

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S "THE CELESTIAL RAILROAD"

This short story was published by Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1852 in a book called The Snow Image and Other Twice-Told Tales. Hawthorne, the greatest American author of the 19th century, cast "The Celestial Railroad" in the form of one of the classic works of prose in the English language, John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress.

John Bunyan (1628-1688) was an English Puritan preacher and author. He wrote much of Pilgrim's Progress while imprisoned for his refusal to accommodate himself to the official Anglicanism of the years following the restoration of the Stuarts at the close of the Puritan Revolution and the rule of Oliver Cromwell.

Pilgrim's Progress is an elaborate religious allegory in which the protagonist, Christian, abandons his life in the City of Destruction and sets out on a long, arduous journey, determined to reach the Celestial City. He travels by foot, bearing a heavy burden (emblematic of original sin) on his back. He passes through the Slough of Despond, escapes the City of Destruction via the Wicket Gate, and endures many temptations to despair of his faith and be diverted from the true route to the Celestial City. Along Christian's journey, on Mr. Worldly-Wiseman tries to dissuade him, and he is rescued several times by the stern intervention of Evangelist and Mr. Greatheart, who guide the bewildered Christian back on the road to the Celestial City. He overcomes the towering challenge of the Hill of Difficulty, defeats with sword in hand the fiery Apollyon (the demon of spiritual doubt), passes through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and stays for a time at the city of Vanity. There Christian visits the bazaars and commercial emporiums of Vanity Fair (modeled on the great summer merchants' fairs of 17th century England), and there also a companion, Faithful, meets a martyr's end.

Ultimately, Christian succeeds in avoiding the fires of Tophet (hell), arriving in the land of Beulah, a pleasant resting place before his passage over the River of Death and his entrance into the Celestial City.

The form of Hawthorne's story presents an updated mid-19th century American version of Bunyan's enormously influential and popular tale.

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A free version of "The Celestial Railroad," found in *Mosses from an Old Manse and Other Stories*, can be downloaded from Project Gutenberg at <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/512>.