

THE INTERACTION OF FORM AND CONTENT

INTERPLAY OF CONTENT AND FORM: EXAMPLE

Having learnt to identify the alliteration and rhythmic stresses, the next step is to develop greater understanding of how these techniques interact with the narrative content, and thus how they can augment appreciation of the text – and how they can be used in critical analysis.

Alliterative poetry was intended to be read aloud. The rhythm and alliteration drive the performance forward, and help to emphasize the primary themes and motifs. For example, the word *gome* ('knight'), often used to refer to the Green Knight, alliterates with his colour, *grene*, and with the word for 'game', *gome(n)*, used in the context of the Beheading Game and the Exchange of Winnings.

The form can also underline the emotional focus of an episode. In this passage Gawain muses on the appearance of the Green Chapel:

'Now iwis,' quoth Wawayn, 'wysty is here.
This oritore is ugly, with erbes overgrewen;
Wel bisemes the wye wruxled in grene
Dele here his devocioun on the Develes wyse.
Now I fele hit is the fende, in my fyve wyttes,
That has stoken me this steven to strye me here.
This is a chapel of meschaunce, that chek hit bityde!
Hit is the cortedest kyrk that ever I com inne.'
(ll. 2189–96)

Each line provides thematic connections, either with the immediate context or the wider text, sometimes both at once. The word *wysty* (l. 2189) expresses the cold desolation of the chapel onomatopoeically (and picks up the *w* and *s* sounds from *iwysse*), and the alliteration on *w*, linking with the *Wawayn* form of the hero's name, emphasizes Gawain's own desolation:

he is alone in this desolate place whose hostile appearance prefigures the violence he expects from the Green Knight's axe-blows. The alliteration in the next line is subtler, intermingled with a series of vowel-sounds that suggests a falling rhythm, a drop in the pitch and tone of the reader's voice. (Remember: rhythm and alliteration can help supply 'stage directions' for someone reading the poem aloud to an audience.)

The unalliterative, but stressed, *grene* in line 2191 is a reminder both of the Green Knight it describes, and the connection sometimes (but not constantly: do not over-read colour symbolism) made in the Middle Ages between the colour green and the Devil, whose dark masses are evoked in the alliteration and stresses of the next line. The synonymous *fende* (l. 2193) alliterates with *fyve*, offering a reminder of the pentangle, its values and its connection with Gawain; here both alliteration and stresses make the point. The term *fyve wyttes* at the end of the line counterpoints *develes wyse* in the previous line (the alliterative echo of *wyse* and *wyttes* strengthens the effect), suggesting a binary placement of opposing forces (Devil/God, evil/good). The hostility of the location is echoed in the harsh *st* sounds of line 2194, acting as a reminder that Gawain has been forced (*stoken*) to accept this appointment (*steven*) to meet his destruction (*to strye me here*); but the phrasing simultaneously acts as a reminder that this fate has been thrust upon Gawain by Arthur's acceptance of the challenge at Camelot.

Gawain's speech ends with two single sentences: an exclamation and an observation. In the former, alliteration and stress coincide on the *ch* sound (*chápel*, *mescháunce*, *chék*, all from OF). These words evoke

motifs of the poem: the *chapel* is what Gawain has searched for; but other chapels, at Camelot and Hautdesert, have played roles: at Camelot, Gawain heard Mass, dressed in the full armour of a Christian knight; at Hautdesert, the chapel is where Gawain first meets the lady, and where he goes to confession and then to Mass before he sets out for his appointment). This chapel is where he expects to meet his end – *meschaunce* (ill fortune) indeed... The term *chek*, forming part of Gawain's curse on the chapel, derives from OF *esch(i)ec*, meaning 'checkmate', but the word used for the game of chess itself; here, it offers a reminder of the deadly serious outcome of games in this poem.

The *ch* sounds give way to alliteration on hard *k* sounds, with the unpleasant juxtaposition of *corsedest* and *kyrk* echoing the idea of the *develes devocioun*. In a few lines, the poet has evoked the horror of the place and of the moment, shown the hero's emotions clearly, and provided connections to a network of the poem's themes and motifs – who or what is the Green Knight? Has he been sent by the Devil? Is Gawain the perfect knight the pentangle suggests (*fyve wyttes*) or will he prove flawed and die here (*meschaunce*)?

The poet is an economical writer: very little in the poem is wasted. Using repetition, rhythm, alliteration, rhyme, and other poetic tools, he constantly connects the themes and motifs of the immediate episode with the wider text. He flags key elements; and his methods clearly show that he expects the audience to understand and remember what is important, as well as to enjoy the story.

EXERCISE 4: METRE AND THEME

Examine how metre and theme interact in the passage below. Consider both the immediate context of the episode and the text as a whole. Highlight the strongest metrical points and write notes on their poetic effect and how they interact with theme. Look out for unusual alliterative patterns and consider their effect.

That other stif mon in study stode a grete whyle,

So agreved for greme he gryed withinne;

All the blode of his brest blent in his face,

That all he schrank for schame that the schalk talked.

The forme word upon folde that the freke meled:

‘Corsed worth cowardise and covetyse both!

In yow is vilany and vyse, that vertue disstryes.’

Then he caght to the knot and the cast lauses,

Brayde brathly the belt to the burn selven:

‘Lo! there the falssyng, foule mot hit falle!

For care of thy knokke cowardise me taght

To acorde me with covetyse, my kynde to forsake,

That is largesse and lewty, that longes to knightes.

Now am I fauty and falce, and ferde have bene ever

Of trecherye and untrauthe – bothe bityde sorwe

And care!’
