The Parable of *The Little Prince*

Elijah Smith

A parable is more than just a brief and vivid anecdotal lesson: it is a complex pedagogical tool capable of initiating a complete cognitive transformation in the reader or listener. In his book *Peace, Violence, and the New Testament*, Michel Desjardins documents the way in which Jesus used parables to challenge the widely-held beliefs of his audiences. Desjardins explains that parables differ from other forms of narrative in three key ways: by implicitly challenging the listener to re-evaluate their beliefs; by initiating the process of re-evaluation without explicitly providing an alternative to their current way of thinking; and, if successful, by transforming the listener into a more compassionate person.

Parabolic teaching, like any other form of teaching, is not always successful. Each of these three stages requires the student to actively participate in the process of transformation, largely because of the reductive, allegorical nature of a parable.\(^1\) If a student fails to do this, he or she risks drawing literal conclusions which are limited intellectually to the specifics of the parable. Though the authors of the Gospels recorded numerous instances of Jesus using parables to teach, they rarely (and then only briefly) described how audiences were specifically affected by the challenges imposed by this method of learning.

The New Testament Gospels are not the only source of parabolic literature. Despite being fictional, the moral transformation of the Pilot, a protagonist in Antoine de Saint Exupéry’s *The Little Prince*, follows Desjardins’ pattern of parabolic learning: worldview is challenged, no alternative is explicitly offered, and the student is required to complete the transformation on his

or her own terms, increasing in his or her compassion for others. It is by recognizing this unique process of learning that the reader can understand the Pilot’s complex transition from a lonely man with no one to talk to, to an emotionally expressive individual who recognizes the value in sharing his story. The purpose of the following paper is two-fold: first, to use Desjardins’ generic theory of parable to better understand the motivations of St. Exupéry’s characters, who often speak to one another using parables; and second, to use a close reading of *The Little Prince* to supplement the information missing from the Gospel accounts of parabolic teaching, namely how it affects the student through each of the three stages of the transformative process.

First published in 1943, *The Little Prince* is the story of an introverted and unnamed Pilot who crash-lands in the Saharan desert. While struggling to repair his plane and survive the harsh environment, the Pilot unexpectedly meets the Little Prince, an enigmatic, interplanetary traveller. Alone together in the desert, the two bond over a series of conversations which are often parabolic in form and function.

*The Little Prince* is narrated by the Pilot, who describes his life before, after, and during his encounter with the titular Prince. The story begins not with words, but with the image of a boa constrictor poised to devour some unfortunate mammal; the Pilot then recalls the image as he had seen it at six years old, in a book called *True Stories from Nature*. Through the eyes of this child the world is eminently comprehensible, a system of binary oppositions easily defined: order and chaos, primeval and modern, cold- and warm-blooded, magnificent ingestion and mundane digestion (the snake feeds quickly and dramatically, then lies motionless for months while it digests its food). The image inspires the boy to illustrate an imagined scenario in which a boa constrictor has swallowed a massive elephant. When he shares the drawing with others, however, all they see in it is a misshapen hat. Frustrated by the discovery that not all phenomena
are as straightforward or as easily interpreted as those in *True Stories from Nature*, the Pilot explains: “That is why, at the age of six, I gave up what might have been a magnificent career as a painter… Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them.”

Generically, this story is a parable, a type of narrative described by Michel Desjardins as “a short story depicting an everyday situation, which functions to tease its audience into [accepting]… that reality is not fully as one sees or experiences it.” The “misshapen hat” is not a misshapen hat, and though the Pilot has grown up to be a sensible man able to charm other adults with talk of bridge, golf, and politics, he feels that he has “lived [his] life alone, without anyone [to] really talk to.” This is only the first of many parables in *The Little Prince* that serve to illustrate that not all is as it first appears. The story of the Turkish Astronomer is another such example: the Astronomer’s observations are rejected by the scientific community when he presents them wearing traditional Turkish clothing. When he presents the same findings some years later, this time wearing contemporary European clothing, they are immediately accepted.

According to the Pilot, failing to recognize the true nature of phenomena can result in more than just a harmless misunderstanding—it can be devastating. Explaining the importance of weeding a garden, the Prince says the following: “if it is only the sprout of a radish or the sprig of a rose-bush, one would let it grow wherever it might wish. But when it is a bad plant, one must destroy it… the very instant that one recognizes it… A baobab is something you will never, never be able to get rid of if you attend to it too late… And if the planet is too small, and the baobabs are too many, they split it in pieces.” In this example, the Prince suggests that one must

---

5 Ibid., 21-22.
look beyond what one sees—in this instance, a young baobab—in order to recognize and thus guard against the potential danger it represents. The inclusion of this injunction against baobabs is in keeping with Desjardins’ understanding of parables: he argues that some parables include a description of what can be expected if the listener fails to heed the advice presented within.\(^6\)

The story of the baobabs in *The Little Prince* is of further interest because it represents another crucial aspect of parabolic teaching, as described by Desjardins: “Parables tend to destabilize the hearer by not providing a direct answer to a specific question.”\(^7\) Though they are designed to initiate a process of inner transformation by challenging the listener to re-evaluate their view of the world, they do not explicitly provide the listener with an alternate way of thinking. Though the transformative lessons contained in a certain parable might seem relatively explicit, their primary function is only to “tease listeners into beginning that process of transformation.”\(^8\) Because of this incompleteness, this form of teaching is ineffective if the student fails to adapt the esoteric wisdom of the lesson beyond the example provided in the parable. For example, the story of the baobabs might contain any number of useful lessons: do not procrastinate, consider the consequences of one’s inaction, things are not always as they appear, etc. It is not, however, a piece of horticultural advice.

The failure to apply a lesson beyond the example used to present it is again demonstrated by the Prince’s depiction of the Lamplighter. This unfortunate character was tasked with lighting a lamp at night and putting it out by morning. As time went by his small planet spun faster, until it made full rotations every minute. The Lamplighter was incapable of modifying what he had been taught in order to accommodate his new situation. Since his orders—to light and extinguish his lamp every day—had not officially changed, he continued to work himself to complete

\(^7\) Ibid., 43.
\(^8\) Ibid., 50.
exhaustion. By doing exactly as he had been told without applying experience or common sense to his orders, the Lamplighter allegorizes both the value of thinking for oneself and the necessity of adapting a particular lesson to accommodate the unique conditions of one’s changing experience.

According to Desjardins, many of the men and women who listened to Jesus encountered similar difficulties with his parabolic method of teaching. According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus once asked: “Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?” The implication here is twofold: first that the allegorical nature of the parables was not always understood; second, that there is a universal method to understanding all parables. This means that the key to decoding a parabolic lesson lies not in the words themselves, but in the student’s ability to apply the allegory to his or her own experience.

A parable is successful when a student is able to use the story to better understand his or her own way of thinking about their immediate surroundings and circumstances. The Gospel literatures—and to a lesser extent, *The Little Prince*—remain popular beyond their writers’ lifetimes because of the nature of the parables in each. Despite the historical context of each story, astute readers of any generation are able to apply the allegorical wisdom therein to benefit their own experiences.

When parabolic teaching is successful, it amounts to a transformative experience for the student. “They are expected to be open to new ways of thinking and acting,” argues Desjardins. Throughout *The Little Prince*, both the Prince and the Pilot describe characters that resist this transformation and thus remain in a perpetual state of destructive ignorance. The Prince’s encounter with the Tippler is one such example. The man continues to drink because he wants to

---

9 Ibid., 44.
10 Ibid., 47.
forget that he is ashamed of being a drunk. Without any inner transformation, the man is destined to continue to drink and to “shut himself up in an impregnable silence.” Similarly, the Conceited Man whom the Prince meets on his travels is only concerned with being “the handsomest, the best-dressed, the richest, and the most intelligent man on [his] planet.” The Conceited Man fails to realize that he is in fact the only person on his planet—a lonely and purposeless existence. Further along on his travels, the Prince meets a Geographer. The Geographer, however, has only been trained to study geography. As such, he refuses to explore his own tiny planet, leaving this to a trained explorer. Unfortunately, the Geographer, like the Conceited Man and the Tippler, is the only resident of his planet. By refusing to transform his own ideas about what a geographer ought to do, he remains ignorant of the places he has been tasked with mapping.

Each of these stories, as well as the story of the Lamplighter, serve to demonstrate the value of being willing to consciously alter one’s preconceptions about what it is they ought to think and how they ought to behave. If a student is unable or unwilling to engage in this process of inner transformation then the parabolic method of teaching will remain ineffective. However, if the student remains willing to be open to new ways of thinking, “the parables encourage [them] to transform themselves internally and, in the process, increasingly minimize their worldly preoccupations.” This is evident in the Pilot’s conclusion to *The Little Prince*. When the story began, he described how, after the incident with his painting of the boa constrictor eating an elephant, he “would never talk…about boa constrictors, or primeval forests, or stars…[He] would talk…about bridge, and golf, and politics, and neckties…So [he] lived [his]

---

12 Ibid., 50.
life alone, without anyone that [he] could really talk to."\textsuperscript{14} By the end of the story, and because of his interaction with the Little Prince, the Pilot has had a transformative experience. Because of the allegorical nature of his learning from the Prince’s parabolic teaching, he has become less concerned with any of his former material preoccupations, namely being understood and valued by others. By the end of the narrative, the Pilot has learned the consequences of empathy and experiences genuine compassion for the Prince.

The lessons that the Pilot learned from the stories told by the Little Prince did more than transform his inner thoughts—they transformed his actions, too. When his story began, the Pilot believed that a person could see his painting of the boa constrictor eating an elephant only as a painting of a misshapen hat because they were not “a person of true understanding.”\textsuperscript{15} The truth, however, is that they saw a misshapen hat because the Pilot was either unable or unwilling to convince them of his own particular way of experiencing the world. According to Desjardins, parables “extol compassion as part of this transformation.”\textsuperscript{16} The evidence that the Pilot has learned to be more compassionate as a part of his transformation is that he has taken the necessary time and effort to record his story for others to read. As a young man, the Pilot was unwilling to describe a simple drawing to others, but after his encounter with the Prince he learns the value in sharing his complex and emotional journey with others. The ultimate success of a parable lies in the student’s recognition of the value in sharing their new outlook with others.

In St. Exupéry’s \textit{The Little Prince}, each character is regularly burdened by the challenges of either misunderstanding others or being misunderstood themselves. In the New Testament, Jesus is portrayed as having faced those same challenges. According to Desjardins, Jesus

\textsuperscript{14} Saint Exupéry, \textit{The Little Prince}, 5.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
overcomes these challenges through parabolic teaching—portraying his own particular wisdom in a way that could be readily understood by his public. Unfortunately, parables are only capable of beginning the process of learning; it is the responsibility of the student to complete the process by then transferring the wisdom in the parable to challenges not literally described in it. It is not known whether Jesus’ audiences were able to engage with the parables affectively and use them to apply adaptive wisdom to their own circumstances. In *The Little Prince*, both wisdom and ignorance are the result of parabolic teaching: wisdom, the ability to re-enact a particular knowledge in a functional and socially adaptive way; ignorance, the tendency to reduce a lesson to the mere words used to present it and thus lose the adaptive function of wisdom.
Bibliography

