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Narrative Technique in the Works of the Pearl Poet

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of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Karl Craig Agger

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Abstract

In the fourteenth century, the so-called Pearl Poet created such masterpieces as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl*. Though his surviving body of work comprises only four poems, these are enough to have him considered among the greatest medieval English writers. Much scholarship has focused on the poems' sources, style, symbolism, and thematic content, but comparatively little has approached these works as narratives. The Pearl Poet was a masterful storyteller who employed a consistent yet flexible set of narrative techniques. Borrowing the theories developed by Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, I present an analysis of the narrative techniques used by the Pearl Poet based on a hybrid of individual and comparative readings of his four works. All the poems together display common features of fully realized drama and flexibility of perspective. While certain techniques can be found throughout his writing, the Pearl Poet reveals himself to be skilled in adapting different techniques in the service of different genres: from the sermon-like directness of *Patience* and *Cleanness*, to the intensely personal dream-vision *Pearl*, to the ambiguous romance *Sir Gawain*. I will particularly focus on the poet's employment of the narrator's voice, as it ranges from authoritative to friendly to sympathetically flawed, and argue that the diversity of these voices are each appropriate to the subject and matter of the poems as he tells them.

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Approaching the Poems as Narratives

The poems of Cotton Nero A.x—*Pearl*, *Patience*, *Cleanness* (or *Purity*), and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—have a long critical history, yet the portion of critical attention given to the narrative quality of these poems has been relatively small. It is telling that Charles Moorman, writing in 1968, when proclaiming that “our greatest need... seems now to be for studies in which the works of the *Pearl*-poet are taken for a whole,” specifies that these new studies should especially “be devoted to establishing the central themes and techniques of the poet,” as opposed to primarily “biographical, cultural, or linguistic.”¹ To scholars of medieval literature, it is perhaps natural that an examination of literary techniques should be a secondary concern. As A. R. Heiserman explains, Middle English literature is abundant in complex symbolism and theological commentary.² To approach Middle English literature as an exegetical puzzle is appealing to the medieval scholar, for not only does it lead to easy and lively debate, but it brings to bear that specialist knowledge of the medieval intellectual milieu that is the medievalist’s special province. The narratives of these poems seem straightforward, merely the clay out of which philosophical content is to be mined. As Heiserman appropriately puts it, “No wonder people are more intrigued by these pearls than by the oysters in which they live.”³

But to follow this approach is to assume much of the attitude of the Pearl Poet towards his own work, especially as can be seen in the qualities of the texts themselves. Lynn Staley Johnson argues convincingly that storytelling was a primary concern of the Pearl Poet, for he would go so far as to break the meter of his verse in order to serve a narrative purpose.⁴ She frames the Pearl Poet’s sense of narrative within the terms of “dramatic appeal,” a recognition

¹ Charles Moorman, *The Pearl-Poet* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1968), 113.

² A. R. Heiserman, “The Plot of Pearl,” *PMLA* 80, No. 3 (1965): 164.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Lynn Staley Johnson, *The Voice of the Gawain-Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), xiii-xiv.

that the thematic content of the poems is communicated more effectively when revealed through the dramatic situations of human characters.⁵ That is to say, stories have the ability to move us because they are stories. Johnson's statement may seem quite matter-of-fact, even blindingly obvious to any appreciator of fiction. Still these observations show how, in the time since Moorman's statement, a greater emphasis of the poems' narrative quality has entered the scholarly conversation.

In that time, few critics have made the narratives so central to their criticism as W. A. Davenport does in his *The Art of the Gawain-Poet*. At the very beginning of this work, he sets himself up as not just extremely sensitive to the deficiencies of what he calls "historical scholarship" on the poems, but as a corrective to it, willing, unlike past scholars, to follow "the logic of the poems themselves."⁶ Much as Johnson did, Davenport finds that the poems, on their own terms, betray a preoccupation with the dramatic, especially in their tendency to render scenes through an accumulation of descriptive detail and how their most crucial points are rendered through dramatic action rather than summary or commentary.⁷ Most importantly to this essay, Davenport names the overriding concern of the critical response to be "to define the effects [the poems] have on the reader and the way the reader responds to them."⁸ His reading of the poems, each taken individually, is consistent with this statement. Yet despite the novelty of his approach, Davenport's analysis is flawed in many points, the greatest of which is his frequent disregard for what he calls the "didactic" dimension of the poems whenever they seemingly come in to conflict with their narratives. For Davenport, "the narrator is, for the most part, the

⁵ Ibid. 220-221

⁶ W. A. Davenport, *The Art of the Gawain-Poet* (London: Athlone Press, 1978), 3.

⁷ Ibid, 199.

⁸ Ibid, 3.

servant of the tale,” whose interludes as “moralist” are infrequent and often regrettable.⁹ It is perhaps that Davenport, in attempting to overturn the conventional scholarly approach to the poems, goes too far in his embrace of them as narratives and downplays their symbolic and theological content. Even Moorman, in his attempt to take a more narrative view of the poems, maintains “that the *Pearl*-poet is essentially a moral poet,” and that “it would be profitless, I think, to approach the poet... simply as an entertainer.”¹⁰

At the heart of the critical controversy surrounding narrative qualities is an explicit or implicit dichotomy between what might be called the dramatic and the didactic. Doubtless, the Pearl Poet shows interest and skill in his rendering of dramatic action, and equally doubtless he does the same in delivering moral or theological themes. This has led to a critical presumption that these two interests may be picked apart and analyzed separately. Though this easy division seems at first simplifying, it ends up leading to further interpretive problems, especially the tendency to think that drama and didacticism are qualities that are opposed to each other. Those who want to argue that the poems succeed along both lines must tread carefully. John M. Ganim, for instance, writes that “despite its wonderful success as an entertainment, the poem deals explicitly with profound moral issues,”¹¹ presuming that “entertainment” (drama or narrative effectiveness) is a contrary quality to “moral issues” (didactic content), and that their mutual success counts as an exceptional thing. Attempts to explain the success of the Pearl Poet in these areas run up against the same problem of trying to make these qualities complimentary yet keeping them largely distinct. Take Enoch D. Padolsky’s appraisal:

⁹ Ibid, 137

¹⁰ Moorman, *The Pearl-Poet*, 114.

¹¹ John M. Ganim, "Disorientation, Style, and Consciousness in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *PMLA* 91, no. 3 (1976): 384.

He deliberately encourages our involvement in the action and our sympathy for the characters, exciting our hearts, as it were, by the ongoing drama of the story... On the other hand, he also provides us simultaneously with a clear moral and intellectual framework for judging character and event in the narrative.¹²

As with other critics, Padolsky appeals to the distinction of dramatic vs didactic, but here his words betray a complication of this scheme. “Sympathy for the characters” and “judging characters,” though here presented as facets of the dramatic and didactic, respectively, are almost the same thing, with neither necessarily preceding the other. Taken further, it becomes less clear that encouraging the audience’s involvement and providing an intellectual framework are wholly distinct activities on the part of the poet. The distinction between the dramatic and the didactic is presumptuous, even fallacious, for as Heiserman has pointed out, none of the poems can be understood as a welding together of story and message; rather, they only make sense when approached as narrative wholes.¹³

If the critical approaches to the narratives of the Pearl Poet have, thus far, been insufficient, then it stands to reason that a new form of criticism must be applied. I do not doubt that there are multiple complimentary and valid approaches, but the one which I have chosen to take up is that which is advanced by Wayne C. Booth in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Booth’s criticism will serve as the inspiration, if not the strict guidelines, for my reading of narrative technique in the poems.

The Rhetoric of Fiction does not present a rigid system of criticism, but rather a set of interrelated ideas. Booth’s main idea, or at least the one that is most relevant to my purposes,

¹² Enoch D. Padolsky, “Steering the Reader’s Heart’ in *Patience*,” *University of Ottawa Quarterly* 53 (1983): 169.

¹³ Heiserman, 164.

could be best summarized as “the author’s judgment is always present, always evident to anyone who knows how to look for it.”¹⁴ In his work, Booth goes on to show how we as readers can look for these traces of the author’s judgement, as well as evaluate whether the authorial techniques which communicate these judgements are effective or not. When Booth first wrote this book in 1961, he was, in large part, responding to a trend in the writing and criticism of fiction which, for one reason or another, totally rejected the idea of an author communicating their judgement to their readers, by reason that the best and purest fiction was realistic, objective, and presented itself to its audience without any hint of the author. One of Booth’s main goals in this work was to demonstrate that such a goal is both impossible to achieve, and goes against the very idea of fiction itself, which, as the quote above demonstrates, is entirely permeated by the author’s judgement.¹⁵ Though, in the course of his argument, Booth focuses on the modern novel for his examples, this does not mean that his statements only apply to modern literatures; his inclusion of Chaucer and Boccaccio,¹⁶ who were indeed contemporaries of the Pearl Poet, among his examples indicate that Booth’s theories are meant to apply equally well to medieval literatures. Booth’s theories are more descriptive than prescriptive and intended to apply to narrative fiction of any genre or time.

The great strength of Booth’s criticism, which allows it to deal equally well in modern novels and medieval poetry, is its pluralism. He discounts the idea that there is any one single object towards which the composition of narrative fiction must pretend. Instead, he argues, “any literary work of any power... is in fact an elaborate system of controls over the reader’s

¹⁴ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction: Second Edition* (University of Chicago Press, 1983), 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 149.

¹⁶ For Booth’s use of Chaucer, see 170; for his use of Boccaccio, see 9-16.

involvement and detachment along *various* lines of interest.”¹⁷ It is the author who decides which lines of interest they want to heighten, and it is their task to implement the controls that will nudge the reader along those interests. There are no devices that are desirable in themselves (e.g. realism, objectivity); they are only desirable insofar as they advance the reader along the line which the author has chosen for the work. The interests are the controlling factor, and Booth develops a “catalogue of interests”¹⁸ that authors may appeal to in their works. “(1) Intellectual or cognitive:” our desire to know the truth of things in any of its senses; “(2) Qualitative:” our desire to see patterns or forms completed; “(3) Practical:” our desire to see the success of that we like and the failure of that we hate.¹⁹ Note that none of these interests map perfectly on to the dichotomy of dramatic and didactic, and that none of them has precedence over any other. The author’s task is to use their narrative tools to heighten certain interests and lessen others; no work of fiction can be everything at once.

By now it is quite apparent that Booth enjoys to talk freely of the author’s hand in the construction of fiction, especially against those who “understate the importance of the author’s individuality.”²⁰ He is clearly against such modern critics as celebrate “the Death of the Author” or think of the text as nothing more than an aesthetic object to which the reader responds. This should not, however, be taken to mean that he endorses the much-maligned intentional fallacy as the primary means of approaching a narrative. He recognizes, however, that in our reading of stories we invariably engage with the intelligence whom we picture as standing behind the words on the page. We should not equate this intelligence with the historical author, but understand

¹⁷ Ibid, 123.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 125.

²⁰ Ibid, 70.

that, in the act of writing a story, the author creates “an implied version of ‘himself.’”²¹ Booth later calls this the ‘implied author,’ and this concept is perhaps the single most central idea of his whole criticism:

However impersonal [the implied author] may try to be, his reader will inevitably construct a picture of the official scribe who writes in this manner—and of course that official scribe will never be neutral towards all values. Our reactions to his various commitments, secret or overt, will help to determine our response to the work.²²

It may be said that the reader’s relationship with the implied author—our ability to understand their values and our judgement whether those values have been communicated effectively—is the criterion by which a work of fiction succeeds or fails.

Though the necessity of the implied author’s and reader’s understanding is a constant, the nature of this relationship and the techniques with which it may be achieved are ever-variable. This leads in to what I consider Booth’s second most critical concept, the idea of variations of distance in narration. Distance, here, means relation along the line of “identification to complete opposition;”²³ it describes not spatial or temporal distance but the feeling of concurrence between one or more intelligences. Distance exists in a complex web of relations that include the implied author, the narrator, the characters, and the reader.²⁴ The distances between any of these may be great or small, although it is usually imperative that the implied author and the reader stand at little distance to one another if the narrative is to be a success. For example, a narrator

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, 71.

²³ Ibid, 155

²⁴ Ibid, 155-159.

may stand at little distance from the implied author, in which case we as readers can trust what the narrator says as reflective of the implied author's values. On the other hand, if the narrator stands at a great distance from the implied author, then we as readers must be able to determine through other authorial hints and techniques that we must judge the narrator against the implied author's values. The great strength of this system is that it goes beyond the usual questions of narration, namely point-of-view and the dramatized vs the undramatized narrator. Those are matters of technique that can be used to effect many different kinds of distance and should not be taken as overly determinative.²⁵ Through the control of distances, the author does not simply present the narrative as a matter-of-fact, but shapes the reader's response to the action and points towards a certain judgement or range of judgement.

There is much more to be said of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, but these concepts are the ones I find most useful to keep in mind when reading the narratives of the Pearl Poet. His control of the distances in each of his poems, whether straightforward, subtle, or shifting, is the key to the success of his stories and, indeed, the balance of drama and didacticism. It is well that Booth's criticism allows for diversity, for no two works of the Pearl Poet are wholly alike. They represent a broad range of genre, and each demands a different set of tools in order to achieve its proper effect. So it may be said that there is not a single narrative technique for the Pearl Poet. He embraces a range of techniques, and his ability to employ them properly, and even surprisingly, is the true mark of his mastery.

²⁵ See Larry D. Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1965), 189. Benson makes the common error of identifying omniscient narration as necessarily "objective" and limited point of view as necessarily "dramatic."

Scene, Movement, and Frame

Though each poem is different in the voice that guides it, it is clear that the Pearl Poet has a set of certain favorite techniques which he uses in all of his works. These techniques operate less on the larger scale of providing context for the story, but more on the smaller scale of rendering the action with incredible vividness. Many critics have described the Pearl Poet's descriptive technique as "cinematic,"²⁶ and for several reasons. The descriptive detail is usually concrete and specific, as if it were being seen in sharp focus before the camera lens. Important visual images are lingered upon. The presentation of these images is not all in the same fashion; they may be static or in motion, near or distant or moving from one to the other. The cumulative effect is much like watching a film, with close-ups followed by long-shots, as well as moving shots and montages. Of course, this effect is not really like that of a film, since words read or heard do not move in the same way as pictures on a screen. But a reasonable illusion is achieved, as "the poet presents a scene and then resolves it into its distinct components,"²⁷ creating through arrangement a sense of space and time.

The big, cinematic scenes often function as focal points in the poems' narratives, their vividness grasping the reader with a sense of urgency. Take the flood sequence in *Cleanness* as an example. The entire sequence lasts from 361-402 and covers a huge, yet unified, range of images. It begins as "bolned þe abyne, and bonkez con ryse"²⁸ (363); the water gushes forth from both the earth and the sky (362-372), the humans left behind desperately attempt to save themselves (373-386) and are joined by the equally frightened animals of the earth (387-390),

²⁶ Spearing, 38.

²⁷ Ganim, 376.

²⁸ All quotations of *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* come from *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed. Malcolm Arnold and Ronald Waldron (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007).

but it ends as they all realize that there will be no escape for them and that they are to perish (391-402). Each segment is enriched by the accumulation of detail, illustrating the various sources of the water or the different kinds of beast and bird. Through it all, however, is a motion from first cause to immediate effect to final conclusion. The Pearl Poet gives us these images on a world-spanning scale as if it were a long-shot in a film. The events are dramatic, but the audience views them from a considerable distance.

Equally dramatic, but at a much closer range, are the two sequences involving the ship in *Patience*. The first comes as Jonah steps aboard the ship, and we are given this image as his journey is about to commence:

Then he tron on þo tres, and þey her tramme ruchen,
 Cachen vp the crossayl, cables þay fasten,
 Wiȝt at þe wyndas weȝen her ankres,
 Spende spak to þe sprete þe spare bawleyne,
 Gederen to þe gyde-ropes, þe grete cloþ falls,
 Þay layden in on laddeborde, and þe lofe wynnes,
 Þe blyþe breþe at her bak þe bosum he fyndes (101-107).

The overall picture is one of the busyness of the sailors as they prepare the ship to go to sail, but this picture is made by focusing singly and in succession on the various parts of the ship as they are gotten ready. This creates an image of the whole ship through an accumulation of very tangible details, while also creating a sense of action and expectation. This passage is paralleled by one later on as the ship is caught in the storm:

Þe bur ber to hit baft, þat braste alle her gere,
 Þen hurled on a hepe þe helme and þe sterne;

Furst tomurte mony rop and þe mast after;

þe sayl swayed on þe see, þenne suppe bihoued

þe coge of þe colde water, and þenne þe cry ryses (148-152).

This passage describes a natural disaster much as the flood-scene in *Cleanness*, only this time with a much narrower focus. As before, the drama of this scene, already heightened because the occasion is not calm but dangerous, is communicated through an accumulation of small, concrete images. Instead of seeing the storm acting upon the ship as a whole, we see the ship being broken apart quite literally one rope and plank at a time. Finally, this passage gains even more urgency by its similarity to the previous one; in the first scene, we see the ship being prepared, and in this scene we see all of that work being undone.

The above examples present a scene from a wider angle, allowing the reader to observe the scene vividly, but at some distance. In the case of descriptions that take much closer views, this visual closeness can be used to imply that we are looking at the scene from a particular character's point of view. This technique is found especially in *Pearl*, which makes sense since that poem is told through a highly dramatized narrator. Upon arriving in the dream world, the dreamer says, "Towarde a foreste I bere þe face" (66), indicating that he is reporting his views exactly as he experienced them in time, noting even for the turning of his head. This is borne out in the descriptive passage that follows, where the dreamer scrutinizes his surroundings point-by-point. He lifts his head upward to the "glem of glodez" in line 79, and then turns it down to look at "þe grauayl þat on grounde con grynde" in line 81. This technique of describing through the eyes of a character is not just useful in laying out a static scene, but is effective in conveying dramatic action. In *Patience*, as the ship is caught in the storm, Jonah is momentarily dropped from the narrative, and the focus is kept entirely on the sailors as they struggle fearfully to keep

afloat in the maelstrom. Eventually the idea to gather everyone to draw lots is brought up, and we follow a “lodesmon” who “lyȝtly lep vnder hachches” (179). Under the deck, searching for the last man to bring up, “hym fayled no freke þat he fynde myȝt,/ Saf Jonas þe Jwe, þat jowked in derne” (181-182). The ‘discovery’ of Jonah is made more of a surprise because it is told from the point of view of the sailor; we, the audience, walking with the sailor, discover Jonah alongside him. It is almost as if there is a camera perched on the sailor’s shoulder that pans down at the most suspenseful moment to find Jonah asleep in the hold. This kind of sprung dramatic surprise need not even be done visually. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as Gawain circles the Green Chapel looking for his foe, the Green Knight’s absence, coupled with the eerie quiet surrounding the chapel, creates an expectant tension. Suddenly,

Þene herde he of þat hyȝe hil, in a hard roche

Biȝonde þe broke, in a bonk, a wonder breme noyse.

Quat! hit clattered in þe cliff as hit cleue schulde (2199-2201).

The noise of the Green Knight sharpening the axe, made even punchier by the poet’s interjection, comes to Gawain, and to us, as a complete surprise, all the more because he and we literally do not see it coming. The poet’s use of this limited point-of-view does not just create a believability and descriptive texture, but heightens the drama of his stories and make them more exciting.

The poet’s ability to provide striking descriptive passages from varying angles certainly creates a strong effect for the audience, but it is also important to understand just what that effect is. Commenting on the scene of the wedding-feast in *Cleanness*, Spearing writes that the great

level of detail goes “all in the direction of increased realism, both in setting and in speech.”²⁹ Spearing focuses on how the stories in *Cleanness* and *Patience* contain much more descriptive detail than their antecedents in the Bible, which are written quite plainly, but his usage of the term ‘realism’ is curious. If he means realism as in real-to-life, then this is not always true. Many highly descriptive passages, such as the *Pearl*-Dreamer’s exploration of the dream-forest or Jonah’s journey down the whale’s gullet, are plainly intended to feel fantastic. However, the Pearl Poet’s style is often ‘realistic’ in the sense that it is *realized*—made as sensory and concrete as it may possibly be. The verisimilitude comes through in the poet’s ability to portray convincingly narrative events within their space and time. As Benson notes,³⁰ the organization of events during the scene of Gawain’s trial at the end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is exaggerated beyond realism, almost to melodrama. But the crystallization of each solitary motion of that suspenseful scene is exactly what is called for at that point of the narrative, and the heightening effect creates a stronger impression.

This account of the Pearl Poet’s descriptive technique has so far focused upon his rendering of static scenes or sequences to make them intensely focused and realized. However, the texture of his poetry is not always dramatic; it is able to shift back and forth depending upon the demands of the narrative. The most common of these shifts is a narrowing effect. William Vantuono identifies the movement “from a general description of a nature scene to a specific feeling which controls the minds and hearts of the characters”³¹ as one of the consistent stylistic features that unites the four poems. Other scholars have identified how this narrowing-in accords with the Pearl Poet’s cinematic technique, the effect much like a zooming-in of a movie

²⁹ Spearing, 45.

³⁰ Benson, 175.

³¹ William Vantuono, “*Patience, Cleanness, Pearl, and Gawain: The Case for Common Authorship*” *Annuaire Mediaevale* 12 (1971): 54.

camera.³² However, it is important to note that this effect is less literally visual than it is psychological, moving from the presentation of a scene to its reception by one of the characters of the story and their reaction.

Such an example occurs in *Cleanness*, during the story of Belshazzar. This scene describes a magnificently opulent feast. Lines 1393-1417 reveal a dazzling array of servants, lords and ladies, exotic animals, beautiful vessels of silver and gold, and sumptuous foods. At the end of this catalogue, the view shifts to Belshazzar, overseeing the whole affair from his dais:

For he waytez on wyde, his wenches he byholdes,
 And his bolde baronage aboute bi þe woʒes.
 Penne a dotage ful depe drof to his hert,
 And a caytif counsayl he caʒt bi hymselfen (1423-1426).

This “caytif counsayl” becomes Belshazzar’s plan to defile the Jewish holy relics by using them as table setting. The poet takes us fully within Belshazzar’s point of view, reinforcing the idea that he is seeing the opulence of his feast as we are, and then taking that impression and transforming it to the cause of Belshazzar’s evil purpose. He is reacting to his environment, and the audience is made privy to that reaction. A similar thing happens in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as Gawain approaches the Green Chapel. The description of the landscape surrounding the Green Chapel is given its own stanza, touching on such features as “ruʒe knobled knarrez with knobled stonez” (2166), a stream that “blubred þerinne as hit boyled hade” (2174), and the Chapel itself “ouergrownen with gresse” (2181). Taking all of this in,

‘We! Lorde,’ quop þe gentyle knyʒt,
 ‘Wheþer þis be þe Grene Chapelle?’

³² See Spearing, 92 and Benson, 190-191.

Here myȝt aboute mydnyȝt

þe Dele his matynnes telle!’ (2185-2188).

The descriptive scene, though containing premonitions for the perceptive reader, is presented most matter-of-factly. At the end, however, Gawain comes in with what is essentially the verbalization of an interior view: Gawain is surprised that the Chapel is not what he thought it would be, and it seems evil to him. Thus the description is narrowed in to its narrative significance: what it means in light of Gawain’s trial.

This narrowing-in is an effective tool that combines the presentational possibilities of a more omniscient point-of-view with the option to focus in upon the perceptions or inner states of certain characters at crucial moments. It is often used to control our sympathies, for it is the natural inclination of the audience to sympathize with those characters who are afforded the most inner views. This can even be done with multiple characters in the same scene³³ to provide a longer view of not just the visual action but the psychological action. However, the most important narrowing movements are always those that begin with setting the story and end in the commencement of the story proper.³⁴ Instead of moving from a wider dramatic angle to a narrower one, this is the movement that begins the story entirely.

Each of the poems has a frame, a section before the story begins and after it ends that usually consists of direct address by the narrator. This gives each poem a kind of symmetry, with the narrowing-in effect of the beginning balanced by a widening-out effect on the other end. Despite not being dramatic, these sections are perhaps the most crucial for understanding each of the poems in turn. Moorman calls them “a mixed introduction and commentary” that provides

³³ See Benson, 195 for the multiple points of view used in the hunting scenes of *Sir Gawain*.

³⁴ See Benson 185-186.

the poet a place “to announce... his thematic intentions before plunging into the narrative proper.”³⁵ This is a rather crude way of putting it, and for two reasons. First, it is not as if the voice of the poet, seemingly so clearly revealed in the frames, is absent the rest of the story. The frames do not necessarily give a clear idea of the poet’s thematic intentions; they serve as primers in forming the reader’s attitude towards the narrator, which will be continuously explored, and possibly changed, through the narration of the story proper. Second, it is debatable whether these sections establish, as Moorman puts it, “a wholly unified and individual point of view.”³⁶ It would be more appropriate to say points of view. Each poem is very different in its scope and intent, and requires a different way of being told. Each creates a different implied author, even if they all come from the same hand, that is suited to make one particular impression on the reader. The understanding of these implied authors is the most important part of my reading, and since they are largely distinct from one another, to understand each in its place, each poem must be looked at separately and in its own terms, though comparison to the other poems can shed its own light.

³⁵ Moorman, *The Pearl-Poet*, 71.

³⁶ Moorman, *The Pearl-Poet*, 32.

Cleanness and Patience

In this section, I will be addressing *Cleanness* (sometimes called *Purity*) and *Patience* at the same time, because they bear a number of important similarities, which only throw their differences into sharper relief. Both of these poems are simpler and more straightforward than *Pearl* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. They are both strongly homiletic, consisting primarily of an imaginative elaboration of biblical stories framed by a fairly explicit theme. It would seem that two poems of such similar genre and subject by the same author would come off comparably well, yet the scholarly reception shows exactly the opposite. Spearing notes that “it has been generally felt that *Purity* is the least unified... of the *Gawain*-poet’s works,”³⁷ whereas he calls *Patience* “a simpler, less ambitious, and more perfect poem”³⁸ in comparison. Johnson calls *Cleanness* “the least successful of the four poems.”³⁹ The reason for this disparity is debatable. Spearing offers that the primary difference lies in the fact that *Cleanness* puts homiletic purpose over plot,⁴⁰ but as we have seen, the dichotomy between dramatic and didactic simplifies criticism more than it clarifies. Using Booth’s principles, I would like to venture a different understanding of the fundamental differences between the poems, one that lies in their use of the narrator and the very different implied authors behind each one.

This difference is evident from almost the very beginnings of the poems. *Patience* and *Cleanness* begin similarly, starting at the very first word with their titular virtue, and then giving a short explication of that virtue’s importance in living a Christian life. However, both poems immediately introduce human actors to the scene, with a crucial distinction. *Cleanness*, in creating an embodied example of its virtue, brings up in the sixth line, “as renkez of relygioun

³⁷ Spearing, 41.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁹ Johnson, xv.

⁴⁰ Spearing, 41.

pat reden and syngen:” a non-specific group of clergy, presented in the third person. *Patience*, in its eighth line, reads, “Ʒen ay þrow forth my þro, þaʒ me þynk ylle,” bringing what is initially a disembodied exhortation to a first-person, narrating voice. As has been noted, the mere difference between first- and third-person should not be exaggerated, but here it is the first sign of what becomes a large disparity between the narrators of *Cleanness* and *Patience*. The narrator of *Cleanness*, throughout the entire poem, hardly ever uses ‘I’ or ‘me’ beyond a few conventionalisms. At the beginning of the poem, he turns his theme of cleanness not upon himself, but upon a theoretical group of clergy with an implicit warning to keep to purity lest they “Hym to greme cachen” (16). By beginning his story with an introduction like this, the narrator of *Cleanness* is made anonymous yet critical, reliably reflecting an implied author whom we may trust as an authoritative guide to the ways of God’s judgement. The narrator of *Patience*, by contrast, develops a personality that reflects a quite different implied author.

The intrusion of that first “my” and “me” in line 8 of *Patience* is done specifically in the context of the narrator applying his own lesson to himself. Patience, he says, is difficult to bear, no less to him than to us, his audience. This puts him in the interesting situation of not simply supplying the lesson of the prologue, but identifying himself as someone who needs the lesson. “Syþen I am sette with hem samen,” says the narrator of poverty and patience, “suffer me byhoues” (46). Not just these admissions, but a number of other details given by the narrator establish that he “is no preacher but an ordinary man like ourselves.”⁴¹ He mentions, when introducing the Beatitudes, that this is something “I herde on a halyday, at a hyʒe masse,” (12) denying any kind of clerical authority and putting himself in the position of a humble layperson receiving wisdom. He says later “ʒif my lege lorde lyst on lyue me to bidde/ Oþer to ryde oþer to

⁴¹ Davenport, 112.

renne to Rome in his ernde,” (51-52) again placing himself in the socially inferior position of the servant who must patiently do whatever his master tells him. All this is to create an identification between the narrator and the audience; he presents himself as ‘one of us,’ one of the poor souls trying to learn a difficult virtue. This is somewhat illusory. The narrator of *Patience* is a reliable reflection of the implied author, and he does in some sense preach to the audience. His explication of the Beatitudes and the relationship between poverty and patience is the work of a theological mind, not a common person. Despite his humble self-reflecting, “the narrator is himself an example of patience” and “thus an exact opposite to Jonah,”⁴² a point which will prove important in the story. He is no less authoritative than the impersonal narrator of *Cleanness*, for a work of this nature requires an authoritative voice; but this authority is made much more acceptable by the sense of empathy and fellow-feeling that the audience grows to have for that narrator-persona.

The relationship established between the audience and the narrator becomes especially important as he turns to the story proper and its central character, Jonah. Moorman curiously describes Jonah as “the principal image of the poem” and “its greatest symbol,”⁴³ which might seem to be an odd choice of words for describing the hero of the story. But Jonah is not the hero of the story, at least not consistently. Though the prologue-frame focuses on patience as a positive virtue, it is at first Jonah’s lack of patience that is highlighted in the story, making it a negative *exemplum*. This error is made clear in Jonah’s first action of the story, which is to monologue about his plans to run away from God’s order, a speech that Spearing aptly calls a “soliloquy” of “unconscious self-exposure.”⁴⁴ The speech runs from lines 75 to 96 and in it

⁴² Spearing, 75.

⁴³ Moorman, *The Pearl-Poet*, 68.

⁴⁴ Spearing, 86.

Jonah gives a number of rationalizations for why he should not follow God's order and why he thinks he can get away with it. The speech creates a sort of sympathy for Jonah in that it is psychologically believable, but the audience, primed for this display of impatience, knows that Jonah's reasoning is absurdly naïve, the rationalization of a desperate man. The fact that Jonah is allowed to "speak for himself" without any further narrative comment only makes his self-interest plainer to see.⁴⁵

All this is to say that, despite being the central character and making mistakes that are understandable, "even the most sympathetic reader cannot identify"⁴⁶ with Jonah. This is not a mistake or a flaw of the story, but an attitude that the author carefully cultivates in his audience. Anticipating my 'Boothian' reading, several critics have taken note of the way in which the narrator creates distance between the audience and Jonah.⁴⁷ The 'I'-narrator of *Patience* does not often intrude upon the story, which makes the one moment he does so all the more significant. This is right after Jonah has embarked on the ship; at the moment, it seems as if everything is going well for him. But the narrator cuts in:

Lo, þo wytlēs wrechche! For he wolde noȝt suffer,
 Now hatz he put hym in plyt of peril wel more.
 Hit watz a wenyng vnwar þat welt in his mynde,
 Þaȝ he were soȝt fro Samarye, þat God seȝ no fyrre (113-116).

Up to this point, we have been treated to the story fully dramatically. At this point, as Jonah thinks to himself that he has gotten away with it, the narrator cuts in to make explicit the foolishness of his confidence. Jonah has a very limited and selfish perspective of the situation,

⁴⁵ Johnson, 216-217.

⁴⁶ Moorman, *The Pearl-Poet*, 67.

⁴⁷ See Johnson, 33 and Spearing, 83.

but by bringing us in to his confidence, the narrator aligns the audience with the larger worldview, one that is aware of the ironies of the situation. The audience is further distanced from the main character by this break, and made closer in distance to the perspective of the reliable narrator who was established in the prologue. However, even though the reader is brought to a great distance from Jonah, a basic sympathy is still maintained. For one, his apprehension is very human, even if his ignorance of God's authority is plainly foolish. Also, the story of *Patience* has Jonah vacillating between accepting patience and forgetting it. His prayer in the whale's belly (305-336) asserts his basic goodness and capacity to learn, and his frustration about God's sparing of Nineveh (413-427) shows him reverting to his old grumbling self. These changes make the distance between the narrator and audience on the one hand and Jonah on the other a "comic distance" in which "the ironic and empathetic responses... are complimentary."⁴⁸ Jonah's flaws are consequential and found in all humans, but they are presented so that we, along with the author, may laugh at them.

All this follows from the character of the implied author of *Patience* who stands close behind the narrator, which is markedly different from the implied author of *Cleanness*. The author of *Patience* sees humanity as foolish and wayward, but capable of reforming under the guidance of a merciful God. Davenport wonders why that author chooses to give so much attention to the fate of the sailors and their eventual submission to and deliverance by God when they ultimately play a minor role in the story,⁴⁹ but the reason is quite simple. The author wants to show that salvation is achievable by those to submit themselves to God's will, and even if Jonah's status is ambiguous at the end of the poem, this value is not. This gentle attitude accords with the character of the narrator, who is contrite, but warm and hopeful for himself and his

⁴⁸ Padolsky, 175.

⁴⁹ Davenport, 104.

audience. The implied author of *Cleanness*, however, takes a very different emphasis. As has been stated before, the narrator does not individuate himself, rarely using an ‘I,’ and thus does not put himself within the framework of the moral as the narrator of *Patience* does. The reader does not identify with the narrator through shared experience, but only as an authority whose warning should be heeded. In each of the stories, although there are a number of virtuous characters with whom the audience is invited to sympathize (Noah, Abraham, Lot), these figures are given relatively little characterization and are not dynamic as Jonah is in *Patience*. The positive figures are not the focuses of their respective stories. The emphasis is given to the transgressors, to God and his judgement, and the severity of the punishment as it comes.

I do not mean for this to sound like a negative criticism of *Cleanness* vis-à-vis *Patience*. Surely, we should not judge *Cleanness* by *Patience*’s standard. They mean to communicate a different set of values, and therefore require different implied authors with different approaches. Any negative criticism must begin by taking the stories by their own explicit or implicit purposes, and that is where it is possible to see some places where *Cleanness* is arguably weak. At the end of the flood-sequence, as the world’s sinners are drowned, comes this passage:

Frendez fellen in fere and fapmed togeder,
 To dry3 her delful destyné and dy3en alle samen;
 Luf lokez to luf and his leue takez,
 For to ende alle at onez and for euer twynne (399-402).

These lines humanize the drowning multitudes and make the audience grieve for their deaths. But as touching as the sentiment is in isolation, when taken in the context of the entire poem, it goes against the overall effect of portraying the evils of impurity. The problem of creating an effect that contradicts the overall arc of the story is not just present here. The scenes in the

second story that depict Lot's home life and his negotiations with the Sodomites in lines 811-855 have "a loving exactitude" and "are comically persuasive," yet this narrative color makes these scenes "too delightfully comic for the mysterious import of the situation" and "almost of parody."⁵⁰ Comic exaggeration for the point of irony is not in itself a bad thing. Along with an emphasis on empathy, it is one of the things that makes *Patience* so successful. But when an isolated comic incident is sprinkled on what is otherwise a distant, judgmental story like *Cleanness*, the effect is jarring. These facets of the story are, more than anything else, evidence for the case that *Cleanness* is weaker than the other poems.

The narrators of *Cleanness* and *Patience* both put the audience at a fair distance from their narrative subjects, but even those distances are not quite of the same kind. It is fallacious to say, as Johnson does, that *Cleanness* is "the most moral and didactic" of any of the poems, but she comes nearer the mark in saying that "the poem demands an intellectual, rather than an empathetic response."⁵¹ The response demanded by *Cleanness* is not exactly intellectual, but it is certainly not empathetic in the way *Patience* is. For *Cleanness* to succeed, it must get the audience to accept that one should fear God's punishment and that falling into impurity is a very human potentiality. But the audience is not to sympathize with the sinners; they must be viewed with a critical and specifically negative scrutiny. In composing *Cleanness*, the author chose to portray a particular side of God that demanded a particular attitude to accept. The point of *Patience*, on the other hand, demanded an attitude that could be more accepting of human frailty and thus looks upon the action of the story with a more comic sensibility. This does not need to imply, as Spearing guesses, that "the *Gawain*-poet clearly had more sympathy, if one may so put

⁵⁰ Spearing, 61-62.

⁵¹ Johnson, 97.

it, for the God of Jonah than he had for the God of Genesis.”⁵² It may be simply that those Gods belong to two different stories, each with their own legitimate interests, and that one demanded a greater feeling of sympathy than the other.

Though *Cleanness* and *Patience* are both stories placed within discursive frames (or frames created around stories), the implied author working through the narrator creates a unity between the narrative and commentarial elements. The ending of *Patience* is arguably an anticlimax, since we do not get any response from Jonah indicating a change or continuation in his character. Instead, the frame returns in line 527, and “the narrator steps forward to make the act of patient subjugation that Jonah never does.”⁵³ Jonah never was the exemplar of a human achieving patience; that designation was associated with the narrator back in the prologue. Now at the end, “the narrator alerts us to the process of spiritual change” and gives the poem the “unified whole” that it would lack without his controlling voice.⁵⁴ The same can be said for the epilogue of *Cleanness* (1805-1812): it unifies the story by bringing everything back to the framework that was established in the prologue. This is the achievement of the reliable, involved narrator.

⁵² Spearing, 78-79.

⁵³ R. J. Spental, “The Narrative Structure of *Patience*,” *The Michigan Academician* 5 (1972): 108.

⁵⁴ Johnson, 24.

Pearl

Pearl differs immediately from *Cleanness* and *Patience* by being a dream-vision, rather than a homiletic work, a generic difference which brings with it an attendant change in narrative technique: a first-person narrator who is personally involved in the dramatic action of the story. Although *Pearl* raises important and deep “questions of allegory and symbolism,” it is the dreamer—who is both the narrator and the central actor of the poem—and his development that makes for “the dramatic heart of the poem.”⁵⁵ The importance of the dreamer’s centrality can hardly be exaggerated. Although the narrator of *Patience* becomes a concrete personality for the audience, he is still, like the narrator of *Cleanness*, “a commentator who mediates between his sources and his audience by offering speculation about the detail and significance of his stories.”⁵⁶ As I have shown above, this creates for the reader a certain distance from the events the narrator relates, which is important for the author’s desired effect. In *Pearl*, however the narrator “tells us of an experience of his own, and there is no part of it of which he is not an eyewitness.”⁵⁷

An active narrator-character almost always provides a more complicated point-of-view than a dramatized but detached narrator. In the latter case, if the narrator creates distance between himself and the characters, and we have every reason to find the narrator reliable (as we do in *Patience* and *Cleanness*), then we as readers can be quite confident of where we should stand as we judge the narrative. This is because we can trust that the dramatized narrator is a reliable reflection of the implied author’s values. But as Booth explains, “the *narrator* may be more or less distant from the *implied author*;” the narrator-as-character almost inherently has

⁵⁵ Moorman, *The Pearl-Poet*, 51.

⁵⁶ Spearing, 97.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

limits on his knowledge, whereas the implied author by definition knows “how ‘everything will turn out in the end.’”⁵⁸ In this case, the implied author must provide clues within the testimony of the narrator-character that will provide the audience with enough perspective to judge the narrator’s reliability. In any such story, we cannot simply accept “the authority of the known and identifiable author-narrator-dreamer”⁵⁹ because even if the narrator implies some identification with the implied author, by definition there must be some distinction between the narrator-dreamer and the implied author who controls the work.

Pearl begins with something that is very much like a frame, though as we soon find out, it does not quite count because the voice that immediately speaks to us is itself at the center of the poem’s dramatic action. Though the “Perle plesaunte” is the first image presented, it is very soon followed by “Oute of orient, I hardyly saye, Ne proued I neuer her precios pere” (1-4). This pearl, whatever it is, is not just valuable in a general sense, but is personally valuable to the narrator. The intimation that the pearl stands for a person is already apparent by line 10 –“Pur3 gresse to grounde hit fro me yot” suggests the grave so heavily—and this is followed by the revelation of the poem’s problem: the dreamer has been “fordolked of luf-doungere/ Of þat pryvy perle withouten spot” (11-12). The first five stanzas, before the beginning of the dream proper, focus upon this theme: what Johnson calls “the reality of human grief and the apparently meaningless waste of death.”⁶⁰ This theme is important, because unlike the themes of patience and purity, which are things that humans often see the value of only grudgingly, grief is an emotion that is, in its own way, immediately appealing. The dreamer’s problem has “universal

⁵⁸ Booth, 156.

⁵⁹ Moorman, *The Pearl-Poet*, 35.

⁶⁰ Johnson, 161.

application, since all men experience the frustrations of death and grief.”⁶¹ Because the dreamer is presented as having this universal problem, and because he does not stand above us as a commentator, he comes off as a fully realized and emotional human being whom we can empathize with. This introductory section is all about creating empathy through passages of high pathos, such as, “My breste in bale bot bolne and bele” (18). The effect of all this is to create as little possible distance between the audience and the dreamer-narrator. In the beginning, we empathize totally with him, and his desires and pains become our desires and pains. This identification is crucial for what comes later in the story.

The persona of the dreamer and our close distance to him has led down some very curious interpretive paths. The ‘I’-voice is very strong, the action of the poem is presumably contemporary, and the problem is perfectly grounded, if we take the later introduction of the Pearl-maiden to represent the deceased daughter of the dreamer. All these things led early scholars to speculate on *Pearl* as if it were (barring the dream sequence) an autobiographical poem, and that the historical author really did lose his young daughter and that was the foundation of the story. The autobiographical reading has been treated much more skeptically by later scholars,⁶² who write that such dream-personas can be highly fictionalized, and that we must not assume that the dreamer reflects the Pearl Poet’s true identity. I am not here endorsing the autobiographical thesis, but I do understand why it is attractive, and suggest that such a reading is partially encouraged by the poem itself. As Heiserman points out, at the beginning of the poem, “we discern no distance between the author of these intricate lines... and the narrator expressing his profound grief.”⁶³ Unlike the commentator-narrators of *Cleanness* and *Patience*,

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² See Spearing, 127-128 for a concise account of the controversy.

⁶³ Heiserman, 165.

whose need to be authoritative necessitates they adopt a greater-than-human perspective, the *Pearl*-narrator's perspective is limited to what we expect of a human, and fully empathetic because of that. The beautiful intensity of the grief makes us feel that only a person who experienced such grief would be able to express it so. Whether *Pearl* has autobiographical truth or not, its narrator seems as a real person to us.

In the sixth stanza, the dreamer slips into his dream, bringing with this change a number of shifts in his internal state. First, he is effected by the otherworldly and beautiful landscape of the dream world, which “bylde in me blys, abated my balez,/ Fordidden my stresse, dystryed my paynez” (123-124). The heavenly beauty is so great, that it manages to assuage the grief that consumed him only a little while ago. The dreamer comes to the river and the Pearl-maiden; he does not recognize her at first, but “On lenghe I loked to hyr pere;/ Þe lenger, I knew hyr more and more” (167-168). Even when he recognizes the maiden as his lost pearl, the dreamer's reaction is constantly vacillating. At first his heart is filled with gladness (171), but almost immediately a feeling of confusion restrains his desire to call out (173-174), oddly perturbed that he is seeing “hyr in so strange a place” (175). This anxiety overmasters his longing to be with her (181), even as he shows a new fear that the maiden will flee if he does something wrong because it appears “þat gostly watz þat porpose” (185). After gazing upon her for some time, the maiden finally comes down to the riverbank and hails him (235), which he joyously takes as an invitation to speak. The mixture of joy, anxiety, confusion, and longing is extremely palpable, and we hope, as the dreamer does, that these feelings will have resolution.

What comes next is a shock. The dreamer expresses the sorrow that he has felt since losing the pearl (244-248), and instead of receiving empathy, the pearl-maiden rebukes him, saying, “Syr, 3e haf your tale mysetente” (257). She criticizes the dreamer for feeling grief over

something that was inherently transitory (265-270). The dreamer, at first, is able to take this in stride (281), but after making more ejaculations of happiness at being delivered from grief, the pearl-maiden rebukes him even more strongly (290-292). With this the dreamer collapses:

‘Demez þou me,’ quoth I, ‘my swete,
 To dol agayn? Penne I dowyne.
 Now haf I fonte þat I forlete,
 Schal I efte forgo hit er euer I fine?
 Why schal I hit boþe mysse and mete?
 My precios perle dotz me gret pyne.’ (325-330)

The happy reunion is not at all what he wanted it to be. It is clear at this point that the dreamer and the pearl-maiden have two irreconcilable points of view: “he asks for pity; she demands full understanding.”⁶⁴ It has been established that the audience’s sympathies are with the dreamer and his grief, but the maiden’s arguments and the narrator’s continued intransigence lead us to question that. As Spearing explains, that same sentiment which made the dreamer so pitiable to us suddenly looks less admirable and more naïve.⁶⁵

At this moment, it becomes clear that the author is leading us on through an adjustment of our distance from the dreamer-narrator. The relationship began almost unquestionably intimate, but it is now increasingly apparent that his attitude of grief may not be the proper reaction. Any such change in distance must be accomplished by an intrusion (to say it non-pejoratively) of the implied author through some avenue besides his narrator; here, that avenue is the pearl-maiden. In her long and almost unbroken speeches, which make up the bulk of the middle of the poem, she demonstrates a knowledge of Christian theology and talent for

⁶⁴ Moorman, *The Pearl-Poet*, 58.

⁶⁵ Spearing, 106.

exhortation that Spearing rightly compares to the narrators of *Cleanness* and *Patience*.⁶⁶ Those narrators were both reliable reflections of the implied author's values, so by comparison the same may be said of the pearl-maiden. She is—at least as far as the values of the poem are concerned—the perfect reflector of the implied author. In contrast to the very human narrators of *Cleanness* and *Patience*, the pearl-maiden is a quasi-divine figure with direct knowledge of the kingdom of heaven. This does not make her too much different from other reliable narrators, who, Booth remarks, “often speak with an authority as sure as God's,”⁶⁷ but it does perhaps cause some consternation when the implied author invests his voice into a character of superhuman knowledge.

The strange case of the dreamer and the pearl-maiden, the narrator and the implied author, strikes at what one might call a paradox in the telling of fiction. In the case of *Pearl*, we have a narrator-character who is at first totally reliable (i.e. has almost no distance with the audience) who is revealed to be unreliable as the tale progresses. When the unreliability is revealed, we get a better sense of where the implied author stands, and that is far above his narrator. So far above as to be almost impossibly high. The trouble with the implied author is that, by definition, he controls every part of the work. As Booth says, he is the god of his own fictional world. But the *real* author, the *historical* author whom we know must have existed, is a mere human, flawed in his understanding of the world; yet through fiction he creates, whether intentionally or no, a world in which he as the implied author has total understanding. In the case of the Pearl Poet—the real, historical Pearl Poet—he has created a poem in part about the insufficiency of a man to grasp a divine knowledge that is greater than himself. It is no wonder that scholars wonder if the dreamer is autobiographical of the Pearl Poet: the real Pearl Poet was

⁶⁶ Spearing, 99-100.

⁶⁷ Booth, 152.

doubtlessly a flawed human being like the dreamer. Yet for his tale to work, the Pearl Poet needed, as the implied author, to assume a perspective that claims something about more-than-human knowledge. Moorman is wrong, though understandably, so to call the dreamer the persona of the Pearl Poet.⁶⁸ The implied author, and the pearl-maiden who serves as his reliable reflection, is the real persona, reflecting values that by definition could not be held by a mere man. Sutton comes much nearer the mark:

The persona... is functioning to some degree as one party to a debate and simultaneously as a central intelligence. The latter two functions cannot easily be reconciled because the former activity is directed toward another dramatic character within the poem while the latter is directed toward the reader.

Recognition of this split in function alerts us that this important character is a compound.⁶⁹

This split is operative in many stories, but is especially noticeable in *Pearl* since the realization of the opposition is the chief movement of the first half of the story.

The second half of the poem is simple enough, being a mirror image of the first. The first half saw the dreamer's disappointment and the audience's distancing from him. Now, "our recognition of the nature of the poem's lessons" grows along with "the dreamer's gradual apprehension,"⁷⁰ and the distance between him and us is closed. The dreamer patiently listens to the pearl-maiden's speeches, and his spiritual journey climaxes with his vision of the heavenly Jerusalem. The dénouement comes with the dreamer waking up, severed from the ecstatic vision

⁶⁸ Moorman, *The Pearl-Poet*, 42.

⁶⁹ Robert F. Sutton, "Characterization and Structure as Adjuncts to Theme in *Pearl*," *Massachusetts Studies in English* 2 (1970): 88-89.

⁷⁰ Johnson, 208.

for his trying to cross the river, which causes him to “fel in gret affray” (1174). This might seem like a return to his old state, but his words tell us it is not so:

To þat Pryncez paye hade I ay bente...

To mo of His mysterys I hade ben dryuen.

Bot ay wolde man of happe more hente

Ben mo3te by ry3t vpon hem clyuen. (1189-1196)

The dreamer is restored to his unhappy state, but now with the consciousness of why he must be there and what he must strive towards. He relapses into grief knowing that his grief is both foolish and inescapable. In other words, he has done all a mere human can do. At this point, the distance between reader and narrator is once again closed. “Neither reader nor dreamer can bend his will wholly to God’s, nor reconcile himself blandly to the limits of human knowledge and experience,”⁷¹ but the dreamer’s story reveals these limits, and leaves himself and us with some hope that consolation may be found in God’s kingdom. This narrative journey would never have been achievable if we had not started at the level of the narrator’s empathy, only to leave and come back. “Were it not for his continuing and touchingly human love,” writes Spearing, “the poem would not move us as it does.”⁷²

⁷¹ Heiserman, 171.

⁷² Spearing, 116.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight differs from its companion works in several respects. The most obvious is that it is a romance, and much less explicitly concerned with religious or biblical themes compared to the other poems. Another is that the story it tells is much longer and structurally complex. As far as technique is concerned, the great difference is that the narrator of *Sir Gawain* is far less prominent. He is present as an ‘I’ at various times, but he is nothing like the commentators of *Patience* or *Cleanness*; nor is there a reliable character like the pearl-maiden whose statements we can trust to reflect the implied author’s. That the narrator makes himself less visible does not mean, however, that he is less active. Even “with commentary ruled out, hundreds of devices remain for revealing judgement and molding responses.”⁷³ Without a single clear voice to telegraph his intentions, the narrator must rely on an accumulation of suggestion to communicate the values of his work. Such a technique is not inferior or superior to a more ‘explicit’ commentarial kind—merely different. It is useful, as Ganim calls it, in “achieving the subtlest of effects,”⁷⁴ which is precisely what *Sir Gawain* does.

This poem, like the others, begins with a prologue, but even here where the narrator’s voice comes through the strongest, it is curiously quiet. The opening stanza recounts the familiar traditional legend of the foundation of Britain, traced back to the destruction of Troy and the coming of Felix Brutus. “Mo ferlyes on þis folde han fallen here oft/ Þen in any oþer þat I wot, syn þat ilk tyme,” (23-24) claims the narrator, and transitions to talking about the great feats of Arthur’s court. Here, he gives his stated intention: “Forþi an aunter in erde I attle to schawe” (27). Besides testifying to the antiquity of the story (31, 36), this is all the explicit expectation

⁷³ Booth, 272.

⁷⁴ Ganim, 377.

that the narrator provides us before he plunges in. Implicit in the prologue seems to be a shift in tone. As Ganim notes, the brief account of the founding of Britain is told in a suitably epic style, but as the narrator turns towards his subject, “the poet’s own tone of voice becomes increasingly skeptical and distant.”⁷⁵ This guardedness is perhaps the first clue that the narrator gives us of his attitude toward the story, that besides colorfully recounting the marvels he maintains a critical detachment from the narrative at hand.

Since the narrator has framed his story loosely, he is free to move among different points of view to use whichever best suits the moment. The linear trajectory that Astell proposes may be an oversimplification,⁷⁶ but it is right to recognize that the narrator adopts not just omniscient and limited perspectives, but that their limitedness exists on a fluid spectrum. This is shown in the story’s first scene: the Christmas banquet at Camelot that takes up almost all of the first fitt. This scene is told at first half-dramatically and half-summarized: the “luflych lorde” are surely “ledez of the best,” (38) and the court is without a doubt “þe hapnest vnder heuen” (56). As Benson notes, an omniscient viewpoint is necessary when compressing events and in telling romance; the reputation of Camelot cannot be doubtful.⁷⁷ But omniscience cannot hold forever. *Sir Gawain* is in part a mystery, and any mystery demands the withholding of something from the audience. Camelot is an established entity, but when the Green Knight arrives, he is totally opaque. The narrator likewise considers him a marvel, saying “Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene,/ And þat þe myriest in his muckel þat myzt ride” (141-142). By sharing the “shocked reaction,” the narrator creates a “rhetorical identification” with the court.⁷⁸ This is only a primer for the narrator’s introduction of Gawain. He is a character who is particularly defined by what

⁷⁵ Ganim, 379.

⁷⁶ Ann W. Astell, “*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: The Rhetoric of Romance,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 84, no. 2 (1985) 189.

⁷⁷ Benson, 172.

⁷⁸ Astell, 195.

he says and does, and the narrator lets Gawain's entrance play very dramatically because it needs little embellishment. His taking up the challenge from Arthur is itself a noble act, and the speeches which he gives, the one to Arthur in lines 343-365 and the one to the Green Knight in lines 381-385, commend him as a courteous, honorable, and humble knight. The narrator sees fit to boost our opinions a little, calling him "Gawan þe hende" (404) and noting he "ruchched hym fayre" (367). His conduct so far has been exemplary, and there is little immediate doubt when the Green Knight rides out that he will fail to rise to the challenge. There is a little hint of self-assurance in the way "þe kyng and Gawen þare/ At þat grene þay laze and grenne" (463-464).

At the very end of the first fitt, the narrator does something that happens nowhere else in the story: he makes direct comment on the action. As the knights happily return to their feast and the day comes to an end, the narrator gives a warning:

Now þenk wel, Sir Gawan,
 For woþe þat þou ne wonde
 Þis auenture for to frayn
 Þat þou hatz tan on honde. (487-490)

Contrasted against Arthur and Gawain's laughter after the Green Knight departs, these are "earnest and ominous words of advice,"⁷⁹ qualifying through commentary the optimism of the characters. I would say further that this passage carries a tone of ironic understatement; the audience, at this point, does not have a reason to doubt that Gawain is in any danger of shrinking, but here the narrator slyly intimates that he knows better than we do (although he does not give reason why), and suddenly we are wondering if we should be suspicious too.

⁷⁹ J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965) 30.

The beginning of the second fitt continues this vague, but important, commentary:

Gawan watz glad to begynne þose gomnez in halle

Bot þa3 þe ende be heuy haf 3e no wonder:

For þa3 men ben mery in mynde quen þay han mayn drynk,

A 3ere 3ernes ful 3erne and 3eldez neuer lyke;

Be forme to þe fynisment foldez ful selden (495-499).

This passage is more suggestive than the previous, but it yet keeps the air of mystery. He says almost explicitly that the ending will be serious and not like the beginning, so we are given an intimation that something will go wrong, but we hardly know what. As Benson notes, the suggestion that Gawain's confidence may have been the false courage that comes from drink directly undercuts the image of the ideal knight that we saw in the first fitt.⁸⁰ Through this commentary, the narrator plants in our minds against what we have directly seen a suspicion that Gawain might fail in that quest, but by keeping us in the dark about the when, where, and how, the narrator keeps us expectant.

Having inculcated the audience with a critical distance towards the subject, the narrator now carefully determines what information we have access to in the narrative, subtly directing our suspicion. *Sir Gawain* follows the action of Gawain both spatially and temporally with only a few exceptions; however, to say that our perspective is the same as Gawain's is inaccurate. We travel alongside him, but only occasionally receive inside views to his mind. These inside views reveal that which cannot be revealed dramatically. After Gawain arms, he takes his leave of Camelot, "and gef hem alle goud day—/ He wende for euermore" (668-669). Gawain has nowhere before expressed the doubt that he will perish in the quest, and does not do so after, but

⁸⁰ Benson, 203.

this single inside view, if the audience remembers it, gives evidence that Gawain fears for his life, which will prove important later on. These inner views “create a bond of sympathy between reader and hero, which is implicitly identifying the hero as an ordinary man,”⁸¹ but this does not mean, as Astell seems to think, that we are being encouraged to identify ourselves *with* Gawain.⁸² Though we are sometimes brought into Gawain’s heart in a way that excites our sympathy, the narrator has already primed us to keep some distance from the hero. We may not know as much as the narrator does, but we certainly know more than Gawain does, and are thus able to look at his feelings and actions not just sympathetically, but critically. The inside views are a means of communicating with certainty Gawain’s motives, but the audience judges these motives with the help of our larger understanding.⁸³

Just as the usage of inner views can be revealing of character, so does the absence of inner views reveal through what it omits, which becomes especially noticeable once Gawain enters the castle of Hautdesert. Though this location will serve as the setting of the rest of the poem, and includes the very important characters of the Lord and the Lady, “the poet has significantly not developed their inner life,”⁸⁴ or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the inside views we are given only deepen the mystery rather than resolve it. We are given some reaction by the inhabitants of the castle, who on learning of Gawain’s arrival “maden much joye/ To apere in his presense prestly þat tyme... byfore alle men vpon molde his mensk is þe most” (910-914). The deliverance of Gawain from his hardship into a warm castle where the people worship him seems too good to be true, and as Burrow notes, the fact that everything seems

⁸¹ Davenport, 183.

⁸² Astell, 198-199.

⁸³ See Burrow, 102-103.

⁸⁴ Davenport, 178.

absolutely perfect makes us all the more suspicious that something is not what it seems.⁸⁵ These suspicions are never quite fulfilled until the reveal at the end, for the test that Gawain undergoes at Hautdesert—his temptation by the Lady—has its own ambiguities. At the end of their second meeting, the poet says explicitly “Pus hym frayned þat fre and fondet hym ofte” (1549), but this really only tells us what we have already figured out, and it does not signal whether this testing is just the Lady’s personal amorousness or whether it has greater purpose, as we learn it does. We are likewise given no insight into Gawain’s thoughts during this sequence,⁸⁶ taking his skilled rejection of her as being done to honor his chastity and not dishonor his host. This sequence, which is conducted almost entirely through dramatic speech, primes us for the story’s turning-point.

This comes, of course, at the ending of the third meeting between Gawain and the Lady, when she offers him the life-preserving girdle. It is something which Gawain or the audience could have seen coming, and the narrator curiously underplays it. He significantly, “allows himself no moral comment at all when Gawain’s accepts the girdle;”⁸⁷ his action instead is to give a short inner view of the hero:

Den kest þe knyȝt, and hit come to his hert

Hit were a juel for þe jopardé þat hym jugged wer:

When he acheued to þe chapel his chek for to fech,

Myȝt he haf slypped to be vnslayn þe sleȝt were noble. (1855-1858)

This view establishes explicitly that Gawain takes the girdle so that it might save his life in the encounter with the Green Knight, but it is far more significant in that it implies that he is either

⁸⁵ Burrow, 56-57.

⁸⁶ Benson, 192.

⁸⁷ Spearing, 109.

not cognizant that he is breaking his promise to the Lord or more likely that he is subconsciously burying the thought. The narrator helps in in this regard. After Gawain hides the girdle in line 1875, the narrator makes no mention or implication of its absence during the exchange-of-winnings between Gawain and the Lord. The narrator “significantly chooses to withdraw knowledge of Gawain’s inner mind in the scenes immediately after the acceptance of the green belt,”⁸⁸ giving no hint that Gawain fully understands the significance of his taking the girdle beyond its protective function. The audience, unlike Gawain, is able to realize that he has just failed the true test; that all along it was not about the denial of the lady, which was only just a red herring for the girdle. We may not know yet how all the events are connected, but we already have the intimation that Gawain has committed a fatal mistake.

The subtle technique need not be maintained for the climax and afterward, for at that time Bertilak may come forth and make everything known, surprising Gawain and to a lesser extent the audience. The failure of taking the girdle was not just in breaking the oath, but doing so because he feared for his life and was thus not courageous enough to take the blow. As the failure becomes clear to Gawain himself, its nature and extent is debatable. Gawain and Bertilak take his failure very differently, and critics are likewise unsure of whose viewpoint, if either, is more correct.⁸⁹ Gawain considers the girdle a great shame, and we may be liable to agree with him. He is the hero and we sympathize with him, and though it has been long coming, it is satisfying to see Gawain finally grasp his own flaws. But as Spearing writes, the “magnetic force of Gawain’s point of view” should not be “irresistible.”⁹⁰ He has just been shown to be a rather poor judge of himself, and his shame could be a compensatory overreaction. Bertilak, for his

⁸⁸ Davenport, 189.

⁸⁹ Moorman, *The Pearl-Poet*, 107.

⁹⁰ Spearing, 232.

part, laughs at Gawain's histrionics (2389), and says that his sin has already been paid for by receiving that nick on his neck (2384). This might strike us odd how the former enemy and trickster is so immediately forgiving, but we should remember how Gawain's story has been presented all along. As Moorman notes, the story is full of ironies, but since we are made to stand at a distance from Gawain, the ironies do not come as tragic but comic.⁹¹ Gawain's mistake is serious, but from our semi-detached understanding we may laugh at it. As the story concludes, the narrator zooms out, returning to the story's frame. Gawain's story may have seemed intense and morally significant when we were inside it, but standing with the narrator from the height of Britain's legendary history, we realize "mony aunterez herebiforne/ Haf fallen suche er þis" (2527-2528). Some such adventures have ended sadly, but Gawain's did not, and for that he, and we, may take some consolation.

⁹¹ Moorman, *The Pearl-Poet*, 111.

Conclusion

This essay began with the words of Charles Moorman, who wrote, “Our greatest need... seems now to be for studies in which the works of the *Pearl*-poet are taken for a whole” and are “devoted to establishing the central themes and techniques of the poet.”⁹² My demonstration of the poet’s technique should be clear enough, but the meaning of this technique for the works as a whole is more complex. Indeed, I have argued that the poems are quite heterogeneous in their technique. Even *Patience* and *Cleanness*, so similar in genre and mode of presentation, yet differ markedly in the kind of narrator employed, which further contributes to the quite different effects of the poems and even their relative success. For these poems, the implied authors wish to highlight different values, the narrators stand at different distances from their subjects and their audience, inside views are present to various degrees, and the mode of scenic presentation can shift even within a single work. Wherefore, then, can we speak of an individual, omnipresent narrative technique in the works of the Pearl Poet? Where is there unity?

If one is willing to look close to the poems’ heterogeneity, they will see not only, or even principally, difference, but similarity. Each poem contains an element of literary technique that ties it to each other poem. *Patience* and *Cleanness* have a penchant for richly rendering dramatic scenes, as does *Sir Gawain*. The dreamer-narrator of *Pearl* takes something from the humble narrator of *Patience*, while the exhortating pearl-maiden has a commentarial authority like the narrator of *Cleanness*. Both *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain*, while radically different in narrator, utilize an obscuring effect in order to communicate the works’ values through subtler means. Doubtless there are even more points of similarity than these. The Pearl Poet would be counted a lesser poet if all of his works were done in the same technique, with only different subjects. But in only four

⁹² Moorman, *The Pearl-Poet*, 113.

poems, he shows himself to have a hoard of varying techniques, from which he can select those that are most appropriate to a particular story. They may be different colors, but we can tell by comparison that they all come from the same palette. Even more impressive, the Pearl Poet demonstrates an awareness of the complex nature of the author's authority. His thematic concerns intersect with his technique, as he explores the complicated relationship between human and more-than-human knowledge, and how any author must play the difficult role of maintaining both of these things at once. He sees that the author must have a knowledge that is like God's, but his stories tell us how human knowledge is necessarily limited. His attempts to reconcile these two streams of thought lead to stories in which intellectual and moral progress for the characters is tentative, but hopeful. Even if the outcomes are—for the characters, for the poet, and for us—ambiguous, the message is clear.

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