2014

Medieval Thought and the Gothic Cathedral

Anna Schoenwald
Cedarville University

Recommended Citation

Schoenwald, Anna, "Medieval Thought and the Gothic Cathedral" (2014). *Student Publications*. 8.
https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/student_publications/8

**"Medieval Thought and the Gothic Cathedral," by
Anna Schoenwald**

Instructor's Note

Anna's assignment was to choose a topic and write an informational research paper using six peer reviewed sources. The goal of the paper was to demonstrate not only integration of outside material but also a controlled prose style whereby she moved the reader forward with her concrete nouns and active verbs. What do you learn about Gothic Cathedrals? How does Anna synthesize her quoted material into her own prose? Choose several paragraphs and identify the active verbs, the concrete nouns, the distinctive word choices.

Writer's Biography

Anna Schoenwald is a freshman Language Arts Education major from Chardon, Ohio. Although she is an English major, she never really thought of herself as a writer. She enjoys doing almost everything, including traveling the US, skiing the slopes of Colorado, playing her violin at church, and hanging out with family and friends.

Medieval Thought and the Gothic Cathedral

"[T]he [Gothic] cathedral is best understood as a 'model' of the medieval universe" (von Simson 16). As this quote implies, a Gothic Cathedral's design reflects the Medieval belief system. Although some Medieval beliefs warrant the title, "The Dark Ages," many imply the opposite. For example, the Medievals superstitiously thought outside influences, such as air or demons, directly caused every natural occurrence. In other words, if a Medieval peasant experienced an illness, his family would assume a demon had overtaken him.   However, Medieval people also believed in a light, holy God. In contrast to the former Greek gods, the Medieval God remained stable and infallible. Ultimately, the Medievals attempted to combine

their assortment of beliefs into one coherent model. Gothic Cathedrals became the embodiment of that synthesized model.

The Gothic cathedrals reflected the Medieval Model. The designers strived to create in these buildings a sense of awe and reverence for God. Because Medieval culture centered on Gothic Cathedrals, they greatly influenced the people (Reich, Lawrence 218). Thus, the designers strived to give these buildings meaning that would be relevant to the largely illiterate people. For instance, the cathedrals' tall walls, vaulted ceilings, and vertical lines drew the people's eyes up toward God (Reich, Lawrence 215). The people would encounter this large, foreboding structure, much different than their shacks and peasant lifestyle, and be thoroughly moved. God, through the cathedral, seemed distant, but powerful – he seemed worthy of intense worship. The cathedral drew the peoples' eyes up and out.

The Medieval model sought to encompass all Medieval beliefs. As Dr. David Mills, professor of Philosophy at Cedarville University explains, "The Medieval model blended Greek, Christian, and Pagan ideas into synthetic unity." Eventually, through gradual developments Medieval thinkers organized all these ideas into a geocentric view of the cosmos. In this view, two drastically different spheres emerged, separated by the moon. Earth lay on one end, in the center of the universe. Contrary to common thought, this idea downplayed earth's importance. By its central position, the earth lay in the farthest place possible from the heavens. God occupied the outer reaches of the spheres. He, in all his glory, resided far from earthly creatures. He "danced" with the angels in his outer, heavenly sphere. The humans, excluded from this enjoyment, remained on the "outside, looking in." In addition, God interacted with creation solely through intermediaries. In this way, he had no personal interaction with creation. Thus, according to the Medieval Model, God remained distant to the excluded humans.

As represented in the Medieval model, the cathedrals showed the clear separation between the celestial

sphere and the earthly sphere. The medieval person, upon entering the cathedral, would immediately feel insignificant. The cathedral's pointed arches directed the viewer's gaze upward (Sweeney 29). The pointed arches allowed the ceilings to reach new heights, implementing a larger gap between the worshiper and the heavenly sphere. In addition, the point, as opposed to a rounded arch, forced the people to wonder beyond the cathedral. In other words, the points implied a higher being's existence, but God's intangible region remained unreachable to the lowly people. More specifically, the Chartres Cathedral brought its visitors to this sense of awe. According to John Walford in his book *Great Themes in Art*, "The height of Chartre's nave relative to its width increases the sense of height, while the engaged columns, dividing the bays, and pointed arches accentuate the vertical accent" (167). In these ways, the Gothic cathedrals emphasized God's distance from the world.

In addition to representing God's distance from the world, the Medieval model showed God's quality of light. To the Medievals, light symbolized holiness and purity. According to Lawrence Cunningham and John Reich in their *Culture &* Values, the model represented "an ascending hierarchy of existence that ranges form inert mineral matter to the purity of light, which is God." Thus, the farther from the earth (or closest to God), the purer the light. In these ways, the Medieval model symbolized their beliefs.

In addition, the Gothic Cathedral captured as much light as possible to represent God's holiness and purity. Advances in technology, including the pointed arches and flying buttresses, enabled the cathedrals' architects to incorporate massive stained glass windows on every wall. The Abbey Church of St. Denis, for instance, features these windows. "The radiance of colored light passing through these windows symbolized the splendor of God, as 'the True Light,' passing into the church" (Walford, 163). The whole ambience of the Cathedral, brought the Medieval person to an understanding of God. As Robert Calkins notes in his article, "The Cathedral as Text," the windows

of St. Denis had the power to "transport [the viewer] from a material world to an immaterial world" (NP). As he worshiped in the Cathedral, the Medieval would tangibly experience God's purity.

In this synthesized model, everything worked together in literal harmony. According to Jon Sweeney in his article, "Arranged by Measure," "For the medieval person, a symbol was an objective piece of reality" (28). When all the spheres rotated as they should, they formed a melody (Mills). This melody showed the world had achieved synthesis.

Finally, just as the Medieval model harmonized many different concepts, the Gothic Cathedrals coordinated various elements into a cohesive structure. For instance, the cathedrals incorporated extensive geometric relationships. These relationships "relate[d] to the mathematics of musical harmonies, which were thought to reflect the divine harmonies of the universe" (Calkins). In this way, the architectural synthesis corresponded with the Medieval religious synthesis. Additionally, some of the structural designs served a dual purpose. The pointed arches, for example, not only pointed the people's gazes toward heaven, but they also allowed for larger walls and taller ceilings (Walford 166). The more spacious walls, in turn, allowed for larger stained glass windows that ultimately had a greater effect on the Medieval worshiper. All these elements connected to form a cohesive embodiment of the Medieval model's various elements.

Compared to Greek architecture, the Gothic style seems barbarous or rude. On the contrary, the Gothic style follows carefully planned synthesis, in accordance with the Medieval model of the Cosmos. This entire coherence brought the medieval people to a sense of unparalleled reverence toward God. "The effect of the stained glass windows added to the ambience, working together with the insubstantial interior structure and soaring vertical space to give the Gothic cathedral its ultimate expression as a sacred space" (Calkins). Undoubtedly, the Middle Ages do not deserve to be called the Dark Ages.

Works Cited

Von Simson, Otto G. "The Gothic Cathedral: Design and
          Meaning." *Journal of the Society of Architectural
          Historians*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Oct., 1952): 6-16.
          University of California Press on behalf of the
          Society of Architectural Historians.
          http://www.jstor.org/stable/987608. Web. 12 Dec.
          2012.

Mills, David. "The Medieval Model." 2012 Cedarville
          University. 26 September 2012.

Cunningham, Lawrence S., and Reich, John J. *Culture and
          Values: a Survey of the Humanities.* Boston,
          Massachussetts: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning,
          2010. Print.

Sweeney, Jon M. "Arranged By Measure." *America* 203.1
          (2010): 27-30. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 13
          Dec. 2012.

Walford, John. *Great Themes in Art.* Upper Saddle River,
          New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, inc., 2002. Print.

Calkins, Robert J. "The Cathedral As Text." *Humanities*
          16.6 (1995): 35. *Academic Search Complete*. Web.
          13 Dec. 2012.