

Born Again: Transcendence and Renewal in Narratives of Spiritual Rebirth

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Employing a comparative approach, this paper examines narratives that portray spiritual rebirth, in which a central protagonist undergoes psychological and moral growth during a difficult journey towards spiritual fulfilment. This paper adopts the theoretical framework offered by Christopher Booker (2004) to argue that it is in the depiction of spiritual rebirth, with its subversion of the conventions that characterize secular narratives, that there is also a rebirth of form, structure, and genre. By undermining secular narrative structures, narratives of spiritual rebirth demonstrate how rebirth functions as a key literary trope, while potentially providing insights about the nature of the spiritual journey itself.

In 1951, when the American publisher New Directions decided to publish the first English translation of Hermann Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*, it could hardly have anticipated the remarkable influence that the novel would have on American culture. As Paul Morris comments, *Siddhartha* addressed the existential unease and social unrest that characterised the United States during the Cold War, providing "a new set of values for a generation of young people disenchanted with their parents' conservatism."¹ Yet almost three centuries before the emergence of *Siddhartha*, another novel similarly revolutionised the American imaginative landscape. As Rosalie de Rosset notes, when John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* was published in 1678, it was highly popular in the colonies of New England, where it was "a smashing success"² among young Puritan immigrants disenchanted with the corruption and religious conservatism of Europe. Both novels spoke to the people of their time: the texts foreground the figure of the restless spiritual seeker, alienated from worldly society, in search of a transcendent reality that can only be accessed after trials and tribulations.

Both novels, then, are narratives of spiritual rebirth – stories featuring a central protagonist who undergoes psychological renewal in a quest for transcendence and fulfilment, which often involves a journey of self-actualisation.³ There is usually a similar process involved for the protagonist – a difficult process of maturation requiring the overcoming of severe obstacles, until the protagonist is reborn into a state of grace, gaining new

knowledge both about himself and about the spiritual reality that he eventually discovers. In both Western and non-Western literature, narratives that depict such a process have recurred, but it has rarely been studied why these narratives bear significant resemblances in their motifs and themes. Another area that has hardly been examined is the role that such tales play in comparison with narratives that are conventionally conceived to be secular, such as romance or action thrillers. Do narratives of spiritual rebirth undermine and subvert secular narrative structures, or instead reinforce and align themselves with them?⁴ What distinguishes narratives of spiritual rebirth, especially those which reflect or reaffirm secular ones, and what do such parallels tell us about the nature of the spiritual journey as depicted in such narratives?

To answer these questions, it is useful to adopt the theoretical framework offered by Christopher Booker in *The Seven Basic Plots* (2004). According to Booker, all stories can be anatomised to unearth the elemental building blocks that form their basis, and narratives can be observed to revolve around the same "hidden, universal rules."⁵ Considering the basic structure of the narratives of spiritual rebirth, we can identify their underlying patterns to compare them with secular narrative structures. Employing Booker's framework, I argue that it is in the depiction of spiritual rebirth, with its subversion of the conventions that characterize secular narratives, that there is also a rebirth of form, structure, and genre.⁶ While not claiming that all narratives of spiritual rebirth necessarily enact this process, I suggest that certain secular conventions and stereotypes are apt to be shed in such narratives, revealing how structural rebirth tends to accompany the subject of spiritual rebirth.⁷

A Remarkable Resemblance: Unity in Structure and Form

In his book, Booker posits that the "ancient riverbeds along which our psychic current naturally flows"⁸ serve as structures which determine the patterns that underlie all stories. Given that narratives are psychological constructions, they "ultimately spring from the same source,"⁹ indicating that despite any surface differences between stories, it is possible to find the essential core of such narratives. It is thus prudent to begin by considering how narratives of spiritual rebirth bear close similarities with each other in their depiction of the spiritual seeker and their common emphasis on the importance of individual autonomy. In John Bunyan's classic religious allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), the journey of the protagonist Christian is foregrounded as he leaves his hometown alone to undertake an arduous voyage, enduring multiple obstacles in his path before arriving at his final destination, the Celestial City. This motif of a quest for spiritual fulfilment is paralleled in Hermann

Hesse's novel *Siddhartha* (1922), which depicts the spiritual odyssey of a young Brahmin who lives at the time of the Buddha in ancient India. Casting off a life of privilege, Siddhartha seeks guidance from a series of ascetic teachers, before leaving to find his own answers, ultimately achieving enlightenment.

The resemblance in the texts may first be observed in the way that Bunyan and Hesse highlight religion as the dominant force that shapes the lives of the protagonists in each text. For instance, while Christian's name is self-evidently indicative of the religious persuasion that he represents, Siddhartha's name is also the first suggestion of his link with the Buddha, as the historical Gautama Buddha bore the same first name.¹⁰ Indeed Siddhartha's life closely parallels that of the Buddha, considering that the Buddha's life can be regarded to have revolved around three key events: his departure from his father's house, his struggle between the pursuit of worldly pleasures and a life of extreme asceticism, and finally his discovery of the Middle Way as the path to enlightenment.¹¹ Siddhartha similarly progresses through these three events, as he leaves his father, explores various teachings, before attaining spiritual liberation. Siddhartha is both seeker and sage – he becomes the very mirror of the Buddha.

Religious allusions are also replete in *Pilgrim's Progress*: the metaphorical connotations of key biblical passages and phrases are removed, to be translated as physical landscapes that Christian enters. The Valley of the Shadow of Death becomes an actual valley that is populated with hobgoblins and dragons,¹² while biblical figures are also borrowed and inserted into the narrative, as when Faithful describes his encounter with Moses,¹³ or when Lot's wife features both as landmark and as conversation fodder for Christian and Hopeful.¹⁴ Bunyan ensures that the name and the discourse of each character articulates the vice or virtue that he represents: for instance, while the characters Talkative¹⁵ and Mistrust¹⁶ are depicted as fully expressive of the weakness of excessive verbosity and groundless suspicion respectively, others like Piety¹⁷ and Charity¹⁸ offer spiritual sustenance to Christian by exhorting him to walk the path of virtue.

Names bear similar allegorical significance in *Siddhartha*: for example, the name of Kamala, the beautiful courtesan, means 'sensual love' in Sanskrit, while Kamaswami, Siddhartha's rich merchant employer, can be translated as 'master of the material world,' both names deriving from the Sanskrit root word *kama* which refers to lust or desire.¹⁹ If Bunyan portrays sites of danger or seduction as the testing grounds of faith for Christian, Hesse depicts the city where Siddhartha experiences worldly success and sensual pleasures to be the site of temptation that lures him from the path of enlightenment. When Siddhartha temporarily loses himself in sense pleasures in his pursuit of Kamala, he derails his quest for union

with the Absolute, thus demonstrating the hazards that arise when the body is privileged over the spirit.

At the heart of each text is the central figure of the spiritual seeker, one who is eventually willing to sacrifice all for the sake of transcendence. Siddhartha and Christian even abandon their wives and children; as Christian explains to Evangelist about his encounter with Mr Worldly Wiseman, "I am so laden with the burden that is on my back, that I cannot take pleasure in them as formerly."²⁰ Both protagonists are motivated by the same initial premise: it is impossible to both live in the world and gain spiritual salvation. Despite their troubles, however, each protagonist is fortunately often accompanied by spiritual companions: Siddhartha finds Govinda, and later Vasudeva, to share the spiritual quest, while Christian has Faithful, and later Hopeful to accompany him. The protagonists in both texts also extend this sense of communion with objects in the natural world, as seen in the images of nature employed. Christian is physically and spiritually refreshed by the River of God,²¹ while Siddhartha gains enlightenment only after he meditates upon the river: "All of it together was the river of occurrences, the music of life . . . his Self had flowed into the Oneness."²² In both texts, the river flows between the material and the spiritual worlds, revealing how communion with the natural world serves as a means to access the spiritual reality that sustains it.

Beyond European Literature: Another Tale of Spiritual Rebirth

With spirituality as the driving force that propels both protagonists towards the quest for salvation, the texts reveal a close resemblance, exhibiting a likeness in structure and form. Significantly, such narrative structures are not confined to European literature. In Ameen Rihani's *The Book of Khalid* (1911), the narrative also features a protagonist who struggles with his faith, though the tale is steeped in the Middle-Eastern tradition. Regarded as the first novel by an Arab-American writer in English, Ameen Rihani's story tells of a boy called Khalid, who migrates with his friend Shakid to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. Just as Siddhartha left home to embark on his spiritual quest, Khalid bravely sets out on the long and potentially hazardous voyage. As the narrator describes, "And now, warming himself on the fire of his first ideal, Khalid will seek the shore and launch into unknown seas towards unknown lands."²³ During his spiritual journey, Khalid experiences his own Via Dolorosa, or way of grief, when he is jailed for spreading pamphlets promoting heretical religious views amongst members of the local Arab community. Echoing the incarceration that Christian endures when he is imprisoned by Giant Despair,²⁴ Khalid's imprisonment serves as a test for his faith as he suffers

| | <i>The Pilgrim's Progress</i> | <i>Siddhartha</i> | <i>The Book of Khalid</i> |
|---------------------------|---|---|---|
| (a) Departure from Home | Christian leaves the City of Destruction ²⁷ | Siddhartha leaves his father, and later leaves Kamala ²⁸ | Khalid leaves Lebanon for the United States ²⁹ |
| (b) Overcoming Suffering | Christian is imprisoned, tortured, and subject to multiple attacks by enemies ³⁰ | Siddhartha becomes physically emaciated, almost starving to death ³¹ | Khalid is imprisoned and subject to lonely isolation ³² |
| (c) Communion with Nature | Christian is refreshed by the River of God ³³ | Siddhartha experiences a spiritual epiphany when meditating along the river ³⁴ | Khalid contemplates the mountain forests and rivers as a hermit ³⁵ |
| (d) Achieving Liberation | Christian reaches the Celestial City where he is welcomed with great joy ³⁶ | Siddhartha attains enlightenment ³⁷ | Khalid escapes the Ottoman authorities pursuing him, disappearing into the wilderness ³⁸ |

Table 1. A Brief Comparison of Christian, Siddhartha, and Khalid

heavily while under detention.²⁵ Yet like Siddhartha and Christian, persistence has its own rewards: Khalid is released, and after returning to Lebanon with Shakid, he continues his heretical activities there, angering the city's clerics. Khalid goes into self-exile, living as a hermit while writing about religion, before travelling to Damascus to speak in the Great Mosque, before finally escaping the Ottoman forces pursuing him by disappearing into the wilderness. This liberation from political authority not only parallels Christian's moral victory over authoritarian figures like Lord Hategood,²⁶ but also marks Khalid's spiritual emancipation from the oppressive ideological hegemony that the Ottoman state represents. As illustrated in Table 1, Khalid thus closely resembles Christian and Siddhartha: all three are emblematic of the figure of the spiritual seeker who is ready to sacrifice everything to quench the thirst for transcendence.

In all three narratives, the spiritual seeker attempts to escape the briar patch of the material world, but is forced to travel a road fraught with dangers. As Barbara A. Johnson has noted, *Pilgrim's Progress* is less of a fictionalized account of Bunyan's own experience than it is a generalized paradigm based on archetypal struggles of selfhood,³⁹ and Hesse's Siddhartha similarly engages in such an epic struggle. Albeit there are differences between the goals of the protagonists: Siddhartha seeks an experience of the Oneness of ultimate reality, Christian and Khalid seek an experience of the One who is the Creator of all things; one seeks liberation from within, the other two from without. Yet for all three, it is their autonomy that is paramount, as salvation remains in the choice of the individual – the ability to struggle against

worldly norms and seek redemption through a deeper spiritual understanding.

How Genres are Reborn: Subverting Literary Conventions

With this preliminary analysis of the three novels, we can consider how the subversion of conventions and stereotypes leads to the rebirth of genre. To begin with, it is necessary to identify the conventions that serve to characterize the secular narratives which most closely resemble the texts analysed. For instance, in *Pilgrim's Progress*, the narrative begins not as a comforting devotional reflection, but as an adventure story charged with the vigour of a historical epic:

I dreamed, and behold I saw a man clothed with rags standing in a certain place... he wept and trembled, and not being able to contain, he broke out with a lamentable cry, saying, "What shall I do?"⁴⁰

This dramatic beginning poses multiple questions to the reader, about the nature of the man and the reason for his terrible anguish. It is noticeable that such an opening could very well be that of an action-packed thriller: for example, in *The Testament* (1999) by John Grisham, the novel similarly begins by describing the plight of a wretched man: "Down to the last day, even the last hour now, I'm an old man, lonely and unloved, sick and hurting and tired of living."⁴¹ Yet unlike Grisham, Bunyan borrows biblical themes and characters to set the stage for a spiritual *Bildungsroman*. Furthermore, as de Rosset has noted, Bunyan's novel

was regarded to be a revolutionary political tract when first written – by insisting on the promotion of God’s law on earth, and the primacy of the Bible in its discourse, the novel effectively advocates a theocracy.⁴² This sense of the revolutionary and the radical underlies the spirit of the text, and secular conventions are replaced by spiritual ideals, converting a potential action-thriller into a politically-charged spiritual allegory.

Like *Pilgrim’s Progress*, *The Book of Khalid* is a tale of adventure, but it similarly subverts readers’ expectations of what Booker describes as the classic “rags-to-riches story.”⁴³ After Khalid goes to the United States, he does not make the fortune that immigrants usually aspire towards, and he even has to pay enormous debts after he is accused of a crime he did not commit.⁴⁴ Khalid also does not gain any resounding victory over the Ottoman authorities, but instead disappears into the wilderness, leaving the reader in doubt about his whereabouts. As the narrator advises, “Therefore, ask us not, O gentle Reader, what became of him. How can we know?”⁴⁵ In a conventional man-on-the-run thriller, the hero often gains a decisive victory over his pursuers: for example, in John Buchan’s adventure novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915), the spy Richard Hannay emerges triumphant. Rihani’s novel, however, denies any easy triumph for Khalid, subverting common-sense assumptions about the need for the protagonist’s ‘victory’ by leaving the conclusion of the narrative open-ended, offering possibilities unarticulated in the text.

The subversion of secular conventions is apparent as well in *Siddhartha*, as the novel not only features a spiritual quest but a love story, with the romantic relationship between Siddhartha and Kamala forming a vital narrative thread in the narrative. However, the novel subverts traditional stereotypes of love: Siddhartha demonstrates his love for his family not by providing for them, but by abandoning them in order to seek spiritual liberation for one and all. This paradox is expressed particularly when Siddhartha leaves Kamala, realising that the mundane world “had been a mere game to him, a dance he was observing, a comedy.”⁴⁶ In a sense, the text is engaged in a struggle against itself; as Tom Robbins observes, the tone of Hesse’s prose shifts back and forth, from a comic and romantic optimism towards the world, to a sober and reflective scepticism of worldly affairs.⁴⁷ This struggle thus echoes that experienced by Siddhartha himself, and it is in this struggle that a conventional romance is reborn as a spiritual classic.

Spiritual Renewal: Subverting Conventions in Drama and Film

Having considered novels featuring narratives of spiritual rebirth, we can analyse such narratives as

depicted in films, in order to establish whether they also reflect the four-stage structure proposed earlier, and whether the portrayal of spiritual rebirth translates to a rebirth of genre. In Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946), the structure of the film is patently that of romantic comedy, with the relationship between the couple George and Mary forming the backbone of the story. The film depicts the life of George Bailey, a kind-hearted housing agent who becomes suicidal, but who is convinced not to take his own life after his guardian angel arrives to show him what his town would have been like if he had never existed. Finally, George is rescued from his financial woes, and reunited with family and friends. It is George’s spiritual rebirth that subverts the conventions of the romantic comedy, as the romantic scenes of the film serve as mere precursors to the heart-wrenching scenes of George’s pleas for salvation. In most romantic comedies, the central crisis often revolves around a misunderstanding between the couple, and its resolution results in a happy ending. But in the film, the crisis is not primarily between George and Mary, but between George and God – as seen when George runs to a bridge rail during a snowstorm, crying out to God thrice, “Please God, let me live again!” The snow-covered rail also functions as the liminal space within which his future hangs in the balance, while the heavy snowstorm allows George to experience baptism, cleansing him of the painful memories of his past. The divine companions, namely God and his angels, thus take on a greater role than the human partner, Mary, in ensuring that calamity is averted and relationships restored. It is the resolution of this struggle between the divine and the human that permits the protagonist to gain deliverance, contributing to the subversion of the conventions of romantic comedy.

If deliverance underlies the transformative process that George experiences, the salvific potential of spiritual redemption is even more significant in contemporary films that depict the protagonist as guilty not just of minor misdemeanours, but of rage, hatred, and even acts of great evil. In the Danish film *Adam’s Apples* (2005), written and directed by Anders Thomas Jensen, the violent thug Adam is forced to leave his vicious neo-Nazi gang after he is sentenced to community service at a rural Danish church, where he meets Ivan, a priest with an irrepressibly optimistic outlook. Despite Adam’s initial anger and frustration, he is eventually transformed, serving as an assistant to Ivan even after completing his sentence by staying at the church to help other troubled young men. This transformation echoes the conversion process portrayed in the Hong Kong-Chinese film *Shaolin* (2011), directed by Benny Chan.⁴⁸ The film is set in the 1920s during the warlord era of early republican China, and depicts the protagonist Hou Jie, an aggressive warlord whose ruthlessness allows him to conquer the city of Dengfeng. However, after he is betrayed by his deputy Cao Man, his daughter

dies and his wife abandons him, leading him to seek refuge in the Buddhist temple of Shaolin. Ordained as the monk Jing Jüe, he helps to save hundreds of refugees fleeing to safer grounds in the mountains, and following a final confrontation with Cao Man, he dies in peace as a changed man who has found spiritual redemption.

In both films, religious elements lend significant allegorical depth to the narratives. As is the case in *Siddhartha* and *Pilgrim's Progress*, even the names of the films' characters are loaded with religious significance: for instance, 'Adam' is a direct reference to the first man as recorded in the Book of Genesis,⁴⁹ while 'Ivan' derives from a Latin variant of 'John,'⁵⁰ and in *Shaolin*, the name of Jing Jüe means 'pure awakening,' which recalls the Buddhist aim of achieving enlightenment. Yet at the beginning of each film, Adam and Hou Jie are initially unaware that they are even on the spiritual path, and they reflect the stages of struggle and agony that characterise the protagonists of the other narratives analysed earlier. Adam, for instance, is furious with Ivan for his chirpy optimism and for what he regards to be delusional beliefs: Ivan believes it is the Devil that is testing them, especially when birds, worms, and lightning beset the church's apple tree. Hou Jie's anger and suspicion even leads him to shoot his own sworn brother Song Hu in a pre-emptive attack, even though it is the dying Song Hu who proves to save Hou Jie by warding off assassins intent on killing him. Unlike Adam's conversion though, which is revealed when Adam gives up on his neo-Nazi skinhead identity by growing a full head of hair, Hou Jie's change of heart is marked by his insistence on shaving his head before his entry into the temple, reflecting the similar act of the Buddha after his decision to renounce worldly life.⁵¹ Both protagonists embark on their own road to Damascus, and their spiritual progress is indicated when others acknowledge their new-found humanity. For example, it is when the children share their *mantou* (steamed buns) with Jing Jüe that he smiles with gladness, while Adam finds peace when Ivan shares an apple pie with him: in both instances, sharing food is a sign of communion and companionship. Given that the word 'companion' derives from the Latin *companionem*, which literally means 'bread fellow' or 'messmate,' as it stems from the root words *com* ('with') and *panis* ('bread'),⁵² the scenes depict the sharing of physical nourishment as a sign of spiritual sustenance, suggesting the protagonists' growth on their journey to rebirth.

The portrayal of spiritual rebirth in the films further serves to undermine the conventions of secular narratives, indicating the rebirth of a genre. In *Adam's Apples*, the comedy of the narrative is undercut by scenes of violence and sacrifice, which offer a thoughtful reflection on the importance of faith in a world indifferent to human suffering. For instance, while Ivan's deadpan humour results in several comic

scenes, he nevertheless suffers a level of pain that can almost be compared with the sufferings of Christian: Ivan is repeatedly beaten by Adam, and is even shot in the head. Beneath the comic pratfalls is the serious message about the value of faith, and the religious significance of the narrative undermines any easy assumptions that the film can be easily categorised as comedy. *Shaolin* similarly subverts audience expectations: while audiences may probably expect the film to belong to the *wuxia* or Chinese martial arts genre, rather than the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, the terms of the narrative of spiritual rebirth serve to negate and undermine the terms of the *wuxia* structure.⁵³ In most *wuxia* narratives, the hero's martial skills are generally expected to increase, and for him to be winning the battle and to be reunited with the leading lady. Yet in the film, Jing Jüe peacefully separates from his wife, and it is his apparent loss of martial skills that is foregrounded, especially when he refuses to kill Cao Man in the final confrontation, even rescuing him by pushing him away from a falling wooden beam and being killed in the process, thus returning the *karma* of Song Hu's sacrifice. Jing Jüe perishes in peace, falling into the loving palms of the temple's Buddha-statue, and as light shines through a hole in the ceiling onto his body, the ensuing rain seems to baptise him, washing away his blood and his sins: it is a total loss in the secular realm, but a complete victory in the spiritual one. With the undermining of secular conventions about success and failure, the genre of the narrative is thus reborn, as a martial arts film is converted into a spiritual drama.

The Journey Continues: Spirituality and Personal Transcendence

Considering the various narratives that have been analysed, it is possible to raise two main questions: firstly, why is there a continuity of structure and form amongst narratives of spiritual rebirth, and secondly, what inferences can be made about the nature of the spiritual journey, as depicted in such narratives? With regard to the first question, it is difficult to pinpoint any underlying 'reason' beyond the idea that such narratives remain part of the human imagination at an intuitive level because they all answer to the same human need for a sense of rebirth, regeneration, and renewal. Yet, relating to the second question, the fact that the narratives exhibit a particular form, with an underlying structure beyond temporal or geographical distinctions, seems to indicate certain qualities about the nature of spirituality.

Noticeably, all the protagonists of the narratives analysed pursue their quest mainly as a solitary seeker; their journey is primarily internal and psychological. For the protagonist, it is the result of particular actions that prompt particular realisations, and these realizations only work at an individual level. This

observation echoes the anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski's remark that "much of religious revelation takes place in solitude".⁵⁴ Even collective salvation still boils down to certain choices of the individual. In *Shaolin*, for instance, hundreds of refugees are physically saved, but this is mainly due to the individual decisions of Jing Jüe and his fellow monks, and their own spiritual salvation depends upon their personal awareness of their path to transcendence. The spiritual seeker, even if initially accompanied by companions, must ultimately tread their own path; Siddhartha, Christian and Khalid must work out their own salvation. Spirituality is thus a largely individual pursuit, with struggles and triumphs part of the personal quest for liberation.

Furthermore, in narratives of spiritual rebirth, the quest does not end in stagnancy; it is not as if one freezes into a point of stasis after gaining salvation or enlightenment. In other words, enlightenment is not the end of the story, as the process that follows after requires practice. The structure of a narrative of spiritual rebirth reveals that our identity as spiritual beings continues to be modified when new trials arise and when the times call for testing or refining. Khalid continues his trek into the wilderness, while for Christian, his arrival at the Celestial City is not the end of the story – in the often unread second part of the narrative, his wife Christiana has to make her own long and arduous journey to join him. Tellingly, the final scenes of *Shaolin* also do not depict any final and triumphant victory, but focus on a young monk practising *kung fu* amidst the snow-blanketed temple: the snow provides the *tabula rasa* to start afresh by offering the promise of a new beginning, echoing the sentiments of Wordsworth's poem 'Michael' that "a child, more than all other gifts / That earth can offer to declining man / Brings hope with it, and forward-looking thoughts."⁵⁵ As in Siddhartha, like the river that continuously flows, spirituality is a continuous process, running a perpetual course towards transcendence.

To conclude, we return to the beginning: from the examples of the novels and films, it can be observed that the depiction of spiritual rebirth is often accompanied by a rebirth of form, structure, and genre, as secular narrative conventions may be undermined and subverted by spiritual ideals.⁵⁶ The question thus arises about the deeper significance of narratives of spiritual rebirth in contributing to our understanding of the human imagination. It is possible that the overlapping motifs and symbols reflected in such narratives point to something below the threshold of our immediate consciousness, especially if the mind naturally conceives of the spiritual and the mystical in a way that differentiates itself from the secular and the mundane. This idea affirms the argument that Keith Thomas offers in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971): even when magic and superstition has passed,

we still require the sustenance of the noumenal, which we seek in the form of religion; after all, it is the conviction that religion 'worked' that has sustained people in adversity for centuries.⁵⁷ Perhaps narratives of spiritual rebirth serve a similar purpose: they offer a glimpse of the noumenal, in a world that often has had little room for it. By identifying with the figure of the spiritual seeker, readers can embark on their own search for selfhood, and thus in a sense, have the opportunity to be born again with an enhanced awareness of spirituality and transcendence.

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- 2007), 7.
3. I have deliberately chosen not to use the term *Bildungsroman*, or novel of formation, as an umbrella term to refer to all the texts that I discuss, because the term largely refers to a particular genre of novels. In this paper, I will discuss narratives that are conveyed through various media, including film, so in order not to confuse readers, I have preferred to use the term "narratives of spiritual rebirth" instead.
4. The (anonymous) reviewer of this paper has my thanks for pointing out the importance of defining key terms. I am also mindful of the reviewer's comments about the need to include examples of secular narratives to allow for a clearer comparison with narratives of spiritual rebirth.
5. Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots* (London: Continuum, 2004), 13.
6. I am grateful to Dr Susan Ang, for raising the idea for this thesis during a consultation session. Consultation session, UIS3911, National University of Singapore. 4 Mar 2011.
7. To ensure that my choice of texts is sufficiently representative of the range of narratives of spiritual rebirth, I have endeavoured to select the texts based on the principle of diversity: the texts range from the medieval to the modern, and they are grounded in various religious traditions (for instance, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is steeped in the Christian tradition, *Siddhartha* in the Buddhist tradition, and *The Book of Khalid* in the Islamic tradition). After all, these are texts whose *raison d'être*, as Dr Susan Ang memorably put it in another context, "is not lodged in the specificity of time and place but in a commonality of focus and subject" (Concluding Lecture, EN3268, National University of Singapore. 6 Apr 2011.)
8. Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots*, 12.
9. *Ibid.*, 13.
10. P. Lakshmi Narasu, "Life of the Historic Buddha" in *A Buddhist Bible*, ed. Dwight Goddard (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 6. Siddhartha's own Sanskrit name refers to "he who is on the right road", or alternatively, "he who attains his goal".
11. *Ibid.*
12. John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. Rosalie de Rosset (London: Moody Publishers, 2007), 87.
13. *Ibid.*, 95.
14. *Ibid.*, 144.
15. *Ibid.*, 107.
16. *Ibid.*, 58.
17. *Ibid.*, 64.
18. *Ibid.*, 68.
19. Bhikkhu Nyanatiloka, "The Word of Buddha" in *A Buddhist Bible*, ed. Dwight Goddard (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 30.
20. Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 30.
21. *Ibid.*, 146.
22. Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*, trans. Susan Bernofsky (New York: The Modern Library, 2008), 114.
23. Ameen Rihani, *The Book of Khalid*, Project Gutenberg, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/29257>> (cited 11 Mar 2011), 23.
24. Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 151.

Notes

1. Paul W. Morris, introduction to *Siddhartha*, trans. Sherab Chödzin Kohn (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), xiii-xiv.
2. Rosalie de Rosset, introduction to *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. Rosalie de Rosset (London: Moody Publishers,

25. Rihani, *The Book of Khalid*, 116.
26. Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 123.
27. *Ibid.*, 15.
28. Hesse, *Siddhartha*, 11, 72.
29. Rihani, *The Book of Khalid*, 29.
30. Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 76, 84, 120, 127, 151.
31. Hesse, *Siddhartha*, 13.
32. Rihani, *The Book of Khalid*, 115.
33. Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 146.
34. Hesse, *Siddhartha*, 112.
35. Rihani, *The Book of Khalid*, 248.
36. Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 214.
37. Hesse, *Siddhartha*, 126.
38. Rihani, *The Book of Khalid*, 349.
39. Barbara A. Johnson, *Reading Piers Plowman and The Pilgrim's Progress* (Chicago: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 29.
40. Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 7.
41. John Grisham, *The Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 1.
42. De Rosset, introduction to *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 7. This is another possible reason for the immense popularity of the novel amongst the Puritans in New England during the late seventeenth century.
43. Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots*, 52.
44. Rihani, *The Book of Khalid*, 111.
45. *Ibid.*, 348 (author's italics).
46. Hesse, *Siddhartha*, 71.
47. Tom Robbins, introduction to *Siddhartha*, trans. Susan Bernofsky (New York: The Modern Library, 2008), xvii.
48. Film enthusiasts may be interested to know about the cast of the film: Andy Lau (as the warlord Hou Jie, who later becomes the monk Jing Jüe), Nicholas Tse (as Hou Jie's deputy Cao Man), Fan Bingbing (as Hou Jie's wife Yan Xi) and Wu Jing (as the monk Jing Neng), with a special appearance by Jackie Chan (as the monk Wu Dao).
49. Genesis 2:7.
50. This is likely to be a reference to John the Baptist rather than the Apostle, considering Ivan's Old Testament convictions.
51. Narasu, "Life of the Historic Buddha", 6.
52. "compassion, n.". *OED Online*. June 2012. Oxford University Press. <<http://www.oed.com.libproxy1.nus.edu.sg/view/Entry/37475?result=1&rskey=B2kDPB&>> (accessed August 30, 2012).
53. I am grateful to Dr Susan Ang again for this idea. Consultation session, UIS3911, National University of Singapore. 18 Mar 2011.
54. Bronisław Malinowski, quoted in Jose Casanova, *Public Religions of the Modern World* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 45.
55. ll. 146-148.
56. As the reviewer of this paper has noted, it is essential not to make any easy assumption that narrative forms, structures, and genres can be classified neatly and tidily, or that narratives of spiritual rebirth fall under a fixed group. I fully acknowledge the grey boundaries between forms, structures, and genres. However, some level of generalization

is required in order for meaningful comparisons to be made, and for the purposes of this paper, narratives of spiritual rebirth can be usefully commented about by referring to them as a singular category.

57. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 798.

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