

**THE PEARL: RENDERED  
INTO MODERN  
ENGLISH VERSE**

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The Pearl: Rendered Into Modern English Verse by S. Weir Mitchell

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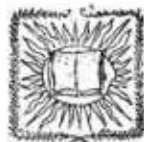
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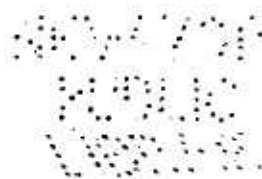
# PEARL

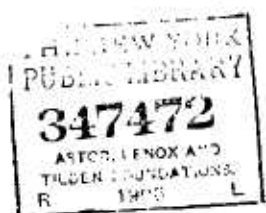
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BY  
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## A FOREWORD

In the west midland of England, in the second half of the fourteenth century, lived a poet whose name no man knows to-day. A strange chance has preserved the manuscript of four of his poems. One of these, "Pearl," emblem of purity, has been the subject of much controversy as to whether it be the poetic record of a real loss in the guise of allegory, or an allegory based on an imagined grief.

About this question there has long raged a war of words. The last argument in favor of the merely allegorical nature of "Pearl" is from the able pen of Professor Schofield of Harvard. Not all scholars agree with him, and there are competent students of the fourteenth-century poems who still believe this noble poem to be the voice of a real grief in the form of an allegory. I am altogether incompetent to decide the question on scholarly grounds. When,

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however, feeling that Professor Schofield might be right, I read again the stanzas which appeal to those who have suffered as this nameless poet seems to have done, I felt anew that this poem is surely the honest gift of a personal sorrow to the sorrow of all the after years.

This ably waged contest does not greatly concern me, to whom the elegiac beauty and tenderness of the verse address themselves with more appealing force. Its simplicity and quaintness add a singular charm, and as concerns its quality as poetry there can be, I think, but one opinion.

The story is simple. It is a lament and a vision. The father falls asleep on his daughter's grave, and, dreaming, sees in heaven Marguerite — his Pearl. They talk together, and then later there is much discussion of theological matters, and, at last, a rendering in verse of the apocalyptic vision of St. John.

The poem has interesting peculiarities of structure.

There are one hundred and one stanzas, each of twelve lines in three quatrains, all rhymed *a b - a b*. The alliteration of an earlier day is



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still seen in the verse, but is less freely employed. Some one word of the final line of each stanza is repeated in the first line of the succeeding stanza.

The rhythms of this charming poem deserve closer study. The poet uses with delightful freedom lines of very varied length; usually they are octosyllabic.

The language of "Pearl" belongs to the Middle English of the west midland counties, and even now is not, as a whole, difficult if it be read aloud so as to address the mind through the ear rather than through the eye. Few, however, will be tempted to wrestle with the original version. But there is an excellent translation into unrhymed verse by Israel Gollancz. ...

For five hundred years this poem was unknown and lay hidden in the difficult writing of the fourteenth century. That this wail of grief appealed to Tennyson, even in its imperfect modern dress of unrhymed verse, may serve to excuse my effort to restore to its measures the melody and lifting wings of rhyme.

In many places I have used archaic words or such as now have meanings they had not in the

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poet's day. Thus *pleasance* here means pleasure, and *courtesy* must be accepted as having more than its modern meaning. I owe an apology to Mr. Gollancz for my free use of his translation of "Pearl" into modern English. Without such a rendering, I should have been incompetent to follow with reasonable accuracy the meaning of the author.

For convenience of reference I have numbered the stanzas of my version in the order in which I give them. I have made no use of stanzas 12, 23, 24, 28, 30, 38, 39, 47, and of those between 49 and 96. The stanzas thus left out are either such as add little of value, or such as, in the larger gap, deal with uninteresting theological or allegorical material.

S. WEIR MITCHELL.

**PEARL**