



Pilgrim's Progress into the 21st Century

*An Essay on Bunyan's Christian Classic and its Suitability for
the Multi-Cultural Swedish Upper Secondary School*

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Table of Contents

Abstract	
Introduction	
Chapter 1 - Analysis	5
Chapter 2 - Pedagogical Aspects	15
Conclusion	23
Works Cited	24

Abstract

Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan is an allegory and a classic which, during its almost 350 years of existence, has earned a readership and popularity that many other English classics used in today's Swedish school have not been able to attain. Despite its age and explicitly Christian context the book contains many valuable themes and issues that are highly relevant for students in the upper secondary school. In his text, Bunyan discusses and renders his own experiences with not only despondency and despair but also the suppression of free opinion. These topics can be discussed outside of a Christian context and therefore certain parts of the book are adaptable to other religions and cultures, which is very desirable in today's multi-cultural Swedish society. Moreover, besides being a very suitable book for the teaching of allegory, the book is also a good tool in order to facilitate integration of the subjects English and Religion.

Introduction

In the year 1678 a detained tinker and preacher named John Bunyan wrote a book that would turn out to be one of the most widely read and loved books in the whole of English literature. The book is called *Pilgrim's Progress* and it is written in the form of allegory. It is based on the Bible and describes the life of the protagonist Christian and his friends Faithful and Hopeful on their pilgrimage from the *City of Destruction*, through this world with its perils, difficulties, joys and sorrows towards the *Celestial City* in heaven. *Pilgrim's Progress* is a book in which Christian teaching is strongly promoted and where the author clearly asserts that the only way to obtain admittance into heaven is through faith in Jesus Christ. Bunyan was a poor man without any formal education, yet this literary work is according to *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* "the most popular allegory in English" (2142). According to N.H. Keeble, "N[o] other seventeenth-century text save the King James Bible, nothing from the pen of a writer of Bunyan's social class in any period, and no other puritan, or, indeed, committed Christian work of any persuasion, has enjoyed such an extensive readership" (qtd. in Horner 460). Or in the words of the leading Bunyan scholar Roger Sharrock:

Th[e] Pilgrim's Progress is a book which in three hundred years of its existence has crossed most of those barriers of race and culture that usually serve to limit the communicative power of a classic. It has penetrated into the non-Christian world; it has been read by cultivated Moslems during the rise of religious individualism within Islam and at the same time in cheap missionary editions by American Indians and

South Sea Islanders. Its uncompromising evangelical Protestantism has not prevented it from exercising appeal in Catholic countries. But to English readers it is bound to appear as the supreme classic of the English Puritan tradition.

(qtd. in Horner 23)

Since the day *Pilgrim's Progress* was first published it has reached people far beyond the borders of Britain and today the book is available in more than 200 languages.

In the National Syllabus for English B in the Swedish upper secondary school it is stated that students should “have a basic orientation to English literature from different periods” (unpag.). I believe that *Pilgrim's Progress* should have a natural place among the literature that is taught in English B or C in upper secondary school, partly for the reasons stated above, but also since it is a beautiful example of allegory. However, there may be problems with the book since the Swedish school is not allowed to express disdain towards other religions nor promote the Christian faith as truth. Therefore, teachers who want to work with *Pilgrim's Progress* in class need to be very clear with explaining the book's origins and the purpose of using it.

Pilgrim's Progress was written in a time when reformed Christianity blossomed throughout Western Europe. Ordinary people were fairly acquainted with the Bible and its teaching, and Bunyan himself, since he was a preacher, knew the sacred Scriptures as his own pocket. In the book he mentions places like *the Valley of the Shadow of Death*, *the Wicket Gate* and *Mount Sinai*, places which people who are familiar with the Bible immediately will recognise. The book further mentions characters like *Moses*, *Beelzebub*, *Apollyon* and *Demas*, all of whom appear in the Scriptures and represent different human phenomena and characteristics. Today, Christianity in Sweden is declining and most people do not read the Bible on a regular basis, let alone study it. However, *Pilgrim's Progress* also contains places and people who are not explicitly connected to the Bible, which therefore makes it teachable

and possibly profitable to groups of people who are not confessing Christians. Most people, Christian or not, can probably relate to an experience of floundering around in the *Slough of Despond* or being beaten and mentally abused by the *Giant Despair*.

It is for this reason I believe that *Pilgrim's Progress* can be a useful book for upper secondary school students in the multinational and multicultural society of Sweden. One of the purposes of this essay is to examine four extracts from the book and see to what extent they are profitable to other views of life or religions than Christianity. Furthermore, since it is desirable in today's school to integrate subjects with each other, I will argue that *Pilgrim's Progress*, a book containing explicit Christian doctrine, is a useful tool in order to facilitate integration of the subjects English and Religion. In the syllabus for Religion for the upper secondary school it is stated that students should "deepen their familiarity with the languages, concepts, narratives and pictures, which express the interpretations of different religions and outlooks on life" (unpag.). Also for the study of Christianity I believe that reading certain parts of Bunyan's book can facilitate that goal to a large extent since it predicated on a personal testimony.

This essay will be divided into two different parts. In chapter one I will analyse four episodes from the book and examine their suitability for teaching. The first episode takes place in the *Slough of Despond* where Christian is squelching around for quite some time. The second episode that will be discussed is Christian's release from his burden at *the Foot of the Cross*. The third episode is about Christian's and Faithful's experiences at *Vanity Fair* in *the City of Vanity*, and the fourth episode, finally, takes place when Christian and Hopeful decide to leave the King's Highway and take a shortcut which brings them to a stinking dungeon in *Doubting Castle*.

Chapter two will discuss how a teacher can use *Pilgrim's Progress* in a classroom situation. On the basis of an imagined multicultural class in a Swedish upper secondary school

I will explain what teachers need to be aware of and what the opportunities are when working with this book. I will offer practical examples how to use the four episodes discussed in chapter one in order to teach not only critical reading but also the nature of the allegory. Furthermore I will also suggest how the book can be a useful addition for the teaching of Christianity within the subject of Religion.

For this essay I have chosen a modern version of *Pilgrim's Progress* in which the archaic language of the original has been rewritten into today's English. It must be emphasised that none of the themes or the contents of Bunyan's original have been altered and that I have made this choice since modern English is preferable to archaic language in a classroom situation

Some of the critics quoted in this essay are old and their essays were first published in the beginning of the twentieth century. It may seem odd to use them in a pedagogical essay in the twenty-first century, but my reason for doing so is that it is difficult to find modern non-Christian critiques of the passages chosen for discussion in this essay. However, the issues which they bring up are not outdated and their viewpoints are likely to reappear in classroom discussions today.

Chapter 1

Literary Analysis

Pilgrim's Progress is a book in which John Bunyan tells about his own experiences of the Christian life through the form of an allegory. Most situations in which the protagonist Christian finds himself in have their equivalents in the Bible; since Bunyan was a preacher, he wanted to teach his readers about it. He looked upon life from a reformed Christian viewpoint and so did many of his contemporaries. This is not always the case in twenty-first-century Sweden, so in order to use *Pilgrim's Progress* as a tool for teaching literature in the multinational and multicultural Swedish school, it is important to find angles for approaching the book that are not explicitly Christian. In this chapter I will highlight four episodes from the book and discuss how they are suitable for teaching in a multicultural context.

The Slough of Despond

After having been convinced that Christianity is true, pilgrim Christian, laden with a burden¹ and clothed in rags², eagerly sets out on his pilgrimage towards his goal – the *Celestial City* in heaven. However, it does not take long before he finds himself stuck in the marshy mire called the *Slough of Despond*. In his autobiography called *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, Bunyan recalls his own experiences in that bog. He tells that he found himself “a[s]

¹ This burden is his conviction of being a sinner and one of the major purposes of the pilgrimage is to be set free from it. See Isaiah 59:2

² The rags represent Christian's own piety without belief in Jesus Christ. See Isaiah 64:6

on a miry bog that shook if I did but stir” (qtd. in Horner 88). For him it was a hard decision to trust the word of the Bible for guidance in life and he depicts his inner turmoil through the image of floundering around in a swamp. But eventually both he and his created pilgrim got out of it through the aid of a character called Help who later instructed them that there are steps placed in the slough but fear may make them hard to see. Mr Help further instructs Christian:

It is true, he continued, that some good and substantial steps have been placed through this slough by order of the Lord of salvation, but at times this marsh spews out a lot of filth, and in times of changing weather the steps are hardly seen. Even if the steps are visible to a normal person, here a man’s head often becomes so dizzy that he cannot see the steps; then he staggers to one side and mires down in the slime.

(Bunyan 18)

According to Bunyan these steps are Jesus’ exhortations in the Bible where he repeatedly tells his followers not to worry.³ Bunyan wanted to believe, but he struggled in faith and fell into despondency. Later on he allowed his pilgrim to experience the same thing in the allegory.

That this problem is universal and affects most people is one reason why *Pilgrim’s Progress* is suitable today. Here the book conveys a message which is discussable in a multi-cultural classroom since fear and anxiety for major decisions are a normal part of human life regardless of culture or religion. Christians will often turn to the Bible or a fellow Christian in order to find guidance whereas Muslims or followers of other religions turn to their sacred writings. It is further a universal issue that it is difficult to think clearly when in a bewildered state of mind. However, after having been freed from a journey through despondency, many people will afterwards testify that there was good guidance to find through the advice of

³ In the Gospel of Matthew (6:24-33) Jesus tells his followers not to worry about the basic necessities in life since God has promised to provide that for those who trust him. In John’s Gospel chapter 14 – 17, Jesus consoles his fretful disciples promising them that he will prepare room for them in heaven after his death and resurrection.

friends or books, in other words, substantial steps. But it is also evident that some people do not associate that experience with Bunyan's text. Robert Bridges, a twentieth-century critic of *Pilgrim's Progress*, observes that:

Most men must have waded in the Slough of Despond, and none can have more readily used his name for it than I; but it has not escaped my attention that I never in my despondency found any assistance from Christian's adventure, were a man whose name was Help came and pulled him out, and told him that he should have tried to find the steps, though no one could see them, nor are we informed of what nature they are.

(Bridges 109-10)

Apparently Mr Bridges does not share Bunyan's experiences but his observations clearly show that different viewpoints can be applied to this episode in the book. Whether a student is an atheist or professes a religion other than Christianity does not change the fact that people occasionally face difficult times. The nature of the substantial steps through the mire invites to discussion and an atheist or a Muslim will probably reach other conclusions than Bunyan did. This issue has the ability to elicit valuable view points which will help students to familiarise themselves with different outlooks on life. One of the major goals for the subject of Religion is that students should "develop their understanding of how religion and outlooks on life are expressed in people's ways of thinking, creating and acting" (unpag.). Hence, this episode from *Pilgrim's Progress* could be used in a multicultural classroom where students reflect on what the steps in the *Slough of Despond* or assistance from Mr Help could imply for them. This will be further discussed in chapter two.

At The Foot of the Cross

After Christian has escaped the swamp he continues his pilgrimage. After having passed that first difficulty he is now determined to follow the teachings of the Bible and he is eager to learn its message. He walks through the *Wicket Gate*⁴ and from there he walks up to a cross which is placed on the top of a hill where he experiences a miracle. The burden loosens from his shoulders, his rags are stripped off and he is clothed in white and clean garments. This passage of the book describes the very core of Christianity and it will probably be difficult to teach a religiously universal version of this event since it has no equivalent in other religions. Here Bunyan allows his pilgrim to experience one of the most significant and liberating moments of his life. “He knew his sins had been paid for by the death of the One who died on the cross. They were gone, buried in the saviour’s tomb, and God would remember them against him no more forever” (Bunyan 39).

This little passage, only one page long, is the most important one in order to understand why Bunyan wrote his book. This event illuminates situations on Christian’s pilgrimage that otherwise would have been covered in smoke screens, in particular his interactions with people on the pilgrimage who want him to abandon the King’s Highway.⁵ People like *Mr. Worldly Wiseman* from the town *Carnal Policy*, *Mr. Talkative* from the *City of Fairspeech*, *Mr. Lustful*, *Mr. Crafty*, *Mr. Moneylove* and *Mr. Save-All*, all of whom have names representing phenomena which are difficult to combine with sincere devotion to God⁶, perpetually try to divert Christian’s attention. The critic and dramatist George Bernard Shaw

⁴ Here Bunyan makes an allusion to John 10:9 which mean that Christian has realised that he needs Jesus Christ in order to reach the Celestial City and be free from his burden. He confesses him as saviour and trusts him for salvation.

⁵ The King’s Highway represents the way of living that is pleasing to God.

⁶ This statement is based on Jesus’ words in Matthew 6:24. “No one can serve two masters. Either he will he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” (NIV)

questions Bunyan's choice of villains, asserting that names like Mr. Murderer, Mr. Burglar or Mr. Blackmailer would be more appropriate names to depict evil or immorality. (Shaw 118) But here it is important to remember that Bunyan is portraying experiences from his own Christian pilgrimage rather than pursuing a discussion about right and wrong in earthly matters. He believed that these men with seemingly inoffensive names had the power to ruin the pilgrimage. This becomes evident when Christian, *Mr. Crafty*, *Mr. Moneylove* and *Mr. Save-All* pass by a silver-mine located nearby the King's Highway. Christian avoids the danger and hurries away from the trap whereas the other three want to get rich. Bunyan relates that "they were never seen again on the road" (109).

In the national syllabus for Religion in the upper secondary school it is stated that students should "develop their ability to describe, analyse and understand how and why living conditions, traditions and societal systems interact with religion and outlooks on life". In the introduction of this essay I suggested that *Pilgrim's Progress* could serve as a tool for facilitating the integration of the subjects English and Religion. I believe that the text about the cross plus the passages in which Christian's different adversaries appear could be a spring board for the discussion and teaching of Christianity. Because they are rather controversial and possibly offensive, I believe it is wise to approach them within the subject of Religion since its syllabus encourages such activities.

Vanity Fair

The question of what is desirable and what is reprehensible has been discussed and debated in every country and in every culture on earth, and its answers have changed with time. Many religions have rules or strong recommendations for their followers about how life should be lived and they are often set for protection or sometimes out of fear for the unknown. In *Pilgrim's Progress* Bunyan allows Christian and his friend Faithful to walk through *Vanity*

Fair in the *City of Vanity*. This chapter allegorically refers to the different values of this world and its transience, and it also tells the reader about the values of the everlasting kingdom in heaven.⁷ In this chapter these two are in conflict. Bunyan's naming of the city and its fair discloses his attitudes towards the merchandise and entertainments which are sold there. Christian is offered gold and silver, popularity, phoney titles, fame, lands, sex appeal, prostitutes, human lives and much more at the fair, and he observes that lying, cheating murders, adulteries, revelries and drinking are frequent there. In other words, the *City of Vanity* represents mindsets that are diametrically opposed to the teaching of Jesus, and whose followers mock, mob and sometimes kill Christians who are not interested in their goods. Christian and Faithful have their eyes fixed on golden crowns of glory and other imperishable treasures in heaven and do not buy anything at the fair. Accusing Bunyan of inconsistency, Robert Bridges writes that "...when he talks of his "crowns of gold" [...] he seems worse than inadequate; for we cannot forget that these objects are of the sort which arouse his anger and contempt in Vanity Fair" (112). Here Mr. Bridges apparently interprets a biblical metaphor literally and he seems to not realise that it is not the gold in itself that is the issue but rather what it represents. When the Bible was written, gold was probably the most valuable material substance available and that is why the authors choose to use that word metaphorically when trying to describe heaven. Since *Pilgrim's Progress* is an allegory based on the Bible, a reader who wants to fully decode the deeper levels of the book needs to be familiar with at least the New Testament. The manager of *Vanity Fair* is *Beelzebub* i.e. Satan himself and Bunyan firmly believed it is the *devotion* to earthly treasures that is very dangerous to pilgrims.⁸ The

⁷ In Luke 12:15 Jesus says to his followers, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." (NIV) 1 John 2:16-17 says, "For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from this world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever." (NIV)

⁸ In 1 Timothy 6:9-11 Paul teaches, "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds

Prince of Peace, which is Jesus, also walked through *Vanity Fair* and was offered the finest merchandise possible by the manager himself⁹, but “He left the town without spending a penny for any of Beelzebub’s goods”(Bunyan 90).

This episode is a good starting point for a discussion not only about morality but also for tolerance and human rights. The contents of the episode are possible to “translate” into the spheres of other cultures and religions. The chapter about *Vanity Fair* ends with the execution of Faithful on the charge that he did not buy anything and that he publically announced his opinions about the fair. This kind of persecution is today a tragic reality worldwide and it affects people who do not wish to conform to the opinions of the majority of people in society (e.g. followers of different religions). This issue brought up by Bunyan, that is the conflict between two systems of value, is highly relevant today. Today not only Christians have to endure persecution and sometimes martyrdom when refusing to adapt to values imposed on them. In Swedish classrooms of today it is possible to find students representing groups of people who have been forced to flee their countries because of their unwillingness to conform to political or religious values. The underlying issue in this passage in *Pilgrim’s Progress* is common to all mankind and is thus possible and perhaps also profitable to work with in school. Surely students professing other religions than Christianity could write about their own encounters with opponents of their world view.

of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.” (NIV)
⁹ Matthew 4:1-11

In Doubting Castle

Most people in this world, regardless of religion and culture, are sometimes seized with anguish and anxiety. Bunyan portrays this in *Pilgrim's Progress* when Christian and Hopeful decide to take a shortcut during a strenuous passage of their pilgrimage. However, this shortcut proves to be very treacherous and they fall out of the frying-pan and into the fire: more specifically, straight into the hands of *Giant Despair*, who throws them into a dark and stinking dungeon in his home – *Doubting Castle*. This event refers allegorically to doubt in faith and what may happen when Christians abandon God's advice and look for non-Biblical ways of escaping hardships, but it also conveys a deeper meaning. The story on the subsequent pages in which the suffering pilgrims are tormented by the giant probably depicts Bunyan's own experiences in prison. Bunyan was detained in November 1660 for preaching without a licence and he spent twelve years in prison separated from his wife and children¹⁰. He could have been released at any time provided that he recanted from his teaching and promised never to preach again, but he chose to stay in prison rather than compromise with his faith in Christ. The mental afflictions he experienced during that time are perceptible in *Doubting Castle* when Christian and Hopeful are severely beaten and exhorted by the giant to end their own lives, and his words to them are dreadfully similar to many depressed peoples' putative thoughts about suicide: "...would it not be smart to take the quick way out of your suffering? For why should you choose to live, seeing life holds nothing for you now but extreme bitterness?" (Bunyan 115). Eventually, both pilgrims manage to escape from their predicament by means of a key called *promise* which Christian had in his bosom. What

¹⁰ In January 1672, when Charles II issued the Declaration of Religious Indulgence, Bunyan was finally released and he worked as a pastor the rest of his life.

exactly is this key? Bunyan here explicitly writes that Christian had the key *in* his bosom. Not in his pocket or in a chain around his neck. This key must represent something very powerful since it brought Christian from despair and suicidal tendencies to freedom and zest for life.

Most certainly Bunyan had Scripture in mind when he wrote about the key *promise*.

Memorised passages of the Bible¹¹ are possible to keep in the bosom and this is surely what helped Bunyan to escape from *Giant Despair*. Robert Bridges brings up an important issue when he suggests that “Promise implies faith in the promise, and it is surely just the eclipse or lack of faith that they are suffering from” (110). Is there not something wrong with a promise if it lacks the power to prevent people who possess it from despair? It is evident through this narrative that not even Christians are spared from the sometimes harsh realities of life. In his autobiography Bunyan writes:

[I] have sometimes seen more in a line of the Bible than I could well tell how to stand under, and yet another time the whole Bible hath been to me as dry as a stick, my heart hath been so dead and dry unto it, that I could not conceive the least drachm of refreshment, though I have looked it all over.

(qtd. in Horner 56-57)

Despite very strong convictions people can still walk astray into *Doubting Castle*. This problem is not something that only affects followers of religions but all kinds of people. Most people who are married can probably testify that they sometime have doubted their choice of mate although it did not necessarily bring them into the state of despair; and the most devoted politician may from time to time doubt the opinions of his party. This issue is relevant today and is very discussable in a multicultural classroom. Furthermore, it is today a deplorable fact that many young people suffer from feelings of despair in an increasingly demanding society.

¹¹ In Isaiah 41:10 God says:” So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” (NIV)

Many young people can relate to the experience of having been mercilessly beaten by *Giant Despair* and some have unfortunately followed the advice which he gave Christian and Hopeful.

This is another episode in *Pilgrim's Progress* which can be used as a bridge between the subjects English and Religion.¹² In the literature classroom this text is a good in order to help students understand the nature of allegory, whereas the difficult questions about despair, the key of promise and even the tragic reality of suicide should be approached and discussed within the subject of Religion since the teaching about existential questions is a part of its curriculum.

¹² Of course discussion about life issues is very profitable also in the literature classroom but in this case I believe it is wise to divide the topics and work with them in different classes.

Chapter 2

Pedagogical Aspects

The syllabus for English in the Swedish upper secondary school explicitly states that students should be familiar with books and authors from different periods. According to the National Agency for Education, “Student[s] should improve their skills in reading English literature and reflect upon the texts from different perspectives” (qtd. in Lundahl 94).¹³ How do I as a teacher assist my students in accomplishing this goal and how should *Pilgrim’s Progress* be used as a tool for teaching? In this chapter I will discuss different pedagogical implications for using a book of that kind, what advantages it may have and what risks a teacher must be aware of. I will also give suggestions about how the four extracts from the book can be applied in a classroom situation.

For this study I will refer to an imagined average upper secondary class on a study-orientated national program¹⁴ taking the English B or C course. I calculate that a few students come from another cultural background than Swedish and that one or two of them are professing another religion than Christianity.¹⁵

“Co-operation over the subject borders enriches the outlooks and the reading of other texts than the current ones for language teaching broadens students’ pictures” (Lundahl

¹³ Since Lundahl writes in Swedish, all quotations from his article are freely translated.

¹⁴ The Nature Science program, the Social Science program or the program for Arts.

¹⁵ The implication of this statement is, of course, not that all Swedish young people are professing Christians but I have chosen this expression since the official religion in Sweden still is Christianity. In Sweden approximately 2 – 3 percent of the population are professing Christians which would imply that less than one person in an average school class hold beliefs like Bunyan’s.

103). *Pilgrim's Progress* is a good book for the integration of the subjects English and Religion. Reading the extract called *At the Foot of the Cross* will serve several purposes. First, it describes through narration the very essence of reformed Christian beliefs such as the doctrines which the Swedish state church and most free churches are founded on. One of the goals in the syllabus for Religion is that students should be familiar with these.¹⁶ Second, many educational books used in school for teaching Religion often stick to the historical facts about Christianity. This is, of course, appropriate, but in order to achieve an understanding about why many people choose to believe in it, a book with a personal testimony is a useful addition. Since the syllabus for Religion requires that teachers should help students to “develop their ability to describe, analyse and understand how and why living conditions, traditions and societal systems interact with religion and outlooks on life”, I believe that a lesson about for example the villains in *Pilgrim's Progress* could be interesting. Discussion about why Bunyan regarded characters like *Mr. Moneylove*, *Mr. Crafty* and *Mr. Save-All* as villains will acquaint students to some parts of the Christian outlook on life. Third, if a team of teachers choose to work with this book, not only within the subject of Religion but also for the study of literature in English B, students will acquire a deeper understanding of why Bunyan wrote it. The other three extracts may work well for lessons without having to include Christianity but if a teacher should choose to use *Pilgrim's Progress* as an example of allegory, then I believe that it will be much easier if the students are familiar with the author's intention in writing the book.

Bunyan's main reason for writing his book was definitely not to encourage many different worldviews coming together in some kind of pantheistic sphere. He wanted to

¹⁶ Students should be familiar with some of the fundamental beliefs and ideas of Christianity, and some other world religions and other outlooks on life.

preach and promote reformed Christianity only and a person who reads the whole book will find that it is a piece of persuasive writing. Today, Bunyan would probably be accused of narrow-mindedness, especially by non-Christians. Should a book like this really be presented to young people in secularised Sweden? I think so partly because they need to practice critical reading. Hedge observes that: “the writer presents his version of reality and tries to move the reader to that same version. Attempts to position the reader are perhaps more obvious in a genre such as journalism, but persuasion is present in almost all writing” (198). Since young people will be subject to persuasive texts throughout life it is important to learn how to approach and handle them.

Reading is an educational process in which students have large opportunities to practice critical thinking and reflection. As we have seen, *Pilgrim's Progress* is a book in which Bunyan's Christian beliefs and values are very explicit; a teacher who chooses it in his or her teaching may enjoy many substantial and fruitful lessons, but it may also present difficulties. Tricia Hedge further observes that “[...] teachers need to recognize the dangers inherent in presenting culturally alien and provocative texts which try to persuade readers to identify with the writer's own moral vision” (197). In order to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings when commencing to work with a book like *Pilgrim's Progress*, it is very important to make clear the purpose of reading it. Lundahl notes that “There is a risk that the teacher and the students have different opinions why a certain text is being read” (103). He further writes that “a teacher who plans to let his students read [*Pilgrim's Progress*] or similar books must therefore be very clear with the purpose of doing so and thoroughly think through how the students may perceive the nuances in the book” (ibid). After having taken these precautions and clearly explained the book and why it is used, the teacher may let the students read the extract about *Vanity Fair*, and, with that text as a foundation encourage the students

to read it critically and question it. If it is difficult to get started then the teacher can prepare questions in advance such as:

1. Why is this topic being written about?
2. How is the topic being written about?
3. What other ways of writing about the topic are there?
4. Who is the text's model reader?

(qtd. in Hedge 213)

By doing so, and also by presenting examples of critiques which others have written, a teacher can introduce the students to the important skill of reading critically. This skill is today increasingly important since nearly unlimited sources of information are easily available on the Internet, and most of the students use web-based search engines when collecting material for essays. A practical way of working with this text is to divide the class into small groups of three or four students in each group. (Larger groups are not desirable because there is a risk that unobtrusive students will not be heard.) The students read the text extract and together answer the four questions mentioned above. They write down their answers on a paper and after that the teacher arranges a discussion in which the groups present their viewpoints. By using discussion and preparation in small groups the risk of unnecessary outbursts of biases is diminished.

Since the selected class for this study has representatives from other cultures, a text like Bunyan's will hopefully elicit different viewpoints that can be valuable for all students. A teacher who works with a class like this has thus a great opportunity to provide first hand information about how other cultures may interpret West-European literature. Lundahl observes that "since we are members of different fellowships of interpretation, a group of students reading a text can predicate their understanding on different experiences. That variety should be heard when students talk and write about their reading" (99). Since one

of the major values for the Swedish upper secondary school is that “the school shall contribute to people developing an identity which can be related to and encompass not just Swedish values but also those that are Nordic, European and global” (Lpf 94), classroom activities including reading and critical discussion about different texts are good in order to reach that goal. When students from another cultural background than Swedish share their thoughts about a text like Bunyan’s, Swedish students will be exposed to other values and different ways of interpreting life issues. In connection to this a teacher may want to discuss the issue about persecution based on different values. It can be a sensitive thing to talk about but it can also be liberating for some students to talk about such issues and also to see that people experienced it and wrote about it hundreds of years ago.

“The fact that our own interpretations never completely run together with others is due to our broad range of social identities. When we read a text, a certain identity may affect our interpretation” (Lundahl 98). It is important for a teacher, and also for the students, to be aware of this fact when working with literature. As noted in the previous chapter, Mr Bridges, one of Bunyan’s critics did not find the nature of neither *Mr. Help* nor the substantial steps in the *Slough of Despond* helpful to him. One of Bunyan’s identities was that he was a Christian and he studied the Bible. To him *Mr. Help* must have been a fellow Christian who guided him out of his despair and bewilderment. Later on he discovered the nature of the substantial steps after having learnt more about Christianity. Bridges did probably not share all of Bunyan’s social identities and thus had some difficulties in understanding him. In order to help students to understand this phenomenon the teacher can introduce a writing exercise in which the students writes a paragraph or a poem about a situation they consider to be very important to them and the feelings they have when they experience it, but without mentioning the topic. A little exercise like this is good to do as a warm-up before studying a text like the *Slough of Despond*. The topic, as we already have noted, is about difficulties in life –

something which many teenagers today are familiar with to some extent. The curriculum for the upper secondary school states that “the school shall develop the social and communicative competence of its pupils as well as draw attention to health and lifestyle issues” (Lpf 94). A critical approach to this text is important and by using the four questions mentioned above the teacher reminds the students how to read a text like this from an objective perspective and helps them to avoid prejudices. A writing task connected to this text is to allow the students to think about the mire (difficulties), a possible Mr Help and the substantial steps and tell them to write about their own experiences. Again, the four questions are a good help to get started and it is probably a good idea to go through them on the blackboard and write down some suggested answers. Hopefully some students will discover that writing can be an effective means in order to dispel disturbing thoughts. One student may interpret the substantial steps to be the Muslim faith whereas another may find it difficult to recall a Mr. Help, just like Bunyan’s critic did. An exercise like this one is in accordance with the syllabus for English B in which it is stated that students should “have the ability to present contents in writing in a clear and well-structured way, as well as be able to express themselves in a varied and personal manner with respect to the audience and situation” (unpag.). A successful outcome of their stories is not the important thing in the exercise I have described. Here it is the process of writing that is important and through an exercise like this; students may by themselves begin to discover the interesting nature of the allegory.

Allegory is a genre in literature which is very interesting but can be difficult to approach since a reader not accustomed to it may find it very demanding to disclose the different levels of meaning. However the study of allegory is appropriate in the English C course since one of the goals in the syllabus is that “students should be able to read literature from different periods and different genres, as well as be able in their reading to reflect on textual content and form from different perspectives” (unpag.). How shall a teacher go about

introducing and explaining the allegory? E. Beatrice Batson suggests that allegory “is the nature of thought and language to represent what is immaterial in picturable terms” (28). One practical conclusion of this is that students who study allegory should be taught not to think like Robert Bridges, that is, to interpret allegorical references literally.

Pilgrim’s Progress is an allegory in which four different levels of meaning can be distinguished. There is, of course, the level of the pilgrims and their adventures, which is a nice story in itself, but if that would have been all Bunyan intended to produce, then the book would probably never have been as famous as it is. The perhaps most obvious secondary level is the Biblical level, where Bunyan follows and highlights the most important events in both the Old and the New Testament. Next there is the theological level, in which Bunyan tells what he would have taught his congregation from the pulpit. In order to obtain admittance into Heaven a man must trust Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Finally, there is also a historical level where Bunyan informs the reader about the religious persecution and the geography in seventh-century England. It is probably too steep to assign students to disclose all four levels in *Pilgrim’s Progress* although it is good to briefly explain their existence. It is enough to work with one secondary level when introducing the allegory for the first time. One part in the book in which it is easy to discern a second level of meaning is the episode in *Doubting Castle*.

“It is equally important that reading is integrated with speaking, listening and writing and that students are encouraged to ask their own questions about what they read. An active attitude is a necessary prerequisite in order to penetrate the surface in what they read” (Lundahl 99). A teacher who wants to use an allegory in the classroom must be aware of this and not take for granted that students, even if the text is easy to grasp, will understand its underlying levels. A good method for working with the passage on *Doubting Castle* is to hand out the text and after having explained the book and the purpose of using it, let the students

read it. After that the teacher talks about, for example, the nature of *Giant Despair* and his wife *Gloom*, and explains that these two characters also are symbols for Bunyan's state of mind at a certain time. Next, the students get into groups of three or four and together they try to decode the rest of the contents of the text. The teacher may want to prepare a stencil which contains some phenomena with an allegorical meaning from the book in order to facilitate the discussion. During the discussion the students will hopefully assist each other in understanding and also propose interpretations based on their own experiences of life. The final stage of the lesson will be for the groups present their solutions to the whole class one at the time. Those who are listening will be encouraged to ask questions and also to write down the different view points. A lesson like this will hopefully disclose some of the secrets surrounding the genre of the allegory, and if the students find it interesting the teacher can chose to work with another episode from *Pilgrim's Progress* or another book in the genre.

Conclusion

Pilgrim's Progress has a message which is relevant for people in the twenty-first century. If a teacher makes the effort of penetrating below the surface of Bunyan's Christian book he or she will find topics that are teachable, valuable and adaptable to a multi-cultural upper secondary class. When reading the episode about the *Slough of Despond* the complicated reality of doubt, which most people will encounter in life, can be discussed and written about. When studying the passage about *Vanity Fair* a teacher has the opportunity to discuss the important skill of critical reading as well as discussing the seemingly perpetual phenomenon of persecution based on different opinions and beliefs. The episode about *Giant Despair* and *Doubting Castle* invites lessons about decoding the sometimes difficult but interesting nature of the allegory. Besides this, teachers who wish to discuss today's reality of despair among young people will find that Bunyan and his created pilgrim faced these issues, and thus the book can serve as a platform for such a discussion.

Finally, selected sections like *At the Foot of the Cross* and other parts of the book which discuss and promote Christianity explicitly are probably not suitable for the English literature classroom. Instead they should be approached as narratives within the subject of Religion. Teachers who want to use this book in class will find that it has the ability to connect these two subjects and enable cooperation over the subject borders. *Pilgrim's Progress* may be an old classic but several parts of its message are certainly not outdated.

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