

MichaelDavid Smith
California State University, Los Angeles

The Man Who Dreams, Awakens to Witness Prolonged Truths: Piers Plowman the A Version: Passus 10, lines 124-153

Abstract

William Langland's *Piers Plowman* is a 14th-century Christian dream poem that shares common elements with the pulp-noir detective stories of more recent authors like Agatha Christie and Raymond Chandler. This interpretation may seem idiosyncratic when speaking about a piece of Middle-English literature that was composed in the late 1300s. Yet, like the contemporary detective novel, *Piers Plowman* goes about its work by presenting the answers to its own questions in a non-linear fashion, requiring the reader to engage with the piece critically. While some readers will enjoy themselves and glean a nugget of truth—which they will take with them, apply to their lives, and lackadaisically move on—those with a keen eye and skills in deductive reasoning will observe an almost perfect story of contradictions. This translation is a creative adaptation of Langland's work, intended to recapture the timelessness of a story like *Piers Plowman* for the pulp fiction readers of today.

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MICHAELDAVID SMITH

The Man Who Dreams, Awakens to Witness Prolonged Truths:
Piers Plowman the A Version: Passus 10, lines 124-153

William Langland's *Piers Plowman* is a 14th-century Christian dream poem that shares common elements with the pulp-noir detective stories of more recent authors like Agatha Christie and Raymond Chandler. This interpretation may seem idiosyncratic when speaking about a piece of Middle-English literature that was composed in the late 1300s. Yet, like the contemporary detective novel, *Piers Plowman* goes about its work by presenting the answers to its own questions in a non-linear fashion, requiring the reader to engage with the piece critically. While some readers will enjoy themselves and glean a nugget of truth—which they will take with them, apply to their lives, and lackadaisically move on—those with a keen eye and skills in deductive reasoning will observe an almost perfect story of contradictions.

This translation is a creative adaptation of Langland's work, intended to recapture the timelessness of a story like *Piers Plowman* for the pulp fiction readers of today. The passage opens with Will and Thought having arrived at Wit's place, and Wit begins to answer Thought's question about where the Do's can be found. It is important to note that Wit is often a character in the story whom others come to for vital information. This exudes a Chandleresque tone by presenting Wit as both a mentor for Will, and as the barkeep informant who happens to be the nexus of intel. Meanwhile, Will plays the flatfoot gumshoe that just arrived to find Wit cleaning glasses after closing with a story to tell about Will's missing subjects: The Do's. Wit knew his onions¹ and started to spill it about the harshness of the world and a bad romance involving Dowel. Wit then goes on to tell Will about a couple of owls² named Paul and Luke, who spill the secrets of Dowel and Dobet, which ultimately lead to the path to Dobest. To faithfully capture Langland's narrative and the authenticity of 1920's noir, I spent a great deal of time doubling back to ensure the original meaning of lines were not lost when translating the modern English definitions found in the Middle English Dictionary into 1920's slang that would have been used in Los Angeles. Additionally, I proceeded to color the ephemeral details of the translation with peculiarities that are chronologically and geographically correct.

What makes *Piers Plowman* so interesting is how it is not like *The Canterbury Tales*, or other "great" middle English texts. Rather, *Piers Plowman* is a story that is shared through the slow process of social distillation. It's reminiscent of detective novels by exaggerating the injustices and issues witnessed every day into allegorical devices with the intent of sharing a moral lesson of hope. Yet, unlike the detectives found in modern stories, where our protagonist is the ultimate hero of the story, Will is just a man trying to find his path to honor and salvation through goodness. Much like the story of Will in *Piers Plowman*, the purpose of this translation is not to give us an answer that satisfies every question we may have. Instead,

¹ Knowledgeable.

² Wise and distinguished individuals.

like many of the pulp detective stories of the early twentieth century, it is directing the reader through the vacillating moments between life's different milestones and providing a map through the rough and rugged moments of existence, to espouse to us the goodness that is found in the mundane and quotidian.

Right as a Rose, that is a candy ruby
Out of raggedy roots and rough briars
That it sprung and spread, which that apothecaries covet
Or as the White Sonora³ and Jimson weed⁴ out of the earth,
So Dobest rolls forth dolo⁵, from Dobet and Dowel
Amongst birds made of this earth, that are humble gigglemugs⁶
For the ducky⁷ of their humbleness, the Boss gifts them grace
To labor in such toils, that is cashed through his berries⁸;
Now, to begin, for those who are hitched
And live their lives according to the good book, they will please the Big Cheese Almighty.
“That through gettin hitched humanity is firmly established, if you really want to be put wise.
They are the Ritzest in the world, the foundation of Dowel
out their groins come those who embody those we card the confessors
Both, Dames and Marys, Monks and Anchored Bucks⁹,
Big Shots and Buttonmen¹⁰, and every dicastery of galways¹¹,
Barons and Burgesses, and the Bondsmen of town.
The stool rats, and banana oilers¹², heels and liars,
After Adam and Eve ate of the *Malum*¹³
Against the instruction of the Divine Architect that wrought ‘em.
Then an Angel bolts, came to bid them scam
Into a wretched world, there to dwell and dwindle
Morosely while they toil until released from their mortal coil.
In that star-crossed state they laid petting nookie¹⁴
And bore a child that wrought great bedlam.
Cain was his moniker, a pill of a time he harbored

³ White Senora is one of the oldest gene of wheat in North America. Presently thought to possibly be the oldest, It was brought over to the new world by the Spanish in 1700's and has grown in California since 1800's.

⁴ A native weed to southern California that is both highly toxic and used by natives for its psychoactive properties.

⁵ 1920's slang for being able to go alone, when others cannot.

⁶ Victorian slang that was a holdover in the 1910-20's for a kind, always smiling, although sometimes foolish individual.

⁷ The word ducky was used to express high praise.

⁸ Recognition of something worthy of distinction, like the 'bee's knee's' and ducky.

⁹ Buck was slang used by criminals to talk about money and male clergy who has access to funds.

¹⁰ Protection for crime bosses and hitman who often used machine guns.

¹¹ Slang for Catholic Priests, arising from to the high quantity of ordained Irish Catholics.

¹² A person who speak with insincerity.

¹³ Latin for apple and evil.

¹⁴ Intercourse

And so did the Marys say, catch an earful when you like
(*Creating crumbing saps & brought in lousy bokum*)^{15, 16}

¹⁵ Something that sounds incredible but is actually nonsense.

¹⁶ Translating the Latin bible verse from the original A-text into 1920's slang highlights how Cain can be depicted as both a grifter and hatchetman, whose very name would cause fear. The Latin is the second half of Psalms 7:15, which translates directly as “he hath conceived sorrow and brought forth iniquity” (Douay-Rheims). Tying this partial biblical verse with the pulp-noir genre creates an image where those who encountered Cain would be reduced to nothing through a cacophony of cons, and their gullibility would leave them rambling in immoral nonsense if they managed to survive the encounter, only to fall due to their actions soon after.

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