

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in the Classroom (and on Screen)

Katrin Rupp, University of Neuchâtel

Introduction

Despite their decline towards the end of the 15th century, the Middle Ages have not ceased to capture the popular imagination. While the term “medieval” tends to be used negatively – to designate something as outmoded or to refer to practices of extreme violence, for example – the medieval spirit is conjured up in numerous contemporary books, films, comics, role playing games and historical re-enactments. Quite often, the only thing such modern approaches have in common with the medieval period is their setting in a remote world. But there are also those that take their inspiration from an identifiable medieval source.

A recent example is David Lowery’s 2021 film *The Green Knight*, an “epic fantasy adventure” ([IMDb](#)) based on the 14th-century anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In this poem, a mysterious knight all in green appears at King Arthur’s court in the Christmas season. He proposes a game to try the courage of King Arthur’s knights. One of them is to behead him with his gigantic axe and to be ready for a return blow in a year’s time. None of King Arthur’s brave knights is willing to accept the challenge. Eventually, Gawain, the most inexperienced among them, volunteers and cuts off the strange knight’s head in front of the entire court. To everyone’s amazement, the Green Knight miraculously survives the blow, picks up his severed head and leaves the court, reminding Gawain of the rules of the beheading game: Gawain must seek him out at the Green Chapel in a year’s time to fulfil his part of the deal.

The opening of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* shows in a nutshell the timeless appeal of this medieval text. Indeed, supernatural forces paired with heroic courage are the core elements of contemporary action films as well, just think of James Bond, for instance. And like in a James Bond movie, the medieval poem will also feature a clever and seductive female protagonist as the story moves forward. In *The Green Knight* David Lowery includes all these elements even as he changes the medieval plot and personnel in various ways. John Nugent describes *The Green Knight* as “a rivetingly weird and exceptionally beautiful fantasy film that offers no easy answers but ponders the biggest questions – through myths, mysticism, and men in crisis” ([Empire, 21 September 2021](#)).

Discussing the medieval poem and the modern film in the (grammar school) classroom allows students to ponder these “biggest questions” such as the value of loyalty and courage or the pull of temptation in different contexts, including their personal experiences. The film in particular is bound to appeal to young adults, since it “takes an age-old text and transposes into it an eminently contemporary subject: the failson, the son of privilege who, when confronted with the pressures of adulthood, ends up frozen in adolescence,” as Keith Watson puts it ([Slant Magazine, 28 July 2021](#)). In addition to these fundamental questions, a discussion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Green Knight* can be extended to other topics such as the history of the language, manuscript culture, chivalric codes and film studies. In short, a discussion in the classroom of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and its cinematic version is enriching and rewarding.

In the following, I would like to present a lesson plan that can be used and adjusted according to individual needs. Teachers will find ideas on how to approach the medieval poem and the modern film in the course of several sessions. All skills trained in English classes (speaking, reading, listening, writing) are covered.

45–90 minutes

- At the start, tell students that they will be reading a medieval text in a modern adaptation (see annotated bibliography for suggestions) as a homework.
- Ask students what they know of the Middle Ages and collect their answers.
- Pick some of the answers and get students to check their ideas / knowledge by doing some research on the Internet and present their findings to the class.
- Add information on King Arthur and the Round Table or get students to do some research on the Internet (if this has not been done yet).
- Introduce *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (use the introduction to your translation or the Internet for information).
- Students read part 1 of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a homework.

90–180 minutes

- Students discuss what makes *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* a medieval text for them.
- Show the beginning of the original Middle English text in the manuscript ([British Library Cotton MS Nero A X/2, fol. 95r](#)) and in a [transcription](#).
- Give students a [short introduction to Middle English](#).
- Play the [audio recording](#) of the first 19 lines of the poem for students to hear what Middle English sounded like.
- Talk [about the manuscript](#). The webpage also mentions alliteration and the bob and wheel pattern of the poem that you may wish to examine with your students.
- Students discuss the Green Knight. Is he human or monstrous or both? Evidence in text?
- Students think of how they would represent the Green Knight in a movie. They may draw him or use an online movie maker (e.g. [Invideo](#)).
- Show students how the Green Knight is depicted in the manuscript ([British Library Cotton MS Nero A X/2, fol. 94v](#)).
- Show students the beheading scene in *The Green Knight* (available on Apple TV or on DVD), minutes 15–25.
- Students compare the depiction of the Green Knight in the movie with their own drawings / films.
- Students may also include the initial 15 minutes of the 1982 movie *The Sword of the Valiant* (available on DVD from Swiss libraries) in their discussion.
- Students read part 2 of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a homework.

90–135 minutes

- Students discuss the depiction of Sir Gawain in the medieval poem and *The Green Knight* (and possibly *The Sword of the Valiant*); they may also think of how the film(s) is (are) a product of their time.
- Introduce [the code of chivalry](#) and the genre of [chivalric romance](#).
- Discuss Gawain's quest in the second part of the poem (and possibly in the movie).
- Students write a short essay on what they consider to be heroic qualities in our day and age. They may use Essel's quote in the film – “Why greatness? Why is goodness not enough?” (minutes 35-36) – as a starting point.
- Students read part 3 of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a homework.

90–180 minutes

- Ask students to write down Gawain's thoughts when the lady enters the bedroom for the first time. Get some of students to read them out loud.

- Introduce [the code of courtly love](#). Ask students if any of these ideas still apply today.
- Show the illumination in the manuscript of the initial bedroom scene ([British Library Cotton MS Nero A X/2, fol. 129r](#)).
- Students discuss the parallels between the hunting scenes and the bedroom scenes. They may include the hunting scenes in the film (starting at 1:14) in their discussion.
- Students read part 4 of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a homework.

90–180 minutes

- Show the [Green Chapel](#) and [Arthur's court](#) in the manuscript (British Library Cotton MS Nero A X/2, fols. 129v and 130r).
- Students discuss what the green girdle means to Sir Gawain and to Arthur's court respectively.
- In the *The Green Knight*, the girdle is given to Gawain by his mother (minutes 35-37), but it finds its way to the Lady of the Castle, who gives it back to Gawain. At the end of the film, Gawain removes the girdle. Ask students how these changes affect the way they interpret the girdle.
- Students write a short essay on the role of women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (and possibly the film).
- Students write a review of the poem and/or the film as a homework.
- Students may compare their film review with that of other critics (see the introduction for examples).

Suggestions for follow-up lessons

- Students may watch *The Sword of the Valiant*, a rather ludicrous cinematic adaptation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and compare it with *The Green Knight* (and the poem).
- Look at [14th-century fashion](#) and compare it to the costumes used in the film(s).
- Discuss other medieval texts that have served film makers as a source of inspiration, e.g. Robin Hood ballades or Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.
- Discuss J. R. R. Tolkien's translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and his use of medieval sources in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

Additional inspiration for teaching *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

<https://fliphtml5.com/zitw/bxgk/basic>

Translations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (a selection with annotations)

Andrew, Malcolm and Ronald Waldron, trans. *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript in Modern English Prose Translation: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008. [a student-friendly prose translation]

Armitage, Simon, trans. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. A New Verse Translation*. New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2008. [a poetic translation by the UK's current Poet Laureate with facing original text]

Barron, W., ed. and trans. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. An Authoritative Translation, Contexts, Criticism*. Manchester Medieval Studies. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998. [a scholarly edition of the Middle English text with a facing Modern English translation]

- Borroff, Marie and Laura Howes, ed. and trans. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Norton Critical Editions. W. W. Norton, 2009. [includes a translation of the text and selections from the original Middle English as well as ten critical essays]
- Raffel, Burton, trans. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Signet Classics. New York: Penguin Publishing, 2009. [a student-friendly verse translation]
- Harrison, Keith, trans. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. With an introduction and notes by Helen Cooper. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. [a verse translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*]

Further reading

- Aberth, John. *A Knight at the Movies. Medieval History on Film*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Ashe, Laura. "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Limits of Chivalry." *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance*. Ed. Laura Ashe, Ivana Djordjević and Judith Weiss. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 159-72.
- Bernau, Anke and Bettina Bildhauer, ed. *Medieval Film*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009.
- Brewer, Derek. "The Colour Green." *A Companion to the Gawain Poet*. Ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997. 181-90.
- Cooper, Helen. "The Supernatural." *A Companion to the Gawain Poet*. Ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997. 277-83.
- Craymer, Suzanne. "Signifying Chivalric Identities. Armor and Clothing in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Medieval Perspectives* 14.1 (1999): 50-60.
- Finke, Laurie and Martin Shichtman. *Cinematic Illuminations. The Middle Ages on Film*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.
- Fisher, Sheila. "Leaving Morgan Aside. Women, History, and Revisionism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Arthurian Women. A Casebook*. Ed. Thelma Fenster. New York: Routledge, 2000. 77-95.
- Gilbert, Jane. "Gender and Sexual Transgression." *A Companion to the Gawain Poet*. Ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997. 53-70.
- Goodman, Barbara. "The Female Spell-Caster in Middle English Romances: Heretical Outsider or Political Insider." *Essays in Medieval Studies* 15 (1998): 45-56.
- Gross, Gregory. "Secret Rules: Sex, Confession, and Truth in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Arthuriana* 4.2 (1994): 146-74.
- Harty, Kevin J. *The Reel Middle Ages: American, Western and Eastern European, Middle Eastern and Asian Films About Medieval Europe*. Jefferson and London: McFarland, 2006.
- Haydock, Nickolas. *Movie Medievalism. The Imaginary Middle Ages*. Jefferson and London: McFarland, 2008.
- Larrington, Carolyne. "English Chivalry and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*. Ed. Helen Fulton. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. 252-77.
- Pearsall, Derek. "Courtesy and Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: The Order of Shame and Embarrassment". *A Companion to the Gawain Poet*. Ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997. 351-60.

- Rooney, Anne. "The Hunts in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *A Companion to the Gawain Poet*. Ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997. 157-63.
- Twomey, Michael W. "Morgan le Fay at Hautdesert." *On Arthurian Women. Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries*. Ed. Bonnie Wheeler and Fiona Tolhurst. University of Michigan: Scriptorium Press, 2001. 103-19.