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Suggested Citation:

Henczel, K. I. (2018, April) *The Sunset Limited: Through the lenses of James and Maslow*. Paper presented at the Ambrose Research Conference, Ambrose University, Calgary, AB.

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The Sunset Limited: Through the Lenses of James and Maslow

Kaitlin I.G. Henczel

When looking at religion there are often two distinct groups of people: believers and non-believers. Both James and Maslow look at concepts that can define and contrast these groups. *The Sunset Limited* is a script that depicts both a believer and non-believer, and upon reflection of both characters, one can see where a non-believer gains a foundation of his stance. I will argue that when contrasted with Black, the character White is the true representative of a non-believer. The perspectives of both James and Maslow can be used to further understand each of the characters, however, it is Maslow that offers a richer explanation. James presents two concepts: the sick soul and unified self but avoids the concept of institutions. Maslow on the other hand presents the concept of peakers and non-peakers, and also offers the explanation of organized religion. The additional concept of recognizing and implementing the institutionalized side of religion is what adds to Maslow and provides the better explanation for understanding White's personality.

The Sunset Limited script, written by Cormac McCarthy, depicts an elaborate conversation that takes place between the characters White and Black after White rescues Black from committing suicide. There are two main excerpts in particular that provide description of both characters. Given that the script will be the basis of the analysis, the page numbers will be the best way to break up these excerpts. The first excerpt occurs between the pages of twenty two and thirty five. In this section the readers are first introduced to Black's jailhouse stories along with the first open dialogue of God. This excerpt is where readers begin to be shown how closed off White is to the concept of God and the exact impact jail had on Black. The second excerpt is between pages forty seven and sixty. Although this is the end of the script, readers are given the most information on White. His stance and rationale for his beliefs are elaborated on and

explained, and Black realizes just how engrained White's beliefs are in his soul. In addition to these two main excerpts, there is one additional segment of the script at the beginning that once finishing the script helps put together the rationale for White. The segment on pages thirteen to fourteen is what connects the dots to White's harsh views on the world and reveals the reason why Black's intervention ultimately doesn't make a difference in White's life. However, it is White's harsh views of the world, that is only helpful in giving insight once the reader has finished the script and reflects back to gain understanding on what went wrong and why Black wasn't able to help save White. It is within these three sections that the foundation of James and Maslow's explanations can be built and further explained, which ultimately shows why Maslow can give a better interpretation.

I will argue that James would only be able to define White as being in a state of the sick soul. The sick soul, as defined by James, is a place of having such a strong awareness of evil inside a person that they cannot interpret anything in life without it. James states that "the entire consciousness...is choked with the feeling of evil that the sense of there being any good in the world is lost altogether" (James, 1990, p. 140). Relating then to the idea of being reflective, the sick souls are almost too reflective that they transfer the evil seen in the world to evil seen in him or herself. Hints of the start of seeing the sick soul can be picked up when White says "suffering and human destiny are the same thing" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 25). For James someone in the sick soul can't see the hope in the world but is stuck in looking at all the negatives. This quote shows that White's interpretation of the world could be clouded by that vision as well. However, the second excerpt begins to reveal the evil in White: "I yearn for darkness. I pray for death. Real death" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 57). This remark demonstrates James' conception of the sick soul. Before this part in the segment White's view of evil was predominantly in the world but here it is

shown that White does see the evil in himself as he wants his life to be full of darkness and tragedy and neglects the opt out that God has given the people. Now that James has both evidence of White seeing evil in the world and within himself, the sick soul view would be solidified. Contrary to White however, McCarthy is able to parallel Black showing how someone can have the ability to move through the sick soul to a conversion experience. This can be seen in Black's retelling of his jailhouse story when Black was about to kill the man and then in the infirmary hears God voice (2006, p. 22-23). This comparison of the two characters allows for the concept of the sick soul to be illustrated as a not only a state that one remains in, but also as a state that leads to a higher level of being in the world.

Adding to the element of the sick soul, one could argue that White is a representation of what James would define as the unified self. However, the difference being that James cannot explain how White has reached a unified self, given that he has not had a conversion experience and remains in the sick soul. James would argue that people are at an equivalent to a divided self or divided will, in which a person has two selves that are "oppositely constituted" (James, 1990, p. 156). James would then go further to say that in order to reach a unified self, you "must lose one before you can participate in the other" (James, 1990, p. 155). This means that you cannot be present in both the natural and spiritual selves at the same time. You need to in a sense lose or forget one in order to be fully present. Furthermore, James would say that upon this unity come peace and happiness, through involvements with a higher power, intellectual insight, or mystical experiences that are either gradual or abrupt (James, 1990, p. 163). When looking at this concept James wouldn't be able to explain how White got to a unified self because he ignores and fears the higher power and mystical experiences because he is in the state of the sick soul. However, White is clearly unified because he has lost his spiritual self and is no longer present in that

realm of perspective. Black, who is also a unified self, was one who became present in the spiritual self and gained a sense of both peace and happiness. This is when one can begin to see one of the short falls with James' explanation as he is unable to fully explain and address how it was possible for White to reach a unified self.

In contrast to the explanation by James, Maslow is another theorist that can give explanation to the character of White. According to Maslow, White would be classified as being classified as a non-peaker, or someone who is in fear of having a peak experience. Maslow defines peak experience as an individual experience that everyone is able to have, to the point that those who say they don't, are just afraid of a loss of control (Maslow, 1994, p. 22). Peak experiences are seen as "lift[ing] us to greater than normal heights so that we can perceive in a higher than usual way" (Maslow, 1994, p. 61). Being taken out of the time and place allows one to see past the constraints society has and the selfish desires of one's self. Thus a non-peaker would be the opposite and "regard peak experiences as...insanity, a complete loss of control, a sense of being overwhelmed by irrational emotions" (Maslow, 1994, p. 22). Maslow would suggest that White can be defined as being a non-peaker. This can be seen in the first excerpt when White questions Black, "why can't you people just accept it that some people don't even want to believe in God" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 25). Given that this statement was made just after Black's peak experience with God in the infirmary, one can assume that the statement came out of fear of not wanting to have a similar experience. In the recollection of Black's account of God speaking to him to some degree there was a loss of control. Black was not the one who initiated the "conversation," but instead it was God that came and spoke to him. If this is a predictor of a peak experience Maslow would suggest that White is in fear of giving up his control to a higher power.

Furthermore, McCarthy sets the stage nicely for Maslow to suggest that Black, throughout the script, is attempting to create and stimulate a peak experience to occur for White. This imitation begins through the first excerpt of Black's jail story illustrating his own personal peak experience, which is the moment god spoke to him in the infirmary and opening up the discussion on the views of God. Moving on to the second excerpt, where Black draws at the heart of White, in hopes that White will give in to the work of a higher power intervening to put his life back on track. However, Black ultimately fails at this creation and is unsuccessful in changing the deep-rooted beliefs in White. This would be the point in which James's description would end, yet Maslow's description can go one step beyond to explain the why.

Maslow offers a strong justification for why White's beliefs are so strongly rooted, suggesting that it is due to the value that White places on organized or institutionalized religion. Although White doesn't explicitly express his support of organized religion it can be assumed through the values he supports from other institutions. The effects of organized religion can be explained by Maslow through the "power [it has] to shake the individual in his deepest insides. Words can be repeated mindlessly and without touching the intrapersonal depths..." (Maslow, 1994, p. 34). These effects can be illustrated in rules as they affect the individual but don't cause a deeper meaning to be interpreted from them. This is when the third segment comes into play. After understanding the end stance White takes, one can then interpret his statement that "cultural things...books and music and art...they're the foundations of civilization," is White recognizing the importance of ruled confined institutions that make up the world or societies culture (McCarthy, 2006, p. 13). This understanding is what sets White apart, White values the role that the rules and constraints that religion has play in society but he doesn't want to value it for himself. Furthermore, White in the second segment goes on to say, "show me a religion that

prepares one for death...there's a church I might enter" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 58). This shows that White is in support of the church as an institution but not as a personal experience. In contrast, Black is against organized religion. Maslow would argue that just as "each science was once a part of the body of organized religion but then broke away to become independent," so too can one break away from the structured rules of the church (Maslow, 1994, p. 12). This is illustrated when Black states that he doesn't believe in reading the Bible to define your faith, as well when he states he is a questioner and doesn't just blindly follow rules, even in religion (McCarthy, 2006, p. 30-31). Therefore it can be seen why Black values his own religious experiences so much and why he spends so much time trying to create a peak experience for White; but, it also shows why White is so opposed to the personal experiences but isn't against the structure of religion.

In comparison, both James and Maslow can offer valid explanation for the personality of White. However, it is Maslow who is able to go one step further to take in account the role of organized religion, a concept ignored by James, to explain why White has the personality he does. This added element that Maslow accounts for is what makes his fuller description of White that much richer. Both the sick soul and non-peaker are similar descriptions that explain and account for White's negativity in himself and the world. Due to the fact that James' concept of the unified self can be applied to White, this is where the shortfalls of James begin to emerge because it can be applied but not explained of how that happened. This concept is quite unique in the fact that the definition of the state is true to White, but the process of how one gets there is not similar at all, leaving a term with no explanation relating to one. Furthermore, James continues to falter when Maslow enters the idea of organized religion having a structure in society, a concept that James doesn't even give credit to or believe exists. This idea becomes the

official turning point in which one leaves the side of James and can now see why White is the way he is and sides with Maslow.

The script of *The Sunset Limited* is an intense conversation that takes place between two characters: White and Black. It is in these two characters that one can see the description of both a non-believer and believer when it comes to the views of religion. The two theorists James and Maslow both can explain parts of White's character, allowing one to see beneath the surface level rebuttal of religion and begin to uncover the reasons of why he is against religion. Through the two excerpts where Black begins to share one of his jailhouse stories and the first discussion around God begins and when White takes his final positioning stance, one begins to see just how engrained White's beliefs are and why Black won't be able to save him. It is Maslow that can explain White on two different levels, which allows for a deeper understanding of why White believes and acts the way he does. Maslow goes to another level that James doesn't even give thought to or acknowledge. Although James can explain White's mindset, he cannot explain the element of why his views are the way they are. Therefore, this confirms that Maslow offers a more comprehensive explanation for who White is in contrast to James.

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