THE GAWAIN-PENTANGLE.
A STUDY OF STRUCTURE
AND SYMBOLISM IN SIR GAWAIN
AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

JOANNE M. COONS
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IN SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

by
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Allen W. Greer, Department of English, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the College of Humanities and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

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In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the hero sets out on a journey in which he is forced to make moral choices that ultimately alter his self-knowledge. Gawain's journey is the direct result of a challenge offered by the Green Knight under the guise of a Christmas game. Metaphorically, his actions are reflected by the pentangle, which although composed of oppositions, always leads back to itself. Gawain's divided consciousness is further symbolized by the Virgin-shield, which alludes to caritas, and the magic girdle, which alludes to cupiditas. Their opposition forms the basic conflict of the poem: between spirit and flesh. These symbols initiate two sequences of action wherein Gawain is tested, fails and is absolved. He returns to Camelot a new man, wiser for his folly, a true exemplar of Christianity as symbolized by the pentangle virtues.
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Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a Christmas story, and like all Christmas stories, it contains elements of make-believe: enchantment, merriment, and a kind of magic which treads a thin line between truth and illusion, reality and fantasy. The Gawain-poet has presented the reader with a game, even as the Green Knight offered a game to the courtiers at Camelot. Many plays are possible in the game, but some are better than others. There is a myriad of meanings—all possible, all even probable, and all an exasperating shade different. This much has been allowed in Gawain criticism. Mr. Kiteley, for example notes the ambiguity of the pentangle symbol; Mr. Howard, among other things, comments upon the curious symmetrical design of the poem; and Mr. Burrow is interested in the game-like tone of the work.

I should like to consider all of the above within a somewhat isolated framework. I wish to look at the poem in a way which has not been suggested thus far. I will use for my inner framework, all the while acknowledging the Gawain-poet’s authority, the journey. The journey will refer to Gawain’s adventure. However, encompassing the journey is yet another, outer frame—that of the game.
The purpose of the game is to remind the reader of two things: first, that in a game nothing is so serious as to be a real life and death matter; second, that a game is enigmatic—nothing is true and everything is true. The tone is not terribly serious, but not terribly light-hearted either. When the Green Knight arrives with the offer of a Christmas game, it becomes obvious that it will involve more than a simple exchange of blows. Yet the conception of the game always remains in the fore, and for this reason, one never expects a life to be lost.

The idea of death, in fact, becomes a metaphor. "Death" in the poem involves a loss, but not a physical loss. It is a dying to one kind of life (material), and the re-birth to another (spiritual). Within the context of the poem as make-believe or as game, death, while containing real elements of terror, is generally accepted rather casually. Although the court is terrified when the Green Knight's head is struck off, the whole episode becomes somewhat droll as the decapitated figure calmly retrieves his rolling head from the floor and gallops out of the hall. Consequently, within the poem, one never expects a "physical" death. Nevertheless, one does anticipate a loss which is somehow related to the concept of the game.

Since Gawain is the chief player, he is the one who loses something. The idea of losing one's life to find it is, in a religious sense, the main theme of Christianity.
(John 12:25). Through his birth, death and resurrection, Christ gained for man, who was lost through sin, a new life by redemption. In the Christian sense, one renounces sin in order to realize salvation. Metaphorically, this "death" to sin becomes a re-birth in grace. Arthur's is a Christian court; thus, it is appropriate to find the basic tenets of the Christmas story enacted in Gawain's adventure. Because of his pride, Gawain is made to realize his human imperfection after a series of tests in which he loses a false conception of himself and finds the promise of redemption through humility.

The poem, then, is concerned with the moral growth of the hero. Within the frame of action, he moves from ignorance to knowledge, from pride to humility. His journey is two-fold. Gawain's physical journey from Arthur's court to Bercilak's castle is real. But concomitant with the physical journey is the spiritual one. Thus, the journey can be seen on two levels: one adventurous and fanciful; the other somber and serious. Parenthetically, it is also Christmas, a time of festivity and gaming but also a time of thought and prayer.

Within the framework of the journey, I will show the symmetrical oppositions which refer directly to and visually demonstrate the central conflict of the poem:
the opposition between caritas and cupiditas, as personified by Gawain and symbolized by his pentangle emblem. The pentangle is the direct visual manifestation of Gawain's consciousness. His consciousness is a divided one, drawn to both caritas and cupiditas. Likewise, the entire poem is divided according to these oppositions.

Initially, Gawain's interior conflict is visually perceptible in the pentangle emblem. This visual perception continues throughout the symmetrical design of the poem.

Moreover, this design can be broken down into two sequences of action which are also in opposition. The first sequence is governed by the Virgin-shield, symbolizing caritas, as suggested by the virtue of clannessse in Gawain. The second sequence is governed by the Lady-girdle, symbolizing cupiditas, as suggested by one aspect of

In the last twenty years, the terms caritas and cupiditas have become a commonplace in the criticism of Medieval literature. My purpose in using these terms is to take advantage of what has already been done and to demonstrate how the Gawain-poet has shown this conflict in a dynamic sense.

According to Christian doctrine, man is divided into two sides: the one striving for perfection through charity (caritas), and the other striving to become immersed in the things of the flesh through covetousness (cupiditas). St. Augustine made the following comment: "I call 'charity' the motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one's self and of one's neighbor for the sake of God; but 'cupidity' is a motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of one's self, one's neighbor, or any corporal thing for the sake of something other than God." On Christian Doctrine, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (N.Y.: The Liberal Arts Press, 1958), p. 88.
cortaysye in Gawain. Gawain's increasing consciousness of these oppositions causes them to become substantial, rather than to remain abstractions. Furthermore, these oppositions reflect the basic conflict between spirit and flesh as seen in Gawain's choice between faith and the use of magic. Ultimately, the conflict resolves itself at the Green Chapel—a rather ambiguous destination, combining the elements of both trickery and penance, perhaps emphasizing that all of life is made up of oppositions. Here Gawain has a true consciousness of himself as a human being composed of both strengths and weaknesses. This recognition permits him to feel true contrition for his sin and this, in turn, makes him worthy to receive absolution.

Thus, by the end of his journey, as a result of his expanded consciousness, Gawain has become a truly "Christian" knight. Within the larger frame of the game, this consciousness is met with great levity at Camelot where the contrite Gawain is greeted with laughter and good-natured ribaldry.

3Regarding the use of the word "Chapel," Mother Angela Carson has observed that "the twelfth century word 'chapel' has not only the meanings of heavy blows and carnage, but more significantly, that of the place where they are given and where the slaying is accomplished," in "The Green Chapel: Its Meaning and Its Function, in Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. Donald R. Howard and Christian Zacher (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 248. Although Gawain initially understands the word "chapel" in its modern sense, eventually he realizes that: "his is chapel of meschaunce" (2193).
after relating his experiences (see Appendix).

However, by the end of the poem, Gawain emerges as a man transformed by his experiences into a wiser individual. Through failure and its accompanying lesson in humility, Gawain approaches the ideal of Christian perfection, as the criticism of the poem has long maintained. The testing of the hero is a widely accepted theme of the work. Even the use of the pentangle as Gawain's emblem has been identified as a reinforcement of those virtues, typically Christian, which Gawain supposedly exemplifies.

While this study of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight basically accepts the Christian interpretation of the work, it goes a step further. I shall isolate the pentangle and, through a consideration of its historical associations, extend its meaning within the context of the poem. I wish to show that it is a metaphor for Gawain and that as such the pentangle is assigned an importance equal to that of Gawain in the action of the poem. Just as Gawain is influenced by clannesse and cortaysye, figuratively the pentangle is influenced by the Virgin-shield and the magic girdle. The parallel between the actual drama and the symbolic drama is an example of the symmetrical pattern of the whole. Moreover, the symbolism directly contributes to the symmetry of the poem.

The Gawain-poet uses the pentangle to signal the two sequences of action in which Gawain is the principal actor.
The action is precipitated by the testing process wherein Gawain is required to make moral choices. These choices become the matter of electing either to uphold the ideals of clanness or to succumb to the material desires suggested by one aspect of cortaysye. This dilemma and its eventual conclusion are seen in the pentangle symbolism. In the first sequence of action, the shield is symbolically strengthened by the portrait of the Virgin; similarly, Gawain remains faithful to clanness and overcomes the temptations of the flesh. But in the second sequence of action, the pentangle is cloaked with the magic girdle; similarly again, Gawain moves away from clanness by giving in to the temptation to save his own life. Once confronted with his guilt, Gawain finds his redemption in acknowledging the human imperfection within himself. So too the unity and perfection of the pentangle, also called the endless knot, may be realized in always leading back to itself.

 Appropriately, when Gawain returns to Camelot, he bears, in addition to the pentangle and the shield, a third emblem, the magic girdle, symbolizing his new awareness of himself and in that awareness, the wholeness of his nature. He returns to Camelot as the best which it has produced. He becomes an exemplar of the virtues of Christian man, the same virtues which are symbolized by the pentangle. Gawain's journey has not been an easy one, but it has been representative of man's journey through life and his
endeavor to become Christ-like by redeeming himself within himself. As Gordon Shedd has observed, "in the person of Gawain we recognize the strengths and weaknesses of all men, and with him we are reminded that the real opponent against whom we strive is no external bogey man, but the man within." 4

CHAPTER I

The Gawain-pentangle

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is not only a Christmas poem, but it is also a poem about man. It is a poem which portrays a particular man on his journey toward self-actualization. It is a poem which painstakingly traces his steps, sometimes heroic, more often simply human, from ignorance to enlightenment; from innocence to knowledge. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a poem which talks about the state of man and the human condition, not as man would like it to be, a "Camelot" of frivolity, but rather, as it really is: a "Whirral" of thickets which becomes the more dense, the more desolate with each new choice that must be made, with each more compromising dilemma that must be faced. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is, in essence, a dramatization of man's fall into sin and redemption through grace.

Moreover, in the world of Sir Gawain, things are not always what they appear to be; this is particularly true regarding the character of Gawain, as I will presently demonstrate. The tale is a romance, but not a naïve example of the genre; in fact, it violates the traditional success story pattern of the romance. The poem is Christian, but
it operates within a landscape which has both primitive and pagan elements. It is serious, but also profoundly funny. Beneath the fairy-tale-like setting all is not the glimmer of Camelot; there is also the earthy barrow of the Green Chapel. By using a make-believe setting to frame the realities of the human predicament, the poem ironically contrasts the ideal with the actual.

 Appropriately, this contrast is treated in the opening lines of the poem which set the tone for the events to follow. The poet describes a "fallen" world:

> Where werre and wrake and wonder  
> Bi sy¢e hat3 wont perinne,  
> And oft bo¢e blysse and blunder  
> Ful skete hat5 skyfted synne.

(16-19)¹

In the world of the poem, just as in the world of men, age-old conflicts emerge: the opposition between God and king; between church and state; between spirit and flesh. For at base, the poem talks about man's fallen state; that is, it accepts his separation from an essential unity with God. While these oppositions are certainly rooted in man's nature, their resolution is dependent upon man's ability to make moral choices.

On the surface, this appears to be a simple enough matter. However, as man soon learns, choices are never so

¹All subsequent quotations from Sir Gawain and the Green Knight are from J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon's revised edition (Oxford, 1930).
simple. There are always consequences, and with the increasing complexity of a situation, the more serious the consequences become and the more precarious is man's position as the one who must make the choice. If man were perfect, as Gawain initially believes himself to be, there would be no problem. But because man is a "fallen" creature and in the spiritual sense possessed of a divided nature, he must wage a constant struggle within himself and he must repeatedly make choices. This moral choice essentially refers to a conflict between caritas and cupiditas as the words were defined by St. Augustine. While caritas reminds man of his former spiritual harmony with God, cupiditas lures him to the secular world. Caritas, then, is the means and goal of the Christian life, while cupiditas results in the dissolution of the Christian ideal.

For the knight this conflict causes a dilemma which finds its origin in the medieval concept of cortaysye. On the one hand he is called to spiritual harmony with God (caritas), while on the other hand, he is bound to a worldly concept of honor which includes loyalty to his lord and to the courtly code of behavior known as chivalry; in addition he is subject to the whims of his own human

nature (cupiditas). Eventually, Gawain finds himself caught completely unaware between two powerful forces in his own nature. And finally, it is cupiditas, his desire to save his own life, which dissuades him from caritas, his faith in God, with his acceptance of the magic girdle.

The root of Gawain's failure, however, can be found in the false conception he has of himself and of life in general. What he does not immediately realize is that appearances, his own included, are usually misleading. In the make-believe kingdom of Camelot, Gawain's initial choice in accepting the Green Knight's challenge is made reflexively, without much consideration either for the import of the challenge or its possible consequences. Either out of youthful brashness or pride or both, Gawain stuns the knights and ladies of Arthur's court by asking leave to take the Green Knight's challenge:

3 John of Salisbury states in The Policratus, "This rule must be enjoined upon and fulfilled by every soldier, namely, that he shall keep inviolate the faith which he owes first to God and afterwards to the prince of the commonwealth. . . . It is vain to expect one to be true to his secondary loyalty who holds his primary loyalty in no regard," as quoted in The Literature of Medieval England, ed. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (N.Y.: McGraw Hill, c1970), p. 216.

4 Morton Bloomfield, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal," in Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. Donald R. Howard and Christian Zacher (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, c1968), p. 54, has made the following observation: "Gawain, the perfect knight, is also a human being and the Green Knight is really only a mask. His wife only seems to be unfaithful. The old harmless lady is really a witch. . . . Nature is both horrid and benign. Life is a tissue of contradictions, even in its most aristocratic and idealized form."
"I am be wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest,
And lest lur of my lyf, quo laytes pe sope,
Bot for as much as pe ar myn em I am only to prayse,
No bounté bot your blod I in my bodé knowe;
And syben pis note is so nys, pat no3t hit yow falles,
And I haue frayned hit at yow fyrst, folde3 hit to me,
And if I carp not comlyly, let all pis cort rych
bout blame."

(354-61)

For the young knight, all of this is a game. It is Christmas. It is a time for merriment and joking. That Gawain does not immediately recognize that beneath the festive surface of the Christmas game lies a deeper, darker truth of his own place in the universe is hardly surprising. For the reader is presented with an "untested" Gawain, one who has never experienced the difficulty of making choices. Early in the tale this is appropriate, for Gawain is only at the beginning of his journey, steeped in ignorance and the kind of innocence that goes with it. He has yet to come to terms with the man he finds himself to be, and to reconcile what he learns with his preconceived notion of self with which he begins his journey.

The reader's first impression of Gawain, then, is a highly unrealistic one. Beginning in the Camelot setting which becomes more unreal with the entrance of the Green Knight, the reader is presented with a utopian character in the person of "gode Gawan" (109). But this is perfectly acceptable in context of what eventually occurs. As the poem unfolds, the reader becomes aware of a natural progression in Gawain's character. The more Gawain becomes
aware of his human nature, the more believable he is for the reader. The poet does, in fact, present a completely "human" portrait of the hero, unlike the romance characterizations which had preceded this one.

Interestingly, it is with this more human portrait of the hero that the medieval conception of Gawain ends, with the possible exception of Mallory's characterization in Morte Arthur, which is usually considered an example of the early Renaissance period. From the French romance comes a Gawain heroic, but tarnished to an extent because of his notorious weakness for the things of the world. B.J. Whiting notes:

That Gawain was conspicuously lacking in the qualities demanded of the winner of the Grail will be admitted by his most ardent admirers, except perhaps those who know him only in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. At his very best he is a man of war and women, one whose character requires no shading to make him the antithesis of Galahad.5

The early romances also point to the fact that the concept of chastity, which virtue he gallantly upholds in the poem, was, if anything, foreign to him.6 In the prose Tristan,


6Whiting, p. 203, comments that Gawain is most assuredly not a courtly lover as he is usually too polite and never becomes emotionally involved with a lady. "The most courteous of knights, he is a foil to the courtly lover through elasticity rather than chastity." This appears to be accurate because although Gawain is lauded for his chastity in the poem, he is not beyond being powerfully tempted to lay his virtue aside. This is particularly evident on the third morning when, upon seeing the lady, "Wiȝt wallande joye warmed his hert" (1762).
Gawain's utter moral debasement is scrupulously effected, so that, finally, it is not Gawain but Galahad who becomes the hero of the Grail.

Thus, when Gawain appears as the hero of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, despite the supernatural aura which surrounds the tale, one is prepared to meet a Gawain who, by and by, becomes a real person. Bercilak's servants immediately accept his complete humanness for they promptly allude to the hero's courtly rather than Christian reputation.

"Now schal we semlyche se sleȝteȝ of þeweȝ And þe ticcheles termes of talkyng noble . . . ."

(916-7)

Moreover, his *cortaysye* is linked with his "luf-talking":

"In menyng of manereȝ mere Þis burne now schal vus bryng, I hope þat may hym here Schal lerne of luf-talking."

(924-7)

7See Whiting, pp. 28, 133, 175-6, 210, 216, 221, 235-6, 293, 300, 314, 329-30, 439 for specific references.

Later at the castle, Lady Bercilak pleads with him to instruct her in the art of courtly love:

"And je, pat ar so cortays and coynt of your hetes, 
Oghe to a jonke ynk zern to schewe 
And teche sum tokenez of trweluf craftes."

(1525-7)

While "luf-talking" is fairly typical of the romance Gawain, it is not so typical of the Gawain of this poem, perhaps because there is really no opportunity for him to engage in it. And the impression of Gawain that the reader gets as the poetic drama unfolds is very different from the one set forth in the pentangle description.9

And quy pe pentangel apendeʒ to pat prync noble
I am intent yow to telle, pof tary hyt me schulde:
Hit is a synghe pat Salamon set sumquyle
In bytoknyng of trawpe, bi tytle pat hit habbeʒ,
For hit is a figure pat haldeʒ fyue poynteʒ,
And vche lyne vmbelappeʒ and loukeʒ in oper,
And ayquere hit is endege; and Englych hit calle
Oueral, as I here, pe endeles knot.
Forpy hit acordeʒ to his kynʒt and to his cler armeʒ,
For ay faythful in fyue and sere fyue sypeʒ,
Gawan watʒ for gode knawen, and as golde pured,
Voyded of vche vylany, wyth vertueʒ ennourned
in mote;
Forby pe pentangel nwe
He ber in schelde and cote,
As tulk of tale most trwe
And gentylest knyʒt of lote.

(623-39)

9Donald R. Howard, The Three Temptations—Medieval Man in Search of the World (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 38, sheds some light on the "different" aspect of Gawain's character when he notes that there existed in the medieval audience an essential tension, which corresponds to a similar tension in the character of Gawain, namely, "the conflict between the secular and the Christian, the actual and the ideal."
While on the surface this may appear contradictory, it serves to establish a distinct and deliberate relationship between Gawain and the pentangle. Initially, the pentangle description presumes a relationship seen in terms of absolute perfection. Both Gawain and the pentangle are "bytoknyng of travpe" (226). However, the poet makes no claim as to his first-hand knowledge of this assertion. Rather, he relates the legend as he has heard it: "Oueral, as I here," not as he knew it to be. What the reader knows is the Gawain which the poet shows him. He is a young man with so exalted an opinion of himself that he feels worthy to bear the image of the Virgin Mother on his shield. He is a young man who modestly feels deserving to carry the pentangle as his emblem. Finally, he is a young man who has found himself to be faultless without ever having considered the possibility of being otherwise. Moreover, Gawain has assumed the virtue of perfection without having first proven whether or not he could even approximate it. He is most imperfect in his very ignorance.

10 This point will be discussed in Chapter 3, note 7.

11 Richard H. Green, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," in Sir Gawain and Pearl--Critical Essays, ed. Robert J. Blanch (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), p. 184. He states that "the description of the pentangle supports the idea that Gawain is the noblest of Arthur's court and of all England . . . he is the model of perfection." While the pentangle is indeed related to Gawain neither emblem nor man is the model of perfection as presented in the poem. Rather, they symbolize Christian man's aspiration toward the ideal.
of his human nature. Ironically, as his human nature later leads him astray, for which he chastizes himself unduly, he ventures as close as any man can to the ideal of Christian perfection. It is through human failure that Gawain becomes conscious of his own identity as a man, and simultaneously, moves from ignorance to enlightenment.

It is appropriate, then, that the *endeles knot* is his emblem. For like man's nature, it always leads back to itself. And while the pentangle is initially introduced, by report, as a symbol of perfection, like Gawain, its potential for perfection ultimately derives from its symbolic dualism. It is this dualism which I will explore and extend to a corresponding dualism in the character of Gawain. Like man, the pentangle is divided against itself. And like man too, its unity comes in the joining of the two sides, which in Gawain, is analogous to self-actualization.

John F. Kiteley makes an observation regarding the novel use of the pentangle: "The poet, who we may safely

12 A.C. Spearing, *Criticism and Medieval Poetry* (N.Y.: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1972), p. 38, makes the following comment regarding the use of the pentangle: "The effect of the poem, I would suggest, is to break the *endeles knot* (630) of the pentangle, which linked clannes and cortaysye in the same line (653); to undermine the pious gaiety or gay piety of Camelot, by driving a wedge between courtliness and Christianity."
assume, was well versed in Romance tradition, is thus consciously providing Gawain with a novel device, perhaps to emphasize the new concept which he has of Gawain's character. This "new" concept of Gawain's character is that he is the perfect Christian knight, bearer of the perfect Christian emblem. But since Gawain has little real conception of what it means to be either perfect or Christian until the end of the poem, he must be judged by the standards of the pentangle. Ironically, in relation to what Kiteley has said, this is precisely the point. It is important to remember that there are two separate pentangles:

Forpy þe pentangel nwe
He ber in schelde and cote. . . .
(636-7)

On the inside of the shield is the additional symbol of Mary. Thus, the essentially secular object, now governed by the image of the Virgin, becomes a spiritual symbol—an emblem of the knight's inner moral perfection. Similarly, the pentangle device which appears on the front of the shield is governed by the Virgin. Consequently, so long as Gawain bears the Virgin-shield, he and his pentangle emblem are drawn to uphold clannesse. However, once Gawain has laid aside the Virgin-shield influence by his acceptance of the girdle, both he and his pentangle have come under a

baser influence. The girdle, which is a worldly object, is emblematic of Gawain's moral weakness. The pentangle device which appears on his coat of arms is covered by the girdle, symbolizing Gawain's submission to his human weakness.

A parallel is finely drawn between Gawain as Christian man and the pentangle as a symbol of Christian man. Kiteley himself is aware that there is ambiguity surrounding the pentangle symbolism: "Most Gawain scholarship which concerns itself with the pentangle . . . concentrates on . . . the moral and religious . . . side of the significance. . . . I should like to consider . . . the 'other' side of the pentangle." 14 It is this "other" side of the pentangle which now warrants attention. Kiteley goes on to explain that although the pentangle was well-known as a symbol used in magic, the poet's use of it within the poem as an emblem of Christian perfection is simply his attempt to Christianize a pagan symbol. The pentangle, which was a rare device in the Middle Ages, has as colorful a history as does Gawain. It was a symbol employed by the Greeks. They, in turn, probably passed it on to the Hebrews, 15 where it became

14 Kiteley, p. 43, begins to make a good case for the "other" side of the pentangle but stops abruptly and concludes that, although there is ambiguity present in the history of the pentangle, i.e., its use in magic and popular superstition, the use of it as Gawain's emblem is simply the poet's attempt to Christianize a pagan symbol.

associated with Solomon. Richard H. Green comments that Solomon is a figure of perfection. . . . He was for the Middle Ages a figure of Christ, the exemplar of wisdom and kingship, of power over demons. But in the Bible, and everywhere in the exegetical tradition, he is a gravely flawed figure, remarkably wise, but in the end guilty of follies that cost him his kingdom; and though he had power over demons, he was ultimately their victim, for his weakness for women turned him away from God and he built temples to the powers of darkness.16

If the pentangle is associated with Solomon, who was considered a gravely flawed figure in the Bible, then Gawain, who represents the Middle Ages, takes it in error. But in the long run, it is appropriate because like the pentangle, Gawain is not quite what he appears to be.17 Moreover, the pentangle has found its way into many legends and superstitions just as Gawain has. Like Gawain, too, its origin is not definitely known.18 Consequently, when

16Green, pp. 185-6.

17It is interesting to note that there are no associations made between Solomon and the pentangle in the Bible; however, there are associations made between them in books of magic which were condemned by the church. Furthermore, Vincent F. Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism (N.Y.: Copper Square, 1969), p. 122, states that "The Black Book of Solomon prescribes that the magic circle should be 9' in diameter, within which four pentangles must be drawn."

18The magical aspect of the pentangle receives further impetus with the pagan-ritualistic interpretation offered by Jessie L. Weston, From Ritual to Romance (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, c1958), p. 74. She identifies it as one of the Black Arts. And David Hoy, The Meaning of the Tarot (Nashville: Aurora Publishers, c1971), pp. 11-12, notes that the Tarot was introduced to Europe during the Middle Ages. It was one of the novelties that the Crusaders brought back from the Orient. Furthermore, he says, "According to mystic tradition, there is a connection
the Gawain-poet says of the pentangle,

For by hit acorde to his knynt and
to his cler arme. . . .

(631)

there is the same shade of irony which is present when the somewhat imperfect person of Gawain is equated with an emblem which is supposed to be representative of perfection and truth. Kiteley is of a similar opinion though his thesis ultimately takes a different turn. He says that in fourteenth century England the magical qualities of the pentangle were still predominant in popular superstition—it represents a perfect number and therefore a fit defense against evil spirits. This relates back to the assumption (and we can only assume) that the appearance of the pentangle in the poem is simply another example of the Christianization of a pagan legend. However, this is of minor importance. Although many medieval poets, notably the Beowulf-poet, did in fact "Christianize" popular folk legends, the use of the pentangle in this particular poem, whether or not a part of such an effort, has a far more specific purpose which directly relates to the theme of the poem and to the characterization of Gawain.

between the Tarot and the legendary Holy Grail." However, while no one knows for certain where the Tarot originated or with whom, its use of the pentangle symbol is nevertheless revealing as it tends to re-inforce its appropriateness as an emblem for Gawain, because like his own nature, its nature is also crossed.
Because the pentangle is an ambiguous symbol, it makes a larger statement about mankind in general; namely, that like the symbol, man is divided. The ultimate unity and perfection of the pentangle is seen in the joining of its sides, each intersecting to form the whole. The ultimate unity and perfection of Gawain as a man is seen in his awareness of his faults, which in turn, makes him conscious of his whole self, and this further enables him to bring together, with a new sense of understanding, the disparate elements of his nature.

Gawain, like most men, out of pride or just simple naïveté, expects too much of himself and is ever surprised when he finds himself lacking. But this is all a part of the test, all a part of his journey into himself. With each failure and its consequent personal shame, comes a little more insight into the nature of the self. Herein lies one of the essential truths of Sir Gawain and of human nature in general as represented by the pentangle symbolism.
CHAPTER II

Caritas/Cupiditas: The Moral Journey

Earlier, I have said that Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a Christmas poem about man and his journey toward self-actualization. Necessarily, this journey involves moral choices. The basic choice that Gawain must make relates back to his own interior conflict between flesh and spirit, which is the basis for his divided nature. I have equated Camelot with a sense of unreality. Within the Camelot setting then, it is evident that the Gawain who speaks up in front of the Green Knight is both an example of one aspect of cortaysye and of a misguided sense of perfection.¹ More simply, Gawain has a false image of himself. But in Camelot, this is in character. Gawain is never called upon to put his notion of perfection to the test while he is within the enchanted court. However, this situation changes dramatically once he bids farewell and sets out to keep his bargain with the Green

¹A.C. Spearing, Criticism and Medieval Poetry (N.Y.: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1972), p. 44. He suggests to the contrary that "The actual content of the speech . . . is supremely 'cortays'; but Gawain's 'cortaysye' is expressed most fully in the way in which he says what he says." His manner of speech, Spearing notes, is the height of cortaysye --that is he begs to take Arthur's place by deferring first to Arthur, then to Guenivere, and finally to the whole court by giving no offence to anyone.
Knight. Appropriately, the landscape also changes. Now Gawain is thrust into the density of the Whirral:

So mony meruayl bi mount per pe mon fyndeʒ,
Hit were to tore for to telle of pe tenbe dole.
Sumwhyle wyth wormeʒ he werreʒ, and with wolues als,
Sumwhyle wyth wodwos, pat woned in pe knarreʒ... . . .
For werre wrathed hym not so much, pat wynter was wors. . . .

(718 . . . 26)

It is in the midst of this realistic landscape that Bercilak's castle suddenly appears, in a Camelot-like cloud of enchantment. And while indeed there is a good deal of magic going on at Hautdesert, the "tricks" which are employed result in self-revelation. That is, they permit Gawain to see himself as he really is. From the first, the test for Gawain is one which tries clannesse.2 Notice, for example, his first meeting with Lady Bercilak.

When Gawayn glyʒt on pat gay, pat graciously loked,
Wyth leue last of pe lorde he went hem ajaynes;
p better he haylses, heldande ful lowe,
better louelcker he lappeʒ a lyttel in armes,
He kysses hir comlyly, and knytly he meleʒ.

(970 -4)

Gawain's attraction to Lady Bercilak reminds the reader of his reputation for cortaysia. Obviously, if his chastity were of an ascetic nature her charms would hold no allure

2Spearing, p. 39. He suggests that Gawain’s adventure becomes a moral struggle which sets cortaysia against clannesse. This is accurate as it is obvious that Gawain is drawn to the material aspects of cortaysia; otherwise it would not be so physically difficult for him to remain true to clannesse.
for him. However, because they are mutually attracted to each other, and this is evident on Gawain's first evening at the castle when, during supper, they take "comfort of her [their] compaynye" (1011), his self-imposed _clannesse_ becomes the object of the first test. While Gawain may not be conscious of it as yet, the reader is certainly aware of a blush which begins to color Gawain's lily-white countenance.

The poet tells us that _clannesse_ and _cortaysye_ are two of the virtues symbolized by the pentangle, and likewise, they are personified in Gawain. As I have suggested, _clannesse_ and _cortaysye_, as aspects of _caritas_ and _cupiditas_, present a dilemma for man. Their pairing as two of the points of the pentangle tells something of the conflict that Gawain will soon have to face.

When on the first morning of the temptations, the Lady steals into Gawain's bedroom, the conflict begins to consciously impress itself upon him. Prior to this incident, her physical beauty has already moved him for he thinks her "wener pen Wenore," (945). And once she has seated herself on Gawain's bed, she literally makes him a captive of her charms. Moreover, he hardly resists when she,

\[ ... \text{cachey hym in arme}, \]
\[ \text{Loute} \text{lych adoun and pe leude kysse} ... \]
\[ (1305-6) \]

While Gawain does not succumb to her seduction physically, and thus technically he remains true to _clannesse_, he is
clearly tempted. This is certainly evident in the kisses
and in the instances where they casually brush against one
another. It is also evident by the third morning, when
upon seeing the Lady, "Wiȝt wallande joye warmed his hert "
(1762).

Throughout the temptations, the Lady constantly reminds
Gawain of his reputation for cortaysye. When he does not
respond to her seduction, she baits him:

"Now he ā pat spedeȝ vche spech þis disport ā elde yow!
Bot ā pat āJe be Gawan, hit gotȝ in mynde. . . ."

(1292-3)

His reputation and likewise his vanity thus challenged,
Gawain immediately shows another side of himself with the
retort:

"Querfore?" quop āJe freke, and freschly he askeȝ,
Ferde lest he hade fayled in fourme of his casteȝs.

(1294-5)

It is not long before Gawain becomes aware of the
conflicting demands of clannesse and cortaysye. When the
Lady sits beside him for supper on the second evening, she
makes subtle advances to him. Suddenly Gawain is confused
and angry with himself because he does not understand the
feelings going on within him. He is obviously taken with
her beauty, but at the same time he is angry for finding

3Spearing, p. 192. He notes that "there is a persistent
contrast between the outward clannesse of their conversation
and the actual suggestiveness of the Lady's behaviour, a
contrast which offers a far more seductive temptation than
greater openness and outspokenness could do."
himself so inclined. His confusion lies in the fact that he is just awakening to a force within himself with which he had not previously reckoned. This prompts a side of him, which he has never seen before, to respond to Lady Bercilak in a manner which, in his mind, confuses his image of himself:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{And euer cure luflych kny}\mathbf{\ddot{\text{j}}}t \text{ be lady bisyde.} \\
\text{Such semblaunt to } \text{ }\mathbf{\ddot{\text{j}}}t \text{ segge semly ho made} \\
\text{Wyth stille stollen countenaunce, } \text{ }\mathbf{\ddot{\text{j}}}t \text{ stalworth} \\
\text{to plese,} \\
\text{ }\mathbf{\ddot{\text{j}}}t \text{ al forwondered wat } \text{ }\mathbf{\ddot{\text{j}}}t \text{ wyje, and wroth with himseluen.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(1657-60)

Already, Gawain has changed considerably from his first appearance at Camelot. Earlier, he would not have considered the possibility of finding himself lacking in any of the pentangle virtues. When he learns that it is a struggle for him to remain true to clannesse, he is angry with himself for falling short of his expectations.

It is unimportant whether or not Gawain actually gives in to the temptations of the flesh. What matters for the purposes of Gawain's self-actualization process is that the conflict or the problem of the physical versus the spiritual has arisen. Were he the knight of clannesse whom the pentangle supposedly describes, there would have been no temptation because he would not have responded to it. That he does respond only proves to him and to the reader that he is, after all, first a man and second, a Christian knight.

As a human being he is naturally attracted to the lure of
the flesh. And it is for being human that Gawain is both angry and disappointed with himself.

Perhaps this is the reason that Gawain does not immediately recognize that his acceptance of the girdle is a gesture of disloyalty toward his host. Since he does not give in to the lure of the flesh (he has even denied the Lady a love-token, excusing himself on the grounds "hat mislyke me, ladé, for luf at his tyme/ Iche tolke mon do as he is tas, to non ille/ ne pine" (1810-12), he justifies his acceptance of the girdle as an act of cortaysye to the Lady whom he wishes not to offend by refusal, when actually he takes it as a safeguard to protect his own life. It is clear that in this situation, Gawain holds his life more dearly than he holds his loyalty to his host.

There is no question that Gawain's dilemma is a difficult one. On the one hand, his cortaysye demands that he not give offence to the Lady. Moreover, since he has not been able to please her by giving her a token of his own, he can hardly reject the one which she offers to him:

'Nay, hende of hye honours,'
Quo hat lufsum vnder lyne,
'I had no t of youre',
yet schulde je haue of myne.'

(1813-16)

On the other hand, the Lady asks Gawain not to reveal the gift to Bercilak:

And bisaut hym, for hir sake, disceuer hit neuer,
Bot to lelly fro hir lorde. . . .

(1862-3)
This places Gawain in an impossible position as he has given his word to exchange winnings each day with Bercilak. Added to the already complicated situation is the fact that the girdle is a love token, even though Gawain accepts it for its magical rather than amorous qualities. This naturally casts a shadow over *clannesse*, even though Gawain has not physically indulged himself. He has indulged his imagination, and even though the girdle is accepted for its magical powers, it is physically beautiful, it does belong to the Lady whose charms have already enticed his imagination, and finally, it is a traditional love-token. Thus, *clannesse* becomes slightly ambiguous here. Gawain is confronted with a situation which requires not only discretion, but also a discerning judgment.

The judgment is the more difficult because Gawain has a reputation, within the context of the poem, for both *clannesse* and *cortaysye*. Yet ultimately his decision is made with regard to neither, for it is his desire to save his own life—*couetyse*—which takes precedence. 4 Gawain is only mildly interested in the girdle until he is told of

4 Regarding *couetyse*, St. Thomas Aquinas makes the following remark in *Summa Theologiae*: "In one sense, it is an excessive desire for riches. . . . In another sense, it means an excessive desire for any temporal goods whatsoever. And so it is a type of all sins for in every sin there is an excessive turning toward a mutable good. . . . And thus they say that covetousness is the root of all sin. . . ." Quoted by David Farley Hills, "Gawain's Fault in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in *Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Donald R. Howard and Christian Zacher (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 314-15.
its magical properties. It is his inclination toward couetyse which prompts him to desert the ideal of cortaysye which he owed to Bercilak, and furthermore, it is couetyse which makes a mockery of clannesse. Gawain has taken a token, commonly known as a love-token, for love of himself. He has sinned against clannesse first in thought by his attraction to the Lady, and second in action by accepting the love-token for the express love of his own life.

Furthermore, Gawain is consciously aware of his disloyalty; otherwise he would not have taken leave of his host the night before his departure, but would have waited until the next morning. But since he will wear the sign of his betrayal—the green girdle—on the morning of his departure, he would not wish to meet Bercilak on that occasion:

\begin{verbatim}
Jet laft he not þe lace, þe ladieʒ gifte,  
Pat forgat not Gawayn for gode of hymseluen.  
Bi he hade belted þe bronde vpon his balʒe hauncheʒ,  
Þenn dressed he his drurye double hym aboute,  
Swyþe sweþed vmbe his swange swetely þat knyʒt  
Þe gordel of þe grene silke, þat gay wel bisemed,  
Vpon þat ryol red cloþe þat ryche watʒ to schewe.  
\end{verbatim}

(2030-36)

And even though Gawain does keep his appointment with the Green Knight, his decision is somewhat less than admirable in view of what has transpired. When the guide advises him that no one would be the wiser if he chose to turn back, Gawain insists on keeping his bargain. Under the circumstances, this is not so commendable.
It is evident that Gawain is aware of his actions, although his awareness becomes the more pointed as his situation increases in complexity. However, it is not until the Green Knight reveals his true identity that Gawain is made to answer for his actions. Moreover, his immediate reaction, once exposed, is to blame someone else. The fault, he says, lies with the female sex:

'And purȝ wyles of wymmen be wonen to sorȝe,
For so watȝ Adam in erde with one bygyled! . . .'  

(2415-16)

He does, however, acknowledge his own moral failure,

'Now I am fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer
Of trecherye and vntrawpe: bope bityde sorȝe
and care!'  

(2382-3)

which he later associates with a sin against clanness, and thus vows to wear the girdle evermore, "in synge of my surfet" (2433) and as a safeguard against pride.

When Gawain returns to Camelot and relates the story of his misadventure, the others respond to it humorously and vow to wear a green baldric as a sign of honor. Typically, Arthur's court evinces complete moral ignorance. Furthermore, the contrast between the world to which Gawain has returned and the world which he has just left symbolizes the change that has occurred in Gawain himself. He has gone from the ignorant naïveté of Camelot to the reality of the Green Chapel. When he returns to Camelot, he can no longer identify with its lack of understanding. It has not
changed, but Gawain has. For Gawain the girdle signifies his newly discovered awareness of his human frailties. For those at Camelot, the girdle is an ornament of honor. So although Gawain goes back to Camelot, he no longer "belongs" there in the sense that he once did. His journey into himself has made him a better man, even for his imperfection. Moreover, it is in coming to terms with his weakness that he comes closer to the ideal of perfection and puts away his false pride. Imperfection has taught him that true perfection is not within man's grasp. It is only in the striving toward an unreachable ideal that, as Christian man, he can become not Christ, but Christ-like.
CHAPTER III

Structure and Symbolism

I have said that Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is composed of two structural frames. The outer one is called the game and the inner one is called the journey. A complete recognition of the outer frame is necessary to insure the reader's understanding of the poem. That is, because Sir Gawain is first and finally a game, the inner frame is kept from becoming too somber and serious. Moreover, in a game, nothing is exactly what it appears to be. Life and death are treated with a certain amount of levity. While there is certainly a strong seriousness present, it is more a matter of degree than of kind. The outer frame prevents the tale from becoming morose and overly didactic. Dying in the poem is understood as symbolic death. This notion is far deeper and more profound than the idea of physical death. The Green Knight's decapitation, while initially terrible, is finally rather ludicrous. But when Gawain beholds the Green Chapel, his identification of it as a place of the devil figuratively connotes a far more terrifying death which is not physical but spiritual.

Now I fele hit is be fende, in my fyue wytte, pat hat stoken me pis steuen to strye me here.

(2193-94)
Thus, dying in the poem refers to a symbolic dying of the self to find the self.

So the game is not really a game at all. Ironically, it becomes a kind of ruse at the end, which again, is not quite a ruse at all, but something much more profound and serious. Thus, in the world of Sir Gawain nothing is quite what it appears to be. There is always a qualification, always another side to the story. This is true of Gawain and likewise of his pentangle emblem. The relationship between the two has been established as an intimate one. Symbolically, the pentangle is representative of Gawain's actions. As he becomes more aware of his true nature, he recognizes the duality within him, which is apparent in the form of a conflict between spirit and flesh. This same conflict is perceptible symbolically and structurally in the poem. Of the symbolic motifs, the Gawain-pentangle is the central one. This is so because the basis for man's duality is best seen in man himself and in the pentangle due to its assignment to Gawain as an emblem--a sign of his nature.

Through symbol on the one hand and structure on the other, the poem dramatizes Gawain's journey and the choices he must make enroute. The pentangle, as a symbol of Gawain,

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1 Howard, Three Temptations, p. 173, notes that in the Middle Ages "a symbol could signify two opposing concepts, one good and one evil: a lion might stand for Christ or Satan, depending upon context."
is logically the central symbolic motif and as such, it initiates the symbolic drama. Since the poem accepts the divided nature of fallen man, it can structurally be divided into two sequences of opposing events—opposing because at base the poem speaks about the basic opposition in man—between flesh and spirit. Two symbolic motifs, suggested by different aspects of the Gawain-pentangle metaphor, dominate the opposing parts of the action. The shield, symbolizing moral perfection, governs Fitts II and III and influences all of the events in that first sequence. The girdle, symbolizing moral failure, governs Fitt IV, and influences all of the events in that second sequence.

The two sequences illustrate the conflict which is implicit in the Gawain-pentangle motif. The ambiguous pentangle functions according to which influence is dominant at an appointed time, and Gawain’s actions reflect this. The shield and the girdle each reinforce a different aspect of the central conflict as understood in the


3 For the purposes of this study, Fitt I will function as a prologue—it will provide the background for the tale and set the ground work for the oppositions in the poem. I will call it the challenge episode.
Gawain-pentangle metaphor; the shield reminds us of spirituality while the girdle calls to mind the things of the flesh. This brings to mind the underlying conflict between caritas and cupiditas.

The shield and the girdle are symbolic of Gawain’s moral dilemma. In addition, the poet’s use of the two separate pentangle emblems symbolically illustrates the opposing sides of the choices which Gawain is offered. Structurally, the use of the two pentangles is part of the poem's symmetrical design. Furthermore, the position of the pentangle is reversed during the course of the adventure. While Gawain is under the influence of the Virgin-shield, the pentangle is clearly visible, suggesting his moral innocence. However, once he is under the influence of the girdle, the pentangle becomes obscured by that magic token, suggesting Gawain’s moral failure. This reversed position of the pentangle extends the symmetry of the poem.

The shield evokes the chivalric ideal. As a wordly object, it reminds the knight of his duty to his lord. But

Howard, pp. 50-1, has observed that the shield and the girdle are juxtaposed in such a way as to present two contrasting types of worldliness: "The girdle an illicit and self-centered means of holding on to life: the shield an allowable, self-abnegating use of the world’s goods in the service of the highest Christian ideals," in "Structure and Symmetry."

Howard, p. 46, notes that: "As a part of the knight’s armour, it is not surprising that it [the shield] has symbolic meaning, for a knight’s garments and gear, like a priest’s vestments, were often given symbolic values," in "Structure and Symmetry."
since Gawain's shield also carries on it the portrait of Mary, it serves to remind him of his duty to God. Symbolically, this conflict is represented by the pentangle which appears on the outside of the shield. Gawain is torn between two masters; similarly, the pentangle is composed of two intersecting sides. However, since the pentangle-shield is governed by the image of the Virgin, it becomes a spiritual symbol: it denotes a soldier of Christ, and it serves as a devotional reminder to the knight and to the world. The shield, then, functions in a dual sense: first to remind the reader that Gawain is Mary's knight, so long as he is under its influence; and second, to make the reader aware that with its pentangle emblem, it represents the spiritual aspect of Gawain's nature, his clannesse.

Just as the shield is symbolic of Gawain's knightly virtue, the girdle is symbolic of his human weakness. Like the shield, the girdle is a worldly object. However, unlike the shield, it connotes vanity and self-worship rather than faith in God, and thus it represents an aspect

6Robert Holkot, a contemporary of the Gawain-poet, makes the following observation regarding the nature of the shield in his commentary on wisdom: "Our shield is our faith. . . . In the history of Britain it is written that King Arthur had a picture of the glorious Virgin painted on the inside of his shield, and that whenever he was weary in battle he looked at it and recovered his hopes and strength. . . ." Quoted by Green, p. 182.

7Howard, "Structure and Symmetry," p. 48, makes a similar observation.
of *cortaysye* suggested by Gawain's material nature.\(^8\)

By the end of the poem, Gawain bears two emblems: the girdle, symbolic of his human frailty, and the Virgin-shield, symbolic of his chivalric virtue. Both emblems are worn with a separate pentangle, and together they make up the whole pentangle-nature. Separately, the shield and the girdle only represent one aspect of it. But it is in their union that the Gawain-pentangle is completed, just as it is in Gawain's awareness of the union of spirit and flesh within him that he is completed and brought close to perfection.

Taken individually, however, the one symbol is set against the other. Likewise, the sequence of events governed by the shield is in direct opposition to the sequence of events governed by the girdle. The following diagram illustrates the structural divisions and how they

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\(^8\)A. Kent Hieatt, "Sir Gawain: Pentangle, Luf-Lace, Numerical Structure," *Papers on Language and Literature*, 4 (1972) p.341, has said that the girdle represents evil. He bases this on the meaning of the word "lace" found in the OED: "a net, noose, snare" which corresponds to OF "laz" and Italian "laccio," but originating from the Latin "laqueus," of which the principle meaning is "noose." Hieatt observes: "Typically a personified principle or divinity spreads a lace to catch the unsuspecting." Commonly the word suggested the idea of a "noose" or a "snare"--a device in which one is entrapped. Applied to Gawain's circumstances this notion points to the temptation scenes during which he is almost, and then finally, entrapped by his desire for self-preservation--a reference to his entrapment by the material aspect suggested by *cupiditas*.
are governed by the symbolic motifs.9

GAWAIN-PENTANGLE

1st sequence - SHIELD 2nd sequence - GIRDLE
Fitts II and III Fitt IV
(Setting out from Camelot) (Setting out from Hautdesert)

1. Mass and the arming of the knight—description of the shield.
2. Journey to Bercilak's castle.
3. Description of the castle.
4. Three temptations, three days of the hunt.
5. Confession to the priest.

1. No Mass, but arming of the knight—description of the girdle.
2. Journey to the Green Chapel.
3. Description of the Green Chapel.
4. Three strokes of the ax.
5. Confession to the Green Knight.

SHIELD worn by Gawain ever after GIRDLE

GAWAIN-PENTANGLE

In both sequences of the poem, the hero sets out from a castle. In the first sequence, governed by the Virgin-shield, appropriately, Gawain sets out from Arthur's court. In the second sequence, governed by the girdle, again appropriately, he sets out from Bercilak's castle. In the first sequence a Mass is offered and there is an elaborate description of the arming of the knight. In the second sequence, however, there is no Mass offered, which is curious since the day is a "holy day" and the faithful

9This diagram has been suggested by Howard, "Structure and Symmetry," p. 51, though with a different interpretation and emphasis.
are required under pain of mortal sin to attend Mass; but there is an elaborate description of the arming of the knight. That there is no Mass offered in the second sequence is also appropriate since now Gawain has fallen under the baser influence of the girdle. In both sequences, Gawain undertakes a journey. Traditionally, the journey has been understood in terms of a "pilgrimage," a journey of the soul, a holy endeavor whereby, through prayer and dedication, the pilgrims would receive the gift of sanctifying grace at the journey's end.\(^{10}\) The concept of sanctifying grace is likewise an interesting one because in Christian doctrine it is linked with the waters of baptism, the ultimate cleanser of the soul, which renders man pure and totally free of iniquity, mortal and venial.

This relates back to Gawain in a somewhat ironic sense. His first journey is to Bercilak's castle after he has been "shriven" at Arthur's court. Thus he is in the state of sanctifying grace. In the second journey, where there is the curious absence of the Mass, Gawain seeks out the priest to be confessed:

\begin{quote}
Sy\pen, cheeuely to \textit{pe} chapel choses he \textit{pe} waye, Preuely aproched to a prest, and prayed hym \textit{bere} Dat he wolde lyfte his lyf and lern hym better How his sawle schulde be saued when he schuld seye hel\pen.
\end{quote}

\(^{10}\) In \textit{Canterbury Tales}, Chaucer uses the frame of the journey.
There is no reason to believe that Gawain confesses his acceptance of the girdle. But even if he has done so, since he does not lay it aside but wears it anyway, his confession is invalid; thus he is not in the state of grace, but still under the influence of the girdle.\textsuperscript{11}

In the second sequence of action, Gawain's journey has not brought him the respite which followed the first journey, but rather it has brought him to the chaos of the Green Chapel, supposedly the place where he will find not respite, but death. In both sequences, following the journey there is a description of the final destination.

In the first sequence, Gawain prays to Mary:

'I beseche pe, lorde,
And Mary, pat is myldest moder so dere,
Of sum herber he\textsuperscript{3}ley I my\textsuperscript{3}t here masse,
Ande pe matyne\textsuperscript{3} to-morne, mekely I ask,
And pe\textsuperscript{3}erto prestly I pray my pater and aue
and crede.'

\textsuperscript{(754-8)}

\textsuperscript{11}J.A. Burrow, "The Two Confession Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in Sir Gawain and Pearl, ed. Robert J. Blanch (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), p. 125, suggests that Gawain's confession is invalid because he neither makes restitution nor resolves to sin no more. Moreover, he says that the medieval audience was familiar enough with the penitential rite to know that absolution depended upon the right disposition of the penitent.
Immediately following, he crosses himself three times and Bercilak's castle miraculously appears.

A castel þe comlokest þat euer knyþt aþte,
Pyched on a prayere, a park al aboute,
With a pyked palays pyned ful þik,
Þat vmbeteþe mony tre mo þen two myle.
Þat holde on þat on syde þe hapel auysed,
As hit schemered and schon þurþ þe schyre okeþ.

In the second sequence, there is a description of the odious mound that is the Green Chapel. This time, however, Gawain does not utter a prayer since he is under the influence of the girdle.

'Now iwyse,' quop Wowayn, 'wysty is here;
Þis oriþore is vgly, with erbeþ ouergrown;
Wel bisemeþ þe wyþe wruxled in grene
Dele here his deuocioun on þe deuëþ wyse.'

In the first sequence of action, there are two sets of parallel events: the three temptations which are parallel to the three days of the hunt. These, in turn, are parallel to the three strokes of the ax in the second sequence of action. Just as Bercilak encounters the animals in the hunt, Gawain encounters the animal nature in himself. These events are parallel to the three strokes of the ax in the second sequence of action. For on the first two days, Gawain has become aware of and has conquered some undesirable traits in himself; therefore, the ax does not touch his flesh. It is only for the third day's choice (the acceptance of the girdle) to give in to temptation rather than to conquer it
that Gawain receives the nick on the neck, a reminder of the unworthy sport of the day.  

Finally, in the first sequence of action, the shield influence wanes as Gawain makes his false confession to the priest. This, in turn, is contrasted to Gawain's true confession to the Green Knight, after his fault has been openly revealed to him. Gawain's return to Camelot sharply contrasts his setting out from Arthur's court. Initially, he leaves with a false sense of his own worth; but finally, he returns wearing the baldric of his fault, symbolizing his awareness of himself as a human being with limitations and subject to potential failure. Appropriately, the poem ends with the fall of Troy, complementing not only the symmetrical design of the work, but also symbolizing the transitoriness of the human order and the cycle of ruin which finally brings about restoration:

Mony auntegre3 here-biforne  
Haf fallen suche er pis.  
Now þat bere þe croun of þorne.  
He bryng vus to his blysse! AMEN.

(2527-30)

Structurally, then, the events in the poem correspond to the self-actualization process which is taking place in Gawain. That is, just as he is torn between oppositions within himself, so too the sequences in the poem contain

12 This corresponds to Bercilak's hunt of the fox, considered a base and verminous animal in the Middle Ages.
opposing events. Within the structural division, the symbolic motifs function in a similar fashion.

The two separate pentangles are representative of this. While Gawain bears the pentangle-shield, which is governed by the portrait of the Virgin, both he and his pentangle emblem are drawn to uphold clannesse. Even as Gawain approaches Bercilak's castle he is true to clannesse. Like a holy pilgrim, he comes through sufferings and hardships enroute.

\[\text{Ner slayn wyth } \text{pe slete he sleped in yrnes} \]
\[\text{Mo nyȝte } \text{pen innoghe in naked rokke,} \]
\[\text{Per as claterande fro } \text{pe crest } \text{pe colde borne renneg,} \]
\[\text{And henged heȝe over his hede in hard iisse-ikkles.} \]
\[\text{Bus in peryl and Payne and plytes ful harde} \]
\[\text{Bi contray cayre } \text{pis knyȝt, tyl Krystmasse euen,} \]
\[\text{al one. . . .} \]

(729-35)

Finally, Bercilak's castle appears, "As hit schemered and schon jyr } \text{pe schyre okeȝ . . . "}(772).

Gawain remains faithful to clannesse even when he first beholds the Lady, although his attraction to her is evident. Immediately the tone begins to change and there is a foreshadowing of the usurpation of the Virgin-shield influence by the influence of the girdle, represented by the anti-virgin image in Lady Bercilak.

Although Lady Bercilak is not in herself evil, she is still an anti-type of the Virgin because she is the instrument or the mirror of the "dark" power within Gawain. Her relationship to the "dark" powers is suggested in the scene
where she is led from the chapel by a matron as old and ugly as she is young and beautiful: 13

\[ \text{An oper lady hir lad bi } \text{be lyft honde,} \\
\text{Dat wat} \gamma \text{ alder pen ho, an auncian hit semed . . .} \\
\text{Bot vnlyke on to loke } \text{po ladyes were,} \\
\text{For if } \text{be jonge wat} \gamma \text{ jep, golge wat} \gamma \text{ pat oper . . .} \]

(947-51)

The hag is really the witch, Morgan le Fay, we later learn, who has been the perpetrator of the whole adventure. The witch is too grotesque to be an aesthetically acceptable anti-type of the Virgin. But Lady Bercilak, on the other hand, is lovelier than Guenivere. The Lady’s relationship to the witch suggests that she will influence the girdle symbol even as the Virgin influences the shield. Moreover, Lady Bercilak’s relationship to Morgan illustrates another important point, namely, the duality of evil: sin too is alluring, often more so than goodness. 14

Even though the Lady is more alluring than Guenivere, Gawain rejects the seduction of the world and clings to the Virgin-shield influence. He successfully withstands the three temptations of the flesh, owing again to the Virgin-shield influence, for the poet says:

13 The juxtaposition of the old woman with the young one may be no more than a statement of the natural order of things; namely, that all beauty decays. The physical world is transitory, as suggested in the description of the fall of Troy.

14 St. Thomas Aquinas states in Summa Theologae (I q. 39, art. 8), that one of the three conditions for beauty is integrity or perfection. Thus, that which is broken or injured or incomplete is ugly. "Beauty," The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 1967 ed.
Although Gawain does not actually sin against clannesse, his fear for his life makes him guilty, finally, of couetyse. Instead of entrusting himself to Mary and the influence of the Virgin-shield, he chooses safety in the acceptance of an object of magic—the girdle. When Gawain goes to confession, that he does not lay aside the girdle only proves that, symbolically, the pentangle has come under another influence. Presented with a choice between loyalty on the one hand and safety on the other, he chooses safety, and thus he is found lacking in both clannesse and cortaysye.

Logically, the next set of parallel events occurs in the second sequence of action governed by the girdle motif. Again, as in the first sequence, there is a description of the arming of the knight. This time, however, the poet does not mention the shield—for Gawain has symbolically put aside this pentangle by choosing to accept the girdle. Therefore, there is a description of the girdle which contrasts with the description of the shield in the first sequence.

While pe wlonkest wedes he warp on hymseluen—
His cote wyth pe conysaunce of pe clere werke
ej
Ennurned vpon veluet, vertuus stone,
Aboute beten and bounden, enbrauded seme,
And fayre furred withinne wyth fayre pelures—
Yet laft he not pe lace, pe ladies gifte,
Pat forgat not Gawayn for gode of hymseluen.
Bi he hade belted pe bronde vpon his balpe haunche,
Penn dressed he his drurye double hum aboute,
Swype swepled vmbe his swange swetely pat knyj
Just as the Lady influences Gawain, so too, the girdle influences the pentangle. As the pentangle-shield is emblematic of Gawain's knightly virtue, the pentangle-girdle is emblematic of his fault. Just as the pentangle was superimposed over the Virgin-shield, so too is the girdle superimposed over the pentangle on Gawain's coat of arms.

In the elaborate and detailed lines noted above (2025-36), the Gawain-poet leaves little doubt about the meaning of his choice ("Swyp e swep led vmbe his swange swetely at knyt / pe gordel of pe grene silke, pat gay wel bisemed"), the choice, that is, to save himself, thereby ignoring the demands of cortaysye.

The poet reminds us that Gawain has accepted the girdle not for the richness of its beauty or as a love-token even though it is just that, but rather, as a magical token to save his life:

Bot wered not his ilk wyse for wele his gordel, For pryde of pe pendaunte, pa polyst paay were, And pa pe glyterande golde glent vpon ende, Bot for to sauuen hymself, when suffer hym byhoued, To hyde bale withoute dabate of bronde hym to were oher knyffe.

(2037-42)

Like the shield, the girdle is a worldly object. But unlike the shield, it is used for a worldly end. It does not, as does the Virgin-shield, remind Gawain of his struggle to overcome the temptation of the flesh; rather,
it reminds Gawain of his human frailty.

Appropriately, on the journey to the Green Chapel there is no intercession of the Virgin; no glorious castle appears in the mists, but instead, an image in complete contrast to the description of the castle, which symbolizes the choice which Gawain has made:

\[ A \text{ bal} \text{J ber} \text{J bi a bonke pe brymme bysyde,} \]
\[ \text{Bi a for} \text{J of a flode } \text{at ferked pare;} \]
\[ \text{pe borne blubred perinne as hit boyled hade.} \]

(2172-74)

All of the events in this sequence of action are in complete opposition to their parallels in the first sequence, again reflecting the choice which Gawain has made. Similarly, this choice is reflected in the pentangle which now figuratively "wears" the green girdle, even as Gawain does.

I have suggested that the shield represents Gawain's choice to uphold the virtue of clannesse. The girdle, on the other hand, represents his human weakness—his choice to save his own life. Each symbol represents an aspect of Gawain's human nature, and he is not a whole man until he realizes that his human disposition tends toward both. Thus, when armed with the girdle, he also picks up the shield. Symbolically, Gawain has pulled together the opposing aspects of his human nature. Both pentangles lead back to each other, and like their endeles knot, Gawain too is led back to himself in the new consciousness he has gained of himself. Through his failure he learns that imperfection is as much a part of human nature as is
the striving toward that perfection. Where previously he had only half a vision of reality, in the end, armed with the shield and the girdle, brought together in the pentangle emblem, his vision of life and of himself has broadened to include his humanity.

Unlike the final portrait of the knight, the Gawain of the opening lines of the poem is reputedly the very mirror of Christian chivalry—a flawless reflector of the ideals of Camelot. The balance between the man and the ideal is supposedly so perfect that both can be symbolized by one geometrical figure. But just as the poem contains two pentangle emblems, so too is Gawain torn between two conflicting desires. And it is in his acceptance of both as integral parts of his nature that he becomes a complete man. Furthermore, it is in accepting imperfection as a part of his nature that Gawain, like the endeles knot, comes back to himself to find the perfection inherent in self-awareness.

Appropriately, the poem ends with the fall of Troy. Appropriately, too, by the end of the poem, Gawain can attest to the vanity of all mortal kingdoms. And even as the vanquished city of Troy lay in ashes, so too does Gawain's "old world" with its misconceptions and false aspirations. He returns to Camelot a new man to build a new world on the ashes of the old.
APPENDIX

TROY

GAME

(laughter of Camelot)

THE JOURNEY

Gawain
  └── Clannesse
      └── Cortaysye

  Pentangle/Shield
      └── Virgin/Shield
          └── Lady/Girdle

Spirit vs. Flesh
  └── Green Chapel
      └── trickery
          └── penance
              └── consciousness
                  └── contrition
                      └── absolution
                          └── Gawain, Christian Knight

THE RETURN

(laughter of Camelot)

GAME

TROY

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