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On the Quest for Alternative Ways of Becoming – Multifaceted  
Means of Maturation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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## Abstract

Living in an era where success is embraced as a life style, raises concerns that the alternatives to become, to grow and mature have been limited to a single variety – one where only triumph matters. This is a view that is spread through contemporary popular culture, whether it be in social media, video games, tv-series, films or books. One of its origins can be found in Christopher Vogler's dramaturgical template The Hero's Journey. A common motif used in The Hero's Journey is the Quest-motif; a knight on an adventure seeking the holy Grail; or Indiana Jones on search for the Arch. One of the foremost examples of the Quest-motif in English literature is the medieval poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but the hero in this tale does not come of age through success, but rather through shame and failure.

By comparing the original 1400-century alliterative poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, with the 2021 film adaption *The Green Knight*, and relating them to the Hero's Journey, the aim of this essay is to show that the ways to become are altered in the adaptation and to argue that the film is moulded to fit with the Hero's Journey. This essay proposes that contemporary story telling lacks alternative ways to become, since modern narrative structures are focused on Coming of Age through success in accordance with the Hero's Journey. If storytellers can create a greater awareness of the discourse of success and how they themselves are subjects of malleability of this discourse, maybe the contemporary audiences will experience narratives that provide a variety of ways to become, creating a world shaped by diversity and inclusion.

**Keywords:** *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; *The Green Knight*; Failure; The Hero's Journey; David Lowery; Christopher Vogler; Coming of Age

Why greatness? Why is goodness not enough?

- Essel in *The Green Knight*

A common way to depict individual transformation is through a journey, a mission or a quest. While physically moving from point A to point B the protagonist is also on a mirroring inner journey. Narratives about heroes on quests are a significant part of our collective psyche, they constitute a considerable part of how we perceive ourselves and operate as humans. Sadowski (1996) explains that narratives of self-fulfilment in Western literature have been depicted in this manner for centuries: “The motif of the inner quest emerged then as the main regulating structural pattern of romance, an organizing principle of plot and action” (48). Society, through history, seems very concerned with growth and maturation, different eras have their own genres dealing with the subject: Chivalric romance, the Bildungsroman, Coming-of-Age narratives, High School Movies. In interactive video games the audience themselves take part: we should not just learn from the protagonist in the story, but even become the hero. Like a knight sworn to a chivalric code, setting out on a quest defeating a terrorizing dragon and through this victory discover ourselves, or to level up the character in the game: “be all you can be”, to quote the U.S. military’s old recruiting slogan (Shyles 1990). With this in mind, one can see that the narrative structures of how these stories are told impact both what their audiences understand to be a goal of growth, and further how they are going to achieve that goal.

Today personal growth is commonly portrayed as success stories and shared via social media platforms. The trend seems to idolize celebrity and youth, and the only thing that matters is what is shown – or seen. Our lives have become narratives where awkwardness (if not meant as irony), and what is not photogenic are removed before

posting. This raises not only questions not only of who is excluded, but also of what is excluded. Which people do not fit in the success stories? Whose lives are never told of and therefore never depicted. Life experiences that are cut from of the narrative fabric of society. What possibilities to grow, mature, to become are not being told? Surly, there must be alternative ways to become than just through success, more inclusive paths to become where ordinary people play a part in society. If there are such ways, why do we see and hear so little of them in contemporary mainstream storytelling?

In order to show that there are alternative ways to become than just through success as depicted in narratives, a comparison of the medieval alliterative poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* will be made with the 2021 film adaptation *The Green Knight*. The aim is to illustrate differences in how the process of maturation is depicted, and if so, what the dissimilarities are and why they have arisen. Williams (1997) made a comparison of the then existing adaptations of the poem, and claims that “an adaptation is in effect a critical reading, and can teach us, if only by contrast, about the nature of the original, but can tell too about the fate of this long-lived figure in the wider world of popular culture, about the significance of such medieval fictions for the twentieth-century imagination” (385). It is by such kind of contrast this essay hopes to shed light on the poem and what it can offer a twenty first-century audience. To do that one needs to understand the world of the *Gawain*-poet, as well as the world of writer/director David Lowrey.

### *The World of the Gawain-poet*

The Middle Ages are commonly associated with a primitive society ruled by ignorance and shrouded in darkness, but recent scholarship have more and more come to change this perception. Some claim that this image of Medieval times has been ‘manufactured’ by sixteenth-century intellectuals, in order to showcase what they felt to be the genius of their own time, while others emphasize “the continuities between the Middle Ages and the later time now often called the Early Modern Period” (Greenblatt et al. 2018. 3-4). Whichever approach you take it is clear that the Medieval society was more complex than we previously have imagined it to be.

The identity of the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* remains unknown, and is therefore referred to as the *Gawain*-poet, or sometimes the *Pearl*-poet alluding to another of the four (sometimes five) poems accredited to the author. The four poems

are found in one single surviving manuscript: the British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x., which has been dated on palaeographical grounds to the second half of the fourteenth century (Edwards 1997). Furthermore, the poem is written in vernacular language and the dialect it is written in has been defined to be from the West-Midlands of England, Cheshire to be precise (Duggan 1997). Most critics have agreed on that the *Gawain*-poet was by most certainty a man. A man who's "cultural milieu [...] was the court of Richard II, which had strong connections with the North-West, especially Cheshire" (Andrew 1997, 31). It belongs to the Alliterative Revival, a style suited for recitations. In fact "this romance is an oral poem and [the *Gawain*-poet] asks the audience to "listen" to a story he has "heard" "(Greenblatt et al. 2018. 201), a presumption that matches Bennett's (1997) findings about the anticipated audience in the region: "the impression is that the local gentry culture was predominantly visual and oral, and lacking in solidity and depth." (74). The Cheshire area was "looked at as a recruiting-ground" for warfare in Wales and Ireland and "later, in the Hundred Years War" (Bennett. 1997. 73), and suffered setbacks in its cultural development during the Black Death. Nevertheless, the *Gawain*-poet did compose a tale that puzzles and amazes both critics and readers, some six hundred and plus years later.

Derek Brewer (1997) describes his days as an undergraduate at Oxford in 1946 where "Tolkien himself lectured on the poem [and] there was not a single critical article available (happy days?). [...] Since then the stream of discussion has become a river" (2). To get a grasp of everything that has been written about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and what it might entail is a rather overwhelming task. Anderson (1990) suggests that "in this poem, romance is largely judged by itself. The poet allows the unfolding of the story to lead us to look beneath the attractive surface of chivalry – a Chaucerian method." (338). While Howard (1966) claims that "fact about the chivalric ethos has often been allowed to pass out of sight [...] in critical discussions" (223-24), thus arguing that a dimension of the poem is lost, that chivalry should not pass out of sight but be focused on. Tenga (2016) applies an environmental reading, finding that "through Gawain's wound and his vow always to wear the green sash as a visible mark of shame, the text conveys a sense of new humility in the face of a greater, greener power" (61). When humbly, trying to find a common denominator among all different schools and approaches, a suggestion is that they agree on the poem being about some kind of transformation. Whether the transformation is rooted in Christianity, Chivalry,

Theology, Psychology, Heathenism, or Style – what matters for this essay, is what can be derived when comparing the poem with the film.

### *The World of David Lowery*

Director and writer David Lowery's first encounter with the poem was during his freshman year of college, the poem was the last of an odyssey of early Western classics, beginning with Homer to continue with *Beowulf* and Chaucer. Lowery recollects that "by the time I cracked open *Sir Gawain*, I was all literatured-out" (Lowery 2021, c). But some twenty years later when he wanted to make a medieval adventure film the poem echoed. The stakes of the adventure begat by the Beheading game bewildered Lowery, implying "an entirely different standard by which to measure a quest (and, indeed a life) than a traditional hero's journey might prescribe" (Lowery 2021, c). Starting to write the script before he even had finished rereading the poem, Lowery (2021, c) believes "may have been a mistake". He continues claiming that "when you watch the finished film, you will see evidence of my very linear and rather literal journey through a text I did not thoroughly comprehend" (Lowery 2021, c).

Growing up, Lowery was a huge fan of *Star Wars*, and the saga inspired him to become a film director (Vpro 2022). George Lucas, the director and writer of *Star Wars*, was in his turn inspired by the writings of Joseph Campbell. The mythologist Campbell, stood on the shoulders of Jung when he formulated his so-called Monomyth or the Hero's Journey. Campbell's work focuses on how "the figure of the hero is itself important in literary studies" (Birch 2009, b). Although Campbell wrote his 1926 master thesis on Arthurian Romance, he is barely mentioning the Arthurian 'Universe' in his most influential work: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, in which he carves out the constituents of the Monomyth focusing on the "universality of the quest motif" (Hart 2004). The Monomyth consist of a number of stages the hero goes through in order to Come of Age, to become. Stages that Campbell (2008) saw as unison in different myths and legends (see figure 1). Myth criticism overlaps on large areas with that of psychoanalytic criticism, where theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung have made great impact. Freud contributed with his interpretational work of both dreams, neurotic symptoms and literary texts in relation to the Oedipus myth, although Jung is considered to be "the principal founder of school of myth critics" (Birch 2009, a).

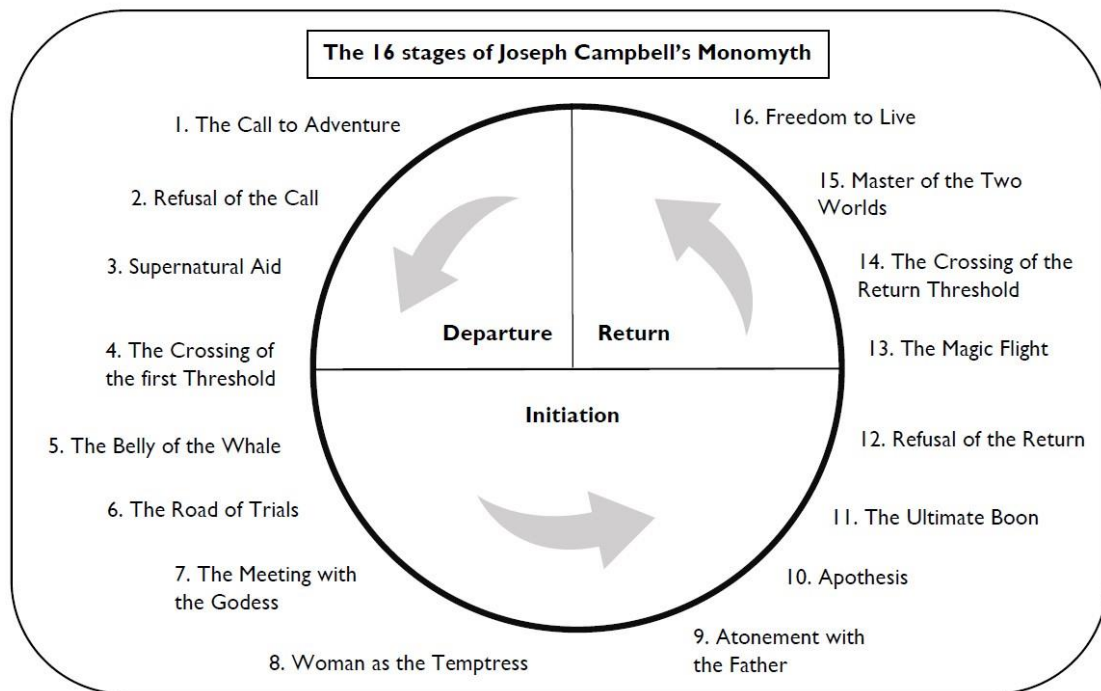


Figure 1. Model of the circular stages of Campbell's Monomyth as described in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell 2008).

Another influential person, inspired by both Campbell and Lucas, is Christopher Vogler. He took the Monomyth and refined it into a dramaturgical template sharing the name of the Hero's Journey<sup>1</sup>. Vogler is not the only one that provides help to writers using these ideas, but he claims to be one of the first when he in the mid-1980s, wrote a 7-page memo condensing Campbell's ideas. Vogler explains that he found these ideas "to be of unlimited value for creating mass entertainment. I was certainly making profitable use of them, applying them to every script and novel I considered in my job" (Vogler, n.d.). Vogler describes the stages (see figure 2), the hero goes through "as creative principles, a set of reliable building blocks for constructing stories, a set of tools for troubleshooting story problems" (Vogler, n.d.). The 12 stages are divided into three acts, or main sections, which mirrors Campbell's divisions into Departure, Initiation, and Return. Vogler's ideas plays a major role in Lowery's world and are therefore going to be used when comparing the poem with the film. In an attempt to fully understand why the differences found has emerged.

<sup>1</sup> Henceforward, when referring to Vogler's template the term The Hero's Journey will be used. When referring to Campbell's theory the term Monomyth will be used.

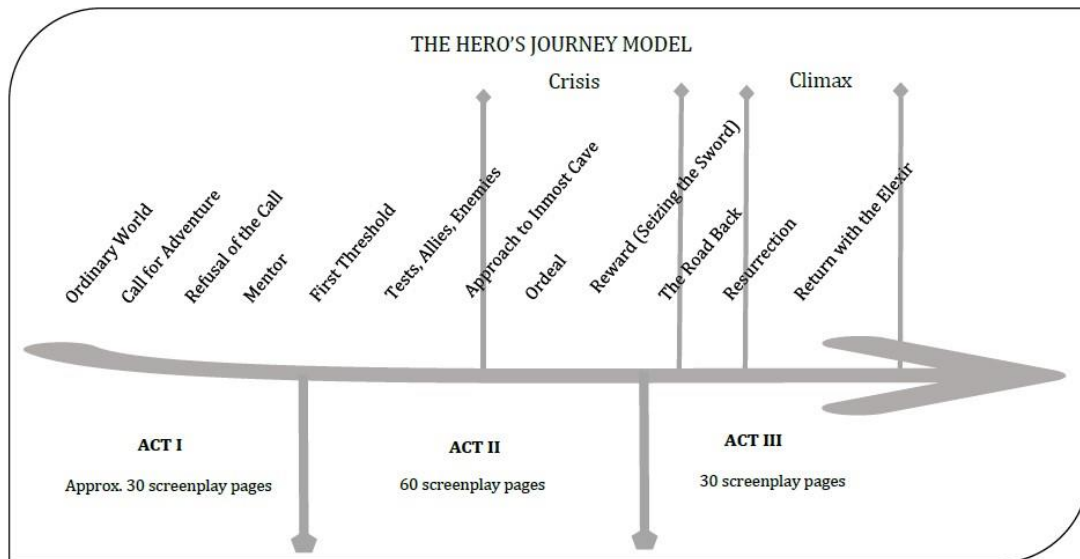


Figure 2. Christopher Vogler's version of The Hero's Journey. Vogler based his dramaturgical template on Campbell's Monomyth, and designed the narrative structure in a linear fashion (Vogler 2007, 8).

When 'troubleshooting for story problems' there is evident risk that valuable aspects become collateral damage. Like using pesticide when getting the weeds out: everything dies. Comparing several adaptations of Gawain-stories, Williams urged for more "complex possibilities", and continued suggesting that, "if it is the very strangeness, the alterity of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, [...] that appeals," we need a version "which does not seek to conceal gaps, resolve contradictions, but allows what is awkward to stand" (Williams 1997, 392). One aspect of alterity in the poem, is that Gawain becomes, matures, through failure and not success. Something that contemporary audiences might view as awkward and not immediately relatable, and therefore as Vogler would describe it, a 'story problem'. This essay argues that failure as a means to mature is sacrificed, while success rises as the only means presented to contemporary audiences, because narrative templates, such as The Hero's Journey, dominate contemporary storytelling. In order to illuminate the argument, parts of the Beginning, the Middle, and the End of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* will be compared with *The Green Knight*, relating them to the narrative template The Hero's Journey.



## ANALYSIS

Every story should have a beginning, a middle and an end, and even though French director Jean-Luc Godard is accredited to claim that they not necessarily have to be in that order, the parts will be analysed in order, in the following section. The aim is to shed light on how and why the protagonists in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Green Knight* mature through their journeys. In hope to make the investigation clearer the comparison will be made with relation to The Hero's Journey, in which 6 of the twelve 12 stages will highlighted; the Ordinary World; the Call to Adventure; Tests, Allies, Enemies (the Special World); the Ordeal; the Reward; and the Road Back. A certain sequentiality is vital within the template of The Hero's Journey. The order of when things happen, to the protagonist, gives a straight and accessible psychological chain of events that the audience can comprehend. The teachings of Jung and Freud being the fulcrum to that sequentiality. As, in the Quest-motif a certain sequentiality is part of how meaning is created, and thus relevant to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Green Knight*: the hero ventures out from his or her home, endures some kinds of ordeals and / or challenges to overcome his or her fears or shortcomings, to finally return home with the won boon for everyone to benefit from. This boon can either be a thing, like a sword (Excalibur) or insights that will be beneficial (to be able to use the Force).

In Vogler's Hero's Journey the first step is called The Ordinary World, in which the hero is presented in his or her everyday life. This is the protagonist's starting point internally as well as the physical place that the hero is about to leave when embarking on the path of the quest. It is quite common that we see characters evolve from a lesser being to become a better or more human version of him- or herself i.e.; Bill Murray in *Scrooged* or *Groundhog Day*, Mark Hamill in *Star Wars* or Alicia Silverstone in *Clueless*. Arguably, in accordance with The Hero's Journey, the lesser a version of themselves the hero or heroine is at the beginning, the more they can evolve, mature, Come of Age: "if you're going to show a fish out of his customary element, you first have to show him in that Ordinary World to create a vivid contrast with the strange new world he is about to enter" (Vogler 2007, 10). This way the journey the audience is taken on becomes more evident and efficient.

### *The Beginning*

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a cyclical tale of rebirth through death, or at least rebirth through symbolic death. Set and written in the borderlands of England and Wales, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is rooted within an integral theme in Welsh historiography, a theme of deliverance and renewal (Gillingham 2000). The Gawain-poet uses several motifs and tropes, known to a medieval audience; the Beheading Game, the Temptation, the Exchange of Winnings and the myth of Brutus as the founding father of England (Sadowski 1996). Both the myth of Brutus and the Beheading Game have enveloping functions to the poem, giving the narrative a circular quality, that is not found in the film.

The poem and the film offer two different starting points for Gawain. The poem starts by linking King Arthur's Camelot to the great ancient civilisations of Troy and Rome through Brutus, lines 1-26, continuing to describe the rumbustious celebration of Yule and the coming New Year: "Ther tourneyed tulkes by tymes ful mony, / Justed ful jolilé thise gentyle knyghtes, / Sythen kayred to the court, carols to make" (41-43)<sup>2</sup>. Brewer describes the feast as something normal of human life in all times and likens the courts' (or the very rich's) feasts with contemporary occurrences: "at their extremes, as incredibly wasteful extravagance occurred in the medieval period as with modern pop-stars. But there were psychological, social, and political compulsions as well as ostentation, adding to the sense of belonging to an élite" (Brewer 1997, b. 131). This was an élite that should inspire and lead, but the court of Camelot seem far from being a guiding light.

King Arthur is described as uncontrolled "he lovied the lasse / Auther to longe or lye or to longe sitte, / So bisied him his yonge blod and his brayn wylde." (87-89) and juvenile, "sumquat childgered" (86). So far it seems as if it is Arthur that has the most work to do with his personality, and whether the Gawain-poet alluded to the boy-king Richard II is hard to tell. What we do know, from the character description above, is that Arthur has poor impulse control and that his court most likely also knew this. King Arthur and his court are portrayed as being "in their first age" (54), implying that everyone in Camelot is immature and still being wet behind the ears, including Sir

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<sup>2</sup> All references from the Middle English text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, are from Norton's 2007 American edition of Simon Armitage's translation.

Gawain. Anderson (1990) states “that the youthful exuberance of Arthur, and by implication the court and the romance ideals they represent, is indicated: a potentially damaging carelessness, a lack of stability and responsibility” (341). When entering the stage, Gawain is seated at the high table next to queen Guinevere “[a]nd Agravayn a la dure mayn on that other syde sittes, / Bothe the kynges sister suns and ful siker knyghtes;” (110-111). Here we learn that Gawain has a brother, they are nephews to King Arthur and both are recognised knights. We also learn that the Gawain-poet is to some extent an educated person, he is describing the brother in French; “a la dure mayn”, “à la dure main”, “of the hard hand”: a brute (Borroff 2022, 6).

In the film David Lowery, the writer and director of *The Green Knight*, has created another starting point as the film starts off with carnal intimacy and a spoiled brat: “INT. HOUSE OF TOLERANCE – MORNING / EXTREME CLOSE UP: a man sleeps hard. His face fills the frame: it is dirty, creased, thick with stubble. His hair is matted with grease. / This is GAWAIN. / [...] He looks up at [...] a half-dressed young woman with an empty pitcher (ESSEL)” (Lowery 2021, b). In the film Gawain is abruptly awoken by his lover Essel, played by the same actress that later in the film portrays the Lady. Gawain is hungover and they are in a brothel; it is evident that this is not the same Gawain as in the poem.

Lowery states that “traditionally Gawain was one of the more virtuous knights’ of Arthur’s round table. [...] But I wanted [an interpretation] that was, a little less virtuous, a little less noble, so the he had somewhere to go as a character. And the Gawain we meet in the film is not yet a knight.” Lowery elaborates on why making this choice: “it makes the journey that the character goes on, from the original poem, far more palatable, I think, to modern audiences” (BTM 2022). Here we follow the logic of Lowery when he makes alterations in the story in order to design an Ordinary World for his Gawain to start off from. Deliberately or not, Lowery moulds the Beginning in accordance with Vogler’s idea about the Ordinary World.

The second step on The Hero’s Journey is The Call to Adventure where the protagonist gets a challenge or offer to abandon the safety and familiarity of home. In both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Green Knight*, this is manifested when the Green Knight is crashing the festivities and challenging the court, where it is now New Year’s Eve (60) “for ther the fest was ilyche ful fifteen dayes” (44). The challenge, the Beheading Game, is a well-known trope in medieval chivalric romances originating from Irish folklore (Tracy 2012). In the trope a stranger arrives at a royal court where

he challenges a knight to an exchange of blows, and whatever the hero does to the stranger, the stranger has the right to return upon him. The hero, always, chooses to decapitate the stranger, possibly because he thinks himself clever since no dead man can retaliate. Here comes the twist: the stranger picks up his head and attaches to his body (Sadowski 1996). This is how it is revealed that the stranger is of some kind of otherworldly origin. The hero, who has his word and honour on the line has to submit to receive the return blow, to be himself decapitated. When submitting, he is instead spared and rewarded for his valour, left only with a scratch, a symbolic wound. By undergoing the exchange of blows the hero is Coming of Age, experiencing a symbolic death and rebirth represented through the redemptive return blow. Sadowski (1996) claims that “the audience of *Sir Gawain* would in all probability have guessed what was at stake in the New Year Beheading Game” (205), but were they aware of the twists to come? Both the poem and film feature the Green Knight and the Beheading Game but they differ a lot in how they are presented and what they entail.

In the poem, as stated above, King Arthur is described as childlike and restless. He wants to hear a tale of adventure or some challenge take place. As the saying suggests, that you should be careful what you wish for, Arthur’s wish is soon realised, when “[t]her hales in at the halle dor an aghlich mayster” (136). The Gawain-poet continues describing a creature of a man, a half giant but who is also handsome and slender (136-149). It takes until the very the end of the vivid character description before it is revealed that the Green Knight is green, not just dressed in green but that his skin has a green hue: “[a]nd overal enker grene.” (149-150). The text then goes on describing everything green about the stranger, and there are three aspects of the colour green are of value for this essay.

Firstly, green is the colour of the grass on the ground, the ground man is buried in and from which new life, in forms of plants and vegetables grow (Tenga 2016). In this sense green denotes both death, birth and rebirth. Second, it alludes to the folklore myths of the Green Man, a fertility symbol often linked with The Green Knight and that “the theme of decapitation suggests the ancient ritual of fertile sacrifice for the good of humanity, a process re-enacted in the Christian story of Jesus, who died on the “tree”-cross and was resurrected in the spring, symbolizing a new spiritual fertility” (Leeming 2006). The third and final aspect is the foreshadowing of Lord Bertilak de Hautdesert hunting: medieval huntsmen were “dressed in green to appear harmless to their prey, so was the devil pursuing human souls in green guise” (Sadowski 1996. 93).

Even though the shapeshifting Lord Bertilak might not be the devil, he is the Green Knight transformed in green disguise by King Arthur's half-sister Morgana Le Fay. And when Gawain later arrives at Hautdesert, Lord Bertilak together with his wife, are definitely hunting for his soul. But no one at Camelot knows this yet.

What they do know is that a giant green man mounted on a hoarse, rides into the hall holding a twig of holly in one hand and an enormous battle axe in the other. He insults King Arthur by asking "[w]her is, [...] [t]he governour of this gyng?" (234-35); it would be assumed rude to not know that he is in Camelot and who King Arthur is – presumably one of the most famous people known in Logres<sup>3</sup>. King Arthur welcomes the stranger who seeks a challenge and as soon as it is granted starts to taunt and insult both Arthur and his court (256-278). The reputation of the court is now in jeopardy, everything being orchestrated to push Arthur's buttons even though the instigator is yet not known. In anger out of hurt pride Arthur accepts the challenge: "I schal baythen thy thy bone that thou boden habbes" (327).

Arthur takes the axe and means to use it, and it is at that moment Gawain steps into the action. Making the assumption that Gawain genuinely wants to relieve Arthur from the embarrassing situation, even though this means that he is putting his own life on the line, implies that Gawain wants, as a sociolinguist would phrase it, to save the King's face. Armitage (2007) claims that Gawain, when taking over the challenge, wants to find a way to make his mark, to launch his career as a knight. But as stated Gawain is already a renowned knight, thus strengthening the argument that Gawain wants to save the reputation of Camelot by saving Arthur's face, an argument supported by Anderson (1990). In doing so, he also has to proceed with how Arthur has accepted the challenge: by gripping the axe. If Gawain were to simply cuff the Green Knight, Arthur would seem rash and proud, not really fitting qualities for a King. Brewer (1997, a) describes the situation, "if we follow our immediate responses we destroy ourselves" (8). So, Gawain is forced to fulfil a challenge designed for Arthur, with a bait the King jumped at. Here Gawain's journey in the poem begins, a balancing act where he has to be constantly on his guard. Gawain, who is all focused on not hurting King Arthur's pride, chops off the head of the green stranger. The head rolls on the floor, the Green Knight picks it up and mounts his horse, and with the red blood still dripping, "[t]hat

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<sup>3</sup> Logres is King Arthur's realm in the Matter of Britain, a fictional place situated in the real geography of the British Isles.

ugly bodi that bledde” (441), holding his head and proclaiming that Gawain should be wise enough to keep his word, or forever be renowned as a coward, exits, riding off head in hand (413-458).

In *The Green Knight* there is another take on The Call to Adventure. As already mentioned, Lowery has another starting point for his Gawain-character, but also King Arthur and Camelot are depicted quite differently, they are at the end of their age rather than in the first. Lowery’s Arthur seeks an heir and he is set on Gawain, only his conundrum is that Gawain needs to grow up. This is an opinion he shares with his sister, Gawain’s mother, who is tired of her son coming home being hungover. The two characters of Gawain’s mother and the sorceress Morgana Le Fay have been merged into one character, which quite drastically changes the ramifications for the reading of the film in its entirety. The film’s Morgana is the one conjuring the Green Knight, seemingly in cahoots with her brother King Arthur. What the audience is told, is a tale of a concerned mother and uncle, who want the young man to grow up, so they orchestrate a challenge for him. But it is not merely a tale about a spoiled brat that is going to be, to use a contemporary term, curled into adulthood. The dangers Gawain will encounter will be for real and the journey his own to make. Maybe that is why it is his mother that first gives him the green girdle: in the film Morgana is bestowing the girdle with magic powers that will protect her son from harm.

### *The Middle*

Following The Hero’s Journey, the protagonist now enters the second act. Vogler (2007) explains that, “once across the First Threshold, the hero naturally encounters new challenges and Tests, makes Allies and Enemies, and begins to learn the rules of the Special World” (13), where the hero’s determination and manhood are tested. Vogler (2007, 13) exemplifies: “in *Casablanca*, Rick’s Café is the den of intrigue in which alliances and enemies are forged, and in which the hero’s moral character is constantly tested”. In *Star Wars*, the setting is the cantina. “Scenes like these allow for character development as we watch the hero and his companions react under stress” (Vogler 2007, 13). This is a crucial sequence, where the audience gets to know the “real” hero and starts to empathize with him. Scenes in which the psychological narrative takes shape.

Vogler has, as stated, built the Hero's Journey on Campbell's theories in the field of Myth criticism, and scholars within the field often demonstrate "that literary works draw upon a common reservoir of archetypes or recurrent images, or that their narrative patterns repeat those of ancient myths or religious rituals, as in quests for sacred objects, or cycles of death and rebirth" (Birch 2009, a). In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, there is a quest, not for a sacred object but for certain character traits: 'fraunchyse', 'felawschyp', 'clannes', 'cortaysye', and 'pité' (652-54). Or in modern words: friendship, fellowship, cleanliness, courtesy, and pity, the five traits that constitute Gawain's chivalric codex. Howard (1966) claims that "Gawain is tested for all the virtues of knighthood, and in a degree he fails in all" (224). But Sadowski (1996) emphasises that it is 'trwe', truth, that is the most desirable character trait for Gawain to aspire to, truth is to be understood as faithfulness. Anderson (1990) proposes that 'trwe' could be understood as integrity, something Gawain will be tested on in the climaxes of both the poem and the film.

The poem's richness opens for a variety of interpretations, the following six lines functioning as an example:

So many mervayl bi mount ther the mon fyndes,  
 Hit were to tore for to telle of tenthe dole.  
 Sumwhyle wyth wormes he werres, and with wolves als,  
 Sumwhyle wyth wodwos that wonded in the knarres,  
 Bothe wyth bulles and beres, and bores otherquyle,  
 And etaynes that hym aneled of the heghe felle. (718-723)

In the passage Sir Gawain is encountering both wild animals and wild men, he is fighting dragons, 'wormes' (Sadowski 1996. Elliot 1997), and escaping raging giants. Normally this is the kind of adventures bards would sing whole songs about. The knights of the round table fighting over who would be "cast" in the story, to get a chance to show off their bravery and courage: a narrative with which to create legends. But in the poem, the events are comprised to the mere sum of six lines. Yet, the poet, is aware that this is the stuff of myth, of legend. In fact, he compressing similar adventures towards the end: "[a]nd mony aventure in vale, and venquyst ofte, / That I ne tight at this tyme in tale to remene" (2482-2483). So, if this, what many critics refer to as the finest romance-story (Greenblatt et. al 2018. Bennet. 1997), is not about a knight having victorious adventures, what then is the poem about? Even though Gawain is

encountering several adventures and has successful victories, it is not through these encounters his maturation takes place.

Director David Lowery makes a completely different reading of the six lines, and seems to view them as blank slates, empty spaces to fill in. Lowery has taken the lines and created whole new scenes and characters. The most predominant addition being that Gawain is passing the Welsh town Hollywell, where the legend of St. Winifred has its origin. Winifred was decapitated and later restored in a holy spring and Lowery found the legend both intriguing and appropriate since Gawain was himself on a journey facing decapitation (Robinson 2021). This reading is very different from the one above and is more in line with the progression of events described in the Hero's Journey, where the protagonist is facing tests and makes friends as well as enemies. In order to make the poem into a more psychological narrative, Lowery has built a large part of the Special World on the scenes of his own imagination in the film, scenes where the hero is tested and in that process humanized for a modern audience.

In the poem, and in parts of the film, the Special World unfolds in the castle of Hautdesert, where Gawain's moral and chivalry are under a severe stress test. What unfolds is a two-folded challenge within the already ongoing challenge of the Beheading Game. First, the lord of the house, Bertilak challenges Gawain to an Exchange of Winnings. Second, his wife, the Lady (whose first name is never revealed), is subjecting Gawain to a Threefold Temptation. The Exchange of Winnings is yet another familiar folk motif for a medieval audience, the rules of which in this specific poem is that when Bertilak goes hunting, Gawain will stay and rest in the castle, and at the end of the day they will share whatever they have won with one another. A fairly straightforward deal compared to the Threefold Temptation by the Lady.

Already during the first morning when Bertilak is hunting for deer, Gawain battles in his mind to find the right way to deal with the Lady entering his room while he is still in bed: "[c]ompast in his concience to quat that cace might / Meve other amount, to mervayle hym thoght." (1196-1197). Here Gawain is grappling in his conscience about the morality of right and wrong, a *Psychomachia*, proving that the themes of the poem was assessable for an enlightened medieval audience. When the Lord and his men have killed a doe during the first day of hunting, a quite intricate description of how they butcher the animal follows. When they remove the viscera the Gawain-poet makes a remarkable comment "[a]nd that they neme for the noumbles bi nome, as I trowe, bi kynde" (1347-1348). Borroff (2022) draws attention in her



translation, to that “the modern expression “humble pie” comes from *umble*, a variant form of *numble*” (37). When adding Borroff’s finding to Howard’s claim about the theme of the poem: “because of human frailty *no* knight can be perfect, and that in striving for perfection one must therefore learn humility” (1966, 219), it adds up to a quite anachronistic foreshadowing of Gawain’s destiny in the poem: Gawain is about to eat a humble pie.

The following three days are showing a repetitious pattern of events: Bertilak goes off early to hunt, the Lady tries to seduce Gawain – or get him to seduce her, only to lure Gawain to one, two or three kisses, Bertilak comes home from hunting and he gives Gawain his spoils and Gawain is fulfilling the exchange by kissing The Lord in the exact same manner he has been kissed, never revealing who he won the kisses from. Bertilak is not satisfied with the outcome and therefore challenges Gawain again. After three days, during which Gawain has been treading carefully not to be caught in a trap, the Lady changes her strategies. In order not to break his codex of courtesy Gawain finally accepts a green girdle. The Lady claims that the girdle has magic power and will protect Gawain. Howard (1996) concludes the outcome of the three temptations that “Gawain has taken the girdle, then, not to own it for its value or wear it for its beauty, but simply to save his life. [...] The circumstances under which Gawain accepts the girdle are, in the simplest terms, an elaborately ritualized temptation” (229-30). When not giving the girdle to Bertilak Gawain is breaking the most important codex, the ‘trwe’, and Morgana Le Fay, through her proxy Bertilak a.k.a. the Green Knight, finally has leverage on the young knight. As will be addressed in the final part of the analysis, the intention never was to decapitate either Arthur nor Gawain, but to inflict sorrow in the heart of queen Guinevere.

A medieval audience were bound to be familiar with motifs and tropes played out in Hautdesert (Sadowski 1996), and as Anne Rooney explains, “whether or not as modern readers we recognise a familiar motif with an uncertain outcome, we and the medieval audience alike seize upon the new interest of the seduction and enjoy it for its own sake” (Rooney 1997, 161). Gawain’s sojourn at Hautdesert is depicted with both humour and a sense of strange otherness, where both his soul and flesh are tested. Gawain is the prey and Bertilak with wife are the hunters. Rooney (1997) adds that “the hunting devil turns up in devotional and moral works, but usually with emphasis on trapping rather than the noble hunt” (158-59), but here Gawain is trapped and the Lady

thus being the prime hunter. Something that the film takes hold on, but for different reasons.

The cinematic media would seem perfect for portraying psychomachia, a psychological battle of the soul: where what is going on inside both the castle and the protagonist's mind, is mirrored by what is going on outside, in the hunting and butchery scenes, contrasting the courtly playfulness between Gawain and The Lady with the brutal chase and dismembered flesh. But Lowery explains that “the structure of the film didn't allow us to include those hunting scenes, because I wanted the whole film to be told from Gawain's perspective. And in the poem those scenes are intercut with the Lady's seduction” (BTM. 2022). Being the prime hunter in the film the Lady becomes more prominent than in the poem. Gawain has lost the green girdle his mother gave him on his journey, and the Lady gives him a new one, looking exactly like the one lost. Gawain takes the girdle “and he almost immediately comes, quickly jerking away from her, rolling over to his side, ejaculating all over the girdle” (Lowery 2021, b. 59). Whether Lowery is alluding to the expression ‘la petite mort’ – the little death, with the scene is unsure. If so then would, Gawain's “sensation of post orgasm likened to death” (Wikipedia 2022), indicate to a ‘small’ rebirth. A rebirth conditioned in the trope of the Beheading game, and a kind of anti-climax Lowery most likely would shun. For a schematic overview on how the three-folded temptation, the Exchange of Winnings and the final part of the Beheading game relates to one another, please see Sadowski's (1996) tables the appendix, together with tables relating to how the similar events are depicted in the Film.

Gawain leaves Hautdesert and pushes on, to finally encounter the Green Knight and to face his destiny. In the poem this is the end of the Beheading game, when Gawain has to stand up for his word and to be ‘trwe’. This is the climax of the story, but it could have been an anti-climax, had not the Hautdeserts manoeuvred Gawain to break his word in the Exchange of winnings, which of course our hero is not yet aware of. This the Ordeal in The Hero's Journey which Vogler (2007) describes as a “black moment for the audience, as we are held in suspense and tension, not knowing if he will live or die”, adding that this “is a critical moment in any story, an Ordeal in which the hero must die or appear to die so that he can be reborn again, It's a major source of the magic of the heroic myth” (15). The Green Knight swings at Gawain three times, the first two blows are feigned but the third scratches Gawain. In contrast with the film Gawain never takes off the green girdle, but it seems as if its magic powers have been somewhat

exaggerated. Even though just suffering a flesh wound, Gawain still got hit. The Beheading Game is now concluded, but what happens next is somewhat of a twist.

The Green Knight reveals the true reasons for the three blows: they are in fact conducted in relation to the Exchange of Winnings. The first two days Gawain was true when making the exchanges but then he faltered on the third when he, out of love for his own life, kept the green girdle. Like just in passing, the Green Knight starts to refer to himself as Lord Bertilak de Hautdesert (2358-2368). Gawain is getting his soul stripped bare by the Green Knight, but he never questions the shape-shifter's identity. Instead Gawain breaks down: "'Lo! Ther the falssyng, foule mot hit falle!'" (2378), the Green Knight accepts this as a confession and gives an absolution of kind (2391-2394), and Gawain is spiritually reborn: "I halde the polysed of that plight and pured as clene / As thou hades never forfeited sythen thou was first borne." (2393-2394). This is the next step of The Hero's Journey: The Reward (Seizing the Sword). Vogler (2007) emphasises that this is the moment of success in which the protagonist is reborn. "Having survived death, beaten the dragon, slain the Minotaur, hero and audience have cause to celebrate" (16). But as stated above, Gawain is reborn through failure and shame in the poem. While Gawain in the film, has a proleptic vision showing his future making the wrong decision at the Green Chapel. From this vision Gawain finds the courage to stand up for his word and accept his fate, thus reborn through success.

The Green Knight/Bertilak then offers the green girdle as a gift to Gawain as a token of their encounter, Gawain promises to keep the girdle as a reminder when pride is about to get the upper hand of him. He thanks the Green Knight/Bertilak and asks him about his true name, his identity. In reply Gawain gets more than he asked for: "'Bertilak de Hautdesert I hat in this londe, / Thurgh myght of Morgana la Faye, that in my hous lenges,'" (2445-2446). Not only is the Green Knight Bertilak but he explains that King Arthur's half-sister Morgan Le Fay is the main instigator, the antagonist of the tale. Her reason for all this is "[f]or to haf greved Gaynour and gart to dyde" (2460). The only reason for this mischief to make sense is that it was King Arthur that was supposed to accept the challenge in the first place, and the queen would grieve herself to death, during the twelve months before her husband had to seek out the Green Knight and himself get decapitated. The Green Knight tries to lure Gawain back to Hautdesert to meet up with his aunt but Gawain turns down the offer and heads for Camelot.

### *The End*

The third and final act consists of three sections according to The Hero's Journey; the protagonist takes the The Road Back, goes through the Resurrection and finally Return(s) with the Elixir. In short, the hero is returning with his or her new-won boon. But as Vogler (2007) states he or she is "not out of the woods yet. We're crossing into Act Three now as the hero begins to deal with the consequences of confronting the dark forces of the Ordeal" (17).

Gawain never heads back in the film; it cuts immediately to an end title: "...the GREEN KNIGHT" (Lowery 2021, a). The audience, though, has already seen the whole third act in the vision, in which Gawain makes the wrong choice and suffers through tragedy and despair. It is from this vision that Gawain finds the courage and nobility to make the right decision. The audience can at the end of the film envision a reversal of the Return depicted, in which a happy ending is implied and left for the audience to imagine for themselves. The vision is a metaphor for Gawain finding the answer within himself, contrary from the poem where he is guided and aided to realize the truth, the 'trwe'.

In the poem this dangerous road back is, as mentioned before, comprised to a few lines, and yet again the Gawain-poet indicates that this not our ordinary romance (2479-83). Gawain wears the green girdle "[a]belef as a bauderyk, bounden bi his syde, / Loken under his lyfte arme, the lace, with a knot, / In rokenyng he was tane in tech of a faute." (2486-2488). But no matter how ashamed Gawain is by his conduct, he is welcomed with open arms by King Arthur, Queen Guinevere and the court. Laughingly they adopt the green girdle as their own symbol to be worn by all the knights of the round table.

### Conclusion

To conclude this essay, as well as the journey, there is evidence that a dramaturgical template such as The Hero's Journey reduces the possibilities of other ways to mature than through success in mainstream media. When steering a narrative to fit the mould something must give. Williams summarizes the dilemma:

By translating the poem into a psychological narrative, the film not only adopts to the normal procedure for the medium, it also responds to something genuinely present in the poem. The realism of the writing has

proved dangerously appealing, not only to filmmakers, but to readers, distracting them from the rhetorical and abstract structure of which it is part, emphasizing the familiarity and accessibility of the text at the expense of its medieval otherness. (Williams 1997, 395)

As this essay has argued, one of the aspects of this ‘medieval otherness’ is the possibility to become through failure. This is a narrative option that a contemporary audience seldom encounters; a point-of-view that transmits that you are okay; that one does not have to be a celebrity nor an influencer to be of value; nor to be a hero that wins his earnings on a battlefield (whether it is IRL or on-line). To just be is fine. When you learn from your shortcomings you are maturing, you are a hero. In the poem Gawain evolves through a failure, he has made the wrong decision and is therefore being taught a lesson, while the Gawain in the film finds the answer within himself through the proleptic vision. Contemporary culture proves this is the case almost all the time – that maturation comes through victory, success. At least that is what the images and stories we share and are being shared in the media-infused society of the twenty-first century signal. When reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, there seems to be other ways to mature, to become, to Come of Age.

Alternative starting points of the hero is yet another aspect of narrative options that could do a contemporary audience good to take part of. To see a mature person, go on a quest, to learn, to evolve, might change our views on ageing. Scholars claim (Bitsch 2021), ageing communities around the world are being Othered in Beauvoirian processes. To learn that it is never too late to learn could be an important lesson. It seems as if the medieval audience had an open mind to that someone not being a novice could grow. Or at least the gentry of Cheshire.

The circular aspect of the poem indicates that you can start again, start a new quest, one is never too old or wise to learn and evolve. In a linear narrative you simply arrive. Arrive at a fixed spot and are not expected to go any further - hence the problem many contemporary sequels fall short upon, the hero has no place to go. This thought implies that one had another more multifaceted way of viewing the journey of life in the Middle Ages: you are born, you die, and you are re-born, just make sure you live as ‘trwe’ as you possible can.

In the introduction to his translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, J.R.R. Tolkien expresses gratitude “for what we have got, preserved by chary chance: another window of many-coloured glass looking back into the Middle Ages, and giving us

another view” (Tolkien 2021, 9). Hopefully this essay also has provided a many-coloured looking glass but looking at our present, presenting new perspective on six-hundred-year-old poem by comparing it with a contemporary film.

A suggestion for future research would be to do a post-modern reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Williams (1997) states it has been done on Chaucer and “paradoxically [...] the post-modern and the medieval have much in common.” David Lowery wrote in his foreword to a Penguin Book edition of the poem: “this may be a poem that resists adaptation, and yet I find myself now with a perverse, pathological desire to try again” (Lowery 2021, c). I share that desire, but to analysing it again, paraphrasing Gawain’s last words in the film, when he bows his head to receive the final blow from the Green Knight: then, now I am ready. I am ready now.

## APPENDIX

Table 7

The Tripartite Symbolic Correspondence Relevant to *Sir Gawain*

Platonic souls	concupiscible (vegetative)	irascible (emotive)	rational (divine)
Parts of the body	abdomen	heart	head
Faculties	sexuality, appetite	strength, courage	thought, perception
Social structure	commoners	warriors	priests-kings
Type of vice	gluttony, lechery, sloth	wrath	pride, vain-glory, avarice
Stages of sin	suggestion	delectation	consent

(Sadowski 1996. 156)

Table 6

The Tripartite Structure of Fitt III of *Sir Gawain*

Days of temptation	First Day (29 Dec.)	Second Day (30 Dec.)	Third Day (31 Dec.)
Animals chased	the does	the boar	the fox
Bertilac's hunting spoil	flesh of many deer	boar's head	fox's pelt
Gawain's winnings	one kiss	two kisses	three kisses and the girdle
Other elements			the glove and the ring
Beheading blows (Fitt IV)	first blow	second blow	third blow
Manner of the blow	feigned blow	arrested blow	positive blow
Gawain's behavior	avoidance of the blow – cowardice	determination to accept the blow – anger	acceptance of the blow – joy

(Sadowski 1996. 155)

There are several alterations made by Lowery and to give a manageable overview, they are added as an extra table relating to Sadowski's tripartite division of the Middle.

Table with the corresponding information in the film *The Green Knight*.

Gawain's winnings in the film	a poem in a book	a kiss	the green girdle
Gawain return gift	reading the poem to the Lord, from the book	nothing – claims he didn't get anything	nothing in the script. A kiss in the film.
Other things happening	The Lady takes his photograph with a Camera Obscura	The Lord says he knows what he got – kisses Gawain and says he must play fair.	Gawain ejaculates on the green girdle, and flees the castle. The Lord catches up with him, says he knows what he got – kisses Gawain and gives him the fox.
Manner of the blow in the film	The Green Knight raises the axe and are about to strike...	The Green Knight raises the axe and are about to strike...	Gawain kneels again, the Green Knight raises the axe and are about to strike...
Gawain's behavior in the film	... Gawain flinches, the Green Knight says he didn't flinch. Gawain cries.	... Gawain backs away, asking if this really all there is, to which the Green Knight replies "what else ought there be?".	... Gawain flees from the Green Chapel, comes across Gringolet and rides back to Camelot...
The Ordeal in the film	... Gawain is having a vision of how his life will unfold if he makes the wrong choices, if not taking the right way.		
The Reward in the film	... Gawain is now ready to stand by his word, he removes the green girdle and bows his head. The Green Knight kneels next to him and gently caresses a tear from Gawain's cheek and proclaims: "Well done my brave knight... now off with your head." Cut to END TITLE: ... the GREEN KNIGHT		

*Sadowski offers a structured summary of the tripartite outcomes of the Beheading Game in Table 6 as shown above. Augmented to Sadowski's table are rows in which the corresponding information from the film is added to make for a more transparent comparison.*



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