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An Uninformed Pilgrim

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Nathaniel Hawthorne, skilled American author, wrote perhaps one of his most complex characters into “The Celestial Railroad,” a tale often misjudged as simplistic and shallow because of its allegorical format. In Joseph C. Pattison’s article, “The Celestial City, or Dream Tale,” Pattison explores the delicate psychology of the story’s narrator, and honors him as a modern-day Christian. However, while Pattison attempts to summarize the narrator’s character, his article draws evidence from the obvious facts, and fails to read the story closely enough to intimately know the character, thereby incorrectly representing three key aspects of his nature.

Pattison views “The Celestial Railroad” as the narrator’s attempt, not only to discredit modernism, but to establish his identity as a Christian pilgrim. He states, “the narrator wants to do more than show modernism as absurd in his dream. He wants as well to assert positively his own orthodoxy as a true Christian and pilgrim” (Pattison 30-31). However, this hypothesis is a half-hatched view of the narrator, who continually changes and compromises his beliefs throughout the story. The narrator begins his journey with the adopted views of Bunyan regarding the Celestial City and the journey there. He sets out in the knowledge of what he has heard and read, but little concrete belief in either the Bunyan-esque views or the prevalent modernist views of his time. He begins his journey with the simple desire of visiting the Celestial City to satisfy a curiosity aroused in him by the rumors he has heard (Hawthorne 1300-1301). However, on the narrator’s journey to the city, Mr. Smooth-it-away becomes his personal Great Enlightenment. As the journey progresses, the narrator repeatedly encounters circumstances that challenge his preformed notions of the route and conditions of his journey to the Celestial City, and Mr. Smooth-it-away helps to adapt his views. The narrator voices the cautions of Bunyan when he crosses the Slough of Despond, and Mr. Smooth-it-away, the embodiment of contemporary modernism, promises that Bunyan’s record is now outdated and inaccurate – an answer that allays the protagonist’s fears. The narrator accepts his answer and promptly discards Bunyan’s record of the slough (Hawthorne 1301). Again, when the narrator discovers that Apollyon will be conducting the engine, he voices his horror to Mr. Smooth-it-away, who promises that they will travel in perfect safety with Apollyon as conductor. Mr. Smooth-it-away explains that the railroad company has employed Apollyon as conductor in order to expedite the function of the train, and the narrator immediately believes this, and trust Apollyon, though he knows the same man was once Christian’s “old antagonist”, in Bunyan’s tale (Hawthorne 1303). As Hawthorne’s protagonist progressively reaches the Interpreter’s House, the Palace Beautiful, and the Valley of the Shadow of Death, he continues to accept the modernist arguments of Mr. Smooth-it-away when they conflict with Bunyan’s orthodox Christian descriptions (1304-1306). It is not until the narrator encounters the foot-travelers in Vanity Fair that he begins to doubt

the modernist reasoning that Mr. Smooth-it-away has offered him (Hawthorne 1310). However, the narrator, still relying heavily on modernist thought, does not trust the pilgrims' information enough to re-embrace traditional Christianity, explaining that he "was not simple enough to give up [his] original plan of gliding along easily and commodiously by railroad" (Hawthorne 1310). Therefore, he continues on his journey, periodically resigning more of what orthodox notions he still holds until he reaches the ferry adjacent to the Celestial City. It is not until he is on the ferry-boat that he realizes the true identity of Mr. Smooth-it-away, who "felt the fiery tortures [of Tophet] raging within his breast" (Hawthorne 1313). Then, the narrator realizes his folly and repents of his route to the city. However, at this point, repentance is too late. He has already completed his dream journey on the railroad, has settled his fate, and, as the pilgrims promised, has lost his soul (Hawthorne 1310). Therefore, while the narrator expresses orthodox Christian views in select instances throughout the narrative, he does not actually believe these views until the end of his dream, but chooses instead to embrace and act on the prevalent modernist understanding of his time.

Pattison argues that the narrator, far from sensing guilt for specific sinful actions, rather experiences guilt as a result of his overall passions and desires. He states, "What is at issue in the narrator's dream is not an actual crime, but the question of guilty desires" (Pattison 227). However, the article presents little evidence to support this claim, and Hawthorne's work does not suggest such an opinion. Rather than entertaining sensations of guilt over his sinful appetites, it is much more evident that the narrator discredits all guilty feelings as mere fancies of his imagination. Throughout the story, the narrator makes only two allusions to a personal sense of guilt, both of which accusations he promptly discredits. The narrator first encounters guilt while traveling through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. As the train speeds along, he describes the fearsome accusations that the darkness suggests to him, stating that "grim faces, that bore the aspect and expression of individual sins, or evil passions, seemed to thrust themselves through the veil of light...as if to impede our progress" (Hawthorne 1307). Here the narrator experiences sensations of guilt, not simply for general sinful passions but for specific actions and events. However, within seconds, the narrator disregards these accusations, indicting his own shame for considering these feelings of guilt, calling the sensations merely figments of his imagination, and attributing them to the toxic gasses that the tunnel emits (Hawthorne 1307). He ends his record of this brief encounter with guilt by absolutely stating that the "whole gloomy passage was a dream" (Hawthorne 1307), thus discrediting all implications of these guilty sensations and positively stating that such feelings or fears are utterly unsubstantiated. The only other reference which the narrator makes to a situation of guilt is after his departure from Vanity Fair, when he mentions the location of Lot's wife and asserts that his own covetous desires

would earn him a similar pillar of salt, should they be “punished as rigorously as this poor dame’s were” (Hawthorne 1311). However, he does not accompany this statement with any repentance or regret for his desires, but indicates, instead, an attitude of pity for Lot’s wife. He seems to consider the misfortune of Lot’s wife as more tragic than her initial sinful action. Far from serving as an example of his own contrition, this event serves rather as a further instance of his indifference to any sensations of guilt.

Pattison claims that the narrator disregards the contents of the dream as pure fable, without looking for a deeper meaning. He states that “the narrator recoils in pride and rationalizes away the real meaning of the dream” (Pattison 235). However, this view of the protagonist’s response is inaccurate. If the narrator saw no deep meaning in his dream, his story would serve as no more than a record of his fantasy, and would not include his reflections on the events he saw. However, as he supplements the story with commentary, he indicates that he has invested much thought in the details and implications of his dream. The contrast between his journey and that of the original Christian is one which the narrator considers. Using the narrative voice which he employs throughout the story, he describes the convenience of the modern transportation route in comparison with the traditional pilgrimage. He follows this with a comment in the present tense: “Whether they [railroad tickets] will be as readily received at the gate of the Celestial City, I decline giving an opinion” (Hawthorne 1302). He sheds his narrative voice to enter the present tense, in order to give his current opinions on the reliability of the railroad system in granting passengers entrance to the Celestial City. Though he gives no absolute opinion on this point, he raises his question in a manner which indicates his personal reflection on the issue. While this is the most potent instance in which he indicates a belief in the underlying meaning of the dream, the narrator employs this present-tense commentative voice again near the end of the story when he accuses Mr. Smooth-it-away of deception, and labels him an “impudent fiend” (Hawthorne 1312). Here, he again makes his remarks after the fact, asserting the indignation which he feels for the real entity, rather than simply for a dream figure. In both instances, the narrator expresses his current views on the events, rather than simply his initial impressions of the dream, hereby indicating his continuing interest in the dream’s plot, even after waking. Therefore, his final comment, “Thank heaven, it was a Dream!” (Hawthorne 1313) is not a glib dismissal of his nightmare, but an expression of his relief in finding that, in reality, he has not yet sealed his fate on the route to Tophet.

While Pattison views the narrator as an orthodox Christian journeying to the city by modernist means, it is apparent that the narrator is not as committed as the Christian of Bunyan’s tale. Starting his journey with only a vague notion of the route and with nothing more than curiosity to prompt his actions, Hawthorne’s character rapidly drowns his traditional views in a flood of modernist principles.

He quickly demonstrates a general naiveté concerning the practical matters of his journey, which leads him to accept whatever false information his guides offer him. Contrary to initial appearance, the narrator's dream journey does not end successfully. Instead of arriving triumphantly at the Celestial City in spite of the deception and skepticism surrounding him, his expedition ends as he realizes his own horrible gullibility. Hawthorne's protagonist is not a shining example of a well-conducted journey, but rather serves as a warning to those who seek to complete their earthly passage in a Christian manner, without having the slightest idea of what such an undertaking entails.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "The Celestial Railroad." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym. 6th ed. Vol. B. New York: Norton, 2003. 1300-313. Print.

Pattison, Joseph C. "'The Celestial Railroad' as Dream-tale." *American Quarterly* 20.2 (1968): 224-236. JSTOR. Web.