

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF NUMERICAL SYMBOLISM IN “*THE DIVINE COMEDY*” AND “*PEARL*”

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Abstract. This article examines numerical symbolism in “*Divine Comedy*” by Dante Alighieri and the Middle English poem *Pearl*. It argues that symbolic numbers function as key structural and thematic elements in both works. While “*The Divine Comedy*” is organized around the numbers three, nine, and ten, “*Pearl*” is structured through the recurring numbers three, four, and twelve, largely derived from the vision of the New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation. These numerical patterns influence the poems’ narrative organization, stanza structure, and symbolic imagery. The study demonstrates that numerical symbolism serves as a fundamental organizing principle reflecting the medieval belief in a divinely ordered universe.

Keywords: numerical symbolism, medieval literature, biblical numerology, poetic structure, “*Divine Comedy*”, “*Pearl*”.

The use of numerical symbolism in Dante’s “*Divine Comedy*” has long attracted scholarly attention. In contrast, the comparable use of numerical patterns in the Middle English poem *Pearl*, written by the anonymous *Pearl*-poet, has received considerably less recognition. Nevertheless, both works demonstrate a deliberate and sophisticated use of symbolic numbers as structural and thematic devices.

While the “*Divine Comedy*” is fundamentally organized around the numbers three, nine, and ten, “*Pearl*” is structured through the recurring numbers three, four, and twelve. These numerical patterns are not arbitrary; rather, they derive from biblical symbolism and reflect a broader medieval tradition in which numbers carried theological and spiritual meanings.

In Dante’s case, the symbolic framework of the poem is closely connected to biblical numerology and Christian theology. Similarly, the numerical symbolism in “*Pearl*” also originates from the Bible, most prominently from Chapter 21 of the Book of Revelation. This chapter provides the visionary description of the New Jerusalem, which the poet adapts in the latter part of “*Pearl*”. Drawing directly from this biblical source, the poet describes the heavenly city with twelve foundations (lines 993–1022), four walls, each measuring twelve furlongs in length (line 1030), and twelve gates, arranged with three gates in each wall (lines 1034–35)

The city extended in three directions in its form,
Stretching twelve furlongs before one reached its end—
In height, in width, and in length alike,
For so the Apostle John measured it.

And, as John writes, I saw even more:
Each side of that place possessed its own gates.
Thus I perceived twelve in total,
The portals fashioned from rich plates of precious metal.

These lines from “*Pearl*” provide a clear explanation for the poet’s deliberate selection of the number *twelve* and its related numerical factors. The description of the heavenly city is

structured around the numbers *twelve*, *four*, and *three*, which together form the numerical foundation of the vision. This symbolism is particularly significant because the vision of the New Jerusalem represents the culmination of the poem, the point toward which the narrative and spiritual movement of the work gradually develops.

If the poet had employed these numbers merely in a conventional or decorative manner, their presence would not appear especially noteworthy. However, the situation is quite different in "*Pearl*". The numbers drawn from the Book of Revelation are not used superficially; rather, they are intricately integrated into the very fabric of the poem. They shape not only the imagery of the vision but also influence the metrical design, structural organization, and poetic ornamentation of the work. In this way, numerical symbolism becomes an essential organizing principle that underlies both the artistic form and the theological meaning of the poem.

The numerical pattern based on twelve, four, and three also governs the metrical and structural organization of "*Pearl*". Each stanza consists of twelve lines and employs three rhyme sounds, while every line is composed of four stresses. In addition, many lines demonstrate alliteration on three or four words, reinforcing the poem's formal symmetry. The opening lines illustrate this stylistic pattern:

In total, the poem contains 101 stanzas, which results in 1,212 lines overall. Of these, the first ninety-nine stanzas are organized in a way that resembles the structural design of Dante's "*Divine Comedy*". They are arranged into three sections of approximately equal length, followed by two concluding stanzas that function as an epilogue.

A similar numerical structure appears in the "*Divine Comedy*", which consists of ninety-nine cantos preceded by an introductory canto. In "*Pearl*", transitions between the three main sections occur in stanzas 33 and 65, where the dreamer poses questions to the Pearl-maiden concerning the nature of her heavenly life. Particularly noteworthy in these transitional passages are the balanced rhetorical questions found in lines 389–392 and 771–774, as well as the verbal echoes linking lines 392 and 774, which further emphasize the poem's structural symmetry.

The distribution of stanzas within the poem is also significant. The first section contains thirty-three stanzas, the second thirty-two, and the third thirty-four, producing a total of ninety-nine stanzas, to which the two concluding stanzas are added, resulting in 101 stanzas overall. A comparable arrangement can be observed in Dante's poem: the "*Inferno*" contains thirty-four cantos, while both the "*Purgatorio*" and the "*Paradiso*" contain thirty-three cantos each.

The division of "*Pearl*" into three parts is one of the most striking examples of the poet's use of numerical symbolism. However, the poet does not limit this symbolic structure only to the larger organization of the work. In addition to arranging the lines, stanzas, and the overall composition according to the patterns of the numbers 3, 4, and 12, the author consistently integrates the numbers 3 and 4 into even the smallest structural elements of the poem. This careful and deliberate use of numerical patterns demonstrates the poet's deep commitment to symbolic order and reveals how numerical meaning operates throughout the entire composition.

Dante Alighieri carefully employs numerical patterns throughout the narrative. For instance, Dante encounters three beasts (*Inferno* I, 30–51), is guided by three figures—Virgil, Beatrice, and Bernard of Clairvaux—and ascends three steps to reach the gate of Purgatory

(*Purgatorio* IX, 94–102). He also observes the three theological virtues on the right side of the chariot and the four cardinal virtues on the left (*Purgatorio* XXIX, 121–130).

A similar numerical pattern can be observed in *Pearl*. In this poem, the narrator commits three errors (lines 290–300) and later poses four questions (lines 560–565). He also offers four expressions of devotion to the Virgin Mary (lines 433–436), while Jesus Christ is compared to a Lamb three times (lines 853–854). The poet extends this symbolic pattern even into descriptions of the natural world. The beautiful land where the narrator falls asleep is described as containing flowers of three colors—yellow, blue, and red (line 27). Similarly, the hill where the *Pearl* maiden disappeared is said to produce four different flowers: gillyflower, ginger, gromwell, and peony (lines 43–44). Numerical symbolism also appears in theological imagery. The Virgin Mary is described as the empress of three realms—heaven, earth, and hell (lines 441–442). Likewise, humanity is metaphorically portrayed as forming the body of Christ, with believers described as parts of the body such as the head, arm, leg, and nail (lines 458–459).

In conclusion, both “*The Divine Comedy*” and “*Pearl*” demonstrate a deliberate use of numerical symbolism that reflects medieval theological and literary traditions. In “*The Divine Comedy*”, Dante Alighieri structures the poem around the symbolic numbers three, nine, and ten, while the *Pearl*-poet organizes “*Pearl*” through the recurring numbers three, four, and twelve, largely derived from the imagery of the New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation.

These numbers shape not only the thematic meaning of the poems but also their structural design, including stanza form, narrative organization, and symbolic imagery. Consequently, numerical symbolism functions as a central organizing principle in both works, reflecting the medieval belief in a divinely ordered universe expressed through sacred numbers.

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