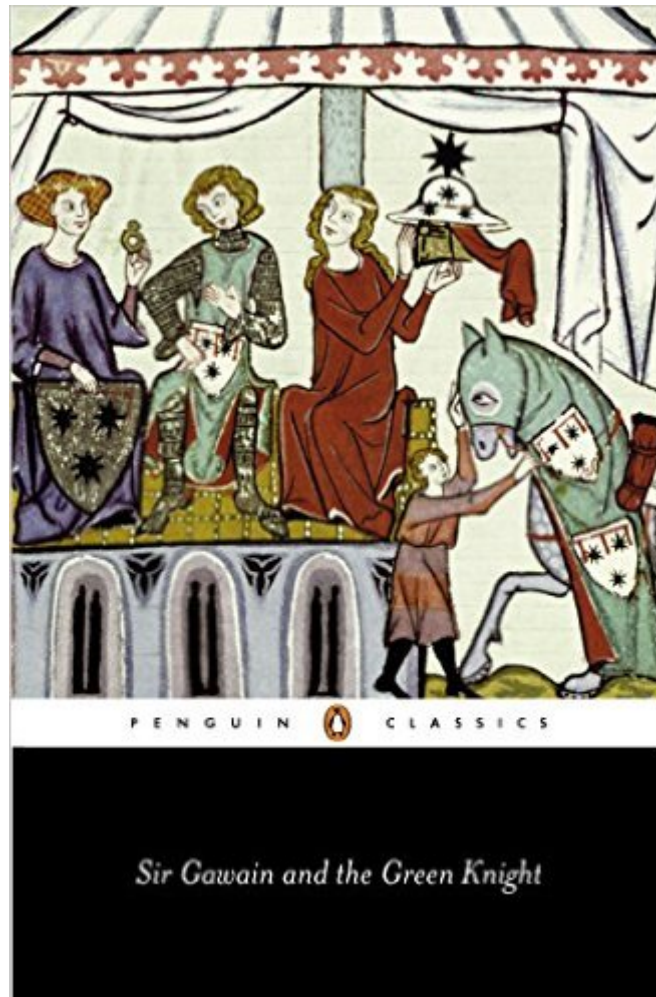


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# Sir Gawain And The Green Knight (Penguin Classics)



## Synopsis

A classic of early English literature, by an anonymous poet from the time of Chaucer. Although the date of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is uncertain, and we know nothing about the author, its composition is roughly contemporary with Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* in the latter part of the fourteenth century. It is a remarkably subtle and accomplished poem, in which the hero's knightly virtues of courage, courtesy and fidelity are put to the test in a strange adventure involving a huge green knight on a green horse, a winter journey, a lady in a mysterious castle and a challenge answered. It ranks as one of the greatest works of the English Middle Ages and perhaps the greatest triumph of the English alliterative tradition. Unlike *The Canterbury Tales*, however, *Sir Gawain* is written in a dialect belonging to Cheshire, Lancashire or Staffordshire, and this seems more remote to the modern reader than Chaucer's London language. The aim of this edition has been to remove unnecessary impediments while retaining the integrity of the original. Notes and a glossary have been provided to assist an informed, critical reading of the text. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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## Customer Reviews

Between Tolkien's legendarium and scholarship fall his translations, which are by far the most regularly metrical translations in English. "Sir Gawain" includes 101 laisses or verse paragraphs of varying length, head-rhymed on the head-stave, each with an end-rhymed bob-and-wheel refrain; "Pearl" includes 101 12-line stanzas with regular (alternating) end-rhymes in addition to the head-rhymes, plus stanza-linking rhymes. Not even Professor Lehmann's Beowulf includes 101 bob-&-wheel refrains. Tolkien's international reputation as a scholar began with his revival of "Sir Gawain" in the early '20s, and he developed these translations over the course of some 50 years. Scholarly consensus has held that "Sir Gawain" and "Pearl," the masterworks of the 14th-century Middle English alliterative-stave revival (standing in relation to Chaucer as Marlowe to Shakespeare), were composed by a West Midlands author whose name has not survived, the authentically bereaved father of the "Pearl" herself. Tolkien's "Gawain" lecture (published in *The Monsters and the Critics*) enlarges very helpfully on the early-'50s radio preface included in this volume. "Sir Orfeo" is a mere frippery by comparison, in stichic ballad couplets, but probably originated as a single-author work as well. Admittedly there are more authoritative sources on the Classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice than "Sir Orfeo," but that's part of the point: the Classical elements in these translations are real-life analogues of elvish/dwarvish influence in hobbit poetry.

These three texts from the translating pen of J.R.R. Tolkien comprise an uplifting trio that give the reader a glimpse of times when literature was aimed at both beauty and the edification of proper values. This is particularly true in the first two texts. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* presents a late Arthurian legend which was penned in a relatively obscure West-Midland dialect of early Middle English. The text, as translated by Tolkien, still maintains the auditory alliteration used to drive the poem itself. This in itself is a blessed treasure to the reader, as it is a rarely used method of poetry. The story is a gem in that it presents a fallible human, Gawain, who strives by the Grace of God to fulfill his oaths made. It is an exposition of piety, casting the Arthurian knight into a wholly Christian light. *Pearl*, written in a dialectic style of poetic meter, is a moving poem of grief and understanding in the face of the death of a two-year-old child. The imagery used in it is absolutely breathtaking, drawing heavily on the *Apocalypse of John* for its material. The discourse is a journey of enlightenment and eventual peace, marked with profound trust in God. I found this poem to be absolutely stunning in itself. *Pearl*, along with *Gawain*, exposes the existence of a great deal of Marian piety at the time of the writing. This presents an intriguing scenario which reminds Christians of the ongoing understanding of Mary's role in the Christian faith. *Sir Orfeo*, related in many ways to

Classical myth, is a much more light-hearted adventure. It is a quick read that presents the reader with the brave quest of King Orfeo for his lost wife, Heurodis. The sybols used are mixed from Classical as well as English/Celtic sources.

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