

British Masterpiece



READING 2 Analyze, make inferences, and draw conclusions about genre in different cultural and historical contexts. **2C** Relate the characters, setting, and theme of a literary work to the historical, social, and economic ideas of its time. **3** Evaluate changes in figurative language and dramatic structure in poetry across literary time periods.

from *Piers Plowman*

Allegory by William Langland

BACKGROUND *Piers Plowman* is a 14th-century narrative poem that combines deep religious faith with biting social satire. Its authorship is uncertain, but evidence points to William Langland, about whom little is known. The poem's large number of surviving manuscripts suggests its popularity in its day, and it influenced the works of later writers such as Edmund Spenser, John Milton, and John Bunyan. *Piers Plowman*, like much medieval literature, is written in Middle English alliterative verse, in which several words in each line repeat the same initial sound. For modern readers, the poem provides valuable insights into medieval life. This excerpt is a modern translation of the so-called B text, the second and best known of the poem's three surviving versions.

LITERARY ANALYSIS *Piers Plowman* is an **allegory**, or work in which characters, settings, and events represent abstract concepts to convey a message, such as the need to lead a more moral life. Like the Venerable Bede (page 96) and Margery Kempe (page 116), Langland uses the device of a dream vision to portray a powerful spiritual struggle and transformation to his audience. Through a series of dreams, Will, the hero of *Piers Plowman*, travels to a strange, alternative world where Conscience, Reason, and Truth have human characteristics that allow them to walk, talk, and debate important religious issues. Each encounter with these characters represents another step in Will's quest to achieve greater spiritual understanding.

Allegories often incorporate **personification**, a figure of speech in which the author attributes human qualities to ideas. In *Piers Plowman* each of the Seven Deadly Sins has a distinct appearance, personality, and point of view. In the following excerpt, for example, Envy, characteristically dissatisfied, carries a knife, shakes his fists in frustration, and admits he deliberately causes trouble wherever he goes. In an effort to redeem himself, Envy begs Repentance to hear his confession in hopes of doing shrift, or penance, for his dreadful deeds.

WRITE After you read the excerpt, write a short allegory in which you convey a message about an abstract concept, such as love, anger, or fear, by personifying it as a character with human traits. If you saw this character walking down the street, what would he or she look like? How would he or she speak? What would this character say about him- or herself?



- Envy with heavy heart asked for shrift
And grieving for his guilt began his confession.
He was pale as a sheep's pelt, appeared to have the palsy.
He was clothed in a coarse cloth—I couldn't describe it—
A tabard and a tunic, a knife tied to his side,
Like those of a friar's frock were the foresleeves.
Like a leek that had lain long in the sun
So he looked with lean cheeks, louring foully.
His body was so blown up for anger that he bit his lips
10 And shook his fist fiercely, he wanted to avenge himself
With acts or with words when he saw his chance.
Every syllable he spat out was of a serpent's tongue;
From chiding and bringing charges was his chief livelihood,
With backbiting and bitter scorn and bearing false witness.
This was all his courtesy wherever he showed himself.
"I'd like to be shriven," said this scoundrel, "if shame would let me.
By God, I'd be gladder that Gib had bad luck
Than if I'd won this week a wey of Essex cheese.
I've a neighbor dwelling next door, I've done him harm often
20 And blamed him behind his back to blacken his name.
I've done my best to damage him day after day
And lied to lords about him to make him lose money,
And turned his friends into foes with my false tongue.
His good luck and his glad lot grieve me greatly.
Between household and household I often start disputes
So that both life and limb are lost for my speech. . . .
I condemn men when they do evil, yet I do much worse;
Whoever upbraids me for that, I hate him deadly after.
I wish that every one were my servant,
30 And if any man has more than I, that angers my heart.
So I live loveless like a loathsome dog
So that my breast is blown up for bitterness of spirit.
For many years I might not eat as a man ought
For envy and ill will are hard to digest.
Is there any sugar or sweet thing to assuage my swelling
Or any *diapenidion* that will drive it from my heart,
Or any shrift or shame, unless I have my stomach scraped?"
"Yes, readily," said Repentance, directing him to live better;
"Sorrow for sins is salvation for souls."

