In 1667, the English poet John Milton published *Paradise Lost*, an epic poem with over ten thousand lines of verse. Eleven years later, John Bunyan published a wildly popular Christian allegory called *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. No greater contrast can be drawn between two people than the relationship of Milton and Bunyan. One was born in the purple and had all the advantages that flow from wealth and liberal education; the other was the son of a tinker, who had only a common school education. Milton produced a poem that was rich in allusions to classical literature and mythology, while Bunyan wrote a simple allegory with only the knowledge of two books. Despite its apparent literary inferiority to Milton’s poem, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* was destined to have sales in English-speaking countries second only to the *Bible* because of its allure to the large lower class through its language, vocabulary, thematic focus, and story.

A primary reason *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is much more popular than Milton’s poem is its use of simple language and vocabulary that allures to the less educated. John Milton’s writing is full of proofs of his own leaning. His English is fine and stately, but it is filled with complex words made from Latin roots. An unknown seventeenth century writer once wrote, “Milton’s language is English, but it is Milton’s English.” For example, early in *Paradise Lost* he says in a line that would confuse most common folk, “Or if Sion Hill delight thee more, and Siloa’s Brook that flow’d fast by the Oracle of God; I thence invoke thy aid to my advent’rous song.” In comparison, Bunyan’s writing is remarkably simple, using strong, plain, purely English words. There is hardly one word in his writing that a man who has read the *Bible* cannot easily understand. It is for this reason that people enjoyed the language of Bunyan over Milton’s language. The common man of the 17th century was not well educated and would only have read a few books.
including the *Bible*. People do not want to read what they cannot understand, so *The Pilgrim’s Progress* was incredibly popular because of its simple language and vocabulary.

The complex themes in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* turned readers away, while Bunyan’s easily understood and practical themes attracted large audiences. This can be accredited to the specific themes that are addressed in each work. John Milton’s themes cover a variety of extremely abstract and intellectual ideas such as the hierarchical nature of the universe. This theme comes from the description that the universe is divided into a hierarchical structure with God literally sitting on a throne on top and hell on the bottom, as far away from God as possible. Contrarily, Bunyan covers much more realistic and utilitarian themes in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. He highlights the knowledge that can be gained through travel by telling the story of Christian, and emphasizes the importance of reading by criticizing Christians who have not read the *Bible*. Bunyan portrays themes in his writing that people can actually use, and not just sit around thinking about. Thus, his writing has much more appeal to the common, working man of the late 17th century. *The Pilgrim’s Progress* attracted much more attention because its themes are more practical and more easily understood than Milton’s themes.

While the plot of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is both rich and complex, its popularity is subordinated by *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, which has a more interesting and stimulating story. The downfall of Milton’s popularity is the very nature of human literary desire: most people would rather read a great story than a more philosophical book. When readers pick up a copy of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and start to read, they step into an entertaining story that they can vividly imagine. Readers of *Paradise Lost* will find that
they are reading a formal, tragic, and philosophical assessment of the temptation of Adam
and Eve. Furthermore, they will find characters that are easily identified by certain
stereotypes and archetypes, such as Satan as the antihero. *The Pilgrim’s Progress* tells its
story using characters that could be any everyday man, even going as far as simply
naming them after their function in the story. It is a story that people want to read for
entertainment over literary quality. The larger popularity of Bunyan’s book than *Paradise
Lost* can largely be accredited to the nature of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* as a genuinely
interesting story that people want to read.

Although *Paradise Lost* could be considered a literary masterpiece in comparison
to *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Bunyan’s allegory is one of the most read works in history,
especially in comparison to Milton’s epic poem. This vast popularity difference can be
attributed to a language, thematic focus, and story that the common man of the 17th
century can understand and connect with. John Bunyan and John Milton are two
extremely contrastable writers and their difference in writing style and book popularity is
no exception.