



Do *Pearl*, *Patience* and *Sir Gawain* present the same concept of humanity through their portraits of their protagonists?

Rachel King

In *Pearl*, *Patience* and *Sir Gawain*, the deficiencies of the three protagonists are exposed in order to create a coherent concept of humanity as fundamentally imperfect. The Dreamer, Jonah and Gawain all fail to live up to an ideal; that is, they are ultimately unable to achieve and/or maintain the high standards to which they are held. While the protagonists of both *Pearl* and *Patience* are held to the standard of Christian perfection, the ideal in *Sir Gawain* is made up of a mixture of secular and religious values. Accordingly, the Dreamer's and Jonah's conduct is assessed by the heavenly figures of the Pearl-maiden and God, whereas Gawain faces the judgement of the Green Knight. The function of the tests set for each protagonist by the corresponding authority figure is identical: to show that an irreconcilable disparity exists between the earthly and the ideal. In this essay, I will examine the poems' depiction of the ideal value systems to which humanity is expected to conform, the way in which the protagonists are shown to be unable to fulfil the demands of the ideal and are shown instead to live their lives 'on purely human terms, accepting the values of this world'.¹

The miscomprehension that results from the conversation between the Dreamer and the Pearl-maiden in *Pearl* arises from the contrasting value systems – earthly and heavenly – of father and daughter. The incompatibility of the two approaches to human experiences is brought to light by the 'communicative short-circuits and misunderstandings'² which characterise their discourse. The Pearl-maiden represents the ideal; her appearance and understanding are 'withouten spot' (1.12).³ It is against the Pearl-maiden's perfection and supreme understanding of the divine that the Dreamer is to be compared. The aspects and details of Christian perfection are revealed in the course of the poem by the Pearl-maiden as corrective counsel as they arise from the Dreamer's demonstration of the opposite, earthly view of human experience.

In *Patience*, however, the narrator opens the poem by stating the necessity of the virtue of patience ('Pacience is a point, þa3 hit displese ofte' 1.1) and continues to provide the reader with a clear understanding of its importance. His investigation into the meaning of patience includes the recollection that 'Christ included patience among the eight Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount'.⁴ The Beatitudes function as criteria by which humans should live their lives and hope to attain grace. Jay Schleusener explains that the poet's assertion that poverty and patience 'arn fettled in on forme' (1.38) alludes to Augustine's interpretation of the Beatitudes as 'the poles of a hierarchy of maxims which is at once a linear ascent to perfection and a cycle of progress which returns to its own beginning'.⁵ Augustine's *De Sermone Domini in Monte* argues that the first seven Beatitudes 'constitute perfection' and

¹ A.C. Spearing, *The Gawain-poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p.29.

² Ad. Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain Poet* (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman, 1996), p.147.

³ *Pearl* in M. Andrew and R. Waldron, (eds.), *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), p. 54, l.12; all further quotations from *Pearl*, *Patience* and *Sir Gawain* will be taken from this edition and line references given in parentheses.

⁴ Thorlac Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle English Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p.139-40

⁵ Jay Schleusener "Patience," Lines 35-40' *Modern Philology*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (Aug., 1969), pp.64-66.

the eighth 'starts anew, as it were, from the very beginning: it clarifies and approves what is already complete' and 'designate[s] the perfect man'.⁶ As such, the Beatitudes create a cyclical symbol of perfection against which Jonah is to be measured.

Just as the eight Beatitudes are intrinsically linked, so are the 'fyue poyntez' (l.627) of the 'pentangel' (l.636), the image displayed on Sir Gawain's 'schelde and cote' (l.637) as a symbol of knightly perfection in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The 'endelez knot' (l.630), so called because 'vche lyne vmbelappez and loukez in oPer' (l.628), represents a set of highly regarded virtues that Gawain, as the 'gentylest kny3t' (l.639), is seen to embody. The virtues are grouped collectively under 'courtesy' and include 'battlefield', 'religious and social ones'.⁷ The Green Knight is concerned to test this chivalric ideal; that is, the 'kydde cortaysye' (l.263) that is 'Pe reuel and Pe renoun of Pe Rounde Table' (l.313). The pentangle acts as an outward sign of Gawain's supposed inner virtue, it is a 'bytoknyng of trawPe' (l.626), a symbol of his integrity and commitment to all aspects of the chivalric ideal. He certainly appears to fulfil the chivalric expectations in his 'physical perfection',⁸ displays of courtesy (for example in his address to Arthur, ll.343-366) and later as 'a virtuoso performer of his game of courtly love'⁹ with the lady. Gawain sets out on his adventure 'Voyded of vche vylany, with vertuez enourned' (l.634), appearing to be as spotless as the Pearl-maiden herself.

Perfection is, by its very definition, total. However, all three protagonists are shown to be susceptible to misdemeanour. The theme of possession runs through all three poems and is functional in its presentation of humanity's potentially covetous preoccupation with material objects. The Dreamer, Jonah and Gawain all exhibit greed of some sort, believing that they are entitled to the possession of a physical entity that does not belong to them by right and have to be brought to a realization of this fault by the three authoritative figures. Putter notes that the 'landscape in Pearl allegorizes this predicament of human desire, of always wanting "more and more"'.¹⁰ For the Dreamer, his expectant desire is qualified by his observation that both good and bad experiences seem to come all at once (ll.129-132). The garden contains no end of incredible sights ('More meruayle', l.157) and the Dreamer's 'desire' increases exponentially as he progresses through the garden: 'And euer me longed ay more and more' (l.144) / 'More and more, and 3et wel mare, / Me lyste to se Pe broke by3onde' (ll. 145-6). The Dreamer's 'insatiable desire to advance' and to reach the other side of the stream is indicative of humanity's never ending 'quest for satisfaction'.¹¹ In addition, the Dreamer's metonymic description of his daughter as a 'perle' is indicative of the human materiality. His expressed admiration of the Pearl-maiden's clothing 'Dat wro3t Py wede he watz ful wys' (l.785) and concern about her living arrangements ('Haf 3e no wonez in castel-walle, / Ne maner Per 3e may mete and won?') (ll.916-7) reveal his fixation with earthly reality and consequent inability to transcend physical existence. His obsession with physical actuality is such that he 'leuez noPynk bot 3e hit sy3e' (l.308), which hinders his ability to comprehend either the Pearl-maiden's transformed appearance or her speech. For example, he is unable to understand that there exists both an earthly and a heavenly Jerusalem: 'Pou tellez me of Jerusalem Pe ryche ryalle, / Per Daudid dere watz dy3t on trone, / Bot by Pyse holtez hit con not hone, / Bot in Judée hit is, Dat noble note' (ll.919-22). Felicity Riddy argues that the Dreamer's ascribed vocation as jeweller is particularly efficacious because the way in which

⁶ *Patrologiae Latinae*, vol. 34, cols. 1234-35, in *Fathers of the Church*, trans. D. J. Kavanagh (New York, 1951), 11:26, 29-30. in Schelusener.

⁷ Christine Chism, *Alliterative Revivals* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2002), p.86.

⁸ A. M. Markman, 'The Meaning of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', *PMLA*, Vol. 72, No. 4, (Sept., 1957), p.576.

⁹ Ad. Putter, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and French Arthurian Romance* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1995), p.315.

¹⁰ Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain-poet*, p.156.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.155.

'jewels pass through' jewellers' hands mirrors 'the temporariness of the relation between parent and dead child'.¹² Thus, the Pearl-maiden's criticism: 'Pou art no kynde jueler' (l.276) plays upon the analogy in order to emphasise the Dreamer's inadequacy, implying that just as a 'proper jeweller' would recognize that possession of his jewels is only temporary, so should the Dreamer understand the transitory nature ('raysoun bref' l.268) of earthly existence and realize that his extreme level of grief is unwarranted. The Dreamer's initial joy at seeing the Pearl-maiden is founded in a mistaken belief that she has, in effect, been returned to his possession and that he can 'wony with hyt in schyr wod-schawez' (l.284) indefinitely.

Jonah exhibits a similarly reprehensible attitude to possession and material prosperity in *Patience*. The narrator emphasises the significance of pouerté (l.35), the eighth Beatitude at the beginning of the poem, stating that 'pouerté and pacyence arn nedes playferes' (l.45) because they are 'not qualities spontaneously cultivated but the unavoidable demands imposed by circumstance'.¹³ Whereas the narrator has learnt that patience is necessary from his own state of 'pouerté' (l.35), Jonah is shown to actively resist both patience and poverty. The poet's elaboration of the Biblical text in the description of Jonah's attempt to escape to Tarshish is functional in the presentation of humans as overly concerned with material wealth and possession. Jonah chooses 'a fayr schyp' (l.98) equipped with all of the state-of-the-art technology of a contemporary medieval trading ship believing that its earthly value guarantees safe passage. What Jonah does not recognize is that however magnificent the 'swete schip' (l.108) - however great the earthly value - it is insignificant in heavenly terms and at the mercy of God's will. Jonah's excessive desire for and inappropriate attitude to material wealth is exposed for the second time by God in His creation of the 'fayrest bynde...Pat euer burne wyste' (l.444). Jonah's assertion that 'a worPoker won to welde I neuer keped' (l.464) betrays his misconceived belief that the woodbine is his to possess and to enjoy indefinitely. Although Putter argues that God's destruction of the woodbine is not 'to demonstrate his supremacy, but rather to make Jonah understand that he, too, feels attachment to creation',¹⁴ the episode undeniably reminds Jonah of his place in the divine order. Jonah's violent, indignant reaction to the loss of the shelter draws attention to his selfish sense of entitlement and material greed. The precept that humanity has difficulty in understanding the divine order and divine justice recurs in *Pearl*, where the Pearl-maiden's attempt to explain her high heavenly status ('a quene!', l.492) is thwarted by the Dreamer's misinterpretation of the parable of the vineyard because his sense of entitlement and justice is developed in material terms: that only those who have 'endured in worlde stronge' (l.476) and 'With bodily bale' (l.478) deserve a greater reward than those who have done 'Pe lasse in werke' (l.599).

Gawain's realization that he has taken possession of and, more specifically, retained the girdle leads to his self-accusation of 'couetyse' (l.2374); that is, of avarice. The accuracy of his choice of noun is questionable because his acceptance and retention of the 'luf-lace' (l.1874, l.2438) was not motivated by material greed but because he hoped it would protect him from a mortal blow ('cowardyse me ta3t / To acorde me with couetyse', ll.2379-80). Indeed, his failure lies not with the acquisition of the girdle itself, but with the failure to relinquish it to Bertilak in the exchange of winnings. Gawain cannot be guilty of avarice in a straightforward sense since he does not desire the girdle itself, but what he believes it promises: invulnerability in the face of the Green Knight's issuance of a potentially mortal return blow. Rather, he is guilty of 'untruthfulness, fear of death, and the greed to live longer than the amount of time which has been ordained'¹⁵. The pleasure that Gawain derives from

¹² Felicity Riddy, 'Jewels in *Pearl*' in Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, (eds.), *A Companion to the Gawain Poet* (Woodbridge: D.S Brewer, 1997), p.154.

¹³ Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain-poet*, p.112.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.140.

¹⁵ Richard Newhauser 'Scriptural and Devotional Sources' in *A Companion to the Gawain-poet*, p.271.

the possession of the girdle ('Pus myry he watz neuer are, / Syn he com hider, er Bis', ll.1891-2) is literally his renewed sense of *joie de vivre*. Putter comments that 'the correspondences between Jonah and Gawain come to light'¹⁶ from their respective expressions of delight: Jonah too is shown to be delighted ('Watz neuer so joyful a Jue as Jonas watz Penne', l.109) when he thinks he has 'so derfly ascaped' (l.110) harm by acquiring passage on the boat to Tarshish. There is also a comparison to be drawn between the protagonists of *Gawain* and *Patience* and the Dreamer, who derives joy from the thought of being re-united with his daughter: 'Now were I at yow by3onde Bis wawez, / I were a joyfol jueler' (ll.287-8). The human tendency to measure value in material terms is evident in Gawain's consideration of the girdle as 'a juel for Pe jopardé Pat hym jugged were' (l.1856), echoing *Pearl*. The Dreamer describes the Pearl-maiden as 'Pat wele / Pat wont watz whyle deuoyde my wrange / And heuen my happe and al my hele' (ll.14-16); similarly, the girdle is a 'precious thing' which dispels Gawain's own 'wrange'. Indeed, the link between materiality and happiness is inherent within the noun 'wele' (l. 2037) itself, which means: 'happiness, good fortune, prosperity; wealth, costliness; *as n.* precious one'.¹⁷

Ultimately, for the protagonists, earthly value systems prevail and their desire for the physical comfort that material objects offer is illustrative of the supreme value that humans place upon life and their common instinct for survival. Gawain has 'fayled' (l.2356) at the very last hurdle because human instinct prevails, causing him to break his 'trawPe' (l.1108) in order to protect his life. Although, 'knights are under no obligation to risk their lives wantonly',¹⁸ chivalric culture demanded that 'the public and the private were the same; there was no such thing as "privacy"'.¹⁹ The symbol of the pentangle is used to indicate that there should be no discrepancy between Gawain's inner and outer self. Ironically, it is his concern to act 'as a kny3t fallez' (l.1303) that leads to his downfall; he succumbs to the lady's 'narrative fashioning'²⁰ of a publicly approved identity ('of alle cheualry to chose, Pe chef Pyng alosed / Is Pe lel layk of luf, Pe lettrure of armes' ll.1512-3) and falls 'for one of the oldest commonplaces of romance: the talismanic love-token'.²¹ In fact, by agreeing to withhold the girdle from his host (to 'disceuer hit neuer', l.1862) he is not only guilty of breaking his word, but of constructing a private self - albeit unknowingly.²² That Gawain appears to be unaware of his transgression indicates that the life-instinct operates subliminally and is the preserve the private self. Indeed, Gawain pronounces outwardly that he would rather die than fail in his task ('me als fayn to falle feye as fayly of myyn ernde', l.1067) and immediately refuses the guide's unambiguous offer to 'lelly [Gawain's] layne and lauce neuer tale' (l.2124) if Gawain 'fondet to fle' (l.2125) to save his life. Gawain is thus shown to vehemently deny explicit invitations to break his trawPe, making his concealment of the girdle appear to be all the more of an innate human reaction to his situation. In retaining the girdle and constructing a private self, he is shown to subscribe to the same earthly value system as the animals on the hunt; that is, to share the 'lowest common denominator of being alive, of belonging to the order of *kynde*'.²³ The poet highlights the similarity between Gawain and the fox with the use of the verb 'schunt' (l.2280, 1902) to describe both the movement of fox and of Gawain as they instinctively try to avoid death.²⁴

¹⁶ Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain-poet*, p.134.

¹⁷ Glossary of *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, p.359.

¹⁸ D. Pearsall, 'Courtesy and Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: The Order of Shame and the Invention of Embarrassment' in *A Companion to the Gawain Poet*, p.356.

¹⁹ Pearsall, p.357.

²⁰ Putter, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and French Arthurian Romance*, p.109.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.140.

²² For discussion, see Pearsall, p.358.

²³ Helen Cooper, 'The Supernatural' in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, p.291.

²⁴ Pearsall, p.355.

Gawain's attempt at privacy is mirrored in *Pearl* and *Patience*. The Dreamer's grief is determinedly private and self-indulgent; he claims that he is unable to 'grasp the proffered hand' of Christ, who has shared man's experience of suffering and is willing to offer comfort: 'Þa3 kynde of Kryst me comfort kenned' (ll.55).²⁵ Although he recognises that 'resound' (l.52) would have reconciled him, instead he keeps 'A deuely dele' in his 'hert' (l.51). In prioritising his private emotion, he is potentially cutting himself off from grace: 'For dyne of doel of lurez lesse / Ofte mony mon forgos Þe mo' (l.339-40). The Pearl-maiden urges him instead to 'abyde Þat He schal deme' (l.348). The concept that humanity has to exercise a level of self control over their private emotions and ensure what God ordains is stated explicitly in the prologue of *Patience*: 'Pay ar happen also Þat con her hert stere' (l.27). Like the Dreamer, Jonah is unable to 'stere' his heart and is shown to be ruled by his emotions. Rather than submit to the will of God, Jonah's human fear of bodily harm ('On rode rwly torent', l.96) leads him to the mistaken belief that he can evade God. Jonah's desire for privacy is extorted to the level of ridiculousness, he actually tries to escape to Tarshish and physically hide in 'Þe boÞem of Þe bot' (l.183) and under the woodbine. Initially, Jonah and the Dreamer do not realise that privacy is neither attainable nor sustainable because they believe that God too has a private imperative: the Dreamer continually questions the truth of the Pearl-maiden's words (l.421, 481, 1185), suspecting that 'oure Lorde woude make a lyze' (l.304) whilst Jonah accuses God of deliberately making him look foolish ('Þi lore Þat Þus me les makez', l.428). However, all three protagonists finally learn that there is 'no hiding from the judge'²⁶. In addition, Jonah's multiple attempts to hide highlight the difference between him and Christ, who accepts his role and crucifixion. There exists a disjuncture between his public and his private self in Jonah that did not exist in Christ. On the one hand, Jonah is a brilliantly powerful preacher able to bring the 'wykke' (l.69) Ninevites to repentance. On the other hand, he himself is incapable of the sustained repentance that he promises with 'trauthe' (l.336) from inside the whale (ll.333-6).

The coherent presentation of the protagonists of *Pearl*, *Patience* and *Sir Gawain* as unable to entirely fulfil the requirements of the ideal is illustrative of the way in which humanity is defined by this very gap between the earthly and the ideal. The concept of humanity is necessarily one of limitation, of being unable to fully transcend one's physical existence. The examples of misunderstanding, possession, untrawþe, privacy and unrestrained emotion demonstrate 'the intractability of basic human attitudes'²⁷ towards their mortal condition. Indeed, what humanizes Gawain is that he 'lakked a lyttel' (l.2366), the story of Jonah is effective as an exemplum only in so far as the reader recognises the plausibility of Jonah's actions and the poignancy of *Pearl* depends upon the reader's empathetic response to the Dreamer's 'continuing and touchingly human love for the Maiden'²⁸. In contrast to the judgements of *Pearl* and *Patience*, Gawain's imperfect behaviour is condemned neither by the Green Knight nor by the knights of Arthur's court because he, unlike the Dreamer or Jonah, is consistently committed to the ideal: his adoption of the girdle as an external symbol of his shame marks his continued attempt to ensure that there is no discrepancy between his public and his private self and to comply with the chivalric ideal. Humanity is prone to mistakes, but, as the final line of Gawain makes clear, there is no shame in an honest attempt to do what is right: 'HONY SOYT QUI MAL PENSE' (l.2532).

²⁵ Turville-Petre, p.155

²⁶ Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain-poet*, p.73.

²⁷ Introduction by J. J. Anderson in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, Patience*, ed. J. J. Anderson (London: J. M. Dent, Orion Publishing Group, 1996), p.x.

²⁸ Spearing, p.116.

Bibliography

Andrew, Malcolm and Waldron, Ronald, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007).

Burrow, J. A. and Turville-Petre, Thorlac, *A Book of Middle English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

Brewer, Derek and Gibson, Jonathan, eds., *A Companion to the Gawain Poet* (Woodbridge: D.S Brewer, 1997).

Chism, Christine, *Alliterative Revivals* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2002).

Markman, A. M., 'The Meaning of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', *PMLA*, Vol. 72, No. 4, (Sept., 1957), pp.574-586.

Moorman, Charles, 'The Role of the Narrator in "Patience"', *Modern Philology*, Vol. 61, No.2 (Nov., 1963), pp.90-95.

Paul F. Reichardt, Paul F., 'Gawain and the Image of the Wound', *PMLA*, Vol. 99, No. 2 (Mar., 1984), pp. 154-161.

Schleusener, Jay, "'Patience,' Lines 35-40' *Modern Philology*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (Aug., 1969), pp.64-66.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, ed. J. J. Anderson (London: J. M. Dent, Orion Publishing Group, 1996).

Spearing, A. C., *The Gawain-poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

Turville-Petre, Thorlac, *Reading Middle English Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

Putter, Ad., *An Introduction to the Gawain Poet* (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman, 1996).

Putter, Ad., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and French Arthurian Romance* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1995).

Williams, David, 'The Point of "Patience"', *Modern Philology*, Vol. 68, No.2 (Nov., 1970), pp.127-136.

Woolf, R. *Art and Doctrine: Essays on Medieval Literature*, ed. O'Donoghue, H. (London: The Hambledon Press, 1986).