

“He must get back to where he had been before”: Death as Dreamlike Phenomenon in Eudora Welty’s “Death of a Traveling Salesman”

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Drawing theoretically from Sigmund Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, psychoanalytic literary criticism suggests a parallel between the creative author and the unconscious dreamer. Freud examines dreams as a manifestation of “wish fulfillment” and as “products of the unconscious that serve to process events or feelings, past or recent, that are repressed and unresolved” (“On Dreams”). Therefore, as an unconscious device, the dream can become a way to grapple with the past as well as imagine a future that resolves previous conflict. The application of psychoanalytic theory to literature creates an opportunity for interpretation. Unconscious dreams blending with memory form a central component of Eudora Welty’s short story, “Death of a Traveling Salesman,” which presents the story of itinerant shoe salesman R.J. Bowman as he returns to the road following a debilitating bout of influenza. While he seems eager to travel once again, there are indications throughout the story that Bowman is not yet fit for exertion. Moreover, Bowman’s visions suggest that he may, in fact, be moving into death early in the story while he contrives or dreams the events that subsequently unfold. Consequently, “Death of a Traveling Salesman” offers an innovative speculation on death via Bowman’s experience in the context of Welty’s authorial process, prominent myths, dream language, and archetypal frameworks,

Both the professed origin and the publication history of “Death of a Traveling Salesman” are important for a thorough understanding of Welty’s inspiration and method. The story was her first publication and provides relevant insights into her creative practice. In her autobiographical lecture collection, *One Writer’s Beginnings*, Welty explains:

My first good story began spontaneously, in a remark repeated to me by a traveling man—our neighbor—to whom it had been spoken while he was on a trip into Northern Mississippi: “He’s gone

to borrow some fire.” The words, which carried such lyrical and mythological and dramatic overtones, were real and actual—their hearer repeated them to me. (87)¹

The remarks here help to codify some of her writing process and provide some clues to interpretation.² The “borrow some fire” story has salient echoes of the Greek god Prometheus, who is known as both the immortal who gave humans the creative arts and the god who provided the essential tool of fire to humanity. Each of these identifications echoes within the story's beginnings, as the mythological overtones of Prometheus provide a source and the raw material for the aspiring creative writer to devise a complex plot. Welty herself even commented that “Prometheus was in my mind almost at the instant I heard Mr. Johnson tell about the farmer borrowing fire” (“Looking Back” 753). Moreover, Welty photographed a great deal as she roamed the rural South, so her process would have involved pulling from a store of memories collected while traveling. In fact, a number of her photos feature images of remote dirt roads and meager homes that provide source material for “Death of a Traveling Salesman.”



Fig. 1, Rural Cabin. Eudora Welty, photographer. <https://eudorawelty.org/life-works/photography-art/>

In addition to drawing from her experience, Welty's story makes frequent use of dream elements to frame the erosion of Bowman's consciousness and perspective. The narration ostensibly follows traveling salesman R. J. Bowman, who is out of the hospital after battling a severe case of influenza, on a sales trip. He moves through "desolate hill country" while his thoughts wander and he fights the oppressive heat. Despite the generally straightforward beginning to the story, there are numerous unusual "dreamlike" elements visible in Bowman's reflections and observations that point to an underlying instability in point of view. In fact, early descriptions of Bowman illustrate the precarious state of his health as he is characterized as "angry...helpless [and] feverish," and while driving, "he was not quite sure of the way" (119). With his declining physical and mental health, it appears that Bowman is in no condition to drive for an extended period, particularly on what becomes an unfamiliar road. He becomes geographically unmoored, so that "he seemed to be going the wrong way" (119). Framed by the story, the salesman's dreamlike disorientation can be viewed as a metaphorical expression of human dislocation in the realm of an unfamiliar psychological descent into death.

While he assesses the road to find his way, Bowman's thoughts move beyond mere feverish miscalculations to reflect a man who is in a hallucinatory and ungrounded state. The narrator speculates: "it was as if he were going back, far back" (119). The place where he is returning is evasively unclear. Perhaps he is recalling his own past, as his memories and recollections force their way into his dreamlike circumstances. Remembrances begin to enter when "for no reason, he had thought of his dead grandmother," while he muses: "[s]he had been a comfortable soul" (119). This reminiscence, and his spiritual remark suggest a deference towards childhood comforts, towards an embrace from remembered soothing experiences. Psychoanalytic literary critic Raymond Tarbox calls such a recurring situation in Welty's work: "an idealized hallucination which is the equivalent of the still moments Welty characters attempt to experience when in dire need of being saved" (73). Welty further reinforces this theme of salvation by

making Bowman's destination the hamlet of Beulah, Mississippi. Census data shows that during the general time period of the story, the population never exceeded 350 residents ("Beulah"), so it is an unusual destination for a man needing a large consumer population to purchase his products. However, the name Beulah carries some additional spiritual import, as Welty may be drawing from the "Southern Baptist hymn "'Beulah Land,'" thus making reference to an eternal home, that is, *heaven*" (Kállay 228).³ Though Bowman's movement into his version of the afterlife might have begun with an intent to reach a Christian heaven, his startling realizations reveal that he is far off course. He thinks: "Beulah was fifty miles away from the last town, on a graveled road. This was only a cow trail. How had he ever come to such a place?" (120). Clearly, Bowman is no longer headed for some potential Christian vision of the afterlife, revealing a shift away from his own Christian mythology to an evolving, confused vision.

The final event before Bowman's movement to the cabin solidifies his transition into a dreamlike and hallucinatory state. Bowman turns from journeying towards Beulah/heaven to passage into a more equivocal sort of purgatorial plight. After driving through "a heap of dead oak leaves," he realizes he is at "road's end" (120). The wording here is significant. While oak trees have traditionally represented rugged endurance,⁴ Bowman passes over *dead* leaves, suggesting that just as leaves on a mighty oak tree will eventually perish, so will Welty's protagonist. Finally, "road's end" indicates more than just the final stretch of this dirt road; it also represents the metaphorical "end" of life's road for Bowman. Here, he must stop his quest for "heaven" and confront where his life and his fate have brought him.

Ethereal details grounded in the language of dreams further indicate that Bowman's trip to the end of the road is more than literal and instead metaphorical/spiritual in nature. There are numerous signs of his disconnection from reality that began early in the story. For instance, while he does realize that his car "was going over the bank" (120), he does not rush to extricate himself. Instead, "getting out quietly," he slowly removes his bag and sample case, and

watches “the car roll over the edge” (120). Like a dreamer, Bowman moves with no sense of alacrity, and his thoughts reveal his disorientation. He wonders: “Where am I?...Why didn’t I do something?” (120). Perhaps he *couldn’t* “do something” given his passage out of life, or at least his presence in a dreamlike state. The salesman seems to be approaching his own death in a hallucinatory vision driven by his own dreams/memories and Freudian displacement or as someone experiencing dream paralysis. There is little grounding in reality for Bowman, again suggesting death as a frightening reality couched in the language of a dream for him.

As his dreamlike situation endures, unconscious manifestations continue making their way into the next important phase of Bowman’s surreal state: his encounter with a sibyl-like woman. Before his vehicle went over the embankment, Bowman had spotted “a cabin on the edge of a hill,” (121) and the dwelling now becomes a fixture in his surreal narrative. Upon meeting the woman at the “shotgun house,” he imagines that “his heart began to behave strangely...and he could not think” (121). He finds that “he could not hear his heart.” (121).⁵ The language and “feel” of dreams persist here: “Stock-still in his confusion, he dropped his bags, which seemed to drift in slow bulks gracefully through the air” (120). Such slow motion perception is typical of dreams. Soon after, as Bowman’s journey continues, the woman takes on the role of chaperon. Leading him to a sort of purgatory where he must confront and make judgements about his own life, she holds a lamp that is “half blackened, half clear” as he stands before “the dark passage behind her” (121). From this point in the story, the woman serves as a mysterious attendant for Bowman, piloting him into “the darkness of the house” where she points “almost like a professional person, *a guide* [my italics], to a chair” (122). Bowman’s visit will be an individual journey, though, with the woman existing only as a presence meant to *show* rather than *tell* him what to discover. In the cold of the fireless room with “the hearth [and] dead coals lying on it” (123), Bowman sits in a sort of limbo, forced to contemplate his own life and choices, as she bluntly tells him: “‘Yes. We are alone.’” (123). The suggestion here is that the

passage from life into death is ultimately a solitary journey, and Bowman comes to represent a pilgrim left alone within the spiritual nether world of dying.

The woman's remark induces the salesman to evaluate his past more deeply than he has done in his conscious life, fostering a spiritual searching often associated with an individual's last moments. Bowman's existence has been itinerant, built only on fleeting and temporary relationships. He has lived mainly in hotels and therefore never formed deep interpersonal bonds, particularly with women. This realization is made significant by Bowman's own recollections of many transitory and fickle encounters: "Women? He could only remember little rooms within little rooms...if he thought of one woman he saw the worn loneliness that the furniture of the room seemed built of" (119-20). In this passage, Bowman's lifelong loneliness is linked patently to women, and this parallel sets up the role of the woman in Bowman's vision. Tarbox asserts that "the Welty hero is often an isolated individual in need of being saved by objects he fears as much as idealizes" (73). Clearly, Bowman has been isolated in his life, and feels the same loneliness within the confines of the dark cabin. However, he is also in need of salvation, and his possible fear of female relationships may be the catalyst for the sibyl-woman's appearance. In this role, the woman takes on substantial mythical qualities that affect the salesman deeply. As he sits alone in the cabin with her, Bowman nears a moment of epiphany: "he felt a curious and strong emotion, not fear, rise up in him...his soul—seemed to leap, too...he wanted to leap up, to say to her, I have been sick and I found out then, only then, how lonely I am. Is it too late?" (125). For someone transitioning from life into death as I am arguing Bowman is, the question of whether it is indeed "too late" to reach self-knowledge and clear his conscience is critical. However, his passage must be made alone; Bowman leaves this scene on the *brink* of realization, but still only grasping at important self-knowledge.

The persistence of myths within the framework concocted by Bowman's unconscious certainly reflects their import for the salesman, but also their persistence for humanity, particularly in connection with movement into the

afterlife. Light and fire play a significant role in archetypal stories, from Classical mythology to Genesis, so it is significant, then, that the woman in the story appears here to Bowman as a “statue” who “did not light the lamp” (126) as darkness falls upon the cabin. In this early role, the woman may furnish Bowman with the opportunity to find truth and assess his life through introspection, but she is not yet the sort of Earth-mother who attempts to engender spiritual rebirth in Bowman. These evolving mythological elements are important, as the Greek goddess Persephone spent a part of each year in the dark underworld with Hades, so this may have entered Bowman’s mind alongside concerns about his own ultimate fate. Though he saw himself on a road to heaven (“Beulah”), his introspection has led him to a cold place of impenetrable darkness, where the light prevalent in mythology remains elusive.

Before Bowman can harness the comprehension linked with reflective self-awareness, the story needs to move from the darkness into the light, which is where Welty’s and Bowman’s mythological vision find full articulation. To affect this luminous manifestation, the woman tells her reticent companion Sonny, “‘you’ll have to borrow some fire’” (127), over the protest of Bowman who claims to possess his own matches. The effect of this illogical situation is twofold. First, the incident again highlights the dreamlike, hallucinatory state where the ease of lighting a fire with matches is discarded for a solitary nocturnal expedition. Second, dispatching Sonny for fire provides a link to Prometheus of Greek mythology as provider of fire to humans. The fire and the lamp are essential symbolic elements. Critic Northrop Frye provides a vital archetypal context: “Dante has to pass through a ring of fire...to go from the mountain of purgatory, which is still on the surface of our own world, to Paradise or the apocalyptic world proper...In Classical mythology, the story of Prometheus indicates a similar provenance for fire” (145). Bowman’s story evolves directly from these archetypes. He must be affected by fire by passing through it as a part of this spiritual journey, so the woman as mother-figure like Persephone, and Sonny as Promethean, present an opportunity: By being brought into the light,⁶ Bowman is

able to engage in further self-analysis because he can now “see,” casting Bowman as a twentieth-century sojourner, awash in archetypes and images drawn from his and humanity’s collective experience. As a result, the story links mythology, dream illogic, and death as common vehicles while moving the plot towards a compelling conclusion.

The crucial scene in the story occurs as Bowman joins the couple for dinner. Here, his disorientation is shown further through his speculation about the woman, suggesting a mythological transformation, or true “seeing” brought about through movement from darkness into light. At first, Bowman had believed that the woman was around fifty years old. Now, her appearance, in his perspective, changes dramatically. The narrator explains: “A pain pressed at [Bowman’s] eyes. He saw that she was not an old woman. She was young...her teeth were shining and her eyes glowed” (128). The rapid changes in Bowman’s understanding are reflective of a dreamer’s malleable unconscious. The transformation continues when Sonny announces his wife’s pregnancy and Bowman realizes that “what was really in this house...[was a] marriage, a fruitful marriage” (129). He calls this a “simple thing” that “anyone” could have, but fails to perceive the import of this vision. This is the culmination of movement from darkness and unknowing to light and knowledge brought about through intervention by the mythological couple. They allow for the continuation of humanity through a spring-like rebirth enabled by both the feminine Earth, and the light and warmth of fire. Nonetheless, Bowman seems to miss the resounding significance of these crucial relationships, since he reasons only that “[t]here was nothing remote or mysterious here—only something private” (129). The powerful dreamlike situation ultimately leaves him unaffected and grasping for some elusive significance in the cabin.

While the mythological couple offers Bowman an opportunity to understand some deep core element of humanity, he ultimately ignores their invitation. As he lies by the dying fire, he watches “every tongue of blaze lick out and vanish” (129). With the failing light, the opportunity for reflection and self-knowledge is fading as well. Following Frye’s assertion that fire represents a

purgatorial “spiritual or angelic world midway between the human and divine,” (145) we can conclude then that Bowman was given spiritual insights into his life that he might have taken back with him—either as recovering hospital patient or into his own afterlife. Sonny and the woman have shown him the light, both literally and metaphorically, as a way of “enlightening” Bowman to the power of human relationships and their role in sustaining an inner life. This revelation may, in fact, reveal the psychological “wish fulfillment” aspect of Bowman’s dream. He approaches the darkened cabin with hope of guidance from the woman, but his unconscious shifts to a realization that his own relationships with women have been shallow. Therefore, he re-imagines her as a young woman, and the renewed vision presents him with a possible lesson. Bowman misses the message, though. Like Dante, he has the opportunity to return enlightened upon some homecoming: “He must get back to where he had been before,” he thinks; but he sees that “the woman had never got through with cleaning the lamp” (129). The couple has given Bowman a vision to take away, but his own predispositions obscure any resonant realization. If Bowman cannot comprehend the private lives envisioned here to view the universality of relationships, then he has truly encountered a spiritual “dead end” on his mythical journey.

The closing of “Death of a Traveling Salesman” offers both a physical and spiritual death grounded in empty solitude for Bowman. Instead of meditating on his discovery of the happiness attendant to the couple’s relationship and the woman’s life-giving pregnancy, he shifts focus from the spiritual to the mundane world of the consumerism he has promulgated in his life. Bowman recalls his job, deliriously repeating not a deathbed prayer, but a salesman’s line: “‘There will be special reduced prices on all footwear during the month of January’” (129). His mutterings present both a bewildered death state and the monotonous drone of consumer capitalism that drives the life of a salesman. This physical world proves inescapable for him. The mythical couple of Bowman’s own unconscious offers him an antidote to lonely and shallow salesmanship, but Bowman does not

internalize their message; he leaves the cabin ignorant, putting “all the money from his billfold under [the lamp’s] fluted glass base, almost ostentatiously” (129). As the story closes, dream images recur as the “cold of the air seemed to lift [Bowman] bodily” (130). He believes that his heart “began to give off tremendous explosions like a rifle” (130), but this is perhaps his feeling of shifting from life into death due to his illness. Moreover, he feels “as if all of this had happened before” (130), again suggesting the progression into death as human archetype. Ultimately, Bowman appears to have imagined the entire spiritual journey from setting out to Beulah, to sharing fire with the couple, to collapsing outside his car near the cabin. Bowman’s unconscious offered a transcendent vision in the moments of his passing from life to death,⁷ but such insight does not leave a deep spiritual impression on the man. The exploration of life in a dreamlike state informed by archetypal mythology provided Bowman with the possibility of some transcendent vision, but this enlightenment is never fully realized. Instead, the fruitless purgatorial journey is reinforced in the final image of the story as he sinks on the road. Like he lived, R.J. Bowman dies alone with only fragments of final imagined encounters creating a dreamlike passage into death and no transitional passage to some welcoming spiritual “Beulah.” In “Death of a Traveling Salesman,” Eudora Welty has linked myths, dreams, and death to create a powerful story reflecting her belief in the necessity of human relationships.

Notes

¹ Welty elaborates about the traveling salesman in her essay “Looking Back at the First Story”: “Mr. Johnson (long and happily married, a jolly talker) was not R. J. Bowman, but it was Mr. Johnson whose tales, and whose traveling life, made me imagine this story” (752).

² Lawrence Dessner notes the differences between the 1936 version of the story (in the journal *Manuscript*) and the revised version published in *A Curtain of Green* in 1941. He does a careful comparative reading and finds that we can see “how much of ‘Death of a Traveling Salesman’ was revised, and [says] a

great many pins were needed to reassemble the innumerable sentences and paragraphs to which Eudora Welty took her scissors" (146).

³ Kállay provides additional explanation: "Beulah Land" is a well-known gospel hymn written by Edgar Page Stites (1836- 1921) in either 1875 or 1876. The hymn, Stites's most popular, is set to music written John R. Sweney (1837-99). The hymn concludes with the chorus: O Beulah land, sweet Beulah land!/ As on thy highest mount I stand, / I look away across the sea/ Where mansions are prepared for me" (236).

⁴ The U.S. Forest Service remarks: "In popular imagination, the oak tree stands for strength, endurance, and longevity" ("The Mighty Oak" 1).

⁵ Kállay engages in a comprehensive literal and metaphorical analysis of the "heart" in the story, and claims that "these heart sensations...might be diagnosed as atrial fibrillations" (229). My argument is that the heart is to be read more figuratively in the story, precluding any particular medical diagnosis of Bowman.

⁶ Sonny takes Bowman on a brief additional journey through a "sort of tunnel that the bushes made over the ground" in order to unearth a jug of whiskey. The excursion suggests additional mythological elements in the story that are beyond the scope of my analysis.

⁷ In this death as suspended visionary state, Welty's R.J. Bowman recalls Ambrose Bierce's Peyton Farquhar in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" and the solitary man in Jack London's "To Build a Fire".

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