

# The Liminal Undead

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## Abstract

Den enorme populariteten til zombier og vandøde i disse moderne tider, har skapt en teoretisk interesse og relevans for disse skapningene. Denne oppgaven går inn på de vandøde, og deres opphold i liminelle rom mellom liv og død, hvor målet er å oppdage hva disse vandøde gjør med vår forståelse av døden. Dette vil bli gjort ut ifra et utvalg av tekster som er skrevet i England under Middelalderen. Tekstene som benyttes vil være *The Vision of Tundale*, *Sir Owain*, *The Gast of Gy*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, og fra *The Canterbury Tales* vil jeg benytte *The Prioress's Tale* og *The Second Nun's Tale*. Gjennom disse tekstene vil jeg se på de vandødes liminelle posisjon, og hva deres posisjon kan gjøre med vår forståelse av døden.

I kapittel 1 vil jeg se på *The Vision of Tundale*, *Sir Owain* og *The Gast of Gy*, og hvordan disse bidrar til en ny forståelse av livet etter døden. Jeg vil poengtere den liminelle posisjonen til protagonistene, og forklare hvordan de kan bidra til å skape en forståelse og insjisere liv inn i døden. Den liminelle siden til litteratur vil også bli tatt opp og da vil jeg ta for meg hvorfor litteratur er særskilt egnet til å dele kunnskap om uobserverbare rom.

Kapittel 2 vil gjennomgå den interne reisen Sir Gawain gjør i *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Introspeksjon og gransking av sin egen identitet vil være i hovedfokus, i lys av konflikten mellom tro og magi. Jeg vil da se om liminelle faser som skyldes trusselen om død bidrar til introspeksjon, før jeg ser på om dette leder til forandring og omdannelse av personlighet og tro.

Kapittel 3 vil gå nærmere inn på miraklene som finner sted i *The Prioress's Tale* og *The Second Nun's Tale*. Jeg vil vise at den interne endringsprosessen blir eksternalisert, og påvirker de som observerer de liminelle fasene, istedenfor subjektene av de liminelle fasene. Jeg vil også se på hva følgene er av at døden starter opp igjen, når disse martyrene dør helt.

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## Table of Contents:

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Purgatory, Literature & the Undead.....	10
Chapter 2: The Possibility for Change in the Liminal Phase.....	36
Chapter 3: The Undead Martyrs: The Externalization of Conversion.....	61
Conclusion.....	88
Bibliography.....	94

## Introduction

One aspect of modern day pop culture is the prevalence of and fascination with the undead. The dead infused with life has been major themes in everything from books, TV-shows to videogames. Throughout history the living dead has been used to entertain, scare and explain aspects of our own mortality which would otherwise be difficult if not impossible to explain. Both the supernatural and the ephemeral has and still is part of the belief system of the day. The undead, ghosts and spirits are not just figments of one's imagination, but part of the conscious understanding of reality. Through a wide variety of literary and media genres, death remains a part of our entertainment and psyche. Humanity's horror and glee regarding the undead is a cultural phenomenon which is not limited to contemporary times, though it operates with a different purpose or image. In the words of Sarah Juliet Lauro:

“[...] the zombie that entertains us in the cinema today operates as a modern-day foil, providing almost an inverse image of the Christian martyr that thrilled and terrified the medieval mind: in the contemporary imagination, it is not God who raises the dead as a sign of his divine authority, but secular forces that cause the dead to rise in defiance of natural law”.<sup>1</sup>

The reason for their resurrection in current pop culture is often viral in nature, where the infection resulting in the creation of undead spreads throughout society. This all-encompassing nature of the undead is opposed to the more selective process of becoming one of the living dead during the Middle Ages. God or entities with immense power selected individuals and created an undead for a specific purpose. Throughout this thesis I will explore the liminal position of these undead, and how their liminal position influences our understanding of death. What does the cessation of death, and the reanimation or revival of the dead do to our understanding of death? It is a momentous challenge to satisfy humanity's

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Juliet Lauro, “The Zombie Saints: The Contagious Spirit of Christian Conversion Narratives: A Zombie Martyr,” *Literature and Theology* (2012), 2.

curiosity with death, the dead and the afterlife, as death and the afterlife in itself is an impossibility to witness.

Faith and religion step in to fill the unknown void created by the inability to witness the afterlife. There are several large questions regarding death and our fate after we die, questions such as; how death works, who is in control and where we go. The nature of the afterlife is also in question, whether it is physical or spiritual, which directly comments on what the relationship between the body and soul is. It is not possible to answer these questions in a definite manner however, and these are some of the questions religion offers answers to. Religion therefore becomes an inescapable facet in our exploration of the afterlife, as almost all religions expostulate their own version of the afterlife and all of the texts within this thesis have a Christian religious nature. The Middle Ages had a number of texts which featured the undead, and it is exciting studying how these undead are portrayed and what purpose they serve.

The undead I will highlight in this thesis serve various purposes, each creating a separate understanding of death. This makes each text I have used in this thesis instrumental in a larger discussion on the concept of death. *The Vision of Tundale*, *Sir Owain*, and *The Gast of Gy* are the purgatory visions featured in Chapter 1. These purgatory visions aid in the discussion on what happens after one dies, with a special focus on the afterlife, especially purgatory and hell. Their descriptions of the afterlife through the undead helped breathe life into a new understanding of the afterlife. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in Chapter 2 highlights the power of death, through the threat and expectation of Sir Gawain's execution. This text is used to portray how it is possible to view death, as a catalyst for introspection, change, and conversion of the self. The two tales used in Chapter 3, *The Prioress's Tale* and *The Second Nun's Tale* from *The Canterbury Tales* comments on the frailty of human life and the power of God and his saints. The undead in these tales exemplifies the frailty of humanity,

raises the power of divinity, and shifts the focus away from the afterlife towards life. Each of these texts cover a different interpretation of death, and each text contains a member of the living dead.

The living dead, or undead, are ideally suited for the exploration of a question which has resulted in widespread answers. As these texts deal with the persistence of life beyond death, or a reanimation of the dead, they are able to explore the question: What is the relationship between the body and soul? The question of relationship between body and soul can be boiled down to the concept of identity. Is identity tied to the body or the soul, or a combination of the two? They are able to give answers to this question through the journey the protagonists of the texts go through, as each text consists of a journey either spiritual or physical. The structure of my thesis can be seen to reflect the division of the afterlife, with a hell, purgatory and heaven. Chapter 1 starts off with a foray into hell and purgatory, where the undead explore death and the afterlife. This leads to Chapter 2's exploration of the earthly purgatorial state experienced by Sir Gawain. Lastly in Chapter 3, we see how the undead effects change on earth before their entry into heaven.

Throughout this thesis I refer to the terms undead and the living dead. I use these terms interchangeably. The definition I operate with is that the undead or the living dead are people who can no longer be considered fully alive. They are the subject of a liminal phase that is located in between life and death. Sarah Juliet Lauro in her work, *The Zombie Saints: The Contagious Spirit of Christian Conversion Narratives: A Zombie Martyr*, underlines the unique position of the zombie or undead:

The difference between the saint and the zombie might seem as stark as the disparity between the apostolic and the awful, the miraculous and the macabre, the holy and the horrifying, but nonetheless, they share a unique duality as liminal figures, straddling ontological boundaries in such a way that a third, new term is created. They are neither

living nor dead, but a third state of being, created by the paradoxical inseparability of these conditions.<sup>2</sup>

Through the use of simile and juxtapositions she divides the saint and the zombie, but in the end she joins them together in a shared liminal phase. I will not argue that the protagonists in the texts are saints however, especially since *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* become a commentary on imperfect human nature. I do however wish to differentiate the undead from zombies however since I agree with Lauro, who merely operates with what she calls this “third state of being”<sup>3</sup>, that zombies are the antithesis of a saint. The term “zombie” brings with it certain connotations that leads to the comparison between the protagonists of these texts and the zombies influenced by contemporary pop-culture, with an unnatural fixation with brains. This is something that the critic Lisa Weston also points out in her article “Suffer the Little Children, or, A Ruminant on the Faith of Zombies”. “Chaucer’s *Litel Clergeon* is by no means literally one of the shambling, decaying hulks that seem to be our monster-du-jour”.<sup>4</sup> I would therefore step away from the word *Zombie* and go with a more general term.

The modern zombie also differs in another way from what I refer to as the “undead” inherent to the Middle Ages. Lauro writes that “The zombie’s defiance of death, which is explicitly not a resurrection, but a reanimation of an empty corpse, is a warning of the unnatural capabilities of such secular powers”.<sup>5</sup> Though this might appear similar to some of the undead within this thesis, i.e. *The Second Nun’s Tale*, where the child appears to reanimate, the child’s soul is very much still within what appears to be a reanimated corpse. The soulless nature of the modern zombie might explain why the zombies of today are seen as

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<sup>2</sup> Lauro, “The Zombie Saints,” 4.

<sup>3</sup> Lauro, “The Zombie Saints,” 4.

<sup>4</sup> Lisa Weston, “Suffer the Little Children, or, A Ruminant on the Faith of Zombies,” in *The Dark Chaucer: An Assortment*, ed. Myra Seaman et al. (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2012), 182.

<sup>5</sup> Lauro, “The Zombie Saints,” 6.



mindless drones slave to their baser instincts. Zombies do nonetheless occupy a position between life and death however, and are thusly part of the more general term “undead”.

I prefer the more general terms “undead” or the “living dead” as they more aptly describe the condition of not being dead while at the same time not being alive. This is an important facet to my coming discussion, as not all of the protagonists are reanimated as one would expect a “zombie” to arise anew. One aspect of being undead is that death has failed or been foiled in some manner. Since either the bodies or souls remain amongst the living, and are able to be considered, as written in *The Vision of Tundale*, “Not all dedde” (109) (Not all dead). The undead highlighted within this thesis are all temporary in nature and they are occupying a space between two stable endpoints, they therefore occupy a liminal phase.

The concept of “liminality” is a large part within the coming discussion, and there are some terms that need clarification. I will not however attempt to give a comprehensive explanation of the “liminal” rather highlight areas which is pertinent and will aid in the coming discussion of liminal phases. Bjørn Thomassen writes in his work on the liminal, *Liminality and the Modern: Living through the In-Between* (2014), that “the concept of liminality is today experiencing a revival. This revival takes place more than a century after the concept was introduced by Arnold van Gennep”.<sup>6</sup> With the rising interest in the concept of liminality, it is interesting to see how liminality is relevant for the discussion of the living dead, and how it impacts the concept of death. When studying the concept of liminality there are several benefits of looking at the theories made by Victor W. Turner, a very influential theorist within social anthropology from the 1960s.

Victor W. Turner explains and defines the nature of liminal phases in existence within society. For Turner, Arnold Van Gennep was a major influence on his work on the liminal.

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<sup>6</sup> Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern: Living through the In-Between* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014), 3.

Van Gennep put forth three phases that mark the rites of transition: “separation, margin (or limen), and aggregation”.<sup>7</sup> These three terms, will be used in ascertaining whether we perceive a true liminal phase or not. The definition of these three terms, are according to Turner:

The first phase of separation comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions (a “state”); during the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject (the “passenger”) is ambiguous; he passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state, in the third phase the passage is consummated.<sup>8</sup>

In non-technical language, the liminal is the transitional phase between two fixed ends, between a starting point and an endpoint. In the case of the purgatory visions, *The Vision of Tundale* and *Sir Owain*, one of the liminal phases might be the phase between heaven and hell. Both heaven and hell are two fixed ends, whereas purgatory is the transitional phase in between them. Turner also makes a point of saying that: “emphasis tends to be laid on the transition itself, rather than on the particular states between which it is taking place”.<sup>9</sup> This fact can be seen in the purgatory visions, where purgatory is the main focus. Purgatory then diverts the focus from the start or endpoint. It is also possible to see the focus on the transition in the tales employed in chapter 3, where the state between life and death is portrayed so aptly. Through the use of literature, which is uniquely suited for the injection of life into dead worlds, purgatory was animated, and became alive in the collective understanding of Christians. Just as purgatory occupies a halfway point between heaven and hell, the undead and literature occupy a halfway point between alive and dead. Tied closely with my study of the liminal is the ability of these liminal phases to enable the possibility for change.

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<sup>7</sup> Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage,” in *Sosialantropologiske Grunntekster*, ed. Thomas H. Eriksen (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1996), 510.

<sup>8</sup> Turner, “Betwixt and Between,” 510.

<sup>9</sup> Turner, “Betwixt and Between,” 511.

Some more recent work done on the liminal deals directly with the aspects of change and conversion, and I will therefore also be using the theories of Bjørn Thomassen. In his book *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between*, he states that: “Liminality refers to moments or periods of transition during which the normal limits to thought, self-understanding and behaviour are relaxed, opening the way to novelty and imagination, construction and destruction”.<sup>10</sup> By going through a liminal phase, the subject opens himself up to change, either constructing or destructing aspects of his own personality, which is exactly the changes we are studying. These changes are readily apparent in Chapter 2, where Sir Gawain’s limits for self-understanding are, using the words of Thomassen, relaxed. The possibility for change is thereby made possible through a change in a subject’s life, which leads to a liminal phase. The changes these liminal phases enable will be studied more closely in the coming chapters.

I have decided to split my thesis into three chapters, as I previously mentioned. Each chapter will cover a different aspect of the living dead, and the subsequent liminal phase they occupy. Chapter 1 explores the purgatory visions, and the subsequent foray into hell and purgatory. The three purgatory visions, *The Vision of Tundale*, *Sir Owain*, and *The Gast of Gy*, all deal with the inception of a newly founded version of the afterlife. They give a small glimpse of the beyond, creating not only an opportunity for change and conversion of the self, but bringing a new afterlife to life. This is something I will argue happens through blurring the line between imagination and reality through the use of literature. I will argue in Chapter 1 that literature inhabits a liminal phase between alive and dead, and through this understanding look at what, if anything, this liminal phase enables. I will however start the chapter with a short introduction to purgatory and the texts themselves, before qualifying why these protagonists could be considered a member of the undead. I will then argue that it is because

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<sup>10</sup> Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern*, 1.

of their entry into a liminal phase that these undead protagonists enable the exploration and animation of the new liminal phase of purgatory. The death scenes of the character also become an important aspect of this chapter, because when we study how these protagonists enter into the afterlife, it is possible to understand the relationship between the soul and the body. I will also show, through the use of close reading and analysis of select passages, that these texts attempt to appear as authentic accounts of the afterlife to increase their own believability. Does this attempt at authenticity do anything to the message they are conveying?

In Chapter 2 the focus shifts from the exploration of the afterlife to the exploration of the self. I will argue that the liminal phase experienced by Sir Gawain challenges his own identity as a knight, and thereby opening up for change and conversion. After giving a short introduction to the text itself, I move on to explain how it is possible to consider Sir Gawain part of the living dead, and thereby inhabiting a liminal phase. This is done through the use of three criteria which limit what can be considered a liminal phase. As this chapter will go in depth on the changes made possible within the confines of a liminal phase, it is necessary to understand how Sir Gawain is perceived by himself and others. This will be done through close reading and subsequent analysis of his personality, and by comparing the perception of his personality to his actions and statements throughout the liminal phase. These changes will be exemplified by the green girdle Sir Gawain accepts, and the girdle will therefore be especially pertinent to this discussion. I will prove that his brush with mortality enables the liminal phase, which in turn reveals the power of death as a shadowy unknown and concrete threat. The themes of change and conversion is continued in Chapter 3, but with a different twist than the other two chapters.

As we move from Chapter 2, where the change was an internal process, Chapter 3 will show how this change can be externalized to affect those witnessing the liminal phase instead

of the subject inhabiting them. *The Prioress's Tale* and *The Second Nun's Tale* will show that death can be postponed by a powerful entity, through the use of faith and mundane objects infused with fantastical properties. The liminal phases the two protagonists, the boy and Cecilia, occupy conforms most to the modern and obvious form of the living dead. Their bodies, though mutilated, and for all intents and purposes they should be deceased, continue to function. The entities who appear to be all-powerful through their control over death, did not intercede in the events leading up to the death of these protagonists however. Through them interceding and postponing death it become possible to discuss how by them interceding in the process of dying changes the perception of death as inevitable. Who is able to control and hold power over death and what is the purpose for these powerful beings temporarily fending off death, are but two of the questions that will be studied through the use of these two tales. The uncanny imagery of the singing boy with a slit throat, or how Cecilia is still alive after her visceral execution, create the seed for change and conversion.

# Chapter 1

## Purgatory, Literature & the Undead

The three texts I employ in this chapter are some of the most exciting medieval texts exploring a newly canonized part of the afterlife. They had a part in influencing the inception of a new understanding of the afterlife, and challenged the preconceived notions of the fate of souls. With the introduction of purgatory, it became necessary to disseminate the knowledge in society, as there was a lot of confusion regarding the nature, duration and location of purgatory. Many might envision these texts to be written as scholarly texts, only to teach the facts of purgatory, but *The Vision of Tundale*, *Sir Owain* and *The Gast of Gy* are almost written as adventures, with pain, adversity and joy, and their popularity reflects the success of this narrative approach to purgatory. *The Vision of Tundale* was written in the original Latin version around 1149, and was translated into the Middle English version, which I am using in this thesis, approximately during the late fourteenth- early fifteenth century. The popularity of this text in the Middle Ages can be seen in the fact that it was translated into over 13 vernaculars.<sup>11</sup> *Sir Owain* was no less popular, maybe even more so, and according to Edward Foster, “it survives, in whole or in part, in over one hundred and fifty manuscripts in Latin alone [...]and in over three hundred translations and adaptations in almost every European vernacular”.<sup>12</sup> The same can be said for *The Gast of Gy*, which was extremely popular during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. There are over sixty different versions of the narrative in existence.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Edward E. Foster, ed., *Three Purgatory Poems* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004), 179.

<sup>12</sup> Foster, *Three Purgatory Poems*, 112.

<sup>13</sup> Foster, *Three Purgatory Poems*, 16.

The texts not only gave a glimpse of the believed notion of the afterlife, but were actually able to influence people's understanding of it. They helped bring purgatory to life and they are therefore situated in a unique position. By employing aspects of the afterlife used since antiquity and by creating a narrative, which was both engaging and exciting, it became possible to introduce the new division of the afterlife and bring it to life through the use of literature. The undead which explore the afterlife for us occupy the halfway point between life and death. What is the effect of the liminal phase they occupy? Are the liminal phases merely for the benefit of the protagonist? I will show that it is possible through death to make discoveries and change of the self, but also inspire change and conversion in others. The position of literature as a liminal phase enables the possibility for effecting change and conversion. I will also show that the liminal position of the undead affords them the opportunity to serve as middlemen between life and death, enabling the exploration of the afterlife. First, however, I will give an introduction to the concept and inception of purgatory into Christian dogma, before giving a short summary of the texts themselves.

The afterlife has gone through several iterations throughout history, from Elysium and the fields of punishment in ancient Greek mythology, to the present notion of heaven and hell. In the twelfth century however, the concepts of heaven and hell changed within the Christian faith. The new "understanding" of the afterlife introduced the notion of purgatory. The introduction of purgatory marked the start of a new genre of literature called purgatory visions. To analyze and fully understand purgatory visions, it is important to understand the conception of purgatory itself. Even though it is fully possible to analyze and draw conclusions based on the texts themselves, the liminal phases explored in this thesis is easier to understand with a familiarity with purgatory and its history.

Purgatory was not introduced overnight, but through centuries of debate on the nature of the afterlife. Before the twelfth century, the afterlife was a simpler concept. From early

Christianity, a period “between the second and fourth century”<sup>14</sup>, according to Jacques Le Goff, “Christianity set itself to thinking about the situation in which souls find themselves between the death of the individual and the Last Judgment.”<sup>15</sup> The previously dualistic approach to afterlife with a heaven and hell, would soon get an addition of what Le Goff refers to as a “third place”.<sup>16</sup> It would be unwise to disconnect the discussion of purgatory from the rest of the overarching theological views on the afterlife, as many of the ancient imaginings were transferred into this new concept of purgatory. “Purgatory reused motifs that had gained currency in very early times: darkness, fire, torture[...]”.<sup>17</sup> The development of medieval purgatory was a sporadic one, as stated by Le Goff: “Changes came more rapidly in some periods than in others: The pace picked up at the beginning of the fifth century, again between the end of the sixth and the beginning of the eighth century, and finally in the twelfth century”.<sup>18</sup> The twelfth century version of purgatory is the one version I am most interested in in relation to this thesis.

Up to the inception of purgatory in church doctrine, the “period between death and resurrection Church doctrine had little of a precise nature to say”.<sup>19</sup> There were several different interpretations of the afterlife, which differed in regards to a soul’s residence in a neutral place after death, to an immediate judgement of a soul. Le Goff does highlight however, that “most of those who believed in the existence of an intermediate category held that the dead awaiting admission to heaven would have to undergo some kind of purgation”.<sup>20</sup> The belief in this purgation of souls, or trial, can be inferred to be the forerunner of the then “modern” understanding of purgatory. According to Eileen Gardiner, there was:

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<sup>14</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, 58.

<sup>19</sup> Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, 133.

<sup>20</sup> Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, 133.



no distinct place known as purgatory. Purgation was, however, a part of the afterlife, and the place of purgation occupied the outer reaches of either hell or heaven, depending on whether the soul was 'good but not totally good' or 'bad but not totally bad'.<sup>21</sup>

There were however large differences in opinion with regards to how and where the souls were to be purged and the extent of time the purgation of souls took. On the nature of the purgation there was, according to Le Goff, a consensus: "[...] almost everyone agreed that some sort of fire, distinct from the eternal fire of Gehenna, played a role[...]"<sup>22</sup> The purgation through fire was a widely held belief, and is substantiated through several sources. One of the sources is Raoul of Laon, who is the most known representative of the Laon School, one of the best medieval schools of theology: "[...] even those who have loved the world will be saved provided they did not prefer the world to God, but that first they must be punished by fire".<sup>23</sup> Who exactly were to be punished or purged was also an issue of debate. According to Le Goff: "only the perfectly good escape the fire of purgation, because, even though no one can be entirely free of venial sins, in the perfectly good these sins can be consumed by the fervor of love (*fervor caritatis*)".<sup>24</sup> There was therefore some form of universality to purgatory. It was something every person had to pass through, which might make its canonization all that more distressing for believers.

The afterlife was not just a topic for ecclesiastical circles, but the ordinary people in society had its influence in the construction of purgatory. The notion that the laity was outside these debates is understandable, due to the nature of the theological debates. Le Goff on the other hand highlights that: "The questions of the fate of the soul after death and of the nature of purgatorial fire also drew attention from outside ecclesiastical circles".<sup>25</sup> The popularity of

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<sup>21</sup> Eileen Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven & Hell Before Dante* (New York: Italica Press Inc., 1989), xiii.

<sup>22</sup> Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, 134.

<sup>23</sup> Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, 138.

<sup>24</sup> Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, 157.

<sup>25</sup> Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, 141.

these debates, both in ecclesiastical circles as well as among the laity, makes the emergence of the purgatory visions understandable. Through the use of these literary works, purgatory would no longer remain a debate, but serve as illustrations of the afterlife itself. The liminal space souls occupy after death become part of the collective understanding of death and the afterlife. The afterlife would therefore not only be debated, but it would make the theoretical fires “real” in an imaginary way.

Purgatory visions were a valuable tool in regards to disseminating the knowledge, and anchoring it to the reader’s conscious understanding of the afterlife. Eileen Gardiner explains that: “In the mid-twelfth century the concept of purgatory as a separate and distinct place was formalized [...]”.<sup>26</sup> With the canonization of purgatory within Christendom, it became necessary to disseminate this knowledge. Purgatory visions became a valuable tool in that regard. Gardiner states that “because these visions were believed to be factual and not fictional, they were often also incorporated into chronicles of the period”.<sup>27</sup> The visions of purgatory were therefore understood not as pieces of literature, but as that of proof of life after death. The literature was widely disseminated, and according to Gardiner, *The Vision of Tundale* had been “translated into at least thirteen languages [...]”<sup>28</sup> by the end of the fourteenth century. She also states that the texts “were obviously used as didactic pieces in the church”.<sup>29</sup> This dissemination coupled with the fact that these texts were used in a didactic setting, would have contributed to a shared collective understanding of the afterlife.

The fact that the visionaries often were outside of ecclesiastical circles means that it was the literature of the people. The contact with the divine has often been the domain of the established church and its representatives. The purgatory visions changed the existing power

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<sup>26</sup> Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven & Hell Before Dante*, xiii.

<sup>27</sup> Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven & Hell Before Dante*, xiii.

<sup>28</sup> Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven & Hell Before Dante*, xiii.

<sup>29</sup> Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven & Hell Before Dante*, xiii.

structure to one where the ordinary people have more influence over church dogma and in particular the afterlife. The concepts of heaven and hell become more accessible to ordinary people, and less of an ecclesiastical monopoly. The fact that it was not merely saints that received these visions can be seen by the texts this chapter will explore. *The Vision of Tundale*, *Sir Owain*, and *The Gast of Gy* all contain flawed protagonists. Their sins were varied, but they do create an image of themselves as ordinary people. *The Vision of Tundale* is the first of the purgatory visions dealt with in this MA-thesis.

*The Vision of Tundale* was written in the original Latin version around 1149 and it was later translated into Middle English around the late fourteenth- early fifteenth century.<sup>30</sup> From the very beginning, it stresses the vices and sins of the protagonist, the knight, Tundale. He was a sinful man, who early on in the text, almost dies. His sins were numerous, and ranged from treachery, anger and envy to lecherous thoughts and a gluttonous appetite. One of the main reasons he receives his vision, is because of the sins he has committed. Through witnessing and enduring purgatory, his sins will be cleansed, and gain access to heaven. His apparent death scene places a lot of weight on the fact that he is dead, as well as stating that the burial was postponed due to the fact he was not wholly dead:

Anon in the flore he fell don dedde.<sup>31</sup>      *Instantly on the floor he fell down dead.*  
(79-98)

The fact that he is dead was later contradicted in the text, where some believe him not to be fully dead, a point I will return to. After his death, he wakes up in the afterlife. With a guide, he goes through purgatory and hell before witnessing heaven itself. The text focuses

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<sup>30</sup> Foster, *Three Purgatory Poems*, 179.

<sup>31</sup> Foster, Edward E., ed. *The Vision of Tundale*, in *Three Purgatory Poems*, ed. by Edward E. Foster (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004), 193. All subsequent quotes from this poem within this chapter will be marked with line numbers in the quote. Translations are my own through the use of glosses in the book.

extensively on the horrors and tortures in purgatory and hell, which separates the text from the more didactic nature of *The Gast of Gy*. Similar to *Sir Owain*, the text contains the physical descriptions of purgatory, and the protagonist goes through the same trials and phases inherent to purgatory and hell. It is however a separate entity entirely, due to the fact that purgatory is not a physical location.

The tale of *Sir Owain* is the second of the purgatory visions that falls under the scope of this thesis. Many might notice the resemblance of the events unfolding in *Sir Owain* to what happens in *The Vision of Tundale*. Both of these purgatory visions are closely linked by the keen focus on torture and suffering the protagonists witness in purgatory, and not only that, a lot of the imagery in use is similar as well. The text begins quickly as the first thirty-two lines are lost, and with it, most of the “probable” introduction of *Sir Owain*. We do however get to know *Sir Owain* throughout the text, and the similarity to *Tundale* is striking. Both of them are sinful knights that will end up in hell if they do not repent and cleanse themselves of their sin. There are large differences between *The Vision of Tundale* and *Sir Owain* however. *Tundale* experiences the entire ordeal within his vision of purgatory, and while *Sir Owain* does receive a vision, his experience in purgatory does not occur until after the vision ends. *Sir Owain* does not enter purgatory in the same manner as *Tundale*. He enters purgatory still alive, and through a physical gateway leading to purgatory and hell, a fact that will be explored in greater detail later in this chapter. Similar to *Tundale* God’s grace would shield him from harm, although he needs to go through purgatory and hell alone, without a guide. In purgatory itself, he witnesses many of the same horrors and tortures as *Tundale*. Through his journey through purgatory, he calls out for God whenever he needs saving from the tortures within, though he does not escape completely unscathed. After the cleansing of his sin in purgatory, he gains access to paradise. During the stay in paradise, he witnesses the

glory contained within. Sir Owain's return from the afterlife is uneventful. The fiends that tortured him on the way in flee as he walks back out of purgatory to the mortal realm.

*The Gast of Gy* is the most clear-cut case of the undead aspect over the other two texts. The two purgatory visions vividly describe the horrors of purgatory to us in detail, while the ghost story *The Gast of Gy* diverts the focus away from pain and suffering. The focus of *The Gast of Gy* is not the suffering that takes place in purgatory, but a more didactic explanation of the nature of purgatory. It is through dialogue that we gain an insight into the envisioned purgatory in *The Gast of Gy*. Even from the very beginning of the text, we understand that this text is different from the other two. In both *The Vision of Tundale* and *Sir Owain*, the texts introduce the knightly protagonists. They follow the pattern of describing their deeds, vices and sins, before moving on to their foray into purgatory. In *The Gast of Gy* however, the introduction makes clear the "intent" or hope of God. Through the dissemination of knowledge of learned men, it becomes possible for more people to avoid living a sinful life. The introduction of Gy as a person on the other hand, does not occur until after the sermon is over, and consists of nothing more than a short statement of his death.

Eight days after his passing his wife becomes distraught and suffers because of the loud sounds and dreadful commotion coming from his chamber. Although she hopes it is the spirit of Gy, she fears it might be a fiend come to torture her. To ascertain what exactly is happening, she goes to speak to the Prior, who calls a council. It is through the coming conversations, between the "gast" and the Prior, we glean an insight into the afterlife and purgatory. Before the meeting between the spirit and the prior, there is a great deal of emphasis put on the rituals of the church, examples include, a mass and the Holy Communion (135-150). In the first encounter with Gy, the Prior poses the question of whether he was a good spirit or not.

"Whether ertow ane ill gast or a gud?"<sup>32</sup>     *Are you an evil spirit or a good?*  
(235)

Gy answers the prior with an answer that challenges the perception of evil and sinful:

And, als I am the gast of Gy,     *And, as I am the spirit of Gy,*  
Tharfor may thou have in mynde,     *Therefore you may understand,*  
That I am a gud gast be kynde,     *That I am a good spirit by nature,*  
Bot I am evell after my dede,     *But I am evil after my deeds,*  
(246-249)

The fact that spirit refers to himself as a good spirit would imply that you do not need to be evil to end up in purgatory. It is by the deeds committed in life, his sins, he is considered evil by the judgement of God. Compared to Tundale and Sir Owain, Gy was the opposite, both a kind and pious person. It was because of the sins he had committed he had to be purged in purgatory. Pain is also present in his tales of purgatory, but the conversation emphasizes on the duration of purgation, not the purgation itself. Gy states quite clearly that his occupancy in purgatory is a temporary one, and when his cleansing is complete, he will move on to heaven. The nature of purgatory again arises as the conversation proceeds. Purgatory in the other texts is a specific location, either physical or ephemeral, a distinct place disjointed from anything else. In *The Gast of Gy* purgatory is everywhere, at least the individual purgatory. Gy was in purgatory as he spoke to the Prior, as can be seen in line 526. The common purgatory shared by everyone, they were subjected to great pains, but there is also an individual purgatory they can occupy at the same time. During the course of the conversation, they speak of many facets covering the afterlife, but before the meeting is over, the Prior asks the spirit when the suffering is to end. Gy states that by Easter, he will be pure, and permitted entry into heaven. The Prior leaves, and the text is concluded with a note from a representative of the pope,

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<sup>32</sup> Foster, Edward E., ed. *The Gast of Gy*, in *Three Purgatory Poems*, ed. By Edward E. Foster (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004), 33. All subsequent quotes from this poem within this chapter will be marked with line numbers in the quote. Translations are my own through the use of glosses in the book.

stating that Gy has indeed gone to heaven. *The Gast of Gy* is therefore the only of the purgatory vision in this thesis where death was effected fully, though death was what all of them explored.

In all of the texts, death is a common theme in between them. The notion of death is however different in each of the texts. From Tundale's physical half death, Gy's permanent death, to Sir Gawain entering into the afterlife with his physical body. To be able to look at the quasi state of existence beyond death, it is necessary to define what constitutes death. During the Middle Ages, dying, according to Jane Gilbert, "is seen as ceasing to be one kind of person and becoming another, significantly altering but by no means destroying social roles and relations".<sup>33</sup> In Gilbert's text, she places weight on the distinction between corporeal death and 'symbolic' death. "Symbolic death may follow bodily death, as in the funeral or the memorial ceremony. Symbolic may also precede corporeal death, as when such phenomena as religious commitment or mental illness make a person 'dead to the world'".<sup>34</sup> I will focus on the corporeal aspect of death when studying these three texts. The terms are however useful to know, as it opens up the understanding of death. It thereby makes it possible to discuss the cases of continuation of life beyond death in my texts. It is through the continuation of life the texts are able to explore themes related to death. Throughout the texts employed in this thesis, death does not mark the end, but rather the beginning. As the "second" life of the protagonists start, the readers gain an insight into an envisioned version of the afterlife. What makes this window into a closed off liminal space possible? Dying is a process, which at times is possible to observe, but for the most part it remains elusive to us. What lies at the end of that process is the territory of imagination. Is the death of the protagonists, either corporeal or symbolic, the nexus between imagination and expected reality? Since dying is a process, it is

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<sup>33</sup> Jane Gilbert, *Living Death in Medieval French and English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>34</sup> Gilbert, *Living Death in Medieval French and English Literature*, 6.

automatically a transitional phase, which moves a subject from the somewhat stable state of life into the stable state of dead, but usually we cannot return to life to report on death. The fact that these undead protagonists return from the afterlife is what makes these texts so powerful, because of the impossibility for everyone to witness the afterlife directly.

By using the terms of Turner, the liminal spaces I will explore often occupy the final aggregation stages in the overarching processes. I defined the aggregation stage in the introduction to be the endpoint of a process. Because of the wide nature of liminal spaces, I will focus on three particular liminal spaces during the course of this thesis, the liminal space of the undead, the liminal space of purgatory, and the liminal space that literature itself occupies. I call purgatory a liminal space, even though it is the aggregation of the process of dying. It depends on the perspective you have on death. If you consider being alive as a starting point, and death as the end, purgatory becomes the entrance into the endpoint. I will on the other hand argue that purgatory becomes a liminal space in its own right, a liminal space within aggregation stage within the process of dying. The portrayals of purgatory, as stated in the introductory chapter, tell of a temporary residence for souls that needed cleansing. They are in fact in a middle state between heaven and hell, who are headed, once the cleansing process is over, to a permanent residence in either heaven or hell. I would then conclude that purgatory becomes a process, where the residents have one foot in both heaven and hell, a liminal space deciding their final destination. The critic Diana W. Pasulka also states this fact: “As a transitional state between death and heaven, purgatory is liminal, a threshold between two ostensibly stable conditions”.<sup>35</sup> A lot of the same theory used when talking about purgatory is directly applicable when discussing the concept of the undead.

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<sup>35</sup> Diana Walsh Pasulka, *Heaven Can Wait: Purgatory in Catholic Devotional and Popular Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 20.



The undead as explained in the introduction occupies a liminal space similar to that of purgatory, although the undead is stationed between life and death not heaven and hell. The undead are in part occupants of the afterlife, but they are also often able to exert their influence upon the living world. During the death scene in *The Vision of Tundale*, which will be explored in detail later in this chapter, his spirit and higher faculties are not working in our world. The consequence of his death, mentally if not physically, is that he occupies a halfway-point between alive and dead. He does not have the ability to affect the world around him in his lifeless state, but we can still consider him a member of the undead, since his body is still alive in the mortal realm. One who is definitely able to exert his influence on the world, is Gy. This fact makes him a clearer case of undead than the others, as he actually returns from death to haunt his widow. To be able to explore the manner of their form of being undead however, we need to clarify their death. By studying the way by which the protagonists enter purgatory, we will gain insight into an important aspect of how the subject goes through the phases of liminality.

The separation of the protagonists from the rest of society through the process of dying has widespread complications for other aspects of our understanding of death itself, as well as how belief and imagination works together in creating a window into the unobservable. The process of entering into purgatory is different in all three of the texts, and every text imparts a different imagining of the afterlife in direct consequence of it. In *The Vision of Tundale*, the entrance to purgatory is not a physical location, nor was it voluntary for him to enter into purgatory.

<p>He lay cold dedde as any stan,          But of the lyft syde of Tundale          Was sumwat warme the veyne corale,          Werfor sum hylt hym not all dedde;          (106-109)</p>	<p><i>He lay cold dead as any stone,          But on the left side of Tundale          Was somewhat warm the median vein,          Wherefore some believed him not fully dead;</i></p>
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The fact that he is “not all dedde” (109), does indicate that he is in fact part dead. It was however just his physical body that was “not all dedde”.

Wen Tundale fell don soddenly,            *When Tundale Fell down suddenly,*  
The gost departyd sone from the body. *The spirit departed immediately from the body*  
As sone as the body was dedde,            *As soon as the body was dead,*  
The sowle was sone in a darke sted.    *The soul had was immediately in a dark place.*  
(117-120)

His higher faculties, or soul, is removed from his corporeal body, which can be seen in the line “The gost departyd sone from the body” (118), and brought to purgatory. The text does not leave it to chance whether the version of the afterlife merely took place within his imagination. The removal of his soul does not explain the necessity for the cold body, or the need for his half dead state, especially when comparing him to Sir Owain, who could enter into purgatory with his physical body. His transfer into the purgatorial plane does indicate that he has ceased to be alive in the mortal realm. I would therefore argue that the corporeal death Tundale is afflicted with could be referred to as being undead. Through his soul being transferred to purgatory, the text inadvertently comments on the non-physical nature of the afterlife.

The fact that his soul had to be separated from his physical form, does indicate that purgatory is not a physical location located somewhere on earth. Through explaining how his body is “not all dedde” (109), creates the understanding that the soul and body is connected. The concept of a link between body and soul is also brought up by Caroline Walker Bynum in her work on material continuity and the resurrection of the body; “[...] twelfth-century thought was characterized, philosophically speaking, by Platonic dualism – that is, by the

view [...] that the person is the soul, to which body is attached as tool, garment or prison”.<sup>36</sup> The image of the body as a garment or prison will also be brought up in chapter 3. This separation of the body and soul stands apart from the discussions on material continuity, and is part of the “philosophical discourse in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries [...]”.<sup>37</sup> It does on the other hand not separate the soul completely from the physical, as Tundale is portrayed in bodily form as he witnesses purgatory and hell. It does however separate the nature of purgatory from the physical nature of the afterlife in both *Sir Owain*, and the two-fold nature of purgatory in *The Gast of Gy*. The nature of purgatory will be discussed later in the thesis, when we look at what the texts portrays themselves to be, and what the effect of that portrayal is. *Sir Owain* stands in opposition to the non-physical nature of the afterlife in *The Vision of Tundale*.

The physical gateway leading to purgatory in *Sir Owain* contributes to a different understanding of the nature of the afterlife. It is also one of the more glaring differences between *The Vision of Tundale*, and *Sir Owain*. The fact that Sir Owain enters a physical gate implies that he does not die in the traditional sense of the word. In my description of the text, he enters purgatory through a physical location, which is more similar to that of Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, who was also alive when he entered the afterlife. Owain walks through the gate and enters into a hall of stone.

The gate thai schet anon.  
 The knight his way hath sone ynome,  
 That into the feld he was ycome  
 Ther was the halle of ston.<sup>38</sup>

*The gate then shut again.  
 The knight continued on his way,  
 So that he came to a field,  
 Where the hall of stone was.*

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<sup>36</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, “Material Continuity, Personal Survival and the Resurrection of the Body: A Scholastic Discussion in Its Medieval and Modern Contexts,” in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 254-255.

<sup>37</sup> Bynum, “Material Continuity,” 254.

<sup>38</sup> Foster, Edward E., ed. *Sir Owain*, in *Three Purgatory Poems*, ed. By Edward E. Foster (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004), 129. All subsequent quotes from this

(255-258)

The fact that purgatory is a physical location is highlighted by the fact that Sir Owain also receives a vision before he sets out on his pilgrimage to Lough Derg. In his vision he receives instructions to travel to purgatory, instead of bringing his soul to purgatory itself. As stated he did not die, at least not in the traditional sense of the word. He does on the other hand enter a physical afterlife, with his corporeal body. One could therefore argue that this would signify him to be dead, as he occupies a place in the afterlife, and is no longer part of the living realm. Just as how the undead can occupy a place in the living realm, the living could occupy that same liminal state if they ventured into the afterlife. I would therefore argue that he is in part dead, and in part alive, as per the definition in the introduction, and until he returns from the afterlife, or remains there, he is in a liminal state of his own. By creating the understanding of a physical afterlife the text conforms to the theory of material continuity.

One could even say that the body and soul are so interconnected, that they are both needed for the afterlife to work. The continuation of the material, i.e. body, creates an understanding of the afterlife as a physical location with physical pains. Through the physical foray into the afterlife, the body and soul remain connected. The thinkers of the middle ages, found it, according to Bynum, “almost impossible to envision personal survival without material continuity”.<sup>39</sup> Material continuity is in other words the continuation of the physical body after death. The differing opinions of the connection between the soul and the body not only affects the concept of the afterlife, it opens up the opportunity for understanding death as a concept better as well.

The death of Gy in *The Gast of Gy* is important even though the text glosses over the death itself. The death scene in *The Gast of Gy* is different from both of the other texts. In the

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poem within this chapter will be marked with line numbers in the quote. Translations are my own through the use of glosses in the book.

<sup>39</sup> Bynum, “Material Continuity”, 247.

other two texts, the protagonists either does not die completely, or at all. In this text, the death of Gy is very much a true form of dying. Exactly how Gy dies is not stated in the text, which might mean how he died is inconsequential. In the introduction of the text, there is nothing but a small notation of his death:

A gret burges, that named was Gy, In that same ceté gan dy. And, when the cors in erth was layd,	<i>A great citizen, who was named Gy, In that same city died. And, when the corpse was laid in earth,</i>
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(41-43)

An interesting aspect of his death is that this is the only text that actually talks about the burial of the protagonist. In *The Vision of Tundale* the text is more concerned with explaining the process of dying, and the subsequent reason for not believing him to be fully dead. In *The Gast of Gy*, the mention of the burial is meant to assure the reader of the fact that he was actually buried, and in turn underline the fact that Gy was completely dead. It is stated quite clearly that it is not until after the burial of Gy that his soul returns. According to Jane Gilbert the fact that a soul returns after its death is not unheard of during the middle ages. It was not common, but it was a part of the societal belief system, as it is in many cultures. She goes on to say that:

Most dead persons remained quietly in their place. Those who rose from the grave in dreams, visions, apparitions or even vivid memories did so to intervene in the existence of the living and in this sense were troubled and troublesome even where their intervention was appreciated, and much more so when not.<sup>40</sup>

What then is interesting is that the return of Gy does not break with the expectations inherent to the characters or the implied reader of that day and age. This becomes an important aspect of the coming discussion on the effect of authenticity.

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<sup>40</sup> Gilbert, *Living Death in Medieval French and English Literature*, 3.

Up until this point, I have pointed out the differences in the texts, and how the protagonists can be considered undead. The deaths of the protagonists open up a gateway into the afterlife however. Just as how Sir Owain had to enter through a gateway to the afterlife, we need to have an entrance into the concept of the afterlife.

During the course of the texts, it becomes apparent that death is the nexus of imagination and reality with regards to the afterlife. The death of the protagonists bridges the gap between the concepts of reality and imagination, and by reality, I mean the implied reader's expected reality formed by their belief system. Jane Gilbert mentions the role of the imaginary in her article on the living dead: "The imaginary is a valid heuristic tool and dimension of knowledge, though naturally scholarly observation and analysis also require drawing on documented external sources".<sup>41</sup> I am not saying that the texts are meant as scholarly analysis of the afterlife. I am on the other hand saying that through imagination it becomes possible to create a new vision of something we cannot observe directly, something which it is impossible to gain perfect information on. Not only will the fact that they die and return give the visionaries credibility of a first-hand account of the afterlife, but it also carries with it religious connotations. Dying and returning to life is a powerful image within Christianity. One of the most famous examples of this is of course Jesus Christ, who resurrected three days after his death.

A resurrection like that of Tundale and visitation of Gy blur the line between imagination and reality by challenging the standard outcome of death, and inserting a flicker of the supernatural. Thereby when one effaces the lines between imagination and reality, it becomes possible to gain an insight into the unobservable. Throughout the purgatory visions dealt with within this thesis, imagination and reality combine to form a new understanding of the afterlife, a new world of its own. It is also important to mention that these texts might not

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<sup>41</sup> Gilbert, *Living Death in Medieval French and English Literature*, 8.

have had the same impact, had they been written as a scholarly text. Through writing them as a first-hand account, the stories have the ability to bring the concept of purgatory to life.

Death creates a doorway into the afterlife, which literature gives us the opportunity to witness. The implied readers are not just recipients of the knowledge in the texts, but they are also a participant in creating the story unfolding before them.

Since liminal spaces facilitate the venture into other liminal spaces, they are ideally suited to exploring the liminal phases of purgatory and the undead. They all have the same temporary structure, and can therefore help in infusing life into other liminal phases. One such liminal space is literature. Literature has several innate abilities, which makes exploring the mundane as well as the fantastical possible. Works within literature contain a mini cosmos, a world wholly its own. This cosmos however, is dead, devoid of life, laughter and emotions, until a reader brings it to life. The letters and words devoid of life on their own become alive within the mind of the reader. When a text is well written, the world created might seem as alive as the world we inhabit. Because of this, it becomes possible to regard literature as inhabiting a liminal phase between alive and dead. Literature has endless ways of presenting a fictional universe to its readers. Similar physical rules, real versus imaginary locations, people and time are but a few of the methods used to create a literary world it is possible for a reader to identify with. The readers can go on a fantastical journey all the while linked to the common understanding of the underlying world. This does however give rise to the question of whether the believability of the text influences the subject matter in any way. Freud stated in his work on the uncanny that: “an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced”.<sup>42</sup> By removing the boundary between imagination and reality, it becomes possible to feel the uncanny. I will on the other hand

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<sup>42</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch. (London: Norton & Company, 2010), 826.

combine what Freud says on the nature of the uncanny, with the theories of Turner. By combining the thoughts on the uncanny and liminal spaces, we can witness hitherto closed off liminal spaces, such as Heaven, hell and purgatory.

To expand upon or spread the dogma of purgatory, the texts needed the undead to have an explanation as to why they possessed knowledge of the afterlife. As posited earlier, the belief system of that day and age consisted of a rich and nuanced supernatural world. That belief system would accredit a lot of authority in the visionaries that witnessed the afterlife. Eye witness accounts would still be more effective than just positing theories on the nature of the afterlife, and of course, the need of eyewitness accounts would be problematic, as death is most often a rather permanent affair. The solution would naturally then be to use eye witnesses that would be able to return after their venture in the afterlife.

*The Gast of Gy*, *The Vision of Tundale*, and *Sir Owain* helped to bring the liminal space of the afterlife to life. It does not automatically follow that every text is able to influence a preexisting definition of the afterlife however. There are several different conditions that need to be filled to be able to do so, and just some examples includes the time and place it was written, the style it was written in, and authenticity of the text itself. To be able to prove my statement of them being able to bring the liminal space of purgatory to life, it becomes necessary to see what the texts portray themselves to be. I will not delve into what the people of the time knew, thought or to prove the existence of the supernatural. I will however look at how the texts attempted to portray themselves as authentic visions of the afterlife. The reason for this might simply be to get the largest number of people believing in the new conventions of the afterlife. In the later chapters, I will also show how the other texts I am using, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Canterbury Tales*, chooses not to do so, and thereby seeing what effect that has on the texts.



All three texts attempt to assert their own veracity and authenticity, and use locations, people and other means of establishing their own authority as genuine portrayals of the afterlife. *The Vision of Tundale*, *Sir Owain*, and *The Gast of Gy*, all do this differently, but at the same time, they employ the same strategies. Up until the death of Tundale, the text presents itself as the day-to-day life of any normal person, through the locations and people mentioned. One example of this in *The Vision of Tundale* is the use of Ireland as the setting:

In Yrlond byfyll sumtyme this case                      *In Ireland occurred once upon a time.*  
(11)

The use of “Yrlond” is just a small example of a geographic location, and even though it is not a very specific location, it does tie it to a known country. There are similar examples in both *The Gast of Gy* and *Sir Owain*, which is more specific than *The Vision of Tundale*. In *The Gast of Gy*, it is stated quite clearly that the specific location is Alais:

In Alexty, a noble toune,                      *In Alexty (Alais), a noble town,*  
That thretty mylle es fro Bayoune,      *Which is thirty miles from Bayoune (Bayonne),*  
(37-38)

The locations here are important, as “Bayoune” most likely carries with it religious meaning. Foster believes that Bayonne is not the current name of the city, and that: “the city intended is almost certainly Avignon, which John XXII had made the seat of the Papacy in 1316.”<sup>43</sup> Although it is not a big reference, the small references, especially those that have both religious and societal connotations, all contribute to increasing the authenticity of the text, and in turn the believability.

The death scene in *The Vision of Tundale*, is used in confirming its own authenticity as a truthful text. I earlier talked about the death scene itself in *The Vision of Tundale*, as well as

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<sup>43</sup> Foster, *Three Purgatory Poems*, 82.

the fact he remained somewhat alive despite being dead as a stone. The text does go into detail of the sensation of coming death:

“That strenthe in me fell Y nane. For now my hart so febull Y fele, [...] Anon in the flore he fell don dedde. (79-98)	<i>That strength in me feel I none. For now my heart so feeble I feel [...] Instantly on the floor he fell down dead.</i>
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A death anchored in reality, with the loss of “strenthe” (strength), and a “febull” (feeble) heart, all being familiar sensations, as well as a realistic form of dying. As shown, the text goes into the process of dying to a certain degree, but the focus of the text switches to a more factual aspect of death. It does this by employing scientific jargon to root itself more deeply in the real world. I quoted earlier in this chapter the scene where Tundale is discovered to be still alive. The quote is also important in a different setting, where we can show the attempt to employ scientific terms in order to increase its on validity.

He lay cold dedde as any stan, But of the lyft syde of Tundale Was sumwat warme the veyne corale, Wherfor sum hyld hym not all dedde; (106-109)	<i>He lay cold dead as any stone, But on the left side of Tundale Was somewhat warm the median vein, Wherefore some believed him not fully dead;</i>
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The phrase “veyne corale” is especially interesting in this setting. In an otherwise non-scientific text, the “veyne corale” translates directly into the median vein.<sup>44</sup> The median vein is the superficial vein close to the skin on the forearm. The use of medical terms in this text does not only link it to reality, but also lends an air of authority to the text. It would also serve to prove to the implied readers of the truthfulness of his apparent death and subsequent re-animation. In *Sir Owain*, the beginning of the text mentions a lot of then “familiar” and famous people.

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<sup>44</sup> Foster, *Three Purgatory Poems*, 193.

By tethering the setting of the text, to a familiar and factual setting, the text increases its own authenticity. It also places a lot of weight on the shared legends and tales that was already a big part of the collective societal identity. One of the most famous examples of this is St. Patrick. Foster states that: “Ancient Irish legends associated the existence of an entry into the next world with the mission of St. Patrick (c. 389-c. 461) to convert the pagan Irish.<sup>1</sup> In these legends, the Irish would not accept St. Patrick's teachings unless a man was able to enter the next world and return again.”<sup>45</sup> This fact would be part of the reason that Sir Owain entered the gates of the afterlife, through the church built by St. Patrick. There are also several different allusions to St. Patrick during the course of the text, which would only serve to increase the perceived authenticity of the text. One such example is the staff and book Sir Owain receives in his vision.

And gaf him a bok that nas nought lite:  
Ther nis no clerk that swiche can write,

[...]  
And Godes Staf, ich understand,  
Men clepeth that staf in Yrlond

(49-59)

*And gave him a book that was not little:  
There is no learned man that such can write,*

[...]  
*And God's Staff, I understand,  
Men call that staff in Ireland*

According to Foster, “It is tempting to see the book as the ninth-century Book of Armagh, often taken to be a relic of St. Patrick”.<sup>46</sup> Though it is doubtful it is this book, it does cast certain allusions to it. The staff is a clearer example of an attempt to tie the legends of St. Patrick to Sir Owain, as the staff most likely is tied directly to St. Patrick in several of his stories.<sup>47</sup> Through tying *Sir Owain* closer to the old legends of Ireland, it might have contributed to making the readers identify with the story in the text.

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<sup>45</sup> Foster, *Three Purgatory Poems*, 109.

<sup>46</sup> Foster, *Three Purgatory Poems*, 164.

<sup>47</sup> Foster, *Three Purgatory Poems*, 164.

In *The Gast of Gy* the protagonist imparts an understanding of the afterlife that bears resemblances to both of the previous versions. The notion of purgatory in this text is a wholly different affair. It does contain a physical purgatory and hell.

And said: "Thare er Purgatoryes sere:     *And said: "There are several Purgatories:*  
Ane es comon to mare and les,             *One is common to all,*  
And departabill aneother es."             *And another is set apart for an individual."*

(536-538)

How purgatory functions in *The Gast of Gy*, is interesting, especially considering how the text chooses to explain it to the reader. By using discussion between the prior and Gy himself, the text chooses to rely on logical discussion to convey its message to the reader. Through the discussions between the prior and Gy (535-585), we learn that Gy is in fact in a dual purgatory. One is "common to mare and les" (537) ("common to all") which indicates that it is similar to that of the purgatories portrayed in *The Vision of Tundale* and *Sir Owain*. The second purgatory is "departabill", which according to the MED translates into "purgatory set apart for an individual".<sup>48</sup> This problematized the notion of purgatory for the prior however, as he argued the indivisibility of the soul.

A saule may nocht in a tyme ga     *A soul may not at one time go*  
To be ponyst in places twa;         *To be punished in two places;*  
For, whils he sall be in the tane,     *For, while he shal be in the one,*  
Of the tother he may have nane,     *Of the other he may have none*

(541-544)

The prior saw it as impossible that the soul should be able to inhabit two purgatories at the same time. Gy on the other hand answers the prior that it is possible due to the nature of souls.

The saule es gastly, and forthi     *The soul is a spirit and therefore*  
It occupys na stede bodily.         *It occupys no place physically.*

(575-576)

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<sup>48</sup> MED, "Departabil", Adj., 1.C. <http://tinyurl.com/gnljy3g>.

Not only does this dual purgatory ensure a wholly different understanding of the nature of purgatory, but it also comments on the fact that his soul is in a spiritual form. This fact is supported by the fact that Gy returns to haunt his old chambers, the text uses this room as his individual purgatory. According to Jean-Claude Schmitt during this period with its belief in the supernatural “a “belief in ghosts” was accepted by all”.<sup>49</sup> It was not commonplace to see one, and one would not expect to see one at every turn. The duality of purgatory as explained through *The Gast of Gy* would be helpful in explaining the existence of ghosts, as they may be souls inhabiting their personal purgatorial state.

Authenticity and authority makes it possible to not only explore liminal phases, but also actually affect the explored liminal phase. Through the authority and the believability of the texts, and the faith held by the implied readers, the texts could enable the animation of the afterlife. By using or reusing themes established through generations, they tied the new division of the afterlife to a common understanding. The use and combination of the theories of Freud and Turner, enable the exploration of the imaginings of the afterlife. The mixing of reality and imagination opens up for the possibility to explore liminal spaces, but to actually influence the inception of the newly canonized version of the afterlife demands something more. The same principles are in play when we are talking about creating the new liminal space of purgatory. By creating an authentic text, which needs to appear as a genuine text, and the correct mixing of reality and imagination, literature can produce not only a new understanding, but a new world.

The undead are situated in a unique halfway point in between living and dead. Similar to Charon, who ferried the deceased across the river Styx from the land of the living to the beyond, these undead have the ability to serve as ferrymen. They do not serve as ferrymen of

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<sup>49</sup> Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3.

souls, but of information and knowledge from the beyond. They serve the express role of animating life into dead concepts, through the temporary or permanent loss of their own lives. I have throughout this chapter argued that death is the nexus between imagination and reality, and through death, one can express imagination as reality.

I made the point that literature also inhabits a liminal state worthy of being referred to as an undead state. Through the reading the reader animates the dead world within it, and the dead world within is brought to life temporarily within the scope of the reader's mind. The possibility made by the liminal state occupied by literature made it possible to witness the afterlife through the use of imagination. Literature is then also serving as a ferryman of information, containing knowledge and impressions within the latent and dead worlds the reader reanimates as he reads it.

The fact that these texts presented themselves as authentic accounts of the afterlife through various literary tools creates the possibility of belief in the portrayed afterlife. They enabled the conversion of the protagonists from sinful beings, to pure men worthy of entering into heaven, as opposed to hell. The liminal phase they occupy enabled them to convert themselves, but it also served other functions beyond the subject of the liminal phase. One such function was to influence the society which surrounds them. The influencing the society at large would be based on retelling the observations the protagonists made of the afterlife. The concept of conversion and change will be a vital part of the coming chapters, where conversion of the self, and of others will be even more in focus.

Similar to this chapter, the liminal phases in the coming chapters enable the discovery of and the preaching of lessons stemming from death. The preaching and spreading of knowledge was, as stated previously in the chapter, one of the most important action learned men could do. The spreading of this knowledge is facilitated well by the writing of literature.

Texts enabled the construction and dissemination of worlds that expand upon the understanding of the observable world by bringing the unobservable to life.

## Chapter 2

### The Possibility for Change in the Liminal Phase

Up until this point I have mainly dealt with purgatory visions, where the protagonists either appear to be dead or they inhabit a state where they are considered to be dead. In this chapter however, I will shift the focus from the religious aspect of purgatory to the more supernatural facet inherent within the medieval society. Magic is closely intertwined with the supernatural and is a prevalent theme in the Arthurian romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Magic and the supernatural will therefore also fall under the scope of this thesis. The old Arthurian romances were hugely popular during the Middle Ages. The popularity is pointed out by Ad Putter, who writes that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* “belongs to the genre of Arthurian romance, which, by the time Gawain was composed (c. 1390), was the most popular literature of entertainment for the higher strata of society”.<sup>50</sup> The extent of the popularity led to romances being present in many facets of society, from icons in art and music to carvings in churches. The fact that it was such a well-known genre, many were familiar with the characters and they most likely had certain preconceptions about the text. The concepts of death and liminality are present in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and are therefore directly applicable to this thesis. My intent is therefore not only to study the liminal phases present, but what effect those liminal phases have on the characters in the text.

Similar to the purgatory visions in Chapter 1 the liminal phase in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* enables the opportunity for change within the subject of the liminal phase. The change occurring within this text is more personal than that of the purgatory visions however. The purpose behind the liminal phase was not to influence change and subsequent conversion of others as seen in *The Gast of Gy* for instance. The implementation of the liminal phase

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<sup>50</sup> Ad Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain-Poet* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman Inc., 1996), 38.



occurring in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is different from both the purgatory visions and the liminal phases occurring in Chapter 3. Magic is getting a more prevalent role than in the other texts, and magic in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* challenges the absolute power of divinity. During the course of this chapter, I wish to highlight that the change and conversion occurring in the subject of the liminal phase is not always for the better. The liminal phase opens up for a process of self-discovery, a process that does not hide or sugarcoat one's true nature. This process of self-discovery leads to an opportunity for change and conversion for the subject inhabiting the liminal phase. What does the liminal phase within this text say about the nature of death, and of the possibilities which are created when one is intimate with the concept of death? I will first give an introduction to the text itself before going more in depth of the consequences of the liminal phase present in this text.

The story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* revolves around the protagonist Sir Gawain. Sir Gawain is a knight of the court of Arthur, and the text introduces the characters during the court's New Year's Eve celebration. During the festivities, a knight clad only in green enters the hall and challenges the knights to a game.

<p>þer hales in at þe halle dor an aghlich mayster,  on þe most in þe molde on mesure hygh,  [...]  half etayn in erde I hope þat he were,<sup>51</sup>  (136-140)</p>	<p><i>There hurtles in at the hall door an unknown rider  One the greatest on ground in growth of his frame  [...]  Half a giant on earth I hold him to be,</i></p>
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The description of the knight seems almost otherworldly, and the spectacle shocks the present company into silence. The game proposed by the knight was out of the ordinary as well.

<p>Forþy I craue in þis court a Crystemas gomen,  [...]  þat dar stifly strike a strok for anoþer,  I schal gif hym of my gyft þys giserne ryche,  þis ax þat is heue innogh to hondel as hym lykes,  and I schal bide þe fyrst bur as bare as I sitte.</p>	<p><i>And so I call in this court for a Christmas game,  [...]  As stoutly to strike one stroke for another,  I shall give him as my gift this gisarme noble,  This ax, that is heavy enough, to handle as he likes,  And I shall bide the first blow, as bare as I sit.</i></p>
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<sup>51</sup> Malcom Andrew and Ronald Waldron, ed., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), 212-213. All subsequent quotes from this book within this chapter will be marked with line numbers in the quote. All translations are by the translated version of the text, with corresponding line numbers: Marie Borroff, Trans., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in *The Gawain Poet Complete Works* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 204.

(283-290)

The Green Knight is quite clear that this is not a normal challenge. He taunts the group, and states that because of his strength and the weakness of the knights present in the hall, it would be an impossibility for him to lose. Because of the manner of his arrival and otherworldly nature, the knights were slow to pick up the proverbial gauntlet. The king accepts the challenge set by the knight, but Sir Gawain interjects and begs to take the challenge himself. In his one blow, Sir Gawain cleaves the neck of the knight, beheading him. In this gruesome scene, the Green Knight's head falls on the floor, blood spurting from the still standing body:

þe fayre hede fro þe halce hit to þe erþe  
þat fele hit foyned wyth her fete þere hit forth roled.  
þe blod brayd fro þe body þat blykked on þe grene,  
(427-429)

*The head fell to the floor as the ax hewed it off;  
Many found it at their feet, as forth it rolled;  
The blood gushed from the body, bright on the green,*

Even though his head is completely removed from the body, and is rolling among the guest's feet, Sir Gawain fails to kill the Green Knight. The Green Knight walks across the room towards his head, and picks it back up. While he is holding the head he mounts his steed, and reminds Sir Gawain that he must receive a return blow a year later at the Green Chapel, before riding out of the hall still grasping his head.

After a succinct succession of the seasons, Sir Gawain sets out on All Saints Day in search of the Green Knight. He faces a lot of adversity and hardships on his journey, and on Christmas day, he happens upon a castle. He is greeted well by the lord of the castle, and he remains there for a while. The lord of the castle, whose name is Bertilak, strikes a bargain with Sir Gawain. The host will go out hunting, and exchange the kills for anything Gawain manages to get during his stay that day in the castle. The days Bertilak is out hunting, his wife attempts to seduce Sir Gawain. The first day he receives a kiss from her, and Gawain in turn gives Bertilak a kiss in exchange for the catch of the day. This continues over the next two days, with an increasing number of kisses. The last day, Gawain receives three kisses and a green girdle. The girdle is no ordinary girdle however, as the wife told him it was magical and would protect him from all physical harm. That night, Sir Gawain gave his host the three

kisses, but deceives Bertilak and keeps the green girdle for himself. Gawain leaves the next day in search of the Green Chapel, and finds the cavern quickly. Sir Gawain keeps his word, and offers his bare neck to the Green Knight. The knight proceeds to feign his blows twice, because Sir Gawain flinches each time he bears the axe down before drawing blood on the third strike. This mere scratch would be all the Green Knight required of Sir Gawain, and even that would not have been necessary, if Gawain had given the host of the castle the girdle he received. As it turns out Bertilak was none other than the Green Knight, whose appearance had been enchanted by the witch Morgan le Fay.

Compared to the purgatory visions I dealt with in chapter 1 of this thesis, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is markedly different. Whereas the other texts explore a newly canonized afterlife, this text binds itself more firmly in the land of the living. It is not concerned with the notion and definition of the afterlife, other than being an ultimate consequence to the unfolding events in the text. Death and the process of dying, on the other hand, are major themes in the text. These themes not only challenge the beliefs of the characters, but they create a tension in the text. By shifting the focus from the aggregation stage of dying, to the process itself, the text becomes a commentary on the process of dying and of imperfect human nature. Even though I stated that death is a prevalent theme in the text, death itself never actually occurs in the text. The process of expected death, and that the process of dying is stretched to cover the span of a year. The process of dying will therefore be explored during the course of this chapter. By studying the process of dying and how the protagonist, Sir Gawain, deals with this process, it is possible to gain insight into what humanity can learn from going through such a process. The commentary on the process itself sets it apart from the didactic nature of the purgatory visions. I will delve into this statement later in this chapter, when I explore the process Sir Gawain goes through.

As one reads the beheading scene in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, one would

expect the Green Knight to occupy a liminal phase. As his head is separated from his body, it is only natural to assume he is to die instantly. He does not however occupy a liminal phase like the protagonists in the purgatory poems. In fact the magic employed by Morgan le Fay serves to hinder him in starting the process of dying at all. There is however a more subtle liminal phase in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

By failing to kill the Green Knight, Sir Gawain triggers his move from a permanent state to a liminal one. Even though he succeeded in decapitating the knight, his attempt at killing the Green knight still ultimately failed, and this failure would eventually lead to what he believed to be certain death. The crux of this understanding is based on the contract he entered into when he accepted the terms of the game. Before he failed in his task, Sir Gawain had agreed to certain stipulations regarding the contest. Stipulations that dictated the core rules for the game:

and ȝet gif hym respite  
a twelmonyth and a day.

(297-298)

*He shall have of me the same  
In a twelvemonth and a day.*

The agreement was that Sir Gawain had to receive a blow in return a year and a day later, and the fact that the Green Knight had used magic does not seem to negate the oath given by Sir Gawain. The oath Sir Gawain made is an ironclad contract because of his nature, not as a man, but his nature as a knight.

Since he was a knight, he was honor bound to uphold the agreement he made with the Green Knight. The need Sir Gawain feels to uphold his agreement is something the other knights comment on:

and so had better haf ben þen britned to noȝt,  
hadet wyth an aluisch mon for angardeȝ pryde!”  
“Who knew euer any kyng such counsel to take  
as knyȝteȝ in cauelacionȝ on Crystmasse gomneȝ?”  
(680-683)

*And better so to have been than battered to bits,  
Beheaded by an elf man, for empty pride!  
Who would credit that a king could be counseled so,  
And caught in a cavil in a Christmas game?”*

They anguish at the thought of losing Sir Gawain, and they feel it would have been better if Gawain had managed to destroy the Green Knight. As one can see, the use of the words

“angardeȝ pryde” (681) to explain the reason for his beheading. The phrase “angardeȝ pryde” is according to the Middle English dictionary translated into “arrogant, proud”.<sup>52</sup> The fulfillment of the game, leading to Sir Gawain’s execution is according to the court caused by nothing more than arrogant pride. The word “cauelacionȝ” is according to Boroff translated to “trivial argument”<sup>53</sup> though there is an alternate way of reading it. I on the other hand would attribute the meaning of the word “cauelacionȝ”(683) to fraudulent, as according to the MED it translates into “fraud”.<sup>54</sup> This reading changes the reason why the other knights are incredulous of his arrogant pride. The court does then not consider it to be a frivolous game, rather a fraudulent game, which negates the need to keep his word. The criticism of the game, or at least the outcome of it, becomes a criticism of the chivalric spirit and ideals, where concepts such as pride and honor were highly regarded attributes within every knight.

I argue that Sir Gawain can be seen as inhabiting a position in between life and death for the year leading up to his expected beheading. To reiterate the point made by Diana W. Pasulka, liminality serves as “[...] a threshold between two ostensibly stable conditions”.<sup>55</sup> To be considered being in a liminal phase, the subject needs to move from a stable state into an ambiguous phase, before moving on to another stable state. This is also why the Green Knight does not enter into a liminal phase, as he does not start the process of death. Evidence of him not doing so can be seen in the beheading game itself. Right after his head was separated from his body:

and nawȝer faltered ne fel ȝe freke neuer ȝe helder,    *Yet fell not the fellow, nor faltered a whit*  
 bot styȝly he start forth vpon styf schonkes            *But stoutly he starts forth upon stiff shanks,*  
 (430-431)

He neither “faltered” nor “fel” (fell), and continued standing “styȝly” (stoutly) even though he should have been killed. The fact that he remains unfazed by his head rolling on the floor

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<sup>52</sup> MED, “Angard”, Adj., 1.b (“angardes pride”)., <http://tinyurl.com/hecorm9>

<sup>53</sup> Boroff, *The Gawain Poet Complete Works*, 217.

<sup>54</sup> MED, “cavillāciōun”, N., 1a. <http://tinyurl.com/jt9qhpX>

<sup>55</sup> Pasulka, *Heaven Can Wait*, 20.

would indicate that the process of dying is suspended from starting in the first place. The magic supplied by Morgan le Fay not only makes it impossible to kill the Green Knight, but to harm him physically as well. He therefore undoubtedly inhabits a stable state, which at its very core negates the concept of a liminal phase.

Secondly, it is necessary for the subject of the liminal phase to go through some sort of change during the liminal phase, a change that might be physical, spiritual or both. It is possible to see the change in *The Vision of Tundale*, where Tundale's sinful soul is cleansed during his stay in the liminal phase of purgatory. It can also be seen in the physical change in *The Gast of Gy*, where Gy returns the mortal realm not with his corporeal body, but as a spirit. This change which might lead to a subsequent spiritual conversion is imperative for the continued discussion in this chapter. Sir Gawain goes through these changes, but the Green Knight is magically unchanging, which also eliminates the possibility that this is a liminal phase. The third condition is more dependent on the social circles that surround the subject, although it can happen at the subject's behest as well.

The removal of the subject from society and subsequent removal from the ranks of the living is a process that is of significance for the subject and witnesses of the liminal phase. I explain this removal in the introductory chapter more fully, but I find it helpful to reiterate what Turner states, as the change inherent to a subject is important to the chapter:

The first phase of separation comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions (a "state"); during the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject (the "passenger") is ambiguous; he passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state, in the third phase the passage is consummated.<sup>56</sup>

This removal from society is an important aspect for Sir Gawain, in his belief of impending death. It also affects the witnesses, which is more clearly exemplified in Chapter 3, where I

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<sup>56</sup> Turner, "Betwixt and Between," 510.

will go through *The Prioress's Tale* and *The Second Nun's Tale*. The Green Knight does not go through this removal from society or world as he is already set apart from normal mortal men. He stands wholly alone as an invulnerable man defying the very mortality that is part of what defines humanity and our perception of life. I will go into more detail on these three facets that signify the entry into or inhabitation of a liminal phase later in this chapter. This entry into the liminal phase in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is different from the other texts in this thesis.

Sir Gawain becomes his own proverbial executioner, who enables and is to blame for his admission into the liminal phase of dying. The liminal phase Sir Gawain experiences is not the result of the intervention of an all-powerful figure which is what happens in most of the other texts covered in this thesis. The liminal phase the protagonists enter into is the result of divinity intervening in the natural order of life and death. One critic who supports this understanding is Victoria L. Weiss, who calls the beheading scene into question. Though it is natural to conclude that the beheading scene is part of the tradition of the “beheading game”, which was part of the literary convention of the time, Weiss argues against the assumption of the beheading game. She looks at the motivation for Sir Gawain’s response to the proposal made by the Green Knight, as Sir Gawain as a character would be unaware of the tradition of beheading games in romance literature. Weiss therefore writes that: “A number of critics tend to read the Green Knight's challenge for someone to exchange blows with him as if he were asking someone to chop his head off in exchange for the privilege of doing the same”.<sup>57</sup> Thereby critics often fail to see the consequences of the placement of blow Sir Gawain makes, as they operate with the assumption that the Green Knight proposes a “beheading game”. Weiss thereby makes several assumptions about both the Green Knight and Sir Gawain.

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<sup>57</sup> Victoria L. Weiss, “Gawain's First Failure: The Beheading Scene in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight",” *The Chaucer Review* 10:4 (1976): 1.

One of the assumptions made by Weiss is that a beheading was not the automatic response to the challenge the Green Knight put forth to the knights attending the New Year's party, as she disregards the whole tradition of beheading games. If one is to entertain this assumption, it becomes necessary to study a small excerpt of his challenge:

be so bolde in his blod, brayn in hys hede,	<i>Be so bold in his blood, his brain so wild,</i>
þat dar stifly strike a strok for anoþer,	<i>As stoutly to strike one stroke for another,</i>
I schal gif hym of my gyft þys giserne ryche,	<i>I shall give him as my gift this gisarme noble,</i>
þis ax þat is heue innogh to hondel as hym lykes,	<i>This ax, that is heavy enough, to handle as he likes,</i>

(286-289)

The challenge consists of exchanging “a strok” (a stroke) with the knight as one can see in line 287. This exchange of blows is also something that would also happen during the course of a normal non-lethal tournament duel. If read in such a light Sir Gawain becomes his own executioner, because of his failure to see the implications of the action he is about to perform. I earlier mentioned Sir Gawain's failure to kill the Green Knight led to Gawain's own entry into the liminal phase. This fact still holds true, though it is possible to view his decision to hew off the Green Knight's head as his first failure. This is a stance Weiss defends; Gawain “fails to see that he can fulfill the terms of the challenge and still spare lives”.<sup>58</sup> Weiss then supposes that Sir Gawain can save himself from his own fate, by not beheading the knight, and merely nicking the neck, in the same fashion as the Green Knight would proceed to do to Sir Gawain in the Green Chapel.

Further support for this type of reading is supplied by the critic Helen Cooper. She also claims that “The *Gawain*-poet repeatedly shows the protagonists of his poems getting things wrong, having to be trained to read the world they inhabit, and in that process, the central character also serves as a surrogate for the reader of the poem”.<sup>59</sup> What Cooper states

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<sup>58</sup> Weiss, “Gawain's First Failure,” 364.

<sup>59</sup> Helen Cooper, “The Supernatural”, in *A Companion to the Gawain Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2007), 278-279.



serves to back up the statements of Weiss, that the protagonist fails to see things as they are, and thereby takes the wrong course of action. One of the clearest instances of this according to Weiss is “As Gawain moves forward to accept the challenge for Arthur, he has already impulsively associated the rendering of the blow with death”.<sup>60</sup> I find her understanding of the lines to be a stretch and too much of bleak reading of the lines:

And lest lur of my lyf, quo laytes þe soþe	And my life is worth the least if we view it thruthfully
Bot for as much as gear myn em I am only to prayse	I am only praiseworthy in that you are my uncle
No bounté but your blod I in my bode knowe	My only honor is that your blood is carried in my body

(355-357)

One can see that Sir Gawain believes there to be a risk of death, as he mentions that: “And lest lur of my lyf” (355) (And my life is worth the least), which would indicate he is aware of the possibility of death. This risk of death is present in many of these tournaments that tests the valor of knights.

While it is true that the knight does not state it outright to be a “beheading game”, there are no guarantees that the Green Knight would spare Sir Gawain based on his actions or on his placement of the blow. I find however, that the Green Knight creates a scenario where Sir Gawain would unavoidably enter into a liminal phase regardless of the actions of Sir Gawain. Sir Gawain’s entry into the liminal space is based on his firm belief and expectation of his own impending death. Weiss states that the Green Knight taunts Sir Gawain into the beheading:

After these devilish taunts, the Green Knight temptingly stretches out his neck for the blow, an action which the poet describes in great detail. But this action by the Green Knight only foreshadows that of the final episode in which the Green Knight demonstrates that a “strok,” even to the neck, need not result in a beheading.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Weiss, “Gawain's First Failure,” 363.

<sup>61</sup> Weiss, “Gawain's First Failure,” 364-365

I do not share this view however. For my theory it does not matter if The Green Knight goaded Sir Gawain into the decapitating stroke, or if he could have hit him in a less lethal manner. By the stance of the knight, and the weapon he offered to Sir Gawain, he would most likely believe that a beheading would be expected, and by consequence return blow would result in a beheading blow. The description of the moments preceding the beheading in the text is very revealing, and it creates an unmistakable expectation, as the Green Knight bares the nape of his neck:

The grene knyzt vpon grounde grayþely hym dresses; a littel lut with þe hede, þe lere he discouereȝ.	<i>The Green Knight upon ground girds him with care; Bows a bit with his head, and bares his flesh;</i>
His longe louelych lokkeȝ he layd ouer his croun, let þe naked nec to þe note schewe.	<i>His lovely locks he laid over his crown, Let the naked nape for the need to be shown.</i>

(417-420)

The Green Knight bows his head a little, “a littel lut”, removes his “longe louelych lokkeȝ” (i.e. his hair), and bares his “naked nec” (naked neck). By taking this stance, the Green Knight creates strong associations about the expected placement of the stroke. He also implies the necessity of a beheading when he offers the use of his axe, as an axe is not normally considered a dueling weapon. They were considered instruments meant for hewing things in half, not cutting or stabbing. Because of these actions, the Green Knight manages to create the assumption of a beheading. If Sir Gawain would have spared him, he would be sure that the return stroke would necessitate him assuming the same stance, and thus expecting to be beheaded. The assumption made by Sir Gawain based on the gestures by the Green Knight led him to expect a return blow resulting in a more permanent and decidedly more serious beheading.

Both the other knights and Sir Gawain himself expected that he would be beheaded in return. No one believed the beheading would have the same result for Sir Gawain as the Green Knight had, something that is clearly seen by the reactions and ministrations of the

people surrounding him.

Wel much watȝ þe warme water þat waltered of yȝen  
when þat semly syre soȝt fro þo woneȝ  
þat daye.

(684-686)

*Many were the warm tears they wept from their eyes  
When goodly Sir Gawain was gone from the court  
That day.*

Sir Gawain and the others are absolutely certain of his impending death, and it is through this certainty I say that it is possible for Sir Gawain to inhabit a liminal phase. I previously mentioned three criteria for why the Green Knight does not inhabit a liminal phase and why they are relevant to Sir Gawain. I will therefore go into further detail to how they pertain to Sir Gawain.

The first point I made was that it was necessary for the subject to start the process of dying. Some might argue against the fact that Sir Gawain is occupying the liminal space of dying, as he is still alive for a year past his failure in the unfortunate Christmas-game. I however posit that one should not view these processes in such a black and white manner. Being alive remains just one aspect of his process during the course of the year. The previously stable condition of life is no longer stable for Sir Gawain. The year before his expected death is much more than a waiting period for him. The year becomes the threshold between the two stable conditions of life and death, making him inhabit a state between being alive and dead, thus enabling it to be considered a state of undead.

It is also very clear that his detachment from life is imminent, which starts a process of his removal from his social sphere. Similar to the burial of Gy, and the ceremonial fasting of Sir Owain, Sir Gawain does receive a ceremonial “bon voyage” before leaving his established social sphere and setting out to ultimately be beheaded by the Green Knight. The text does go into detail of the celebration and sorrow courtiers all felt at Sir Gawain’s impending death.

and he made a fare on þat fest for þe frekeȝ sake,  
[...]  
Al for luf of þat lede in longynge þay were,  
bot neuer þe lece ne þe later þay neuened bot merþe.  
(537-541)

*And he held a high feast to honor that knight  
[...]  
With sorrow for Sir Gawain were sore at heart  
Yet they covered their care with countenance glad*

The “fest” held in honor of Sir Gawain could be read as a ceremonial aspect of his impending

death. The critic Derek Brewer illustrates the link between feasts and their larger implications, as “they involve the most immediate necessities, food, drink, and society, but for that very reason are highly symbolic, carrying a great charge of religious, social, personal, political, psychological implications”.<sup>62</sup> Sir Gawain’s departure from the court of Camelot is seen as a permanent departure, which is exemplified by the people attending and by the implications of the feast they held for him.

As stated previously, to inhabit a liminal state implies a change in the subject as it is a process from a permanent to a temporary state. Therefore, it does become necessary to find the changes occurring within the protagonist during the course of the text. I will split these changes into changes to his nature or personality, and that of his beliefs. I do this because of the fact that his actions do not always conform with his beliefs. I will explore the changes occurring within Sir Gawain, and thereby ascertaining what those changes tell us of the process of dying. What exactly is the catalyst for this supposed change?

To understand what changes Sir Gawain goes through, it is essential to know how Sir Gawain himself and others defined him before the events of the beheading game took place. If we do not know the starting point, we will not know the implications of Gawain’s actions, as we do not know the motivation for him doing what he does in the text. The nature of Sir Gawain is described very clearly in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

for ay faythful in fyue and sere fyue syþe3	<i>For ever faithful fivefold in fivefold fashion</i>
Gawan wat3 for gode knawen, and as golde pured	<i>Was Gawain in good works, as gold unalloyed,</i>
voyded of vche vylany, wyth vertue3 ennoured	<i>Devoid of all villainy, with virtues adorned</i>
in mote.	<i>in sight.</i>
(632-635)	

His worth and nature as a knight, is clearly described, as he was “for gode knawen” (in good

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<sup>62</sup> Derek Brewer, “Feasts”, *A Companion to the Gawain Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2007), 131.

works), and was “as golde pured” (as pure as gold). He was highly regarded for his virtues, as they were “adorned in sight”. Does this automatically mean he was as virtuous as he is made out to be?

The poet has created a knightly persona for Sir Gawain, and he attempts to quell human emotions and the frailties of humanity. The importance of the knightly ideals are described clearly by Richard Hamilton Green, who states that “The chivalric ideal, however modified and tarnished by practice and human imperfection, was the imitation of Christ, the effort to realize in the individual and in society the perfection to which human nature aided by grace could aspire”.<sup>63</sup> Sir Gawain was bound to follow these ideals because he identified himself as a knight, thereby living a fabricated knightly persona devoid of the faults and imperfections of humanity. Because of Sir Gawain’s wish and drive to live the constructed identity of a knight Sir Gawain would die a year later. The persona created for him comply with the way he is described, and it does imply he is the knightly aspiration incarnate.

The persona as a perfect knight is a view that is shared by critic Richard H. Green as he talks about the five fives: “Gawain was endowed with all the five fives in the perfect unity of the endless figure by which they were represented - a wholly virtuous knight, the best that his society had to offer”.<sup>64</sup> The description of his knightly nature, as retold by the narrator paints a fair picture of Sir Gawain:

wat3 Fraunchyse and Fela3schyp forbe al þyng,  
his Clannes and his Cortaysye croked were neuer,  
and Pite þat passe3 alle poynte3—þyse pure fyue  
were harder happed on þat habel þen on any oþer.  
(652-655)

*Were benefice boundless and brotherly love  
And pure mind and manners, that none might impeach,  
and compassion most precious – these peerless five  
Were forged and made fast in him, foremost of men.*

It is through the description of his nobility made by the omnipotent narrator, one gets the impression that he is viewed as the exemplar of morality and the knightly ideals. Perhaps the most interesting word to take a closer look at is the word “Pite” (654). It can according to the

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<sup>63</sup> Richard Hamilton Green. “Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection,” *ELH* 29:2 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962): 122.

<sup>64</sup> Green, “Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection,” 128.

MED be understood to be “the quality of being merciful”<sup>65</sup>, i.e. pity, which fits with the criticism levied at his choice to behead the knight. It is important to point out however, that this reading could also be something completely different. “Pite” (654), could mean to have a “reverent and devout obedience to God”<sup>66</sup> i.e. piety. This devotion to God is something that changes the nature of the excerpt. It is not only his compassion that is among the peerless five he inhabits, but his faith as well. Through employing the description of Sir Gawain as the basis for further comparison, it becomes possible to ascertain whether or not he has gone through some changes by the end of the text. As his faith is part of his peerless fives it becomes essential to understand if there are changes not only to him as a person, but if there are changes to his faith and by extension his belief system.

One of the more important aspects of change for this thesis is then whether there are changes in Sir Gawain’s belief system or not. Even though physical changes and changes in status within a societal group are important for our understanding of liminal spaces, the change within his beliefs is directly tied to the discord between religion and the more secular magic in the text. Similar to his change in knightly nature, his belief in Christianity and the Virgin Mary is apparent in the text, similar to her role in *The Prioress’s Tale*. This belief is exemplified through the shield he carries:

þat þe hende Heuen-queene had of hir Chylde.  
 At þis cause þe knyzt comlyche hade  
 in þe inore half of his schelde hir ymage depaynted  
 (647-649)

*That the high Queen of heaven had in her child.  
 And therefore, as I find, he fittingly had  
 On the inner part of his shield her image portrayed,*

The fact that her visage is on the inside of his shield to grant him comfort and support indicates that he is a firm believer in the Christian faith and of the tenets of the holy church. It was so expected of him to be a firm believer in the Virgin Mary, that the word “comlyche” (648) is used in describing the fact that his shield was adorned with the Virgin Mother. It can be understood is that the translation is “fitting”, as it was proper and expected of him hold her

<sup>65</sup> MED, “pitē”, N., 1., <http://tinyurl.com/hnwa52k>

<sup>66</sup> MED, “pitē”, N., 4., <http://tinyurl.com/hnwa52k>

so dear. He is also tied to his belief system through his body, his five senses and fingers:

Fyrst he watȝ funden faultleȝ in his fyue wytteȝ; and efte fayled neuer þe freke in his fyue fyngres; and alle his afyaunce vpon folde watȝ in þe Fyue Woundeȝ þat Cryst kaȝt on þe croys, as þe Crede telleȝ; (640-643)	<i>And first, he was faultless in his five senses. Nor found ever to fail in his five fingers, And all his fealty was fixed upon the five wounds That Christ got on the cross, as the Creed tells;</i>
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He has never faltered in his belief in Christianity, and does not doubt the “Crede” (statement of belief) of the holy church. I would posit however, that his beliefs and expectations of his own nobility is challenged throughout the text, starting from the moment he cut off the head of the Green Knight.

From that moment his expected reality, or belief in a set of rules governing life and death failed him. Even though death is something a knight is used to face on the battlefield, the fact that his belief system is changing becomes clearer the more he approaches what he believes to be his moment of death. The reality is different on the battlefield as well, as the chances of survival is dependent on the abilities of the fighter, and to a certain degree luck. As the outcome of the stroke becomes clear, the outcome of the entire game suddenly became certain for Sir Gawain. He does not yet have the possibility of employing magic to save his life. He does however, have his faith to rely upon, a faith that he does not expect to save him physically but spiritually after his head is separated from his shoulders. The possibility of a miracle fits with his belief system, but apparently Sir Gawain and the other knights do not believe that to happen in this case. Magic would therefore become a more potent force in the world for him. The proof of its existence is clear to him because he just witnessed it himself, as opposed to the faith needed to believe in the tenets of his religion. The Virgin Mary and his five tenets are what supposedly gives Sir Gawain his strength as a knight, something that suddenly has had its absolute power challenged right before his eyes when death failed to work as he cut off the head of the Green Knight.

The doubt in God and the possibility of a miracle can be seen from what the other knights are saying as Gawain is leaving to seek out the Green Knight:

carande for þat comly, “Bi Kryst hit is scape  
 þat þou, leude, schal be lost þat art of lyf noble!”  
 [...]
 hadet wyth an aluisch mon for angarde3 pryde!”  
 (674-681)

*Fearing for their fellow, “Ill fortune it is  
 That you, man, must be lost, that are most worthy!  
 [...]
 Beheaded by an elf man, for empty pride!*

As he leaves, they lament the loss of such a worthy man, as they do not doubt that Sir Gawain is to be “hadet” (beheaded). It is not only the doubt in god saving Sir Gawain that makes this passage interesting. The word “lost” (675) is also an important word, as it is very open to interpretation and it can serve as a premonition of what is to come.

The open nature of the word “lost” (675) enables various interpretations of the passage. One of the more obvious interpretations of the word “lost” is that he will be lost to the present company through his death. It could also mean that he will be lost from the path he is walking, led astray by the magical nature of the Green Knight and by extension the Devil. By keeping the girdle for his own he loses his righteous virtue. By flinching before the axe hits him, something that is reminiscent of denying Christ, he shows his fear of dying. He is however supposed to be placated with the knowledge that he will enter heaven after death. Though this is not something he has witnessed, as opposed to the effect of magic, and must therefore take on faith.

The Virgin Mary no longer is his primary strength and source of comfort in his moment of need. Previously he found his strength in his five tenets, but in the face of certain death, neither the virgin mother or his previous tenets seem to suffice. Although he has accepted the fact that he is going to die, and is going towards it, he grasps for the glimmer of hope when it is offered to him. Evidence of this can be seen in his musings after the lady offers him the girdle, and explains its magical properties:

þen kest þe kny3t, and hit come to his hert,  
 Hit were a juel for þe jopardé, þat hym jugged were:  
 When he acheued to þe chapel his chek for to fech,  
 My3t he haf slypped to be vnslayn þe sle3t were noble.  
 (1850-1854)

*Then the man began to muse, and mainly he thought  
 It was a jewel for his plight, the peril to come  
 When he gains the Green Chapel to get his reward:  
 Could he escape unscathed, the scheme were noble.*

The word “juel” is according to the Middle-English dictionary “Something valued for



religious, magical, or human reasons”<sup>67</sup>. The magical properties of the girdle have an alluring quality to it, and it was through a deliberate thought process he accepts the girdle. To help him survive his ordeal, he fails to hand over the girdle at the end of the day. Through breaking his word, he hopes he is able to use magic to save his own life.<sup>68</sup> He does not forsake his religious belief entirely however, but magic has proved its existence for him, in a way that neither Christ nor the Virgin Mary has. His faith is still seen as he goes to confession after he receives the girdle, “And called on his confessor to cleanse his soul,” (245). He is under no impression that God will help him survive his meeting with the green Knight; in fact, God might be the power directing him towards his final fate:

bot I am boun to þe bur barely tomorne,  
 to sech þe gome of þe grene as God wyl me wysse.” *From the grim man in green, as God may direct.*”  
 (548-549)

It is expected that God will “wysse” (direct/guide) him towards his fate, and his meeting with the Green Knight. Even though miracles are part of the belief system, neither Sir Gawain or the other knights expects that God will intercede and save him from the magical man, who seems to almost be an unopposable magical force. He therefore places his faith in the magical nature of the girdle, and by doing so he tarnishes the very order of knights he is part of. His situation is comparable to that of Christ as he heads towards crucifixion, but as opposed to Christ, Sir Gawain breaks away from the tenets he is supposed to personify.

By keeping the girdle, Sir Gawain not only breaks his word to his host, Bertilak, but also tarnishes his own identity as a knight. Even after the lesson taught by the Green Knight, Sir Gawain continues to wear the green girdle around his arm. Some critics believe that the reason Sir Gawain chooses to wear the girdle on his arm is a sign of contrition at his own failure as a knight. The critics Albert B. Friedman and Richard H. Osberg say that:

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<sup>67</sup> MED, “Jeuel”, N., 2a., <http://tinyurl.com/jjndkgl>

<sup>68</sup> For more on the agreement and the hunts, see: Anne Rooney, “The Hunts in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” in *A Companion to the Gawain Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2007), 157-163.

For though the poet spends forty-three verses (623-665) carefully, almost pedantically, expounding the symbolism of the pentangle, he says nothing explicitly about the symbolism of the girdle. Its symbolic value is simply what Gawain assigns it: a memento of his humiliation at the Green Knight's castle and chapel.<sup>69</sup>

The symbolism is therefore in large part open to interpretation, and the meaning of the green girdle has large repercussions for a deeper understanding of the text. I believe that Sir Gawain's gesture not only is a sign of contrition, but also is a symbol of his changed nature. The powers the girdle represent is a power he has witnessed, and a power he attempted to attain to save his own life.

Similar to his shield, the girdle becomes not just a source of inspiration and strength, but also as a symbol of his nature and newly evolved beliefs. Richard H. Green stresses the importance of the shield: "This shield and its device constitute an iconographical instance of extraordinary importance in the late Middle Ages, unique in its combination of rarity, elaboration, and focal position in the work as a whole".<sup>70</sup> The importance of the shield is highlighted as Green goes on to state the figurative meaning of the shield; as a safeguard against evil forces, and the devil.<sup>71</sup> I want to, similar to Friedman and Osberg, raise the importance of the girdle up to that same level of importance, especially for Gawain on the basis of his experiences.

As stated previously, Sir Gawain goes through changes during the course of the year, changes that are exemplified through him keeping the green girdle. The changes in how he views his own faith and how he now views himself, become part of the man exiting the liminal phase a year later. He can no longer be considered to be the same man that a year prior beheaded a man at a New Year's feast. One of the purposes of the girdle, to save him from physical harm, had the opposite effect. The reason he keeps it can be viewed as an attempt to

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<sup>69</sup> Albert B. Friedman and Richard H. Osberg, "Gawain's Girdle as Traditional Symbol," *The Journal of American Folklore* 90:357 (1977): 302.

<sup>70</sup> Green, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," 126.

<sup>71</sup> Green, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," 126.

create a spiritual defense as important as his shield. In one instance where Sir Gawain mentions why he keeps the girdle, he refers to the girdle as a sign of the frailty of the flesh: “þe faut and þe fayntyse of þe flesche crabbed,” (2435) (The faults and the frailty of the flesh perverse). This is interesting, since it gives an insight into what Sir Gawain believes the frailty of the flesh is. The frailty of the flesh could also be read as “faint-heartedness”<sup>72</sup> or as the flesh being prone “to flinching from danger”<sup>73</sup>. Because of the fact that Sir Gawain flinches during his supposed beheading the girdle would serve as a sign of his own personal failure, rather than a symbol for the general frailty of the flesh. He does go on to say that whenever he is “pryde”(2437) (praised) he will look upon it and “leþe my hert” (2437) (lower my pride). Humility is one of the virtues the church cherishes, and one virtue that is seen most clearly in Christ. Through the girdle he becomes able to more closely emulate the chivalric ideals exemplified by that of Christ. The shield both serves as a physical defense as well as a religious safeguard of his religious beliefs, the girdle then serves to safeguard him against his own imperfect human nature.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* stands in stark contrast to the purgatory visions in chapter one. As opposed to the purgatory visions from chapter one, God is not relied on to save the protagonist from harm, though we can say that one similarity is that it is at God’s behest that they are subjected to their tests. Whereas Sir Owain only has to call out the name of God, and Tundale is saved by his angelic guide, the power of God is downplayed in favor of magic in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The fact that Morgan le Fay had the power to avert the death of Bertilak would imply that magic does have the power to trounce the powers of death. In fact, I would posit that it is possible to imagine that Morgan le Fay inhabits the proverbial role of God in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. According to the text itself,

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<sup>72</sup> MED, “feintise”, N., 2, <http://tinyurl.com/zhrqx8d>

<sup>73</sup> MED, “feintise”, N., 2, <http://tinyurl.com/zhrqx8d>

Morgan le Fay is described to be the true master of the castle of Bertilak, and thereby by extension master of the earthly purgatory.

þe olde auncian wyf heȝest ho sytteȝ;      *The old ancient lady, highest she sits;*  
þe lorde lufly her by lent, as I trowe.      *The lord at her left hand leaned, as I hear;*  
(1001-1002)

Even though she sits on the right hand of Bertilak, she is described to have the highest position at the table. This fact is exemplified as the text describes the lord sitting at her left side, instead of Morgan le Fay sitting at his right. Her power is also described by Bertilak after he revealed he was the Green Knight. In line 2453 he refers to Morgan le Fay as “Morgan the Goddess”, and he moves on to describe the extent of her powers.

Weldez non so hyȝe hawtesse      *None holds so high degree*  
þat ho ne con make ful tame-      *That her arts cannot subdue-*  
(2454-2455)

There are none that are able to withstand her powers, which creates an image of an all-powerful being, a being that stands above the rest of humanity. Even though Sir Gawain believes that the driving force behind his predicament is a test directed by God, the source is none other than Morgan le Fay. The purpose of this test is not so that the knight would be able to prove himself in this earthly purgatory, but directly opposite. The purpose was to shame and embarrass the court of Camelot through shaming and embarrassing Sir Gawain.

It could be said that Sir Gawain is going through a proverbial purgatory during his year and consequent stay in Bertilak’s castle. Though the year is very shortly summed up, with the utmost expediency, one can expect the fact of his impending beheading to overshadow the year. At the behest of Morgan le Fay, Bertilak tests the character of Sir Gawain at the castle, just as how the souls in Purgatory are tested for their vices. The purpose for these trials however, were to be completely opposite of those in purgatory. They were meant to be confirmatory of the frailty of human will, as opposed to the transformative cleansing of souls that occur in purgatory. The critic Friedman disagrees with Kittredge’s viewpoint that the result of the trials were meant to humiliate Arthur: “In the result, [...]

Morgan did not succeed in humiliating Arthur by proving that his leading knight lacked the virtues of knighthood.”<sup>74</sup> Some critics believe that Morgan le Fay succeeded in shaming the knights of Camelot through the fall of Sir Gawain. I disagree to a certain degree with both of these interpretations. The fact is that the court of Camelot supported Sir Gawain upon his return to the court. They did not see his fall as a loss of honor for the collective knights of Camelot. I think however that Morgan le Fay succeeded in proving to the leading knight himself that he is no longer the moral exemplar among the knights. This is something that can be seen during the conversation between Sir Gawain and Bertilak after their agreement was fulfilled in the Green Chapel.

For care of þy knokke, cowardyse me tazt [...]	<i>Your cut taught me cowardice, care for my life</i> [...]
Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer (2379-2382)	<i>Now am I faulty and false, that fearful was ever</i>

The cut made by Bertilak taught him “cowardyse” (2379), and he has become “fawty” (2382) (faulty) and “falce” (2382) (false). His persona has become tarnished, and he no longer considers himself worthy of being a knight.

The fall of the leading knight, albeit a personal fall, would thereby be all the more telling of the fallibility of even the best of knights. The source of these tests in *Sir Owain* and *The Vision of Tundale* is God, and if you compare that to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, that source is the all-powerful character of Morgan le Fay. Sir Gawain becomes the only knight of the knights dealt with within this thesis to fail the test he was subjected to. Though one could say that the power God employed to save the two other knights, Sir Owain and Tundale, are similar to that of the green girdle offered up by Bertilak’s wife: a power they employed freely to save themselves from harm and the tortures of purgatory and hell. The torment of Sir Gawain is more mental than physical however, and it is subjected by making him not face the sins and threat of physical pain, but to face his own mortality. Magic and the

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<sup>74</sup> Albert B. Friedman. “Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” *Speculum* 35:2 (1960): 260.

supernatural can be perceived to be seen as more powerful than the power of God in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This power struggle between faith and magic can be exemplified by the shield and girdle Gawain carries at the end of the text.

The green girdle stands in opposition to the shield adorned with the image of the Virgin Mary. By previously adorning the shield with the Virgin Mary, he associated himself with life, creation and good. As stated before, the girdle was a symbol of his change, but it also bears connotations to Morgan le Fay, who can be seen to be the antithesis to the Virgin Mary. If we view the girdle as a symbol for his new understanding of himself, and as a second line of defense, Sir Gawain takes a twofold understanding of the world into himself. One aspect symbolizing Christianity, high morality and his aspirations, but also the primal nature of magic, his human frailty and darker desires. Even though Morgan is associated with falsehood, death and evil, it is Morgan who enables Bertilak to survive the beheading. By wearing the girdle, he not only incorporates the image of life in his persona, but also that of death. By having faced his own mortality, he came out of the experience with a new understanding of both life and of death. The fact that Sir Gawain chooses to wear the green girdle around his arm and chooses not to forget the experience, shows that he has learned something about not only life and death, but also discovered something about himself through self-discovery.

Through the liminal space he occupies through the year, it becomes possible for Sir Gawain to start on a path of self-discovery. Through the year, and especially as he is tested in the castle of Bertilak he makes discoveries about his own nature. Although he is considered to be the model knight, and knightly exemplar, he is still faulty. His faults stem in the problematic nature of the chivalric ideal, and the point made by Green on this ideal is important enough to reiterate: "The chivalric ideal, however modified and tarnished by

practice and human imperfection [...]”.<sup>75</sup> He deems himself a failure, not for doing something most humans would do, but for doing something a knight should not do, doing everything in his power to stave off death, to the detriment of his own ideals. He elevates himself above the rest of humanity, and ultimately falls all the harder because of it. The rest of the knights and the court of Camelot does not judge him however, but shows their support for him at his return. They judge him not for the lofty ideals expected of a knight, but that of a man. One could say however, that the girdle does not merely remind him of his humiliation at the hands of Bertilak, but it also serves as a reminder of his own humanity.

The liminal phase Sir Gawain has gone through, and his brush with death is exemplified by the girdle. As stated, the girdle becomes a symbol for his changed nature, and shows his conversion from the knightly ideal to a normal person. The power of death can be understood to be so great, that the mere belief in one’s impending departure from life can lead to an entry into a liminal phase. This does not mean that just the concept of dying is enough to enter one into a liminal phase however. The three points mentioned, i.e. the removal from society, change and the entry into an unstable or temporary state, contributes in limiting who enters into a liminal phase. It is thereby not all who believe they are dying, but those that actually are. The fact that Sir Gawain nor the Green Knight never actually died within the text comments on the nature of death. It becomes the ever looming shadow of humanity, which is always close by. It is however not until death materializes, when the shadow takes shape as a concrete threat it becomes truly real for Sir Gawain. The brush with Sir Gawain’s own mortality led to him making choices he normally would not make, and thereby revealing his imperfect human nature, not merely to others, but to himself as well.

The earthly purgatory Sir Gawain is subjected to at the behest of Morgan le Faye tests the value and purity of Sir Gawain. Within the purgatory poems, the power of religion is

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<sup>75</sup> Green, “Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection,” 122.

proved to the knights before they are thrust into what they knew to be trials by God. To Sir Gawain on the other hand, it is not religion but magic that has proved its worth and value to him, as the effects of magic were clear when the Green Knight was beheaded. Through the use of the girdle Sir Gawain would be safeguarded from death's grasp, and he forsook his values to attain that ability. As Sir Gawain did so, he exemplified the fear humanity feels about the unknown, which death is. In Chapter 3 the power of religion will be exemplified just as clearly as magic in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The two tales in Chapter 3 does not portray death as an intimidating unknown, but as a comfort to the gruesomeness of life.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it is possible to witness how self-discovery, which Sir Gawain attained within the liminal phase, leads to conversion. He is no longer deceived by his own vision of himself, and can honestly strive to be a worthy knight again. The girdle exemplifies the struggle to better oneself, and the will to adhere to a set of moral rules. Through his brush with death, he brought the understanding provided by his brush of death into himself, as well as an understanding of his own mortality. The understanding of both death and his thirst for life lead to him being more aware of his sins and faults. We as humans are faulty and are unable to be exemplary creatures, though awareness of these faults enables the possibility to better oneself as a human.



## Chapter 3

### The Undead Martyrs: The Externalization of Conversion

Up till now I have shown that death has been foiled time and time again. In this chapter death is not foiled, merely postponed. I will use two tales from *The Canterbury Tales* to highlight the power of God and the heavens, a power that reduces death to a mere tool used to further its own cause, and for the salvation of souls. *The Canterbury Tales* is the most famous of Geoffrey Chaucer's works, and according to Helen Cooper, it: "occupied the last dozen or so years of Chaucer's life. He probably started work on it in the late 1380s".<sup>76</sup> The genre of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is not so easy to assign, though it is generally regarded as a collection of stories.<sup>77</sup> Cooper explains the difficulty in classifying it: "The differences lie in three principal areas: the kind of frame narrative he uses, with multiple tellers of different outlook and social class; connected with that, the variety of the stories told; and the lack of any clear moral framework".<sup>78</sup> It is therefore no surprise that it is difficult to classify *The Canterbury Tales*, as it offers such variation in its structure and content.

*The Canterbury Tales* itself however, revolves around a group of pilgrims on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. During the course of the pilgrimage, the pilgrims tell stories as part of a story-telling contest. It is the collection of these 24 tales told by the pilgrims on their trip that make up the text *The Canterbury Tales*. The two tales I will study within this chapter are *The Prioress's Tale* and *The Second Nun's Tale*, two tales that challenge the grim view on death, and the value of heavenly immortality. The events unfolding in *The Prioress's Tale* are perhaps the most eerie and uncanny of all of the texts within this thesis, and *The Second*

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<sup>76</sup> Helen Cooper, *Oxford's Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>77</sup> Cooper, *Oxford's Guides to Chaucer*, 8-9.

<sup>78</sup> Cooper, *Oxford's Guides to Chaucer*, 9.

*Nun's Tale* could be considered to be even more gruesome than the beheading scene in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. *The Prioress's Tale* is considered to belong to the genre of miracle stories, which enables us to look at the possibility for miracles to intercede in death. In the previous chapters I have gone through the effects of liminal spaces on the undead protagonists that inhabit them. In this chapter however I will exemplify the ability of influence the living dead has. The concept of conversion will be explored, as their dreadful fates and devotion to Christ influences the people witnessing their plight. Death is not easily foiled however, and I will explore what the effect is when death starts working again, though first I will give a short introduction to the tales themselves.

*The Prioress's Tale* and *The Second Nun's Tale* are interesting texts to use in this thesis to create a well-rounded understanding of liminal spaces and their full ability to incite change or conversion. Critics have studied and written a great deal of theory on *The Prioress's Tale*, but most of it is focused on antisemitism. This has been pointed out by the critic John C. Hirsh: "Thus the Prioress's anti-Semitism is both a part of and apart from her time, and so it is unfortunate that in recent years her whole character has been defined by her attitude towards Jews".<sup>79</sup> I choose not to focus on this aspect of the tale however, as it is not tensions between religions that is important to this chapter, but rather the possibility for conversion and reaffirmation caused by liminal phases.

Miracles are one of the strongest tools for proving the power of a given religion. Within these two tales the miracles that take place are at odds with the power magic has over death as seen in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Whilst magic served to sustain the life of the Green Knight in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the power of Christ and religion were in doubt for Sir Gawain, the power of religion in *The Prioress's Tale* is prevalent.

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<sup>79</sup> John C. Hirsh, "Reopening the 'prioress's Tale'". *The Chaucer Review* 10:1 (1975): 31.

Religion and faith is equally powerful in this text as that of magic in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. According to Helen Cooper, “The genre of the Prioress’s Tale is precisely defined within the text, as a ‘miracle’ (691/1881). Miracles of the Virgin had been widespread across Europe as an expression of popular piety throughout the Middle Ages [...]”.<sup>80</sup> I have touched on liminal spaces and the living dead as a result of visions, ventures into the afterlife, hauntings and magic. Miracles as the source of undead and liminal spaces is valuable to study, as these miracles often hold special meaning and lessons not found through other means. It is through these lessons that the possibility of conversion and discovery is possible. It is fair to say that neither Tundale nor Sir Owain would be aware of their sinful nature, if not for their lessons and experiences of the afterlife. What ability do these liminal spaces have, if any, to create an opportunity for learning, not only for the subject that inhabits them, but for the people who observe the subjects that inhabit them? To be able to answer these questions, I will first do a short introduction of the tales in question.

*The Prioress’s Tale* revolves around the tale made by the Prioress travelling as part of the pilgrims. She tells a tale about the Virgin Mary, and of a miracle she performs. The tale revolves around a young boy, who attends a local Christian school in a prominent Asian city. In this city there is a Jewish district, which the boy needs to pass through every day to and from school. He hears the song *O Alma Redemptoris*, and he begs an older boy to tell him what the song is about. The older boy tells him that the song is about the greatness of the Virgin Mary. The child, being a devout Christian, wants to know the song by heart and he starts learning it. Every day he is walking to and from school, he sings *O Alma Redemptoris* as he walks through the Jewish quarter. As time goes by, the devil makes an appearance to influence the Jewish population in the district, rousing their anger at the boy. The devil insists that the boy is singing the Christian song to insult them. Some of the Jews are so angered that

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<sup>80</sup> Cooper, *Oxfords Guide to Chaucer*, 288.

they band together and hire a murderer to kill the child. As the boy is walking past an alley, the hired murderer pulls the child from the road, and slits his throat. The murderer dumps the child's body into a communal toilet. When the boy does not return home, his mother starts to worry about him, and goes out searching. Although she begs, the Jewish inhabitants refuse to tell her anything about her son's whereabouts. By the guidance of Christ, she draws nearer to where his body had been dumped, and when she gets close the child then rises up and begins to sing the same song he was singing earlier. The spectacle of the singing murdered boy draws together a crowd of Christians, and when they witness the singing boy they call for the magister of the city. They start to carry the child towards the abbey, in an eerie procession. The friar of the abbey asks the child how it is possible for him to still be singing as his throat is slit. The child answers that it is by the grace of the Virgin Mary. She placed a grain on his tongue which enabled his spirit to remain. When the Friar removes the grain, the soul is released from the body. The friar cries at the sight and praises the Virgin Mother for her ability and power. The boy is then entombed in a marble tomb as a martyr to his faith.

*The Second Nun's Tale* is the second of the Canterbury tales I am using in this thesis to explore the effect of the failure of death. The failure to take a life, and the failure of death completely is something this thesis has dealt with extensively. In *The Second Nun's Tale* however, the instance of the cause of expected death is more gruesome than any of the other texts. The tale centers around Cecilia, a noble woman who is betrothed to a man by the name of Valerian. She is a devout Christian who wishes to remain chaste and celibate throughout her life, and begs her new husband to let it be so, as an angel is guarding her virginity. She promises that if he lets her remain chaste and he is baptized, he would have the opportunity to witness the angel. He gets baptized by Pope Urban, and can see the angel by her side. The angel promises to fulfill any one request made by Valerian since he let Cecilia remain chaste. His wish is that his brother, Tiburtius, would also be able to see the light, which he does.

After some time passes Valerian and Tiburtius were to be executed for refusing to make sacrifice at the altar of Jupiter. Before they were executed however, they manage to convert the executioner Maximus. Maximus brought them to his house after hearing what they had to say of the Christian faith, and was subsequently baptized. Valerian and Tiburtius was given another chance to make a sacrifice on the altar of Jupiter, but again they refused. After their execution, Maximus claims that he saw their spirits return to the heavens, and he is executed as well. A while after these events, Cecilia is brought before Almachius, the roman prefect. Because of her devoutness, and obstinate lecturing of Almachius, she is sentenced to death by boiling. The execution does not work as well as planned however, and she sits in the boiling water for a day and night without being hurt in the slightest. The executioner is therefore summoned, and is ordered to decapitate her with a sword. After three strokes with the sword she is still not dead, and the executioner is not allowed to take a fourth. While the blood is spurting from her half decapitated neck, her head supported merely by her throat, she remains alive for three whole days. In those three days, she lectures and preaches on the Christian faith, and it is not until she is done that she dies fully.

Death and the suspension of the power of death are different in each of the texts within the scope of this thesis. From the removal of a soul, entering the afterlife in physical form, to the return of a spirit, the purgatory visions focused on an entering and subsequent return from an established afterlife. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* death was foiled completely by the power of magic, where the Green Knight not only stopped death, but denied death a “prey” to begin with. There are noticeable differences that emerges when one compares the two tales with the rest of the texts used within this thesis. Both of the protagonists’ death is caused by a physical event or injury, which would normally serve to expedite their entry into the afterlife.

This physical injury is reminiscent of the beheading of the Green Knight, although it appears to be dissimilar in its very core. The Green Knight is a stoic figure, who remains alive and well during his beheading. As discussed in chapter 2, the Green Knight never starts upon the process of dying. His injury does not affect his life or ability to continue living in the slightest, and is therefore unable to die or start the process of dying in itself. What then becomes interesting is how the injury the protagonists receive affect them, and how death is foiled, albeit temporarily. One unclear aspect surrounding the undead state the protagonists occupy is exactly how their case of being undead is possible.

When looking at the deaths that take place within these two tales, one notices that the death scenes are vivid and visceral in nature. Because the causes of these expected deaths are physical in nature it becomes natural to compare it to the expected death of the Green Knight. There is however a salient point that separates the death of young boy from the expected death of the Green Knight. Through the nature of his injuries, the boy is aware that his condition is unnatural.

<p>“My throte is cut unto my nekke-boon,”          Seyde this child, “and, as by wey of kinde,          I sholde have deyed, ye, longe tyme agoon,<sup>81</sup>          (649-651)</p>	<p><i>“My throat is cut till my neck bone,”          Said this child, “and, as by the way of nature,          I should have died, yea, a long time ago.</i></p>
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He does not remain stoically on his feet, unabashed by the deadly cut dealt to him, as the Green Knight did. What becomes interesting is that the boy mentions that his throat is “cut” all the way to the “nekke-boon” (649). This detail makes the singing of the child all the more miraculous as his murder is not merely a cut of the carotid artery in the neck. The detailed description highlights that his throat, including the windpipe is severed, which would make

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<sup>81</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Prioress’s Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, and F. N. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 212. All subsequent quotes from this tale within this chapter will be marked with line numbers in the quote. Translations are my own through the use of glosses in the book.

the singing all the more impossible, than with a “mere flesh wound”.<sup>82</sup> Next he uses the word “kinde” (650), which according to the Middle English Dictionary translates into “naturally; by innate disposition”<sup>83</sup>, which combined with his matter of fact statement does indicate that naturally anyone should be dead with this injury. That would also indicate that his condition is unnatural and goes against the natural order of things, which leads to the conclusion is that the boy is aware of his own undead state, and does not suffer any delusions that he is to survive his injuries. He knows that his throat is cut, he is aware that him being alive goes against nature, and his nature as a human at its very core. The way he phrases “I sholde have deyed” indicates that he knows that for some reason death does not work. The word “Sholde” betrays this fact, that it would have been a fatal injury if not for the miracle.

The death scene in *The Second Nun’s Tale* is more detailed and graphic than what we can find in *The Prioress’s Tale*. The execution of Cecilia is quite visceral and the elongated execution scene really stands out compared to the executions of her husband and his brother, where all that is stated is that they lost their head, and Maximus witnessed their departure to heaven:

With humble herte and sad devocioun	<i>With humble heart and firm devotion</i>
And losten bothe hir hevedes in the place.	<i>And lost both their heads in the place.</i>
Hir soules wenten to the Kyng of grace.	<i>Their souls went to the King of grace</i>
This Maximus, that saugh this thing bityde, <sup>84</sup> (397-400)	<i>This Maximus, who saw this thing happen,</i>

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<sup>82</sup> For more on the injury in relation to his undead state, see: Lisa Weston, “Suffer the Little Children, or, A Ruminaton on the Faith of Zombies,” in *The Dark Chaucer: An Assortment*, ed. Myra Seaman et al. (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2012), 181-184.

<sup>83</sup> MED, “kīnde”, N., 2.A., <http://tinyurl.com/jqm55uz>

<sup>84</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *Second Nun’s Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, and F. N. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 212. All subsequent quotes from this tale within this chapter will be marked with line numbers in the quote. Translations are my own through the use of glosses in the book.

One very interesting aspect of this, is that their souls “wenten to the Kyng of grace” (399). Similar to that of the boy’s soul, they are safeguarded against the tortures and cleansing required of normal men. Both the child, Cecilia and these men who died for their faith would be safeguarded for their devotion. The men’s death however, stands in stark contrast to that of Cecilia. Why is it that her death is so much more horrifying than that of her husband and his brother?

The manner of death Cecilia is subjected to is indicative of her fate as a martyr. At first the attempts to execute her by boiling fails completely, in a manner similar to that of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The longe nyght and eek a day also	<i>The long night and a long day also</i>
For al the fyr and eek the bathes heete	<i>For all the fire and all the bath’s heat</i>
She sat al coold, and feeled no wo;	<i>She sat all cool, and felt no woe;</i>
(519-521)	

She behaves just as stoically as the Green Knight, as she did not seem to mind what her body was put through. Bynum offers up one explanation as to why she was able to withstand the boiling. “[...] preachers and teachers sometimes suggested that the ability of the martyrs to withstand pain or corruption was owing to an assimilation of their bodies on earth to the glorified bodies of heaven”.<sup>85</sup> The coming attempted beheading of Cecilia however, is perhaps even more gruesome than the beheading scene in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. It is often the case, according to Sarah Juliet Lauro, that “After a trial or debate in which the holy personage refuses to sacrifice, convert to Paganism, or marry there is a period of incarceration and/or torture, which the martyr’s body often impressively resists”<sup>86</sup>. It is possible to see evidence of this resistance in Cecilia, in her refusal to succumb to the boiling

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<sup>85</sup> Bynum, “Material Continuity,” 267

<sup>86</sup> Sarah Juliet Lauro, “The Zombie Saints: The Contagious Spirit of Christian Conversion Narratives: A Zombie Martyr,” *Literature and Theology* (2012), 7.



water. After the failure of the water, an executioner was called. The executioner had to perform three strikes to the neck, and still he failed to behead her. After the failed attempt at beheading her, she spent the next three days half dead:

But half deed, with hir nekke ycorven there,	<i>But half dead, with her neck cut there</i>
He lefte hir lye, and on his wey he went.	<i>He left her lie, and on his way he went.</i>
The Cristen folk, which that aboute hire were	<i>The Christian folk, who were about her</i>
With Sheetes han the blood ful faire yhent.	<i>With sheets have very carefully taken up the blood.</i>
Thre dayes lyves she in this torment;	<i>Three days lived she in this torment,</i>

(533-537)

One could say that the attempted beheading is similar to that of the Green Knight if she had remained alive at the end of the finalization of it. Some might say that she does remain alive similar to the Green Knight, but she is in fact “half deed” during the three days. The critic Nicola Masciandaro writes in her article “Half Dead: Parsing Cecelia”, that: “Cecilia’s half-death is deathly, ghastly an ‘unbearable’ torment of being neither here nor there, alive nor dead”.<sup>87</sup> She can thereby be considered in part dead and in part alive, thus fitting the definition of an liminal state of undead. Her liminal state is also brought up by Masciandaro: “St. Cecilia’s botched beheading in Chaucer’s *Second Nun’s Tale* masterfully sculpts the conundrum of life/death liminality into a horrific three-day dilation of the moment of martyrdom”.<sup>88</sup> How she differs from the Green Knight, is that she not only feels the “torment” over her state over the next few days, but she suffers consequences to the attempted beheading before she in the end passes on. One question that arises by their expected deaths, is how are they able to return or sustain their existence beyond the precipice of death.

One exciting aspect of the boy’s return from death’s grasp is the clear description of what happened after he should have died. Though some of the previous texts attempt to

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<sup>87</sup> Nicola Masciandaro, “Half Dead: Parsing Cecelia,” in *The Dark Chaucer: An Assortment*, ed. Myra Seaman et al. (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2012), 88.

<sup>88</sup> Masciandaro, “Half Dead,” 71.

explain how the undead return, none are so clear as the case of the boy in *The Prioress's Tale*. This clarity is delivered through the conversation between the Abbot and the boy. As the abbot questions him on how it is possible for him to still be singing and speaking to him, the boy explains that the Virgin Mary interceded as he was to enter into death:

And whan that I my lyf should forlete,      *And when I was to leave my life*  
To me she cam, and bad me for to synge      *She came to me, and asked me to sing*  
(658-659)

She interceded in the process of dying, as he was to “forlete” his life, something that does indicate that the boy had started the process of dying. What is interesting is the way the child speaks of dying: “And whan that I my lyf should forlete”(658). It separates life from the identity of self. The soul is then the person, not the earthly vessel that contains it. One interpretation of what he says, is that life on earth might not be as important as the coming eternal life, and the physical processes are less valuable to the functioning of the body than the workings of a soul. She interceded in the process of dying, but how exactly does the Virgin Mary intercede in the matters of life and death, and what is her purpose for doing so?

There is at first glance a clear and straightforward explanation to how the Virgin Mary managed to intercede in the death of the child. When the child's throat is cut his soul is restrained within the confines of his body by use of a grain.

Me thought she leyde a greyn upon my tonge. *I thought she laid a grain upon my tongue.*  
(662)

The Virgin Mary stops his soul from leaving the body by the placing of a grain on his tongue, which temporarily restrains the soul, denying its release from his broken body. The body is then portrayed as a vessel for containing the soul. I find it necessary to reiterate what Caroline Walker Bynum stated, “that the person is the soul, to which body is attached as tool, garment

or prison”.<sup>89</sup> The fact that the Virgin Mary stops the soul from leaving the body thereby making it a prison or vessel for temporarily holding the soul, does influence the concept of death. It does not however negate the possibility for bodily resurrection after the Last Judgement, merely moving the identity of self away from the physical to the soul. The grain, which might appear to be simple, then becomes an important factor in understanding how his soul could be restrained within his physical body.

Just by her placing the grain on the boy’s tongue the Virgin Mary staves off death, albeit temporarily. The grain has for a long time been studied by scholars who attempts to single out the symbolism of the grain. The critic Albert B. Friedman comments in his work *The Mysterious Greyn in the “Prioress's Tale”*: “Scholars have become fixated on what the grain is and curiously incurious about what the grain does”.<sup>90</sup> Because of the extensive focus that has been given to the nature of the grain, there are different understandings of the grain, ranging from a normal seed, to a cardamom seed, “known as the grain of paradise”<sup>91</sup>, to the more medicinal connotations of the word. Friedman argues however that: “The Grain, I would argue, has no symbolic valence at all but is simply a prop in the dynamics of the story. It fulfills a ritual necessity and shores up the narrative logic of the piece, but a dozen other objects would have served just as well”.<sup>92</sup> There are however theories that focus more on where the grain-like object is placed, rather than of the exact nature of it. I will therefore only touch upon the nature of the grain, if it pertains directly to what the grain means either to the miracle itself, or the cessation of death.

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<sup>89</sup> Bynum, “Material Continuity,” 254-255.

<sup>90</sup> Albert B. Friedman, “The Mysterious Greyn in the “Prioress's Tale,” *The Chaucer Review* 11:4 (1977): 330.

<sup>91</sup> Ynez Violé O’Neill, “A Speculation Concerning the Grain in Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale,” *Medical History* 12:2 (1968): 185.

<sup>92</sup> Friedman, “The Mysterious Greyn in the “Prioress's Tale,” 330.

The tale does, as stated, offer an explanation to how the boy managed to stall death after what is clearly a fatal injury. The placing of a grain on the tongue is reminiscent of the focus on medical science in *The Vision of Tundale*. In the scene depicting the death of Tundale, the line: “Was sumwat warme the veyne corale”(108)<sup>93</sup>, brings medical terms into an otherwise religious text, as stated previously the “veyne corale” means median vein. The grain in *The Prioress’s Tale* is not so readily clear however, but according to Ynez Viole O’Neill, in her article on the various meanings of the grain, “the deposition of a grain-like object on or under the tongue was commonly prescribed during the later Middle Ages for relief of various complaints, including deprivation of speech”.<sup>94</sup> Speech, or in the case of the boy, singing, is definitely an impossibility due to the trauma he was subjected to. It therefore is interesting that a grain on the tongue was used to keep him alive, but also gave him the opportunity for speech. What then is the relevance of an injection of the medicinal or the scientific into the miracle? One aspect that is influenced by this is the role of the Virgin Mary, whose part changes in the text if one operates with the understanding that the grain has medicinal connotations.

As it is the Virgin Mary that deposits the grain on the tongue of the boy, she is portrayed as an all-powerful figure with powers over life and death. If one operates with the understanding that the grain is likened to medicine, the Virgin Mary is showing her benign side as well as her ability and power. This is something O’Neill highlights: “the Virgin’s role in the story is that of a mother who uses medicine<sup>95</sup> to treat her child, her selection of a remedy recommended by the most prominent medical authorities could scarcely have been

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<sup>93</sup> Foster, *The Vision of Tundale*, 193.

<sup>94</sup> O’Neill, “A Speculation Concerning the Grain in Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale,” 189.

<sup>95</sup> For more information on the nature and medical connotations of the grain, see: Paul E. Beichner, “The Grain of Paradise,” *Speculum* 36:2 (1961): 302-307.

more appropriate”.<sup>96</sup> The authority and power of an all-powerful entity is not a foreign concept, but one that is reminiscent of a mother. The role of the Virgin Mary in the tale affects not only the relationship between her and the boy, but it changes the purpose and understanding of death in the tale.

She is both an all-powerful figure in the tale, as well as a caring mother figure. She is the one who restrains death in the tale and she is therefore infinitely more powerful than mortal men. Her purpose for sending the child back is to illustrate her greatness and power, as she begs him to sing the song after his return. The child therefore sings to heighten the renown and honor of the Virgin Mary, a fact the boy states himself in his conversation.

Wherefore I singe, and singe moot certeyn,    *Wherefore I sing, and indeed must sing*  
In honour of that blisful mayden free,        *In honour of that blissful maiden generous,*  
(664-665)

Death is thereby changed from being an absolute force of nature, to a powerful tool, wielded by a figure who appears to be both powerful and compassionate, to exemplify the might of divinity. The show of power is comparable to the show of might made by the Green Knight in the name of Morgan le Fay. The attempt of conversion through this spectacle is then threefold. First the impossibility and gruesomeness of the singing child illustrates God’s power over nature. The second attempt is through the devotion the boy shows the Virgin Mary. The third attempt is through the sheer power the divine can wield according to its will. The fact that the child had such a devotion for her also indicates the need for devotion to receive such a miracle, a faith and devotion Sir Gawain sorely lacked during the course of his own trials. One question that arises from my discussion on the consequences of the grain is what the injection of the scientific does to our understanding of the grain itself?

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<sup>96</sup> O’Neill, “A Speculation Concerning the Grain in Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale,” 190.

The injection of the scientific, the grain, into the fantastical is something that does not efface the miracle; rather it draws on the knowledge one has of the physical world to create an understanding of the greatness of the miracle. The grain and placement on the tongue is indicative of a certain level of medical understanding, and by extension tells of the limits of humanity's control over death. It also highlights the power of the miracle itself by comparing itself to the limited ability of society to stave off death. The items used are easy items to grasp and comprehend, and no explanation is needed for their function, as would have been the case if the items were substituted for something otherworldly, or concepts.

Instruments of fantastical abilities then are forged out of mundane objects that normally would not be seen as special. A normal girdle or a normal grain would not be considered treasures if not for the special properties the text or protagonists imbue them with. The Virgin Mary imbues the grain with power, creating the understanding that the divine can create and achieve the effect they want through the most mundane items, even to the extent of muddling the line between life and death. By creating fantastical items out of the mundane, the texts highlight the power of magic, religion and the power of faith. The items award the protagonists more time and, in some cases, hope for the future or of postponing their entry into the afterlife. The hope to avoid death is something I brought up in chapter two when Sir Gawain accepted the girdle. There is however no physical item that explains the state of living dead Cecilia experiences in the cauldron.

There is no readily available explanation for her ability to postpone the effects of death in the manner in which she does it. The tale does not offer up a magical solution or item containing fantastical abilities for her miraculous ability to stave off death. What was readily available to her is the angel by her side, who was determined to guard her body and chastity.

"I have an aungel which that loveth me,  
That with greet love, wher so I wake or sleepe,

*"I have an angel who loves me,  
Who with great love, wheter I wake or sleep,*

Is redy ay my body for to kepe.

*Is always ready to guard my body.*

(153-154)

One would imagine that the angel would guard her from bodily harm, since she states that the angel is “redy ay my body for to kepe”(154). The angel did save her chastity, but did not save her from the bodily harm that would befall her after he safeguarded her from the boiling. It then becomes evident that the chastity of Cecilia is more important to the angel than that of her physical wellbeing, as her chastity affects the purity of her soul within the afterlife. It indicates that the body is merely a vessel for the soul, making the body redundant for the identity of self. Although the physical can certainly influence the soul, i.e. purity in life.

The grain explains how death was postponed for the child, but the grain fails to explain why the child was temporarily restored to his former body in the first place. Just as the purpose for the return of Gy was to enlighten and teach, there is also a similar focus in the case of the boy. The purpose is not to impart knowledge of the afterlife however, as the boy’s soul was denied the opportunity to leave the body. As one can see in the line “And whan that I my lyf should forlete” (658), the Virgin Mary interceded right before he was to leave his body. It is also exemplified where the abbot removes the grain from his tongue.

His tongue out caughte and took away the greyn,

*His tongue caught out and took away the grain*

And he yaf up the goost ful softly

*And he gave up the ghost ful softly*

(670-671)

The boy’s soul is released as soon as the grain is removed from his tongue. According to Nicholas Maltman: “Of course, the action of the story necessitates something to make the boy stop singing so that the monks can bury him, but more importantly the story demands some indication that the soul does not depart when the body dies”.<sup>97</sup> Though I disagree with his statement that the grain is merely a random plot tool in the story, it does indicate that the soul

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<sup>97</sup> Nicholas Maltman, “The Divine Granary, or the End of the Prioress’s “Greyn”,” *The Chaucer Review* 17:2 (1982): 167.

does not depart from the body. The child did not get to witness the afterlife at all until the grain was removed. There is however a large focus on the Virgin Mary herself, and a deep fascination with her and the appropriate amount of devotion one is supposed to show her, something one can see from the selection of song, to who saves the child. When one compares *The Prioress's Tale* with that of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, one notices a similarity when studying the role of the Virgin Mary in the text. There is however a glaring difference between the power of religion and magic in the texts.

A large portion of the text is devoted to the Virgin Mary in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. It is a focus that not only tells of the expected devotion to her, but it also highlights the doubt he feels about the possibility of a miracle that would serve to save him. Sir Gawain therefore reaches out in an attempt to pursue magic as an alternate way to survive. Through his choices he upsets the balance of power between religion and magic. As I stated in chapter 2, the Virgin Mary is more of a comforting image, and a source of strength for Sir Gawain. The boy in *The Second Nun's Tale* shows her the devotion which was expected of Sir Gawain as well. Sir Gawain does not show the devotion one might expect to find between a mother and child, as one might see in the relationship between the boy and the Virgin Mary.

This welle of mercy, Cristes moder swete	<i>This spring of mercy, Christs mother sweet</i>
I lovede alwey as after my conninge	<i>I worshipped always after my knowledge.</i>
(656-657)	

He states that he “lovede [her] alwey” (worshipped [her] always), and it was after his “conninge”, which according to the Middle English Dictionary translates into “knowledge, understanding,”<sup>98</sup>. I would then argue that the child showed her devotion, through his worship of her to the best of his knowledge.

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<sup>98</sup> MED, “Cōnninge”, GER., 2. <http://tinyurl.com/zy5rv38>



In *The Prioress's Tale* the Virgin Mary has a large amount of power over life and death, which is also how she is represented in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. By interceding in the death of the child she shows her ability and power as both the mother of Christ, but also as that of a saint. The purpose for his singing is not only to highlight her powers over life and death and her ability to perform miracles, but to show her generosity as well. It was because of her benevolence she allowed him to return to seek justice for his own death. The fact that she does intercede in the matters of life and death is important since this was the exact thing Sir Gawain doubted would happen. The implication for this is that the possibility for the boy's return might therefore dependent on the devotion he had for her.

The possibility for the miracle the boy was awarded by the Virgin Mary can be attributed to the devotion he shows her. The theorist Gwenfair Walters Adams highlights the dynamic he refers to as "Reciprocated Devotion", where the chance for a miracle is dependent on: loving service and aid in distress. What the two had in common was the element of exchange, of *quid pro quo*".<sup>99</sup> To receive a miracle from a saint it would be necessary to show the appropriate amount of devotion to the saint. The miracle performed by the Virgin Mary stands in stark contrast to the view on miracles in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. I do not mean to imply miracles would not be possible under their belief system, but the fact that the other knights doubted that Sir Gawain would be saved by a miracle implies that miracles were not expected to happen often and that Sir Gawain failed to show her the appropriate amount of devotion. A fact that can also be seen in his actions as he started to turn towards magic to save him.

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<sup>99</sup> Gwenfair Walters Adams, *Visions in Late Medieval England: Lay Spirituality and Sacred Glimpses of the Hidden Worlds of Faith*, (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2007), 55.

The probability of miracles was not so great as to expect them to happen even if the subjects showed an appropriate amount of devotion however. It is therefore not a foregone conclusion that the singing boy was a miracle when he was first witnessed.

And whan they holy water on him caste,                      *And when they cast holy water on him,*  
Yet spak this child, whan spreyn was holy water,    *Then spoke the child, at touch of holy water,*  
And song *O Alma redemptoris mater!*                      *And sang, O Alma redemptoris mater!*  
(639-641)

The need for testing shows that it could just as easily been the work of magic or demons. Through the application of holy water and subsequent discussion with the boy, the friar decides that this was indeed a miracle, as we can see by his reaction to the removal of the grain:

And whan this abbot had this wonder seyn,                      *And when this abbot had seen this wonder,*  
His salte teres trikkled down as reyn,                      *His salty tears trickled down as rain,*  
(673-674)

Although the word “wonder” can be translated to simply be “Something that causes astonishment”<sup>100</sup>, I am certain that the priest saw it as a miracle.

Weping and herying cristes moder dere                      *Weeping and praising Christs mother dead.*  
(678)

By his prasing of the Virgin Mary, the alternative translation of “wonder” is more probable than the first interpretation. The alternate translation according to the OED is “a deed performed or an event brought about by miraculous or supernatural power; a miracle. to do wonders, to perform miracles”.<sup>101</sup> The testing of the returned soul and following otherworldly conversation is similar to the conversation we find in *The Gast of Gy*. The didactical nature of *The Gast of Gy* is also present in *The Prioress’s Tale* through this conversation, though it is

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<sup>100</sup> OED, “Wonder”, N. 1. <http://tinyurl.com/hv2pfpq>

<sup>101</sup> OED, “Wonder”, N. 2a. <http://tinyurl.com/hv2pfpq>

not as in-depth and lengthy as the conversation between Gy and the friar. The conversation is however colored by the eerie nature of the liminal phase the boy occupies.

The protagonists of both of these tales enters into their own liminal phases after murder and execution. In the previous chapters I have determined how and why the protagonists of the stories enter into liminal phases. Some enter into the afterlife, whilst some remain on earth as the living dead incarnate. As these tales involve protagonists that remain on earth, Cecilia, and the return to earth, the boy, during their liminal phases, they are most easily comparable to Sir Gawain and Gy. These two cases of the living dead, however, are clearer than the more subtle liminal phase inhabited by Sir Gawain.

In *The Prioress's Tale* the boy enters into a liminal phase after the murderer slits his throat and his body is dumped into the toilet.

This cursed Jew him hente and heeld him faste,      *This cursed Jew seized him and held him fast*  
And kitte his throte, and in a pit him caste.      *And cut his throat, and cast him into a pit.*  
(570-571)

The violent slitting of the boy's throat is reminiscent of the violent act of decapitating the Green Knight, which is as far as the similarities go. There is a lack of focus on the act itself, which was highly present in the Green Knight. By not focusing on the murder itself, the tale does signify that it is not the attack that is important in the grand scheme of things. This is similar to that of *The Gast of Gy*, where it was merely stated that a citizen named Gy had died. It is what happens after the consequent attack which is important, which is the message and purpose for their sustained life beyond death.

Change and the concept of conversion have been two concepts that are instrumental to my thesis, and is no less so in this chapter. What room, if any, does the liminal phases the boy and Cecilia occupies create as it pertains to conversion and change? Are they the ones that changes during their trials, or might the focus be elsewhere in these two tales?

Cecilia and the boy both undoubtedly goes through changes during their process of dying. The changes both of these protagonists go through can be said to be twofold. By going through the process of dying they go through a physical change that leads to a new conceptual understanding of the afterlife, at least in the case of the boy. Cecilia would have a more intimate understanding of the afterlife, as she was intimately familiar with the angel guarding her. When their bodies cease to function in the way there were intended to function, they go through a physical change. In the boy's case, when his soul attempts to leave his body, he gains an understanding and a knowledge of the afterlife. It might be the reason for his ability to deal with his own death so calmly. Something I pointed out earlier in his "a matter of fact"-attitude to his own condition. The change these protagonists go through is not the only purpose for these visions however.

The purpose for the death of Cecilia, can be considered to be the same as that of the return of Gy. They both inhabit a liminal phase with a didactic focus. The didactic nature of the liminal phases they both occupy are different however. The in depth explanation of the afterlife supplied by Gy makes the liminal phase he occupies more focused on the teaching of a concept, that of purgatory. Cecilia is focused on the teaching of the general tenets of her religion.

Thre dayes lyved she in this torment,	<i>Three days she lived in this torment</i>
And never cessed hem the faith to teche	<i>And never ceased to teach them the faith</i>
That she hadde fostred, hem she gan to preche,	<i>That she had fostered, To them she did preach,</i>
(537-539)	

While Cecilia is still in her physical form while she preaches from the confines of her cauldron, it is comparable to the spirit form of Gy. Her undead state consisted of teaching and preaching compared to the purification of her own soul. The salvation and conversion of others can then be said to be the ultimate purpose behind these liminal phases. If the salvation

of souls is the ultimate purpose of these events, could their purpose not be completed without them dying?

I have compared these two tales to the beheading scene that took place in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but the question of why the miracle could not have the same outcome as it had for the Green Knight has not yet been answered. Why did the magic placed upon Bertilak by Morgan le Faye save his life completely and bring him out of his ordeal perfectly fine, whilst the miracles in the two tales led to the death of the protagonists? Does the continuation of the process of dying create a new possibility for realization and conversion?

The nature of their deaths, both horrifying and unnecessarily brutal does not seem to matter to the subjects of the liminal phases. It is possible to see this fact in *The Second Nun's Tale*, when Cecilia continues to preach and teach when she is half decapitated. The same can be seen in *The Prioress's Tale*, in the conversation with the abbot, where the boy simply states that he should be dead. The manner of their death, however, does have a deep impact on the people observing them. The ability to affect and by extension convert the observers indicate that the liminal phases have an impact not only on the people who are the main subject within them, but also those who are observing them.

I previously mentioned that liminal spaces have a special ability that enables subjects to go through a process of self-discovery or a conversion. As one can see in both *The Vision of Tundale* and *Sir Owain*, the subject of the liminal phases goes through the cleansing process of purgatory and emerges converted. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the knightly protagonist Sir Gawain, goes through what I referred to as an earthly purgatory. The earthly purgatory Gawain is subjected to, not only challenges the knight, but it exposes him to his own mortality and fallibility. It is through him being exposed to these concepts, that it is possible for him to challenge the understanding he has of himself. The process of self-

discovery and his conversion from the moral exemplar, the prototype of knightly virtues, to the humanized form of Sir Gawain is part of the process of liminal spaces.

The change that occurs might also be influenced by the purpose behind the creation of the liminal space, but it is definitely influenced by what the subject is subjected to in the liminal state. The creation of a liminal space itself is not the goal of either the subject, someone else or even a mystical power. It is often created nonetheless as a consequence or a reaction to what the subject is going through. It is through what the subject is subjected to and what he is going through, that influences the properties and outcome of the liminal state itself. In the liminal states I have outlined during the course of this thesis, the changes and effects of the liminal state has always been directed at the subject of the liminal state.

The purpose for the liminal space dictates who goes through the process of self-discovery and conversion. One purpose behind the liminal space the boy is inhabiting is stated to be the opportunity to seek justice for his death. The seeking of justice stands in opposition to the previous liminal spaces, where the protagonists were in need of redemption and change. The liminal phase the boy inhabits does however enable the chance of proof of the existence of a religious reality, where miracles in the name of Christ and the Virgin Mary are possible. It is then possible to separate the themes of faith and belief from the conflict between Christianity and Judaism that has been explored so fully in criticism on anti-Semitism within *The Prioress's Tale*.

The themes of faith and belief can then be viewed in a new light based on the liminal phase inhabited by the boy. The liminal phase enables the possibility for conversion, not only for the subject of it, but for the witnesses of the grotesque show as well. If one works with this angle, one can see that the purpose behind the liminal space the boy occupies in *The Prioress's Tale* is not too dissimilar to the purgatory visions. The purgatory visions sought to save the soul the protagonist of their respective texts, something that is seen in both *The*

*Vision of Tundale* and *Sir Owain*. The purpose of the liminal spaces they occupy is meant to cleanse them of sin and give them the opportunity for their own redemption and salvation. They do however also have a second purpose: to enable the protagonists to share what they have witnessed and experienced with the society surrounding them. The purgatory visions do however employ different teaching stratagems from *The Prioress's Tale*. The use of knowledge and first-hand accounts of the afterlife does give the texts an air of authority. In *The Prioress's Tale* however, authority is not as important aspect as empathy for the change and conversion of the witnesses.

Empathy is a powerful emotion and by extension a powerful tool to effect a change in the witnesses of a liminal phase. I have previously stated that the purpose behind the liminal phase in *The Prioress's Tale* is the seeking of justice for his death. This purpose is something one can refer to as a personal purpose, valid only for the subject himself. The overarching purpose for the liminal phase is to save souls, although the boys' soul is not the primary one in question. I therefore posit that one of the purposes behind the liminal phase is to save the souls of the attendees or witnesses. Hirsh does raise an important point regarding the reaction to the image of the murdered boy: "Empathy with innocent and pathetic suffering is virtually a hallmark of late medieval devotion, and the story of a young boy slain by Jews for singing Mary's praises would have struck a sympathetic chord in many."<sup>102</sup> The visceral sight of a singing boy with a slit throat is definitely a powerful image, and the witnessing of it could certainly lead to a conversion of those witnessing the spectacle, and by extension the readers of the tale. The normally familiar and serene image of a singing child changes into the disturbing, and the possibility of change is heightened through this uncanny scene. The failure of death, by the intervention of the Virgin Mary creates an eerie, if not uncanny, atmosphere

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<sup>102</sup> Hirsh, "Reopening the "prioress's Tale"," 38.

over the procession towards the church. The concept of conversion of witnesses become all the more direct during the liminal phase Cecilia goes through.

Cecilia's liminal space was focused on the preaching of the faith she had fostered to the witnesses. It is not just through the witnessing of a gruesome sight, or the singing meant to highlight the greatness of the Virgin Mary. It is through explicit preaching of her faith in Christianity. The fact that she refuses to die, and is sustained as if by magic over three days, gives her authority and credibility in the eyes of the witnesses. According to Sarah Juliet Lauro: "the martyr's miraculous resistance of torture effects mass conversion. We might say that the martyr's sacrifice has infectious results, as the witness is figured as one colonized by the Holy Spirit, in a manner similar to the martyred saint".<sup>103</sup> While I certainly agree that the resistance to torture and the sacrifice they make contribute to the conversion of others, I am hesitant to attribute the conversion of the spectators solely on the torture and sacrifice. The notion of conversion is dependent on the fact that the witnesses learn something from their encounters with the liminal phases the protagonists occupy. The lesson created by the undead, either explicit or implicit, would then preferably lead to substantial changes within the observer. One such lesson is provided in the miracle of the singing boy in *The Second Nun's Tale*, where he sets out to teach and show of the greatness of the Virgin Mary. Gy in *A Gast of Gy* shows another clear example of such a lesson, where he actually speaks didactically about his stay in purgatory. The liminal spaces the protagonists occupy creates room for learning, but when death starts working again the lessons more clearly enables the possibility for reaffirmation.

In most of the texts within this thesis the protagonists live on after their return from purgatory and hell. *The Gast of Gy* is an exception, as Gy returned in a spectral state, and Sir

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<sup>103</sup> Lauro, "The Zombie Saints," 3.



Gawain who never truly died. When death starts working again, especially in the case of Cecilia and the boy, they become martyrs. Being martyrs to ones' faith is something that holds a lesson for many people within the same faith. The definition of the term martyr is "a person who chooses to suffer death rather than renounce faith in Christ or obedience to his teachings, a Christian way of life, or adherence to a law or tenet of the Church".<sup>104</sup> The young boy and Cecilia are both referred to as martyrs as both of them died whilst proclaiming and furthering their faith. Cecilia is a prime example of this fact, as she continues her teaching even in her liminal state:

And never cessed hem the faith to teche;      *And never ceased to teach them the faith;*  
That she hadde fostred, hem she gan to preche. *That she had fostered, she began to preach to them.*  
(538-539)

When death is suspended the protagonists we previously have studied receives the opportunity to learn something about themselves, and something new about their own faith. This all changes when death begins working properly again however. Through the very real and final death of the subject, there arises the possibility of reaffirmation. The previous room for conversion of the subject and the witnesses is still possible, but it is likely that stories of martyrs, when someone dies for the belief, affirms the belief in believers. The living dead therefore holds special power over the conversion of both the subject and the witnesses. The conversion occurring in a liminal space might be a change in personality, physical body or be that of a metaphysical change. Is it then fair to say that death and the process of dying then enable changes within all who experience a liminal phase, be they in it or just by simply witnessing it?

The purpose behind the miracles taking place in these two tales was to influence the witnesses and inspiring a change and conversion to those who witnesses them. The cessation

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<sup>104</sup> OED, "Martyr", N., 1.A., <http://tinyurl.com/hmfjjsl>

of death creates an opportunity for the witnesses in a manner different from the purgatory poetry, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The purgatory poems were meant to spread a new concept, to expand upon the knowledge of a set notion of an afterlife. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* problematizes the power struggle between the power of magic and religion, thereby highlighting the power of magic, and death's ability to incite change and discovery within the self. The liminal phase Sir Gawain went through was personal for him, and focused on his change and conversion as a knight and a human being.

The liminal phases in *The Prioress's Tale* and *The Second Nun's Tale* had very specific purposes. They were meant to incite change and conversion, not in the subjects but in the witnesses of the liminal phase. This was of course because of the devotion and purity the subjects inhabited, making them worthy of not merely entering into heaven, but warranted a miracle. One aspect *The Prioress's Tale* has in common with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the focus on The Virgin Mother. During the course of Sir Gawain's adventures and testing, the understanding of her power and ability to safeguard the souls of believers is created. She becomes the all-powerful presence in the text, which creates the possibility of conversion of the witnesses. The purpose for the boy was to spread the greatness of the Virgin Mary, and convert the witnesses. Cecilia would on the other hand teach the tenets of Christianity and spread the word and devotion of her own faith.

As death resumes however, the lessons changes their nature, and as opposed to the purgatory visions and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, end with the death of the protagonist. The purgatory visions needed someone to come back from the afterlife and their undead state, so as to spread the word of purgatory. This could also have been the case in these two tales, but the lesson of their death creates the possibility for reaffirmation. To die for one's faith creates a martyr. The boy and Cecilia became martyrs, and not only that, their case of martyrdom is underlined and sanctioned by the divine. They were kept alive by a

miracle, and in the end died for their faith serves to underline their message and the power of their faith. It thereby served to reaffirm the faith of believers, and to the conversion of the witnesses.

## Conclusion

The undead creates the opportunity for knowledge, realization and conversion. Their liminal nature ensures the possibility for imparting knowledge from the unobservable other side, where they operate as ferrymen of information. This liminal space between alive and dead is mirrored in literature, which contain dead worlds brought to life by the imagination of its readers. Literature is able to influence our understanding of themes by the mixing of reality and imagination, thereby creating a new understanding of our surrounding world. In the introductory chapter I posed the question: what does the cessation of death, and the reanimation or revival of the dead do to our understanding of death? These questions have been partly answered in the preceding chapters, and I will through this conclusion tie some of these answers together.

In all of the texts, *The Vision of Tundale*, *Sir Owain*, *The Gast of Gy*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Prioress's Tale* and *The Second Nun's Tale*, death is explored in relation to a protagonist. They are not all perfect men, as it is possible to see with Tundale, Sir Owain, Gy and Sir Gawain. These imperfect men are all given the opportunity to explore what happens beyond the boundary separating the living from the dead. In the purgatory visions, Tundale, Sir Owain and Gy experience the tortures of purgatory. They impart an understanding of the afterlife, as they have witnessed the afterlife with their own eyes. Literature enabled this exploration of the afterlife, bringing the abstract notions of purgatory and hell to life through vivid descriptions.

The three purgatory poems, *The Vision of Tundale*, *Sir Owain* and *The Gast of Gy*, enabled the change of the protagonists through their fear of the tortures of purgatory and the possibility of hell as their final destination. Their fear of their probable future is similar to the fear of death experienced by Sir Gawain, as the threat of death enabled the possibility for self-

discovery. The changes made by Tundale and Sir Owain was for the better, cleansing them of sin in the fires of purgatory. Gy on the other hand became more aware of his faults, which is similar to the awareness exhibited by Sir Gawain after his supposed beheading. They both have the opportunity for repentance however, and repentance has the possibility to lead to change and conversion. The threat of purgatory and hell were not merely directed at the protagonists of the texts however.

As I commented on in Chapter 1, when someone reads literature, the worlds, characters and events come to life within the reader's mind. It is therefore only natural that the events, characters and worlds hold sway over the reader, thus enabling the possibility for change and conversion of the reader. Many of the traits inherent to these seemingly faulty protagonists are easy to identify with, some examples include: treachery, deceit, anger, envy, lechery and gluttony. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* it is possible to see how Sir Gawain turns away from the image as a perfect knight, and becoming more like the rest of humanity, making it possible to identify with him. Through the eyewitness accounts of purgatory in the purgatory visions, it is as though the reader is witnessing them as well, as the unfolding events take place within their mind. These same vivid descriptions can be seen in *The Prioress's Tale* and *The Second Nun's Tale*.

Even though death is featured heavily in the two tales, it is not the main focus of the tales. Through the postponement of the death of the protagonists, the witnesses of the unfolding events are shown the power of faith. The degree of faith the child and Cecilia had in the Virgin Mary and God in general, made their particular miracles possible. Powerful entities interceded in their death, which is reminiscent of Morgan le Fay's power to foil death on behalf Green Knight. These tales do however have a more didactic tone than the other texts, except *The Gast of Gy* however. The focus of the tales therefore is on the lessons the protagonists teach in their undead state. Their particular cases of undead, where death ceases

to work despite overwhelming physical trauma, are particularly graphic in nature, putting to use several tools to make an impression on the witnesses. It is then possible to see the effect liminal phases have as a catalyst for change.

The liminal phase the undead occupy between alive and dead, enables the conversion and change within not only the protagonists but within those who witness the liminal phases as well. The changes made possible from the liminal phases, are as varied as the subjects that goes through them. Dying and death are highly individual experiences, each coloring and shaping the changes made by the subject during the temporary process. Power exemplified enables the change and reevaluation of one's view on reality. One such example is quite clear in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where Gawain's faith in God waned, when faced with his own mortality, leading him to grasp for the proven power of magic to save his life.

It is probable to conclude that death becomes a tool for inciting change and conversion, not only of the subjects of the liminal phases, but of the witnesses as well. Powerful entities postpone, hinder and challenge the supposed permanent and unstoppable nature of death to show their power. If one has power over death, one appears to be all-powerful. The undead, who in these texts are created by the powerful entities; God, Christ, the Virgin Mary and Morgan le Faye, serve as ferrymen of information. Through the loss of a stable state either as alive or dead, they inhabit the fluid state in between the stable endpoints, and are therefore uniquely capable of relaying information over the previously unfordable river separating life and death. This fluid state is similar to the position literature itself is in, with its liminal position between being alive and dead. This is part of the reason for its ability to influence the reader in such a profound way. Through the information provided by the undead of the afterlife it is possible for us to make realizations of the unobservable. Our understanding of death is ever evolving however, and the changes that occur within our belief system are influenced by a myriad of factors.

The undead which occupies the middle ground between alive and dead enable us to explore these new changes, and give a voice to our fears and concerns. Through their experiences, we are either terrified by or placated by the knowledge of a life after death. The living dead are then our fear and hope exemplified. Through images of the undead, cessation of death, knowledge of the afterlife, or through the undead's devotion to God, change and conversion become possible. The effect of death does however change when death suddenly works again.

Some of the protagonists in these texts returned to the living after their experiences. Tundale, Sir Owain and Sir Gawain exited their liminal phase still as a member of the living. Their undead state ended as the liminal nature of their journey came to a close. Gy, the child and Cecilia on the other hand died completely. They are not all similar, though they all show a release and death which was preferable to their current state as a member of the undead. Gy finished his stay in purgatory before moving on to heaven, and the child and Cecilia was released from their mangled bodies. Both the child and Cecilia died for their faith, and thereby died as martyrs. Through their martyrdom, and very public release from this mortal world, they not only enable the chance for change and conversion for the people present. Martyrdom leads to a reaffirmation of faith, which serve to cement the faith of a believer, making it less likely for him to lose faith.

Death is and always will be a theme which it is impossible to gain perfect information on. Through exploring themes of death and dying we are able to give release to our fears enabling a catharsis of sorts. The change we effect when faced with the very real probability of death is based on the need for self-preservation. The purgatory visions exemplified a protagonist leaving the comforts of home to face the torturous afterlife. The visceral and terrifying nature of these journeys render a bleak outlook on death, and it also paints the picture of a vindictive and cruel God, where penance is gained through the tortures of the

flesh. *The Prioress's Tale* and *The Second Nun's Tale* in Chapter 3 stands in opposition to the purgatory poems. Death is not exemplified to be terrifying, as the portrayals of death are more comforting in nature. It is instead life that is painted in a bleak manner, and as life ends, the pure are saved by an all-powerful benign figure. Death becomes a release of the tortures of the flesh, enabling us to shed the physical which in some of the texts does not appear as important as the soul.

The soul often has a differing relationship with the physical body as it pertains to the afterlife and death. This relationship between the soul and body when it comes to death are themes that are also explored within these texts, though this relationship is not as readily available in them. The physical manifestation of the afterlife in *Sir Owain* creates an understanding that the souls within are inhabiting physical bodies. This is reversed in *The Vision of Tundale*, *The Prioress's Tale* and *The Second Nun's Tale*. Even though the afterlife in *The Prioress's Tale* and *The Second Nun's Tale* was glossed over for the most part. In the spiritual journey made by Tundale into the afterlife, his body remains on earth. His identity as Tundale however is still tied to the physical image of himself, which conforms to the physical nature of the tortures the souls in Hell were put through. These bodies might be temporary since, according the point made by Bynum, their final form will be recreated after the Last Judgment. *The Prioress's Tale* and *The Second Nun's Tale*, had little to say of the specific nature of death, at least that might influence our understanding of it. It did in its description and tone of their final death-scene limit the value of the body. Their soul appeared to be more important for the continuation of identity beyond their undead state.

All of the texts have dealt with death and the afterlife differently, creating just as many interpretations of the afterlife and the process of dying. Which is caused by the personal nature of death, as everyone deals with and experiences death differently. A fact that is exemplified in how the undead are witnessed differently, with reactions ranging from disgust



to fascination. How we handle death does not, on the other hand, change that these liminal phases have an influence on the reader. There is a possibility for change and conversion for the readers who witness the liminal phases of undead through the liminal space of literature. It is possible to see the effect literature can have through its ability to elicit emotional responses from the reader. When readers can identify with the protagonists of the text, i.e. Tundale, Sir Owain and Sir Gawain, it becomes more probable for change within the reader. The examples put forth by the faithful, i.e. the boy and Cecilia, reaffirms the faith of believers, giving them examples to strive for. These undead which are able to effect these changes stand opposition to the modern zombies however.

I started this thesis by looking at the modern zombie and concept of the undead, where I stated that the modern understanding of the zombie is different from the undead of the Middle Ages. It does not however negate the fact that they both enable a new interpretation of each other. My conclusion of the undead of the Middle Ages creates an image as messengers and catalysts for change and conversion. The same might be true for the modern zombie, as they may be a commentary of society enabling and striving for the change of the society that surrounds them. The study of the modern interpretation of the zombie in recent times has become more and more popular, and it is my hope that the undead from the Middle Ages can influence discussion of the liminal state of today's shambling zombie. There has not been a great deal of study done on the undead and the liminal phases they occupy, especially in the poetry of the Middle Ages, and this is but a small contribution to an area which deserves much deeper study than it is possible for me to supply within the scope of this thesis.

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