'He gef vus to be His homly hyne': Teaching *Pearl* in the Undergraduate Classroom through the Lens of Apostolic Embodiment

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One of the greatest challenges in teaching medieval English literature lies in the fact that modern college students lack the depth of scriptural familiarity that was common to clerical, courtly, and even lay audiences of medieval England. Although students in a university classroom may be familiar with key Bible stories and the central tenets of Christianity, very few (if any) will have grown up with the sort of absolute immersion in biblical doctrine and narrative experienced by the typical citizen of 14th-century England. As a result, professors may hesitate to teach a work such as *Pearl* due to its heavy emphasis on scripture, a concern evidently shared by the editors of most undergraduate-level anthologies, who tend to privilege a text like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—with its appealing elements of adventure, chivalry, romance, combat, and humor—over one such as *Pearl*, an introspective and biblically-saturated lament. Such an omission is unfortunate, however, since *Pearl* provides a rich opportunity for students to gain insight into the remarkable extent of Christian—and specifically biblical—influence upon medieval English culture and art. Rather than attempting to demonstrate every aspect of this
influence, I have found it more effective to focus in great depth on one or two biblical facets of the poem. *Pearl* contains many such facets, but two that I have found to be particularly fruitful in the classroom are the poem’s use of the Book of Revelation and apostolic analogy.

Although scholars have convincingly argued that the anonymous author of this poem was likely influenced by a rich variety of sources—from Boethius to Dante to Guillaume de Lorris— it is the Bible, and in particular the Book of Revelation, or Apocalypse, that serves as the poem’s most strikingly obvious source. Scholars throughout the centuries have observed the thematic and structural parallels between *Pearl* and this final book of the New Testament, all of which can provide rich fodder for classroom discussion.

Because time constraints make it impractical to have students read the entire New Testament during a one-week unit on *Pearl*, I have found it useful to ask students to do some preparatory internet research into the background, history, and general content of the New Testament, particularly focusing on the four gospels and the Book of Revelation. I also provide students with a list of specific passages to read from these biblical books in conjunction with the *Pearl* poem. From those passages, students are asked to discuss ways in which *Pearl* both reflects and differs from the biblical sources to which its author is clearly referring.

I begin by having students examine the structural and thematic parallels of *Pearl* to the Book of Revelation. One of the first similarities they notice aligns with P. M. Kean’s observation that both works contain a prologue in which a human author describes being alone due to grief or hardship and then falls into a subsequent sleep or trance of supernatural origin. Further, both narrators encounter celestial beings, each of whom is described in great detail. While not always
comprehending the purpose of recurring number patterns in each work, students do notice the elaborate and similar numerologies that have been explored by scholars such as C. O. Chapman and Edward Condren. Students also note that both works contain a stylized series of questions and rebukes, a struggle between good and evil, and ultimately, a vision of the New Jerusalem.

Additionally, in the process of outlining both *Pearl* and Revelation, students can be led to discover the circular structure of each, as has been described by Cary Nelson and others. *Pearl* begins and ends in a terrestrial garden, and both the first and last stanzas refer to a “prince’s pleasure” (l. 1; 1201). At first reading, students may argue that the Book of Revelation seems to be lacking this circular structure. After all, unlike the *Pearl* narrator, John does not awaken from his vision and consciously return to his earthly locale. Rather, John’s book ends while he is still in his trance. Nevertheless, when asked to delve more deeply, students realize that many elements of the end of Revelation refer back to its beginning, creating a circular pattern not unlike *Pearl’s*. For example, in the first chapter of Revelation, Christ says: “I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending” (Rv 1:8 King James Version), and in the last chapter he repeats this claim almost verbatim (Rv 22:13). In chapter one, John says: “Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein” (Rv 1:3), and in the last chapter he repeats: “blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book” (Rv 22:7). Similarly, in chapter one John says of Christ, “Behold, he cometh” (Rv 1:7), and at the end of the book Christ echoes this, saying, “Behold, I come quickly” (Rv 22:7). Moreover, in both the first and last chapters of Revelation, John falls down in awe (Rv 1:17, 22:8). Thus, in its circular nature as well as in so many other structural points, *Pearl*
closely imitates Revelation. In view of the multitude of parallels between the two works, it is not surprising that both end with the word “Amen” (a detail that students are quick to notice).

These thematic and structural parallels between *Pearl* and Revelation serve as a staging-ground for the extended apostolic analogy that also runs throughout the poem. As Charles Moorman has argued, the development of the narrator/Dreamer’s character in *Pearl* is of primary importance in understanding the true purpose of this poem, and the same may be said of the character of John in the biblical Book of Revelation. After comparing the structures of the two works in class, I students are asked to read a selection of verses from Revelation and *Pearl* that focus on the two central characters. They immediately recognize that the Pearl Poet intentionally drew parallels between his Dreamer and the Apostle John in Revelation, since both men are led by supernatural visitors from a state of bewilderment to one of spiritual understanding within the context of a visionary tour of the “New Jerusalem.”

After discussing these similarities, however, I ask students if they notice any ways in which the Dreamer and John differ. Although in Revelation John—who was banished to the desert island of Patmos by the Roman Emperor Domitian for his Christian testimony—recognizes from the start the purpose of his exile (“for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rv 1:9)) and has seemingly reconciled himself to his situation, the Dreamer in *Pearl*, fretting over his loss, can discern no constructive spiritual reason for his suffering. Furthermore, when the glorified and radiant “Son of Man” appears to him in the first chapter of Revelation, John waits silently to be instructed what to do, unlike the Dreamer who, when approached by the Pearl Maiden, impetuously asks her a question (l. 241-52). Also, John never
challenges what he is told in Revelation. When commanded to do so, he obediently seals up the voices of the thunders (Rv 10:4) and eats the little scroll (Rv 10:9-10). Even when an angel asks him a direct question, John does not presume to answer but instead replies: “Sir, thou knowest” (Rv 7:4). In contrast, the Dreamer frequently questions and even contradicts the Pearl Maiden, seemingly unable to comprehend the spiritual paradoxes she reveals. In short, John is already a mature Christian, fully submissive to God’s will, at the beginning of the Book of Revelation, whereas the Dreamer does not reach spiritual maturity until the end of the Pearl poem.

Once these similarities and differences between John of Patmos and the Dreamer in Pearl have been established, I ask students to read a selection of passages from the four New Testament gospels that feature the Apostle John, as well as the other apostles of Christ. Students readily grasp the fact that John of Patmos (if indeed he is the same as the Apostle John of the gospels and later epistles, as most early Church Fathers maintained)\(^1\) was not always depicted in the New Testament as the paragon of spiritual maturity that he seems to have become by the time he composes the Book of Revelation. Although now often referred to as the “Apostle of Love” for his emphasis on that virtue in later books of the Bible—such as the three epistles that bear his name and the Book of Revelation—John is portrayed in both his eponymous gospel as well as in the three synoptics as anything \textit{but} loving. Instead he is stubborn, spiritually obtuse, and hot-tempered, even to the point that Christ bestowed upon him and his brother James the sobriquet “Boanerges”—or “Sons of Thunder”—in Mark 3:7. In these traits, John is not alone: the twelve chosen apostles exhibit throughout the gospels character flaws such as obtuseness, demands for proof of spiritual truths, arrogance in rebuking instructors, failure to understand

\(^1\) This reference should be included in the text.
parables, confusion regarding the nature of heaven, and so on. In fact, the story of the New Testament is, in part, the story of the spiritual growth and eventual maturation of the twelve apostles, under the tutelage first of Christ himself and later of the Holy Ghost.

Through classroom discussion, I ask students to explore why the *Pearl* poet might have chosen to align his poem so overtly with the book of Revelation (and thus with the Apostle John), if it is true that all twelve of the apostles shared in John’s failures as well as his successes. When asked to do a bit of research on the lives of the twelve apostles, students find that John is traditionally thought to have been the last of Christ’s original twelve apostles to die (circa 100 c.e.). Not only does John author the final book of the New Testament canon, but he also symbolically embodies the culmination of this collective apostolic spiritual development.

Therefore, although the author of *Pearl* clearly wished to draw attention to the similarities and dissimilarities between the Dreamer and the Apostle John as he is depicted in the Book of Revelation, the anonymous poet does not limit his comparisons to the final book in the biblical canon, but instead he goes beyond, relating the Dreamer’s character arc to the maturation process of John—and of Christ’s twelve apostles collectively—over the course of the entire New Testament.

Having established that the *Pearl* poet is relating his Dreamer not simply to John of Patmos but also to John as a symbol of all the apostles, I ask students to look for similarities in the plots of *Pearl* and the gospels, just as we did with the Book of Revelation. It does not usually take much time for students to identify key symbolic moments in the poem that echo such archetypal gospel events as the Calling of the apostles, the Transfiguration, and the Passion in
the Garden of Gethsemane. Having established these links, students discover—with minimal
guidance—that the author of *Pearl* clearly meant to extend the metaphor of the Dreamer’s
growth beyond the Book of Revelation to encompass the entire apostolic narrative of the New
Testament, from gospels to Apocalypse.

The next key question I ask students to explore is *why*? Why did the author of *Pearl* go to
such great lengths to relate his Dreamer not only to John of Patmos and the Book of Revelation,
but also to the apostles collectively and to specific events in the gospels? What did this
anonymous writer hope to communicate? After some discussion, students recognize that the
central theological concern in *Pearl* involves the movement of the individual Christian away
from earthly values and toward heavenly ones, what Louis Blenkner describes as: “the
progression from the secular and human to the religious and divine.”

One of the ways we explore that progression in the classroom is through discussion of the parallels students notice
between the Dreamer’s spiritual growth and that of the twelve apostles throughout the span of
the New Testament—and these parallels are manifold.

For instance, students may notice some of the following: that the apostles desire to be
physically with Christ, and they grieve when they learn he is leaving them. Jesus rebukes them
for trying to cling to his physical presence, saying: “Ye have heard how I said unto you, I go
away, and come again unto you. If ye loved me, ye would rejoice” (Jn 14:28). Later, when the
apostles are still upset about Christ’s statement that he is leaving them, Jesus says: “ye shall be
sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy” (Jn 16:20). Similarly, the *Pearl* poem’s
Dreamer is devastated by the physical loss of his “pearl” and, like the apostles, refuses to be
comforted, so that the Pearl Maiden accuses him of mourning what should not be mourned and advises him to be joyful, saying: “You speak of nothing but the sorrow of grief...why do you so? Through the tumult of grief for lesser sorrows many a man often loses the greater [thing]” (l. 337-39). When the Dreamer sees the Pearl Maiden in his vision, he immediately wants to cross the river to be physically beside her (l. 283-8) because he does not understand her spiritual nature. In the same way, the apostles fail to realize that Christ is going to move from an earthly to a spiritual realm, and even when he tries to explain it to them they remain confused and say to each other: “We cannot tell what he saith” (Jn 16:8).

Furthermore, when the apostles finally realize that Christ is probably going to be killed, they fall asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane not out of physical exhaustion but because they are overwrought with sorrow, as Luke makes a point of mentioning in 22:45. Likewise, the Pearl narrator, exhausted with sorrow over the loss of his “pearl,” also falls into a deep sleep, which the writer is careful to point out in line 59 occurs in a garden—not in a graveyard, as one would expect if the “pearl” represents a human being—perhaps a child—who has died.14

The apostles and the Dreamer are further similar in their demands for proof of spiritual truths. After Christ’s resurrection, Thomas, one of the apostles, refuses to believe without evidence. After appearing to the assembled apostles and providing Thomas with the proof he requires, Jesus rebukes him, saying: “because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed” (Jn 20:29). In similar terms, the Pearl Maiden criticizes the Dreamer for “believ[ing] nothing unless you have seen it” (l. 308).

Additionally, both the apostles and the Dreamer are at times arrogant enough to rebuke or
contradict their respective instructors. When Christ predicts his own death, Peter “t[akes] him, and beg[ins] to rebuke him” (Mk 8:32), and later, when Christ tries to wash the apostles’ feet, Peter refuses to cooperate, saying: “thou shalt never wash my feet” (Jn 13:8). In the same way, the Dreamer chastises the Pearl Maiden for being so happy (l. 246-8) and also tells her bluntly that her explanation of her position in heaven is unreasonable (l. 590). Not only that, but the Dreamer has the temerity to rebuke God, as well, taking it upon himself to “judg[e] God’s actions, and in so doing, he is both presumptuous and convicted of error.”

Furthermore, the apostles and the Dreamer both misunderstand concepts central to Christian teaching. For example, both fail to comprehend the truth about rank in the kingdom of Heaven. To explain that “the last shall be first, and the first last” (Mt 20:16), Christ tells the apostles the Parable of the Vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16, but the apostles are unable to understand the parable’s meaning, a point Matthew highlights just four verses later when he juxtaposes the vineyard parable with John’s request for a special role of importance in Christ’s coming “kingdom” (Mt 20:20-22). Similarly, the Dreamer clearly assesses his and others’ worth according to an earthly, not a heavenly, metric, and sees the pearl as a “possession, something that he incorporates into his extended self by claiming it as [his],” not God’s. When the Dreamer questions the Pearl Maiden’s right to be a queen in heaven, which demonstrates his earthly point of view, the Pearl Maiden, like Christ, responds by recounting the Parable of the Vineyard, taking nearly seventy lines to tell it in full (l. 499-568); but the Dreamer, like the apostles, misunderstands the story and continues to challenge the Pearl Maiden’s heavenly status, viewing heavenly reward as something to be earned by the individual Christian based on merit.
By having his protagonist listen to a parable that was originally told to Christ’s apostles, the *Pearl* poet implicitly positions the Dreamer in the apostolic role in the poem, a point that is not lost on most students.

Another Christian concept that both the apostles and the Dreamer have difficulty comprehending is the role of children in the kingdom of heaven. When people bring their children to Christ, the apostles “rebuke them” (Lk 18:15), but Christ in turn rebukes the apostles, saying: “Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein” (Lk 18:17). In *Pearl*, the Dreamer, like the apostles, objects to Christ’s acceptance of children by claiming that the Pearl Maiden had not lived long enough on earth to be so glorified. She responds by paraphrasing Luke 18.15-17 very closely (in lines 712-24), thus overtly identifying the Dreamer with the apostles by rebuking him with the very words used by Christ under similar circumstances.

Students may also note that both the apostles and the Dreamer are confused regarding the nature of the heavenly kingdom. Christ is obliged to reassure his apostles by saying: “In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you” (Jn 14:2). In surprisingly comparable terms, the Dreamer also expresses concern regarding the heavenly dwelling, asking: “Have you no dwelling-place with castle-wall, no manor where you are able to live together?” (l. 917-18) and asserting that such a large crowd of heaven-dwellers would require “a great city” (l. 927) to house them.

Additionally, the apostles and the Dreamer are both permitted to see miraculous visions in order to help them mature spiritually. Near the end of his ministry, Christ takes Peter, James,
and John up on a mountain (Mk 9:2), where he is transfigured before them so that his clothes appear “shining, exceeding white as snow” (Mk 9:3), and he is seen talking with Moses and Elijah (Mk 9:4). Because of this vision, the apostles come to accept Christ’s divine nature and his superiority over the law and the prophets of the Old Testament, as symbolized by Moses and Elijah (Mk 9:5-8)—an important step in their spiritual maturation. Likewise, the Dreamer witnesses a similar transfiguration scene near the end of *Pearl*. During the “New Jerusalem” section of the poem, the Dreamer, like the apostles, is taken up on a mountain (l. 976; 979) where, after viewing the Holy City, he sees a great procession of the saints in which he spots his “little queen” (l. 1147). She, like Christ in his transfiguration, is dressed in dazzling white (l. 1102; 1150) and, like Christ, is talking to companions (l. 1149-50). When he sees her transfigured, the Dreamer finally comprehends the Pearl Maiden’s divine nature, realizing that she has not actually physically been standing beside him in the valley (l. 1148).

Lastly, in examining the end of the gospels and comparing them to the ending of *Pearl*, students ascertain that both the apostles and the Dreamer have matured through the teachings of Christ and of the Pearl Maiden, respectively, so that they are willing not only to submit to God’s will but to find productive purpose and even joy in relinquishing their own expectations and desires. As previously described, the apostles are initially grief-stricken over the prospect of losing the physical presence of Christ. Yet by the end of the gospels, when Christ actually leaves them and ascends into heaven, the apostles: “worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God” (Lk 24:52-3). They have clearly ceased to think in earthly terms and have matured so that they now understand
Christ’s purpose on earth. Moreover, they now also understand their own role in the divine plan, as is evidenced by the fact that they “went forth, and preached every where” (Mk 16:20).

Although when the Dreamer wakes from his vision to find himself once again in the garden, he is not full of joy like the apostles but instead describes himself as being in “great dismay” (l. 1174), “untaught and unconsolled,” he nevertheless does submit, albeit with a heavy heart, to the loss of his “pearl” because he realizes he has been mad to resist God (l. 1199-1200). Even more significant, however, is the Dreamer’s willingness to go beyond mere submission to God’s will. Though earlier in the poem the Dreamer lacks what Cory Owen describes as “the appropriate understanding by which to act prudently,” he now goes beyond prudent action to acknowledge that God is, to him, “both day and night…a God, a Lord, an entirely perfect friend” (l. 1203-4). As the apostles had to relinquish the physical presence of Christ in order to understand fully the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven and to delight in their own divinely ordained roles within it, so the Dreamer now demonstrates affection for God that he has hitherto shown only toward his “pearl.” By the poem’s final line, the Dreamer has matured to the point that he can now take delight in what he finally recognizes as his own spiritual purpose, which is to become for God a “precious pearl” and “humble servant to [God’s] pleasure” (l. 1211-12). This is the final, crowning paradox of the poem—that the Dreamer who was bereft of his “pearl” now himself becomes the “pearl”—the object of divine love—and in so doing proves the truth of the Pearl Maiden’s earlier assertion in lines 339-40: that by letting go of the “tumult of grief” for the “lesser sorrow” of his initial loss, he has achieved the “greater [thing]”—the true “Pearl of Great Price”—a relationship with God himself.
As they begin to compare *Pearl* and Revelation, modern students are struck by the impressive similarities between the structures, themes, and main characters of the two works; however, when they are led to discover the true complexity and layered richness of these biblical allusions, as well as the almost staggering degree of biblical knowledge that the *Pearl* poet’s use of such complexity presupposes on the part of his audience, they gain a greater understanding of the true scope of Christian and biblical influence upon 14th-century culture. It was vital to the *Pearl* poet that his Dreamer both grow as a character and reach maturity, or culmination, as a Christian, and so he concretized this rather abstract notion by describing, perhaps autobiographically, the movement of one man from grieving over a physical loss to understanding the paradoxes of the Christian faith. In the end, the Dreamer submits to and accepts his loss, not only acknowledging it as a part of God’s will, but now, as a mature Christian, even recognizing this loss as an expression of divine love. Knowing that his readers and hearers would be steeped in biblical teaching, the poet included rich layers of biblical—including apostolic—referents that would have resonated with a fourteenth-century audience,—whether courtly, clerical, or lay,—to a degree unlikely to be experienced by the typical twenty-first century reader. In going beyond the poem’s more apparent references to the Book of Revelation to include portions of the four gospels in teaching this work, the college professor can bring into greater focus to the author’s initial intent and help modern students gain an experience of the text that much more closely approximates that of the medieval audience in reading this strange and beautiful poem.
Bibliography


1 See footnote #20.
4 Chapman, “Numerical Symbolism in Dante and the Pearl,” 256.
7 Due to the difficulty of the Northwest Midlands dialect, I teach *Pearl* to my British Writers survey classes in modern translation. Therefore, I have elected to provide in this paper modern translations of all quotes from the text of *Pearl*. All quotes are taken from *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Patience, Cleanness, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Translation by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron. Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2007. CD-ROM.
8 Some examples of these other structural parallels include the following: both works contain some sort of prologue introducing the main characters and their respective situations (Rv. 1.1-9 and Pearl I. 1-49). Moreover, both narrators fall into a similar trance-like state of supernatural origin (Rv. 1.10 and Pearl I. 59); both narrators encounter a celestial being (John’s “Son of Man” and the Pearl narrator’s maiden) that frighten and stun them speechless at first (Rv. 1.17; Pearl I. 181); both contain a formal, stylized series of rebukes, which in Revelation take the form of letters to the angels of the seven churches (Rv. 2.1-3.22), while in *Pearl*, the Pearl maiden rebukes the Dreamer three times between lines 241-360; both texts then provide a vision of the New Jerusalem (Rv. 21:21; Pearl I. 980-1080); and at the end of each text, both narrators are providentially saved from doing something that would have displeased God (Rv. 22.9 and Pearl I. 1159-60).
14 While I do briefly discuss with students the fact that there is no scholarly consensus on this issue, I explain the arguments in favor of viewing “pearl” as a deceased person, possibly a child of the Dreamer, and we proceed to discuss the text under the assumption that this is a plausible interpretation.
20 Since the Pearl poet lived and wrote well before the Protestant Reformation and the proliferation of English biblical translations that accompanied it, the laity of his time had little (if any) direct access to actual biblical text. Although a few English translations of the Bible existed in the14th-century (such as John Wycliffe’s), they were not widely disseminated among the lay citizenry. However, there is no doubt that even illiterate members of the laity could be quite well versed in scripture, presumably acquired from a lifetime of exposure to sermons and exempla (which were often given in English), as well as to liturgical art. Though fictional, Chaucer’s Wife of Bath uses dozens of scriptural references in her Prologue, a fact that the other fictional (but presumably realistic) pilgrims sometimes dislike but
do not seem to find terribly surprising. A few decades later, the dictated autobiography of the illiterate brewer Margery Kempe proves that members of the laity did have a great deal of access to scripture through oral transmission.