Name: _____ Date: _____

Sir Gawaine and the Riddle

Reading level 13 · 1387 words

One bright spring morning, while the court waited at Carleon, King Arthur was seized by an irresistible impulse to do something reckless. He called his favorite squire, Boisenard, put on plain armor with no badge or device, and slipped out of the castle without informing anyone, intending to surprise the queen. They sang as they rode, choosing their way through the forest for no better reason than the beauty of the day, until the trees grew thick and the paths dwindled and they were thoroughly lost. When night fell, Boisenard climbed a tall tree and discovered a light in the distance. It came from a grim castle with many towers, and the porter who answered their knocking warned them bluntly that sensible travelers would sleep in the woods instead.

Arthur, who found this warning fascinating, insisted on going in, and inside, the hall blazed with candles, and at the head of a long table sat an old knight in black, with a white beard, enormous shoulders and a golden locket hanging from his neck. He invited the strangers to supper, and afterward he leaned toward Arthur with eyes that sparkled like a young man's and proposed an extraordinary game. "Each of us strikes at the other's neck, one blow apiece. You first. If I survive, I strike you in return." Arthur drew Excalibur and swung with all his strength, and the old knight's head flew across the floor. Then the headless body stood up, retrieved its head, fixed it back upon its shoulders and laughed uproariously.

Now it was Arthur's turn, and he stood with his collar open while the knight swung his sword three times and each time stopped just short of the neck, thoroughly enjoying the king's expression. At last he offered a bargain. He would postpone the blow for twelve months and a day, if Arthur promised to return to the castle and give an answer to a riddle: what does a woman want most in the world? "I do this for my amusement," said the knight, "because I wish you to dread it." Arthur swore on the hilt of Excalibur and rode home, and the only person he confided in was Boisenard, who wept.

All that year Arthur questioned everyone he met, though every person gave a different answer; some said wealth, others said beauty, and still others said fine clothes, or flattery, or power. None of the answers sounded convincing, and as the year ran out, he began to wonder whether he was actually going to lose his head over a riddle. A fortnight before the deadline he put on his plain armor again and went to the forest, alone, to keep his promise. The day before it was due, he stumbled upon a small hut hidden under a huge oak, with a thread of smoke curling from its roof, and an old woman with a face like crumpled paper, sitting beside the hearth.

She greeted him by name, which startled him considerably, and said she knew the answer to

the riddle and would tell him in return for a promise. "One of your knights must marry me," she said, "whichever one I choose." Arthur hesitated for a considerable time. He had no right to promise another man's future, but he had even less right, he reasoned, to throw away his own, which belonged to his people. "I agree," he said. "What a woman most wants," said the old woman, "is to choose for herself." Arthur knew at once that this was right, and she added a second gift, a warning that the knight kept his life in the locket he wore, and that whoever broke it would break him.

In the great hall the next day, the old knight demanded the answer, and Arthur supplied it, and the old knight turned as pale as ash. Before he could speak, Arthur seized the chain and tore the locket from his neck. Inside lay a glass ball. "You asked me to play a game with you," said Arthur. "Now I will play one with you." He threw the ball down on the stone floor, and it shattered, and the knight cried out once and fell, and did not rise. The household shrank away in terror, and Arthur walked out of the castle without a single hand lifted against him. At the hut, he told the old woman he would keep his word, and lifted her onto his horse behind him, and treated her all the way home as though she were a queen.

At Carleon, the court was strolling through the meadows, and everyone turned to stare when the king rode out of the forest with a bent old woman holding on behind him. Arthur told them the whole story, and when he had finished, he asked the seventeen lords who were present whether he had done right to give his promise, and they replied that he had, and that they would have done anything to save him, whereupon the old woman pointed a bony finger at Gawaine. "That one," she said, "is the son of a king." Gawaine stepped forward at once, took her hand and kissed it, and not a single knight dared to smile, and eleven days later, in the chapel, they were married.

Gawaine was the proudest man at the court, and the wedding had humiliated him beyond description. As soon as the ceremony was over, he shut himself up in his own house and paced the chamber until dusk, thinking, for the first time in his life, about how it feels to be pitied. But when darkness descended, something in him changed. This lady was his wife, he told himself, because he had said so in front of God and the whole court, and a knight who neglected courtesy toward his own wife was no knight at all. He went to find her, and found her angry, and told her sincerely that he regretted his absence, and asked what he could do to make amends.

"It is much too dark in this room," she said. "Bring a light." Gawaine fetched two wax candles in golden holders and carried them into the room, and as the light fell on her face, he cried out, because the old woman had vanished, and a young woman with black hair and eyes as bright as jewels was standing in front of him. "Who are you?" he whispered. "I am your wife," she said. "An enchantment was laid upon me, and part of it dissolved when you accepted me as you did, with a generous heart. I must keep one half of it still. For half of every day I may look like this, and for half like the old woman. Which would you prefer, the day or the night?"

Gawaine considered the matter carefully, for if she wished to appear lovely before the world, she would have to endure the old woman's face at home, and if she accepted the old face in public, she would suffer the stares of strangers. Neither arrangement was fair. "My lady," he said, "you must decide this yourself, because it is your life." Then the lady laughed with delight and declared that his answer had broken the rest of the enchantment, and that she would be as she was now forever. She told him she was one of the Ladies of the Lake, who had abandoned her home beneath the water to become mortal, because she had once watched him weeping over a friend, and had wanted to discover what kind of knight he truly was.

The next morning, Gawaine took her by the hand and conducted her into the great hall, and when the people saw her, and heard what had happened, they cheered until the rafters trembled. The king laughed hardest of all, because he had been given the answer to a riddle by an old woman in a hut, and it had come back to him again through his nephew's marriage. A woman wants to choose for herself, and Gawaine, who had begun the day as a proud young man and a prisoner of his own pride, had given exactly that answer before he knew the question. There was not a knight at the court who would not have changed places with him.

Questions

1. What riddle did the knight in black ask King Arthur?

A. What is stronger than a king?
B. What does a woman want most in the world?
C. What is hidden in a locket?

2. What was the old woman's answer to the riddle?

A. To choose for herself
B. To be rich
C. To be beautiful

3. Why did Arthur promise that one of his knights would marry the old woman?

A. He believed it was the only way to save his own life, for his people's sake
B. He wanted to make Gawaine unhappy
C. He liked her house

4. What does Gawaine's answer to his wife's question show?

A. He didn't know which she preferred
B. He believed she should make decisions about her own life
C. He was afraid of her

5. In the sentence "I want you to dread it," what does dread mean?

A. Look forward to
B. Be afraid of
C. Forget

6. How did Arthur defeat the knight in black?

A. He broke the glass ball in the locket

B. He challenged him to a joust

C. He asked Merlin for help

Words to know

reckless: careless of danger

locket: small necklace case

amends: making things right

riddle: puzzling question

humiliated: deeply embarrassed

Answer key: Sir Gawaine and the Riddle

1. B. What does a woman want most in the world?
2. A. To choose for herself
3. A. He believed it was the only way to save his own life, for his people's sake
4. B. He believed she should make decisions about her own life
5. B. Be afraid of
6. A. He broke the glass ball in the locket