



**DESCENT INTO WILDERNESS: KATABASIS OF
DISPLACED HEROISM IN CHARLES BROCKDEN
BROWN'S *EDGAR HUNTLY***

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ABSTRACT: In Charles Brockden Brown's novel, *Edgar Huntly, or Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker*, the main character, Huntly, traverses the American wilderness to retrieve Clithero and discover the truth of Waldegrave's murder. This journey into the woods imitates the literary trope of a *katabasis*, or descent to the underworld by the archetypal hero. However, Huntly's epistolary narrative, however, reflects the problematic attempt on his part to qualify himself as a hero. Displaced within his story as a failed hero-figure because of his unreliable narration, his text remains elusive as a moral story, unlike most classical mythological hero tales such as *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*. In this paper, I use Huntly's story to foreground his displaced heroism when writing about his descent into the American wilderness. Additionally, I compare and contrast Huntly's journey with the classical *katabasis* and how the dangers of the American wilderness transforms into an underworld. Huntly does emerge from this underworld, but he becomes a destructive force. Lastly, I posit that, while Huntly's narrative parallels the mythological hero's journey to the underworld and back, the portrayal of his displaced heroism inverts the archetypal hero story and challenges the morality of America as a new nation.

KEY-WORDS: Mythology, Katabasis, Classical Literature, Heroism, Epic, Narrative

In Charles Brockden Brown's novel *Edgar Huntly or Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker*, the main character, Huntly, traverses the woods to retrieve Clithero and discover the truth of the murder of his friend, Waldegrave. However, having failed to aid Clithero, Huntly wakes up to find himself displaced in the woods, at the bottom of a dark cave with no recollection of how he got there. Huntly finds out later in the novel that he and Clithero are both sleepwalkers, indicating the instability of both their minds as they both become destructive forces in their decline into madness. This journey into the woods and into insanity imitates the classical literary trope of a *katabasis*, or descent into the underworld, that is at the core of the archetypal hero journey, depicted in classical epics such as *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*. Since the woods encompass the American underworld, I will reference the classical *katabasis* as a means of comparison when describing Huntly's adventure into the American wilderness and as a framework for his unsuccessful attempt to be a hero within his narrative.

With Huntly's descent into destruction within the American wilderness, I also pair his heroic efforts to tell his story as an example of displaced heroism. My concept of displacement is Huntly's position within an unknown environment that reflects his own psychological turmoil. This displacement turns Huntly into a failed self-proclaimed hero, making him unreliable in the telling of his tale.¹ In not learning from or realizing his hurtful actions and by committing heinous deeds to "set the world right," Huntly displaces his heroic identity when recounting his adventures in the novel. While Huntly's narrative parallels the classical mythological hero's journey to the underworld and back, the portrayal of his displaced heroism inverts this underworld journey and emphasizes his failure as a hero.

Scholars have discussed epic archetypal and symbolic patterns in *Edgar Huntly* when looking at its use of tropes from classical mythology. Marietta Patrick argues that Huntly embodies a typical hero figure, displaying "a movement toward these symbols of transformation [that] precipitates and defines the conflict as a journey inward."² In her view, Huntly achieves a mythical "spiritual maturation"³ by the end of the novel. However, there remains a certain type of madness in the novel that precludes the idea of maturation. Scholars, like Philip Hughes, connect myth and symbolism with

¹ Similar to the Gothic Hero-Villain in American Literature, such as Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick*.

² Marietta Patrick (1989) 360.

³ Patrick (1989) 370.

Huntly's mental landscape. Huntly's sleepwalking further complicates this mental landscape with the move from madness to awareness. Hughes concludes that after Huntly's symbolic "journeying... the hero, presumed dead, rises again, with a newfound identity and awareness" even though the novel does not end happily.⁴ As for Dieter Schulz, he examines the novel within the tradition of the "quest romance" following the trajectory of the epic hero's journey with the sequence, "separation—initiation—and return."⁵ Schulz notes that the *Bildungsroman* motif, as well as the hero's search for identity, transforms the individual for the better, by learning from trials and returning to tell others of the experience.

The classical *katabasis* tradition stems from the heroic process of a gradual descending to the underworld, while still alive, in search of a better understanding of the world of the living and dead. To become heroic, the individual should emerge from this *katabasis* and become enlightened through knowledge from the journey. While I concur with these scholars that certain heroic archetypal patterns are recurrent in *Edgar Huntly*, the main character's lack of awareness, and the absence of a heroic transformation after his *katabasis*, represses his chance to realize his mistakes and misdirects his desired heroism. Misguided by sleepwalking and held captive in the American wilderness, Huntly spirals into the danger he tries to conquer. He fails in his attempt to bolster a heroic identity, when he becomes destructive to others after his descent into the woods. In comparing Huntly's *katabasis* with the notion of the classical *katabasis*, critics have reached the conclusion that Huntly's self-righteousness, rather than his genuine pursuit of knowledge when telling his story, ultimately disqualifies him from being a hero, in spite of his survival. MacNeil acknowledges the importance of the hero's learning when describing the emergence of the American frontier hero and Huntly's journey into and out of the "wilderness underworld."⁶ Although Huntly learns that Waldegrave was killed by the Native Americans, who saw their land taken by the settling Americans, Huntly does not understand this perspective and fails to reach enlightenment from his underworld wilderness journey when he returns to the "surface" world of civilized American society because he becomes destructive to himself and others. Not knowing where he is placed in this environment, he straddles a liminal space between the construct of the "savage" wilderness and "civilized" human society,

⁴ Philip Hughes (1973) 187.

⁵ Dieter Schulz (1971) 324.

⁶ Denise MacNeil (2009) 106-109.

keeping him in limbo until his sleepwalking into the woods. Therefore, his depiction as a “displaced hero” encompasses his need to find where he belongs in an environment that constantly shifts from civilized to savage in the chthonic American landscape.

In the novel, the American wilderness becomes a hell for the booming American population. In building a new nation in the late 18th century, the American people eagerly sought more land. However, this uncharted landscape housed the Native Americans already living there. The land haunts the American population and torments Huntly due to the American belief that the natural world contains otherworldly hellish forces. While neither located in the world of the living or in an entirely different realm, the American wilderness embodies another world that most of the early Americans did not escape alive from. Warden, in looking at Lucretius and Virgil's depictions of the underworld, states that “The underworld is a figment created by man's ignorance...If one understands that the soul is mortal...then one can be rid of the darkness that exists within man's heart, the fears and desires which cause men's pain, and torture them as though they were in hell”⁷ (84). Huntly fails to learn from misguided actions in his *katabasis*, creating his own version of Tartarus because although he returns from this hell, he returns obsessed with his own heroism, not willing to look at his own arrogance and twisted morality. Huntly acknowledges his destructive nature but describes it in a way that tortures and excites him at the same time: “The evil of my present circumstances consisted chiefly in suspense...but my imagination had leisure to torment itself by anticipation” (*Edgar Huntly* 120). In the novel, we see Huntly's descent into destructive wildness as he attempts to conquer nature as a self-proclaimed hero of the forest. In his confusion and ignorance, Huntly does not rid himself of his inner darkness and becomes controlled by his own fears and therefore projects his vision of hell onto the wilderness that surrounds him.

The underworld for the hero reflects his environment so the literal idea of the underworld for the Ancient Greeks becomes metaphorical and symbolic within *Edgar Huntly*. Eliade in his *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, comments that “From one point of view, we may say that all these myths and sagas have an initiatory structure; to descend into Hell alive, confront its monsters and demons, is to undergo an initiatory ordeal.”⁸ In Huntly's case, his ordeal encompasses his journey into the woods as the

⁷ John Warden (2000) 84.

⁸ Mircea Eliade (1958) 62.

American landscape transforms into the terror of the underworld. If we are to look at this underworld topographically, it would be dark and overshadowed by various fauna and flora, without a building in sight, warding off the innocent traveler. Not being able to *see* within this darkness invites the individual to be gripped by fear, along with the coldness from the lack of sunlight, which only emphasizes extreme loneliness. Essentially, this underworld is nature in its most frightening form without any human comfort. Since the physical component of this underworld contains the natural world, it is Huntly's description and wildish imagination that validates its hellish nature. Huntly describes nature as in a constant state of decay which "eminently abounds in rifts and cavities... the gradual decay of their cementing parts... dear to my youthful imagination" (22). He juxtaposes the natural environment with a sublime visual description as the environment becomes alive with death-like imagery and his imagination exaggerates and manipulates the adventure he tells in his story. According to Huntly, the wilderness, with its terrifying presence, haunts his journey:

Whatever nature left flat it is made rugged and scarcely passable by enormous and fallen trunks, accumulated by the storms of ages and forming, by their slow decay...the haunt of rabbits and lizards. These spots are obscured by the melancholy umbrage of pines, whose eternal murmurs are in unison with vacancy and solitude, with the reverberations of the torrents and the whistling of the blasts. (92)

His portrayal of these woods shows his determination to reveal the hidden dangers of the natural world as a land of the dead, unlike the environment of civilized society he has grown up in. Words such as "decay," "melancholy," and "haunt" suggest a darker aspect of the wilderness that Huntly experiences in his encounter with this "hell." Booker ascertains that "The first problem facing the hero and his companions is the nature of the terrain across which they have to make most of their journey... the perils they encounter therefore are simply those of the hostile terrain itself."⁹ Of course, Huntly erroneously sees himself as an expert of this "land" because he takes frequent walks in the woods. He concludes that, "Perhaps, no one was more acquainted with the wilderness as I" (92). However, a walk in the woods in proximity to his hometown is a

⁹ Christopher Booker (2004) 73.

vastly different experience from delving deep into the interior of the wilderness. Thus, Huntly displaces himself in an environment outside his normal surroundings and the sleepwalking only expresses Huntly's unresolved heroic gestures, turning his perceptions of heroism from epic to pathetic.

In describing Hesiod's Tartarus, David M. Johnson mentions that the representation of this part of the underworld is multiple because of the different roles it plays in each narrative: "For the most part the images of underworld are complementary, and describe the whole of the underworld as an immense, dark, enclosed place... Tartarus is the place for the past and for the repeating present."¹⁰ The wilderness for Huntly, therefore, is not an American rendition of the Elysian Fields; rather, it is a place that manifests his worst fears about himself and others around him, constructing an environment of destruction. The darkness becomes the catalyst for unwarranted actions of survival as the dark leads Huntly to believe he has become a hero when he decides that in order to save himself, he must kill to survive. Huntly states, "If, by any chance, I should awake and find myself immersed in darkness, I know not what act of desperation I might be suddenly impelled to commit" (151). Fiedler states that Brown, through Huntly, deals with "The exaggerated and the grotesque... as they correspond in quality to our deepest fears and guilts as projected in our dreams or lived through in 'extreme situations.'"¹¹ Huntly fears the darkness growing within him and surrounding him, but he remains unwilling to *see* the danger when trying to be heroic. Sivils suggests that the darkness within Huntly constitutes a perversion of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" since Huntly *does* emerge from the cave but instead of attaining enlightenment, he is more confused as well as violent.¹²

In an attempt to become heroic, fears of the unknown can creep around and within the individual, creating a personal underworld projected onto the physical representation of the real world. The landscape offers insight into the heroic nature of each individual encountering the world: "The idea of a journey to the realm of the dead brings out this contrast between worlds as the traveler moves from one realm to the other."¹³ The underworld then "is not only the invisible realm of the dead, but also the tacit (or silenced) world of other interacting discourses in the crucible of its

¹⁰ David M. Johnson (1999) 12-13.

¹¹ Leslie Fiedler (1966) 155.

¹² Matthew Wynn Sivils (2014b) 66.

¹³ Radcliffe G. Edmonds III (2004) 2-3.

representation.”¹⁴ John Heath mentions that the underworld in Latin and in later Greek literature was known as the “silent regions” and the dead as the “silent ones.”¹⁵ The silence in Huntly’s American underworld corresponds to the silence he experiences when he wakes up alone in a dark cave, suspecting that he was “buried alive” and “consigned...to the tomb from which a resurrection was impossible (155). The Homeric picture of the land of the dead is more complicated and ambiguous. Therefore, Heath proposes that “The epics are poems first, and Homer draws on various strands of moral, political, mythological, and religious tradition as they suit his thematic purposes.”¹⁶ With its various representations and interpretations in classical literature, the underworld becomes more of a symbolic place that one can venture into to find truth or understanding in a place of ultimate fear and death. In a sense, *Edgar Huntly* could read as a story depicting a new perspective of the American wilderness as an underworld that one could learn from if one remains true to the self. However, if overcome by fear, the wilderness can be a force of destruction to the individual.

Consequently, to venture into the uncharted American landscape, overrun by the dangers of wild animals, treacherous peaks and crevices, and hostile natives, one encounters the sublimity of death at close quarters, “a negative experience because it reinforces feelings of transience (our passing) and insignificance (our smallness).”¹⁷ The fear that we as individuals will amount to nothing in this vast world reflects Huntly’s perception of his limbo in the wilderness: “On one side I seemed still upon the verge of a precipice, and, on the other, all was empty and waste” (96). His feeling of powerlessness and inferiority next to the sublimity of nature and death frightens Huntly. Not wanting to feel insignificant, he compensates by making himself a hero in this underworld: “My wishes were now bent not only to preserve myself, and to frustrate the future attempts of these savages, but likewise to relieve this miserable victim [the captured female]” (168). Sivils pinpoints the American wilderness as a “hellish labyrinth” because the dangers of the natural world also include the “demonic Indians.”¹⁸ Furthermore, Gardner acknowledges that while there is an internal struggle within Huntly, the psychological “dark side” also represents a conflict for his identity

¹⁴ Lars Albinus (2000) 67.

¹⁵ John Heath (2005) 398.

¹⁶ Heath (2005) 389-390.

¹⁷ Andrew Smith (2007) 12.

¹⁸ Matthew Wynn Sivils (2014a) 87.

as an American when he encounters the wilderness and the Native Americans.¹⁹ Subsequently, the Native Americans in the story, mirror what Huntly fails to accept as conceptually American. The Native Americans, placed within the realm of the underworld, display another American fear: the fear of the civilized world succumbing to savagery. The Native Americans murdered Huntly's family. In revenge, he kills them, justifies "frustrating" future attempts of "savage" atrocities, and simultaneously sees himself as the hero protecting innocent captives from the hell of the wilderness (168).

This heroic aspiration to conquer "savagery" in the untamed wilderness represents the anxieties of America unable to control the "hell" of natural environment, making *Edgar Huntly* a narrative of "insubstantial shadows."²⁰ These shadows reflect not only the unpredictability of the environment but also the mythical aspect of the human condition: the repressed, often frightening and shameful elements of the psyche. The shadows, according to Jung, also symbolize "natural attempts to reconcile and reunite opposites within the psyche."²¹ To "heal this split"²² man is bound to become more adventurous and acknowledge his achievements as "splendid" regardless whether they are harmful to other humans or not. The dark side of the self, frightening and horrific at times, is mirrored in the novel by the physical environment surrounding the main character. But, the darkness within the self must be acknowledged so that it can be healed. The "uncanny tendency to invent things... [and] become more dangerous"²³ on Huntly's part, unearths confusion within his psyche, blurring good and evil, which he displays when suffering from thirst: "I felt a strong propensity to bite the flesh from my arm. My heart overflowed with cruelty" (156-57). Huntly's mental landscape within his own narrative inverts his perceived heroism and accentuates his unreliability as a narrator, which counteracts the hellish sublimity of the outside environment. Edmonds contends, "Whether a projection of desires unrealized in this world or a nightmare image of one's worst fears, the description of the realm of the dead reflects a conception of the realm of the living, locating the narrator within this world as he or she sees it."²⁴ While *Edgar Huntly* represents the stumbling of the human figure attempting to

¹⁹ Jared Gardner (1994) 429.

²⁰ Eric Savoy (1998) 6.

²¹ Carl G. Jung (1964) 90.

²² Jung (1964) 90.

²³ Jung (1964) 91.

²⁴ Edmonds III (2004) 3.

understand his environment and where he belongs, Huntly does not acknowledge the hazardous nature of his “darkself” and fails to “heal the split” within his psyche. Hence, by his own pen, Edgar Huntly becomes the hero-villain displaced in the underworld wilderness and his own written narrative.

Huntly concludes that, “Intense dark is always the parent of fears” as this journey into the “intense dark” further describes the trials of the underworld in his physical environment and mental landscape (96). Since Huntly does not see the symbolic reference to his dark nature revealing itself in the dark woods, his past remains incomplete and inconclusive in this dangerous, uncontrolled environment: “I endeavored to recall the past, but the past was too much in contradiction to the present, and my intellect was too much shattered by external violence, to allow me accurately to review it” (153). This attempt to relive the past and eliminate contradictions revives a desire in Huntly to see himself as an authentic teller of his tale: “Such a desire to relive or repeat the past cannot be satisfied by the controlled retrospection of narrative...can only be fulfilled in the uncontrollable and compulsive realm of the unconscious.”²⁵ Huntly, through writing, has the unconscious need to connect what he has done to who he *is* and in turn, force the reader to see him as he *sees* himself: an epic hero.

This unreliability of Huntly makes MacNeil confirm that the main character’s narrative voice “seems not to be his own but is rather the projection of his idealized vision of himself.”²⁶ Since the novel consists of a letter written to his fiancée, Huntly believes in his own heroism through his writing. He tells her, “There is a tale connected with it... Listen to me” (30). Huntly projects his persona onto the need for others to hear his heroic “tale.” Written to inform Mary, his wandering narrative distracts the reader from the initial focus: what happened to Waldegrave? Huntly muses towards the end of his letter that “A tale like this could never be the fruit of invention or be invented to deceive” (264). Using “invent” twice allows Huntly to forge a narrative in which he expresses himself as a heroic savior, covering up the fact that to even follow his narrative remains an arduous task for us as readers. This unreliability shows Huntly no closer to attaining understanding than when he left on his self-appointed journey. He is the main storyteller speaking about his own “heroic” story, but certain aspects of his

²⁵ Peter J. Bellis (1987) 43.

²⁶ MacNeil (2009) 102.

narrative create doubt in the audience and further displace Huntly as a mythical hero. For instance, Huntly mistakenly declares that he has become the “first” to walk certain paths: “Since the birth of this continent, I was probably the first who had deviated thus remotely from the customary paths of men” (99). He believes that no one has experienced what he has gone through, even in an epic hero sense: “Few, perhaps, among mankind have undergone vicissitudes of peril and wonder equal to mine. The miracles of poetry, the transitions of enchantment, are beggarly and mean compared with those which I had experienced” (229). With this statement, Huntly fails to grasp the importance of heroic epics, such as *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid* as an array of different, yet similar, trials of the self.

In contrast to Huntly’s so called “epic heroism”, the epic hero in ancient mythology “plays the role of a living being, strong and glorious by way of being an outstanding warrior.”²⁷ Odysseus does not become a hero because he makes it to the underworld and back, but rather, becomes heroic because he seeks knowledge to help him survive further in his quest: “Odysseus does not merely confirm his own status of being a hero in passing the ordeal of the *katabasis*; he also learns what happened, long ago and far away, to other heroes, and gains some idea of the general fate of the dead.”²⁸ Odysseus goes to find truth, not to make his mark in the underworld. He has to sacrifice a lamb and feed the blood to Tiresias in order to receive answers of what he must do next. There is no “trip” per se, but the communication with the dead encompasses Odysseus’s *katabasis*. Aeneas has a similar journey to the underworld as well, learning from his deceased father about the past, the present, and the future of what was to come of his fate and his tasks to fulfill in order to save his people:

Once Anchises has led his son through each new scene
and fired his soul with a love of glory still to come,
he tells him next of the wars Aeneas still must wage...
and how he should shun or shoulder each ordeal
that he must meet. (Virgil *The Aeneid* 1024-1028)

²⁷ Albinus (2004) 58-59.

²⁸ Albinus (2004) 69.

By seeing his past, present, and future, Aeneas knows that even with knowing this information, he still has to complete the task of fulfilling his ancient destiny. He seeks to restore what was taken from him: his home. Aeneas and Odysseus are common men blessed by the gods who fulfilled their journeys in returning home. However, by making false assumptions with his “firsting,” Huntly seeks to set himself above the common man and qualify as a heroic individual having “undergone vicissitudes of peril and wonder” and make his mark in the wilderness. He sees his written story as evidence of his prowess since he assumes the highest forms of classical epic “poetry” as the “enchantment” of the imagination cannot even concoct an adventure this complex and detailed (229). But Huntly’s error lies in the assumption that he is doing something right for his homeland, rather than accepting that there are still trials ahead even after his *katabasis* into the American wilderness.

In his *Preface*, David L. Pike looks at the “descent to the underworld” trope as a “retrospective recreation” of the storyteller, stating that “By telling us what it is looking for, the autobiographical voice simultaneously recreates its past as the place in which such a thing could have come into being.”²⁹ In a way, the first person narrative allows us as readers to see ourselves as the hero, projecting the need to be heroic in our lives onto the hero of the story. However, Huntly’s narrative wanders far from the heroic ideal as his reflective narration inverts the classical hero story. Most classical hero narratives invoke a muse that inspires the traditional bard/omniscient narrator to retell the tales of heroic individuals. Edmonds elaborates that there is a distinction between successful and unsuccessful journeys to the underworld, according to the plot of the story, but ultimately, “the other distinctions that are mapped onto this opposition depend upon the individual teller and the way he or she shapes the myth.”³⁰ Huntly, in explaining his story in the first person, strays from the oral tradition and challenges its simplicity, ultimately becoming unsuccessful in his journey. Speaking “in propria persona” from the “fragmentation style... consequence of the disappearance of the controlling and authenticating myth,” contrasts with the usual role of an epic muse, challenging the authenticity of the tale the hero tells of himself.³¹ Therefore, the confusion of Huntly as a displaced hero relies on his misdirection in telling of his descent into the American wilderness.

²⁹ David L. Pike (1997) x.

³⁰ Edmonds III (2004) 24

³¹ George Lord (1983) 5.

The wilderness throughout Huntly's tale reflects narrative misdirection because the truth Huntly seeks lies hidden *within* the woods Clithero escaped to. When Huntly enters the woods, nature converts into a place he fears, preventing him from discovering his desired truth. Huntly explains, "To persuade him [Clithero] to leave his desolate haunts might be a laborious and tedious task" (103). Referring to the woods as "desolate haunt," Huntly appoints himself to this "task" by travelling into an environment that reverts into a place of death, and thus an underworld. To understand the ultimate descent of a hero, the general mythos surrounding the typology and archetype of the actual hero-figure needs categorization and then individualization. Campbell's monomyth states that the start of the mythological journey, the "call to adventure" or the "summon," signifies that "destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity... to a zone unknown... a forest."³² Huntly, even as a displaced hero, forges a story of complex ingenuity that follows an archetypal form. This complexity reflects the structure of mythic stories, much like Greek mythology, "For myth is the foundation of life, the religious formula... the moment when the storyteller acquires the mythical way of looking at things—that marks a beginning in his life... a new serenity in his powers of perception and creation."³³ The "task" to save Clithero in the woods indicates that Huntly willingly answered "the call" to venture into danger.

The second step, the "Initiation" or *The Road of Trials* from Campbell's monomyth, mirrors Huntly's need to survive in the dangerous hell-like woods, encountering death in different forms.³⁴ The underworld remains outside the civilized world, so any misstep can lead to death. Huntly asserts, "[I could] dash myself to pieces on the points of rocks" (96). The second half of the narrative goes into full hero-mode with Huntly killing a panther and several Native Americans and saving a captive girl in the wilderness. Portraying Clithero's fixture in the wilderness as a "desolate haunt" motivates Huntly to save Clithero from the natural world's "hellish" perils, essentially initiating himself in a trial of ordeals filled with various horrors. Huntly feels his own pain but states somewhat selflessly that, "My languor, my excruciating heat, vanished in a moment, and I felt prepared to undergo the labours of Hercules" (173). Yet, in

³² Joseph Campbell (1972) 58.

³³ Honor Matthews (1968) 17 (quoting Thomas Mann).

³⁴ Campbell (1972) 97.

comparing himself to the Greek demi-god hero who suffered from Hera's multiple inflictions, Huntly sees himself as more than human and prepares to act as something "other" than human. This "othering" in turn reflects the wilderness, the animals, and the Native Americans, seen as figments of the hellish, evil landscape and as representations apart from the civilized, rational world. His descent to the underworld/wilderness then becomes a descent into "savagery" rather than heroic awareness as indicated in the classical *katabasis* of Odysseus and Aeneas. As stated previously, Huntly's descent embodies the liminal space between the underworld of the wilderness and the rational existence of his American society. West states: "Individuation/maturity and political commitment to the land and to those humans who have been exploited as Other are mutually reinforcing processes. Experience with extra-human nature can itself be an aid in the process."³⁵ Huntly could become "extra-human" and heroic in order to bring together the separate worlds and eliminate his liminal limbo existence; unfortunately, he drives nature and society further apart, bringing death, destruction, and psychological confusion

The underworld in classical literature resembles a place where the dead reside and where there is a slight chance of returning. The hero must attempt that return journey but not before encountering the fear of death itself. As stated previously, Americans feared nature the same way they feared the underworld because of their unpredictability and potential for death. Huntly's adventure reveals this fear through the unlikeliness that he will return to the civilized world, as he states, "to prosecute an endless journey, and to return was scarcely a less arduous task than to proceed" (97). The inversion of the hero's journey for Huntly shows that although he goes through trials and symbolic passages of initiation in his descent to the American wilderness, he fails to grasp the purpose of his descent when he does return. He intends to seek the truth about Waldegrave's murder but shifts his focus to save Clithero, who probably should not be rescued due to Clithero's mental instability. Clithero's overbearing and self-inflicted guilt led to his unconscious sleep-walking into the woods. Nature's "desolate haunts," in addition, refers to Clithero's sleepwalking hazards because he has no control of his own mind; he remains haunted by his past and excluded from human society. In needing to escape, Clithero enters a world outside of human contact. Since the wilderness encompasses anything not human, the underworld is the physical and

³⁵ Rinda West (2007) 31.

mental state to which Clithero succumbs to because the “land of the dead is the ultimate other world, a realm in which normal conditions do not apply.”³⁶ The wilderness becomes an underworld to both Huntly and Clithero, perverting the *katabasis* as a heroic journey of truth-seeking and rescue into an excursion of losing oneself in an environmental horror.

Huntly and Clithero double each other in their descent into the woods: both experience being lost inside the woods and their minds. The underworld continually re-establishes itself as an unknown place of death both in the mind and in the environment. One of the most common obstacles in Greek myths of the underworld journey are “the dangers of losing one’s way in the underworld...and the dangers of wandering lost.”³⁷ The uncontrolled mind, overwhelmed by basic urges, symbolizes a living hell. The underworld of the obscure wilderness upends the classical *katabasis* while allowing distortions to question the place of human control on the landscape and within the mind. Sleepwalking, then, for both characters, represents another kind of gate to an inner hell: “The wilderness is no longer elusive and remote, but hard, dominating, reflecting the transformed nature of Edgar’s quest.”³⁸ Arguably, the sleepwalking acts as Huntly’s *psychopomp*, or guide, in the woodland underworld. He would not be able to *see* himself in the wilderness had he not sleepwalked himself into the woods. Huntly asks, “Had some mysterious power snatched me from the earth, and cast me, in a moment, into the heart of the wilderness?” (164). Huntly, initially unaware of his own sleepwalking, first attributes his presence in the cave to some mysterious power that has “snatched” him from his home. The “heart” of the wilderness refers to his emotions *and* the dark pit in the cave he has fallen into “mysteriously.” The cave becomes the “subterranean prison” (202) from which escape seems futile.

Huntly’s narrative includes the hero’s third step, “The Return,” but his displaced heroism falls short of “bringing the runes of wisdom... back into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may rebound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand worlds.”³⁹ Huntly returns lacking wisdom and sensitivity, thinking Clithero is misunderstood rather than mentally unstable and suicidal. Huntly writes, “It was the instinct of self-preservation that swayed him (Clithero)... He acted

³⁶ Edmonds III (2004) 24.

³⁷ Edmonds III (2004) 22.

³⁸ George Toles (1981) 147.

³⁹ Campbell (1972) 193.

in obedience to an impulse which he could not control, nor resist” (87). Huntly’s only guilt is not saving Clithero, coalescing with his obsession of finding Waldegrave’s murderer, turns Huntly into a dangerous individual. MacNeil contends that:

Ultimately Huntly fails at all aspects of the hero cycle as he unsuccessfully occupies multiple positions within it and within the fundamental captivity narrative... His forays into the mythological underworld confuse and weaken him, destroying his own marital and financial future... Huntly is a failed hero, whose effect on his countrymen, and countrywomen, as well as on Native Americans, is destructive.⁴⁰

After the third stage of the hero’s journey, the hero should undergo some transformation of self, learning from his trials and ordeal from the *katabasis*. However, Huntly returns unstable to the “upper world” of society as his intent to save others turns into failure. His ascent from the underworld is not a process of learning and growth, hence his chances for heroism crumble. He remains in limbo within the natural and civilized environment, displaced by not learning from his chthonic experience in the woods and his mind. Even though Huntly states, “I was the instrument of their [his family’s] destruction” (186), he does not heed Sarsefield’s warning not to tell his wife about Clithero, hence her miscarriage, or secure himself romantically or financially. Huntly’s failure to learn reinforces the novel as a cautionary tale for the American public: if the nation is to survive the challenges of a new government it needs good leadership that has learned how to control freedom without limiting it. Since people feared Huntly as an individual due to his inability to transcend from his “spirit of mistaken benevolence,” (87) Huntly’s *katabasis* reads as a journey of displaced heroism.

An adventure exposes the hero’s identity. Aristotle states in his *Poetics* that one’s actions reveal character and whether that character exhibits a moral purpose.⁴¹ Huntly’s choice in implementing certain modes of action in his narrative displays his personal need to tell a unique American hero-tale with a classical epic undertone. Huntly’s heroic journey to the underworld as a descent into the American wilderness hearkens back to the influences of the classical *katabasis* and establishes a narrative

⁴⁰ MacNeil (2009) 109.

⁴¹ Aristotle, Translated by Leon Golden (1968) 11-12.

that looks at the natural environment as a place of death. Arguably America's first frontier hero, Brown's *Edgar Huntly* offers a distinct view of an American identity when individuals confront the wilderness of the world and their inner fears. The classical lens suggests that these terrors parallel a descent to the underworld and back and invites a reading of discovering what the American identity actually consists of in its quest as a new nation with a new government. Inverting the archetypal hero's journey by consciously and unconsciously traversing in an uncontrolled natural environment, Huntly embodies a displaced hero who brings destruction rather than enlightenment. Although failing to reach the heroic standards with his unreliable narrative, Huntly represents a common human desire to find oneself, however inaccessible his story may read.

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