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Central Quote:

PRE-GRAMMAR | Preparation

*Prepare the student for understanding the Central One Idea
by drawing upon his or her prior knowledge or experience.*

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1. Imagine being challenged to go on an arduous adventure. Where would you go if you had the opportunity?

2. Now imagine that your adventure has an important moral purpose, such as putting your own life at risk in place of a friend or a relative. Describe how this might change your adventure or what it might entail.

GRAMMAR | Presentation

The student is presented with and discovers essential facts, elements, and features of the poem.

READING NOTES

- (Stanzas 1-2)** – The first two stanzas feature a traditional medieval literary device of placing the story to come in actual history. However, the “history” is more a collection of legends, developed gradually since the classical period, which traces English origins to heroic classical times.¹
 - **Troy** (1.1) – the classical city in Macedonia, and site of the Trojan War with Greece.
 - **Aeneas** (1.3-5) – the Trojan hero in Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Referred to here as the “treacherous trickster,” which is based on a story from pseudo-classical writings in the early medieval period that tells of the treachery of Antenor and Aeneas at the fall of Troy.
 - **Romulus, Ticius, and Longbeard** (1.8,11,12) – legendary ancestors who gave their names to Rome, Tuscany, and Lombardy.
 - **Brutus** (1.13-15) – According to medieval historians Geoffrey of Monmouth and Nennius, Brutus was the grandson or great-grandson of Aeneas. Brutus landed at Totnes and then named the island Britain from his own name, and his fellow travelers he called Britons.²

*“And far over the French flood Felix Brutus
On many spacious slopes set Britain with joy
And grace”* (1.13-15)
- Arthur** – the legendary king of the Knights of the Round Table at Camelot in Arthurian romance. Historically, he was possibly a fifth- or sixth-century British general who fought against the Saxons and became a hero – and then during the Middle Ages gradually attracted a range of mythical and magical exploits appropriate to a national hero.³ Nennius, in his *Historia Britonum* (8th cent.), was mainly responsible for making Arthur a historical figure. Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his mostly fictitious *Historia Regum Britanniae* (12th cent.), was responsible for creating the legendary Arthur and other national king-heroes.⁴
- Camelot** – the location of King Arthur’s court. Many parts of England and Wales claim to be the original location of Camelot, which suggests that it is more legend than factual.
- Round Table** – a large round table created for the knights of King Arthur’s court, designed to avoid seating according to rank. In some accounts, Merlin is credited with making the Round Table.
- Guinevere** – King Arthur’s beautiful wife and Queen
- lay** (2.11) – a short lyric or narrative poem intended to be recited or sung by a minstrel
- Christmastide** (3.1) – the feasting and celebration of Christmas
- lords and liegemen** (3.2) – men of rank and high position; noblemen
- largesse** (4.7) – A New Year gift meant to express good wishes or bring good luck.
- blazon** (6.11) – coat of arms; insignia

1 Brian Stone, trans. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, second edition (London: Penguin Books, 1974), 163.

2 *Ibid.*, 164.

3 *Ibid.*, 153.

4 *Ibid.*, 163.

11. **loth** (6.21) – loath
12. **crupper** (8.18) – strap attached to a saddle
13. **hauberk** (10.1) – coat of chain mail for armor
14. **plastron** (10.2) – steel breastplate worn under the hauberk
15. **ell** (10.8) – 45 inches
16. **cavalier** (12.10) – a mounted soldier; a knight
17. **chivalry** (12.14) – the spirit and character of knighthood: honor, courtesy, and generosity
18. **quail** (14.21) – to lose heart; to cower
19. **What place he departed to no person there knew** (20.17) – This description of the exit of the Green Knight is a fairy formula conventionally applied to supernatural beings.⁵

WORDS TO BE DEFINED

| Definitions Bank | | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| accessories | curt; snippy | full of spirit | distinguished |
| boasts | delightful | gleaming | raised platform |
| ceased | demeanor | made widely known | respite; delay of sentence |
| to condescend; to lower oneself | denying; contradicting | merriment | sharply |
| courageous | excelled | outer garment | splendid; stately |
| discouraged | following | polished | train of attendants |
| | food and drink | prominent; | |

1. A happening **eminent** among Arthur’s adventures (2.10) _____ prominent; distinguished
2. Jousted in **jollity** these gentle knights (3.6) _____ merriment
3. For lords and their ladies, **delectable** joy (3.13) _____ delightful
4. That day double on the **dais** were the diners served (4.2) _____ raised platform
5. At every fine feast among his free **retinue** (5.17) _____ train of attendants
6. Erect stood the strong King, stately of **mien** (6.1) _____ demeanor
7. For barely had the blast of trump **abated** one minute (7.5) _____ ceased

⁵ Ibid., 169.

8. Who in height **outstripped** all earthly men (7.8) excelled
9. And verily his **vesture** was all vivid green (8.11) outer garment
10. In ravishing array on the rich **accoutrements** (8.13) accessories
11. **Mettlesome** in might (8.26) full of spirit
12. And **brusque** with bit and reign (8.27) curt; snippy
13. Yes, garbed all in green was the **gallant** rider (9.1) splendid; stately
14. Many bright golden bells, **burnished** and ringing (9.17) polished
15. **Acutely** honed for cutting, as keenest razors are (10.11) sharply
16. So even the **doughty** were daunted and dared not reply (11.10) courageous
17. Please **deign** to dismount and dwell with us (12.5) to condescend; to lower oneself
18. Acquiring clear possession of it, no claim from me **ensuing** (13.15) following
19. And a day's **reprieve**, I direct (13.20) respite; delay of sentence
20. What, is this Arthur's house, the honour of which/Is **bruited** abroad so abundantly? (14.10)
made widely known
21. Your victories, your valour, your **vaunts**, where are they? (14.12) boasts
22. Less unmanned and **dismayed** by the mighty strokes (15.14) discouraged
23. And the **scintillating** steel struck the ground (19.10) gleaming
24. Go to the Green Chapel without **gainsaying** to get/Such a stroke as you have struck (20.8)
denying; contradicting
25. However, I am now able to eat the **repast** (21.8) food and drink



Now that you have completed the Pre-Grammar questions, read the Reading Notes, and answered as many Words to be Defined as you can, read Fit I in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, marking the text in key places.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does the poet begin the poem with a discussion of classical figures and places such as Aeneas and Troy, Romulus and Rome, and Brutus and Britain?

This question reminds the student to use the Reading Notes section—as the answer is presented there: The poet uses a traditional medieval literary device of placing the story to come in actual history—and that “*history*” traces English origins to heroic classical times.¹

2. When the poet says, “*Listen to my lay but a little while:*” (2.11ff), he proceeds to tell the reader in the following five lines several things that his **narrative poem** will entail. List three things he mentions about his poem.

Note: If some students use Stone’s Notes in the back of the book to answer this question, that is fine; it will be beneficial either way.

- It is already authenticated by performance (“*in city as I heard it*” – 2.12) and the written word (“*As scribes have set it duly*” – 2.14).
- It will be spoken (“*shall I speak it*” / “*With tongue*” – 2.12-13).
- It is in alliterative verse (“*with letters linking truly*” – 2.16).
- It is a narrative (“*In story bold and strong*” – 2.17) of traditional subject matter (“*In the lore of the land so long*” – 2.15).

3. Once the poet begins his lay, where is the opening **setting** (time and place)?

Camelot at Christmastide (3.1)

4. Describe the mood of the inhabitants of Camelot at this time. Include a phrase or line from the text in your answer.

The mood is festive and celebratory. “*In splendid celebration, seemly and carefree*” (3.4ff, et al.)

¹ Brian Stone, trans. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, second edition (London: Penguin Books, 1974), 163.

5. *“Saving Christ’s self, the most celebrated knights,
The loveliest ladies to live in all time,
And the comeliest king ever to keep court.
For this fine fellowship was in its fair prime
Far famed” (3.15-19)*

Summarize what the poet says about King Arthur’s court.

With the exception of Christ himself, the knights are the most celebrated and loveliest to live. King Arthur is noble and good. His fellowship of knights and followers are fine and in their prime.

6. How is Guinevere described? Include a phrase or line from the text in your answer.

She is glorious and happy; she is elevated on a “*princely platform*”; She is “*fairest of form*”; “*No man could say he had seen a lovelier*” (4.15ff)

7. What important announcement did Arthur make that initiates the **plot**?

“*He never would eat / On such a fair feast-day till informed in full / Of some unusual adventure ... Of some momentous marvel ... About ancestors, or arms, or other high theme; / Or till a stranger should seek out a strong knight of his, / To join with him in jousting*” (5.7ff)

8. Was this unusual for Arthur to make this announcement?

No, “*Such was the King’s custom when he kept court, / At every fine feast among his free retinue in hall*” (5.16-17)

9. Describe the Green Knight physically (but not what he was wearing because that is the next question). Include in your description at least seven details.

He heaved in at the hall door; an awesome fellow; in height outstripped all earthly men; from throat to thigh thickset and square; loins and limbs long and great; half giant, yet mainly a man; handsomest of horsemen; huge; back and breast broad, small hips and haunches; all parts perfectly proportioned; fiercely grim; glittering green hue (7.7ff)

Garbed all in green; hair of his head also green and floated finely like a fan around his shoulders; great bushy beard on his breast flowing down; heavy hair hanging from his head, shorn below the shoulder, so that half his arms were under the encircling hair (9.1ff)

10. Describe some of the Green Knight's attire. Include in your description at least five items.

Garments of green girt the fellow about; two-thirds length tunic, tight at the waist; comely cloak on top with lining of the finest fur, of one piece; marvelous fur-trimmed material, with matching hood, lying back from his locks on his shoulders; fitly held-up hose, green in color, that was caught at the calf, with clinking spurs beneath; bright gold on bases of embroidered silk; no iron shoes on feet; vesture all vivid green; bars on belt; brilliants set in ravishing array; rich accoutrements; trifles embossed and embroidered, such as birds and flies, in gay green gauds, with gold everywhere (8.1ff)

11. What does the Green Knight say about Arthur's court? Include a phrase or line from the text in your answer.

"But as your reputation, royal sir, is raised up so high, / And your castle and cavaliers are accounted the best, / The mightiest of mail-clad men in mounted fighting, / The most warlike, the worthiest the world has bred, / Most valiant to vie with in virile contests, / And as chivalry is shown here, so I am assured, / At this time, I tell you, that has attracted me here." (12.9ff)

12. The fact that he had no hauberk, helmet, or combat armor reveals what about his **purpose**?

That he did not come there to fight or to bring death, but rather for something larger and more important—to present a test to one of Arthur's knights. (13.1ff)

13. What challenge does the Green Knight present to Arthur's court?

The Green Knight challenges anyone to strike him a blow on his neck with his axe—provided that he can return the blow a year and a day later. (13.7ff)

14. What are the two reasons that Arthur responded to the Green Knight's challenge himself?

- Nobody else in the court stood up to accept the challenge.
- To defend the honor and renown of his court

LOGIC | Dialectic

The student reasons with the facts, elements, and features of the poem and begins to uncover and determine the Central One Idea.

SOCRATIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What features or aspects of the Green Knight suggest that he is an enchanter or something supernatural?

Essentially everything about him—his green color, his size, and his outlandish dress

2. Did members of King Arthur’s court also perceive him as something supernatural? Quote a line or two from the text which reveals their perception of him.

Yes. “For astonishing sights they had seen, but such a one never;

Therefore a phantom from Fairyland the folk there deemed him.” (11.8-9)

3. When the Green Knight heaved into the hall, he held an axe in one hand and a holly cluster in the other. The holly cluster was a **symbol** of Christmas good luck—its green leaves a reminder that spring will come after the dead of winter.

What does the juxtaposition of the axe and the holly cluster suggest about the Green Knight’s **purpose**?

That his purpose for coming to Arthur’s court is specific—to test one of Arthur’s knights (hence the axe), and that he comes in peace: “By this branch that I bear, you may be certain / That I proceed in peace, no peril seeking” (12.16-17).

The holly cluster might also suggest that the test itself, should it be passed, will bring new life and spiritual renewal.

4. When Gawain asks to accept the challenge, some important facets of his **character** become apparent. What virtues do you notice in his character at this point? Support your answer with a quote from the text.

Gawain is very humble. First he politely asks Arthur if he can leave his seat and stand beside him. Then he proceeds to say how brave the other knights are in comparison to himself, and how his only value comes from being Arthur’s

nephew: “Under heaven, I hold, the highest-mettled, / There being no braver knights when battle is joined. / I am the

weakest, the most wanting in wisdom, I know, / And my life, if lost, would be least missed, truly. / Only through your being my uncle, am I to be valued; / No bounty but your blood in my body do I know.” (16.10-15)

In his humility, he also believes the challenge is too foolish to fall to King Arthur, but not to himself. (16.16)

Gawain is also courteous, respectful, and brave.

5. When King Arthur let Gawain have the challenge, he “gave him _____ God’s blessing _____, gladly urging him to be _____ strong in spirit _____ and _____ stout of sinew _____ (17.5-6).”

What do these three things **foreshadow** about Gawain’s upcoming challenge and adventure?

They seem to suggest that the challenge has a spiritual cause and purpose (God’s blessing), and that it will require fortitude in mind, heart, and will (strong in spirit), and strength in body (stout of sinew).

6. “And you have gladly gone over, in good discourse,
The covenant I requested of the King in full,
Except that you shall assent, swearing in truth,
To seek me yourself, in such place as you think
To find me under the firmament, and fetch your payment
For what you deal me today before this dignified gathering.” (18.3-8)

Notice here in the covenant that the Green Knight insists that Gawain seek for him himself to fetch his payment. Why do you suppose that going alone is an important and necessary component of the test? Secondly, does this hint or **foreshadow** anything about the return “payment” in a year’s time?

It is necessary because the difficulty of going on the journey alone in faith and honor is part of the test—for it reveals that the test has a number of challenging obstacles or trials within it. The test is also meant for one person, possibly for Gawain in particular. Yes, it seems to foreshadow that there might be more to the return payment—which is of course the castle and its temptations—and which also necessitates that he be alone.

7. By accepting the challenge, we see Gawain’s humility. We also see his faithfulness—his commitment to fulfill the terms of the contract (to search for the Green Knight and receive the same blow). But ultimately, what is the most virtuous action of Gawain and likely the **Central One Idea** of Fit I?

By asking to accept the challenge in place of Arthur, Gawain nobly puts his own life at risk in place of his uncle’s.