

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

who wish to understand the problem under discussion? We shall answer that question in the second part of our inquiry.

ED. KÖNIG.

*THE SENSE OF SIN IN GREAT LITERATURE.*

II.

“PEER GYNT.”

It is the customary thing to say that Ibsen in *Peer Gynt* set himself to hold up the mirror to the moral countenance of his native Norway. Here, however, as elsewhere, the insight of genius, like the word of God, is never of merely private interpretation. “Peer Gynt” is not simply a Norwegian of our time; he is a man of all time. The poet has grasped the principle of his life so deeply, has with such fairness and inevitableness pursued what may have seemed to Peer Gynt himself to be casual and irrelevant words, imaginations, actions, to their one source in his ultimate nature; that in writing the play, *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen has declared from the housetops the secret of many hearts. For, once again, we men and women have come a long way, and have in the course of our voyage seen many things by land and sea. We have trafficked in strange merchandise. The reminiscences of infinitely various experiences lurk within us, written, as it were, on the tablets of our heart, in invisible ink. And at the challenge of a deep-seeing report concerning any one human soul, the hidden characters in every human heart stand out.

I am quite sure that if *Peer Gynt* had a fair chance, it would do an enormous moral service. In spite of its apparent richness and complexity, it is a simple drama. The very opening words, “Peer, you’re lying!” put the clue

into your hands at the outset. All that follows is the movement towards that particular moral crisis (and to the solution of it, if there is in the drama such a solution), in which an essentially shifty and plausible human soul is at last confronted with the truth about itself.

It is a work also which should appeal to men of what is called a practical turn of mind, who may not take seriously the moral challenge of such poetry as deals with the troubles and embarrassments of rarer souls. I can overhear a man saying, "Hamlet! 'to be or not to be!' What moonshine! The man has far too little to do! These dreamers and poets only put ideas into people's heads." Now "Peer Gynt" is a practical man in the sense that he is one of those men who, having set his heart upon something, tries to get it. If scruples arise in his mind as to whether or not what he is doing or has done is right, he has an inexhaustible faculty for dodging the moral point and slurring it over with that rhetoric of self-support and self-justification for which we all have a perilous facility. Of course, he has his deeper moments as we all have, even the most prosaic, when we suspect that the kind of thing which we try to make light of as poetry, as imagination, as dreaming, may after all be the truth and the thing with which we have to do.

I once walked over the island of Rousay in the Orkney group. It stands sheer out of the sea like a table, a green and pleasant island. The sun was shining in a cloudless sky that day; and yet it would have been disastrous to keep one's eyes too much above the earth. For again and again, one came to a narrow slit or crack where, looking down, one saw the sea wriggling like a snake some hundreds of feet beneath. In his successful and outrageous career Peer Gynt comes to such slits and cracks in his own chosen scheme of things. Of course he does things which we who

dwell in cities cannot do. But these are not of the essence of his moral history. The essence of his moral history is something which we have in common with him, something certainly which offers itself to us all. No one knows better than Peer Gynt himself what precisely is that fundamental fault. He did not regard it as a fault : he simply regarded it as a fact. Sometimes he boasted of it. Sometimes he simply accepted it as part of himself, as he accepted the mountains as part of the world. There were moments when he was ashamed of it. And at the last he cried out in terror to be delivered from it.

And now what was this last fact or bias in Peer Gynt's soul which, and not circumstance, ordered his life and, to say no more, put his eternal destiny in hazard ? Well, after all, no one knows us so well as we know ourselves. "The spirit of a man is the candle of the Lord" : and more than once did Peer Gynt himself put his finger with absolute precision upon his own weak spot. For example, once upon a time, when he was in hiding in the forest, after one of his early misdemeanours, he sees a boy carrying a scythe. The boy looks about him stealthily to make sure that he is not observed ; and then with the scythe *cuts off his own finger*. He wraps up his bleeding hand and disappears. Peer Gynt understands everything. It is a boy who in fear or hatred of the national conscription has maimed himself so that he may escape as disqualified. Pondering the incident, Peer sees with perfect clearness that it is just a thing like that that he could never bring himself to do. Like that boy, he also might hate conscription and take means to escape it ; but it never, never would be such means. He might think of such means. Yes, he probably would : for it was a well-known, much-used way of avoiding the military service. He would certainly think of it.

“Ay, wish it done,—will it to boot,—  
But do it!—No, that’s past my understanding.”

There you have the moral formula for this man: *he will never go through a thing, but round about it.* He will never stand up to the consequences of his own acts. He will not act unless he has already conceived the consequences and discounted them, not by the energy and fidelity of his own soul, but by making sure of a back door, a line of retreat, a bridge. Rather than look into the face of those moral realities which visit him, he will fell trees, as another man might play hard at golf, or he will drink, or he will whip up his own jaded passions, or he will intoxicate himself with lies of his own imagining, or he will assume the very consolations of religion as though they had been specially intended for him. Peer Gynt will not go straight. He will not think straight: and straight thinking is a formula for righteousness. Whenever a situation is becoming too hot for him, he will leave it. Whenever his own thoughts are becoming too sombre and close-fitting, he will think of something else. He will never cut off his finger—for anything, either good or bad. He will not endure the knife of reality even for the sake of the integrity and thoroughness of his soul. And yet, all the time, except in those moments when he sees through himself and knows that with all his tricks, he is merely postponing a painful interview,—all the time he takes pride in this mastery of himself as he calls it,—that he is above those scruples and interior judgments which stultify weaker men. He calls this ‘being himself,’ and ‘being emperor of himself’; when the fact is, he is all the time afraid of himself. He even allows himself to believe that he is fighting his own battle, and bearing the consequences of his own acts: whereas the fact is, his whole path is strewn with sorrow which falls, not upon himself, but upon those like Åse his old mother and Solvejg his

sweetheart, who, because they love him, must wait and suffer. It is such an easy thing for a man to say that he can surely do what he likes so long as he is ready to bear the penalty. But the fact is, no man can bear more than a very small part of the influence which follows inevitably upon his acts.

One night, later on in the story, Peer Gynt, in the height of his prosperity, is discoursing over the wine. He is, as usual, complimenting himself upon his success. He attributes it all to his consistent adherence to the policy of "going round," of hedging, of not-committing oneself "once for all" to anything. He has a fine outburst elsewhere against the phrase "once for all," and against the entire idea of it. Hold on, he would say, so long as it suits you; but at that point let go. But hearken to Peer Gynt: like some of the world's most sinister figures, he has style.

"The key to the art  
Of life's affairs is simply this:  
To keep one's ear close shut against  
The ingress of one dangerous viper."

"What sort of viper, pray dear friend?" asks Mr. Cotton, one of the sycophants who is listening to him. And Peer continues:

"A little one that slyly wiles you  
To tempt the irretrievable.  
The essence of the art of daring,  
The art of bravery in fact,  
Is this: To stand with choice-free foot  
Amid the treacherous snares of life,—  
To know for sure that other days  
Remain beyond the day of battle,—  
To know that ever in the rear  
A bridge for your retreat stands open.  
This theory has borne me on,  
Has given my whole career its colour."

Peer Gynt, in fact, is one of those who *will* be morally com-

fortable. They do not propose to conform to the rules for living which make for peace of conscience. But if conscience should stir, and such men are not unaware that it may, he has his resource. He will dodge its thrust. He will think of something else. He will make a large contribution to some undoubtedly good cause, as Peer Gynt, when he became a little uneasy about his slave-carrying business, became a large exporter of Bibles by the same ships,—with the idea that God will be sensible and is sure to put one thing against another. It was like him, for instance, when, after a long absence, during which his old mother was left to see her home dismantled to pay his fines, herself sinking to death, it was like him on entering the old home, to forestall any word of reproach by sitting on the edge of her bed, putting his big arms round her frail body, knowing (for these subtle rascals know everything) that the divinity of a mother is just this, that she is ready to take any excuse for not keeping up even a true judgment of her child if that judgment is hard. There he sat, and before she could speak he had begun his old romantic stories recalling old incidents, mixing them with new lies, bearing down all her sense of injury :

“No, now we will chat together,  
But only of this and that,—  
Forget what’s awry and crooked,  
And all that is sharp and sore.”

“Forget all that is sharp and sore”: that is the formula for Peer Gynt. And now for this piece of sincere imagination, in which one who even here betrays that profound and ruthless power of analysis to which he gave free rein in his later social plays depicts the career of a man who has adopted such a formula for life.

Peer Gynt’s first handicap was his father. From that father he inherited a swaggering and disorderly disposition.

The father had been a hard drinker, proud, flamboyant, unusual. He came of a family of some standing, and that fact alone had seemed to justify his indolence, and to establish his right to be a law to himself. He was what Mr. Chesterton has called "a rich and reeking human personality." As was natural, his wife Åse had a hard time. Poverty crept upon the home like a frost. Poverty, says Emerson, is demoralising. It is no answer to Emerson to say that it need not be.

Åse took refuge from the brutality of her position in fairy-tales, in stories of heroes, in folklore and mystery. Peer Gynt was the child of these two, according to the spirit also.

For myself, I think that in this drama Ibsen is fairer to all the facts of heredity than he came to be in his later writings. In those later writings he lays a terrible emphasis upon the inheritance which descends from generation to generation. But he came almost to lose sight of the spirit of protest and moral freedom which likewise is an endowment or prejudice of every human life.

In Peer Gynt we can see the working of the drunken, riotous father, and of the dreamy, imaginative mother: but in Peer Gynt we can see also the working of another personality which knows itself and which might have taken measures.

When we first meet Peer Gynt, he is in the middle of one of his stories which were apt to grow more and more wonderful as he proceeded with them; stories which he told with such circumstance and eloquence that he ended either believing them, or feeling and behaving as though they were true.

He is sore at the moment because in a quarrel he has had the worse of it, and with that thin-skinnedness of his he suspects that people are laughing at him. He would like to



do something to soothe his vanity and to re-establish himself as what Mr. Arnold Bennett has called "a card."

Ingrid, who would appear to have been in love with him, though her parents were opposed, is to be married to a kind of simpleton. Peer Gynt hangs about, hating everybody. The young girls will not dance with him. Even Solvejg, whom Peer has the insight to see as differing from all the others in sweetness and modesty, "with her eyes on the ground and her hand on her mother's skirt," even Solvejg shrinks from this wild man. He breaks through a door, finds Ingrid, the bride, and carries her off to the mountains by a path too perilous for pursuers. This is done not in love, but in sheer vanity and rebelliousness and self-assertion. An action like that, of course, brings things to a crisis: a man must repent and get better, or go on and get worse. He sends Ingrid home, and himself wanders among the mountains. Here he encounters mythical beings, trolls and the Dövre King,—representing without doubt the collapse for the time being of all the protesting voices in the man's soul. For the trolls are those beings in this world who are affected by our *thoughts* and whose thoughts affect us just as though thoughts were completed actions.

Nevertheless the higher voice is not quite silent in Peer; though when it appeals to him, instead of acting upon it, he simply becomes sentimental over it, thus allowing it to evaporate without having touched his will.

"There go two brown eagles sailing, and southward the wild geese fly; and here in the mire knee-deep must I tramp and moil. (Leaps up). Yea! I will with them! Yea, I will wash myself pure in the bath of the keenest wind! I will up; I will plunge myself clean in the shining baptismal font, I will out . . . o'er the mountains, I will ride all sweet in soul."

But as a matter of fact he does nothing. He was one of

those who exhaust the impulses of their soul in mere feeling or in speech, who, instead of acting, simply approve of themselves for having had such feelings, and move a vote of confidence in themselves. If there is any motion to the contrary, they declare it to be out of order.

Solvejg, the sweet maiden, who, as such things in the wonderful Providence of God do happen, sees something in this wild man which has let loose her power to love, Solvejg seeks him in the mountains, and is ready to share her life with him. He is man enough to know the value of her,—“it makes any day a holy day to look at you”;—and sensitive enough to perceive that in loyalty to such a pure woman his disintegrated life would become sound and true. But he is man enough also to know that Solvejg is not one to love lightly, but to love once for all. And there, of course, he fails. She has entered his cottage, he remaining outside. But he does not enter. Solvejg speaks: “Are you coming?” “Round about!” he answers to himself. “What?” “You must wait. It is dark, and I’ve got something heavy to fetch.” “Wait: I will help you: the burden we’ll share.” “No, stay where you are! I must bear it alone.” “But don’t go too far, dear!” “Be patient, my girl: be my way short or long, you must wait.” And Solvejg answers, nodding to him as he goes, “Yes, I’ll wait.”

But he does not come back: at least, not yet.

He visits his mother, who is just dying. She is too weak to scold, and, as we saw, he soon with his stories and his fancies puts her off. He makes her imagine that he and she are off on a sleigh. He snaps his fingers, cracks a whip until the old woman feels the wind on her cheeks, and sees the lights of the city towards which she is being borne. But it is the city of God: for as Peer Gynt looks hard at her he sees that she is dead. A great gulp of tenderness

rises in his throat ; but once again he destroys the very power of moral grief to do him good. He takes credit to himself for such fineness of feeling. He kisses his mother, saying, " That is the driver's fee," and then goes out leaving a poor peasant girl to bury her !

Peer Gynt emigrates, and we are led to understand that by the faithful application of his own unscrupulous principles he makes a fortune. This, in course of time, he loses. After wanderings in Morocco and in the Sahara he at length turns his face homewards. It is here that the drama rises to the level of great writing, to that level of moral insight and tenderness which will ensure it a place for ever. Peer Gynt comes back, and Ibsen makes us feel that this is what we have all to do : we have to come back. It is not easy. " Like an infinite wail is this coming in, coming home, coming back." For those who have eyes to see it is the first streak of any possible dawn for this man that he has so far overcome his love of moral comfort as to come back to scenes which must have the power to strike at his soul.

On the ship which is bearing him to Norway he encounters, when they are about a day's sailing from port, a stranger whom he had not seen previously. Of course this is simply Peer Gynt himself. It is the poet's way of telling us that after the mid-time of our life a man is never alone ; that there is always himself, the man he has been, and himself, the better man he has not been and might have been. Out at sea, and especially when, as happened to Peer Gynt's ship, a storm has broken loose and spars are going by the board, is a sure time and place for meeting that stranger who is a man's own self.

The ship is wrecked. Peer Gynt and the cook hang on to the keel of an upturned boat. But it can only bear one, and Peer Gynt takes care that he is the one. Seated

there, the mysterious stranger joins him and begins to talk about things. Peer Gynt reaches land, and things begin to ferment in his soul. There was a time when he was more or less master of his own faculties, a time when he could use his subtilty to extricate him out of difficult places. But, as I said in our last study, we never know how we are going to behave. Those very faculties now turn upon Peer Gynt and employ all their subtilty to drive him out of his own corners, to expose his own sophistries to himself and to leave him no hiding-place from reality. He begins with awful clarity to see through himself. He sees that he has never been anything. Thinking himself master of himself, he has on the contrary been the victim of this and that and everything. He picks up an onion and begins to peel one layer from another, always discovering still another, and that the whole thing is a thing of layers without any central personality. And he perceives that that is a picture of himself.

“What an enormous number of swathings!  
 Isn't the kernel soon coming to light?  
 I'm blest if it is! to the innermost centre  
 It's nothing but swathings each smaller and smaller.”

He tries to rally the old Peer Gynt who could sophisticate his own feelings; but in vain. He cannot but be serious, even superstitious. He sees grey thread-balls, and they keep saying to him, “We are the thoughts thou should'st have brought us.” He sees withered leaves, which also charge him: “We are a watchword: thou should'st have proclaimed us.” The winds sigh, and they seem to say: “We are the songs thou should'st have sung.” “We are tears,” say the dew-drops, “unshed for ever.” The broken straws on which he treads speak up to him: “We are deeds, thou should'st have achieved us: Doubt hath throttled, hath crippled us.” And at last he hears the wail-

ing of his old mother's voice : " You've driven me the wrong way," it complains.

In this mood he encounters a strange symbolical figure. Ibsen calls him the Button-moulder. He carries with him a ladle in which are placed for melting the souls of people who, like Dante's neutrals (who were too bad for Hell), have in this world been nothing, have never with energy been either good or bad.

There is, says this Button-moulder, one destiny for those whose will has been good : and there is another destiny for those whose will has been bad ; but for those who have never taken up a strong stand in life, either good or bad, who have simply been for themselves at every moment, there is no destiny but to be melted down into mere material, as you melt down a defaced coin. The charge, that is to say, which Peer Gynt's awakened conscience makes against him is that he has been—nothing !

There follows a time, we are asked to imagine, when Peer Gynt is searching for something either good or bad which he can bring to the Button-moulder's judgment, claiming that there and then did he, Peer Gynt, assert his true soul, that he may claim on the strength of that one thing a man's place and destiny. But his own ruthless and subtle mind, which formerly served him well, is now against him. He can find in all his career no individual, personal act, no act which with all its consequences he accepted and stood by. Time and again the Button-moulder crosses his path, reminding him that the hour cannot be much longer delayed.

One day in his wanderings he hears through the mist the voice of one singing. Something awakens within him. Following the direction of the sound, he reaches a hut, and coming to the doorway he sees within, Solvejg the sweet maiden who loved him, now old and blind. Though her

eyes are without vision, she knows that it is he,—he for whose coming she has waited all those years. “It is he! it is he! Now blessed be God!” she cries. But in a voice hoarse with concern he interrupts her. He asks her for the tale of his heartlessness towards her, so that he may submit even that to his judge. But she protests that he has never wronged her; that, on the contrary, her love of him has made her life the great thing it has been.

With this, his last hope seems lost, when it comes suddenly upon him that perhaps Solvejg can tell him where his true self has been. And here let Ibsen speak:

*Peer Gynt.* Lost! if you cannot guess riddles.

*Solvejg.* Ask them.

*Peer Gynt.* Ask them? ay, verily! Can you tell me where Peer Gynt has been since last we met?

*Solvejg.* Where he has been?

*Peer Gynt.* With the mark of his destiny upon his brow; e'en as he sprang from God's thought? Can you tell me that? If not, I must wend me home, must sink into the land of mists.

*Solvejg.* Oh, that riddle is easily read.

*Peer Gynt.* Then say what you know. Where have I been as myself, whole and true? Where have I been with God's stamp on my brow?

*Solvejg* (smiling). In my faith, in my hope, in my love.

*Peer Gynt* (starting back). What say you? Ha! they are juggling words. To that boy in your heart<sup>1</sup> you yourself are the mother.

*Solvejg.* His mother I am. But who is his father? 'Tis he who pardons at the mother's prayer.

*Peer Gynt* (as a ray of light from the rising sun falls on him). My mother, my spouse, thou innocent woman! Oh, shield me, shield me in thy bosom! (He grips fast hold of her and buries his face in her lap. Long silence as the sun rises).

*Solvejg* (sings softly). Sleep thou, sleep, my darling boy. I will rock thee, I will watch. The boy has sat on his mother's lap. They two have played the whole livelong day. The boy has rested on his mother's breast the whole livelong day. God bless thee, my joy! The boy has lain so close to my heart the whole livelong day. Now he is so tired. Sleep thou, sleep, my darling boy! I will rock thee, I will watch.

<sup>1</sup> “Boy in the heart”=idea.

*The Button-Caster's* voice (from behind the house). We meet at the last crossway, Peer ; and then we shall see—I say no more.

*Solvejg* (sings louder as the day strengthens). I will rock thee, I will watch. Sleep and dream, my darling.

It is true that Peer Gynt has still to meet the Button-moulder. He has still to stand up at the great Assizes. What then is his new confidence ? It is this : that in any world in which the Button-moulder has a place there will be a place likewise for Solvejg.

There are two rocks on which man must cast anchor,—or be wrecked,—woman and God. For many souls, those two rocks are outcroppings of the same underlying reef.

JOHN A. HUTTON.

## STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY.

### VII. UNIVERSAL RESTORATION.

It is a question of some real interest, whether Christian faith involves any particular belief respecting the destiny of those who persist in hostility to God. If the doctrine of verbal inspiration has gone, and we no longer feel obliged to give a place to every isolated Bible statement, it may be contended that the gaze of faith is bent solely on the Christian prospect, and that about everything outside the pencil of light cast by Jesus, and visible only to His followers, it must be wholly agnostic. In the main, I should hold, this contention is sound ; but a single reservation ought to be attached to it. Not even here can we escape from the logical principle that the knowledge of opposites is one. If faith predicates something of the redeemed, it must tell something also about those who spurn redemption. The words in which their lot is described may be preponderantly negative, but they contain a real meaning. And the positive knowledge available