to take it,

And Gawain did, and she gave him the gift with great pleasure

And begged him, for her sake, to say not a word,

235 And to keep it hidden from her lord. And he said he would,

That except for themselves, this business would never be known

to a man. ❶

He thanked her earnestly,

And boldly his heart now ran;

And now a third time she

240 Leaned down and kissed her man.

When the lord returns at the end of the third day, Gawain gives him a kiss but does not reveal the gift of the sash.

On New Year's Day Gawain must go to meet the Green Knight. Wearing the green sash, he sets out before dawn. Gawain arrives at a wild, rugged place, where he sees no chapel but hears the sound of a blade being sharpened. Gawain calls out, and the Green Knight appears with a huge ax. The Green Knight greets Gawain, who, with pounding heart, bows his head to take his blow.

Quickly then the man in the green made ready,
Grabbed up his keen-ground ax to strike Sir Gawain;
With all the might in his body he bore it aloft
And sharply brought it down as if to slay him;

❶ MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 227–236. Why is Gawain distressed when he learns about the sash's magical powers?

K MAKE INFERENCES

Pause at line 273. Why does the Green Knight stop his axe from falling a second time?

- 245 Had he made it fall with the force he first intended
 He would have stretched out the strongest man on earth.
 But Sir Gawain cast a side glance at the ax
 As it glided down to give him his Kingdom Come,²⁹
 And his shoulders jerked away from the iron a little,
- 250 And the Green Knight caught the handle, holding it back,
 And mocked the prince with many a proud reproof:
 “*You* can’t be Gawain,” he said, “who’s thought so good,
 A man who’s never been daunted on hill or dale!
 For look how you flinch for fear before anything’s felt!
- 255 I never heard tell that Sir Gawain was ever a coward!
 I never moved a muscle when *you* came down;
 In Arthur’s hall I never so much as winced.
 My head fell off at my feet, yet I never flickered;
 But you! You tremble at heart before you’re touched!
- 260 I’m bound to be called a better man than you, then,
 my lord.”³⁰
 Said Gawain, “I shied once:
 No more. You have my word.
 But if my head falls to the stones
 It cannot be restored.

- 265 “But be brisk, man, by your faith, and come to the point!
 Deal out my doom if you can, and do it at once,
 For I’ll stand for one good stroke, and I’ll start no more
 Until your ax has hit—and that I swear.”
 “Here goes, then,” said the other, and heaves it aloft
- 270 And stands there waiting, scowling like a madman;
 He swings down sharp, then suddenly stops again,
 Holds back the ax with his hand before it can hurt,
 And Gawain stands there stirring not even a nerve; **K**
 He stood there still as a stone or the stock of a tree

29. **his Kingdom Come:** his death and entry into the afterlife; a reference to the sentence “Thy kingdom come” in the Lord’s Prayer.

30. The Green Knight has proclaimed himself a better man than Gawain.



- 275 That's wedged in rocky ground by a hundred roots.
O, merrily then he spoke, the man in green:
"Good! You've got your heart back! Now I can hit you.
May all that glory the good King Arthur gave you
Prove efficacious now—if it ever can—
280 And save your neck." In rage Sir Gawain shouted,
"Hit me, hero! I'm right up to here with your threats!
Is *it you* that's the cringing coward after all?"
"Whoo!" said the man in green, "he's wrathful, too!
No pauses, then; I'll pay up my pledge at once,
I vow!"
- 285 He takes his stride to strike
And lifts his lip and brow;
It's not a thing Gawain can like,
For nothing can save him now!
- He raises that ax up lightly and flashes it down,
290 And that blinding bit bites in at the knight's bare neck—
But hard as he hammered it down, it hurt him no more
Than to nick the nape of his neck, so it split the skin;
The sharp blade slit to the flesh through the shiny hide,
And red blood shot to his shoulders and spattered the ground.
295 And when Gawain saw his blood where it blinked in the snow
He sprang from the man with a leap to the length of a spear;
He snatched up his helmet swiftly and slapped it on,
Shifted his shield into place with a jerk of his shoulders,
And snapped his sword out faster than sight; said boldly—
300 And, mortal born of his mother that he was,
There was never on earth a man so happy by half— L
"No more strokes, my friend; you've had your swing!
I've stood one swipe of your ax without resistance;
If you offer me any more, I'll repay you at once
305 With all the force and fire I've got—as you
will see.

L MAKE INFERENCES

Pause at line 301. Underline text details that show how Gawain feels after he is cut by the blade. Why does he feel this way?

M ROMANCE

Reread line 330. Which characteristic of romance does the information in this line exemplify?

- ☐ adventurous heroes
- ☐ idealized love
- ☐ exotic places
- ☐ supernatural elements
- ☐ hidden identity

I take one stroke, that's all,
For that was the compact³¹ we
Arranged in Arthur's hall;
But now, no more for me!"

- 310 The Green Knight remained where he stood, relaxing on his ax—
Settled the shaft on the rocks and leaned on the sharp end—
And studied the young man standing there, shoulders hunched,
And considered that staunch and doughty³² stance he took,
Undaunted yet, and in his heart he liked it;
- 315 And then he said merrily, with a mighty voice—
With a roar like rushing wind he reproved the knight—
"Here, don't be such an ogre on your ground!
Nobody here has behaved with bad manners toward you
Or done a thing except as the contract said.
- 320 I owed you a stroke, and I've struck; consider yourself
Well paid. And now I release you from all further duties.
If I'd cared to hustle, it may be, perchance, that I might
Have hit somewhat harder, and then you might well be cross!
The first time I lifted my ax it was lighthearted sport,
- 325 I merely feinted³³ and made no mark, as was right,
For you kept our pact of the first night with honor
And abided by your word and held yourself true to me,
Giving me all you owed as a good man should.
I feinted a second time, friend, for the morning
- 330 You kissed my pretty wife twice and returned me the kisses;
And so for the first two days, mere feints, nothing more
severe. **M**

A man who's true to his word,
There's nothing he needs to fear;
You failed me, though, on the third
Exchange, so I've tapped you here.

335

31. **compact**: binding agreement.

32. **staunch and doughty** (dou'tē): firm and brave.

33. **feinted** (fān'tīd): pretended to attack.



“That sash you wear by your scabbard³⁴ belongs to me;
My own wife gave it to you, as I ought to know.
I know, too, of your kisses and all your words
And my wife’s advances, for I myself arranged them.

- 340 It was I who sent her to test you. I’m convinced
You’re the finest man that ever walked this earth.
As a pearl is of greater price than dry white peas,
So Gawain indeed stands out above all other knights.
But you lacked a little, sir; you were less than loyal;
- 345 But since it was not for the sash itself or for lust
But because you loved your life, I blame you less.”
Sir Gawain stood in a study a long, long while,
So miserable with disgrace that he wept within,
And all the blood of his chest went up to his face
- 350 And he shrank away in shame from the man’s gentle words.
The first words Gawain could find to say were these:
“Cursed be cowardice and covetousness both,
Villainy and vice that destroy all virtue!”
He caught at the knots of the girdle³⁵ and loosened them
- 355 And fiercely flung the sash at the Green Knight.
“There, there’s my fault! The foul fiend vex³⁶ it!
Foolish cowardice taught me, from fear of your stroke,
To bargain, covetous, and abandon my kind,
The selflessness and loyalty suitable in knights;
- 360 Here I stand, faulty and false, much as I’ve feared them,
Both of them, untruth and treachery; may they see sorrow
and care!

I can’t deny my guilt;
My works shine none too fair!
Give me your good will
And henceforth I’ll beware.” **N**

365

N ROMANCE

Reread lines 357–365. What
ideals of chivalry does Gawain
believe he has betrayed?

34. **scabbard** (skăb’ərd): a sheath for a dagger or sword.

35. **girdle**: sash.

36. **vex**: harass; torment.

PAUSE & REFLECT

Explain why the Green Knight reacts the way he does to Sir Gawain's confession.

At that, the Green Knight laughed, saying graciously,
 "Whatever harm I've had, I hold it amended
 Since now you're confessed so clean, acknowledging sins
 And bearing the plain penance³⁷ of my point;

- 370 I consider you polished as white and as perfectly clean
 As if you had never fallen since first you were born.³⁸
 And I give you, sir, this gold-embroidered girdle,
 For the cloth is as green as my gown. Sir Gawain, think
 On this when you go forth among great princes;
- 375 Remember our struggle here; recall to your mind
 This rich token. Remember the Green Chapel.
 And now, come on, let's both go back to my castle
 And finish the New Year's revels with feasting and joy,

- not strife,
 I beg you," said the lord,
 And said, "As for my wife,
 She'll be your friend, no more
 A threat against your life." **PAUSE & REFLECT**
- 380

- "No, sir," said the knight, and seized his helmet
 And quickly removed it, thanking the Green Knight,
- 385 "I've reveled too well already; but fortune be with you;
 May He who gives all honors honor you well." . . .

- And so they embraced and kissed and commended each other
 To the Prince of Paradise, and parted then
 in the cold;
- 390 Sir Gawain turned again
 To Camelot and his lord;
 And as for the man of green,
 He went wherever he would.

37. **penance:** punishment accepted by a person to show sorrow for wrongdoing.

38. The Green Knight is saying that Gawain has paid for his fault by admitting it and offering his head to the ax.

Text Analysis: Medieval Romance

The chart below lists elements usually found in medieval romances. Complete the chart by identifying examples of these elements from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Elements in Medieval Romances	Examples
Larger-than-life characters	
An adventurous hero who faces a severe challenge	
Idealized love involving a noble lady	
Exotic settings	
Supernatural elements	
Hidden or mistaken identity	

Review the notes you took while reading. On the lines below, explain how the case of mistaken identity affects the outcome of this medieval romance.

Reading Skill: Make Inferences

Review the inferences you made as you read. Which character shows greater courage, Sir Gawain or the Green Knight? Indicate your response with a check mark in the first row of the chart. In the column below the statement you marked, support your answer with details from the text.

<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Sir Gawain showed greater courage.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>The Green Knight showed greater courage.</i>

Is HONOR worth dying for?

Review your responses about honor on page 52. Trying to live up to high ideals such as always being honorable can be a double-edged sword. List at least two advantages and two disadvantages of having such high ideals.

Advantages

1. _____

2. _____

Disadvantages

1. _____

2. _____

Academic Vocabulary in Writing

concept

culture

parallel

section

structure

Though legend has it that Gawain was one of Arthur's most loyal knights, the Gawain poet depicts him as flawed. Why might the Gawain poet have portrayed him in this way? What point might he be making about the **concept** of chivalry? Use at least two Academic Vocabulary words in your response. Definitions of these words are on page 1.

Assessment Practice

DIRECTIONS Use this excerpt from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to answer questions 1–6.

- 1 The challenge the Green Knight makes to King Arthur and his knights is to —
 - ☐ A ride a horse while wearing armor
 - ☐ B exchange blows with an ax
 - ☐ C compete against him in a game
 - ☐ D fight a duel on horseback
- 2 Gawain is distressed when he hears about the sash's powers because he knows —
 - ☐ A women are not allowed to use magic
 - ☐ B the sash really has no magic powers
 - ☐ C he cannot wear someone else's clothing
 - ☐ D he must keep the gift secret from his host
- 3 What happens first when Sir Gawain meets the Green Knight on New Year's Day?
 - ☐ A The Green Knight makes a fake swing at Gawain's neck with the ax.
 - ☐ B The magic sash stops the ax blow.
 - ☐ C The Green Knight knicks Gawain's neck.
 - ☐ D Gawain admits he has not acted like a true knight.
- 4 Which is the best paraphrase of lines 352–353?
 - ☐ A Because I was afraid, I did not act as a knight should.
 - ☐ B I was foolish to leave my fellow knights.
 - ☐ C I learned that only cowards make bargains.
 - ☐ D I should have learned to fear the stroke of your ax.
- 5 What is the Green Knight's opinion of Gawain after Gawain's confession?
 - ☐ A He thinks Gawain is a perfect knight.
 - ☐ B He thinks Gawain is a foolish coward.
 - ☐ C He thinks Gawain is imperfect but still the finest of all knights.
 - ☐ D He thinks Gawain needs to do penance.
- 6 Gawain declines the Green Knight's invitation to celebrate because —
 - ☐ A he has a battle he must fight in
 - ☐ B he is ashamed of betraying his host
 - ☐ C knights are not supposed to have fun
 - ☐ D he is angry with the Green Knight