

# “The Celestial Railroad” by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Where to Find: [The Celestial Railroad](#)\* on Project Gutenberg

## Overview

Written in Massachusetts in 1843, “The Celestial Railroad” is an allegorical short story, serving as a satirical reimagining of John Bunyan’s “The Pilgrim’s Progress.” With approximately 6,300 words, it critiques modern Christianity and the idea of an easy path to salvation.

## Themes

- Faith versus Convenience (Matthew 7:13-14, James 1:22)
- True Spirituality versus Superficial Religion (Matthew 23:27-28, Isaiah 29:13)
- Progress and Modernization in Religious Context (Jeremiah 6:16, Hebrews 13:8)

## Summary

The narrator embarks on a train journey to the Celestial City, a modern alternative to the arduous pilgrimage in Bunyan’s tale. Along the way, he encounters various characters and locations from “The Pilgrim’s Progress,” now altered to reflect a more comfortable and less spiritually demanding journey. The train passes through places like the Slough of Despond (now bridged) and Vanity Fair (now a respectable town). However, as they approach the final river crossing, the narrator realizes the train cannot reach the Celestial City, and the easy journey has been an illusion.

## Main Characters

- The Narrator: An unnamed traveler who describes the journey on the celestial railroad
- Mr. Smooth-it-away: The guide who represents the modern, easy approach to faith
- Apollyon: The conductor of the train, named after the demon in “The Pilgrim’s Progress”
- Giants: Former obstacles now employed by the railroad, symbolizing how modern society co-opts challenges

## Reflection/Impact

The story’s largest impact on the reader might be its pointed critique of modernized religion and the dangers of seeking an easy path to spiritual fulfillment. Hawthorne’s allegorical approach invites readers to question their own spiritual journey and the authenticity of their faith in an increasingly convenient world.

In your own life’s journey, are you taking the comfortable train or the challenging pilgrim’s path? Where might each truly lead you?

## Art Project: “The Celestial Railroad: Journey of the Soul”

### Objective

Students will create a mixed-media art piece that captures the allegorical journey depicted in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Celestial Railroad.” This project encourages students to explore the story’s themes of spiritual complacency, the dangers of taking the easy path, and the contrast between material wealth and spiritual well-being.

### Materials Needed

- Mixed media paper or sturdy drawing paper
- Graphite pencils and erasers
- Colored pencils, markers, or pastels
- Magazines or printed images for collage (optional)
- Scissors and glue sticks
- Rulers for creating structured elements (e.g., railroad tracks)
- Fine liners or black ink pens for detailed work
- Watercolors or acrylics (optional for background washes)
- Paintbrushes and water cups (if using paint)
- Paper towels or rags
- Smocks or old shirts (to protect clothing)

### Discussion and Inspiration

1. **Story Themes Discussion:** Begin with a discussion about the allegorical nature of “The Celestial Railroad,” focusing on the key themes such as the allure of the easy path, spiritual complacency, and the dangers of substituting true spiritual growth with superficial shortcuts.
2. **Personal Connection:** Encourage students to reflect on a time when they faced a choice between an easy, tempting path and a more challenging but ultimately rewarding journey. This reflection will help them connect with the story’s themes on a personal level.

### Sketching Ideas (Optional)

1. **Visual Symbol Brainstorm:** Ask students to brainstorm symbols from the story that could represent key elements, such as the railroad, Vanity Fair, the Celestial City, or the figures like Mr. Smooth-it-away. They should consider how these symbols could be depicted visually.
2. **Sketching Layouts:** If students feel comfortable, they can begin by lightly sketching a layout for their piece. This might include a central image of the railroad, with different scenes or symbols branching off to represent various stages of the journey.

## Creating the Mixed-Media Artwork

1. **Background (Optional):** If students choose to use a background, they can create a wash of colors to represent different spiritual or emotional states—such as the dark, murky tones of Vanity Fair contrasted with the light, serene hues representing the Celestial City.
2. **Main Elements:**
  - **The Railroad:** Students can depict the railroad as a central element, possibly using straight lines or curves to symbolize the journey. The tracks can be drawn with fine liners or markers to give them a defined, structured appearance.
  - **Scenes Along the Journey:** Encourage students to create small vignettes or scenes along the railroad that represent key moments from the story. For example, Vanity Fair could be a collage of material goods and distractions, while the Celestial City could be a serene, light-filled area on the paper.
  - **Figures and Symbols:** Students can include symbolic figures like Mr. Smooth-it-away, who represents the dangers of complacency, or Christian, representing the earnest seeker of spiritual truth. These figures can be drawn or collaged onto the paper, depending on the student’s preference.
3. **Details and Symbolism:** Guide students to add details that reinforce the story’s themes. For instance, the railroad tracks could gradually fade or become broken as they approach the Celestial City, symbolizing the inadequacy of the easy path. Students might also add small symbols like keys, chains, or paths that diverge from the railroad, representing choices and consequences.
4. **Color Choices:** Discuss how color can convey the mood and message of the piece. Darker, muted tones might be used for Vanity Fair and the railroad, while brighter, more ethereal colors could represent the Celestial City or moments of spiritual clarity.

## Reflection and Sharing

1. **Class Discussion:** Once the artwork is complete, have students share their creations. Encourage them to explain the symbolism in their work and how it relates to the themes of “The Celestial Railroad.”
2. **Personal Reflection:** Ask students to reflect on the process of creating their art and how it helped them understand the story’s deeper meanings. What did they learn about the choices they make in their own lives?

## Display

1. **Artistic Journey Gallery:** Display the students’ artwork in a way that mimics the journey of the story. You could arrange the pieces in a line or pathway that represents the railroad, with different sections reflecting the stages of the journey from Vanity Fair to the Celestial City.

2. **Themed Exhibition:** Consider creating a themed exhibition where the pieces are grouped by the themes they explore, such as “The Allure of Vanity” or “The Quest for Spiritual Truth.”

### **Additional Tips**

1. **Encourage Personal Interpretation:** While students are guided by the themes of the story, they should feel free to express their unique interpretation of the journey. Each piece should reflect their individual understanding of the story’s message.
2. **Incorporate Text:** If students wish, they can add text to their artwork—perhaps quotes from the story or personal reflections that connect the visual elements to the themes of the story.

This project allows students to delve into the allegorical depth of “The Celestial Railroad,” encouraging them to think critically about the choices and paths we take in life, while expressing these concepts through creative visual art.

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## Quiz

### Multiple Choice (5 Questions)

- 1. What themes are being critiqued by Hawthorne in “The Celestial Railroad”?**
  - A) The ease of modern life compared to traditional faith
  - B) The corruption and superficiality within organized religion
  - C) The journey to the Celestial City
  - D) The value of material wealth over spiritual wealth
- 2. Who serves as the conductor on the Celestial Railroad?**
  - A) Mr. Smooth-it-away
  - B) Mr. Greatheart
  - C) Christian
  - D) Mr. Worldly Wiseman
- 3. What does the railroad represent in the story?**
  - A) Technological progress
  - B) A shortcut to salvation
  - C) The path to worldly success
  - D) The journey of life
- 4. How does the narrator’s journey end?**
  - A) He reaches the Celestial City.
  - B) He returns to the City of Destruction.
  - C) He remains in Vanity Fair.
  - D) It’s left ambiguous.
- 5. What happens to the passengers who take the ferry at the end of the railroad?**
  - A) They safely reach the Celestial City.
  - B) They drown in the river.
  - C) They turn back to Vanity Fair.
  - D) It’s not explicitly stated.

### True or False? (2 Questions)

- 6. The story “The Celestial Railroad” is a direct retelling of John Bunyan’s “The Pilgrim’s Progress.”**
  - True
  - False
- 7. The narrator of “The Celestial Railroad” ultimately reaches the Celestial City.**
  - True
  - False

**Essay (1 Question)**

8. Discuss how Hawthorne uses allegory in “The Celestial Railroad” to critique modern religious practices and attitudes. How does this story compare to Bunyan’s “The Pilgrim’s Progress,” and what message is Hawthorne conveying about faith and salvation?

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