



Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

with Dr. Junius Johnson

Lesson for Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Outline:

In this classic poem, Dr. Johnson draws upon the story's central conflict for Sir Gawain's virtue to cultivate conversations about morality with students.

- Sir Gawain is King Arthur's chief knight after Lancelot.
- Together they represent the tension between the English and French cultures, kingdoms, and traditions.
 - The Arthurian tales speak to a commentary about French rule in England which began with the Norman Invasion in 1066.
- The story takes place on Christmas Day when King Arthur and his court await a magical occurrence before sitting down to dine.
 - The Green Knight enters.
 - He makes a deal to trade blow for blow.
 - Sir Gawain steps up and cuts off the giant's head.
- Later in the story it is revealed that Morgan le Fay was responsible for the plot.
 - She devised it in order to have Guinevere die from fright.
 - The plot fails and now Sir Gawain is honor bound to the deal he made with the Green Knight.
- Dr. Johnson discusses that the text makes clear the double standard between the Christian standard and the knightly standard and is key to understanding what passes between Gawain and the lady of the castle.
 - He was set up to fail because he had an impossible task:
 - To be both free with his love and chaste at the same time
 - The real battle in the poem is for Gawain's virtue.
 - He attempts to fend off the lady of the castle's advances with courteous replies.
 - After successfully refusing her, he turns to his business with the Green Knight but not before we see his cowardice in withholding the girdle to preserve his life.
- Although Sir Gawain escapes the Green Knight with only a scratch, he returns to Camelot a failure to himself for what was simultaneously expected of him as a knight and as a Christian.
- In the end we see the conflict that being a Christian in the world creates with the systems of the world, and the one whose mind stays upon wickedness or whose body stays within the bed is going to come to shame and disgrace.