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Man in the Face of Suffering: The Late-Medieval *Pearl* Poem and the Biblical Story of Job

Człowiek w obliczu cierpienia. Późnośredniowieczny poemat *Perła*
oraz biblijna historia Hioba

Abstrakt

Zamysłem autorki artykułu jest ukazanie roli śmierci i cierpienia w życiu człowieka w późnośredniowiecznym poemacie *Perła*. Utwór ten, napisany pod koniec XIV wieku przez anonimowego poetę, jest utrzymaną w konwencji snu alegorią zawierającą elementy średniowiecznej debaty. Historia ojca, który utracił ukochane dziecko, inspirowana starotestamentową opowieścią o Hiobie, przedstawia drogę do akceptacji cierpienia w ludzkim życiu. Z perspektywy chrześcijańskiej jest ono sprawdzianem wartości człowieka w oczach Boga, niezbędnym do osiągnięcia zbawienia. Opowieść pokazuje stan ducha osoby dotkniętej osobistą tragedią oraz proces godzenia się ze stratą. Z perspektywy chrześcijańskiej Bóg doświadcza człowieka, aby sprawdzić, na ile jest on w stanie Mu zaufać.

Słowa kluczowe: cierpienie, perła, Hiob, ojciec, grzesznik

Key words: suffering, pearl, Job, father, sinner

Suffering and death have always accompanied man. They have constituted part and parcel of human existence, as well as a popular theme employed in literature.

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People react differently to the feeling of loss. In the Middle Ages, dominated by the Christian doctrine, man was encouraged to look for consolation in suffering and the promise of salvation in God. However, death of a beloved person is one of those painful experiences not everybody can accept easily. The late fourteenth-century *Pearl* poem narrates a story of a father coping with the pain after the death of his child. The aim of the article is to show *Pearl* as a poem about man's crisis of faith in God, echoing the Biblical Job.

Composed by an anonymous author in a North-West Midlands variety of Middle English and highly alliterative, *Pearl* is often classified as an allegory or elegy, or a mixture of the two (Hoffman 1960: 73, cf. Carson 1965: 17). It can be analyzed in many ways; one of the possible interpretations is perceiving this piece of late medieval literature as a story about human loss and suffering which, from the Christian perspective, are seen as an ordeal testing man's faith in God.¹ In the story, the poet/ speaker/ father narrates his way through his grief over the death of his child.² Anthony Colin Spearing observes that "that the narrator is using the image of the loss of a precious stone to express the loss, presumably through death, of a girl" (1961: 3, cf. Heiserman 1965: 170). The poet employs the convention of a dream allegory, very popular in the Middle Ages, in which he dreams the events of his tale: he meets his beloved daughter and talks to her, gains direct access to universal truths, and sees things inaccessible to mortals. His suffering serves as a test of his trust in God. Although apparently different, the poet's crisis of faith bears resemblance to the one of the Biblical Job.³

The story begins with the father lamenting the loss of a very precious jewel – the pearl – in the garden.⁴ As he says, the jewel "Þer hit down drof in moldeþ dunne" (*Pearl* [in:] *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* 2007: l. 30), which may indicate the ceremony of burying a human body into the ground. Then he falls asleep. The slumber comes to him in a "style stounde" (*Pearl*: l. 20), which is a short moment of relief in his outspoken sorrow. Although at first the relation between the child and the gem is not clear, quickly it becomes established by the

¹ Another possible interpretation is seeing the loss of the jewel as an allegory: the loss of innocence due to the sin of Adam and Eve (cf. Stanton de Voren Hoffman 1960: 73). The pearl can also stand for the Eucharist, clean maidenhood, the Virgin Mary or Heaven (cf. Charles Moorman 1955: 73).

² In the article "The Plot of *Pearl*", A. R. Heiserman observes that early modern editors read and translate the poem as an elegy for a two-year-old girl, perhaps the poet's daughter, however it is difficult to stick to one interpretation only as the pearl is ambiguous in meaning (164–5).

³ The Old Testament presents Job as a "perfect and upright [man], and one that feared God, and eschewed evil" (Job 1: 1). His piety and loyalty to God is tested, as the result of a bet made by the Lord and Satan. The Devil claims that Job loves God because he provides him with prosperity. To check the man's true value, God takes from Job away everything he loves: family, belongings, and health.

⁴ The gem has many meanings; it can be seen as a symbol of lost innocence, but also it can mean the beloved person the man has lost.

words: “Ho wat3 me nerre þen aunte or nece: / My joy forþy wat3 much þe more” (l. 233)⁵ and the fact that the maiden the poet sees later wears a precious pearl on her neck. In Anthony Colin Spearing’s view, the reader “gradually come[s] to recognize that the lost pearl was itself a figure of the loss of a human being: the death of a person, who is eventually though obscurely identified as the narrator’s daughter, who died in infancy” (1976: 111–12). The very close parent-child bond intensifies the feeling of loss. In some respect, the narrator is placed in Job’s position, as one day he loses everything he loved without any warning. Although the condition of the two men is different, the common denominator of the two stories is worldly suffering that causes man to question God.

The narrator’s reaction to the discovery of the loss of the precious jewel is very emotional, which is revealed in his words:

For care ful colde þat to me ca3t;
A deuely dele in my hert denned,
Þa3 resoun sette myseluen sa3t.
I playned my perle þat þer wat3 penned,
Wyth fyrce skyllez þat faste fa3t
(*Pearl*: ll. 50–54).⁶

He is a mourning father who cannot accept the fact of his child’s death. His sadness pervades almost every line of the poem, even his daughter notices that he speaks of nothing but sorrow and grief.

Thow deme3 no3t bot doel-dystresse,
Þenne sayde þat wy3t; “why dot3 þou so?
For dyne of doel, of lure3 lesse,
Ofte mony mon forgos þe mo
Þe o3te better þyseluen blesse
And loue ay God, in wele and wo,
For anger gayne3 þe not a cresse”
(*Pearl*: ll. 337–343).⁷

The narrator shows that it is the moment of the greatest grief when man’s trust in God is tested. His misery results from the fact of his child’s death, which he cannot accept. Job’s pain has its origins in a different source. Although he

⁵ “[S]he was nearer to me than aunt or niece: therefore my joy was much the greater” (*The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. A Prose Translation*, 2007: 6).

⁶ “[B]ecause of the chilling sorrow that seized me; / a desolating grief lay deep in my heart, / though reason would have reconciled me. / I mourned my pearl that was imprisoned there, with fierce arguments that fought insistently” (ibid, p. 2).

⁷ “You speak of nothing but the sorrow of grief, / then said that being, ‘why do you so? / Through the tumult of grief for lesser sorrows / many a man often loses the greater [thing]. / You ought rather to cross yourself, / and always praise God, in prosperity and suffering, / for anger does not profit you a jot” (ibid, p. 8).

loses seven sons and three daughters, he is not a heart-broken parent. He accepts the Creator's will, which is confirmed by his words: "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away: blessed be the name of the LORD. In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly (Job 1: 21–22 [in:] *The Holy Bible (KJV) 1611*). Job becomes truly devastated on one occasion only: when God takes his health away. Contrary to the father of the Pearl, he seems to be more self-centred. The man's breakdown has its origin in his unfair disgrace in the public eyes: God inflicted injury to his reputation of his being sinless, touching his bones and flesh with leprosy, the disease believed to be punishment for sins in the ancient times. This is the key moment when Job starts doubting God's will (Job 34: 31–35).⁸

In the poem, the speaker's doubting God's ideas begins in a short moment of happiness. In his dream, the poet finally finds his precious jewel, who is now "[a] maiden of mensk, ful debonere: / Blysnande whyt was hyr bleaunt" (*Pearl*: l. 162).⁹ Although she is transformed into a young woman by God's grace, the man recognizes her at once, which is revealed in his words: "I knew hyr wel, I hade sen hyr ere" (l. 164).¹⁰ Charles Moorman claims that what the father notices in the maiden immediately is "the whiteness and brilliance of the pearl" (1955: 77). However, William Henry Schofield pays attention to the fact that this immediate recognition is mixed with disbelief; the poet asks the apparition if she is his lost gem or not (1909: 616). This meeting is crucial as it evokes contrasting emotions in the speaker's heart. The girl, restored to eternal life by miraculous power of baptism, lives a blissful life in the beautiful heavenly garden with God being her protector. Seeing the maiden, the narrator feels delighted, on the one hand, and wants to cross the river to join her:

Now haf I fonte þat I forlete
 Schal I efte forgo hit euer I fyne?
 Why schal I hit boþe mysse and mete?
 My precios perle dotz me gret pyne
 (*Pearl*: ll. 327–330)¹¹.

He thinks it is unfair to meet his daughter and lose her again afterwards (he cannot cross the stream to go to Heaven and return as a mortal). On the other hand, the meeting changes his viewpoint on divine justice. He is struck by the feeling of envy of the maiden's prelapsarian state of being in perfect relation with the Creator. His doubts arise when he begins a debate with the girl. It is a con-

⁸ The Bible says that God used to send diseases to people to punish them for the sins they had committed (cf. e.g. Exodus (9: 14–16), Leviticus (26: 21–25), or Deuteronomy (28: 22).

⁹ "a courteous maiden" (*A Prose Translation*, 2007: 4).

¹⁰ In the Middle Ages people believed that a child is not a perfect form of a human being, that is why the poet's daughter is transformed into an adult person when she lives in Heaven.

¹¹ "Now I have found what I lost / shall I give it up again before I end my life? / Why must I both find and lose it? / My precious pearl causes me great pain" (*ibid.*, p. 8).

versation with friends that inspires Job's confusion about God's injustice, too. Both men ponder over God's treatment of righteous people and sinners. When Pearl reveals to be happily married to Christ in Heaven, the poet's initial joy gives way to uneasiness and theological doubts." Me þynk þy tale vnresounable;" he says, adding that "Goddez ryȝt is redy and euermore rert, / Oþer holy wryt is bot a fable;"¹² (*Pearl*: ll. 590–92). As a father, he feels relief seeing his child safe and happy, but at the same time as a Christian, he sees his daughter's condition an instance of God's unfair treatment of people. He is confused about divine justice and grace, and the superiority of infant baptism over earthly deeds and faith. If one dies in infancy, not having committed a sin, they go directly to Heaven, whereas those who live and sin have to constantly repent for their wrongdoings to be saved in life after death. Aspiring to reach the same status in Heaven as his daughter has, the father has to do penance for the sins he has committed in his life. His way to salvation is demanding and tedious.

I leue,
And charyte grete, be yow among;
Bot my speche þat yow ne greue,
Þyself in heuen ouer hyȝ þou heue,
To make þe quen þat watz so zonge,
What more honour moȝte he acheue
Þat hade endured in worlde stronge,
And lyued in penaunce hys lyuez longe
With bodyly bale hym blysse to byye?
(*Pearl*: ll. 469–78).

The narrator does not take into consideration the errors he has committed: firstly, he did not believe in eternal life after death, secondly, he failed to remember that death is the only gateway to eternal life, and thirdly, in order to be saved, he requires God's grace. Anthony Colin Spearing suggests that "[b]y forgetting that the girl's soul is immortal, even though her body dies, the [d]reamer has underestimated her absolute value" (1962: 4). For Charles Moorman there are some mitigating circumstances that can justify the father's state of confusion, however. As he remarks, the narrator standing in a miraculous garden and observing the New Jerusalem is caught between the two worlds: in fact "his world has become neither earth nor heaven, but a middle ground where earth and heaven can, under certain conditions in the dream-vision, meet" (77).

Job is confused, too. He doubts his own strength and patience (Job 6: 10–11), and loses confidence in his innocence: "[Though] I [were] perfect, [yet] would I not know my soul: I would despise my life" (9: 21). He does not understand why God allows sinners to live long (21: 7) whereas innocent people have to

¹² "I cannot believe, so help me God, that God would blunder so badly. / On my word [*lit.* by my faith], young lady, it would be fine to hold the rank of countess in heaven, / or else [of] a lady of lower position; but a queen!" (ibid, p. 11).

die young, like the *Pearl* poet, the man sees God's attitude towards sinners and innocent people unfair. In his opinion he is a pious man, however, as the Bible reveals, he has sinned being proud (32: 2, 34: 31–35). Listening to the words spoken by one of his friends: "Behold, happy [is] the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty: For he maketh sore, and bindeth up: he woundeth, and his hands make whole" (5: 17–18), Job starts seeing a flaw in his reasoning. All the time he wanted to be an equal partner to God: "I would seek unto God, and unto God would I commit my cause" (5: 8). He judged God's behaviour from the perspective of a human being. His prosperity is restored once he accepts the Lord's superiority. The narrator of the *Pearl* poem also understands God's intention through the suffering. He realizes that man is not the one who decides about other people's being sinless or not. The maiden encourages his father to think about God's dealing with sinners in terms of the Lord's great mercy. Playing the role of a supernatural guide from Heaven, she reminds the poet that there is no point in crying over the dead. People have to accept God's will as only through the Lord's grace they can be saved. The dreamer knows those basic assumptions of Christian teaching in theory, but he has no idea of their practical application (cf. Spearing 1976: 112). God is omnipotent and merciful. He gives a chance to any sinner to change his behaviour. Penance is a gateway to heaven (*Pearl*: ll. 661–72) and it seems that it is a sinner's choice whether to be saved or not.

The two stories, although different, focus on the role of suffering in God's plan of saving man. They are allegories of people's search of wisdom. The wisdom the father of Pearl quests for is a theme of the book of Job:

¹² But where shall wisdom be found? and where [i]s the place of understanding?¹³ Man knoweth not the price thereof: neither is it found in the land of the living.¹⁴ The depth saith, It [is] not in me: and the sea saith, [It is] not with me.¹⁵ It cannot be gotten for gold, neither shall silver be weighed [for] the price thereof.¹⁶ It cannot be valued with the gold of Ophir, with the precious onyx or the sapphire.¹⁷ The gold and the crystal cannot equal it: and the exchange of it [shall not be for] jewels of fine gold.¹⁸ No mention shall be made of coral, or of pearls: for the price of wisdom [is] above rubies (Job 28: 12–18).

The Pearl shows her father the way to salvation, but simultaneously, she is the embodiment of what every Christian seeks for – she is the New Jerusalem. This can be concluded from the parallel between the poem and the Book of Revelation which says "And the twelve gates [were] twelve pearls: every several gate was of one pearl: and the street of the city [was] pure gold, as it were transparent glass" (21: 21). The ending of the *Pearl* poem may seem not to be a satisfactory one, as the speaker ventures to leap over the stream to join his daughter in the Heavenly Jerusalem, but the moment he takes action to achieve his goal he suddenly wakes up, ending up in sorrow again. A. R. Heiserman sees the end meaningful, though, as the narrator's feeling of grief which precedes and follows the vision creates a frame of his spiritual development:

By closing his action in the garden with the grief, where it began, the poet emphasizes the change that has taken place in his character. The narrator was desolated by the grief which began the poem; having gone through the action, he responds to the concluding grief by saying 'All be to that Prince's paye.' We can now believe that his health, his capacity to work out his salvation, has been restored by the experiences of his vision (1965: 171).

The conclusion resulting from the two texts, separated by thousands of years, is the same: man needs painful experiences to gain a new perspective on seeing themselves as Christians, and a better insight into their hearts. Although suffering might be perceived to be a cruel and unnecessary obstacle in life from the perspective of a person affected by it, in the long run it is necessary to understand God. It is the Lord who can determine whether one is sinful or not, and man has to bear this fact in mind. Man and God will never become equal partners. Both Job and the *Pearl* narrator understood their status in the moment of their ordeals. The Biblical story of Job and the *Pearl* narration have a lot in common when approaching the problem of man's doubting God's action. The texts are based on the same pattern: happy life unexpectedly interrupted by a painful experience – disbelief – suffering – anger – and man's final reconciliation with the loss. Both Job and the *Pearl* poet undergo a test of faith by being robbed of something they treasure by the Almighty: the poet loses his beloved child, whereas Job is deprived of his health and reputation of being sinless. Suffering forces the men to reevaluate their life, ponder over God's treatment of people and the nature of sin. The process of their accepting God's will is long and accompanied by violent emotions, having its culmination in the moment of the men's doubting God's justice. The moment of reconciliation comes when Job and the poet understand their inferiority to God. The picture of man in the face of suffering in the late-medieval *Pearl* poem and the Biblical Story of Job is grim, as man constantly undergoes divine ordeals they cannot escape on earth. However, this picture brings hope, too, showing man as a creature with their free will and a choice of what to do. Salvation and the Heavenly Jerusalem are rewards for those who trust the Lord.

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