

Quo Vadis: The Journey as Allegory in Homer, Attar, Milton, Bunyan, and Tolstoy

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Abstract This paper examines the employment of allegory, an extended metaphor, by writers throughout literary history, as they explore the universal themes of the search for meaning, redemption, and salvation. From the epic poetry of Homer in 8th or 7th century BCE Greece, to the Sufi poet Farid ud-Din Attar in the classical Persian poetry of the 12th and 13th century CE, to the Puritan writers John Milton and John Bunyan in the English tradition, to Russian Count Leo Tolstoy, the theme is presented in allegorical form rather than a straight-line narrative. Concepts such as redemption, salvation, and the search for meaning are complex and often beyond the grasp of the reader, whereas a journey is more easily understood. We find that these writers provide in great detail the journey itself, rather than the destination.

Keywords: Allegory, Attar, Bunyan, Homer, Journey, Milton, Redemption, Salvation, Tolstoy

Introduction

The “journey” is an ancient theme in literary time and space, from the earliest time of storytelling, before the beginning of writing. In literature, the journey is a powerful allegorical tool, showing the full range of behavior characteristic of the human condition. It allows the storyteller to reflect on the enigmatic and mysterious nature of the spiritual quest and search for meaning in a way that readers might more fully grasp what is intended by the author. The literary tradition of the journey as an allegory for a quest for the divine and the search for meaning is ancient: From Homer (1999) in ancient Greece, to Attar in Persia (Abdulla, 2013), to the Romans (Beard, 2014), and continuing to Milton and Bunyan in the wake of the English Renaissance (Lewalski, 2003; Manlove, 1980), to Tolstoy (1886) in the 19th century Tsarist Russian Empire. This study aims to connect the ancient and the modern, seeking to compare and contrast the stories built on perennial questions of philosophy and religion manifested in poetry and prose.

Methods

We chose a sample consisting of five writers from different literary times and places: Homer in ancient Greece; Attar in the age of

classical Persian poetry; Milton in the late English Renaissance or the Early Modern age; John Bunyan in what might be considered a bit later in the Early Modern period; and Leo Tolstoy in the Realist or Victorian era of Russia in the 19th century.

We then selected one representative work from each of these five writers and did a close reading of each to allow a compare-and-contrast literary analysis. Based on the analysis, we found several common themes, one of which stood out among the others: the theme of a journey as an allegory of the search for spiritual enlightenment and ultimate reality.

The theoretical foundation undergirding the methodological approach to this examination is poststructuralist literary theory. We have come to understand that any of the many meanings of a text is the product of the reader’s culture, including the language, beliefs, and personal experiences that differ from one reader to another, and from each reader in each encounter with the text. Through the lens of poststructuralist literary analysis, we may discern a variety of meanings, each leading both to answers and to new questions about the text that are the substance of this exploration of the journey as allegory in literature over the centuries.

Results

We found in the literature an abundance of evidence linking the five stories included in this study using the allegory of the journey as an extended metaphor representing some reality that might be more difficult to explain. The allegory serves as a means of conveying the more abstract ideas that the author wishes to treat, concepts such as spirituality, and the universality of the search for meaning. We may have difficulty comprehending these concepts, but we all understand the idea of a journey. While the substitution of a metaphor or allegory will always be imperfect, the approach may serve the larger purpose of the author in the attempt to convey meaning or meanings.

In each case under study, we found the journey to be a more concrete representation of seeking a goal, often the goal was a quest for spiritual enlightenment through communion with the divine. On close reading, we find in the stories acts of contrition in the poetry and prose of the search. Along with faith, these acts of contrition and good works comprise some of the essential elements required for redemption and salvation.

The stories are rich in content and varied in form, from Odysseus's adventurous return from Troy to his home and to Penelope in Ithaca; to the anthropomorphic birds of Attar; from Satan's descent from Heaven to the fiery lake of perdition; to the post-fall expulsion of Adam and Eve and the progress of the Pilgrim in contention with a multitude of obstacles impeding that progress; to the impossible dream of the godson of defeating evil; all are squeezed into the narrow neck of the vessel that is the allegory of the journey. We will now deal in greater detail with each of these stories.

Homer: late 8th or early 7th century BCE. The Odyssey

Homer's epic poem describing the ten-year voyage of Odysseus from Troy to his home in Ithaca (Homer, 1999) is typically seen as an adventure story. While the genre may be accurate, the work is much more. A strong case may be made that the journey is an allegory for the quest for truth, reality,

and meaning. It was, after all, Odysseus who created the ruse to entice the Trojans to open the gate in their impenetrable wall to haul in the wooden horse. The horse concealed a few soldiers who would later drop down from the horse and open the gate for the Greek army. The destruction of Troy not only meant the end of the Trojan War but also the beginning of the victors' return to their homes.

The voyage of Odysseus, with all its trials inflicted by gods and humans, is remarkably like the passage of each of us through a lifetime of contention as we seek answers to the questions posed by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The ultimate success of Odysseus in reaching his destination is but one dimension of the allegory. Even more instructive perhaps is the use of his wit in dealing with each trial, whether resisting the seduction of the Lotus Eaters or avoiding the violence of the Cyclops.

Farid ud-Din Attar: 1145-1221. Conference of the Birds

In Attar's *Conference of the Birds*, the journey becomes a metaphorical pilgrimage seeking spiritual enlightenment complicated by both physical and moral obstacles. In Attar (sometimes Aṭṭār of Nishapur), thousands of birds start the journey to find Simurgh, the divine, but only thirty survive the arduous journey, echoing Matthew 22:14. "For many are called, but few are chosen." The birds travel broadly across geography and deeply into matters of the soul. They seek the Simurgh, believed to be the divine and the answer to their urgent questions.

As an aside, we feel it necessary to disabuse the reader of the notion that Attar's *Conference of the Birds* is directly associated with Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*. The connection may be excused because of the titles and the employment of anthropomorphized birds. However, while both are long poems with birds as their central characters, the main theme of the former describes a journey to redemption and salvation with all its obstacles. The theme of the latter has perhaps more to do with romantic love and its difficulties in a power relationship. Indeed, a better comparison in Chaucer

would be the pilgrimage itself. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* shows some twenty-nine pilgrims traveling to visit the shrine of St. Thomas at the great Canterbury Cathedral. For the most part, it would be mere speculation to conclude the purpose of each in making the journey.

John Milton: 1608-1674. Paradise Lost

The text of *Paradise Lost* is rich in momentary metaphors and, in its entirety, a rich allegory of the journey. Milton makes it clear that his creatures have free will. Lucifer chooses poorly, declares war on God, and in consequence falls from Heaven and becomes Satan. Angels travel between Heaven and Earth. Adam and Eve travel from the Garden of Eden to some place east of Eden, from Paradise to the harsh world below.

One of the major themes in *Paradise Lost*, as we see most clearly in Tolstoy's Godson, is redemption for the sin of disobedience. The journey after the Fall is a search for forgiveness. Adam and Eve had Paradise given to them with only one prohibition, which was not to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. As a result of their disobedience, they were expelled from the Garden of Eden, i.e., Paradise, and were sent on the painful journey to redemption, which they would find in the vicarious atonement in the blood of the Son.

While the epic poem is arguably Milton's greatest work and his deepest dive into the allegory of the journey, it is not his only such treatment. For example, in his masque, *Comus*, Milton shows the journey of "The Lady," as she navigates her way through the perils of temptation in the form of worldly pleasures. In *Samson Agonistes*, Milton shows the spiritual journey of Samson that corresponds to his physical journey, one that transforms him from powerful to powerless and back to powerful, concluding with a spiritual enlightenment that it took his sacrificial death to realize.

John Bunyan: 1628-1688. The Pilgrim's Progress

Bunyan takes his Pilgrim, and his reader, on a difficult journey from City of Destruction to the

Celestial City (Manlove, 1980) with the former being the world after The Fall (Genesis 3) and the latter being the reward of redemption and salvation granted by the grace of the Christian God. Just as Attar's birds struggle in their search for meaning and longing for the divine, Bunyan's Pilgrim must face the choice between good and evil, longing for spiritual fulfillment.

The Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, founded historically in that order) confess a confidence in the faith journeys of believers in such sacred texts as Psalm 23:4: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

In the Holy Qur'an, Surah Al-Isra (17:1), says,

Glory to (Allah) Who did take

His servant for a journey by night

from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque,

whose precincts We did bless—

in order that We might show him some of Our Signs:

for He is the One Who heareth and seeth (all things).

Leo Tolstoy: 1828-1910. The Godson

Born into a poor family, a boy finds himself, by the grace of his godfather, chosen by chance, in a world of affluence beyond anything he could have imagined. As with Adam and Eve in the paradise of the Garden of Eden, there is but one rule. In this case, the rule is that he must not open a sealed door. Again, as with the Fall, the godson disobeys. He concludes that his sin cannot be expiated. His journey is a fruitless effort to atone for his sin. The theme is not new for Tolstoy. In *War and Peace*, he shows the spiritual journey of another godson-like figure, Count Pyotr Kirillovich Bezukhov, as Pyotr deals with the vexing fact that he is an illegitimate son of a noble father.

The faith journey of the godson leads, in the end, to a profound change in the goal of the protagonist, which is to live a life of fulfillment through service to others: “With joy, he recognized that his sins were at last redeemed” (Tolstoy, 1886, p. 30). Moreover, the godson having taken the journey to redemption, leaves the robber in a position to make his own journey, a journey past denial through repentance and salvation. “He told all this to the highwayman and died. The highwayman buried him, and lived thereafter as the godson had bidden him, and taught men to do likewise” (Tolstoy, 1886, p. 30). The godson fulfilled “The Great Commission,” given by Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”

Discussion

Why does it matter that so many stories, including those examined in this study, use a journey to discuss the universal search for meaning? In the language of semiotics, the signifier “journey” is more accessible to the reader than is the signified, “the search for meaning.” These and other stories show an allegorical journey to call to the reader’s attention that we are all searchers, that we are all seeking answers to the most basic questions.

We may justifiably surmise that the journey, the quest, has a goal that may be out of reach. But the goal, as we see in these stories, is that we continue the pursuit, whether the end is attainable or not, we continue to engage in the search for spiritual fulfillment, redemption, or salvation. Perhaps, then, the conclusion to be drawn from these exemplars is not that the importance lies in the attainment of our goals but in the pursuit itself. These stories remain popular across time and space because they resonate with what Jung called the “collective unconscious” and reside in us as vestiges of our primordial ancestors (Yetwin, 2009). Each of us is on a journey, and while few if any ever

reach the destination, we share that most human activity, the search. We are all pilgrims.

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