

The Function and Character of the Green Knight in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'

The Green Knight of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' is a strange and fascinating character in an already strange and fascinating poem. He is frightening, attractive, humorous, and noble all at once. His persona is slippery as an eel and one can never be sure if he comes as friend or foe. This essay argues that this clamorous and contradictory personality is exactly his purpose in the story. First, we will examine the stock characters of the Green Man and the Wild Man, then how the traditional view of Gawain allows us to better analyze the Green Knight's function. Thirdly, we will place them together into the structure of the poem to show how by using the traditional function of the wild man as a foil to knighthood, the Gawain-poet created a comedic critique of chivalry that both praised it and revealed its limitations.

While Bercilak, or the Green Knight, is described as grotesque and intimidating, the narrator recounts how he was also 'the fairest, the gayest for his size.'¹ We will first examine this 'fair' side of the Green Knight. Bercilak is described to be adorned all in green, from his armor to his shirt to his stockings. His mantle is merry and his hair flows, elegantly. Focusing on this half of his description, he seems pleasing and friendly, riding in with 'only a branch of holly in one hand.'² The green color of his clothes is the first hint to the contemporary listeners of the familiar character which has galloped into Camelot. He is the Green Man. Larry Benson describes this character, found throughout fourteenth-century literature, as 'richly clad in green and garlanded with flowers, and often, as in contemporary life, they carry boughs of greenery into the court.'³ Commonly associated with the May King,⁴ the Green Man is tied to themes of death, rebirth, and fertility. He is often represented as tall, jolly, and handsome and as a vegetation spirit, he participates in a sacrificial rite where he is killed, typically by beheading. It is not hard to draw the similarities to Bercilak, who laughs 'with delight,'⁵ and urges Gawain 'to mirth,'⁶ by playing

¹ Burton Raffel, trans., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New York: Signet Classics, 2001), p. 61.

² *ibid.*, p. 62.

³ Larry Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1965), p. 65.

⁴ Ellen Castelow, 'The Green Man,' *Historic UK*, <<https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/The-Green-Man/>> [accessed 1 January 2026].

⁵ Raffel, *Sir Gawain*, p. 84.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 86.

games and jokes. It is even mentioned when Gawain first enters Bercilak's castle and changes his clothes that 'all at once it seemed to be spring.'⁷ However, the most telling sign is the one mentioned above. In a sacrificial rite, the Green Man is beheaded just as the Green Knight is, symbolizing how the old year must die so the new year can begin.⁸ It is unsurprising with this knowledge of the Green Man's association with fertility and rebirth that Bercilak picks up his head, sitting, 'headless for everyone to see, twisting his bloody, severed stump.'⁹ Further, these events occur during the last stretch of the old year and the coming of the new. Another point to note is how 'the green costume also came to be symbolic of love, and sometimes... of love that borders on lechery.'¹⁰ The Green Man is inherently a good, jolly, and vitalic figure, symbolizing rebirth and vegetation. However, the Green Man is only one side of the Green Knight, and it is his other, darker side which would have thrown the medieval audience of Sir Gawain into suspense.

The Wild Man was a 'mythic creature'¹¹ which fascinated the medieval imagination. Stemming from pagan rituals associated with the horned/beast-god, the wild man has many features similar to Cernunnos, the Celtic god of the underworld¹² and Benson claims he entered the romance genre through Celtic literature.¹³ He is known to be 'violent and aggressive'¹⁴ and is always 'large, sometimes a giant, remarkably hairy, strange in color... marked by a grotesque head and beard, and armed with a club or with a huge axe.'¹⁵ Bercilak is not far off when he springs through the door:

Huge, taller than men stand, so square

And thick from neck to knee...

He seemed half an ogre, a giant,¹⁶

The traditional marking of hairiness, sometimes covering the whole body, as in the case of the Wild Man from the Luttrell Psalter, is a sure sign that we are dealing with the

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 83.

⁸ Ed Oldfield, 'The Green Man is all around us, but who is he and where did he come from?' *Wordpress*, (2016), <<https://edoldfield.wordpress.com/2016/01/23/the-green-man-is-all-around-us-but-who-is-he-and-where-did-he-come-from/>> [accessed 1 January 2026].

⁹ Raffel, *Sir Gawain*, p. 69.

¹⁰ Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain*, p. 65.

¹¹ Timothy Husband, 'Introduction,' *The Wild Man: Medieval Myth and Symbolism* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980), p. 1.

¹² Phyllis Siefker, *Santa Claus, Last of the Wild Men: The Origins and Evolution of Saint Nicholas, Spanning 50,000 Years* (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1997), pp. 45-50.

¹³ Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain*, pp. 75-76.

¹⁴ Husband, *The Wild Man*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain*, p. 74.

¹⁶ Raffel, *Sir Gawain*, p. 60.

animalistic, nature god of myth, legend, and literature.¹⁷ Bercilak's beard is as 'thick as a bramble-bush'¹⁸ and grows as long as the hair on his head—that is, all the way to his elbows. He is a skilled hunter and brings down a stag, a boar, and a cunning fox in the latter half of the poem, asserting his dominance over nature. Beyond this, the Wild Man is the stock opponent of knighthood, and his uncivilized way of life was viewed as 'completely opposed to that represented by the knight.'¹⁹



FIG. 1. The British Library Archive, *Luttrell Psalter*, MS. add. 42130, f. 70 (England, 1325-1335)

In the early Middle Ages, he was viewed as a bestial and base figure in need of taming like that depicted in *Valentine and Orson*²⁰ or in the familiar picture of hunters pursuing a Wild

¹⁷ The British Library Archive, *Luttrell Psalter*, MS. Add. 42130, f. 70 (England, 1325-1335) <<https://www.imagesonline.bl.uk/asset/17814>> [accessed 1 January 2026].

¹⁸ Raffel, *Sir Gawain*, p. 62.

¹⁹ Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain*, p. 80.

²⁰ Siefker, *Santa Claus, Last of the Wild Men*, p. 57.

Man, symbolizing the need for man to conquer his own base instincts.²¹ However, in the later Middle Ages, the theme began to shift as chivalric ideals lost dominance.²² 'Medieval man realized that "wildness" was not just a remote, but a universal condition, as evident within "civilization" as without.'²³ The Wild Man and his unruly, unrestricted behavior allowed him to critique the conventions of society in a comic way; his mockery gave 'voice to the people's most hidden thoughts.'²⁴ Hence, Bercilak, as the Wild Man, functions as the opposite of Gawain and the knights of Camelot. He is rude and blunt, uncourtly and unseemly. He spews out his emotions and makes faces at the knights who recoil from his blood-spurting, decapitated head. He 'seemed to glow like lightning,'²⁵ another feature of the wild man who delights in storms, and his green complexion and 'rolling,' 'red' eyes²⁶ all point to a figure of chaos and mayhem, one closer to a demon than the jovial, fertility spirit he resembles not twenty lines before. How are these two figures melded into the Green Knight? And more importantly, what purpose do they serve in the tale?

Benson argues that Bercilak's ambiguity is the whole point.²⁷ We are never sure whether he is a malevolent or benevolent figure until Gawain himself discovers the answer at the end of the poem. This is highlighted by the dichotomy present in the two stock figures which form Bercilak's character. While Benson admits that in folk ritual, the Green Man and the Wild Man are interchangeable, in literature they function very differently. Where the Green Man evolves from the delightful aspects of nature and 'in literature he becomes an attractive, youthful figure,'²⁸ the Wild Man develops from the harsh side of nature. He is associated with winter and storms, and he is old 'rather than youthful, grotesque rather than beautiful'²⁹ and, as always, opposes the values of the romance courts. To see how these details are brought together, one must evaluate the context in which the Green Knight functions, especially in regard to Gawain.

Gawain, despite the recounting of his chaste and noble attitude at the beginning of the poem, was not a character known for courtesy, chastity, and loyalty. In fact, he was famed for his 'courtesy, lechery, and treachery.'³⁰ In Malory, Gawain is described as 'wicked' and

²¹ Husband, *The Wild Man*, p. 14.

²² Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain*, p. 80.

²³ Husband, *The Wild Man*, p. 13.

²⁴ Seifker, *Santa Clause, Last of the Wild Men*, p. 80.

²⁵ Raffel, *Sir Gawain*, p. 62.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 65.

²⁷ Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain*, p. 59.

²⁸ Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain*, p. 75.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 75.

³⁰ Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain*, p. 95.

to have 'lived mischievously many winters.'³¹ Beyond that, he vows to be truthful to Sir Pelleas only to betray him by sleeping with the lady Pelleas loves.³² This is the traditional picture of Gawain that the audience would have been familiar with. Yet it is not the one the Gawain-poet paints as he details the pentangle shield Gawain carries:

His five senses were free of sin;
His five fingers never failed him;
And all his earthly hope was in Christ's
Five wounds...
And the fifth of his fives was love and friendship
For other men, and freedom from sin,
And courtesy that never failed, and pity,
Greatest of knightly virtues.³³

Yet still, Gawain is considered one of the most courteous knights, especially in early depictions.³⁴ He is famed for it and for a knight to act in a way contradictory to what he is famed for is to bring shame upon himself, to sin.³⁵ His renown for such things is exemplified when he comes to Bercilak's castle, and all the knights express how they've heard of Gawain:

What lessons we will learn in noble speech,
What marvelous words, what practiced methods
Of converse... the meaning
Of manners, will work
Miracles for us to see

³¹ Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur: The Winchester Manuscript*, ed. Helen Cooper (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 327-328.

³² Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, pp. 77-78.

³³ Raffel, *Sir Gawain*, p. 77.

³⁴ Kennis Jobe, 'A Model Knight: Sir Gawain, Chivalric Contradictions, and Grief in Medieval Literature,' (master of arts thesis, Louisiana Tech University, 2023) <<https://digitalcommons.latech.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1104&context=theses>> [accessed 1 January 2026], p. 32.

³⁵ Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain*, p. 210.

In the soothing of lovers' hurts.³⁶

With sensual skills and courtesy which would never allow him to leave a lady 'unkissed',³⁷ the Gawain-poet has perfectly set up a dilemma where the pillars of chivalry collide, and Gawain must dance between courtesy and continence. It is the Green Knight, the anti-chivalric figure, who brings this theme to the forefront.

The theme is best exemplified through the exchange of roles between Gawain and the Green Knight. To understand this, we must go back to the beginning of the poem. The Gawain-poet uses the churlish nature of the Green Knight to reveal the churlish nature of Camelot. When the Green Knight confronts the knights of the Round Table, challenging them based upon their fame for courtesy and bravery, he calls for them to respond to his challenge as a Wild Man would, to 'Rise so boldly, so fierce, so wild / And give a blow and take a blow.'³⁸ Arthur, instigated to wrath and shame, 'surrenders to his natural impulse',³⁹ and accepts, in the same wild and churlish manner that Bercilak demands, forgetting his own courtesy. In contrast, when Gawain is tested in the temptation scene, he upholds his courtesy and continence as the most famed aspects of his chivalry, but fails in bravery, for he 'is ignorant of the churlish fault within him that is symbolized by the concealed lace.'⁴⁰ It is this exchange of behavior between Gawain and Bercilak that emphasizes not only the test of bravery in the final beheading scene at the Green Chapel in which Gawain succeeds, but also the comic seriousness of the ideals which Gawain is unable to uphold. To highlight this, Gawain even takes on nature associations like the Green Knight. He vows, at the falling of the axe, to stand 'like a stone, or a stump of a tree tied to the ground by a hundred tangled roots.'⁴¹ Relieved to have survived, yet infuriated to be so tested, Gawain is reduced to an uncourtly outburst where their roles change. Gawain becomes a furious churl, readying to fight, and Bercilak becomes the calm gentleman, leaning upon his axe. This is a prime example of how when the Wild Man and the knight 'skirmish, the boundary between them becomes fluid, and is re-invented as a site of play.'⁴² It is precisely this interplay between the two characters that allows the weakness of chivalry and human limitations to reach its peak realization. Bercilak, in amused tolerance, deems Gawain 'a pearl among peas'⁴³ compared to other knights, for while the chivalric ideals are 'absurd, a

³⁶ Raffel, *Sir Gawain*, p. 84.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 98.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 65.

³⁹ Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain*, p. 216.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 226.

⁴¹ Raffel, *Sir Gawain*, p. 127.

⁴² Dorothy Yamamoto, 'Th Wild Man 2: The Uncourtly Other,' *The Boundaries of the Human in Middle English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 170.

⁴³ Raffel, *Sir Gawain*, p. 129.

bit too narrow, and clearly too demanding for a man in this world,'⁴⁴ they are still noble and worth striving for.

The Gawain-poet, drawing from literary convention and stock characters, purposefully painted a picture of a knight who was as mysterious and unpredictable as his separate components were familiar to his medieval audience. The festive and playful Green Man and the churlish Wild Man combined in an enigmatic character which serves as a foil to Gawain and the supposed paragon of knighthood. It takes the Green Knight, an unromantic and ambiguous Wild Man, to uncover both the importance of chivalric ideals and the imperfection of man who is unable to ever reach them.

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⁴⁴ Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain*, p. 243.

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