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Poetry of Great Price

To some students, nothing could be less interesting than a poem. Many consider the whole genre of poetry boring, and some consider it trivial, or stupid. However, if there were anything worse than a poem in these student's minds, it would be a long poem. Two lengthy poems that so aptly fit these students' idea of torture are Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* and the Middle English *Pearl*. However, a careful reading of these works reveals anything but boredom and irrelevance. There are numerous levels of significance and myriad similarities between the two poems. They both address the deepest issues of human pain and depravity, probing the depths of the mystery of salvation. Although Dante and the *Pearl*-poet both use place and person as a means to motivate redemption, the actual impetus behind the journey of redemption in *Pearl* is essentially different from that of Dante's *Comedy*, because the stories lead to entirely different conclusions.

At its very uptake, this comparison presents a problem. It appears absurd to compare *The Divine Comedy*, unfathomable in its complexity and mastery, to this comparatively short poem of obscure and anonymous authorship. Indeed, it seems that there could be no two poems less fit to be compared. In explanation of the meaning of his work, Dante once described the *Comedy* as "polysemantic, that is, of many senses...that which comes from the letter...and that which is signified by the letter" (Dante, *Letter to Can Grande*, par. 7). In its duality of meaning, the *Comedy* seeks to tell not only about Dante's experiences but also what Dante's experiences mean. Dante renders this combination masterfully, simultaneously painting a marvelous picture

of the afterlife and preaching his theology of salvation and holiness. This level of meaning stands unprecedented in average fiction, elevating Dante to his rightful title of genius.

Nevertheless, such multileveled meaning is also found in the *Pearl*. Most of the bountiful critical discussion about the *Pearl* has been over the amount of allegory represented in the *Pearl*, disputing whether it should be interpreted on a spiritually allegorical level, or whether a simply literal view is the more correct interpretation. Scholars such as William Henry Schofield and Charles Grosvenor Osgood have been over this territory repeatedly, arguing anagogy against elegy and symbolism against simplicity. Regardless of how this poem is interpreted, all its critics agree that it is significant to medieval culture and thought. Moreover, Osgood writes, “the few who enter deeply into his experience with him may find therein revealed to them, as to the poet himself, the most difficult mysteries of life” (*Introduction*, lix). This complex, meaningful, and academically challenging poem is consequently more than worthy to be compared with the genius of Dante.

A comparison of these works must first begin with organization, for when Dante wrote his *Divine Comedy*, he endowed it with so many facets of organization that most students of his book uncover a mere few of his systems of hierarchical meaning. One of the most important of these systems of meaning is made up of differing locations and the hero’s travel between them. Most obviously, the three volumes of the *Comedy* are divided into places, as their names indicate: *Inferno*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise*. Additionally, each of these three places is divided into levels, and in some cases, the levels themselves are subdivided. Furthermore, the locational changes, in each case, signal progress in the story. For instance, when Dante makes the journey from Hell to Purgatory, he observes, “Renewed my joy in looking on the skies/as soon as I had come from the dead air/that had saddened my heart and dimmed my eyes” (Dante, *Purg.* 1.15-

18). The heavy mood of hell falls from him as he travels with Virgil to Purgatory, and the shift of location is intrinsic to this change.

Secondly, Dante organizes and motivates his story by means of person. Although one must search deeper into Dante's poetry to find it, the significance of persons in *The Divine Comedy* arguably outstrips that of places, for in each section of his journey, Dante has a guide. First, his literary hero, Virgil, leads him through Hell and Purgatory. When he gets to the summit of Mount Purgatory, Virgil disappears, and the beautiful Beatrice becomes his guide. Finally, in the highest level of Heaven, Dante is given yet another guide, Bernard of Clairvaux. In each case, Dante's character develops as a result of the change in mentor. This is clear in Dante's transition from Purgatory to Paradise, for as he completes the change from Virgil to Beatrice, he is washed in the river Eunoe, and again, his state is altered. "From its holy waters I returned...pure, and in trim for mounting to the stars" (Dante, *Purg.* 33.142-145). He leaves his guilt and sorrow behind him in Purgatory, and in embracing the guidance of Beatrice, is wholly purified.

In the *Pearl*, similar transitions occur. It is important to note, however, that these changes are less frequent and are on a smaller scale, as befits the shorter form of the *Pearl*, though they are no less significant. The Jeweler in the *Pearl*, like Dante, goes through distinct places, beginning in the garden where his daughter lies buried, continuing through the paradisiacal land next to the river, and culminating in his vision of the new Jerusalem (Tolkien 124, 127, 158). Less distinctly, the *Pearl*-poet goes through three spheres of interpersonal influence. Beginning again by his daughter's grave, the Jeweler's only guiding influence is himself. He then reaches the river, where he meets the Pearl-maiden, and she guides him until he is ready to see the new Jerusalem. Lastly, at the end of the poem, the Jeweler exchanges her

guidance for that of the Lamb of God. The similarities of person and place show an unmistakable organizational parity between these great works.

However, these similarities would bear little relevance, if they were merely coincidental similarities of minor detail. On the contrary, their organizational similarity is vitally significant to the overall direction of the work. Dante uses the progression of place, for instance, to show how the cardinal sins are expunged from his soul as he ascends through the levels of Mount Purgatory and the seven marks vanish from his forehead. The climax of this section of *Purgatory* comes as Dante builds up the courage to advance through the flames of the seventh and last level of Purgatory. At first he quails before the fire, but Virgil reminds him, “what’s keeping you from Beatrice is this wall” (Dante *Purg.* 27.36). This simple reminder of the next person in his soul’s journey gives Dante the courage that he needs. This intersection of these two threads of organization shows the importance of both, for without the strength of character lent him by his journey through Hell, Dante could not have suffered through the pain of Purgatory. Likewise, without his love for Beatrice and his admiration of Virgil, Paradise would have been unattainable. Each change of place or person in the *Comedy* signals progress in the redemption of Dante’s soul, from disillusionment, to enlightenment, and finally to sanctification.

In the same way, person and place are significant to the development of the *Pearl*. First of all, the Jeweler begins in a lost state. He doubts the goodness and sovereignty of God, and has been overcome with grief for his daughter, for as he grieves, he writes, “her only alone I deemed as dear” (Tolkien 123). It is, however, his love for his deceased daughter that enables him to accept the salvation that is offered to him, and it is through her that he is consoled for her death, and through their conversation that his desire for the New Jerusalem is cultivated. Like Dante, when he sees the new Jerusalem, the Jeweler’s falls under the jurisdiction of another person. His

daughter seems to fade into the background, another spotless pearl in the city, and the focus of the Jeweler's love and obedience shifts from her to the Lamb. This is the turning point of the story, for like Dante, the story is not only moved by the change in person and place, but the very life and growth of the main character is tied to them.

One instance of almost direct parallel between these two poems shows a great deal about the way that they should be compared. It occurs in the striking similarity between Dante meeting Beatrice across the river Lethe in the highest sphere of Purgatory, and the poet in the *Pearl* meeting his glorified daughter across the river. First, they are in almost identical locations. They meet on the threshold of heaven, with a lesser paradise on one hand, separated from a greater one by a river, which also separates the heavenly lady from the poet. Secondly, the hero of the tale is in love with the lady, and although the relationship in the *Pearl* is filial, the love between them is still one of the main driving forces in the story. Thirdly, in the conversation across the river, both Beatrice and the Pearl-maid correct the wayward desires of the poet. Beatrice tells Dante that her death should not have stopped his love for her godliness, and rebukes him for letting his physical longing for her keep him from pursuing her holiness (Dante *Par.* 31.22, 46). In the same way, the Pearl-maid explains to the poet that he should no longer think of her as lost, but safe. She chides, "Good sir, you have your speech mis-spent/to say your pearl is all away/that is in chest so choicely pent" (Tolkien 132). Like Beatrice, she reprimands the poet for allowing her death to draw him away from Christ, and also tells him that his desire, even now, to cross the river and join her, is improper.

However, this last edict from the Pearl-maid begins to make the comparison more complicated. Dante is first made to repent in tears (Dante, *Par.* 31.19), and then allowed to cross

the river Lethe into Paradise proper, finally rising, by his lady's merit, to the heights of heaven.

The Jeweler in the *Pearl* no doubt hopes to have the same privilege as Dante, as he exclaims:

In the darkness I deemed my pearl was laid
I have found it now, and shall make good cheer
[...] Now could I to reach you these waters wade
I should be a joyful Jeweler. (Tolkien 133)

But his daughter disagrees, reprimanding him and explaining to him that he will not necessarily obtain this privilege. She tells him first to pray for permission, but warns, "that grace you might not gain" (Tolkien 134). As much as the poet may want and hope to join his daughter in Paradise, he is, in the end, not only denied the direct experience of the new Jerusalem, but he is denied even the doorstep of heaven, and left instead in his still-more-inferior dreamscape of Paradise. Unlike Dante, the Jeweler of the *Pearl*, stays, by his Lord's command, on the further bank, and though he is allowed a brief glimpse of heaven, he returns to his existence on earth without being privy to the mysteries of the God-head.

All of the parallels between this pivotal place and conversation between these two poems throw this cardinal difference into sharp relief: the poet of the *Pearl* is denied a journey that is the final cause of Dante's salvation. Though Dante's soul is cleansed by his journey through Purgatory, it is not until he sees God himself that his perfection is complete. However, the end of the hero's journey in the *Pearl* is the Jeweler's turning back from crossing the river. This disparity of final destination is cause of the tension between these works.

Dante's salvation is motivated by the love of persons. Beatrice knows this, and as she is reprimanding Dante for his waywardness, she alludes to the fact that his earlier spiritual progress was because of his love for her. She attributes them to, "The desires that led your boyhood on to love that Good," and scolds him for going astray at her death, saying, "you should have followed me on wing--for then I was no longer like those lies" (Dante *Purg.* 31.22-23, 55-56). Indeed, it

is her love that inspires the whole journey, as Virgil explains to Dante in the dark forest. Upon hearing Virgil's story, Dante cries:

O lady of compassion and my help
 [...]
 Your words have put my heart in order now,
 Kindling so great a long to set on
 you've turned me to our first intention -- go! (Dante, *Inf.* 2.133-138)

Clearly, as she draws him through heaven by the light of her eyes, in each circle growing more beautiful and wonderful in his sight, it is the relationship that leads him on to glory (Dante *Par.* 18.55-63). In this respect, all of Dante's guides are the same. They lead him on, by love or admiration, and teach him what he must know.

It has been argued, because the Jeweler turns back from Paradise, that he is not saved. One proponent of this idea is *Pearl* scholar Mary Hillman, who interprets this circumstance by admonishing, "Man is wont...to grasp at more than justly belongs to him...For this fault, he, the jeweler, was cast out from regions that last forever" (Conley et al. 17). She therefore places the fault for this untimely departure on the head of the Jeweler. However, the moment of salvation in the *Pearl* is unmistakable, and its consummation is in the act of the Jeweler's retreat from the river. As he takes in the wonderful sight of the Lamb and the New Jerusalem, with his daughter among its inhabitants, he is filled with a longing to be there himself, as he says:

Delight there pierced mine eye and ear
 In my mortal mind a madness reigned
 When I saw her beauty I would be near
 [...]
 From plunge in stream would none me steer. (Tolkien 166)

However, as he rushes toward the river, he is constrained, not by his own will or his daughter's preference, but by the will of his Savior. He repents of his intentions and returns to the mound in the garden where his dream had begun. "With Christ's sweet blessings," he writes in

benediction, “I then to God did it resign” (Tolkien 168). Without doubt, the Jeweler is saved by his choice to obey.

In that salvation, the *Pearl* gives no indication of the relationally redemptive journey of Dante. Although she is the original reason for the Jeweler’s trip to Paradise, the Pearl-maid does not remain in the redemptive role. At first she is his motivation for holiness, but he must then leave her in the care of the Lamb, for “It pleased him not that I leapt o’er those marvelous bounds” (Tolkien 166). Richard Newhauser, another critic of the *Pearl*, illustrates this dichotomy this way: “In the dialogues with his daughter, the dreamer is taught to give up his possessive, earth-bound love for her and to find sufficiency in God” (Newhauser 267). Nothing would ever entice Dante to give up his love for Beatrice, and he would present the very idea as unholy, but the *Pearl* portrays any love but love for the Lamb as insufficient for salvation.

The discrepancies between the *Pearl* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy* leave this distinction evident: despite the countless things that Dante and the *Pearl* have in common, they disagree in this one vital point. Dante goes on to glory, while the *Pearl*-poet returns to earth. While Dante weaves an exquisite tale of a romance-based salvific journey, the *Pearl* paints for its readers a less rosy but still inspiring picture of sacrifice and earthy faith. In this contrast is the very crux of theology, raising questions of the nature of salvation, the facility of the soul to experience God, and the true essence of redemption. Such questions, even when presented by poetry, are not to be ignored.

Annotated Bibliography

Alighieri, Dante. A Letter to Can Grande. Trans. James Marchand. 5 May 2009. Newark:

University of Delaware, 26 June 1996.

<<http://www.english.udel.edu/dean/cangrand.html>>.

A famous personal letter from Dante to his acquaintance, Can Grande, this piece describes Dante's own method for endowing his writing with meaning. He describes the levels of meaning. This is a starting point for anyone who wishes to understand Dante in the way that Dante intended to be understood.

Alighieri, Dante. Paradise. Trans. Anthony Esolen. New York: Random House, 2004.

This third volume of Dante's *Divine Comedy* describes Dante's journey through heaven with Beatrice. This is where much of Dante's doctrine of salvation and the imputation of glory is explained. Because the focus of this paper is on the doctrines of salvation in the *Pearl* and Dante, this book was useful in describing Dante's point of view.

Alighieri, Dante. Purgatory. Trans. Anthony Esolen. New York: Random House, 2004.

This second book of Dante's *Divine Comedy* continues where *Inferno* left off, as Dante and Virgil leave Hell and travel through Purgatory. Much of the development of Dante's soul takes place in this volume, and the conversations with the inhabitants of Purgatory reveal much about the theology of Dante as well. This book shows the most similarity to the *Pearl*, and consequently was the most useful in comparing the two poems.

Brewer, Derek, et al. A Companion to the Gawain-Poet. Suffolk: St. Edmundsbury Press Ltd., 1997.

This anthology of articles pertaining to the supposed common author of *Pearl*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Cleanness*, and *Patience*, has much to say about the poet's unusual and distinctive writing, and the themes and images by which an interpretation of such writing should be guided. Specifically, an article by Nicolas Watson on Theology in the *Pearl* provides an example of a theological attempt at an interpretation of the *Pearl*. Also, Priscilla Martin's article on allegory and symbolism, which seeks to identify the symbols and allegories in a medieval context, was helpful for an idea of the possible allegorical interpretations of *Pearl*.

Conley, John et al. The Middle English Pearl: Critical Essays. Ed. John Conley. Notre Dame: U

of Notre Dame Press, 1970.

This collection of critical essays on the *Pearl* is indispensable for any serious student of the poem. From the celebrated Sister Mary Hillman, who first conceived of the revolutionary allegorical approach to the *Pearl*, to the later scholars who would batter her arguments and contradict each other beyond reason, this book contains them all. Most interesting was the essay by Charles Moorman on the role of the narrator. This was the original inspiration for a paper exploring place and location in *Pearl*. Moorman does not engage himself in the elegy versus allegory discussion, but simply explores the possible meaning in a particular part of the poem.

Muscatine, Charles. "Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer." Medieval Literature, Style, and Culture: Essays. Columbia: U of South Carolina Press, 1999.

Mr. Muscatine presents, in this essay, a broad view of the things that affected the style of medieval literature, exploring contemporary culture, individual author's crises, the culture's effect on style and interpretation, and, in turn, the affect of their literature on the culture. Although most of the book is devoted to Chaucer, a particular section devoted to the *Pearl* was helpful with a broad scope of interpretation and helpful as an introduction to that genre of medieval poetry.

Osgood, Charles G. The Pearl: a Middle English Poem. Introduction. 25 March 2009. D & C Heath & Co.: Boston, 1906.

<<http://books.google.com/books?id=ivkVAAAAYAAJ&output=text>>.

This edition's extensive introduction by Charles Osgood about the book that he had studied and translated directly disagreed with the arguments of W.H. Schofield, and provided depth of understanding on the topic of disagreements about the *Pearl*.

Pearl. Trans. J.R.R. Tolkien. New York: Random House, 1975.

The *Pearl* has been lauded as the most metrically complex poem of the English language, and it would certainly seem that its complexities of meaning match its form. Written from the perspective of a grieving father, the narrator has a dream about his daughter in Paradise, and through the lessons that he learns in that dream, the father turns toward his savior, and his heart is comforted. Though it is not long, especially when it is compared with such poems as the *Canterbury Tales* or Dante's *Commedia*, it has been laden with much allegorical significance throughout its literary career, mostly based on the interesting character of the Pearl-maid.

Schofield, William H. The Nature and Fabric of the Pearl. 25 March 2009. Courtesy of Google

Books and the Harvard University Library.

<<http://books.google.com/books?id=ofkVAAAAYAAJ>> . Page 154.

Mr. Schofield was the first to open the Pandora's box of literary criticism about the *Pearl*, billing the allegorical interpretation. Arguably, it was he that started the long and involved debate over allegory and elegy. His work is well thought out, and enlightening, in terms of the possible symbolism in the *Pearl*.