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Literary Dude's Apologia and an Interrogation by Officer Reason: Piers Plowman the C Version: Passus 5, lines 35-62

Abstract

While the question of who authored *Piers Plowman* is no longer a controversial topic, a question still lingers: who was William Langland? In his fifth passus of his third version of his poem, known as the C-Text, Langland offers his readers a clue. By way of adaptation, I use the allusion of "The Dude," the hip radical Los Angelino character as seen in the 1998 detective comedy *The Big Lebowski*. Together, I compare the character traits of the film's protagonist with the poem's protagonist, Will, a name that alludes to the human will as well as to the poet's real name. Langland scholars have been thrilled to discover this passus in the C-Text, which appears neither in the A- or B-Text, because it reveals a possible interview with the author himself. We enter Passus 5 after Will wakes up from dream in which a King, representing government authority, is counseled by his two advisors, Conscience and Reason, regarding how the government must handle fiscal corruption, personified by a woman named Lady Meed.

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PATRICK SERRANO

A Literary Dude's Apologia and an Interrogation by Officer Reason:
Piers Plowman the C Version: Passus 5, lines 35-62

While the question of who authored *Piers Plowman* is no longer a controversial topic, a question still lingers: who was William Langland? In his fifth passus of his third version of his poem, known as the C-Text, Langland offers his readers a clue. By way of adaptation, I use the allusion of "The Dude," the hip radical Los Angelino character as seen in the 1998 detective comedy film *The Big Lebowski*. Together, I compare the character traits of the film's protagonist with the poem's protagonist, Will, a name that alludes to the human will as well as to the poet's real name.

Langland scholars have been thrilled to discover this passus in the C-Text, which appears neither in the A- or B-Text, because it reveals a possible interview with the author himself. We enter Passus 5 after Will wakes up from a dream in which a King, representing government authority, is counselled by his two advisors, Conscience and Reason, both personifications, regarding how the government must handle fiscal corruption, personified by a woman named Lady Meed.

Upon awaking, Will is interrogated by Sire Reason about why Will refuses to engage in physical labor. Will defends that he was born and raised to go to school and that his clerical recitations to the dead and living are enough justification to be his occupation.

By justifying his time spent on his literary work, the author essentially provides his own editorial thought about what it means to be a writer and not a laborer, and at once offers clues about who he is in real life. He thus depicts himself as a grad student in Theology, stalled in his studies, and a freelance prayer master (putting his Latin to good use—and paying his bills—by helping families sing masses for the dead), as he attempts to explain his worth in a society that values, at least in Reason's interrogation, heavy labor by the sweat of one's brow, as commanded in the Genesis. Can he be useful in society if he can't do back-breaking physical labor? Does working with your brain count?

When Will encounters Sire Reason who asks him why he won't do such heavy labor, Will defends his work through the knowledge he gained in school. Then the poet inserts an epigraph from the bible, "*In eadem vocacione qua vocati estis,*" from 1 Corinthians 7:20, which translates to "You should remain in the state that you are called."

In my adapted translation I write, "The dude abides to the calling in which he is called, man."

In this passus, Will expresses a snotty elitism by saying that heavy labor should only be the duty for uneducated commoners. The Dude's laid-back counter-cultural character trait complements Will. In the film, The Dude continuously expresses aphorisms when faced with authoritarianism to justify his way of living.

Another significant biblical scripture the poet nests in his passus, as he does throughout his poem, reads: "*Non reddas malum pro malo.*" This is a line from 1 Peter 3:9, which translates to: "Do not render evil for evil."

I adapted it to, “Do not repay aggression with aggression, man.”
By embedding and analyzing scripture in Will’s responses to Sire Reason, Langland subverts his culture’s preference for only priests and friars as sole interpreters of biblical texts. By doing this in a vernacular poem, he also helps his readers (educated but not necessarily ordained clerics) to become biblically literate, and he models for all his readers the response of a sort of conscientious objector who is being interrogated by a strict, hectoring voice of social pressure, compelling him to conform to standards of productivity.

It is my hope that students can find counter-cultural inspiration in *Piers Plowman* and see relevance in how it justifies education as a human right, as educators and students still fight today.

When I was young, many solar returns ago, man
My father and comrades in arms crowdfunded my schooling,
Till I knew truly what holy writ was getting at
And what is best for the body, as the book telleth
And surest for my soul, I will continue is such a way.
And indeed I never found, in faith, since my comrades’ deaths,
Any lifestyle I liked other than being suited in my sweatpants and Crocks
And if I must work to earn my living and procure what is mine
The work that I learned best is what I should live by, man.
The dude abides to the calling to which he is called.
And so I live in Los Angeles and Alhambra, too;
The tools of my trade and my property
Are The Dude’s mantra, my tape decks of Creedence, and 8 hours of Bowling ASMR
And sometimes my Medieval literature and my seven favorite literary theorists.
So I proclaim literary presentations for souls of such that help me,
And those that furnish me provisions guarantee me, I am sure
A welcome when I come from time to time
Now with this student, now with that professor; in this way I beg
Without tip jar or Venmo but with my stomach, man.
And also moreover me thinketh, Officer Reason,
One should not constrain a literary dude to do a knaves work, man.
For by the Port Huron Statement that our student activists decreed,
Literary dudes with Masters degrees, it is naturally understood,
Should neither toil and sweat nor take oaths at work, man.
Nor fight in the vanguard of an army or harm his foe.
Do not repay aggression with aggression, man.
For all with degrees have autonomous agency,
And are the Dude’s brethren on campus and the conference room.
The discourse is the portion of my inheritance. And elsewhere: Mercy is ever-present.
It becomes literary dudes, like me, to serve the student peace movements
And for uncredentialed peasants to labor and work.