

The Winter Solstice Season and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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I write this in the midst of the “holiday season” where so many people are navigating the complexities of personal and family relationships. This is a time where our aloneness hurts more and we take more joy in our connectedness. It’s often wrenching.

This is reflected in traditional holiday literature and in our holiday movies. It is no accident that the two best-known modern tales of the holiday season, Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* and O. Henry’s *Gift of the Magi* involve grappling with poverty and deprivation. From *A Charlie Brown Christmas* to *It’s a Wonderful Life* to *The Apartment*, dark occasions are broken by a shaft of light coming only at the very end.

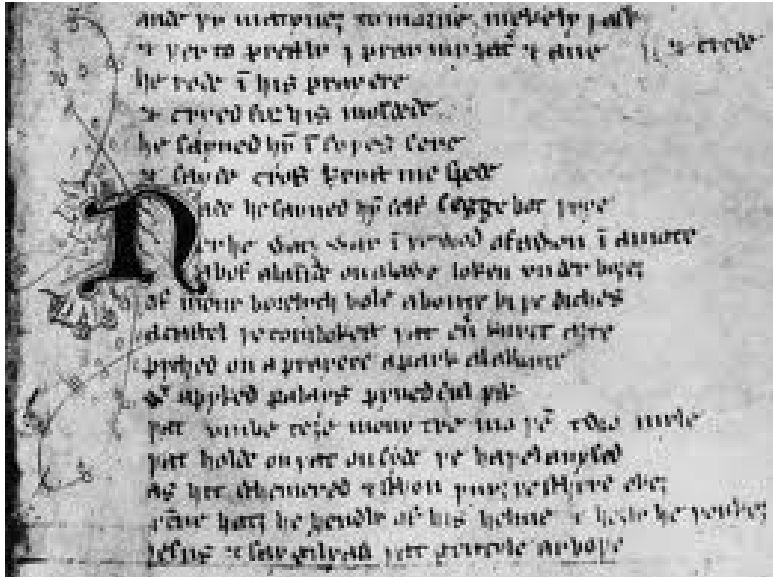
When is the holiday season? We tend to look at the weeks *before* Christmas (coinciding the Hanukkah) as the season for revelry and fun, Christmas is a time of families getting together and sometimes re-traumatizing each other; after several days, the final revelry is on New Year’s Eve and then the whole thing is suddenly over. Does the season of the dark and the increasing day correspond to our own journeys into the dark and a celebration of light with new understanding and strengthened connectedness? Perhaps there is more than a bit of Pluto symbolism in our activities of the winter solstice.

Traditionally, however, the holiday season took place *after* Christmas, beginning with the winter solstice and continuing for 12 or 15 days afterwards. This is the time of the pre-Christian “Yule” that later became the “Twelve Days of Christmas.” Its origins concern light and dark of the North Hemisphere year. The word “solstice” means “Sun stands” and reflects the fact that the lengths of the days do not change within several days of the Sun’s limit of southern declination, its ingress into Capricorn.

At what time do the days begin to noticeably lengthen? It begins around New Years Day. From Providence, RI, at the solstice the day is 8 hours and 56 minutes; by January 1 it has become 9 hours and one minute. (By the middle of January, the day’s length has grown to 9 hours 19 minutes.) New Years Day begins the visible reassertion of light and is similar to a very thin crescent Moon one day after an invisible New Moon. This is a new beginning – but what lies beforehand is the true matter of the winter solstice and its “holiday season”. This year let’s approach the season of the Solstice through a remarkable anonymous medieval work, *Sir*

Gawain and the Green Knight, a poem of about 2500 lines. It is a well-known solstice tale containing no small amount of astrology's Pluto.

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Only one manuscript survives of this work from the fourteenth century. In fact the work was largely unknown. It was uncovered in the nineteenth century, and over the last century there have been many versions (notably by JRR Tolkien, published after his death) and much recent scholarship.

The *Sir Gawain* work is also a meditation on the possibilities and limitations on the extent of human goodness, on the relationship between outer disposition (and reputation) and inner character. It is a meditation on the dark and light of human nature. This is seen through the prism of unexpected events that are mirrored by the season of the year.

The setting is in King Arthur's court at Camelot and the poem begins on Christmas Day. The seasonal festivities last several days and are splendid – there is much food, dancing, and merriment within an uplifted elegant social environment. On New Year's Day gifts are exchanged and a great meal is readied. King Arthur waits to eat until something truly interesting has happened and now it does: breaking into the gathering is a huge knight on a horse and splendidly attired. But the knight and his horse are the color green, skin, fur, and all. This mountain of a knight holds a holly in one hand and an axe in the other and approaches the court with a challenge, a "Crystemas gomen" [Christmas game]: if one of these brave men cuts off my head I will return the favor in one year's time. Generally this is called "the Beheading Game." Stunned, all look at the knight; in response he ridicules the assembly for being hidden cowards. He and his horse, storming into the fancy goings-on at Camelot, are the proverbial "bull in the china shop" and his presence is both opulent and utterly wild, like the color green itself. He does not say who he is or his motive until the end of the poem.

King Arthur himself approaches the Knight to take up the challenge but Gawain, seated next to Queen Guinevere, takes up the challenge instead. Gawain is Arthur's best knight and is renowned for his courage in battle and his courtesy and goodness of character. The Green Knight dutifully bares his neck and Gawain severs his head. The Knight – what's left of him – finds the head, raises it above, returns to his horse, and tells Gawain to find him at the "Green Chapel" next year for the return favor. As the door shuts behind the Green Knight and his horse, the laughter and partying resume.



The seasons now pass from winter to spring to summer and we take up the action at the holiday of Michaelmas (September 29), for Gawain must soon set out for the Green Knight and his Chapel. Before leaving on All Saints Day (near Halloween), he is readied for the contest and receives a brilliant interlaced pentagon to wear around his neck: there are five groups of five qualities symbolized by the five sides. The five are the virtues of a Knight: friendship, fraternity, purity, courtesy, and compassion. With fanfare but sadness Gawain leaves the court, for he will probably not return.

Gawain's journey to find the Green Knight and receive a return blow of his axe is cold, rainy, and lonely. On Christmas Eve, completely depleted and desiring to find a Christmas mass, Gawain sees walls and a moat in the distance. As he gets closer he sees a large castle and approaches it. He asks for hospitality and suddenly he has entered another seasonal festivity. Gawain meets the lord of the castle, a burly affectionate man and soon meets the lord's very lovely wife. When this unexpected guest reveals that he is Sir Gawain, all are pleased that such a noble knight would be among them for their Christmas celebrations. For the next three days Gawain is wined and dined and has a great time among his new friends.

Between the celebrations of Christmas and New Years Day the lord of the castle is to go on hunting expeditions. The lord proposes to Gawain a game – he and Gawain will meet at the end of each day and give to the other the winnings of the day – this is usually called the Exchange of Gifts game. The assumption is that Gawain will be in bed resting and not have much to offer his generous host. And, for the next three days the lord goes hunting with differing degrees of success and Gawain is trapped attempting to fend off being seduced by

the lord's wife, nor appearing to reject her. In each day's bedroom drama juxtaposed with the lord's hunting endeavors, Gawain is to be hunted by the lord's beautiful wife.

To me this part of the poem is most delightful: the lord's hunting pursuits are given in great detail, including the manner of "cleaning" the animal carcasses and at the same time there is delicacy and humor and great personal challenge to our esteemed Gawain in his bedroom. At the end of the first day the lord's "winnings" are a mass of venison from an abundant kill which he gives to Gawain. Gawain's winnings are one kiss from the Lord's wife, which Gawain must give to the Lord! On the second day the hunter eventually kills a tough and dangerous wild boar and Gawain plants two kisses upon him. The next day, while the lord is spending an entire day trying to track down one fox, his wife's entreaties to Gawain are becoming more ardent. She kisses him three times and proposes that they exchange gifts. Gawain refuses, for he had nothing to give. She offers him her green girdle – more like a belt – that could protect its wearer from being struck by another. Fearing for his life the next day when he is to meet the Green Knight, Gawain takes the girdle. Then, when he and the lord of the castle exchange gifts, Gawain gives his host three ardent kisses but does not mention the girdle.

The next day is New Years Day and Gawain sets off with a servant for the Green Chapel. The servant tells Gawain how murderous and coarse is the dweller of the Chapel and Gawain replies that he must honor his pledge. After some journey the servant leaves and Gawain looks around him for this Chapel. He sees is a little hill in the distance and soon hears the sounds of an axe being sharpened. It is the Green Knight looking just as he did one year before at Camelot. They exchange insults and Gawain puts his head on the chopping block. At the last moment Gawain flinches and the Knight insults Gawain for his cowardice, but upon the second blow the Green Knight stops in the middle. Now comes one more attempt and the axe falls down on Gawain but only nicks the side of his neck, drawing enough blood so that Gawain sees red drops on the snow. Gawain jumps up – his part of the agreement has been served!

Leaning on his axe, the Green Knight explains: he is also the lord of the castle where Gawain was staying. Both the Beheading and Exchange of Gifts games were both to test him. Gawain passed two of the three tests with flying colors on the first two days by giving the Green Knight the kisses Gawain had received from his wife (!). However, on the third day Gawain failed by not returning to the lord the green girdle – his fault was his love of his own life. The nick of the axe blade was in return for this fault. The Green Knight tells Gawain that he is the most faultless fellow on earth, more prized than a pearl among white peas. The whole thing was to test Gawain's and Camelot's pride in its noble character. At first Gawain is speechless but then angrily curses the "cowarddye and covetyse bothe" that are the cause of so much unhappiness. The Green Knight invites him back to the castle and Gawain refuses, now going

into a diatribe against women. The Green Knight offers him the green girdle; Gawain accepts it and will wear it as a token of his failure.

Gawain's journey back to Camelot is filled with difficulty, but he and his horse finally return home to a hero's welcome. Wearing the green girdle as a sash, he tells all his adventures and failures. King Arthur decrees that this green sash will be also worn by his best knights as a token of their value. And the poem ends.

Gawain may be the most virtuous knight in the realm but his pride has been punctured: he (and we) correctly see him more like you and me than some kind of hero. During the solstice season Gawain's fear of death and his love of life were tested by this wild and magical being who we see as a wise man at the poem's end. A year ago, the wild knight intruded upon the New Year festivities. This year the festivities included a more sinister and hidden test of desire, courtesy, and judgment. It is a test of light by darkness and brings about a new light and a New Year, and hopefully a humbler Gawain and Camelot.