Pragmatism in E.M. Forster’s “The Celestial Omnibus”

In 1911 Edward Morgan Forester published a short story titled “The Celestial Omnibus.” The story is about a boy who finds a carriage that takes him to a sort of literary heaven, and what happens when he returns home and tries to tell other people about what he found. When Forester talked about this short story and the collection of stories that were published alongside it, he said that he “liked them better than [his] long books” and that he “would rather people praised [the short stories] than anything else [he] wrote” (Hai). This was a work that he had a lot of pride in and wanted people to enjoy. The problem with the short story and the collection that they were published with is that most critics fall in line with the thought that this was a way for Forester to push his pro-homosexual views onto the reader and the world at large. Ambreen Hai commented that the short story “encodes a covert politics […] that addresses homosexual desire and links it […] to societal oppression such as of race, class, and gender” (“Forster and the Fantastic”). This view that “The Celestial Omnibus” is pushing a homosexual agenda is pretty dark for this light-hearted story about a boy going to literary heaven. In fact, I feel that the story has a much more pragmatic, or practical, view to offer the world than a homosexual agenda. I feel that the story shows how literature can illuminate truth about the world, and that literature should be studied in heart and spirit rather than simply memorizing stories and facts about authors. Bruce Clark comments that the story is an allegory of how to look at and view literature. He says “we see Mr. Bons representing one approach (the wrong one) to literature, and the boy as representing another approach (the right one)” (Out of the Best Books) This view that things should be pragmatic, useful, and functional was a significant belief of William James. James, a philosopher and psychology contemporary of Forester, thought that things should have a useful purpose, and not merely be ornamental. Using William James’ theory of pragmatism, I will show that “The
Celestial Omnibus” has a very practical look on literature, shows that literature should not be merely ornamental, and proves that the story has more to offer the world than homosexual propaganda.

The first thing that Forester does to show how literature should be pragmatic is by giving the short story a very pragmatic title. An omnibus is a public transportation device that takes its patrons from one destination to another and then back again; in this case it is from “Buckingham Park Road, Surbiton” to heaven (“The Celestial Omnibus”). Throughout the whole story, the characters are either talking about whether or not it exists or they are actually riding it. Even though the story’s plot is about going to a literary heaven, the omnibus is the focal point of every scene. Forster named the short story about exactly what the story is about. There is no lofty title that the reader has to ponder over, nor does the title talk about heaven, a place where the story spends almost no time. The story is about the omnibus, making this a very pragmatic title. On top of that the story itself is a celestial omnibus, because it is a means to transport the reader from a lower level of literary evaluation to a higher level. Forester successfully utilizes James’ pragmatic theory in the title of his work; “The Celestial Omnibus” shows function over form by telling the reader exactly what the story is about before they even start reading (James). The simplicity and pragmatism of the title shows that literature should be practical to the reader and avoid being ornamental.

The next step that Forster takes to show how literature should be pragmatic is through the character known only as “the boy,” and Mr. Bons. The boy is the one who sees the sign advertising the omnibus and wants to know if the omnibus exists. He asks his mom, who tells him that the sign was put up as a joke. The boy, thinking that the sign has to mean more than a simple joke, asks Mr. Bons about the sign. This first interaction between the two main characters
is where the story starts to show how literature should be used pragmatically. The boy asks Mr. Bons about the sign which advertises the omnibus and who put it up, and Mr. Bons replies that he does not know much about it but is pretty sure it was a man named Shelly. He then asks the boy if he has heard of him. This isn’t a case where Mr. Bons is trying to be helpful; this is where a grown man is trying to insult and demean a young boy. When the boy replies that he does not know who Shelly is, Mr. Bons asks “But is there no Shelley in the house?” (“The Celestial Omnibus”) This causes the boy’s mother to reply “Dear Mr. Bons, we aren’t such Philistines as that. [There are] two at the least”. Saying that someone is a Philistine is a way to say that a person is uneducated or that they lacked culture. If the mother felt the need to say that the boy’s family had at least two Shellys in the house, then she felt the need to say that they were cultured to the point where they would have multiple copies of the same book. Mr. Bons replies “I believe we have seven Shelley”. This shows that he didn’t care at all about educating the boy about Shelly, he just cared that he was educated and cultured to the point that he would have seven Shelly—as if the more copies a person had, the more cultured they were. At the end of the conversation, no one has really answered the boy’s question and all Mr. Bons has done is to belittle a young boy to make himself look better. Both the boy’s mother and Mr. Bons treat literature as if it is nothing more than a decoration, or a means to show that someone is beneath them if they do not know about an author or literary work. What is funny is that they are talking about the author who wrote “Ozymandias,” a whole poem about a person trying to use his possessions as a way to show how great they are. Mr. Bons and the mother are acting just like the character in the poem—they think that their worldly possessions are equated to their personal worth. By caring more about owning multiple copies of the book than the knowledge contained
in the book the mother and Mr. Bons are showing that ornamental value is more important than literary value.

James wouldn’t agree with the thought of ornamental works, and he certainly wouldn’t agree with the thought that a whole story is just a way to push a hidden agenda such as homosexual propaganda. One of the major criticisms of Forster is that he is a homosexual, and that he is trying to push his views onto the world. The whole story is about an adventure that the boy and Mr. Bons share. There are no conversations between the two that can be confused for a double entendre and there are no blatant declarations of homosexual lusts. Forster has written a story that shows that there should be less Mr. Bonses in the world and more boys when it comes to literature. That people should read literature in order to get something useful out of it, not to aggrandize a person’s ego.

This short story is not a device to express homosexual themes, nor does the story have a dark message that it is secretly trying to share with the world. It is a story about a boy that goes to heaven and finds that it is a wonderful place to be. The story shows that readers and critics do not need to be arrogant when they talk about literature, that literature should not be lofty and unreachable, but that it should accessible to everyone just like an omnibus should be. In the end the arrogance and lofty talk of Mr. Bons is what gets him killed. While this will not lead to physical death for the reader, it will lead to a literary death for them where they will lose sight of how literature should and can be useful and pragmatic.
Works Cited


---“Discussion of ‘The Celestial Omnibus.’”
