

Notes on *Piers Plowman*

The poem is essentially a religious work, filled with the religious doctrines, dogma, views, and sentiments of medieval Catholicism. In the poem, each vision concerns humanity's relationships to God—relationships that concerned every aspect of life, according to medieval thought. It concerns an intense quest for the true Christian life, from a certain milieu.

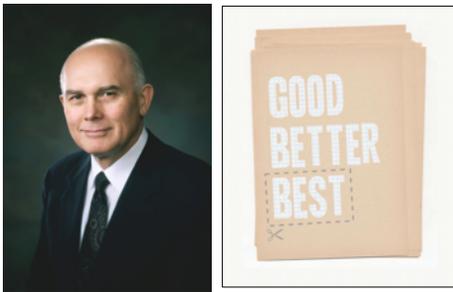
Characteristics

- Middle English allegorical narrative poem—a sustained metaphor.
- Written in unrhymed alliterative verse divided into sections called “passus” (Latin for “step” or “stage”—like “cantos”).
- This quest entails a series of dream-visions (like “Dream of the Rood”) and an examination into the lives of three allegorical characters:

Dowel (“Do-Well”)

Dobet (“Do-Better”)

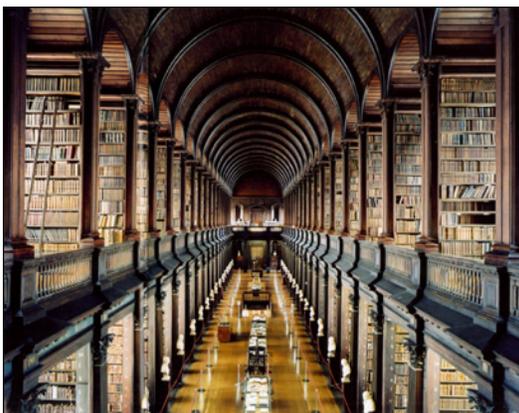
Dobest (“Do-Best”)



The Dream Vision (a.k.a. Dream Allegory) is a type of poetic narrative especially popular in medieval literature. So named because the poet pictured himself falling asleep and envisioning in his dream a series of allegorical people and events. The device made more acceptable the fantastic personifications and symbolic objects characteristic of medieval allegory.

Origins

- Written sometime between 1360-1387.
- It's now commonly accepted that *Piers Plowman* was written by William Langland, about whom little is known. This attribution of the poem to Langland rests principally on the evidence of an early 15th-century manuscript of the C-text (see below) held at Trinity College, Dublin.



- In the 16th century, when *Piers* was first printed, authorship was attributed to John Wycliffe and Geoffrey Chaucer, among others.
- One source lists Langland as a probable protégé of Wycliffe.
- All modern discussion of the text revolves around the classifications of W. W. Skeat. Skeat argued that there are as many as 10 forms (of 50+ manuscripts) of the poem, but only 3 are to be considered authoritative—the A-, B-, and C-texts.
- Although precise dating is debated, the A, B, and C texts are now commonly thought of as the progressive work (20–25 years) of a single author. This is known as the “three versions hypothesis.”

—The A-text was written ca. 1367–1370 and is the earliest. It breaks off, apparently unfinished, at Book 11. Book 12 is written by another author or interpolator. The poem runs to 2,500 lines.

—The B-text was written ca. 1377–1379; it revises A, adds new material, and is 3x the length of A (about 7,300 lines). It’s at Oxford.



—The C-text was written in the 1380s as a major revision of B except for the final sections. There is some debate over whether the poem can be regarded as finished or not. It entails additions, omissions, and transpositions; it’s not significantly different in size from B.

Allegorical Categorizations

4 categories of interpretation (or meaning) used in the Middle Ages:

1. The first is simply the **literal** interpretation of the events of the story for historical purposes with no underlying meaning.
2. The second is called **typological**, which connects the events of the Old Testament with the New Testament; in particular drawing allegorical connections between the events of Christ’s life with the stories of the Old Testament. For example, the four major Old Testament prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel prefigure the four apostles.
3. The third is **moral** (or “**tropological**”), which is how one should act (think of the phrase “the moral of the story”).
4. The fourth type of interpretation is **anagogical**, dealing with the future events of Christian history: heaven, hell, the last judgment; it deals with prophecies.

Thus the four types of interpretation (or meaning) deal with past events (literal), the connection of past events with the present (typology), present events (moral), and the future (anagogical).

The poem presents much biblical lore, from both the Old and New Testaments. The events in Eden, Job's trials, the betrayal of Judas, Jesus' suffering and crucifixion, along with many other familiar and traditional Christian elements, are recorded in the poem. There are digressions on sin and virtue, on the nature and value of learning, and on the activities of laity and clergy, some good and some bad.

The allegorical aspect is an outstanding example of the later 14th-century alliterative verse, and combines various popular medieval literary forms. It presents a quest or pilgrimage occurring within the context of dream visions that satirize secular and religious figures corrupted by greed. The poem includes debates, and many scenes recall the mystery and morality plays of the period.

Social Context

Langland's poem is in part a work of social unrest and protest, written from the viewpoint of the common person. The last half of the 14th century was a period of disaster, the time of severe visitations of the plague (with accompanying moral, social, and economic upheavals). Then there was the Peasant Revolt of 1381, and of John Wycliffe's Lollard movement. Langland often inserted, on behalf of the common folk, protests against unfair dealings by the 3 C's: the crown, the courts, and the clergy. Langland himself was part of the common folk, and recognized the trouble visited upon them.

Mice + Cat

One explanation is that this is an allusion to Parliament's attempt in 1376 to limit the king's power). The mouse says that everyone is better off with an unfettered ruler. If the king ruled with the advice of Reason and Conscience, and if all who could do so labored in their vocation, everyone would live comfortably. Another interpretation: Cat = Catholic Church, Rats = populace

Seven Sins

To expand on the notions of virtue and vice you'll recall "The 7 Deadly Sins" and "The 7 Heavenly (or Cardinal) Virtues":

	Vice	Virtue
	Lust	Chastity
	Gluttony	Temperance
	Greed	Charity
	Sloth	Diligence
	Wrath	Patience
	Envy	Kindness
	Pride	Humility

These stemmed from Greek ideals, articulated by Aristotle:

VICE (Defect)	VIRTUE (Mean)	VICE (Excess)
Cowardice (too little confidence)	Courage	Rashness (too much confidence)
Foolhardiness (too little fear)	Courage	Cowardice (too much fear)
Insensibility (too little pleasure)	Temperance	Self-indulgence (too much pleasure)

Meanness or Stinginess (too little giving)	Liberality	Prodigality or Wastefulness (too much giving)
Niggardliness (in giving out large sums of money)	Magnificence	Tastlessness and Vulgarity (giving out large sums)
Undue Humility (too little honor)	Proper Pride	Empty Vanity (too much honor)
Inirascibility (too little anger)	Good Temper	Irascible (too much anger)
Shamelessness (too little shame)	Modesty	Bashfulness (too much shame)
Surliness	Friendliness	Flattery



Good Samaritan = Jesus

Condensed Argument:

<https://www.lds.org/ensign/2007/02/the-good-samaritan-forgotten-symbols?lang=eng>

Medium Argument:

<http://magazine.byu.edu/?act=view&a=985>

Full Argument:

<https://ojs.lib.byu.edu/spc/index.php/BYUStudies/article/viewFile/6562/6211>



Piers = Jesus

Piers ap-Piers (ha!) again and again in the poem, each time emerging as a clearer incarnation of Christ. Seen at first as a hardworking, sincere, and honest plowman (think stable, carpenter, laborer), Piers later shows up in the poem as the figure who can explain the Tree of Charity and the nature of the Trinity. He appears also as the Good Samaritan and, later, as the builder of the Church and the one who will joust in God's armor against Satan. These appearances serve to hold the poem together; without them the work would be a loosely coupled series of episodes and digressions.



Christian Themes

The poem addresses two central questions of Christian theology concern society: one in this world and the one in the next. The first two visions focus mainly on the first question. Though Langland is sometimes presented as a reformer (if not revolutionary), his ideal commonwealth is hierarchical. Holy Church, as early as the first *passus*, says that Will already knows Truth, which is that love is the key to the just society.

Love is also the source of salvation. A key question the poem explores, however, is whose love? Is it enough for one to love others, including one's enemies, to give charity, to shun the 7 Deadly Sins? *Passus* 11 presents the Roman emperor Trajan, who was saved through his love of others and his good life, even though he was not baptized. In *passus* 12 Imagination argues that Aristotle and Solomon also achieved salvation because of their actions [instructor's note: be careful about the poem's Solomon conclusion]. Langland constantly stresses the importance of good deeds. One of his repeated targets of satire is the granting of pardons that eliminate the need for action. Such indulgences troubled many Catholics and would help spark the Protestant Reformation. Yet human action alone is also inadequate, as Langland indicates in his parable of the Tree of Charity. Works and grace thus emerge as the twin pillars on which salvation rests.

Harrowing of Hell

The word "harrow" comes from the Old English *hergian*, meaning "to harry or despoil."



W: "Bro, you do realize that I'll be king someday—and you won't."
H: "Yes, but you're balding. I'd rather have hair than the throne."
W: "Perhaps you'd enjoy your hair more while in exile?"
H: "I slap you with my white cotton accent glove."

Synonyms: assail, attack, besiege, crush, overpower, pillage, plague, plunder, torment
Also: aggravate, agitate, discomfort, distress, disturb, exasperate, perturb

Interestingly, a farming term: pulverizing the soil. [Now, think of the title character's name.]



Possible Political Implications

- The most conspicuous omissions from William Caxton's press were the Bible and *Piers Plowman*.
- Both may have been avoided for political reasons—e.g., Wycliffite associations.
- John Wycliffe was an English philosopher, theologian, preacher, translator, reformer and university teacher at Oxford, who was known as an early dissident in the Roman Catholic Church during the 14th century. Died of a stroke in 1384. About 30 years later, the Catholic Church decreed that his books be burned and his remains be exhumed. The exhumation was carried out in 1428 when, at the command of Pope Martin V, his remains were dug up, burned, and the ashes cast into the River Swift.



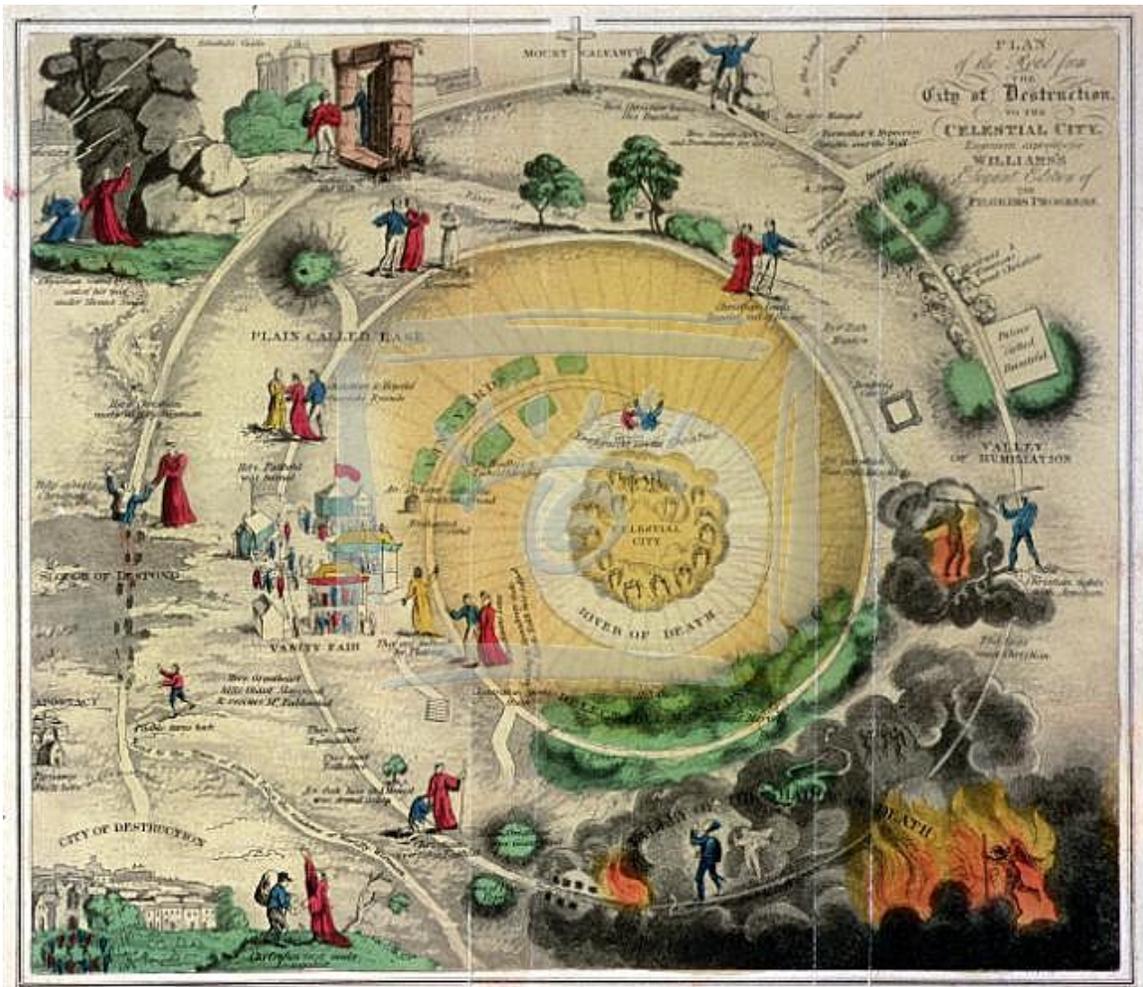
- Many scholars assert that *Piers Plowman* was a banned book, that it was published as “propaganda” for reformist interests by high-placed aristocrats.
- The political nature of the poem—its mention of and association with popular rebellion—would obviously be unacceptable to the king, Edward IV.

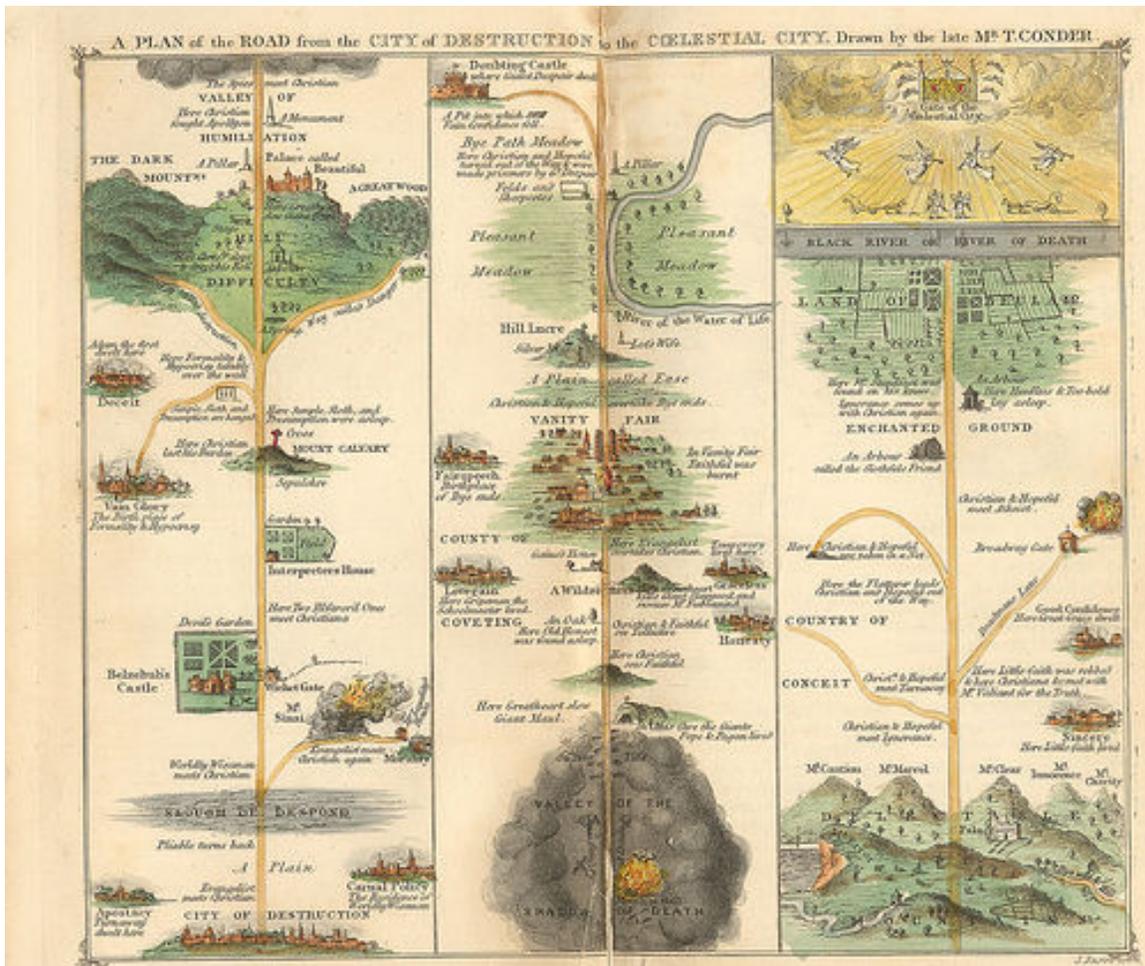
Work’s Later Life

- With its old language and alien worldview, *Piers Plowman* fell into obscurity until the latter part of the 19th century.
- In 20th century, it was introduced to emerging university programs for English language and literature.

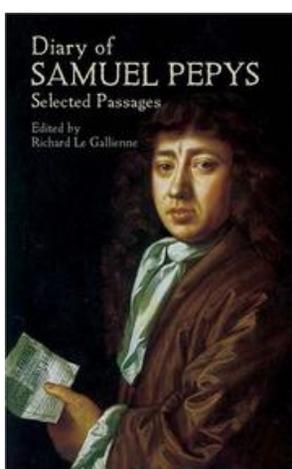
Famous Owners & Readers

- Edition may have reached Edmund Spenser, John Milton, and John Bunyan (but no records, citations, borrowed lines, or clear allusions exist in their writings).





- Samuel Pepys owned a copy of *Piers Plowman*.



- Milton cites "Chaucer's Ploughman" in "Of Reformation" (1641) when discussing poems describing Constantine as a major contributor to the corruption of the church.
- Alexander Pope owned a copy *Piers Plowman*.



- Lord Byron praised it.

