



Morpheus
Literary Magazine

HEIDELBERG UNIVERSITY FALL 2016



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Staff



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Carly Evans
Anna Freidin, Publicity
Tanner Gitcheff
Cameron Godsey
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Rachel James, Layout Director
Ethan Miller, Publicity
Rachel Peters, Layout Director
Haley Sterling
Hannah Taulbee, Editor-in-Chief

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Faculty Advisor, David Kimmel
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Staff & Contest Winners

Kassandra Christner | *Morpheus Staff*

Kassandra Christner is a freshman at Heidelberg majoring in English (Writing), from Wilmot Ohio. She loves music and she usually enjoys writing essays and any fiction that's not fantasy or scifi.

Carly Evans | *Morpheus Staff, 3rd Place Short Story*

I am majoring in English with a concentration in writing and minoring in history, and I plan to earn my MBA here at Heidelberg University. I am part of the Honors Program, Morpheus, and I work with the theatre department's scene and costume shops. I hope one day to expand on my Cain and Alec story to write a full novel about the life of the brothers.

Anna Freidin | *Morpheus Publicity Chair*

In regards to Morpheus I am in charge of the Publicity and Social Media. I am a senior English Literature major with a minor in writing. I have studied abroad literature at Trinity College Dublin for a full year. I am planning on perusing a publishing postgraduate degree in either Ireland, Scotland, or England this coming fall.

Tanner Gitcheff | *Morpheus Staff, Contributor*

Tanner is a freshman here at Heidelberg this year who loves to read! He's a rookie when it comes to writing though, because despite every narrative essay he's written, he's dumped about 10 short stories, one of which involved a fanfic about unrequited/forbidden love between two male Disney dogs. He has also written (and completed) a few narrative essays about emotional times in his life that he thinks has shaped him into the man he is today. With these stories and essays, Tanner is a writer who believes that emotion is "the key."

Kelsey Griffin | *Poetry Honorable Mention*

I am from Farmington Hills, Michigan, but I have been able to call Ohio, more specifically Heidelberg, my new home since I stepped foot on campus in the fall of 2014. I have studied Criminology & Psychology and am proud to be graduating this year! I will be continuing my education in our MBA program. My piece reflects on my high school graduation as I am heading towards graduation again in May. My mother gave me her



class ring to wear when I walked the stage, and it meant so much to me. I treasure the things that are passed down to me in my family, but I also treasure that I am the first in my immediate family to go to college and graduate. My mom graduated high school and started her family 2 years after, and my dad, a few years older than my mom, was established as a mechanic after graduating from a trade school. I have so much pride in what I have accomplished in my family.

Rachel James | *Morpheus Staff, 3rd Place Poetry*

I am a junior majoring in Psychology and minoring in Writing. I am very happy to be apart of Morpheus that encourages everyone to write and share idea in such a unique way.

Chelsea Jones | *2nd Place Short Story*

I am a single mom working on a Bachelor's Degree in English Writing. My creative pieces often have a darker edge and I hope to become a published author one day. The Shadow of a Mistake came from being stressed about not having an idea for a creative piece. So I used that stress to create the character Jason and his enemy, his creation.

Ericka Kaimer | *Morpheus Cover Designer*

I am an English Writing major and have a passion for the arts and drawing especially. Currently, I am engulfed in many literature and writing based classes while also maintaining my classes for the MBA program I plan on completing during my fifth year. Along with my artistic visions, I am also an athlete on the Berg's Track and Field Team. When I was asked to design the cover for the Morpheus, I immediately thought of the tree that is pictured on the front and knew that watercolors would be the best way to make my vision complete. I thoroughly enjoyed creating this Fall 2016 cover, it further developed my skills as an artist.

Dr. Kimmel | *Morpheus Faculty Advisor*

Dr. David Kimmel is Professor of English and current Chairperson of the English Department. Before signing on with the Morpheus, he worked as Second Assistant Ferret Trainer in all of Keanu Reeves' movies.

Anika Maiberger | *2nd Place Poetry*

My name is Anika and I'm a senior English Literature major with a German minor. Like most of my writing, lots of my work is influenced by my study abroad experience and having been in Europe for almost a year, Absinth came up a lot amongst other American



college students-as you could imagine. “Sip at your own Risk” was a love poem I wrote for Dr. Reyer’s Creative Writing course and according to him it’s pretty “groovy”. I hope you think so too!

Ethan Miller | *Morpheus Publicity Chair*

I’m a freshman English writing major with a literature and theater minor. As you can see, reading and writing are two of my biggest passions. Morpheus allows me to participate in those hobbies I love. But with Morpheus, reading and writing are more than just hobbies. They are the glue that allows us to personally express ourselves to each other and be who we are. For that reason, I’m immensely grateful to be a part of this group.

Sarah Miller | *1st Place Poetry, 1st Place Short Story, 1st Place Literary Essay, 3rd Place Literary Essay*

I am a senior at Heidelberg, double majoring in English writing and environmental science. When I graduate, I hope to use my writing major to benefit the environment, such as by writing grants. Before graduating, I am staying to complete the MBA program and I hope to open a small business. Most of the pieces that I entered into the Morpheus contest centered on a theme of nature, as these are the easiest for me to write. My favorite piece that I have written is “Every Tree has It’s Enemy, Few have an Advocate”, which is an ecocriticism of The Lord of The Rings. Most of my poetry also centers on the natural world and its fleeting beauty. I enjoy being able to combine my love for writing with my love for the environment, and I hope that someday I will be able to use it to bring about some positive change.

Rachel Peters | *Morpheus Layout Director, 2nd Place Essay, Short Story Honorable Mention*

Rachel Peters is in her third year at Heidelberg, and this is her second year as a Layout Director for Morpheus. She is double-majoring in English Writing and AYA Language Arts Education and is currently participating in Partners for Academic Coaching for Excellence (PACE). Most of the time, she prefers to write longer stories, but the short story included in this issue, “The Ascension,” is her favorite of her shorter pieces.

Haley Sterling | *Morpheus Staff*

I’m Haley Sterling and I’m from Northwood, Ohio. Writing has been my passion for many years now, fiction being my go-to genre.



Hannah Taulbee | *Morpheus* Editor-in-Chief

Hello! I am a senior English writing and Political Science double major, and this is my second year as Editor in Chief for the *Morpheus*.

Letter from the Editor

Hannah Taulbee

Hello!

To start things off, I would like to extend a large “thank you” on behalf of *Morpheus* to all those who entered our Fall Writing Contest this year. It takes courage to not only write and complete a piece, but to let others see and critique that work. Thank you for trusting us, and please feel free to join us during our weekly meetings or other activities.

I have been very involved on campus through my three and half years at Heidelberg, but *Morpheus* is easily the hardest thing to leave behind. When *Morpheus* once again became a student-run organization separate from the Writing Capstone requirements in the Fall of 2014, I’m not sure anyone knew what was going to happen. Still, we did our best and I’m so proud of what it has become. Being able to work on this magazine and watch it grow from a small group to a dynamic mix of majors has been a gift I want to share with everyone, and this issue does just that.

So, please enjoy our second Fall Issue in *Morpheus* history! And thank you for the amazing opportunity to share it with you.



Poetry at the Berg

Hannah Taulbee

On October 14 and 15, Heidelberg University hosted the 79th annual Ohio Poetry Day in Pfeleiderer Hall, welcoming Kansas poet laureate Eric McHenry, Ohio Poet of the Year Maggie Smith, and poets from all corners of the state.

McHenry, who was named Poet Laureate of Kansas in 2015, visited a handful of classes Thursday afternoon and Friday morning, where he shared his experiences as a published writer and Poet Laureate. McHenry's work has been published in Poetry International, Slate, and the Yale Review. He currently holds a position as Associate Professor of English at Washburn University, teaching and writing poetry.

During his visits, McHenry offered advice for both creative and academic writing, while still focusing on poetry. To battle writer's block, when possible, choose a topic you're interested in, or something that you can get worked up about. Remember that the basic formula consists of an opinion and the reasons behind it, while also including the opposing opinion. Lastly, take time away from the piece and focus on other things, giving yourself an opportunity to return to it with a different state of mind.

On the topic of poetry itself, McHenry commented that the goal of poetry, like other forms of literature, is to engage the reader by creating a relatable emotion or experience in an entirely new way. "You've

got to willfully push yourself toward nonsense," McHenry advised writers of any level. By pushing yourself toward nonsense, he explained, you open yourself up to connections and move away from the ready clichés of the language, which can lead to ideas never considered before.

Creative writing, in general, is "all about original expression", finding new ways to communicate. As most writers are aware, it is important to "show, not tell" and taking time to practice writing for fun, giving yourself a fun or ridiculous prompt, is a great way to do that, and keep the nonsense flowing. Writing can help as a form of stress relief, as well as improve reading skills. McHenry remarked that writing creatively and teaching composition "compliment my writing and have made me a more discerning reader."

McHenry held an open poetry workshop during his visit in which he met with a handful of students to work on their own pieces and give objective feedback. He was also the guest poet during the opening Ohio Poetry Day activities, reading from his newest book, *Odd Evening*, and leading an overnight contest to write poems with a familial theme for those in attendance.

There were more activities held throughout the following day, including a book display and sale, a workshop with Heidelberg's Dr. Bradley featuring the workshop winner poems, and a read-



ing by the Ohio Poet of the Year, Maggie Smith, from her most recent book *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison*. Smith is a Columbus native, who resides in Bexley, Ohio. She is the author of three chapbooks and the full-length collection *Lamp of the Body* (Red Hen Press). Smith holds degrees from Ohio Wesleyan (B.A.) and the Ohio State University (M.F.A.) She has served as lecturer at Gettysburg College and is now a freelance writer. Smith has received awards from The National Endowment for the Arts, Sustainable Arts, and was recognized with an Ohio Arts Council award for individual excellence.

After the reading, all winners of recent contests, whether state or national, had a chance to read to the group and prizes were awarded for the overnight contests.





Fate of a Flower

Sarah Miller

“We were driving the river road.”*
Suddenly, a moment froze -
Snapshot of a single frame,
Capturing the sunlight’s reflection.
Dew shimmering on fallen leaves
In morning’s timid light.

My eyes blinked once -
Entrapping the golden image of
A late blooming flower,
Seeded by fate on the roadside -
Pleasuring me with its life
And short-lived vibrancy.

Bright spark in my morning,
An imprinted memory.
Pushing up through fall leaves -
Entering into chilly fall air, and
Greeting me with the warmth of
Yellow petals.

*First line from William Stafford’s *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* (Graywolf Press, 1998).



Sip at Your Own Risk

Anika Maiburger

Did I drink you in,
Or was it a shot of Absinth?
You haunt me like a sin.
Falling for you was an accident.

Green like your envy
Of imaginary threats.
Always searching for a remedy
To the scalding fire in my chest.

We could have made it last-
If I believed you had any aspirations.
Stop living your life in the past
Our dreams of forever were hallucinations.

When I start to question if I made a mistake
I remind myself of that crippling hangover.
Thank God I have friends who force me to wake
And encourage me to stay sober.



The Mirror

Rachel James

I find myself staring into the mirror,
And she always stares back at me.
The woman who lives behind the glass.
We are copies of the other.

She highlights all my faults and flaws,
A perfect picture of imperfection
A dark shadow of my insecurities,
That follows me wherever I go.

She is a tormentor of my mind.
She drags me down into the deep waters,
Just as I am feeling like I can float.
She is always looking back, always watching.

But I do not have to give her power.
She does not have to control me.
She cannot live without me.
I can.

I will look into the her glassy prison,
And have no fear.
I can clear the darkness away,
And let my light shine in.



Glory of a First Generation

Kelsey Griffin

When I was a little girl,
my momma told me –
“Go to school. Get good grades,”
and I did.

I found her class ring
John Glenn, Class of ‘92.
I wore it with pride
as I walked across the stage.

So vintage, my friends said,
but it meant more than that.
At 18, my mom was working –
18 meant opportunity for me.

New faces, new places.

A walk across the stage,
about 12 years long,
a move of a tassel
from right, to left.

I grabbed my diploma
And the old ring glimmered
I smiled.
Not for the camera

But because the ring from ‘92 meant more to me.



What I Wish

Anonymous

What I wish I could tell my professors is that I hate going to class. I wish I could love classes but I have reasons why I simply cannot.

What I wish I could tell my professors is that I love learning. Learning is my absolute passion. It gives me fire to continue to breathe. Learning is my oxygen.

What I wish I could tell my professors is that I have had this love for a long time. I have always known that I loved to collect information the same way that students on the playground would love to take a break.

What I wish I could tell my professors is that I was once very open about my learning. I knew more than anyone in my entire class.

What I wish I could tell my professors is that it wasn't really a good thing.

What I wish I could tell my professors is that at a young age I was told "slow down, you're learning too fast." But how can I learn too fast when there's so many things that are unknown?

What I wish I could tell my professors is that I went to a harsh school with harsh teachers that told me that if I spoke too much in class about what I had learned no one would like me.

What I wish I could tell my professors is that no one liked me anyway.

What I wish I could tell my professors that classrooms are a trigger to my anxiety because behind all of my teachers' backs I was told I was a loser and I amounted to nothing.

What I wish I could tell my professors that I was told that when I didn't raise my hand I was wrong and my thoughts didn't matter.



What I wish I could tell my professors that when a student yells out the answer in class I sit in the back of the room cringing, trying to hold myself together because my anxiety tells me that is wrong.

What I wish I could tell my professors is that when no one answers a question in class the silence stings me because I was told that if no one had anything to say that we wouldn't learn anything more that day.

What I wish I could tell my professors is that while everyone else is sitting in the classroom bored I am held by a straight-jacket trying to get free.

What I wish I could tell my professors is that I promise I'm doing the material, I promise I'm learning, but classrooms are not the place for me.

What I wish I could tell my professors is that I appreciate the effort, I appreciate the emails and the check-ins, I appreciate the notification that someone cares about me.

What I wish I could tell my professors...no, what I wish I could *show* my professors is that I care too.



Short Stories





White Petals

Sarah Miller

March 7, 2016

Ruby died exactly seven days ago. Today, I saw her again.

It was outside of Henslow Hall, my English building at school, when I was walking back to my dorm. I'm going to try to record all of the details, so you will understand that I'm telling the truth. So I won't be talked into thinking I imagined her. Because I did see her. And more than a glimpse, too. I want to be able to tell my friends exactly what happened, so they will know I'm not crazy. They'll think I'm traumatized, or something ridiculous like that, and say it's because I miss her so much and all of that sappy trash, which really just means they don't believe me. The truth is, I don't miss her. And I know I should, it's just that it doesn't feel real. It doesn't feel like she could really be dead. Because if either of us were to give up on life, it would have been me before her.

Ruby was always the stronger one, she liked to be in control of everything. And maybe that's why the two of us didn't work out. Or maybe two months with

someone isn't long enough to get to know them. Maybe I should have stayed with her. Well, it's too late now. I watched them lower her into the ground in Grayview Cemetery in a black box. I threw the brown clay on top of it, and watched the puffs of smoke as it settled. It should have been final. That was the end of it, right? I told myself it was. That is, until today.

I've never been one for creativity. I suck at making up anything, and the poetry unit in my English class nearly murdered me. Sometimes I feel like my lack of creativity is my biggest shortcoming. I don't think of detailed plans for my future, or any girly things like that. There's no point in planning out the future, when you don't even know if you'll make it there. Ruby showed me that. It's funny, because she was the one with all of the plans. It freaked me out. She knew how many kids she wanted (four), that she wanted to get married under the same tree by Clark Pond that her parents had been married under, and that she wanted to start her own coffee shop. And maybe that's why I ended things. I said it was just the bad timing, and that I was busy



with school, and the distance of two hours wasn't working out for me, but it may have just been that I didn't like feeling trapped in her goals for the future. A guy needs to breathe sometimes.

Regardless of why I broke up with Ruby, the fact still remains that I saw her today. She was wearing an orange dress shirt, or I guess girls call them blouses, and dark blue jeans. Her hair was in a long braid down her back, like she usually wore it. That alone would have made me do a double take. But there was no need. She was looking right at me as she walked down the steps of the library, carrying like ten books. Or maybe it was more like five really big books. It was honestly really picturesque, with yellow maple leaves all over the sidewalks, and the brick of the library with her orange blouse. It made my heart jump, and my legs stop working momentarily.

She turned towards me as I stood like a statue in the sidewalk, in everyone's way, looking like an idiot. She was far away, but I swear I saw her smirk. I don't miss that smirk. It always meant she was going to do something that would embarrass me, or at the least make me uncomfortable. Just when I felt like I could maybe take a step closer, I was plowed into by a tribe of loud, obnoxious baseball players on their way to lunch. My bookbag fell off my shoulder

and when I readjusted it I lost sight of Ruby. I spent the next hour looking for her around the building, and I even asked the desk manager at the library if they had seen where she went. They hadn't. And I know that sounds crazy, but it really was like she disappeared into thin air. If I had imagined her, then why now? Why not a week ago, or two weeks ago? Why at school, in front of the library? The types of books she read were fanfictions not likely to be found in a university library, and she had only been on campus once, to help me move in.

I know I have no proof, but she was there. I could feel it, like the feeling in your stomach when you drink something that's too hot, and it settles and makes you feel all droopy and sloshy. Let me tell you, it was not a pleasant feeling. And now when I think about that moment, which has basically been constantly since 9:00 this morning, the feeling comes back. I keep expecting to see her when I look out my fourth floor window to watch the other students on the sidewalk, or when I walk to dinner, or over to Wyatt's room in the upperclassman dorm. But I haven't. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. After all, she was really there, so what are the odds of me seeing her twice in one day?

March 8, 2016



Wyatt doesn't believe me. He says that when his mom died when he was twelve it felt like she was everywhere, and watching him. He doesn't understand. It doesn't feel like that. It's not some weird guardian angel crap, like she's watching over me or any of that bull shit. It's like she's stalking me.

I keep looking over my shoulder everywhere I go, and I think Dr. Stein is starting to notice that something's up. Twice today I didn't realize he had called my name, and Vera, who sits next to me, decided that meant she had the right to use her pink pen as a cattle prod in my side. Let me tell you, the sound that came out of my mouth is not one I will live down anytime soon. I have a meeting with Dr. Stein tomorrow before British Literature. He knows about Ruby dying, because he waived my assignments for the week I was at home. Now, he probably thinks I'm just falling into depression or something. I'll have to set him straight tomorrow.

March 9, 2016

Ruby had (has?) a type A personality, and she was the one who initiated our relationship. She asked me to a Fourth of July party over the summer, which surprised me because I had never really noticed her before. I wasn't really a fan of her friends, they all wore too much black,

and one girl even had purple hair. But she really seemed to enjoy me being there, and a week later we were dating. It was all sort of rushed, nothing really romance movie worthy. And then I was leaving for school, and summer was over. She helped me move in, I started classes, we broke up, and a week later she was dead.

I had just survived Brit Lit with Dr. Stein, which was the longest class in the world after being told I should "speak to a counselor", and that he was "really worried about me". Worry doesn't change the fact that I'm being stalked by my dead ex-girlfriend. And I know it for sure now, because I saw her again after class. I wanted to go grab some fast food from the Wendy's drive-thru so I could avoid people, and as I was waiting in line to get my frosty and fries she walked across the parking lot and went inside. The sound of my radio and the recorded greeting asking me if I wanted to try a new Steakhouse Jr. Cheeseburger Deluxe faded out as I watched the door close behind her. I pulled out of line, ignoring the lady on the headset, parked, and went inside. When I looked around I saw a toddler throwing chicken nuggets at his mom, two older men eating hamburgers at a booth in the back, a few factory workers on lunch break in line, and an employee wiping down tables. No Ruby. I ordered my



frosty and fries, and waited. I sat at the table nearest the door and the hallway to the restrooms for an hour after my frosty had melted and my fries were disgustingly cold. I finally gave up and threw them out. The employee who had been wiping the tables watched me leave, with an obvious judgmental look on his face.

I had to sit in my car for another ten minutes, to calm my nerves enough to drive back to school. My hands had been sweaty, and I don't remember most of the ten minute drive. There was no way that she had left that restaurant without me seeing her. I watched the doors like a hawk, and payed attention to every vehicle that had gone through the parking lot. But she had somehow slipped past me. It was infuriating. I needed to talk to her, to ask why she was doing this to me. Until then, I had no way of knowing if Wyatt wasn't actually right about her not really being there.

March 10, 2016

Wyatt didn't invite me to the party at the Soccer House last night. It probably has something to do with me not texting him back and not showing up for meals. I don't want to tell him about seeing Ruby again, because I know I'll just get another lecture. I skipped Dr. Stein's class too. Every time I look at the library I have to

stop myself from scanning the whole area looking for a glimpse of her. So I'm staying in my room today instead.

It's the perfect setup to avoid other humans, and I can watch YouTube videos in bed within reach of my minifridge. I'm contemplating cleaning, but with a room in a guy's dorm that already has a moldy ceiling tile, cracks in the floor, and graffiti on the desk, what's really the point?

From my bed I can see out my fourth floor window. As the sun started setting the glare on my laptop screen became horrendous, so I went to close the blinds. And there she was. Four stories below me, wearing a floral dress and sticking out like a sore thumb surrounded by the college students in their school day outfits of jeans and hoodies. And she looked up. Right at me. And I swear she smiled.

So now I'm sitting on my bed with the curtains closed, and trying to remember exactly what I saw. She was there. Again. How was that possible? How did she always know where I was? It doesn't really make sense. I'm going to try to sleep now. Not sure how well that's going to go.

It's not going well. I had a nightmare of her. I was walking past the apartments next to campus, and she was hanging out of one of the windows, waving at



me. I smiled at her, because she looked beautiful. And I mean stunning. Her hair looked like she was ready for prom, and she had on a low cut red shirt and silver dangly earrings. When I was right below her I could almost reach her hands that were stretching out towards me. Then she jumped. And I lunged back as her body flew at me, only it wasn't her. It was her corpse. The hair became stringy and damp, and the skin was a shriveled sickly white color. And there was no shirt. It was ruby blood dripped over her torso, because that was all there was to her. The bottom half was gone. I'm probably not going back to sleep tonight.

March 11, 2016

After two hours of sleep and five hours of YouTube, Economics with Wyatt was murder. We didn't talk much, because I think he's still a little scared about how I've been acting. And I'm not sure that we'll ever talk much again. She was there today, while we were in class. She stood right outside the door. And I couldn't believe it. When I elbowed Wyatt he looked at me annoyed, then looked out the door where I was pointing. And looked back at me. And frowned. And when I looked back, she was gone. I watched the door for the rest of class, and I saw her walk by two more times, but every time I pointed her

out to Wyatt she was gone. The dread set in.

I still feel it now. The pit in my stomach is making it hard to focus on anything else. Wyatt couldn't see her. Then that means.....maybe only I can see her. And if I'm the only one who can see her.....

But that's not possible. I don't believe in ghosts and supernatural crap. Those are scary stories for boy scouts and TV shows for teen girls; not a reality. There's no way I was imagining her, because despite what Wyatt and Dr. Stein say, I'm not caught up over her "death", and I am certainly not guilt ridden for breaking up with her. I didn't kill Ruby. She killed herself. It had nothing to do with me, so I wish she would leave me alone.

I can't even focus on my video games. It's like she's stuck in my head, but the Ruby I see keeps switching from the one in the hallway, to the one in my nightmare, to the one on the bulletin from the funeral home service. Again and again and again. The pile of dirty laundry on my bed looks like her. And the coat on the back of my door. And my cheap curtains. Why do they have to be red? It made the evening sunlight turn the whole room a terrible shade of blood. Like in the nightmare.



It's too much. The spinning around in my head – Ruby – the curtains – the dirty laundry – the black casket – the crowded party. I feel like I'm going to be sick. She's dead. She's dead.

She's Dead.

So I need to go see that for myself. Then my head will go back to normal instead of spinning.

I went to the cemetery. I kneeled in the sparse new green grass in front of her granite headstone, surrounded by pots of flowers and wreaths, and read the words. Ruby Cross. I remembered when they told me she was dead. My mom showed up on campus and at first I was annoyed, because it was only my second week of school, and she was already having separation anxiety. Then she broke the news, and she cried and hugged me. I didn't understand why she was crying, she never like Ruby. Women make no sense. I didn't cry for her then. Or at the funeral. But kneeling in front of her grave it felt like it was actually the end. I cried one tear as I told her goodbye. The anguish of the past week rolled off of me, and my fear and frustration all accumulated into one droplet that fell off my nose and landed in the fresh grass. I wiped my face and stood up, brushing off the dirt. And there she

was.

She was standing a few yards away on the opposite side of the headstone from me, and had a hesitant smile on her face. I will never forget that smile. It terrified me. She was mostly put together, but there was something in the way her hair was parted crooked, and her stance, and the look in her eyes that made her seem not quite real. Like it was only someone that looked a lot like Ruby standing there, but it couldn't be the same girl I remembered.

She spoke to me. She said "Hello Eric". It was creepy. And I started to leave, but when I stepped back she stepped forward, so I stopped. Part of me wanted to turn and run. And the other part of me stood and pretended to be brave, and asked "Why are you following me?"

I remember how she tilted her head to the side after that, unnaturally far to the side, and asked, "Why did you break up with me, Eric?"

I told her to stop, and to leave me alone. I told her she wasn't real. But she just kept half smiling at me, and took a few more steps forward. I told her not to come any closer. She kept coming. I remember screaming. My throat still hurts from it. I remember lunging for the flower pots. I remember grabbing one and throwing it at her. I expected it to go through her. For it to dissipate her spirit so she would



stop tormenting me. Instead I heard the crunch.

The flowers were geraniums. White geraniums. I know because they were the ones my mom had bought. She said they lasted longer in the hot August sun here. And they looked sort of pretty with the red speckles on them. But the speckles became rivers, and the flowers stopped being white altogether. And I remember the whistle. No wait that was the yell of the lady with the fluffy dog. It hurt my ears. And the men who put me in the car let my mom bring me things like my notebook. I think that was a few hours ago, but they told me today is the 13th, but that can't be right. It was only a few hours. I answered all of their questions, so I'm not sure why my mom hasn't come to pick me up yet.

March 15, 2016

It's been a few days since it happened. And they let me out, but I have to come in once a week for "evaluation". And my mom won't let me go back to school. I'm not sure I would be able to focus on classes anyways. I keep thinking of the faces of the police at the sight of the geraniums. But I got off easy. Self-defense and whatnot. I guess it's pretty hard to kill someone who is already dead. The hardest part was getting them to understand that I hadn't gone completely looney. But

the Wendy's security footage definitely helped. Who hides in a bathroom for two hours? Someone disturbed. My breaking up with her was the last nail in her coffin. Literally? Her father left when she was thirteen, and her mom's boyfriend had beat her. I'm not sure why all of her crazy directed itself towards me, but I do feel sorry for her. I might recover. Someday. But there was no fixing Ruby. So when they told me I could go out of the house, I put back on the gray suit and black tie I had worn last time.

I've been to her funeral twice now. And I lied earlier, when I said I didn't miss her. The truth is, now I don't think I'll ever get over Ruby Cross.



The Shadow of a Mistake

Chelsea Jones

The sheets are scratchy. The overhead fan swooshes repetitiously. Sounds from nocturnal city life drift through the window. I shift. I can't sleep so I scrunch up the pillow and try to relax. One hand rolls the end of the sheet between my fingers. The texture is rough and unyielding but the motion is soothing.

Even though the lights are out, I can still see into the other room. It's an open space with a barely used kitchen on one side and the other side is my living room/studio. I know I can't see it from the bed and though that should be a relief it's not. I can't bear to look at it. Every time I'm near it all I can do is see it. It's such a small thing. Barely noticeable yet glaring. A mistake. Only a small one though. Just one small mistake.

Then why do you keep thinking about it?

I squeeze my eyes shut and bring the sheet over my head. "Shut up." I whisper.

Are you sure no one will notice?

"Yes. I'm sure. Stop talking about it." I know there's no one talking but I can't help but hear it.

You're nearly finished and since you're awake why not come over here?

I want to say no. I want to sleep. Staying under the sheet doesn't keep the voice away, doesn't muffle it. It will just keep going on and on until I finally listen to it. I'm so tired but the painting is nearly finished. When it's finished it can be sold and then I won't be able to hear it anymore. But what if someone notices the mistake? It's only a small mistake. I doubt anyone will see it. Maybe.

The night before, I had a dream and tried to paint what I remembered. I stood on the porch of Gammy's house and a single wolf passed by making its way through the trees. Worrying that the beast wanted our chickens I grabbed a nearby stick and meant to scare the thing away. Then I noticed the apple in its mouth. The apple shone with picture perfect glossiness without a mark from the wolf's teeth. At first I didn't question the oddity because of dream logic. Only on waking did the apple seem unnatural. I pondered the meaning of it. Surely it meant something. The image wouldn't leave me so I figured if I painted it then I would understand.

In the morning I started to sketch the image. Everything went fine with the sketch and the forest. The wolf held a menacing but curious glint in his eye. The apple glowed with an obscene luster. I felt the meaning coming as the image took shape. Just a bit more and then I would understand what I'd seen. I started to paint the image. The burst of understanding and joy started to take hold of me. The need to see my dream rewarded me. It told me how to make the lines, which colors to mix, the right way to make the light fall through the leaves. The image captured me and I felt that creativity burning within. I ceased to exist in that moment. Only my hands and the canvas lived. All I did was sit back and watch. I knew pure happiness.

The morning and noon passed over and eventually ticked towards dinner time. Time meant little to me at the moment so I didn't notice. I don't even know if I felt hungry. I was so close to finishing the image.

Then it happened, as I started shaping the apple's single leaf my girlfriend Maggie barged through the door of my apartment and the jarring sound caused my hand to flinch. I jerked the paint brush back and stumbled away from the painting. My jaw dropped and eyes widened. The brush fell carelessly. The feverish

need to create withered in the wake of a leaf angled in a way that marred the image.

No. Did I say that aloud?

"Sorry for bothering you," Maggie said as she set her bag and coat aside. "But I figured we could go out to dinner. I was thinking some place nice. You?" Silence. "Jason?"

I heard nothing but I saw everything. Everything being that single leaf tilted down a few too many centimeters. Unfixable. Once sound caught up to me I turned and noticed Maggie standing beside me. Did she see it?

She made a hmm sound. "What's this?"

I couldn't breathe. She'd seen it. The painting I ruined. No I did. I should've been able to manage a distraction. Slowly I managed to get air into my lungs. Turning back to the painting I tried to explain.

"I..." How should I explain it? What would she think?

"I like it," Maggie said. "Though it's a bit darker than your usual, isn't it."

"It's from a dream," I replied. Did she not see it?

"Looks almost done. I know you don't like walking away from work, but sometimes you forget to take a break. How about it?" She turned that hopeful look my way.





I turned back to the painting. If she could not see the wrongly placed leaf maybe no one else would notice? Maggie was an artist like me. She had talent with drawing, but her passion would always be music. So I knew that if she didn't detect the flaw then probably no one else would. I felt like I could finally breathe. She did not see it. So then the flaw didn't matter.

"Dinner you said?" I asked retrieving the fallen paint brush.

"Uh huh," she said. "There's this lovely place on St. James's I want to try. It's your favorite, Italian," she said in a teasing voice that made me smile. Maggie always had good ideas. I set the brush on the easel.

For a moment I reached to pull Maggie close but when she squeaked and backed away I realized my hands were splashed with paint. I smiled an apology and walked over to the kitchen area. Special soap cleaned away the paint. As the colors ran down the steel basin, I thought back to the exaltation I felt earlier. I nearly understood the meaning of the wolf and his apple. Now it seemed I would never understand my dream.

Maggie stood beside me and helped me wipe off a bit of red from my jaw. She was so beautiful. Her dark brown hair curled around her shoulders messily and contrasted with her fair skin. We were

about the same height and usually dressed in the same earthy colors. Her hazel eyes held so much love and compassion that I envied her. I envied her ability to love and I felt lucky to have it.

After cleaning the paint off, I leaned forward and kissed the tip of her nose. She giggled and all the fear I felt over the painting faded.

"I'll get my coat," I went to the closet and she followed. As we walked to the door I turned back to the painting.

Are you really just going to walk away? I paused. Maggie already held the door open, did she not hear that? No, she didn't. Frowning, I walked away and followed her out the door.

I liked the new Italian restaurant. Maggie and I talked about the dream and we pondered the meaning. During the conversation I didn't tell her about the voice or the leaf. I just wanted to forget. Besides once the painting sold I wouldn't have to look at it again. Likely the buyer would have no idea that the leaf should've been higher up. They paid an exorbitant amount for my work and I, more than happy about it, let them. As soon as I finished the work, I never needed to think about it again. I noticed my hand shook with the thought of returning to it but I brushed away the concern. Maggie told me about her latest composition. She really did play

the cello well.

Once home I kissed Maggie good night. She took a cab home and I watched her go. Pretty soon we would need to step it up and try to live together. The thought occupied me on my way up the elevator. The elevator creaked on its way up. Each time I rode it I felt like it might be my last time. Such morbid thoughts but it always amused me.

I unlocked my apartment and there inside, in the middle of the room, I saw the damn painting. I resented the thing now. Nevermind, I'll finish it tomorrow.

Tomorrow is much too long.

I stopped. I heard it again. No, impossible. Besides I didn't physically hear a voice. More like a thought? I shook my head. I must be going crazy. I thought I heard a voice when we went to dinner but I knew that was too weird. No way did I hear the painting talk. Maybe the voice came from my own thoughts. That seemed more rational than a talking painting.

I know you can hear me. I'm surprised you walked away. You know you messed up the leaf right?

Gritting my teeth I turned to the painting. "I know." Replying to a thought never sounded like a good idea. But it was right. I messed up.

No one will buy it now.

I shook my head and kept walking.

They'll take one look and then they'll know. You know this don't you?

"Stop it," I choked out. It chuckled.

People will take one look at it and then walk away. Your buyers, your fans, maybe even Maggie.

Rage. "Shut it! You're just a stupid painting and that's just a stupid leaf!" A coffee mug smashed against the far wall.

Such a temper. Have you gotten mad at Maggie like that before?

I couldn't. I walked away from that needling voice. How do you run from a bodiless voice though? Well I tried to. I distracted myself with getting ready for bed. Whether the voice said everything it wanted or was waiting for round two I don't know, but I didn't hear it for a while.

Later that night, I lay in bed worrying the scratchy sheets and trying to sleep. I wanted to forget the damn thing. At the same time I also tried to figure out what to do. Either the painting went to someone else or I'd burn it. I hated the damn thing. Something had to be done. I shifted. The voice returned and didn't let up its mocking tone. I tried to block it out but the irritating sheets and insistent voice ruined my efforts.

Why do you keep thinking about it? You're nearly finished and since you're awake why not come over here?

It called me to finish the painting.





The more it called the more my resistance weakened. With a massive growl I flung back the covers and strode over to the painting. I turned on a light and got together my tools. I poured the paint on my palette and mixed the colors exactly.

You used too much white. The color is off.

I growled and continued. The voice continued every second I stood there. The more time passed the more I felt a sharp sting in my eyes. I was angry but I also despaired. The burst of creativity lay vacant and I felt hollow. I couldn't tell if my hand shook or held steady. I didn't care. I couldn't stop, the painting wouldn't let me. Every time I slowed down or nearly stopped it would start berating me again. I felt trapped.

The night stretched on and I continued. The white canvas filled with color. If my greens were darker than usual I didn't notice. If the blue light that filtered through the trees became blacker I didn't notice. What was once a wolf with an apple prowling through midday became a beast carrying an apple through the darkness.

That's more like it. I think a bit more red there and you're done.

The sun started to peak through the shutters. I stepped back from my work. My hand ached with fatigue. A tear fell

down from my eyes because the leaf still tilted down too much. The painting was perfectly wrong and I wanted to cry. I set aside the palette and turned away. I didn't see any meaning to my dream. My flawed image and the voice laughed at me.

I moved to the couch and sat down curling up inside and out. My arms wrapped around me and I tried to hold myself together. Sobs came out. I hated it. I *hated* it. I eyed my carving knife. Whether I would use it to destroy the painting or myself I didn't know.

That's an interesting thought.

I stood up and went to grab the knife. The phone rang. I startled and snapped towards the sound. My hand twitched. The phone rang again. I swallowed and went to pick it up. Maggie. With a deep breath I pressed the little green button and brought it to my ear.

"Jason! I have great news! I told a friend of mine about the wolf and she told her friend who's an art collector. Get this, he collects fairy tale paintings. Isn't that odd? And he wants to see yours! Is it finished?"

I nodded then realized she couldn't see it. "Yea." I eyeballed the painting and took a shuddering breath. "Tell him he can have it for fifty dollars."

"Fifty dollars? That's barely enough to cover your cost."



“Tell him to take it before I burn it,”
I gripped the phone hard.

You’re such a cheap date, Jason.

I closed my eyes against the voice.

“Sure, I’ll tell him. We should celebrate. Should I come over?”

“No!” I hastily replied. I tried to calm down. “I’ll meet you outside. We’ll go to your favorite place in the park.”

“Oh! Are you sure?”

“Yea, maybe see about getting rid of this painting too.”

“If you’re sure. I’ll send him a message. Shouldn’t take long,” Maggie’s cheerful voice always chased away the darkness. I think she knew how important she was to me. If not I would make sure she knew tonight. I smiled down at the phone as we hung up.

A few hours later the door sounded. The buyer. I could still hear the painting but the hope of a sell drowned it out a bit. The buyer seemed nice. I didn’t really notice all that much. I didn’t care. He asked about my inspiration and I told him about the dream. I’m not sure if he saw the badly shaped leaf but once I named the price we made the exchange. He carried the painting out the door. The voice went with it.

After the buyer drove away I felt the air clear. The sun seemed brighter and the lethargy of the past few days came over me. I still went to the park with Maggie

and we smiled and laughed. I didn’t tell her about the voice or the mistake but I told her how important she was. By the end of the conversation I invited her to move in. Her smiling response chased away the rest of my darkness.





Cain and Alec

Carly Evans

New York City. 1930.

Alec was a singer for an audience that didn't quite appreciate him. The crowd was only interested in the cheap drinks and measly suppers at the club. They were unaware of the time Alec put into his work and the sacrifices he took for his second full-time job -- raising his four-year-old brother, Cain. Alec had a feeling that the audience still wouldn't care if they had known that at only 19-years-old, Alec was basically a single parent and still managed to practice his music for hours. Alec didn't let it bother him, though. His plan was to only work there until a better deal came along. He was happy to do anything to support his brother, but there was always a taste of bitterness when he saw the glamorous performers in other clubs. For Cain's sake, he just couldn't afford to be picky about a paying job.

Cain was the most precious boy in the world, and Alec couldn't imagine loving anyone else more. His dark curls and large hazel eyes made him the cutest child in the world. He was always nestled in Alec's lap with his trusty stuffed elephant nearby. Even when Alec was brushing

powder on his cheeks before a performance, Cain had assumed his usual position of safety and comfort -- essential in the dressing room Alec detested.

The room was run down like rest of the club and was definitely not the place for a child to be playing and sleeping in for hours at a time. The mirror was foggy with grime and speckled with black cracks and chips. The vanity was splintering and stained and didn't match the rest of the furniture. Alec tried his best to make it look as welcoming as possible, but there was only so much that could be done. It was doomed to be dark and damp and dirty until the whole building was one day demolished. And, Alec constantly thought, the building deserved nothing less than demolition. He couldn't stand the place.

"Want some?" Alec asked, swiping Cain's button nose with the powder brush.

Cain squirmed away, wrinkling his nose and wiping off the makeup.

"When you grow up and perform on stage like me, you'll have to wear makeup," Alec said, setting the brush aside on the vanity.



“No!” Cain said.

“No’, you don’t want to perform? Or ‘no’, you don’t want to wear make-up?”

“Only girls wear makeup.”

“Are you calling me a girl then?”

A knock at the door didn’t allow Cain to answer (although, Alec supposed he never would have).

“Come in,” Alec called.

A funny looking crew member popped his head in, big ears and buck teeth included. He was just as young as Alec and still suffered from the awkward final stages of puberty.

“20 minutes until curtain,” he said.

“Thank you,” Alec said, smiling politely.

When the crew member left, Alec felt compelled to look at himself in the mirror. He examined his own unfortunate features of youth; his bare chin, big eyes, the occasional blemish covered under powders and paints. At the safe distance between the stage and the audience, he looked young and handsome (according to the bartenders and the few critics who struggled in their careers as much as Alec and could only write about the headliner at a lowly club). Which, he supposed was fine. It was fine for a kid. But Alec wanted to look like he belonged on a bigger stage – one that wasn’t home to cockroaches

and squeaky floorboards or was the constant subject of prayers so it wouldn’t collapse under anyone. He wanted to look flashy and drink champagne at the parties in Upper Manhattan. He wanted to perform for celebrities and get his name in real newspapers.

Some nights, when Cain was asleep next to him in their shared bed at home, Alec could replay the same fantasy in his head over and over. Moonlight and streetlights would stream across the room from the window. Commotion from outside would cut through the walls, but none of it ever disturbed Cain’s sleeping or Alec’s imagination. Someday, someone in the audience would be waiting to offer him a contract. He would get a manager and nice clothes to perform in. After he paid bills and bought groceries, there would still be plenty of money left over. Cain would have a babysitter or maybe even a nanny. Alec wouldn’t have to act in loco parentis all the time anymore. He would have a big house and go to parties where blonde women adorned with gold and silver would hang on his arms. In his dreams on those nights, he would be a big name among New York’s elite. Just like his mother said he would be.

In the morning, he would wake up to cold, nauseating reality where his pay was nothing more than a handful of dol-



lars at the end of grueling hours. It all disappeared too soon. The money that wasn't spent on necessities was set aside for a new apartment. Alec was close to having enough for the down payment. It would be cramped, but big, fancy houses were reserved for the millionaires of the city that were untouched by what made hundreds of people homeless and starving. Alec could settle for something small in a nicer neighborhood. At least for the time being. Just until he moved up in the entertainment world.

Cain slumped into Alec's chest, bringing his attention back to his first priority.

"Bedtime, kitten," he announced.

Cain didn't put up much of a fight. His half-hearted plea to stay up was quickly denied and was never followed up with further begging. He succumbed to being carried to the settee and tucked in on the gray cushions that showed years of use; sagging with splotches of discoloration.

"Comfortable?" Alec asked.

He grabbed the stuffed elephant from the vanity and handed it to Cain.

"Yes," Cain said, clutching it close to his chest.

In a mockery of a bedtime routine, Alec pulled a throw blanket over Cain. He kissed his brother on the nose, and made sure no chubby limb was exposed to the

chilly room.

"Goodnight, Kitten," he whispered.

"G'night, Alec."

Alec always wished someone had taught him how to put a child to bed – even if their version of bed didn't even deserve to be called such. Cain would start on the beaten down settee backstage, and then Alec would carry him home once the club closed. He was just the right size to be carried across town at two in the morning. He wasn't too heavy, and he fit snug in Alec's arms (whatever the average size of a 4-year-old was -- Cain surely wasn't it).

Alec returned to the vanity, checking his dented and dull pocket watch. It would only be a matter of seconds before a crew member would be back to tell him there was only 10 minutes until curtain. Alec didn't want to risk Cain being woken from his dozing. So, like every other night, he slipped out the door, nearly bumping into the same buck-toothed boy as before. He pressed his fingers to his lips.

"Your brother sleeping?" There was thinly-masked annoyance in the question (common in the tone of everyone who thought bringing a 4-year-old to every performance was unprofessional and feared the possibility of being forced to babysit).

Alec nodded and walked past, bare-



ly missing an eye-roll and scowl. He did what he always did and ignored it.

Such was life.

The single bedroom apartment had been home to the two boys for less than a year. Alec despised the whole building, as he did with most things in his life. It was filthy and loud and full of shady characters. He didn't feel right raising Cain there. But Cain, as far as Alec was aware, didn't seem to care. Their old house was always warm and clean, full of friends and family – and later sold by the same friends who were trying to scrape together as much money as they could for the boys while avoiding taking them in. All that was left was Cain's toys, their candlestick telephone, a few pieces of their mother's jewelry, and pictures. Everything else was long gone to pawnbrokers. Cain was too young to clearly remember any of that.

He, of course, had no sentiment towards that house. He never knew their mother (who died as soon as he was born like it was some sort of sick trade). He probably barely remembered their father who drank himself to death three and a half years later; too overwhelmed by the loss of his wife and unable to see his youngest child as nothing more than a painful reminder.

Alec missed the days in his old home, but he had to make do in the apartment. It was all he could afford since their family's money was lost with the rest of the country's only months before they lost their last parent.

Alec tried not to think about it too much. Most days, he just thought about what he was lucky to have. Which was Cain. But Cain was enough for him. Cain smiled when things were bad, and Alec wanted to keep that smile on his face.

Alec watched him play with a toy train in front of the fireplace with his elephant in the role of the conductor. He was oblivious to everything. Sure, he knew that his parents were dead, and that occasionally caused crying fits when he was reminded that he would never get to know them as all the other kids his age did. But for the most part, he had nothing to compare their current situation with. He had no memories of their mother's smile or their father's laughter. Alec envied him. He could go through life, not knowing a life that was so much better had been painfully ripped away.

The phone ringing pulled Alec out of his reverie. He kept an eye on Cain as he picked it up.

“Hello?”

“Hello, is this Alec Bennet?” a thick New York accent asked.



“Yes. May I ask who’s calling?”

“My name is Franklin Harlow. I’m calling on behalf of the managers of McKinley’s Club. They saw you had inquired about a position here some time ago. They sent out a scout to watch you the other week, and they really liked what they heard about you.”

Alec’s heart thumped in his chest and leapt up into his throat. His head spun, and his stomach churned. He sat on the floor, pulling the phone with him. He said a little prayer for the conversation to end the way he hoped.

“They’ve looked at dozens of other people this past month,” Harlow continued. “They’ve narrowed it down to ten to come in during the winter season when we get busy. If you’re still interested, they can offer you a position here.”

“Yes! I’m still interested!” Alec said. His hands shook, and he leaned his head against the wall.

“Great! Just to make it clear, the position is only temporarily temporary.”

Alec ran a hand through his hair. “What does ‘temporarily temporary’ mean?”

“It’s a little term I’ve made up,” Harlow said, getting a little giddy. “It means that it’s temporary, but it may not stay temporary. You know what I mean? They

may keep you after the season. I guess a better term would be ‘potentially temporary’. I’ll mull that over. Anyways, they usually keep three people out of their annual ten from what I’ve seen. Between you and me, though, it’s always a rough fight between you ten. Don’t make friends with anyone that comes in with you. It ain’t worth the hurt feelings.”

Alec beamed. He remembered walking into McKinley’s for the first time for an audition when his father died. There was a breath-taking, crystal chandelier in the lobby hanging from a high ceiling and nice red carpets on the floors. There weren’t too many people but enough to cause a low roar. The dining room was covered in white and gold, filled with sparkling dresses and well-tailored suits. The managers cancelled all auditions half-way through the day when they found all the people they wanted. Alec never saw anyone that day, but apparently they kept him in mind.

“They said your singing is like a cradle song,” Harlow said. “Folks like that stuff this time of year since Christmas will be right around the corner. It sets the mood and all that jazz. If you come in this week, I can give you a schedule and music.”

“They already have music for me?”

“It’s not anything special, kid. Just





a few sheets they give most newbies. It's been altered for you, though. They gave me your range, so I upped it an octave."

"Oh... are you the composer, Mr. Harlow?"

"I wish. Sadly, I'm just the composer's monkey. I run errands and take care of newbies such as yourself. I get to fix up scores occasionally. But, I can run through the music with you if you'd like. It'll help you prepare for your first rehearsal, so I suggest you take me up on this offer. You wouldn't imagine the amount of people who think they're too good to do a personal rehearsal with the composer's apprentice. Those twits don't stay here long. They really blow their chances with their egos and their noses up in the air. So, take any opportunity you can to have one-on-one work with anyone here. Besides, it's my job to help you kids out. If you don't come to me, I'll be bored outta my skull."

Alec wondered if Harlow was always so talkative. He didn't mind too much. Harlow sounded friendly and helpful. It was better than the impersonal staff he was used to.

"Yes," Alec said. "That all sounds wonderful. I can be there first thing tomorrow afternoon."

"Great! I'll see you then, Mr. Bennett."

"Thank you so much!"

Alec left the phone lying on the floor and ran to Cain. He scooped him up and spun him

around.

"I got the job, kitten! I actually got a job at a nice club, can you believe it?"

Cain looked alarmed until the spinning stopped. Alec knew that he wouldn't fully understand what he was talking about, but he rambled anyways.

"I'm going to be a real singer, and we're going to have money. Imagine if this is permanent, Cain. You won't have to go to work with me every night. You can sleep in a bed instead of at a club. We won't have to live here anymore."

He was determined to be one of the three people. He would practice day and night. He would be with Harlow every chance he got, even if the man talked his ear off. He would do anything it took. Even if he didn't get to stay at the club, he would still be getting enough money to put towards that new apartment – a place he could proudly call home. Doors would open to other elite clubs with his new experience, and he could find connections to all sorts of people. Alec's head spun with all possibilities.

"Can we get a dog now?" Cain asked, face lighting up. "You said we could get a dog if we had money."



Alec laughed. He vaguely remembered that conversation and the empty promise. He found Cain's priorities to be amusing.

"We'll talk about it," he said.

Cain cheered. Alec set him down so he could jump and down in celebration. Maybe they weren't on the way to fulfilling Alec's biggest dreams. Maybe he wasn't going to be famous or rich from a gig at McKinley's. It didn't matter. Nothing was perfect, but everything seemed like it was going to be alright.



The Ascension

Rachel Peters

The Moon was full and bright. It always was on the Dark Side of Earth.

Annabella gazed at it from the large rock she sat atop in the woods, and the light it reflected illuminated her blond hair and pale skin, making her easy to spot alongside her black cat and snowy owl. She frequently sat there with these friends to get away from humanity's oddities and concentrate on the Creator (who she suspected was predominately male and consequently referred to Him as God), and the Moon that the Creator provided her Side with. Annabella had never known a world of light – Earth stopped spinning a couple generations ago, and she had never visited the other Side. Even the Moon froze in its place right above their heads.

For the most part, Annabella was free from human distraction when she went to the woods, but she did not sit too deep within the trees. She always stayed relatively close to the edge closest to the town. Once in a great while a passerby on the outskirts would notice her and say hello or ask for some sort of advice. Annabella was frequently asked for advice; many on the Night Side knew she received vi-

sions. God sent them. So when she heard the footsteps breaking twigs coming closer and closer to her, she assumed that someone had a question to ask her.

“What does God say today?”

Annabella dropped her gaze from the Moon to the person before her. It was Vera, a girl Annabella's age – about thirteen years old – with a sour face and orange hair pulled back in a restrictive ponytail.

“I have had no visions today,” Annabella said softly. All the muscles in her nuisance of a body should have been tense, but her essence could not properly tell the body that she was uncomfortable. She was calm.

“Surprise, surprise,” Vera mocked. Her voice sounded nasally.

“Vera? What are you doing?” a voice called from outside the woods. Annabella could see Baron coming closer from her position on the enormous rock. She began to relax a little. Baron was not so disagreeable.

“I'm just seeing what our Holy Prophetess is doing,” Vera sneered with thick sarcasm as Baron approached her



left side. They looked nothing alike – while Vera’s thin face was defined by a pointy nose and a pointy chin to match, Baron’s was round – but they were cousins, and almost the same height.

“Just go home, Vera,” he said.

She raised an eyebrow and looked back and forth from Baron to Annabella curiously as though trying to understand this alliance and whether or not it was even real, but his expression was earnest. “I don’t know why you bother,” she muttered to Baron before turning on her heel and exiting the forest. Her ponytail swayed from side to side as she walked.

“Sorry,” Baron told Annabella. She couldn’t help but be surprised by how much his voice kept changing; he nearly sounded full-grown now. “She’s not very good at disagreeing with someone without being rude. I hope she doesn’t bother you too much.”

“Her aura makes me uncomfortable. Very abrasive, like a porcupine. I feel it if she gets too close.”

Baron scrunched his eyebrows and nodded slowly as though he was trying to process gibberish. He usually did as much when she spoke to him; she could tell he didn’t like metaphors. “Mmhm...Well, just let someone know if she does or says anything that bothers or distracts you, okay?”

“God knows. That is enough.”

He shifted his weight awkwardly, and Annabella could tell that he didn’t know what to say to her. She could tell he wanted to leave. After all, he hadn’t actually come to visit her; he just wanted to see what Vera was up to. He probably had things to do. While Baron meant well, he didn’t understand her. Most people their age didn’t. The only reason the older ones were better with her was that they had the most knowledge of the older religions. Annabella’s generation had only lived in a world of science despite it being a time where science was constantly defied and made less and less sense.

“Go on home so I can concentrate,” she encouraged, keeping her voice high and light so he knew that she understood his discomfort and was not offended. Regardless, his face reddened, but he obeyed nervously. *So transparent*, she thought.

She wasn’t just putting up a façade of comfort and acceptance for him – not entirely. It was true that she was not offended, but she wasn’t necessarily content with the way things were with her peers either. She saw the way other groups of people her age could connect and enjoy each other’s company, and sometimes she yearned for such approval. However, her peers were concerned with frivolous matters: Gossip, appearances, and increas-

ingly, the uncertain future of the planet. Annabella never had such concerns. She surpassed them when she was seven, when she first began receiving visions from the Creator in dreams. It wasn't an experience most could relate to.

The black cat, Comes, nudged its face between the inside of Annabella's arm and side, and she scratched its soft head.

"You understand though, don't you?"

The cat just kept purring like it didn't matter and her owl flew to a tree branch that was closer to her. Annabella smiled at it.

"I wonder if being able to fly would make me feel freer," she mused. "I've come to hate this body. It feels more and more like a cage...It makes me sad that some people keep their owls in cages. You wouldn't like that, would you?"

She held out her arm and the owl flew to it. Once he gripped the sleeve of her coat, she rose. "It's time to go."

Once every couple of weeks, Annabella would speak to the people of her town. She would tell them of her recent visions and realizations about the Creator and their place in a divided world, and they were fascinated. But curiosity was only a minor motivation to listen to her: She provided them with an idea to hold

onto, a belief that they weren't neglected on the Side that was consistently dark and cold.

Her snowy owl flew from tree branch to tree branch as she and the cat made their way out of the forest. She wrapped her grey jacket around her tighter because she knew she should be cold even though she couldn't quite feel it anymore. Deep inside, her soul seemed to recoil from the inner flesh, so she still had an ability to control her movements but felt numb to what the body felt, like it served as a barrier between her and the world around her. She wanted to get out, but she didn't know how, and even though she had come to resent her restrictive body she knew she must take care of it.

The clumps of trees became thinner and thinner as she worked her way out of the woods. "Go on ahead, Custos," she told the owl once they left the trees and walked the stretch of grass behind the buildings of the town, and he flew off knowing that she meant for him to find a building to sit on to watch her when she addressed the people. "I'll hold you, Comes," she told the cat and picked her up. She licked Annabella's face.

Tall electric lanterns illuminated the town and cast shadows across brick houses, apartments, and shops that men built long before Earth stopped turning.





Annabella's dainty figure cast an additional thin shadow in front of her as she skirted down the sidewalk with her cat, whose eyes reflected the light and glowed a bright, wild shade of green. A few pedestrians smiled and dipped their heads in respect as they passed Annabella, and she faintly smiled back. Even though she struggled to feel the sensations of her body, her spirit could feel the warmth her people emanated. She could feel their invisible auras. They comforted her.

"Annabella! Up here!"

She stopped in her tracks and looked up. Roscoe's head peeped out of a restaurant's third story window, grinning as though seeing her was the best part of his day. "I'm coming down. I'll walk with you."

Even though she felt she shouldn't, Annabella couldn't help but smile and wait. She enjoyed Roscoe's company more than that of most humans, and this was so primarily because he seemed to take her seriously. He respected her, and whenever he didn't understand her, he tried.

Within a handful of seconds, he came out from the restaurant and greeted her and her cat on the sidewalk. They immediately began to walk together. Less than half a foot of air was between them. "How are you today?" he asked.

Annabella shrugged. "Empty. But

full."

Roscoe was handsome; Annabella knew that. His pale skin contrasted with his black hair the same way the Moon and stars contrasted the darkness of space around them. He stood eight inches taller than her, and he was two years her senior even though he looked – and sounded – older than that.

"What can I do to help?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Get me out of this body."

He chuckled and squeezed her arm. Annabella felt sorry that she could barely feel the warm gesture.

"I don't know how to do that," he said. "It's a shame you don't feel connected to the one you were given. It's beautiful."

Now would be an appropriate time to blush, she thought. But she couldn't.

"Hey," he said, stopping and motioning so she'd pause and face him. She put Comes down on the ground next to her, letting him know she wouldn't be distracted. She felt the air between them change, as though each particle sensed the moment's tension. He hesitated for a moment before he spoke. "Does it bother you when I say things like that?"

"No, of course not."

He thought for a moment and fidgeted, but Annabella broke his silence. "Did I

do something to upset you?”

“No, you’re perfect. It’s just...You might not be *unhappy* when I talk about you like that, but you don’t ever seem *happy* either. Not like other girls would be. But I know you’re not like other girls.”

Annabella sighed. She knew this conversation would have to happen soon, and she dreaded it because she knew it would disappoint him. He was right – she wasn’t like other girls. And that affected everything.

“Roscoe, I believe you are a very genuine human being,” she told him carefully. “I see the look in your eyes when you speak with me, when you see my spirit. I also see the look in your eyes when you see my hair in the breeze, my body when I walk across the street. You care for me in a spiritual, unspoken way, but also in the animalistic human way. You feel desire; I can’t. Aesthetic means something to you, but it doesn’t for me.”

He articulated for a moment, and Annabella was right, he looked disappointed – but not altogether surprised. “Can’t or won’t?”

“I can’t, Roscoe. My body fails me more and more every day.”

A few bats flew overhead and the two looked up. When Annabella looked back to Roscoe, he was still looking upward, but not at the bats. He looked at the

stars.

“You weren’t made for this world,” he said softly and sadly. He lowered his gaze to her and gently touched her cheek. “That’s what it is. You weren’t made to connect with people – you were made to connect with God.”

He looked like he wanted to kiss her, but Comes rubbed against Roscoe’s leg and he took her in his arms instead. “I’ll hold on to Comes while you speak.”

She told him that was fine and they continued their walk in silence, but Annabella was anything but quiet inside. She didn’t know if she should be disappointed in Roscoe, herself, or the God who branded her as something slightly inhuman.

More and more people surrounded her and Roscoe as they crept closer to the center of town, and by the time they reached their destination the crowd was so thick that they wouldn’t have been able to get through if Annabella hadn’t been so famous. People parted to form a path for her so she could get to the large concrete water fountain at the center of the open space, a roundabout. No water had poured from the fountain since before Earth stopped spinning. Now, it was often too cold to bother with it, reducing it to a mere relic of the past. Annabella stood atop its ledge to address the people so they could see her better, for she only stood at





about five feet tall.

Roscoe came to a halt at the front of the crowd as Annabella climbed up the side of the fountain and walked to the middle part of the ledge. The crowd, which was so chatty when Annabella first arrived, dared not say a word now – not out of fear, but out of reverence.

“Hello,” Annabella greeted them.

“Hello, Annabella,” they all said, but not in unison. Every age group was represented in the voluntary congregation even though it tended to be dominated by adults and the elderly. Annabella’s parents, a modest couple, hung in the back to watch the prophetess daughter they’d been so blessed with. Annabella inherited her mother’s face and her high cheekbones that made her look powerful despite a tiny frame, but she had her father’s blond hair and blue eyes. Roscoe wasn’t just blinded with infatuation – Annabella was in fact very pretty. Her body was born from an aesthetically pleasing gene pool.

Annabella noticed that Vera’s parents stood at the opposite side of the crowd, and she could tell they were searching for her parents, probably to scold them for not taking care that their daughter would not become an infamous phony – they’d done so before. Annabella’s spirit sank a little. Her snowy owl, Custos, sat at the ledge of a building directly above her par-

ents, and Annabella wished he could act as their protector from such people.

“I will tell you of my most recent visions,” she told the crowd.

“Were you able to see the Creator this time?” an eager woman asked.

“No. Unfortunately, I still do not know what He looks like, but I am still confident that the Creator emanates a masculine energy.”

“We believe you,” a few murmured to show their support.

“And I always believe you,” she replied. “Two nights ago I received a vision about the future of the Dark Side of Earth.”

Everyone’s eyes widened in both fear and excitement. “Has she seen our end?” a few whispered.

“How far into the future did this vision take place?” one person asked.

“Not far. I don’t think this vision signified the end of anything, but perhaps a beginning. The coming generations will evolve, you see. We will figure out how to survive this world. Night vision will be even better than it is now. Everyone’s eyes will reflect light, like the raccoons and cats, but natural selection will eliminate some -”

A flicker of light from above stole her attention. Annabella stopped speaking for a moment to glance skyward and scan the starry dome above them, but all



was as it should be. All the light that she could see was the Moon and the vast sea of stars.

“I’m sorry,” she said to the crowd, shaking her head almost in ridicule of herself. “I got distracted. I might have just seen a shooting star, but I caught it too late.”

“Is it a message from the Creator, Annabella?” a man in the middle of the crowd asked.

Before she could answer, she saw the flicker again, and when she looked up, she gasped: The Moon, which she had loved so dearly and memorized every detail of, had changed. The blessed satellite was no longer ivory with grey craters; it was light blue with darker craters, and its light shone down like a spotlight. Annabella was at the center.

Those in the crowd chattered in speculation. She was aware that their vocal chords were vibrating, but she did not know what they were saying. Her ears rang and her eyes could not pull away. Time seemed to slow as she stared at the Moon and reached an intense calm, an intense level of concentration she had never reached before. She almost forgot where she was and why she was there until one voice sliced through the moment. Vera.

“I can’t believe you people buy into this show.”

Annabella jerked her head downward in fury to look at her. Vera stood in the front right next to Roscoe, and when Annabella made eye contact with her, Vera flinched and began to back away in horror. Annabella’s eyes were ablaze in icy blue light, a fierce and powerful sight, but Roscoe only smiled.

Annabella quickly looked back to the sky, as though her eyes and the Moon were opposing magnets. Every bat and owl flew about in a frenzy but none entered the Moon’s blue spotlight, which felt like a tether connecting Annabella’s being to the blackness of space above.

She felt the weight of her body all around her, as though it was about to collapse in on her.

Take me away from here, she thought. Get me out of this body.

She tried to make a motion of desperation to get the Creator’s attention, but her arms would not cooperate. They were so heavy. She’d lost control.

I don’t belong here. I want to come home.

Her soul abruptly darted upwards through her eyes. Her cage, the body, collapsed and dissipated below her as she flew. It was almost like she was pulled out, but the process was not harsh. She felt more like she was floating or flying, as if Earth’s gravity no longer had any in-



fluence over her and her spirit answered to something else, something light-years away.

She ascended past the rooftops and through the nearly invisible puffs of clouds. The farther away she moved from the ground, the lighter she felt. She moved through the atmosphere within seconds and soared over the Moon, and alas, she knew no more of Earth. There was no time to look back.

The blackness of space was tinged with the same shade of pale blue she'd seen when first summoned, as if God laid out a path especially for her. Stars looked like white lines streaming along her peripheral vision as she passed them, and their lights grew brighter and brighter as she passed more clumps and moved deeper into the galaxy. The closer she got to the center, the brighter the space around her became.

Minutes passed as she flew. At last she saw a break in the stars and nebulae that appeared to be emptiness but her orb-like figure kept zooming toward it. The singularity she would have to pass through at its center was miniscule; it took several seconds before she even noticed it. It looked like a tiny tunnel. She stretched herself as thinly as she possibly could in order to pass through it, but the process was not painful. Her essence was far more

flexible than the heavy, rigid body she had been confined to for so long. She could fit into the blue-lit tunnel comfortably.

Soon, she flew out of the other side of the tunnel and her spirit was still stretched thin, like a string. The world around her consisted of a colorful, glowing fabric. There was no ground, no dome-like atmosphere above. Her strand of energy joined the other strands in the cloth, who gladly made room for her. They would never run out of room. The space they could take up was infinite, more could always be made when needed.

When she leaned back into the other strands of souls she looked up and gasped in awe.

She saw Him.

Him? Her? It?

The Largest Orb. The Original Membrane.

He looked very familiar.

“Hello, Annabella.” The warm voice slid into her being like they shared a mind, like they were internally connected, or at least wired to understand the frequencies.

“Thank you for bringing me here,” she said. The string of her soul trembled when she communicated, like vocal folds when singing.

“It seems a human body was not the best fit for you after all. Even that level of consciousness wasn't quite enough.”





“I am sorry if I disappointed You.”

“No. You did very well with the situation you were placed in. You exceeded expectations. And I can assure you that you will see the other spirits you cherished on Earth in time, but they still have some development to undergo before they can join us here. Witnessing your Ascension will help them progress – in fact, it’s already helping them.”

“More believe in You?”

“Yes, and also in you. It has become quite clear that you do not belong with my dear animals. You belong in this realm, and I know you will be very happy here.”



Friends: Life's Most Precious Gifts

Tanner Gitcheff

I dialed his number, which he had written down for me, where I had pinned it on the kitchen board. I felt as though I should just say it to him, both of them, tonight just so I could get it off my chest. I had wanted to say this sooner, but I decided to wait a week after the Choir Holiday Concert to tell them. I had met both of them in Show Choir, but I didn't start to actually get to know these two beautiful people until I starting sitting with them at lunch, ever since then, they've been like my best friends and I loved them, and tonight, I was going to let my platonic feelings for them be known.

My thumb left the dials on the phone after I pressed the dial labeled "Call" and then I pressed the phone to my ear, hearing nothing but several rows of the low monotone chirping coming from the other end, until I finally heard a voice, his voice. "Hey, um, not here right now. But please leave me a message, and I'll get back to you, because I'm sure your call was very important," my goodness, he was too nice! After hearing the high pitched beeping noise, I went off on my non-scripted monologue. "Hey, Parker, um, I just

wanted to call you because I wanted to get something off my chest. Look, I just wanted to say that before I met you and Gabby in choristers and before I started hanging out with you guys at lunch, I was actually really lonely and depressed. I don't think I've had such understanding, and caring friends before you guys, and you're also two of the few people who think I'm actually funny; ha ha." The voice that I had when speaking this message was something that I could only describe as monotone yet powerful, and by the time I was wrapping it up, I had a lump in my throat, ready to cry. "Look, the point I'm trying to make here is that you and Gabby have made a huge impact on me in the couple of months that we have known each other, and I just wanted to say that I love you guys, and you really make me happy," and with the last bit of strength that I had to hold in my happy tears, I said "Call me back when you get this, if you want."

I hung up the phone, and quietly shed a few of my happy tears before I made my next call. A call sent to, in both Parker and I's opinion, the most beautiful girl on the planet; and while I mean to say



that platonically, Parker always means to say it in a powerful way, a romantic way. They had been dating for at least a year when I made this call. After calming down from my tears, I dialed the beautiful girl's number. This time, however, I did not hear the low monotone chirping when I put the phone to my ear. In fact, the line went straight to voicemail, and I heard her voice on the other line immediately. "Hi, you've reached Gabby, sorry I can't come to the phone right now; but if you leave a message, I'll be sure to get back with you as soon as I can. Thank you!" Man, Parker can pick 'em, I'm jealous even to this day. After hearing the high pitched beep again, I went on the same monologue as I did before, with a few small changes, but they both ended the same way "call me back when you get this. See ya."

Then, I waited, and I waited a while. During that time, I had thought about what I had confessed to my new, dear friends; would they find my platonic affection suspiciously creepy? Would they never talk to me again? Would they hate me? I realize now that all I was doing in those several minutes was what most teenagers do, over-think. I will admit, however, that I was excited when I heard the home phone finally ring after about 30-45 minutes. I ran as fast as I could to grab the phone with speed that would put Usain Bolt to

shame. When I saw that Parker was the one who was calling, I became emotional, but I picked up the phone anyway.

"Hello, this is Parker," I exhaled before replying with "hey, man." "Hey Tanner, I heard what you said on the message, and I just wanted to say-" He was somewhat cut off by my sudden, quiet sob, before continuing. "You've made a difference in both of our lives, too, you make both me and Gabby real happy, I honestly should be the one thanking you. I love you, Tanner," my sweet, male friend said. I immediately I felt like I was about to start sobbing uncontrollably, but not out of sadness or loneliness, as I had before I met them, but out of pure joy. "Oh, my God, dude, I'm sorry but I feel like I'm gonna cry," "No, man, it's okay, I think I am too," Parker replied, in a comforting yet bittersweet voice. "I am actually really happy right now, you have no idea," I admitted, and I was "I know, me too," Parker said with a smile in his voice. "I wanted to tell you after the Holiday Concert, but I didn't get the chance, I'm sorry." Parker chuckled a little before replying "That's okay, buddy, your message totally made my day." We talked a little while longer before deciding to hang up with a "see ya" and an "I love you man."

Now, on to the other friend who I had confessed my platonic love for, I still



had to wait for Gabby to call me back. After waiting for a little while longer, I decided to call Gabby again, and I was shocked when she picked up after the second or third ring. “Hello,” answered the sweet voice I had called three or four times to hear. “Hi, Gabs,” I replied with a nervous voice that I knew was going to become more emotional in a couple of minutes. “What’s up, Tanner?” She inquired, curious as to why I sounded somber. “Did you the message that I left you,” “No, my phone died and I just got it charged; what’s going on?” I sighed, slightly agitated that I would have to repeat my monologue that I had left on her phone, that had remained unheard, nonetheless, I repeated it. Gabby’s reaction was similar to Parker’s, “Aw, I love you too, and I feel so blessed to be your friend!” There were a few words in that statement that I will remember forever ‘I feel so blessed to be your friend.’

Before the two angels named Parker and Gabby came into my life, I considered myself to be a very lonely individual, the only people I talked to being hoodrats (people that I did not, do not, nor will I ever, identify with) and a few teachers. Besides those people, I had no one who would actually talk to me, relate to me, and consider me their best friend to my face, and mean it. I was also very depressed, but these two beautiful indi-

viduals named Parker and Gabby came into my life and, if I was any less stronger, saved it. I responded to what Gabby had said with “I know, I feel blessed, too” and I wasn’t lying. It was at this time that I realized that I’d had a lump in throat since the beginning of the call. We talked more for a little bit before ending the same way that I had with Parker with a “see ya” and an “I love you,” and hanging up.

After quite possibly the most emotional 2 hours of my life, I finally decided to lay down, and think about both of my dear friends. It was true, I loved them, I was grateful to them for being my friends; but was my feelings toward them stronger than what I thought they were; did I love both of them in a way that a friend shouldn’t? These were the questions that kept lingering in my mind after I talked to both of them. Well, those questions were for another time. That night, all I was thinking about was how much I had been blessed with two great people that I had met 2 months before this event; I loved them like a brother and a sister, and that was all that mattered at the moment.





"Every Tree has It's Enemy, Few Have an Advocate": Respect for Nature as a Divider between Good and Evil in *The Lord of the Rings*
Sarah Miller

J. R. R. Tolkien is credited as the father of fantasy due to his creation of an entirely new world, Middle Earth, complete with detailed races, complex characters, and multiple languages. His world exists in his famous works *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as in collections of shorter stories. Within his famous trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien impressed upon his readers the importance of the natural world. His use of writing as a canvas for his beliefs was an effective method of expression. Tolkien writes in a manner that leaves readers wondering if they read the most detailed or most vague descriptions in all of literature, due to his tendency to give adjectives that have many meanings or applications. The lack of solid facts as descriptors intentionally places the reader into the story. Tolkien states, "the theatre of my tale is this earth, the one in which we now live, but the historical period is imaginary. The essentials

of that abiding place are all there...so naturally it feels familiar even if a little glorified by the enchantment of distance in time" (Saguaro). Tolkien's work is very descriptive on topics relating to the natural world such as plants, wildlife, and scenery. Nils Ivar Agoy claims that, "*The Lord of the Rings* contains some of the most lush and vivid examples of nature writing of any twentieth-century work; who cannot imagine the stunning beauty of the golden-leaved Mallorns in the forest of Lothlórien or the towering giants of Fangorn?" (Agoy). The focus on nature was a deliberate action made by Tolkien to immerse the readers into a natural world that deserved protection and cultivation, and he can be seen as an advocate for the environment.

Environmental concerns are more easily understood when framed with good storytelling, when the mind of the reader is already open to hearing new ideas. As stated by Chris Brawley in his



interpretation of ecology in Middle Earth, “literature is a means to a paradigm shift, a learning of a new language which places the non-human in a central position as part of the whole; [...replacing] anthropocentric worldviews with ecocentric worldviews, where the environment is viewed with respect” (Brawley). When the reader has an open mind, their imagination allows them to visualize and understand things that do not exist that way in the real world, especially in regards to issues of environmental concerns.

Humanity has difficulty acknowledging problems that occur right under their noses. However, there is a solution that allows for a transition between complex ideas and literature. This solution calls for “a new language, one which engages the non-human, and mythopoeic fantasy, [and] through its subversiveness, offers a plausible alternative” (Brawley). Fantasy literature offers many opportunities to explore environmental concepts that are not provided by traditional literature. The scope is not hindered by the limits of what exists in reality, but by what exists in imagination. By using its unique dynamics, “fantasy has the unique ability to subvert normal categories of thought, such as those between human and non-human, in order for a fusion of new possibilities

which are not available in mimetic works” (Brawley). The usual constructs of the real world have no place in fantasy literature, and so the possibilities for solutions are endless. Deforestation on earth is due to the logging industry and rapidly growing urbanization. Deforestation in Middle Earth is due to one of the races using the wood for fires to forge weapons. The first of these problems must be combated through the processes of law but the second, being in another universe altogether, can be combated through war. The solutions to problems in Middle Earth that correspond to those on earth can vary greatly due to the freedom afforded by the fantasy genre. Part of this freedom is used in the addition of many fictional races that make up the diverse cultures in Tolkien’s works.

J. R. R. Tolkien created a unique world that combined otherworldly races, some of his own invention, into a cohesive whole, complete with detailed cultures and languages. Races such as elves and dwarves had existed prior to his works, but he expanded upon their mythology and formed his own versions, so detailed that they leave the reader believing that those races could not exist in any other form. Races such as Hobbits and Orcs were Tolkien’s own creations, based on the needs of the story line, Hobbits being





the innocent race needing protection, and Orcs being the mindless soldiers of the enemy. Other races include Wizards, Ents, and men. All of the races are comprised of differing cultures based on the region they inhabit, and display unique behaviors, customs, and language abilities. Each race fills a particular niche in Tolkien's Middle Earth that revolves around varying levels of respect for nature. Tolkien was attuned to nature and environmental concerns because of the experiences he went through before becoming an author.

The strong presence of environmentalism in Tolkien's works was greatly influenced by his upbringing and major events in his life. He grew up in England in the Worcester countryside, and was deeply impacted by a move to an industrialized area. Tolkien felt a connection especially with trees: mainly older trees such as oak, elm, willow, and his favorite, the black pine. He viewed them as a pure form of nature that did not deserve the destruction that mankind wrought upon it, and stated in one of his letters, "In all my works I take the part of trees as against all their enemies" (Letters #339). He was a strong advocate for these defenseless lifeforms, and took advantage of the fantasy genre to give power to them, so that they could defend themselves. By creating characters that were the

embodiment of nature, Tolkien also needed to align some of his characters with the trees and others against, which created a division between the protagonists and the antagonists. To Tolkien, a person or being with a pure heart would always be one who sided with the trees, and he used this belief frequently in his symbolism of good and evil. In Tolkien's work, *The Lord of the Rings*, each race can be characterized as good, evil, or neutral based on how they align themselves with nature and the role that they play in the war for Middle Earth.

There are many races that align on the side of nature, either fully or partially. However, there are also races that have little to no respect for nature, and the two sides clash in one of the most epic battles in all of literature. In Middle Earth, the evil Lord Sauron enlists the race of Orcs and their larger and more intelligent relatives, the Uruk-hai. They fight as minions, doing his bidding and being slaughtered by the thousands. It is wondered if the Uruks were a result of breeding men and Orcs to make a new stronger race. Orcs are a war loving race who are bred to fight, and revel so much in fighting that they even quarrel amongst their many clans. It is the Orcs who cut down the forests at Isengard and destroyed much of Fangorn Forest for their all-devouring industry. Orcs are described as dark and dirty



creatures, larger than men, with cruel faces and harsh voices. Tolkien describes the creation of Orcs, saying that they, “by slow arts were corrupted and enslaved; and thus did Melkor breed the race of the Orcs, in envy and mockery of the Elves, of whom they were afterwards the bitterest foes” (Tolkien Appendix B). They are very brutish creatures with no respect for nature. They are the most evil of the races because they fully aligned themselves against the trees, and for full scale war and the destruction it brings. When they destroyed the forests, Orcs not only killed the trees, they destroyed living, breathing, and even thinking beings which could exact their own revenge.

After the battle of Helm’s Deep in the second book, an army of retreating Orcs encounters the Huorns, trees that belonged to the forest they had been cutting down. They were trapped between the army of men and an equally vicious army of trees. Tolkien describes; “the land had changed. Where before the green dale had lain, its grassy slopes lapping the ever-mounting hills, there now a forest loomed. Great trees, bare and silent, stood, rank on rank, with tangled bough and hoary head” (Tolkien 529). The Huorns were more mobile than regular trees, yet were still considered sleepy, or less aware than other races of Middle Earth. Because

the Orcs had destroyed the forest, the Huorns used their ability to move to kill the Orcs, travelling leagues from Fangorn Forest to Helm’s Deep in order to do so. Although they are frightening due to their power and lack of personifiable traits, the Huorns are still inherently good. Their only aim is to stop the destruction that the Orcs are causing, and this rage does not boil over into any other areas of the war. After cleaning up the remaining Orcs when the battle is over, the Huorns retreat back to where they originated and become still once more. Their role in the story is to present the anger that nature holds for those who desecrate it, as well as the power it possesses, but they are not the only race to fill this role.

As stated by Ina Habermann regarding the thematic importance of trees, “there is an emphasis on land degeneration, a ‘missing forest problem’ which prompts a closer look at the role of woods and trees in Tolkiens work. It emerges that the preservation of trees is at the centre of Tolkien’s sustainable fictions” (Habermann). Tolkien had a love for nature and trees that was so strong that he gave trees their own voice. He personified trees in the form of not only the Huorns, but also the Ents, who were more aware than the Huorns. The most important Ent is named Treebeard.



Tolkien says, “Treebeard is Fangorn, the guardian of the forest; he is the oldest of the Ents, the oldest living thing that still walks beneath the Sun upon this Middle-earth” (Tolkien 488). He is a tall tree-like creature with limbs and a face, who is mobile and thus has the power to fight back against those who would destroy the forests. Treebeard is a tree herder in Fangorn forest, which was once known as Greenwood due to its lush greenery and pleasant atmosphere. When corrupt magic from the evil Lord Sauron invaded the woods, it became overrun with foul creatures and the trees slowly became dark and menacing. One character warns of the forest’s disposition, saying, “Fangorn [...] is perilous too; yet he is wise and kindly nonetheless. But now his long slow wrath is brimming over, and all the forest is filled with it. A thing is about to happen that has not happened since the Elder Days: the Ents are going to wake up and find that they are strong” (Tolkien 488). The Ents are roused to march into war against the armies of Isengard.

After seeing the destruction that has been wreaked upon their forest by the orcs, Treebeard says, “Orcs came with axes and cut down my trees. I came and called them by their long names, but they did not quiver, they did not hear or answer: they lay dead” (Tolkien 472). Although they did

not stop the destruction of large portions of their forests, the Ents would not stand back and allow nature to be corrupted and destroyed by evil. Tolkien personified nature in a race that is physically more powerful than the races of evil. The Ents marched to war singing,

We go, we go, we go to war, to hew the stone and break the door;

For bole and bough are burning now, the furnace roars – we go to war!

To Isengard with doom we come! (Tolkien 474)

Although the goal in this scene was for revenge, the Ents as a race would go on to help the forest recover. Indeed, “recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a regaining - regaining a clear view” (Brawley). After the evil is gone from Middle Earth, the Ents are able to go about restoring health to nature and the other races. Ents, like Treebeard, are a race unique to Middle Earth, and pull much of their substance from Tolkien’s own experiences.

Each Ent is a particular kind of tree, all of which are indigenous to England. Some of his favorites included Willows, Elms, Birch, and Pines. Despite Middle Earth being separate from the actual earth, the nature there is still the same, including the trees. This allowed





Tolkien to convey his views on nature to the readers more easily. In one of his letters, He stated, “The ennoblement of the ignoble I find specially moving. I am (obviously) much in love with plants and above all trees, and always have been; and I find human maltreatment of them as hard to bear as some find ill-treatment of animals” (Brawley). The Ents were the personified versions of Tolkien’s real life friends and companions, the trees. Being such, they have pure hearts and noble causes, and fight only to protect their own, the trees of the forests of Middle Earth. Ents and Huorns are races of good because they fight for a just cause, which is the preservation of nature.

Many of the races aligned themselves for nature, and one such race that Tolkien is solely responsible for creating is the Hobbits. They are a peaceful race that live in homes built into the ground, and whose main activities include farming, eating, and having festivals. Because of their isolated location from the rest of the races, Hobbits are proud of being well-to-do, and having a great capacity to avoid all conflict or anything out of the ordinary. In one instance it is warned that, “Hobbits will sit on the edge of ruin and discuss the pleasures of the table, or the small doings of their fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers, and remoter cousins

to the ninth degree, if you encourage them with undue patience” (Tolkien 522). The Hobbits that are included in the Fellowship, the group of main characters who embark on the quest, mostly fit this profile.

Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin are all Hobbits from the Shire, a peaceful village that has never been involved in a major war. Ina Habermann, in her work on the sustainable nature of *The Lord of the Rings* says that, “Tolkien creates an intricate symbolic topography, which manages to retain the complexity of our world while at the same time advocating a careful stewardship of the environment” (Habermann). The race of Hobbits is made entirely of these stewards, or caretakers of the land, whose livelihood comes from agriculture and gardening in the Shire. The focus on gardening as a pure form of expression, especially noted by the Hobbit Samwise Gamgee, Sam, is fitting as a tribute to nature. Riona Kelly discusses, “the concept of the garden as a site of interaction for nature and culture”, which is what the utopian society of the Shire can be described as (Kelly 2). When a garden is viewed as an Edenic place of purity, the destruction of such a place is then equal to sin. By cultivating this purity, the Hobbits as a race are therefore equated with goodness and innocence, or



a lack of sin.

The Hobbits remained untainted by the destruction of nature until they become caught up in the struggle for Middle Earth due to possession of the Ring of Power. Frodo, the main character, and Sam, his helper, are the ones to ultimately destroy the ring. Sam is a gardener, and arguably the moral center for the novel. When the ring is destroyed by the two Hobbits it is the ultimate triumph of the goodness of the natural world over the corrupt nature of war and industrialization. Besides fulfilling the goal of the quest, Sam also restores the nature of the Shire that has been destroyed in their absence. Tolkien says, “The trees were the worst loss and damage, [...] they had been cut down recklessly far and wide over the Shire; and Sam grieved over this more than anything else. [...] This hurt would take long to heal” (Tolkien 999). Sam not only grieved for the loss of the trees; he acted, and planted seeds from the Elven kingdom of Rivendell to replace those that had been lost, and in this final act balance was restored between the races and the natural world.

Despite being the heroes of the epic, other races view Hobbits as childlike, as shown in the numerous instances when they are ostracized. When the army of Rohan is being summoned to aid the

kingdom of Gondor, Theoden, the king of Rohan dismisses the Hobbit Merry from his service as he is too small to go into battle. Merry begs, “As all my friends have gone to the battle, I should be ashamed to stay behind” (Tolkien 784). Tolkien reverts this misconception by making the Hobbits irreplaceable heroes in his epic. Pippin saves the steward’s son Faramir, Merry saves the handmaiden of Rohan, Eowyn, and Frodo and Sam ultimately destroy the One Ring. All four Hobbits have major roles in the battles that occur during the war for Middle Earth. In fact, it was Merry and Pippin who convinced the Ents to go to war against the forces of evil. The Hobbits put aside their peaceful dispositions in favor of a quest to preserve their home, the Shire. The triumph of good over evil, with respect for nature as a symbol of all things good, is most notable in the peaceful race of Hobbits.

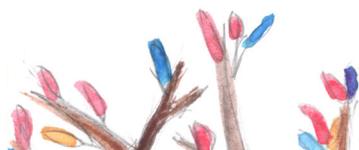
The Hobbits meet a very powerful character on their journey to Rivendell, the home of the Elves. His name is Tom Bombadil, and he is excluded from the movie trilogy because he does not play an actual role in the quest to destroy the ring, and many critics question why Tolkien even wrote him into the story. He lives in the woods near the Shire with his beautiful wife Goldberry, and is described as a jolly, short man. He says of himself, “Eldest,

that's what I am... Tom remembers the first raindrop and the first acorn... He knew the dark under the stars when it was fearless - before the Dark Lord came from Outside" (Tolkien 72). Tom is an ancient power that predates the reign of the evil Lord Sauron and the creation of the ring. He is the most knowledgeable being in Middle Earth on the topics of nature, as he has power over all of it. His wife Goldberry was a personification of the four seasons, the two combined being equivalent to what Mother Nature represents to many people. According to Tolkien, he included Tom as a character to make a statement on the disappearance of nature, and its decline in power. He says, Tom represented "the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxford and Berkshire countryside" (Brawley). Even with his dominion shrinking, Tom Bombadil still has a way with nature, which is shown by his rescuing of the Hobbits from Old Man Willow, a tree with a bad temper and strong limbs. The tree has witnessed the destruction of his kin by Men and Orcs who burned and chopped down the other trees. He is slow to forget and even slower to forgive. For this reason he captures weary travelers when they rest against his trunk, and engulfs them. Tom Bombadil had experiences with Old Man Willow in the past, and knew how to rescue the

Hobbits from his snares. It took singing and lots of persuasion to convince the tree that neither he nor the Hobbits were there to harm him, and only then were they released (Tolkien 197-198).

Despite not having a role in the overall quest to destroy the ring, Tom Bombadil is a necessary character in the grand scheme of Tolkien's ecocentric fantasy novel, if only to emphasize the spirit of untainted nature. It is insinuated that Tom is the only character not drawn to the One Ring, which is a great temptation of power to every other character in the story. Tom does not partake in the war for Middle Earth, and instead remains in his home to protect the lands around him. He is a notably pure character because he realizes that the ring can only cause evil and corruption and instead helps the Hobbits on their journey to destroy it. When the Hobbits arrive at their destination, Rivendell, the Fellowship of the Ring is formed and tasked with destroying the ring.

Out of all the Fellowship members, the most in tune with nature is the Elf Legolas of the Woodland Realm, also known as Legolas Greenleaf. If the name does not make it evident, the lifestyle of Elves removes any remaining confusion. When the Hobbits enter the Elven kingdom of Rivendell, home of





the Elf lord Elrond, it is described as pure serenity. Tolkien says, “The air was warm. The sound of running and falling water was loud, and the evening was filled with a faint scent of trees and flowers, as if summer still lingered in Elrond’s gardens” (Tolkien 127). Rivendell, the civilization most integrated with nature in all of Middle Earth, is also described as being a solitude of peace, a fortress where the weary traveler was welcome to rest. Tolkien created the nickname the “Fair Folk” to describe the beauty and grace of the Elves, to whom he also gave the most detailed language and lore. As the favored civilization of the author, it is no surprise that the Elves are also the most connected to nature. Elves can live to be thousands of years old because they do not age and only die in battle. In a civilization where life is so treasured, they do not throw it away lightly by going to war. When the war for Middle Earth reaches a peak, any Elf not fighting leaves on ships to the Undying Lands, the Gray Havens that lie across the ocean. Many times throughout the epic the Elves sing about their beloved ocean. One such instance is when the last ship carrying the most important Elves is about to set sail and make the journey. An Elf sings,

*“We still remember, we who dwell
In this land far beneath the trees*

*The starlight on the Western
Seas” (Tolkien 1005)*

This fixation on the natural world stems from their extreme dedication that manifests itself in a distaste for war and desire to preserve nature. With their extended lifespan, Elves have a better realization and comprehension of the importance of preserving the world for generations to come.

The Elves have multiple civilizations, Rivendell ruled by Elrond, and another which is ruled by the powerful queen Galadriel. When the Fellowship passed through her realm, Lothlórien, she aided them and gave gifts to each member based on what they needed or asked for. To Sam, the Hobbit gardener, she gave the seeds with which he restarted the gardens of the Shire. The lands of the Elves are also where Sam first saw the flower elanor, which Galadriel wore a crown of. It was so beautiful and inspiring to him that after the war he named his first daughter Elanor (Tolkien 219). The Fellowship is also given the gift of Elven cloaks with leaf shaped broaches. These leaves were called the leaves of Lorien, and played a role in characters being able to track each other down once they were separated. Nature was a powerful symbol for the Elves, and they revered and honored it by



living immersed in it. Although some of the Elves fight in the war, they say it is not their war, and their time on Middle Earth is ending. As nature diminishes, so do they. The race of Elves is tightly entwined with the natural world in the epic.

Although they are less attuned to nature, the most prevalent race throughout Tolkien's trilogy is the race of men, which has multiple civilizations throughout Middle Earth. Two members of the Fellowship are men. They are Aragorn, a ranger from the line of the Gondor kings, and Boromir, from the line of the stewards to the king. The race of men is not decidedly good or evil. Individuals like Aragorn and Boromir, as well as their nations, choose to fight against the enemy, but there is still corruption within this system. Not everyone fights to end the fighting, and there is much unnecessary destruction caused by needless warring. Both of the men in the Fellowship hail from the kingdom of Gondor, at least in ancestry, which is the largest civilization of men in Middle Earth. Their banner depicts the symbol of a white tree, often referred to as the White Tree of Gondor. The entrance to Gondor is prefaced by a rhyme muttered by the wizard Gandalf, saying,

*"Tall ships and tall kings
Three times three,*

*What brought them from the foundered
land*

Over the flowing sea?

Seven stars and seven stones

And one white tree." (Tolkien 583)

Nature has a strong influence in much of the lore of the race of men, the above six lines mentioning four different aspects of nature alone. Despite not being gentle gardeners and farmers like the Hobbits, the destiny of the race of men is still entwined with the well-being of nature. This tree is described by Tolkien at Gondor; "drooping over the pool, stood a dead tree, and the falling drops dripped sadly from its barren and broken branches back into the clear water" (Tolkien 736). The white tree is dead, and is used as a symbol to represent the corrupt and dark nature of the times. Housed within the center walls of the capital Minas Tirith, the tree is the heart of the city, much as nature is the heart of the world. When the heart is corrupted, the whole fortress can fall. While the race of men has great potential to restore the natural world, they also have pride and a tendency to fight which leads them to destroy the world they rely so heavily on.

While both men in the Fellowship are ultimately good, it is Boromir who is tempted by the power of the one





ring, the symbol of evil throughout the trilogy, and Aragorn who remains loyal to the cause throughout the story. One line of distinction between the two can be made by analyzing how in tune each man was with nature. Boromir is part of the quest because his father sent him and he is seeking glory and his father's approval. There is nothing ultimately evil in this, but his goals are set to be achieved through glory in war, something that J. R. R. Tolkien ultimately grew to disapprove of. Tolkien fought for the British army in the First World War, but only did so because it was required of him, and he hated being parted from his wife, and especially hated the destruction that he was a part of. Boromir seeks glory in war, but shows character development when he dies protecting two of the Hobbits from Orcs. Some of his last words are, "I tried to take the ring from Frodo. I am sorry. I have paid" (Tolkien 404). Despite having been weak and seeking power, Boromir overcomes this weakness and fights to his last breath to save the Hobbits, and thus achieves redemption. He is the least attuned to nature of the members of the Fellowship, and is also one of the first to die.

Throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien expresses his distaste for war, and this is also shown in his promoting of

Aragorn, a man who fights in war only to end the war. Aragorn is a ranger and the traditional hero of the epic because he is the greatest warrior and leader, who does not seek to rule. One of his most underrated traits is his understanding and respect for nature which stems from his upbringing and choice of lifestyle. Aragorn was raised by the Elves of Rivendell before leaving to become a ranger, someone who lives a solitary life off of the land. When he meets the Hobbits in the beginning of the epic there is an incident in which Frodo is stabbed with a cursed blade and in need of immediate medical attention. Because of his knowledge of nature and plants, Aragorn knows that the plant Athelas is needed to help Frodo before he can be taken to the Elves for professional healing. To all races besides the Rangers and the Elves, the healing properties of the plant are unknown, and it is considered a weed. For Aragorn, a Ranger raised by the Elves, use of this technique comes naturally and he utilizes it in multiple instances. After the battle of Pelennor Fields he uses Athelas to heal the sick in the houses of healing; "Men came and prayed that he would heal their kinsmen or their friends whose lives were in peril through hurt or wound, or who lay under the Black Shadow" (853). Because of Aragorn's dedication to healing the wounded, the entire kingdom recognized



him as the rightful king. The knowledge of nature on these occasions is associated with healing and kindness, which is what nature represented to Tolkien. Aragorn's distaste for war paired with his respect for nature and the preservation of life led to him becoming the king over men.

Tolkien was sure to include as many races as possible into his epic, ensuring that there would be many equally worthy heroes. One such hero is Gimli, a dwarf. Dwarves in most fantasy literature are portrayed as surly, bearded, stout men, and Tolkien's work is no exception. Gimli, a member of the fellowship, is a sour-dispositioned, yet fiercely protective, axe-bearing fighter. Dwarves are well known for their love of gold and all things subsurface, where they build not only their mines but also their homes. While this connection is different than that of the gardening Hobbits, a love of the earth is still a love for nature. The dwarves long for the earthy tunnels and the minerals and precious metals and gems that they mine. Entire great civilizations such as Moria and Erebor existed entirely below ground, and were ruled by great kings. Dwarves were normally considered a good race, fighting for noble causes, but they had the weakness of being too greedy. When they lost their connection with what was truly important in life, such as the preservation

of the natural world, it ended with drastic consequences. In the Hobbit prequel this consequence was a dragon, and in the trilogy this consequence was a Balrog. Balrogs can be equated to a demon or evil fire spirit, and when the greed of the dwarves caused them to dig too deep they disturbed one. The lesson that Tolkien gives not only entails the punishments for greed, but also for overexploitation of natural resources. Dwarves are a race that is inherently good, but can become bad when their desires and greed lead them to do things against the best interest of nature. This greed also leads them into wars that cause the destruction of nature.

Another race of Middle Earth that is susceptible to greed is the ancient race of Maiar, also known as wizards. They are supposedly the angels of the land, charged with restoring harmony. The architect of the quest to destroy the ring was the wizard Gandalf, who was also the leader of the Fellowship. He was the rank of a gray wizard, under the charge of Saruman the white wizard. Gandalf is considered the most wise of the Maiar, and has a friendship with all of the before mentioned races, as well as the Eagles. He uses his wisdom to orchestrate key players in a battle against the enemy, all the while hiding behind the guise of an old man. Tolkien says of him, "He wore



a tall pointed grey hat, a long grey cloak, and a silver scarf. He had a long white beard and bushy eyebrows that stuck out beyond the brim of his hat” (Tolkien 35). Possessing even more years and wisdom than the Elves, Gandalf is an advocate for the minorities in Middle Earth, such as the peaceful Hobbits. Although the wizards should all have this respect for nature, they are still prone to corruption.

The White Wizard Saruman, leader of the Maiar at the time, was jealous of Gandalf and joined the forces of the evil Lord Sauron to gain more power. Prior to this, Saruman lived in Isengard, a lush forested area with gardens. Once he took the side of corruption and greed, Saruman allowed orcs to cut down the trees around Isengard. They also built blacksmithing areas to make weapons for war, which required trees to fuel the fires of the forges. When Sauron captured Gandalf, he tried to persuade him to join his cause, but Gandalf saw his evil nature, refused, and was then imprisoned. It was with the help of the Eagles that he escaped after passing out from his injuries and exhaustion. He awoke and was sent back to the world of the living as the new White Wizard. Gandalf appeared to members of the Fellowship in Fangorn forest, the home of the Ents. The place of his rebirth was in one of the most natural places in all of

Middle Earth, showing his strong ties to the natural world.

As Saruman’s replacement, Gandalf possessed the power to combat his destructive plans. When questioned on this change, Gandalf replies, “Indeed I *am* Saruman, one might almost say, Saruman as he should have been” (Tolkien 484). Gandalf knows that power and strength should be used to help the minorities and weaker races, and to preserve the natural world. By clearing the mistakes of his predecessor, Gandalf restored balance to nature. When Gandalf died he was sent back, but when Saruman died he was not. The “universe” of Middle Earth still had need of Gandalf, but had no need for a wizard who would use his power to destroy. This decision by the author emphasized his views on those who deserve life and those who do not. In the world that Tolkien created, those who respected nature and did not seek power and glory through war were elevated above all others, and rewarded with second chances at life, strong friendships, and even positions of power. Those who sought power, and in their pursuit destroyed nature, were ultimately sent to their demise. Tolkien’s epic centers around nature, or ecocentrism.

The importance of ecocentric writing in fantasy was stressed by Eleanor

Johnson when she stated, “any separation of the human ecosystem from the rest of the world is an insidious fantasy: human cultures are permeated by and implicated in the fluid ecosystem of the world’s oceans. To pretend otherwise is to invite our own demise” (Johnson). Since Tolkien’s time, the destruction caused by war has only worsened in intensity and area effected, making his message that nature needs a voice even more potent. In fact, *The Lord of the Rings* would not have been termed an ecocentric piece at the time it was written, as it predated Ecocriticism by over two decades. Nevertheless, an Ecocriticism approach can easily be applied to Tolkien’s writing because of his love for nature that presents itself very predominately throughout the text. Due to his fervor for preserving nature, coupled with a distaste for war, Tolkien aligned different races of his Middle Earth either for or against his ideals, and this divide separated good from evil. Races like the Hobbits, Elves, Tom Bombadil, Huorns, and Ents are fully good, and this is shown through either their care and cultivation of nature, or their being a personification of nature. Men, Dwarves, and the Maiar have the potential to sway between the verges of good and evil, and it depends on the actions of the individual toward nature to determine which side they

align with. Finally, Orcs, working for the evil Lord Sauron are the epitome of evil throughout the trilogy, because of their unrestrained destruction of nature and a general disregard for life. The dichotomy of good and evil in *The Lord of the Rings* is very much the same as the division between races that respect nature and have a distaste for war, and those that do not.

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Historical Implications of Race, Endurance, and Empowerment in Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path"

Rachel Peters

The 1930s marks a time of racial segregation in America. While the African American population was no longer enslaved, it certainly did not enjoy freedom from fear of a racist society. As Wendy Atkins-Sayre of the University of Southern Mississippi notes, "to be Black in the American South during the Jim Crow era was terrifying, but Mississippi was even more segregated and violent" (81-82). Published in 1941, Eudora Welty's short story "A Worn Path" exposes these racial tensions and provides a glimpse into what life was like for African Americans in segregation-era Mississippi. As an elderly former slave named Phoenix travels through a forest and into Natchez to fetch medicine for her grandson, both her natural and societal surroundings display some of the threats and disrespect African Americans received at that time, but Welty crafted Phoenix as a symbol of strength as she endures these hardships.

Mississippi was no stranger to racism in the 1930s, and Welty's text insinuates that the white-dominated social

structure was harmful to both African Americans and the state land itself. In an examination of Phoenix Jackson, Timothy K. Nixon of George Washington University refers to Mississippi as "the figurative capital of American racism" even when considering the state's condition after slaves were freed (954). But Mae Miller Claxton, an English professor at Western Carolina University, also emphasizes that having a well-tread path in the forest shows how humans have impacted nature: The path Phoenix travels "is not wilderness but space impacted by humans" (76). The path is not wholly natural. Claxton explains

The timber industry did not turn its eye to Mississippi until after railroads opened up much of the state after the Civil War and new technology permitted money to be made in transporting logs to national markets. Welty knew about the devastation of Mississippi's forests during this period. (77)



Hence, forests were destroyed. This correlates to the social climate in Mississippi: “Like the forests, Native Americans and African Americans were viewed as resources to be used up and then discarded” (Claxton 83). Through this lens, the worn path is symbolic of being altered by unwanted visitors for personal gain. Like the country’s minorities, nature suffered, and since Welty was aware of the changing condition of the forests she may have made this correlation intentionally.

But even without direct human intervention, the forest holds many obstacles for Phoenix to cross. She reflects on past encounters on the path, specifically a dangerous one involving a snake: “Glad this not the season for bulls...and the good Lord made his snakes to curl up and sleep in the winter. A pleasure I don’t see no two-headed snake coming around that tree, where it come once” (Welty 235). Phoenix is so used to dealing with such obstacles that she warns away any animals and insects before she begins her journey at the beginning of the story (Welty 233). After all, Phoenix is very elderly and probably not the strongest physically: “I never did go to school, I was too old at the Surrender” (Welty 239). If she was too old to go to school after the Civil War, this puts her at a remarkable age at the time of this story. This has also given her plen-

ty of years to familiarize herself with the natural world around her. The fact that she can handle a forest setting shows that Phoenix truly is knowledgeable, strong, and skillful.

Welty also uses bird imagery to characterize Phoenix more directly. When Phoenix taps her cane, Welty describes the sound as “meditative like the chirping of a solitary little bird” (233). This phrase has a positive connotation behind it: Birds are generally seen as agreeable and the sound of “chirping” is often considered relaxing. Birds may even be viewed as innocent, and seeing a bird alone may make it seem even smaller and more fragile compared to the world around it. However, since a phoenix is a bird that rises from its ashes time and time again, the character Phoenix may be compared to a bird to embody strength. After all, she does make the same trip over and over again to get medicine: She rises from her ashes and begins again, and since she is so elderly, one can only guess how many times this has occurred. Phoenix also describes her grandson as birdlike: “He wear a little patch quilt and peep out holding his mouth open like a little bird” (Welty 240). Ever since her grandson swallowed lye, he occasionally is unable to swallow without medicine, so this comparison may also represent strength since he must also rise from his



ashes as he goes through a cycle of medicine repeatedly. Hence, the bird imagery suggests that Phoenix herself is powerful (and thus able to survive a racist society) and generally has good intentions. She and her grandson suffer multiple times for some reason or another and have to pull through, and the same can be said of most African Americans in a segregated time.

However, not all species of birds have such a positive connotation attached to it. The most grotesque description of the landscape is of the trees and a buzzard: “Big dead trees, like black men with one arm, were standing in the purple stalks of the withered cotton field. There sat a buzzard” (Welty 235). Of course, in times of segregation, “lynchings were widespread,” and connecting the dead trees to hanged men are a reminder of this cruel and prominent point in history (Atkins-Sayre 82). In fact, most of the lynchings that occurred in United States were in Mississippi, and “the 1930s saw a brief spike in state lynchings” (Atkins-Sayre 82). Claxton also points out that “the mention of ‘one arm’ in Welty’s story also possibly hints at the horrible custom of cutting off body parts as souvenirs. Phoenix would have lived in an environment of fear” (79). By seeing figurative dead (and possibly dismembered)

hanged men in the trees, Phoenix is acknowledging that racially-targeted deaths occur in the world around her. Furthermore, buzzards eat the dead, and noting their presence so near the comparison of dead men who were hanged to dead trees creates a disturbing image. This contrasts Welty’s prior use of bird imagery as it describes Phoenix. While some birds appear benevolent and strong, buzzards have an opposing connotation. Not all birds are the same, just as not all humans are the same: People like Phoenix go to town to retrieve medicine for their grandchildren, but others go to town to find a minority to hang. Not everyone she will encounter on her journey will have the same good intentions as her because the world she lives in is characterized by discrimination and violence.

This becomes apparent when she meets a hunter and his dog in the forest, but she faces this encounter bravely. At first, it seems as though the dog poses a threat to Phoenix instead of the hunter: “A black dog with a lolling tongue came up out of the weeds by the ditch...when he came at her she only hit him a little with her cane. Over she went in the ditch, like a little puff of milkweed” (Welty 236). The language forms a contrast between the dog and Phoenix: While the dog is black and solid, Phoenix is essentially called



white and dainty. The dog seems physically much stronger than Phoenix. In fact, Phoenix probably could have been injured when the dog ran into her, and that would have caused an even greater delay than the encounter already did. However, Kevin Moberly of Saint Cloud State University suggests that Phoenix and the black dog contrast the whiteness of the hunter and are mistreated by him, giving them a major commonality (118). The man encourages the dogs to fight, and Phoenix “heard the man running and throwing sticks” and shooting his gun as this occurs (Welty 237). Phoenix praises the dog because she believes he is fearless, and the hunter makes the same remark about Phoenix later in the scene (Welty 237). The hunter shoots his gun when the dogs fight and he eventually points it at Phoenix as well. Phoenix probably did not take the threat lightly since “in Mississippi during this time, black people were still killed with few repercussions if their murderers were white,” but she “stood straight and faced him” anyway, an act of bravery (Claxton 81; Welty 237).

Considering how he treats Phoenix and his dog similarly and even points a gun at her, the hunter seems to represent the power white people still had over African Americans in Mississippi at this time. This scene insinuates that African Amer-

icans were regarded more like dogs than human beings as they were prone to being controlled and threatened. However, Phoenix does not cower in fear. In fact, she does not even tell the hunter her age when he asks, thus committing “a conscious act of civil disobedience” (Moberly 123). Not only does she refuse to be afraid of the white hunter, but she refuses to give him what he wants and steals money from him. This rebellion against an oppressive force can easily be seen as empowering.

Going to Natchez specifically adds layers of empowerment to Phoenix’s journey when considering its historical significance. When walking uphill in the forest, she says “seem like there is chains around my feet, time I get this far” (Welty 234). Since she is walking uphill, it may initially seem as though the incline is what pulls her back. However, the destination of her journey must be considered: the Natchez Trace “serves as a link for African Americans who traveled it as slaves to reach new lands for growing cotton along with the Trail of Tears for Native Americans” (Claxton 83). The feeling of “chains” on her feet may be symbolic of returning to a place that is closely connected to her time as a slave. Once she arrives in Natchez, she asks a white woman to tie her shoe. Even though she is returning to a place symbolic of her former oppression as a slave, she





is able to manipulate the situation so that a white person feels obligated to do something kind for her rather than being cruel. Not all white people would be willing to do her a favor, but as Nixon notes, “Phoenix has not survived 100 years in the virulently racist society of Mississippi without learning how to read white people” so she must choose “the most likely (white) citizen of Natchez who would be willing to tie her shoes for her” (952-953). Furthermore, since the woman would have to bend down and “put her packages down on the sidewalk beside her” to tie Phoenix’s shoe, she is essentially bowing to Phoenix (Welty 238). This signifies that Phoenix has more power now than she has had before. While she was a slave, no white person would bow to her even inadvertently. Now that she is able to manipulate and ask favors from white people, she is able to find moments of empowerment in a town that symbolizes the past inhumane practice of slavery.

Phoenix is brave enough that she goes as far as rebelling against the present segregated setting when she goes to the doctor’s office to retrieve medicine for her grandson, and ultimately, she endures society’s cruelties for his sake. The attendant at the doctor’s office refers to Phoenix as “a charity case” (Welty 238). Nixon suggests that this offends her (949). After

the attendant makes this remark, Phoenix is unresponsive. Since Phoenix is indeed elderly, it may seem as though her memory failed her, but Nixon argues that her silence is purposeful:

In 1940s Mississippi, Phoenix could not realistically have come back with an appropriately stinging retort; she, therefore, uses the one response that both assuages her anger at the attendant’s rudeness and communicates her disdain: silence. (949-950)

Rather than having a moment of forgetfulness as Phoenix herself tells the nurse, she may have been using silence to express her anger and annoy the attendant and nurse. She “only speaks when she is ready” and “knows just how far she can push the issue” because she understands societal expectations (Nixon 949-951). She cannot afford to make the women too angry at risk of not getting the medicine her grandson needs to help his throat, for he swallowed lye. If she were to be turned away, all she endured would be for nothing. She cannot react in a more upfront way that she might find more desirable and instead must conform to social standards: “In admitting her ignorance, her age, and the failure of her memory, she gives the nurse and the attendant the answers they



want. In doing so, however, Phoenix is only playing a role” (Moberly 123). In other words, Phoenix may know how to act submissive in front of white people, but that does not necessarily mean that she is submissive. Not only is her grandson’s well-being at stake, but Moberly suggests that swallowing lye “would also make it difficult for him to speak,” and “in this sense, the grandson’s injury is representative of the African American condition” (111). Much like Phoenix at the doctor’s office, African Americans did not have the same freedom as white people to speak their minds. They did not have the same freedom as white people at all. So in this sense, Phoenix is enduring hardships in hopes that things will be different for future generations.

This textual evidence and research all suggest that Welty is trying to depict Phoenix as a strong woman doing the best she can to live in a segregated Mississippi. Research by Suzanne Marrs of Millsaps College also shows that Welty had “a concern for human rights,” which “she voiced in letters to friends” (10). Welty additionally demonstrated this concern through her photography. Atkins-Sayre notes that Welty’s photographs were taken in what seem to be a “natural setting,” depicting both African Americans and whites as they were in Mississippi (83). The peo-

ple in the photographs seem to express a range of emotions, and Atkins-Sayres concludes that

Welty’s insightful and poignant photographs serve, in many ways, as a celebration of the strength and courage of the Black women who are portrayed in those frames. The images of pride, hope, and joy send a message that humans can endure great pain and injustice and still survive or even prosper in their own ways. (91)

Welty seems to be sending the same message to readers about Phoenix. She does have pride and she is able to find moments of empowerment in a racist society. In fact, she is strong enough to handle very different types of situations: “Even with the challenges she faces as an elderly African American woman, Phoenix successfully achieves her goal in the story, negotiating both nonhuman and human communities” (Claxton 74-75). Like her fictional namesake, Phoenix rises from her ashes and continues on in the face of oppression.

Thus, “A Worn Path” is quite connected to the struggles African Americans faced in segregation-era Mississippi. Evidence of and allusions to racial oppression exist

both inside Natchez and in the forest, as both settings have been touched by those of ill-intent. However, Phoenix faces both natural and societal obstacles bravely, even going as far as rebelling against the wishes of white people, for she knows well what she can and cannot get away with in society. The only time she backs down near the end of the story is for the sake of her grandson so that she can tend to his immediate needs. In her analysis of Welty's photography, Atkins-Sayre remarked that Welty's "photographed women represent many individuals in some ways" (88). That same universality can be applied to Phoenix: Strong women in segregated Mississippi had to choose their battles, and Phoenix serves as an emblem of their strength and patience.

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The Trifling of Women

Sarah Miller

In the story *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell, there are five characters physically present, in addition to Mr. and Mrs. Wright. The story revolves around the mystery of the death of Mr. Wright, who was found by Mr. Hale, a neighboring farmer, hung in the upstairs of the house. As the search for evidence progresses, the two women, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, often find themselves separate from the men. They should not be a direct part of the “nasty business” of looking for evidence of murder. A reoccurring theme throughout the search is that the women dote on things of little to no significance while the men have more important matters than quilting and canning to look into. The story *Trifles* is aptly named because it highlights the ironic truths between the views of the women and men of the story, in light of the situation.

As a general consensus, no one in the town can think of any reason someone would commit such a treacherous act against such a man as Mr. Wright. As Mrs. Hale says, “He didn’t drink, and he kept his word as well as most, I guess, and paid his debts.” (750). As far as small town outlook

goes, he is a well-to-do respectable citizen. However, as the Wright’s neighbor, Mrs. Hale has more insight to add. The town may have seen him as “Mr. Right”, but in the eyes of the women, he was not a good husband for Minnie. “I wonder how it would seem never to have any children around,” said Mrs. Hale, “No, Mr. Wright wouldn’t like the bird - a thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that, too.” (751). The discussion of Mr. Wright not being a good husband is essential to the story because it is the true underlying motive for the murder. The men, however, do not understand the way the women do that the “respectable” man was not perfect. To them, as long as a man provides and has all his affairs in order then he is practically above reproach. The women are more astute to Minnie’s feelings and needs as a female, and realize how unhappy she was in her marriage. The men, for all of their high speaking and professional methods, overlook the “trifle” of an unhappy wife.

Another instance in which the men fail to notice the significance of trifles is in the condition of the house. The attorney comments, “Dirty towels! Not much of



a housekeeper, would you say, ladies?” (746). The men view the shortcomings of the woman as a flaw in her character, rather than a clue as to what her life was like living with Mr. Wright. The women feel insulted by the slight to their gender, and Mrs. Hale, sympathetically says, “I’d hate to have men coming into my kitchen, snooping around and criticizing.” (746). The dust and disorder show neglect and it is a cold house, as Mrs. Hale puts it, in which all happiness is gone, snuffed out like a candle. Minnie, held in jail for murder, had requested that they look at her canned goods to see if any have survived the fire going out and freezing them. When the men see the broken jars they see a mess and a woman who is worrying over such small trifles compared to the fact that she is held for murder. The women, on the other hand, manage to salvage one jar that did not break and decide to not mention the others. They feel sorry for Minnie and realize that it is unlikely she will ever come back home to find the broken jars anyways. The broken jars represent Minnie, just as the bird did. She used to be pristine and beautiful like the canned goods she worked so hard on, but just like them, when left alone in the cold house she shattered. The men in their investigation fail to see what is staring back at them, which is someone having

the motive to commit such a treacherous murder, and they disregard the cold and dirty house as simply a trifle, or hindrance to their search.

As the two women are searching for clothes to take to Mrs. Wright, they discover an empty birdcage. Mrs. Peters says, “Seems funny to think of a bird here. But she must have had one, or why would she have a cage? I wonder what happened to it.” (749). They realize that she must have had a bird and assume that it had been set free or died. It comes as quite a shock to both of them when they find it in her sewing supplies wrapped in silk. The little yellow canary itself is quite symbolic, and represents happiness and freedom with its cheerful singing. The women agree that Minnie Foster, the present Mrs. Wright, had been much like a bird herself in her prime. Now the bird is dead. The most disturbing part of the discovery was that its neck had been broken, or wrung. Mrs. Peters had previously noted that, “what was needed for the case was a motive; something to show anger, or - sudden feeling.” (748). Because the women feel sorry for Mrs. Wright having to live in such a cold house, they take pity on her and decide to hide the existence of the bird from the men. Mrs. Hale says, “If there’d been years and years of nothing, then a bird to sing to



you, it would be awful - still, after the bird was still.” (751). The men had seen the birdcage and thought nothing of the way the door was broken as if forced. They had not looked through Mrs. Wright’s things to see if there was anything out of the ordinary. All three men, the sheriff, the attorney, and the neighbor thought only about the big picture, and the women had no inclination to enlighten them.

Finally, further evidence that that the men overlook but the women are perceptive enough to see is that Minnie Wright had been working on a quilt. This in itself is no evidence, but that last few pieces had been stitched very poorly, as if she had been anxious. The women wonder to themselves if Minnie was going to quilt it or just knot it, and the men overhear and laugh at how petty they are. Mrs. Hale, stung, remarks to Mrs. Peters, “I don’t know as there’s anything so strange, our takin’ up our time with little things while we’re waiting for them to get the evidence. I don’t see as it’s anything to laugh about.” (748). It is when they look closer at the quilt that they realize how poorly stitched the last square is compared to the rest. They wonder what she had been so nervous about. In their minds though, they must have realized why Minnie had been nervous, and that is why Mrs. Hale pulls out the bad stitches,

one again covering up evidence against the guilty Mrs. Wright. The last lines of the story have very deep implications, because by that time the women have found enough evidence to pin the murder on Mrs. Wright, while the men have found none and been told nothing. In frustration they decide to leave and the attorney says, “Well, Henry, at least we found out that she was not going to quilt it. She was going to – what is it you call it, ladies?” and Mrs. Hale replies, “We call it – knot it, Mr. Henderson.” (752). Minnie did indeed knot it, for she is the one who tied the knot for the rope and hung her husband, and the men believe that the women have only been fretting over quilting.

Throughout the story, the men prove themselves to be too focused on their professional investigation to see what the women can see. Hale says, “Well, women are used to worrying over trifles.” (746). This is exactly right, and if they had realized the importance of this worrying, they would have found the evidence proving Mrs. Wright guilty of murder. The author of *Trifles*, Susan Glaspell, probably wrote the story in order to highlight the differences between men and women. By nature, women are more doting than men, and worry far more. They are also more sensitive to the plights of others. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters display all of these





attributes throughout the story when they look into the small things that Minnie had been doing such as quilting and canning. They also break the law by withholding the evidence that they find, the dead bird, and tampering with evidence, the poorly sewn quilt. Throughout the search of the Wright house the women are superior in finding the evidence that the men are there to search for. They continually see what needs to be seen in the trifles that the men so easily discard and are therefore successful not only in solving the case, but in protecting their fellow woman with whose plight they are sympathetic. The play is aptly named because it highlights the differences between the nature of men and women through the presence of the trifles in the investigation.

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