

### **SYMBOLISM IN “SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT”**

The romance “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”, written in the 14th century, has been an object of numerous studies interpreting its symbolic meaning. Scholars have made an attempt at providing reasonable and convincing explanations of the symbols in a new way.

The object of the study is the text of medieval romance “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”. The subject of the article is symbolism in this romance. This paper aims at decoding and analysing the central symbols of the text without which the full understanding of the text is impossible.

Firstly, we would like to analyse the symbolic numbers occurring in the text and their function. More specifically, we will focus on numbers two and three.

English people lived at that time in a world full of contradictions, extremes, and dichotomies. Some of these are fundamental in the development of the plot, the most important one being that of the pentangle and the girdle. Several scholars have focused on the oppositeness of both symbols. On the one hand, the pentangle is the endless knot, it is indivisible, it presents a “monosemous, unambiguous character”. On the other hand, “Gawain’s new sign [the girdle], in contrast, is polysemous, complex, an acknowledgement of his new sense of himself” [12, p. 206].

Another contrast can be seen between “nature “ (wilderness) and culture (civilization): “At the beginning of the poem Nature and Culture seem clearly distinguishable as the Green Knight –representing the mysterious forces of nature–bursts in on the cultured and artficed setting of Arthur’s court” [1, p. 214].

However, we should not be shocked by this abundance of oppositions for this is a matter not only of society and life, but also of religion. For example, throughout

the romance, we find Gawain living in the luxury and warmth of the court, but also undergoing the hardness and extreme cold of wilderness [11, p.69].

A different dichotomy is represented by the two games occurring in the poem. According to Prior, “the two games that organize the plot apparently fit the courtly/uncouth classification. The Beheading game frames the story in grotesque danger. The second game, which organizes the events in between, is played at a court, and involves the noble pursuits of hunting and “luftalkyng” [13, pp.106-107]. Finally, another element we find twice in the text is verdicts: there are two of them at the end of the poem.

Number three is the most exploited number in the poem. As Brewer points out, “The folkloric “three” is particularly effective in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” [4, p. 18]. Even from the structural point of view, the plot is made up of three different themes mingled together: the Beheading Game, the Sexual Temptation, and the Exchange of Winnings. Martin (9), Blanch (2), Miller (10) and Wasserman (3) also underline the importance of number three and focus on its religious connotations.

Firstly, there are three elements in Gawain’s armour according to Davis: “Three components of the army –all loops of various kinds, representing bonds of human correctness and obligation – are singled out for our attention. They are in presented sequence the “*vrysoun* “ (modern “horizon “), a silk band which attaches the rear of Gawain’s helmet to the backplate of his armour; embroidered by female hand with turtle doves, love knots and the like, this is significant of courteous and erotically inflected relations between the sexes. Next mentioned is the “*cercle* “, a flat metal crown studded with brown (= “male “) diamonds projecting the bonding of chivalric brotherhood and of a society of (male) equals (the form of the Round Table). Last comes Gawain’s pentangle emblem, which receives its own passage of complex exposition. It is generally agreed that this passage places courteous and chivalric commitment [6, p. 345].

Also, when the knight is completely lost and desperate, he turns to God and Mary asking for a place to attend a mass. Finally, he says his prayers three times:

*And þerfore sykyng he sayde, “I beseche þe, lorde,  
And Mary, þat is myldest moder so dere,  
Of sum herber þer heȝly I myȝt here masse,  
Ande þy matynez to-morne, mekely I ask,  
And þerto prestly I pray my pater and aue and crede “ [17, p. 259].*

Three hunting scenes are closely connected with the “temptation scenes” and the exchange of winnings scenes. They take place “during daylight on the 29th, 30th, 31st, December” [5, p. 137] and most scholars have focused on a supposed parallel of pursuit (Bertilak hunts animals while his wife hunts Gawain). In fact, there is a clear relation between Gawain and the hunted animals. As Rooney puts it, “an early, indeed pioneering, proponent of a symbolic link between the hunts and the bedroom scenes was H. L. Savage, who found characteristics of the animals hunted paralleled in Gawain’s behaviour. Thus on the first day he is timid like the deer, on the second day bold like the boar and on the final day willy like the fox [16, p.159]

However, we notice a striking similarity between Gawain and the animals, namely on the third day he resembles a fox: “The fox in the field swerves aside trying to avoid its fate. We may see Gawain deviating from his path of denial to take the girdle in the hope that it will save him from his anticipated fate. The symbolism cannot be taken very far. The poem does not condemn Gawain wholeheartedly for his fault and he is hardly reduced in our eyes to the status of the wily and ignoble fox.” [15, p. 160]

According to D. W. Robertson, Jr., the three victims, deer, boar and fox, may carry their traditional religious symbolism and may therefore represent respectively the Flesh, the Devil and the World” (14).

We should note that, as Prior puts it, the three days spent in the castle with the Lady “constitute the real test of Gawain’s integrity and honor” since there is a clash between two codes: the moral one and that of *cortaysye* [13, p. 120]. On the third day, Gawain has to choose between one of these and eventually the moral criterion defeats the social one. It reminds us of the scenes concerned with hunting

because, as it was the case in those, here we also find an evolution: tension grows as we read. Thus, the first day Lady Bertilak visits Gawain's bedroom and tells him that she wants to talk to him; here we find a "not-too-subtle invitation to lovemaking" [13, p. 116]:

*And now ze ar here, iwysse, and we bot oure one;  
My lorde and his ledez ar on lenþe faren,  
Oþer burnez in her bedde, and my burdez als,  
Pe dor drawn and dit with a derf haspe;  
And syþen I haue in þis hous hym þat al lykez,  
I schal ware my whyle wel, quyl hit lastez,  
with tale.  
ze ar welcum to my cors,  
Yowre awen won to wale,  
Me behouez of fyne force  
Your seruauant be, and schale [17, p. 268].*

Therefore, the first temptation is the less subtle and the most direct. However, the second one is more subtle: she does not offer herself openly and she will be happy with partial victories. The third one presents an innovation on the part of the author because he, for the first time, shares with his audience the knight's thoughts:

*In drez droupyng of dreme draueled þat noble,  
As mon þat watz in mornyng of mony þro þoztes,  
How þat destiné schulde þat day dele hym his wyrde  
At þe grene chapel, when he þe gome metes,  
And bihoues his buffet abide withoute debate more [17, p. 274].*

This last temptation day is the most important of all. It "includes moments of humor, irony, and almost farce" (13). Nevertheless, this is also the moment of "most moral tension, when Gawain makes his most important and most seriously wrong move: when he accepts the Lady's "luflice" [13, p. 121-22].

In the text, we find Bertilak urging an arrangement by which he himself will go hunting while Gawain remains in the castle, and on the return from the hunt there is to be an exchange, the host giving whatever he has gained and Gawain providing whatever he achieves [11, p.74].

This “game “ lasts three days. Thus, Bertilak being away, his wife visits Gawain’s bedroom and gives the knight a kiss on the first day, two on the second, and three on the third; these kisses enable him to fulfil the arrangement made with his host because he will give the kisses to him on his return to the castle each evening [11, p. 75]. However, on the third day Gawain keeps her present of the girdle secret. This failure, according to Gilbert, “can be read as an adulterous act” (7).

Gawain is guided to the Green Chapel where the Green Knight gives him three feinted blows, just nicking his neck with the third stroke. The first stroke is a feint: the Green Knight was going to hit Gawain the first blow. The second blow is also feinted, but the final blow nicks Gawain in the neck. Then the Green Knight reveals three things: first of all, that he is Gawain’s host; secondly, that the first two feinted blows stand for the two occasions on which Gawain faithfully gave him his gains (Lady Bertilak’s kisses), and, thirdly, that the nick was a reproof for Gawain’s failure to reveal the gift of the girdle [11, p.76].

One more famous symbol in the romance is the one chased in gold on a field of bright gules, the pentangle. Its mythic significance has been widely discussed, though nowhere more clearly than in Jessie Weston's “From Ritual to Romance”, and the Gawain-poet utilizes the familiar meaning of the pentangle in folklore by allowing it to underlie the religious symbolism which he explains in twenty-two lines, the whole of which adds up to a chivalric moral in the hero of perfection. The magical aura of the pentangle, being an ancient and powerful sign, is at once understandable to the audience [8, p. 130]:

*Hit is a syngne pat Salamon set sumquyle  
In bytoknyng of trawpe, bi tyle pat hit habbez,  
For hit is a figure pat haldez fyue poyntez,*

*And vche lyne vmbelappe3 and louke3 in oper.*

*And ayquere hit is endelez; auid Englych hit callen*

*Oueral, as I here, pe endeles knot.1 [17, p. 250].*

Its appropriateness as Gawain's device is ironically underscored in the concluding stanzas when Gawain's bitter speech against the well-known treachery of women includes Solomon's "fele sere," or his many and various women who led him away from righteousness [8, p. 130].

The religious explanation which the poet gives is the one of primary importance, for it emphasizes that aspect of Gawain's character which is an integral part of the overall chivalric ideal, principles stemming from both pagan and Christian ideas of honor and justice. The pentangle is a sign of perfection. Saying that it stands for truth equals to statement that it stands for the ideal in chivalry, for the virtue of truth would be the capstone of the lesser virtues, and Gawain's strength lies in his allegiance to this truth. It is this quality which enables him to reach the valley without overt hindrance, for he rejects the guide's suggestion that he ride away, no man being the wiser, and so fulfills his vow. [8, p. 131]

Gawain's most bitter lamentation is that he has forsaken "pat is larges and lewté pat longe3 to kny3te3." Or as he also puts it, he is guilty of "trecherye and vntrawpe." His scutcheon has been tarnished and his reputation lessened, for he has failed to be entirely worthy of the sign of perfection which he bore away proudly from Arthur's hall. The depths of his feeling are understandable, and his lament is not an exaggerated one; the care with which the poet depicted and explained the pentangle shows the audience that the responsibility of the virtue of perfection is no small one, a realization which is all too clearly emphasized by the theme. Perfection is not attainable by mortal man any more than other ideals. It is true, however, that as far as it is possible for a mortal, Gawain does approach something very near to perfection; hence the poet's emphasis on Gawain's being given the pentangle device [8 pp. 131-132]:

*Forpy hit acorde3 to pis kny3t and to his cler arme3,*

*For ay faythful in fyue and sere fyue sype3*

*Gawan watz for gode knawen, and as golde pured,  
Voyded of vche vylany, wyth vertuez ennoured ....* [17, p. 250].

Of all the knights he is the most highly regarded, the worthiest; he is a true "hero of destiny" and therefore the one who must venture out to have his mettle and his truth tested [8, p. 132].

Thus, the romance is full of symbols, the central of which are numbers two and three and also the pentangle which can be interpreted in different ways – five wounds of Christ, the Star of Bethlehem and also five virtues of knighthood: “generosity, courtesy, chastity, chivalry and piety”. Also, the pentangle represents five joys of Mother Mary: The Annunciation, Nativity, Resurrection, Ascension, and Assumption.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1. Ashley, Kathleen M. Bonding and signification in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight / Kathleen M. Ashley // Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet. – January. – NY: Whitston, 1991. – PP. 213-219.
2. Blanch, Robert J. Religion and Law in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight / J. Robert Blanch // Approaches to Teaching Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. – NY: The Modern Language Association of America, 1986. – PP. 93-101.
3. Blanch, Robert J. and Wasserman, Julian N. The Current State of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Criticism / Robert J. Blanch and Julian N. Wasserman // The Chaucer Review. No. 4 (Vol. 27). – Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993. – PP. 401-412.
4. Brewer, Derek Introduction / Derek Brewer // A Companion to the Gawain-Poet. – Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 1999. – PP. 1-22.
5. Brewer, Derek Everyday Life: Feasts / Derek Brewer // A Companion to the Gawain-Poet. – Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 1999. – PP. 131-142.
6. Davis, Nick Narrative Form and Insight / Nick Davis // A Companion to the Gawain-Poet. – Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 1999. – PP. 329-350.

7. Gilbert, Jane *Gender and sexual transgression / Jane Gilbert // A Companion to the Gawain-Poet.* – Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 1999. – PP. 53-69
8. Jones, Shirley Jean *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Its Magic, Myth, and Ritual / Jean Shirley Jones.* – Oklahoma: The University of Oklahoma, 1966. – 172 p.
9. Martin, Priscilla *Allegory and symbolism / Priscilla Martin // A Companion to the Gawain-Poet.* – Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 1999. – PP. 315-328.
10. Miller, Miriam Youngerman, and Chance, Jane *Tolkien and His Sources / Miriam Youngerman Miller and Jane Chance // Approaches to Teaching Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* – New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1986. – PP. 151-155.
11. Pedrosa, Antonio Vicente Casas *Symbolic Numbers and Their Function in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight / Antonio Vicente Casas Pedrosa // Philologica Canariensia.* No. 12-13. – University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 2006-2007. – PP. 67-88.
12. Plummer, John *Signifying the Self: Language and Identity in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight / John Plummer // Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet.* – January. – NY: Whitston, 1991. – PP. 195-212.
13. Prior, Sandra Pierson *The Pearl Poet Revisited / Sandra Pierson Prior.* – New York: Twayne's English Authors Series, 1994. – 161 p.
14. Robertson, Durant Waite, Jr. *Essays in Medieval Culture / Durant Waite, Jr. Robertson.* – Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980. – 404 p.
15. Rooney, Anne *Everyday Life: The hunts in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight / Anne Rooney // A Companion to the Gawain-Poet.* – Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 1999. – PP. 157-164.
16. Savage, Henry Lyttleton *The Gawain-Poet: Studies in his Personality and Background / Henry Lyttleton Savage.* – University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, N.C., 1956. – 236 p.



17. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight // The Norton Anthology of English Literature. Vol.1. – New York, London: W.W. Norton and Company, Fifth edition, 1986. – PP. 233-288.

*The article deals with the chivalric romance “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” written by an anonymous author of the 14 century and representing English Middle Ages. As the complexity of the romance consists in its symbols, the subject of the study is symbolism in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”. There is obvious repetition of number three in the text. This number is used in religious context symbolizing the central concept of Christian religion – unity of God Father, God Son and Holy Spirit. The religious connotation of this number can be traced in three prayers to Virgin Mary, three hunting days, three hunted animals, three kisses, three days of seduction and three blows. One more central symbol is number two representing universal dichotomy. A reader can observe this number in opposition “nature vs culture”; “luxury and warmth of the court vs hardness and unbearable cold while travelling” as well as in two verdicts at the end of the romance, two interpretations of Sir Gawain’s behaviour and two games at the beginning and at the end of the romance. One more central symbol is a pentangle on Sir Gawain’s shield. The pentangle represents number five which has various connotations and interpretations – five wounds of Jesus Christ, five virtues of knighthood and five joys of Mother Mary.*

**Key words:** *romance, symbol, religious connotation, numbers two and three, pentangle.*

### **СИМВОЛІЗМ У РОМАНІ «СЕР ГАВЕЙН І ЗЕЛЕНИЙ ЛИЦАР»**

*Стаття фокусує увагу на лицарському романі «Сер Гавейн і Зелений Лицар», що відноситься до англійського Середньовіччя та написаний невідомим автором 14 століття. Роман насичений символами, центральними з яких є цифри 2, 3 і 5. Тому нашою метою було*

*проаналізувати саме ці символи та визначити їхнє імпліцитне значення у творі.*

***Ключові слова:** роман, символ, релігійна конотація, цифри 2 і 3, п'ятикутник.*

### **СИМВОЛИЗМ В РОМАНЕ «СЕР ГАВЕЙН И ЗЕЛЕНЬИЙ РЫЦАРЬ»**

*Статья фокусирует внимание на рыцарском романе «Сер Гавейн и Зеленый Рыцарь», который относится к английскому Средневековью и написан неизвестным автором 14 столетия. Роман насыщен символами, среди которых центральными есть цифровые – 2, 3 и 5. Поэтому нашей целью было проанализировать именно эти символы и определить их имплицитное значение в произведении.*

***Ключевые слова:** роман, символ, религиозная коннотация, цифры 2 и 3, пятиугольник.*