

## ***Piers Plowman*** 1377

William Langland. (1330-1387)

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What is *Piers Plowman*?

*Piers Plowman* is an allegorical moral and social satire, written as a "vision" of the common medieval type. The poet falls asleep in the Malvern Hills and dreams that in a wilderness he comes upon the tower of Truth (God) set on a hill, with the dungeon of Wrong (the Devil) in the deep valley below, and a "fair field full of folk" (the world of living men and women) between them. He describes satirically all the different classes of people he sees there; then a lady named Holy Church rebukes him for sleeping and explains the meaning of all he sees. Further characters (Conscience, Liar, Reason and so on) enter the action; Conscience finally persuades many of the people to turn away from the Seven Deadly Sins and go in search of St. Truth, but they need a guide.

Piers (Peter), a simple Plowman, appears and says that because of his common sense and clean conscience he knows the way and will show them if they help him plow his half acre. Some of the company help, but some shirk; and Piers becomes identified with Christ, trying to get men to work toward their own material relief from the current abuses of worldly power. In the last section of the poem, much less coherent than the rest, the dreamer goes on a rambling but unsuccessful summer-long quest, aided by Thought, Wit, and Study, in search of the men who are Do-Well, Do-Bet and Do-Best.

*Prologue to Piers Plowman*

In a summer season when soft was the sun,  
I clothed myself in a cloak as I shepherd were,  
Habit like a hermit's unholy in works,  
And went wide in the world wonders to hear.  
But on a May morning on Malvern hills,  
A marvel befell me of fairy, methought.  
I was weary with wandering and went me to rest  
Under a broad bank by a brook's side,  
And as I lay and leaned over and looked into the waters  
I fell into a sleep for it sounded so merry.

Then began I to dream a marvellous dream,  
That I was in a wilderness wist I not where.  
As I looked to the east right into the sun,  
I saw a tower on a toft worthily built;  
A deep dale beneath a dungeon therein,  
With deep ditches and dark and dreadful of sight  
A fair field full of folk found I in between,  
Of all manner of men the rich and the poor,  
Working and wandering as the world asketh.  
Some put them to plow and played little enough,  
At setting and sowing they sweated right hard  
And won that which wasters by gluttony destroy.

Some put them to pride and apparelled themselves so  
In a display of clothing they came disguised.  
To prayer and penance put themselves many,

All for love of our Lord living hard lives,  
In hope for to have heavenly bliss.  
Such as anchorites and hermits that kept them in their cells,  
And desired not the country around to roam;  
Nor with luxurious living their body to please.

### *The author*

William Langland comes to us virtually without personal details. He was from the West of England, and was, as we can see from the present poem, immersed in the religious and social values of his time. He was also in sync with the aesthetic assumptions of serious contemporary poets—compliant in his long, three stress alliterative line, compliant in the framing of his most serious work in terms of dream and allegory. We have to imagine that Langland's own values are wrapped up in the allegorical clothing of his text, for *The Vision of Piers Plowman* is not only a history of the major events of the Christian story, but a revelation of the poet's understanding of Christ's significance. In the following we give a caption survey of the contents, quickly tracing the 'plot,' then looking into our main concern, the nature of the kind of allegorical thinking from which Langland—like John Bunyan three hundred years later—created his world vision.

### *The story of Piers Plowman; critical comments*

#### Vision 1

The poem begins in the [Malvern Hills](#) between [Worcestershire](#) and [Herefordshire](#). A man named Will (either simply a personal name or an allegory for a person's will, in the sense of 'desire, intention') falls asleep and envisions a tower set upon a hill and a fortress ([donjon](#)) in a deep valley; between these symbols of heaven and hell is a 'fair field full of folk', the world of humankind. A satirical account of different sections of society follows. The trope of a wide lens optic onto the human condition could remind us of many movements in great literature: The messenger's speech, in Aeschylus' *Persians*, in which a haunted voice reports, of the battle that defeats Xerxes, that 'I did not know that death had undone so many'; a passage powerfully picked up by T.S. Eliot in the *Four Quartets*.

Passus (section) 1: Holy Church visits Will and explains the tower of Truth, and discusses Truth more generally. Langland risks the most irrefragable languages, fearing not to personify Holy Church. Haven't we to ask ourselves whether Langland's entire world perception differs from that our time makes possible for us? Don't we enjoy an (often empty) freedom to criticize our highest institutions?

Passus 2: Will sees Lady Mede ('payment') and finds out about her planned marriage to False. From this point on we begin to appreciate the role of the satirical in Langland's vision; satire, like allegorical thinking, personifies vices or virtues, then evaluates them like people.

Passus 3: Lady Mede travels to the royal court; the King proposes she marry Conscience; but Conscience denounces her. The poet is reliably on the side of clean conscience. Piers serves regularly as the exponent of this virtue.

Passus 4: Conscience and Reason convince the King not to marry Mede to False. Will wakes up.

#### Vision 2

Passus 5: Will falls back to sleep. Reason gives a sermon to the Field of Folk and the people decide to repent. The [Seven Deadly Sins](#) make confession and in penance attempt to go on pilgrimage to St Truth. They get lost, and Piers Plowman makes his first appearance: he will help the penitents if they help him plough his half-acre. Piers Plowman will from now on appear working to plough his acres, occasionally struggling as though bearing the cross of Christ, more often appearing as a simple honest man attempting to live a moral life. In this latter role he resembles a mediaeval Everyman.

Passus 6: Piers and the penitents plough the half-acre. Some people refuse to work, and Hunger punishes them until they work. But once Hunger has been sated, the people return to idleness. Such is mankind, saith Langland.

Passus 7: Eventually, Truth sends Piers a pardon for the penitents' sins; its main content is 'Do well and have well and God shall have your soul' and 'Do evil and have evil, and expect nothing other than that after your death, the Devil shall have your soul'. When challenged on the pardon's validity by a priest, Piers angrily tears it in two. Will is awakened by their arguing and, musing on his dreams, decides to seek 'Do-wel.'

### Vision 3

Passus 8: Will's search for Do-wel begins. He enters into a disputation with Friars. He then falls asleep once more and meets Thought. Thought instructs Will in 'Do well, do better, do best'. Practical interpretation of what these concepts mean is to be provided by Witl.

Passus 9: There is an extended allegory featuring Dowel and the Castle of Flesh, exposing the need for people to be governed by their 'Inwit'. The text discusses poverty and marriage. Wit makes further inroads to understanding Dowel, as active virtue.

Passus 10: Will meets Wit's wife, Dame Study. She complains to Will about his ignorance. Will then proceeds to Clergy and Scripture to learn more about Dowel. He considers what value scholarship might have in helping him achieve salvation. Langland's sense of the immediately pertinent, in his critique, gives his imaginative work its lasting power. His mind is forever on improvement, and though this sounds Pollyanna it is not, for Langland shares with us the conviction that moral value is inexhaustible and forever to be reacquired.

Passus 11: Scripture complains about Will's lack of self-knowledge. Angered, Will (who is already dreaming) goes to sleep and has a dream-within-a-dream in which he meets Fortune. He serves her into old age, but she abandons him. Will learns about the salvation of the [Emperor Trajan](#) and the power of love. Kynde ('character, natural disposition, nature', here understood as an aspect of God) shows Will the world. Will has an argument with Reason: Reason, Will concludes, does not do enough to keep people from sin; but Reason disagrees. Will awakes from the dream-within-a-dream. He now meets Imaginative, who advises Will to be patient. This vivid discourse between imagination and reason (with all its limits) clarifies the priority Langland always gives to the full hearted interpretation of human events.

Passus 12: Imaginatif teaches Will, bringing together and improving his understanding of earlier discussions in the poem. Imaginatif emphasises the need for humility and the importance of Grace.

### Vision 4

Passus 13: Will awakens and then falls back to sleep; he dreams of sharing a feast with Conscience, Scripture, Clergy and Patience; he encounters a greedy Doctor of Divinity (who later shows disdain for love) and as well as eating actual food also dines on spiritual food. Piers the Plowman offers a definition of Do Well, Do Better and Do Best. Then Conscience and Patience meet Haukyn the Active Man, who wears a coat of Christian faith which is, however, soiled with the Seven Deadly Sins.

Passus 14: Conscience teaches Haukyn to seek forgiveness and do penance; Patience teaches Haukyn about the merits of embracing poverty. Haukyn cries out for God's mercy, which awakens Will.

### Vision 5

Passus 15: Will finds himself alienated from the waking world, but Reason helps him to go back to sleep, whereupon Will meets Anima ('spirit'). Anima tells Will off for his pride in wanting to know too much, but goes on to talk about charity, in particular how the Church should care for its flock, but how its priests and monks do not always fulfil this duty. Talking to Anima, Will starts to conclude that Piers the Plowman is Christ. Will realises that he needs to switch from searching for Dowel to searching for Charity. Will

realizes that the extraordinary grace apparent in Piers Plowman is his participation in the face of him which is Christ.

Passus 16: Will falls into another dream-within-a-dream, this time about the Tree of Charity, whose gardener is Piers the Plowman. Will participates in a re-enactment of the Fall of Man and then has a vision of the life of Christ; when this reaches the point where the Devil is defeated, Will wakes up from the dream-within-a-dream. Will goes looking for Piers and meets Faith/Abraham, who is himself searching for Christ. In the dream within a dream, of this natural dreamer, Will, the dreamer retreats to the origins of man in sin, and is led by Piers to the footsteps of Abraham and faith.

Passus 17: Next, Will meets Hope/Moses, characterized by the tablets of law, who is also in search of Christ. Will learns about the Good Samaritan, the prospect of salvation, and the importance of Love. He wakes up.

#### Vision 6

Passus 18: Will sleeps again, and experiences the climactic section of *Piers Plowman*. He experiences Love and the intersection of human and divine time. Will witnesses Christ/the Good Samaritan/Piers Plowman riding into Jerusalem and Christ's crucifixion. He then witnesses the [Four Daughters of God](#) (Truth, Justice, Mercy, Peace) in debate; the Harrowing of Hell; and Redemption. Will is swept into high theology by experience of love, which Piers frees in him. Will wakes again, and now exhorts his family to hear Mass.

#### Vision 7

Passus 19: During the mass, Will falls back to sleep and meets Conscience once more. Conscience recounts the life and Passion of Christ and how Piers/Peter was given his power by Grace/Christ. In a state of change, Will moves forever in and out of dream. Piers assumes different forms—an honest man of the soil, in search of the honest life, a straightshooting Will finds out about Pentecost; once more sees Piers as a ploughman, and witnesses Pride attacking Unity/Holy Church. He wakes up and records his dream about it and its characters. Will and Piers Plowman are both consciousness satirist, with a moral self-confidence deriving from his own Christlike nature. Does Will share in that nature, as he dreams?

#### Vision 8

Passus 20: While awake, Will meets Need. He falls asleep again and now dreams of the Antichrist. Kynde sends Old Age, Death, and Pestilence, to chastise people: Will is attacked by Old Age. He witnesses Holy Church undermined by a hypocritical Friar. Conscience goes on pilgrimage to seek Piers the Plowman, and calls on Grace for help—whereupon Will wakes up. The search for Piers, which is a theme of this entire poem, leads back into a certain transcendence of Will's self.

#### *The imagination at work*

The action, above, opens on the picture of a world-trudging pilgrim (Will) dreaming of "Christ's passion and pain" and of His people, which includes one Piers the Plowman, a slightly tweaked version of Will himself. (Will is an abstract notion, like Mede, False, Hunger, Fortune, Truth, Conscience, Clergy; a blend of nouns and adjectives, which all serve equally to stand in for essential human conditions. Will is the overall observer, while Piers is the active doer who mobilizes the interactions of the whole narrative.) Through the lens of dream, Piers allows allegorical figures to play across an account of the tale of Christ's life and sacrifice, as it is embedded in the sacred tales that substantiate the central Christian mystery.

#### *Types of Imagination*

In many ways the Christian mediaeval imagination—allegorical, indirect, trading in symbols drawn from intense belief, personifications of human conditions—is hard for us to read, harder either than ancient

classical literature—whose obscurities derive from undetermined references or even than the difficult works of our own time, like James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* which requires a detailed commentary, which jumbles reality and history after a fashion meant to reconfigure, for the reader, his/her entire landscape of cultural symbols. Erich Auerbach's book *Mimesis* takes us down the pathway of interpretive mindsets, helping us to value the angle inside language from which Langland transmutes the ordinary play of reference through the imagination, under the spell of a formal narrative. The kind of analysis Auerbach brings to the varieties of mimetic form helps free us—still prisoners of the romantic, as we are—to explore older and less familiar styles of world recreation through language. Another useful run-up, to reading *Piers Plowman* might be Charles Williams' *Descent into Hell* (1937), for a scary and profound twentieth century mediaeval type thriller, with some kinship to Langland's thought world. Here we find language which aligns with the satiric as well as the transcendent of fictional speech, though the characters carry the back drop of their historical moments far more conspicuously than does Piers, who never quite 'belongs to a place.')

### *Langland and some great texts*

In *Piers Plowman* Langland creates a character in search of the best way to lead the Christian life. The social perspective, under which that search is imagined as possible, is communitarian, and in a way conservative, supporting the reigning feudal structure of the time. You might think of other ambitious literary texts which attempt to construct and find value in a large social panorama of this sort. Dante comes directly to mind with his own vision of the pageant of human conditions which make up the whole society of human being. I think equally of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the narrator of which steps back, like Piers through Will, into a place from which he can survey the global nusus upward rising toward salvation. Similar strategies of comprehensive perception, and carefully aligned imagination, buttress the work of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, or Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdottir*. In both of those novels the historical world is seen from some point like Piers', rinsed of what might limit it. Does literature of that level seem to you of special value as an interpreter and forecaster of human societal possibilities? Can you acquire something like that sense, of the height of literature, from criticism like Leavis' *The Great Tradition*, which takes away our breath, with its appropriateness to the standpoint of true art?

### *Who is Langland the Man as distinct from Langland the imaginer?*

Little is known of Langland himself, as we have said. It seems probable that he was born in the [West Midlands of England](#) around 1330. The narrator of *Piers Plowman* receives his first vision while sleeping in the [Malvern Hills](#). The text of the poem contains a passage in which the narrator describes himself—later in life, obviously-- as a "loller" or "idler" living in the [Cornhill](#) area of [London](#), and refers to his wife and child. It also suggests that he was well above average height and made a living reciting prayers for the dead. However, the distinction between allegory and reality in the entire text of *Piers Plowman* is blurred, and the entire passage in question is reminiscent of the false confession tradition in [medieval literature](#). A passage in the final Passus of the B and C texts of *Piers Plowman* provides further ambiguous details on the poet's wife and his torments by Elde (Old Age), including baldness, [gout](#), and impotence. This may indicate that the poet had reached middle age by the 1370s, but the accuracy of the passage is called into question by the conventional nature of the description and the fact that it occurs near the end of the poem, when Will's personal development is reaching its logical conclusion. To the end of our acquaintance with his work, Langland remains as transitorily present as his characters, who blow in the wind of the mind.

### *Study guide*

Particularly compelling, in the present poem, are certain recurring 'sates of affairs': the waking-dreaming-dreaming of dreaming-- sequences, which are Will's bridges of perception of the human turmoil he observes ahead of him in the daleful of people milling about, the human scene; the coming into presence of the two main avatars of Piers, as 'honest man,' and as transcendent Christ; the voice of Will/Piers proliferating sharp satirical passages against the corroded conditions of the time. This list of thematic linkings could be enriched—in fact with each new vision there is a new set of local conditions, to enframe the ongoing process of the poem. Given this interhatching of various themes or verbal positionings what

seems to, you to hold the poem together? Is it Will, the dreamer who calls the series of settings into existence? Is it the milling crowds who provide the global perspective—the kind of perspective Dante approaches his world with? Or is it Piers, who, for all his changeability—honest farmer into savior of the world, bitter satirist of corruption?—appears the directive sensibility of the whole, but only as he interacts with the extreme conditions of the human scene?