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The visual literacy of race in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

An assignment created by Wan-Chuan Kao

In this two-part assignment, Wan-Chuan Kao includes considerations of visual literacy for both a student essay and a short presentation. Students construct a rigorous comparative argument about Gawain across texts and/or film practicing visual literacy as a critical method.

Assignment context

This assignment is part of the course's investigation of the nexus of whiteness, race, environmental studies, and representations of Gawain in text and on the screen. Students consider the politics of white fragility and precarity in the neoliberal university, recognizing it as a racialized comfort zone of learning. They investigate how engaging Arthurian literature requires confronting racialism if not racism.

In the course, students examine medieval and postmedieval forms of racialization, negotiations with identity politics, and strategies for maintaining rigorous critical inquiry. Course readings introduce students to Michel Foucault's notion of environmental power, Brian Massumi's theory of neoliberal terror, and Peter Sloterdijk's concept of atmoterrorism. By centering on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, David Lowery's film *The Green Knight*, and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*, students analyze white environmentality as a technique of racial violence in all three works.

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In addition, students consider visual literacy, which requires them to move beyond description and ask how composition, color, framing, medium, scale, gesture, costume, and spatial design produce meaning, particularly in relation to whiteness, race, and the environment.

Critical essay assignment

Students compare the representations of Gawain in two texts (one of them *The Buried Giant*) or a text and a film. They must incorporate one or two secondary sources, and at least one secondary source must be published in academic journals or by academic presses after 1980. This excludes book reviews, non-academic websites, MA theses, PhD dissertations, newspapers, and popular magazines.

In the body of the essay, students must include one or two paragraphs that make a comparison between the literary representation of Gawain and a visual figuration of him. Students must examine how different media encode power, fragility, heroism, and racialized identity, and how visual form itself participates in the cultural production of "Gawain."

For example, a student might begin the visual literacy section in this way: "Whereas Kazuo Ishiguro depicts Gawain as sly and manipulative, David Lowery portrays him as naïve and immature. In this still image from the 2021 film, *The Green Knight*, Gawain...."

Visual literacy presentation

During the last week of classes, students create and present a 7-minute flash talk on one visual representation of Gawain and how it compares or contrasts with the textual Gawain.

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Students find **one** visual representation of Gawain in any visual medium—e.g., illumination, painting, sculpture, graphic novel or comic book, photography, or still images from films, animation, or theatrical productions. The only source that is off-limits is the original manuscript of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Visual literacy assignment requirements:

- Create 4-5 slides.
- Include a high-resolution image and provide a correct citation.
- Identify the physical, technical, and design components of each image.
- Situate the image in its respective cultural, social, and historical contexts.
- Compare and contrast the image of Gawain with the textual Gawain.

Visual literacy example slides

Goal: Students learn to consider images as *made objects intended to make meaning*. Visual analysis goes beyond naming or describing because it explains *how* an image influences a viewer's perception.

Questions to ask as students review images (such as example slides):

- What does the image ask viewers to notice first, and how does it direct the viewer's attention?
- What does the image make central? What is peripheral? What is hidden?
- How does the image make meaning—for instance, shaping our sense of Gawain.

Example: how does *authority* or *vulnerability* appear through armor, body (size/shape), clothing, landscape, or atmosphere?

- What is the historical/cultural context of the image and what assumptions are being made about (for instance) race, whiteness, masculinity, chivalry, environment, and power through its depiction of the text?

Activity

Cite this:

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- Where does the visual representation confirm the text? Where does it revise it?
- What does this image do that language cannot do (at least in the same way)?