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Defined by Number: The Concurrent Numerology of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and  
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## Defined by Number:

The Concurrent Numerology of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl*

What size pants are you wearing right now? Almost all readers balk at this question. If I were to ask you whether or not numerology affects the way you live, you would undoubtedly respond, "It does not." That is a reasonable assertion. You would not, for instance, after working 11 hours straight, work an extra one just for the sake of reaching 12. Also, you would not feel cheated and deficient were you eighth in line at the Post Office. Finally, would you choose to rent an apartment on the seventh floor over the sixth floor merely based on its numerical significance? No. In fact, none of these three occasions receive even one bat of an eye, even though you would have thrice cursed yourself, numerically speaking. But, you meet the question of pant size with, likely, an outright refusal to answer or, at the very least, a moment of hesitation. Yet, the response is simple: a number. Granted, numerology has far less of an impact on our modern world than it did on the medieval one, but, undoubtedly, numbers still can affect the way we live.

As numerology is much more dilute today than it was several centuries ago, an understanding of the medieval view on numbers is necessary to analyze literature from the time. The often quoted and foremost expert on medieval numerology, Vincent Foster Hopper, describes in the preface of his book, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, the interconnectedness of idea, number, and divine implantation (Hopper vii-xii). The three concepts are so intertwined

that to fully remove one from the thought process of a denizen of the medieval era, would prove impossible. The preeminence of numbers is one aspect that can be proven to have permeated even the lay of society. Dhuoda's *Handbook for William* is one such example. Carol Neel, the translator, summarizes this Carolingian woman's counsel for her son, William, concisely in her introduction with the following; "Lay existence, she [Dhuoda] suggests to her son, is as direct a path to salvation as clerical or monastic life" (Neel xvii). This imprisoned mother's words of advice outline everything she wishes to teach her son so that he can mature into a man that is "both effective in this world and pleasing to God in every way" (Dhuoda 5). To conclude her many descriptions of living a holy life, Dhuoda's final didactic section of importance is "Book 9: Interpreting Numbers" (91-94). This section explores the significance and relation of numbers to divinity, the Bible, and perfection, specifically their importance in living a proper and moral life. Numbers were so influential in everyday existence to the Christian medieval society that ignorance of their meaning can lead to ignorance of the very medieval way of life.

With this fact in mind, one could easily claim that the genius of the *Gawain-Pearl*-poet in his numerically perfect writing of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl* came less from painstaking craftsmanship and more from mere antiquated knowledge of the period. Nevertheless, an analyst cannot truly understand either work without at least acknowledging the presence and impact of numerology on the meaning of the text. Many authors, like Michael Robertson with *Gawain* and Marie Borroff or Arnie Sanders with *Pearl*, have analyzed the numerological significance of only a single poem in the poet's four-piece manuscript; each with varying degrees of adherence to the traditional medieval number philosophy "rules." Even though Hopper, the master of numerology himself, states, "it was never a matter of defining the meaning of a given number by checking it against these rules, but rather of selecting the rule

which would provide the traditional and desired meaning” (Hopper 103), I intend to show that the context of this poet’s two most numerically explicit poems together provides the information to correctly interpret the similar numerological meaning. Additionally, whereas analysts like Edward Condren, through a series of rounding and approximating, relate the proportions of poem lengths within the entire manuscript, I will explore only the more explicit numerology present in *Gawain* and *Pearl*. This paper seeks to conclude that the *Gawain-Pearl*-poet incorporates similar numerology into the two poems in very different ways to reflect upon his main characters’ failures – specifically, Sir Gawain’s pride which pushes him beyond heaven’s perfection into hell, versus the *Pearl*-narrator’s ignorance which prevents him from reaching divine perfection – but also outlines each protagonist’s chance at redemption.

#### *Numerology and the Gawain-Pearl-Poet*

Before delving into the numbers and their meanings in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl*, one must note the varied purposes numbers play in medieval literature. Robert L. Surles, editor of *Medieval Numerology: A Book of Essays*, presents two methods of numerological inclusion in literary works of the time period: “structural arithmetic metaphor” and “literary allegoresis” (Surles viii). While none of the essays in the collection reference *Gawain* or *Pearl*, and the poet does not use each technique in perfect concordance with its definition, an understanding of these general methods of number inclusion will provide a strong foundation which one can use to better understand the numerological significance of the texts.

#### *Defining the Character as a Number: Structural Arithmetic Metaphor*

The first of the techniques I wish to address in this paper is “structural arithmetic metaphor,” a common and viable practice throughout medieval narrative poetry, like *Gawain* and *Pearl*, where a number becomes a participant in the action of the text. These numbers are often

incorporated into the structure of the story, rather than being explicitly stated within the text. An excellent example of this technique and its application within a narrative is explored by Joan Helm in her analysis of Troyes's *Eric et Enide*. In her essay, "Eric and Enide: Cosmic Measures in Nature and the Hebrew Heritage," Helm shows that Enide's identity is intricately linked with the numbers 396, 3960, and 1980 which correlate to the line numbers where the character appears or takes some significant action (Helm 53-76). The linkage between number and identity is often related to the old Christian belief that God created humans as numerically "ordered" so to be in perfect harmony with all creation (Surles viii). Therefore, each person can be numerically defined. This concept is carried into both of the *Gawain-Pearl*-poet's texts; numbers begin to define certain aspects of each story's protagonist, almost to the point of personification.

With even the most casual reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the preeminence of five in relation to the Camelotian knight is unavoidable. The number five or some variant is mentioned fifteen times over the two stanzas describing the pentangle upon Gawain's shield, lines 619 to 669 – a section fifty lines in length. The poet, ironically, utilizes just as many stanzas to describe Gawain's arming as he uses to describe his journey through the wilderness until he reaches Bertilak's castle. Gawain spends such a significant amount of time arming himself because he is literally attempting to define his attributes through what he adorns. The knight defines himself as perfect in every way using the continuous design of the symbol placed prominently upon the face of his shield. The continuity of the ring is Gawain's supposed infallibility. The shape's five points represent the perfection of qualities embodied by the knight, "For always faithful in five ways, and five times in each case" (*Gawain* 632). Obviously, in this instance, the number five is intended to represent the perfection Gawain seeks in his every deed,

especially evident in the poet's repetition of five separate pentads relating to Christianity and humanity at their peaks.

Hopper backs this assertion with many different qualities of the number five. The most appropriate and applicable is referenced in Hopper's own analysis of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. "The properties of this figure [the pentangle] coincide perfectly with the attributes of the number 5, for, like the lover's knot, it is endless and thus corresponds to the 'circular' property of the number" (Hopper 124). Five is one of the few numbers in the special category of circular numbers, "one which reproduces itself in its last digit when raised to its powers" (102). Therefore, the number itself is incorruptible and endless, traits Gawain undoubtedly would die to obtain. Additionally, the poet calls upon other properties and symbolisms of the number five to further reinforce Gawain's intent at perfection. The Pythagoreans believed five to be the "type of nature, embracing all living things" because of the five natural senses (43). Gawain must be "perfect in his five senses" and utilize all of "his earthly faith" (*Gawain* 640, 642). For the first primitive tribes who used numbers, "5 [was] referred to as a hand" (Hopper 9). Gawain's shield refers to his fingers and hands and their unfailing dexterity (*Gawain* 641). In terms of Gawain's heavenly faith and piety placed in the "five wounds" of Christ, the "five joys" of Mary, and the five noble attributes of a knight, Hopper's book provides us even more insight. Odd numbers, of which five is included, were "universally considered more godlike, more perfect, and [...] more powerful than the even" due to their ability to produce odds or evens in addition, whereas evens may only produce other evens (Hopper 101). And finally, just as Gawain feels entitled to claim the perfection of God, the number five, as a prime number (one only divisible by the number one), comes straight from the unity of one which is God in number symbolism.

Other authors, as well, corroborate similar analysis concerning the symbolism of five in medieval texts. Arnie Sanders, a professor of English at Goucher College, quotes the “blessed Medieval Christian number interpretations” (Sanders 2) laid out in Brian Stone’s *Chaucer*. He states that five is “the union of the first even and odd numbers” (qtd. Sanders 3); likewise, Gawain seeks to become the union of all powers and the pinnacle of perfection. In his article “Numerical Proportion as Aesthetic Strategy in the *Pearl* Manuscript,” Edward I. Condren, while never discussing the number five, explores the numerical significance of the pentangle. He concludes that, like the manuscript as a whole, the symbol incorporates the “golden cuts” and “divine proportion” that aid in its meaning of perfection (Condren 285-305). Finally, Michael Robertson, in addition to calling upon Hopper’s knowledge and classification of five as the number of incorruptibility present in the pentangle description, finds a second instance of five’s presence. He points to the “number of the last long line, 2525, [as] represent[ing] the incorruptible five” (Robertson 785). Hopper, in discussing elementary number symbolism, notes that “in the repetition of a digit [...] the meaning of [a number] does not change by reason of its decimal position” (Hopper 9-10). While this operation is generally reserved for the repetition of a single digit, the significance of this line is notable, especially when viewed in conjunction with the pervasion of five in *Gawain* and the similar occasion in *Pearl*, which I will discuss later.

Even without the numerical symbolism background, the extensive cataloging which the *Gawain-Pearl*-poet undertakes in his lengthy description of Gawain’s shield and traits embodies the figurative emphasis Gawain places between himself and the five-pointed symbol. While the knight may be “reputed as virtuous, like refined gold,” (*Gawain* 633) he goes beyond the pursuit of this goal and begins to believe that he has reached the heavenly perfection and flawlessness of God. Five, therefore becomes Gawain’s covetous desire to achieve perfection. In fact, the

number defines his arrogance in presuming the ideal is achieved. Gawain is “devoid of all vice” (*Gawain* 634); except that of pride.

After numerically establishing Gawain’s arrogance, the poet then puts this flaw to the test using the characters of Bertilak and the Lady Bertilak while Gawain stays in their castle. During this section of the text, the number three appears on numerous occasions; the most prominent being the three hunts, three seductions, and “three times / Kissed” (1868-9). Especially given the obvious Christian lens of the poem, the influence of three, here, is unmistakable. Again, using Vincent Hopper as a guide, the poet’s intended meaning of this number can be deduced. Hopper indexes 3 with the following categories; “statically complete,” “all,” “indissoluble and incorruptible,” “divine,” “holiness, sanctity,” “number of perfection in beginning, middle, and end,” “earthly symbol of ultimate perfection,” and “the Trinity” (Hopper 233-41). In his analysis of this number, he often references the very influential Christian writer and thinker of the time, St. Augustine. This man’s writings, in particular, *On the Trinity*, when referring to the number three, hugely shaped the widespread meaning of perfection and holiness associated with the Trinity and, frankly, any appearance of the number three.

However, in his trek for perfection, Gawain denies the number its value and due reverence by failing to live up to his self-proclaimed flawlessness. During his bed chamber tests, Gawain is as physically and mentally naked as he’ll be in the text. The poet has penetrated all of the structural and descriptive layers of the poem to reveal Gawain’s true nature (see my previous paper, “Constructing an Identity: The Impact of Structure on Character Development in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” for further discussion of this point). Even in these instances, Gawain remains arrogantly confident of his ability, comparing himself to God in his apparent absence of vice.

This transgression due to arrogance is embodied in the number eleven. Hopper's *Medieval Number Symbolism* has less to say about eleven but still notes it as a significant player in numerology. Its meaning is derived "by manner of extension" due to its "relation to other numbers," namely going one beyond ten (qtd. Hopper 101). Ten is seen as "completeness, finality, [and] perfection" (Hopper 11) in almost all numerology. The number is a "return to unity" (101) in its marking off of the decimal system, in its reconstitution of the monad, or God, in its Pythagorean quality of the "tetraktys" (42) [1 (point) + 2 (line) + 3 (surface) + 4 (solid) = 10], and finally, in its Christian connotation of the 10 commandments. Therefore, Hopper summarizes eleven going beyond ten as "transgression outside of measure" (qtd. Hopper 101).

This conclusion about eleven began with the early Christian writers and has never lost its meaning since. The highly influential Saint Augustine was the first to relate this number to sin based on the Ten Commandments in his work *City of God*.

[J]ust as law in general, and the Decalogue in particular, is symbolized by the number ten, so the number eleven which goes beyond ten, *transgreditur denarium*, stands for a transgression of the law and, therefore, for sin. (359)

Going beyond the perfection and judiciary influence of the Ten Commandments results in sinful behavior and a damnation to hell. In fact, Dante literally constructs an image of Hell from the number eleven in his *Divine Comedy*. Discussing this point, Hopper states,

[T]he ninth *bolgia* is said to be 22 miles in circumference, and the tenth is 11 miles around [...] it is possible to assume that the infernal dimensions are made up of fractions [...] or of multiples of 11, the number of sin since the time of Augustine. (152)

Haderlein, in his article *Two, Three and Eleven: Disharmony, Disorder, Disarray*, explores the meaning of numbers, specifically 11, in various poetic documents of the thirteenth century. He defines the number in two different ways; “*transgressio*” and “*numerous deficiens*” (Haderlein 131). Even though Haderlein never discusses the *Gawain-Pearl*-poet, the author’s description of *transgressio* fits *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* perfectly. “[I]t is evident that this transgression of ten, by its arrogance of coveting excess, signifies sin” (131) – I will discuss *numerous deficiens* later. Gawain covets perfection beyond perfection and by his arrogance, believes he has achieved it. This pride is Gawain’s fatal sin that becomes his “failure, folly, disarray and impending disaster” (124). The most important quality of numerology that Haderlein addresses is that many numbers would bring their attributes to a literary work “rather than borrowing them therefrom, or assuming them therein” (124). So, by the fact that eleven appears in the text in relation to Gawain, we can deduce the poet intends the number to represent the faults of the character even without any contextual hints from the narrative. However, I intend to show that the contexts of the two poems combined, strengthen that assumed connotation.

But first, where does eleven appear in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*? Very few learned critics reject the idea that the number five is important when examining Gawain’s identity. However, nearly no critic considers this second, equally important number because it is not stated explicitly. Rather, it is incorporated into the structure of the poem. Michael Robertson, in his article, “Stanzaic Symmetry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” explores the modern subdivision of the poem. Based on an intricate conglomeration of evidences and analyses, Robertson presents a schema that shows the structural symmetry of the poem is divided into series of eleven-stanza sections (Robertson 780). In defense of his somewhat drastic conclusion,

he reminds his readers that, given “the degree of structural balance evident in [...] *Pearl* [...]A]re we not right to expect a greater degree of structural balance [in *Gawain*]?” (779) While this statement is true, especially given the number-ideology of the medieval time period, still skeptics might believe that this critic’s analysis is contrived.

However, one has a much more difficult time dismissing the significance of the stanza length of each hunt/seduction scene. From lines 46 to 56, 57 to 67, and 68 to 78, we find the Lady Bertilak testing the very unawares and naked Gawain in three exactly eleven stanza sections. This thrice repeated division is not coincidence; the poet is revealing Gawain’s fate based upon his actions during the trials. Even though he does not wield the pentangle shield against this seductive foe, Gawain still believes that he has conquered the power of five and has become more perfect than God. This arrogance blinds him from the sin he commits against Bertilak. The pursuit of perfection is admirable, but the assumption of achieving it is rash. The *Gawain-Pearl*-poet denounces Gawain’s arrogance both numerically in the number eleven and through the voice of the Green Knight. However, whereas the Green Knight forgives the knight from Camelot, the poet leaves Gawain’s identity twisted in an “endless knot” (*Gawain* 630), pursuing perfection and transgressing beyond measure, just like the symbol he has emblazoned on his shield.

In reviewing my above analysis of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a critical eye might still argue that the relation of Gawain to five, three, and, especially, eleven is too stretched and contrived to be suitable evidence. However, keeping these numbers in mind while carefully reading the *Gawain-Pearl*-poet’s second highly numerological text, disperses doubt, because, similar to the way Gawain defines himself numerically, structural arithmetic metaphors also define the *Pearl*-narrator in terms of numbers. In this poem, however, arrogance is not the sin

that damns the character. Rather, in *Pearl*, the narrator, after falling asleep while mourning the loss of his daughter, dreams of her dwelling in the heavenly city of New Jerusalem as a queen, where she scolds his ignorance of the faith and resolves his misconceptions. This ignorance, coupled with the covetous desire to dwell in heaven with his daughter, is the character's fatal flaw. As Marie Borroff, in the introduction to her translation of *Pearl* succinctly summarizes, "To dwell there is to possess a happiness which [... is] perfect, without qualification [...but the dreamer] cannot escape the habit of insatiable desire" (Borroff xiii). The dreamer covets the perfection of heaven, just as Gawain does.

Borroff's main substantiation to this proposed theme, with which I entirely agree, is the use of link-words. In every stanza a word or phrase is repeated from the last line to the first line of the next stanza. Additionally, each section is linked to the next through "concatenation," an overlapping repetition of the link-word (Borroff xvii). On the point of covetous sin, this analyst highlights "the poet's choice of *more* as link-word in sections III and X" (xiii). She does not go into any more detail about this significance, however, a numerically-minded approach to this detail quickly adds to strength of its assertion. As I explained before, three and ten represent completion, wholeness, and perfection in number symbolism. Therefore, its even more significant that the *Gawain-Pearl*-poet used the word "more" extensively throughout these two particular sections. Just as Gawain's arrogance proves its existence while in the midst of three's perfection, this narrator's covetous desire reveals itself in the same way; even after reaching unity of the Trinity or the boundary of ten, the closest his mortal self can come to heaven, he wants more.

An even stronger numerical correlation between the two poems exists in the number five. *Pearl* is painstakingly divided into twenty sections, each – except for section XV – is broken into

five stanzas. Even the section consisting of six stanzas maintains the air of perfection and continuity. Hopper, in his exploration of Pythagorean number theory, describes the mathematical “relationship of a number to its aliquot parts [...] its divisors, exclusive of itself” (Hopper 37). A number can be “perfect, deficient, or abundant” (37) and since six’s divisors, 1, 2, and 3, add up to itself, it is considered a perfect number. Additionally, six has the same incorruptibility and circularity as five, because it too is a circular or spherical number. Incidentally, these vastly positive numerical qualities of six are likely the reason the *Gawain-Pearl*-poet chose to show transgression with eleven beyond ten rather than six beyond five. Nevertheless, this poet purposefully decided to incorporate fives into both character’s worlds. Gawain worships the power of the five-pointed symbol; the dreamer in *Pearl* also covets similar perfection and enlightenment but is defined by his separation from it.

The literary message of “humanity’s separation from its heavenly home,” (Condren 285-305) as Condren words it, is portrayed both descriptively and numerically. For the entirety of his dream, the *Pearl*-narrator is literally prevented from reaching his daughter in her heavenly home.

It could not be but Paradise  
Lay beyond those noble banks, thought I,  
And the stream itself seemed a devise,  
A mark to know a boundary by. (*Pearl* III.2)

Even though he knows the river cannot physically be forged, the dreamer’s ignorance drives his desire to cross. Throughout the majority of the rest of the poem, the narrator’s daughter didactically explains his misunderstandings and even scolds him for his obvious fault, saying once, “Most ill-advised your answer is / And errors grave your thoughts misguide” (V.5). Even

after his daughter has explained away his misconceptions of the Christian faith concerning heaven, the man still ignorantly and rashly thinks,

[N]othing could turn me round,  
 Forestall me, or stop me in mid-stride,  
 And wade I would from the nearer ground  
 And breast the stream, though I sank and died. (XX.1)

This descriptive theme concerning the man's inability to understand or ultimately achieve a life with his daughter in heaven is strengthened numerically during the description of New Jerusalem, the heavenly city.

The *Gawain-Pearl*-poet uses the number twelve, and variations of it, ad nauseam throughout his description of the city, most of which are allusions to or outright word-for-word copies of *Revelation*: “a hundred though maidens dear / And forty-four thousand more in view,” (XV.3), “Foundation-stones twelvefold” (XVII.2), the city dimensions spanning twelve thousand furlongs “length, breadth, and height”(XVII.5), twelve “gateways set commensurate” (XVIII.1), and “Twelve fruits of life” (XVIII.4) that ripen “Twelve times a year” (XVIII.4). Indeed, even the length of each stanza echoes this cacophony of twelves. Borroff, in discussing symmetry of the poem, mentions the poem's total length is 1212 lines; and even though, like the 2525 lines in *Gawain*, its numeric meaning doesn't call upon the meaning of 12, its appearance is still meaningful. The poet does more than reference the number in his description of the “City of God” (XVI.4); he blatantly builds this heavenly home from twelve. The foundation is imbued with twelve, the walls are a perfect cube of twelve on each side, and twelve doors and sacred trees grace the city. Similarly, the *Gawain-Pearl*-poet figuratively builds his poem from these stone bricks of twelve.

Even the variations on the simple number add extra meaning. Hopper discusses multiplication and squaring of numbers in his chapter on Medieval Number Philosophy. One thousand, like ten, is “a return to unity,” he states (Hopper 101). Also, 1,000 was loosely considered “as three-dimensional” and therefore “was called the ultimate boundary of number” (101-2). It is only natural to build a city based on dimensions like these, as the multiplication of a thousand just means perfection is involved. Finally, Hopper addresses that “Squaring a number was understood to give it extension” (102); one hundred forty four is merely the same as twelve, just amplified.

Hopper’s *Medieval Number Symbolism* also gives much insight into just how significant twelve was during the time, and therefore, its likely meaning in *Pearl*. The duodecad began astronomically from the “12 signs of the zodiac,” often thought to have been placed in the heavens by God and therefore “became the symbol for a completed cycle” (19). Historically, the number referenced the twelve Tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles. Pythagoras and the Greeks soon discovered the mathematical qualities of this number. Whereas, six was perfect because its aliquot parts added up to itself, twelve was deemed “abundant” because it “has parts to spare:”  $1+2+3+4+6=16$  which exceeds 12 (37). By medieval time, twelve became the “sign of universality because it is composed of  $4 \times 3$ , of which 4 is corporeal and 3, spiritual” (102). The conglomeration of all of these interpretations embodies itself in Aquinas’s discussion of the 144,000 of the Apocalypse; Hopper quotes,

The thousand is easily disposed of as signifying perfection. The remaining  
 $144=12 \times 12$ . One 12 signifies (as always) faith in the Trinity, diffused through  
the 4 parts of earth. By the other can be understood the doctrine of the 12 apostles  
or the 12 tribes. (102)

The *Gawain-Pearl*-poet calls upon all of these connotations in describing the *Pearl*-narrator's separation from the New Jerusalem. In addition to being physically separated by the river, this man's ignorance of church precepts prevents him from reaching the perfect twelve of heaven. He is eternally one short due to this deficient flaw, or, in other words, he is an eleven.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the poet uses the number eleven as *transgressio* beyond ten. However, Haderlein quotes a second significant manner in which medieval authors draw attention to eleven: "*numerus deficiens*" (Haderlein 131). He quotes, "Eleven indeed exceeds ten but does not reach twelve, the number of the apostles; it thus signifies the transgression of the commandments" (131). Gawain's flaw of arrogance causes him to overstep the perfection he seeks, becoming one beyond ten, eleven, and damns him to hell for his covetous pride. The *Pearl*-narrator, in failing to reach the significance and understanding of the twelve apostles also metaphorically becomes the number 11, but for a different reason: deficient by one from 12. The dreamer's ignorance, in addition to being descriptively alluded to, is also structurally included in the text in a way similar to the poet's inclusion of Gawain's arrogance. In the practically perfect numerical poem, *Pearl*, one supposed mistake exists. The fifth stanza of the eighth section contains a missing line (line 472 according to Stanbury edition of *Pearl*), as pointed out by Sanders in his essay entitled "*Pearl* and Number Symbolism." Considering this particular stanza is where the dreamer ignorantly questions his daughter's place in heaven as queen with, "I cannot but think your words are wrong" (*Pearl* VIII.5), and that now the stanza is eleven lines long, the missing line could hardly be seen as an accident. In both cases, Haderlein's analysis shows that the characters are wrapped in the failure, disarray, and impending apocalypse assigned to the number eleven in most medieval literature. This leads to the question; do the characters avoid the apocalypse they have begun based on their arrogance or ignorance?

*Defining the Story as a Number: Literary Allegoresis*

The answer to this question lies in Surles's second liter-numeric-technique; "Literary Allegoresis," where a number is used as a metaphor to a basic and inherent idea of the work (Surles viii). Surles mentions that "While grasping the 'hidden meaning' is not necessary to following the story line, its appreciation [...] serves to strengthen the bond between author and reader" (Surles viii). Often, use of this device is said to develop the "atmosphere" of a text, alluding to the author's true feelings regarding the story. However, in reference to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl*, an appreciation of this connection is necessary to successfully interpret the meaning of these two poems. Without recognizing the numerical weight associated with both poems, a reader may diametrically change the outcome of the story.

The most significant number when addressing the relation between *Gawain* and *Pearl* is the length of the poems themselves. Whereas, each character's correlation to the number eleven was somewhat hidden, the *Gawain-Pearl*-poet blatantly and explicitly links both poems by writing each to contain exactly one hundred and one stanzas. Given the deliberate nature of this poet, a reader would be in folly if he/she assumed this concurrent quality to be a mere coincidence. The poet could have just as easily ended each poem in the numerically complete and perfect number of 100 stanzas, having returned to unity and reached the "boundary of numbers" (Hopper 102). One hundred is often used in medieval writing to show the "amplitude of charity" expanded from the "rectitude of faith," however, the poet deliberately steps beyond the number (101). Why would the poet make both poems identical lengths, if it were not to emphasize some "metaphoric" meaning that the two, together, formed?

In response to the question about length significance, critics have had many varied responses. In reference to *Gawain* specifically, Robertson's article considers the poem's length

as another depiction of the transgression beyond measure that Gawain commits. This deduction is understandable, even given the lack of substantive support on Hopper's part. While 101 is never mentioned in *Medieval Number Symbolism*, 100, like 10, is a "return to unity" (Hopper 101) and therefore the analogy that "101 exceeds 100 as 11 exceeds 10" is not very farfetched (Robertson 784). The final stanza is "the injury and damage that [Gawain] suffered / For the cowardice and covetness that seized [him]" (*Gawain* 2506-7). This same conclusion can be applied to *Pearl*, in the sense that the narrator fails to fully understand his ignorance so he jumps into the water in attempts to ford the river toward heaven. One hundred and one stanzas can represent his banishment "by cares beset, / From realms eternal untimely sent" (*Pearl* XX.4). He as well has transgressed due to his major flaw.

However, Borroff, in her introduction to her translation of *Pearl*, offers another alternative to the significance of 101 stanzas. In her pursuit of proving that the poem represents perfection, she proposes that "the one-hundred-and-first stanza of the poem can be thought of as overlapping, and thus coinciding with, the first stanza, to close the circle" (Borroff xviii). Her argument is based on the fact that the final linking word of the final stanza, "As precious pearls to his content" (*Pearl* XX.5) matches with first of the first, "Pearl, that a prince is well content" (I.1). So as each stanza and each section is connected to the next, the entire poem is connected back upon itself. Similarly, the first line of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, "When the siege and assault were ended at Troy" (*Gawain* 1, 2525) is echoed exactly in the final long line. Dale Randall, in his article about the Structure of *Gawain*, corroborates this cyclical nature of the poem in his schematic outline of the text, which symmetrically builds then falls in inverted order. Borroff's interpretation of 101 is equally as believable as Robertson's. The *Pearl*-narrator, after his dream-drowning in the river, awakes reformed "And to God committed [his Pearl] full and

free” (*Pearl* XX.5) in the final stanza of the poem. Likewise, after his outburst and rant against the Green Knight, Gawain rides back to Camelot a changed man. He adorns the green girdle as a “token of dishonesty” to remind himself always that “a man may hide his misdeed, but never erase it, / For where once it takes root the stain can never be lifted” (*Gawain* 2509, 2511-2).

Still other authors deem different conclusions upon the one hundred and one stanzas. Stone’s *Chaucer* briefly observes that “*Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* both have 101 stanzas (101 being a prime number, in which unity figures twice)” (Stone 219). Similarly, Condren recognizes the number one hundred and one as the twenty-fifth prime number, but offers no more analysis. Given the importance of five in the texts, the twenty-fifth prime number again may allude to the knot between perfection and transgression. Keep in mind that the lines 2525 in *Gawain* and 1212 in *Pearl* both manifest themselves in the 101<sup>st</sup> stanza. The interpretations of these critics present a theme of redemption and unity with God. It should be obvious now that the number one hundred and one had no well-understood meaning and identity of its own during the medieval period, but that does not discount its influence on the stories. In arguing that numbers had connotations that were common knowledge and would reinforce an allegorical message without drawing from context, Haderlein addresses the opposing concept of “*Kontextgebundenheit*, i.e. the dependency of a numeric symbol upon the content of a literary message” (Haderlein 124). This analytical method requires a discussion about the story’s context.

In terms of *Gawain* and *Pearl*, one hundred and one’s closest numerological meaning would be “*transgressio*” beyond the perfection of one hundred. However, when taken in context, the concept of continuity and circularity associated with one hundred and one is furthered echoed by each story’s dominant symbol. *Gawain*’s girdle encircles his physical body and spiritual

identity. The *Pearl*-narrator's lost jewel, representing both corporeal and spiritual desire, is a perfect sphere. The poetic structures relate back to these symbols in *Gawain*'s cyclical journey and in *Pearl*'s linked, spherical stanzas that literarily resemble a necklace of pearls. I argue the *Gawain-Pearl*-poet intends for this "endless knot" between numerology and context, transgression and unity, damnation and salvation. When read in a linear fashion, each character remains doomed for eternity based on one explicit flaw. But if read in a circular fashion, each poem reveals a character that is redeemed and saved from hell. Like a girdle or a string of pearls must be willingly fastened around oneself to complete the circle, the character must willingly return to the beginning of their identity development to acknowledge their weakness and reform. In both cases, the reader, by recognizing the numerical significance of each poem and understanding the necessity of endless encircling and reform, not only metaphorically saves the characters from certain doom, but also saves him/herself from repeating the folly of arrogance and ignorance.

#### Why Numerology?

Without understanding the implications of numerology, one could easily miss the key message of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl*. Additionally, without reading the two poems side-by-side, one could easily confuse or at least overlook the implied significances of numbers in relation to the characters. Defining a character by the number eleven based upon its appearance in just one of the poems is mere conjecture; finding it prominently in both characters and their respective narratives is conclusive evidence to its importance. Likewise, when reading only one of the *Gawain-Pearl*-poet's masterpieces, 101 stanzas is dismissed as just artistic flair; but it is truly the deciding factor between saving the reader's soul and allowing it to slip sinfully

into hell. The two poems seek to strengthen and bolster the other's message. The numerology becomes the common foundation of the two poems.

Numerology and its impacts were so antiquated in the medieval worldview that the *Gawain-Pearl*-poet could not imagine writing a poem that did not call upon its preeminent inclusion. In fact, in these two poems, this medieval poet placed his entire message within the numbers of the story, not aware it might be misunderstood. Seeing that the previously-acknowledged meanings of well-known poems can diametrically change when proper numerology is applied to its analysis, brings to mind what antiquated values modern society takes for granted that drastically change the view of our world. Hopefully, I've illuminated the likely presence of modern ideas and practices that may be so ingrained in our thought processes, we don't even notice.

Take numerology as an example. At the beginning of this essay, you likely didn't consider that numbers could affect your everyday actions. Yet, public superstition has driven office buildings and hotels to renumber their floors, skipping the dreaded thirteen. Expectant mothers induced labor on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2006, so as to not have their child born on 6/6/06. Clothing companies will deliberately alter the numbers corresponding to different sizes on their merchandise to sell more. Numerology affects the way society lives, even today. This analysis of medieval mindsets will hopefully allow you to more critically analyze your own worldview and its repercussions. Knowing what subconscious values affect your decision-making, can allow you to deny it power over your actions. Dhuoda realized that the public and the church put their faith and hope in numbers. She did everything in her power to ensure her son was aware of the proper and moral course of action concerning his interactions with them. What issues will we warn our children about in the future? Racism? Religious tolerance? Pant size? Only by being

aware can we change our behavior. After all, pant size is just a number. It only receives power when we allow it power. Let's just hope you're not size eleven.

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