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Pilgrim's Progress Progress: How a Novel Can Affect an Entire Culture's Communication

Abstract

In this discussion of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, three main areas will be explored as ways to show why this book is so worthy of communication study and why it has endured for so long. The first area will be a deeper exploration of the book's historical background and contemporary role at the end of the 17th century. For the second point, the cultural, social, literary, and communication effects will be examined, reinforcing the concept that the book's impact was especially substantial in American history. Finally is an argument listing the reasons why a communication scholar should study *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Again, these major points together will enable communication scholars to see the centuries-old effect this beloved book has had on communication.

Keywords

Pilgrim's Progress, John Bunyan, communication

Disciplines

American Literature | Christianity | Communication

Comments

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The Pilgrim's Progress Progress:

How a Novel Can Affect an Entire Culture's Communication

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January 30, 2012

The Pilgrim's Progress Progress:

How a Novel Can Affect an Entire Culture's Communication

By many accounts, society is currently experiencing the greatest revolution in communication in history. In the midst of all the Internet tools and social media venues, it might seem strange to even suggest examining a media product over three hundred years old.

However, analyzing one of the most popular novels ever written and its effects on the world not only will provide for better understanding of the early roots of mass communication, but also might enable a more deliberate, thoughtful use of newer media.

The work in question is John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, first published in 1678 and still regarded as a key piece of literature in world history. As an example of the book's durability, Megan White, says, "No other English work (excepting the Bible) has been so widely read over such a long span of time as has John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*" ("Impact"). This kind of statement is readily found in much writing about the book, signifying at the very least that the allegory has had a lasting impression on the consciousness of readers through the ages. The publication of millions of copies of the book since 1678 also shows its high level of acceptance and popularity.

Of course, popularity alone does not make a book or any other media product worthy of study in and of itself. In this discussion of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, three main areas will be explored as ways to show why this book is so worthy of communication study and why it has endured for so long. The first area will be a deeper exploration of the book's historical background and contemporary role at the end of the 17th century. For the second point, the cultural, social, literary, and communication effects will be examined, reinforcing the concept that the book's impact was especially substantial in American history. Finally is an argument

listing the reasons why a communication scholar should study *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Again, these major points together will enable communication scholars to see the centuries-old effect this beloved book has had on communication.

An Overview of *The Pilgrim's Progress*

As popular as this book has been over the past 300 years, a short synopsis of the book might be in order for those not as familiar with the plot or the general background of Bunyan's story. The key word for the book, of course is the word "allegory," since Bunyan was very clearly attempting to make a parallel between the action of the story and the reader's Christian life. Although the book in present form consists of two parts (labeled "First Part" and "Second Part"), the first part that was published in 1678 is generally regarded as the heart of the book, the "true" *Pilgrim's Progress* in other words.

In this first part, the everyman hero named Christian sets off on a journey from his home in the City of Destruction to the Celestial City – which referred to "the world" and to "heaven," respectively. Along the way he meets positive characters like Evangelist, Help, Good Will, Faithful, and Hopeful, and negative characters like Obstinate, Pliable, Worldly Wiseman, Mr. Legality, the Giant Despair, and Ignorance, most of whose names are readily interpreted for the concepts they represent. Christian meets these characters in his adventures through the Slough of Despond, Morality, House Beautiful, Valley of Humiliation, Vanity Fair, and the Delectable Mountains, each location highlighting the joys and trials of a Christian life, as well as continually showing the need for a Christian to remain steadfast in the face of all trials. In the end, Christian is able to cross the River of Death and enter the Celestial City, where he is welcomed with open arms at the end of his journey.

The second part was published six years after the first, in 1684. In many ways this part is very similar to the first, and represents again the allegory of a Christian life, perhaps in a slightly more detailed and organized way. The hero in this story is Christian's wife, Christiana, and her journey with their sons parallels and adds to the journey previously taken by Christian. In both cases, the ideas of repentance, of faith, of resisting temptation, and of perseverance are key, and it is no surprise that these obvious moral lessons were used by Christians in the 1600s and 1700s to guide their spiritual life.

The Context of *The Pilgrim's Progress*

In beginning to highlight the book's historical background, it is necessary to take a step back and look at the general picture of literature in the late 1600s, especially in England. Even though it had been in existence for 200 years, the printing press was just starting to get into its "adoption" or "commercial" stage in terms of communication technology (Bugir). As Olaf Simons notes, at the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th, there was an exponential rise in the number of books printed in the "fiction" category, and even more striking is the number of books printed in the sub-genre of "novel." Many forces combined to create this atmosphere, but one of the most important factors according to Ian Watt – whose book *The Rise of the Novel; Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* is often considered a leading authority on the history of the novel – is that perhaps for the first time in history, fiction was being made available to everyone regardless of social class (41). Watt suggests these early novels changed "the audience for literature," and as such became one of the first manifestations of mass communication outside of the Church (35). Isabel Hofmeyr agrees: "Given its dissemination across so many different languages, societies, and intellectual contexts, *The Pilgrim's Progress* can be considered as an early example of a translingual mass text" (12-13).

As a short side note, it should be mentioned that *The Pilgrim's Progress* is not always considered a true novel, although some, like editor George Latham from a century ago, have considered as a strong contender for the “first English novel.” Novel expert Ian Watt suggests that Bunyan's book cannot be considered a novel, although he acknowledges the enormous impact the book had on English and world society (50). However, the actual genre designation of the book, while perhaps interesting in a literature study, is not as crucial for this paper's particular focus. Whether labeled a “novel,” an “allegory,” or an “extended parable,” *The Pilgrim's Progress* remains an integral part of literary and cultural history; Norton's *Anthology of Literature*, the ubiquitous authority of the field, says the book is “the most successful allegory in our literature” (1809). Jim Hargan extends this evaluation, saying *The Pilgrim's Progress* is “the most phenomenally successful book of its age” (52). Raymond Lowell agrees, stating that after the Bible, *The Pilgrim's Progress* “is the most printed, published, and translated book in the world.”

Since there are plenty of other evaluations along this line, it seems sufficient to say that Bunyan's book is generally regarded as a successful book, both in and beyond its time. Given the political climate of England at the time, though, such success is perhaps a little surprising. Megan White suggests that Bunyan and other Puritans “were largely reviled under the Restoration and suffered many persecutions, including not being lawfully allowed to meet and worship according to their own doctrines” (“Impact”). James Forrest, however, argues that “Bunyan's dream was delivered to a reading public ready to receive it,” in that the political and cultural climate throughout Europe and the Americas was such that Bunyan's allegory (and other similar works) resonated greatly with readers of all ages and classes (29). Regardless, in such an atmosphere, *The Pilgrim's Progress* flourished beyond anyone's expectations. John Brown, in

his comprehensive biography of John Bunyan, suggests, “one of the foremost causes of its success is that with singular felicity it meets a pre-existing love of metaphor, fable, parable, and allegory, which is deeply rooted in human nature” (271). Brown goes on to counter the argument that the book was successful only because of its clarification of grace: “But many people have been charmed by this book who do not accept this doctrine, and we must go farther afield for an adequate explanation of the ‘Pilgrim’s’ influence” (281), such explanations including its spontaneity, its dramatic unity, its characterization, its humanity, and its purity (281-285).

Norton’s *Anthology of Literature* continues this idea by saying the effectiveness of the book lies in its “immediacy of daily experience,” the fact that Bunyan is a “superb storyteller,” and how his style and language “enable even the simplest reader to share the experiences of the characters” (1809-1810). With these kinds of characteristics making the book so popular, Bunyan not only was able to avoid further displeasure of the monarchy (which had landed him in jail for twelve years previously) but also to enjoy a measure of freedom. Jim Hargan says in the years following the publication of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, “Bunyan had become a national figure, much in demand. He frequently preached to large London audiences.” Isabel Hofmeyer, in her remarkable book *The Portable Bunyan* agrees: “In both the popular and academic domains, Bunyan stands as an icon of Englishness. Indeed, existing Bunyan scholarship is almost obsessive in its focus on him as a national figure of seventeenth-century England” (1).

Beyond the author’s newly-found freedom and unsought-for fame, the very publication numbers of the book speak to its monumental popularity. Raymond Powell’s overview of the publication history, for example, states the book “appeared in ninety different editions in the first hundred years after its publication and has been translated into more than two hundred

languages.” Megan White is more specific to Bunyan’s time when she highlights how “the first edition was published in 1678 and before the year was out there was a need for a second one. In 1684 Bunyan wrote *The Pilgrim’s Progress Part II* ... in response to Part I’s huge success” (“Impact”). Furthermore, its success was not limited to England. Galen Johnson says, “Only three years after its initial 1678 publication in London, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* attained enough cachet in New England that a colonial printing became necessary to keep up with a demand that exceeded the availability of imported copies (2). Bunyan himself in regard to the trans-Atlantic popularity introduces Part II with these words:

‘Tis in New-England under such advance,
 Receives there so much loving Countenance,
 As to be Trim’d, new Cloth’d & Deckt with Gems,
 That is might shew its Features, and its Limbs,
 Yet more; so comely doth my Pilgrim walk,
 That of him thousands daily Sing and talk. (195)

Megan White also cites this passage, and adds that for this American edition, “unlike the crude materials used by the English publishers, the New Englanders ... thought it worthy of the most elegant binding” (“Impact”). Johnson further clarifies the setting: “Indeed, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* was a staple of early Americans’ literary diet. It was one of only seven books excepting the Bible, almanacs, and reference materials to sell more than 1,000 copies in America by the year 1690” (3).

The Historical Impact of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*

It is with this mention of the book’s first migration that we turn to the paper’s second point. As has been suggested above, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* made an immediate, widespread

impact on the minds and hearts of people in the late 1600s, and this role that one of the first major printed non-Bible books ever made seems clearly worth study in itself. However, any communication study needs to go beyond these initial publication figures and address the effect it had the discourse and other communication aspects of culture. Although Brown says the book was translated into 120 languages (439) and Hofmeyr argues that Bunyan has a “global reach” (2), and others focus on its particularly British heritage (White, *Journey*, 23), its impact on American culture seems especially strong. Ruth MacDonald, for example, suggests that familiarity with *The Pilgrim's Progress* was once the “mark of a good American” (35). In this light, the effects of Bunyan's book on American communication and dialog will be addressed.

One initial effect was how *The Pilgrim's Progress* was a mainstay of Americans' sense of literature. U. Milo Kaufman states in his close thematic analysis of the book that the presence of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in American households through the 1700s and 1800s was nearly a given (v). Megan White adds, “Up until the twentieth century it was a standard household book in English-speaking homes, a common sight on bookshelves alongside the Bible” (“Impact”). James Forrest suggests that this focus of American imaginations onto the book “is indicated not only by the astonishing number of American adaptations produced in the nineteenth century, of which Hawthorne's *The Celestial Railroad* is no doubt the best known, but also by the inspiration the allegory provided for authors as disparate as Hawthorne, Louisa May Alcott¹, Mark Twain, and E.E. Cummings” (30). Such writing was common because “There existed such common knowledge of the allegory that writers could think and comment and describe in terms of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, knowing their audience would pick up on and understand their references (White “Impact”).

¹ The reader may remember the wonderful chapter references to *The Pilgrim's Progress* in Alcott's *Little Women*.

In the early years of the United States, the book enjoyed especially high sales; David Smith says about this time, “From 1800 to 1810, there were more printings of works by Bunyan than at any other comparable period either earlier or later” (“Publications” 632). George Latham postulates that the surprising rarity of early editions of *The Pilgrim's Progress* can be explained by how the “the people who bought copies of *The Pilgrim's Progress* bought them to read, and literally read them to pieces.” In his book about Bunyan's role in American society, David Smith suggests that the allegory was often seen as an example to follow in terms of Westward Expansion and Manifest Destiny; in many ways, it inspired “Americanized imitations of its journey from worldly wilderness to heavenly reward” (*John Bunyan* 6).

This last concept by Smith moves the discussion from whether or not *The Pilgrim's Progress* had a place in American culture to why it had such a large impact. On one level – as it has been previously suggested – the book is simply a good story. Ruth MacDonald suggests that the book's romantic and adventure aspects, as well as its focus on virtue, caused this perpetual popularity (11-19). James Forrest, however, states the impact resulted from more than just the book's tale-telling abilities; “It was from the start adopted to become one of the most potent metaphors in Christian thought, especially when wayfaring is combined, as here, with its cognate image of warfaring” (30). This wayfaring/warfaring metaphor became especially strong for the American consciousness, and it should be no surprise that the height of the book's popularity coincided so strongly with the height of America's exploration. Forrest goes on to suggest, “The parallel between the vision of Christian's journey through a harsh and hostile world to a shining city on a hill and their own utopian dream and millernarian hope was too sharp for most Americans to miss” (30). John Warfield Simpson spends a good amount of time in his book, *Visions of Paradise*, showing repeatedly that the draw to the West was a conquest of a new land,

spurred in part by Bunyan's writings (97). Holland Cotter summarizes this concept very effectively: "Its narrative of a religious journey through the wilderness to stake a claim on a piece of Paradise was part of the American foundation myth, one of struggle and entitlement, in which ideas of divine mission, national destiny and nostalgia for the past merged."

Another specific influence *The Pilgrim's Progress* had was on the concept of mission work. Like the ideas of Westward Expansion mentioned above, the concept of evangelizing unreached peoples found in the allegory a perfect model for the why and how of missions. Nearly one hundred years ago, Martha Hale Shackford said, "In addition to its appeal as imaginative art and its significance as a link in literary history, *The Pilgrim's Progress* has extraordinary power in stimulating in its readers deep concern regarding the spiritual destiny, the ethical duties, the religious life of man" (648). The word "destiny" here and in many other missional writings conveys the strong sense of duty that many Americans felt in terms of reaching other people in the name of Christ². Highlighting this idea, Megan White says Bunyan's book "gradually but thoroughly" became adopted by "all Protestants, regardless of denomination, and it became ... a favourite of missionaries" ("Impact"). Isabel Hofmeyr adds that the "nineteenth-century Protestant mission movement" saw *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a "key evangelical document" (1).

In addition, the ideas of sacrificing earthly desires for the purpose of gaining heavenly benefits was a key idea; "the consummation which the Puritan pursued in his pilgrimage was an end perfectly capable of reducing all antecedent experience to the status of means." (Kaufman 125) Galen Johnson claims that the always-pragmatic Ben Franklin, for example, found at least

² Hofmeyr, among others, refers to a famous British mission trip in reference to the book's impact: "On 31 October 1847, the *John Williams*, a ship of the London Missionary Society (LMS), left Gravesend for the Pacific Islands from whence it had come. Its cargo included five thousand Bibles and four thousand copies of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in Tahitian" (11).

this concept of “persistence through trial” endearing about *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, despite the book’s spiritual elements (3). However, the spiritual elements were the main draw for missionaries and other Protestants, following Bunyan’s belief that “victory is with him who perseveres” (Shackford 658). This Puritan ideal of the temporal nature of the physical is just one of many religious elements that affected Christians in America; Raymond Powell is so bold even to claim, “With time, however, and certainly helped by the wide popularity of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Puritan beliefs became more and more mainstream, until today many of their convictions are widely held in the Protestant community worldwide.”

The Pilgrim’s Progress obviously had a tremendous impact on the general American culture as well as Protestant sensibilities throughout the years. However, it is also clear that it is no longer a part of today’s overall awareness. Such a decline seemed obvious even in the mid 1800s, despite a “brief resurgence” in the 1840s (Johnson 8). The whole tenor of Martha Hale Shackford’s “Shall We Study *The Pilgrim’s Progress*?” article from 1916 laments the discernible drop of interest in the book, opening with the rhetorical question, “Is it not true that *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is being slowly but surely withdrawn from the lists of required reading in our secondary schools?” (647). James Forrest more recently states that the book “has suffered from the disrepute into which many Puritan books have fallen” (32). Such current ignorance about the book seems lamentable, given its illustrious history. One can almost feel the sadness in a statement like, “Most adults today have heard of the famous allegory, but few have actually read it, and even fewer are aware of the worldwide impact that the book has had and continues to have in terms of culture, religion, literature, and language” (White, “Impact”). The lack of knowledge of the book is so prevalent that Isabel Hofmeyr assumes her readers probably haven’t

read it, and uses such an occasion to show why she's spending time summarizing the world's most unknown famous allegory (3-4).

Such a change in the book's fortunes begs the question then of the causes of the decline. These factors seem quite diverse overall, but at the same time represent a changing general worldview in American culture. For example, if the book was so intimately entwined with the exploration of the frontier, then "when the American wilderness had vanished, the conventional figure of Bunyan's Christian vanished also" (Smith, *John Bunyan* 12). Galen Johnson claims, "The waning of interest in *The Pilgrim's Progress* after 1820 reflected the priorities of a changing nation, whose common focus by then had become the very earthly business of populist politics" (4). In other words, it seems as though *The Pilgrim's Progress* was not "real" enough for the average American. In many ways, broaching the subject of religion or even spirituality seems an especially difficult task in today's world (Shackford 656). Even the suggestion of anything related to the Bible seems problematic; "Bunyan's references to his scriptural sources sprinkled in the pages of *The Pilgrim's Progress* have undoubtedly served to blunt the interest, whether casual or scholarly, of many modern readers" (Kaufman 25).

Modern Reasons to Study *The Pilgrim's Progress*

Although *The Pilgrim's Progress* appears to have had a rollercoaster ride from its publication in the midst of persecution to its status as one of the most read books in the world to its seeming obscurity, there still remain key aspects of great value and interest to communication study. One of the most cited reasons is the effect it had on language. Some phrases from the book might not be necessarily everyday uses of language, but they still persist. For example, Norton's Anthology says, "*The Pilgrim's Progress* is no longer a household book; but it survives in the speech of men who have never read it, for it gave to our language phrases that will

doubtless always live: “the slough of despond,” “the house of beautiful,” “Mr. Wordly-Wiseman,” “Vanity Fair.” And it lives again for anyone who reads beyond the first page”(1810). Perhaps not quite as common but still influential are “other inventive names such as Hill Difficulty, Valley of Humiliation, By-ends, Mr Facing-both-ways, Little-faith, the Delectable Mountains, Giant Despair and Doubting Castle” (White, “Impact”).

Beyond language, deeper values and concepts were affected as well. One of many suggested specific examples of direct influence is found in J. Karl Franson’s article, “From Vanity Fair to Emerald City,” in which Franson outlines the numerous debts *The Wizard of Oz* owes to *The Pilgrim’s Progress*; he says such “similarities between the books convinced me that Baum’s supposedly original tale is simply a recasting of Bunyan’s. Doubtless Baum was familiar with Bunyan’s book, the most famous allegorical journey in Western literature” (91). If true, one could then argue that the popularity of Baum’s book and the subsequent movie are indications of the lasting effect of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Regardless, there are many other such examples; Galen Johnson, for one, lists nearly 10 other books that owe some sort of allegiance to *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, one being *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (8). Raymond Powell has his own list, which duplicates Johnson’s to some degree, but includes others like *Slaughter-House Five*, *Jane Eyre*, and (of course) C.S. Lewis’ *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. Holland Cotter takes a broader, more sweeping view of the book’s effects, saying *The Pilgrim’s Progress* by itself “generated an entertainment industry” in the 1800s that focused on the book but ultimately affected media even to the end of the 20th century. He says, for example, “if Bunyan’s spirit seems to have survived primarily in literature (where it began), we can also still detect its presence in some of our century’s art.” To this end, Galen Johnson suggests,

Yet there is still one type of modification of *The Pilgrim's Progress* that, while it is almost completely unacknowledged in published research, has not only a long history in America but also a surprisingly modern utility. This is the use of Bunyan's characters and expressions in various expressions of public discourse, including political cartoons and satire, civic speeches, and state funerals. (10)

Johnson then proceeds to unveil a plethora of these expressions, culminating in Margaret Thatcher's eulogy for Ronald Reagan in 2006 in which she quoted a key passage from *The Pilgrim's Progress* (30).

Such effects on media are surely worth a close examination in terms of communication. In addition, though, the very values espoused by *The Pilgrim's Progress* would provide deeper and perhaps even more valid reasons for examining the book. James Forrest, for example, argues that the book "asserts values that are of a timeless validity, and what remains from our experience of it is a vision of human life and destiny which far transcends any other consideration," adding the allegory "can yet deliver a message supremely relevant to our nuclear age" (32). Again speaking from a century ago, Martha Hale Shackford presciently asks, "Is it not a good thing to discuss codes of morality, and is not *The Pilgrim's Progress* an excellent stimulant to the conscience?" (658). A contemporary of Shackford, George Latham, says it's especially important for us to "remember that *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a book which can be read with genuine interest long after the state of society of which it was the expression has passed away." Holland Cotter doesn't stray far from Shackford's or Latham's ideas when he writes (in 1999) that *The Pilgrim's Progress* "embodies a cultural history worth remembering." Although Megan White suggests modern readers need to view *The Pilgrim's Progress* with only Bunyan's historical context in mind (*Journey 1*) and Isabel Hofmeyr conversely suggests the

reading of the book is best done with a modern, global perspective (229), both agree that the book is still highly valuable for any sort of historical or communication study. Perhaps more specifically, Raymond Powell claims, “Modern Christians particularly appreciate Bunyan’s theological understanding of discouragement as a natural part of faith.”

Conclusion

The history of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is a fascinating one on any level, and thus it can find some sort of connection with just about any reader. One decades-old remedy for fighting the decline of the book’s readership, for example, suggested that concentrating on John Bunyan’s personal life might help gain empathy among modern readers (Shackford 649). The book’s humble beginnings and meteoric rise are noteworthy aspects to examine, but when one also considers the far-reaching effects *The Pilgrim’s Progress* has had on culture and media, such an analysis becomes almost a necessity. Although the common popularity has greatly faded, the scholarly interest actually has perked up, now that interest in the book has “swayed more towards academic recognition” (White, *Journal*, 89). With that renewed academic interest in mind, in addition to other important focal points to consider like the book’s stance on morality and its impact on language, today’s reader has ample opportunity to find a wealth of material to study and even to utilize for modern applications. Such reading or analysis might not be the easiest task to undertake, but the results can be especially rewarding. Bunyan himself invites the modern reader to undertake the fight in these words from *The Pilgrim’s Progress*:

Who would true Valour see,
Let him come hither;
One here will constant be,
Come wind, come weather.

There's no Discouragement
Shall make him once relent,
His first avow'd intent
To be a Pilgrim. (357)

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