

# **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo Study Guide**

**Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo  
by J. R. R. Tolkien**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapter I, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Chapter II, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Chapter III, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Chapter IV, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Pearl.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Sir Orfeo.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>



# Plot Summary

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a compilation of three Medieval English poems translated by the famous twentieth century author and philologist J. R. R. Tolkien. All of the poems are translated from Middle English, the English language as spoken between 1066 and around 1470, a language on which Tolkien remains a great historical expert.

The first poem and the longest is Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The story is something of a 'spinoff' from the standard Arthurian tales that populated the Medieval (and modern) periods. The poem begins in the Arthurian Court, with Arthur and Guinevere presiding over a Christmas-tide festival. Sir Gawain is sitting with the queen and other notables when a massive knight, covered in green garb, rushes into the court. He then challenges any knight of the round table to strike him on the condition that he may return the favor in one year and a day. Gawain takes up the offer, decapitating the Green Knight, who then picks up his head and rides off.

Gawain spends most of the next year happy and finally embarks to find the Green Chapel where the Green Knight awaits him. He finds a castle with a lord and lady that welcome him to stay with them. The lord often goes off to hunt, prompting Gawain to agree that whatever game he catches will be Gawain's if whatever Gawain catches on his quest will be the lord's. When the lord is gone, the lady attempts to seduce Gawain and only slightly succeeds, garnering two kisses and getting Gawain to take a silk belt she gives him to his battle with the Green Knight.

Gawain leaves to find the Green Knight. When they finally meet, Gawain bears his neck to the Green Knight who strikes him. The axe only nicks his neck and otherwise passes through him. Gawain appears to have one but the Green Knight reveals that he is in fact the lord of the castle and that his wife is a witch who transformed him into the Green Knight in order to test Gawain's character by drawing him to the castle and seeing if the lady could tempt Gawain and diminish his honor. Distraught and humiliated, Gawain returns to the Arthurian Court; when he is arrived, much to his surprise, he is received with mercy and forgiveness.

Pearl is a shorter poem. It is something of an allegory and theological treatise. In the poem, Pearl, the not-two-year old child of Pearl's father has died and her father is deeply grieved at his loss. In the poem he has a vision of Pearl in Paradise and has an extended conversation with her. In the conversation he learns that God has made Pearl a queen, which Pearl's father considers deeply unjust, as Pearl had not merited such grace from God given that her life was so short. Pearl then gives an extended argument that no one merits a particular amount of grace and that God can shower his grace on anyone. Ultimately Pearl's father relents and is delighted to find not only that Pearl is to be a citizen of the New Jerusalem but that she has earned God's favor regardless of what she has done.

Orfeo is the shortest piece and tells the story of King Orfeo of Traciencie, a famous harp player, who loses his queen, lady Heurodis, to the Faerie King. He places a steward in



his stead and leaves on a ten year journey to win her back. Eventually he enters the Faerie King's palace and wins Heurodis by impressing the Faerie King with his harp-playing. When they return, King Orfeo is joyously restored to the throne.



# Chapter I, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

## Chapter I, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Summary

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is laid out in one-hundred and two stanzas, whereas the first quarter of the epic has twenty-one stanzas. The story opens with a focus on the setting. It begins with the siege and assault at Troy, the rise of the Roman Empires, its expansion across Europe to Britain. Britain rose under Felix Brutus with bold men and many marvels, including King Arthur.

King Arthur is in Camelot at Christmas at the Round Table with his men, who had been feasting. The author describes the feast of twelve days until New Year. There were competitions for prizes, debates, and merriment. Guinevere was graceful and beautiful. Arthur was noble, waiting to eat until others had been served. He did this in part to gather news of the realm beforehand.

Sir Gawain stands near Guinevere with Agravain a la Dure Main on the other side. Bishop Baldwin stands there as well. They sit together to eat. But before they can eat, a 'perilous' horseman appeared. He is strong and large, dressed entirely in green, including his armor, weapons and horse. The man is happy, with long hair and a large beard, and seems indestructible.

But the Green Knight lacks many pieces of armor, like a helm, but has a large axe, however. He moves forward to the dais. He asks to speak to Arthur. The court pauses to observe the man; they are afraid. Arthur addresses him and the green knight claims that he has no violent intent. Instead, he wishes to play a game. He claims that he will allow any knight to strike him undefended if he can do the same in one year and a day. No one responds. The Green Knight laughs at their silence. Then Gawain turns to Arthur and asks if he can face the Green Knight.

Gawain claims that he is unfit, weak and feeble, having honor only because he is Arthur's cousin but he still wishes to prove himself. Arthur commands him to rise and take his chance. Gawain then announces himself to the Green Knight. The Green Knight is pleased and Gawain asks where they are to meet and when. They decide to meet that very day and in that very spot. The Green Knight dismounts and readies himself, as does Gawain. Then the Green Knight reveals his neck and Gawain cuts through it with his axe. The Green Knight's head falls off and blood bursts forth from his body. Yet his body catches his head and raises it up. He then speaks and tells Gawain to get ready. Gawain's task is now to find him to gain his treasure or he will return to fight Gawain again. The Green Knight reveals that he is known as the Knight of the Green Chapel and rushes out of the door into the yard. Arthur encourages Guinevere not to be downcast and encourages the people to keep their spirits up. They continue to eat.



## Chapter I, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Analysis

Part I of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight introduces the story and the setting, and sets up the plot. The story takes place in Arthurian Britain deep in the Middle Ages. The main setting is King Arthur's court, with King Arthur, Queen Guinevere, and the Knights of the Round Table, as so many other stories have opened. This epic, however, is much shorter than the typical Arthurian tale and instead concerns a fairly circumscribed conflict. King Arthur's court is engaged in Christmas-tide celebrations that last for twelve days. Sir Gawain, one of the Knights of the Round Table, is introduced.

The plot begins when an enormous knight gallops in on his horse into the King's Court. The man is enormous, covered in green - his clothes, his weapons, his armor and even his horse. The court is stunned at his appearance. His size and shape make him appear invulnerable. He then challenges the knights of the Arthurian court to a challenge. He claims that if any man can disarm him, they can have his axe. But it is quite clear this will be a difficult task for even the greatest of Arthur's warriors. Despite this, one of the meekest knights, Sir Gawain, asks Arthur to represent him against the Green Knight. Arthur obliges. Gawain decapitates the Green Knight but he does not die, and instead picks up his head, challenging Gawain to find him, and rushes off.



# Chapter II, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

## Chapter II, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Summary

The New Year finds Gawain happy and the year passes happily. In the Harvest season, around Michaelmas's moon, Sir Gawain embarks on his journey, leaving on All Hallows eve. The court is concerned for him, but he reassures them. He leaves the next morning, equipped with items and armor and with a Mass said for him. He bears a five-pointed symbol known as the Endless Knot.

Gawain leaves, riding through Logres. He is alone, hunting for game. Only God accompanies him. He draws through Northern Wales, the wilderness of Wirral, and tries to find the Green Chapel. Gawain climbs cliffs in unknown countries, sleeping wherever he can, petitioning Mary for aid. One morning, while riding, he prays to God and Mary that he might hear the Mass and Matins on the next day. He then finds a mansion, a beautiful castle; he thanks Jesus and Saint Julian and gallops forward with Gringolet, his horse. The castle was walled up; it was also large, tall and beautiful.

A porter hails him, and Gawain asks him if he can deliver a message to the lord of the house. The porter obliges and asks him to stay. He is allowed in the castle, meeting the porter upfront. He is drawn to a chamber and is assigned a squire to serve him. He is treated quite well. Gawain tells them that he is a member of Arthur's Round Table and the lord of the castle was very pleased. That evening the chaplains take Gawain to the chapel. The lord greets him there; and the lady of the castle greets him as well, Gawain finding her more beautiful than Guinevere. An older, hideous woman accompanies her.

The next day Gawain and the court of the castle share a meal. They have a great feast and festival. This continues for several days. Gawain must leave and the lord thanks him for his visit. The lord asks Gawain about his quest; Gawain tells him and asks him about the Green Chapel. He has only three days left. It is only two miles away, according to the lord. Gawain is overjoyed and is happy to stay for a few more days until he can meet the Green Knight. The lord is going to hunt the next day and asks Gawain to stay with his wife for him. Gawain obliges. The lord promises to let Gawain have whatever he wins in the wood if Gawain will do likewise. Gawain agrees and is happy with the bargain.

## Chapter II, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Analysis

Part II builds towards the climax of the epic. Gawain was victorious in his first battle with the Green Knight, but the Green Knight had the magical power to survive decapitation. Gawain waits for months before embarking to find the Green Knight in the Green Chapel. He leaves with much fanfare but travels for some time trying to find the Green



Chapel. He is unsuccessful until he prays to God and Mary that he will be able to attend Mass and Matins the next day. Apparently, God and Mary oblige when Gawain discovers a castle and is allowed to enter. He is able to attend both Mass and Matins.

The lord of the castle is delighted to have Gawain, a Knight of the Round Table, staying with him. He treats him well, giving him clothes, food and lodging, along with throwing him a feast and festival. Gawain hears from the lord that the Green Chapel lies only two miles away, so Gawain decides to continue to rest up for his encounter with the Green Knight. However, the lord makes a bargain with him - the next day he is going to go on a hunt and Gawain must guard his wife, the lady, at the castle. The lord will give Gawain whatever he wins during his hunt, so long as Gawain does the same. Gawain agrees. It appears that the lord is up to something, however.





# Chapter III, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

## Chapter III, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Summary

The lord and his men ready for the hunt; they hear the Mass and eat a quick meal, rushing out in the early dawn. They have a hundred hunting dogs with them. The dogs find a deer and begin to chase it. The men shoot arrows and kill many of the deer. Gawain lies in bed still, asleep. The lady comes to awaken him and slips in his bed. She wakes him up and has a proposal for him. Gawain wants to get up but the lady will not let him; she then flatters him with praise and invites him to take his fill of her body.

Gawain claims that he is unworthy but the lady disagrees, admiring his prowess and excellence. Gawain is honored by her favor but he denies her. Yet she claims that she wishes to be with him above all others. The two then begin to chat until past midmorning. She then leaves and exits the room with some additional praise. She asks for his kiss and he kisses her on command. Gawain dresses and goes to Mass and a meal afterward. The lord continues to hunt, killing and preparing their catch. At the end of the day, they return home and enter the hall.

The lord calls Gawain and shows him his catch; he then offers the catch to Gawain. Afterwards they shared wine and talk and eat. The next day, they leave on the hunt again. The hounds again catch a scent and chase a boar; he was difficult to catch. Even when the boar was hit with arrows, it would not fall. Gawain continues to nap. The lady returns to his bed to wear away his will. They chat again throughout the morning. She then asks him if he has a lover, wife, etc. Gawain has no one and is honored that the lady wants to take up with him. She then continually tests him to draw him into making love.

Gawain rises to go to Mass and eats dinner. The lord continues to hunt, chasing the boar. It had hurt many men, and few wished to approach it. One knight confronts the boar and kills it. The lord and his men are happy to carve up the boar. The lord was eager to present the boar to Gawain. When the lord returns, he assembles his court and presents the boar to Gawain. Gawain affirms their agreement to present the lord with his gains. They then feast, sing songs and make merry. Gawain asks to leave the next day to continue his quest to find the Green Chapel. The lord agrees.

After morning Mass and a meal, the lord leaves with his huntsmen. A hound finds a scent and they pursue a fox. Gawain sleeps in once more and is awakened by the lady of the castle again as well. Gawain was dreaming about the lady and she pressed him in the bed. The lady is wondering how to get Gawain to sin. She offers herself to him and he refuses again. She pretends to be devastated and asks for a kiss before she leaves. She then asks for a token to remember him by. He says he has nothing to give her and then she asks to give him something, a beautiful ring of red gold. But he



refused. She then offered her girdle but he refused this as well. Next she offers him a silk belt which he accepts.

The lady then leaves Gawain and he dressed and got ready. He stored the love-lace he was given and he decided to prepare to leave for the chapel. He finds a priest and prays to learn how his soul should be saved when he leaves the world. The priest then absolved him of his sins. The lord, back outside, catches his fox. He then leaves for home. When he arrives back at the court, he and Gawain meet for a third time, and Gawain receives the fox. They again have a feast. But this time Gawain insists on leaving for the Green Chapel to avoid his New Year's Day doom. The lord sends a servant along with Gawain. Gawain says his farewells and the people say goodbye. Gawain sleeps, waiting for the morning.

### **Chapter III, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Analysis**

Gawain and the lord have made their covenant. Whatever the lord catches in the wood will be Gawain's and whatever Gawain catches in the wood will be the lord's. Gawain apparently does not believe that he will find as much as he expects the lord will. But the lord seems to know something he does not, seeming to expect the opposite. So the lord spends the next three days hunting, catching deer on the first day, a boar on the second and a fox on the third.

However, all the while, Gawain is sleeping in and relaxing while being the object of seduction by the lady of the castle. It is not clear why the lady is interested in Gawain, given that she is already married to the lord of the castle. She gets into bed with him, begs for his kisses and for more, and constantly impresses herself upon him three day in a row. Gawain behaves like an almost perfect gentleman, rebuffing her whenever she advances too far. The only thing he will give her is a kiss, which he obliges her twice.

While the lady seems outwardly flustered by Gawain's resistance, she appears to have a plan. She tries to get him to give her a gift, and when he has nothing to give her that he does not need for the coming battle, she offers him a ring, her girdle, and finally a silk belt, which he takes. Both the lord and the lady appear to be making three offers to Gawain, flattering him and trying to win his affection. But one gets the sense that these events point toward an unknown future.



# Chapter IV, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

## Chapter IV, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Summary

New Year draws near, snow covers the land. Sir Gawain cannot sleep as he imagines the next day. He awakens and clothes himself; he also remembers the silk belt the lady gave him. Gringolet, his horse, is ready to ride; Gawain mounts him and says goodbye, crossing the bridge out of the castle. His squire pleads with him not to go forward, since the Green Knight is incredibly strong and impossible to defeat. Another rider points him towards the Green Chapel.

Gawain then spurs Gringolet forward, initially finding a mound and then discovering a barrow that he could enter. The Green Chapel appears to be a grave. When Gawain enters, he finds the barrow overgrown. He then climbs up on the roof of the mound, hearing a noise clattering up the cliff. He has no idea what awaits him.

The Green Knight appears, standing over Gawain's head. The Green Knight climbs out of a hole, equipped with a horrible Danish axe. The Green Knight looked exactly as before. The Green Knight greets him and thanks him for remembering their agreement. He promises to repay Gawain. Then Gawain bows, exposing his neck. The Green Knight lifts his axe to decapitate Gawain and as he swings down the axe, Gawain moves to one side. The Green Knight mocks him for being cowardly. Gawain admits that he flinched but notes that he cannot restore his head if it is removed. He then bows again, asking the Green Knight to strike once more.

The Green Knight swings but did not hurt Gawain, save but a small nick. The axe passed through his neck and he sprang back, exclaiming that their covenant was dissolved, his having withstood the Green Knight's attack. The Green Knight then relinquishes his claims to his things. But he notes that he set Gawain to another trial when he sent his wife to seduce Gawain. Gawain kissed her twice and she gave him a silk belt that was owned by the Green Knight. She was sent to test him and he failed.

Gawain is ashamed, castigating the Green Knight for deception. He then repents and the Green Knight receives his penance. The Green Knight, apparently, is the lord of the castle; he then invites Gawain back to the castle and promises to make his wife Gawain's friend. Gawain declines and gives his regards to the lady. He will not open himself up to more danger. But he decides to keep the silk-belt to turn to in order to humble himself when he needs it. He then asks the Green Knight his name.

The lord replies that he is named 'Bertilak de Hautdesert'; he was transformed by Morgan le Fay in his mansion through crafts learned from Merlin. The lady is Morgan le Fay, and is now known as Morgan the Goddess. She sent Bertilak to the castle in the guise of the Green Knight to test the honesty of the Knights of the Round Table. She



wanted to embarrass the Arthurian court in order to hurt Guinevere so much that she might die. Morgan is Arthur's half-sister, daughter of the Duchess of Tintagel from whom Sir Uther begat Arthur. After the conversation ends, Gawain leaves.

It was a miracle of God that Gawain lived. His neck healed and he continued to wear the belt. He then reached the Court and the court was delighted. They asked about his quest. The notch in his neck was for his dishonesty. The silk-belt and the nick in his neck were connected, representing his dishonor. Gawain was guilty but Arthur comforted him, much like the others. Gawain retained his honor because his actions and penance were still honorable.

## Chapter IV, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Analysis

Part IV brings Sir Gawain and the Green Knight to a close. The last part opens with Sir Gawain setting out to find the Green Chapel and face the Green Knight. After some searching and resisting the advice of his squire to avoid the confrontation, he finds the Green Chapel in a mound with a barrow. When he climbs to the top he finds the Green Knight. According to their covenant, he must now bear his neck to the Green Knight. After dodging one blow for fear of his life, he submits to another and survives it when the Green Knight's axe passes through his neck.

However, the Green Knight is not upset. It turns out that in fact he is the lord of the castle in disguise. While he yields his treasure to Gawain, he points out that the silk belt is his and that his wife, the lady, intentionally tried to seduce him with the two kisses and the gift. In fact, she is a magician, a student of Merlin's, who transformed - temporarily - the lord into the Green Knight. She sent him to the Arthurian Court to lure a noble knight into her clutches and seduce him. She intended this to humiliate Queen Guinevere, causing her so much grief that she would die. Gawain is distraught, although he only acted a bit ignobly.

The nick on his neck and the silk-belt are marks of his sin and penance. When he repents to the lord, the lord forgives him and reveals his name to him - Bertilak de Hautdesert. Gawain then slinks away, riding home to Camelot. He expects to return to the Arthurian court in shame. But the court is very forgiving, honoring Gawain for resisting Morgan de Lay and repenting for his sins.

In the end, the tale of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is the story of honor, sin, moral excellence and penance, with Sir Gawain failing to be morally perfect under temptation but doing almost as well in his actual resistance and quick penitence. One might observe that no one is perfect but some individuals can achieve a high, if not flawless degree of moral excellence.



# Pearl

## Pearl Summary

Pearl is a poem that concerns the death of an infant, Pearl, and her father's struggle to see whether she will enter heaven. The poem opens with a description of Pearl as a beautiful, radiant infant. Pearl's father is full of torment because she has recently died. Pearl was a seed that never had a chance to blossom. But she died 'without a spot'. After Pearl's death, her father begins to debate her eternal fate.

Next Pearl's father has a vision, where he is taken away to another world. Pearl's father describes the landscape as imbued with a heavenly beauty. At the sight of this world, Pearl's father's grief evaporates. He finds that as he follows the waters in this land that his heart receives increasing degrees of joy. Eventually, he sees a city with great walls far away, in an even lovelier land. A crystal cliff appears in this land as well, and Pearl's father sees a beautiful child at its base, dresses in a glistening white gown. He recognizes her.

The girl or ghost moves toward the water where Pearl's father is. She appears ready to welcome him. He asks whether it is Pearl who stands before him and describes his grief to her. He sees her wearing beautiful gems and proclaims that he wishes to be a 'joyful jeweller'. Pearl replies that she is not really gone or in a worse place, that he should not grieve for her fate is not dark. Pearl's father is grateful but she cautions him in reply that he is still making assumptions about her fate that are unwarranted. Pearl cautions him that there is more to this world that meets the eye. She notes that he wishes to cross the water to be with her but he must follow another path.

Pearl's father expresses desperation; he wishes to be with Pearl but she appears to forbid him. Pearl encourages him not to despair or be resentful. She urges him not to call God unjust but to instead submit to His will. Pearl's father repents for his arrogance and he then tells her of the bliss she brought him and the grief he feels now. Pearl is grateful for his expression of affection, but his darker emotions - pride, resentment, are unwelcome in this domain. She tells him that God took her away from the world pure in order to be his queen and live entirely on His Love.

Pearl's father wonders how Pearl can be queen instead of Mary, but she tells him that she is queen of a lesser domain, whereas Mary is empress of the universe. Heaven is such that anyone who attains it is a king or queen. All Christians, after all, are members of one body. Pearl's father then wonders why she would be a queen when she was so young. Why not leave her on earth long? Pearl had not even lived two years on the earth; she was not even old enough to please God. He thinks she is placed too high in heaven because she was not given the chance to merit God's affection. In response, Pearl emphasizes that God's grace is not as limited as her father believes. God gives his grace to whoever he will give it to. Pearl then cites various Scriptural passages on



behalf of her claim. But Pearl's father finds it unjust of God to distribute grace so unevenly.

Pearl maintains that God has enough grace to go around and that given great grace to some does not prevent showering it on others with more merit. Further, she was baptized, which brings much grace. There are many ways to receive grace as well, such as through repentance. One can also achieve grace through innocence or righteousness. Pearl's father relents and asks Pearl more about her relationship to God. She repeats that God invited her to be his queen and crowned her for her purity and virginity. Pearl was flawless and so she deserved great standing in heaven. She then praises God's greatness and notes that innocence of the lamb of the New Jerusalem, the lamb who was slain but lives.

Pearl's father is, again, grateful for Pearl's words. But he wishes to ask her a question. Why doesn't she have a place within the castle walls? She seems to be excluded. Pearl replies that she cannot enter until the Apocalypse and neither can any other human. All humans must be redeemed before the city may be opened. Pearl's father then begs to go with her to wherever she is but she tells him that God forbids it; he has to be cleansed from sin. But she has been permitted to give him a glimpse of the New Jerusalem, as St. John did in Revelation. Pearl's father then describes his view of the city, which is just like St. John's. For instance, the city has no need of sunlight because the city is lit by the light of God Himself. Pearl's father then sees the city full of the holy, seeing the 144,000 of heaven mentioned in Scripture. Pearl was among them.

Out of joy, Pearl's father rushes towards the Lamb in the city, but as he does so, his dream fades. He wakes up in his garden as before. He thanks Pearl for his vision and is overjoyed that she has pleased God.

## Pearl Analysis

Pearl is a poem which ostensibly concerns that grief that a father feels over the death of his toddler-aged daughter, Pearl, who has recently died. He cannot make sense of why she died when she did not have time to please God through her actions and he also is concerned that she is not with God in heaven. To answer these questions, he is whisked away to a land outside of Paradise, where he sees Pearl across the river on the same side as the New Jerusalem. She comes to the water's edge to speak to him and there a conversation ensues.

First, Pearl's father is overjoyed to see her. And she is glad to see him too. He exclaims that he is happy to see her in heaven and living in this land. But she cautions him not to make assumptions about her station as quickly as he does. The current land is not her home. Instead, her ultimate home is within the New Jerusalem. Further, God has made her a queen of the heavenly realm. In fact, one reason God took her was to have a pure and innocent queen to rule with him.



But by this exclamation, Pearl's father is scandalized. He thinks it is unjust that Pearl has been made a queen when so many others lived longer lives and garnered more merit before God through their actions. However, he only seems to be upset that God has taken Pearl away at all. Nonetheless, Pearl cautions her father against accusing God of injustice and then engages in a sustained theological argument that grace is not apportioned in direct proportion to merit but instead, God's grace is 'great enow'. There is so much of God's grace that He can give it abundantly to all regardless of their merit. Further, Pearl does have merit through her innocence and baptism. It is in this section that the theological nature of the poem becomes most clear. There is an animating question about the relationship between grace and works in the poem and Pearl is providing an answer. A man can merit grace but the degree that he receives is entirely up to God.

Pearl's father eventually agrees and then asks to see the heavenly city, which no one may yet enter, as the Apocalypse has not occurred and humanity's general redemption not achieved. He sees a vision of the New Jerusalem much akin to the original vision given to St. John in Revelation. Pearl is among the number of the heavenly kingdom, he discovers. He is overjoyed at the sight of the Lamb and when he rushes towards Him, Pearl's father's dream ends. He finds that his grief is assuaged and that he is happy for God to have Pearl and that she pleases Him, no matter what the reason may be.



# Sir Orfeo

## Sir Orfeo Summary

Sir Orfeo was an old English king in a line of English lords. His father was descended from Pluto, his mother from Juno. He was honorable and played the harp better than anyone else. Orfeo ruled in the city of Tracience, also known as Winchester. His queen, Lady Heurodis, lived there with him.

In early May, lady Heurodis was on a stroll in an orchard with two maidens when she fell asleep. The maidens let her rest. She awoke that afternoon, writhing and making great clamor. She seemed out of her mind. The maidens ran to the palace and had some knights and ladies restrain her. Orfeo was full of grief, finding her in her bed wondering what was wrong with her.

Heurodis spoke finally and tells him what has happened. She thanks him for loving her but tells him that they must be torn apart. When he asks why, she tells him that while she slept, two knights came to her and told her that their king was coming with his knights. The king was noble and bold, as were his men. The king caught her and took her to his palace, showing it to her, and then brought her home. He then demanded that Heurodis return the next to the same tree to be taken away with him forever. If she resists, they will kill her.

Orfeo, upon hearing this, is determined to resist. The next day, he amasses one thousand armed knights to protect lady Heurodis at the tree. But in the midst of the knights, lady Heurodis is snatched away through some sort of magic. The knights and the king are overcome with grief. Orfeo then appoints a steward to run the kingdom in his place while he goes to search for his queen.

Orfeo leaves his kingdom with only a beggar's cloak and his harp. He travels on foot throughout the land, dressed as a mere peasant, far from his former glory. As time progresses and the months pass, he does not find Heurodis, but instead subsists on forest food and gradually wastes away. His skin cracks and his beard grows long. For ten years he searches in the wood and hides his harp so that it would not be stolen.

From time to time, King Orfeo would see the Faerie King hunting in the woods, the King who stole Heurodis away. The Faerie King never took a beast with him, however. And Orfeo did not know where he went to. But one day, he sees sixty ladies on horses, each bearing a falcon on their hands. The falcons then descend upon other birds and slew their prey. Orfeo laughs at them and asks to join them, but as soon as he walks up to them, he sees that one of the women is Heurodis, but she says nothing. She begins to cry and the ladies leave. Orfeo is overwhelmed with grief and begins to chase the ladies, following them for miles until he finds their castle. The castle is enormous and ornate, and the land beautiful. He appears to be in a land akin to Paradise.





Orfeo knocks on the castle and offers his skill as a minstrel to the King of the castle. The porter then allows him to enter. But within the walls there are living but dismembered men and men covered in wombs. The castle contains the dead, caught there through fairy magic. And then he sees Heurodis asleep under a tree. Eventually Orfeo reaches the king and offers his skill as a poor wandering minstrel. The king allows him to play and the melody he produced is beautiful. The king is pleased by the music and tells Orfeo that he will give him whatever rich reward he asks for.

Orfeo asks for his wife back, but the king refuses because he claims they would be a sorry pair. He is dirty, but she is clean, he poor, she wealthy. Orfeo challenges him, though, to keep his word, and the king obliges. He takes Heurodis and leaves. The two of them then trace their way home to Winchester. Yet no one recognizes him. He and Heurodis have to sleep in beggar's lodgings that night.

The next day, he and Heurodis awake and Orfeo goes into the city to meet the steward, introducing himself as a mere minstrel. The steward invites him to the castle to listen to him play. The court is stunned at his ability. The steward asks where he found the harp, and Orfeo says ten years ago he found it on a carcass that had been eating by lions and wolves. The steward is grieved to learn that Orfeo had died. Seeing that his steward remains loyal and true, Orfeo then announces that it is him and that he has won back his queen. The steward understands and bows before the King. Then Orfeo is bathed, shaved and robed. The king and queen are carried in a procession and King Orfeo is recrowned.

## Sir Orfeo Analysis

Orfeo is a briefer poem than either Sir Gawain and the Green Knight or Pearl. It is also less complex. The story begins with King Orfeo happily ruling his kingdom of Traciencie/Winchester. His wife, lady Heurodis, is a great beauty and the two live a happy life. But one day, lady Heurodis falls asleep under a tree in the royal orchard. When she wakes up, she apparently has gone mad. When the court has calmed her down, she tells Orfeo that she had a vision of the Fairy King demanding that she return to that same tree the next day to be forever taken away to live with him in his kingdom. If she does not return, she will be savagely killed.

Orfeo plans to resist and amasses his forces in the orchard grove. However, the Faerie King uses magic to snatch Heurodis away before anyone can stop him. Orfeo is deeply grieved and hands his kingdom over to a steward while he goes into the wilderness with only a cloak and his harp to find Heurodis. He spends ten years in the forest, occasionally seeing the Faerie King on a hunt, although never catching animals.

The reader will be able to infer after reading the story that the King is on the hunt to save the dead and trapping them within his castle walls. For one day, Heurodis happens upon sixty ladies hunting game with falcons and one of them turns out to be Heurodis. He follows the ladies home and gains entry into the castle by offering his harp-playing services to the king. When he enters, he sees the living dead, men dismembered,



women who apparently died in childbirth, and then he finds Heurodis still asleep under a tree.

Apparently the Faerie King is the guardian of the dead and through his harp-playing Orfeo is able to gain the King's favor. He then gets the King to allow him to leave with Heurodis. They return to Winchester/Traciencia, Orfeo tests the loyalty of his steward, and when the steward passes the test, Orfeo reveals himself and the story ends happily.



# Characters

## Sir Gawain

Sir Gawain is the main character of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the longest of the three works included in the Tolkien compilation. Gawain is a member of the Knights of the Round Table and conceives of himself as one of the weakest and meekest members of the group. However, when the Green Knight storms into the Arthurian Court, it is Sir Gawain who asks Arthur for permission to strike the Green Knight and take up his bet. When Arthur obliges, Sir Gawain decapitates the Green Knight, who then picks up his head and storms out, beginning the year and one day period until he has a similar shot at Gawain.

In the meanwhile, Gawain relaxes and enjoys his year. Several days before he must meet the Green Knight, he finds his way to a castle, two miles from the Green Chapel, where the encounter with the Green Knight will take place. He graciously accepts that favor and hospitality of the lord and lady of the castle. And he makes an agreement with the castle lord that they will exchange their bounty from their respective quests/hunts. While the lord is out, the lady attempts to seduce Gawain, only to partly succeed through garnering two kisses and getting Gawain to accept a silk belt from her as a gift.

When Gawain encounters the Green Knight, the Green Knight's axe passes through his neck, only nicking him. But when Gawain is happy to have survived and demands his reward for surviving the Green Knight's assault, the Green Knight reveals that he is in fact the lord of the castle and that Gawain is wearing his sash, which represents his failure to act nobly and wholly resist the lady's advances. Gawain, who is almost entirely morally upright, is aggrieved and guilt-ridden. He immediately repents, but the Green Knight/lord of the castle seems forgiving. Gawain's story is one of a noble, righteous and brave man who makes a moral error but repents and reveals an almost perfect character.

## The Green Knight/the lord/Bertilak de Hautdesert

The Green Knight is the second main character of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and also the main villain/antagonist of the poem. The Green Knight is introduced when he gallops into the Arthurian Court, an enormous man covered in green garb, with green weapons, a green horse and green skin. He challenges any Knight of the Round Table to strike his neck in exchange for allowing him to do the same in one year and a day. Gawain strikes him, decapitating him, following which the Green Knight picks up his head and gallops off, hiding for a year.

It turns out that the Green Knight is in fact that lord of the castle where Gawain stays. His wife, the lady of the castle and also the witch, Morgan de Lay, has goaded him into testing the honor of the Knights of the Round Table in the hopes of revealing one of



them to be morally corrupt, embarrassing Queen Guinevere to such a degree that she dies from grief. When her husband accepts, she transforms him into the Green Knight with miraculous powers, sent to do her bidding. When he tests Gawain and finds that he (partly) fails to represent honor and righteousness he is forgiving and reveals both his wife's plot and his name, Bertilak de Hautdesert. Thus, it turns out that the Green Knight, rather than a villain, is in fact the standard by which Gawain's character is judged.

## **The lady/Morgan de Lay/Morgan the Goddess**

The lady of the castle and a magician trained under Merlin, Morgan de Lay transforms her husband into the Green Knight and attempts to seduce Gawain in order to dishonor the Knights of the Round Table and grieve Queen Guinevere to such a degree that she dies as a result.

## **King Arthur**

The legendary English King who presides of the Knights of the Round Table and allows Gawain to represent the Round Table in battle with the Green Knight.

## **Queen Guinevere**

Arthur's famous wife and noble queen of Camelot, Guinevere is the target of Morgan de Lay's plot.

## **The Knights of the Round Table**

The famed honorable and equal knights of Camelot.

## **Pearl**

The daughter who dies at a very young age in 'Pearl' and who confronts her father in his vision of the afterlife, assuring him that God is just in crowning her his queen and unequally apportioning his grace to her.

## **Pearl's Father**

Pearl's father is the protagonist of 'Pearl', who grieves at his daughter's death and in his vision accuses God of unjustly distributing his grace. He comes to accept God's justice as the poem ends.



## **King Orfeo**

The protagonist of King Orfeo, King Orfeo's wife is stolen away and he goes on a ten year mission to win her back.

## **Lady Heurodis**

King Orfeo's wife, who is captured by the Faerie King.

## **The Faerie King**

The King of a far-off land who steals Lady Heurodis away from King Orfeo.

## **Orfeo's Steward**

The honorable man Orfeo appoints to rule his kingdom in his absence.

## **God**

God brings Gawain through his quest alive and makes Pearl his queen.



# Objects/Places

## Medieval England

Medieval England is the country setting of all three poems.

## Camelot

The famed kingdom of Arthur and Guinevere, and the home of Sir Gawain.

## Arthur's Court

The opening setting of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight where the Green Knight challenges the Knights of the Round Table, Gawain decapitates him and where Gawain returns in shame at the end of the poem.

## Hautdesert's Castle

The castle near the Green Chapel where Sir Gawain stays for several days at the behest of the lord of the castle, who turns out to be not only the Green Knight but Bertilak de Hautdesert.

## The Green Chapel

The supposed dwelling of the Green Knight.

## Mass and Matins

Two major Christian worship services that Sir Gawain participates in at numerous points throughout Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

## The Green Knight's Axe

The Green Knight has a mighty Danish Axe which he uses to slice at Gawain's neck.

## Morgan de Lay's Magic

Morgan de Lay transformed her husband into the Green Knight with magic powers she learned from Merlin.



## **Morgan de Lay's Kiss**

When Morgan de Lay procured Gawain's kiss she revealed his moral imperfection.

## **Gawain and Hautdesert's Promise**

Gawain and Hautdesert agreed that if Gawain was allowed to strike at Hautdesert's neck, that Hautdesert could return the favor in one year and one day.

## **Hautdesert's Silk Belt**

The token of the lady's love that she gives to Gawain when he goes into battle with the Green Knight. When Gawain discovers that the silk belt is owned by Hautdesert/the Green Knight he is filled with shame because the belt comes to represent his sin.

## **Gawain's Nick**

The only damage Gawain received from the Green Knight was a nick on his neck but it came to represent his sin.

## **Paradise**

The setting of both most of 'Pearl' where Pearl and her father have a theological discussion but also supposedly the land that is ruled by the Faerie King.

## **New Jerusalem**

The city in Christian Scripture where the elect live in eternity with Jesus.

## **God's Grace**

God apportions his grace disproportionately in 'Pearl', giving Pearl more than Pearl's father believes she deserves. Pearl's father ultimately accepts God's distribution of grace as just.

## **Traciencie/Winchester**

The kingdom of Sir Orfeo



## **Orfeo's Harp**

Orfeo was the greatest harp player in the land and uses his skills to win back his wife from the Faerie King.

## **Heurodis's Vision**

Lady Heurodis has a vision of the Faerie King coming to capture her.

## **The Castle of the Faerie King**

King Orfeo finds Lady Heurodis in the Faerie King's castle. It also contains vast legions of the dead.





# Themes

## Sin, Righteousness and Penance

All three pieces in the compilation have deeply Christian themes. This should be expected as all three pieces were penned during the High Middle Ages in Medieval England. The symbolism of the text is full of religious icons, and items that in reality represent theological ideas. For instance, the nick on Sir Gawain's neck and the silk belt he received from Morgan de Lay both represent Sir Gawain's shame, sin and moral imperfection.

The idea of sin, repentance and atonement are central to Christian doctrine and theology; these themes pervade the text. The entire plot of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is set in motion by Morgan de Lay's desire to show the moral imperfection of the Knights of the Round Table in order to kill Queen Guinevere by filling her with unbearable grief. Moral excellence is highly prized. When Sir Gawain is tempted by Morgan de Lay, the reader will clearly identify a theme of seduction and temptation common to Christian understandings of sin. And when Sir Gawain's moral imperfection is exposed, he reacts not with a defense but with profound shame and instant penance.

Pearl also contains a discussion of sin, righteousness and penance, but these themes are subordinated by a focus on the nature of God's grace. God chose Pearl to be his queen because she is innocent and without sin. She has no 'spot' as Pearl claims in the poem. Righteousness in life is one way to earn God's favor, but so is remaining innocent. Further, Pearl's father challenges the justice of God's apportionment of grace and comes to repent of his arrogant judgments at the end of the poem.

## God's Abundant Grace

God's grace is the primary theme of Pearl, but it is reflected in part in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. God's grace is seen as a primary factor in leading Sir Gawain through his trials unharmed. Gawain prays at Mass to be protected from the Green Knight's axe and he believes that he is spared from harm from the Green Knight through God's favor. He also knows that when he repents God's grace it allows him to be forgiven.

But again, Pearl is where the theme of God's abundant grace takes center stage. When Pearl's father encounters Pearl in Paradise, they discuss how Pearl has become a queen. Pearl argues that God called her to Him because of her purity and innocence. But Pearl's father finds this reasoning of God's profoundly unjust. God's grace should be apportioned to merit, he argues, and giving so much grace to Pearl seems unfair to those who spent decades trying to live an upright life of worship and repentance.

But Pearl emphasizes that the distribution of God's grace is His own prerogative and she cites several Scriptural passages that support her argument. However, she also repeatedly emphasizes that there is enough of God's grace to go around. Just because



God showers abundant grace on Pearl does not mean that he cannot more than compensate others for the work they do. God's grace does not run out. Again, it is abundant.

## Death and the Life to Come

Death and the Life to Come is ultimately another Christian theme of these three pieces. But all three pieces understand death according the Medieval Christian theology. First, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Sir Gawain at times appears to believe that in fact that Green Knight will kill him with his axe. He is afraid to submit to his agreement with the Green Knight to bear his neck. He also finds the Green Knight on a barrow, or a tomb. Further, the Green Knight has the miraculous power to survive death. In his worry, Sir Gawain hopes that his moral excellence will lead to God's favor in the afterlife but he is distraught when his righteousness is tainted by his sin. Additionally, the whole plot is set in motion by Morgan de Lay's desire to kill Queen Guinevere.

Pearl is all about death and the life to come. For one thing, the plot is driven by the untimely death of Pearl, who was not even two years of age when she passed on. Pearl's father's vision takes him to Paradise, finding Pearl in the afterlife. And the two of them discuss Pearl's role in the life to come at length. Further, Pearl's father is fortunate enough to observe New Jerusalem, the heavenly city where all the elect will spend eternity in the presence of Jesus and God.

Finally, in *Sir Orfeo*, death is an important theme because the Faerie King appears to live in Paradise and have control over the fate of the dead. It is unclear whether Lady Heurodis died under the orchard because Orfeo finds her asleep in the Faerie King's castle surrounded by obviously dead individuals.

# Style

## Point of View

The points of view of the three pieces included in the book vary according to the authors, as one might expect. But before addressing the differences, let us first focus on their similarities. First, all three of these pieces were written during the High Middle Ages in England, following the Norman Conquest of 1066. This gave rise to a particular form of the English language known as Middle English, which is largely incomprehensible to English-speakers today.

Further, all three authors are deeply committed Christians or at least are attempting to look that way. Pearl appears to be partly a theological treatise about the nature and justice of God's actions and decisions in the world. And Sir Gawain and the Green Knight prominently features the Christian mass and Marian and Saints piety characteristic of the Roman Catholic faith as central to Medieval English social practices. Finally, while Sir Orfeo does not explicitly discuss God or Jesus, it features Paradise prominently, although admittedly this is not unique to Christianity. The authors also are clear products of their time, writing of Medieval Lore, particularly of magical powers combined with Christian symbolism.

The points of view of the three pieces are different however. First, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is written in the third person; the author seems intent to vindicate Sir Gawain's character while admitting his flaws. Second, Pearl is written in the first person, reflecting the internal struggle of Pearl's father with his daughter's death. The author here is interested, presumably, in defending God's justice and distribution of grace even when the reasoning behind God's actions is unclear. Finally, Sir Orfeo returns to the third person and appears to largely be a simple story with a simple plot and no overt point to get across.

## Setting

The settings of all three pieces begin in Medieval England, presumably where they were written. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight draws heavily on the Arthurian legend, whose lineage extends back centuries into English history. It begins in Camelot, where Sir Gawain is engaged in Christmas-tide festivities until the Green Knight rushes in and challenges the Knights of the Round Table. Sir Gawain then proceeds to stay at Camelot for a year until he embarks on a long journey to find the Green Chapel. On the way, he finds a castle where most of the story takes place. The castle is ruled by a lord, who turns out to be the Green Knight, and by his lady, who turns out to be a magician, taught by Merlin. The final unique setting of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is at the Green Chapel, a mound with a barrow in it where Sir Gawain encounters the Green Knight for the last time. The tale ends with Sir Gawain's return to Camelot.



The setting of Pearl is much less concrete. The poem begins with Pearl's father mourning her death while sitting in his garden, but this is brief for his reflections lead quickly to a mystical vision of Paradise. Pearl's father finds himself in Paradise, in a land of stunning beauty and light. But across a river lies an even more beautiful land, which appears to be closer to the location of God. Across the river, Pearl's father sees Pearl all adorned in beautiful clothing appearing perfectly peaceful and full of joy. They speak together from across the river, which is the primary setting of the poem. But towards the end, Pearl's father is given a vision into the New Jerusalem, which is situated in Pearl's new homeland. When Pearl's father tries to enter, his vision ends.

Sir Orfeo is set in Orfeo's kingdom of Traciencia or what was known at the time of its writing as Winchester. Orfeo's wife, Lady Heurodis, is stolen away to the Faerie Kingdom, which apparently is something of a habitation for the dead. Sir Orfeo spends ten years in the forest that separates Traciencia from the Faerie Kingdom.

## Language and Meaning

The language and meaning of the compilation is of great significance. All three pieces were written in Middle English, a language that was spoken largely between 1066 and some time in the 1470s. Middle English is distinct from contemporary English in a variety of important respects. It also includes numerous French words that are more obvious imports from Norman rule. Furthermore, the language functions in a completely different cultural context, in a period of time when people were deeply and profoundly religious and superstitious, believing not only in the whole gamut of Christian theological beliefs but in miscellaneous doctrines about the saints within Christian history and about wholly non-Christian mystical ideas, such as Faeries, magic and the like.

J.R.R. Tolkien is one of the modern period's great masters of Middle English and to this day one of the world's finest philologists. His translations of these texts are careful and the book includes a detailed appendix which explains Tolkien's translation strategy. A careful reader will want to pay close attention to how Tolkien translates symbolic imagery as such translation inevitably involves a large degree of interpretive leeway.

The meanings of the language in these texts are meant to tell stories. They are set up in stanzas and have a deeply poetic structure. The stanza structures differ, to be sure, but a common theme running in the linguistic structure of these texts is that they are meant as lyrical story-telling literary devices.

## Structure

The compilation is divided into three pieces, each of which are included in the title. The first poem is the longest, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The poem takes place over 101 separate stanzas each of which encapsulate some key point or another or important piece of dialogue. The stanzas are grouped roughly into four parts which themselves correspond to different parts of the story. The first chapter sets up the main



plot, introduces Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, their pact and Sir Gawain's year in between his first encounter with the Green Knight and his last.

The second and third chapters record Sir Gawain's travels to the castle near the Green Chapel, his finding the castle and the ensuing complicated relationship that Sir Gawain quickly develops with both the lord and lady of the castle. The fourth chapter wraps up the story, giving the climax of the book where the reader discovers that the lord of the castle and the Green Knight are the same person and that Sir Gawain's moral excellence is flawed. It ends with Sir Gawain's forlorn return to Camelot where, much to his surprise, he is greeted with open arms.

Pearl is a shorter poem. It has a similarly large number of stanzas but these standards are quite a bit shorter. Pearl is not divided into discrete parts, despite having some informal grouping of the stanzas; it is unclear from the text whether these distinctions were imposed on the text or not. Pearl begins with Pearl's father explaining Pearl's death and his subsequent grief. It transitions into his vision of Pearl and their theological debate and it ends with Pearl's father's vision of the New Jerusalem, the resolution of his theological struggle and his return to his garden.

Orfeo is structured according to stanzas as well, but is numbered in groups of ten. So the 56th stanza would be listed as '560' to represent that set of ten lines that brings the line count to 560 lines. It is not divided into parts either; instead, it transitions from introducing the main characters, Lady Heurodis's vision, her subsequent capture, Orfeo's grief and embarkation on a ten-year long quest to find her. It then moves from Orfeo's discover of Lady Heurodis in the wood, his chasing the sixty women to the castle of the Faerie King, his persuasion of the Faerie King to give him back his wife and their triumphant return to Tracience/Wincester.



## Quotes

"There good Gawain was set at Guinevere's side ..." p. 27

"... for at the hue men gaped aghast in his face and form that showed; as a fay-man fell he passed, and green all over glowed." p. 28

"Now where is the governing of this gathering? For gladly I would on the same set my sight, and with himself now talk in town." p. 30

"The fair head to the floor fell from the shoulders, and folk fended it with their feet as forth it went rolling ..." p. 35

"Before God, 'tis a shame that thou, lord, must be lost, who art in life so noble!" p. 42

"Remain till New Year's Day, then rise and riding go! We'll set you on your way, 'tis but two miles or so." p. 51

"She came near thereupon and caught him in her arms, and down daintily bending dearly she kissed him." p. 57

"Nay! Lover have I none, and none will have meanwhile." p. 69

"By God on high I will neither grieve nor groan. With God's will I comply, Whose protection I do own." p. 79

"The grace of God grew great enow." p. 106

"Now all be as that Prince may please." p. 121

"May He that in form of bread and wine By priest upheld each day one sees, Us inmates of His house divine Make precious pearls Himself to please." p. 122

"Thus came Sir Orfeo out of care. God grant that well we all may fare!" p. 137



## Topics for Discussion

Why does the Green Knight come to Camelot?

Why does the lady of the castle tempt Sir Gawain?

What are Sir Gawain's main failings in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight? What are his noblest actions?

What are the marks of Gawain's sins? The marks of his penitence? How does the silk belt fit in with these questions?

Why has God chosen Pearl to be his queen?

What is Pearl's father's argument that God is unjust to make Pearl a queen? What is one of Pearl's counterarguments?

What is the point of Orfeo? Is it a simple poem? Or does it have a deeper purpose?