Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as a Fairy Tale

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To quote J. R. R. Tolkien, "To speak of Fairy is a perilous thing to do."[1] Yet I plan to do this dangerous thing, dangerous because 'The Good People' as elves are called might get angry. It was once considered bad luck to speak of Fairy. It is also dangerous because of the trap of mass generalization, over simplification and exclusion. An example of exclusion would be if I said that a fairy tale has an isolated hero, one who is somehow cut off from his society, it would overlook that not every story with an isolated hero is a fairy tale.

But what is a fairy tale? Joseph Campbell in his essay on the Grimm Brother's work uses the term folk tale as interchangeable with fairy (yet I would argue that they are not because the story about George Washington chopping down the cherry tree is a folk tale and not a fairy tale because no magical or other worldly events take place). Originally fairy tales were oral and not written, they passed from mouth to mouth, gaining and losing details. It wasn't until Charles Perrauet and the Brothers Grimm started collecting these stories that these tales started to be taken seriously.

There are certain similarities among these stories. One is repetition. To quote Joseph Campbell: "Throughout the Old World repetition is commonly in threes".[2] This element of threes can be seen in such works as "Goldilocks and the Three

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1) From "On Fairy Stories" by J. R. R. Tolkien as found in the book *Tree and Leaf* George Allen and Uwin 1964. Page 3.

2) From *The Flight of the Wild Gander* by Joseph Campbell, A Gateway Edition, 1972. Page 17.

Bears" ; "Hansel and Grettel", in which they are kicked out of the house three times before they are finally lost ; and numerous other stories where the hero, or heroine, meet three old ladies along the way who give them some sort of gift or advice ("East of the Sun, West of the Moon" is one example). It is interesting to note that the persistence of threes is more than in Folk or Fairy Tales. Many people, especially beginning writers, when trying to be poetic will use three adjectives for description instead of just one or two (I base this observation from having taken many creative writing workshops). People love to hear things in threes — it strikes their poetic fancy. Threes are also used as a mnemonic device within an oral tradition. How many old ladies are there ? Three. One gives a silver comb, the other a golden apple and the third a crystal flask containing an all important elixir.

Another important aspect of the tale is the formulaic words at the beginning. "The wonderful phrase 'Once upon a time' is found not only in German fairy tales ; all European peoples know and love it. 'Once there was, One day there will be : this is the beginning of every fairy tale. There is no 'if' and no 'perhaps', the three-legged stool unquestionably has three legs.' These are the introductory words of a Breton tale, and they contain a brief statement of fairy-tale philosophy : Once there was, one day there will be."[3] This timelessness of once upon a time sets up an important matrix of fairy land. Fairy land does not grow old nor suffer the ravages of time in the same way humans do, because fairy itself is somehow apart with its unique set of magical rules.

Rules and taboos are important. Taro, the Fisher-boy, is not supposed to open the magic box ; Lanval is not supposed to tell who his fairy lover is ; and the young girl is not supposed to look at her mysterious lover. This taboo is always broken and the appropriate punishment follows : Taro withers into an old man ; Lanval

3) From *Once Upon A Time : On the Nature of Fairy Tales* by Max Luthi, Fredrick Ungar Publishing 1970. Page 47.

loses contact with his love and is put under suspicion in Arthur's court ; the girl's lover disappears and she must go in search of him. This forbidding breaks the spell that has unknowingly protected the hero, puts them back in the mundane where fairy princes and princesses are no more and where magic talismans no longer work. It also sets up a new problem that must be somehow resolved to the reader's satisfaction.

Another aspect of fairy is its location. Fairies can come and visit humans quiet easily and uninvited (a good reason not to speak of them). The bear in "East of the Sun, West of the Moon" appears at the poor girl's family's door ; the fairy queen in *Lanval* rides into Arthur's court ; Rumpelstiltskin appears magically when the soon to be queen needs him to spin gold. However, while they might find it easy to visit us bring the fairy realm with them as it were, it is difficult for humans to visit them or their realm. A journey is usually called for. Lanval crosses a stream ; Hansel and Grettel take a hike in the woods ; and the young girl in "East of the sun, West of the Moon" must ride the four winds until she finally comes to the forbidden castle. The journey properly prepares the hero for their visit, because it isolates them from the mundane world, or from the world they are familiar with. It is this removal of the everyday that opens for them new experiences. The journey also has the same effect on the reader for once the hero has gone through his trek we are now ready for the new challenges and perils be they in gingerbread houses or decrepit castles. We have been prepared for the magical.

The isolation of a character is one of the universal and important aspects of the fairy tale. From a Jungian point of view, it gives the character a chance to grow, to gain new experiences and to see the world, at any rate a world different from their own. The isolation can come in many forms. Jack the Giant-killer is not in his normal habitat when he steals the golden hen and must figure a way back to human society. Cinderella is isolated within human society-first as a drudge

cleaning the fireplace and then when she attends the ball where the lie of her costume separates her from the other party-goers. Even though she looks likes everyone else attending the ball she would not have the same mannerisms nor be able to make the same conversation. This isolation is also what makes her stand out and attracts the prince's attention. Furthermore, the hero when alone represents the individual man where the epic hero does not. One example of this is that King Arthur represents his society in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie* and even when he dies in *The Death of King Arthur* he has an attendant—it is the society of the round table which is dying and not just an individual. It is this isolation which gives the fairy tale character a chance to figure out who he is and a chance to solve the problem before him.

Last, but not least, a fairy tale must have some aspect of fairy. J. R. R. Tolkien has this to say, "Faerie contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons : it holds the stars, the sun, the moon, the sky ; and the earth, and all things in it : tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted."[4] Later on he concludes, "I will say only this : a 'fairy story' is one which touches on, or uses Faerie".[5] As can be seen, fairies can come in all manners of packaging. They are not necessarily good nor evil, dimininutive, tall, beautiful, nor ugly but they are magical. Even the most stupid of giants is somehow enchanting.

The one thing that is not questioned is the magic itself. in Keats' "La Belle Dame sans Merci" we do not question the power of the knight's elfin lover ; in "Taro the Fisher-boy we do not question how three days can pass for him but over three hundred years can pass for the rest of the world ; we do not question how

4) From "On Fairy Stories" by J. R. R. Tolkien as found in the book *Tree and Leaf* George Allen and Uwin 1964. Page 9.

5) From "On Fairy Stories" by J. R. R. Tolkien as found in the book *Tree and Leaf* George Allen and Uwin 1964. Page 10.

Rumpelstiltskin can spin straw into gold ; nor do we question how Cinderella's pumpkin can become a horse-drawn carriage. If the reader stops while reading the story and thinks, "Hey, that can't happen," or, "That's impossible !" the willing suspension of disbelief will have been lost and the tale will fail to enchant us, nor will we wish to continue to read. It is the strength of the fairy tale that it takes the impossible [and I submit that even the story teller of the 1200 s knew that the spinning of straw into gold was impossible] and makes it come true. This has to be accomplished through detail. We can picture Rumpelstiltskin sitting at the loom within the dark room, the wheel is spinning wildly and he is leaning forward, greed pinching his little evil face which is lit by the sparks of lightening shooting off his thin, knobby fingers. Also like any story the details have to be convincing. A Rumpelstiltskin with a round happy face and beautifully shaped fingers would not work—his fingers have to be long, knobby and perhaps even disfigured with blotches of ringworm.

To repeat : what is a fairy tale ? A fairy tell is a story with these traits : it probably comes from a folk or an oral tradition (even though modern ones like *Lord of the Rings* can be invented) ; if it comes from an oral tradition it will have things repeat in threes ; have a formulaic beginning that sets the times ; rules or taboos that the hero must follow ; be set in a remote or magical location that isolates the hero from his/her mundane world ; and must have something to do with the real of Faerie. It also must not poke fun of, nor attempt to destroy, the magic that gives its peculiar power.

Now that we have a brief, workable explanation of what a fairy tale is, we can take an example and see how it fits into our schemata. We should also be able to see if a story is a fairy tale. The story I plan to take is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* If it is a fairy tale it should contain the fore mentioned items.

First, let's look at the beginning. Does it contain the reference to 'Once upon

a time' ?

Since the siege and the assault was ceased at troy … "[6]

While the words might not be an exact quote, they do convey the spirit of the idea and start the story in the vague ancient past. The author goes on to summarize Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie.* We go from Troy to Rome, to Tuscany, to Lombardy to Briton, who's first king is a man named Brutus. The poem continues with :

"Wherefore an adventure I aim to unfold,
That a marvel of might some men think it,
And one unmatched among Arthur's wonders.
If you listen to my lay but a little while,
As I heard it in the hall, I shall hasten to tell Anew."[7]

This tale is obviously set in the past and follows very elaborately the convention. Also, by mentioning the words adventure and marvel the author has set us up for what will follow. The reader's expectations have been lifted and lead in a certain direction. We have the magic formula that will start the story. The 'if you will listen but a little while' is a mere politeness, a way of saying that what is to follow will be a harmless story－a convention we find repeated in the prologues to plays.

Now the setting of a fairy tale starts in the mundane, where we will learn what human character is to interact with Faerie. Tolkien wrote, "Most good fairy stories are about the adventures of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy reaches."[8] Another aspect of the beginning is that it sets the situation. Usually

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6) From *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* A new verse translation by Marie Borroff, 1967 by W. W. Norton & Company, as found in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 1974 Page 296, Line 1.

7) From *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* A new verse translation by Marie Borroff, 1967 by W. W. Norton & Company, as found in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 1974 Page 296, lines 27-32.

something is awry. In Cinderella, and many others like it, she is being mistreated by her evil stepmother. In *Lanval* he is being mistreated by the court. There is something not quite right, or real, about the situation the hero or heroine finds themselves in.

This is also true in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* In stanzas 3－6 we have a lavish description of Arthur's court. As the introduction to the poem in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* says, "The court of King Arthur is presented, in the most grandiose and laudatory of language, as the place where the ideal of chivalry has reached its zenith, where all is courtesy and martial prowess in defense of the right. The praise bestowed by the poet upon this court may seem excessive, and indeed the sequel suggests that the author made it so intentionally."[9] The intention is apparent when the Green Knight, an arrogant monster, rides in and makes the court look slightly unreal. The Green Knight's insult is that the reputation of the court is hollow and is founded more on fictitious propaganda than fact.

Furthermore the poet in this lavish praise is also setting up the downfall of the Arthurian Court that will later be reflected by Sir Gawain. In the fifth stanza we are told that Arthur would not eat on so high a holiday (Christmas) until

> ". . . he heard first
> Of some fair feat or fray some far borne tale".[10]

What means is that Arthur is guilty of pride. We are told this in line 90.

> "And also a point of pride pricked his heart."[11]

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8) From "On Fairy Stories" by J. R. R. Tolkien as found in the book *Tree and Leaf* George Allen and Uwin 1964. Page 9.

9) From the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* by W. W. Norton & Company 1974. Pages 294-295.

10) From *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* A new verse translation by Marie Borroff, 1967 by W.W. Norton & Company, as found in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 1974 Page 296, lines 92-93.

This is youthful folly, for in this poem we have an Arthur, and a Gawain, before the Grail Quest. It is within this proud and still boyish court that the Green Knight makes his appearance.

Now there is something that thematically heralds the giant's entrance and that is the land of Faerie is not called the Perilous Realm for nothing. The giant can enter the story because King Arthur will not eat until he hears some miraculous tale. Well he is going to get it in the flesh as it were. Before any knight can show or tell of something adventurous and grand, the Green Knight rides in.

If *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a fairy tale hangs very much on if the Green Knight is a representation of Faerie. He is for three reasons: 1, his color; 2, his size; and 3, his magic.

The fact alone that his skin and hair are as green as green could be suggests that he is from Faerie. In Briggs, *The Fairies in English Tradition and Literature* there is the following account, "The other tale, that of the Green Children, is more unusual still, and has a curiously convincing and detailed air. It is an account of two children who were captured near Wolfpits in Suffolk. There were of a pale greenish colour…. According to her (the female elf) account they lived in an underground country, where there was neither sun nor moon…."[12] Besides the same elfin skin color, both the Green Children and the Green Knight share another trait in that they are both have connections to a country beneath the earth. At the end of the poem when Sir Gawain rides to the Green Chapel for his final encounter he arrives at a mound.

"And hollow all within, like some old cave,

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11) From *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* A new verse translation by Marie Borroff, 1967 by W. W. Norton & Company, as found in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 1974 Page 296, line 90.

12) From *The Fairies in English Tradition and Literature* by K. M. Briggs, the University of Chicago Press, 1967. Pages 7-8.

Or a crevice of an old crag—he could not discern aright.

'Can this be the Chapel Green ?'"[13]

It is of course, and within it is the Green Knight sharpening his axe on a great wheel.

The second reason for the Green Knight being a part of faerie is his size. When he rides into Arthur's court he is described as,

"Half a giant on earth I told him to be,

But believe him no less than the largest of men".[14]

Dr. Ellis Davidson wrote in a paper on Wade and Weland: "Behind the figure of Weland the Smith it seems possible then to discern a race of supernatural beings thought of in general as giants (but related also to dwarves and elves), who are both male and female, who live in families, who are skilled at the making of weapons and at stone building, and whose dwellings may be reached by a descent into the earth or under the water. Wade and Weland are associated with certain places in England, and possibly Grendel also. The local traditions of giants who dwell in mounds, caves or stone tombs are of great interest, and Sir Gawain's Green Knight should perhaps now be added to the list."[15] In summary, the Green Knight's color, size, connection with the underground, and his metal working (sharpening of his axe) put him as a creature from the Perilous Realm.

Another aspect of the Green Knight as a fairy is his magic: his ability to change his appearance (Sir Bercilak does not have the same skin coloring), and his ability to live after his head is chopped off. As Tolkien wrote: "There is one

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13) From *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* A new verse translation by Marie Borroff, 1967 by W. W. Norton & Company, as found in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 1974 Page 341, lines 2182-2184.

14) From *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* A new verse translation by Marie Borroff, 1967 by W. W. Norton & Company, as found in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 1974 Page 299, lines 140-141.

15) From *Weland the Smith* by H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Folklore Volume 69* Pages 145-159.

proviso : if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself. That must in that story be taken seriously, neither laughed at nor explained away."[16] This holds true here. If we stop to say how can this happen (we are told that Morgan le Fay causes this to happen but not how she brings this about), then we lose the powers of the story to entertain us.

But such an outrageous event, like someone getting his head cut off and living, must be given some credibility, or the tale falters. In his book, *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner wrote that a tale is a lie told with enough elaboration and detail to make the lie convincing. To make both the man's color and ability to live convincing the poet gives us a lot of detail. There are five stanzas devoted to the Green Knight's appearance and two stanzas devoted to the beheading.

Yet another way the beheading is made believable is through the use of magic. John Stevens' book on *Medieval Romance* breaks down the miraculous into three categories, the second one being : "The strictly magical. An event is magical, as I define it, if it shows the marvelous controlled by man."[17] We are told at the end of the poem that it was Morgan le Fay who put a magic spell on Bercilak that made him into the green elf. As Briggs points out, "Morgan le Fay or Fate Morgana and her kind probably show a mingling of Celtic and classical traditions, or perhaps stem from beliefs older than either. In the late Romances it is clear that most the fairy ladies belong to the human race, and owe their great powers to the knowledge of magic."[18] This holds true in this poem. Morgan le Fay is described as an old crone with a fat butt. All her power is off-stage. We do not see her use it, nor

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16) From "On Fairy Stories" by J. R. R. Tolkien as found in the book *Tree and Leaf* George Allen and Uwin 1964. Page 10.

17) From *Medieval Romance : Themes and Approaches* by John Stevens, Hutchinson U Library 1973, Pages 100-101.

18) From *The Fairies in English Tradition and Literature* by K. M. Briggs, the University of Chicago Press, 1967. Page 4.

does she appear magical. The same is true of Bercilak. When we meet him he appears as an average man in charge of his castle.

As previously stated, one of the items a fairy tale usually has is an isolated hero. It is obvious that Gawain is isolated from the very beginning of the poem. When the Green Knight rides in Sir Gawain is the only one who will stand up to the giant. He does this because, he is King Arthur's sister's son and therefore is expected to place his life in service to his uncle, and because if King Arthur dies then the whole court will fall apart. Sir Gawain himself tells King Arthur,

> "And for that this folly befits not a king,
> And 'tis I that have asked it, it out to be mine."[19]

It should be noted that the mine here is referring to the challenge.

When the year starts to come full circle, Gawain takes his leave of his uncle on All Hallows Day and starts to seek the Green Chapel. It is not an easy quest.

> "'Twere a marvel if he met not some monstrous foe,
> And that so fierce and forbidding that fight he must.
> So many were the wonders he wandered among.
> That to tell but the tenth would tax my wits.
> Now with serpent he wars, now with savage wolves,
> Now with bulls and with bears, and with boars besides,
> And giants gibbering from the jagged steeps."[20]

n the next stanza Sir Gawain is on a mountain with a very ugly and twisted woods. Because of this journey, he is now far removed from the luxurious court. It is just

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19) From *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* A new verse translation by Marie Borroff, 1967 by W. W. Norton & Company, as found in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 1974 Page 303, lines 358-359.

20) From *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* A new verse translation by Marie Borroff, 1967 by W. W. Norton & Company, as found in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 1974 Page 311, lines 716-723.

him pitting his strength and ingenuity against monstrous foes. Not only that but the consequences of losing are more than dire.

The next and more profound level of isolation comes from when the three things that make Sir Gawain a fine knight are stripped away from him. The first thing that is removed is his courtliness. As Sir Gawain is lying in bed, Bercilak's wife enters his bedroom and tries to seduce him. Through this affair, since he refuses to sleep with her, she keeps teasing him about his reputation as a ladies man and asks him if this is the great courtly knight. There are two reasons why Gawain doesn't let himself be seduced. One is that if he does follow through, what will he give Bercilak in return? (The game Gawain and Bercilak are playing is that whatever Bercilak wins on his hunt he will give to Gawain and whatever Gawain wins during his stay at Bercilak's castle he will give to Bercilak.) Another reason Gawain doesn't follow through on the seduction is that he things he is close to death and does not want to die with an adulterous affair on his consciousness.

It will be this fear of death that will be the crack in his armor. After waking from a nightmare about his impending doom, Bercilak's wife offers him a green girdle (the color should tip him off at what is happening but doesn't). When Sir Gawain takes the love-lace he strips himself of the second thing that made him a fine knight—his trust in the Virgin Mary. This trust in Mary was one of the stays of his knighthood. Now instead of putting his trust in her, he is putting it on a girdle.

Moreover, this acceptance of the girdle breaks the rule or taboo that is the normal set up in the fairy tale convention. The rules he breaks are the same rules he willingly self-imposed upon himself, and are also a violation of the original agreement. He does not give Bercilak what he wins, and he does not come to the Green Chapel unarmed, at least not in his mind. It was previously mentioned that punishment is usually quick and just, and within this poem it is that way too. The

Green Knight gives him a small cut on his neck and this scar he will have to bear as punishment.

The last thing that is stripped from Sir Gawain is simply his armor. He cannot wear a shield or an iron plate to protect himself. He is supposed to be as unprotected as the Green Knight was when he takes the blow.

What all this removal and isolation of Gawain from his natural world and natural aspects accomplishes is to show Gawain as a real man. To quote John Stevens, "Arthur does not stand for Man Alone in the way that, for example, Chertien's Lancelot does, or as the English Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* does."[21] What Gawain as Man Alone shows is one of the most human elements—fear of his own personal death, for Gawain realizes that unlike the giant he as no magic to protect him.

One of the aspects of a fairy tale is the repetition of threes, and this poem is no different. Threes are running all over and are even intertwining—though there are other numbers too like fives and fours. The court of Arthur is insulted in three bouts, first when the Green Knight first rides into it, the second bout is in another grouping of threes and comes when Bercilak's wife teases Gawain in much the same way the Green Knight teased the court, and the third time comes when Gawain flinches at the first blow at the Green Chapel. Some of the other threes are when Gawain first prepares to leave Bercilak's castle after spending the knight has three days left to find the chapel. Bercilak goes on three hunting trips; Bercilak's wife tries to seduce Gawain three times; and finally when Gawain goes to the Green Chapel there are three blows.

One of the final aspects of good story telling (this applies to every story and not just fairy tales) is that the hero must somehow grow or change. When Gawain

21) From *Medieval Romance: Themes and Approaches* by John Stevens, Hutchinson U Library 1973, Page 91.

is told by the Green Knight what his sin is, a legitimate fear of death which overrides his virtues, Gawain commits an even more grievous one. Like King Arthur in the beginning of the poem, one of the seven deadly sins, pride, raises its ugly head in Gawain. Arthur is described as blushing, he is embarrassed because he has been insulted and nobody will defend him. In his pride he rushes to take the challenge without stopping to think what the loss of him to his kingdom would be. Gawain repeats this by going into a long tirade about how a woman lead to his downfall, thus sidestepping the blame himself.

Yet to a certain extent Gawain realizes this when he tells Bercilak,

"And so when praise and high prowess have pleased my heart
A look at this love-lace will lower my pride."[22)]

This point about pride is further brought out when Bercilak tells Gawain why he went to the court.

"To assay, if such it were, the surfeit of pride
That is rumored of the retinue of the Round Table."[23)]

This is all brought to a close when everybody in the court decides to share Gawain's shame by wearing a green girdle.

The final question that may be asked is if the poet intended the tale to be what it is—a fairy tale. W. R. J. Barron in his introduction to the poem writes, "He (the poet) has fulfilled his professional obligation by providing an acceptable example of a familiar form, exploiting its conventions with intimate understanding."[24)] I would

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22) From *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* A new verse translation by Marie Borroff, 1967 by W. W. Norton & Company, as found in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 1974 Page 346, lines 2437-2438.

23) From *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* A new verse translation by Marie Borroff, 1967 by W. W. Norton & Company, as found in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 1974 Page 347, lines 2457-2458,

24) From the introduction to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by W. R. J. Barron, Barnes & Noble Books, 1974. Page 24.

like to add that with the skill and manner of description the poet used in this poem about fays and wonders, he did a very good job in making the tale believable. To quote the poem,

"And he had honor that had it, evermore after."[25]

which seems to be another convention of the fairy tale, does it not ?

25) From *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* A new verse translation by Marie Borroff, 1967 by W. W. Norton & Company, as found in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 1974 Page 348, line 2520.