

# Before You Read

## FROM SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

### Make the Connection

#### Finding a Hero

One of the great works of medieval literature, this story was probably written around 1375, at a time when the old ideals of knightly conduct—courage, loyalty, and courtesy—were beginning to erode. Perhaps, as in our own age, people then were looking forward to the future but were also feeling nostalgic for values that had once defined their lives.

### Quickwrite

Are we living in a heroic age? Or do most people feel that there are no genuine heroes today? What do we demand of our heroes today? Do a quick survey of your classmates or of people outside school. Keep your survey results, and think about today's heroes as you read about the severe testing of a hero at King Arthur's court.



### Elements of Literature

#### The Romance

Romances (or at least works with some of the trappings of romances) are still being written today. They take the form of novels, movies, even comic strips. Strictly speaking, a **romance** is a narrative set in a world of pure wish fulfillment, where the ordinary laws of nature are suspended and where idealized and superhuman heroes fight and almost always conquer the forces of evil. The basic narrative pat-

tern of the romance is the **quest**, in which the hero undertakes a perilous journey in search of something of value.

From the thirteenth century onward, **romance** was a term applied to a verse narrative which traced the adventures of a brave knight or other hero who had to overcome danger for love of a noble lady or high ideal.

For more on the Romance, see page 167 and the Handbook of Literary Terms.

### Background

As *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* opens, King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table are feasting. Suddenly an enormous green stranger bursts into the hall. King Arthur greets the Green Knight and asks him to state his business. The Green Knight, after a few scornful words about the manliness of King Arthur's knights, says he only wishes to play a New Year's game. He challenges any knight there to agree to "exchange one blow for another"—he will even give that knight his gisarme (gi-zärm'), his two-bladed ax. The stranger says he will stand for the first blow; the knight must agree to let the Green Knight have *his* turn in a year and a day. Gawain accepts the challenge—no other knight except Arthur himself has dared to, and Gawain refuses to let the king give up his life.

Gawain hefts his ax and chops off the giant green head. But the Knight never falters. He picks up his green head, repeats his challenge, and gallops off with the head in his arms.

Just before Christmas the next year, Gawain sadly sets off on the long journey to honor his pledge. One day he comes upon a beautiful castle. The lord of the castle invites him to rest a few days and then suggests an odd "game." The lord says that he will go hunting each day and whatever he wins in the hunt he will give to Gawain. In return, Gawain must give anything he has won that day to the lord.

Each day when the lord goes off hunting, his beautiful young wife tries to seduce Gawain. For two days, Gawain accepts only kisses, and true to his bargain, he gives the lord the kisses when he returns from hunting. But on the morning of the third day, the lady not only kisses Gawain but also makes him accept a magical green girdle, or sash. She says that if he wears the sash, he cannot be killed.

When the lord returns from the hunt, Gawain gives him the kisses but keeps the sash a secret.

Now it's New Year's Day. Gawain sets off to find the Green Chapel and the dreaded Green Knight. Snow and sleet have fallen, and howling winds have piled up drifts of snow. Gawain leaves the castle with the green sash wrapped around his armor. He is certain he is headed for his death.



# from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

translated by John Gardner

- He put his spurs to Gringolet,<sup>o</sup> plunged down the path,  
Shoved through the heavy thicket grown up by the woods  
And rode down the steep slope to the floor of the valley;  
He looked around him then—a strange, wild place,  
5 And not a sign of a chapel on any side  
But only steep, high banks surrounding him,  
And great, rough knots of rock and rugged crags  
That scraped the passing clouds, as it seemed to him.  
He heaved at the heavy reins to hold back his horse  
10 And squinted in every direction in search of the Chapel,  
And still he saw nothing except—and this was strange—  
A small green hill all alone, a sort of barrow,<sup>o</sup>  
A low, smooth bulge on the bank of the brimming creek  
That flowed from the foot of a waterfall,  
15 And the water in the pool was bubbling as if it were boiling.  
Sir Gawain urged Gringolet on till he came to the mound  
And lightly dismounted and made the reins secure  
On the great, thick limb of a gnarled and ancient tree;  
Then he went up to the barrow and walked all around it,  
20 Wondering in his wits what on earth it might be.  
It had at each end and on either side an entrance,  
And patches of grass were growing all over the thing,  
And all the inside was hollow—an old, old cave  
Or the cleft of some ancient crag, he couldn't tell which  
25 it was.  
“Whoo, Lord!” thought the knight,  
“Is *this* the fellow's place?  
Here the Devil might  
Recite his midnight mass.  
30 “Dear God,” thought Gawain, “the place is deserted enough!  
And it's ugly enough, all overgrown with weeds!  
Well might it amuse that marvel of green  
To do his devotions here, in his devilish way!  
In my five senses I fear it's the Fiend himself

1. Gringolet: Gawain's horse.

12. barrow: grave mound.



Sir Gawain strikes off the head of the Green Knight in King Arthur's presence, from an English manuscript (c. 15th century). MS Cotton Nero A.X., fol. 94v.

By permission of the British Library, London.

35 Who's brought me to meet him here to murder me.  
 May fire and fury befall this fiendish Chapel,  
 As cursed a kirk<sup>o</sup> as I ever yet came across!"  
 With his helmet on his head and his lance in hand  
 He leaped up onto the roof of the rock-walled room  
 40 And, high on that hill, he heard, from an echoing rock  
 Beyond the pool, on the hillside, a horrible noise.  
*Brrrack!* It clattered in the cliffs as if to cleave them,  
 A sound like a grindstone grinding on a scythe!<sup>o</sup>  
*Brrrack!* It whirred and rattled like water on a mill wheel!  
 45 *Brrrrrack!* It rushed and rang till your blood ran cold.  
 And then: "Oh God," thought Gawain, "it grinds, I think,  
 For me—a blade prepared for the blow I must take  
 as my right!

50 God's will be done! But here!  
 He may well get his knight,  
 But still, no use in fear;  
 I won't fall dead of fright!"

And then Sir Gawain roared in a ringing voice,  
 "Where is the hero who swore he'd be here to meet me?  
 55 Sir Gawain the Good is come to the Green Chapel!  
 If any man would meet me, make it now,  
 For it's now or never, I've no wish to dawdle here long."  
 "Stay there!" called someone high above his head,  
 "I'll pay you promptly all that I promised before."  
 60 But still he went on with that whetting noise a while,  
 Turning again to his grinding before he'd come down.  
 At last, from a hole by a rock he came out into sight,  
 Came plunging out of his den with a terrible weapon,  
 A huge new Danish ax to deliver his blow with,  
 65 With a vicious swine of a bit bent back to the handle,  
 Filed to a razor's edge and four foot long,  
 Not one inch less by the length of that gleaming lace.  
 The great Green Knight was garbed as before,  
 Face, legs, hair, beard, all as before but for this:  
 70 That now he walked the world on his own two legs,  
 The ax handlê striking the stone like a walking-stave.<sup>o</sup>  
 When the knight came down to the water he would not wade  
 But vaulted across on his ax, then with awful strides  
 Came fiercely over the field filled all around  
 75 with snow.

Sir Gawain met him there  
 And bowed—but none too low!  
 Said the other, "I see, sweet sir,  
 You go where you say you'll go!

80 "Gawain," the Green Knight said, "may God be your guard!  
 You're very welcome indeed, sir, here at my place;

37. **kirk**: Scottish for "church."

43. **scythe** (*sīth*): long-handled cutting tool.



Sir Gawain, from *Le Roman de Lancelot du Lac* (detail) (c. 15th century).  
 MS 805, fol. 48.

The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

71. **walking-stave** (*stāv*): staff.

You've timed your travel, my friend, as a true man should.  
 You recall the terms of the contract drawn up between us:  
 At this time a year ago you took your chances,  
 85 And I'm pledged now, this New Year, to make you my payment.  
 And here we are in this valley, all alone,  
 And no man here to part us, proceed as we may;  
 Heave off your helmet then, and have here your pay;  
 And debate no more with me than I did then  
 90 When you severed my head from my neck with a single swipe."  
 "Never fear," said Gawain, "by God who gave  
 Me life, I'll raise no complaint at the grimness of it;  
 But take your single stroke, and I'll stand still  
 And allow you to work as you like and not oppose  
 95 you here."  
 He bowed toward the ground  
 And let his skin show clear;  
 However his heart might pound,  
 He would not show his fear.

100 Quickly then the man in the green made ready,  
 Grabbed up his keen-ground ax to strike Sir Gawain;  
 With all the might in his body he bore it aloft  
 And sharply brought it down as if to slay him;  
 Had he made it fall with the force he first intended  
 105 He would have stretched out the strongest man on earth.  
 But Sir Gawain cast a side glance at the ax  
 As it glided down to give him his Kingdom Come,<sup>o</sup>  
 And his shoulders jerked away from the iron a little,  
 And the Green Knight caught the handle, holding it back,  
 110 And mocked the prince with many a proud reproof:<sup>o</sup>  
 → "You can't be Gawain," he said, "who's thought so good,  
 A man who's never been daunted on hill or dale!  
 For look how you flinch for fear before anything's felt!  
 I never heard tell that Sir Gawain was ever a coward!  
 115 I never moved a muscle when you came down;  
 In Arthur's hall I never so much as winced.  
 My head fell off at my feet, yet I never flickered;  
 But you! You tremble at heart before you're touched!  
 I'm bound to be called a better man than you, then,  
 120 my lord."  
 Said Gawain, "I shied once:  
 No more. You have my word.  
 But if my head falls to the stones  
 It cannot be restored.

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### WORDS TO OWN

daunted (dɒnt'ed) *adj.*: intimidated.

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Sir Gawain is tempted by the lady of the castle, from an English manuscript (c. 15th century). MS Cotton Nero A.X., fol. 129.

By permission of the British Library, London.

**107. his Kingdom Come:** life after death.

**110. reproof:** rebuke; scolding.

### The Medieval Castle

Mention the Middle Ages, and romantic images of castles immediately come to mind: fires blazing in huge stone fireplaces, merrymaking at long wooden tables laden with roasted meats and jugs of ale, candles warmly glowing in an immense hall! Are these images at all accurate, or was the medieval castle something other than our idyllic movie image?

In reality, as in our imaginations, medieval castles created an imposing presence. But several design features made living conditions inside a castle communal and somewhat uncomfortable.

The castle's basic living space was the great hall. Although withdrawing rooms were added later for privacy, initially the lord, his family, attendants, and staff *all* ate, slept, and conducted business in the great hall—the first multi-purpose room. For meals, the lord and lady of the castle usually sat on chairs on a dais, or raised floor area, at the hall's end. The castle staff, arranged in descending rank from the dais, sat on benches at trestle tables, which could be taken down. At night the lord might sleep on a feather bed at one end of the

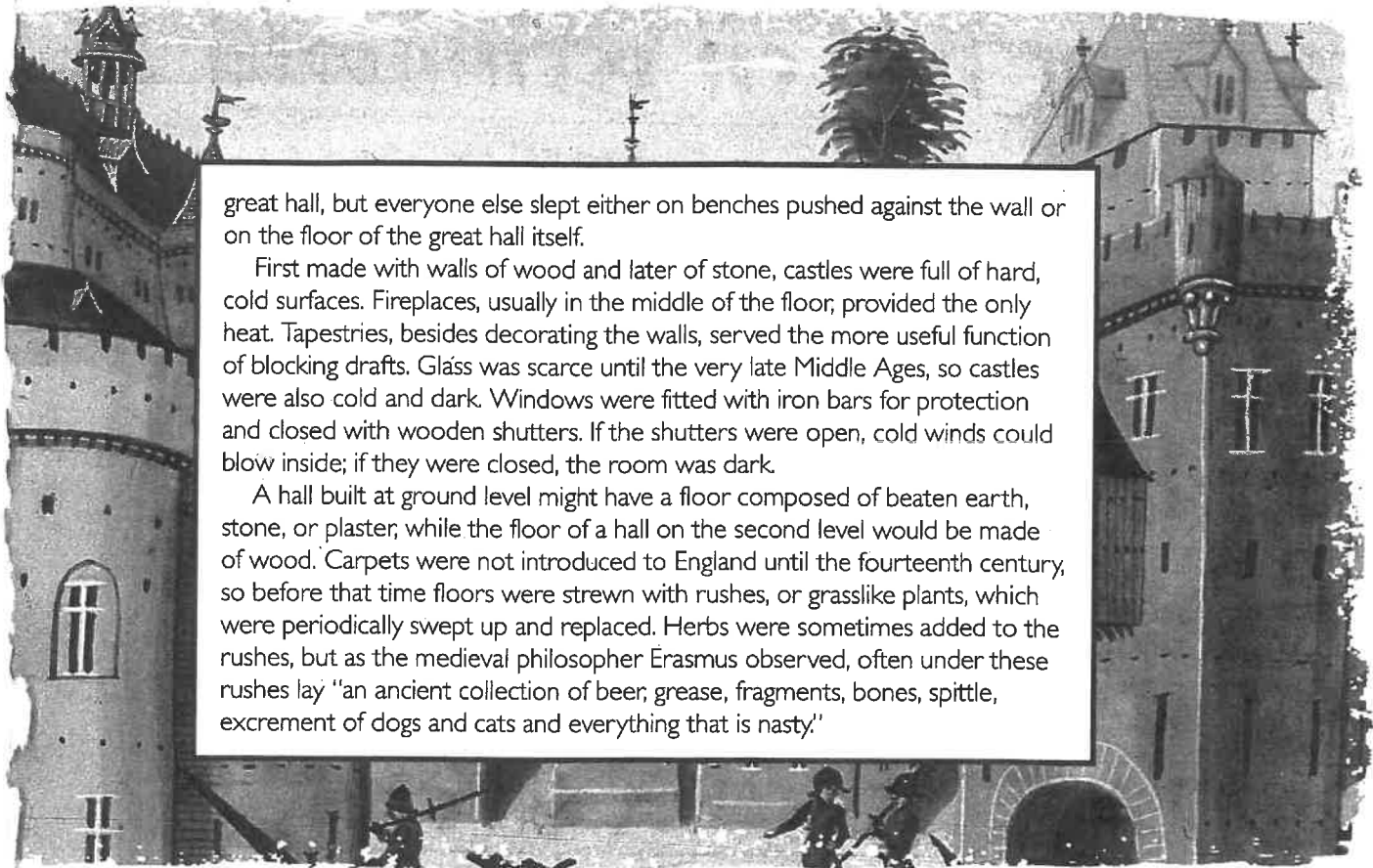
- 125 “But be brisk, man, by your faith, and come to the point!  
Deal out my doom if you can, and do it at once,  
For I’ll stand for one good stroke, and I’ll start no more  
Until your ax has hit—and that I swear.”
- “Here goes, then,” said the other, and heaves it aloft
- 130 And stands there waiting, scowling like a madman;  
He swings down sharp, then suddenly stops again,  
Holds back the ax with his hand before it can hurt,  
And Gawain stands there stirring not even a nerve;  
He stood there still as a stone or the stock of a tree
- 135 That’s wedged in rocky ground by a hundred roots.  
O, merrily then he spoke, the man in green:  
“Good! You’ve got your heart back! Now I can hit you.  
May all that glory the good King Arthur gave you  
Prove efficacious now—if it ever can—
- 140 And save your neck.” In rage Sir Gawain shouted,

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#### WORDS TO OWN

**efficacious** (ef'i·kā'shəs) *adj.*: effective. ∴

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great hall, but everyone else slept either on benches pushed against the wall or on the floor of the great hall itself.

First made with walls of wood and later of stone, castles were full of hard, cold surfaces. Fireplaces, usually in the middle of the floor, provided the only heat. Tapestries, besides decorating the walls, served the more useful function of blocking drafts. Glass was scarce until the very late Middle Ages, so castles were also cold and dark. Windows were fitted with iron bars for protection and closed with wooden shutters. If the shutters were open, cold winds could blow inside; if they were closed, the room was dark.

A hall built at ground level might have a floor composed of beaten earth, stone, or plaster, while the floor of a hall on the second level would be made of wood. Carpets were not introduced to England until the fourteenth century, so before that time floors were strewn with rushes, or grasslike plants, which were periodically swept up and replaced. Herbs were sometimes added to the rushes, but as the medieval philosopher Erasmus observed, often under these rushes lay "an ancient collection of beer, grease, fragments, bones, spittle, excrement of dogs and cats and everything that is nasty."

Page from *Froissart's Chronicles* (detail).  
MS Fr. 2643, fol. 226v.  
© cliché Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

145 "Hit me, hero! I'm right up to here with your threats!  
Is it *you* that's the cringing coward after all?"  
"Whoo!" said the man in green, "he's wrathful, too!  
No pauses, then; I'll pay up my pledge at once,  
I vow!"

He takes his stride to strike  
And lifts his lip and brow;  
It's not a thing Gawain can like,  
For nothing can save him now!

150 He raises that ax up lightly and flashes it down,  
And that blinding bit bites in at the knight's bare neck—  
But hard as he hammered it down, it hurt him no more  
Than to nick the nape of his neck, so it split the skin;  
The sharp blade slit to the flesh through the shiny hide,  
155 And red blood shot to his shoulders and spattered the ground.  
And when Gawain saw his blood where it blinked in the snow  
He sprang from the man with a leap to the length of a spear;  
He snatched up his helmet swiftly and slapped it on,  
Shifted his shield into place with a jerk of his shoulders,

160 And snapped his sword out faster than sight; said boldly—  
And, mortal born of his mother that he was,  
There was never on earth a man so happy by half—  
“No more strokes, my friend; you’ve had your swing!  
I’ve stood one swipe of your ax without resistance;  
165 If you offer me any more, I’ll repay you at once  
With all the force and fire I’ve got—as you  
will see.

I take one stroke, that’s all,  
For that was the compact we  
170 Arranged in Arthur’s hall;  
But now, no more for me!”

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

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

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

175. **staunch** (stōnch): steadfast.  
**doughty** (dout’ē): courageous.

199. **scabbard** (skab’ərd): case that  
holds the blade of a sword.

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### WORDS TO OWN

**fainted** (fānt’id) v.: pretended to strike.

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It was I who sent her to test you. I'm convinced  
 You're the finest man that ever walked this earth.  
 205 As a pearl is of greater price than dry white peas,  
 So Gawain indeed stands out above all other knights.  
 But you lacked a little, sir; you were less than loyal;  
 But since it was not for the sash itself or for lust  
 But because you loved your life, I blame you less."  
 210 Sir Gawain stood in a study° a long, long while,  
 So miserable with disgrace that he wept within,  
 And all the blood of his chest went up to his face  
 And he shrank away in shame from the man's gentle words.  
 The first words Gawain could find to say were these:

215 "Cursed be cowardice and covetousness both,  
 Villainy and vice that destroy all virtue!"  
 He caught at the knots of the girdle° and loosened them  
 And fiercely flung the sash at the Green Knight.  
 "There, there's my fault! The foul fiend vex it!  
 220 Foolish cowardice taught me, from fear of your stroke,  
 To bargain, covetous, and abandon my kind,  
 The selflessness and loyalty suitable in knights;  
 Here I stand, faulty and false, much as I've feared them,  
 Both of them, untruth and treachery; may they see sorrow  
 225 and care!

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

230 At that, the Green Knight laughed, saying graciously,  
 "Whatever harm I've had, I hold it amended  
 Since now you're confessed so clean, acknowledging sins  
 And bearing the plain penance of my point;  
 I consider you polished as white and as perfectly clean  
 235 As if you had never fallen since first you were born.  
 And I give you, sir, this gold-embroidered girdle,  
 For the cloth is as green as my gown. Sir Gawain, think  
 On this when you go forth among great princes;  
 Remember our struggle here; recall to your mind  
 240 This rich token. Remember the Green Chapel.  
 And now, come on, let's both go back to my castle  
 And finish the New Year's revels with feasting and joy,  
 not strife,

245 I beg you," said the lord,  
 And said, "As for my wife,  
 She'll be your friend, no more  
 A threat against your life."

210. **stood in a study:** stood thinking deeply.

217. **girdle:** sash.



*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1952)  
 by Dorothea Braby. Golden Cockerel  
 Press.

Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New  
 York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, and Tilden  
 Foundations.



## MAKING MEANINGS

### First Thoughts

1. What do you think of the way the Green Knight and his wife trick and seduce Gawain? Do people today endure similar trials to test their values? Discuss.

### Shaping Interpretations

2. "A man who's true to his word, / There's nothing he needs to fear." The Green Knight says this to Gawain after he reveals how Gawain has been tricked. What do you think of this idea?
3. In what ways is Sir Gawain a superhuman **romance hero**? In what ways is he weak or flawed, just as a real person might be?
4. Describe the **symbolic** use of the color green in this story. (Green usually symbolizes hope; it is associated with the appearance of new life in the plant world.)
5. What **images** make the setting of the confrontation seem demonic? Do you think there is any **symbolism** suggested by this setting? Explain.
6. If you read the complete story of Gawain and the Green Knight, you will learn that King Arthur's wicked half sister, Morgan Le Fay, sent the Green Knight to test Gawain. What do you think—did Gawain prove himself to be a good knight or not? Do you think sexual morality is as important in Arthur's court as honesty and courage? Discuss your opinions.
7. How would you describe the writer's **tone** in this story? Is he entirely serious, or do you find moments of humor? Find passages in the story to support your responses.

### Reading Check

- a. Where does Gawain find the Green Knight, and what is the Knight doing?
- b. What happens with the first and second strokes of the Green Knight's ax?
- c. What happens the third time?
- d. Who does the Green Knight turn out to be?
- e. How does the Knight finally evaluate Gawain's character?

### Extending the Text

8. Do you think people long to find heroes like Gawain today? Do you think the singer of "Holding Out for a Hero" (see *Connections*, page 166) is thinking of a Gawain type? Why?
9. This story has been read as an **allegory**, or symbolic story, of Christian redemption. From this point of view, who would be the sinner and who would be the Christ figure? What would be the terms of salvation?
10. Compare the romantic triangle in this story—the two men and the woman—with romantic triangles in contemporary fiction or movies.

## ELEMENTS OF LITERATURE

### Romances: Wishes Fulfilled

Romances are often too incredible for some modern readers, too lacking in the realistic details of life we have come to expect of literature. Yet in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, we feel the gripping reality of sexual temptation and of life in the medieval castle.

The **romance** has a simple, inevitable plot: A hero battles an evil enemy and ultimately wins. As part of the story, the hero undertakes a **quest**. The quest usually has three stages: a dangerous journey, a central test or ordeal to determine if the hero truly has the qualities of a hero, and a return to the

point from which the journey began.

In *Gawain* we have the model of the chivalric hero whose honor is being tested. This is a serious romance whose purpose is clearly to teach a moral lesson. Yet the hero does not have unlimited powers. Gawain is a human being who, like all of us, is limited in his moral and physical strength.

### Elements of Romance

- a near-perfect hero
- an evil enemy
- a quest
- a test of the hero
- supernatural elements
- good vs. evil
- female figures who are usually maidens (in need of rescue), mothers, or crones

Romances are still a popular form found in today's novels, movies, television shows, and comics. The *Indiana Jones* movies and the *Star Trek* TV episodes are essentially romances, as are these books, which you may have read: C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, many of Lloyd Alexander's books, Brian Jacques's *Redwall* series, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*.

Romances are traditionally set in the past, which is where the Wife of Bath sets her story: "When good King Arthur ruled in ancient days." Today, romances may also be set in the future, as in the *Star Wars* movies. Through this journey to a remote time or place, the hero learns something of value.

**Comparing romances.** As part of a group, discuss the Gawain story as a romance. Next, expand your discussion to include other works, using a chart like the one below. Present your ideas to the rest of the class, using specific examples to support your conclusions.

| Work                      | Romance Elements |
|---------------------------|------------------|
| Sir Gawain                |                  |
| Beowulf                   |                  |
| "The Wife of Bath's Tale" |                  |
| Current movie or TV show  |                  |
| Novel                     |                  |

## CHOICES: Building Your Portfolio

### Writer's Notebook

#### 1. Collecting Ideas for a Comparison-Contrast Essay

When you write your essay of comparison and contrast for the Writer's Workshop on page 185, you might want to compare one of these medieval stories with a modern story. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* would be a



good medieval story to use as part of your comparison-contrast. Take notes now on the ways Gawain's experiences are like or unlike the tests that the modern hero must undergo. Be sure to note how each story uses the elements of romance listed on page 167. If your modern story is far from a romance, note how it distorts the romance elements. Save your notes.

### Expository Writing

#### 2. Gawain Goes to Hollywood

When the elements of a romance story (or myth) are adapted to a more modern setting, we say that the story has been "displaced." In two or three paragraphs, discuss how *Sir Gawain* might be displaced into a contemporary movie or TV show. Think about the story's **plot**, **characterization**, and **theme**.

### Expository Writing

#### 3. The Game of Love

In the twelfth century, rules governing the "game" of love were actually set down by a court of love in France. Four of the rules are listed below. Do you agree or disagree with these "rules"? Have the rules of love changed? In an essay, explain your position.

- iii No one can be bound by a double love.
- xiv The easy attainment of love makes it of little value; difficulty of attainment makes it prized.
- xvii A new love puts to flight an old one.
- xix If love diminishes, it quickly fails and rarely revives.

### Critical Thinking / Speaking

#### 4. Roles for Women

In romance literature, women are often represented as (a) maidens, (b) mothers, (c) temptresses, or (d) crones. Is that true in *Sir Gawain*? Do these character roles for women still exist today? Prepare a panel discussion on this issue. Defend your ideas with specific evidence from current fiction and movies, as well as from *Sir Gawain*.