PARALLELS AND POLARITIES: DISCOVERING
THE DUALITIES IN 
SIR GAWAIN AND
THE GREEN KNIGHT

by
Carol Kamman

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the
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SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

Allen W. Greer
Thesis Advisor

Robert C. Collins

Mary Tucci

H D Pearce
Chairman, Department of English

Allen W. Greer
Dean, College of Humanities

Dean for Graduate Studies

June 12, 1987

Date
ABSTRACT

Author: Carol Kamman
Title: Parallels and Polarities: Discovering the Dualities in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
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Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is comprised of hundreds of parallels and polarities which balance, by reflection and contrast, all of its parts: plot structure, tone and style, words and sounds, characterization, settings, symbolism, purpose and meaning. Everywhere one looks, the dualities abound, one part of these pairs serving to illuminate, and at the same time, diminish the opposing part. What results is a tension between the serious and the comic; the poet puts us in a delightful game-like maze of misdirection to teach us that human nature is, at best, a compromise between the antithetical components of spirit and flesh.
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INTRODUCTION

The one overall feature of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (SGGK) that best reveals its total essence and reality is the striking balance of the poem's structure, the Pearl-poet's penchant for polarity. This symmetrical structure presupposes opposite sides; it creates, by its very nature, polarities which balance the poem and, at the same time, cause the resulting ambiguities. This duality has not gone unnoticed by the critics:

No one who reads SGGK fails to notice its elaborate, symmetrical structure. Everywhere in the poem is balance, contrast, and antithesis. (Howard, "Structure" 159)

There is something remarkably proportionable and almost mathematical in the way it all works out. ("SGGK" 43)

... at once more comic and more serious, more arcanely religious and more secular, more structured and yet more variegated in style and meaning. It is a more difficult poem for all these critical possibilities. (30)

Itself [the poem] something of a paradox, the style can best be defined as a study in antithesis; at its heart is the technique of juxtaposing—or combining—opposite and contrary moods, characters, settings, and actions. (Goldhurst 61)

SGGK builds upon a series of dualisms. (Bercovitch 30)

... the author of Sir Gawain proves himself realist enough to be able to present a complex
world where joy and sorrow, comedy and tragedy, entertainment and instruction may exist together.
(Soucy 166)

Situations are repeated, but with skillful, deliberate variety and contrast. (Loomis 539)

Many have noted the poet's fondness for symmetry, for balanced and ordered arrangements of scene and detail. (Bachman 511)

... this generalized opposition or polarity most informs the vision of the poem. (495)

... elaborate, symmetrical structure of the whole poem. ... (Foley 78)

In its broad outlines the entire poem is constructed on the same principle ... the juxtaposition of parallel, opposing elements. ...
(Benson 162-3)

What does pervade Sir Gawain is the subtle use of ambiguity. ... (Blanch 68)

It [the poem] is a combination of secularism and religion, of the marvelous and the real, of the subjective and the objective, of the decorative and the direct, of the vague and the clear, of courtesy and horror, of the elevated and the plain. (Bloomfield 17)

Although much of the critical focus of SGGK refers, in some way, to the polarities, dualities, ambiguities, parallels, comparisons, oppositions, contrasts, ironies--however we choose to call them--few, if any, have viewed the poem as a totality in regard to these elements. Most discussions of these intriguing and purposeful polarities have been piecemeal, with no attempt to suggest that the great number of these dualities alone is enough to support their being the central key to the poem. Therefore, I propose to identify the major dualities and to suggest ways
in which they express meaning and purpose. In identifying over one hundred polarities, it was necessary to develop a logical organizational pattern. I chose to arrange them under headings that represent critical components of a narrative poem: Plot Structure, Tone/Style, Lines/Words/Sounds, Characterization, Settings, Symbolism, Meaning/Purpose. Obviously, some overlapping is unavoidable. Structure is influenced by style, style by descriptive methods, description by word choice, and so on. All of these are influenced by theme and purpose and visa versa. In addition, the nature of the polarities themselves means that one part of the duality recalls the other, which may, in itself, be an element in another paired duality on another level or in another grouping. All this makes for the inherent ambiguity and the confusion and difficulty in any discussion of the many polarities in the poem. However, this is all a purposeful part of the delightful game, much like a miraculous maze of mirrors, that the Gawain-poet is playing with his readers, a game that ends with the ultimate irony of the poem. The perfectly symmetrical nature of the dualities are, in the final analysis, presented to explain the imperfect nature of the human condition. This may be the most important duality of all: that a poem so fully comprised of balanced polarities can teach us a lesson in moderation--that human nature is an imperfect blend of all these antithetical components.
SECTION I

PLOT STRUCTURE

The polarities in SGGK have their origins in the poet himself and also, no doubt, in the literary device called the formal paradox. The poet, who wrote in the dialect of the Northwest Midlands of the late fourteenth century, was both a pious, knowledgeable Christian and, in contrast, a zestful secularist familiar with courtly life and its pleasures and luxuries. It seems likely that these two sides of his experience and personality influenced the two-sided composition of SGGK. In addition, balanced opposition, in a technique called the formal paradox, is an important, conventional element in Middle English writing, having survived from the Old English principle of structural parallels and oppositions (Bachman 512; Gardner, Complete Works 28; Benson 163) and certainly helped to determine the dualistic nature of SGGK. The dualism of courtly love and sacred devotion in the Marian lyrics, the irreverent juxtaposition of the holy and the profane in early English drama, the pairing of contrasting stories in The Canterbury Tales (Knight's and Miller's, et al), and
the host of parallel yet opposing elements that characterize SGGK are commonplaces of medieval literature.

Another traditional characteristic of medieval tradition can be described as a fervent desire for unity and order (Coulton 153), and the most profound feeling for order in the Middle Ages was spatial (Brandt 33). An example of this interest in schematic balance of related opposites is the medieval ethical system which was thought of as a body of paired contrasting elements connected spatially on a continuum: for instance, humility, at one end, as a remedy for pride, on the other (34). Whenever a conceptual problem presented itself, a medieval thinker often drew a geometric figure or pattern to explain it. The Great Chain of Being, an established concept of the Renaissance, has its origins in the ancient and medieval need to spatially explain man's place in the universe. The chain links all creation in a hierarchy, with God at the top, inanimate objects at the bottom, and man in the middle. Since God has given man freedom of will, he is free to choose to realize his angelic nature by exercising his reason and rising in the chain or to follow his animal nature by following the pull of his base desires and falling lower on the chain (Partridge 101; Kernan 133).

That same need to spatially explain phenomena has led modern critics to explain the plot structure of SGGK by placing its events in a spatial schemata. A. C. Spearing
sees the Pearl-poet's plot as occupying a three-dimensional space (37). "The Gawain-poet ... goes much further than any English artist of the fourteenth century in opening up and entering into the spatial world of his work (37). . . . the characters and objects in his poems [are] set in motion through a space which the sense of motion makes real" (38), as when the Green Knight and Gawain assume their positions at the Green Chapel, one to raise his ax, the other to watch it coming down on him, his blood spurting onto the snow. This change in viewpoint, "presenting events now from one angle, now from another, now in panorama, now in close-up" (38), is an almost-cinematic technique that helps to support the ambiguous nature of the poem.

Jan Solomon believes the structure of the poem can "best be described as a set of concentric circles" (271). The story begins, typically, and ends, rather atypically (?) with an allusion to Brutus as ancestor of the Britons. This can be considered the most outward-lying of the circles. The second circle, or second and penultimate incidents, involves a festive gathering at the court of King Arthur. Working progressively inward the circles move thus: an explanation either of the rules of the beheading game or of the fabric of the plot, the blow with the green axe, the arming and journey of Gawain, parties at the Castle of Bercilak de Hautdesert, the hunt, and finally the bedroom scenes. The hunt and bedroom scenes are tripled, but the structure remains intact as each bedroom scene is surrounded by the two parts of the corresponding hunting scene with a party separating each group. The circles serve as a series of frames surrounding the moment when Gawain accepts the lace, for this is the climactic third of these interior scenes.
Dale B. J. Randall presents another interesting schematic graph of the opposing dual elements in *SGGK*. He also notes the poem's enveloping reference to the noble Trojan ancestry of the British people, their founder Brutus, and the reveling at Arthur's court. From Christmas and New Year's though the seasons to the holidays again, from Arthur's court to Hautdesert and the Green Chapel and back to Camelot, the story can be systematically balanced (162), as shown in Figure 1 (page 8).

Just as Spearing's three-dimensional explanation shows how this aspect can enhance the ambiguity of the poem, Solomon and Randall present visual representations that both demonstrate and illuminate its symmetrical structure. The separate elements of these spatial representations, as part of the parallel sequences, all have their own dualities. For example, both Arthur and Bertilak want holiday diversions; the resulting games—exchange of blows and exchange of winnings—structurally divide the poem and initiate the action at Camelot and Hautdesert. Denton Fox sees the second game as "a pale but exact reflection of the beheading game: in both cases there is an exchange, in both cases Gawain seems to be given the advantage, and in both cases he accepts out of courtesy" (11). On the surface, these games seem like part of the holiday festivities, but they also serve to test Gawain's virtues.
Figure 1
Randall's Schemata of Symmetrical Structure in SGGK

"Si\textit{pen pe sege and pe assaut} ..." \[l. 1\]

Frame Brutus
Arthur's court
Challenge made (New Year's Day)
Ride to seek chapel
Evening festivities
Hunt #1, pt. a
Giving of kiss
Hunt #1, pt. b
Payment of kiss
Evening festivities
Hunt #2, pt. a
Giving of 2 kisses
Hunt #2, pt. b
Payment of 2 kisses
Evening festivities
Hunt #3, pt. a
Giving of 3 kisses
Hunt #3, pt. b
Payment of 3 kisses
Evening festivities
Ride to seek chapel
Challenge fulfilled (New Year's Day)
Arthur's court
Frame Brutus
"After \textit{pe segge and pe asaute} ..." \[l. 2525\]
In connection with these games, there are two contracts to which, after repeating their terms, Gawain agrees. Michael M. Foley finds an important contrast in the degree of commitment to these agreements. Although both involve swearing an oath, the first is a solemn promise, the second a playful bargain which, if violated, would not mean rejection of serious Christian principles (75-6). The first agreement is assented to in an atmosphere of deadly earnest while the second is proposed almost as an afterthought amidst lighthearted, playful banter. From one point of view, Gawain's failure to keep this second bargain is a matter of cheating in a friendly "layk" or game. Although Bertilak does regard this as a fault, certainly he does not think Gawain has committed a mortal sin. He "lakked a lyttel" (l. 2366). But Gawain takes his failure much more seriously; "for care of by knokke cowardyse me taȝt" (l. 2379). David Farley Hills' view is that Gawain's sense of guilt is "in keeping with his moral scrupulousness" (130). But Richard Hamilton Green contends that those, like Gawain, who tend to believe in their own virtues can be overwhelmed by a shameful failure and over exaggerate its seriousness (92).

Other structural parallels and contrasts in the plot concern two elaborate arming scenes which precede Gawain's two journeys, a long one to Hautdesert and a short one to the Green Chapel. The journeys, in addition, have both
physical and spiritual dimensions as trek and quest. The armings parallel each other in their vivid descriptions of the gold, jewels, silks, and furs of Gawain's attire, but they end with descriptions of contrasting means of protection--one allowable, the other not. The first arming at Arthur's court concludes with a lengthy explanation of the pentangle shield, a symbol of Gawain's virtues. The second, at Bertilak's castle, concentrates on the green girdle, the emblem of his failure. Thus, donning the shield and the girdle initiate separate sequences, both structurally parallel and each demonstrating the basic conflict between the spirit and the flesh, between reason and emotion, between the civilized and primitive sides of the knight's nature.

Before both arming scenes, Gawain goes to mass and confession. The second confession has raised much discussion and many conflicting interpretations, but most critics see it within the context of structural parallels and oppositions. Some consider this confession (not admitting to taking the green girdle) a "false" one and note the ironic contrast between Gawain's false confession to a real priest and his later true confession to a false priest (the Green Knight). Others view the confession as merely incomplete and see an ironic contrast in the priest, who hears the offenses against the Christian code, and the
Green Knight, who hears the offenses against knighthood (Foley 78).

The sandwiching of the temptation scenes between halves of the hunting scenes is, no doubt, the best known example of structural parallels. This pattern recalls the alternation between court and country that begins with Gawain's departure from Camelot into the Wirral and continues with Hautdesert and the Green Chapel. The action-packed hunting scenes "both expose and make up for the essentially passive nature of the hero's own role in the poem" (Davenport 163). These outdoor scenes of few words and a great deal of motion reveal by contrast the witty word play of the languorous indoor scenes. Further, the animals Bertilak hunts possess those qualities (deer/avoidance, boar/confrontation, fox/deceit) that Gawain displays in the lady's bedroom (Bachman 502; Ingham and Barkley 384).

In the same way that the hunt scenes parallel the temptation scenes, the three exchanges of winnings parallel the three strokes of the Green Knight's ax at the Green Chapel. These blows, which Gawain thinks will mean his death, actually mark his rebirth and parallel a medieval knighting ceremony (Weiss, "Knighting Ceremony" 183). The accolade was usually bestowed with three sword strokes; the Green Knight uses three strokes of his ax. Dubbing gifts were often an article of knightly apparel; the Green Knight
returns the green baldric to Gawain. The ceremony became a Christian ritual and took place in a church or chapel; Gawain's induction takes place at the Green Chapel. Furthermore, it is significant that the Green Knight does not refer to Gawain by his title "Sir" (l. 2396) until he has been tested, has received the third stroke, and is found worthy of knighthood (184-86).

Even smaller elements within the poem are balanced structurally. An admonition ("Now penk wel, Sir Gawan . . ." [l. 487]) and its echo ("pen penkkez Gawan ful sone . . . [l. 534]) form an envelope around the traditional yet original stanzas on the passing of the seasons. These stanzas serve to quickly get us--and Gawain--through the year, but they also "interpose a check to overt action that joins and clashes with their inward speed to produce a restlessness which deepens our anxiety for the hero . . ." (Silverstein, "Art" 183) even though Gawain is not mentioned as the "mre mernes ful mrne" (l. 498).

The circular nature of the enveloping structure and the many parallels within it allow the Gawain-poet, by returning to and repeating numerous elements of his poem, to compare and/or contrast them in an ingenious complex of variations. In other words, each element of the symmetrical structure, being part of a pair, reflects the other half, but often that reflection is distorted by deliberate ambiguities embedded in the plot.⁵
SECTION II

TONE/STYLE

In the same way that the structure of SGGK underlines the plot, so do the mood and tone, "which are carefully balanced between suspense and humor" (Solomon 271). Sacvan Bercovitch draws a similar conclusion: the scenes counterbalance "blysse and blunder," festivity and trial, "each stage of which alternates a traditional romance episode with a humorous and realistic scene that implicitly undercuts its predecessor" (30). Next to exaggerated traditional romantic elements, the Gawain-poet moves in equally vigorous untraditional, unromantic material (Benson 297). In other words, the poet infuses his poem with enough comical elements to lessen the seriousness of his romance. Time after time, opposite suggestions concerning significance, that is, whether serious or comic, emerge from the same event or detail. For example, after the Green Knight leaves Camelot, head in hand, Arthur himself helps to send a mixed signal: he dismisses the gruesome decapitation as simply a playful interlude (l. 473). In another instance, also at the beginning of the tale, Arthur jokes "... heng vp pyn ax, pat hatz in-nogh hewen"
even as he knows Gawain's grim wanderings may well end in death. At the end, the court's lighthearted tolerance and easy forgiveness of Gawain's failure contrast sharply with the hero's own recriminations. The vivid, often brutal and bloody description of the hunts opposes but illuminates the sophisticated yet comical courtship scenes. Here, the poem's tone and style "... combine qualities of straightforward vigor with a suggestiveness and a subtle, almost elegant, lightness of touch" (Goldhurst 61). Jan Solomon recalls that "the serious and comic tones remain in equilibrium even at so crucial a moment as that of Gawain's first taste of humility and the consequent lessening of his pride" (272). In the middle of his self-recriminations, Gawain has some advice worthy of a flippant playboy: "... luf hom wel, and leue hem not ..." (l. 2421).

The play element that balances the serious moral and theological dimension of SGGK has its own dualistic nature. Robert G. Cook believes "play is both profound and childlike, both serious and fun" and finds it at all levels of the poem, "in its language and tone, in its conventions and customs, and in the games its people really play" (5). Robert J. Blanch agrees and cites Johan Huizinga's "Homo Ludens": A Study of the Play-Element in Culture. Huizinga claims that "play embraces the element of repetition [parallels], generates order [symmetry], and nourishes

The Pearl-poet combines two contrasting styles of narrative development, what the medieval rhetoricians called naturalis and artificialis (Benson 170). He uses the first with Gawain, and his story follows in natural, chronological order; the second is reserved for the Green Knight, who enters the plot in medias res. We must wait until the end to learn his real name and why he came to Camelot. This consistent use of natural order for Gawain and artful order for the Green Knight helps to focus on the familiarity of Gawain and the mystery of the Green Knight. Paradoxically, as Gawain's familiar role becomes less clear, the mystery surrounding the Green Knight's role becomes more clear.

These two types of narrative order also mean that there are two distinctly different points of view—the omniscient in the natural order and the limited in the artful (172). The Pearl-poet uses omniscient power to move Gawain through the Wirral by compressing events and omitting details. Conversely, he acts like an eyewitness in the limited point of view, detailing the events of the Green Knight's experiences. This alternation between points of view makes it possible to see the action from different perspectives in much the same way that the poet's cinematic movement around his plot does. It allows us to
make a distinction between the activity of the Green Knight and the passivity of Gawain, the wild actions of the churl versus the controlled reactions of the courtier. Even when Gawain is his most aggressive, vigorous self, he seems inactive compared to the Green Knight/Bertilak. The summary-like, omniscient point of view--"Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez . . . and etaynez, pat hym a-nelede" (ll. 720, 723)--leaves an impression of one who is often nature's victim. In contrast, the Green Knight/Bertilak seems to control nature as his decapitation and the eyewitness accounts of his hunting prowess clearly prove. Ironically, these contrasting points of view are sustained even when Gawain and the Green Knight perform the same act (198). When the Green Knight bends down to receive his blow, the limited viewpoint concentrates solely on his actions:

The grene knyjt vpon grounde grayly hym dresses,
A little lut with pe hede, pe lere he discourererez,
His longe louelych lokkez he layd ouer his croun,
Let pe naked nec to pe note schewe. (ll. 417-20)

When Gawain bows for his blow, his actions are the same, but the omniscient point of view stresses Gawain's emotions as much as his movements:

He lened with pe nek, and lutte,
And schewed pat schyre al bare,
And lette as he no3t dutte,
For drede he wolde not dare. (ll. 2255-58)
The result is a feeling that the Green Knight/Bertilak is active, and Gawain is passive.

Another stylistic technique that helps to contrast the Green Knight and Gawain centers around their modes of speech (Taylor 169). Gawain, the epitome of courtly sophistication, uses courteous, circuitous language, which is just the opposite of the Green Knight's blunt and natural style. Ironically, these contrasting modes of speech are just the reverse of the natural/artful styles of narrative development. Although Gawain's story follows a natural order, he uses the artificial language of the court; the Green Knight's story does not develop chronologically, but his style of speech is a natural one. A good example of these differing styles of speech is found in Gawain's failure and the way each one explains it. The Green Knight, simply and to the point, places the cause within Gawain himself: "Bot for ye lufed your lyf . . . " (l. 2368). Gawain, in contrast, swings between the extremes of shame and justification, citing a complex variety of external causes: "Gawain presents himself, in fairly rapid succession, as a perfect knight subverted to evil; the blameless victim of a scheming woman; a fallible human being prone to evil; and, finally, as a knight who has been tarnished by his dealings with the world " (Hollis 271).
Another good example of differing modes of speech occurs at the beginning of the poem when the Green Knight first enters Arthur's court. He quickly states his ostensible reason for being there: "... I craue in pis court a crystemas gomen..." (l. 283). Gawain, on the other hand, seems as concerned with courtesy ("Pat I wythoute vylanye myzt voyde pis table...") [l. 345]), respect ("To pe kyng he can enclyne...") [l. 340]), decorousness ("For me pynk hit not semly...") [l. 348]), and humility (I am pe wakkest...") [l. 354]) as he is with the game.

Being both a romance and an alliterative poem means SGGK may be somewhat ambiguous in terms of style and tone. The origins of romance as a literary genre are "inextricably linked with feudalism--particularly that variety established in France by the end of the tenth century" (Kreuzer L). SGGK owes a great deal to the French tradition for its sources and motifs, and "certainly in tone Sir Gawain is the most continental of English romances" (Benson 110). But SGGK owes its style to the alliterative tradition established in England. The Gawain-poet uses a conventional form and traditional sources and transforms them into a complex variation within the traditional framework. These "complicated literary relations," as Larry D. Benson calls them (110), only add to SGGK's dualistic nature and cause controlled confusion and considerable ambiguity. For example, the multiplicity of
suggested possibilities in the blending of irreconcilable myth figures gives the sense of mystery that surrounds the Green Knight (Davenport 156). Similarly, it is necessary to reconcile the Gawain of traditional chivalric romance with the Gawain of SGGK. This is a very different Gawain from the expected one famous for his lechery and treachery. His great quest arises out of an impetuous holiday game. The detailed descriptions of daring battles, usually the province of the hero, are reserved for the hunting scenes of the Green Knight. Gawain neither woos nor rescues fair maidens; in fact, he becomes the hunted and expends his energies, more mental than physical, in warding off the lady's attentions (Fox 5). Time and again, although the seriousness of Gawain's dangers are never forgotten, the comic elements serve to diminish his basic heroic nature. This balance of comic and serious tone and stylistic elements results in a more finely drawn Gawain, both hero and human being.

The Gawain-poet's knowledge of literary genres and how to play one type against another influences the style and adds to the poem's dualistic nature. Laura Hibbard Loomis points out that the poet calls his work a "laye" (l. 30), and Arthur compared the Green Knight's beheading to the playing of an interlude (l. 472) (538). Several critics (Benson 50; Levine 66, 71; Gardner, "Review" 309) have felt "the temptation story shows romance at its nearest to
fabliau" (Davenport 139). And, of course, SGGK is full of conventional romance motifs: a challenge, an arming, a quest, a stay at a strange castle, the climax of a single combat (138).
SECTION III

LINES/WORDS/SOUNDS

Also contributing to the dualistic nature of the poem are the complex formulaic alliterative patterns which, by their very nature, demand repetition and variation of parallel constructions of form and content (Benson 113). To neutralize the inordinate regularity such parallels can impose on a line of poetry, the Pearl-poet exploits another propensity of the alliterative style: demonstrating contrasts. "The tension between the movement toward parallelisms and that toward contrasts lends the alliterative line much of its strength (148). W. A. Davenport points to polarities in the structure of each stanza, which is comprised of an unfixed number of alliterative long lines followed by a bob-and-wheel of five short lines. This structure

... combines a sense of pattern with an impression of freedom and flexibility, since it is able to expand or contract according to the needs of the moment. The alternation of long and short lines creates a rhythmic balance between expansive expression and condensed; the long lines tend towards amassing of detail, complex sentence-structure and elaborate expression, while the short lines tend towards simple sentences, antithesis, summary and sententiousness. (137-38)
The long lines are divided into two parts, each often carefully balanced against each other (Fox 4). For example, "pe burne bode on blonk, pat on bonk houed" (l. 785). And "pe freke ferde with defence, and feted ful fayre" (l. 1282).

Often, a line near the end of the poem echoes one at the beginning, emphasizing the poem's circularity and symmetry. For example, both bargains--the exchange of blows and the exchange of winnings--are struck under the influence of alcohol: ".. quen pay han mayn drynk" (l. 497) and ".. per spared watz no drynk" (l. 1935). In another instance, both the Green Knight and Gawain are described similarly as each prepares to receive the ax blow: "A little lut with pe hede, pe lere he discourerez" (l. 418). "He lened with pe nek, and lutte, / And schewed pat schyre al bare" (l. 2255-256). The two blows--one decapitates, the other merely nicks--are, nevertheless, described in similar terms: ".. and schrank purз pe schyire grece .. " (l. 425). "Pe scharp schrank to pe flesche purз pe schyre grece .. " (l. 2313). When Gawain is overcome with his own failure, his remorse is described in the same words used for Arthur when he was silent in face of the Green Knight's taunting challenge: "pe blod schot for scham in-to his schyre face / And lere" (ll. 317-18). "Alle pe blode of his brest blende in his face" (l. 2371). The seriousness of Gawain's fault is mitigated
when the phrase used to describe it is also applied to Arthur's hesitancy to play a game.

The alliterative tradition makes use of a great number of synonyms, often simply neutral alliterative and/or rhythmic variations used to fit a certain meter or formula but, just as often, synonyms with definite connotative differences (Borroff, *20th Century*, 58-59). By carefully choosing his vocabulary, the Gawain-poet makes a complex comparison or contrast in a single word. For example, the poet uses only three synonyms (*hende* [used substantively], *Arthur, kynge*) in thirteen opportunities to refer to the king with a noun. In contrast, he uses twelve synonyms (*reke, segge, sott, renke, gloton, hulk, bierne, schalk, lede, carl, warlowe, theef*) in fifteen places where he names the Green Knight. Larry D. Benson explains that the difference between Arthur and the Green Knight is portrayed "not simply by the words but by the mode of designation, in which the restrained, decorous manner of designating the king is sharply contrasted to the freely varying mode of designating the giant, a character with none of the unchanging nobility of Arthur" (140). In another example, Authur's courtiers are both *knijtez*, a word used only for the nobility, and *tulkez*, a word used for all classes. Benson believes "the poet's point seems to be that even opposites are not irreconcilable. Even noblemen, the vocabulary implies, are no more than men" (140-41).
Sometimes the Gawain-poet's playful approach to language manifests itself in antithesis, specifically, words which have two meanings, opposite in nature, like the following:

- gyng - attendants of a great person or rabble (Borroff, "Narrator" 128)
- flesch - body or meat (Silverstein, SGGK 21)
- chapel - place of Christian worship or a slaughterhouse (Carson, "Chapel" 247-48)
- lace - girdle/belt or noose/snare (Hieatt 340-41)
- wonder - marvel or crime (Bloomfield 28)

At other times, the poet uses different words having similar sounds or forms. In SGGK, this ornamental device called traductio is once serious, then again witty, sometimes romantic. It is serious in the sensitive description of the passing of the year: "A ȝere ȝernes ful ȝerne, and ȝeldez neuer lyke" (l. 498). Witty when Gawain exchanges two kisses for the boar: "Now ar we euen ... in pis euen-tide" (l. 1641). And, finally, romantic when Gawain first sees his hostess at Hautdesert: she was "... wener þen Wenore, as þe wyge þoȝt" (l. 945).

(Silverstein, "Art" 185 and SGGK 7-8, 20-21).

Mother Angela Carson, O.S.U. points out the poet's love of and his precision in using words in her interesting study of the Green Knight's real name, Bertilak de Hautdesert. It is a double compound with a dual meaning
study of the Green Knight's real name, Bertilak de Hautdesert. It is a double compound with a dual meaning which underlines its owner's dual role as challenger and host.9

Many of the verbal constructions of alliterative verse are dualities—paired synonyms or, less often, antonyms. These pairs, like "brittened and brent" (l. 2), "stad and stoken" (l. 33), "glimered and glent" (l. 172), "blysse and blunder" (l. 18), "rypez and rotez" (l. 528), and "bryȝt and brown" (l. 618) help to set up the parallels and polarities that are the model for the entire poem.

The Pearl-poet uses non-verbal sounds to punctuate and further evoke his visual descriptions. These sounds help to support the dualistic nature of the poem; they emphasize parallels and/or contrasts between two events or enhance the ambiguities inherent in one event (Renoir 149). Laughter and rejoicing are the first and last sounds heard, bringing the poem full circle. The braying of the hounds and the blaring of the horns during the hunting scenes counterbalance the "littel dyn" (l. 1183), the tiptoeing of the temptress, and the delicate flirtatious repartee of the bedroom scenes. When Gawain arrives at the Green Chapel, the first sound he hears is what he thinks is the Grim Reaper sharpening his scythe. This auditory image heightens the intensity of Gawain's terror and, at the same time, contrasts with the comical pole-vaulting entrance of
the Green Knight. It also contrasts with the Green Chapel's ultimate purpose: to be a place of rebirth rather than a house of death (Fox 12). When Gawain arrives at the Green Chapel, it is not to face the ultimate test of his knighthood but to experience a "post-mortem on his behavior" during his real testing at Hautdesert (Davenport 140-41).
SECTION IV
CHARACTERIZATION

The modes of speech of Gawain and the Green Knight/Bertilak and the sounds associated with them parallel and support their behavior traits. The Green Knight is boisterous: "... al stouned at his steuen..." (l. 242). Gawain is reserved: "... if I carp not comlyly, let alle pis cort ryche / bout blame" (ll. 360-61). The Green Knight makes a noisy exit from Camelot:

With a runisch rout pe raynez he tornez
Halled out at pe halldor, his hed in his hande,
pat pe fyr of pe flynt flaye fro folc houes.
(ll. 457-59)

The sounds associated with Gawain's leave-taking are very different:

Wel much watz pe warme water pat Waltered of
When pat semly syre sozt fro po wonez...
(ll. 684-85)

In the contrasts between Gawain and the Green Knight/Bertilak, we see that the poet extends his penchant for polarity to his characters. But here, again, misdirection is at play. Although the main characters seem like opposites of each other, they share common qualities, and each is comprised of dualities and ambiguities which make them the more confusing for being the more real.
Gawain, the man, is not physically described; only Gawain, the knight in his ornate armor, is detailed in all of his artificial splendor. The result of Gawain's arming is the creation, "piece by piece . . ., [of] a knight made of metal" (Hollis 272). The last piece to be added is Gawain's helmet, the description of which has been separated from the rest of the arming by several lines on his horse's trappings. This symbolic severance of head and body recalls the beheading motif.

In contrast, the Green Knight is vividly described in details that positively burst with contradictory signals and suggestions. The Green Knight's description alternates between the grotesque aspects of a wild monster and the rather handsome features of a well-endowed physical specimen. Each description, taken by itself, is clear and sharp; together they form a blurred, ambiguous figure. Is he "... an aghlich mayster, / On pe most on pe molde on mesure hyghe" (l. 136-37) or "Herre pen ani in pe hous by pe hede and more" (l. 333)?

The Green Knight's actions are also conflicting. He rides into Arthur's court covered with snow but shoeless; he carries an ax, a terrifying weapon of war, in one hand and a holly bough, a medieval symbol of peace (Bachman 499), in the other. At first, he is the taunting challenger, the hostile enemy; later he becomes the tolerant friend, the sympathetic confessor/judge. As
Bertilak, the lord of Hautdesert, we see a courteous aristocrat, something the Green Knight is not, but also glimpse this alterego, the "gomen in grene," in Bertilak's features, particularly his bushy beard; his gamesmanship; his love of the hunt; his natural vigor. We sense Bertilak is a threat. He is, after all, not only a lord in his own right but also an instrument of Morgan la Fay's magic. However, his hospitality, his generosity, his jovial mood do not allow us to take the threat very seriously.

Bertilak's presence does allow us to believe in the Green Knight's sympathy and forgiveness—even his humanity. In the same way, we see some of the worldliness and ritual of the court in the Green Knight's expensive gold-embossed, fur-lined, jewel-encrusted accoutrements. After all, he is a knight, albeit a green one; that is to say, the Green Knight, who represents the harsh, primitive, uncivilized, sensual, emotional side of man's nature, is to some degree connected to the complex of courtly ideas best represented by Gawain.

Gawain, on the other hand, has never understood his natural, primitive side because it is allowed expression only in the highly ritualized aggression of courtly combat. In accepting the green girdle as a badge of his imperfection, Gawain is acknowledging that part of himself he has refused to accept (Goldhurst 64; Shedd 11). Gawain's view of humility undergoes a change. In the beginning, this
knightly virtue manifests itself in false if polite self-deprecation (Engelhardt 225). "I am \textit{pe wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest, / And lest lur of my lyf, guo laytes pe sope ...}" (ll. 354-55). After accepting his failure, he learns genuine humility: "\textit{Pat is larges and lewte, pat longez to kny\textit{t}ez}" (l. 2381). Thus, the two main characters are comprised of differing mixtures of the same human traits.

Another parallel between the two characters is that they both have two identities. Obviously, the Green Knight is really Bertilak de Hautdesert, but Gawain, idealized, abstract hero-knight at the beginning, becomes, at the end, a real Everyman. Ironically, right before Gawain is presented as the perfect pentangle knight, he feels he is the least worthy to be Arthur's replacement in the beheading game. Later, when he accepts his failure and feels the shame, he becomes as close as is humanly possible to that perfect knight.

This complex confusion of comparisons and contrasts between the Green Knight and Bertilak and between the Green Knight/Bertilak and Gawain has parallels with the two women of the poem, who are presented at the same moment to dramatically emphasize the contrast between beautiful and ugly, youth and age. The Gawain-poet once again blurs his portrait, this time of the old lady. Yellow skin, black chin and brows, sinister countenance do suggest an evil,
black-magic witch. The poet obscures her evil in chalk-white veils and silk "toreted and treleted with tryflez aboute" (l. 960) that recall the mystical white paper castle she lives in. This old hag walks on the left side of the young wife, a position of rank, has a retinue of escorts, and is "hezly honowred" (l. 949). The Green Knight calls her "Morgne pe goddes" (l. 2452). The poet has given her two identities also: she is the magic enchantress, Morgan la Fay, and an ugly old woman. Being the latter diminishes the power of the former in a similar way that Gawain's human error lessens his knightly perfection or the comic elements in the poem lessen the seriousness of the romance. In an ironic twist, the evil Morgan allows her Green Knight to be the instrument of good and to serve as Gawain's merciful confessor and benevolent judge. Bertilak's wife, the beautiful half of the female pair, also provides an ironic twist. This woman, who seems like an adulterous temptress, turns out to be the faithful, helpful wife.
SECTION V

SETTINGS

Just as the characters parallel and contrast each other, so, too, do the settings of SGGK. These vividly depicted places alternate between civilized order inside and wild disorder outside. Gawain moves from Arthur's festive court, through the feral Wirral, to Bertilak's courteous castle, over to the mysterious mound called the Green Chapel, and back to still-joyous Camelot. The exterior scenes are set in the English north country, "on heath and crag and in tangled forests of hoar oaks, hazel, and hawthorn" (Loomis 538). The interior scenes reveal the ritual and splendor of medieval aristocracy. They both support and extend the dualistic nature of the poem.

The castles of Camelot and Hautdesert reflect each other in their similar activities of holiday feasting, merrymaking, game playing, and praying. Even Bertilak's actions recall Arthur's "sum-quat childgered" (l. 86) behavior. "His lif liked hym [Arthur] lyjt, he louied pe lasse / Auper to lenge lye, or to longe sitte . . ." (ll. 87-88). "Pe lorde [Bertilak] luflych aloft lepez ful ofte / Mynned merthe . . ." (ll. 981-82). Ironically,
Bertilak may even "out-Arthur" Arthur. His household is excessively courteous:

... 3e ar welcum to welde as yow lykez, 
pat here is, al is yowre awen, to have at yowre wylle
and welde. (ll. 835-37)

His wife is more beautiful than Guenevere:

Ho watz pe fayrest in felle, of flesche and of lyre,
And of compas, and colour, and costes of alle oper,
And wener pen Wenore . . . . (ll. 943-45)

His religious observances are more devout and are not said to have "cheued to an ende" (l. 63):

Chaplaynez to pe chapeles chosen pe gate,
Rungen ful rychely, ryzt as pay schulden,
To pe hersum euensong of pe hy2e tyde. (ll. 930-32)

Bertilak even recalls the beheading game when he removes his hood, places it on his spear, and promises the merriest will win the honor of it (ll. 983-90).

Further, in and of itself, Bertilak's castle offers some interesting dichotomies. When Gawain first sees Hautdesert, it seems to have appeared magically in answer to his prayer to the Virgin Mary. The many white carved pinnacles that glimmer through the dark oak wood certainly give the scene an illusive, enchanted quality even though they come in response to a fervent Christian prayer. But once inside the castle of Bertilak, the shape-shifter, and Morgan la Fay, the enchantress, there is no hint of magic or the supernatural. Even the lord's hunts are graphically
and realistically detailed by an artist with knowledge of the ritual and ceremony of the court.

The animals of these hunts are real, nothing like those that Gawain must fend off in the Wirral. This wilderness is home to supernatural "wormez" (l. 720) and "wodwos" (l. 721), but it is also the bitter and brutal habitat of ". . . mony bryddeyn unbllye vpon bare twyges / Pat pitosly pery pipped for pyne of pe colde" (ll. 746-47). Here the natural is often more awesome than the unnatural. Ironically, Gawain can handle the marvelous "etaynez" (l. 723), but he suffers in the harsh reality of the winter weather.

The Green Chapel is another locale where the natural world and the unnatural otherworld coexist. To Gawain, this "chapel of meschaunce" (l. 2195) is a place where he feels the presence of the "fende" (l. 2193), "a lawe as hit were; / A bal[y] ber[y], bi a bonke, pe brymme by-syde" (ll. 2171-72). Thus, the Green Knight, as "high priest" of the Green Chapel, lives partially buried underground in an unrestrained primeval no-man's land. As Bertilak, lord of Hautdesert, he lives up on the knoll in a splendid, controlled, civilized castle. Gawain misunderstands the missions of these locations and mistakes the welcome he receives. At Hautdesert, he thinks he is being offered congenial hospitality as a valued guest when he is really being tested (Davenport 157). He fearfully arrives at the
Green Chapel, expecting the test he has already taken and partially failed.
SECTION VI

SYMBOLISM

The pentangle shield and the green girdle are the two major concrete objects in SGGK which further express figurative meaning beyond their literal realities. These images carry both actual and allegorical meaning. "Symbol hunting" is not necessary here; the poet clearly reveals that they have symbolic functions. "... quy pe pentangle apendez to pat prynce noble, / I am in tent yow to telle ..." (l. 623-24). "Pat [girdle] wyl I [Gawain] welde ... in syngne of my surfet ..." (l. 2430, 33). However, these symbols are obscured by related oppositions which, here again, enhance the dualistic nature of the poem. As Bryant Bachman, Jr. puts it, "... part of the sublimity of the poem is the very inclusiveness of its symbols--as impulse and repression, as energy and formalism, nature and civilization, pragmatism and idealism, or the demands of this world and the proscriptions of the next one, the opposition remains ..." (512).

That the shield serves as symbol is primarily because of its decorations: on the outside, a pentangle or "endless knot," and on the inside, an image of the Virgin
Mary. As the front protects the knight's body and the back protects his immortal soul, these images also remind him of his dual obligations: duty to his lord and duty to the Lord. The pentangle's function as pure symbol is spelled out for us:

Hit is a syngne ᵀat Salamon set sum-quyle,
In bytoknyng of trawpe, bi tytle ᵀat hit habbez,
For hit is a figure ᵀat haldez fyue poyntez,
And vche lyne vmbe-lappez and loukez in oper,
And ay quere hit is endelez, and Englych hit callen,
Ouer-al, as I here, ᵀe endeles knot.
For-ʸ hit acordez to ᵀis knyʒt, and to his cler armez,
For ay faythful in fyue and sere fyue sypiez,
(ll. 625-32)

However, this symbol of perfection fails to be perfect as Gawain fails to be perfect. The pentangle symbolizes Gawain's "fautelez . . . fyue wyttez" (l. 640), but these unfailing senses are in error when, in his terror, he mistakes the Green Knight for the Devil: "Now I fele qit is ᵀe fende, in my fyue wyttez" (l. 2193). The five senses are imperfect because they need the guidance of reason in the same way as "the pentagonal soul is limited by its dependence on grace" (Green 86).

Just as the shield has two sides with two images, the pentangle also has an ambiguous, dualistic nature: a pagan, magic half and a Christian, moral half. The Gawain-poet interrupts his narrative to draw a long parallel between the pentangle as a symbol of perfection and Gawain as an example of the perfect Christian knight. The
pentangle is aligned on the side of knightly virtues and moral obligations. But not completely. The poet also connects the pentangle to Solomon (l. 625). "The poet could hardly have chosen a more ambiguous patron for Gawain's virtue" (82). Although remarkably wise, wealthy, and world-renowned, he ultimately turns away from God toward the powers of darkness. In the Bible, he is a "gravely flawed figure" (82). In the Middle Ages, "Solomon's seal" (pentangle) is associated more with magic and the occult than with any Christian significance (83). Solomon's image as a figure of perfection is further tarnished by being included in Gawain's list of men who went wrong through the wiles of women (ll. 2414-28). The poet turns an emblem of magic into one of perfection "to achieve the simultaneous suggestion of greatness and potential failure" (84).

The green girdle, in contrast to the pentangle, has magical properties—not in the symbolic sense—but in and of itself as a piece of knightly adornment. Gawain accepts the baldric as a talisman that will save his life. Besides its occult aspects, it carries significant Christian overtones as well. After Gawain understands and accepts his "sin," he wears the lace as a tangible reminder of his weakness. For Gawain, the "luf-lace" is a "token of vntrawpe" (l. 2509); for the Green Knight and Arthur's court, it is "for py grete traupe" (l. 2470). They clearly
differ on the gravity of Gawain's guilt. In fact, the court and the Green Knight laugh (ll. 2514, 2389). The good-natured mirth of the court can mean they have learned less than Gawain about human limitations ... or more. In any case, their essentially comic reactions balance and contrast the didactic implications of Gawain's remorse. Hence, the poem ends on a balanced note of "blysse and blunder."

In addition to the use of concrete images to express abstract or mystical ideas, as in the case of the pentangle shield and the green girdle, the Pearl-poet selects colors for their medieval symbolic meanings, whose origins developed from use in heraldry, precious gems and metals, folklore, and church art, liturgy, garments, and insignias (Hieatt 341-42; Gardner, Complete Works 82). This medieval color code holds that all colors have opposite connotations, both good and evil (Blanch 66). Because the Pearl-poet employs the traditional dualistic code, it follows that his symbolic use of color supports the polarity of the poem.10

The Green Knight's "ouer-al enker grene" (l. 150) is the "one unconventional element, the only one in the portrait of the Green Knight, [and] casts the familiar parts of that character into a new and ambiguous context and lends him the novelty and mystery upon which the effect of a 'ferly' depends" (Benson 91). The use of green in
such a striking way means that it is a substantial method of establishing, supporting, and enhancing polarity.\textsuperscript{11} That the Gawain-poet's audience would find this most prominent feature significant is confirmed within the context of physiognomy, a medieval belief that the character of a person can be understood by observing physical characteristics (White 251; Pace 161). For example, it was natural for Chaucer to develop the personalities of his pilgrims by describing their physical characteristics. In the case of the Green Knight, "the green skin is puzzling because that is what the poet intended it to be" (Benson 91); more to the point, the skin is green because this color has a bi-polar nature.

To many critics who have dealt with the puzzle of the Green Knight's color, it is symbolic of a vegetation or nature god (Speirs 87; Moorman 214) or a reborn fertility deity (Stone 10). Certainly green represents fertility, nature, vegetation, and certainly the Green Knight has the force of nature and is in control of it. He arrives in Camelot in the middle of winter without shoes; like a pruned tree, he remains vigorously alive after his head is chopped off; he is not menaced by the monsters that beset Gawain. Like nature, the Green Knight is jubilantly vital and alive, a changeable yet unavoidable perpetual force.

Closely associated with nature, fertility, and vegetation is the idea of renewal, regeneration, and
rebirth. Green can be the symbolic color of life resurgent (Speirs 87). The Green Knight rides into Arthur's court on Christmas, a holiday that celebrates a birth and uses green as one of its colors. This connection with life is usually associated with the ancient green man legend, who signals passion, vitality, rebirth, and impulsive tendencies toward life and is balanced by an opposite literary tradition, the wild man legend, concerning a hostile, savage character with impulsive tendencies toward death (Benson 62-95; Bachman 496; Speirs 220; Tolkien and Gordon xx). "The poet has . . . combined two literary and iconographical traditions. . . . The denominator of both is impulse. With the Green Knight, the Gawain-poet now has both positive and negative impulse, life and death, in one figure" (Bachman 496). Of course, the green man's color is green, but the wild man is also often depicted as green in paintings (Benson 90). Death and the color green can also be linked at the Green Chapel, described as a pagan burial mound (ll. 2180-84). Heinrich Zimmer points out that the Green Chapel is a kind of eerie crypt, and green is the color of putrid corpses. "We may safely assume that the death-green, towering apparition out of the forlorn valley of the 'corsedest kyrk' . . . was the great reaper, Death" (76). Symbolic proof that the Green Knight represents both opposing forces of life and death is that in one hand he
carries the ever-green and ever-living holly branch and in the other he wields a death weapon.

Color symbolism has exegetical applications as well. Critics have, at various times, believed the Green Knight to represent either Christ or the Devil, good or evil. A. C. Spearing states that "the Green Knight is a figure whose power is clear, but whose theological or metaphysical status is completely uncertain" (102). The best evidence that the Green Knight represents the Devil is that his powers come from Morgan la Fay, "the sister of sin herself" (Tolkien and Gordon 15). In addition, Gawain describes the Green Knight as the Devil's proxy (l. 2192) who lives where "dele his matynnes telle" (l. 2188). "The Green Knight is a symbolic summary of all that opposes the law of God, a fusion of elf-knight, druid, and fiend" (Gardner, Complete Works 81). Like the Devil, he is a shape-shifter, a hunter, a mound-dweller, and a tempter (82; Spearing 223). Green is the common color for fairies, elves, otherworld creatures, even devils in medieval times (Benson 91; Blanch 65; Bercovitch 33). In Chaucer's Friar's Tale (CT D1382), the Devil's messenger is dressed in green (Blanch 66; Spearing 223). "Green is the appropriate color for the devil because he is the evil spirit of the world, the purely terrestrial man for whom heaven is not possible" (Blanch 66).
But Chaucer also supports the ambiguous nature of green, for his good yeoman in the General Prologue "was clad in cote and hood of grene" (CT A103) . . . the bawdryk was of grene" (CT A116). As John Gardner makes clear, to view the Green Knight as simply the agent of the forces of darkness is to ignore that he also serves God (Complete Works 82). His wild grassy mound is called a "chapel" with all the Christian inferences the term suggests (Goldhurst 64). His contemptuously mocking attitude toward human fear and frailty which characterizes his speech at Camelot is noticeably missing when he becomes priest-confessor for Gawain's complete admission of sin. Gawain is confronted by the "corrective agent of grace" in the form of the Green Knight as sympathetic judge (Blenkner 386). Here again, the knight's color is appropriate. Green is emblematic of God's goodness in His free gift of eternal life through Christ (Gardner, Complete Works 82); it is the color of hope that comes through grace (Blenkner 386); it is the color of Epiphany when the Wise Men found the source of grace (Spearing 179; Leighton 61). The Green Knight/Bertilak represents something both good and evil. "This ambivalence is seen immediately in the color green, which is the symbol of chthonic (i.e., earthly or material) life as opposed to the life of the spirit; but it is also the color of hope and of rebirth" (Manning 285).
Certainly green, a blending of two opposing primary colors—\text—the compressed warmth of yellow and the diffused coolness of blue—is the appropriate color to express the ambiguity inherent in the Green Knight and in the poem itself. Because the greenness of the Green Knight may be identified with life and death, good and evil, a bewildering variety of associations are evoked that intensify the polarity of the poem (Davenport 152; Fox 7; Blanch 70).

Although less significantly, the other colors also serve this ambiguous purpose. The lavish "wedes" of both Gawain and the Green Knight are described with gold, red, and white; the Christmas colors accentuate the holiday game and reflect the complex use of parallels (Blanch 75). One delightful use of color parallels is the Green Knight's red eyes and green bushy brows which are reminiscent of the holly sprig of red berries and green leaves he carries (ll. 304-05). Brown is the color of the diamonds in Gawain's helmet which medieval lapidaries suggest are protection against pride, but only if the wearer remains chaste (Blanch 75; Benson 91). Although Gawain does indeed remain chaste, the diamonds do not help against overconfidence in his own excellence. The robe Gawain is given on his arrival at Hautdesert is also brown. Just as the sumptuous feast he is served is ambiguously called a "penance," the brown robe, so similar to a monk's habit, is equivocally embroidered with jewels and lined with furs.
(l. 878-81). Another color with a specific religious reference is blue. It is the color that the Virgin Mary traditionally wears in Christian art and iconography (Blanch 81; Taylor 169). It is ironic that Gawain is wearing this spiritual color of truth and faith (l. 1928) when he fails to keep his promise to give up the girdle. This failure signals a change in his protector, from faith in the Virgin Mary to trust in a magic girdle. These examples illustrate that "the dazzling variety of color symbols, suggestive of literary convention, ironic reversal of tradition, and poetic ambiguity . . . reinforces the elaborate symmetrical design and game-like tone of the poem" (Blanch 85).
SECTION VII

MEANING/PURPOSE

We should expect, by now, that SGGK has a dual purpose. It does: Prodesse aut delectare--to profit or to amuse (Engelhardt 58). "This poet is more than propagandist and entertainer; he is the amiably ironic teacher and conscience of the court" (Green 73). The Christmas games are countered by a Christian allegory. A sense of humor mitigates the seriousness of Gawain's quest which, although trivialized by the comic "mayn meruayle" (l. 94) that makes it necessary, is clearly Christian in tone and intent, as evidenced by the pentangle description (l.l. 621-69), Gawain's plea to the Virgin (l.l. 736-39, 753-58), reference to the Devil at the Green Chapel (l. 2188), the allusions to Judas and Peter in the kisses and the crowing cock (l. 1412) at Hautdesert, and, especially, the Green Knight's explanation that follows the confrontation and confession at the Green Chapel (l. 2391).

Although the Gawain-poet does not condemn the ebullient and elegant court life he so deftly portrays, he knows that beneath this brilliant surface lies a darker world of imperfection and potential failure, which emerges,
in part, from the impasse between chivalric romance values and Christian morality (Foley 77). In his attempt to live by two parallel codes of conduct, the Christian and the knightly, Gawain chooses to fulfill his religious duties but fails in his secular obligations. Bertilak's wife, in the crucial temptation scenes, gives Gawain an impossible choice: when he chooses "clannes" in the religious sense by being chaste, he must forego "cortaysye" in the secular sense by not being sexually obliging. An even more serious dilemma is caused by Gawain's human weakness in wanting to safeguard his life. When he accepts the green girdle, he pledges to conceal this fact from Bertilak with whom he has already agreed to exchange all winnings. He cannot fulfill one compact without breaking the other. The Green Knight, who at Camelot has been an ambiguous figure bent on destroying the Round Table's reputation, reacts to Gawain's failure as a sympathetic and wise judge. Behavior that is inexcusable by chivalric standards is found understandable and deserving of grace by an enlightened Christian code. His forgiveness--"Bot for þe lufed your lyf, þe lasse I yow blame" (l. 2368)--is totally alien to the chivalric code, whose basic tenets are courage and honor and the determination to deny the natural impulses of man (Shedd 11). Because the code assumes the possibility of perfection and Gawain is the perfect pentangle knight, he has not looked within himself for the enemy. Although
the code assumes that perfect adherence can produce human perfection, the romance ideal of perfection is beyond the grasp of mortal human beings who have both primitive and civilized, physical and spiritual impulses. When Gawain recognizes this as truth, when he adopts the color of the Green Knight in the baldric and accepts that part of himself he has refused to claim, he understands that life, at best, is a merging, a melding of these opposing forces. He comes to agree with Dante's opinion in De Monarchia: "Man is a mean between the corruptible and the incorruptible. Just as every mean partakes of both extremes, so man has a dual nature" (Southern 57). Life is a mass of contradictions: Gawain, the perfect knight, is also a human being; Arthur is childgeder and the hendest of all; the Green Knight is really Bertilak; the old lady is really a witch; the temptress is really a faithful wife; the seasons rypen and rotez; nature is threatening and tame; Gawain is humbled yet enobled. There are no satisfactory solutions to the human condition, and this fact is both the terror and the delight of life. It is also the ultimate duality of SGGK. "The vision of the poem is truly a dialectical one" (Bachman 512). The Gawain-poet is playing his delightfully comic game of polarities to make some serious inferences about moderation. Gawain wears the green girdle "in syngne of my surfet" (l. 2433), his sin of excessive "sourguydrye" (l. 311). This prideful trust in
his own virtues is now balanced by the knowledge of his humanity. Paradoxically, this acceptance of his own failure brings him as near perfection as human nature allows. The Gawains of this world continue to strive for that which they can never totally attain. In that ultimate irony lies their greatness.
APPENDIX

INDEX OF POLARITIES

The purpose of this appendix is to list alphabetically the elements in this thesis that pertain to the polarities in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Page numbers refer to those of this thesis; references to lines in the poem appear when specificity is possible and are in parentheses. This cataloging is intended to make the thesis more useful as a resource for studying the dualities.

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NOTES

1For more information, see Lovejoy's The Great Chain of Being.

2All quotations from SGGK are from Medieval English Literature (254-332) by Thomas J. Garbáty, who based his text on the Davis edition of Tolkien-Gordon.

3H. L. Savage was the first to point out the relationship between the hunting and temptation scenes in: "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," 1-15.

4For a differing view on the relationship between the animals and Gawain, see Davenport's The Art of the Gawain-Poet, 163.

5For a more complete discussion of structure, see Howard's "Structure and Symmetry in Sir Gawain" in Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Eds. Howard and Zacher, 159-173.

6For good discussions on style, see: Benson's Ch. 3 (110-166) in Art and Tradition in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" and Borroff's book entitled SGGK: A Sylistic and Metrical Study.

7For a full discussion of the traditional Gawain, see Whiting's "Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy, and His Appearance in Chaucer's Squire's Tale," 189-234.

8For more information on genres in SGGK, see Loomis's, Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History, 538.

9For the complete etymology see Mother Carson's article entitled "The Green Knight's Name."

10Robert J. Blanch, in his Ph.D. dissertation entitled "An Investigation of Medieval Color Symbolism and Its Application to Pearl," explains the poet's traditional use of color symbolism. This information was obtained through the Dissertation Abstract, 1780A (1967). I did not read
the thesis itself; I only know from the abstract that the poet used the traditional color symbols of the Middle Ages.

11For the best discussions of green as an ambiguous color symbol, see: Benson's Art and Tradition in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" (90-95) and Blanch's "Games Poets Play: The Ambiguous Use of Color Symbolism in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Nottingham Medieval Studies (64-85), available at Florida State University.

12For more on traditional sources and literary conventions, see the first two chapters of Benson's Art and Tradition in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," 3-109.

13Chaucer quotations are from The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, Ed. Robinson.

14The concept of two parallel codes is found in handbooks of chivalry, like William Caxton's, The Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry, 54.

15For a different look at Gawain's altered concept of the knightly code, see the article by Victoria L. Weiss entitled "Gawain's First Failure: The Beheading Scene in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight."
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