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Space, Time, and Identity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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**Abstract** – *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* explores the transformation of Gawain's identity through his quest, where time and space play crucial roles. The narrative juxtaposes brief, action-packed episodes with extended periods of stillness, emphasizing Gawain's passive heroism. The circular structure of the journey symbolizes a return to the self, yet transformed through encounters with the other. The use of Paul Ricœur's theory about narrative identity highlights the significance of Gawain's wounds as paths to self-recognition. The comparison with David Lowery's 2021 film adaptation reveals contemporary concerns with identity and otherness.

**Keywords** – Narrative Identity; Circular Structure; Passive Quest; Temporal Rhythm; Self-Recognition.

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# Space, Time, and Identity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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## 1. Introduction

*Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* is a 14th-century Arthurian romance written in Middle English in which the dimension of path and space-time plays a central role in defining the protagonist's identity.

A challenge to the knights of King Arthur's court must be completed after exactly one year, travelling to a place that no one knows. The rhythm of the narration reverses the common experience: the long journey is reduced to a few verses, while the two scenes related to the challenge of the Green Knight, even if they concern a short time, cover most of the text. Time and narrative are masterfully intertwined to build a story about the achievement of a new identity for the protagonist and his community.

The romance will be analysed through the theoretical concepts of *narrative identity* and *recognition* developed by Paul Ricoeur: the wound, which Gawain inflicts on the Green Knight and which he receives in a game of *exchange of blows*, symbolizes the idea that a wounded identity is a significant *path* to access a new recognition of other and self.

In the third and in the last chapter, I will compare the romance to its most recent cinematographic adaptation (*The Green Knight* by David Lowery, 2021).

## 2. Rhythm and Speed

It has been noted (Hark) that Gawain's quest in this story is a passive quest. The Green Knight arrives in Camelot and challenges the knights to behead him. A year later, he will hit back. Whoever proposes the game and whoever accepts it, in turn, will have to passively receive the opponent's blow. Heroic action does not consist in *performing* an action, but in *receiving* it. This reversed heroism influences the dimension of rhythm and speed, because the hero will not be someone who runs, jumps, fights and acts. The hero will be the one who manages to remain completely still in front of the opponent's axe.

During the Christmas holidays, the mysterious Green Knight challenges the knights of the Round Table to a beheading game. At first, no one dares to accept and the knight laughs at the cowardice of Arthur's famous knights. The king is about to accept the challenge himself when Gawain steps up. He beheads his opponent, who meekly offers himself to his blow. But the Green Knight regains his head and reminds Gawain of the challenge in exactly one year. Then he goes away. The green colour of the mysterious knight, in the past, was connected to the natural element (as with the Celtic *Green Man*). But the most recent studies link this colour to the idea of fortune. As Michel Pastoureau writes:

I would see in this strange and threatening green the colour of the goddess Fortuna, often represented in medieval images with a green or striped dress. By accepting the challenge proposed by the Green Knight, Gawain is not only risking his reputation but also his life. Perhaps the colour described is the green of Destiny, an uncertain and capricious green. (Pastoureau 124)

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The image of the goddess Fortuna and her wheel, as we will see, is crucial in defining the path of this romance.

The first 498 verses of the work (which has 2530 verses) are dedicated to the few minutes in which the first challenge takes place. Almost the entire year that must pass is summarized in the following 37 verses. After a few verses dedicated to the knight's dressing, the journey lasts a total of 71 verses. In these few verses, Gawain faces wild animals and enchanted monsters. There is no narration about all of this: the monsters are only named. Gawain's heroism is not traditional, and this element influences the speed of the narrative. Those monsters, that in other romances require hundreds of verses to be defeated, are killed here in one verse. And they are not few! There are dragons, wolves, ogres, bulls, bears, boars and giants:

Many a cliff must he climb in country wild;  
Far off from all his friends, forlorn must he ride;  
At each strand or stream where the stalwart one passed  
'Twere a marvel if he met not some monstrous foe,  
And that so fierce and forbidding that fight he must. (*Sir Gawain* 21)

The rhythm of the work is closely linked to the passive nature of the quest: every particularly active action, like killing a dragon, is very fast. The preparations for the beheading game and the simple action of kneeling to receive the blow significantly slow down the narrative.

Gawain arrives at a castle and is hosted during Christmas celebrations. Here, once again, a complex alternation of different rhythms and speeds is staged. Gawain remains in the castle to rest, in the company of the beautiful and seductive chatelaine. The lord of the castle, Bertilak of Hautdesert, goes hunting. The hunting scenes are fast and exciting, the animals flee, and the dogs and the hunters chase faster and faster. Bertilak and his men triumph over the beasts. On the contrary, the scenes in the castle have a completely different rhythm. Gawain stays longer than usual in his bed, and the Lady goes to visit him. She pins him down on the bed, using the blankets as a hunting net, but the hunting here is slow and meditative. The two characters talk about love. Love and hunting are two themes often linked in ancient and medieval literature. This second love hunt, unlike the first, is slow and sensual:

"For as certain as I sit here, Sir Gawain you are,  
Whom all the world worships, whereso you ride;  
Your honour, your courtesy are highest acclaimed  
By lords and by ladies, by all living men;  
And lo! We are alone here, and left to ourselves;  
My lord and his liegemen are long departed,  
The household asleep, my handmaids too,  
The door drawn, and held by a well-driven bolt,  
And since I have in this house him whom all love,  
I shall while the time away with mirthful speech  
at will.

My body is here at hand,  
Your each wish to fulfil;  
Your servant to command  
I am, and shall be still."

"In good faith", said Gawain, "my gain is greater,  
Though I am not he of whom you have heard;  
To arrive at such reverence as you recount here  
I am one all unworthy, and well do I know it". (34)

The day of the challenge arrives (after a year and a day). Gawain submits to the Green Knight's blow but is not beheaded. The opponent's axe only causes a slight wound on his neck. Perhaps thanks to a magical green belt that the Lady had given him or perhaps because his behaviour at the castle had demonstrated his nobility.

The return journey, from the point of view of the story, is quicker than the outward journey. It is consumed in just five verses:

Wild ways in the world our worthy knight rides  
On Gringolet, that by grace had been granted his life.  
He harboured often in houses, and often abroad,  
And with many valiant adventures verily he met  
That I shall not take time to tell in this story. (64)

An Arthurian romance that has *no time* for adventures! We are faced with an important paradigm for the problem we study here.

Gawain returns to Camelot and fears a negative judgment by the court. He used the magical green belt to save his life, so he did not completely respect the agreements. Surprisingly, however, Arthur welcomes him joyfully. He praises his slight wound and his belt as evidence of unparalleled courage. In the end, the king states:

That the lords and the ladies belonging to the Table,  
Each brother of that band, a baldric should have,  
A belt borne oblique, of a bright green,  
To be worn with one accord for that worthy's sake. (65)

### 3. Spatiotemporal Experiences: Configurations and Patterns

The story takes place through a circular spatiotemporal configuration with a goal-oriented spatiotemporal pattern. From the Round Table to Gawain's movement, everything is circular: time is circular (exactly one year passes between the two moments of the challenge); Gawain's journey starts from and returns to the same place; the blow that the knight strikes in the beheading game will be received in the same way, according to a circular logic. This attention to circular scenes, albeit with great representational freedom, was highlighted well in Lowery's film (*The Green Knight*, 2021).

In the scenes preceding Gawain's departure, which represent the anticipation of his challenge with his adversary, his story has already been transformed into a popular puppet show. In this portrayal, the passage of time is depicted by a wheel that, by turning, marks the interval between the two beheadings.

In another scene, which, like the previous one, is present only in the film and not in the book, Gawain faces the risk of death due to an ambush: he is bound and laid on the ground. The camera moves in a circular motion, completing a 360-degree pan and revealing the hero's corpse. Subsequently, time appears to reverse, and the camera performs another 360-degree circular pan in the opposite direction, with Gawain once again alive and able to free himself.

Lowery's passion for circular narratives, which undoubtedly attracted him to the poem we are studying, is also evident in what is likely his most intense film, *A Ghost Story* (2017), where the ghost protagonist relives in a circular manner (albeit with slight differences) the time associated with the house he shared with his wife.

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But circularity, in the poem, does not mean the return of the same, in fact, Gawain's spatiotemporal experience is goal-oriented. What is the aim of this spatial and temporal construction?

The hero does not bring with him a freed lady, a defeated enemy or an unimaginable treasure. He simply returns to the starting point: but he is no longer the same as he was before. His path of glory is nothing more than bringing back a wound and a green belt:

The hurt was whole that he had had in his neck,  
And the bright green belt on his body he bore,  
Oblique, like a baldric, bound at his side,  
Below his left shoulder, laced in a knot,  
In betokening of the blame he had borne for his fault;  
And so to court in due course he comes safe and sound. (*Sir Gawain* 64-5)

### 4. Path and Chronotope of the Road: The Question of Identity

Let's move on the *path* of Gawain. A path can be a line of ground that has been marked by people walking or a strip of ground to walk on. It can be the space ahead of you which you are moving towards or the direction of something moving. On the way this romance interprets it, a path has the meaning of a particular course of action or a way of doing something. Gawain establishes another path for chivalry, overturning the chronotope of the road and adventure.

Gawain's experience, *his* path, transforms the image of the perfect and infallible knight into that of an order of imperfect men. The image of the Pentangle on his shield (symbol of the perfect knight) is transformed, at the end of the romance, in the presence of the wound on his neck and the green belt worn over his shoulder. But green, in this case, is the colour of the adversary, of the other than the self. Carrying the colour of the other means knowing how to cross your path with that of others. This means abandoning presumptuous selfishness for a mature and complex identity.

However, Gawain does not reach this awareness alone. His path is not a path he can take alone, and the Green Knight's test is not sufficient.

Bertilak (the Green Knight) didn't judge him negatively for the little green belt trick. According to him, it's a small fault. For Gawain, however, his gesture is a sign of unforgivable cowardice: he has not yet developed the new recognition of himself. This is not always an operation that the individual can perform on himself, without the help of significant others:

Though Gawain does not entirely recognize the kind of person he is, Camelot performs the work of recognition upon his return [...]. Camelot as a whole rises to the challenge as it practices its re-creative bent, turning fault into honour, wrenching Gawain's individual misery into communal triumph. (Reynolds 45)

This function which will allow the new recognition of the knight is therefore carried out with the help of Arthur and his court who do not recognize Gawain as guilty, but make his presumed mark of shame a sign of glory for the Round Table. We celebrate the escape from a proud and smug identity towards the recognition of one's own identity as something complex, capable of taking on the challenge of the other (the green colour of the knight's skin will no longer abandon Arthur's brave knights).

The path of Gawain cannot be solitary, because reflecting on the wounded identity in comparison with others is always a collective task.

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Gawain, with the help of Arthur and the knights, exposes a shame or lack, but that fragility becomes the strength of his new recognition. Against all pride of identity, the entire Round Table will make it a distinctive sign, the *real glory* of the Round Table.

The recognition that includes the other must necessarily start from a *wound* that the other inflicts on our self-sufficiency. The perfect knight is no longer the Pentangle knight, a stainless hero, but a knight who carries the wound of the encounter of knowledge and recognition with the other.

Gawain's identity is wounded several times in the romance: "Thou art not Gawayne", the Lady and the Lord of Hautdesert say. He will truly be himself only after having taken on him these wounds and the green colour of the other who challenges him.

Several interpreters have pointed out that Gawain does not quite pass the test (Burrow 169). The Celtic hero Cu Chulainn in *Fled Bricrend* (the archetypical model of our romance) overcomes the same test without tricks but confirms himself without any change. He was the bravest and remains the bravest.

If Gawain had passed the test without the help of the green belt and therefore without suffering the slight wound on his neck, he would have confirmed himself (the knight of the Pentangle) and would not have been able to take on the complexity and ambiguity of the green colour of his antagonist's skin.

From a poetic and rhetorical point of view, Gawain's path is a seriocomic path, which is based on the same comic structure as the *Divine Comedy* by Dante. As Giorgio Agamben writes:

Tragedy appears as the guilt of the just, comedy as the justification of the guilty. [...] The 'sacred poem' [the Divine Comedy] is a comedy because the experience that constitutes its centre - the justification of the guilty and not the guilt of the just - is decidedly anti-tragic. (Agamben 12 and 14)

Faced with Gawain's confession of guilt, which he tragically sees as a definitive wound to his nature as a knight, both Bertilak and Arthur respond by laughing:

[Bertilak] laughed aloud, and lightly he said,  
" [...] I hold you polished as a pearl". (*Sir Gawain* 62)

The king comforts the knight, and the court all together  
Agree with gay laughter and gracious intent. (65)

Laughter, justification and love undoubtedly characterise these scenes in the sense of the comic that Agamben identified as the basis of Dante's comic (see also: Burrow 185).

A comical and generous sense of life allows Gawain a happy transformation similar to that which allows Dante, *mutatis mutandis*, to move from the forest of guilt to the disposition to rise to the stars: different paths but the same poetics.

### 5. Gawain and His Head: from *The Green Knight* to *Ponzela Gaia*

As Thomas Hahn wrote:

Over and over, Gawain proves the worth of familiar values by facing the marvellous or unknown, and rendering it manageable for the rest of his society. [...] Gawain's role in the romances works therefore to effect the reconciliation or reappropriation, rather than the destruction, of the strange or alien. (Hahn 9)

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Gawain is undoubtedly the hero who encounters the other and the different, managing to bring them back to the logic of the Round Table while avoiding conflict. However, he is also the ideal knight *upon whose head* experiments on personal and collective identity can be conducted.

A profound connection between path, identity, and *head* can be discerned in various works involving the hero. I would like to focus on a 15th-century Venetian *Cantare* (likely derived from a 14th-century Tuscan original), which I find particularly significant for our study: *Ponzela Gaia*.

In the opening verses of the *Cantare*, a knight named Troiano challenges Gawain in a beheading game: the one who will bring back the less beautiful prey to Arthur's court after a hunting contest will have his head cut off. Troiano captures a magnificent white doe, while Gawain encounters an invincible serpent. The knight battles until noon (Gawain is stronger in the morning: see Heijkant 242) and then surrenders. At that point, surprisingly, the serpent speaks to him "sweetly":

Tell me the truth, oh garden lily,  
For courtesy and the love of a lady,  
Are you a knight of the Round Table? (*Ponzela Gaia* VI, 6-8)<sup>1</sup>

The question challenges the collective identity to which the knight belongs, and Gawain's response represents a questioning of both his collective and personal identity:

I believed I was of the Round Table,  
But now I am no longer, due to this misadventure,  
Nor would I have the courage to say who I am,  
For such a disgrace could kill me. (*Ponzela Gaia* VII, 5-8)<sup>2</sup>

The serpent reassures the disheartened knight: no one can defeat it, and Gawain is the best it has encountered. Gawain requests that the adversary grant him death. However, the enchanted reptile wishes to know his name, as it is seeking a knight. Gawain pretends to be Lancelot (another play about identity), but the serpent claims to know that knight and that the person before it is more cunning and prudent.<sup>3</sup>

When Gawain finally reveals his true name, the serpent transforms into a beautiful maiden and, embracing him, declares her love for the knight.<sup>4</sup> She reveals herself as the daughter of Morgan le Fay and says that people call her *The Marry Maiden* (or *Gaia*, *the Maiden*, *Ponzela Gaia*). The girl offers herself to the knight, who "from the branch well picked the flower" (XVI, 3). After several hours, Gawain remembers the beheading game: "Sir Gawain then immediately recalls / the head he had wagered" (XVI, 1-2). The knight's head is to be severed from his neck, but, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a woman saves Arthur's nephew with a magical object: Gaia gives her beloved a ring that can make anything he wishes appear

<sup>1</sup> The translation is mine. Here is the original text: "Dime la veritade, o zilio d'orto, / per cortexia e per amor di dona, / saresti de queli de la tavola retonda?".

<sup>2</sup> "De la tavola redonda esere e' me credia, / hora non ne son più, per la disavventura: / a dire ch'io ne sia e' non abia tanto ardire, ché sì soza chossa me conducha al morire".

<sup>3</sup> In the poem *La Tavola Ritonda* (14th-century), well-known in Italy in these centuries, it is told how Gaia (the maiden who here disguises herself as the serpent) was once saved by Lancelot from an attempted rape (see *La Tavola Ritonda* LXXXI).

<sup>4</sup> The connection between Gaia and Melusine has been studied, among others, in: Heijkant, 244 e Donà, 253-257.

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(including the maiden herself), but Gawain must tell no one of his love for Gaia, or the ring will lose its power.

With the ring, the knight easily wins the challenge against Troiano, who flees from the court to avoid decapitation. Gawain's fame grows so much that Queen Guinevere falls in love with him, but the knight rejects her affection. Guinevere wants to understand the reason for his refusal and announces an unusual tournament: all knights and ladies must boast of their greatest and most precious joy. Initially, Gawain refuses to speak, but, when pressed, he confesses that his greatest joy is his gentle beloved. The queen sets an additional challenge: those who have boasted must provide proof of their words, or they will lose their head (another beheading game!). Unfortunately, Gawain cannot summon his beloved, for, having revealed his love, he has caused the ring to lose its power. Arthur prepares the scaffold where the knight is to be beheaded, but, just before his death, Gaia arrives at Camelot dressed in black. The maiden saves Gawain's life by showing that his boast is not false, but she bids farewell to her beloved. Upon returning to her mother, Morgan calls her a "whore" ("Hora donde vieni, putana?" LI, 4), imprisons her in an underground tower, and immerses her in water up to her chest.

Gawain sets off to find and rescue her, discovering along the way that his identity is once again in question. He was the noblest of knights and now is "Sir Gawain the disloyal" (LX, 7 and LXIII, 7) and "unbeliever" (LXIV, 7). He invents for himself a new identity and name: "the poor knight" (LXXI, 8), to avoid recognition. He learns that his beloved is imprisoned in an impregnable fortified city, where her mother Morgan le Fay also resides. For four years, Gawain besieges the castle in vain until Gaia manages to send him a letter revealing the way to enter: he must disguise himself (yet another play about identity!) and one hundred knights in female attire (red for himself, green for his men) and pretend to be The Lady of the Lake with her hundred handmaidens:

If you wish to save me, depart secretly,  
And hide outside for fifteen days.  
Then among your servants, you will find  
A hundred knights: do not fear,  
Dress them in green as if they were ladies,  
And you, dressed in vermillion, lead them. (XCIV, 3-8)<sup>5</sup>

With this stratagem, Gawain manages to penetrate the castle, defeats Morgan, and brings Gaia back to Camelot.

Once again, Gawain's path concerns identity and its possible transformations, showing us how, with this knight, personal recognition and that of an entire chivalric world are at stake, along with his very head.

## 6. The Different Paths of Identity: From the Book to the Film

Since the late 50s, it has been noted that the descriptive technique adopted by the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is particularly akin to that of cinematography:

<sup>5</sup> "Se scanpare me voi, pàrtite a la zelatta / e stai da quindexe zorni ascoxo de fuore. / E poi tu troverai de la tua masnatta / zento chavalieri, e non aver zìà timore: / tutti li vesti di verde a modo di donne, / e tu vestito di vermelio fa che si' con ele".

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The very consistency with which that technique is used suggests in the *Gawain* poet an exceptionally fine sense of space distribution as well as an unmatched talent for transferring a visual experience into a poetic utterance. (Renoir 132)

This similarity in descriptive technique has led to five adaptations (one of which is an animated film), with very different results:

Of the films based on our poem, neither of those by Stephen Weeks, *Gawain and the Green Knight* (1973) nor *Sword of the Valiant* (1983), shows much allegiance to the original. [...] The final encounter with the three blows survives, but turns into a conventional combat (of which both films are full); gone is Bertilak's lady, replaced by Linet, a sort of phantom lover who nevertheless has a green sash to offer. [...] The dispiriting jumble of contents is much the same in each film, with the emphasis so much on individual motifs that all the sense of native line is lost, whether the original's or any other. (Williams 314)

Leaving aside in this paper the reflection on the excellent animated film by Tim Fernée (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 2002),<sup>6</sup> a far more successful adaptation is the television version written by David Rudkin and directed by Michael Phillips (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 1991):

The intelligence of its approach makes it instructive both about the nature of the poem itself and about what might in general be expected of film versions of a text whose visual qualities seem to invite filming. (Williams 342)

However, the seriousness of this adaptation leaves unexpressed the seriocomic potential that we have previously highlighted, which is indissolubly linked to the question of the possibility of creating a new identity for oneself and others.

A path towards identity, structurally similar but thematically different from the one we have highlighted in the poem, is at the centre of the most recent *The Green Knight* (2021) by David Lowery: here the director courageously chooses to completely overturn the terms of the romance. Gawain, in the romance, is fully in possession of a proud identity that the encounter with the other skin of the Green Knight positively puts in crisis. The same character, in the film, is in a desperate and mostly unsuccessful search for his consistency.

Lowery's film, as we have already seen in the third chapter, is constructed upon the same circular structure as the book. However, while in the book this structure transforms itself into a virtuous spiral of growth and enrichment of identity, in the film we are confronted with the risk of an identity that perpetually confirms itself, where the image of the circle is linked to the image of a return to the same.

In the film, the Lady of Hautdesert serves as a kind of alter ego for the director himself: this role is confirmed by the “portrait” of Gawain that she creates using an evidently anachronistic and rudimentary photographic technique. In a scene exclusive to the film, set within a library, the woman tells Gawain that she is an avid reader but that when she perceives “room for improvement” in stories, she rewrites them. In this instance, the *room for improvement* that the director has in mind is not inherent to the literary value itself, but certainly lies in the ability to speak to our present. When the Lady invites Gawain to pose for a portrait and the knight replies that his portrait has already been painted, she replies: “Not by me!”.

If it is true that adaptations consist more in speaking about us than simply representing the original works, we must conclude that the current problem of the self is very far from

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion about this work, I refer to: Talamo 76-78.

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that of an identity educated by the exchange with the other. For Lowery, we morbidly focus on our self which, moreover, continually displeases us; we are increasingly incapable of a transformative encounter with otherness and bound by a prolonged dependence on parental figures. We experience the serious dimension of love with difficulty and prefer to reduce it to a simple search for pleasure; we suffer the weight of the gaze of significant others who judge us unfulfilled: Gawain, in the film, has not yet managed to become a knight.

According to Lowery, Gawain is an eternal adolescent who struggles to find himself: his mother Morgan (in the film, she is his mother and not his aunt) scolds her son Gawain because he returned home at dawn after a night spent in a brothel; his uncle Arthur reminds him that he is *his blood*, but he has not yet accomplished heroic deeds. The possibilities, according to the film director, for positive transformations in the present, with the help of significant others, seem to be reduced. The identity game seems to become a solipsistic game of chance.

For this reason, it does not seem useless to return to a text like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* which can show us how the other is the *shortest path* to find a better re-figuration of the self.

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