

Gawain is Not a Hero? Tensions Between the Heroic and the Complex Subject in Representations of Sir Gawain in Art

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1. Introduction



Key Points – Gawain's Identity and Transformation in *SGGK*

•Gawain as a Complex Subject

- Struggles with internal conflict shaped by mythic heroic ideals
- Represents a shift from collective identity to personal introspection and individuality

•Theoretical Framework

- Combines poststructuralism, alchemical transformation, and feminist critique
- Informed by Cohen's "monstrosity," Jungian psychology, and the Rosarium *Green Lion* symbol

•Feminist Reorientation

- Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay as agents of disruption and complexity
- Challenge chivalric masculinity and enable Gawain's psychological growth

•Artistic Engagement

- Personal artworks reflect and interrogate Gawain's crisis and transformation
- Latest work *Sighs Softly on Slopes and Shadows* explores subjectivity through Lady Bertilak

•Gawain's Identity Formation

- Contrasted with traditional hero/monster archetypes and modern adaptations (e.g., *The Green Knight*, 2021)
- Gawain emerges as flawed, morally resonant, and necessarily incomplete

•Visual Hermeneutics

- Uses established and emerging visual languages ("fifth text") to interpret the poem's symbolic and thematic layers



Gawain, Between Two Deaths (2025), oil on canvas.



2. Artistic/Alchemical Framework





Illustration number 18: Green Lion Devours the Sun, 18th-century English manuscript copy of the Rosarium Philosophorum, or Rosary of the Philosophers (1550).

Phase	Alchemical Stage	Lines	Keywords	Transformation Theme
● Court	Citrinitas (Yellowing)	1–690	Glory, Ideal, Surface	Symbolic Identity
● Wilderness	Nigredo (Blackening)	691–763	Dread, Hunger, Isolation	Dissolution
○ Hautdesert	Albedo (Whitening)	764–1997	Reflection, Seduction, Guilt	Ethical Crisis
● Chapel & Return	<i>Rubedo</i> (Reddening)	1998–2531	Blood, Shame, Memory	Integration Responsibility



3. Gawain: Beyond Heroism and Monstrosity





Left to right: *Gawain Confronted by a Wodwose* (1971) by Cyril Satorsky; *Gawain and the Wodwose* (2018) by Michael Smith; and *The Travails* (2015-18) by Clive Hicks-Jenkins.

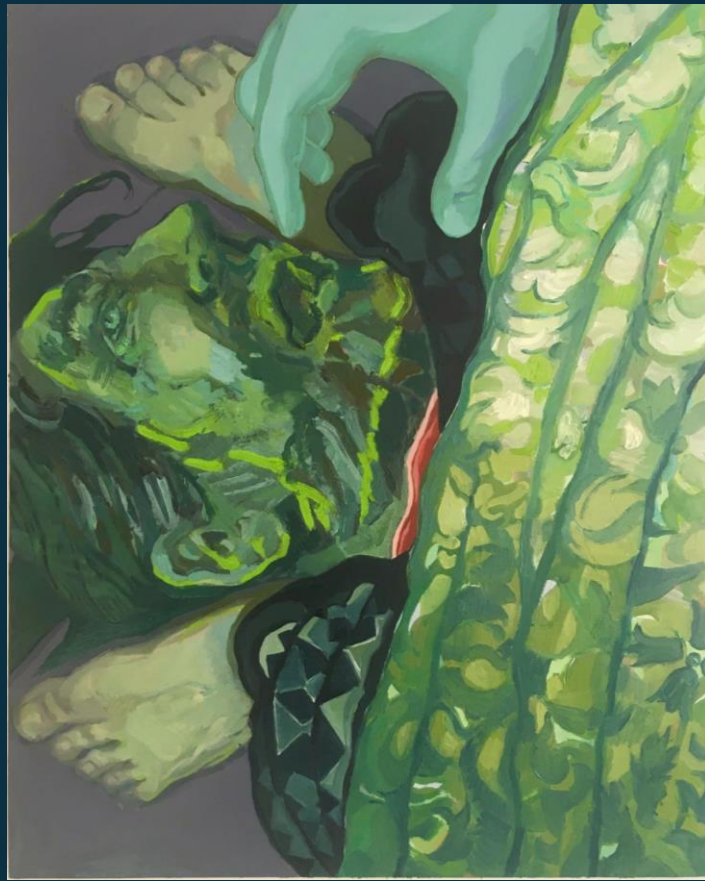
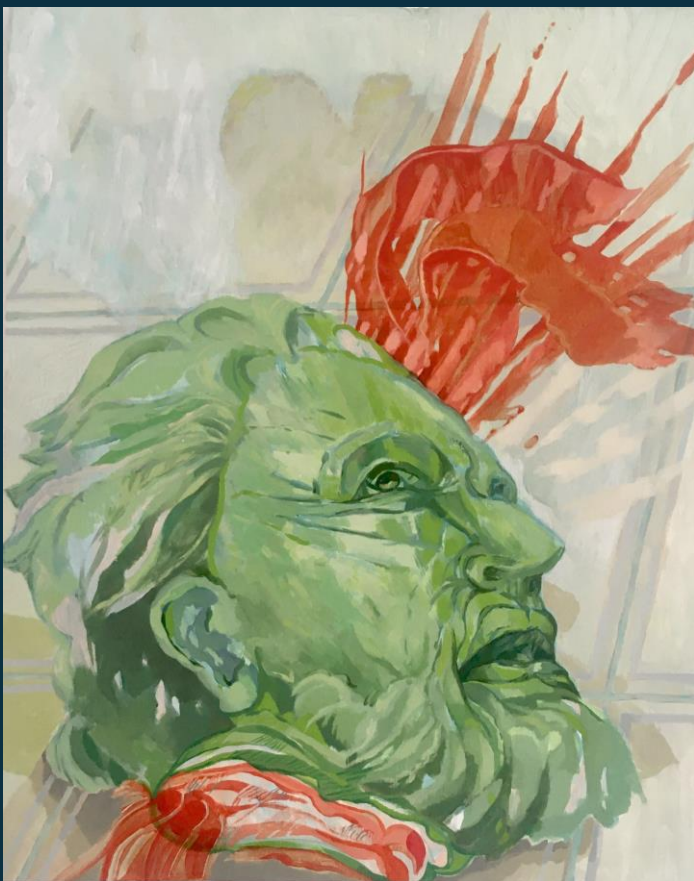


Wodwose II (Storm Coming) (2022) by Michael Eden.





The Green Knight Bows to Gawain's Blow (2015-18)
by Clive Hicks-Jenkins.



Left to right: *Green Knight's Head (blood refraction)*; *Green Knight's Head (no point of view)*; *Green Knight's Head (point of no return)* all 2024.



Left: *The Reproachful Head of the Green Knight* (2020); Right: *Green Knight's head (die cast)* (2024)

‘Constructive Monstrosity’

Constructive Monstrosity:

constructive monstrosity refers to the concept of monstrosity as not merely a destructive or frightening force but as a catalyst for transformation, self-awareness, or growth. It challenges the traditional view of monsters as purely antagonistic or threatening, instead framing them as entities that provoke reflection, disrupt normative assumptions, and reveal deeper truths about identity, morality, or society.

Produces a doubting and/or changed subject.

- **Monsters as Mirrors:** They reveal hidden fears, suppressed desires, or unresolved conflicts within the subject. In SGGK, the Green Knight functions as a mirror to Gawain’s insecurities and inadequacies within the chivalric code.
- **Challenges to Normativity:** Monsters expose the arbitrariness or constraints of societal norms. In SGGK, the rigidity of knightly ideals is problematized through Gawain's failure and the Green Knight's enigmatic test.
- **Agents of Change:** Monsters disrupt the status quo and provoke transformation. For Gawain, the Green Knight becomes an agent of self-knowledge, forcing him to renegotiate his identity.

‘Agonistic Monstrosity’

Agonistic Monstrosity

Agonistic monstrosity refers to the concept of monstrosity as a force of conflict, opposition, or destruction, embodying antagonism without a transformative or constructive outcome. It positions monsters as external threats that reinforce boundaries between self and other, good and evil, civilization and chaos, without challenging the status quo or encouraging growth. This view sees monsters as embodiments of fears and dangers that must be confronted and defeated, rather than engaged with or understood.

Produces a hero or heroic legacy.

- **Monsters as Adversaries:** Monsters in this framework are symbols of externalized fears or dangers that must be vanquished. They represent a clear opposition to the protagonist’s goals, existing primarily to highlight the hero’s courage or moral superiority.

Example: Grendel in Beowulf, who serves as a straightforward representation of chaos and destruction, existing to be defeated and thus affirming Beowulf’s heroism.

- **Reinforcement of Normativity:** Agonistic monstrosity upholds societal norms by positioning monsters as "the other" that threatens order, morality, or identity. Their defeat restores the status quo and reaffirms the values and boundaries they threaten.

Example: The Cyclops in Homer’s Odyssey represents savagery and barbarism, reinforcing the idea of Odysseus as a hero embodying cleverness and civilization.

- **Obstacles to Change:** Rather than provoking self-awareness or growth, agonistic monsters block transformation. They are seen as barriers to be overcome, functioning primarily as challenges to the hero’s strength or willpower.

Example: The dragon in Beowulf’s final battle serves as a destructive force that leads to Beowulf’s demise but does not provoke personal or societal reflection.



Dev Patel in a scene from the (C)A24 film: *The Green Knight* (2021).



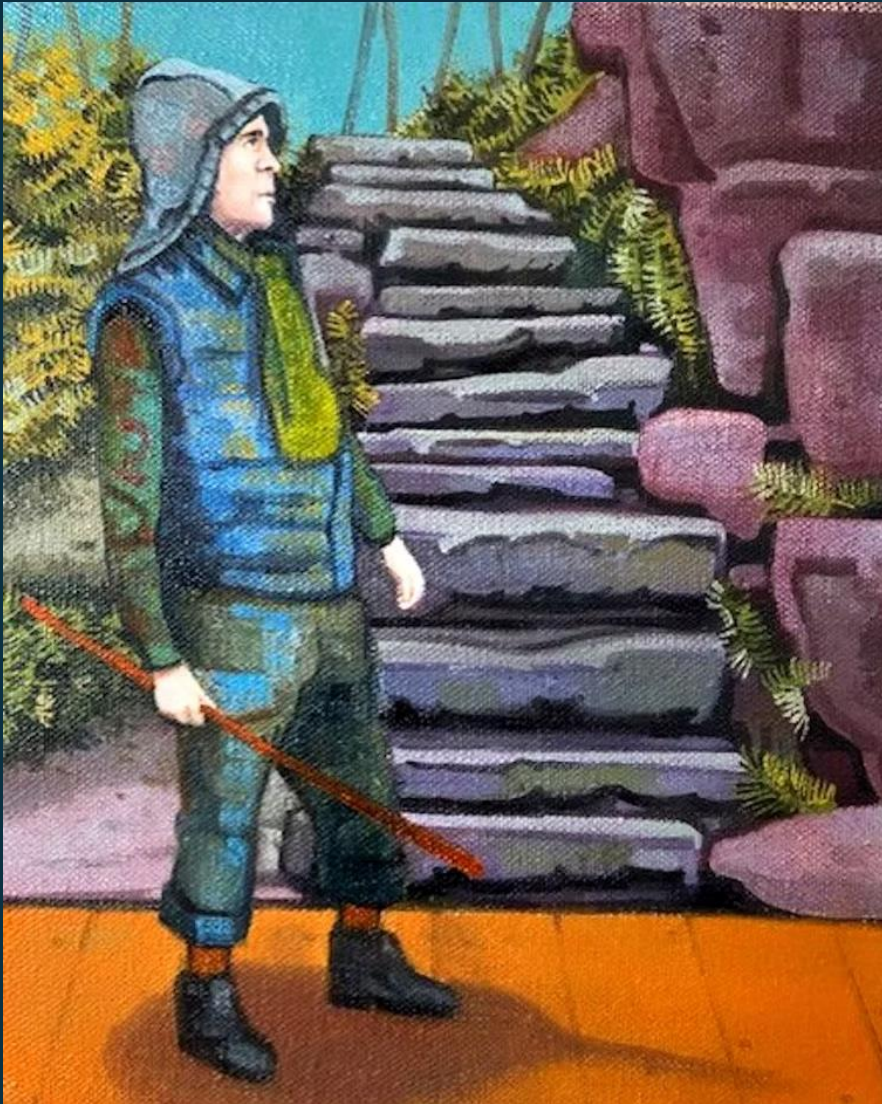
Edward Woodward in a scene from *The Wicker Man* (1973).

Ideological Engagement vs. Detachment

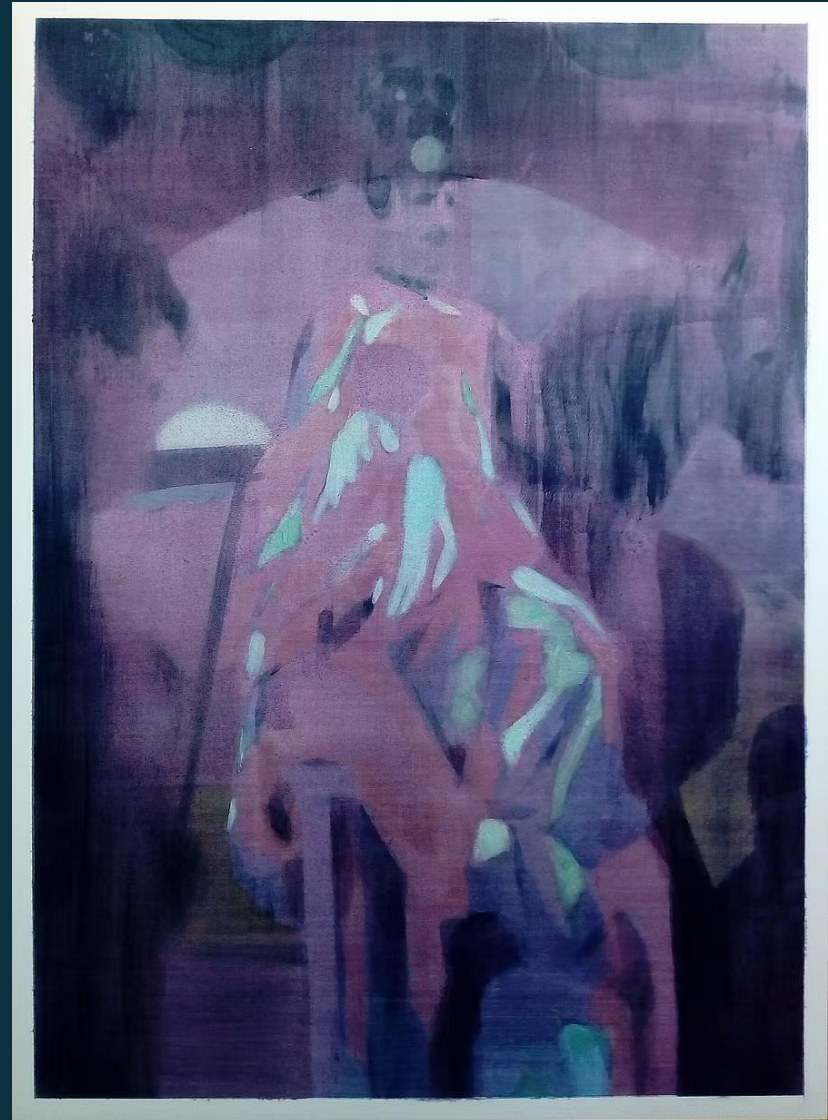
Contrasts Gawain's earnest belief in chivalry with two other modes of being:

- * Ironic detachment (e.g., Lowery's *The Green Knight* film portrays Gawain as a passive "eternal adolescent").
- * Rigid dogmatism (e.g., Sergeant Howie in *The Wicker Man*, who resists all ideological rupture).

Alternatively: Gawain's authentic struggle with chivalry's contradictions—rather than rejecting or blindly obeying it—allows him to transcend its limitations.



Green Chapel (2023) by Geraint Evans.



Sir Gawain (2021) by Adam Dix.



4. Engaging with Marlene Dirschauer: A Counterargument on Gawain's Humanity



Engaging with Dirschauer: A Counterargument on Gawain's Humanity

- **Gawain's Journey Is Humanising, Not Heroic**

Contrary to Dirschauer's reading of Gawain as a compliant, mythic hero, his internal conflict and emotional breakdown mark a shift toward psychological subjectivity and human vulnerability.

- **Female Figures as Agents of Transformation**

Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay are threats to a patriarchal order as catalysts for Gawain's self-reflection and growth. Their fluidity contrasts Guinevere's static ideal, complicating gender roles and narrative authority.

- **Critique of Ideological Fixity**

While Dirschauer and Dinshaw offer politicized readings, I argue that *SGGK* resists closure and ideological stability. The poem thrives on ambiguity, rupture, and contradiction—qualities flattened by reductive interpretation.

- **Disruption of Human Exceptionalism**

Gawain's emotional kinship with animals (e.g., hunted deer, Gringolet) and his absence from Bertilak's hunts reflect a non-dominant, affective subjectivity. This levels human-animal distinctions and decenters traditional chivalric mastery.



Guinevere with Photocopier (2019), oil on canvas.



*Sighs Softly on Slopes and
Shadows (2025) oil on canvas.*



5. The Green Lion Devouring the Sun: Alchemical Origins and Symbolism



Catalytic greenness as
a vital, transformative
essence.

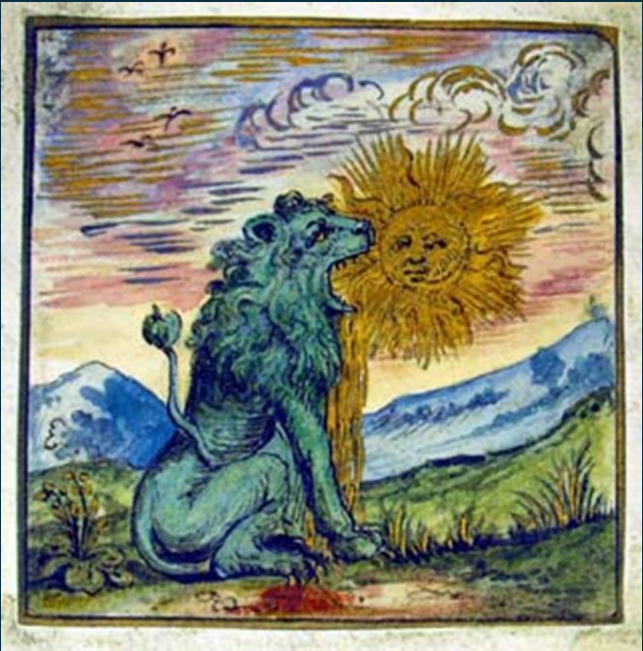


Illustration number 18: Green Lion Devours the Sun, 18th-century English manuscript copy of the Rosarium Philosophorum, or Rosary of the Philosophers (1550).

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Application of Alchemical Phases to SGGK (2025).

The Green Knight as the Green Lion: Dissolving the Solar Ideal





Sighs Softly on Slopes and Shadows (2025) oil on canvas.



6. Internalization and Subjectification: Gawain's Mental Crucible



- From Public Hero to Private Subject:**

Gawain's journey begins as a public, mythic act but becomes an introspective psychological trial—moving from external action to internal transformation.

- Subversion of Epic Heroism:**

The poem contrasts the outward heroism of the Trojan prologue with Gawain's inward moral struggle, reframing the heroic journey as personal, not performative.

- Alchemical Journey as Metaphor for Subjectification:**

- Citrinitas (Gold):** At Camelot—idealized perfection and surface virtue, symbolized by the golden pentangle and radiant court.

- Nigredo (Black):** In the wilderness—cold, fear, and narrative uncertainty erode Gawain's heroic image.

- Albedo (White):** At Hautdesert—seduction, confession, and moral ambiguity reflect internal purification and psychological tension.

- Rubedo (Red):** At the Green Chapel—blood and shame mark the final phase: not triumphant return, but self-integration and psychic maturity.

- Psychological vs. Physical Trial:**

Gawain's "failure" (accepting the girdle) is less about moral collapse and more a break from rigid idealism—his shame becomes a vehicle for growth.

- Court vs. Self:**

Camelot's laughter at his return contrasts with Gawain's internal transformation—the myth persists, but he has evolved beyond it.

- Colour as Symbolic, Yet Unstable:**

The chromatic sequence is meaningful but culturally contingent—colours (gold, green, red) carry shifting symbolic weight, resisting fixed interpretations.

- Crucible of the Mind:**

Gawain's arc is best read as a psychological alchemy—a symbolic breakdown and reformation of the self through fear, contradiction, and self-awareness.

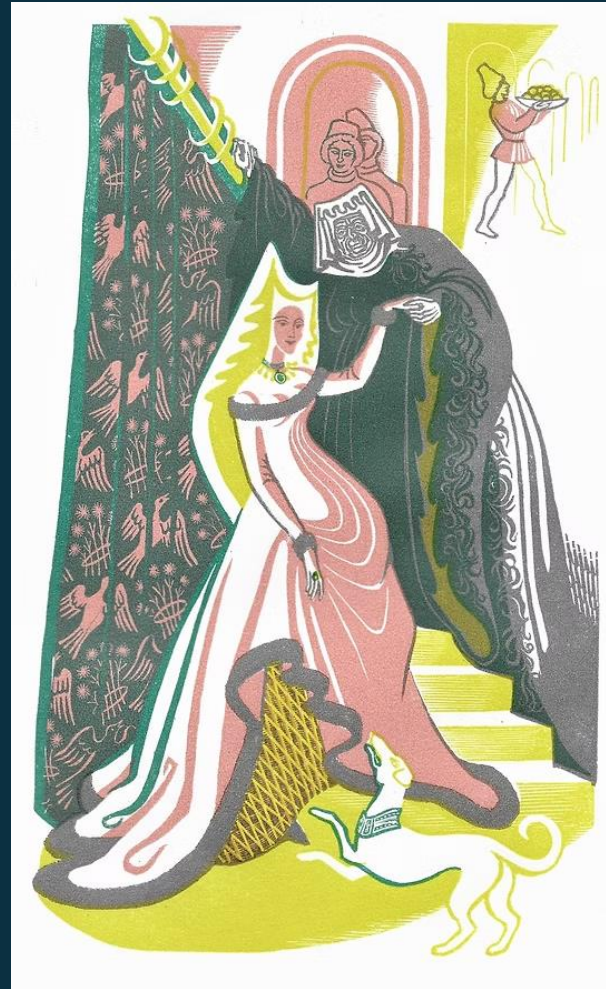


7. Reconsidering the Role of Women: Fragmentation and Emergent Abstraction





Lady Bertilak & Morgan le Fay (1912) by Frederic Lawrence.



Lady Bertilak accompanying Morgan (1952) by Dorothea Braby.



Morgan le Fay (2018) by Clive Hicks-Jenkins.

Lady Bertilak: The Subtle Dissolver

- Dynamic Presence:**

Lady Bertilak is adaptive—she mirrors, manipulates, mocks, and seduces—never fixed in one role.

- Relational Identity:**

She exists through interaction, not as a static character—her subjectivity is fluid and multifaceted.

- Role-Play and Subversion:**

Her shifting social roles and sharp wit challenge Gawain's rigid chivalric identity.

- Disrupting Knightly Certainty:**

By refusing to be confined to a singular role, she destabilizes Gawain's self-concept as a flawless knight.

- The Girdle as Symbol:**

Her gift becomes:

- A **mnemonic** of internal change
- A **fragment** of humility
- A **disruption** of Gawain's totalizing self-image

- Catalyst for Becoming:**

The girdle holds open Gawain's transformation—symbolizing a move from fixed identity to layered, ongoing subjectivity.



Detail: Sighs Softly on Slopes and Shadows (2025).

Morgan le Fay: The Hidden Architect

- Alchemical Role:**

Morgan is likened to the alchemist wielding *vitriol*—the transformative agent behind the trial—not merely a villain.

- Beyond Patriarchal Structures:**

Positioned outside Arthurian ceremonial authority; she disrupts the static roles of Arthur and Guinevere.

- Revealed as Orchestrator (Lines 2452–62):**

Not a meddler, but a *temporal artist* who designs a layered, moral test for Gawain.

- Time and Illusion:**

Morgan stages a trial that blends:

- Future simulation:** Gawain faces judgment-like consequences in advance.

- Past haunting:** The Green Knight evokes Celtic myth and folkloric beheading games.

- Multitemporal Aesthetic:**

Like a cubist painter, Morgan compresses multiple timeframes and viewpoints—myth, critique, and psychology—into one staged event.

- Reframing Identity:**

Her actions destabilize knightly ideals, forcing Gawain to confront the constructed nature of his chivalric identity.



8. Conclusion



Conclusion: Gawain as a Complex Subject, not a Zealot

•Myth as Language:

SGGK inherits and rewrites myth to construct and then deconstruct a “solar” chivalric identity.

•Emergence of Complexity:

Gawain becomes a complex subject through internal contradictions and exposure to alternative cultural modes and temporalities.

•Agents of Ambiguity:

The Green Knight, Lady Bertilak, and Morgan introduce moral and psychological ambiguity, destabilizing heroic ideals.

•Myth and Visual Art:

The poem’s ambivalence is mirrored and expanded through visual interpretations, reinforcing or challenging its depth.

•Alchemical Transformation:

Gawain's journey parallels alchemical phases:

- Citrinitas* (golden court)
- Nigredo* (dark wilderness & dread)
- Albedo* (confession & reflection)
- Rubedo* (shame, blood, rebirth)

•Psychic vs. Heroic Change:

Gawain’s failure marks inner transformation, contrasting with epic heroes like Achilles or Aeneas whose arcs are external.

•Resistance to Zealotry:

Chivalry risks producing a zealot, but key characters intervene to humanize Gawain and prevent ideological rigidity.

•The Girdle’s Symbolism:

A feminine, ambiguous object that undermines and redeems Gawain—forcing him into tension, not collapse.

•Morgan’s Role:

Shifts mythic conflict into a psychological crucible, enabling Gawain’s subjecthood rather than heroism.

•Open-Ended Conclusion:

The poem ends in psychological resonance, not narrative closure—suggesting becoming, not return.



*Sighs Softly on Slopes and
Shadows (2025) oil on canvas.*

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