

How To Read *The Pilgrim's Progress*

The Pilgrim's Progress is the story of a man who is seeking to find his way to heaven. Written by John Bunyan, probably in the early months of 1676 when he was in prison in the city jail on the Bedford Bridge in Bedford, England, it represents the Christian life as a journey, a quest for salvation. Relevant for every generation for over three hundred years, untold millions around the world have discovered how to receive the free gift of eternal life and have matured in their walk with Christ by returning over and over again to this creative masterpiece.

In Bunyan's *Apology*,¹ his stated reason for writing this book, he tells us that he was actually working on another book, when suddenly he began to think about the journey to heaven in allegorical terms. He quickly recorded his thoughts on paper because the images were beginning to multiply in his mind "like sparks that from the coals of fire do fly."² In the end, it turned out to be a rather large volume.

Apparently, the book proved to be divisive. Some pressed him to publish it, while others severely criticized him, saying it was contrived and dark, and demanded that he present biblical truth through straightforward teaching and doctrine. His detractors contended that the metaphors he used "overpower weaker believers and blind us from the truth."³

Bunyan stood his ground. He argued that the Scriptures use various figures of speech (e.g., parables, metaphors, and allegories) and said, "We don't despise parables, do we? If we did, we might...deprive our very souls of things that are good for us."⁴ Perhaps his most compelling and comprehensive argument was made when he wrote, "Truth, even when presented in allegorical language, informs the judgment, purifies the mind, pleases the understanding, and makes the will more submissive."⁵ His claim was that God's truth, irrespective of how it was delivered, sanctified one's judgment, understanding, thoughts, and volition, all of which are to be brought into greater conformity to Christ. His allegory, he concluded, would not smother the truth; rather, it would make it shine "as bright as the light of day."⁶

¹ The word *apology* is from the Greek word *apologia*, a noun meaning "defense." Webster's *New Twentieth Century Dictionary* defines it as "something said or written in defense; an argument to show that some idea, religion, etc. is right." Bunyan begins his *Pilgrim's Progress* by defending his use of allegory and his writing style to represent the Christian life. The same word is used eight times in the New Testament. See Acts 22:1; 25:16; I Cor. 9:3; II Cor. 7:11; Phil 1:7, 17; II Tim. 4:16; I Pet. 3:15.

² John Bunyan, *The Author's Apology*, line 15.

³ Bunyan's words: "They drown'd the weak; Metaphors make us blind" (line 123).

⁴ Bunyan's words: "All things in parables despise not we...and things that good are, of our souls bereave" (lines 143, 145).

⁵ Bunyan's words: "Come, Truth, although in Swaddling-clouts, I find Informs the Judgment, rectifies the Mind, Pleases the Understanding, makes the Will Submit" (lines 171-174).

⁶ Bunyan's words: "Make it cast forth its rayes as light as day" (line 221).

Near the end of his *Apology*, Bunyan's pastoral heart is revealed as clearly as his intellectual grasp of figures of speech. His prime interest was not in winning an argument, but in having his work impact the lives of his readers. He writes:

This book presents you with the story of a man who seeks the everlasting prize. It tells you from whence he came and where he is going; what he leaves undone, and what he does. It also shows you how he runs and runs until he comes to the gate of Glory.

It also exposes those who set out to find life with great energy, all the while thinking they would attain the eternal crown. In my book you will discover the reason why they forfeit all their labor, and die like fools.

This book will make a traveler out of you, if you will be ruled by its counsel. It will direct you to the Holy Land, if you follow its directions. It will even make the slothful, active; and the blind will see delightful things.⁷

As you set off on your own journey to read *The Pilgrim's Progress*, you will soon discover that Bunyan's book is simply a portal through which you have entered into a world full of adventure, one that is filled with hobgoblins and dragons, giants and lions, castles and courtrooms, faithful friends and diabolical enemies, along with fierce battles and peaceful rest. With every turn of the page, you will encounter intriguing and colorful characters, imaginative places, and engaging drama punctuated with some of the most enlightening and life-transforming dialogue ever penned.

Compelling stories like Bunyan's make for good reading even when the deeper significance is ignored or unseen. Beauty and goodness in art have the capacity to touch the human spirit apart from explanations or rational thought. As a vehicle, the story itself carries moral weight and, by the operations of the Holy Spirit, may be used to bring about both inner and outer transformation.

Good enough. But what if Bunyan wanted us to see more? What if every metaphor he employed could take us to untold depths in our quest for the truly spiritual life? Indeed, what if his allegory could actually bring us face to face with the living God so that we could be "called in, welcomed, received, and acknowledged by God"?⁸

Even the casual reader of Bunyan's *Apology* would recognize that these were, in fact, his aims. He claimed that his "dark and cloudy words"⁹ "contained the truth as cabinets house the gold."¹⁰

⁷ John Bunyan, *The Author's Apology*, lines 228-245.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975), p. 36.

⁹ *Apology*, line 147.

¹⁰ *Apology*, lines 147-148.

Cabinets crafted by skilled furniture-makers are works of art in themselves, but when filled with gold become secondary, irrespective of their magnificence. His purpose is not to denigrate the beauty and craftsmanship of the cabinet, but to direct our attention to the greater value of the nuggets within. Bunyan apparently wants us to fling the doors of the cabinet open and go for the gold. He is inviting us into this deeper significance, unveiling truth after truth from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. As you pass from one metaphor to another, page after page, we can almost hear Bunyan whispering in our ears: “Do you see this truth? See? And...look...another. Do you see that one?”

As everyone knows, the primary goal of reading has always been to receive from the book what the author intended. True communication between writer and reader takes place when the content has been understood as the author conceived and wrote it. A careful reader approaches literature with a discerning eye, evaluating and categorizing language, style, coherence, atmosphere, character, form, point of view, and many other literary devices,¹¹ in order to read the piece for what it is (and not as something else).

As an incomparable work of English prose,¹² *The Pilgrim’s Progress* deserves to be read with this kind of care, lest the moral and spiritual lessons presented by Bunyan be overlooked. C.S. Lewis, in his essay *The Vision of John Bunyan*, noted that most people read Bunyan’s classic work as a delightful story without regard for his own stated purpose for writing it:¹³

There are books which, while didactic¹⁴ in intention, are read with delight by people who do not want their teaching and may not believe that they have anything to teach – works like Lucretius’ De Rerum Natura or Burton’s Anatomy. This is the class to which The Pilgrim’s Progress belongs. Most of it has been read or re-read by those who were indifferent or hostile to its theology, and even by children who perhaps were hardly aware of it.¹⁵

To reduce the risk of misreading Bunyan or overlooking his “didactic intention,” you must first seek to comprehend the literary vehicle he used to convey his message. Understanding his method and style of writing will greatly enhance your reading experience, enrich your life, and provide you with clear directions to heaven.¹⁶

¹¹ *Style*: a writer’s characteristic way of saying things; *coherence*: the parts of a composition form a sequential, cohesive whole; *atmosphere*: the mood or tone of a literary work; *form*: the organizing principle that shapes a work of literature; *point of view*: the vantage point from which a story is told. Definitions from Kathleen Morner and Ralph Rausch, NTC’s Dictionary of Literary Terms (Lincolnwood, Illinois: NTC Publishing Group, 1991), various pages.

¹² “How did a man with no book-learning at all come to write by far the best-written religious book in the English language?” Alexander Whyte, Bunyan Characters (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 2.

¹³ Bunyan’s purpose in writing *The Pilgrim’s Progress* was to advance the truth: “but, all that I may,/Seek the advance of Truth, this or that way” (Bunyan’s *Apology*, lines 196-197).

¹⁴ Didactic: used for teaching.

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, Selected Literary Essays (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 146.

¹⁶ “This book will make a Travailer [traveler] of thee,/If by its Counsel thou wilt ruled be;/It will direct thee to the Holy Land,/If thou wilt its Directions understand:/Yea, it will make the sloathful [slothful], active be;/The Blind also, delightful things to see” (Bunyan’s *Apology*, lines 240-245).

The Pilgrim's Progress is an allegory. In his *Apology*, Bunyan used various words – *metaphors, types, shadows, parables, dark and cloudy words, dark figures, truth in swaddling-clouts, matter in another dress, figure, and similitude* – to convey that he was using a literary device in order to “make truth to spangle, and its rayes to shine.”¹⁷ He firmly believed that this device was nothing more than a cabinet that housed the real treasure, the pure gold of truth,¹⁸ and was “very confident that his allegory would interest, entertain and thus instruct in the way to heaven.”¹⁹ If you should decide to read *The Pilgrim's Progress* without a proper understanding of this mode of expression, you will still be able to delight in the work, but only with a taste of the surface story. On the other hand, learning more about this literary device will enable you to uncover the rich, spiritual insights that God entrusted to John Bunyan.²⁰

What is an Allegory?

An investigation of the etymology²¹ of our English word *allegory* reveals its derivation from the Greek word *allegorein*, meaning “to speak allegorically” and “to explain or denote allegorically.”²² It is formed from two Greek words, *allos*, meaning “other,” and *agoreuo*, “to speak in a place of assembly.” The *agora* is the marketplace or place of assembly. As a compound word, it came to mean a description of one thing (speaking about one thing) under the image of another, or “to speak, not according to the primary sense of the word, but so that the facts stated are supplied to illustrated principles.”²³

Building on these basic ideas, note that an allegory is a *figure of speech*, “a mode of expression in which words are used out of their literal meaning or out of their ordinary use in order to add beauty or emotional intensity or to transfer the poet’s sense impressions by comparing or identifying one thing with another that has a meaning familiar to the reader.”²⁴ Note the ideas contained in this definition.

1. First, in any figure of speech, the actual words are not to be interpreted literally (that is, the story is not literally true). Matthew records that Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites because “you devour widows’ houses,”²⁵ but obviously was not accusing these religious leaders of gathering around widows’ homes with forks in hand. Commenting on this passage, A.W. Pink points out that “*Hard* is

¹⁷ *Apology*, line 120, which means: “Yet some people have made the truth sparkle and its rays to shine by using figurative language haven’t they?”

¹⁸ *Apology*, line 148.

¹⁹ Gordon Wakefield, *Bunyan the Christian* (Great Britain: HarperCollins Religious, 1992), p. 74.

²⁰ Poet Robert Browning wrote: “A fiery tear he put in every tone./’Tis my belief God spoke; no tinker has such powers.”

²¹ Etymology: the origin and development of a word.

²² *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), 1:260.

²³ W.E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1940), p. 47.

²⁴ Author unknown.

²⁵ Matthew 23:14.

the quality of a stone, but when predicated of the heart it is employed figuratively.”²⁶

2. Second, figures of speech may serve several purposes:
 - a. To add *beauty* (rather than using plain, straightforward language)
 - b. To add *emotional intensity* (to make the reader *feel* the story)
 - c. To transfer the writer’s *sense perceptions* to the reader (by comparing one thing with another thing that is familiar to the reader)
 - d. To be a *means of concentration* (the writer may convey an image with the power of a few words rather than many which may be required otherwise)

Of the many figures of speech available to writers,²⁷ Bunyan chose the allegory. Morner and Rausch define an allegory as “an extended narrative in prose or verse in which characters, events, and settings represent abstract qualities and in which the writer intends a second meaning to be read beneath the surface story. The underlying meaning may be moral, religious, political, social, or satiric. The characters are often personifications of such abstractions as greed, envy, hope, charity, or fortitude.”²⁸ The following insights come to light from this definition:

1. An allegory is an *extended narrative*, a story of events and experiences that stresses the details of plot, incident, and action.
2. In an allegory, the characters, events, and settings represent *abstract qualities* (e.g., *Justice*, a blindfolded woman holding scales; or *Liberty*, a woman wearing a diadem and holding a torch aloft).
3. The writer of an allegory fully intends that a *second meaning* be read beneath the surface story. This more important meaning is concealed beneath the apparent storyline. One critic theorizes that “a good story must carry with it a load of meaning...nothing is to be taken at face value.”²⁹ Morner and Rausch agree that “allegory sustains interest on two levels: first, in the characters and actions described by the surface story; second, in the ideas symbolized by them.”³⁰ The idea may be illustrated by the following diagram:

²⁶ A.W. Pink, *Interpretation of the Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), p. 69.

²⁷ e.g., simile, metaphor, allusion, personification, hyperbole, symbol, etc.

²⁸ Kathleen Morner and Ralph Rausch, *NTC’s Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Publishing Group, 1996), p. 4.

²⁹ Kathleen M. Hewett-Smith.

³⁰ Morner and Rausch, p. 4.

Surface Story

Second Meaning

Lewis is careful to remind us, “Allegory frustrates itself the moment the author starts doing what could equally well be done in a straight sermon or treatise. It is a valid form only so long as it is doing what could not be done at all, or done so well, in any other way.”³¹

4. The characters in an allegory are often *personifications* (a thing, quality, or idea represented as a person, e.g., *My car was happy to be washed*).

Donovan Hall offers another helpful definition and illustrates it from *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. “Allegory,” he says, “is a one to one correspondence of elements in a story with truths in the primary world. The classical example of allegory is John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. In this story each character and place bears a symbolic relationship to some general or specific truth in the everyday world. For example, the main character, Christian, is representative of any person and the burden which Christian carries on his back is representative of the sin which each person carries. Every element in Bunyan’s story can be linked with an equals sign to realities extant in the primary world.”³²

Dorothy Sayers provides a third and final definition of allegory in her magnificent introduction to Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*. Here we find, for the first time, a differentiation between two distinctive types of allegory.

“Allegory is the interpretation of experience by means of images. In its simplest form it is a kind of extended metaphor. Supposing we say: ‘John very much wanted to do so-and-so, but hesitated for fear of the consequences’; that is a plain statement. If we say: ‘In John’s mind desire and fear contended for the mastery’ we are already beginning to speak allegorically: John’s mind has become a field of battle in which two personified emotions are carrying on a conflict. From this we can easily proceed to build up a full-blown allegory. We can represent the object of John’s ambition as a lady imprisoned in a castle, which is attacked by a knight called Desire and defended by a giant called Fear, and we can put in as much description of the place and people as will serve to make the story exciting. We can show Desire so badly battered by Fear that he is discouraged and ready to give up, until rebuked by his squire, called Shame, who takes him to have his wounds dressed by a cheerful lady named Hope. Later, he is accosted by a plausible stranger called Suspicion, who says that the lady is much less virtuous and good-looking than she is made out to be...And so forth, introducing as many personifications of this kind as may be needed to express John’s successive changes of mind. In this way we can work out quite a

³¹ C.S. Lewis, p. 146.

³² Donovan Hall, “The Role of Literary Criticism in Understanding Human Nature” (internet article).

complicated psychological pattern, and at the same time entertain the reader with an exciting and colourful tale of adventure. In this purest kind of allegory, John himself never appears: his psyche is merely the landscape in which his personified feelings carry out their maneuvers. But there is also a form in which John himself – or what we may perhaps call John’s conscious self, or super-self – figures among the personages of the allegory, as a pilgrim or knight-errant, exploring the wildernesses of his own soul and fighting against opposition both from within and without. The earlier part of *The Romance of the Rose* is an example of the first kind of allegory and *The Pilgrim’s Progress* of the second. In neither kind does the actual story pretend to be a relation of fact; in its *literal* meaning, the whole tale is fiction; the *allegorical* meaning is the true story.”³³

Suggestions for Interpreting the *Pilgrim’s Progress*

It goes without saying, that *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is “a superb allegory.”³⁴ Bunyan “takes us – and with what movement – into that land of mirages where reality is peopled with the divinities of dream and the marvelous lies open to creatures of flesh and blood. The first scene of the dream reveals the vitality of the rhythm, the marriage of Heaven with Earth, and the universality of the symbols.”³⁵

Today, it is the responsibility of every reader of Bunyan’s beloved allegory to grasp his purpose for writing the book, and to read it with the full anticipation that one’s soul is about to be thoroughly nourished. The following suggestions are provided to that end:

1. Seek to discover why the allegory was written in the first place. Read *The Author’s Apology* to understand Bunyan’s motive for writing and publishing his work.
2. Read *The Pilgrim’s Progress* through once as a child would read,³⁶ imposing nothing upon the story. Read to experience the full impact of the author’s specification. Lose yourself in the story. Abandon yourself to the process of taking the written word and recreating in your mind the world that Bunyan sub-created for that purpose.
3. Search out the basic points of comparison that Bunyan stressed. Let the allegory itself make these clear. Look for the emphasis put upon particular elements in the story (e.g., the burden on Christian’s back, Doubting Castle).

³³ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Hell*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1949), pp. 11-12.

³⁴ Henri Talon, *John Bunyan: The Man and His Works* (London: Rockliff Publishing Corporation Ltd, 1951), p. 215.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

³⁶ C.S. Lewis “held the view that the qualities of a good book could not be appreciated at the first reading.” James Como, *At the Breakfast Table and Other Reminiscences* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1992), p. 206.

4. Always move into the book, not out of it. C.S. Lewis argues that “allegory gives you one thing in terms of another. All depends on respecting the rights of the vehicle, in refusing to allow the least confusion between the vehicle and its freight. The Foolish Virgins, within the parable, do not miss beatitude; they miss a wedding party. The Prodigal Son, when he comes home, is not given spiritual consolations; he is given new clothes and the best dinner his father can put up. It is extraordinary how often this principle is disregarded. The imbecile, wisely anonymous, who illustrated my old nursery copy of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* makes a similar blunder at the end of Part II. Bunyan has been telling how a post came for Christiana to say that she was to cross the river and appear in the City within ten days. She made her farewells to all her friends and ‘entered the *River* with a *Beck’n*’ (that is a wave) ‘of Fare well, to those that followed her to the River side.’ The artist has seen fit to illustrate this with a picture of an old lady on her death-bed, surrounded by weeping relatives in the approved Victorian manner. But if Bunyan had wanted a literal death-bed scene he would have written one.

“This stupidity perhaps comes from the pernicious habit of reading allegory as if it were a cryptogram to be translated; as if, having grasped what an image (as we say) ‘means,’ we threw the image away and thought of the ingredient in real life which it represents. But that method leads you continually out of the book back into the conception you started from and would have had without reading it. The right process is the exact reverse. We ought not to be thinking ‘This green valley, where the shepherd boy is singing, represents humility’; we ought to be discovering, as we read, that humility is like that green valley. That way, moving always into the book, not out of it, from the concept to the image, enriches the concept. And that is what allegory is for.”³⁷

Following Lewis’ thinking as you consider *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, would you say, “The burden on Christian’s back represents sin,” or “How is sin like that burden on Christian’s back?” Which one moves INTO the book?

5. Develop the total thought being presented. Study your Bible (e.g. what does the whole Bible say about sin?) to guard against fanciful interpretations of a specific point of comparison. Let God’s Word be the interpreter of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, and not the other way around. At the conclusion of Part I, Bunyan warns,

Now, reader, I have told my dream to thee;
See if thou canst interpret it to me,
Or to thyself, or neighbor: but take heed
Of misinterpreting; for that, instead
Of doing good, will but thyself abuse:
By misunderstanding evil ensues.

6. Determine the appropriate applications for your life. Ask God to empower you to live out the truths you learn from Bunyan’s allegory which are substantiated by

³⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Selected Literary Essays*, pp. 148-9.

the Bible.³⁸ Seek to understand why these truths are essential for godly living. After all, “the Bible was not written to satisfy your curiosity; it was written to transform your life.”³⁹

Final Questions

- Would you like to turn aside from your sadness and depression?
- Would you like to live right, and stay as far away from foolish behavior as possible?
- Would you like to understand these riddles and their explanation?
- Will you continue to reject truth in favor of your own private thoughts?
- Do you love picking at a steak bone, getting as much meat as possible from it?
- Would you like to see the formation of a man in the clouds and listen to him speak to you?
- Would you like to be in a dream, and yet not sleep?
- Would you like to laugh and cry at the same time?
- If you knew you would not suffer any harm, would you like to lose yourself so you could find your true self again?
- Would you read this book for yourself, even if you don't know what you are reading, and discover whether you are blessed or not?

If so, then come here and lay my book, your head, and your heart together.⁴⁰

³⁸ “Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

³⁹ Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book*, with a Forward by Charles R. Swindoll (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), p. 284.

⁴⁰ *Apology*, lines 259-272.