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LIVING WITH DYING:
GRIEF AND CONSOLATION IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH *PEARL*

By
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LIVING WITH DYING:
GRIEF AND CONSOLATION IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH PEARL

An Undergraduate Honors Project Presented

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Living with Dying: Grief and Consolation in the Middle English *Pearl*

The immortality of souls brings us not the slightest consolation, seeing that in this life we are bereft of our best loved ones. We miss the well-known gait, the voice, the features, the free air; we mourn over the pitiable face of the dead, the lips sealed, the eyes turned, the hue of life all fled. Be the immortality of the soul ever so established, that will be a theme for the disputations of philosophers, it will never assuage the yearning of a parent.

Letter from Fronto, Roman orator, to Emperor Marcus Aurelius (Bottum 6)

The overwhelming grief of a parent at the death of a child and the possibility of consolation become the literary contemplation of an unknown fourteenth-century Middle English poet. This anonymous medieval writer, like the mourning orator Fronto centuries before, questions the “immortality of the soul” as sufficient remedy for mortal sorrow following loss. The unknown Christian poet’s resultant composition, *Pearl*, one of the most beautiful and complex poems in the English language, presents intriguing interpretive issues concerning the spiritual and emotional progress of its first-person narrator, the mourning “Dreamer,” and thus remains open to critical speculation on the capacity of salvation to assuage grief.
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The reader initially encounters *Pearl’s* Dreamer alongside the grave of his two-year old daughter. With his arm outstretched over the patch of earth where she lies buried, “With cover of clay so coldly fraught” (l. 22), the Dreamer appears physically and mentally overcome by loss. Subsequently, he falls asleep on his daughter’s burial mound and re-discovers in a dream his lost child, now in the form of a visually breathtaking, fully-grown young woman, and beholds from afar a heavenly city, the New Jerusalem. Through his conversations with the Pearl Maiden, scripture, parable, and visual experience, the Dreamer is continually reminded of the salvation available to the penitent. He awakens at the poem’s conclusion in the same spot, hand upon his daughter’s grave. With the Dreamer’s return to consciousness, a significant question implied by the text is whether or not he experiences a transformation of mind and spirit as a result of his vision. Does an otherworldly encounter with his lost Pearl and the knowledge of her elevated place in the New Jerusalem alleviate or assuage the Dreamer’s grief? Does the promise and vision of God in his heaven have a comforting effect on the Dreamer as a Christian? Is this a work of successful consolation or has the virtual journey to heaven somehow failed a grief-stricken man and, with him, the poem’s audience?

Current scholarship concerning these questions has not reached a consensus. Many critics feel that the Dreamer attains a spiritual epiphany. Dee Dyas writes: "Mourning beside her grave, the narrator falls asleep and experiences an encounter with his lost child...a theological debate and a vision of heaven which leaves him resolved to lead a life which will ensure his own salvation" (196). Critic David Aers also concurs that “Most commentators write about a new acceptance of loss and of God’s inescapable
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will...” (68), and, in her 2001 introduction to a translation of *Pearl*, Sarah Stanbury acknowledges a continuing debate. She writes: “A question that lingers with *Pearl*...lies within the body of the narrator: does the poem resolve in an aristocratized and utopic vision, or is there a remnant, the narrator himself, not totally encapsulated within a formal sacramental or courtly system?” (Stanbury 11)

In response to the ongoing critical discussion concerning the Dreamer’s inner progress, it is my assertion that the Dreamer has not achieved a newfound Christian acceptance of death at *Pearl*’s conclusion. Unable to realize spiritual consolation through his vision of salvation, the Dreamer likewise remains in a bereft emotional condition, an aspect of the poem which, thus far, seems to have generated far less critical attention than the Dreamer’s Christian state. Through a thoughtful examination of the poem’s text, genre and historical context, as well as similar works of consolation, I will expose an interrupted vision and a failed reformation, confirming the Dreamer’s lack of spiritual and emotional comfort regardless of what he has witnessed. To further reinforce my interpretation of the poem and to apply a contemporary understanding of mourning to the Dreamer’s response, I will employ the research and theory of Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a physician concerned with the experience of grieving and death in our culture. Dr. Kubler-Ross posits that there are five psychological stages that may be experienced when we are confronted with the knowledge of death: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. By applying these stages of mourning to the Dreamer’s reactions to loss, I will provide evidence for an unfinished grieving process at poem’s end and establish the Dreamer’s dispossessed emotional state. In spite of the fact that the
Dreamer is a product of a fourteenth century author, the response to lost love and lost life in *Pearl* proves nearly identical to our own understanding and performance of mourning.

The sole extant version of *Pearl* is found in a manuscript owned by the British Library, MS Cotton Nero A.x., one of four poems copied by a single scribe (Stanbury 1). The other poems contained in the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript: *Patience, Cleanness* and the famous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, like *Pearl*, address the individual’s capacity to meet social or spiritual ideals of behavior (6). For example, the tale of *Sir Gawain* concerns the human failings of a Christian Knight. Gawain finds himself unable to fulfill a symbolic, spiritual and social expectation of perfection, and the poet appears to pardon the shortcoming: “In destinies sad and merry, / True men can but try” (l. 564-65). This thematic similarity assists in supporting my argument against spiritual and emotional consolation at *Pearl’s* conclusion and may further suggest like authorship of both works, another subject of critical contention (Fowler 171-72).

To analyze a text as complex as *Pearl* through the exclusive application of any particular conventions of genre would certainly limit a larger understanding of the poem’s meaning. However, a consideration of the poet’s adherence to a defined mode of narrative can assist in determining the poem’s success or failure within that genre’s framework. More importantly, identifying if and where the work deviates from the genre’s conventional boundaries provides a depth of meaning that moves beyond the mere surface of the poem’s accepted function, or what the poem is generically “supposed to be.”
Evidencing the difficulty surrounding any simplistic understanding of *Pearl*, considerable dispute exists amongst critics about just what exactly the genre of the poem is. Although the work is structured as a dream vision, a very popular literary form employed during the Middle Ages, *Pearl* has additionally “been classified as an elegy, an allegory (in part or in whole) and most recently as a *consolatio*…” (Dyas 196). Since arguments can be made for any one of these literary categories, the poem can be considered exemplar of *all* the specified genres, emerging as an elaborate, generically layered work of multiple purpose.

*Pearl*’s function as an elegy, “a formal and sustained lament in verse for the death of a particular person” (Abrams 72), seems difficult to deny. The poet’s first-person narrator, the Dreamer, is consumed with grief for the death of his young child and the poem’s action results from a father’s extended mourning and unfulfilled desire to reunite with his lost daughter. Additionally, application of the psychological framework for the experience of grief and loss developed by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross serves to support the argument for a mourning of a real “particular person” through the vehicle of the fictional Dreamer. While *Pearl* can be labeled an elegy, however, the poem is not simply that.

Central to the genre of dream vision is the individual who falls asleep and passes into another world. The dreamer’s passing from the mundane to a new environment grants the dreamer and, in turn, the reader “access to a special place,” an escape from the limits of the ordinary, as well as “access to some form of information or teaching” (Spearing 2, 18). During the Middle Ages, the dream could be interpreted as “an expression of human mood or fantasy,” (5) much as it is today, but was often viewed by
the medieval writer as divinely inspired (Lynch 69). Through its association with higher spiritual truths, the literary dream acts as a bridge connecting the earthly human realm with that of the divine, furnishing poets with both the medium and opportunity for writing about mankind’s relationship to God. This genre is frequently and understandably utilized during a historical period where “religion, and ultimately the fate of one’s soul, influenced all aspects of life, both public and private” (Daniell 2).

Moreover, this narrative form affords a site for an intimate consideration of personal emotion and perception, manifesting in an external representation of the individual, interior self.

According to medieval authorities, the dream vision can be divided into several different categories: the insomnium, a vision which can be fully explained in earthly terms and contains no prophecy, the somnium which conceals “with strange shapes and veils” its meaning and requires interpretation, and the viso in which the dream foreshadows an event that comes true (Macrobius 88). Finally, there is the oraculum, defined as a dream in which a revelation is offered by a figure of authority, “a parent, or a pious or revered man, or priest, or even a god” (90). Pearl is found within the category of oraculum. Its Dreamer obtains access to divine truths through the person of his deceased and transformed daughter (the “authority” figure), now a queen of heaven.

In addition to an encounter with the figure of authority by a narrator whose experience is central to the poem, other characteristics of late fourteenth-century dream poetry include 1) the location of the dreamer in an idyllic spring landscape, 2) a delineation of the dream’s beginning and end, and 3) the use of a “heavenly setting”
Because of his dream vision, the individual “absorbs reason” and exhibits a new awareness and a re-ordered mind capable of realizing his teacher’s “abstract truth” (Lynch 70). *Pearl* clearly conforms to many of these conventions. Specifically, the parameters of the dream are distinctly defined within the text. The reader is made aware of its start, “I slipped into slumber unaware” (l. 59), and of an awakening some thousand lines later, “I was reft of my dream and left dismayed” (l. 1170). The poet also employs the divine setting, the New Jerusalem, residence and representative of the ultimate figure of authority in Christian terms. It is heaven to which *Pearl’s* Dreamer travels, and from the first-person earthly perspective that the reader experiences the journey.

While the *Pearl* poet complies with several of the dream vision’s requirements of genre, there are subtle deviations that may furnish additional clues to a greater understanding of the Dreamer’s progress and state of mind. For instance, the idyllic landscape of springtime is where the narrator/dreamer conventionally falls asleep, yet in *Pearl*, the Dreamer enters his dream in August at harvest time. Although the landscape is described as lush, colorful and fragrant, with flowers “peerless blooming” (l. 44), the poet reminds us that it is the time “When com is cut with scythe-edge keen” (l. 40). Rather than images of growth and the potential for change, the reader alongside the Dreamer/narrator enters a garden where leaves, fruits and flowers have reached their peak of development; the corn is cut down and “the wheat...brought to harvest home” (l. 33). Signifying an end to the Dreamer rather than a beginning, this seemingly beautiful, bounteous garden setting is also a graveyard. The grieving father, hypnotized by the
fragrance of bloomed flowers, falls asleep on his daughter’s burial mound, filled with sadness and refusing to acknowledge nature’s fully developed beauty. The binary setting of the idyllic garden/cemetery is where the distraught Dreamer enters his vision and the very same place where he is found “dismayed” (l. 1170) when his vision is cut short. The Dreamer refuses to acknowledge the fruition of nature at the poem’s beginning, just as he refuses throughout the course of Pearl to acknowledge the transformation and maturation of his daughter into a bride of the Lamb, a queen of heaven and a ripened Christian soul.

The perceived authority of the Dreamer’s guide comes into question when we consider the guide’s history and the accompanying shift in the power dynamic between father and daughter. Unlike the guides depicted in Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy and Geoffrey Chaucer’s Book of the Duchess, both dream visions and works of consolation, the Dreamer’s guide is not a stranger who has simply materialized to aid and instruct a wayward pupil. The Pearl Maiden, although physically transformed from child to heavenly woman, queen and bride of Christ, remains to the Dreamer his own “little queen”(l. 1147). She is not the “parent, or a pious or revered man, or priest, or even a god” defined by Macrobius as the conventional oracular figure of authority, but a loved one, a once-living daughter with whom the Dreamer has an earthly history (Spearing 125). Here we locate a changed relationship of power. Once inferior to her father on the earthly plain, the daughter now becomes the superior authority figure possessing absolute spiritual knowledge (125). The Dreamer can only bring his earthly perspective into the divine dream world (119), and to him, the Pearl Maiden is still his daughter whose
teaching he consistently questions and rebels against for the duration of his dream. Formerly a subordinate of her father and just two years’ old at her death, the child has moved beyond his guidance to a Christian paradise, “living” a perfect eternal life which he resents: “I see you set in bliss profound, / And I afflicted, felled by fate” (l. 385-86). The Dreamer resists his daughter’s changed status and superior progress, and so finds it very difficult to “absorb [the] reason” (Lynch 117), the “comfort of Christ” (l. 55), with which his former child attempts to guide him. The remnants of a mortal father/daughter relationship appear to hamper the Dreamer’s potential understanding and realization of the Christian consolation that the Maiden as God’s intermediary offers. Her status as authority figure to the Dreamer can be questioned, and his resistance to her divine instruction explained through an overriding emotional attachment to his lost child and his desire to repossess her.

The genre of *consolatio* can also be applied to *Pearl*. The *consolatio*, or consolation, “a poem designed not so much to commemorate the dead as to strengthen and sustain the mourner” (Dyas 196), is defined by its own set of conventions, somewhat similar and complementary to those of the medieval dream vision. The consolation is considered a work of education or instruction that includes a teacher and consoler of a single subject (Means 3). Elements of allegory are also incorporated into the conventions of the consolation further defined by Means as “an essentially philosophical or theological dialogue with one or more allegorical instructors” which leads the narrator, through reconciliation with his disappointment or loss, to enlightenment (3).
Quite clearly, the narrator’s grief and loss is central to *Pearl*. Concern for the destiny of the young child proves unnecessary; her Christian fate in the figure of the redeemed and resplendent Pearl Maiden seems assured. The deceased daughter has come to exist blissfully in a heavenly realm, and so it is the emotional and spiritual plight of the mortal mourner that becomes the focus of concern for the reader. The Pearl Maiden assumes the role of instructor, a guide who attempts to correct the thinking of her misguided student through dialogue and vision, though critical questions regarding her authority as guide and therefore, her ultimate effectiveness, exist (Spearing 125).

Because of her earthly relationship with the Dreamer, the figure of the Pearl Maiden can be found to violate the allegorical convention of the consolation asserted by Means. The genre of allegory, in which “literal characters represent concepts” (Abrams 5), does not apply when we examine the character of the Pearl Maiden. Although named “Pearl,” a symbol of purity, innocence, maidenhood, heaven, Christ and the Virgin Mary from a Christian viewpoint, she is further assigned an actual rather than symbolic meaning by the poet as the Dreamer’s daughter on earth (Means 57). The meaning of the term “Pearl” constantly shifts throughout the poem, consistent with the Maiden’s multiple representations. She does not stand solely as an allegorical illustration of divine goodness, revealed through her antagonistic treatment of the Dreamer despite her heavenly citizenship. She scornfully rebukes her human parent for his failings within the dream vision: “Who bears bad luck must learn to bend. / Though like a stricken doe, my friend, / You plunge and bray with loud lament” (l. 344-46) the Maiden tells her heartbroken father; “No tittle is gained for all your tears” (l. 351). The persistent
scolding by the Maiden would have constituted “a situation which a medieval audience, even more than ourselves, must have felt to be deeply unnatural,” according to Spearing (125). Thus, the Maiden exhibits an unusual indignation and impatience with her pupil, rather than the compassion we would expect from an allegorical figure of purity, innocence and divinity. For example, Lady Philosophy of Boethius’ *Consolation* wipes away her “patient’s” mortal tears with the hem of her gown, and the naive narrator of Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*, although not considered divine, remains silent, allowing his grieving Black Knight a passionate verbal tribute to his deceased wife.

The Pearl Maiden, possessed of a unique place in both the earthly world of emotional attachment and that of selfless divine love, seems to lack the compassion necessary to provide the Dreamer with comfort. If vestiges of human impatience manifest in the Maiden as authority, is she guiding the Dreamer rightly? Although she is the possessor of absolute divine knowledge, does a prior human attachment to her pupil hinder her teaching? The location of the maiden in both worlds, inside and outside of the dream vision, suggests that the poem is not simply a literary vehicle for Christian doctrine to effect a spiritual lesson, but also concerned with the imperfections and intricacies associated with real relationships of human love.

If the *Pearl* poet has deviated from normative conventions as asserted, then the possible reasons become significant considerations. Rather than a pure work of religious instruction and acceptance, why might *Pearl*’s author complicate a historically traditional education of the earthly sinner with an intensely personal, complex relationship such as
that of the Dreamer and his guide? Potential answers may be found by examining the work’s cultural context.

Generally attributed to the late fourteenth century during the reign of Richard II, the composition of *Pearl* occurs during a politically and socially turbulent time. Peasant revolts against hereditary rights to land and labor, oppressive taxation and an authoritarian method of rule become part of the political landscape (Jones 68-69). Further, the seizure of the throne, deposition and probable execution of King Richard in 1399 by his exiled cousin, Henry, openly, if not officially, challenges the divine rule of kings (131-32). The concept of man’s worldly concerns gradually and more publicly takes precedence over that of God’s law during the political upheaval of the period as evidenced here, and similar values emerge in *Pearl*. The Dreamer appears far more preoccupied with earthly possessions and their worth, failing to understand or acknowledge the spiritual guidance extended to him by what he can only interpret as a lost “jewel” (1.277), his daughter Pearl.

Similarly, “a growing secularization of society in a new age of prosperity, urban development, population growth, increased mobility and accelerated commerce” creates religious discord (Lynch 22). The pursuit and adoration of earthly material reward verified by the behavior of *Pearl*’s Dreamer comes into direct conflict with the church’s spiritual focus on the greater riches available in heaven for the obedient, repenting faithful. Thus, the shift from a resolutely theological existence to an increasingly profit-driven way of life presents emotional and spiritual difficulties for the individual. How and to what does one properly conform within this society? The
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Maiden encourages the Dreamer to "...turn from the world insane" (l. 743), yet it is a world within which he must continue to live, grieving for his lost child and disassociated from the riches of the heavenly realm. The changing social climate of the period calls into question the relationship between humanity and God, prompting a struggle to reconcile earthly realities with the spiritual ideals consonant with the church. The effects of this upheaval constitute "disturbing strains" according to critic Kathryn Lynch (22). Conflicts "between morality and behavior, between theology and society, between religion and life itself" (Little quoted in Lynch 22) manifest in society, and in turn, its literature. Accordingly, these types of conflicts can be located in *Pearl*: the poet's Dreamer embarks on a quest for individual understanding, effectively demonstrating the void that exists between personal, emotional needs and the ideal Christian response to the death of a loved one.

Further, the movement towards individualism and self-examination presents a challenge to the Christian poet. Although *Pearl*'s author engages with established religious doctrine and ideals, he is also an artist, a creator, and an individual in his own right. In response to political, social and spiritual anxieties, the artist may act as both mirror and innovator, reflecting contemporary difficulties and suggesting new ways of coping with these issues. The medieval dream vision *Roman de la Rose* written by Guillame de Lorris and later continued by Jean de Meun concerns the Dreamer who falls in love with the reflection of a rose in the waters of a heavenly landscape. This Dreamer's story is told with explicitly spiritual language, mirroring an intense "religion of love" and in turn, inviting a consideration of the nature and importance of individual
emotion (Spearing 28). *Pearl*’s poet takes a similar path, using the valued language, stories and symbols of Christianity in his reflection on the power and endurance of the human love relationship.

A cultural filter for the complex matters of the time, the poet may “even draw creatively on the revival of ancient philosophy to meet changing institutional needs” (Lynch 22). By employing the mode of *consolatio* as established by Boethius in 522 A.D., the *Pearl* poet reaches back to an ancient form as a new way to express accepted religious doctrine; however, he does so with variation, as Lynch posits, “creatively.” While Christian ideals are clearly articulated in *Pearl*, the poet, as artist, makes the consolation his own through an original, stylized form, sensuous, detailed description and a highly emotional disclosure of the conflicted individual’s internal condition. The *Pearl* poet responds to the crisis that exists in his culture with appropriate religious solutions, yet distinguishes himself as artist in his variation of a traditional form. By creating the Dreamer’s attachment to the child, the poet confers a reality, validity and power to the human bond that endures beyond death. The presentation of the Dreamer in an ambiguous emotional and spiritual state after the loss of his daughter affirms that, while salvation exists, there are no easy or immediate answers for earthly mortals, possessors of emotions that cannot be “tucked into neat packages” and set aside (Kubler-Ross 7 GG).

Another significant cultural event, the outbreak of the black plague, profoundly affected medieval English culture and may have exerted some influence over the composition of *Pearl*. The bubonic plague, or the “Black Death,” moved aggressively
through Europe beginning in 1348 and succeeded in reducing the population by one-third to one-half (Daniell 190). Initially characterized by swellings which appeared in the neck, armpit and groin area, and eventually by the eruption of black or purple spots on part or all of the body, this highly infectious disease allowed its victims only a matter of days before death occurred (Moote 62). Such an abrupt manner of death afforded loved ones little or no time to prepare for loss either emotionally or spiritually. The living, literally “overwhelmed by the dead,” moved about holding flowers and herbs to their faces to combat the odor of decaying bodies (Daniell 93).

Connections to the black plague, its consequent emotional grief and spiritual crisis can tentatively be made to *Pearl*. Although absolute proof of such a hypothesis is unavailable to us, the abrupt death of a two-year old child and her father’s insistence on five occasions within the poem’s first sixty lines that his daughter is “without a spot” merits some attention. She is lost in a “garden of herbs” (l. 9), a possible referentee to the herbs and spices used to shield the living from the stench of the dead. In the Dreamer’s mind and in his vision, his daughter is physically beautiful, well and “without a spot,” the way in which he prefers to remember her. With the collapse of social order as a result of the plague that began in 1348 and continued for many years, traditional religious rituals were disrupted. Opportunities for formal worship, meditation, communion, confession, penance, and the administration of last rites diminished in the wake of infectious disease. Officials of the church, either dying themselves or fearful of contracting the often-fatal illness, did not attend their parishioners. The elaborate and comforting traditions of burying the dead were abandoned out of necessity and plague victims, often left to die
alone, were thrown into communal burial pits without benefit of religious ritual (Daniell 190-93). When traditional social and spiritual behaviors that give shape and meaning to a way of life disintegrate, all that remains is one’s personal, individual faith. A graffito message found on the wall of a church in Hertfordshire and dated 1350 reads: “Wretched, terrible, violent. Only the remnants of people are left to tell the tale” (Ziegler quoted in Daniell 190). In this context, the Dreamer’s confusion and failure to accept or recall the biblical doctrine presented by the Pearl Maiden hardly appears out of place. Society is shaken to its very core by constant, gruesome and unexpected death and a poetic inquiry into the nature of grief and consolation seems a reasonable reaction, as “an overwhelming number of deaths can influence the artistic and cultural mind-set of a population” (Daniell 195).

The *Pearl* manuscript has been dated to approximately 1390 mainly for reasons of dialect (the Northwest Midlands dialect in which *Pearl* was written is consistent with Middle English in 1390); however, the possibility exists that the poem is of earlier composition (Stanbury 5). In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, located in the same manuscript and appearing after *Pearl*, there is a reference to the Order of the Garter founded in 1348, also the year of the initial outbreak of the Black Death (6). Without sure identification of *Pearl*’s author, we cannot know with certainty the precise historical context in which the work was composed. However, we can infer that a tumultuous social and spiritual landscape existed during the mid-to-late fourteenth century, and the poet conveys the confusion and uncertainty of the times.
The genre of consolation as we have come to understand it originates with a work composed by Anicius Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, and parallels can be drawn between Boethius' sixth century *Consolation* and *Pearl* concerning the individual response to grief and loss. It is thought that Boethius, a Roman scholar and political advisor, composed this work for which he is remembered in prison, a condemned man awaiting execution. Prior to his exile from Roman society and incarceration for treason in or around 522 A.D., Boethius lived the life of a privileged aristocrat as consul to the ruler of Italy, Theoderic the Ostrogoth, enjoying the wealth, power and intellectual pleasure that such status accorded him (Watts xv). Boethius separated from the life that he knew, leaving his family, material comforts and classical library to face exile and impending death. Combining prose and poetry with Greek and Roman philosophy, the *Consolation* is Boethius' attempt to negotiate an unjust social isolation and the impending loss of his own life through a written contemplation of misery, happiness and their sources. Significantly, Boethius' writing of the *Consolation* verifies a serious literary concern with man's emotional and spiritual inadequacy when confronted with loss from a very early historical period. Individual feelings of confusion, anger and sadness accompanied loss and death at that time (as in ours) and were considered meaningful enough to merit a theme for poets.

Not surprisingly, *The Consolation of Philosophy* was both influential and popular in the Middle Ages, considered "bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of Middle-Age writers" (Morris quoted in Watts xi). Literary critic Henry Chadwick also confirms a medieval attraction to Boethius, and this affinity was "a significant sign of the
seriousness with which men took his philosophical reflections on the dealings of
dataur slop vith a world beset by so much evil” (quoted in Gibson 1). It is a fourteenth
century medieval world in which *Pearl* appears, composed during an historical period
fraught with political and social upheaval under the unsettled rule of Richard II and the
prevalence of untimely, grisly plague death on a massive scale. Existing in an era laden
with uncertainty, mourning and loss, a medieval audience could likely identify with the
themes of personal crisis and possible pathways to consolation.

Although their source of grief appears dissimilar on the surface, Boethius laments
the loss of his own life and the Dreamer grieves for the life of another, both men mourn a
social death. Boethius has not yet been executed, but his life as a successful Roman
politician and philosopher has already been forfeited. He grieves for his possessions and
position in exile, a victim of Fortune, convicted of a crime he has not committed: “And
so stripped of every possession, thrust from my offices, and with my reputation in ruins,
for doing a favour I have received a punishment” (Book I, IV, 14). *Pearl*’s Dreamer, too,
exists in isolation and counts himself betrayed. He is found alone, lying upon his
daughter’s grave at harvest, a time of community, celebration and bounty, but the
Dreamer cannot partake of life-affirming society. Profound grief has become the
symbolic prison in which the Dreamer resides, yearning for a lost possession, his
daughter, Pearl: “What use is treasure in worldly state / If a man must lose it and mourn
in vain? / Now little I reck what trials remain, / What bitter exile and banishment, / For
Fortune is bound to be my bane / And suffer I must by her consent” (l. 331-36). The
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Dreamer clearly represents "the Boethian imagery of the earthbound soul imprisoned, exiled, unenlightened, sunk in oblivion..." (Crabbe quoted in Gibson 257).

In order to transcend earthly grief and achieve consolation, Boethius and the Dreamer must embrace the source of all life, happiness, goodness and truth. To that end, each man is led by a female guide, a supernatural inhabitant of a higher plane, on a quest for understanding and ultimately, consolation. Boethius is met in a state of self-pity, "giving vent to my sorrow with the help of my pen" (Book I, I, 3) by the Lady Philosophy, "of awe-inspiring appearance, her eyes burning and keen beyond the usual power of men" (Book I, I, 4). The author employs the metaphor of doctor and patient, and thus, Lady Philosophy diagnoses her patient as "sick." Boethius has forgotten himself, "wasting away in pining and longing for [his] former good fortune" (Book II, I, 23). The Lady, through a series of philosophical debates, works to rehabilitate and re-educate his lost soul.

The Dreamer, too, encounters a spiritual guide, the Pearl Maiden, a highly embellished incarnation of his deceased daughter, who now lives as a queen in heaven. Quickly, the Maiden determines the Dreamer's lack of spiritual health: "...if your mind is bound / To mourn for a gem in solitude, / Your care has set you a course unsound" (l. 264-65), and she attempts to correct his thinking. In a literary form like that of the Consolation, a first-person dialogue of instruction ensues between the Maiden and the Dreamer, although the Dreamer's treatment by his "nurse" is decidedly more antagonistic and his relationship with his guide significantly more complex. Further, it is not exclusively with words that the Maiden encourages the misguided Dreamer to cease his
excessive mourning. She applies the power of vision in administering her cure, and the Dreamer literally sees (although in the form of a dream) the heaven that he could only assume, through faith, was there.

Neither Boethius nor the Dreamer believes he bears personal responsibility for his own sorrow, considering himself a victim of fate in a harsh, unappreciative and unfair world. Both conclude that God has erred. Boethius tells Philosophy: “It may be part of human weakness to have evil wishes, but it is nothing short of monstrous that God should look on while every criminal is allowed to achieve his purpose against the innocent” (Book I, IV, 12). Similarly, the Dreamer cannot understand how his two-year old daughter could have earned the rank of heavenly queen: “You live in our country not two years -- / You could not please the Lord, or pray, / Or say ‘Our Father,’ or Creed rehearse -- / And crowned a queen the very first day! / I cannot well believe my ears, / That God could go so far astray” (l. 483-88). Thus, Philosophy and the Maiden must alter the perspectives of their misguided pupils. Philosophy understands that Boethius’ mind is “clouded by shadows of happiness and cannot see reality,” and she must “turn [his] gaze in a different direction [to] recognize the pattern of true happiness” (Book III, I, 47). The Maiden confirms the Dreamer’s faulty process of thought: “I hold that jeweler little to praise / Who believes no more than meets the eye, / And little courtesy he displays / Who doubts the word of the Lord on high” (l. 301-04).

Instead of grieving the loss of ‘valuable’ earthly possessions, both men are encouraged to remember the supreme divinity of the Creator, from whom they have strayed. It is not wealth, power or position that are the source of true happiness, but the
treasure of God’s love. Philosophy explains to Boethius that “true happiness is to be
found in the supreme God” (Book III, X, 69) and earthly rewards are hollow. Both
Boethius and the Dreamer struggle with questions of value, what each deserves and what
each has unjustly lost as their guides encourage them to look to the heavens and not to the
earth for comfort and compensation. A changed perspective through the memory of
one’s divine connection is required to achieve consolation, yet Boethius and the Dreamer
have set their sights on the wrong things. “Look up at the vault of heaven: see the
strength of its foundation and the speed of its movement, and stop admiring things that
are worthless” (Book III, VIII, 61) Lady Philosophy demands, yet Boethius remains
focused on the undeserved freedoms enjoyed by his accusers. The Dreamer bemoans his
own poor state in comparison to the lavish heavenly rewards his daughter has received:
“I see you set in bliss profound, / And I afflicted, felled by fate; / And little you care
though I am bound / To suffer harm and hardship great” (385-88). He mourns the loss of
his gem, “my precious pearl without a spot” (l. 48), and fails to acknowledge the value of
the divine lesson his daughter attempts to impart.

Whereas each man believes himself a victim of haphazard fate, these works
emphasize the notion that an omniscient God has a plan for everything and Fortune, good
and bad, is part of the divine scheme. Even though fate has dealt an unfair blow, there
are yet things to be learned and good to be gained, a “self discovery through hardship”
(Book IV, VI, 108) according to Lady Philosophy. The Pearl Maiden advises the
Dreamer “Better to cross yourself, and bless / The name of the Lord, whatever he send”
(l. 341-43). The person who relies on the whims of Fortune is foolish indeed: “Why
behave like a stranger newly arrived on the stage of life? You know there is no
constancy in human affairs, when a single swift hour can bring a man to nothing” (Book
II, III, 28) Philosophy tells Boethius. This lesson is illustrated both by Boethius’ abrupt
fall from grace and in the Dreamer’s sudden and untimely loss of his daughter. Better to
depend on the constant of God’s love, argue the guides; Fortune may withdraw her favors
without cause or warning.

Ironically, it remains unclear whether Lady Philosophy’s attempt at consolation
meets with success. She alludes to the fact that Boethius appears to be gaining strength
as a result of her rhetorical medicine, which can be construed as a positive admission and
suggests a change in Boethius. However, in Book IV of the five books that comprise the
Consolation, Boethius “still had not forgotten the grief within... and I cut [Philosophy]
short just as she was preparing to say something” (Book IV, I, 85). His questioning
continues until Lady Philosophy takes control of the dialogue in the latter portion of
Book V, both anticipating and responding to questions that she assumes Boethius will
ask. She encourages him to “avoid vice,” “cultivate virtue,” and “put forth humble
prayers” in the face of “the great necessity,” the great personal challenge placed in front
of him (Book V, IV, 137). Boethius’ voice disappears from the narrative prior to its
conclusion, and he is never heard from again. We cannot know how he met his fate when
he was beaten to death in 524 at Pavia, a manner of execution usually restricted to the
lower classes (Matthews quoted in Gibson 15). Boethius appears to understand
Philosophy’s reasoning throughout the narrative, yet there is no evidence for or against
his acceptance of her solution, and the possibility remains that “destructive passions”
(Book V, II, 119) prevail in the end. The Consolation does not tell us, underscoring a true gap between that which can be known intellectually and the power of human emotion.

Both The Consolation of Philosophy and Pearl imply that humans cause their own pain. If we on the earth could embrace the love of God and maintain our faith in Him, we would not be disappointed in our attachments to that which we mistakenly feel we possess, be it material goods or the love of another human being. Yet, as imperfect, feeling beings, Boethius and the Dreamer have no definitive success in overcoming their difficulties, despite their divine guides. Clear understanding seems impossible. Lady Philosophy explains “it is not allowed to man to comprehend in thought all the ways of divine work or expound them in speech” (Book IV, VI, 109) and the Dreamer remains “a stranger” on the streets of heaven (I. 966). Faith, ultimately, must suffice for the unenlightened human.

Several critics have noted that “the philosophy to which Boethius turns for consolation contains few explicitly Christian elements” (Lewis 76). “Since Boethius was a theologian in his own right, why is there no explicit advocacy of Christianity in the work?” questions Anna Crabbe (261). Boethius lived on the historical cusp of paganism and Christianity, yet most believe he was a Christian and so the problem of the work remains. Why did Boethius choose classical Philosophy rather than Christianity as his method of consolation? Perhaps Boethius found Christianity somehow inadequate in a time of great emotional grief and turned to philosophy, his “sumnum vitae solamen,” his chief solace in life (Watts xx), for comfort in an effort to combine reason with faith. Like
the emotional and spiritual condition of Boethius and the Dreamer after all that can be
has been revealed, the answer to this question remains clouded and uncertain.

Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Book of the Duchess*, also a dream vision, has at its
center an abrupt, untimely death and the consuming sorrow of one left behind. *BD* was
written during the last third or quarter of the fourteenth century at the request of John of
Gaunt and is both *Pearl*’s chronological contemporary and a thematically similar work of
consolation. Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster and Gaunt’s beloved wife, fell victim to the
black plague in the late 1360’s, and subsequently, Chaucer was commissioned by a
grieving husband to compose the piece in commemoration of her passing (Benson 329).

Unlike *Pearl*’s father/narrator, however, the *BD*’s narrator/dreamer is not the
mourner but an outsider, initially unaware of the tragedy experienced by the poem’s
central figure, the Black Knight. The narrator falls asleep and dreams of his encounter
with a bereaved Knight, alone in a vast forest at the end of a lush, green path “With
floures fele, faire under fete, / And litel used” (l. 400-01). While other noblemen
participate in the deer or “hart” hunt occurring simultaneously in the forest, the unnamed
narrator discovers the Black Knight sitting on the ground, his back against an oak tree,
his head hanging down. The Knight’s dejected posture causes the narrator to wonder
“...that Nature / Myght suffre any creature / To have such sorwe and be not ded” (l. 467-
69), and we soon learn that the Knight grieves the death of his lady “That was so faire, so
fresh, so fre, / So good that men may wel se / Of al goodnesse she had no mete [equal]!”
(l. 483-86) Lamenting that all his bliss departed with his beloved, the Knight declares
“No man may my sorwe glade” (l. 563).
Although he has already been informed by the Knight that the lady "Is fro me ded and ys agoon" (l. 479), the narrator makes a curious request. Again, he asks the Black Knight to "discure [reveal] me your woo" in order that "hyt may ese youre herte" (l. 556), a solicitation of the Knight to recollect and repeat what he has experienced since the narrator has somehow "forgotten" the source of the Knight's grief. The Knight complies, and the result of relating his tale of love, courtship, marriage and loss to the narrator is an ability to respond to the sound of the hunting horn, concluding the hunt and "Gan homwarde for to ryde" (l. 346). The narrator tells us that "... al was doon, / For that tyme, the hert-huntyng" (l.1312-313). Chaucer cleverly uses the metaphor of the "hart hunt," representing both the noblemen's search for deer (the "hart") in the forest, as well as the Knight's internal quest for understanding the loss of his own heart. Moving away from the spot of original encounter, the Black Knight responds to a call that comes from beyond himself. He is summoned home and into the company of others, done with his heart hunting for now.

Many parallels can be drawn between these two works which describe a similar human response to death: the overwhelming and crippling sadness experienced by both Chaucer's Black Knight and Pearl's Dreamer. We find these grieving individuals enclosed within lush, green settings. Great, strong trees of the forest surround the Knight, and the flower-filled graveyard where his daughter lies buried confines the Dreamer. Both men are located on the ground, closer to earth than heaven, their heads inclined, mourning an untimely death in an untimely manner. Grief interferes with their ability
to function and, mired in extreme sorrow, they are unable to embrace the life of which they are still possessed.

The Black Knight grieves in the month of May when the earth has forgiven the cold of winter and could contend with heaven for its beauty: “As thogh the erthe envye wold / To be gayer than the heven” (l. 406-07). This is also a time when “…al men spoken of huntying” (l. 350); however, the Knight does not acknowledge the beauty of the earth nor participate in the hunt, a nobleman’s natural pursuit. Pearl’s Dreamer, hand outstretched over the grave of his two-year old child, mourns in August, the season of the harvest, with “Gillyflower and ginger on every side / And peonies peerless blooming between” (l. 43-44). August, as described by Pearl’s author, is “festive tide” (l. 38), yet the Dreamer fails to enjoy the abundance associated with the harvest or the beauty of its fruits and flowers. He longs for his lost daughter, his “precious pearl without a spot” (l. 48) “fairer yet” (l. 45) than the natural beauties of the ripening earth. Through the transport of his dream, Pearl’s narrator likewise embarks on an internal quest for consolation, a “hart hunt” of his own. Thus far, however, neither man proves able to allow grief its own season; instead each remains isolated, emotionally rooted in his own sorrow.

Fortune also plays a role in the plights of the Black Knight and the Dreamer. The Knight tells the narrator that “fals Fortune hath pleyd a game / Atte ches with me” (l. 618-19) and because of the Knight’s defeat, death has claimed his lady. Despite momentarily accepting the blame for her loss, however, the grieving Knight soon acknowledges he could never have won the match “For Fortune kan so many a wyle /
Ther be but few kan hir begile” (l. 674-75). The Dreamer, in turn, counts himself a victim of Fortune, “For Fortune is bound to be my bane / and suffer I must by her consent” (l. 335-36), but the possibility exists that he, too, experiences a measure of guilt for the death of his child. “In a garden of herbs I lost my dear; / Through grass to ground away it shot” (l. 9-10) is all we learn of the child’s demise. It remains unclear whether the Dreamer believes that he had some control over her situation and failed her (“I lost”), or whether Pearl, from the Dreamer’s perspective, abandons him (“away it shot”).

As exemplified in both *The Consolation of Philosophy* and *Pearl*, the Black Knight comes into contact with a knowing guide, a figure responsible for creating a change in perspective through a redirection of the mind from self to higher things. However, in *The Book of the Duchess*, the narrator/dreamer fulfills the role of instructor, and the reader experiences the Knight’s tale from an enlightened point of view, rather than from that of the mourner. (It must be remembered that this is a work of patronage, and therefore possible that Chaucer would not claim to assume his patron’s identity.)

The Black Knight and *Pearl*’s Dreamer experience a grief so consuming that each, distracted by the power of memory, fails to acknowledge his teacher. Initially, the Black Knight makes no sign that his is aware of his guide’s physical presence: “I went and stood ryght at his fet, / And grette hym; but he spak noght,/ But argued with his own thoght” (l. 503-05) remarks Chaucer’s narrator, “So, throgh hys sorwe and hevy thoght, / Made hym that he herde me noght” (l. 509-10). Unaware of all except his own pain and loss, the Knight sings aloud a lay of sadness, wishing that death had taken him along with his “lady swete” (l. 483) and recalling her many qualities in life. Despite an eventual
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apology to the narrator for the social slight, the grieving Knight continues in his reverie, verbally re-experiencing past memories of happiness with his wife. Likewise, Pearl's Dreamer cannot see his guide, his lost daughter, but his blindness manifests somewhat differently. He clearly observes her literal figure and material decoration, yet resists acknowledging her changed position and elevated status in heaven, unable to see the Maiden as she now exists and consequently rejecting the insight she offers. Instead, the Dreamer prefers to cling to a memory of his child as prized possession, “my precious pearl without a spot” (l. 47), his earthly subordinate to whom he formerly served as guide. Treating her as a lost object to be recovered, he continually reminds her of the pain she has caused him, re-asserting the past rather than accepting the Maiden’s present condition and authority. “What use is treasure in worldly state / If a man must lose it and mourn in vain?” (l. 331-32) the Dreamer asks his daughter, focusing squarely on the past, anchored in earthly suffering.

By contrast, the Black Knight refers not to his wife as “treasure” (l. 331) over which he claims ownership, but as a person loved and honored. “To love hir in my beste wyse, / To do hir worship and the servise / That I koulde thoo, be my trouthe” (l. 1097-099) is the way in which he characterizes his intentions. After courting her relentlessly, the Knight at long last receives from the lady a ring, a token of her promise to be with him. Notably, he assesses the ring as an object of deep symbolic value, but offers no lengthy description of its appearance: “And therwith she yaf [gave] me a ryng; / I trowe hyt was the firste thyng; / But if myn herte was ywaxe / Glad, that is no nede to axe! / As helpe me God, I was as blyve / Reysed as fro deth to lyve —” (l. 1273-278). Receiving his
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lady’s ring brings him new life, not through its material worth, but as a symbol of her love. The circularity of the lady’s ring parallels the round perfection of the pearl, yet it is solely the Black Knight who assigns the object higher meaning; the Dreamer can only interpret the pearl as commodity, referring to her/it as “jewel” (l. 277) and “treasure” (l. 331).

Describing his beloved in natural terms: “...fairer, clere, and hath more lyght / Than any other planete in heven, / The moone or the sterres seven, / For al the world so hadde she / Surmounted hem alle of beaute” (l. 822-26), the Knight compares her beauty to the planets, moon and stars. Indicative of the Knight’s ability to find value beyond material commodities, he admires his wife’s qualities of body and mind, finding her fair, sweet and unaffected. In comparison, the Dreamer’s breathless description of the Pearl Maiden centers on her “surcoat of white linen pure / [with] open sides of fair design, / And filigree on bands it bore / Where lavish pearls their lustre join,” and “Her priceless crown with pearls alone/...High pinnacles upon it shone, / And florets carved with craft and care” (l. 205-08). His focused admiration of the Pearl Maiden’s physical adornment further reinforces a general preoccupation with material wealth.

When the Dreamer first encounters the Eden-like landscape of his dream in all of its jeweled glory, he expounds “No tongue is worthy to command / Fit words those splendors to display” (l. 99-100) and further, “More of bliss was there to prize / Than ever my tongue could testify” (l. 133-34). Words repeatedly fail him in his attempt to describe the beauty of his environment, “glittering gold” (l. 106). Words also desert the Black Knight, but only when he endeavors to adequately describe the splendor of his
wife’s face: “But a visage had she theretoo! / Alas, myn herte is wonder woo / That I ne kan discryvn hyt! / Me lakketh both Englyssh and wit /...To comprehende hir beaute.”
(l. 895-903), thereby emphasizing a love for the individual rather than the love of the individual’s value articulated by the Dreamer.

Ultimately, Chaucer’s Black Knight exhibits some measure of consolation through his ability to “Gan homwarde for to ryde” (l. 1315). His move from the point of beginning is due in large part to the opportunity he receives to tell his tale. From the very start, the Black Knight simply needs someone to hear him. “I telle the upon a condicion / That thou shalt hooly, with al thy wyt, / Doo they entente to herene hit” (l. 750-52). In other words: I will tell you my story of sorrow if you will do your best to hear it.

Chaucer utilizes a naïve narrator who pretends ignorance of the Black Knight’s sorrow as a device that allows the mourner some measure of comfort. The narrator speaks only enough to prompt the Knight to unburden himself, and the quiet commiseration of a fellow human, rather than a supernatural, all-knowing being, becomes an agent of consolation. Neither the classical logic of Lady Philosophy nor the Pearl Maiden’s “Comfort of Christ” is employed in The Book of the Duchess. Simple human compassion and the unbridled ability to tell one’s own tale however intellectually or spiritually deficient suffice in assuaging grief. The narrator does not suggest that the mourner’s sorrow has been completely alleviated, yet “…al was doon, / For that tyme, the hert-hunting” (l. 1312-313), and the Black Knight, for the moment, can find his way home.

Although the character of the Dreamer appears to have lost control of his life, driven to isolation, his reason overcome by grief, the poet represents his narrator’s
spiritual and emotional chaos in extremely restrained and stylized fashion. The number twelve plays an integral role in the poem's construction, likely based on the biblical structure of the New Jerusalem, that portion of heaven the Dreamer is allowed to see. Built on a foundation of twelve tiers consisting of twelve precious stones, New Jerusalem is described as twelve thousand furlongs wide with twelve portals or gates (Apocalypse 21.10-27). (The *Pearl* poet takes much of his textual description of the New Jerusalem from St. John's account of it in the Book of Revelation.) This highly alliterative poem consists of twelve-line stanzas totaling 1212 lines with a controlled rhyme scheme. Stanzas are grouped into twenty sets of five, except for an additional stanza in the fifteenth grouping, resulting in 101 total stanzas. The inclusion of an extra stanza mars the exactness of *Pearl*’s form, placing one grouping off balance and forcing the stanza count to exceed 100, a recognized number of perfection (Stanbury 4). If we accept that a poem’s form contributes to its meaning, the ideal resolution of the Dreamer’s vision, a complete re-ordering of the mind and spirit, diminishes with the addition of Stanza 101. In a work of such crafted structural control, the failure to reinforce perfection in this instance is not likely an accident.

Another feature of *Pearl*’s composition is the use of a literary technique called concatenation, “an intricate system of verbal echoes,” that connect stanzas together by linking the last word of one stanza with the first line of the next (4). This is done by using the same word or a variation on that word, i.e., “content,” “ill-content,” “discontent,” with each stanza set presenting a different link. Concatenation may act as an echo, a bouncing back of meaning, and a reminder of what has come before.
However, the linking words are not inserted into identical sentences and so their meanings are oftentimes altered. The use of this technique produces a two-fold effect in *Pearl*: it recalls a term’s stable meaning as does an echo, but also creates instability of meaning as a term becomes changed by context or differs slightly from the original. Thus, the poet builds a literal world of uncertainty and unpredictability. Like the Dreamer, the reader must try to make sense of multiple meanings that come back, shift and confuse. Concatenation further contributes to the poem’s structure through its joining of the end to the beginning, “string[ing] stanzas together like pearls on a necklace” (4). Depending on one’s interpretation, this poetic connection may symbolize perfection in the form of a circle with no beginning and no end or, conversely, a circle of perpetuity, where one simply returns to the place of beginning.

*Pearl*’s Dreamer, devastated both physically and emotionally when first encountered, takes no comfort from the earthly experience of nature. The beautiful, fragrant fruits and flowers of the garden cannot distract the Dreamer from his loss, nor can the teachings of his religion: “Comfort of Christ might come to mind / But wretched will would not forbear” (l. 55-56). Following the pattern of possibility offered by the dream, the narrator travels from the place of enclosure and constraint, the walled garden where he mourns his Pearl (in turn buried in the earth), outward to an Eden-like landscape. This vision of nature enables the Dreamer to momentarily forget his sorrow, but this is not just any garden. “All embellished was the land” (l. 97), notes the Dreamer: “Crystal cliffs as clear as day / And groves of trees with boles as blue / As indigo silks of rich assay / The leaves, like silver burnished new....The gravelstones that strewed the
way / Were precious pearls of orient” (l. 75-82). A jeweler by trade, the Dreamer initially appears to overcome his grief through an adoration of rich fabrics, metals and gems. The comfort of the material rather than “the Comfort of Christ” (l. 55) momentarily satisfies him: “Amid those hills embellished bright / My sorrows fled in full retreat” (l. 85-86). Despite the fact that the beauty of nature remains to the Dreamer “all unseen” (l. 45) in the earthly garden, the “embellished” heavenly one has a more pleasing effect. “My pleasures multiplied apace / Conquered my cares / dispelled my pain” (l. 123-24) marvels the narrator at the only point in the poem where he clearly voices any cessation of suffering. His “multiplied pleasures” quickly dissipate, however, as he regards the other side of the river: “For lovely though this landscape were, / What lay beyond was past compare” (l. 146-47). Quickly dissatisfied with the embellished hills of Eden, he looks across the river for more.

It is here in the highly decorated expanse of possibility that the Dreamer encounters his lost gem, his Pearl. Across the shores of a glittering river at the foot of a crystal cliff, sits “a maiden child of mortal mold / A gracious lady gowned in white; / I knew her well, I had seen her of old” (l. 161-63). His child Pearl has been transformed through death to an astonishing maiden, adorned in ornate, imperial clothing encrusted with pearls that the Dreamer/narrator takes five stanzas to describe and assess. The ‘setting’ of his gaze solely on material beauty and splendor constitutes one of the Dreamer’s most serious errors of understanding. In a vision of revelation, the jeweler fails to recognize that which holds true value, instead looking to a false and fleeting consolation of commodity that proves unsustainable.
The Pearl Maiden tries many times to correct his misguided thinking, starting with his insistence that she was in life his earthly pearl. He fails to comprehend the true import of the term “pearl,” representing perfection, the church, the ideal soul, maidenhood, heaven and Christ himself. The jeweler views her only as his embellished gem, and transparently confuses his terms: “My pearl was away, I knew not where; Now I have found it, now I shall rest, / And live with it ever, and make good cheer” (l. 282-84), referring to her as “it,” a material commodity. Exhibiting a particular interest in the “one pure pearl, a wonder great...set secure upon her breast” (l. 221-22), the Dreamer notes that it would take a man some time to determine its worth. The Pearl Maiden reminds him that he lost not a pearl but a rose when she departed: “A flower that fails and is not renewed” (l. 270) and representative of the fleeting nature of beauty. Only God, purveyor of eternal life and perfection, can bestow the true title of “pearl.” The Maiden points out the misunderstanding, the Dreamer fails to acknowledge it, and then successively refers to her as “rose” and “fair flower” in his mode of address. He has altogether missed her point, unable to discern the true meaning and station associated with her designation as pearl in heaven, unconsciously and incorrectly demoting her to heavenly rose.

Once the Dreamer finds his lost possession, he focuses solely on recovery and asks the Maiden to allow him to cross the deep waters of the river boundary in order to live with her in eternal happiness, illustrating a failure to recollect the Christian requirements of salvation. The maiden angrily reminds him that she resides in heaven, and he must suffer death and be buried before God determines whether and when he can
enter that kingdom. “Such mockery comes of mortal pride!” (l. 290) responds the maiden to the Dreamer’s foolhardy request, calling it “ill advised” and filled with “errors grave” (l. 291-92). Conceding that “Mourning had made me mad” (l. 365), the Dreamer asks for mercy, but wastes no time in reminding his guide of the grief she has caused him, perceiving himself the victim: “And little you care that I am bound / To suffer harm and hardship great” (l. 387-88). In reply, the Maiden attempts to redirect her mortal father away from her as object in order to refocus his attention on the ultimate sacrifice of Christ for man’s salvation. She wants the Dreamer to acknowledge the Lamb as true father, true husband and the supreme judge/jeweler, working, like Boethius’ Lady Philosophy, to turn her pupil’s gaze from the mortal and material toward the greater good. From the Maiden’s theological point of view, compassion for God’s suffering and the possibility of salvation represent the only suitable responses to mortal loss (Aers 64).

In order to achieve her goal of re-adjusting the Dreamer’s perspective, the Maiden through dialogue explains her transformation to bride of Christ, glorified and crowned queen. Careful to emphasize that her lawful ownership as heavenly pearl rests with the Lamb, she rejects her father’s claim of possession. “His [the Lamb’s] royal rank, his praise, his pride / Are root and ground of all my bliss” (l. 419-20) the Maiden says, confirming a movement beyond her father in both rank and Christian understanding. Refusing to accept her position or acknowledge Christ as the source of all his bliss, the Dreamer merely re-asserts his earthly viewpoint: “I cannot well believe my ears, / That God could go so far astray” (l. 488-89). So begins a series of denials and resistance that
mark the Dreamer’s failure to embrace Christianity as a form of comfort or his transformed daughter as a source of enlightenment.

Believing his child too young to have earned the rank of queen, the Dreamer assesses her newly acquired status as beyond her due. The Maiden, employing parable, once more tries to set his thinking aright concerning the workings of heavenly justice. Relating to the Dreamer the parable of the vineyard, she explains that in God’s “vineyard” each worker is paid the same penny regardless of time spent at the vine: “For each is paid at the selfsame rate / No matter how little or great his gains” (l. 604-05).

Through the telling of this parable, the Maiden, who died an innocent child, justifies her position to the disbelieving Dreamer and also reminds him of the grace available to the penitent man. Repeating the story of Christ’s crucifixion and sacrifice yet a second time, she cautions her student against judging God’s ways “For judgment is grim if justice guide it” (l. 700). Thus, if mankind receives what it truly deserves by earthly standards, the resulting judgment would be harsh indeed. Persevering with her lesson, the Maiden continues with the biblical story of the ‘good jeweler,’ one who “… sold all his goods, both woven and spun / To purchase a pearl immaculate.” (l.731-32). This jeweler disposes of his material wealth in favor of the kingdom of heaven, symbolized by the “pearl immaculate.” At the conclusion of her tale, the Maiden urges the Dreamer to “…turn from the world insane / And purchase your pearl...” (l. 743-744). Despite the Maiden’s considerable efforts to change her student’s faulty perspective through scripture and parable, he continues to resist her teaching. The Dreamer responds to the Maiden’s images of selflessness and faith by asking, “Who fashioned your form? Who made your
gown?” (l. 747) Not only does he persist in attending solely to the Pearl Maiden’s outward physical and material appearance, but also has no recollection of God as the source of such blessings.

“If the Dreamer, and through him the poet’s audience, are to be motivated to seek the Lamb and the city where he dwells, then they must see that city vividly and unforgottably” writes critic Dee Dyas (205), further illustrating the error of the human perspective. The crux of the Maiden’s lesson concerns the necessity for faith, in other words, to believe although we cannot see. Must a Christian literally view the heavenly city in order to aspire to it, as Dyas proposes, contradicting the Maiden’s teaching? At Pearl’s beginning, the heavenly guide angrily informs her father: “I hold that jeweler little to praise / Who believes no more than meets the eye” (l. 301-02), assigning categorical value to faith. The Dreamer’s final request, to see where the Maiden dwells, reinforces his lack of faith and lack of progress. His entreaty for “a favor express” (l. 910) appears in the poem’s extra stanza, the sixth in the fifteenth grouping, sticking out, as it were, like a sore thumb. Because he cannot see where she resides, he asks for proof: “Yet where these river-banks arise / I see no building large or small... You linger alone, none else in sight; / If you have another house or hall, / Show me the dwelling wholly bright” (l. 932-36). His insistence on a visual display temporarily fulfills his human need for seeing more, prolongs his contact with the object of desire and requires his daughter to prove her story of transformation, a story the Dreamer thus far rejects.
The Maiden, in an ironic twist, succumbs to the Dreamer's desire for the concrete, stating "I have won you a sight of it this day," (l. 968) but reminds him that "The Lord forbids.../ That a stranger in his streets should stray" (l. 964-65). The Dreamer may only view the New Jerusalem from afar, remaining on the mortal side of the river as spectator. Seeing the city for the first time, he expounds at length upon its embellished appearance, its streets paved with gold and the precious gems of its foundation. The *Pearl* poet utilizes the description of the New Jerusalem set forth by the apostle John in Revelation, and although the Dreamer fails to acknowledge the Christian doctrine the Maiden has proffered, he has little difficulty recalling the twelve "bright gems of worth untold" (l. 992). "As John had named them in writ divine/Each stone in order by name I knew" (l. 997-98) exclaims the Dreamer, continuing to count, assess and measure the holy city, ever the earthly jeweler.

Within the city's ramparts, the Dreamer observes a procession of maidens dressed and crowned in the fashion of his daughter, representing the many brides of Christ. At the head of the procession, is the Lamb himself, and when presented with the face of God, the Dreamer's initial impression concerns only the quality of his robe. Taking great delight from the spectacle of the procession, the hosts of angels, the incense, the music, as well as the Lamb's rich, white clothing, the Dreamer appears surprised to notice a wound in Christ's side. "But a wound there was, and wide it stood,/Thrust near his heart with deadly aim./Down his white side the red blood came;/'O God,' thought I,'who had such spite?' (l. 1135-138), the Dreamer wonders as if ignorant of Christ's fate or sacrifice and in spite of the Maiden's lessons. After cursory consideration of the
wound, his gaze quickly returns to his daughter in procession, negating any significant shift in focus or perception: “And then I saw my little queen...I longed with love and great delight” (l. 1147, 1152). The Maiden remains his beautiful possession for which he continues to long, the Lamb and his sacrifice merely part of the spectacle.

As a result of his “maddened mind” (l. 1154) the Dreamer resolves once more to cross the river to re-possess the Maiden. “I would follow her there, my newly found” (l. 1155) he decides, echoing the very desire he expresses at Pearl’s beginning. Due to the Dreamer’s mortal defiance and Christ’s displeasure, the vision is abruptly ended and once again, both narrator and reader return to “that same garden-plot” (l. 1172), the graveyard. “Dismayed” and “ill content” (l. 1170) to have lost sight of “her that had no peer” (l. 1178), the Dreamer concedes that God’s power surpasses that of his own, yet without his possession, the child as commodity, the mourner remains “in dungeon drear” (l. 1187). Christian consolation manifests as resignation, and the poem’s last two stanzas confirm a failed quest for understanding and comfort. “Had I but sought to content my Lord / And taken his gifts without regret...I had seen and heard more mysteries yet” (l. 1189-190, 1194).

The only transformation the Dreamer establishes is that of his own error. His main offense to Christ and by extension his transfigured child, is not merely a human desire to experience more “mysteries,” but, more significantly, his psychological and visual rejection of the bleeding Lamb, the agent of salvation offered within the vision (Aers 69). The focus of desire on the lost Pearl at the expense of all else and regardless of what he has been told and shown reprises the Dreamer’s self diagnosis when first
encountered by the reader: “Comfort of Christ might come to mind / But wretched will would not forbear” (l. 55-56). The Dreamer returns literally, psychologically and physically to the point and place of beginning, the enclosed garden/graveyard, with little evidence of healing.

In the poem’s last stanza, the Dreamer asserts “To content that Prince and well agree, / Good Christians can with ease incline” (l. 1201-202), moving from the pronoun “I” to the generalized “Good Christians.” Pleasing God has proved anything but easy for the Dreamer, however, and although he counts the Lamb “A Lord, A God, a friend benign” (l. 1204), it is a friendship we do not witness (Aers 70). The poem ends with a wish that “we may serve him well, and shine / As precious pearls to his content” (l. 1211-212), again moving to the impersonal “we” and further declaring a loyalty to Christ that for 1207 lines of the 1212-line poem the Dreamer fails to display. Deaf to the words of his guide and blind to the object of true Christian value, the Dreamer demonstrates a greater love for God’s creations than for their creator (59), rendering the “Comfort of Christ” no comfort at all when opposed by the powerful human will.

As a theoretical framework for analyzing the grieving process of the Pearl’s Dreamer and in order to gain further insight into his emotional condition, the five psychological stages of loss developed by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross can be applied to the Dreamer’s response to death. In 1969, Kubler-Ross, out of concern for what she deemed “a lonely and impersonal” experience of death in our modern society published her now famous psychological study On Death and Dying (21). With the advancement of technology and the growth of the hospital as an institution, the act of dying had become
mechanical and dehumanizing according to Kubler-Ross. Rather than the familiar
surroundings of home and a warm, caring hand to hold, the end of life environment was
now characterized by machinery, sterility and a lack of intimate connection with
physicians and other strangers who passed through the dying patient’s hospital room. In
order to combat the often desolate, detached process of modern death and “refocus the
patient as human being,” On Death and Dying offers one way of understanding how
death affects the individual, the professionals involved in treating the dying, as well as
the family and friends who suffer the loss of a loved one (11). Kubler-Ross went on to
write eighteen more books regarding the psychological processes of grieving and death,
her last entitled On Grief and Grieving, in which she reflects on her own impending death
which occurred soon after she completed her final writing in August, 2004.

Through her work as a physician and as a result of many personal interviews with
the dying and those close to them, Dr. Kubler-Ross developed a framework consisting of
five psychological stages of loss which may be experienced when we are confronted with
the knowledge of death: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and
acceptance. Dr. Kubler-Ross is careful to point out, however, that these stages are only
“tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling,” and not every one passes
through each in a linear progression (7 GG). Kubler-Ross notes in particular that denial,
anger and bargaining are “constant companions” (18-19). Further, she strongly expresses
her conviction that the processes of grieving and dying are very individual, unique
experiences. It was not her intent “to tuck messy emotions into neat packages,” but to
help those mourning for their own life or that of someone else, giving clarity to “grief’s terrain” (7).

Denial and isolation, the first stage of loss, is more typical when the death is abrupt and “more symbolic than literal” (8) according to Dr. Kubler-Ross. It is not that a person does not truly believe that their loved one has died, it is a manner of denying emotional pain while still trying to cope with the actuality of loss (10). People frequently “review the circumstances” of how the death occurred and “often find themselves telling the story of their loss,” and “wonder[ing] how [they] can go on” (10). This re-experience of the loss, Kubler-Ross argues, is a denial in that, through its telling, the mind is relieved from the trauma of the death’s concrete reality, if only momentarily.

Although the *Pearl* poet must, in some way, provide the literal history associated with the Dreamer’s condition, layered upon that necessity is the Dreamer’s demonstration of both denial and isolation at the poem’s opening, consistent with the early stages of grief. The Dreamer retells the story of his daughter’s loss, his precious Pearl, where “In a garden of herbs I lost my dear / Through grass to ground away it shot” (l. 9-10), and it is “To that especial spot” (l. 37) that the Dreamer returns “lovesick for the heavy loss” (l. 11). The Dreamer’s Pearl has “shot” away from him, he has “lost” her, she has “plunged deep in earthen tomb” and gone “tumbling wide,” all within the first four stanzas of the poem. He longingly recalls her peerless qualities, his mind ever bent to set her apart, and expresses how often he has wished that his grief would be lifted, indicative of a mourning not necessarily new. Physically and psychologically isolated, the Dreamer is first encountered in a cemetery, alone, lying upon his child’s grave, and he tells us “Yet
There is nothing sweeter to his hearing than silence, and he lays with "stark despair" (51) and "brain distraught" (60) upon the burial mound, remembering Pearl's beauty and reliving her demise.

When the individual begins to retreat from "the external story-telling mode," the stage of denial and isolation, he or she starts "to turn inward as [he/she] begin[s] the search for understanding" (11). This is a step in the healing process, but as the symbolic denial of loss begins to decline, other feelings denied move to the forefront (11).

Kubler-Ross's second stage of loss, anger, manifests itself in several ways: in the form of rage, envy and resentment, for example, and this formerly repressed anger can be directed toward many different sources (Kubler-Ross 63 DD). Anger may be aimed at the self for the inability to save the loved one or for some mistreatment of the deceased in life, at an external force such as a doctor for failing to heal, at the dead person for dying and at the injustice of an undeserved situation (Kubler-Ross 12 GG). One man shared his feelings of anger with Dr. Kubler-Ross:

I'm angry that I have to keep living in a world where I can't find her,
call her or see her. I can't find the person I loved or needed anywhere.
She is not really where her body is now. The heavenly bodies elude me. The all-ness or one-ness of her spiritual existence escapes me.
I am lost and full of rage. (12)

The Dreamer, too, is "lost and full of rage." He cannot find his Pearl, just merely return to "that spot" (l. 50) where she was lost, hoping to catch the barest hint of her in
the air, "the fragrance that my senses sought" (l. 46). After he falls asleep on her grave, and encounters who he recognizes as his "most precious one" (l. 170), the first thing he tells her is that he has wandered "pensive, oppressed with pain" (l. 245-46), yet he sees her "...in bliss of Paradise, / Beyond all passion and strife and strain." (l. 243-44). This scenario he perceives as unfair. Further, he accuses her of increasing his pain, as she rebukes him for trying to cross the water to be close to her, a boundary that separates the mortal from Paradise. "And you have cleft my heart in twain. / That which I lost if found but late / And must I now forgo it again?"(l. 326-28) complains the Dreamer, emphasizing the injustice of his situation. Not only has he lost his daughter once on the earthly plane, but he is also forbidden to join her in the heavenly realm. Thus, his pain has been "doubled" (l. 330), and his anger at the maiden increases: "you gave me a heavy grief to bear" (l. 371).

It is not uncommon to have a love-hate relationship with the departed, according to Kubler-Ross: "The dead person then turns into something the [individual] loves and wants very much but also hates with equal intensity for this severe deprivation" (Kubler-Ross DD 18). The Dreamer reinforces such a relationship when he tells his Pearl, "My bliss you have been and my bitterest woe.../ God forbid I should vex you so" (l. 373, 379). While he treasured Pearl in life, he expresses anger at her for dying and taking with her his happiness to which he has no access, at present. He is angered at the injustice of his situation, finding her in a blissful Paradise while he can experience only pain.

Though anger can be directed at the self, the deceased and at the injustice of the loss, it can also be focused on an outside source: "It can extend not only to your friends,
the doctors, your family...but also to God” (Kubler-Ross 13 GG). The Dreamer does not, throughout the course of the poem, actively rage at God, yet he does not really want to hear about Him. Anger at God, especially in the cultural context of a highly religious medieval world, would truly be difficult to voice: “Many don’t dare talk about these feelings” even now, according to Kubler-Ross (13). “Comfort of Christ might come to mind / But wretched will would not forbear” (l. 55-56), is as far as the Dreamer will go, realizing that Christian comfort is available to him, but refusing to avail himself of it (perhaps God has already forsaken him by taking his Pearl). “You may not want people to talk to you about God’s plan or his mysteries” writes Kubler-Ross (13). You may feel “not given to but taken from” (13). The Dreamer seems to reject or misunderstand much of the doctrinal teaching that the Pearl Maiden offers in her effort to extend Christian comfort to him within the confines of the dream vision. If asked, the Dreamer would doubtless perceive himself “taken from.” Even though the Maiden continually instructs him to turn from his individual hurt and realize Christ’s greater suffering and loss, the Dreamer proves himself unable. His primary goal is to reunite with or recover what he has lost, and he fails to understand or linger long over matters that do not serve this purpose, such as the scripture, parable and visual presentation of heaven that the Pearl Maiden supplies.

Bargaining, the third stage of loss, can occur prior to the loss, but it is generally defined as an agreement that postpones the inevitable with “a slim chance of being rewarded for good behavior” (Kubler-Ross DD 95). Initially, we might bargain with God that our loved one might live or, after the loss, we might bargain that we be allowed to
die in order to be with the deceased or, at least, connected by experience. This psychological stage can represent an attempt to re-establish control over what has happened, “to restore order to the chaos that has taken over” (Kubler-Ross GG 20). This bargaining behavior is exhibited by the Dreamer toward the beginning of *Pearl* when he seeks to cross the river/divine boundary to be nearer the Maiden and is rebuked by her. He fails to understand that he cannot enter the heavenly Paradise as a result of his own mortal will. When the maiden becomes very angry with him for his “headstrong heart and arrogant pride” (l. 401), he begs for her mercy and asks her to “...expound / The life you lead both early and late” (l. 391-92). He fears losing her again, the “double loss,” and apologizes for his earthly ignorance (“I am of earth and speak amiss”[l. 382]), hoping to continue his connection with the Maiden through her story. He exchanges a measure of humility for continued contact with her and ceases, momentarily, his ambitious attempt to reclaim her.

The Dreamer persists in bargaining, this time nearer *Pearl’s* end. He asks for a “favor express” (l. 910): that he be granted permission to see the place where the maiden dwells. This may also be interpreted as a way to prolong contact with the Maiden and further, so that he may form some concrete memory of a familiar structure within which to place her in his psyche. Perhaps this request is made with the wrongheaded hope that the Maiden will reward him with admittance to an opulent and blissful New Jerusalem and he, in turn, can regain control of his emotional situation. The maiden does win him a sight of heaven with the caveat that the Dreamer must observe it from afar and that “no man’s foot may there alight” (l. 970). The Dreamer delights in his visual experience of
the holy city, but he cannot contain his desire and, again, “made for the river incontinent” (l. 1162).

Bargaining also includes “an implicit promise that the patient will not ask for more if this postponement is granted,” yet none of Dr. Kubler-Ross’s patients were able to keep their promises, always longing for one more experience (Kubler-Ross 95 DD). Such is also the case of the Dreamer who acknowledges that “…always men would have and hoard / And gain the more, the more they get” (l. 1195). While granted a divine vision of the Pearl Maiden in her new home thereby fulfilling his request, the Dreamer still finds it emotionally insufficient. Again he seeks entry into a spiritual world from which he has been expressly excluded. Whereas bargaining may be a way to postpone ultimate separation psychologically, “sadly the mind inevitably comes to the same conclusion…the tragic reality is that our loved one is truly gone” (Kubler-Ross GG 20).

After his misguided attempt to enter the New Jerusalem, the Dreamer is “reft of [his] dream” (l. 1169), awakening on his daughter’s burial mound, quite alone.

After realizing that bargaining is only a postponement of the inevitable and cannot alter past or future events, “our attention moves squarely into the present” and “grief enters our lives on a deeper level, deeper then we ever imagined” (20). These criteria characterize the fourth psychological state of loss, depression. The Dreamer’s visual connection with his lost loved one is abruptly severed as he is thrust from his dream for ‘bad behavior,’ and awakens frightened and confused in a present which seems even more painful than before. “Ill content to be dispossessed / Of the sight of her that had no peer….Such longing seized me, I swooned, or near; / Then sorrow broke from my
burning breast” (l. 1180-181) the Dreamer confesses. A mother, recalling her struggle with grief after the death of her grown daughter, reported to Dr. Kubler-Ross: “This time, I heard a loud voice, literally heralding the reality that my daughter was never coming back. This time the depression had no walls, ceiling, or floor. It felt even more endless than before and, once again, I had to deal with this old familiar guest” (23). The Dreamer’s profound sadness for all he has lost: his child, his happiness, his vision of heaven, as well as his newly gained vision of Pearl, similarly overcomes him, as the trauma of losing his daughter re-occurs. Despite that fact that he claims happiness that Christ has found contentment with Pearl in heaven, the Dreamer still locates himself “in dungeon drear” (l. 1186-188). He is no longer realistically able to deny or postpone the knowledge of her loss, and incapable of sustaining his connection, has been literally excluded from the maiden’s new and different “life” in heaven. The experience of depression in relation to death equates to “what hitting the bottom feels like,” according to Kubler-Ross (24).

Acceptance, the final stage of loss, is a journey within itself, and not to be understood simply as the last stage with an “end point” (27) or to be confused with being “fine” with the death of somebody loved. This stage is about “accepting the reality that our loved one is physically gone and recognizing this new reality as a permanent reality” (25). It is also the realization of a human loss of control, as one accepts that no behavior or bargain can bring back the lost. It does seem clear that the Dreamer now understands that his Pearl is not coming back to him and that it is foolish to strive against God’s will; however, he still seems to hold onto the notion that his behavior may have somehow
affected the outcome of his dream vision. “Had I but sought to content my Lord / And
taken his gifts without regret, / And held my place and heeded the word / Of the noble
Pearl so strangely met, / Drawn heavenward by divine accord / I had seen and heard more
mysteries yet” (1. 1189-194). In other words, “If I had only behaved better, I might still
be there.”

Significantly, Kubler-Ross acknowledges that there is more than one loss that
occurs when a loved one dies. There is certainly the love that we felt for the individual
and the missing of the love and companionship we experienced with that individual in
life. Grief, also, “is the shattering of many conscious and unconscious beliefs about
what are lives are supposed to look like” (78). If a death occurs out of time, due to
disease, violence or accident, and not in sleep at the end of a long and satisfying life, it
challenges a traditional belief system. These are things that we feel are not supposed to
happen. Kubler-Ross asserts that it is just as important to apply the grieving process to
“mourn the life we were supposed to have” (80). It is just such a grief that the Dreamer
experiences after the loss of his child of less than two years. It is certainly a death that
was not supposed to happen, despite the misguided belief that, because child mortality
rates were higher in the Middle Ages, people had minimal emotional attachment to their
children (Oosterwijk 3). The Dreamer plainly mourns the loss of his Pearl, yet he is also
sorry for his personal condition and the loss of his “treasure” (l. 331) for which he
receives nothing but pain. He remains a prisoner of his mortal state, mourning the loss of
Pearl, not only as his daughter, but as his “jewel” (l. 277), his source of joy, his sole
achievement of perfection and an incomplete monument to himself.
“Maybe we too would be angry...if all the buildings we started were to go unfinished,” writes Kubler-Ross (64 DD) and, in a way, this relates to the Dreamer’s final psychological state. He may have achieved psychological acceptance of Pearl’s death in that he seems clear that she is not on her way back to him, yet he seems less accepting and frankly angry about the damage done to his life. If he had only behaved differently, he might have received more from the Maiden and/or God. Pearl lives in bliss alongside her Prince, yet the Dreamer remains a mortal “in dungeon drear” (l. 1187). He does not seem particularly accepting of his own fate, although he realizes there is little he can do in affecting hers. As Boethius and Chaucer’s Black Knight similarly affirm, in death we are confronted not simply with one loss, that of the life that has been extinguished, but with the loss of lives that once were and the ones that might have been for those that are left behind.

Despite constant reminders of Christian principles and a visual realization of the spiritual riches available in the afterlife, ultimately Pearl’s Dreamer cannot emotionally comply with the consolation offered him by his faith. Instead of receiving comfort from his knowledge of scripture and salvation, the existence and transformation of his daughter in heaven and the physical face of God, he clings to a perpetual mortal grief, adopting an air of resignation rather than a willing acceptance of his loss. As the Pearl Maiden aptly describes him, the human Dreamer remains “a stranger in His streets” (l. 966) and he shows no sign of truly acknowledging or understanding the workings of the divine system. The Dreamer’s only true recognition is that of his own loss: his child, his joy, his
precious Pearl. He returns to “the world insane” (I. 743) mourning what Kubler-Ross so simply articulates: “the life he was supposed to have” (80 GG).

“So little is the human mind capable of grasping things divine” (Book XI, 28) writes St. Augustine, reflecting on his mother’s death in the fifth century, and this perpetual human struggle to reconcile earthly existence with Christian expectation still resounds in _Pearl_. Dominating the Dreamer’s vision are the difficulties associated with attaining the spiritual ideal and his mortal inability to relinquish an attachment to the real and familiar human love that he has experienced on earth. Acts of compassion are not part of the bereaved father’s virtual journey to heaven, although the Dreamer is told of the Lamb’s love and mercy. Reprimanded by his daughter and unacknowledged by his God, the Dreamer is left “skulk[ing] the banks of the stream” (Stanbury 11), physically and emotionally unable to cross over that boundary to reunite with his child or enter Christian Paradise.

While I have asserted that the Dreamer does not experience spiritual or emotional consolation as a result of his divine dream vision, I am convinced that _Pearl_ succeeds as a work of consolation. It is not the Dreamer, but the reader who may take comfort from the poem, and it does not fail its audience in this regard. _Pearl_’s readers see the Dreamer as a model of failed faith, and in him, they may also see themselves. By closely identifying with the Dreamer’s inadequacies, the reader participates in a consolation of community, taking comfort in the knowledge that others have the same feelings of sadness, confusion, and challenges to faith when confronted with loss. The literary experience of human imperfection even when offered a type of communion with
heavenly perfection might have brought solace to *Pearl*'s very Christian, very human medieval audience.

Ultimately, the achievement of consolation within this work emanates not from the authority of the Maiden, but from the Dreamer’s own experience. Both medieval and modern readers of *Pearl* are afforded comfort in their identification with a fellow human mourner as we “tread the road beside him” (Gibson 260), and not from the distant figures of divinity who prescribe heavenly remedies for the problems of a mortal world that functions in a wholly different way. We, as readers, cannot feel superior to the pathetic, misguided soul because we are him. “If we are honest” writes critic David Fowler, “we must confess that we cannot run ahead of him in the overpowering of genuine grief” (202). Both *Pearl*’s Dreamer and Boethius receive authoritative lessons from guides who are divinely connected and, yet it can be effectively argued that such teaching fails to ease either man’s misery. Conversely, Chaucer allows the Black Knight his grief, and the naïve narrator of the *Book of the Duchess* devises an opportunity for a bereaved husband to tell his tale. Rather than attempting to redirect the mourner away from his pain, the mortal narrator allows his patient to have it. Consequently Chaucer’s Knight claims a measure of consolation from a non-authoritative, purely human connection. Following this logic, the *Pearl* poet then becomes his reader’s own physician, applying the balm of poetry to inexpressible earthly wounds, acknowledging the existence of salvation but also the reality of sorrow.

In her final work, *On Grief and Grieving*, Dr. Elisabeth-Kubler Ross explains that we suffer such intense pain at the loss of a loved one because “in loving we deeply
connect with another... and grief is the reflection of the connection that has been lost.” (203). As human beings in an imperfect world, the intense sadness at the death of a family member, friend, lover or spouse remains very real for us as it does for the Dreamer, although we count ourselves inhabitants of an arguably advanced age. This common emotional thread enables modern readers to relate to a poem created centuries ago about individuals who appear on the surface to be worlds away from our lives. Because we continue to feel such consuming sorrow for our own lost connections, the grief of six hundred years can easily affect us. As we are able to gain insight into an ancient Dreamer’s emotional experience through contemporary theory, we come to recognize the Dreamer not as a stranger but a fellow life traveler, one who has walked the difficult path before us and from whose human frailty we can still take comfort.
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