

A Review of Transmedia Narratives of John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress

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ABSTRACT

Transcending over centuries, by its rich concept, spiritual nature and captivating content John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* from This World, to that Which Is to Come, published in the year 1678, is a literary masterpiece ever since. This paper attempts to review the major transmedia narratives of Bunyan's work. The incredible and unmatched popularity of the work justifies the numerous versions and adaptations of the work. Ranging from translations into more than two hundred languages, to musical adaptations, opera, films, television series and video games, the work has been widely discussed, analyzed and retold. This gives a scope of studying the 'Transmedia' retelling of the work across various modes. Transmedia storytelling is a method adapting a story or a work through multiple platforms. This mainly involves digital platforms of the present age. Earlier when it was translations and adaptations, it is now 'Transmedia'. The concept will thus serve as theoretical framework of the paper.

KEYWORDS: Transmedia Narrative, Allegory, Symbolism, Transmedia Storytelling.

How to Cite: Salu Varghese, Dr. Deepa Caroline D, (2025) A Review of Transmedia Narratives of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Vascular and Endovascular Review, Vol.8, No.16s, 377-380.

John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World, to that Which Is to Come* popularly known as 'The Pilgrim's Progress' published in the year 1678, is one of the most significant and widely read works in the canon of English Literature. The worldwide popularity of the work is very evident as it has been translated into more than two hundred languages. Publishing the 'Oxford World Classics' edition of the book in 2003, the editor claims that 'the book has never been out of print. It has been published in innumerable editions...' (Owen, 15.) This Christian allegory is acclaimed to have the largest range of readership apart from *the Bible*. It has influenced diverse writers including C.S. Lewis, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Thackeray, Enid Blyton etc. It is believed that Bunyan had created the work during his days of imprisonment, in the charge of violating the Conventicle Act 1664. The text comprises of two parts with 108260 words; each part is read as continuous narrative without any chapter divisions. The first part of the book is said to have eleven editions and two editions of the second part. *The Pilgrim's Progress* narrates the journey of Christian, the protagonist, from the 'City of Destruction' to the 'Celestial City'. On the way to Celestial City, he had to encounter and endure through different trials and temptations. This timeless classic allegory takes the readers on spiritual journey, through vivid symbols and imagery, strong metaphors and enthralling characters. The major themes include salvation, Christian virtues, heaven, sin, temptations, death etc. This masterpiece employs various literary devices like symbolism, allegory, imagery, personification, simile etc. The worldly vices appear as characters whom Christian encounters on his journey. Many of the times they join him as companions in his journey, but none of them completes it.

Moral values and virtues also take up their roles in the narration, and they could be found helping Christian through his challenging journey towards salvation. "Bunyan has incorporated elements of romance, the sermon, and the drama into a broad allegorical superstructure..." (Alpaugh, 299). In addition to this it is also stated that if there is an argument on the generic nature of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan's style is undoubtedly visual. There are numerous research articles discussing the work as an allegory, the radical representation of individualism, its connection to earlier medieval allegories and its religious significance. In their research article, Jayapradha and Dr. Sowmya identifies almost fifty pilgrims in the allegory and says, 'the author has characterised in such a way that every reader would feel the characterization unique.' (Pg 2769, 2021). Richard Hinchcliffe calls the work as a 'conversion narrative,' where '...the happy ending of salvation...' is conventionally posited as a natural conclusion to righteous and industrious human behaviour.' (Pg 183, 2002). As Sullivan puts it, "Bunyan's allegorical method allowed the text to navigate censorship while promoting a vision of faith that emphasizes personal spiritual journeys over rigid dogma." (2022). Few researchers have attempted to work on the transmedia narratives of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. This article attempts to review a few transmedia narratives of this classic literary piece.

TRANSMEDIA NARRATIVE

Popularly known as *transmedia storytelling*, it is a method of adapting a literary work or a story across multiple platforms using the contemporary digital technologies. Robert Pratten, CEO and founder of Transmedia Storyteller Ltd., presents a traditional definition of transmedia storytelling, "telling a story across multiple platforms, preferably allowing audience participation, such that each successive platform heightens the audience' enjoyment" (Pratten, 2). Further, identifying the problem with the traditional definition, which only describes production not consumption. He suggests that the audience must be placed at the centre of the definition, thus making a new one: "taking the audience on an emotional journey that goes from moment-to moment." (Pratten, 2).

The concept of transmedia was coined by Henry Jenkins, an American Media Scholar and Professor of Communication, Journalism and Cinematic Arts, in the year 2003. In a meeting which gathered top creatives from Hollywood and games industry

the discussion on how to 'collaboratively develop content that would play well across media' (Jenkin ,2003) progressed. It thus resulted in the realization that transmedia storytelling is the future of entertainment. Later in 2007, Jenkins developed a theoretical framework for the concept of transmedia storytelling, in which he states:

Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. (2007)

This framework serves as an aid to analyze how various literary works, even from the earlier periods of literature, continue to engage the present-day readers or rather audience, through diverse forms. In addition to the various editions of *The Pilgrim's Progress* 1678, the work is also identified to have diverse adaptations including musical and cinematic adaptations. This article will attempt to discuss how such adaptations were brought to the audience.

"The Pilgrim's Progress "Across its Versions

Owing to the widespread acceptance of the work, *The Pilgrim's Progress* had various literary adaptations. It is said to have translated to 200 languages, including German, Dutch, Swedish and various African Languages. The translations also range from Southeast Asia to the Pacific. Illustrated versions of the work also appeared in Chinese. It has also been translated to Asian (Indian) languages like Malayalam and Tamil. The adaptations of the work were even made to be compatible with various cultural contexts as European and African. In a non-European version, a black protagonist is portrayed, who is redeemed for sin as well as slavery.

Apart from the fact that *The Pilgrim's Progress* replicated as translations in many languages, it also had other versions which include poetic adaptations, music adaptations, radio series, cinematic adaptations etc. One of these adaptations is the verse form of work titled "*The heavenly passenger, or, The pilgrim's progress, from this world, to that which is to come delivered under the similitude of a dream wherein is discovered, the manner of his setting out, his dangerous journey, and safe arrival at the desired country / newly done into verse,*" by S.M. The work is said to closely follow the structure of the original text, where it briefly recollects the adventures of the pilgrim. Even though no structural differences identified, the verse form omits certain elements like the conversation with the Talkative and the preachings at the House of Interpreter. There are scholarly articles confirming the work named "*The Pilgrim's Progress...done into Verse,*" by Francis Hoffman. Few research articles have analysed the literary aspects of the work.

The text of Hoffman's adaptation contains 143 pages of rhyming verse—couplets in iambic pentameter. Hoffman, in commendable fashion, efficiently translates Bunyan's prose into poetry. Even the scriptural passages that Bunyan cites are paraphrased and versified so that the rhyme scheme is maintained. Hoffman includes several excerpts of poetry found in prior illustrated editions of *The Pilgrim's Progress* printed by Ponder during Bunyan's lifetime. (Garrett,16)

More prominent adaptation of *The Pilgrim's Progress* was the three-part radio dramatization by Brian Sibley. The first broadcast of this radio play was BBC Radio 4 in the year 2004. Sibley, already acclimated to have successfully adapted *The Lord of the Rings*, have dramatized this challenging work innovatively. The script runs a parallel to the life of Bunyan and that of the quest of the pilgrim. Interweaving Bunyan's life story to the "pilgrim's quest gives it a poignant and pertinent anchor" (Reynolds, 2004). Additionally, in his review on the radio version of Sibley, Reynolds commented on how Sibley given the plain text and a present-day twist, even when maintaining the 'timeless force.' Even someone who is new to this literary masterpiece will be convinced about its influence on poems, novels, plays, films etc. ever since its publication. Presently, the version is available in Spotify, a Swedish audio streaming service, and in Google Play, in the title "*The Pilgrim's Progress: A Full-Cast BBC Radio Dramatization.*" In 2006, an audiobook recording of the complete allegory appeared in public domain offered by LibriVox. It was narrated by Joy Chan and included the first and second part of the work, along with a summary by Chan. This version is said to truly capture the timeless essence of Bunyan's influential work. The powerful prose is rendered in a forthright reading format. Later in 2014, Jesse Lyman Hurlbut's edition of the work appeared in the same public domain. Both the versions offer free access to a dreamy listening experience, making anyone who listens feel the 'burden of guilt.'

A much popular of version of *The Pilgrim's Progress* to be analysed is the opera with same title, composed by Ralph Vaughan Williams. The opera was premiered at the Royal Opera House, London in 1951. Though the composer himself described the work as 'Morality,' it was intended be performed on stage. "The Pilgrim's Progress is the most ambitious of the composer's stage works and I suspect the one that meant most to its creator." (Graeme, 702). His work seemingly depended on the Bible as certain insertions in the opera and took the support of his second wife. The major changes made by the composer is the name of the protagonist being changed from 'Christian' to 'Pilgrim,' thus giving the theme a universal approach towards spreading the spiritual message. Though the premier at the Royal Opera House was not a success, the later productions and staging of the opera received better accolades. As John Quinn puts it, "*The Pilgrim's Progress* is a fine achievement by British Youth Opera at the Three Choirs Festival." The opera was staged at the Three Choirs Festival in the year 2023, which gained appreciation.

In addition to other versions and adaptations Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* has various film adaptations over years. Beginning with the 1912 adaptation which was directed by Francis Powers describing itself as 'A Stupendous Production in Four Reels of Bunyan's Masterpiece,' the adaptations appeared in various years the latest in the year 2020. In 1978, a Ken Anderson directorial was released, of which the IMdb states: 'Journey with Pilgrim as John Bunyan's famous allegory leaps from its pages to a movie.' The very next year, "Christiana," a sequel to this movie was released. The movie portrays Christiana who decided to follow her husband's footsteps and make a pilgrimage to the Celestial City with her children and a friend. Both the movies by Anderson were well received. Following this, in next decade, was the animated film, directed by Scott Cawthon, which was released in the

year 2004. It had to face criticism from the viewers for being 'terribly' animated. Later in 2008, "Pilgrim's Progress: Journey to Heaven," was released. The film which was claimed to be 'a modern retelling of John Bunyan's classic story, was

directed by Danny Carrales. Even when claiming so it did not receive a great deal of attention or appreciation. In 2020, "Heavenquest: A Pilgrim's Progress," directed by Matt Bilen was released. It was not a direct retelling of the work but derived inspiration from it. This version too, did not gain popularity.

Adding to all the versions, Bunyan's work served as a source for other platforms like video games, musical albums, TV series etc. Different digital applications store and game stores offers such games. A musical album of the same name came out in the year 2010, which is 'a deliberate misspelling' of the work. In 2016, The Neil Morse Band released their second album titled "The Similitude of a Dream," a concept album based on *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The work is also said to be presented as a TV serial in the year 1985 by Yorkshire television.

CONCLUSION

Studying and reviewing *The Pilgrim's Progress* across the adaptations, versions, and other media platforms, thrusts on the timeless nature and influence of the work on different areas such as poetry, films, television series, musical albums, animation video games etc. The work undoubtedly stands as an epitome of literary mastery and universal acceptance. The allegorical nature of the works adds to the spirituality of it. The journey of life as presented through the journey of Christian, the pilgrim, very well matches the universally accepted concept of 'quest for salvation.' Though most of the spiritual messages in based on Christianity, it is applicable to any human being. The adaptations and versions have maintained this essence of universal spirituality and timelessness. The review suggests that majority of the transmedia narratives have served justice to their purpose of communicating or spreading the underlying theme of the work. Out of the few discussed narratives, the convincing ones are the literary adaptations into poetry and translations. Following them is the musical adaptation which includes opera and musical albums. Even though the medium of film is more attractive and attention seeking, the only one or two movies inspired by the work, were well received. To conclude, the work could transcend through ages, still serving as a source of inspiration for many artistic adaptations, the various versions not meeting the sublime though.

SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The Pilgrim's Progress remained as literary masterpiece, spreading its influence on anyone and anything that is introduced to it. Furthermore, research can be carried out on how the adaptations can be improved making it more appealing to the audience, while dispersing across various media.

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