

Transcript

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[introduction music]

Welcome to Easy Stories in English, the podcast that will take your English from OK to Good, and from Good to Great.

I am Ariel Goodbody, your host for this show. Today's story is for intermediate learners. The name of the story is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Today's episode is the first two parts, and next week will be parts three and four. You can find a transcript of the episode at [EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Gawain1](https://www.easystoriesinenglish.com/Gawain1). That's [EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Gawain1](https://www.easystoriesinenglish.com/Gawain1). There, you can also download the episode as a PDF.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is an ancient poem originally written in the late 14th century. The original is written in Middle English, which makes it quite hard to understand to modern audiences. What makes it a very interesting poem is that we don't know the author, and the poem was only discovered in 1839. So for hundreds of years, nobody knew about this great work of art, and it wasn't until translations into Modern English were made that the work started to gain interest.

Now it is considered one of the greatest poems in the English language, and there have been many different versions made of it. Recently, I read two different translations of *Sir Gawain*, and I fell in love with the story. It's quite strange by modern standards, and it's very difficult to translate into a modern poetic style, but that's part of why I like it so much.

For hundreds of years, the main form of poetry in English has been rhyming poetry. Words that **rhyme** end in the same sound. For example, 'cat', 'bat', 'pat' and 'sat' all rhyme. 'Thing', 'sing' and 'ring' also rhyme. As I said, most poems these days are rhyming poems.

However, in Old English, the main form of poetry was alliterative poetry. **Alliteration** is when several words are used that start with the same sound. For example, there is a tongue twister in English, a phrase that is very hard to say, that starts, '**Bitter Betty bought a bit of better butter.**' Here, all the words starting with B are alliterating.

Actually, in alliterative poetry, it is the stressed syllables that must alliterate. So in the phrase, '**Steve destroyed the stool,**' the word 'destroy' alliterates with the others, because the second syllable, *stroy*, is stressed, and all the other words begin with *st*.

Alliterative poetry died out in English, but some people decided to bring it back in the 13th and 14th centuries. The poet who wrote *Sir Gawain* was one of these, and the whole poem is alliterative.

The problem with writing alliterative poetry in Modern English is that it's much harder to do than in Old or Middle English. Old English had a much freer word order than Modern English, which meant that words could be moved around to fit a line of poetry better, to make

sure the stress is in the right place. You can sometimes move words around in Modern English poetry, but it's much harder to do without losing meaning or sounding odd.

Despite all this, I decided to take on the challenge of adapting *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* for the podcast. I decided to use a mix of styles: most of the story is written in normal language, not poetry, but whenever a character speaks, they speak in poetry. Some of the characters use rhyming poetry, whereas others use alliterative poetry. I won't tell you who uses what, because it's linked to the story.

Because I'm limited with what words I can use on the podcast, the poetry in my version... isn't the best. But hopefully, you'll still be able to enjoy the story. It also means I've had to introduce quite a few difficult words, but again, I hope it won't be too many. Some of them appear only in one or two lines, so don't worry too much about understanding them all.

The story is split into four parts. We'll have parts one and two this week, and parts three and four next week, and I'll explain new words before each part.

So, what is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* about? I don't want to give away the whole story, but I'll give you a summary to help you understand. *Sir Gawain* is a story that involves King Arthur, an important figure from British myths and legends. You may know *The Sword and the Stone*, which is the most famous story involving King Arthur.

This story is not directly about Arthur, but his nephew, Gawain. Gawain is one of the knights in Arthur's court. A **court** is an area where a king or queen meets with other important people. King Arthur's court, his home, is at Camelot, a castle that appears a lot in British legends.

Gawain is one of Arthur's knights. A **knight** is a person from the Middle Ages who works for a lord or a king. Knights wear heavy armour, clothes that protect them, they ride horses, and they fight for their lord or king. Knights go to battle using swords and shields. Sometimes, there are big competitions called jousts where knights ride horses and fight with long weapons called lances. In fairy tales, a knight often comes and rescues princesses.

Arthur's group of knights, who live at his court in Camelot, are called the Knights of the Round Table, as they all sit around a big round table. For knights at this time, it was very important to be chivalrous, to show chivalry.

Chivalry is quite a complicated concept, but hopefully it will become clear during this story. Basically, chivalry is a code, a set of rules, that knights followed to show that they were good knights and good Christians. To be chivalrous means to fight for your king, your country and God. Chivalrous men are never afraid to go into battle, and they will always defend the weak.

One of the aspects of chivalry that is particularly important in stories such as this one is courtly love. Courtly love was a kind of love that a knight would feel towards a lady, a woman, but he could not actually fall in love with her. Basically, there are lots of these stories where a knight will go on a long journey and fight a monster for a woman, but they will never actually be together. Still, that won't stop them from talking about all kinds of naughty things and maybe kissing once or twice.

Courtly love is a very strange idea for modern readers, but it plays an important role in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as there is a long game of courtly love in part three. As you can imagine, this story does get a bit sexual, and there is also some violence in it. It may not be suitable for your children, is what I'm trying to say!

So, the story starts at Christmas in Camelot. Everyone is celebrating, but then suddenly a huge green man rides in called the Green Knight. He gives the court of the Round Table a challenge: one man can come and attack him with an axe, and in a year's time, he will do the same to that man.

Gawain accepts the challenge, and when he attacks the man, he cuts his head off. But the Green Knight survives! A year later, Gawain goes off to search for the Green Knight, since he has agreed that the Green Knight can attack him as well. Of course, he gets into lots of adventures on the way.

I think that's all the context I need to give. I'll just explain some other words that are in part one of today's story.

A **feast** is a very big meal that you have to celebrate something. You might have a feast at Christmas, although usually it is only kings who have feasts. It is also a verb, for example, I love to feast on chocolate and crisps, although it is not very healthy!

When a man has sex with a woman, and the woman gives birth to a child, the man **sires** the child. We usually use the word 'sire' to talk about animals, but in old stories, we sometimes talk about a king or a lord siring a son.

In the Middle Ages, people used a type of plate called a **trencher**. Trenchers were actually big, round pieces of bread, usually a bit old and hard. After you finished eating your meal, you could also eat the trencher, which had absorbed all the delicious juices.

Something that is religious, related to religion, is **holy**. Basically, 'holy' means good in relation to God and church. So, for example, we can say that John the Baptist was a holy person.

An **axe** is a big tool that you use to cut down trees. It has a long handle and a large blade. Nowadays, we don't use axes so much because we have machines to cut trees for us. Axes can also be used as weapons. For example, Gimli in *Lord of the Rings* uses axes, and so does Jack Torrance in the film *The Shining*.

When you hit something, you make a **blow**. So if you hit someone with a sword, you make a sword blow, and if you hit someone with an axe, you make an axe blow, and so on.

In boxing, the area where you fight is called the ring. So we sometimes use the expression **step in the ring** to mean to accept a challenge. For example, if someone tells you they bet you can't beat them in chess, you might decide to step into the ring and prove them wrong. Of course, there's not actually a ring to step into when you play chess, but you get the idea.

When a priest wants to help someone, they **bless** them. They put their hand on the person's head and say holy words. This is a blessing. The idea is that God is protecting you. In Christianity, priests sometimes bless water, and this is called holy water. If you are very lucky, you can say that you are blessed.

Someone's **offspring** is their child. 'Spring' means to jump, so it literally means 'the thing that jumps off you.' So I think 'offspring' is quite a funny way to refer to children. Personally, I don't have any offspring, although plenty of insects have jumped off me!

When someone tells you to **be on your guard**, it means to be careful. You should always be on your guard if you're walking down a dark street at night.

A **chapel** is a small church inside another building. In the UK, many schools have chapels in them, and students can visit chapel if they want to pray. Prisons and some airports also have chapels.

OK, so listen and enjoy!

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Part One

Long ago, at the castle of Camelot, in the **court** of King Arthur, a great celebration was taking place. It was New Year's eve, the 31st of December, and the **knights** of the Round Table were preparing for a **feast**. They danced and sang and drank, until they were tired and sat down to rest. Arthur sat at the head of the table, looking at his court with pride. Next to him sat his wife, Guinevere, who they say was the most beautiful in all the land.

The queen spoke.

*'I think it is time that I make us a rhyme
and warm these walls with a story.'*

The knights cheered; Guinevere's stories were always full of laughter and adventure.

But the queen smiled darkly.

*'You laugh and you cheer
but instead you should fear.
This story is not an adventure.
I'll speak of the day
when I went away
and met deadly Morgan le Fay.'*

Suddenly, the room fell silent. Morgan le Fay was Arthur's sister, but her name was rarely spoken in the court of Camelot. She knew magic, the people said, and nobody had seen or heard of her for many years.

Arthur placed a hand on his wife's arm, but she continued anyway.

*'It was at Tintagel, that castle by the sea
that I met Arthur's sister, who I thought would be sweet.
At that horrible place the two of them grew
where the waves lick the walls like the hungriest wolves
and the wind hits your eyes so hard you could cry.'*

'Guinevere,' said Arthur, 'I—'

*'After great Uther's death, their wonderful father
the brave knight Arthur left home to run after
his wonderful fate. To Camelot he went.
But Morgan stayed home and cared for Igraine
their mother whose madness gained and gained.
She thought she was helping, cared day and night
but her mother grew madder, a horrible sight.'*

Arthur **cleared his throat loudly**, but Guinevere had had a lot to drink, and there was no stopping her.

*'So I wasn't the warmest when greeting le Fay
but still I expected her kindly to say
that I was her sister, deserving respect*

*but she stared in my eyes and said instead,
“So it’s you, the mouse who married my brother
that great snake Arthur, who left our mother.”
I couldn’t believe she called Arthur a snake!
I said, “Arthur’s the son of King Uther the Great
if such a great man could sire a snake
then his wife is the Devil.” My voice did not shake.’*

The room was so quiet now that you could hear a mouse moving, or a snake sliding across the floor. Guinevere had called Igraine, Arthur’s own mother, the Devil.

‘If only you knew,” said Morgan le F—’

‘Dinner is ready!’

With great relief, the servants came in carrying dishes of chicken, potatoes, carrots and all other kinds of delights. Everyone happily began eating, glad that Guinevere’s story had been interrupted. She didn’t seem to mind, either, as a huge piece of chicken was put in front of her. The only one who didn’t eat was Arthur.

This was not because he was embarrassed by his wife, however. Arthur was a chivalrous man, and he forgave everyone for the occasional foolish remark. No, it was because the great king had a tradition.

He waited until the tension in the room had left and everyone was celebrating again, and then he stood up.

*‘My friends, my men, my Camelot knights.
Have you forgotten the date of this night?
I have a tradition which all of you know.
Until it is done, my hunger will grow.
I must hear a story, a tale of adventure
before I’m allowed to put fork into trencher.
So who’ll tell the story, permit me to eat?
Who’ll tell a tale to sweeten my meat?’*

The men started arguing over who should get to tell the tale. But before a winner could be decided, the doors to the great hall slammed open. A freezing cold wind blew. A man rode in on a horse, and everyone turned to see who it was.

It was a horrible creature, a massive man riding a massive horse. His arms were as large as melons, his chest was like a wardrobe, his legs could have been planted in an ancient forest, and his face was meaner than any monster’s, with a beard that poured from his chin like a waterfall. But what was most shocking was not his shape, but his colour. Because the knight was *green*, green all over, green like fresh leaves in spring. Every part of him—his skin, his hair, his clothes, even his horse—was green.

The Green Knight spoke.

*‘I’ve come to the court of Arthur the king.
I see you tell stories, eat supper and sing.
I’ve heard of you heroes, so holy and happy.
“Be sure of their chivalry,” so say the songs.
But I want to challenge this circle of swordsmen.*

*So this is my deal. You could call it a contract.
Come sign it, brave sirs, so we can decide
if the court of the king is where cowards hide.
A man must come meet me, make himself known.
I'll get down on the dirt and make my neck shown.
You'll swing not a sword, but attack with my axe.
Just once you can swing. Don't worry, I'll wait.
In a year and a day you'll find your fate.
You'll get on the ground and give me your neck.
Because that is the deal, destroy and be dealt
a blow for a blow. Be brave and don't show
any fear. For you follow the finest of kings!
So I ask of you, Arthur: will you step in the ring?'
Everyone turned to Arthur. Slowly, the king got up.
'I welcome you, friend, to sit at my court.
I do not wish any wars to be fought.
Here we are blessed and surrounded by peace.
I ask you, friend; come join the feast.
But if you insist, I'll agree to your game,
though I think it will end in your death and your pain.'*

The Green Knight laughed.
'You call this a king? A coward, I cry!
The offspring of Uther, an ugly surprise.
Did that brave man's blood get bought by another?'
At this insult, one of the knights stood up. It was Gawain, Arthur's nephew.
'These hateful words I refuse to hear!
You insult King Arthur and sweet Guinevere.
But a knight can never say no to a fight
if another knight offers; in that, you are right.
My name is Gawain, the weakest man here,
and yet I will meet your axe without fear.
I agree to your deal. The terms are clear.'

The Green Knight smiled and nodded, and took out a huge axe. It was as tall as he was, with a blade like a mirror. The other knights rushed forward to give Gawain advice and wish him luck. Gawain ignored them and walked up to King Arthur and Guinevere.

The queen spoke first.
'I give you my blessing, my dear sweet Gawain.
When this deal is done, there'll be fame on your name.'
She kissed his forehead. Next, Arthur blessed him with his sword.
'Go strong and true, as a man of the Table
I'm certain you'll win, for no-one is able
to suffer a blow to the neck and survive.'
Then Arthur leant forward and whispered in Gawain's ear.

*'And yet I fear that I smell some magic.
If magic's involved then the end could be tragic.
So be on your guard, and take our regards
and show that green monster just who you are.'*

Gawain nodded and went to face the knight. The Green Knight smiled evilly, and handed over the axe. Now that he was stood before him, Gawain realised just how huge this man really was.

*'Before I attack you, please let me know.
If you live through this blow, where should I go?'
'Don't worry and wonder to where you must walk.
Just cut me with courage and then I will talk.'*

The Green Knight knelt on the floor and presented his neck. Gawain held the axe steady, and then swung with all his strength.

The axe cut cleanly through the man's neck, sending his head to the floor. A fountain of blood poured out of him. Nobody cheered, and Guinevere went as pale as snow.

But then, to even greater surprise, the man stood up. The body of the Green Knight, without its head, continued to move! The man got to his feet and picked up his head by the hair, holding it up to show everyone. Men cried out in horror. The cold eyes of the knight stared at Guinevere, and the queen fainted.

And then the head began to speak.
*'So you see, I can speak! I still am alive.
That little boy's blow was barely a scratch.
A chivalrous man should choose to chase me
to the Green Chapel. That's where I will wait
in a year and a day, to deliver your fate.'*

And the Green Knight climbed onto his horse and rode out of the castle, leaving a huge pool of blood on the floor, and a heavy silence in the air.

In a year and a day, Gawain would have to go to the Green Chapel, and the Green Knight would return his blow.

END OF PART ONE

And I'll just explain some words that are in part two.

Mass is something that Christians go to every week. Mass takes place in church, and the priest of the church leads mass. Christian mass involves eating bread and wine, which are considered to be the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Armour is a set of hard clothes, made of iron, steel or leather. Armour is there to protect you in battle. In the Middle Ages, knights and warriors wore very complicated metal armour and it took a long time to put it on and take it off. These were called suits of armour. Nowadays, usually only the police and soldiers wear armour, and the armour is much lighter.

If a suit of armour isn't enough to protect you, you might also want to use a **shield**. A shield is a round thing that you hold in front of your body, made of wood or

metal, that you use to defend yourself. If someone tries to hit you, you hold up the shield and they hit that instead.

Chastity is when you don't have sex, you are **chaste**. People usually practise chastity for religious reasons. For example, Christian priests must be chaste. They are not allowed to have sex. In tales of courtly love, knights are also expected to be chaste.

A **lord** is a type of noble. Nobles were important rich people in the past. In the Middle Ages, lords owned large houses or castles. Lords had peasants, poor people who worked for them, and knights who fought for them. In return, the lord made sure his people were safe.

A lord's wife was called a **lady**. 'Lady' was also used to refer to a woman who a knight loved, in the style of courtly love. There are many ladies in this story.

In the Middle Ages, one way to win a battle was by **siege**. A siege is when you trap your enemy inside their castle and wait for them to run out of food. Big machines called siege engines which can throw rocks and other weapons are used to make sure the enemy cannot escape.

A **potion** is a magic drink. Witches and wizards make potions, and they can have positive or negative effects. In *Harry Potter*, Snape is the potions teacher, and Harry is quite bad at potions.

A **hag** is an ugly old woman. The image of the hag appears a lot in children's stories. These old women, these hags, are very frightening and often evil.

Chatter means to talk, to chat, about things that aren't very important. Sometimes, other people chattering can be very annoying when you're trying to focus on something.

A **hop** is a small jump. So rabbits and frogs don't jump, they hop, because they are very small. If you hurt one of your feet, you might hop up and down on the other leg.

Wicked means evil, very very bad. So witches are wicked, in fairy tales stepmothers are usually wicked, and so on. You might know The Wicked Witch of the West, a green witch from *The Wizard of Oz*. There is also a famous musical called *Wicked* based on this character.

Spoils are what you have won, or stolen, from a battle. When a lord and his knights attack an enemy town, they may steal lots of money and objects, and these will be the spoils of victory. Or, if a group of thieves rob a big shop at night, the police may arrive, and they'll have to quickly run away with their spoils.

The **fruits of something** are the results you get from something. We often talk about 'the fruits of your labour', the results of your hard work. The fruits of my podcasting work is that you all get to enjoy fun episodes of *Easy Stories in English!*

OK, so listen and enjoy!

Part Two

It did not take the knights of the Round Table long to return to their celebrations. Camelot was a place of joy and peace, and the knights never took anything too

seriously. But Gawain was sure that he saw some worry on Arthur's forehead, and he saw many words whispered between the king and his wife. Guinevere, for her part, was convinced of Gawain's success, and told him not to worry.

And so the year passed. Cruel winter grew into spring, and spring rains dried into warm summer. The leaves burned and danced, announcing autumn, and finally winter came once more, like a child returning home as an adult.

One day, as Christmastime was approaching, Arthur took Gawain aside.

'I worry, Gawain, of your upcoming battle.

For nobody's heard of this place, the Green Chapel.

I know you agreed to the terms of the deal

but I worry about you. The danger is real.'

Gawain smiled and replied.

'My dear uncle Arthur, your words warm my heart

to have your regards on this difficult path

but I cut off his head, that greenest of knights

to avoid the same would just not be right.'

And so, one winter morning, Gawain went to **mass**, made his final prayers in Camelot, and got ready to leave. He had a wonderful **suit of armour**, and a **shield** that was decorated with a pentagram – a star with five points. The five points of the pentagram represented the five qualities a chivalrous knight must have: friendship, generosity, **chastity**, courtesy and holiness. This shield reminded Gawain of his duty, and made him think of the challenges he would face.

So Gawain left the Round Table, and wandered through England. He went to the farthest of places, killing the monsters that lived there and asking the people if they had heard of the Green Chapel. But he found only rumours, and so his path seemed to stretch on forever. At night, he slept on the cold, hard ground, with only his shield and his armour to keep him warm.

At first, Gawain travelled to the south-west, in the direction of Tintagel, the castle where Arthur had been born. When he told people where he'd come from, he heard many stories about the castle. Gorlois was the previous **lord** of Tintagel, and Igraine's first husband. The usual story was that Uther defeated Gorlois in battle, and found Igraine crying for her husband. The **lady** was so beautiful that Uther's heart was touched, and he fell in love with her. She fell in love with Uther, but she never quite got over her first husband's death.

But one night, an old man who lived alone on a windy hill told Gawain a different story.

'I tell you, boy, that story's a lie

Igraine met with Uther before her man died.

*The king was impatient, he hated the **siege**.*

He needed to bring Gorlois to his knees.

*So he ordered a **potion** with parts of Gorlois*

mixed into the liquid, that magical jar.

He drank it and changed, his face disappeared.

He had Gorlois' body, his hands and his beard.

*He entered the castle and found the lord's wife.
He entered her, too, and filled her with life.
Igraine didn't know that the man was disguised
but when she found out, she wanted to die.
And yet, it was over, the battle was won.
Gorlois was defeated, the new king had come.'*

Gawain was so terrified by this story that he ran away, and he slept little that night. He could not believe that Uther the Great had done something so horrible, that Arthur and Morgan were born from such horrors. He tried to forget about it, and refused to hear further stories about Tintagel.

The rumours of the Green Chapel pushed Gawain to head north. But after months of travelling, he began to grow desperate. One night, he prayed that he might find a chapel in the morning where he could go to mass and pray to God.

The next day, he rode out of the forest to see a castle on a hill. It was beautiful, with tall wooden walls and a thick barrier protecting it. It was surrounded by forests, and it was surely the finest castle a knight could ask for.

Gawain kissed his helmet and thanked God for his blessing, and then rode towards the castle. He reached the gate and called out to the watchman.

*'Good sir, I have travelled all over the land
and now I have found this castle most grand.
I'm looking to pass the cold winter weeks
in comfort and warmth, to redden my cheeks.
Would it be alright if you talked to your lord
and asked him to offer a knight room and board?'*

The watchman replied.

'Certainly, sir! I'll seek him and ask.

The guy loves his guests. He'll be glad to greet you.'

A few minutes later, the gate opened and Gawain rode inside. There, he found the lord, a tall, well-dressed man with a long, red beard.

*'I greet you, my guest, the honour is great.
This gentleman's got to be the knight, Gawain!
That shield, for sure, shows Camelot's chivalry.
That armour is rather familiar, too.*

You've crossed the whole country, come to my castle.

*We're happy to have you. We hope you'll be healthy
within our walls. We welcome you gladly!'*

When the rest of the castle found out it was Gawain who visited them, they all came to greet him. They dressed him in fine clothes and gave him finer food. Then, when Gawain was warm and his stomach full, the lord took him to mass.

There, he met the lady of the castle. She was just as beautiful as the lord was welcoming, and she had long red hair that matched her husband's beard.

*'The lord and I've learned the legends of Camelot.
I'm thrilled to think of the time we'll spend speaking.'*

He also met a pair of women. One was quite young, and could not look Gawain in the eyes, and the other was a **hag**, so ugly that Gawain could not look at her face.

The young lady spoke.

*'When the lord and lady are not at leisure
the two of us will take you and treat you to **chatter**.'*

The hag said nothing, but smiled strangely at Gawain.

After mass, they had dinner, and the lord asked Gawain what had brought him to travel this way.

*'As much as I'd like to stay in your walls
I'm seeking a place to which I've been called.
It's called the Green Chapel, a name of great mystery.
Nobody I've met seems to know its history.
By the first day of New Year, I must find the place
or the knight Gawain will fall to disgrace.'*

*'The Green Chapel! The chance of you choosing my castle
is odd, because actually it's close to that place.*

On New Year's day, I'll do you a favour.

*I'll **hop** on my horse and happily take you.*

*That wasteland is **wicked**, I warn you, Gawain,
but you are a knight, and know your own fate.*

But Gawain, I want you to grant me a wish.

In the morning, my men and I move to the forest.

We're having a hunt, and I had an idea.

While we run through the rural, you will make rest.

You'll battle with beauty, you'll chatter with chivalry.

I can tell you'll take a treasure or two.

*When I show you the **spoils** of the chasing and slicing
you'll give me the gift of your gentleman's gains,
trade the **fruits** of your tricks for the meat from my traps.*

Do me this deal. I dare you, Gawain.'

Gawain laughed. It was an interesting idea: to trade the spoils of the hunt for a different kind of spoils. And Gawain had met many beautiful women in the castle already... He had to remain chivalrous, of course, but it would be rude to reject his host's request.

'A deal it is! I cannot wait

I already see the meat on my plate.'

Gawain happily went to bed, wondering what 'gains' he would make tomorrow.

END OF PART TWO

If you enjoyed the story and want to say thank you, you can buy me a coffee on [Ko-Fi](#). Just go to [EasyStoriesInEnglish.com](#) and click the orange button that says [Buy me a coffee!](#) Or you can write me a nice review on Apple Podcasts, or follow me on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#), [@arielgoodbody](#). Thank you for listening, and see you next week for the end of the story and the last episode of the year. Bye!

[kofi]