



THE ALLEGORICAL IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM IN “THE PILGRIM’S PROGRESS”

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Abstract:

An allegory is a story of description in which abstract qualities, virtues and vices are personified and appear as characters. In a moral allegory the characters representing virtue argue and fight against the characters representing vice and finally there is a triumph of virtue over vice. Other points of view can also be shown by making personified abstractions talk and act.

Keywords: allegory, pilgrim’s progress, virtue, personified.

Inner life dramatized:

In ‘The Pilgrim’s Progress’, Bunyan dramatizes an inner experience. A devout soul is extremely sad because it has committed many sins. It prays to God for guidance and grace. When these are granted the soul shakes off the shackles that bind it to the material world and wants to attain salvation. But the path is not easy. It is pulled back time and again by its doubts and fears. It has to fight against temptations and the forces of evil. It is guided by divine grace from stage to stage. The soul becomes purer and stronger. Finally, the soul reaches Heaven and becomes one with God.

In the allegory these things are shown in a concrete form. The soul is shown as a man called Christian who carries a burden of sins on his back.

The soul shaking off the shackles of this world is shown as Christian cutting himself off from his wife and children. He wants to be saved. So he is directed by Evangelist (a preacher) to go to the wicket gate (Jesus Christ). Jesus then shows him the path to salvation. The stages in his spiritual progress are shown as Interpreter's House, Palace Beautiful, Delectable Mountains and the Country of Beulah. His doubts take the concrete shape of the slough of Despond in which he falls and the Doubting Castle in which he is imprisoned. The temptations take the concrete shape of Vanity Fair. Resistance to evil takes the form of Christian's fight with Apollyon (The Devil). Death is shown as Christian crossing the River of Death. The merger of the soul with the Universal soul is shown as Christian entering the celestial city.

The Christian soul's ascent from this world of sins and sorrows to the place of eternal bliss is shown as a pilgrimage from the wilderness of this world to the Celestial City.

Aim:

Bunyan was by temperament a preacher. He was interested in saving the souls of men from the Devil. He wanted to make them devout Christians. He thought that an allegory would serve this purpose better than dry sermons. The allegory would amuse as well as instruct them. Allegory was a powerful medium of teaching the common people the principles of religion.

Sources of his symbols:

Bunyan took his symbols from the Bible and from the life around him.

Christ said, "I am the gate." Bunyan therefore made the wicket-gate stand for Jesus Christ. Jesus called himself a shepherd and his follower's sheep. So Christian's guides on the Delectable Mountains are shepherds. The concept of hell is taken from the Bible. The Country of Beulah and the Celestial City has the same source. The cardinal virtues of Christianity are symbolized by the virgin sisters in Palace Beautiful. They are named Discretion, Pretty, Prudence and Charity.

He took a fair such as he had seen in England and called it Vanity Fair and made it symbol of the material, sinful world. For his allegorical figures he took the persons whom he knew and with whom he had discussed theological questions and called them Obstinate or By-Ends or Worldly-Wiseman or Talkative or Ignorance or Great-Heart.

Bunyan took the matter for the fights which Christian and Great-Heart fought against dragons and giants from the romances and adventure books, which he had read in his youth.

Realism and autobiography:

Macaulay has said that “Bunyan is almost the only writer who gave to the abstract the interest of the concrete.” His allegorical figures bear abstract names but they are all flesh-and- blood Englishmen and women of Bunyan’s days. It seems that he has only described real men and given them some nicknames. Mr.Jack Lindsay has put it thus:

“The impression concrete by the allegory is the exact opposite of what it literally professes. The phantasms of good and evil become the real world; and in encountering them the pilgrim lives through the life that Bunyan had known in definite place and time. The pattern of his experience, the fall and the resolute rising-up the loss and the finding, the resistance and the overcoming, the despair and the joy, the dark moaning valleys and the singing in the places of the flowers-it is the pattern of Bunyan’s life. There are comrades and enemies, stout-hearts and cravens, men who care only for the goal of fellowship and men of greed and fear; and these are the men of contemporary England. The Celestial City is the dream of all England, all the world, united in fellowship.”

That is why ‘The Pilgrim’s Progress’ reads like a realistic novel dealing with the author’s own life and experiences. He only shows in the allegorical form his own joys and sorrows, his aches and ecstasies, his fear of God’s anger and his faith in God’s mercy, he has given concrete shape to his innermost thoughts and feelings.

Defects:

A few minor defects in The Pilgrim’s Progress are:

One defect is that Bunyan is often tempted to make his characters discuss religious questions. The allegory is forgotten and a sort of sermon begins. This may have been all right for Puritan readers but the average reader gets bored by these theological discourses.

Another defect is that of inconsistency. It is emphasized throughout the book that there is only one way for the soul that wants salvation. This way begins at the Wicket-gate and ends at the River of Death. A person who tries to jump over the wall or tries a shortcut is a trespasser and a thief. And yet Faithful is shown as going to heaven from Vanity Fair itself.

Another minor inconsistency is that gold is a symbol of temptation in Vanity Fair; but in his Celestial

City the clothes, the crowns, the harps and even the street are made of gold.

Conclusion:

But there are very minor faults. The facts remain that The Pilgrim's Progress is one of the finest allegories in English literature. In the case of many other allegories a key has to be provided to indicate what the abstractions stand for. But in this allegory everything is clear. The moment an abstraction is introduced and named, we know what it stands for.

The "unlettered tinker" had a very fine imagination and he had a firm grip on life. So the allegory reads like a realistic novel of manners. This is one of the two or three books which Dr. Johnson wished to be longer, and the allegory has given supreme delight to millions of readers, Christian and non-Christian.

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