Literature, Language and Cultural Studies
ISSN Print: 3079-5095
ISSN Online: 3079-5109
https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9202

To See, to Feel, to Believe: The Dreamer's Transformation in *The Dream of the Rood*

Xinyu Tan
School of Foreign Languages, East China University of Science and Technology, Shanghai 200237, China
Email: 3448560947@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Tan, X. (2026). To See, to Feel, to Believe: The Dreamer's Transformation in The Dream of the Rood. Literature, Language and Cultural Studies, 6(2), 95–104. ISSN Print: 3079-5095, ISSN Online: 3079-5109.
https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9202
Published: 2026-08-28

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Erytis Publishing Limited.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Abstract

The Dream of the Rood is one of the most significant surviving works of Old English religious poetry. Through close reading, this article reinterprets the poem by shifting attention from the Cross to the Dreamer's transformation. The Dreamer undergoes a staged process: silence and solitude establish receptivity; paradoxical visions of glory and suffering unsettle perception; and the Cross's voice leads him from fear toward devotion and testimony. His subsequent prayer and longing express his changed belief and relation to the Cross. The article concludes that the dream-vision form represents spiritual transformation as a movement from visionary reception through devotional response to witness, clarifying the poem's theological and literary design.

Keywords

The Dream of the Rood; The Dreamer; Dream Vision; Spiritual Transformation

1. Introduction

The Dream of the Rood occupies a prominent place in Old English literature as both a dream vision and a devotional meditation on the Passion. Its most distinctive feature is the speaking Cross, which appears successively as a radiant object adorned with gold and jewels, a bloodstained instrument of execution, and a loyal retainer recounting its service to Christ. Scholarship has accordingly examined the Cross's relation to Christ and its devotional meanings (Raw 2007), its affinities with the weapons of Old English heroic tradition (Cherniss 1973), and the poem's liturgical contexts (Ó Carragáin 1982). Within these approaches, the Dreamer has frequently been considered through the representative function he performs for the poem's audience.

Hieatt argues that readers "do not need to know anything about him as an individual in order to understand his need of the vision" (1971, 253). Chase likewise places him between the categories of sinner and saint (1980, 14), while Ó Carragáin maintains that his experience "provides a paradigm of the way in which a reader

should react to the poem" (1982, 505). These interpretations establish the Dreamer as an important point of identification and clarify the representative significance of his response. They devote less sustained attention, however, to the sequence through which his perception, emotional condition, and role as speaker change during and after the vision.

Xu and Wei offer a more direct account of this transformation by comparing the Dreamer with Daniel and Cædmon. They identify a recurrent Old English poetic pattern in which an isolated or marginal figure acquires interpretive or poetic authority through divine visitation and is subsequently integrated into a community (2021, 458–459). Their study illuminates the Dreamer's movement from exclusion to empowered speech and provides a basis for examining more closely how the poem stages this development through the successive experiences of seeing, hearing, responding, and narrating.

Building on this account, the present study argues that *The Dream of the Rood* constructs the Dreamer's transformation through interconnected perceptual, affective, devotional, and verbal changes. His separation from the sleeping community establishes the conditions of visionary receptivity. The Cross's alternating appearance confronts him with suffering and glory before its spoken narrative explains the relationship between them and commands him to reveal the vision. His prayer and longing for heavenly life then give devotional and eschatological form to his changed belief. Finally, the opening declaration that he will recount his dream reveals that the poem itself constitutes his response to the commission. The Dreamer consequently develops from a solitary recipient of sacred discourse into a commissioned narrator whose testimony carries the Cross's message to a human audience.

2. Silence and Visionary Receptivity

The Dream of the Rood begins with an announcement of narration before presenting the vision itself. The Dreamer declares:

"Lo! I will tell the dearest of dreams
That I dreamed in the midnight when mortal men
Were sunk in slumber. Me-seemed I saw
A wondrous Tree towering in air"
(Kennedy 1963, lines 1–4)

The opening words, "Lo! I will tell," establish the Dreamer as the speaker of an experience that has already been completed and is now being communicated to an audience. The poem then returns to the midnight at which the dream began. This retrospective arrangement places an act of speech at the beginning of a vision initially characterized by the suspension of ordinary human speech.

Kennedy's "mortal men" translates the Old English compound *reordberend* in the phrase *syðþan reordberend reste wunedon*, meaning "when speech-bearing people

rested". Although *reordberend* is an established poetic designation for human beings, its placement acquires particular significance in this poem (Galloway 1994, 476). Human beings are identified through their capacity for speech at the moment when that capacity has become inactive. The Dreamer, meanwhile, is distinguished from the sleeping community as the recipient of a vision unavailable to the other *reordberend*. The contrast establishes his separation before the poem reveals the significance of what he will see and hear.

Irvine argues that the compound *reordberend* carries more than its conventional sense of "human beings": it presents humankind as a "language-user-as-interpreter," capable of producing discourse that mediates experience and imposes meaning on objects and other discourse (1986, 172). Xu and Wei develop this interpretation by observing that a nearly identical formula appears in the Old English *Daniel*. While Nebuchadnezzar's magicians are unable to interpret his dream, Daniel receives the divine knowledge required to explain its meaning and foretell the destiny of nations. They also connect the Dreamer with a poetic type represented by Daniel and Cædmon, in which an initially marginal and isolated figure acquires interpretive or poetic authority through divine visitation (2021, 458). At the beginning of *The Dream of the Rood*, this authority remains implicit. The Dreamer's immediate distinction lies in his receptivity to a vision in which the surrounding community does not participate.

Galloway questions the direct application of Macrobius's dream theory to Old English poetry because evidence for its significant medieval reception comes mainly from the eleventh and twelfth centuries (1994, 475). He identifies a more directly relevant analogue in Gregory the Great's Moralia in Job, where divine speech becomes perceptible when the mind withdraws from worldly disturbance and enters a state of inward quiet (476–77). This context illuminates the poem's opening scene since the sleep of the reordberend suspends ordinary human speech, while the Dreamer's isolation makes him receptive to the Cross's voice. As such, midnight stillness functions as a narrative condition of revelation, marking the Dreamer's first movement from membership in a sleeping community toward the singular reception of sacred discourse. Once the other reordberend have withdrawn into sleep, the Dreamer first sees the Cross and then hears it speak. This voice emerges after everyday human voices have been silenced (Galloway, 1994, 476). In this context, the opening quiet separates the Dreamer from the ordinary community of speakers and prepares him to receive sacred discourse from the personified Cross.

3. Perception and Affective Disruption

3.1. Visual Paradox: The Glory and the Agony

Once the Cross appears, the Dreamer's receptive isolation becomes an encounter with an unstable visual object. The Cross first appears in a condition of radiant splendour:

"Most shining of crosses compassed with light.
Brightly that beacon was gilded with gold;
Jewels adorned it fair at the foot,
Five on the shoulder-beam, blazing in splendour."
(Kennedy 1963, lines 5–8)

Light, gold, and jewels distinguish the Cross from an ordinary instrument of execution and present it as an object already invested with sacred honour. Yet the Dreamer soon perceives another condition beneath and alongside this splendour:

"I saw the Cross
Swiftly varying vesture and hue,
Now wet and stained with the Blood outwelling,
Now fairly jewelled with gold and gems."
(Kennedy 1963, lines 22b–25)

The Cross alternates between visible signs of suffering and signs of exaltation. The repetition of hwilum in the Old English lines, rendered by Kennedy as "now . . . now," gives the transformation a recurring rhythm. Neither condition permanently replaces the other. The Dreamer must continue looking as the same object appears successively bloodstained and adorned, confronting him with a relationship between the violence of the Crucifixion and the glory subsequently attached to it. The visual sequence therefore presents suffering and honour as connected states of the Cross rather than unrelated images.

Raw notes that the object in the opening vision repeatedly changes among the forms of tree, jewelled treasure, and bloodied Cross (2007, 1). Cherniss places this changing appearance within the heroic tradition by comparing it to "the two states of a sword, bloodstained in use and bejewelled when honoured as a possession" (1973, 250). The comparison accounts for both parts of the image. Blood marks the Cross's participation in Christ's violent death, while its jewels resemble the honour bestowed on a valuable weapon after loyal service.

Cherniss's argument also extends beyond visual resemblance. He observes that the Cross functions like a heroic weapon because it assists its lord in defeating his enemies and is identified as the sigebeam, the "victory-beam" of the sigora wealdend, the "ruler of victories" (1973, 250). Its adornment subsequently becomes an outward recognition of the service it has performed, comparable to the honour accorded to a loyal retainer or a worthy sword (Cherniss 1973, 251). The poem thus presents the instrument of Christ's execution as an honoured participant in his victory.

The Dreamer initially encounters this theological and heroic meaning as a visual problem. He sees the Cross's glory and wounds before hearing the narrative that explains their relationship. The alternation between gold and blood unsettles any fixed interpretation of the object and establishes the need for the Cross's

subsequent speech. Vision exposes the paradox, while narration will disclose how suffering has become the basis of honour and victory.

3.2. Fear and Interpretive Disorientation

The Cross's changing appearance immediately affects the Dreamer's perception of himself. Before he fully sees the blood beneath the gold, he places his sinful condition beside the splendour of the object:

"Wondrous the Tree, that token of triumph,
And I a transgressor, stained with my sins!"
(Kennedy 1963, lines 13–14)

The conjunction between the two statements creates a direct relationship between vision and self-recognition. The Cross is honoured and radiant, while the Dreamer understands himself as *synnum fah*, stained with sins, and *forwunded mid wommum*, wounded by faults. Its brightness therefore illuminates his own moral condition as well as the object before him. The vision begins to transform the Dreamer by altering the way he sees himself in relation to the Cross.

This recognition develops into fear when he perceives signs of suffering through the gold:

"Saddened and rueful, smitten with terror
At the wondrous Vision, I saw the Cross"
(Kennedy 1963, lines 21–22)

The Old English line places forht, fearful, beside fægran gesyhðe, the fair or beautiful vision. His fear consequently arises from an object that combines sacred splendour with visible blood and wounds. The reaction cannot be reduced to repulsion from violence, since the Dreamer remains attentive to the Cross and continues watching its changing appearance. His emotional state combines attraction to its radiance, distress at its suffering, and anxiety about the sinful condition exposed by the encounter.

Irving describes the poem's opening as a movement from darkness and impeded vision toward clearer perception. Yet increased visual clarity does not immediately yield understanding: as the tree becomes more distinct, its nature becomes harder for the Dreamer to determine. He perceives the ancient suffering concealed beneath its gold and recognizes in its wounds an image of his own sinfulness, but he remains unable to identify the object or solve the riddle it presents. Irving thus reads the tree as a "riddle-object" whose paradoxical appearance generates puzzlement, self-recognition, and fear before fuller understanding becomes possible (1986, 101–04). Meanwhile, Burke's account of astonishment offers a later aesthetic vocabulary for this suspension of understanding. He describes astonishment as "that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" (1998, 53). This formulation helps to describe the Dreamer's arrested attention: the changing Cross occupies his perception before he can understand the relationship

between its beauty and its wounds.

The Dreamer's emotional disturbance marks the distance between perception and interpretation. He has learned that the Cross's splendour contains a history of suffering, but vision alone has not disclosed how suffering leads to honour. He therefore remains lying before the Cross, hreowcearig, sorrowful or penitent, and continues to observe it until it begins to speak. His fear registers an awareness that the vision concerns both Christ's Passion and his own sinful condition. The Cross's ensuing narrative provides the explanation that his visual perception has made necessary.

3.3. The Cross's Voice and the Commission to Speak

The Cross's speech transforms the changing visual image into an autobiographical narrative. The Dreamer has already seen blood through the gold; he now hears the Cross explain the wounds that produced those marks:

"With black nails driven
Those sinners pierced me; the prints are clear,
The open wounds."
(Kennedy 1963, lines 49b–51a)

The first-person account directs attention to the Cross's material body. It remembers being cut down, carried away, raised as an instrument of execution, pierced with nails, stained with blood, and compelled to remain standing while Christ suffered. The surviving wounds function as evidence of this history. By showing their visible traces and recounting how they were inflicted, the Cross connects the blood perceived in the opening vision with its participation in the Crucifixion.

Scarry's account of physical pain offers a useful modern vocabulary for understanding the significance of this act of speech. She argues that "physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it," isolating the sufferer from those who cannot directly experience it (1985, 4). The poem reverses this movement through personification. The wounded Cross acquires a voice capable of describing the violence impressed upon its body. Its account remains grounded in its own pierced and bloodied form, which suffered together with Christ. The Cross therefore communicates its participation in the Passion without functioning as a direct substitute for Christ's voice.

The autobiography also interprets the relationship between suffering and glory that the Dreamer could previously perceive only as visual alternation. The Cross explains that it was forced to serve as the instrument of Christ's death, remained steadfast in obedience to its lord, and shared his wounds and humiliation. Because God's Son once suffered upon it, the Cross now "tower[s] under heaven in glory" and bears "healing" for those who hold it in awe (Kennedy 1963, lines 86–88). Its wounds and jewels record successive stages of the same history: suffering establishes the basis

of the honour later bestowed upon it. The spoken narrative thus supplies the temporal and theological connection between the two appearances examined in the opening vision.

After interpreting its own transformation, the Cross turns directly to the Dreamer:

"Now I give you bidding, O man beloved,
Reveal this Vision to the sons of men,
And clearly tell of the Tree of glory
Whereon God suffered for man's many sins."
(Kennedy 1963, lines 96–99)

The affectionate address "O man beloved" distinguishes the Dreamer as the particular recipient of the Cross's instruction. The principal change, however, is expressed through the command itself. The Dreamer must secge mannum, tell the vision to people, and onwreoh wordum, reveal in words, the identity and significance of the Cross. The verbs establish a movement from receiving sacred discourse to becoming responsible for its transmission.

Ó Carragáin observes that the Cross gives the Dreamer both a religious message and the role of messenger (1982, 502). The commission assigns a public purpose to an experience that began during his separation from the sleeping community. At this stage, the Dreamer has been addressed and entrusted with a responsibility; his prayer, eschatological longing, and eventual act of narration will show how he responds to it. The Cross's voice therefore advances his transformation from an isolated recipient of the vision toward a witness capable of communicating its meaning.

4. Transformation and Participation

Once the Cross has interpreted its history and commanded the Dreamer to speak, the poem turns from visionary encounter to response. That response begins inwardly: the Dreamer prays to the Cross and places his hope in the heavenly life associated with it. These changes prepare the outward act of narration examined in Section 4.3. The closing movement thus develops from prayer, through eschatological longing, to witness.

4.1. Prayer and Devotional Response

Following the Cross's speech, the dreamer's response is immediate and interior. He turns from awe-struck listener to active devotee through the intimate act of prayer:

"Then with ardent spirit and earnest zeal,
Companionless, lonely, I prayed to the Cross."
(Kennedy 1963, lines 120–21)

The prayer marks a change in the Dreamer's relation to the vision. At the beginning of the poem, he lies before the Cross troubled by sin and overwhelmed by what he sees; after hearing its testimony, he addresses it bliðe mode / elne mycle—with a

joyful spirit and great courage or zeal. As Ó Carragáin observes, elne mycle occurs first when Christ hastens to mount the Cross, then when the Cross bows to permit the removal of Christ's body, and finally in the Dreamer's prayer. Its third occurrence marks the transformation of the Dreamer's role: the quality previously associated with Christ's action and the Cross's obedience now characterizes his response to the vision (1982, 502–03).

Thieme similarly argues that the Dreamer's hope grows through his worship and imitation of the Cross as the symbol of redemption (1998, 118). Within this passage, such imitation takes the form of worship and reliance: the Dreamer prays to the Cross, reveres it, and places his hope in it. His outward solitude remains, while his inward stance has moved from fearful observation to devotion.

4.2. Eschatological Longing

Prayer develops into an expectation of heavenly life:

> "Each day I dream
> Of the hour when the Cross of my Lord, whereof here on earth
> I once had vision, from this fleeting life may fetch me
> And bring me where is great gladness and heavenly bliss,
> Where the people of God are planted and stablished for ever
> In joy everlasting. There may it lodge me
> Where I may abide in glory knowing bliss with the saints."
> (Kennedy 1963, lines 131b–37)

This longing answers the Dreamer's earthly isolation. Immediately before this passage, he explains that his few powerful friends have departed from the world to seek the King of Glory and now dwell with the High Father (Kennedy 1963, lines 128–30). Heavenly bliss is consequently imagined as entry into the enduring community of God's people and saints.

The Old English syntax also emphasizes the Dreamer's dependence upon the Cross. Dryhtnes rod governs gefetige and gebringe, and the following asette continues the same movement: the Cross will fetch the Dreamer from this transitory life, bring him to heavenly bliss, and place him among the saints (Swanton 1996, lines 135b–144a). The Dreamer's own response consists of prayer, hope, and, ultimately, testimony; his passage into glory remains entrusted to the Cross.

This expectation belongs to the eschatological movement of the poem's conclusion. The Cross has warned of Christ's return at the Last Judgement, while the final lines celebrate Christ's victorious entry into his heavenly homeland. Ó Carragáin accordingly observes that the last third of the poem is dominated by the expectation of Christ's Second Coming (1982, 504). The Dreamer's reorientation is therefore expressed through trust in the Cross and the desire to belong to the heavenly community. This inward change prepares the public act of witness considered in Section 4.3.

4.3. Narration as Witness

The Cross's command in lines 96–99 assigns the Dreamer responsibility for transmitting the vision to others. The poem's narrative frame shows how this responsibility is fulfilled. Its opening declaration presents the Dreamer as already engaged in recounting the dream (Kennedy 1963, line 1). In chronological terms, this narration follows the visionary encounter, although it appears before the Cross's command in the order of the poem. The arrangement allows the complete poem to function as the Dreamer's response to that command.

Ó Carragáin identifies the same relation between command and narration, observing that the opening words fulfil the Cross's instruction and that the poem itself becomes the Dreamer's announcement to its readers (1982, 503). The frame connects the private experience of the vision with its communication to a human audience. The poem records no separate act of preaching after the dream; the Dreamer's first-person account constitutes the textual evidence that he has accepted his commission. His authority remains grounded in the vision and in the Cross's instruction to disclose it.

Xu and Wei's comparison of the Dreamer with Daniel and Cædmon further supports this understanding of his role. Daniel acquires authority through his divinely inspired capacity for dream interpretation, while Cædmon receives the ability to compose religious poetry. The Dreamer similarly becomes the fictive author who interprets and poetically articulates his divine vision for a human audience (Xu and Wei 2021, 458-459). Seen in this light, his development can be described as a movement from solitary beholder to devotional respondent and commissioned narrator. Through his testimony, the Cross's account passes beyond the dream and reaches the audience addressed by its command.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that the Dreamer's transformation forms an integral part of the literary and theological design of The Dream of the Rood. His separation from the sleeping community establishes his initial position as the recipient of the vision. The Cross's changing appearance then confronts him with the conjunction of suffering and glory, while its autobiographical speech connects these visual signs to the Crucifixion and commissions him to reveal what he has seen. His prayer and eschatological longing register a changed relation to the Cross, and his narration fulfils the public responsibility created by the vision.

Placing the Dreamer at the centre of analysis complements established readings of the Cross's symbolism, heroic associations, and liturgical meanings. The Cross remains the principal mediator of transformation: it appears before the Dreamer, explains its wounds and splendour, commands him to speak, receives his prayer, and becomes the expected agent of his passage to heavenly bliss. The poem represents the Dreamer's belief through his responses to this encounter, especially

his prayer, hope, and acceptance of the responsibility to testify.

The dream-vision frame gives these responses a communicative consequence. Because the poem begins with the Dreamer's declaration that he will recount his vision, its narration retrospectively fulfils the command delivered within the dream. Sacred knowledge consequently passes from the Cross through the Dreamer to the poem's audience. His transformation connects seeing, feeling, and believing with the responsibility to speak, establishing him as both the recipient and the transmitter of revelation.

References

[1] Burke, E. (1998) A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. Phillips, A., Ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford.

[2] Chase, C.L. (1980) "Christ III," The Dream of the Rood, and Early Christian Passion Piety. Viator, 11, 11–34. https://doi.org/10.1484/J.VIATOR.2.301497

[3] Cherniss, M.D. (1973) The Cross as Christ's Weapon: The Influence of Heroic Literary Tradition on The Dream of the Rood. Anglo-Saxon England, 2, 241–252. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0263675100000454

[4] Galloway, A. (1994) Dream-Theory in The Dream of the Rood and The Wanderer. The Review of English Studies, 45, 475–485. https://doi.org/10.1093/res/XLV.180.475

[5] Hieatt, C.B. (1971) Dream Frame and Verbal Echo in The Dream of the Rood. Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, 72, 251–263.

[6] Irvine, M. (1986) Anglo-Saxon Literary Theory Exemplified in Old English Poems: Interpreting the Cross in The Dream of the Rood and Elene. Style, 20, 157–181.

[7] Irving, E.B., Jr. (1986) Crucifixion Witnessed, or Dramatic Interaction in The Dream of the Rood. In: Brown, P.R., Crampton, G.R. and Robinson, F.C., Eds., Modes of Interpretation in Old English Literature: Essays in Honour of Stanley B. Greenfield, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 101–113.

[8] Kennedy, C.W. (1963) The Dream of the Rood. In: Kennedy, C.W., Trans., Early English Christian Poetry, Oxford University Press, New York, 93–97.

[9] Ó Carragáin, É. (1982) Crucifixion as Annunciation: The Relation of The Dream of the Rood to the Liturgy Reconsidered. English Studies, 63, 487–505. https://doi.org/10.1080/00138388208598213

[10] Raw, B. (2007) The Cross in The Dream of the Rood: Martyr, Patron and Image of Christ. Leeds Studies in English, 38, 1–15.

[11] Scarry, E. (1985) The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World. Oxford University Press, New York.

[12] Swanton, M., Ed. (1996) The Dream of the Rood. Revised Edition, University of Exeter Press, Exeter.

[13] Thieme, A.L.J. (1998) Gift Giving as a Vital Element of Salvation in The Dream of the Rood. South Atlantic Review, 63, 108–123. https://doi.org/10.2307/3201041

[14] Xu, N. and Wei, Z. (2021) Cædmon, Daniel, and the Dreamer in The Dream of the Rood. ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews, 36, 457–461. https://doi.org/10.1080/0895769X.2021.1968783