

# John Bunyan's the Pilgrim's Progress as a Vehicle of Allegory

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## Abstract

John Bunyan, an English author and Baptist preacher is best remembered as the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). Bunyan's artistry, is most clearly seen in his role as an allegorist. With the publication of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman* in 1680, and *The Holy War* in 1682, Bunyan had shown growing resourcefulness using allegorical symbols. When allegory is used as story, additional meaning lies below the surface narrative. Allegory presumes to engage the reader with at least two narratives: the surface narrative and the underlying one below the surface that most often contains the work's theme. Bunyan models his allegory after his own spiritual experiences and substantiates them with Biblical references. In *Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan refers to a fallen world that is plagued with sin which has lost the glory of God. Christian, the central character, walks through the wilderness of this world in a quest to attain salvation. *Pilgrim's Progress* is an allegory par excellence and this article explores this undeniable fact with precision and clarity.

**Keywords:** Allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian, Grace, Salvation

## 1. Introduction

The world's literature has three great allegories - Spencer's *Faerie Queene*, Dante's *Divina Commedia*, and Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and they appeal to poets, the scholars, and to the people of every age and condition respectively. Allegory is a form of art in which, one or more additional or implied meanings are sustained running parallel to and distinct from the literal or the surface-meaning. Allegorical writing seem to have gone totally out of fashion unless Orwell's *Animal Farm* may be taken as an instance of its determination not to die out. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is still recognized as a masterpiece. The outward story of the Lilliputians may be specially interesting to the child, but the parallel, or the hidden satire of Swift on politics, culture and daily life is the allegorical undercurrent. Only a careful study reveals the intimate relationship between Bunyan's two major works *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* and *The Pilgrim's Progress from this World to the World to come*. The theme of both is Salvation; 'What shall I do to be saved', and *The Pilgrim's Progress* may be considered as *Grace Abounding* 'recollected in tranquility'. While *Grace Abounding* is a human personal document, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a work of art, of universal significance. *The Pilgrim's Progress* is not only the Odyssey of one soul, but of every Soul.

## 2. Objectives

The English Novel as we know it today was unknown in Bunyan's era, though prose-romances in narrative forms were starting to see the light of day. The Novel is generally sentimental; and character-drawing, psychology and subtlety are its chief characteristics. The good and evil present psychologically in his *Grace abounding* and in the allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress* took on flesh. Psychological experience is transformed into fiction. Seasoning his evangelical purpose with humanity and humour. Bunyan achieved a unified appeal – the appeal of a great poem or novel; human richness; moral dialogue; and folklore adventure; and like all first novels, it is autobiographical. The primary objective of this study is to unearth all these aspects of this great work of art as an allegory. This article aims to portray *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a vehicle of allegory.

## 3. Methodology

*The Pilgrim's Progress* is the most popular and highly successful work of John Bunyan and it was published in 1678. In the first part of this article I have analyzed the circumstances that have constituted the writing of the novel. In this article I have done a threadbare analysis of *The Pilgrim's Progress* by selecting appropriate passages and incidents that would reveal the allegorical skill of the author. A study of the critical writings done on *The Pilgrim's Progress* by renowned critics is incorporated to substantiate the argument. Library research method is primarily used to establish the credentials.

## 4. Christian - the Primary Vehicle of the Allegory

The keynote of the whole First Part of the book is the lonely integrity of the ideal Puritan; Christian is the central figure. The allegory takes the form of a dream by the author. In this he sees Christian, with a burden or a weight on his back, having learned that the city in which he and his family dwell will be burned with fire, this knowledge he gained from reading a book. The story begins when, at the prompting of the Evangelist, he put his wife and children and security behind and flies from their pleading with his fingers in his ears, crying, 'Life, life, eternal life'. Christian's singular wish is to be on the right road to the Celestial City: 'he went like one that was all the

while treading on forbidden ground, and could by no means think himself safe, till again he was got into the way'. We are guided to see everything from Christian's point of view from the very beginning, so that his desperate plight is humanly touching and convincing: we accept even his abandonment of his family because in the terms of the allegory their city is the City of Destruction, and Christian does his best to persuade them to leave it with him.

As in Kafka's novels, we are placed in the situation of the central character and accept the world around him with complete objectivity whatever intensity of nightmare it inflicts. An overflowing mountain – Mount Sinai representing the old law of sin and death – threatens to fall upon Christian with peals of thunder; a little later he has to endure foul smoke, demons, whisperings, and blasphemies in the Valley of the Shadow of Death – recalling Bunyan's own worst temptations. But this allegory that deals with Calvinist spiritual experience and its darker side is not allowed to become morbidly subjective; Bunyan set his own experience in an inhabited world, and by so doing draws it nearer to the experience of other Christian people so that it appears less as a special and obsessed phenomenon than it does in the revelations of *Grace Abounding*.

Christian meets on his pilgrimage people who are 'states of mind'. Worldly Wise Man for example, is the typical – well fed, well respected tradesman. He symbolizes the dangerous inadequacy of work without faith. The Worldly Wise Man approaches Christian with pompous self-assurance: 'How now, good fellow, whither away this burdened manner / Hast thou wife and children?' Wiseman attempts to convince him that he will save himself a great deal of trouble by adopting a merely nominal and respectable form of Christianity. This is expressed in the allegory by an invitation, under the care of Legality and his son Civility, to take up residence in the village of Morality: 'Provision is there also cheap and good, and that which will make thy life the more happy, is, to be sure there thou shalt live by honest neighbours, in credit and good fashion'. In the strict terms of the allegory Mr. Worldly Wiseman stands for the temptation of the World and merely conformist, 'Establishment' kind of Christianity. However, he appears in the narrative as a living personality, talking and acting for himself the role of a pompous humbug, the eternal bourgeois trying to tell a social inferior the way he should go – 'Hast thou a wife and children?'

The main temptation that beset Christian and his 'good' friends of the puritan tribe, is Spiritual Despair. Both the folk-tale giants in this allegory are from the Chap Book romances, which Bunyan had read in his boyhood. Apollyon has scales like fish and these shining scales stand for Pride; wings like those of the dragon and feet like a bear. Out of the belly of Apollyon came fire and smoke. The mouth of Apollyon was like the mouth of the lion. Behind all the imagery of the allegory, are the details of the Calvinistic faith of Bunyan. However there is the terrible limiting doctrine already been chosen by God. Unlike St. Augustine, Bunyan traces the origin of Grace, not to Baptism but to the Calvinistic "Election".

## 5. Bunyan's Characters as Personifications

Bunyan is perhaps the only writer who gave to the abstract the interest of the concrete. Bunyan's personifications became men and women. He made individuals of generalities. In his plastic hands, qualities cease to be abstractions and take shape and colour. 'Hypocrisy' is another temptation about which the Puritans were very much concerned. As Roger Sharrock has pointed out, this heresy or sin is symbolized by three characters: Talkative, By-Ends, and Ignorance. Talkative possessed the right ideas but converted them into formulae and jargon. Bunyan described as a 'Tall man, more comely at a distance than at hand'. By-Ends is a near relation of Worldly-Wiseman and his corruption is suggested by a similar air of social importance with which he invests himself, 'My wife is a very virtuous woman, the daughter of a virtuous woman... she came from a very honourable family'. By-Ends is shifty, never makes a plain statement. The three friends of By-Ends are: Mr. Hold-the-World, Mr. Money-love, and Mr. Save-well. By-Ends has a fixed eye on the main-chance. By-Ends is described as the great grandson of a 'Waterman looking one way and rowing another'. Ignorance always makes complacent speeches. He is thrown out of the gates of heaven; because of his willful ignorance he labels the stern beliefs of Christian, as 'Whimsies...fruit of distracted brains'. The Judge of Vanity Fair is Hate-good and the witness is Envy. The four jurors: No Good, Live Loose, Liar and Hate Light. Their names are suggestive by itself of the corruptions.

Christians companions along the road, Faithful and, after his martyrdom, Hopeful, tend to be less strongly characterized than the tempters. Before ever he meets Faithful, Christian knows that he is going before him through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and is encouraged in his own lonely ordeal when he hears the unknown friar-to-be singing out, 'Though I walk through the valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear none ill, for thou art with me'. Before the heroic endurance of his martyrdom at Vanity Fair, Faithful is little more than a peg on which to hang a doctrinal summary of the action in the form of dialogue between him and Christian; later the relationship of Christian with Hopeful is developed with more subtlety. Hopeful is young and untired, the tyro to Christian, now an experienced pilgrim. But Christian is always falling through unpreparedness and it is at his careless instigation that Hopeful lets himself be persuaded to take a short cut by By-Path Meadow which leads them eventually into the hands of Giant Despair. At first Hopeful cannot help the universal human urge to say 'I told you so': 'I was afraid on't at very first...I would have spoke plainer, but that you are older than I'. Christian

apologizes handsomely; so far, both moral lesson and realistic observation of character are straightforward. But then each strives to excel the other in a bravery that is also sensitive. Christian wishes to go first on the dangerous path because it is on his account they are in it; Hopeful, with a fine sense of discretion, declares he must not do so, 'for your mind being troubled may lead you out of the way again'. This is clearly a realism that can explore human affection as well as human faith.

## 6. Critical Appraisal

The allegory of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is not intellectually or highly structured as in the complicated religious allegory of Spenser or Dante. A large portion of the figures and occurrences that spring up along the course are made for the purpose of a prompt impact and after that disregarded when a new episode happens in Christian's advancement; they are not strictly associated to the principle structure of the allegory. Likewise the allegory is not consistently maintained; realism breaks in often, because the one truly binding component in the story's structure is Christian's drive forward through unsafe country to the Celestial City, and the stream of adventures that he encounters as a pilgrim. Thus the metaphor of warfare against the powers of darkness is generally kept up – 'put on you the whole armour of God': Christian fights Apollyon, the demon of spiritual doubt, with sword in hand and armour on his back. But as he goes on with drawn sword through the demon-haunted valley we are told that 'he was forced to put up his sword, and betake himself to another weapon called All-prayer; so he cried, 'O Lord I beseech thee deliver my soul'. Bunyan has simply slipped out of the allegorical mode and declared directly that prayer is the chief weapon against temptation.

Unlike Spenser's characters, Bunyan's creation stay put, cease to be shadows and live in flesh and blood. For example, Madam Bubble, a tall attractive woman, speaks very smoothly and gives you a smile at the end of every sentence. Mr. Feeble-mind is the nephew of Mr. Fearing. Temporary no datics in Graceless, a town about two miles off Honesty and he 'dwelt next door to one Turn Back, nay, the two dwelt under the same roof'. This illustrates the ironic humour of Bunyan also. That 'very brisk lad, whose name ws ignorance, who came down a little crooked lane'. 'Mr. Talkative was the son of one Saywell and dwelt in the Prating Row'. Another example of the most telling place – names Bunyan: 'Love-gain which is a market town in the country of Coveting in the north'.

## 7. Conclusion

The critic Grierson writes that Bunyan's allegory is, one suspects, the inspiration of Defoe's picaresque tales like Robinson Crusoe. He adds that the recording analysis of the inner conflict in *The Pilgrim's Progress* and specially in *Grace Abounding* look forward beyond Richardson, to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Psychological novel. Bunyan's knowledge of the human heart and human character is one of the most penetrating kind. The respective allegories in Spenser's the *Fairie Queene* and Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* may be contrasted. In the first canto of the *Fairie Queene*, the reader is enchanted by the damsel in distress, the Red Cross Knight, the monster in the cave and the machinations of the Enchanter. Suddenly the explanatory lines providing the key to the allegory are presented and we are told that they represent Error, Holiness, Hypocrisy and that very moment the three characters have become mere abstractions. This kind of maddening step forward and step backward, goes on, not once or twice but seventy-two times. Hence J.L. Lowes of *The Road to Xanadu* says, "Bunyan's allegory is to Spenser's what a straight line is to a labyrinth". Bunyan has saved his allegory by the device of the dream. The three points in Bunyan's allegory are bright and clear – the way of Christian setting out; his hazardous journey; and his safe arrival at the desired country.

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