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### Abstract

Using Tolkien's translation, examines three levels of meaning in the Middle English poem. Calls it a poem "into which is woven an intense and organic symbolism of the Christian doctrine of death and eternal life."

### Additional Keywords

Pearl (poem); Pearl (poem)—Symbolism; Tolkien, J.R.R., trans. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo; Patrick Dendale

# LEVELS OF SYMBOLIC MEANING IN PEARL'

by Laurence J. Krieg<sup>2</sup>

Tolkien's recently published translation of the Middle English poem *Pearl* has placed within the range of interests of Tolkien readers a work of exquisite beauty which we might otherwise be very likely to overlook. It deserves attention for its craftsmanship alone, not to mention the insight it gives us into medieval thinking about death. If Tolkien felt that *The Lord of the Rings* was "about Death and the desire for deathlessness" (as quoted in *Mythlore* 10, p. 19), then I'm sure he felt much the same about *Pearl* --for that exactly describes its subject. Since there is some danger that *Pearl* may still be overlooked (or not fully appreciated) by readers of Tolkien's other work--it's not as exciting or as well known as *Sir Gawain* --I'd like to say that I found *Pearl* very interesting, and explain why I found it so.

Since Tolkien gives ample background material in his introduction (pages 18-23), I commend it to you and proceed at once to the matters of structure and interpretation which I find so fascinating.

*Pearl* is a poem into which is woven an intense and organic symbolism of the Christian doctrine of death and eternal life. It is perhaps as nearly perfect in form as human uncertainty can make it, and it is built with many levels of reference around the central image of the pearl. In this paper I would like to explore the levels of meaning represented by the image of the pearl.

The first level of *Pearl*, on the surface and in the opening of the poem, is the physical, in the form of an actual pearl. All the other images are built around this central one, so it is important to see how the poet describes it. In the opening stanzas he sings of pearls, particularly one, in terms glowing with love and adoration. A pearl is round and small, gaily radiant with smooth whiteness. It is a gem meant for kings. The one pearl in particular, we are told, is unique--the very best in the world--for it is perfectly free from spot or blemish of any kind. Fittingly, it is set in gold. But the narrator recounts in all sadness that he has lost this priceless pearl; it has fallen into the ground and he cannot find it, though he is searching diligently. These are the physical details which are given us in the opening stanzas of the poem, establishing the pearl as a symbol or epitome of purity.

Closely associated with the physical pearl, yet not quite part of it, is the description of the effect of the pearl--and of its loss--on the narrator. For him this pearl was a source of great happiness, beyond all other earthly pleasures. It set him free from woe, and lifted his joy to heaven.

þat wont wat3whyle deuoyde my wrange  
& heuen my happe & al my hele

That me once was wont from woe to free 15  
to uplift my lot and healing bring 16

Both night and day he grieves its loss: its loss robs him of all pleasure, and even his faith in God is not sufficient to comfort him in his grief. It is with the description of the devotion of the narrator to the pearl that we begin to suspect

(if we weren't tipped off beforehand) that the *perle* is more than simply the product of an oyster. It does not seem likely that in an age of faith, the purely worldly expression of a jeweler's grief for the loss of part of his stock in trade would be perpetuated in such elaborate verse as this. It is with this suggestion that the poet makes the transition from the physical pearl to the other symbolic levels of the poem.

Beginning with stanza 5, the poet's dream begins, and we enter with him into his vision. The land in which he finds himself is bright with all kinds of beauteous gems, and in stanza 7 we are told that the gravel is made entirely of pearls. These do not seem to have the power which the one special pearl had, for they are mentioned only once before the narrative continues. This will probably extinguish any lingering doubts most of us might have about the question of whether the pearl is physical or symbolic, for if the poem recounted the story of a real jeweler lamenting his loss,<sup>3</sup> would not the value of such a great quantity of pearls attract more than this passing reference? Taking the pearl rather as symbolic of purity, we see this country as a land of purity.

In stanza 14, the narrator first describes seeing a damsel on the other side of the river. With this description of her we return to the style and manner of the poetic description of the pearl, in the opening stanzas. Although she is frighteningly beautiful, the poet knows her, and she is dear to him--closer than aunt or niece. As the singing of her continues we find that she is entirely white, with the exception of her hair, which is like carven gold. She is smooth, small, and fresh; she has a fine face and figure; her manner is gay, yet gracious, and she is a virgin. She brings him gladness such as he had known before the loss of his pearl, and he would like to approach her but is very much afraid that she will vanish if he tries to get closer. She is truly a pearl-maiden, for her gown is encrusted with myriads of lovely pearls, and on her breast is the loveliest pearl of all.

It becomes perfectly clear in stanza 21 that *perle* has now a further level, meaning the girl herself. For there the narrator recounts that he called her "pearl" and asked her if she is not the pearl he had lost:

O perle quod I in perle3 py3t  
Art þou my perle þat I haf playned  
Regretted by myn one on ny3te

'O Pearl!' said I, 'in pearls arrayed, 24!  
Are you my pearl whose loss I mourn?  
Lament alone by night I made...'

After this begins the long didactic section of the poem, in which the narrator sets forth what he has learned from the maiden. For she explained to him the position in which she found herself, and the true nature of heaven. He was wrong to mourn her departure, for she was not stolen from him. Rather, she was placed in a coffer befitting a perfect pearl, where he may join her only after his death. Although the man longs to be with the damsel, there is not a hint of sensual attraction or of the kind of love which men usually have for

women. His love for her is one of longing--  
 --*Sehnsucht*--as one longs for solace and comfort.  
 This is perhaps explained when the maiden tells  
 him that she was very young when she, his pearl,  
 was taken away, and only after arriving in heaven  
 did God's power give her this mature form, crowning  
 her queen of heaven (together with 143,999 others).

Beginning at about verse 60, a further level  
 of meaning for *Perle* is developed. From the very  
 beginning of the poem, the theme of "spotlessness"  
 has played an important part: "wythouten spot(te)"  
 is the expression which knits the first five stanzas  
 together, describing the physically perfect pearl.  
 Here the perfection is again detailed, but referring  
 to the moral innocence and purity of the girl, Pearl,  
 with no spot of staining sin. The heavenly jeweler  
 had sought to bring in the perfect pearls to his  
 dwelling place, and in his devotion to them he gave  
 his entire livelihood for them.

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This makellez perle þat boyt is dere  
 þe joueler gef fore alle hys god  
 Is lyke þe reme of heueneſſe clere  
 So ſayde þe fader of folde & flode  
 For hit is wemleſz clene & clere  
 & endelez rounde & blyþe of mode  
 & commune to alle þat ryztwys were  
 Lo euen in myddez my breſte hit ſtode  
 My Lorde þe lombe þat ſchede hys blode  
 He pyzt hit þere in token of pes  
 I rede þe forſake þe worlde wode  
 & porchance þy perle maſkelles

This pearl immaculate purchased dear  
 The jeweller gave all his goods to gain  
 Is like the realm of heaven's shere;  
 So said the Lord of land and main;  
 For it is flawless, clean and clear,  
 Endlessly round, doth joy contain,  
 And is shared by all the righteous here.  
 Lo! amid my breast it doth remain;  
 There my Lord, the Lamb that was bleeding  
 slain,  
 In token of peace it placed in state.  
 I bid you the wayward world disdain  
 And procure your pearl immaculate!

The pearl worn by the maiden is a symbol first of  
 her purity, but likewise of her marriage to Christ,  
 for it is the token and the prize of all those pure  
 and spotless souls who are spouses of the Lamb  
 (stanza 71). In this manner, the poet arrives at  
 the pearl's significance as symbol for all purity  
 and devotion to Christ in innocence.

Beyond that, the pearl may be taken to signify  
 Christ himself, for the description of the Lamb in  
 stanza 71 bears great resemblance to earlier descri-  
 ptions of the pearl:

71

Thys Jeruſalem lombe hade neuer pechche  
 Of ober huee bot quyt jolyf  
 þat mot ne maſkelle mojt on ſtreche  
 For wolle quyte ſo ronk & ryf  
 Forþy vche ſaule þat had neuer teche  
 Is to þat lombe a werthyly wyf

Jerusalem's Lamb had never stain  
 Of other hue than whiteness fair;  
 There blot nor blemish could remain,  
 So white the wool, so rich and rare.  
 Thus every soul that no soil did gain  
 His comely wife doth the Lamb declare;

A further reason for seeing *perle* as a symbol for  
 Christ himself is in stanza 87, where the Holy  
 City is described. The narrator mentions that the  
 gates of the city are composed of a whole pearl

each, as John records in his Revelation. Although  
 the poet does not pursue the point here, Christ  
 told his disciples that he was the Way, the Truth,  
 and the Life: "no-one enters the kingdom but by me."  
 He is the very pearl of which the gates of the City  
 of God are formed.

In the height of his mystic rapture, the nar-  
 rator tried to cross the river into the City of  
 God, but could not do so. In trying he awoke from  
 his dream, and returned to this world, sorry to be  
 cast out, but re-affirming his faith. Echoes of  
 this theme may be heard in "Frodo's Dreame" and *Smith  
 of Wootton Major*. The narrator's first statement  
 on returning from the vision was "Now al be to  
 þat prynce3 paye" (stanza 98). Tolkien translates  
 this statement as "Now all be as that Prince may  
 please," but this loses a measure of the original's  
 ambiguity. For the pearl is in the first line of  
 the poem called "Perle pleasaunte to prynce3 paye:"  
 the pleasant pay of princes is the pearl. Does  
 "Now al be to þat prynce3 paye" mean "all be to the  
 pearl (prince's pay)" or "all pay be to the prince  
 (Christ)?" The matter seems to rest upon the  
 interpretation of "prynce3 paye." If this means  
 literally "pay of the prince" (or slightly more  
 broadly, "as the Prince may please"), we have a  
 simple statement of devotion. If it means "the  
 pearl," we have a much more complex statement  
 which is also a statement of devotion to God, but  
 which includes all the higher levels of meanings  
 (that is, all the levels beyond the physical pearl)  
 which were developed for *Perle* throughout the poem.  
 The statement thus becomes a summation and praise  
 of all the goodness in the dream.

In stanza 99 we return to the meanings which  
*perle* was given first: that of the physical pearl,  
 and of the poet's lost daughter. For he mourns  
 once more his loss of her (or it), but is comforted  
 by the knowledge that she is with the Lord, set in  
 his ring.

Stanza 100 refers to the "princes pay" once  
 more on its many levels of meaning. Here the poet  
 seems to be mourning his being cast out from heaven,  
 suggesting that knowledge of that place and the  
 seeking of it is a "perle." The last stanza is a  
 statement of devotion and love for the Lord. For  
 although He has taken away His "princes pay" (the  
 "perle" on all levels of meaning), He gives Himself  
 in the form of bread and wine, to men who give them-  
 selves to Him. Thus should we all be his servants:  
 the precious pearls due the King.

The beauty of the poem lies in its complete  
 and entire organic portrayal of the message, in  
 form as well as in content. The poet has wrought  
 this poem to be a pearl itself, corresponding  
 precisely to the description of the pearl given  
 verbally.

This diagram outlines the correspondences  
 between "medium and Message:"

	Pearl
	<u>Physical</u>
A perfect pearl (inanimate)	
The beautiful girl (animate)	
	<u>Spiritual</u>
Symbol of purity and devotion	
Symbol of Christ himself.	
	Poem
	<u>Physical</u>
A perfectly formed circle	

A beautiful poem, group of words

Spiritual

Expression of pure ecstatic  
mysticism

Presentation of the Word of God,  
the Logos, or Christ

The first consideration of both pearl and poem is the physical. The pearl is a perfectly-formed sphere, created by the organic processes of the oyster around a painful sand grain which has embedded itself inside his shell. The poem is a circle, beginning and ending with almost the same sentence; perfectly formed of symmetrical parts knit together by the word and phrase patterns in each stanza and section. It was formed by the organic mental processes of the man, around the tragedy of his daughter's death. The pearl is the gem of the King, and so this poem is a hymn to God, an act of devotion rendered to the Lord.

The second referent of the pearl in physical terms is the maiden herself, "Marjorie" which means "pearl." The name of the poem too is *Pearl*. Both the poem and the girl are in some sense living organisms, finely formed and beautiful: she made of flesh and blood, the poem made of words and language.

The the spiritual category, the pearl is symbolic of purity and devotion to Christ. So also the poem is pure, without portraying lust, but rather showing the mystic passion and devotion on the narrator in beautiful, highly emotional words. Here perhaps the analogy breaks down somewhat,

since the devotion of the man is not perfect at all times. Until he is taught better by the maiden, he resents her being stolen from him; but the poem at least shows more perfect devotion toward the end, while the unworthy emotions of the man are the motivation for his dream-search which leads him finally to learn the truth.

On the highest level, the Pearl is a symbol for Christ himself: perfect, spotless sacrifice, the only true gate into the Kingdom. The poem is symbolic of Christ also, because it presents the true and perfect Word of God within it: the Logos, which is Christ himself, by whom we are led into the Kingdom; to whom be all praise and glory,  
Ande precious perlez vnto his pay.

<sup>1</sup>*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo*, translated by J.R.R. Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975. Middle English (original) version is quoted from the edition of Sara deFord and others (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> University of Michigan, Department of Linguistics. I would like to express my appreciation to Professor C. Paul Christianson of the College of Wooster for his inspiration, encouragement, and sympathetic reading of this paper in an earlier version. I must, however, take credit for any mistakes and buffooneries that have slipped through.

<sup>3</sup> Sister Mary Vincent Hillman puts forward this claim in an article in *Modern Language Notes*, 60, pages 241-248, 1945.



DENGATE