

Didactic Reveries: William Morris's Dream Visions

Sleep is such a comforting, longed for time when humankind may shut “Our gloom-pleas’d eyes” to escape “the weariness, the fever, and the fret” of our daily lives as we rest in the fruit of our sleep, our reveries (Keats, “Sonnet” 3; “Ode” 23). Tapping this valuable source of refreshment and inspiration, writers know the power of dreams to serve as both resources and vehicles for issues they wish to address. Transporting readers into the dream realm offers writers the opportunity to explore issues or ideas in an otherworld where the limits of reality are easily surpassed. The nineteenth-century British Socialist writer, William Morris, composed a number of fictional works that seek the venue of the dream realm to voice his vision of social change and human understanding. In these writings, Morris either explicitly expressed or subtly suggested his dreams for a community where useful work replaced the drudgery common to Victorian "slave" labor and where the people found pleasure, artistry, and purpose in their daily endeavors. Interlacing poetic imagery with philosophic ideals in an imaginative journey, Morris shapes his dream vision, *News from Nowhere: An Epoch of Rest* (1890), to transport his readers beyond their ordinary lives as he focuses on man's need for social change and his ability to rise above the negative forces of the world.

Some have argued that *News from Nowhere* is a utopian work written by an idealist. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a utopia is “[a] place, state, or condition ideally perfect in respect of politics, laws, customs, and conditions . . . [a]n impossibly ideal scheme, especially for social improvement.” Considering these ideas, perhaps Morris had a utopia in mind when he composed *News from Nowhere*. In fact, Morris follows the subtitle, *An Epoch of Rest*, with the statement, “being some chapters from a Utopian Romance” (*News* 42). Indeed,

Morris was an admirer of utopian works. And in the introduction to a recent publication of *News from Nowhere*, Morrisian scholar, Clive Wilmer, suggests that Morris was influenced by two specific utopias, Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus* and Tacitus's *Germania*, in which each presents communities that were "unaffected by the decadence of [its] own society" (xxx). According to Wilmer, these works were highly influential because "[b]oth writers use their subjects as sticks with which to beat their fellow countrymen, and it is clear they gave Morris a hint of how he might do likewise" (xxx). So if Morris truly intended *News from Nowhere* to be a utopia, he would have reflected strong idealism with the punitive purpose of defeating those who disagreed with his Socialist stance.

However, Morris's otherworld shaped in *News from Nowhere* is not perfect a community detailing how one must live but it is a realm reflecting how society might exist harmoniously. As a member of Victorian society, Morris did feel agitation with and knew the truths about the attitudes and behaviors impelling his era and with those who were working for social change. In fact, even as a young adult, he reflected his disenchantment with the abominations of this community when he confessed his inadequacy and inability to forge effective changes in society: "[O]n the whole I see that things are in a muddle, and I have no power or vocation to set them right in ever so little a degree. My work is the embodiment of dreams in one form or another" (qtd. in Mackail 1: 109). In addition, he later confessed that he saw his "ideal clear enough, but had no hope of any realization of it" (Morris, "How" 379). These realist perspectives of social limitations steered Morris away from forming "impossibly ideal scheme[s]" as they influenced the vision expressed in *News from Nowhere* (379).

Also, while Morris might have admired utopian works, he expressed his difficulty with them. In his review of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, originally published in Socialist publication, *Commonweal*, in 1889, Morris explains that Bellamy's work

requires notice all the more because there is a certain danger in such books as this: a twofold danger The danger to the first is that [some members of society] will accept it with all its necessary errors and fallacies (which such a book *must* (sic) abound in) as conclusive statements of facts and rules of action, which will warp their efforts into futile directions. The danger to the second, if they are but enquirers or very young Socialists, is that they also accepting its speculations as facts will be inclined to say, If *that* is Socialism, we won't help its advent, as it holds out no hope to us. (Morris, "Looking Backward" 354)

Morris was one who understood the ideal that authors like Bellamy wished to convey in their utopias but was also realistic about limitations one might encounter in expressing such an ideal. Therefore, Morris chose the dream vision rather than the utopia as the genre through which he might direct his readers to his aspirations for social improvement.

Along with reading utopias that might have been influential, Morris read dream visions. As "a great devourer of books," he possessed an extensive library that included an assortment of works by medieval authors. Dream visions like Chaucer's work, *The Legend of Good Women*, and his translation, *Romaunt of the Rose*, were among his collection, making evident Morris's penchant for this genre of medieval literature. In fact, his fondness for these particular dream visions led him to use characters from each in his designs for stained glass and embroidery (MacCarthy 160, 360).

Also, dreamers populated many of Morris's earlier literary creations. As he explains, "[m]y work is the embodiment of dreams in one form or another" (qtd. in Mackail 1.109). For instance, in a very early story entitled "The Dream," Morris's character Giles has a vision of his deceased brother. In the poem "Sir Galahad: A Christmas Mystery" from the 1858 collection, *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, Galahad has a dream in which he encounters the Holy Grail. And in his poem "Rapunzel," the Prince has a reverie of his lady love imprisoned by the wicked witch in a castle. So for Morris, the dream vision offers a comfortable means of creativity as this genre returns him to his love of medievalism.

Additionally, the structure of the dream vision provides Morris with a succinct model for communicating his ideas. In essence, a dream vision begins when the narrator falls asleep and usually with the help of a guide, encounters a experiences that are out of the ordinary. "After waking up, the narrator usually resolves to share their knowledge with other people" (*Wikipedia*). Several conventions are evident in the structure of the dream vision. One important element found in this genre is a framework arrangement that encloses the reverie. Before the actual dream tale begins, a prologue introduces the dreamer, who often suffers some disturbing or worrisome event that will fuel the imagination during his fretful sleep and will lead the dreamer to his reverie (Russell 5). Once the vision is completed, an epilogue reveals the waking moments of the dreamer and sometimes gives commentary on the significance of the dream adventure.

Another convention of this genre includes the fact that the heart of the dream vision occurs as the narration shifts from reality to the realm of otherworld where anything is possible. Often, the shift into this realm beyond earthly reality is indicated by the narrator's encounter with some enchanting aspect of nature, perhaps a lovely stream or garden. Once the transition into

this supernatural sphere occurs, the perspective of the wakeful speaker has given way to that of the dream narrator, and the tale unfolds through first person narration. “The dream is usually a record of . . . less formal conversation with one or more characters, sometimes real, sometimes allegorical,” and this vision unfolds a variety of topics through an assortment of characters (Russell 5). For example, in his version of *Roman de la Rose*, Jean de Meun “uses [his dream] plot as a means of conveying a mass of encyclopaedic information, discussing such diverse topics as language and signification, fortune and destiny, in a series of discourses by the main characters. Thus the poem becomes a vast store of information about medieval life and thought” (Coleman).

The most important aspect of the genre is that the dreamer is the narrator who relates the actual dream vision (Russell 6-7). In this role, the dreamer attempts to balance two stances, objectivity with subjectivity (Russell 12). Objectivity reveals didacticism through the dreamer’s realistic imparting of the dream events. Subjectivity conveys the dreamer’s self-conscious awareness that he is not capable of solving the enigmatic qualities that surface in the dream realm. All of these conventions are evident in Morris’s *News from Nowhere*, making this fiction “ostensibly mediaevalist in form and content” (Beaumont).

Evidence of Morris’s dream vision structure in *News from Nowhere* first emerges in “Chapter 1: Discussion and Bed,” in which a prologue precedes the dream fantasy. Here, a narrator speaks in the third person about “a friend” who returns home late one evening after participating in a rousing meeting of the Socialist League. At the meeting, disagreements have ensued among the six members present, each who represents one of “six sections of the [Socialist] party” (Morris, *News* 43). Upon returning home, this friend climbs into bed, falls into a brief sleep that is soon interrupted by his disturbing, fretful thoughts. Entertaining these

thoughts, the friend soon relaxes, falls asleep again, and experiences “surprising adventures that . . . should be told” to League comrades and “indeed the public in general” (Morris, *News* 45). However, the narrator explains that he thinks that “it would be better if I [the narrator] told them in the first person, as if it were myself . . .” (45).

Before slipping the narrator’s friend into his reverie, Morris indicates movement away from the harsh environment of discontent and unhappiness. The friend’s earlier trip home from the League meeting offers him an opportunity to encounter sharp, cool winter air, a clear sky full of stars, a gently flowing moonlit river—all enchanting aspects of nature that indicate a readying of the character for a transference between reality and the realm of otherworld. In addition, the character, pondering the changes in life he longs for, states repeatedly, “If I could but see a day of it If I could but see it!” (*News* 45). Thus, the stage is set for the journey into the dream vision.

Another convention of the dream vision—addressing various topics—surfaces as the dream tale unfolds. Morris may address any topic he wishes without any concern of the dangers he observed in utopias like Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* because he does not pretend to offer any specific plan, but only a dream of change. So Morris uses the journey of his dreamer, William Guest, to present an objective observation of a day in his version of an ideal England.

As he begins his journey in otherworld, the dreamer is surprised to find himself out of the cold winter he remembers from his real existence. He wakes to find himself in a world filled with the warmth of spring, “fresh air and pleasant breeze[s]” (*News* 45). The beauty of this environment becomes the first of many motifs upon which Morris focuses. Guest discovers that the “smoke-vomitting chimneys” and the “riveting and hammering” from factories are all gone. Nature and complimentary architecture now replace the pollutants and ugliness of his real world.

Guest observes that “Each house stood in a garden carefully cultivated, and running over with flowers. The blackbirds were singing their best amidst the garden trees, which . . . seemed to be all fruit-tress: there were a great many cherry-trees now laden with fruit, and several times as we passed by a garden we were offered baskets of fine fruit by children and young girls” (Morris, *News* 77). As his kind and friendly guide, Dick, transports him throughout this dream world, sights and songs of nature contribute immediately to the refreshing and peaceful quality of life Guest experiences.

To the dreamer’s delight, the people of this otherworld seem quite content in their existence. One reason for their wellbeing seems to stem from the characters’ mode of dress. Morris contrasts the attire of the inhabitants of Nowhere with that of the people of his era. In Victorian England, women’s fashions consisted of dresses of heavy fabrics like velvets and silks. These frocks were bolstered underneath with crinoline or “‘cage crinoline,’ an apparatus that looked like an inverted, cone-shaped trellis designed for a rather large creeping plant” (Pool 214). Similarly heavy, men’s attire consisted of wool suits, worn most of year, boots, and gloves (214). Obviously, Morris found this attire weighty and uncomfortable, for his dreamer, who is clothed in Victorian garb, is constantly teased about his “gaudy,” “queer dress” (Morris, *News* 165).

Alternatively, in otherworld most men wear clothing made of a simple but “fine web” (*News* 47). These are garments “[n]ot like any modern work-a-day clothes,” but attire parallel to clothing from “fourteenth-century life” (47). Consisting of a simple form, women’s clothing also resembles garments of the fourteenth century. As Guest notes, many of the women “were decently veiled with drapery, and not bundled up with millinery: . . . clothed like women, not upholstered like arm-chairs” (*News* 53). These styles allow one to feel more comfortable, to

have a sense of freedom, “veiling the form, without either muffling or caricaturing it” (*News* 165). In addition, the colors chosen for the clothing, although subdued, provide the society with a sense of beauty and harmony (*News* 164). As one lovely female Nowhere resident explains, “The coverings of our bodies [are] beautiful like our bodies . . . just as a deer’s or otter’s skin has been made beautiful . . .” (*News* 165). Morris incorporates into his dream vision one of his favorite directives which he designates as his “golden rule” intended for everyone, his tenet of useful beauty: “*Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful*” (*CW* 22: 76). Clothing in this dream realm seems to follow this precept. Beauty and comfort in clothing bring splendor to life, which contributes to positive attitudes.

Beautifully attired, the attractive folk of this dream world seem truly to enjoy each other’s company. Through their pleasant interaction, Morris interlaces into his tale another common motif of dream visions: the theme of love and sensual attraction. Frequently indicating his infatuation with the women who populate his otherworld, Guest constantly comments or ponders their beauty. Guest views one woman, whom he deems “Goldilocks,” as a “beautiful creature” (Morris, *News* 72). Taken with another “exquisite” female named Ellen, the dreamer admires her “shapely sun-browned hand and arm” and worries that someone might “come in suddenly and break the spell she had cast about” him (*News* 220). The guide’s reply to his guest’s fascination with the ladies conveys Morris real dream for society. Dick states that “there are so many of [women] that every Jack may have his Jill” (72). Also, in including the love affair between Dick and his lady, Clara, Morris presents his own perspective on love relationships. Dick and Clara once were married, but they divorced. In the dream they intend to remarry to share the life together they have missed. The character Hammond, who is Dick’s great-grandfather, explains to Guest that “there is no unvarying conventional set of rules by

which people are judged; . . .no hypocritical excommunication which people are forced to pronounce . . .” (93). Through Hammond, Morris reveals that in his dream world, love belongs to individuals and not to the dictates of society.

Along with the pleasant topics of clothing and love relationships, Morris guides readers to other matters concerning society. Since Guest’s reverie stems from his restlessness experienced after the evening’s League meeting, the subjects of politics and disagreements emerge in the dream. When he enjoys further discussion with old Hammond, Guest inquires about politics and the management of conflicting positions. Regarding politics, Morris avoids specifics that one might misconstrue as his directive on this subject. In fact, he employs occupatio—emphasizing “something by pointedly seeming to pass over it” (Lanham 68). Morris creates an entire chapter on the topic of politics that consists of five sentences, which include Guest’s inquiry, “How do you manage with politics,” and Hammond reply, “we are very well off as to politics” (*News* 116). However, the dreamer insists on more information from Hammond. Again, Hammond’s retort reveals Morris’s real stance: “I do say that differences of opinion about real solid things need not, and with us do not, crystalize people into parties permanently hostile to one another, with different theories as to the build of the universe and the progress of time. Isn’t that what politics used to mean?” (117). He elaborates on this idea by explaining that in affairs regarding one’s personal existence, no differences of opinion may exist because here, “everybody does as he pleases” (*News* 118) However, in matters affecting the entire community, “the majority must have their way” (*News* 118-19).

Furthering this idea of compromise, Morris expresses a concept that echoes throughout many of his lectures: the idea that all humans need to find pleasure in life through agreeable work rather than labor for just monetary reward. In his lecture “Useless Work *versus* Useless

Toil,” Morris defines work as two categories: “good” and “bad.” According to Morris, “good” work offers man a “threefold” hope—that of rest, of product, and of pleasure—while “bad” work resembles slaves' labor (*CW* 23: 99). Morris furthers this description of work to emphasize that the social structure permits inequalities of class to exist and to create disparity in work: In *News from Nowhere*, Guest encounters people who do not work for any financial gain. Instead, their efforts are compensated by the pleasure they derive from their work. The dreamer first comes across this attitude when he offers to pay Dick for his services as guide, but Dick laughs “loud and merrily, as if the idea of being paid for his work was a very funny joke” (*News* 50). Dick explains that he “should take it as very kind” if this stranger would allow him “to be the showman of our new world” (*News* 50). Guest is so astonished by Dick’s reaction that he ponders his guide’s sanity.

However, Guest encounters other occasions in which work is done without required recompense. For instance, as he and his guide travel past what Guest believes is a factory, he discovers that no factories exist in this otherworld. Instead, individuals gather in “Banded-workshops . . . where people collect who want to work together” (*News* 81). Together, these groups create things like pottery, glass, and clothing as each benefits from camaraderie and the joys of “pleasant” work (81). In another adventure as the dreamer and his guide journey in the country, their excursion is briefly delayed by a group of healthy men mending the road. Guest observes that these “handsome clean-built fellows . . . were laughing and talking merrily with each other” as they take a break from their labor (*News* 82). Then he notices that when they hurry back to work, they behave “like men with a pleasant task on hand” (*News* 82-83). Through each instance of “pleasant” or “real necessary work,” Morris exemplifies his ideal that even the

simplest life efforts should be valued not devalued because they are purposeful and bring joy rather than drudgery to daily tasks.

Guest has an opportunity to learn more about this idea of “good” work during his conversation with old Hammond. As the dreamer questions the group work that he has witnessed, old Hammond explains that “*all* work is now pleasurable; either because of the hope of gain in honour and wealth with which the work is done, which causes pleasurable excitement . . . or else because it has grown into a pleasurable *habit* . . .” (Morris, *News* 122). In the “absence of artificial coercion,” this dream world offers “the freedom for every man to do what he can do best” (*News* 123). In addition, everyone works for the good of his community as all “wares” made are those of necessity rather than “for a vague [commercial] market of which they know nothing, and over which they have no control . . .” (*News* 127). Thus, everyone experiences a pleasant and useful existence—a life all may experience in the dream realm.

Morris sustains his focus on the dream throughout the tale as he allows neither the dreamer nor readers to forget that this journey exists on in a temporary state. At one point, Hammond reminds Guest that while he finds joy in this place, he implies that this visit is only “for a while” (*News* 162). As the dream unfolds, Guest’s friends Dick, Clara, and Annie suggest the tentative nature of the dreamer’s stay in Nowhere as they avoid giving him “too much information . . . or he will be disappointed when the curtain is drawn” (*News* 168). So the inevitable moment comes as the dream narrator awakens and lies in bed pondering the journey he has just encountered. However, unlike the prologue that the narrator relates in third person, the dreamer speaks only in first person. No longer is the dream narrator the “friend” presented in the prologue, but he is now the one who has actually dreamed. Thus, Morris fulfills the most important aspect of the dream vision genre, that the dreamer-narrator relates the dream vision.

The narrator confides that although he has felt close to those he met in the dream realm, he “had no business amongst them” (*News* 228). Yet he wishes for readers to view his excursion not just as a dream but as a vision of what might come.

Morris's growing involvement in politics and his desire to broaden his audience were clearly reasons for him to use his literary talents for the practical end of aiding humanity. Provoked by his increasing disillusionment over the destitution ravaging Victorian society, Morris objects to capitalistic greed, which he considers responsible for the varied abominations oppressing the lowly man. In letters to various journals, in his numerous lectures, in pamphlets and chants written to spur workmen to action, Morris denounces capitalism and many of the problems of Victorian society. He argues that the lack of art in commercial society represents the drudgery and unhappiness of the common worker. He explains that “we Socialists cannot forget . . . a steady expression of the longing for a society of equality of condition; a society in which the individual man can scarcely conceive of his existence apart from the Commonwealth of which he forms a portion” (“Forword to *Utopia*” 373).

Thus lauding Socialism as the most logical approach towards the improvement of society, Morris desires to educate “the individual man,” each from all stations of life, of the imminent need for reform. However, unlike the genres of pamphlets and lectures that rely on his being authoritative and propagandistic, *News from Nowhere* gives Morris an opportunity to educate his readers of a this model society. The words of old Hammond explain this otherworld in which “the men and women who go to make up humanity are free, happy, and energetic . . . beautiful of body also, and surrounded by beautiful things of their own fashioning, and a nature bettered and not worsened by contact with mankind” (*News* 159). Morris’s message is clearly didactic. He wishes to persuade not only members of the League, but the “general public” to understand the

value of the socialist ideal, and his dream vision provides him an opportunity to teach his audience about this ideal.

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