

## Study on the use of symbols in *The Pilgrim's Progress*

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### Abstract:

*The Pilgrim's Progress* is a classic work of English literature by John Bunyan, a celebrated English minister, and preacher. The book is the most characteristic expression of the Puritan religious view and it tells the story of Bunyan's own conversion in symbolic form. *The Pilgrim's Progress* was quite popular with all social classes at the time of its publication for Bunyan's unique narrative technique and fine psychological description of the human mind. This paper tries to explore the religious thoughts expressed from the perspective of symbol study, mainly from the following aspects: in the description of the setting, in the embodiment of objects and in the life experience of the characters. Through symbolic images, the narrative of *The Pilgrim's Progress* strengthens the feel of common life. With the analysis of these images, this study explores the deep religious spirit and conversion behind these images.

**Keywords:** symbolism; setting; objects; characters

### Introduction

John Bunyan is a famous English writer and an essayist. His most outstanding work is *The Pilgrim's Progress*, whose full title is *The Pilgrim's Progress from this world to that which is to come: Delivered under the similitude of a dream*. This book is a parable divided into two parts, published in 1678 and 1684, part I tells of Christian and his journey to Celestial City, part II tells of the journey of Christian's wife and their children to Celestial City. It is said that it is one of the two essential books of the ordinary English people in the 18th century. One is Bible, the other is *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It becomes a British household book and also the reflection of Christian faith.

*The Pilgrim's Progress* is a fable in the form of a dream. The story is about Christian who is elected by God. From the book, in his hand, he realizes he is guilty, and there is a big burden on his back. At the same time, he knows that the City of Destruction will be destroyed by fire. Under the guidance of an evangelist, he begins his travel from City of Destruction to Mountain Zion. At last, he enters the heaven after overcoming all kinds of difficulties.

Many of the images in *The Pilgrim's Progress* are presented in symbols. Employment of symbols is a literary creation, originated in France in the 19th century. The use of symbols is a form to represent an abstract concept with a specific image. Symbols can help readers better understand the implied meaning of literary works.

This thesis aims to interpret the literary and religious meaning of *The Pilgrim's progress* with the help of some images explained in symbols from the three aspects: in the description of the setting, in the depiction of objects and in the life experience of the characters involved to facilitate the deeper understanding of the text.

### 1 His Early Life

Bunyan, the son of a traveling tinker, was brought up in the heart of England's agricultural Midlands. He learned to read and write at a local grammar school, but he left school early to learn the family trade. He had a happy childhood and followed his father's trade to be a tinker. In 1648, he got married to Mary who did not bring much dowry but brought two books, *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* and *The Practice of Piety*, about which he was crazy. He often read them with his wife beside the hearth at night, and these two books got him quite interested in Christianity. Bunyan's mind and imagination were shaped in these early days by the influences different from formal education. He took in the popular tales of adventure that appeared in chapbooks and were sold at fairs. Though his family belonged to the Anglican church, he also became acquainted with the varied popular literature of English Puritans. Then in 1657, he became a priest. In 1660 He was imprisoned on the charge of the illegal sermon in Bedford jail. He refused to obey the law prohibiting religious meetings without the authority of the Established Church. His imprisonment lasted for near 12 years when *The Pilgrim's Progress* was written in prison. After released from prison, In 1678 the publication of *The Pilgrim's Progress* won him the fame of the most popular writer, as he was already the most popular preacher in English.

## 2 The Definition of Symbolism

Symbolism began in the latter part of the 19th century and lasted in the early 20th century in France and flourished in the 1970s. It is the forerunner of modernism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it employs symbols and evocative suggestions in place of direct statement. Symbolism can be regarded as the means of expressing ideas and emotion by suggesting what these ideas and emotions are, by recreating them in the mind of the reader through the use of symbols, or by defining them through comparisons with a concrete image. Symbolism uses symbols or related objects to distill a private mood or to evoke the subtle affinities which exist between reality and the spiritual world. It stresses the priority of suggestion and evocation over the direct description and explicit analogy, the notion of a deeper, hidden level of meaning and connections is favored.

The symbol is a specific device in the artistic creation and is regarded as one of the most frequently used devices in the literature<sup>1</sup>. The word “symbol” derives from the Greek verb *symbolon*, which means “to throw together”. Its noun form “symbol” means “sign, emblem or token”. A symbol does not only express its literal meaning but also contains the meaning of multilevel. A symbol of the literary sense is based on words, images, background, events, or other forms of characters used to suggest the subtle meaning of the works. Symbolic senses can be absorbed chiefly through exercises of human imagination.

The influence of symbolism on European and American literature of the early 20th century was extensive: Paul Valery in French, Rainer Maria Rilke in German, and W.B Yeats in English carried the tradition on into the 20th century, and hardly any major figures of modernism were unaffected by it. As a literary technique, the use of symbols has a great tradition in English literature. It is a way for writers to provide readers with enhanced reading experience without expending unnecessary words, and it can uncover the hidden meaning behind common words. Literary symbols often refer to or stand for a complex set of ideas. Not only will the symbols enhance the meaning of the words themselves, but also give you additional clues to the characters’ motive, the personality, and the theme and essence, etc.<sup>2</sup>

## 3 Illustrations to show symbols are employed

### 3.1 In the description of setting

We use place, weather and time of day and season to create a setting for performance in most cases. We add details to bring the setting alive and base this on sense impressions. In an eventful story, the setting may be more important than the story itself, for instance, you might use a frightening place such as an empty house or you can take a very ordinary place and make it seem scary by making it appear unusual, dark and cold. John Bunyan has associated the settings with specific symbols to bring out different atmospheres.

#### 3.1.1 The Slough of Despond

The Slough of Despair is the pool that cannot be filled. When people realize that they are guilty and they cannot be saved, they are in the state of sadness with no hope, and then all kinds of dross and dirt will be produced continually from people’s deep heart. Those dirty things will inflow the pool. And once people fall in it, they have a feeling of fear, doubt, and uneasiness. This slough has swallowed up at least twenty thousand cart-loads, millions of wholesome instructions, that have at all seasons been brought from all places in the King’s dominions, and these materials are all made from good places. But it still cannot be mended. The causes of it are described in the work.

“This miry slough is such a place as cannot be mended; it is the descent whither the scum and filth that attends conviction for sin doth continually run, and therefore it is called the slough of despond; for still, as the sinner is awakened about his lost condition, there ariseth in his soul many fears, and doubts, and discouraging apprehensions which all of them get together, and settle in this place. And this is the badness of this place<sup>3</sup>.”

Christian falls into it out of fear. He gets out with the help of Help. He begins to regret not to take in the words of Evangelist. But then he knows the true nature of the Slough of Despond, and he has a determination to atone for his sin. Here The Slough of Despond is not only a pool full of dross and dirt, but also is symbolized as “conviction for sin” in the Christian belief. It is a challenge for Christian on the way to mountain Zion.

<sup>1</sup> Zhao Jinjing. On the Significance of Symbolism in *Wuthering Heights*[D].Shandong: China University of Petroleum,2008:13.

<sup>2</sup> Zhao Jinjing. *On the Significance of Symbolism in Wuthering Heights*[D]Shandong: China University of Petroleum,2008:17.

<sup>3</sup> John Bunyan. *The Pilgrim’s Progress* [M]Wordsworth Editions, 1996:14.

### 3.1.2 City of Destruction

The City of Destruction is the Sin city, the home of Christian whose original name is Graceless. He lived in it with his families before he wakes up. The City of Destruction is a big city where the population is very large, densely populated, but crowded with bad and idle people. And this city will be buried in the fire. When he told his families this message he will be overwhelmed by the burden on the shoulder, but they did not believe him. And neighbors thought he was crazy. He ran away from the city, some neighbors laughed at him, some threatened him, some asked him to get back, but just no one believed him. But the book in Christian's hand told him, the city where he lived will be sent to the fire. And the city will fall to a deeper place than a tomb, where there are fire and sulfur burning. Apollyon is the owner of this city, where the wage for sin is death. Apollyon did not tell the people about this, he used the temptation to make the people stay in the city.

The people in the City of Destruction were born with sin, but they do not know this, and they do not know the way to expiate sin until the Bible tells him. The City of Destruction is not just an ordinary city; it stands for the whole world. It is the symbol of sin, a symbol of destruction.

### 3.1.3 Mountain Zion

Mountain Zion is the place where Christian wants to go, the place where God blessed his followers. And there is an eternal everlasting kingdom for people to live in, an eternal life blessed to people. In this city, a crown of glory will be given to people and the clothes that people wear shine like the sun in the sky. Once the people in the City of Destruction find guilt in their heart and they will tell the lord they are exposed to sin, God will bless them. At the end of the first part Christian entered heaven, but the Ignorance following him did not enter the heaven, Ignorance entered the hell because he did not have any certificates.

Mountain Zion is the heaven for the Christians, the Christians can enter it when they can get through the challenges. It is the motivation of the atonement of the Christians, the final embodiment of their faith. Mountain Zion is also a symbol of success.

## 3.2 In the depiction of objects

### 3.2.1 Cross

The Cross in *The Pilgrim's Progress* is the reference to the cross theology. In Christian, the Cross is the symbol of honor, also the most severe and the most humiliating punishment. The Cross represents Christianity, but Christ died on the Cross. The Cross shows the lives of the Christians in their pain and joy, shame and glory. In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian goes to Heaven every day to give their due efforts. And he has to bear the attacks from the old me, the world, the devil. On the way to the Heaven, there is no time to fight against the danger of the three great enemies. All kind of difficulties and obstacles continue to stand on the Christians' way to heaven, *The Pilgrim's Progress* as the theology of the cross is not only full of sunshine but also full of dark clouds.

Quite early in his journey Christian loses his burden of sin at the Cross, so he now knows that he has received the free pardon of Christ and is numbered among the elect. "The Christian came at a place somewhat ascending, and upon that place stood a cross, and a little below, a sepulcher. The Christian came up with the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulder, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do, till it came to the mouth of the sepulcher, where it fell in and I saw it no more<sup>4</sup>."

It might seem that all the crises of the pilgrimage were past, yet this start of grace is not the end of the drama but the beginning. Christian, and the companions who join him, Faithful and Hopeful, are fixed in the path of salvation so that it is the horrors of the temptations they have to undergo that draw the reader's attention. The cross helps the Christian discharge the burden. But before he came to the cross he endured some sufferings. The cross is the symbol of faith, is also that of the suffering.

### 3.2.2 Burden

Christian has the burden since he came to the world. In the past he did not realize the guilt in his heart, so the

<sup>4</sup> John Bunyan. *The Pilgrim's Progress* [M]. Wordsworth Editions, 1996:32.

burden does not exist in his life; now he knows he is guilty, the burden is great and upon his back. He has to hold the burden until he finds the way to Heaven and God allows him to release it.

Christian knows he is guilty from the book in his hand. And he is condemned to die and to the judgment after death; he finds that he is not willing to do the first, nor able to do the second.

Christian no sooner leaves the world than he meets the evangelist, who greets him lovingly with tidings of another: and shows him how to mount to that from his below.<sup>5</sup>

Christian does not want to die and then accepts the judgment, so he begins to wake up, to repentance, willing to accept the gospel of Christ's asylum and prayer. Later he is on the way to Heaven and takes some sufferings, finally, he is released from burden under the cross. Burden is not only the burden on Christian's back, but also the burden of Christian's evil in his soul, and it is also the challenge on the way to the success.

### 3.2.3 Apollyon

The Christian biblical revelation said that Apollyon was a messenger from the bottomless pit, that is, the devil from the hell, another Satan.

In the book, Apollyon is a monster. He is the incarnation of countless temptations.

He is clothed with scales, like a fish, he has wings like a dragon, feet like a bear, and out of his belly comes to fire and smoke, and his mouth is like the mouth of a lion<sup>6</sup>.

Here is the picture of the appearance of Apollyon. His body is a combination of all kinds of animals, the fire and smoke come out from his belly. He used to be the prince and the god of Christian before he wakes up, so he asks Christian to continue to serve him. But Christian refuses, he realizes that the wage of the sin is death. Apollyon lures Christian to get back with profit, and Christian turns it down again, points out that "I swore my allegiance to the King of the prince, can I go back for this, and not be hanged for a traitor". Then Apollyon pointed out that Christian had lived in the past, but Christian told him that the prince whom he served that honor is merciful and ready to forgive. Apollyon cannot tempt Christian in these ways, so in the last Christian beat Apollyon, which means Christian had resisted the temptation, and the spirit of a person's faithful Christian spirit wins.

### 3.3 in the characters involved

In English and American literature, naming the characters in the novels is not simply a means to tell one from another, the choice of names often bears personal features and cultural connotations. Many names in *The Pilgrim's Progress* such as "Helpful" "Hopeful" "Blind Man" convey a symbolic meaning more important than the literary one through personifications and other symbols.

#### 3.3.1 Evangelist

Evangelist appears for the first time when Christian does not know how to atone for his sin, how to look eternal. He asks Christian why he would like to go to life while it has so many disasters. Then he answers to Christian's puzzlement and tells him how to go to the next station. When Christian makes mistakes and go astray, Evangelist does not blame him, just tells him the truth and helps him return to the right path.

"Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draws back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. Thou art the man that is running into this misery; thou hast begun to reject the counsel of the Highest, and to draw back thy foot from the way of peace, even almost to the hazarding of thy perdition".

When Christian meets unexpected troubles on the way to Heaven, Evangelist will come out and direct him in the right way. The Evangelist is the gospel and gives Christian the direction as the gospel of God gives to Christians. The Evangelist is not only a wise man who leads the Christian into salvation but also the gospel of God for the Christians.

#### 3.3.2 Christian

Christian's original name is Graceless, and he is the leading character in the parable narrating the travel of Christian from City of Destruction to Mountain Zion. At the beginning of the parable, Christian knows he is guilty, but he is at a loss about how to save him. His escapes from City of the Destruction show he begins to repent for himself and convert to Christianity. Because of the confusion in his mind he cannot fully believe God, he is more likely to

<sup>5</sup> Ibid:10

<sup>6</sup> John Bunyan. *The Pilgrim's Progress* [M]. Wordsworth Editions, 1996:47.

believe lies and be involved in danger. When he knows he should trust God in the whole life he frees himself from the burden and beats Apollyon. Christian successfully gets rid of the temptation. On the next travel, Christian goes through the test of love and perfect faith.

The travel for an eternal life is not just his personal travel, it is the travel sought by all Christians, and is also the travel of John Bunyan himself. Every Christian wants to go to his mountain Zion and has to overcome these difficulties. Christian is the representative of the majority of Christians.

### Conclusion

*The Pilgrim's Progress* has been hailed as the greatest fable of the English language and a landmark book in the history of English literature. This work has attracted people of all ages and status and has a high aesthetic ideology. *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a combination of theology and literature. The allegory has been studied and analyzed by various readers and critics. The religious mystery and literary wonders remain unexplored for readers all over the world.

In the above analysis of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, this paper tries to explore the effective use of symbols in interpreting the universal theme of allegory. Symbols play an important role in helping us understand the implications behind them. It is through the use of symbols that John Bunyan, the sermon and writer, presents readers a vision of the process of Christian redemption and the final lighted path to Heaven, the Christian soul's journey from unbelief and sinfulness to salvation and glory.

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