

Piers Plowman and Our Role in Society

Ploughing the Half Acre

KS3

KS4

- Medieval history
- Contemporary issues
- Alliterative verse
- Writing stimuli
- Allegory
- Personification



If you have not already worked or read through the 'Introduction to Piers Plowman' resource, then would be helpful to do so in order to acquaint the class with the text, its language, and its historical context.

Introduction

One of the central events in *Piers Plowman* is the Ploughing of the Half Acre. This passage explores themes of work and disability. It comes at a point in the poem when Will's search has ground to a halt because no one knows how to get to Truth. An honest farm labourer called Piers agrees to show Will the way. But before they can leave on this pilgrimage, Piers' half-acre of land must be ploughed. A team of workers is recruited to help him by digging up the 'balkes' (unploughed strips of land), clearing weeds and so on. Piers pays his workers and then watches them work, to decide who to hire at harvest time.

But trouble is brewing. Some of the workers lay down their tools and start drinking and singing.

Piers reprimands them, reminding them that if they do not work they will go hungry. In response, the idle workers pretend they are sick or disabled. They cannot work, they say, but instead they will pray for Piers and for his plough. Piers rejects their lies, warning them that Truth would teach them how to work or else they would have to eat cheap bread and drink from streams. He then makes exceptions for genuinely blind and disabled people, hermits, good friars, the sick and the poor. For these people, he will provide whatever they need.

Piers gets into a fight with the idle workers, and calls upon Hunger to visit them. Hunger attacks the slackers, 'wringing their bellies', and heals a thousand blind and disabled people. Eventually the mutinous labourers get back to work. The section ends with an apocalyptic warning: famine, plague and destruction is coming; there will be floods and bad weather; crops will fail; workers will starve to death unless God grants them respite.

Introducing the text and discussion points

Hand out copies of the Ploughing of the Half-Acre excerpt (pages 6-9 below) and read it through as a class. You can decide whether to attempt to work through the Middle English, or to go straight from the modern English transliteration.

What is the class's immediate response to the text?

Piers the Plowman is seen as an ideal labourer; he sets himself up as a judge who decides who deserves help and who should be punished for being lazy. But is Piers a fair judge of his workers? Are there clues within the text that help persuade the reader to side with him?

Now look in detail at the end of the excerpt, from line 25 onwards. Bearing in mind the historical and religious context of the poem, (see the

'Introduction to *Piers Plowman*' resource for more detail on this) what do you think is the significance of this section? How does it present Piers as a moral and religious man?



'God spede the plough' - from 14th century copy of *Piers Plowman*

Compare this section to lines 11-16. Do you think these two sides of Piers presented are compatible with your idea of him as a good Christian?

It's worth noting that throughout this scene (beyond the excerpt reproduced here), Langland tests out different points of view. Initially when the workers resist Piers' authority, they are attacked by Hunger. But in the end, Piers is so shocked by Hunger's violence that he orders him to leave

Piers the Plowman is the worker *par excellence* in Western literature. Whether or not Langland intended as much, the Ploughing of the Half-Acre reflects the economic realities of the post-Black Death world in which peasants' labour was worth much more on the market economy than it had been. The ideal Christian scenario, in which everyone does what is asked for by God and the community so that no one will go hungry and Truth will prevail, has broken down.

Dr Lawrence Warner, King's College London



Piers Plowman in a modern context

In The Ploughing of the Half-Acre scene, Langland explores hard work, poverty and charity through the figures of Piers the Plowman and Hunger. The workers' revolt in this scene reflects the reality of late medieval England, a time when the balance of power between rich and poor was shifting. Agricultural labourers were no longer tied to the same feudal lord, but were increasingly offering their labour in different places and for higher wages. But it is also a parable (a story with a moral): work hard and help the community, or go hungry. And if you cheat the system, you will be found out.

The behaviour of the idle workers is reminiscent of the Strivers vs. Scroungers debate that we hear nowadays. The workers who pretend to be disabled or sick could be compared with benefit cheats; those who work without guarantee of pay could be compared with people on zero hours contracts.

Langland's vision of England as a 'fair field full of folk' – with its implications of social and ecological justice and carnival – embodies a vision of England that is as relevant today as it was in the fourteenth century. It provides the basis for an exploration of the two most urgent questions of our time: who are we, and how do we want to live?

Steve Ely, Poet



Activity: An alliterative allegory

As we have seen, *Piers Plowman* was written in response to themes and concerns of the time, many of which echo today. The class's task now, is to write their own alliterative poem in response to modern issues.

To begin with, bring in a selection of newspapers. Hand them out, and ask students to take a few pages each and to cut or tear out headlines that they think refer to important contemporary issues. N.B. Tabloid papers can be good for this activity, as they often use alliteration or word-play that can be helpful later on.

Discuss the class' selections. What topics are covered, and how are they discussed? Make a note on the board of what the subjects that students have chosen.

Now start to think about the language is used? Add to the board some of the words that come up repeatedly, especially if they use language in a clever way - utilising alliteration or rhyme.

When you have a good selection of words and phrases written up, ask the class to work in pairs to pick one of the topics. They should spend a few moments adding to the brainstorm, coming up with words, phrases and ideas associated with this issue.

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.

Once they have done this, they can then try and personify one of the concepts involved. In the *Ploughing of the Half-Acre*, William Langland presents Hunger as a being who comes and attacks those who refuse to work. What figure would be the modern-day threat to benefit cheats? How would the concept of Equality visit contemporary England? What would Conservation do to those who pollute?

Ask each student to select a concept associated with their chosen issue, and to think about what sort of character it would be.

Ask them to write a few short headlines imagining their figure has visited modern-day England. Who or where does it visit, and why? Who is the character supporting, and who is it threatening? What does the newspaper think about the situation?

Once students have generated handful of different headlines, ask them to pick a couple and expand some of these, writing a the opening paragraph of a newspaper article. This could be describing the scene that is taking place, or a journalist offering their opinion on what is going on.

Students shouldn't worry too much about spelling or grammar here but just try to sketch out their ideas. They should bear in mind this is not their finished piece. If possible, attempt this task along with the class, modelling the writing and editing process.

Once students have completed a few of these short newspaper pieces, share a few examples from the class, and - if you are happy to - yours as well.

Recap: Alliterative poetry

Piers Plowman 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 or sound). For example:

'Ac on a May mornynge on Malverne bulles'

'Webbesteres and walkeres and wynners with handes'.

Explain to students that with their newspaper snippets the class have all created short allegorical scenes. To emulate Langland though, the next step is to transform them into alliterative verse.

Ask each student to pick their favourite piece. They should use it as their starting point and have a go at expanding it, redraft their prose into alliterative long lines as they go.

The basic rule for alliterative verse is to have four beats to a line, the first three of which alliterate. However, as you can see from Langland's verse, sometimes only two beats will alliterate, and sometimes the alliteration doesn't quite fall in the right places. Students don't need to be exact, but should try to give a flavour of Langland's verse to their writing. From their initial couple paragraph or so they should end up with half a dozen or so lines of verse.

When they (and you) have had a go, share some examples.

What was hard about the process? Did it make them think about their writing differently? Bearing in mind that *Piers Plowman* is over 7,000 lines long, does it make them think again about the process of creating the poem?

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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 - The Ploughing of the Half-Acre (excerpt)

Now is Perkyn and this pilgrimes to the plouh faren;
To erien this half-aker holpen hym monye.
Dikares and delvares digged up the balkes;
Therewith was Perkyn apayed and payede hem wel here huyre.
Other werkmen ther were that wrouhten fol yerne, 5
Uch man in his manere made hymselfe to done
And somme to plesse Perkyn pykede aweye the wedes.
At hey prime Peres leet the plouh stande
And oversey hem hymselfe; ho-so beste wrouhte
He sholde be huyred theraftur when hervost-tyme come. 10
And thenne seet somme and songen at the ale
And holpe eryl this half-aker with 'hey trollilolly!'
Quod Peres the plouhman al in puyre tene:
'But ye aryse the rather and rape yow to worche
Shal no grayn that here groweth gladyen yow at nede, 15
And thow ye deye for deul, the devel have that reche!'

Tho were faytours aferd and fayned hem blynde
And leyde here legges alery, as suche lorelles conneth,
And maden here mone to Peres how thei may nat worche:
'Ac we praye for yow, Peres, and for youre plouh bothe 20
That god for his grace youre grayn multiplye
And yelde yow of youre almesse that ye yeven us here.
We may nother swynke ne swete, suche sekenes us ayleth,
Ne have none lymes to labory with, lord god we thonketh.'
'Yourre preyeres,' quod Peres, 'and ye parfyt weren, 25
Myhte helpe, as Y hope, ac hey Treuthe wolde
That no faytrye were founde in folk that goth a-beggeth.
Ye been wastours, Y woet wel, and waste and devouren
That lele land-tylynge men leely byswynken.
Ac Treuthe shal teche yow his teme to dryve 30
Or ye shal ete barly-breed and of the broke drynke.
But yf he be blynde or broke-legged or bolted with yren -
Such poore,' quod Peres, 'shal parte with my godes,

Bothe of my corn and of my cloth to kepe hem fram defaute.
And ankerus and eremytes that eten but at nones 35
And freres that flateren nat and pore folke syke,
What! Y and myn wolle fynde hem what hem nedeth.'

William Langland
[*Piers Plowman* C-text]

Piers Plowman - The Ploughing of the Half-Acre (excerpt)

Now Perkin [Piers] and these pilgrims have gone to plough;
Many helped him to harrow this half-acre.
Ditchers and delvers digged up the balkes,*
Piers was pleased by this and paid them good wages.
Other workmen worked very hard, 5
Each man got himself work to do in his own manner
And some picked away the weeds to help Perkin.
At high prime [9 a.m.] Piers let the plough stand
And oversaw them himself; whoever worked best
Would be hired afterwards when harvest-time comes. 10
And then some sat down and sang from drinking ale
And helped harrow this half-acre with 'hey trollilolly!'
In pure anger Piers the Plowman said:
'Unless you get up immediately and rush to work
No grain that grows here will nourish you when you need it, 15
And you will die from hunger-pains, the devil take him who cares!'

Those who were slackers were afraid and feigned they were blind
And twisted their legs backwards, as some rogues knew how to,
And made their moans to Piers how they could not work:
'But we pray for you, Piers, and for your plough too, 20
That god for his grace will multiply your grain
And repay you the alms [donations] that you have given us here.
We can neither toil nor sweat, such sickness ails us,
Nor have we limbs to labour with, lord god we thank.'

'Your prayers,' said Piers, 'if they are sincere, 25
Might help, I would hope, but Truth on high wishes
That no swindler is found in folk that go begging.
You are scroungers, I know well, and waste and devour
What true land-tilling men faithfully toil for.
So Truth will teach you how to drive his team [of oxen] 30
Or you will eat barley-bread and drink from the brook.
Except if you are blind or your legs are broken or bolted with iron -

Such poor people,' said Piers, 'shall share in my goods,
Both my corn and my cloth to keep them from shortage.
And anchoresses** and hermits who eat only at noon
And friars who do not flatter and poor sick folk,
What! I and my [family] will provide for them what they need.'

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** Balkes were unploughed strips of land*

*** Anchoresses were female hermits*

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