



The Wayfarer

**Hieronymus Bosch
and the search for the inner self.**

**An esoteric analysis of the
painting from the collection of the
Museum Boijmans van
Beuningen in Rotterdam.**

HIERONYMUS BOSCH ¹

(c. 1450 - August 9, 1516)



Plate 1

Hieronymus Bosch, born Anthonissen van Aken (c. 1450 - August 9, 1516) was an Early Netherlandish painter of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Many of his works depict sin and human moral failings. He signed a number of his paintings as Bosch (pronounced Boss in Dutch). The name derives from his birthplace, 's-Hertogenbosch, which is commonly called "Den Bosch".

Bosch used images of demons, half-human animals, and machines to evoke fear and confusion to portray the evil of man.

His works contain complex, highly original, imaginative, and dense use of symbolic figures and iconography, some of which was obscure even in his own time.

In 1488 he joined the highly respected Brotherhood of Our Lady, an arch-conservative religious group of some 40 influential citizens of 's-Hertogenbosch, and 7,000 'outer-members' from around Europe. Sometime between 1479 and 1481, Bosch married Aleyt Goyaerts van den Meerveen, who was a few years older than the artist. The couple moved to the nearby town of Oirschot, where his wife had inherited a house and land, from her wealthy family.

<https://www.hieronymus-bosch.org/>

Lee Van Laer²

This presentation is based on the work of Lee van Laer



Plate 2

“Supervisor of various engines of creation”

He was born in Yonkers, New York. He is an artist, musician, photographer, poet, and writer. He is currently one of the senior editors of *Parabola* magazine.

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Before I delve into the topic, it's worth noting that some knowledge of Bosch's work is assumed, but for the beginner, I'm sure this will prove interesting and be a good start to your studies.



Plate 3

The Wayfarer³

Hieronymus Bosch and the search for the inner self.

An esoteric analysis of the painting from the collection of the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam. Painted around the year 1500.

Zen master Dogen referred to his pupils who were just starting out, his monks on the path, as "leavers of home." The term, in Zen, actually has a specific meaning, since it's the first step on a sixfold path that progresses from leavers of home to patch-robed monks, and then to aspirants having the flesh, blood, bones, or marrow of the teaching. Each stage represents a progressive

understanding of the spiritual path, very much like what's depicted in Bosch's *The Adoration of the Magi*.

Although the iconographies are widely divergent, the essential principles are exactly the same: a man passes through an identifiable series of stages in inner development, each of which is known; these are the qualities that take the measurement of who a man is, in an inner sense.

These qualities are reflected in how he appears and behaves outwardly; and this principle of the outer being a reflection of the inner quality—an essential doctrine of Swedenborg's—comes into play as we consider the strong connections between Bosch's works and the famous Middle German folk figure Till Eulenspiegel, whose presence is tangible in most of Bosch's great paintings. Eulenspiegel and Mullah Nassr Eddin represent early traditional versions of "crazy masters," the most recent example of which was the 20th century Tibetan master Chögyam Trungpa. (Some argue that Gurdjieff also fell into this category.)

It may at first glance seem absurd to refer phrases drawn from Zen practice to a Northern Renaissance painting, but the ideas behind such practice are emphatically universal; and in this instance, the comparison is entirely appropriate, because Bosch has gone out of his way to construct a carefully considered allegory of the idea of a man setting out on the path to spiritual discovery: a "leaver of home" in the true esoteric sense of the word.

As in all of Bosch's best paintings, the picture—as simple as it appears to be—is a narrative with a distinct flow and a story to be told.

Like many other Bosch paintings, this piece is divided into realms of action and influence, but the artist has chosen, unusually, to divide the painting vertically rather than horizontally.

The seeker stands between two worlds—placing himself between the earthly world of material life and the spiritual world of wisdom, penitence, and sacrifice. His direction is clearly established; yet he looks back over his shoulder at the world he is leaving behind. And this is no sentimental leave-taking; our seeker is self-aware, confident, sure of his actions. (The idea of standing between two worlds, heaven, and earth, is an ancient one in esoteric traditions.)

The left side of the painting which our seeker looks backwards at represents the natural, or material, world. The house represents the ordinary inner life of man; the container in which his Being resides, and the atmosphere, influences, and environment in which his life takes place.

Because this section contains a good deal of detail, we're going to have to look at it in discrete areas.

The house appears to be an inn or tavern, based on the flag⁴ hung outside. Bosch's flags often represent the influence at work in an area (see the bagpipe flag in the Garden of Earthly Delights, slides 121-123.) Rather than indicating it as a house of ill repute, the symbol reminds us that earthly life is mortal, and that we are travellers passing through life. Any residence the soul takes up is temporary.

We might do well to remember that white ducks, spoonbills, and other water birds take on ominous aspects in the Garden. There, birds of the water represent distinctly lower creatures than birds of the air; and in the Garden they gradually metamorphose into malevolent creatures.



Plates 4 and 5

The presence of a duck⁴ on this flag serves as a warning that all is not right in this environment: inner corruption looms.

Taken as a whole, it's a ramshackle place: barely habitable. A long pole—which has apparently been used to hang a jug⁵ upside-down at the top of the house—rests against the dilapidated eaves.

Against all odds, this apparently irrational object has a likely explanation for its presence.

The top of the house—representing the mind, or inner judgment—is falling apart and open to the elements.



Plate 5

The upside-down jug represents a finished process; also, the pouring out of things of value, an inner emptiness. Hoisting it up to the top of the house upside down is an advertisement: "I'm done here," it says, loudly.



Plate 6

Underwear or bloomers⁶ — intimate laundry — hang listlessly from the upper window, indicating that the laundry has been hung out to dry. Everything about the upper story says something is over, finished.

A caged bird⁷, hinting at stunted freedom and ambition, hangs outside the house.



Plate 7



Plate 8

Next to it, drunken lovers⁸ cavort, indicating that pleasures of the flesh are the only pleasures available here.

An empty, tapped-out barrel⁹ outside suggests that the things of value inside have been used up and a woman peers from a broken window.

In a final comment on the degraded conditions of the homestead, a man urinates¹⁰ against the side of the house, indicating its inherent worthlessness. Here's the man who slung the jug up onto the roof, leaving its contents behind him in a final act of contempt.



Plates 9 and 10

Here is the one dark glint of Bosch's sense of humour. "Enough of this place," he is telling us. "We're outta here."



Plate 11

Images of this kind leave us with little doubt that much of Bosch's humour is inspired by the traditional middle German folk hero Till Eulenspiegel. Eulenspiegel means "owl-mirror"¹¹ in German, that is, a reflected image in which we discover a higher form of wisdom.

The implication is that the owl sees himself — that is, discovers his own wisdom through the recognition of his own image, in other words, self-remembering.

The lurking owls in nearly every one of Bosch's paintings are a direct reference to the higher consciousness and awareness embodied by this folk hero's seemingly ridiculous actions; and

his indisputable connection to the Sufi folk hero Mullah Nassr Eddin, a particular favourite of Gurdjieff's, links into a long-standing tradition of esoteric knowledge expounded by seemingly foolish actions and people. Bosch's irreverent and bizarre sense of humour finds a comfortable and completely traditional home here, placing it firmly in the realm of teaching, rather than tomfoolery.



A mother pig and her piglets¹² seek food in an empty trough.

Although the implication might seem to be one of gluttony, what Bosch is actually saying is that there is no inner food available here. He also uses the white swine as a positive symbol in the Garden

Plate 12 of Earthly Delights, here she crops up again, unable to feed her piglets. The house, the yard, and its surroundings are barren; there is no spiritual sustenance in the earthly life.

How do we know Bosch used white swine to represent the sacred? This sounds a bit ridiculous, right? Yet Bosch confounds our expectations with one surprise after another, doesn't he?



Plate 13

We may not quite know why he chose the swine we only know he did. Here's the most holy figure¹³ in the tantric circle from the Garden of Earthly Delights, and a little closer up¹⁴, he's carrying a white crane, and seated on a white swine.

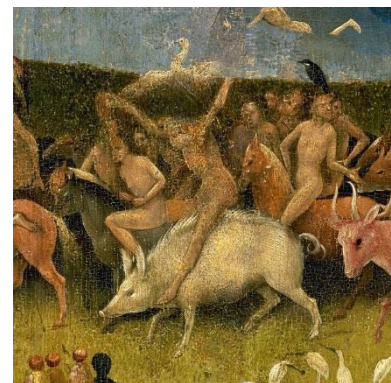


Plate 14

The hound¹⁵ that lurks behind the wayfarer appears to be a possibly malevolent figure; yet we know from the Adoration of the Magi that Bosch uses the hound in the same manner as the unicorn tapestries: to represent a quality of the hunter who seeks Christ.



Plate 15

This particular dog may well have been a family pet belonging to the person who commissioned the painting; the spiked collar may be meant to suggest a fighting dog, one whose persistence is commensurately greater. So, the Wayfarer is, perhaps, thus marked as a man who has acquired the Being needed to embark on a dogged inner quest for salvation.

The centre of the panel is presided over by our old friend the owl¹⁶, who invariably represents the presence of divine wisdom.



Plate 16

Lest we wonder what influence acts throughout the painting, Bosch settles the matter here. Our seeker is under the watchful eye of the Lord; and this adorable little owl steadfastly peers in the direction the wayfarer must travel away from the run-down house of his old life and his ordinary being.



Our traveller cuts a rather dashing figure¹⁷ despite the apparent poverty of his circumstances and garb. Caught mid-stride, we're left with no doubt that he is on his way.

Plate 17 beginning with his kit. He is prepared; he has carefully provisioned himself with the essential tools for an inner search.

In one of those highly improbable yet delightful Bosch moments, the traveller has the most extraordinary thing hanging from his bag: of all things: a cat skin!¹⁸ (poor little kitty!) This is particularly interesting because, in my eyes, it is almost certainly a visual reference to the expression, "there's more than one way to skin a cat." From what I can gather, the first known literary reference to this expression is from John Ray's collection of English proverbs in 1678, but the visual evidence here suggests the expression has earlier origins.



Plates 18, 19 and 20

This isn't, perhaps, particularly surprising; we can surmise that any folk expression worthy of being included in the record by 1678 had been in general circulation for many years, maybe even centuries, beforehand. But the presence of the cat skin here implies that our traveller knows how to skin a cat. He is wise; he is resourceful, and he is above all flexible.

The spoon above¹⁹ the cat indicates that he knows how to feed himself. This is important in light of the fact that the swine back at the inn face an empty trough. Our traveller, on the other hand, is properly equipped to acquire the sustenance he needs during his journey.

The wicker basket²⁰ serves multiple symbolic purposes. First of all, it indicates that our seeker has not yet unburdened himself of worldly baggage and concerns; he is not only weighed down by them, the strap across his chest tells us that he is also restrained by them; and this clever device serves to hold him back visually, indicating that his literal attachment to worldly concerns will hinder him on his journey. The picture is, in other words, a realistic assessment of a man just setting out on his search for his inner self.



Plate 21

Our leaver of home also carries a dagger²¹ with him. While we might expect any traveller to carry a defensive weapon, the dagger is in fact to all appearances the exact same dagger used to prop open the lid of the trunk²² representing the inner self in Death and the Miser.

A close look at the identical and distinctive hilts confirms this; and since the painting is surmised to have originally formed part of a diptych or triptych with the Miser panel, the hypothesis that the dagger connects both the symbolic meanings and the two principle figures of the paintings becomes a powerful one... "same sword, same man." Both daggers, furthermore, are deployed in direct proximity to bags of money, underscoring their symbolic relationship.



Plate 22

The dagger represents a cutting tool, a device that can discriminate, opening the contents of a man's inner life and exposing it for examination. The bags of money²³ represent wealth - whether worldly or inner, the implications are the same.



Plate 23

The difference here is that our wayfarer (the younger version of the miser languishing on his deathbed) has his inner wealth, his purse, dangling from the outside of his garments, an exposed place where a cutpurse might easily make off with it. Our "miser," on the other hand, has his inner wealth firmly stored in a sturdy trunk.

The headgear on both figures provides a bit of further visual support for the idea that they bear a relationship to one another.



Plate 24

This is a sign of respect and submission. Let's recall in the Adoration, the third magus doffs his hat, kneels, and goes bareheaded. It's the sign of a wise man who has finally acquired some real inner, as opposed to worldly, wisdom. The circle with the awl stuck through it indicates that the seeker has hit the mark.

Note the wayfarer's head²⁴ is already covered; yet, oddly, he holds an apparently superfluous second hat²⁵, which he has doffed.



Plate 25

Here, at once in a single figure²⁶, we have a combination of three key stages of the inner search from the Adoration; the doffed hat, the hound that seeks Christ, and the headgear of the penitent hermit. The combination locates the seeker's spiritual aspirations and accomplishments somewhere at the base of the tantric circle of development we see in the Adoration, implying a versatility that has prepared him for the next stage: atonement and sacrifice, in the form of the bull, which we will come to.



Plate 26

Our seeker is no pushover. He carries a shillelagh²⁷, a traditional walking-and-fighting stick made from sloe, or blackthorn, wood. (The plant is known for its savage thorns and is generally used for creating hedges to contain cattle.)



Plate 27

The stick implies that our seeker is a warrior of the spiritual path; and his two mismatched shoes imply an ability to improvise and adapt.

The bandaged leg²⁸ indicates he is no stranger to struggles on the path, which he does not allow to slow his progress.



Plate 28

Finally, we come to one of the most weird, delightful, and striking little details in this painting, in every way as extraordinary as the skinned cat.

There is the foot²⁹ of an animal protruding from the vest of the wayfarer! The fur and cloven hoof are strong indications that the foot is that of a deer. The theme of the huntsman as a seeker of Christ is present here once again, Christ being the Heart of the forest. It underscores the seeker's quest; and the implications are interesting. It suggests he has already acquired a hidden inner relationship with Christ: a secret he conceals from the world, but one that is kept close to his heart.



Plate 29

Moving into the sparsely decorated right hand portion of the painting, Bosch intentionally depopulates the visual field. Our seeker is, after all, moving into the unknown; and the less definitions Bosch gives us here, the better.

There are several important clues to what is going on, however, and one of them crops up in the tree above the action, not far from our little friend the owl. It's a sneaky little detail: and one has to have poured over Bosch at length, and in detail, to understand just what he's done here.

Here we find a chickadee³⁰, in the same position as the exact same bird in the Garden of Earthly Delights. Since Bosch employs a consistent symbolic vocabulary, we can be sure that this bird conveys a symbolic meaning directly related to the bird in the Garden. The bird in the Garden, depicted as an oversized creature of the imagination, represents a superstitious or imaginary belief in God and the afterlife. Shown here in life size, it represents an actual belief, that is, a belief based not on imagination, but a real inner understanding. Rather than hanging from a bone-dry, thorny branch, representing barren ideas, it hangs from verdant greenery, that is, the ideas that support it are alive and growing.



Plate 30



Plate 31

To the right of our seeker lies a stile with a bull³¹. The bull, representing Luke the evangelist and the atonement and sacrifice of Christ, is an indication of the path the seeker is on. He is destined to purify himself through suffering; but he isn't at that stage yet. A gate lies between him and that possibility.

Like the miser's trunk, the gate is prominently marked with the sign of the Holy Trinity in the form of a triangle³² in the top left corner. The right-hand timber of the triangle extends from the top to the bottom of the gate, symbolizing the fact that the Holy Trinity penetrates and influences all levels of effort one must pass through, from the top to the bottom.



Plate 32

This bull is the self-same bull we find in the Adoration, located in the position on the path where sacrifice and purification is needed; and as is usually the case with Bosch, the symbol is applied consistently, with the same general meaning in both pieces.



Plate 33

And in a final example of attention to detail and symbolism, the caged bird³³ we saw on the left-hand side of the painting turns up here on the right side, free and uncaged.

In summary, Bosch hasn't left any doubt as to what his meaning is here: a deft and intriguing summary of a seeker setting out on the path to inner truth.³⁴



Plate 34

Assuming this painting was, indeed, part of a larger whole of which the Death and the Miser formed another part, it appears to be the keynote piece of a whole work consisting of an allegory about man's inner search, and his passage through life. In that case, we can hypothesize that Death and the Miser is the final chapter in that story, and that the man we see here is, in fact, a younger version of the Miser himself.

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Adapted for into a lecture for discussion by Peter Taylor