

# On *Pearl* and Photography



Sophie Terakes\*

University of Sydney

*This article examines the anonymous medieval dream poem, Pearl, through photographic theory, chiefly employing Susan Sontag's book On Photography. While the poem has been analysed as numerous different artforms including a painting, a piece of jewellery and a precious jewel, this article argues that photography (albeit anachronistically) offers an especially useful framework for examining mourning in the poem. Photography is a medium bound up by contradictions (as Sontag writes, the camera is both a scientific tool and an instrument of high art). It thus provides the language necessary to discuss the poem's multivalent depiction of grief, and the tension between pleasure and pain that I argue resides at the heart of the poem. I will examine the poem's photographic qualities in three sections, focusing first on light, then death, then iterability, using each concept to draw out the work's emotive paradoxes. Photography, being a medium constituted by light, offers a rich analogy for the play between fantasy and reality at work within the Pearl-maiden. Similarly, Sontag's writing on the eternality and deathliness of all photographed subjects recalls the tragic relationship between remembering and forgetting that haunts the father's dream. Finally, this article applies the philosophy of photographic reproducibility to the maiden, examining her contradictory status as an indistinguishable copy and priceless original. This article contends that photographs, in their materiality, fragility, ghostliness and (often) emotional pathos, analogise the vain paternal longing that underpins the poem.*

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The eponymous maiden of the Middle English poem, *Pearl*, is dead; that much is intimated by the dreamer's reflections on her young body lying underground, 'clad in clot'.<sup>1</sup> Yet, somehow, she speaks to her bereaved father from beyond the grave. Whether explained in spiritual, supernatural, or magical terms, the father's dream is both brilliant and disturbing, painful and pleasurable. *Pearl* has regularly been analysed as if it were a traditional work of art. Jane Gilbert discusses *Pearl* as an anamorphic painting while Sarah Stanbury has described it as a carefully constructed piece of jewellery or Hollywood film.<sup>2</sup> Arthur Bahr and Helen Barr have likened it to a pearl itself.<sup>3</sup> However, I argue that photography offers a particularly illuminating framework for exploring the poem's multivalent depiction of grief and, more specifically, the tension between pleasure and pain that permeates this depiction. Such a comparison might seem anachronistic given that *Pearl* was written in the late fourteenth century, approximately five hundred years before the camera would be invented.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, it is self-evident that the *Pearl*-poet never intended his poem to be read photographically nor could the medium have influenced his work in any way. Yet I contend that *Pearl* and photography are not as temporally incongruent as they

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<sup>1</sup> *Pearl*-poet, 'Pearl', in *Teams Middle English Text Series*, ed. by Sarah Stanbury (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), p. 22. All subsequent references to *Pearl* are incorporated into the text.

<sup>2</sup> Jane Gilbert, 'Ceci n'est pas une marguerite: Anamorphosis in *Pearl*', in *Living Death in Medieval French and English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 151–90 (pp. 156–63); Sarah Stanbury, 'Pearl: Introduction', in *Teams Middle English Text Series* (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), pp. 1–12 (p. 2); Sarah Stanbury, 'Feminist Masterplots: The Gaze on the Body of *Pearl*'s Dead Girl', in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, ed. by Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 96–114.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Bahr, 'The Manifold Singularity of *Pearl*', *ELH*, 82 (2015), 729–58; Helen Barr, 'Pearl – Or "The Jeweller's Tale"', *Medium Aevum*, 69 (2000), 59–79.

<sup>4</sup> Stanbury, 'Pearl: Introduction', p. 1.

may seem. As Roland Barthes asserts, though all photography ‘is “modern,” mingled with our noisiest everyday life’, all photographs also possess an ‘enigmatic point of inactuality, a strange stasis, the stasis of an arrest’.<sup>5</sup> By framing and then freezing a moment, preserving it as it once was, all photography proclaims that its subject is invariably *no longer* or, Barthes writes, ‘has-been’.<sup>6</sup> Just as the medieval poem (itself a historical artefact) and its mournful narrator testify to the irretrievability of the past, so too all photographs are inherently rooted in history. Indeed, as Susan Sontag puts it, photography is ‘an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos’.<sup>7</sup> Materially, and often thematically, then, photography is a medium of loss. In bringing *Pearl* and photography together through their shared emphasis on mourning and grief, this article will closely analyse hitherto underdiscussed aspects of the poem. To do so, I will chiefly, though by no means exclusively, employ Sontag’s seminal collection of essays, *On Photography* (1977).

Before I begin my analysis, I think it is useful to briefly outline Sontag’s argument and its application to my reading of the contradictory nature of mourning in the medieval poem. Written in the late 1970s, by which point cameras had become commonplace in middle-class American homes, Sontag’s essays trace the history of photography from its conception, focusing on the cultural, political, and artistic

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<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982), p. 91.

<sup>6</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 100.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Penguin Press, 1977), p. 15.

significance of the medium. It should be noted that, like Sontag's essays, this article does not privilege any one iteration of the photograph. Rather, I integrate and amalgamate discussions of various image technologies including celluloid and digital photography, polaroids, paper albums, databases, online archives, and print development. For Sontag, the camera itself is a force of contradictions, operating as both a scientific tool and an instrument of high art. Throughout the book, Sontag suggests photographs are mystical devices that freeze time, imagine the future, simultaneously provide a record of the truth and a fanciful reconstruction of reality; they are a 'pseudo-presence' and a 'token of absence', an illusion of proximity and an unbridgeable distance.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, the linguistic fabric of *Pearl* similarly languishes in contradictions, permeated by metaphors that contain multiple, often oppositional meanings. For example, as David K. Coley succinctly explains, the poem's eponymous pearl 'always remains a pearl, even as it becomes a seed, a courtly maiden, a dead child, a daughter, the pure Christian soul, the Pearl of Price, the Lamb of God, [and] the Kingdom of Heaven'.<sup>9</sup> Alive, dead, immaculate, spotty, forever and fleeting, the maiden is inherently paradoxical. My reading of the poem also draws from a broad array of contemporary *Pearl* scholarship that grapples with the contradictions of grief but chiefly extends and develops the work of Sarah Stanbury and George Edmondson.

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<sup>8</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, pp. 15–16, 163, 165, 168 and 11–123.

<sup>9</sup> David K. Coley, *Death and the Pearl Maiden: Plague, Poetry, England* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2019), p. 63.

Following Stanbury, I argue that the poem's depiction of grief hinges on unresolved and unresolvable 'tensions'.<sup>10</sup> Though, where Stanbury states that the dreamer is 'caught [...] between' the maternal body and 'paternal power', I contend the dreamer is trapped in an affective paradox, oscillating between the elation of reunion and the misery of its impossibility.<sup>11</sup> Further, like Edmondson, I 'read [*Pearl*] as an expression of the sustained tension between the pleasure principle and the death drive'.<sup>12</sup> However, while Edmondson analyses this contradiction through the dreamer's psychology, I analyse it materially, examining this tension in the poem's (photographic) evocation of light, texture, ghosts, and replication. I will thus begin by arguing that photography illuminates *Pearl*'s pleasurably painful depiction of fantasy, as the dreamer's shimmering but flat reverie ultimately proves isolated from reality. This article will then explore how reading the poem through a photographic framework emphasises the dual forces of eternity and ephemerality attached to the *Pearl*-maiden, frozen forever as the Lamb's bride and yet rotting beneath the soil. Finally, I will examine how the *Pearl*-poet contrasts the infinite (photographic) replicability of heaven's brides with the intense singularity of the dreamer's 'original' pearl. In sum, this article will argue that the language of photography is particularly suited to elucidating the conflicting forces of pleasure and pain that permeate the poem's depiction of grief.

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<sup>10</sup> Sarah Stanbury, 'The Body and the City in *Pearl*', *Representations*, 48 (1994), 30–47 (p. 41).

<sup>11</sup> Stanbury, 'The Body and the City', 41.

<sup>12</sup> George Edmondson, '*Pearl*: The Shadow of the Object, the Shape of the Law', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 26 (2004), 29–63 (p. 40).

## FANTASY, SHIMMER, AND IMMATERIALITY

The *Pearl*-maiden, like all photography, is marked by the tension between fantasy and reality, simultaneously a 'pseudo-presence' and tokenistic 'absence' (as Sontag puts it).<sup>13</sup> Enchanting but immaterial, the maiden is, like a photograph, only a (celluloid) construction. Lying over his daughter's grave at the opening of the poem, the dreamer experiences a false sense of proximity to his 'pryvy' pearl, just as one might when holding a photograph of a deceased or faraway relative (12). He laments, 'I dewyne, fordolked of luf-daungere | Of that pryvy perle withouten spot' (11–12). The reference to 'luf-daungere' frames the dream within the gendered conventions of courtly love poetry, wherein the male hero typically exalts the beauty of his majestic but disinterested heroine.<sup>14</sup> Courtly love and photography are bound by their shared interest in idolisation and veneration, as the chivalric lover, like the idealistic photographer, accentuates his beloved's best features and omits what is undesirable. Contrary to John Szarkowski's assertion that 'the lens is impartial', Sontag writes that photographs are 'evidence not only of what's there but of what an individual *sees*' (my emphasis).<sup>15</sup> In other words, more than a record of 'reality', a photograph is an 'evaluation' and every evaluation is inherently subjective.<sup>16</sup> Having entered into the dream-realm, the dreamer glimpses his daughter, now a young woman, standing at

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<sup>13</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, pp. 15–16.

<sup>14</sup> David Aers, 'The Self Mourning: Reflections on *Pearl*', *Speculum*, 68 (1993), 54–73 (p. 57).

<sup>15</sup> John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), p. 12; Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 88.

<sup>16</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 88.

the foot of a dazzling cliff. Much like a flattering photographer or courtly lover, the dreamer captures his beloved from his distinctive subjectivity, adulating her 'fayre face' (169) and 'fygure fyn' (170). The maiden's 'spot'-less perfection becomes a refrain echoed throughout the poem, focalising the pristine but impenetrable surface that both allures and bars the desperate dreamer.<sup>17</sup> Like the spurned lovers of courtly poetry, once reunited, the dreamer swiftly claims ownership over his young daughter, rejoicing 'Now haf I fonde hyt I schal ma feste | And wony wyth hyt in schyr wod-schawes' (283–4). Here, the dreamer's use of the possessive 'fonde' and his assertion that he will 'wony wyth' his daughter (despite her ensuing protestations) reflects what Aers terms his 'fantasy of total possession'.<sup>18</sup> 'Once entertained', this fantasy, writes Aers, wholly 'negates the otherness of the' maiden.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, I argue photography symbolically facilitates the processes of courtly love because it enables the literal objectification of human beings. Reducing its subject to a beautiful but inanimate 'thing', photography, as Sontag writes, 'turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed'.<sup>20</sup> Thrilled by the thought of (re)possession, the dreamer thanks his 'Lorde' for bringing 'thys blysse ner', sublimating the maiden to pure joy (285–6).<sup>21</sup> Importantly, the maiden who appears photographically reincarnated is not

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<sup>17</sup> The word 'spot' links the first stanza group together, simultaneously alluding to its meaning as both 'stain' and as 'place'. The dreamer refers to the maiden's spotlessness in lines 24, 36, 48, 60, 856.

<sup>18</sup> Aers, 'The Self Mourning', p. 63.

<sup>19</sup> Aers, 'The Self Mourning', p. 63.

<sup>20</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> Here, I, following Edmondson, use 'sublimate' in the Lacanian sense of the word, as the dreamer reduces his daughter to pure, flat fantasy, or in Lacanian terms, 'object a'; Edmondson, *Pearl: The Shadow of the Object*, p. 51.

the infant the dreamer lost on Earth but 'A mayden of menske ful debonere' (162); she is a fantasy version of the woman the grieving father dreamt his child might have become. As Sontag writes, all 'photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal', they are 'not so much an instrument of memory as an invention of it or a replacement'.<sup>22</sup> In this case, however, the dream/photograph provides a chimeric construction of an imagined *future* to paper over the trauma of the past.

The maiden soon emerges in a pool of shimmering light, her 'golde [...] fax' (213) and 'playn yvore' face (178) refracting and reflecting the 'crystal' (74) landscape surrounding her. The scenery is described with similarly blinding brightness, as its surfaces 'glyght' (114), 'stremande' (115), and 'lemed of light' (119), though this does not dissuade the dreamer from 'lok[ing]'(167), 'frayste[ing]'(169) and 'dom[ing]'(223) at his vivid illusion. Richard Dyer writes that '[p]hotography' is a 'media of light' and when photographed, 'idealised white women are [typically] bathed in and permeated by light. It streams through them and falls on to them from above. In short, they glow'.<sup>23</sup> The maiden's beautiful radiance, then, immediately signals her status as a feminine, photographic fantasy. The rays that 'So schon that schene anunder schore' (166) distinctly recall the way in which light is reflected off its surroundings and focused into a single point by the camera's lens, producing the miraged image that eventually becomes the photograph. Mentions of light dominate the maiden's entrance into the poem, so that luminescence seems to constitute the very fabric of her

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<sup>22</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, pp. 9, 165.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Dyer, *White: Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 122.

being. Jane Beal notes that ‘the poet appears to be aware of late-medieval optical theory’ and while I do not wish to suggest that the poet presages photography, I argue his writing is certainly conscious of the *construction* of images.<sup>24</sup> Yet where Beal argues the poet’s references to light focalise the maiden’s purity I contend that they underline the maiden’s celestial beauty, rendering her the object of the dreamer’s beaming (paternal) desire.<sup>25</sup> Stanbury similarly calls the dream a ‘purely optical experience’ writing that, ‘because the poet makes repeated references to the dreamer’s emotional responses to what he sees [...] the reader is regularly reminded that the vision is being recorded by an eyewitness, a human eye-of-the-beholder who sees, but does not enter’.<sup>26</sup> Here, Stanbury describes the poem in terms that are uncannily photographic. Paradoxically, she explains, the dreamscape (I like a photograph), is a space that is both shaped by the dreamer’s subjectivity and yet remains tragically uninhabitable to him. The heavenly scenery precariously separates fantasy from reality, its sunbeams so ‘blynd’-ing and its river so ‘depe’ the dreamer ‘dorst not wade’ (143).

Like all photographic fantasy, the maiden soon proves fragile and fugitive. The repetition of the colour white evinces the maiden’s phantasmic intangibility, as she is first described with a ‘ble more blaght then whalles bon’ (212), wearing a ‘blysnande whyt [...] beau biys’ (197), a ‘bornyste quyte [...] vesture’ (220) ‘Wyth whyte perle and

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<sup>24</sup> Jane Beal, *The Signifying Power of Pearl: Medieval Literary and Cultural Contexts for the Transformation of Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 149.

<sup>25</sup> Beal, *The Signifying Power of Pearl*, p. 150.

<sup>26</sup> Sarah Stanbury, ‘Gazing Toward Jerusalem: Space and Perception in *Pearl*’, in *Seeing the Gawain-Poet: Description and the Act of Perception* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), pp. 12–41 (p. 22).

non other gemme' (219). She eventually transforms into a white pearl before becoming obliterated by the hue: 'O maskeles perle, in perles pure' (745). Certainly, while lightness to the point of whiteness is, as Dyer explains, a symbol of exquisite beauty and purity, it is also a marker of non-existence 'because ideally white is absence: to be really, absolutely white is to be nothing'.<sup>27</sup> Like a photograph, the white, diaphanous maiden is, therefore, too thoroughly constituted by light to be tangibly possessed. Having recovered from the shock of seeing her, the dreamer dreads what should happen, 'Lest ho me eschaped that I ther chos | Er I at steven hir moght stalle' (187–8). Here, the dreamer's reliance on sight is undercut by the absence that hovers around the maiden, exquisitely sketched but wholly ungraspable. Her form, 'So smothe, so smal, so seme slyght' (190) is far too glossy, too slippery, and too smooth to grip. Much like a courtly heroine, the maiden thus contests being made the object of fantasy, always threatening to 'eschape' and yet lacking the corporeality to exist anywhere but within the dream/photograph.<sup>28</sup> As Edmondson explains, the *Pearl*-maiden, like the Ladies of courtly love poetry, is herself both the desired 'Thing', and what 'stands [...] in the *way* of the Thing'.<sup>29</sup> However, I argue the *Pearl*-maiden also significantly differs from the Ladies of courtly love poetry. While courtly Ladies deny the affection of their suitors as part of a flirtatious, chivalric game of pursual and evasion, the *Pearl*-maiden primarily eludes her father because she is, *by nature*, only a figment of his mournful

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<sup>27</sup> Dyer, *White*, p. 78.

<sup>28</sup> Aers, 'Self Mourning', p. 63.

<sup>29</sup> Edmondson, '*Pearl*: The Shadow of the Object', p. 56.

imagination. Though the maiden, like an old photograph unearthed by her grief-stricken father, seems to promise reunion, she, in her small, smooth flatness, also necessarily prohibits it.

Photographic theory is distinctly suited to illuminating the paradoxes of mourning in ways that other artistic mediums are not. Gilbert astutely likens the dream to Hans Holbein's anamorphic painting, *The Ambassadors* (1533), noting, 'the Maiden relentlessly informs us that the Jeweller sees [the dream] from the wrong angle'.<sup>30</sup> Adjusting Gilbert's metaphor, I argue the dream is best likened to a photograph, a form which not only imitates but re-enacts reality. Sontag attested to the perceived veracity of photographs when she wrote, 'the consequences of lying have to be more central for photography than they ever can be for painting, because the flat, usually rectangular images which are photographs make a claim to be true that paintings can never make'.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the maiden's hyper-realistic appearance fulfills the dreamer's grief-driven fantasy in a way that no painting could, apparently returning to him the lost object of his mourning. Elated by her illusory resurrection, the dreamer mistakes a photographic fantasy for reality, rejoicing, 'Art thou my perle that I haf playned' (242). But the maiden warns him not to believe all 'that he ses wyth yye' (302), insinuating the frailty lying beneath her eerily lifelike appearance. It seems the dreamer perpetually stands too close to the dream-cum-photograph. Allowing himself to be enveloped by the gorgeous play of light, he fails to see the skull that

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<sup>30</sup> Gilbert, 'Anamorphosis in *Pearl*', p. 161.

<sup>31</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 86.

stains the image, that is, the maiden's painful immateriality. Considering the dreamer's fantasy in photographic terms reveals a visual indefinability in the maiden, hitherto underdiscussed in scholarship on the poem. Though depicted with ornate, ekphrastic language, she remains difficult to describe. Hovering on the threshold of phantasmic presence and painful absence, the dreamer is torn apart by the maiden's visual liminality.

As the poem continues, the dreamer becomes increasingly infatuated with the image of perfection he has conjured before his eyes, exclaiming: 'Pymalyon paynted never thy vys, | Ne Arystotel nawther by hys lettrure' (751-2). In her discussion of the poem-as-a-film, Stanbury likens the maiden to a heroine in a classical movie and the dreamer, to a cinematic audience member, the 'true scopophilic [...] looking in, from without'.<sup>32</sup> While I find Stanbury's argument convincing, I contend that the dreamer is more closely related to a film director or, more specifically, a photographer. Where an audience member merely watches detachedly, the dreamer, like a photographer, conjures and actively shapes the object of his vision. The ontological reference to the maiden's conception self-reflexively gestures to her status as photographic fantasy, and the dreamer's role as photographer. The dreamer ironically boasts that Pygmalion (who fell in love with his own sculpture) could never have painted her beauty, nor could Aristotle have conjured her with words. But, of course, the maiden is a product of the dreamer in every sense: she is the "'self-portrait" of the photographer' that

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<sup>32</sup> Stanbury, 'Feminist Masterplots', p. 100.

Sontag argues resides in 'every portrait of another person'.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the maiden is both his physically resemblant offspring, the fruit of his very DNA, and a figment of his tormented psyche, the celluloid screen memory he has fabricated to fill the void his young daughter left behind. Though he may be physically separated from the maiden by the river and the earth (as Stanbury correctly asserts), he is psychologically enmeshed with her.<sup>34</sup> The dreamer, overwrought with grief, has snapped his daughter in the perfect light, manifesting her as he wishes her to be. Though, as he discovers, she is only a trick of the light. Try as he might to fulfil Szarkowski's 'function' of photography and make the maiden 'real', the dreamer is unable to pin the maiden to reality.<sup>35</sup> Photography thus analogises the pleasurable pain of the dreamer's grief; consumed by the joy of her phantasmic return but dismayed by her incorporeality, *Pearl* taints love with the tragedy of the intangible.

## THE PEARL, THE CORPSE, AND THE GHOST

The maiden, like a photograph, is simultaneously eternal and ephemeral. Surviving beyond death just as a photograph exists even 'after the event has ended', the maiden is conferred with the 'immortality (and importance)' Sontag ascribes to static images.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, while ekphrastic, painterly, and sculptural approaches to the poem are informative, I argue they cannot account for its exploration of temporality as richly as

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<sup>33</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 122.

<sup>34</sup> Stanbury, 'Feminist Masterplots', p. 100.

<sup>35</sup> Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye*, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 11.

photography can. Photographs endure in ways distinct from paintings, jewellery, and sculpture. Though photographs can be corrupted, deleted, and lost, their trace always persists somewhere in the depths of the camera, photo album, computer, database, or internet. Similarly, the dreamer repeatedly imbues his daughter with the everlasting stability of the eponymous pearl, describing her haptic form, 'So rounde [...] So smal, so smothe her sydes were' (5–6). The roundness of the maiden echoes the circular rhythm of each stanza, which is looped together by a complex pattern of concatenating link words, and the circular structure of the poem itself, which ends as it began.<sup>37</sup> Sontag writes that the preservation of 'dead relatives [...] in the family album [...] exorcises some of the anxiety and remorse prompted by their disappearance'.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, the image of the maiden-as-pearl begins to assuage the dreamer's grief – 'My grete dystresse thou al todrawes,' (280) – offering an eternal, possessable, unforgettable 'body' to supplant the one he lost. As Sif Rikhardsdottir notes, the daughter's return as a mature woman (and not the infant the dreamer knew on Earth) destabilises the linearity of time.<sup>39</sup> Collapsing distinctions between past, present, and future, the ageless maiden now resides, like a figure in a photograph, in a temporally transcendent elsewhere (or a 'kythes that lastes aye' (1198)). The maiden is also quick to profess her immortality as she describes how the Lamb of God 'Corounde me quene in blysse to brede | In lenghe of dayes that ever schal wage' (415–6). Here, the maiden

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<sup>37</sup> Stanbury, 'Pearl: Introduction', p. 2.

<sup>38</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> Sif Rikhardsdottir, 'Poetic Sensorium and Aesthetic Objectification in the Middle English *Pearl*', *Exemplaria*, 32 (2021), 283–303 (p. 291).

defines herself in distinctly photographic terms. Just as a photograph captures a moment in time, preserving and elongating it, so too, through her heavenly marriage to the Lamb of God, the maiden is crystallised for eternity as a virgin bride. Certainly, the sense of permanency and constancy latent in the word 'wage' recalls Barthes' assertion that '[w]hen we define the Photograph as a motionless image, this does not mean only that the figures it represents do not move; it means that they do not emerge, do not leave: they are anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies'.<sup>40</sup> The maiden continues, 'I am holy Hysse - | Hys pyese, Hys prys; and Hys parage' (418-9). The reference to the Lamb's lineage ('parage') further reinforces the maiden's timelessness. The word implies a sense of futurity, but because the maiden is deceased, frozen amongst the glassy landscape of heaven, it is a futurity without end. What's more, the maiden's allusion to her own 'whol[iness]' and 'hol[iness]' recalls the broader circularity of the poem. In the space of one stanza, then, the poet captures the maiden's immortality, conveying to the dreamer and the reader alike the infinitude that defines both the realm of heaven and the world of the photograph.

However, the corpse that haunts the dreamer temporally contradicts the pearl. At the opening of the poem, he laments, 'Allas, I leste hyr in on erbere; | Thurgh gresse to grounde hit fro me yot' (9-10). His daughter's 'leste' body is rendered ephemeral as it slowly disappears into the vegetation, symbolic of a past that cannot be retrieved. Sontag famously attested to the deathliness of photography when she wrote, 'To take

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<sup>40</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 57.

a photograph is to participate in another person's [...] mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt'.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the photograph has the power to preserve the maiden's image, but it remains only a celluloid or pixelated imitation. The 'original' will continue to decompose under the earth's surface. The stained corpse 'clad in clot' (22) operates as an unsatisfying and uncanny simulacrum of the dreamer's beloved daughter, a deathly remnant of her former perfection that has been defamiliarised by the distance of space and time. Despite the dreamer's unwillingness to leave her grave, the corpse, in its decay, constantly threatens to be forgotten.

Yet even the heavenly *Pearl*-maiden, the eternal, metaphorical photograph of the poem, is marred by a troubling deathliness. Photographs possess a distinctly ghostly quality and thus, analysing *Pearl* through photography enables us to consider the poet's visualisation of death in unique ways.<sup>42</sup> As Barthes explains, 'by shifting this reality to the past ("this-has-been"), the photograph suggests that' the subject, whether living or dead, is already irretrievable and therefore always 'already dead'.<sup>43</sup> In visually freezing the body, photography both preserves and embalms its subject, transforming it (Barthes writes) into 'Total Image, which is to say, Death in Person'.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the constancy latent in the maiden's assertion that she will reside in heaven

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<sup>41</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 15.

<sup>42</sup> Films possess this haunted, ghostly quality too, although after all they are (only) still photographs projected 24 frames per second.

<sup>43</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 79.

<sup>44</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 14.

'In lenghe of dayes that ever schal wage' (416) signifies eternity, but it also carries a sense of stasis, recalling the paralysis of death. As Coley points out, the concatenating link word of the first stanza group, 'spot', cleaves the pearl to the corpse, as the spotless maiden becomes linguistically intertwined with the spot marking her own grave, and her subterranean, spot-marked twin.<sup>45</sup> While Coley links the play between sickness and health to the poem's engagement with the plague, I argue it highlights the *Pearl*-maiden's immobility, trapping her in the afterlife just as the corpse is trapped in the ground and photographed people are trapped in flat images. As the poem progresses, the maiden's 'gostly' (185) white visage assumes a more complex valency. While her fair face indicates her phantasmic beauty, it also comes to denote the sallowness of her (dead) body. Certainly, the poet's descriptions of her 'more blaght then whalles bon' 'semblaunt' (212, 211) and 'bornyste quyte [...] vesture' (220) vividly recall the pallid surface of white skin when it is photographed in monochrome, transforming the maiden into a wraithlike figure in an antique portrait. In this subtly sickly outline, the maiden undergoes what Barthes describes as the 'micro-version of death' that all photographed subjects experience, as she 'truly becom[es] a specter'.<sup>46</sup> The maiden's fairness (even amongst her fellow pearly 'feres', she is 'so quytl!') also visually binds her to the Lamb of God, both of whom are repeatedly described as being of the same white 'hwe' (896). Yet, the lamb's ivory coat is tainted by the 'blod outsprent' from the 'wounde' near his 'hert', a fatal lesion suffered during his earthly

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<sup>45</sup> Coley, *Death and the Pearl Maiden*, pp. 65–6.

<sup>46</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 14.

crucifixion (1137, 1135, 1136). The maiden's whiteness, then, evokes the death perpetually endured by the Lamb, rendering them both (un)dead.

In conjuring the semblance of a person, photographs are also uniquely capable of evoking what Sigmund Freud terms the uncanny. That is, the ghostly sense that the photographed person is simultaneously *there* and *not there*. Barthes refers to the uncanny as 'the almost' in his discussion of photographic ghosts, lamenting, 'the almost' is 'love's dreadful regime, but also the dream's disappointing status'.<sup>47</sup> The poet's repetitive allusions to the maiden's ineffability – 'I hope no tonge moght endure, | No saverly saghe say of that syght' (225–6) – and her unrecognizability – 'I knew hyr wel, I hade sen hyr ere... | The lenger, I knew hyr more and more' (164, 168) – invoke her partial, 'almost' presence. Just as the dreamer recognises his daughter in pieces, her 'fayre frount' and 'vysayge whyt as playn yvore' (177–8), Barthes recognises his mother 'in fragments', identifying a familiar 'region of her face, a certain relation of nose and forehead'.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, it seems the poem-cum-photograph captures the maiden at a strange angle, failing to crystallise and thus preserve what Barthes calls the 'essence' of her being.<sup>49</sup> For the dreamer, like Barthes, 'Photography [...] compel[s]' him 'to perform a painful labor; straining toward the essence of her identity [...] struggling among images partially true, and therefore totally false'.<sup>50</sup> The poem-cum-photograph ultimately offers only a fractured, ghostly image of the dreamer's

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

daughter which wholly fails to assuage his suffering. In simultaneously reviving and embalming the dead, photography analogises the painful pleasure of the dreamer's grief. Caught between life and death, he languishes in mourning.

The tension between the pearl and the corpse thus surfaces an anxiety central to the poem: how can the dreamer's daughter be eternal and ephemeral, an indexical (photographic) record, a ghostly simulation, and a fading trace? Early in the poem, the maiden likens her earthly body to a 'rose | That flowred and fayled as kynde hyt gef' (269–70), successfully reconciling life and death through regeneration and returning us to the image of the circle.<sup>51</sup> The flower metaphor invokes death as a state necessary for renewal, like a nostalgic photograph that reanimates dormant memories. The maiden goes on to explain that only her immortal soul could be compared to a pearl because 'To a perle of prys [the rose] is put in pref' (272). Indeed, as Barthes makes clear, in 'restor[ing] what has been abolished' 'Photography has something to do with resurrection'.<sup>52</sup> But, unlike Christ, the lost subject of a photograph undergoes a revivification of their memory, not their flesh and blood. As Katherine Terrell explains, the dreamer, in his obsession with recovering his daughter, ultimately fails to distinguish between her transient rose/body and her immortal pearl/soul.<sup>53</sup> I note that throughout the rest of the poem the dreamer struggles toward such a realisation (at one point calling the maiden a 'lufly flor' (962), but never quite

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<sup>51</sup> Katherine H. Terrell, 'Rethinking the "Corse in clot":' Cleanness, Filth and Bodily Decay in *Pearl*', *Studies in Philology*, 105 (2008), 429–47 (pp. 436–7, 441–2).

<sup>52</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 82.

<sup>53</sup> Terrell, 'Rethinking the "Corse in clot"', p. 437.

comes to terms with his daughter's physical impermanence. Even in the poem's final lines the dreamer is torn between temporalities as he laments his fleeting access to the eternal realm, saying 'And I kaste of kythes that lastes aye' (1198). The verbal slippage between 'kaste' and 'laste' torments the dreamer, confusing the immortal, photographic realm with the mortal, earthly one; two spaces that co-exist in tenuous harmony. While *Pearl's* deathliness has been much discussed in scholarship, the application of photographic theory makes particularly clear the dual forces of remembrance and forgetting at work in its evocation of grief. The dreamer's inability to accept his daughter's ephemerality signals his unwillingness to forget her. Unable to reconcile preservation and obliteration, he remains trapped in the pleasurable pain of the photographic archive, always at war with itself.

## ART, REPRODUCTION, AND SINGULARITY

The maiden, like a photograph, is both endlessly reproduceable and entirely singular, pleurably productive but, for the bereaved dreamer, painfully irreplaceable.<sup>54</sup> The *Pearl*-maiden and the other 144,000 brides who reside in Jerusalem are described like indistinguishable photographic copies, 'And alle in sute her livrés wasse; | Tor to know the gladdest chere' (1108-9), with each one enjoying uniform entitlements. The city of Jerusalem is reproductive too, spreading and expanding as the poem unfolds. Twelve thousand furlongs in length, adorned with twelve pearly gates and twelve

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<sup>54</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 125.

arches, and seated atop twelve foundational layers of gemstones, the extreme numerical precision of Jerusalem is mirrored by the poem itself, woven together by twelve stanzas of twelve lines each, culminating in exactly 1,212 lines of poetry.

Explaining the heavenly order of God's kingdom to the dreamer, the maiden recites a Biblical parable about vineyard workers who were each paid the same amount, regardless of how many hours they had worked. The meaning of the parable has been thoroughly debated by *Pearl* scholars, indicative of the expansive depth of the poem: Kerilyn Harkaway-Krieger argues that the parable teaches the infinite abundance of heaven, while Gilbert suggests it is a defence of late-in-life conversion to Christianity and John Bowers reads it as a political allegory about the imbalance of power between medieval workers and the aristocracy.<sup>55</sup> While I certainly agree with such readings, I argue the parable indicates the vitality of communal identity in heaven, wherein the brides are so intrinsically linked that 'more for one' must invariably mean 'more for all'. As the maiden puts it,

Of alle the reme is quen other kyng;  
And never other yet schal depryve,  
Bot uchon fayn of otheres hafyng (ll. 448–50).

Here, the identities of the brides (like the workers) are absorbed into one vast, collective entity where all is shared but they want for nothing. Heaven's economy

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<sup>55</sup> Kerilyn Harkaway-Krieger, 'Mysticism and Materiality: *Pearl* and the Theology of Metaphor', *Exemplaria*, 28 (2016), 161–80 (pp. 172–3); Gilbert, 'Anamorphosis in *Pearl*', pp. 162–3.

operates in the terms of a non-zero-sum game wherein payment can be infinitely afforded to the parable workers without diminishing the vineyard owner's earnings just as a gain for one bride will not lessen another's share. While *Pearl* anticipates mass production by approximately six centuries, written at a time when poems such as it were printed onto handmade manuscripts laboriously constructed from dried animal skin, it nonetheless captures the essence of photographic reproduction.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the photograph serves as an apt metaphor for heaven's democracy because, according to Sontag, 'the objects that are photographs [...] proliferate in a way that paintings don't'.<sup>57</sup> As she explains, 'just about everything has been photographed' and those images are available in books, albums, databases, hard drives, magazines, newspapers, and now, the internet.<sup>58</sup> Thanks to digital technology, Lev Manovich notes, digital photographs can be duplicated infinitely without reduction in image quality while a film print can be scanned and photocopied to create endless replicas.<sup>59</sup> Of course, if something has not yet been photographed it is only too easy to produce a picture oneself, as even the most basic mobile phones now have in-built cameras. Sontag suggests that photography's extreme accessibility (even more so in 2023 than in 1977) makes the medium an inherently 'democratic' one.<sup>60</sup> Photographs, like the

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<sup>56</sup> Boston College, 'Manuscripts: A Short Guide To Medieval English Codicology and Paleography', *Middle English Alliterative Poetry* (Boston College, updated 2020), <https://mediakron.bc.edu/alliterativepoetry/manuscript-guide>. Accessed 21 November 2023.

<sup>57</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 79.

<sup>58</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 79.

<sup>59</sup> Lev Manovich, 'The Paradoxes of Digital Photography', in *The Photography Reader*, ed. by Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 240–9, cited in James Elkins, *Photography Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>60</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 149.

maidens, engender in their beholder a reproducing desire for themselves, as 'uchon enlé we wolde were fyf' (849), swelling in number to meet and then exceed an insatiable demand, creating 'more and never the lesse' (852). Unlike painting, sculpture, jewellery, and tapestry, photographs are available everywhere all the time, to all people and once you have just one, you can reproduce an infinite amount.

However, the dreamer does not perceive his daughter in this way. As Harkaway-Kreiger notes, pearls permeate the poem, paving the streets, encrusting heaven's twelve gates, adorning every bride's breast and yet, these 'countless [other] pearls that appear [...] in the poem crowd out images of individual identity or distinction'.<sup>61</sup> While photographs are infinitely replicable, reproducing a photograph too many times reduces its value and, following this logic, the dreamer attempts to assert his daughter's uniqueness. Indeed, the dreamer treats his daughter, not like a photocopy, but like a precious jewel, rare painting, or an original photograph. The dreamer does not want a reproduction (one of the thousands of interchangeable maidens), he wants *the* daughter that he lost, 'sette [...] sengeley in synglure' (8). For this reason, the dreamer repeatedly addresses the maiden as the singular 'thou' (242), only to ignore her newfound status as 'we' (849) and the community in which she is now inextricably entwined.

Walter Benjamin argues that no photograph, being so small and flat, could possess what he terms an 'aura', that is, a genuine 'presence in time and space'. He

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<sup>61</sup> Harkaway-Kreiger, 'Mysticism and Materiality', p. 164.

contends that, in 'making many reproductions' of an image, one 'substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence'.<sup>62</sup> However, even Benjamin acknowledges that certain photographic portraits possess an aura, admitting

the cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty.<sup>63</sup>

Benjamin makes clear that pictures of lost loved ones (like the dreamer's vision of the dead maiden) maintain a particular 'ritual' value for their grieving family that defies the image's reproducibility and thus essential 'low worth'.<sup>64</sup> Grief, then, attributes a mystical value to otherwise banal objects. Sontag, expanding Benjamin's criteria for the possession of an aura, writes that 'originals – prints made from the original negative at the time [...] that the picture was taken – [...] offer visual pleasures which are not reproducible'.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, she suggests, 'the Polaroid camera revives the principle of the daguerreotype camera: each print is a unique object'.<sup>66</sup> It is the 'thereness' and quiddity of the death-portrait, the photographic negative, the

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<sup>62</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 1–26 (pp. 3–4).

<sup>63</sup> Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', pp. 7–8.

<sup>64</sup> Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 6; Please note, the quotation marks around the phrase 'low worth' do not indicate a quotation (Benjamin does not use this phrase). Rather, I employ quotation marks as scare quotes.

<sup>65</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, pp. 139–40.

<sup>66</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 125.

polaroid, the daguerreotype and, more historically appropriate, the hand-crafted medieval manuscript, that the dreamer so desperately searches for in the maiden.<sup>67</sup> Imposing his fatherly authority, the dreamer belittles the maiden by telling her, 'Me thyngk thou spekes now ful wronge' (472).<sup>68</sup> Stalled in the physicality of his earthly memories, the dreamer fails to grasp how an infant who 'cowthes never God nauther plese ne pray | Ne never nawther Pater ne Crede' (484-5) could transform into the eloquent bride of Christ in front of him. His description of the maiden as prelinguistic and unenlightened serves to disqualify her for the role of heavenly bride, but his narrow perception of the maiden is also mirrored in his own speech, which leaves little room for metaphorical interpretation. As much as he tries to delimit the maiden, the dreamer is the one who is linguistically constrained. The dreamer goes on to rebuke the maiden for being made a queen 'on the fyrste day' (486). Transposing his earthly conceptions of work and reward onto the boundless equality of heaven, he places limitations on titles and time where there are none.<sup>69</sup> In his eyes, (fine art's) hierarchy must be enforced as a means of differentiating the maidens. By attempting to return the maiden to her former state of infancy, the dreamer betrays his desire to recapture his daughter in her original human form, to distinguish her from heaven's abundant photographic reproductions by restoring her to the 'original', familiar child

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<sup>67</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 77.

<sup>68</sup> This line is missing in the original poem, so I have quoted the substitute suggested in Stanbury's notes.

<sup>69</sup> A.C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 111-29 (p. 123).

he knew on Earth. Ironically, his infantilisation of the maiden serves to imbue her with what Benjamin terms the 'authority' of the authentic.<sup>70</sup>

A.C. Spearing calls the dreamer 'an inadequate vessel for the experience of his dream' because he cannot comprehend 'God's excessive generosity'.<sup>71</sup> Perhaps, though, the dreamer's problem is not that he cannot comprehend the excessiveness of heaven but that he cannot conceive of his own daughter in these terms because, to him, she will always be *his* ('My precios perle' 330) and she will always be *unmatched* ('fereles' 431). Nearing the end of the poem, the dreamer calls the maiden his 'lyttel queen' (1147) in an attempt to fuse the infinite (a heavenly queen) and the finite (his earthly child). Ultimately, however, the two concepts prove incongruous. The dreamer dives into the river to join his singular daughter, only to wake in the real world alone because she belongs to the realm of the infinite now. The 'one' he knew has been supplanted by the vast. When the dreamer returns to reality, he laments the brevity of his vision and blames his own greediness, saying, 'Bot ay wolde man of happe more hente | Then moghten by ryght upon hem clyven' (1195–6). Despite the maiden's extensive lecture on the infinitude of heaven, the dreamer remains fixated on earthly limits. The lonely dreamer is once again 'kaste' (1198) away from the maiden, rendering him (not her) painfully isolated from heaven's infinite, photographic connectivity. Like Aers, then, I argue that the dreamer, in his mourning,

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<sup>70</sup> Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 3.

<sup>71</sup> Spearing, 'The Alliterative Tradition', pp. 126, 123.

remains thoroughly individualistic at the poem's end.<sup>72</sup> Following Edmondson, I contend 'the dilemma for the dreamer becomes, again like the shape of *Pearl*, circular'. Yet I suggest that this circularity manifests itself in the relentless tension between the infinite and the finite. Benjamin argues that it is in images of 'loved ones, absent or dead' that photography's 'exhibition value' (its reproducibility) and its 'cult value' (its singularity) fleetingly coincide.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, we grieve the dead in portraits because the subjects themselves are lost, though, like the maiden, they now merely reside in the afterlife-cum-photograph. Similarly, we may imbue portraits of the dead with a sense of irreplaceable worth though they are entirely replicable (just as the maiden has 144,000 twins). While the poet suspends the infinite and the finite concurrently, the dreamer never quite conceives of his daughter in this way and, in his grief, forever struggles between these two poles. Caught between the pleasure of the maiden's photographic accessibility and the pain of her singular irreplaceability, photographic theory elucidates the nebulous, paradoxical nature of the dreamer's grief.

## CONCLUSION

Discussing another poem in the *Pearl*-poet's MS Cotton Nero A.X manuscript, Coley writes that *Cleanness* shows 'the need for poetry to disclose aspects of trauma that other forms of written witness cannot or will not reveal'.<sup>74</sup> Extending Coley's point, I

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<sup>72</sup> Aers, 'The Self Mourning', pp. 69–71.

<sup>73</sup> Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 7.

<sup>74</sup> Coley, *Death and the Pearl Maiden*, p. 54.

have argued *Pearl* similarly discloses hidden aspects of trauma, and that photography (more so than ekphrastic, social, historical, and exegetic frameworks) offers a particularly illuminating means of unearthing these depths. More specifically, I contend that the contradictory nature of photography helps us to understand the analogous contradictions of grief at play in *Pearl*. In this way, this article has attempted to extend Stanbury and Edmondson's examinations of the tensions that proliferate the poem's depiction of mourning. Like Stanbury and Edmondson, I argue that the poem refuses resolution. Yet, where Stanbury argues the dreamer is caught between the maternal and paternal, I argue his grief traps him in a state of perpetual joy *and* agony.<sup>75</sup> Likewise, while Edmondson employs a psychoanalytical approach, my analysis focuses more closely on the poem's visual and textural details.<sup>76</sup> In this vein, this article began by analysing the play of light and shimmer in *Pearl*. Much like a photograph, the maiden appears to the dreamer as fantasy, a bright and vivid illusion that turns out to have been conjured (snapped) by his own tormented psyche. I then examined how the maiden's eternal facade is threatened by her deathliness, just as photographs both preserve and embalm the subjects they depict. In this way, the maiden emblematises Barthes' assertion that photography 'produces Death [even] while trying to preserve life'.<sup>77</sup> Finally, I argued the infinite virgins that proliferate the poem contradict the dreamer's singular perception of his daughter, evoking the

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<sup>75</sup> Sarah Stanbury, 'The Body and the City', p. 41.

<sup>76</sup> George Edmondson, '*Pearl*: The Shadow of the Object', p. 40.

<sup>77</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 92.

tension between replication and authenticity that plagues discourse on photography. Exploring *Pearl's* contradictions through photography has thus offered an opportunity to consider its rich evocation of human emotion more deeply. To take a photograph is, as Sontag made clear, always an attempt to retrieve what is just out of grasp; to reimagine, to return, to remember. Certainly, this vain longing, this paradoxically painful elation, is at the very heart of *Pearl*.



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