

***Piers the Plowman*: Langland's dream vision of social and spiritual reform**

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Abstract: *Piers the Plowman*, the famous dream allegory of William Langland, is a big blow to the prevalent hypocrisy of Medieval England society. Medieval England came across many upheavals which included the arrival of Anglo-Saxons, the Norman Conquest, the Feudal system, the Black Death, the Hundred Years' War, the Peasants' Revolt, and the War of the Roses. A society that was divided into a pyramid of sorts. A pyramid that was comprised of clergy and nobles at the top, in the middle there were scientists, craftsmen, and other artisans while the bottom was occupied by the peasants chiefly. This study aims to investigate the journey of the protagonist 'Will' and how the poem serves as a form of spiritual and social reform would also be evaluated. This allegorical narrative of Langland is supposed to have been written in the 14th century. The poem is a true manifestation of social satire and examines the themes of morality, social justice, and spirituality. William Langland beautifully teaches the aim of human birth through a series of dream visions along with that of appropriate social reform. The poem is mainly divided into three texts i.e., texts A, B, and C. It revolves around the central character 'Will', and exemplifies his spiritual journey along with the materialistic hurdles that come his way. The poem is a true embodiment of Christian values, where we find Langland suggesting ways to reform the corrupt Medieval society of England. Each vision comprises certain symbols, depicting and relating to some or the other form of materialism and propounding ways to stay aloof and unaffected by the same. Peasants or the common men find a special mention in the poem. Their struggle for life and their plight are portrayed by the author in the backdrop of symbolism.

Keywords: Medieval England, materialism, dream vision, spiritual journey, peasants

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Introduction

Literature has always been significant in introducing reformation and portraying the true picture of a society in the cultural and social context. Art, architecture, dialects, cuisines, and literature of an era tell the tale of the cultural heritage of a nation. The history of Medieval England consists of such works of art that brilliantly represent England's major historical and cultural events. The infamous Norman Conquest marks the beginning of the series of invasions on the land of England in the year 1066 by the Norman conquerors. They belonged to a province that was formerly known as Normandy located in Northwestern France. It was Duke William II whose leadership played a key role along with that of William the Conqueror. Several attacks were staged on the natives of England by the Normans. Despite endless efforts, the people of England could not resist those invasions. It was the English people and English culture that were affected most by the said invasions. Normans introduced a new government in society which brought certain changes in society's layout and functioning i.e., the exclusion of the elite class from society, the immigration of the natives, increase in the practice of endogamy. The native language of the country was affected by the prevalent circumstances. The conquest developed two English language categories: Old English and Middle English (Thomas 2008). Before the Norman's conquest Old English was the medium of communication. It was Middle English which the people adopted after the conquest. During this period, the English language was transformed concerning vocabulary, accent, sound, and word structure. The main difference between the two categories is the grammatical elements and the collection of words (Butcher 2013).

Another devastating event that shook the province of England was the 'Black Death'. It caused mass mortality in England, thus, affecting society drastically. The 'Black Death', a disguised plague, was spread between 1347 and 1352. The socio-economic feudal system was upset due to the severe depopulation. Each aspect of the life of natives was deeply affected by the pandemic. In England specifically, it opened with the invasion of Scotland in 1303 which sparked fighting between the two countries for several decades. Then there were climatic changes, ushering in what is known as the "Little Ice Age" and causing the Great Famine of 1315-1317. A bovine plague in 1319 exacerbated the impacts of the famine on the population (Sharp 2016). In 1337, the conflict between the kingdom of France and England arose due to

feudal disputes and to make matters worse, it lasted for a hundred long years running across the reigns of five dominant kings. It was just eleven years of this terrible war that the country met the deadly 'Black Death', which crushed one-third of Europe's population to death.

The Feudal system was one of the popular social practices of Medieval England. The clergy and the nobles, positioned at the top of the social hierarchy, enjoyed almost all the fundamental rights. It was the peasant class that remained at the bottom of the hierarchy. Carpenters, butchers, painters, food sellers, and weavers formed a large part of the society. Peasants used to live a life full of hardships i.e., working on the land and residing in rough huts. The nobility reconstructed the land ownership rules which peasants had to live by. Most of the population living in rural areas consisted of wealthy and powerful nobles such as kings and lords, known as the ruling class. The land owned by them was known as fief. The knights and other working-class people were provided pieces of land to work on and in return, they were supposed to provide military assistance and other services to the nobles. In the social hierarchy, the position of peasants was the most pitiful because they had to give a large portion of the grown crops to the nobility. Though the Middle Ages "features great examples of extreme religiosity, mystics, saints, the flagellants, mass pilgrimage, and the like but it would be wrong to assume that people were always very focused on God and religion" (Arnold 2005).

Literature played a vital role in the Medieval Ages in painting and depicting the layers of social hierarchy and helped bring reformation. Geoffrey Chaucer through his notable works contributed brilliantly to the era. At the same time, the Age also owes to William Langland for his masterpiece 'Piers the Plowman', "the most popular, if the least artistic, poem of the fourteenth century" (Legouis 2006, 113). Written in the form of a series of dream visions, 'Piers Plowman', also known as 'William's Vision of Piers Plowman' is a true manifestation of sarcasm and allegory on the prevalent social, ethical, religious, and economic issues of the time. This impressive allegory was composed in old alliterative meter in the later part of the fourteenth century, comprising three major texts i.e., texts A, B, and C. Text 'A' is the shortest one and relatively least formless. Text 'B' is chiefly the expansion of the third vision which the protagonist 'Will' sees. Text 'C' is the revised version of Text 'B'. *Piers Plowman's* first audience regarded it "as a compendiously didactic work, whose literary mode is narrative or historical" (Middleton 1982, 109). The poem is a perfect

amalgamation of the portrayal of social realism and the spiritual thirst of a being. It appears that the author was born in “about 1330 that is ten years before Chaucer and lived for some time in Malvern Hills” (Skeat 1869, 1).

Significance of prologue

The protagonist ‘Will’ himself is an embodiment of the author himself. The poem’s prologue manifests the role of the shepherd played by the author, who fell asleep on the May morning in Malvern Hills. The prologue begins in the following way:

In a somer seson, whan softe was the sonne,
I shoop me into shroudes as I a sheep were,

Medieval society including its natives from various backgrounds gets a special mention in the poem by William Langland. The author catches a glimpse and then outlines the differences between the lifestyles and rights of the rich, poor, greedy clerks, jesters, ploughman, clergy, idlers, and beggars. The prologue of the poem records the dual picture of Medieval society. One shows the wealthy class who indulges in showing off their riches and taking benefits of the rights provided to them. On the other hand, the peasant class or the poor have been shown as a victim of society, struggling throughout their lives for a single penny.

The same has been portrayed in the opening scene of the poem, which is as follows:

A faire felde ful of folke fonde I there bytwene,
Of alle maner of men, the mene and the riche,
Worchyng and wandryng as the worlde asketh.
Some put them to the plow, played ful selde,
In settynge and in sowynges wonken ful harde,
Wonnen that wast ours with glotony edestruyeth.

The prologue sketches the impartial role of the plowman who imposes heavy charges against men of various orders and ranks. He also keeps himself engaged with the fact that he has to convey to humanity to be on the path of truth. He strives to teach the ranks such as the knights, laborers, and clergy their duties towards mankind. Langland paints the picture of an ideal society where the king aims to make peace, getting assistance from knights, the peasants to work with honesty, and the clergy indulging in studying scriptures. A major section of the society engrossed in prayers finds special mention by Langland. The prologue

ends with a rather crowded picture of 14th-century people living prayerful lives. An example of the same is listed below:

And summe putten hem to pruide, apparayled hem ther-after,
In cuntenance of clothyng comen disgised
In prayers and in penance putten hem manye,
Al for love of oure lorde lyveden ful streyte,
In hope for to heveneriche blisse.

Construction of the visions: Big blow to the immorality

In the course of its twenty-two books the poem “employs a wide range of genres, styles, and tonal registers, complicating and qualifying its relationship to each” (Pearsall 1994). Langland has the index of holy characters to begin his poem. In the first *passus*, a glamorous lady named ‘Holy Church’ is introduced to the protagonist ‘Will’. Langland creates these holy characters to give a big blow to worldly pleasures which provide a bitter betrayal to mankind. ‘Will’ who is wandering meets Lady Holy Church who further warns him about society’s dominant hypocrisy and flattery. Later, the lady shows him the path to salvation. Langland is evenly focused on the characters playing a negative role in the poem. In the second *passus* of the poem, the reader comes across a shrewd character named ‘Lady Meed’. She is dressed up well with lots of jewelry and a crown, showing off her riches. Lady Meed shows a willingness to get married to falsehood. Here, Theology intervenes and takes the matter to the king’s court. Upon hearing the issue, the king threatens punishment for flattery and her companion falsehood. They plan to take refuge from wealthy merchants and minstrels. Langland suggests ways to deal with the prevalent delusion by creating characters like ‘Theology’ and ‘Lady Holy Church’.

The third *passus* manifests how Lady Meed who embodies falsehood tries her tricks on justice by providing a bribe. Later, Meed proposes marriage to Conscience but her efforts are in vain. It happened because of the strict opposition given by the Conscience. A befitting reply came from Conscience depicting his unwillingness to marry Lady Meed. A lively quotation is as follows:

Shal na more Mede be maistre, as she is nouthe,
Ac love and lowenesse and lewte to gederes,
Thise shal be maistres on moldetreuthe to save.

The third *passus* is a compatible portrayal of the practice of the clergy, king, and other bodies of the royal court. Conscience’s reply at the end

of the *passus* shows how bribery has ruined the priesthood. Once again Reason and Conscience convince the king not to let Lady Meed marry Falsehood. This was the first vision that 'Will' sees, including the first four *passūs*.

After portraying the loopholes of the society i.e., bribery, falsehood, etc., Langland frames the fourth *passus* which was envisioned to bring to the limelight the destructive 'Seven Deadly Sins'.

The 'Seven Deadly Sins' are delineated as Pride, Envy, Luxury, Wrath, Avarice, Gluttony and Sloth. It is "the homely realism of his descriptions of the Seven Deadly Sins which is personal to Langland, for these seven are everywhere in medieval literature" (Legouis 116). The significance of repentance is shown through the penance that these 'Seven Deadly Sins' perform. They confess their sins and show a willingness to go on a pilgrimage. The only character who restricts himself from going to the Church is Gluttony. A man whose soul is loaded with greed and lust repents only then when he is drunk and unfortunately awakes after a couple of days. Idleness is one of a human's prominent enemies, which acts as an obstacle to spiritual and moral growth. Langland has highlighted in the second vision the effect of idleness on a human's life. He personifies Idleness in the second vision where the reader finds that the penitents and Piers himself plan to plough his half acre. Those who refuse to work on the land due to idleness are punished by 'Hunger'. Once they satiate their hunger, it was found that they became idle again. Later, Piers received a pardon from the 'Truth' for the penitents' sins. The validity of the pardon was challenged by the priest and thus Piers tears the pardon into two. This was when 'Will' woke up and sought to meet Dowel. Sloth was yet another personified character which is the epitome of a lazy priest who is indulged in reading 'Rymes of Robin Hood' to perform his priestly duties. Here one finds Sins being capable of deep regret and thus repentance urges God to pardon the sinners.

And have reuthe on thise ribaudes that repente hem here sore,
That evere thei wratthed the in this world, in worde, thoughte, or dedes.

In Langland's dream allegory, one finds that most of his personified characters wander in search of Truth or for the sake of holy travels i.e., pilgrimages, etc. This was the very culture of Medieval England where people used to travel for the sake of trade, religion, etc. Langland uses the physical movements of his personified characters for a deeper

understanding of Theological concepts and to make the search for truth accessible.

Portrayal of spiritual figures at regular intervals

The holy figures that appear in the poem wake humanity up from the sleep of ignorance and lack of enlightenment. These personified figures include 'Lady Holy Church', 'Piers', 'Conscience', 'Truth', 'Reason', 'Thought', 'Patience', 'Tree of Charity', and 'Grace'. Each time a social vice is reflected in the poem, the solution of the same has also been suggested by the poet. In the course of its twenty-two books the poem "employs a wide range of genres, styles, and tonal registers, complicating and qualifying its relationship to each" (Pearsall 1994). The most dominating spiritual character is the 'Holy Church' who guides the protagonist to walk on the path of sanctity and search for the truth. This portrayal signifies that in whatever circumstances a human may be, it is God who plans to disguise Himself and then appears to help mankind in whatever possible way He can.

After the emergence of the 'Lady Holy Church', the appearance of 'Reason' takes place. As we can see that the famous 'Fair Field Full of Folk' is a place crowded with people having diverse professions and human traits. They had various vices in them i.e., falsehood, envy, anger, etc. 'Reason' appears in front of them and delivers his holy sermon to them for the purification of their soul. The importance of holy sermons and their impact on the human mind has been portrayed by the poet. It was the 'Reason's sermon' that encouraged the folk for further repentance for their sins. Later, the most eminent character appears named 'Piers' who is a plowman by profession, after whose name the poem has been given its title. He makes his first appearance in Vision 2. In Piers, the author creates "a symbol who eventually united the ideal of the common man with the ideal of God-made-man" (Daiches 2004, 127). He puts a condition in front of the folks that whosoever helps Piers in plowing his field will be getting spiritual guidance in return. It is because of Piers's urge that 'Seven Deadly Sins' agree to confess. In penance, they all attempt to go on a pilgrimage of Truth. This is how Piers introduced purification to the said sins. Later, in this vision, Langland attempts to bring to limelight hunger and idleness and thus teach people the significance of hard-work and the purity of heart.

Further, the appearance of 'Dowell, Dobetter, and Dobest' spreads the light of optimism on the path of spirituality. To find a life full of

contentment and free from vices, the poet emphasizes and tells the value of doing good, doing better, and doing best. Here, the fake religion and the corrupt church are on the target. A character named 'Wit' appears to provide in-depth knowledge of Dobest to 'Will'. Will is further encouraged to follow the path of truthfulness and give preference to doing the good with all. These divine characters suggest ways to stay aloof from the corruption of the church, and they prove to be a victory of light over darkness, truth over falsehood, and life over death.

Conclusion

Langland through his masterpiece breaks many stereotypes and introduces reformation. People of Medieval England believed in many superstitions. One instance of the same is that some folks believed that a human soul was merely a combination of flesh and blood which dispersed to Heaven after the death of a being. People even did not favor thinking that it was God who created this universe. Langland's characters are hereby formed to reciprocate the said thought. The visions that 'Will' sees are framed as a social and moral satire that promotes the search for the divine truth. This is Langland's knowledge of his contemporary society. The chaos and the ignorance portrayed by him along with the suitable solution for the same are commendable. The significance of the last dream that 'Will' sees is of great importance. In the said dream, he visualizes the coming of Jesus into Hell and cherishes His victory over Satan. Jesus, who is Piers in the poem, goes through the sufferings and pain of the entire humanity, "if he be not Christ Himself, he is at least one of the lowly mankind, in whom Christ became incarnate and of whom He made His apostles" (Legouis 2006, 118). The conclusive part of the dream sketches the episode where Conscience turns to be a pilgrim and seeks the Piers' companionship. Thus, the protagonist awakes in tears from the dream.

The conclusive scene of the poem is quite climatic in tone and manner. It sets new standards of spirituality containing appropriate religious reforms. Love, sympathy, cooperation, and patriotism are the virtues that find special mention in the poem. Falsehood, bribery, anger, and lust are the vices that were the target of Langland. He skillfully brought to the limelight the flaws of the church. The poet sets new standards for the working of these places of devotion. The cunning and greedy attitudes of the clergy and the friars are depicted by him in his visions. He circulates the message that by remaining kind

and humanistic one can easily gain God's grace and that's the sole purpose of a human's life.

To paint the picture of contemporary society, Langland uses his imagery, poetic language, and a wide range of literary genres. He makes us familiar with the harsh realities of medieval times. He is not in favor of a fanciful and poetic piece of literature. Rather, he chooses to be harsh at times. His phenomenal work acts as an eye-opener and thus brings forth the hidden vices of medieval society and humans as well. He dreamt of introducing social and spiritual reform in society and he could beautifully do so.

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