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Kirsten A. McKinney
University of Richmond, kmckinne@richmond.edu

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The Waking Life of Winsor McCay:
Social Commentary in A Pilgrim’s Progress by Mr. Bunion

By Kirsten A. McKinney

ABSTRACT
This article suggests that comic scholars and historians of American culture take a closer look at Winsor McCay’s A Pilgrim’s Progress by Mister Bunion. Known as the father of animation and the artistic virtuoso behind the classic children’s comic Little Nemo in Slumberland, McCay actually did most of his comic work for adults. Published in the daily The New York Evening Telegram, McCay’s adult works included Dream of the Rarebit Fiend (1904-1911), A Pilgrim’s Progress by Mr. Bunion (1905-1909) and Poor Jake (1909-1911). McCay signed his work for adults as Silas¹ and all three explored themes rooted in a working-class experience. Pilgrim’s Progress is the most focused on these issues, and while it artistically pales in comparison to McCay’s more well-known creations, it contains all of the typical McCay cues: amusements, dime museum entertainers, animals, menacing transportation, and the occasional pratfall. Neither is the strip lacking in excitement and action: Mr. Bunion suffers thievery, explosions, a cyclone, gunfire and continual conks on the head by his valise of Dull Care². Most significantly, the strip includes social commentary by McCay, something not yet common in comics. A thorough reading of Pilgrim’s Progress offers a deeper understanding of early 20th century American culture and who Winsor McCay was as a person, as well as an artist.

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Say the name Winsor McCay and the first response is likely to be, “Ah! Little Nemo!” *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, which ran in *The New York Herald* from 1905 to 1911, is typically the extent of what most people know about comic artist Winsor McCay. Comic aficionados may also be familiar with his other works for children, *Little Sammy Sneeze* and *Hungry Henrietta*. Students of the moving image may revere McCay’s film *Gertie the Dinosaur*, which established him as the father of animation. But for much of the 20th century, McCay’s rich oeuvre was mostly forgotten. In the 1970s and 1980s, through the work of John Canemaker and Judith O’Sullivan, McCay’s important contributions to comic and animation arts were academically studied. Now in the 21st century, thanks to Ulrich Merkl, Winsor McCay’s longest running comic for adults, *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend*, has been fully examined and documented.

In his introduction to *The Complete Dream of the Rarebit Fiend*, Merkl claims that McCay was so attached to his comic that it was “here and only here” that McCay included self-referential content, current events, and personal opinion (Merkl, 2007:52). Merkl’s work is exhaustive and a great gift to the world of comics, but his conclusion that only *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* contained this type of material falls short of accurate. *A Pilgrim’s Progress by Mister Bunion* was as much an “encrypted diary” as *Rarebit*, reflective of both its time and McCay. Historical references, slice-of-life scenarios, stereotypes, slang, and, most important, social commentaries in *Pilgrim’s Progress* all give insight into life at the turn of the century. Aimed at the evening commuter, the comic tackled topics close to the heart of the average middle-class person: financial anxieties, social class, and the speed of a rapidly changing world.

First appearing on June 26, 1905, *Pilgrim’s Progress* ran on Mondays and Thursdays through that year, and then regularly on Tuesdays from May 1906 to May 1909. As a template, McCay used John Bunyan’s 1678 allegorical tale, *The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come; Delivered under the Similitude of a Dream*, often just referred to as *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. In Bunyan’s story, Christian is an everyman on a journey to heaven who carries on his back the burden of his sins. Along the way he meets allegorical characters that give him advice and sometimes even try to divert him from his path. Humorously, McCay names his main character Mr. Bunion, an allusion to the original
author. Mr. Bunion is the modern-day everyman, out in the world, beating the pavement, hustling for a living, all the while carrying his burden, a valise of Dull Care. Like Christian, Mr. Bunion is also looking for a type of heaven, one he refers to as “the Easy Life.” Freedom from everyday tedium is one way to the Easy Life, and Mr. Bunion usually tries to achieve that freedom by doing away with his valise. If he is able to remove the valise in some way, Mr. Bunion escapes to places like Comfortopolis, Restville, and Pleasant Park. These trips are merely a temporary relief and the valise is always returned to his possession by the end of the each strip. Another way to the Easy Life is by enjoying its trappings—namely fine dining. Whenever the valise seems to finally be lost for good, Mr. Bunion celebrates with a fine meal, which he is never able to finish due to the reappearance of the valise. The most obvious and quickest way to the Easy Life is through sudden wealth, and in his pursuit of it Mr. Bunion regularly interacts with the wealthy—where he usually finds that they too have their burdens. The obvious moral of Pilgrim’s Progress is that no one has it easy, we all struggle, and everyone carries some irremovable weight.

Figure 1: A Pilgrim’s Progress by Mister Bunion, Sept. 18, 1905
It is a simple lesson on the human condition, but not the full extent of what can be learned from a careful reading of the comic. Like today, the economic climate of the early 1900s consisted of a noticeable disparity between the very wealthy and everyone else. Americans were managing the fallout from unchecked Gilded Age of industrial growth triggering President Theodore Roosevelt’s reforms to counteract corporate greed and the coining of the term “1%” (Phillips, 1906:4). Like today, society was also becoming more socially responsible on the whole. This was the Progressive Era, when a citizenry emerged that was focused on addressing issues of labor, immigration, and poverty. It is in this environment that McCay created Pilgrim’s Progress and set its action. The comic was popular in syndication, indicating that people across the country could relate to Mr. Bunion. His mishaps with transportation and urban life surely resonated with the evening commuter on a New York streetcar. His struggle with fatigue and the daily grind certainly found understanding with the laborer in Wheeling, and his desire for wealth and prosperity were likely shared with the department store clerk in Los Angeles. A Pilgrim’s Progress by Mr. Bunion should interest historians since it was reflective of its time. Additionally, its use of social commentary in comics nominates it as a prime candidate for further study by comic scholars.

A compelling and often used theme in Pilgrim’s Progress is the economic disparity between classes. In the 1800s, industrial expansion resulted in new social divisions, namely the creation of the working or middle class. In the early 1900s, the middle class bifurcated into “white-collar” office workers and “blue-collar” laborers (Roth, 2011). McCay explored this relatively new stratification through Mr. Bunion’s struggle to understand it and elevate his place in society. An early Pilgrim’s Progress from September 18, 1905, is a good example (Fig.1). Standing outside of Chanceville, Mr. Bunion decides to go in and take a look around. A jollier walks by, escorted by a woman with money signs on her dress. A large man wearing a checkered suit and carrying a giant corkscrew passes and Mr. Bunion wonders out loud, “Why can’t I have a pull?” Then along comes a knocker carrying large mallets, and then a gentleman with a silver spoon almost the same size as himself. Mr. Bunion is taking it all in, the happy life of the wealthy in Chanceville, until Mr. Hog chases him out, yelling “We don’t want you here!” As he begins to walk along the Rocky Road again, carrying his valise of Dull Care, he
passes a sign that says, “The Road That Has No Turn.” Mr. Bunion mutters, “There’s no chance for me, nope. I’ve just got to keep slugging along.” The commentary by McCay here is that Mr. Bunion and those of his ilk, whether because of breeding, inadequate wealth, or simply a lack of panache, will never be able to move into a higher echelon of society. Wealth is a product of chance and a place that most people can only visit.

The role of chance is featured prominently in Pilgrim’s Progress. It is the focal reason that Mr. Bunion has his fair share of missed opportunities and twists of fate, rarely in his favor. As the adage goes, there are many explanations for failure, but none needed for success, and one of the major explanations for Mr. Bunion’s failure in Pilgrim’s Progress is his simple lack of luck. He is referred to, and often refers to himself, as a Jonah⁵, a person who is cursed or a talisman of bad luck. At times, other characters are Jonahs and in some cases Mr. Bunion refers to Dull Care as a Jonah. The explanation for Mr. Bunion’s continued bad luck is simply that fate has determined his course. But his journey is Sisyphus-like, and he is not deterred from trying to obtain a wealthier, easier life.

Mr. Bunion experiences chance and visits wealth again in an August 6, 1907, strip where he is

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Figure 2: A Pilgrim’s Progress by Mister Bunion, Aug. 6, 1907
invited to a society reception (Fig.2). In the first panel, he is preening in front of his washstand, and decides to “leave old Dull Care behind…for if there is anytime or place where Dull Care is not, it is at a gathering of the wealthy, cultured, refined and the beautiful!” As the reception host introduces Mr. Bunion to Mr. and Mrs. Wealth, and Mr. and Mrs. Culture, Mr. Bunion is taken aback by their unattractiveness. Mr. and Mrs. Talent and Mr. and Mrs. Refinement are equally unsightly. In disbelief, Mr. Bunion asks, “Where are the Beauties?” and his host responds, “Mr. and Mrs. Beauty sent their regrets.” In the last panel, Mr. Bunion is home and thankful, exclaiming, “How good the old valise looks to me! I don’t know whether I am going or coming! Gosh! I am tired!” His societal perceptions askew, Mr. Bunion finds Dull Care’s normalcy appealing and comforting. The use of comparison and opposites are a common technique for McCay in Pilgrim’s Progress, and Mr. Bunion often meets people who either are or wish they were the opposite of how they view themselves. If they are fat, they wish to be thin; if they are busy they wish to be resting; married wish to be single; etc. By seeing the opposites and comparing his life and burden to others, Mr. Bunion, although penniless and tired, comes out the better for knowing his place in the world.

Mr. Bunion frequently comes to this conclusion after meeting many different characters along the Rocky Road. Men and women from different levels of society interact with Mr. Bunion, from a rag picker to millionaires. McCay uses this cast for comparison and as metaphors, but another of their lasting contributions to the comic is archaeological. Characters specific to the time add color to the picture of life in urban America, from vaudeville managers to phrenologists, from streetcar operators to an ocean high-diver. In one episode, a man explains the new X-ray machine to Mr. Bunion by using it to examine the valise. In another, men are playing Faro, a card game popular at the time, and experience a shift in luck when Mr. Bunion enters the room. Painfully, certain characters highlight accepted forms of racism during McCay’s lifetime, represented through his stereotypical treatment of African-Americans, Native-Americans, and the Chinese proprietors of an opium den.
Mr. Bunion’s dress is also reflective of the time. McCay draws Bunion out of fashion, dressed in a ridiculously tall stovepipe top hat, a style that was replaced by derbies and bowlers in the 1900s. As David Barringer explains in *Top Hats and Tales*, the top hat survived in the 20th century mostly as a symbol, its meaning derived from “its use as a social prop of the rich, the upper class, those who feel themselves to be superior.” (Barringer, 2008) Mr. Bunion’s perceptions of the wealthy as people who are superior and live a dignified life of ease is reflected in his wardrobe. Mr. Bunion vacillates between the rich and powerful, and the middle-class realities of his own life. He is dressing the part in hopes of achieving wealth and respect, but he remains just old Dull Care.

In addition to dress, McCay’s use of current events in New York and the United States is also insightful. In the eighth *Pilgrim’s Progress*, appearing August 7, 1905, Mr. Bunion buries his valise so he can retire and calls a cab to dine at the Joy Club. Meanwhile, as workers are digging for the new subway, they find the valise. The first subway line opened in New York only one-year prior in 1904. Later, in September 1906, McCay has Mr. Bunion spend two weeks in Cuba, drawing on the recent occupation of Cuba by the U.S., which started that same month. On October 15, 1907, Mr. Bunion is at the New York Harbor watching the arrival of the Lusitania, “the monster boat that has smashed the record” (Fig.3). As the boat nears, and Mr. Bunion exclaims at her size, he wonders if the boat could

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Figure 3: *A Pilgrim's Progress by Mister Bunion*, Oct. 15, 1907
also smash the valise. Workers warn him to stand back, but Mr. Bunion slips the valise in between the boat and the dock, to no avail. “Think of the pressure on that valise,” says Mr. Bunion, “and no good result.” References to happenings in culture can be found throughout Pilgrim’s Progress, such as Mr. Bunion’s flying machine, mentions of the North and South poles (popular sites of exploration), and a hunting trip with President Theodore Roosevelt. In scenarios like this, McCay made Pilgrim’s Progress accessible to readers of his time and preserved that time period for future generations.

As if he were aware of this, McCay jokingly traces the history of Dull Care in an episode of Pilgrim’s Progress where Mr. Bunion visits the Historical Society (Fig. 4). He views the bag carried by John Smith at Plymouth Rock, imprinted with Dull Care, as well as other Dull Care artifacts: a Babylonian crown, a 9,000-year-old sculpture, a Chinese tapestry, an Egyptian slab, and a Stone Age vessel. In the last panel, he asks the curator if he has any relics of Adam, to which the man responds, “Nothing, except for some boulders we are now gathering from a well-beaten path in the Garden of Eden. He carried a great burden, apparently.” McCay’s message is clear: Dull Care is eternally linked to the human race.

Each of us carries our own valise of Dull Care and McCay’s was filled with a personal type of...
economic inequality—he was a “have not” constantly striving to be one of the “haves.” McCay brought in very high wages for the time; in fact, the average American made in one year what he brought home in one half-week\(^9\) and if wage alone determined status, McCay would certainly have been upper class. But as McCay’s biographer John Canemaker notes, “neither Winsor nor [his wife] Maude saved or invested any substantial amount of money from all his years of large earnings. Despite the continuous flow of cash through their hands, money was always a prime source of irritation between the couple.” (Canemaker, 2005:15) As McCay’s star rose and his fame as a comic artist and vaudeville performer grew, he and his family became accustomed to a lifestyle generally out of their means. Therefore, McCay worked more, churning out multiple comics a week, performing often throughout the year, and negotiating for spinoffs in all forms. His comic art became a monotony, but one which afforded him multiple residences, a dapper wardrobe, and the ability to pay his wife’s hat bills.

McCay frames his monotony inside the panels of *A Pilgrim’s Progress by Mister Bunion*. Mr. Bunion, dressed out of fashion, is kind but burdened and forced by fate to carry his valise of Dull Care. While scheming to rid himself of the valise he observes the burdens of others and after comparing their problems with his own, often comes away more appreciative of his lot in life. Like Mr. Bunion, McCay was known for his dress. He was an impeccable dresser, completely kitted out even at the drawing table. Like Mr. Bunion, McCay dressed the part of the wealthy man, but worked constantly to maintain that façade. Both Mr. Bunion and McCay oscillated between the world above their means and their own middle-class actualities.

One of the most interesting perspectives on McCay is how common juxtaposition was to his personality. Canemaker calls the life of McCay paradoxically torn, listing all of the ways in which McCay’s personality often contradicted his actions, from being a shy person but performing in vaudeville, to earning a fortune but lacking the business sense to manage it during his lifetime (Canemaker, 2005:259). In turn, Mr. Bunion is constantly in a state of juxtaposition as well—he dislikes his life, himself, and his burden until he sees the lives of others and by comparison finds his own to be more agreeable. When reading the whole of *Pilgrim’s Progress* through the lens of social structure, it is difficult not to see it as a dark-humored, illustrated
narrative of McCay’s own struggles with the broken promise of social climbing and wealth. Contrary to Merkl’s conclusion, *Pilgrim’s Progress* also contains self-referential content. For example, two episodes draw on his theatrical experience. In June 1906, Mr. Bunion goes to the theater to forget his burden and be amused. The week before, on June 12, McCay had his theatrical debut at Proctor’s (Canemaker, 2005:131). In another strip one year later, two rival vaudeville theater owners offer Mr. Bunion a chance to do a monologue on their individual circuits. He picks one and gets great reviews, but then the two owners join ways and cancel his act. At the time, McCay was traveling extensively on the vaudeville circuit run by F.F. Proctor. Proctor’s rival, B.F. Keith, had secured cartoonist Richard Outcault, the creator of *Buster Brown* (Canemaker, 2005:135). In April 1907, Keith and Proctor joined forces and, no doubt, McCay feared either he or Outcault would be relieved. Unlike Mr. Bunion, however, both continued to tour.

McCay’s appearances in vaudeville were well known and his use of theatrical conventions in *Pilgrim’s Progress* adds another layer of self-reference. His use of props is evident throughout, but the valise of Dull Care is a prop elevated to the point of being character. Another prop that McCay has “speak” to the audience is the newspaper. As Mr. Bunion reads *The Daily Scowl*, its headlines inform

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*Figure 5: A Pilgrim’s Progress by Mister Bunion, Oct. 19, 1905*
readers as to exactly what happened when subway workers dug up Mr. Bunion’s valise. In the October 19, 1905, episode, the newspaper is actually commenting on a conversation regarding Mrs. Bunion’s shopping habits and the current economic situation. The newspaper itself is almost doing an aside to the reader. Another technique McCay uses is known in the theatre as “breaking the fourth wall,” where the actor will turn and directly address the audience, essentially checking in with the observers. Mr. Bunion will occasionally do this, aligning himself with McCay’s readers as if we are all in this together.

The most obvious self-reference happened on May 4, 1909, the last Pilgrim’s Progress. Mr. Bunion visits Silas (McCay) at his drawing board and requests that Silas stop drawing him. Silas argues that Mr. Bunion has friends and that the comic is amusing. Mr. Bunion responds, “Yes. But it was laughter through tears and above the heads of a great many people.” He continues reasoning that Silas will never be able to rid him from the valise and should therefore try a new idea. In the last panel, as Silas says goodbye, Mr. Bunion walks off into the future, represented by darkness, and exclaims, “Don’t mind me! I’ll keep plodding on alone! I don’t mind!” In this strip we see McCay literally have an argument with himself, as Silas maintains that the strip is popular enough to keep going and Mr. Bunion

![Final episode of A Pilgrim's Progress by Mister Bunion, May 4, 1909](image)

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**Figure 6**: Final episode of *A Pilgrim's Progress* by Mister Bunion, May 4, 1909
rationalizes the reasons he should be left to go on alone. Mr. Bunion won the argument because this was in fact the last episode of *A Pilgrim’s Progress by Mister Bunion*.  

*A Pilgrim’s Progress by Mister Bunion* was as much an “encrypted diary” as *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend*, and may even be seen as the darker, more thoughtful side of McCay. Newspaper legend Arthur Brisbane notoriously called McCay “a serious fellow” and McCay himself, in an article that appeared in *The New York Evening Telegram* in September 1905, stated, “In the first place, I am not a funny man. I am not a humorist. I am a plain, ordinary newspaper artist, and that is distinctly a sad affair.” (McCay, 1905:11) It would not be the last time McCay addressed the audience of the *Evening Telegram* as himself and, as with later articles, the majority of it is written tongue-in-cheek. McCay was far from ordinary or plain when it came to his artistic capabilities, but his insistence on being serious may have been sincere.

One of the saving graces of Mr. Bunion, and in turn McCay, is that *Pilgrim’s Progress* is not merely a man complaining about his lot in life. While there are real moral and heartfelt struggles represented in the strip, it is not completely devoid of joy. In what would be about halfway through the run of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Mr. Bunion has all but given up and is considering suicide by drinking rat poison. A courier labeled FATE shows up with a delivery for Mr. Bunion. It is a fine umbrella that when opened is labeled HOPE. Mr. Bunion immediately feels better. He carries the umbrella in subsequent comics, where it becomes the counterbalance to Dull Care. In one episode the Hope Umbrella saves Mr. Bunion from a charging bear, but for the most part it is simply Mr. Bunion’s fine umbrella that he carries along with the valise, representing the indomitable human spirit to those in the know.

At the end of certain strips and the end of the comic, Mr. Bunion is happy for his small Dull Care. The struggle of Mr. Bunion has been left largely unwritten in comic history—the focus being on McCay’s more artistic and overtly valuable accomplishments. But Mr. Bunion has a lot to teach us about the human condition and the struggles of the middle class in early 20th century America. If nothing else, Mr. Bunion and McCay are sympathetic friends in the journey we each take in managing our own Dull Care.
Why Winsor McCay signed his comics for adults as Silas is up for debate. Some scholars say it was a suggestion by the Herald and Telegram owner James Gordon Bennett, Jr. as a way to differentiate from McCay’s work for children and others feel that it may be a reworking of the word “alias.” McCay claimed that the name was taken in honor of a man he had worked with in the dime museums and that his using it instead of his given name was a contractual issue, which is a confusing explanation since Bennett owned both papers.

The term Dull Care seems to have first appeared in the early 19th century. Closer to McCay’s time, it was used by a secret society, The Bohemian Grove. Started in 1872 by newspapermen in San Francisco, The Bohemian Grove, which is still in existence today, is composed entirely of men, and the roster over the years has included leaders of industry and U.S. presidents. Every year, the society meets for a midsummer, two-week retreat spent camping on their private land amongst the redwoods in northern California. The retreat begins with an evening event known as The Cremation of Dull Care, wherein “Dull Care,” represented by a dummy of the human form, is burned in effigy at the height of a druid-like ceremony. The Bohemian Grove members leave their responsibilities, concerns, and most important, business matters behind, an act symbolically represented by this opening rite. While today it is difficult to find common use of the term “dull care” outside of Bohemian Grove references, given McCay’s audience, his use of it suggests that it was at least a commonly understood concept.

A social person, jovial. (Oxford English Dictionary)

A fault-finder, one who is addicted to captious criticism. (Oxford English Dictionary)

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a Jonah is “any person or object which is deemed to cause bad luck; a jinx.” (OED) As a noun, it originally referred to a person on a shipboard who brings ill luck, referencing the biblical character of Jonah. As a verb, it dates to 1897 and simply means to bring ill luck. McCay used the term both as a noun and a verb in Pilgrim’s Progress.

The New York Evening Telegram, October 23, 1906.


McCay was fond of the Lusitania and also featured it in a September 28, 1907 Dream of the Rarebit Fiend. Like most Americans, McCay was outraged by its sinking in 1915. His animated film The Sinking of the Lusitania took two years to complete and was “primarily fired by patriotic zeal” (Canemaker, 2005:187).

In a 1911 study, Phillip Nearing concluded that adult male wage workers in the Northeastern United States received a total average annual salary between $600-$750, depending upon the industry and skill level (Nearing, 1911:208). By 1908, McCay was making $1000 per week from his comics and about $500 per week in vaudeville (Canemaker, 2005:129, 132).

In her 1976 dissertation, Judith O’Sullivan included A Pilgrim’s Progress by Mister Bunion in her catalog raisonné of McCay’s work. Her source material was Library of Congress microfilm of the Wheeling, W.V., Wheeling Gazette, which was running the comic in syndication. This explains the confused end dates for Pilgrim’s Progress, since Wheeling Gazette appears to have published the comic well into 1910. The last A Pilgrim’s Progress By Mister Bunion ran in The New York Evening Telegram on May 4, 1909.
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Kirsten A. McKinney lives in Richmond, VA and holds a Masters of Liberal Arts degree from the University of Richmond. Her research has focused on 20th century American art and culture. As part of this research she compiled a complete catalog of *A Pilgrim’s Progress by Mister Bunion*, including scans from *The New York Evening Telegram* and full transcriptions. The catalog is available at pilgrims-progress.richmond.edu.