

The importance of three in the poem

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Our lives are seemingly centered around numbers. We count the years we have been alive, recall events based on the numerical dates they occurred on, and organize our finances with the help of simple numbers. Life itself appears to be a quantifiable thing – easily arranged and manipulated by mere numbers. But what does this mean? Is there a reason why numbers take such a significant place in life? The poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* written by an anonymous author possibly offers insight into what numbers, specifically a single number, could mean on the larger scale of human life. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the prevalence of the number three exists as a juxtaposition to Sir Gawain's imperfection to emphasize the contrast between perfection and imperfection.

First, a close examination of what the number three meant when this poem was written offers a new insight into the meaning of the number. To the modern reader, the prevalence of the number three in the poem would perhaps seem to be a mere elemental addition to the piece, an ornament, but in medieval times, the number three was more than a mere number. In early medieval times, numbers were recognized as being gateways for abstract and symbolic thinking and meaning, especially when they pertained to God and Christianity, and they soon became the concrete basis of complex subjects such as architecture, astronomy, and philosophy. It was a common belief that “ numbers were the surest pathway to wisdom,” thus linking numbers and wisdom synonymously as well as the belief that numbers were perfect and could help man achieve perfection through knowledge (Amaro 2). Since numbers were closely associated with perfection, meaning, and wisdom during this time, it can be understood that

the number three is not a mere element in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight but rather the opposing source of Sir Gawain's imperfection because of his choice to adorn and surround himself with perfect threes. Since this number is in fact, according to the ideas held by medieval thinkers, full of this abstract meaning and perfection, it cannot be overlooked because it is so prevalent and blatantly used in the poem. To the medieval mind, there would be no perfection anywhere in the poem if number symbolism was not present. Therefore, in the context that the poem was written in, the number three must associate with some sort of perfection and meaningful knowledge, namely as an opposition to Sir Gawain's imperfection.

To further understand why the number three was closely associated with perfection during medieval times, an examination of Christianity during that time is in order. To many, Christianity is considered pure and perfect (especially in medieval times). In this poem, the prevalence of the Christian faith is extremely evident as mass, God, the Virgin Mary, and religion are often mentioned in the poem. A very prominent feature of the Christian faith is the pentangle that is present in the poem. There are actually three pentangles that adorn Sir Gawain. There is first "the diamond diadem" of a pentangle that Gawain wears upon his head (line 615). Though a diadem is typically synonymous to a "crown," in different translations it is fairly explicit that a valuable design, the pentangle, adorns the headpiece of Sir Gawain (Hodges 24). Sir Gawain also "bore that badge on both his shawl and shield alike," thus providing the other two pentangles (ln. 636-637). The pentangle was the symbol of perfection during this time – representing the noblest virtues that a knight could have while also being very closely

associated with Christianity. The fact that there are three of them that adorn Sir Gawain further establishes this notion of perfection in numbers that was present during medieval times, and this adornment of threes will later heavily contrast the imperfection of Sir Gawain. It should also not be surprising that the number three clearly occurs in Christianity as the three perfect characteristics of God (omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence) and the Holy Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). With the number three this closely associated with the perfect ideals of Christianity, it cannot be overlooked that this number must clearly be regarded as being a “divine” and “perfect” number whose function is to emphasize the imperfect in this piece.

The number three appears in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight a great number of times, and their abundance makes it clear that they are a vital piece to the poem. To begin, there are the three main locations in the poem. There is Arthur's court in Camelot, Bertilak's castle, and the wilderness. Bertilak's castle itself coincides with the idea of perfection because it is described so fantastically perfect that it is almost intimidating and artificial, and it so happens that Gawain “signed himself three times” just prior to approaching this perfect castle appearing before him (ln. 763-764). In addition to this, Gawain is tested in each of these three places as well. He is first tested in Arthur's court when he accepts the challenge of the “beheading game” of the Green Knight, he is tested again in Bertilak's castle, and he is tested a third time in the wilderness when he faces the Green Knight.

The tests that occur in Bertilak's castle are a complex system of threes as well, and they are one of the most important aspects of the poem regarding the perfection of threes. First, the temptations occur in the third Fitt of the poem – the ideal spot in the poem to place the most complex set of perfect threes. This very closely related set of three entails the three hunts, the three exchanges of gifts, and the three temptations of the lady. On the first day, a deer is the primary focus of the hunt, and Gawain behaves much like a deer in his defense against the lady's temptations. In medieval times, a deer was the "symbol of the beloved or the symbol of Christ," and Gawain retains his honor by not succumbing to the lady's temptations, thus maintaining his perfection, much like the how Christ was known as "perfect" (Mduli 187). This subtle connection to Christianity through the symbolism of the deer also circles back to Christianity's perfection with reference to the number three. After the first hunt, Gawain gives a single kiss to Bertilak in their first exchange of gifts because that is truly what Gawain had gained, thus maintaining his honor and honesty, maintaining his perfection. Then the second day of the hunt comes and the animal of prey is a boar. Here Gawain acts similar to the boar in a militaristic defense against the lady's second temptation. Gawain maintains his honor and perfection again by not succumbing to the lady's temptations, and thus gives Bertilak one kiss again at their second exchange. Then on the third day of the hunt, a fox is the animal of prey, and during medieval times, a fox was "a symbol of the Devil" (Mduli 190). This relates again back to the Christian foundation of the piece. Gawain behaves like the wily fox in the lady's temptations, except this time he is not successful in averting them. Like the devilish, imperfectly

sinful fox, Gawain accepts a girdle from the lady, and his perfection is stained. He stains his perfection even further when he does not honor the agreement between himself and Bertilak when he gives Bertilak three kisses in their third exchange after the day's hunt – withholding the girdle that he obtained. Gawain is now no longer perfect, and it is only fitting that his imperfection is revealed in the most significantly perfect fitt of the poem, fitt three. It is in this fitt and through these temptations that Gawain is revealed as imperfect, which makes an emphatic contrast to the perfect number three that he has attempted to surround himself with.

Another set of threes occur when Gawain finally reaches the Green Knight to fulfill his obligation and agreement of decapitation. On the first swing of the Green Knight's axe, Gawain flinches much like the timid deer he was similar to during the first temptation at Bertilak's castle, but he does not receive any injuries because he was honest that day. On the second swing of axe, Gawain does not flinch much like the militaristically brave boar in the second temptation, but he still does not receive injury because of his honesty. On the third and final swing, Gawain receives a gash on the neck because he did not commit adultery, but he was dishonest regarding the third temptation and exchange. This gash signifies the imperfection of Sir Gawain, and thus reiterates and solidifies his contrast to the ubiquitous threes in the poem. It is no coincidence that he realizes his imperfection on the perfectly fitting third swing of the axe.

Because Gawain discovers that he is indeed imperfect, it is necessary that these threes be perfect in every way. They must be perfect because Gawain

and the knights of Arthur's court are imperfect, and this imperfection is portrayed through the temptations that Gawain is put through. It is through the perfection of these threes that a heavy contrast is made with the imperfections of Sir Gawain, and the tension they create between perfection and imperfection becomes even greater because of their close juxtaposition to Sir Gawain. Without the prevalence of the threes, it would not be clear that there is an unattainable good that Sir Gawain is trying to achieve, yet even though he is surrounded with these perfect threes, he still cannot achieve his ultimate goal of perfection. Juxtaposing an imperfect Sir Gawain with an insurmountable number of perfect threes creates a blatant contrast between perfection and imperfection. The perfect threes create such a great contrast between perfection and imperfection that it becomes apparent that perfection is impossible and unattainable no matter how "perfect" a person may attempt to be.

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