

# An introduction to *Piers Plowman*

Exploring Middle English, the Prologue of *Piers Plowman*, and creating a contemporary allegory

KS3

KS4

- Medieval history
- Middle English
- Alliterative verse
- Allegory
- Personification
- Writing about place

At more than 7,000 lines of poetry, *Piers Plowman* is one of the greatest artistic achievements of medieval England. It was written over a thirty year period between about 1360 and 1390 by a poet we call William Langland. Very little is known about Langland - even his name is unsure - but the poem he produced was without doubt one of the most significant works of the medieval period.

*Piers Plowman* tells the story of a dreamer called Will, who falls asleep in the Malvern Hills and sees a vision of the world as a 'fair field full of folk, wandering and working'. Within the dream, Will sets out on a quest to find a character called Truth. Along the way he witnesses strange and amazing scenes such as the marriage of Lady Mede (a character who represents money), the confession of the Seven Sins and the Crucifixion of Jesus. Halfway through the poem Will meets Piers the Plowman, an honest labourer who knows the way to Truth. Piers recruits the local community to help him plough his 'half-acre' (field), but things don't go to plan; the workers refuse to work, and

are then attacked by Hunger. Instead, Piers leads Will on a new journey: to look for Do-well, Do-better and Do-best, and become a good person.

The poem makes much use of personification and allegory; representing concepts as characters to explore moral and spiritual issues in the narrative. The poem asks how a person can lead a good life, love God and their community. At its heart, *Piers Plowman* is a Christian poem, however it also contains dramatic scenes, psychedelic imagery, and some rather bawdy humour.

**Allegory.** A story, poem or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a moral or political meaning, e.g. the Hare and the Tortoise is an allegory teaching us that "slow and steady wins the race".

**Personification.** The representation of an abstract quality in human form, or the attribution of a human characteristics to something non-human, e.g. the Grim Reaper in many cartoons is a personification of death.

## Historical context

The key themes of *Piers Plowman* are work, money and spiritual salvation; and Langland was deeply influenced by the social, economic and religious changes of his time.



A medieval illustration of The Black Death

The fourteenth century was a time of crisis. In the 1340s a plague known as the Black Death killed between 30% and 60% of Europe's entire population. Millions had died, so there was now a shortage of people to work the land. Rural workers suddenly found that their labour was in demand and they could travel around and ask for higher wages. The feudal system - in which peasants were given plots of land in return for loyalty and military service to their lord - was starting to collapse. In the cities, merchants were beginning to get wealthy from the trade in wool and other goods, threatening the nobility. This was the beginning of a change in the power balance between rich and poor.

During the medieval age, the Church and religion dominated people's everyday lives. Many people genuinely thought that the end of the world was coming (1400 was a popular date). New religious ideas were also springing up. A group called the Lollards argued that the Bible should be translated into English so that common people, and not just priests and educated people could read it.

In 1381, all these tensions came to a head in the Peasants' Revolt. King Richard II (aged just 14), raised a Poll Tax to pay for the ongoing war against France, causing rebellions in Essex and Kent. Two armies of peasants marched to London, led by an ex-soldier called Wat Tyler and a Lollard priest called John Ball. The peasants broke into the city, killed important advisors of the King, and sacked royal houses and religious institutions.



A fifteenth century illustration of John Ball addressing the rebels

All of these changes meant that working people of England (such as Piers the Plowman) were beginning to have more power and freedom. And with this new power, they had to make moral decisions about what to do. This, in essence, is what the poem explores.

## Introducing the poem to your class

Approaching medieval poetry can be intimidating, but it can also be quite liberating for students, as it feels very different from normal poetry lessons. An interesting way to begin is by giving your class a copy of the original Middle English opening of the poem (page 7) without any explanation at all. How do they react to it? What can they make out from the text, and what clues are there to the meaning of words? When and where do they think it was written? How do they think it is pronounced? As a class, have a go at reading it a few times. Experiment with different pronunciations and see if this aids understanding. Spend a few minutes discussing initial reactions to it.

Next give students a copy of the language guide (page 4) which gives pointers on pronunciation and meaning. Read through it and then, in pairs, ask them to apply it to the poem seeing if they can decipher the meaning of any of the text.

Share students' attempts at translating the text, before finally, offering them the modern transliteration (page 8). How far had students got in understanding it? Do they think anything is lost in the modern version? At this point you may also want to read through the commentary provided (page 9) which outlines the activity of this opening prologue.

### Additional activity

If you want to hear an example of *Piers Plowman* read in the original Middle English then scholar Alaric Hall has recorded [his reading](#) of the opening of the poem ([bit.ly/PiersIntro](http://bit.ly/PiersIntro)). He uses a slightly different version of the text, so it won't exactly follow the version printed here, but gives a flavour of how the language sounds.

Piers the Plowman's appearance in the poem comes at a point in which Langland wishes to remind his audience of the Christian imperative to toil in the fields of the world. Piers promises to lead the people to Truth, but only after they've helped him plough his half-acre. That ploughing, that labour, is symbolic of one's religious duty.

Later, Reason and Conscience berate Will for his slothfulness: 'Can you sing in a church, or cook for my workers; can you work the fields, oversee the harvest, make shoes or cloth, or keep sheep or cows? Can you do anything that the community needs?' His answer is: well, I can write this poem. *Piers Plowman* is the testament to that conviction that poetry is the highest form of labour.

*Dr Lawrence Warner, King's College London*



## Language guide: Langland's Middle English

*Piers Plowman* is written in Middle English - the form of English spoken between 1066 and about 1500. It is composed in what is known as alliterative long lines. Each line contains four stresses or beats, the first three of which must alliterate (use words starting with the same letter). For example:

*Ac on a May mornynge on Malverne hulles*

*We**bbesteres and walkeres and wynners with handes***

In the medieval period, the English language had not been fixed; there were different ways to spell and say words. To modern eyes the language can look difficult, but with a few tips you can begin to pick it apart.

Some words are exactly the same in Middle and modern English, e.g. 'the', 'boy', 'hope', 'men'. Many words are similar but have different spellings, e.g. 'worchyng' ('working'), 'prestis' ('priests'), 'charite' ('charity'), 'somer' ('summer'). Some words did not survive into modern English at all, e.g. 'selkouthe' ('strange'), 'chaffare' ('trade'), 'sithe' ('since').

### Some tips

- In modern English 'gh' is silent in words like 'thought' and 'plough'. In Middle English the 'gh' is pronounced at the back of the throat, like the 'ch' in the Scots word 'loch'.
- Some words that end with a consonant in modern English have an extra 'e' at the end. This 'e' should be pronounced, e.g. 'harde' ('hard'), 'ende' ('end'), 'bothe' ('both').
- Generally 'y' and 'i' are interchangeable. So 'sowyng' means 'sowing', 'clothyng' means 'clothing', etc.
- Some verbs start with 'y', e.g. 'ycrammed' ('crammed'), 'ythryveth' ('thrives'), 'yblessed' ('blessed').
- Often Middle English has different vowels than modern English. If you're struggling to identify a word, try it with a different vowel, e.g. 'mony' ('many'), 'whan' ('when'), 'chirche' ('church'), 'sherp' ('sheep').
- 'D' and 'th' are sometimes interchangeable, e.g. 'fader' ('father'), 'togyderes' ('together').
- Sometimes the words are in a different order than in modern English, so you have to unjumble them! E.g. 'In a somur sesoun whan softe was the sonne' ('In a summer season when the sun was soft'), 'Wente forth in the world wondres to here' ('Went forth in the world to hear wonders').



## Discussion points: The poem's setting

Now that students have begun to get a handle on the language of the opening passage, ask them to look in detail at the final part of the excerpt, lines 14-26. (You can use either the original text or modern transliteration for this, whichever is most appropriate for your class.)



'Will' on the Malvern Hills (Photograph: Matt Hass)

Here Langland lays the scene for his poem. What do students think he is trying to show us? How do the tower and the dale (valley) figure in this vision?

We know the poem is allegorical and looks at man's role in the world. How does the class think this sets up what might come in the rest of the poem? What is significant about Langland's choice of ploughing as the focus for the final section? (Especially given what we know about the social changes happening at the time).

### Activity: "A fair feld ful of folk"

Langland chooses to begin the poem with this fair field full of folk, which sums up for him the medieval world. It's caught between a tower where Truth lives (representing heaven) and the dale/valley where Death lives (representing hell). Here the full spectrum of life gathers, some

ploughing the land, and some consumed by gluttony or pride.

The class's task is to think about a modern version of this setting, and create their own prologue. Where is the 21st century "fair field" and who is the modern ploughman? Are Truth and Death still

the extremes people are caught between? It could be a young adult on an estate caught between crime and a career; a banker caught between profit and responsibility; a schoolchild caught between working hard or having fun.

Begin by asking the class to fold a piece of paper into four. They have one square each for each idea that they need to update: Truth, Death, the fair field, and the Plowman. In pairs or small groups ask them to brainstorm ideas in these categories.

After a few minutes, feed back some of the discussions. Which ideas work best? Ask each student to pick their favourite idea. This will be the basis for a piece of creative writing. It can be prose or poetry. Like Langland, students should use their own language to express themselves, and not worry too much about spelling!

Students should begin by describing their setting. Where does this take place? What objects or buildings help set the scene?

Next they should introduce their mythical versions of Truth and Death. Langland's versions live in a tower and a dale. Where do the class' modern interpretations live? What do they look like, and how does this reveal their character? (Don't be afraid to allow the descriptions to become exaggerated or fantastical; some of the later parts

of *Piers Plowman* end up as a strange psychedelic dream sequence.)

Finally they should place their Plowman between. Who are they? What are they doing? What other characters are there around them, and are they being drawn to one of the two extremes?

As students write, have a go yourself - modelling writing and editing for them as you do.

After a few minutes ask if anyone would like to share what they have, and - if you're comfortable to - share your own work with the class.

Ask students to continue and, once they're finished, to reshape and edit their work. See if they can introduce elements of alliteration that echo Langland's use. Can they think of where their story might lead, or what issues it might tackle?

Finish by sharing the pieces and inviting constructive feedback.

## Extension ideas

This activity could be the start for looking at descriptive writing, or writing about place.

Alternatively, open it out into a discussion about the issues students have chosen to explore. Which of these issues in 600 years time will be seen as defining our era?

## FAIR FIELD

[thisfairfield.com](http://thisfairfield.com)

Conceived and produced by multi-award-winning arts company Penned in the Margins, *Fair Field* re-imagines *Piers Plowman* for the twenty-first century through site-responsive performances in Ledbury and London; an exhibition at the National Poetry Library; educational workshops; online resources and more. Commissioned by Ledbury Poetry Festival and Shoreditch Town Hall, *Fair Field* is supported by Arts Council England, Jerwood Charitable Foundation and King's College London.

## *Piers Plowman* - Prologue (excerpt)

In a somur sesoun whan softe was the sonne  
Y shope me into shroudes as Y a shep were;  
In abite as an heremite unholy of werkes  
Wente forth in the world wondres to here,  
And say many selles and selkouthe thynges. 5  
Ac on a May mornyng on Malverne hulle  
Me biful for to slepe, for werynesse of-walked,  
And in a launde as Y lay, lened Y and slepte,  
And merveylousliche me mette, as Y may yow telle.  
Al the welthe of the world and the wo bothe, 10  
Wynkyng, as hit were, witterliche Y sigh hit;  
Of treuthe and tricherye, tresoun and gyle,  
Al Y say slepyng, as Y shal yow telle.  
Estward Y beheld aftir the sonne  
And say a tour - as Y trowe, Treuthe was there-ynne. 15  
Westward Y waytede in a while aftir  
And seigh a depe dale - Deth, as Y leve,  
Woned in tho wones, and wikkede spiritus.  
A fair feld ful of folk fond Y ther bytwene  
Of alle manere men, the mene and the riche, 20  
Worchyng and wandryng as this world ascuth.  
Somme potte hem to the plogh, playde ful selde,  
In settyng and in sowyng swonken ful harde  
And wonne that this wastors with glotony destrueth.  
And summe putte hem to pruyde and parayled hem ther-aftie 25  
In continance of clothyng in many kyne gyse.

William Langland

[*Piers Plowman* C-text]

## *Piers Plowman* - Prologue (excerpt)

In a summer season when the sun was soft  
I dressed myself in shrouds like a sheep;  
In a habit like a hermit unholy of works  
Went forth in the world to hear wonders,  
And saw many strange and incredible things. 5

Then on a May morning on the Malvern Hills  
I fell into a sleep, for I was weary from walking,  
And as I lay on a lawn, I leant and slept,  
And I dreamed marvellously, as I may tell you.  
All the wealth of the world and also the woe, 10  
Winking [i.e. blinking], as it were, I saw it clearly;  
Of truth and treachery, treason and guile,  
All I saw sleeping, as I will tell you.

Eastwards I looked in the sun's direction  
And saw a tower - as I know, Truth was inside. 15  
Westward I waited a little while  
And saw a deep dale - Death, as I believe,  
Dwelt in those parts, and wicked spirits.  
I found a fair field full of folk in between  
Of all kinds of men, the poor and the rich, 20  
Working and wandering as this world demands.

Some set themselves to the plough, seldom played,  
In setting and sowing and working very hard,  
And earned what wasters with gluttony consume.  
And some set themselves to pride and dress thereafter 25  
In displays of clothing in many kinds of ways.

Transliteration © Tom Chivers



## Prologue commentary

It is a May morning - in medieval poetry this is the traditional time for adventures and dream-visions. The speaker of the poem is dressed like a sheep, and also in a habit (hooded robe) like a hermit. He is wandering in search of strange sights. Tired from walking, he falls asleep in the Malvern Hills and has a 'marvellous' dream. In the East he sees the tower of Truth, in the West a deep dale (valley) where Death lives. In between he sees a field full of people 'working and wandering'. He then zooms in on different professions, starting with (significantly) the ploughman who is 'swonken ('working') ful harde'.

The opening of *Piers Plowman* beautifully sets up the allegorical format and main themes of the poem. The field represents the world, caught between heaven (the tower) and hell (the dale). The field is home to all sorts of different people, working, praying, making money, begging, telling tales and deceiving one another. We, and the dreamer, are entering a world in moral crisis. But it's also an exciting scene - we can almost feel the hustle and bustle of medieval life as it moves around us.