



Langland's Piers Plowman: A Cultural Analysis

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Abstract: Across the 12th and 13th centuries, the population of Europe increased hugely. In the feudal system society was organized as a pyramid of sorts. The clergy and nobles were at the top, with a great many peasants at the bottom. In the middle were the scientists, merchants, craftsmen and yeoman farmers. Certain aspects of the Middle Ages seem rather glamorous such as kings, queens, knights, and other rumors that surrounded the time period, but overall, the Middle Ages were not a fun and fancy-free type of time. Many fundamental ideas of western culture developed in this middle period. The Middle Ages produced many works that reveal the culture and thought of that age. William Langland's *Piers Plowman* is one of the defining works of late medieval literature, as well as of the English canon. Piers the Plowman or The Vision of Piers the Plowman is an impressive allegory, deeply concerned with social, religious, ethical and economic problems of the time containing a profound consideration of the good life and of man's religious vocation. The poem is a fine synthesis of social realism and religious vision.

Key Words: Feudal system, Medieval literature, Allegory, Culture, Social realism

Across the 12th and 13th centuries, the population of Europe increased hugely. In the feudal system society was organized as a pyramid of sorts. The clergy and nobles were at the top, with a great many peasants at the bottom. In the middle were the scientists, merchants, craftsmen and yeoman farmers. In the cities, people had all kinds of business: there were merchants, salesmen, carpenters, butchers, weavers, food sellers, architects, painters and jugglers, and in the countryside there were those who owned their own land. The expectancy of life for peasants was very low. Peasants worked on the land and lived in rough huts, which they often shared with their animals. They slept on straw mattresses on the floor. Certain aspects of the Middle Ages seem rather glamorous such as kings, queens, knights, and other rumors that surrounded the time period, but overall, the Middle Ages were not a fun and fancy free type of time. Many fundamental ideas of western culture developed in this middle period.

The state and culture of society is better understood after a glance at the literature of that time. The Middle Ages produced many works that reveal the culture and thought of that age. A sense of transience of earthly life pressed hard on the Middle Ages, and medieval writers developed their own kind of cadence for its expression (Daiches 2004: 45). The poetry, in the middle of the thirteenth century was "isolated", but in the early years of the fourteenth century, various forms of poetry "no longer exclusively religious or chivalrous were multiplied" (Legouis 2006: 92). The fourteenth century developed the satirical spirit in adaptations of fabliau, "the first real challenge in European literature to the notion of heroic idealism as a way of life" (Daiches 2004: 69).



Although Geoffrey Chaucer marks the brilliant culmination of the Middle English literature and his great works constitute the bulk of its glory, the literary history of the age also refers the name of William Langland for *Piers Plowman*, “the most popular, if the least artistic, poem of the fourteenth century” (Legouis 2006:113). Written in the old alliterative meter in the later part of the fourteenth century, Langland’s *Piers the Plowman* or *The Vision of Piers the Plowman* is an impressive allegory, deeply concerned with social, religious, ethical and economic problems of the time containing a profound consideration of the good life and of man’s religious vocation. Though Chaucer and Langland are contemporary writers, *Piers Plowman* seems a lot older than Chaucer’s rhymed verse. *Piers Plowman* is one of the defining works of late medieval literature, as well as of the English canon. The characters in this poem are not as real as Chaucer’s. The crowd “swarms as in a thronged market place, a contrast to Chaucer’s peaceful picture of his pilgrims” (Legouis 2006: 115).

Piers Plowman falls into “three texts of unequal length”, the first, the shortest and the least formless, dates from 1362. The date of the B-text, which greatly expands the third vision, is 1377, and the C-text, a revision of B belongs to the end of the century, between 1395 and 1398. Most scholars now believe that at least the A and B texts are the work of William Langland, and the third text is the work of two or more writers. *Piers Plowman*’s first audience regarded it “as a compendiously didactic work, whose literary mode is narrative or historical” (Middleton 1982: 109). Although didactic in tone and ethical in sentiment, the poem comprises a fine synthesis of social realism and religious vision. 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). He certainly refers to himself as Will in the poem, and whose biography has been deduced from passages in the poem. The prologue depicts how the poet, disguised as a shepherd, fell asleep one May morning on the Malvern Hills

*“In a somere seyson. When softe was the sonne
I schop me into shroud as I a shepherd were”*

A dream vision, a common medieval form involves allegory to relate the dream vision and truth in disguised form. The poem consists of eleven visions and has the incoherence and inconsequence of a dream. In his dream he had a vision of a lofty tower with a dungeon in a dell beneath it, and between them was a vast field full of folks representing the threefold universe, earth in between heaven and hell.

The portrayal of diverse people- rich, poor, idlers, workers, bad clerks, jesters, beggars, and ploughmen, each doing his business, reveals much about the values of society in late medieval England. The poets’ worries and anxieties about the contemporary life find voice in *Piers Plowman* and he sadly says how most people prefer the false treasures of this world than the true treasure of the heaven. The opening scene is set thus:

*A feire felde ful of folks fonde I there bytwene,
Of alle maner of men, the mene and the riche,
Worchyng and wandryng as the worlde asketh.
Some putten hem to the plow, pleyed ful selde,
In settyng and in sowynge swonken ful harde,
And wonnen that wastours with glotonye distruyeth.*

Though the Middle Age “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). The average person’s life was filled with a great deal of work and modest earnings. The



wealthier people of society often had a much easier time in life, they did not have to do much hard labor at all and in fact often had live in servants. The artisans such as the businessmen, carpenters, clerks, tailors, and others mentioned in the Prologue, enjoyed growing prosperity. This Prologue, as in Chaucer's Prologue, records a picture of the English society of the 14th century. The prologue ends with another crowded picture of the worthy people who live prayerful lives:

*And some putten hem to pruyde, aparailed hem thereafter,
In contenaunce of clothyng comen disguised.
In prayers and in penance putten hem manye,
Al for loue of ower lorde lyueden ful streyte,
In hope forto haue heueneriche blisse. . . .*

Against the bitter portrayal of the earthly pleasures the poet presents those holy souls who live prayerful lives in love of God. The first 'passus' introduced a beautiful lady, Holy Church, who first shows him the world dominated by flattery and hypocrisy and then the path of salvation. In the second 'passus' the symbol of evil and worldly corruptions, Lady Meed, wearing precious jewellery, and a crown richer than the king appears to be married to falsehood, but the objection of Theology causes the matter to be proceeded to London, to the king's court, where the king threatens punishment to falsehood and flattery who run off and take refuge with the minstrels and merchants. Meed tries her tricks on the justice in the third 'passus' as she recommends to bribe justice. Marriage of Meed and conscience is proposed but conscience opposes. We are shown a lively description of the argument conscience gives:

*Shal na more Mede be maistre, as she is nouthe,
Ac love and lowenesse and lewte togederes,
Thise shal be maistres on molde treuthe to save.*

In passus IV there is an argument with wit, wisdom, peace, reason, and wrong. The king is convinced by reason at the end and asks him to stay with him forever. In passus V the poet awakes and falls asleep again. He says, "and thane saw I moche more" the same field full of folk, the reason preaching the people the punishment for sin. The Seven Deadly Sins- Pride, Envy, Luxury, Wrath, Avarice, Gluttony and Sloth are moved to repent. 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 picture of Gluttony is the most appealing as he stops on his way to Church. He is a gluttonous person, who does not repent until he has made himself drunk and awakes two days later. His fellow drinkers are real people rather than personification:

*Cesse the souteresse sat on the benche,
Watte the warner and hys wyf bothe,
Tymme the tynkere and tweyne of his prentis,
Hikke the hakeneyman and hughe the nedeler,
Clarice of cokkeslane and the clerke of the cherche,
Dawe the dykere and a dozeine other.*



Throughout the poem, people are wandering and traveling in search of the truth. The majority of medieval people travelled a lot. They went on pilgrimage, and those involved in trade certainly travelled, across extraordinary distances. The physical movement and travel in *Piers Plowman* is used as an allegory for a deeper search for truth. This is a new use of the dream allegory. There is rapidity in the verse, a sense of men at work, that is unparalleled in medieval English literature. The poet sees many characters who are personifications of different attributes. The Sloth appears as a lazy priest who prefers to read “rymes of Robyn Hood’ to perform his priestly duties. All the Sins are capable of remorse and repentance prays to God for the kneeling sinners:

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

When the crowd wishes to seek the truth, that is the only path to heaven, no one knows the road, not even the palmer who has recently visited a famous shrine. The vision then develops into the moral and social satire to a vast allegorical search for truth. Strangely enough, the poet is conscious of the prevalent confusion in contemporary life and surroundings around as there is lack of faith and religion and in an attempt to interpret life, they do not seem to understand the truth. Certain people in the Middle Ages believed that the soul was “nothing but blood, and simply disappeared at the point of death, others thought that there was” no reason to think that it was God who made plants and crops grow, but just the innate properties of working and feeding the soil” (Arnold 2014). It is the timer when the person appears who names the poem, *Piers Plowman*, the only guide they can find. Piers offers to lead the crowd to the way to truth through the allegorical country. The difficulties cause the most corrupt and pardoner back and a common woman following Piers. Piers announces that before directing them he must plough half an acre of land and the lovely ladies will sew chasubles and everybody will follow him in ploughing. 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) and the symbolic significance of ploughing takes in all the good works faithfully and sincerely performed. Some escape their task are left in the hands of hunger and others who work eagerly are rewarded in the hands of truth, that promises eternal life to those who do good and damnation to those who do evil. Having shown the ills and vices of life, the poem’s second text consists of three dream visions, the vision of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest. The quest for the search of good life, for truth, and for God becomes the three stages of spiritual progress- to do well, to do better, and to do best. The triple visions of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest unfold their fight against the sins going on simultaneously on other places. There is argument on sin and salvation and on faith and works to signify fight against corruption in the church and false religion. Faith, Hope and Love as the guiding principles culminate in charity. Dowel concludes with the victory of life over death, of light over darkness, and of truth over falsehood. He has a vision of the Christ’s descent into Hell and his victory over Satan. The suffering Christ is seen wearing the humanity of Piers, the ploughman, who is a Christian, “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” (Legouis2006: 118). The attacks of Antichrist and the seven sins pressing the virtue hard and spoiling “the crop of treuthe” and at the end the Conscience turns pilgrim to seek for Piers Plowman, and the poet awakes in tears. About this final scene, Simpson writes:



Even if this climactic and enigmatic passage may seem triumphally to herald a new form of unmediated, lay spirituality, I want nevertheless to argue that for Langland this is a moment of terrible despair, and an admission of at least provisional defeat for the ambitious project of his poem. . . . The Church's failure to dispense penance provokes Conscience's pilgrimage into the wide world outside the Church, and leaves nothing between him and God but grace alone. (Simpson2002: 347)

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). In it, Langland uses language and characterization to develop a group portrait of his society and to establish relationship with the realities of life. He is a poet of sensibility who has tried to give voice to many sided realities of medieval culture. He reveals distortions and incongruities of the social system and sincerely tries to correct ways of the world, and stands up against inconvenient situations and people. His satire is piercing and hurting but with tenderness he highlights earthly pleasure prevalent in the contemporary society as well as his religious vision. Langland was opposed to the practices of his time and his attacks on the vices of the clergy are such as were common and current in the Middle Ages. Though it lacks artistic merits, yet it is a remarkable work that seriously probes and critiques the social and moral life of the age. It includes all the elements that concern humanity and remains a fine mirror of the medieval life.

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