



BOUCTU'S WELL

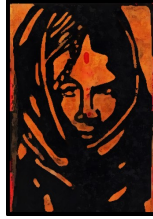
an epic poem by

Scotty J. Williams

Dedicate to the memory of Eva-Marie Williams (a.k.a. MawMaw),
whose love and wisdom continue to guide and inspire me.
Rest in peace and rise in glory.

Table of Contents

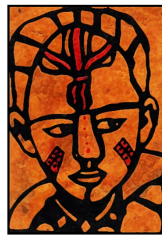
Prologue - *Falling*



Act I - *The Confinement of Vanities*



Act II - *The City of Ages*



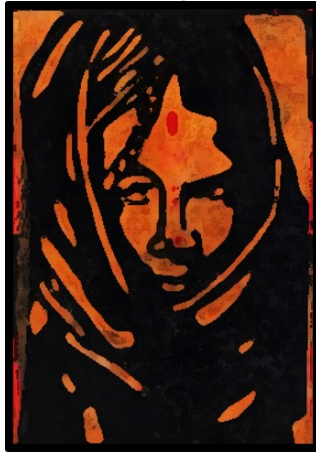
Act III - *The Dunes*



Epilogue - *Paradise*



Falling *Prologue*



(1.) Young and grieving I had been, directionless bereft,
Yet in this state I found myself on edge of Splendid Dream.
“You are Unworthy”, Conscience¹ cried, “For Fools see not the other side.”
Unworthy of this Dream was I, yet I did dream and now shall tell.

(2.) Before a well this Novice² stood in burning desert land.
And then it bid me take a drink, but rope and bucket I had none.
Upon my frame the heat did beat and mocked me saying, “Take a drink”;
Then urgently I searched around, yet still no bucket could be found.

“Take a drink” said well and heat, “Take a drink and quench the thirst.”
Still no bucket could be found, and still no means to quench the thirst,
And so I fell to sandy ground and lay in wait for Death to come.
To look upon its unknown feet, that all behold when life is done.

(3.) So there I lay in wait to see the Reaper’s unknown eerie feet,
But then I saw her placid feet; the feet of the Fulani girl³.
Come to water her flocks she did, with unveiled face and bucket in hand;
And though she saw me on the ground, she left me faint and carried on.

“I Thirst”⁴, said I through gritted teeth, “No bucket, rope, or strength have I.”

¹ Conscience is the protagonist admission that he does know how to deal with grief.

² This is the protagonist accepting the grieving process and attempting to go forward in it.

³ The Fulani (also called Fula, Fulani, or Fulbe) are a predominantly Muslim people group that mainly live in West Africa. They can also be found in Central and East Africa. Originally, the girl that the protagonist meets was Tuareg, but the author made her Fulani after learning that he is of Hausa-Fulani descent.

⁴ “I thirst” were the words of Jesus at His crucifixion, and by using them the author appeals to his personal faith [Christianity] for aid.

“Then rise and fall in Bouctu’s⁵ Well. Rise up and fall”, was her reply.⁶
“The things I need, you have in hand. Young lady give me drink.”
“Fall down”, she said, “In Bouctu’s well, and in its waters sink.”
“Then you must help me rise and stand or help me quench the thirst.
O give me drink, for I am last, and first are last and last are first.”⁷

(4.) With stoic face and tempered care, she motioned to the well;
But when I sought to rise and stand, my weakness⁸ cast a spell.
I tried and tried to no avail, surrendering to weakness’ spell.
Then reaching down, she helped me up and brought me over to the well;

“Humbled⁹ you are”, she smiled and said, “Now rise and fall in Bouctu’s well.”
Then with a push, she sent me down below the earth so deep.

⁵ Bouctu is accredited with founding the city of Timbuktu in Mali, which means “the well of Bouctu”. According to legend, she was an old woman who gave water to travellers from a small well next to her home. Timbuktu was once a centre of learning, and had a great university called the Sankoré Madrasa. The Fulani girl that protagonist meets is Bouctu and the well is the ancient city.

⁶ Bouctu’s reply is not a cold denigration of the protagonist’s faith. Instead, she is showing that faith is not enough to get what he seeks. He cannot simply depend on the Divine to do the work for him. He must do the work of facing grief on his own.

⁷ An allusion to the words of Christ in St. Matthew’s Gospel. The protagonist tries to depend on the Divine a second time.

⁸ Weakness represents the protagonist accepting that he must face grief on his own.

⁹ Bouctu acknowledges that the protagonist is ready to face his grief and puts him on the journey to healing.

Act I

The Confinement of Vanities



(5.) My fall was not a smooth one, for I fell against sharp rocks¹⁰,
On one and then another, and slow it was while breaking me,
But soon I felt the water's splash, and in its coolness I was mended.
And laying whole surveyed the depths, wondering where I had come.

“Arise, O Son”, a voice rang out, “And open up the door.”

The voice was that of an old man, who spoke in Pious Tongue¹¹.

“From death a Father comes to Thee to guide Thee through the deep.”

“Kind sir I pray you let me rest and waken from this sleep.”

“Awaken ha!” he seemed to mock, “While awake Thou didst sleep;
Arise, O Son, for I have come to guide Thee through the deep.”

“No, I shall rest,” I did protest, “Till all has passed away.”

“If Thou doth rise and walk again, Thou shalt embark to endless day.”

“I ask you sir to let me sleep, and then I shall arise.”

“Arise, O weak and feeble one! Become the Scholar Fools despise!
Thou hast been broken on the rocks, now open up for Wisdom knocks¹²!”

(6.) So with his help, I did arise and looked upon his face;
His face was dark and Eastern, and he wore a cassock green¹³.

¹⁰ The rocks are initial fears and worries for things to come.

¹¹ A way of speaking invented by the author that is based on the Elizabethan English of the King James Bible. It is meant to fit the Christian nature of the protagonist's first Guide after falling down the well.

¹² The protagonist learns that his journey will lead to more than healing from grief. It will lead to transformation [the Scholar] and wisdom.

¹³ A ankle-length garment that is worn by Christian clergy. It is usually black, but the first Guide's is green which, in the Christian faith, represents life, hope, and anticipation.

“Are you Athanasius¹⁴, the Arians’¹⁵ great scorn?”
“Indeed I am,” he answered back, “A Coptic¹⁶ son of Egypt’s morn.
The Fool doth dwell within this place, and many Thou wilt know.”
“I fear this place, Your Holiness, for it I do not know.”
“Your Holiness? I have not been a Living Soul for ages;
In all things He¹⁷ alone is good, my holiness now faded.”
“Indeed”, I said in humble tone, “But you are still ‘the Great’.”
“My reverent Son be not a Fool for death became my fate.”
“Am I condemned to torment here? Are these the depths of hell?”
“Tis not”, the Father answered back, “But stories they must tell.”

(7.) Then walking into a murky light, we came upon a prison place.
The embodiment of down and out and hopelessness with no escape.
To us its Warden came, greeting Athanasius with fear,
And then he turned and greeted me with honors unknown to my ears.

“Hail! Hail!” the Warden said, “Hail the Living Soul¹⁸,
Who comes to us from up above to hear our stories told.”
“Hail”, cried others locked in cells, “Hail the Living Soul.”
“Abba”, I asked, “What is this place, where countenance is cold?”
“My Son, behold the Confinement¹⁹ where every Fool doth dwell;
Fools they are, and are indeed, their stories they will tell.”
“Aye”, said the Warden chiming in, “Our stories you must hear,
To free poor souls now up above that they might not come here.”

(8.) This overseer, I knew him well, Tippu Tip²⁰ his name;

¹⁴ Athanasius was a 4th century Christian theologian from Alaxandria, Egypt. He spoke up against a teaching called Arianism, and is sometimes referred to as “the Great”. The author makes him the first Guide as a means of comforting familiarity for the protagonist, who finds himself in a place that will challenge his faith and deep held beliefs. Athanasius also comes to him as a loving father with a voice of discipline that he might leave behind ways that are childish and unwise.

¹⁵ Those who follow the teaching of Arius of Alexandria. This teaching denies the Trinity, and was refuted by Athanasius.

¹⁶ Coptic is a Christian ethno-religious group that is indigenous to North Africa. It is also a language that comes from ancient Egyptian, and Coptic people are descendants of the ancient Egyptians.

¹⁷ God

¹⁸ The protagonist learns that the world he has fallen into is a place of the dead, and he is still alive. It is neither heaven nor hell, but a place unknown to his Christian faith.

¹⁹ The Confinement of Vanities is similar to Purgatory, but it is not a place of cleansing or purification. Instead, it is a place where three Vanities [Denial, Ignorance, and Prosperity] and those who have lived by them are imprisoned. Also, unlike Purgatory, the Confinement is not a second chance for redemption; all within it are perpetually condemned and dealing with it in various ways.

²⁰ Tippu Tip was a 19th century Afro-Omani slave owner and trader from Zanzibar. He was also a ruler of the short-lived Sultanate of Utetera.

Bantu²¹ women within his line, yet made the Bantu slaves.
His clothing was endless chains running down from head to feet,
And he limped under the weight of his iron garb, writhing in pain.
On each chain was a key, and each chain had a cell.
At times new cells emerged from walls and placed more chains to wear.

“For chaining kinsman, Thou art chained”, said the Father with a frown.
“Though high on earth”, said Tippu Tip, “My deeds have brought me down.”
“To guard”, I asked, “The Foolish Souls, and bear their chains as their stories are told?”
“To bear their chains and mine I do, a testament to deeds untrue.
Our deeds which brought to us great fame, but in their power left men lame.”
“Now Thou art lame”, said Athanasius, “Lame from all Thy tyranny.
My reverent Son, art Thou amazed to gaze upon such irony?”
“Yes Abba”, I did reply, “Amazed I am indeed,
The chains he gave are now his own; such irony for tyranny.”

“Oh Living Soul” begged Tippu Tip, “Impart to me some grace.”²²
And I replied, “Grace is above, and you must seek His face.”
“The Lord doth truly hear the Fool”, said Athanasius with a nod,
“But Fools hear not and think that they can take the place of God”
“Your Holiness”, said Tippu Tip, “I come on bended knee.
Oh, hear of my confession now. Absolve me of my deeds.”²³
“Absolution is no more, for Thou must pay Thy debts,
Be gone from us, O Tippu Tip. Thy penitence inept.”

Denial

(9.) Waving his hand, Athanasius shooed the Warden away,
And took me to a cell where I saw a most familiar face.
Behind the bars was George Reisner²⁴ presenting a great thesis.
And as he spoke, his nose grew long and touched the walls whenever he turned.

“Tis clear to me that the 25th dynasty²⁵ of Egypt was not Black Sudanese,
But rather a branch of the Egypto-Lybian dynasty.”

²¹ Bantu is a family of languages spoken by 400 African people groups. These groups originally came from West Africa and migrated to other parts of the continent from the 11th to 17th century. Bantu peoples are now found in Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa.

²² Because he is not dead, some souls within the Confinement see him as a means of freedom.

²³ Some souls within the Confinement believe that forgiveness for their sins in life can set them free. But as Athanasius shows Tippu Tip, they are beyond redemption.

²⁴ George Reisner was an American archeologist of ancient Egypt, Nubia, and Palestine. Despite his great work, he denied the Pharaohs of Egypt's 25th dynasty were Black. For this denial he is sent to the Confinement where he copes by lecturing as he did in life. Reisner also copes by holding firmly to his denial, which hinders him from seeing and learning the truth. He is unable to recognise the Black Pharaohs who have come to set him free, and sees them as mere students to be proudly dismissed. While lecturing his nose grows, like the story of Pinocchio, but he holds to denial and proclaiming untruths.

²⁵ In 744 BC the Kingdom of Kush from southern Sudan invaded a divided Egypt. Upon coming to power the Kushites unified Upper and Lower Egypt, and their kinds [the Nubian Pharaohs] ruled until 656BC.

“But Dr. Reisner”, said a student holding a bust of Tirhakah²⁶,
“How do you explain their Black Sudanese features obvious to the unlearned eye?”
“Well that is quite simple my dear” Reisner puffed and replied,
“It is clear that their features denote a fair and not so dark paternity.”

Upon these words the student smashed the Pharaoh’s bust with rage,
Yet Reisner, who seemed not disturbed, continued with his thesis.
And when I looked I gasped at a very stunning appearance.
For there in the young woman’s place was the great Nubian Pharaoh himself;
On legs like iron he stood tall, radiating a presence of pride and dominion.
Yet still Reisner presented his thesis as if nothing had happened.

“Tis clear to me that Egypt’s 25th dynasty.....”
“Was of Black Sudanese paternity”, Tirhakah thundered like a storm,
“Though we were truly dark of skin, our glory shined as bright as the sun.”

Clearing his throat, Reisner again took up his thesis,

“As I was saying, Egypt’s 25th dynasty.....”
“Came from Kush in 730 B.C.”, Tirhakah interrupted,
And under my father Piye, we took Kemet²⁷ that one fine day.”

(10.) At this my soul was vexed and tears ran down my face,
For here was naked truth chasing a well-dressed lie on shady roads.

“Abba²⁸”, I asked my Guide, “Do tell me of these wonders.”
“The heap sees and few know. Reality torn asunder.”
“Heaps of people see the truth, but few do not receive it?”
“Yay my Son. They are deceived and baffled to believe it.”

Looking back into the cell I saw another stunning appearance,
For now a host of Nubian pharaohs rose to join the discourse.
Piye told of how he took Kemet, the jewel of Egypt’s Nile.
Then Shabaka showed his ancient stone, a relic immortalizing a papyrus of old.
Shebkuti brought forth a stela depicting him with Horus s.
Then Tantamani presented a statue, his likeness, from Gebel Barkal.
But all of this was not enough to help poor Reisner;
And in response the kings invoked the prophet Isaiah, who appeared and said,

“And he heard say concerning Tirhakah king of Ethiopia, he is come forth to make war.”²⁹

²⁶ Tirhakah was the last of the Nubian Pharaohs that ruled Egypt. During his reign he devoted himself to peaceful works and restored many temples. He was also an ally of the Jewish Kingdom of Judah, and is mentioned in the Bible in the books of 2 Kings and Isaiah.

²⁷ The name for Egypt in ancient Egyptian.

²⁸ An Aramaic word for “father”.

²⁹ The Bible mentions Tirhakah in Isaiah 37:9.

Yet even Holy Scripture was not enough to prevail,
And dismissing Prophets and Pharaohs, the teacher puffed and carried on.
“The Greeks called you Ethiopian because you subdued a Negroid population.”
“The heap sees and few know” said Tirhakah ducking to avoid his nose.

(11.) So again, we walked along beholding other prison cells.
“Your Grace”, I asked, “Why is this called the Confinement of Vanities?”
With patience the Father stopped and said, “Incline Thine ear and listen well,
Now will I impart to Thee, the knowledge of three Vanities.”
“Three Vanities are here confined?”
“Nay”, replied my patient Guide,
“Above three Vanities do bind, until the soul is here confined.
And on the earth they capture men; Denial, Ignorance, Prosperity.
These My Son, three Vanities.”
“Was Denial’s captive there, within the cell of Reisner’s speech?”
“Yay My Son, its captive be; the teacher blind with Vanity,
With a love of Knowledge divorced from Wisdom,
And a love of Theory divorced from Practice.
When Knowledge weds Wisdom and Theory Practice, then Truth is born at last.
Divorced and they are empty books of pompous winds that blow and blast.”

(12.) We then resumed our walk, passing by cells of the learned making confessions.
In one cell the Darwinist³⁰ confessed survival of the fittest,
And before him was the Survival of the Unfit.
In another cell the Theologian confessed the curse of Ham³¹,
And before him were the sons of Ham clothed in the blessings of day.
For those in Vanity I did weep, in Denial’s confinement and unbelief.

Ignorance

(13.) Upon leaving Denial’s block we came to a cell unlike that of any other;
No bars, no lock, no guard, and containing an entire cosmos.
Its captives did not escape, but simply walked about.
Man, Woman, Child, and Animal, all possessing tiny lamps.
Even Plants possessed a lamp which gave off greenish lights³².
I found myself transfixed upon their glow,
And wished that I could shine with them.

“Behold My Son”, said the Father, “Behold the second Vanity;

³⁰ This is not a put down of Darwinism or the theory of evolution. It is a reference to Social Darwinism which has used the concept of “survival of the fittest” to justify imperialism, racism, eugenics and social inequality.

³¹ The Curse of Ham comes from bad interpretations of Genesis 9, where Noah curses one of his grandsons. This grandson, named Canaan, was the son of Noah’s second son Ham, and some theologians wrongly stated that the curse was on Ham. The reason for this was to justify the enslavement of people of African descent who, according to the Bible, are descendants of Ham. But the curse was meant for Canaan and his descendants who were called Canaanites.

³² This represents wilful ignorance which, as the differing numbers on each lamp shows, is different for every person.

Though lovely to Thine broken eyes, it brings to all calamity.”

“But how can such a glory be the advent of one’s fall?”

To this he said, “Tis not a light, but Ignorance its’ call.

Look to the sky My Son, and tell me is it day?”

And when I looked, I was amazed to see that it was truly day.

“Look closely at the lamps and tell me what Thou seest.”

“Written upon them”, I replied, “Numbers....Numbers do I see.

A young girl’s lamp bears number 4, an old man’s 62,

An old cat’s lamp bears number 9, and the flowers -56.”

“The numbers are their years of life that burn away so dimly;

The call of Ignorance is light to those who watch with envy.”

“AWAKEN THEM WE MUST!”, I shrieked, “AWAKEN FOOLS AND SEE!

Your lives which burn in lamps so dim, extinguish and be free.”

To my dismay they did not hear, and simply went about.

“Behold My Son”, the Father frowned, “Say not a word and see,

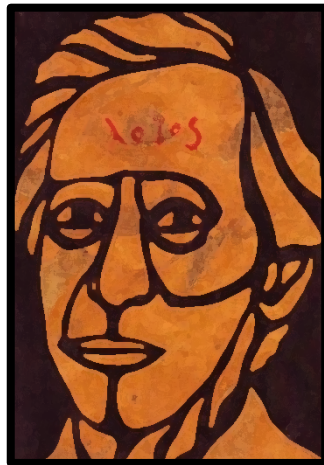
The power and the stronghold of the second Vanity.”

(14.) Suddenly a man appeared and greeted us with a bow.

Donning an old Geneva gown³³ with bands³⁴ and book in hand.

Upon his forehead was the mark of a hallowed word

A word that he had brought enfleshed with pity for imprisoned souls.



“HAIL”, he bowed to me, “HAIL the Living Soul

Who sees the Lost down here below and hears their stories told.”

Then Athanasius with a smile, embraced the man and said,

“Daniel, Friend, Bishop Bold, and Messenger of Love.”

And then to this I asked, “Are you the Teacher Daniel Payne³⁵?”

³³ A pulpit gown worn by Protestant clergy.

³⁴ A form of formal neckwear that is worn by some clergy, judges, and lawyers.

³⁵ Daniel Payne was an American educator and bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He was also a founder and president of Wilberforce University in Ohio. Though not a Guide, Payne watches over the protagonist throughout his journey and represents his Conscience which speaks to him in the first verse

“I am Brother”, he then replied, “Till Death my titles claimed.
 Now I am here for those bound up in sullen place,
 Come down to them from Higher Ground that they might see His face.”
 “Did you descend to them below from Heaven’s heights?”
 “No”, said Payne, “I traverse here from courts of Paradise.”
 “Is Paradise another name for Heaven where He lives?”
 “Dear Brother”, answered Payne, “It is more! The place where Heaven gives”.
 Then the Father added with a nod, “Paradise is more than realm of God.
 Within its hand Thou shalt be free, and Thou shalt know felicity.”
 “Behold Brother”, pointed Payne, “Enlightenment he comes
 To bid them put away their lamps. I pray he might reach some.”

(15.) Walking by in Gambian³⁶ blue was a spindly man named Griot³⁷;
 In his right hand was a staff and a rooster³⁸ sat upon his shoulder.
 With a preacher’s serious tone, he chastised a Youth under a streetlight.
 But the young man simply brushed him off and answered back with disrespect.³⁹

“The rooster does not crow. And why? Because it is day!
 Put out Your lamp Young Brother and take the Narrow Way.”
 “Here we go again”, the Youth replied, “Same story, different day.
 Look old man, there a better things and money to be made.”
 “You finally wish to hear Young Brother?” asked Griot with a hopeful eye.
 “You see? That’s what I mean. Why do you always question me?
 Let me do my thing and leave me to my peace.”
 “But that’s the problem Young Brother, you do nothing and have no peace.”

“So, what old man? What is it to you?”
 “It’s everything Young Brother”, said Griot with concern,
 “For You presently become the past and watch the future burn.
 But if I tell You of Your past and You will heed My words,
 Then You shall be the future and will fly just like the birds.”
 “Look old man, I do not know or care about my past.”
 “So You would rather not know Truth, our Truth and your’s, Young Brother?”
 “Indeed, I am in bliss and don’t need fairytales.”
 “You mean that You have given up, You Brother hear me well.”
 “Call it whatever you want old man, but I like the way it is around here.
 Maybe you should get a lamp and let it shine like the rest of us.”

³⁶ The author’s use of “Gambian” is a reference to the Gambian river that goes through Guinea, Senegal, and the Gambia. This is also why Griot’s clothes are blue which is the color of water.

³⁷ A West African storyteller and musician who is the keeper of oral traditions. Griot represents old connections that have been lost and forgotten, but wish to be known again.

³⁸ In many cultures the rooster is a sacred animal. Its presence with the Griot signifies that this is a sacred moment.

³⁹ The exchange between the Griot and the Youth is not meant to show that one is better off than the other. Instead, it is meant to show a disconnect between old and new generations and the struggle for them to communicate and have a fruitful exchange.

(16.) For some time, the Griot tried to reason with the Youth,
But as they conversed I watched the number on his lamp go down to 19.

“Show me no more”, I cried, “O let me flee this place.”

“No, not yet”, objected Payne, “We must show them His face.”

Then taking me by the hand he led me to a sanctuary⁴⁰,

And upon entering it I found the atmosphere was full of energy.

The congregation, in Sunday best, shouted and danced to Hammond⁴¹ rifts,

Then suddenly, in unison, they lifted their lamps singing, “This Little Light of Mine”.

(17.) Sing they did for what seemed hours until a Preacher⁴², called Bliss, came in.

Clad in a white robe and holding a Golden Book⁴³, he proudly asked,

“Do you love the light?”

“YES!” they shouted in response.

“Do you love the light?”

“AMEN!” they shouted back again.

“The light IS GOOD!

“YES SIR!” they shouted all the more.

“LET IT SHINE BELOVED!”

“LET IT SHINE! LET IT SHINE!!

Then holding up the Book he said, “The Golden Book tells us this, ‘So let Thy light shine’.

“LET IT SHINE! LET IT SHINE!”

(18.) For some time, they went about this call and response with lifted lamps.

“See My Son, O look and see, this the second Vanity.”

And again we watched the people uplift Ignorance with shining charisma,

But Payne stepped forward and thundered, “CEASE DEAR FRIENDS! THAT IS ENOUGH!”

Like thieves caught in the act, the congregation stopped their praise

And staring blankly wondered what the Messenger was all about.

“I come to you”, the Bishop said, “To take you from this place.

O heed the Word! Put out your lamps! In Daylight see His face!”

“We have the Word”, yelled Preacher Bliss⁴⁴, “We have the Word indeed.”

“They have the Word,” Payne answered back, “But understanding need.”

“We have the Ghost,” a woman cried, “And what we sing is Truth.”

⁴⁰ By use of the term “sanctuary”, the author is referring to more than Christian, and specifically Black American, Churches. This term can represent a house of worship from any faith tradition in the Black American community. It can also represent a place of gathering that is exclusively for Black Americans.

⁴¹ A Hammond B-3 organ.

⁴² This character is not solely relegated to Christianity, but applies to any leading and charismatic voice within the Black American community.

⁴³ The Golden Book can be any inspiring idea or concept, religious and non-religious, that people hold in Common.

⁴⁴ This character represents leaders that remain wilfully ignorant and encourage their followers to do the same. For Athanasius and Payne though the motives of Preacher Bliss might be well-intentioned, they are angered by the harm he has caused to his followers.

“You do not Mam”, said Bishop Payne, “And sing without the Truth.”
 “Your eyes are closed”, I added then, “You fail to see the Truth,
 And while you sing, your children die. No Spirit and no Truth.”
 “FALSE PROPHETS”, screamed an old man, “You want to make us slaves.”
 “No”, said Payne with gentle voice, “Put out your lamps that slay.”
 “HERESY”, shouted one man, and “BLASPHEMY” another.
 “I pray you hear with open hearts, for heretics are Brothers.”
 “NEVER FOOL”, the Preacher yelled,
 “His Word will lead my flock to hell.”
 “Hold your tongue”, the Bishop warned,
 “Be gone, O night, for comes the morn.”

(19.) As Francis spoke, the Preacher shrieked and vanished in thin air.
 “Put out Thy lamps”, said Athanasius, “And go beyond the Crystal Stair.
 With every step is knowledge that opens up the closed.
 Enlightenment, He comes to Thee! Behold a voice like Sharon’s Rose!⁴⁵”
 With lifted hands Griot appeared where Preacher Bliss had vanished,
 And seeing him the quaking shrine was shaken all the more.

“Brothers, Sisters, Fathers, and Mothers, the rooster does not crow.
 Put out Your lamps and follow us! To Paradise we go!
 O will You rise and come with us? For rooster does not crow.
 O heed our words, embrace the Word, and with us You shall go.”
 “Heed the Word⁴⁶”, I did proclaim, “And hearken souls below;
 Hear Griots, Saints, and Messengers. PUT OUT YOUR LAMPS AND GO!”

(20.) “Put out Your lamps”, the Bishop said, “And live again, O ones now dead.
 Embrace the Word, for lies are past. All blessed welcome Truth at last.”
 “You too shall meet in Paradise”, said Athanasius mild,
 “Where future is the present bright, and rains for but a while.
 You shall be clothed in costly robes with bracelets and perfumes.
 And You shall dwell in house of joy, a court of many rooms.
 There You shall rest on beds inlaid with gold and precious stones.
 Harken and leave this mourning place, for Realms that do not groan.”⁴⁷
 “Now who will go?” Griot did ask, “To Realms that do not groan?
 And Who will fly to Endless Day, where Bright Souls never moan?
 Who will rise in Endless Morn where rooster here shall crow?
 Whoever shall put out Their lamps, to Paradise They’ll go.”
 “Put out Your lamps”, I joined the plea, “Put out Your lamps dear Friends
 And come to dwell in Endless Day; always and without end.”

⁴⁵ An allusion to Jesus who is called the “Rose of Sharon”

⁴⁶ This is not the Christian message or any other religious message. It is the call to let go of the second Vanity.

⁴⁷ At this point the author began a shift from Christian imagery to Islamic imagery by describing what is at the end of the protagonist’ journey. This description is based on the Quran’s description of Jannah or the final abode of the righteous. This also sets the stage for the upcoming guides who come from Muslim backgrounds.

(21.) “But we have the Truth”, said an old man holding up the Golden Book,
“We have it written down right here. Now come and take a look.”

Then Athanasius patiently walked down the center isle,
And looking in the Golden Book, he turned to Griot in the pulpit.
“Beloved”, said Griot, “Every glittering word is not gold,
For within the precious Golden Book, the Preacher Bliss has written in bold.”
“Who is he?” asked a boy with peaking curiosity.
“My Child”, said Athanasius, “He be a Great Hypocrisy,
A Predikant of wicked leanings, who readeth here his selfish meanings.”

“The Preacher Bliss”, said Griot, “He preys upon the weak,
He silences the Golden Book and does not let it speak.
But Messenger now brings to You what hearts have pleaded for;
The Book of Understanding that can open up the Door.
Arise Dear Ones of weakened heart, become Ones not despised.
Wisdom knocks! Open the door that stands before Your Eyes!
Come Messenger from Paradise handing
Blessings filled with understanding!”

(22.) Upon Griot’s invitation, Payne walked up the pulpit steps,
And opening the book⁴⁸ he held, he placed it on the Golden Book.
Then came the sound of a rushing wind that made the people gasp in awe
And together they began to sing with open eyes of Truth revealed.
Then at the altar some put out the lamps they wore
And laid them down to never be their sacrifice again.
Then others, from their seats, shook heads in great disgust,
And rose with fingers pointed up to show that they would leave.

(24.) “Remember Brother”, said Griot, “Not everyone is saved.
For some will stay with lamps so bright and darkened hearts depraved.”

“It matters not”, I said to him, “That some have now gone out.
Still Griot you have saved a few from Ignorance devout.”

“Beware to say that men like I have come to save.
I could not save my feeble soul, and like them was a slave.
I could not grasp the Rising Sun and see the Daylight true.
My life it burned and burned away as lives of all lamps do.”

“Forgive me Sir”, I did repent, “And let me walk with you.”
“No Living Soul, my Walk is done, but You have more to do.”
“Not only hast Thou more to do, Thy journey is quite long.
My Son Thou soon shalt leave my side, but with Thee is the Song.
The Song of Them now free from scorn.
The Song of those who face the morn.

⁴⁸ Bishop Payne called for critical thinking over emotionalism. Therefore, this book represents critical thinking.

Seek Divine from depths of heart, and He shall loosen sin.
May Thou untwist Thy twisted loves, and Paradise go in.”

(25.) “Abba”, I pleaded in distress, “Please, never leave my side.
Say you shall remain with me, and be my only Guide.
Say you shall not go away. Forever walk with me
To World that is forevermore and through Eternity.”

“Peace”, he said, “Thou hast become a Righteous Man⁴⁹ and not a Fool,
But like the Souls I am to guide, I must apply the Rule.
Thou hast grown up within my care, and Thou must be released,
Released to take Thy foreknown Course that I may rest in peace.
Forget Thou not this Abba’s love when parting it must come.
Remember all this Abba’s love, for You a Precious Son.”

(26.) “Farewell”, said Bishop Payne, “Farewell, O Living Soul.
My journey in this place now ends, but yours must still unfold.
They leave you now for Higher Ground and take a joyful flight.
Again we all shall meet again in joys of Paradise.”

Bidding Griot, Payne, and the Congregation farewell,
We left the sanctuary which ascended to the skies,
And with this we departed the second Vanity.

Prosperity

(27.) Again we walked past many blocks with prisoners confined
To one cell with a ravenous Beast that growled and snarled its angry fangs,
Next to him in another cell was a Beauty with a mirror,
And when she looked into it, her reflection was the ravenous Beast.

Watching her I pointed and laughed, “Beauty and the Beast”.
“Yay”, the Father came to say, “The common tale a fallacy.
And knowing not the tale of truth it closes eyes with Vanity.”
“Does what is common keep one living in Denial?”
“Indeed my Son, it keeps the soul in Vanity so vile.
The Beast was not a pompous prince, transformed because of pride,
And Beauty here was not some belle, who sought her face to hide.
Like every tale, the remedy, a kiss that shows true love,
Tis not so easy to obtain, as is declared Above.
The Beast hath tried, as goes the tale, to kiss the Beauty vain,
Yet turn she does to run from Beast which driveth him insane.”

(28.) “O HAIL the Living Soul, a wonder to my eyes!”
Then throwing down her mirror, Beauty wafted to the bars.
“O HAIL the Living Soul that offers me relief,
And gives to me a vision from the window of my grief”

⁴⁹ Athanasius states that the protagonist has left behind childish ways and is ready for wisdom.

“What grief have I now calmed for you within this sullen place?”
“The window”, Beauty answered back, “I hold before my face.”

Then gazing at the mirror laid cracked upon the floor,
I noticed that what held its glass was not a simple frame.
The mirror’s glass was held by a tiny window sill,
And it showed no reflection but had curtains to another world.
In that world were countless treasures heaped on high,
And in their midst was the Beast hissing like a frightened cat.
His eyes looked human, without the covering of felines,
And his aura was the visage of a man without his form.

Then clutching my shoulders, Athanasius made things clear,
“The Beast is but the end result from hunger for the wealth,
He comes to be a ghastly sight and loseth all his health.
A sickly creature feeding in the shadow of his chains;
The wealth that makes him now devolve, resisting what can change.”

(29.) Upon the Bishops words, I finally understood,
The wealth was not the heaps of gold surrounding the poor devolving soul.
The wealth was the Beauty, and she was the illusion,
A misplaced projection in a reality not her own.

“Ah, they are reversed”, I looked and told my Guide,
“The Beauty and the sickly Beast, in others’ worlds are truly cursed.”
“Cursed they are indeed and trapped like this they be.
The Beast a man lost in her world, and Beauty his reality.
Her name Prosperity, Illusion for the Fool.
His name Insanity, and Vanity his school.
And as the Fool, the sickly Beast, repeats and fails the more.
The lesson that he turneth from, where less be always more.”

“O Abba, can this spell be broken and reversed?
Can Beast not from the window fly and leave behind his curse?”
And while I questioned him, I felt the Beauty’s gentle hands,
And looking deep into her eyes I found temptations binding.
I was tempted to make her my everything at any costs.
And I was tempted to be her everything at any costs.
But as she pulled me to the iron bars the Father yelled,
And roused me from the conscious sleep that almost took my soul.

(30.) “Thou dost now understand, Prosperity is strong,
And though she be a blessing, she can bring Thee down to wrong.
She makes a Beast of man, and looks for other victims.
Then drains and robs the Living Soul of every Benediction.”
“O HAIL the Living Soul”, cried Beauty with distress,
“O HAIL and HAIL forevermore, if you can give me rest.”
Then opening her cell, she beckoned me come in,
But this time I rejected her and rebuked her tempting eyes.

“Away with you, away from me, I close and lock the door.
I shall not be Insanity, the Fool that is no more.
O give me Lady Poverty, just like Assisi’s saint⁵⁰,
And let her be my Lady Fair, a Bride in humble’s quaint.
With simple Poverty, in ragged dress so bright
With her I take my flight from you in hope of Paradise.”

The Crystal Stair

(31.) Suddenly the Beauty screamed at sounds of twisting metal,
Then came the snap of rusted locks unclasping doors they long had held.

“My Son”, said Athanasius, “Our walk together meets its end,
For Thou hath seen the Vanities that bind the hearts of Foolish men.
Recall what I have shown, for this is not the end.
The Vanities will come to Thee from time to time and time again.
Denial Thou wilt meet above in City of the Ages.
And Ignorance it waits to pounce in Dunes with Daughter Sages.
And just before the Rock, that Thou must pass to Paradise,
Prosperity will rise again and offer Thee her great delights.”

(32.) Then lifting up his hand, the Bishop blessed me onward,
“*Soti emmon owoh nai nan. Kerie eleison Kerie eleison*,⁵¹
Lord, save and have mercy, receive this ancient prayer”
“Have mercy now”, I prayed with him, “And bring the Crystal Stair.”⁵²
“My Son”, the Father smiled, “The Stair for Thee, it shall appear,
And with it I shall find my rest in holy shadow bright and clear.
The shadow of a wing that covers all with grace and love,
And hides away the Righteous Man who treasures truth from saints Above.
My Son She comes to Thee, Alethea, beyond this place
To take Thee to another Guide who dwells above this great disgrace.
And there Thou shalt behold the glories of the ages past
For every street a former time with former souls stuck in their pasts.”

(33.) Again the Beauty screamed at the sound of twisting metal,
And the other captives banged their bars and joined her in a chorus.
“O HAIL the Living Soul, and help us flee from here”
“What do you want? What do you need? Please help us, do not fear.”
“O hear our humble cry, and help us get the key.”
“O HAIL the Living Beauteous Soul. Come break the locks and set us free.”
“Hear not their cries my Son”, the ancient Father bade.

⁵⁰ Francis of Assisi.

⁵¹ Coptic for, “Save us and have mercy on us: Lord have mercy”

⁵² The Crystal Stair is the way out of Confinement and shows that redemption is possible. Nevertheless, those within it are too bound by the Vanities to see it. All they need do, as the protagonist does, is leave their cells and go. Nothing but themselves is keeping them bound.

“But fix Thine eyes upon the Stair and climb it to be saved.
No longer Foolish, Living Soul, Thou hast grown up to Righteous Man
A Man in need of open eyes from second Guide to understand.”

And then the twisting metal became the sounds of singing glass
Before me was a Crystal Stair, a wonder leading up above.
“Hear not their cries and close Thine ears”, I watched the Father fade.
Then making haste, I climbed the stair of crystal from the depths depraved.

With every step the Stair chimed a sweet redemption song.⁵³
A bridge of notes that held my feet and lifted me to walk above.
The Confinement now a chapter closed of Vanities I would meet again.

⁵³ These songs confirm that the protagonist has completed the first part of his journey and had escaped a danger that he was not aware of. Without Athanasius' guidance he could have found himself imprisoned in the Confinement.