

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 31 (2015)

Artikel: Didacticism in the york cycle : "In Worde, In Werke"
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-583881>

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Didacticism in the York Cycle: “In Worde, In Werke”

Alexandra F. Johnston

This essay analyses the *York Plays*, the only English “Creation to Doomsday” Cycle that comes down to us in a manuscript dating from as early as the fifteenth century. It argues that it is part, on the one hand, of the didactic campaign to educate the laity in the stories and doctrines of the faith initiated by Archbishop Thoresby in the fourteenth century and, on the other, through the revision of the Passion Sequence in the 1420s, part of fifteenth century “affective piety” literature. Christ himself interprets the scripture as his own Expositor before the Passion and after the Resurrection but, in the Passion sequence, becomes the silent centre of the action in his sacrificial “werke” for the redemption of fallen humanity. The essay shows that the action of the entire sequence of episodes is tied together through repeated actions and the patterns of language, especially the repeated lyrics of praise. It argues that although the cycle was produced by the city and performed by the guilds, the text was written by and then monitored by some group in the city, perhaps the Austin Friar, who, like a modern college, had a continuous scholarly tradition over generations of brothers.

Over the last fifty years, our understanding of Biblical drama in England has changed radically. What was once a settled genre – the multi-episode Corpus Christi play – has vanished under a half century of new scholarship and we are now left with only one such play with a manuscript that was compiled while the play still reflected the social and religious values of late medieval Catholicism – the *York Cycle* (see Beadle, “The York Corpus Christi Play” and Johnston, “An Introduction to Medieval Eng-

Drama and Pedagogy in Medieval and Early Modern England. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 31. Ed. Elisabeth Dutton and James McBain. Tübingen: Narr, 2015. 37-51.

lish Theatre”). The last fifty years has also advanced our understanding of the complexity of the social and religious values of the period, particularly in northern England (see Pantin; Hughes, *Pastors and Visionaries*; Watson; Duffy; Palliser). We now know that the plays at York are part, on the one hand, of the didactic campaign to educate the laity in the stories and doctrines of the faith and, on the other, an effort to provide the laity with a framework of meditative spirituality that would allow them to draw closer to the human reality of such figures as Christ and the Virgin Mary but did not lead them into heresy.

The first campaign grew from the fourth Lateran Council and was specifically focused in the north of England by John Thoresby, archbishop of York 1352-73, who re-issued John Pecham’s *Ignorantia Sacerdotum* (a late thirteenth century tract based on the decrees of Lateran IV) and had it translated into English as the *Lay Folk’s Catechism* by John Gaytrick, a monk of St Mary’s Abbey, York (Pantin 193-4). The second major influence was the “affective piety” movement that grew from Franciscan spirituality and was omnipresent in the vernacular literature of England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. By the end of the fourteenth century, the excesses of this movement had alarmed conservative prelates such as Thomas Arundel, who was archbishop of York from 1388-96 and the archbishop of Canterbury (with a period of exile during the struggles between Richard II and Henry Bolingbroke) from 1396-1414. Arundel was not entirely opposed to the meditative life (indeed he associated himself with the Carthusian house of Mount Grace north of York in 1409) but he was implacably opposed to Lollardy (see Watson). However, through his association with Mount Grace he knew of Nicholas Love, prior of Mount Grace from 1409 to c. 1421. Love translated and adapted *Meditationes Vitae Christi* (a seminal text in the “affective piety” movement) into what is arguably the most influential English version – *The mirrour of the blessyd lyf of Jesu Christ*. Arundel, as archbishop of Canterbury, sanctioned this text, seeing in it a text that was on the one hand anti-Lollard but on the other hand in the main stream of affective spirituality.

The city of York was still the “second city of the realm” with a strong guild structure and civic pride that was enhanced by the declaration of the city as a county in its own right by Richard II in 1396 when he visited it (see Dobson). It was the ecclesiastical centre of the north with its impressive Minster and many religious houses, including an important Augustinian friary and the Benedictine St Mary’s Abbey. The book lists of the Friary (see Humphreys) and the Abbey (see Sharpe *et al.*) survive and we have enough external evidence to have a good idea

of what the Minster owned. These three libraries provided rich source material for the playwrights, from the writings of the Church fathers, particularly Augustine, many classical texts, contemporary sermons and other vernacular works (see Johnston, “The *York Cycle* and The Libraries of York”).

This is the local context out of which the *York Cycle* emerged in the late fourteenth century. The religious of the north, both secular and monastic, were active participants in the didactic and affective piety movements. The city council, the producer of the play, was dominated by the Mercers’ Guild whose guild records refer to themselves not simply as Mercers and Merchants but also as the Guild of the Holy Trinity. Like many other commercial and craft guilds, the York Mercers, however anxious they might have been to be seen as the civic oligarchy, were also dedicated to acts of piety and charity. It is in this context that we must accept the 1399 statement that the play was “en honour & reuerence nostresignour Iesu Crist & honour & profitt de mesme Citee” [“in honour and reverence of our Lord Jesus Christ and for the glory and benefit of the . . . city”] (REED: *York* 11 & 697).

The figure of Christ dominates this cycle, teaching the people of York to live their lives “clene haly/In worde and in werke” (Beadle, *The York Plays* 21/31-2).¹ It is Christ himself who interprets the word as his own Expositor before the Passion and after the Resurrection and, in the Passion sequence, becomes the silent centre of the action – in his sacrificial “werke” for the redemption of fallen humanity. Only twice does he falter, overcome by human frailty – once in the Garden of Gethsemane as he pleads that the “cup” would pass from him and once on the cross when he cries:

Heloy, heloy!
 My God, my God full free,
Lama zabatanye?
 Wharto forsoke þou me
 In care,
 And I did neuere ille
 Þis dede for to go tille: (36/213-219)

But even here in his moment of greatest physical agony he answers his own question, “But be it at þi will”. Richard Beadle has called this play “conceptually subtle” expressing the audience’s “commitment to the duties of being both a citizen of York and a soul in Christ” (Beadle,

¹ All citations from the plays are from this edition.

“The York Corpus Christi Play” 100). I would like to suggest that the play was, indeed, conceived, written and revised to teach each member of the audience to be “a soul in Christ.”

But how can I make such a claim in the light of the history of the plays? The first record evidence for the play comes from a rental of space to house a pageant wagon in 1377.² In his new edition of the cycle, Beadle has changed his earlier dating of the surviving manuscript of 1463-1477 to 1476-7 (Beadle, *The York Plays* xii-xviii; see also Beadle, “Richard Lancaster”). New evidence of the political activities surrounding Richard Duke of Gloucester in the mid 1470s has led him to favour the later date, making the gap between the first record and the text close to a century. We have a list of the pageants from 1415, the *Ordo Paginarum*, that gives us the basic shape of each episode at that time. We also have guild evidence that indicates a major revision, particularly of the Passion sequence in 1422. Other revisions are also attested to by erasures and additions to the *Ordo* (REED: *York* 16-26, 702-711). Despite this clear evidence of constant revision, I believe the manuscript, as we have it, is a highly sophisticated, unified, poetic whole and arguably one of the greatest literary achievements of the English fifteenth century.

The moment when Christ first falters in his humanity, the scene in Gethsemane, is foreshadowed by a pattern of characters from the beginning of the cycle and echoed in the episodes after the Resurrection. Noah is reluctant to build the ark – he is too old and feeble, Abraham is confused by the command to sacrifice Isaac after the promise that his seed would people the earth, Moses claims no one will accept him as a leader, Joseph, like Noah, feels his age as does Simeon. John the Baptist is discouraged in his work, the pilgrims to Emmaus have lost all hope and Thomas will not believe. Each situation is slightly different but the playwrights have carefully structured each story so that, after very human reluctance or disbelief, the central character enters into a trusting relationship with God, accepting the proposition that if the call of God is answered, God himself will help his willing servant. The faith taught by the York Cycle urges members of the audience to engage in the “lif activ” and in this pattern of didacticism we have *exempla* of the difficulty inherent in fallen man striving to do the will of God followed by the assurance that God will help his servants. “Kynde of man,” as Christ says to John the Baptist, “is freele” (21/83).

² REED: *York*, 3. The dating of that entry in the edition is one year out – we did not adjust the date which falls between 1 January and 24 March from Old Style (using the calendar year March 25-March 24) to modern practice as we should have done. See p. xliii.

But it is not only the repeated action that ties these plays together; it is the pattern of language. This is particularly true of the old men – Noah, Joseph and Simeon. Each feels the weight of age and weariness but when each submits to the will of God each feels the weight lifted. In his prayer of thanksgiving Noah says:

Ful wayke I was and all vnwelde
My werynes is wente away (8/93-94)

When the angel tells Joseph he has not been a cuckold and commissions him to care for Mary he prays:

Nowe, lorde God, full wele is me
That euyr þat I þis sight suld see,
I was neuer ar so light (13/282-4)

And when he takes the child from Mary, suddenly afraid of Herod's wrath in the Flight into Egypt episode, he says:

Are was I wayke, nowe am I wight
My lymes to welde ay at my wille
I loue my maker most of might
...
I haue oure helpe here in myn arme (18/219-21; 224)

And Simeon, when he hears the child is being brought to the temple, cries:

Nowe am I light as leyf on tree,
My age is went, I feyll no fray,
Methynke for this that is tolde me
I ame not olde. (17/345-8)

There are also little touches – so subtle that they are easily missed. When God comes into the Garden after the Fall, Adam, with whom he had walked and talked, cries in misery “I here þe, lorde, and seys the noȝt” (5/139). Sin has cut him off from companionship with God. Thirty-four episodes later, in that other garden, Mary Magdalen does not recognise the gardener whom she thinks she is talking to as the risen Christ until he shows her the wounds that have bought her salvation. Then she cries:

Mi lorde Jesu I knowe nowe þe
 Þi woundes þai are nowe wette. (39/80-1)

But perhaps the most obvious of the repeated patterns in the cycle that cause the great sense of unity and direction is the sequences of lyric praise of God, Christ and the Virgin Mary that echo across the pageants. It begins with the familiar liturgical hymn of praise, the *Sanctus* sung by the angels after their creation (1/49sd). When God places Adam and Eve in the Garden, Eve asks him what they should do, to which he replies:

For þis skyl made I 3ow þis day,
 My name to worship ay-whare;
 Louys me, forþi, and louys me ay
 For my making, I axke no mare. (3/65-8)

God made man to love and praise him but after the Fall and before the Incarnation, although the patriarchs are thankful and the released children of Israel sing the great hymn of thanksgiving, *Cantemus Domino* as they follow Moses towards the promised land, there is no lyric praise. It is with the entry of God into the world that the lyrics begin. As soon as the baby is born with Mary, alone on the wagon with her child, says,

Hayle, my lord God, hayle prince of pees,
 Hayle my fadir, and hayle my sone;
 Hayle souereyne all synnes to sesse
 Hayle, God and man in erth to wonne.
 Hayle, thurgh whos might,
 All þis worlde was first begunne,
 Merknes and light. (14/57-63)

to be followed by Joseph when he comes in from the cold:

Hayle, my maker, hayle Crist Jesu,
 Hayle, riall kyng, roote of all the right,
 Hayle, saueour.
 Hayle my lorde, lemer of light,
 Hayle, blessed floure. (14/108-112)

The Kings present their gifts to the Christ child with a stanza of lyric praise each and then Simeon and Anna Phanuel (in a pageant that was not registered until 1567 that shows considerable linguistic difference

from the rest of the cycle) also have long lyrics of praise and welcome. Welcome is also mixed with praise as Christ enters Jerusalem as that episode ends with 56 lines of praise followed by the stage direction "*Tunc cantant.*" These lyric outbursts of praise and love reappear in the Marian sequence when Gabriel opens the Death of Mary play with the second annunciation:

Hayle! myghfull Marie, Goddis modir so mylde!
 Hayle! be þe roote of all reste, hayll be þou ryall,
 Hayle! floure and frewte noȝt faded nor filyd,
 Haile! salue to all synnefull; . . . (45/1-4)

The next play, The Appearance of our Lady to Thomas, combines the motif of despair reversed and lyric praise. Thomas opens the play:

In waylyng and weping, in woo am I wapped,
 In site and in sorowe, in sighing full sadde (46, 1-2)

But 130 lines later, when he recognises the Virgin, he bursts into 12 lines of lyric praise that end,

Haile! pereles in plesaunce,
 Haile! precious and pure,
 Haile! salue þat is sure,
 Haile! lettir of langure,
 Haile! bote of bale in obeyesaunce. (46, 139-145)

picking up even within the lyric the "despair reversed" motif.

The transcendent beauty of these hymns of praise in the plays before the Passion sequence and after the Resurrection, make their brutal parody in the Passion sequence all the more difficult for the audience to endure as the soldiers beat Jesus at the end of the Second Trial Before Pilate:

	<i>Aue, riall roy and rex judeorum</i>
	Hayle, comely kyng þat no kingdom has kende.
	Hayle, undugthy duke, þi dedis ere don,
	Hayle man vnmyghty þi menȝi to mende.
III Miles	Hayll, lord without lande for to lende,
	Hayll, kyng, hayll knave vnconand.
IV Miles	Hayll, freyke without forse to fende
	Hayll, strang, þat may not wele stand
	To stryve.

I Miles We! Harlott, heve vp thy hande,
 And vs all þat þe wirschip are wirkand
 Thank vs, þer ill mot þou þryve. (33/408-419)

This clear pattern of ritual praise and its parody point to a fundamental dichotomy in the approach of the episodes of the Passion sequence and the episodes that precede it and those that follow it to the figure of Christ. Before the Conspiracy begins and after the Resurrection, the York Christ is a man of words – he is the Word made Flesh – a teacher of great persuasion and patience. But in the Passion Sequence, as Herod cries, his “langage is lorne” (31/90). It is in his actions, his submission to the will of God, that he teaches by example.

In the Ministry sequence, Christ himself is the expositor who explains the necessity of the Baptism to John, who exhorts man to follow his example, who chides the angel of the Temptation pageant for his oversimplification of the problem of sin. This Christ is a “leche” to sick souls, a great teacher and a man of humble dignity. This is a God of forgiveness and of love, a God of reason and of patience, a “myrroure for man,” an example for all men to follow. To respond to the exhortation to follow this Christ is relatively easy because he manifests the characteristics most admired in man. There is little awesome or remote in this God. Even the great experience on the Mount of Transfiguration is carefully prepared through gentle teaching. Yet he is a man of authority over the living Baptist, the dead Moses and Elias, the ministering angel and, most importantly, over Satan himself.

This teaching Christ re-emerges in the final episodes of the cycle. He reminds the pilgrims to Emmaus that all that had occurred, including the Resurrection, had been foretold by the prophets (40/130-136). He calms the fears of the disciples in the Upper Room just as he had calmed the fears of the disciples on the Mountain of the Transfiguration and at the end of that episode he commissions the disciples just as he had commissioned John the Baptist:

My brethir, fonde now forthe in fere,
 Ouere all in ilke a contre clere,
 My rising both ferre and nere,
 And preche it schall 3e
 And my blissyng I giffe 3ou here
 And my mer3e. (41/193-198)

But it is in the Ascension play we see most clearly the skilled teacher of the Ministry sequence. We see him first praying an intercessory prayer

of compassion and understanding asking the Father to “hallow them” – the disciples. Christ shows that he knows that the way of life that he has been preaching is not only difficult but can only be accomplished with the help of God. Like the ordinary people in the earlier episodes of the cycle they can succeed only if, as John the Baptist said, they have made themselves God’s “wonnyng stede” – his “dwelling place.” He then turns to the disciples and first reproves them for their “wane-trowing” (43/83). They at least have seen the risen Christ. They must believe that, as he is risen, so shall all men rise and stand before him at the judgment. As he did in the John the Baptist pageant, he adopts a device of a medieval preacher and moves on to his second “skill” or point (43/113) emphasising that as man was lost in the fall, so Christ has bought him, to bring him “agayne to blisse” (42/119) and to confound the devil. “Þe þirde skille” (42/121) is that he shall come again to judge the world. But until that day, they are to preach the gospel “Tille ilke a creatoure lif-fand” (42/131) casting out devils and healing the sick. But, as is the case in all these episodes, it is clear that it is not only the disciples assembled on the pageant wagon who must teach and heal, but all believers. This is once again an exhortation to the people of York to an active Christian life.

These didactic patterns of events and language become more and more obvious the more one reads or sees the play. But, as I have suggested, Christ does not teach only with words. In the Passion sequence he says very little and, when he does, they are particular words of power. There is another key phrase that occurs in two episodes, the Sacrifice of Isaac and the Baptism “in worde, in werke.” Beadle gives, as the first definition of “werke,” “deeds or actions.” At the centre of this play, it is Christ’s “werke” – his willing submission to judicial torture and murder – that brings home to the audience the abundance of God’s grace. In the two great lyrics from the cross, he emphasises to the crowd before him on the streets of York that his sacrifice has been for them:

Al men þat walkis by waye or street,
 Takes tente 3e schalle no trauayle tynne
 Byholdes my hed, myn handis and my feete,
 And fully feele nowe, or 3e fine,
 Yf any mourning may be meete,
 Or myscheue measured vnto myne (35/253-58)

With bittirfull bale haue I bought
 Þus, man, all þi misse for to mende.
 On me for to looke lette þou no3t,

How baynly my body I bende.
 No wighte in þis worlde wolde haue wende
 What sorrowe I suffer for thy sake.
 Manne, kaste [m]y kyndynesse be kende,
 Trewe tente vnto me þat þou take,
 And treste (36/183-91)

After the Resurrection, not only does the risen Christ again emerge as a teacher and a man of words, he also displays his wounds reminding them of his “bittirfull bale.” As we have seen, it is when she sees his “woundes” that “are nowe wette” (39/81) that Mary Magdalen recognises him in the Garden and Thomas believes because he sees the “blode of price,” “þis blessed blode” (41/181, 184). These “images of pity” continue through the final episodes of the cycle to culminate as Christ begins his great Judgment speech:

Here may 3e see my woundes wide,
 Þe whilke I tholed for your mysdede.

Thurgh harte and heed, foote, hande and hide
 Not for my gilte, butt for youre nede (47/245-48)

But the speech that begins with the evidence of the magnitude of God’s grace ends with the Judgment in the humble terms of Matthew 25 – the basis of the Seven Acts of Corporal Mercy. The saved and damned in the York Cycle are not prelates or kings, as they are in Chester, they are simple folk dressed only in shirts and hose. Once again the lesson being taught is that it is when the ordinary people, like the audience, will face judgment, they will be judged for whether they fed the poor, gave them water, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, visited the sick or comforted the prisoner.

The *York Cycle* is neither flamboyant nor curious. If we look to find in it the twisted violence of the Towneley Pilate or the bucolic quick-wittedness of Mak, we look in vain. York’s great strength lies in its simplicity. As pageant wagon trundled after pageant wagon the good news of the Christian faith unfolded before the audience. The stories and the images were familiar to the people of York from the annual performance of the play. Because of this, each episode implies them all. In Adam’s fall is implied the second Adam’s sacrifice and in Christ’s condemnation to death is implied Abel’s murder. Through the figure of Christ the audience is taught how to live in a right relationship with God, how to see that men and women like themselves could be granted

forgiveness and to experience the agony of God as he suffered for them.

But who were these playwrights that I have been referring to so casually? We cannot know for certain but some years ago I made a suggestion that I have no reason to withdraw (Johnston, “The *York Cycle* and the Libraries of York” 370). We know that the city, as producer, kept a close watch on the play and it was by permission of the city council that episodes changed hands or were amalgamated (*REED: York* Appendix 6 “Pageants in the Corpus Christi Play”). But the ruling oligarchy of the city were merchants and did not have, themselves, the learning and poetic skill demonstrated in the text. Whoever first wrote the play, there must have been a stable community within York, one with the continuity and institutional memory for whom the text of the play was of sufficient importance to undertake the responsibility for overseeing the revisions, carefully monitoring the patterns of the poetry, and ensuring that the basic structure and theology remained intact.

This is especially important when we consider the striking difference in the portrayal of Christ in the Passion Sequence from the rest of the cycle. We know that in the 1420s there was a major revision of that sequence and we cannot escape the major shift in the treatment of the character of Christ in those plays. Yet the longer sequence is enhanced rather than destroyed by the great emphasis on the suffering of Christ – an emphasis that has more in common with the “affective piety” movement than with the Biblical didacticism in the plays before or after the Passion Sequence. The two threads of lay piety have been skilfully woven together so that the York Christ, as he presents himself as a “mirroure for man” “in worde and in werke,” can be both teacher and suffering servant. Also, in the Passion Sequence there is more non Biblical material than elsewhere in the cycle – particularly material from the popular *Gospel of Nicodemus*.

In my paper on the libraries of York, I suggested that the community that monitored the text was the Augustinian Friary with its important library, a tradition of scholarship carried out in their *studium concursorium* that provided training for the brothers at the level of a university, with scholars and preachers such as John Waldeby, John Erghome, William Bewick and John Bedford as teachers. The Friary was part of the life of the city. Its house stood beside the Guildhall near the end of Coney Street – a location that made involvement with the city inevitable. One of the station lists for the plays that survived from the fifteenth century provides evidence of the friary renting a station along with its neighbour the Hospital of St Leonard. The Corpus Christi Guild, the most popular

fraternity in a city of fraternities, established an altar in the Friary church in honour of the Real Presence of Christ in 1470-71. Over the years, nine Augustinians became members of the Guild of Corpus Christi. No other religious house, not even St Mary's Abbey, was as involved with the city as the Austin Friary. They were intimately concerned with the cultivation of the spiritual lives of the people among whom they lived and served. Moreover, again and again as I have sought the origins of particular interpretations of scriptural passages dramatised in the cycle, I have found them in works in the Friary library (Johnston, "The *York Cycle* and the Libraries of York" 366-8). They also possessed a copy of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* (Humphreys 69 [item 285c]).

For many years it was assumed that the York plays somehow evolved from a procession of pageants related to the feast of Corpus Christi established in York in 1325. There have been suggestions that the Guild of Corpus Christi must have somehow played a role in the development of the cycle but the Guild had its own dramatic tradition (See Johnston, "The Plays of the Religious Guilds of York" 55-90). It is the historians who have shown us the way. I believe, with Professor Barry Dobson, the deliberate single creation of the York Cycle which he reached by weighing carefully the evolving relationship between the city and the guilds between 1325 and 1377 (see Dobson). Jonathan Hughes in his expansive study of York in the second half of the fourteenth century has insisted that the plays were "written by clergy of the diocese and probably supervised by the York Minster clergy" (Hughes, "Thoresby, John"). But such a heterogeneous group of individuals could not have sustained the revisions that we know took place through the two hundred years. I believe that the play sequence was conceived in the third quarter of the fourteenth century by men primarily caught up in Thoresby's biblical didacticism and created by one or more learned teachers and poets. Once the play was written, an arrangement was made with the guilds and the city council to produce it annually during the feast of Corpus Christi. I believe that the Austin Friary, a community like a modern college with continuous traditions over generations of scholars, took control of the text and, at some time not long after the *Ordo Paginarum* was written down in 1415, undertook to "bring it up to date" perhaps inspired by Love's newly approved *Mirroure of the blessyd lyf of Jesu Christ* by altering the Passion Sequence to strengthen the "affective" impact of the suffering of Christ. Other changes were, of course, made over the years as well. From the erasures and additions in the *Ordo* of the pageants in the Nativity sequence, it is clear changes were made at some time between 1415 and 1476 and we know from the Mercer's In-

denture of 1433 what changes were made in that play in the 18 years between the *Ordo* and the *Indenture*. Yet the integrity of the patterns of episode and language are maintained.

The *York Cycle* is like a great and intricate tapestry worked over again and again not to obscure its basic simplicity of design but to people it with countless ordinary men and women whose frailty and “wan-hope” sets the tender majesty of God the Son in bold relief. It does not shock or terrify us. Even the brutality of the Passion is inevitable from the nature of man. The York playwrights did not seek to frighten their audiences into repentance or entertain them with comic devils or contemporary asides. Instead they chose the simpler approach of reasoned didacticism adding little to the already dramatic story of the scriptures and detracting nothing from it. Because of this, critics have too often been led to consider individual episodes as dull or pedantic, lacking that spark of humour or excitement found in other medieval plays. But, in York, we do not have a fragment, we have a complete cycle loved and laboured over by men of faith and intelligence for perhaps over one hundred years before it was committed to the manuscript that we have. Because of the astounding coherence of the themes and motifs that appear again and again strengthening and reinforcing one another, it must be considered as a whole, not as the sum of its parts.

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