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30 October 2016

Over the Garden Wall: The Hero, Apocalypse, and Coming of Age

“Somewhere lost in the clouded panels of history lies a place that few have seen, a mysterious place called The Unknown, where long forgotten stories are revealed to those who travel through the wood” (Over the Garden Wall).

“Over the Garden Wall” is an animated television miniseries that centers its story around two half-brothers, Wirt and Greg, as they journey through The Unknown in search of a route to get back home. Beatrice, a girl cursed to take the form of a bluebird, acts as a guide for the two boys who continue to wander throughout a late 19th century-esc rural countryside that draws many aesthetic qualities from colonial America. Along their travels Wirt, Greg, and Beatrice come to meet The Woodsmen who warns them of The Beast, a feared malicious being thriving amongst the dark woods of The Unknown. “Over the Garden Wall” displays a seasonal transition from late autumn to winter while simultaneously coinciding with underlying mythic cycles within the series that also transition from Messiah to Apocalypse.

Wirt and Greg retrospectively experience the later two seasons of the mythic cycle together, however each brother fulfills the roles of several different archetypes. Wirt's mannerisms and experiences before, after, and during his journey through The Unknown contribute to the Coming of Age transformation that ultimately leads him and his brother to defeat The Beast and find their way back home. On the other hand, Greg's alert, watchful persona and caring nature for his brother, Wirt, displace him as a Messiah-hero figure who self-sacrifices himself in place of his brother thus enabling Wirt to realize his full potential and outsmart the evil force of The Beast pitted against them.

By focusing our attention to the intentional selection and meaning of each character's name, relationships between their personas and motives can be established and more clearly recognized within the scope of the story. For instance, Wirt's name has Anglo-Saxon roots connecting it to the word: worthy.

The relation between the two is clear, specifically in that Wirt nearly spells “Worthy” if you switch the ‘i’ for an ‘o’ and add a ‘y’ to the end. This is by no means coincidental seeing as how Wirt's strongest weakness is that he repeatedly struggles with self-worth throughout the story. In Chapter 9 of the story, while being pursued by frog police after sneaking aboard the ferry, the group looks to Wirt to replace the bassoon player in the on-boat orchestra to conceal their presence:

“GREG. Hey why don't you play the bassoon?

WIRT. That'll get us kicked off this boat for sure.

BEATRICE. No, Greg's right you should play it. Go ahead, you'll do fine. You play instruments right?

WIRT. The bassoon and clarinet are way different, I don't have the ombushure for bassoon, I mean-the lower and middle ranges have some similarities in tone-

BEATRICE. Wirt you can do it.

WIRT. Seriously, no one wants to hear me play” (Over the Garden Wall).

Following this exchange Wirt is convinced to play the bassoon, which he not only does successfully, but so well that his performance leads the on-boat orchestra and the police forgive their intrusion. Wirt's inability to see merit in his own unique abilities is the main obstacle separating him from fulfilling his Coming of Age archetype. Until that self-worth is accepted, his personal goals of escaping The Unknown and achieving the affection of his hometown crush, Sara, will continue to allude him.

Wirt is also gifted with an excellent mind and expansive vocabulary enabling him to produce beautiful, often times somber, linguistic prose and self-expression of his emotions, as seen in his brief monologue in Chapter 1: “Sometimes I feel like I'm just a boat upon a winding river, twisting towards an endless black sea further and further, drifting away from where I want to be, who I want to be” (Over the Garden Wall). Wirt's intelligent, analytic mind enables him to think in rational terms, but again following the trend of his character, his thought process is often overpowered by emotions of fear and anguish.

“This guy sounds loony, maybe we should make a break for it...if we can-but he must know the woods really well, so we may need to knock him out first, except that may turn out really badly huh? Yea b-bad plan-forget it-bad plan” (Over the Garden Wall).

Wirt's issues with self-worth stem from a fear of uncertainty and endangerment, both of which The Beast personifies within the scope of the story. The Beast represents the darkness of the forest-the overarching adolescent fear of the dark-the potential for unknown dangers hidden from view. This nature is captured well at the closing of Chapter 7 when The Beast declares: “No. There is only me. There is only my way. There is only the forest. And there is only surrender” (Over the Garden Wall). By conquering The Beast, Wirt in turn overcomes the adolescent ties binding him to his fears of the unknown.

“THE BEAST. Your brother is too weak to go home He will soon become part of my forest.

WIRT. I wont let that happen.

THE BEAST. Well then, perhaps we better make a deal.

WIRT. Deal?

THE BEAST. I can put his spirit in the lantern as long as the flame stays lit he will live on inside. Take on the task of lantern bearer, or watch your brother perish. Come here.

WIRT. Okay...Wait, that's dumb. That's dumb, I'm not just gonna wander around in the woods for the rest of my life.

THE BEAST. I'm trying to help you.

WIRT. You're not trying to help me. You just have some weird obsession with keeping this lantern lit-it's almost like your soul is in this lantern” (Over the Garden Wall). By using his intellectual, rational thought process, one of the same qualities Wirt devalued throughout his journey, he's

able to see through lies of The Beast and discover their weakness. Through the defeat of The Beast, Wirt fulfills his Coming of Age archetype, leaves The Unknown with Greg, and with his new-found confidence pursues a friendship with Sara.

Greg, short for Gregory, comes from the Greek word meaning: watchful. (Campbell). This directly reflects the alert nature and caring admiration that he expresses, not only towards his half-brother Wirt, but also to others and his surroundings. Greg fulfills multiple meanings of the word, being watchful over his brother's well-being, as well as over the condition of their environment. This relationship is clearly demonstrated early in their journey during Chapter 2: "GREG. Hey, I hear something! WIRT. It's probably nothing" (Over the Garden Wall). Wirt's one-sided thinking and prejudice disposition that Greg is over-imaginative and immature stagnates their journey through The Unknown and stints their ability to avoid obstacles beforehand. In Chapter 7, the boys hide in an abandoned shack, much to the dismay and warning of Greg. They make friends with an innocent girl by the name of Lorna and hide from her master Auntie Whispers while they plan their escape. Much to Wirt's dismay, and Greg's prediction, Lorna reveals herself to be possessed by an evil spirit and attempts to eat their flesh. Greg's acquiring of Auntie Whisper's bell enables Wirt to use the object to vanquish the spirit from Lorna and return them to their journey to escape The Unknown. Lorna's name draws itself from the Scottish laurel tree symbolic of honor or victory. This has the potential to represent a form of foreshadowing to the eventual triumph that Wirt and Greg accomplish over The Beast and The Unknown, but only if they work as a team. Following this, the name is also a displaced reference to author R. D. Blackmore's title character from his novel 'Lorna Doone' which describes the dangerous love between John Ridd and Lorna Doone (Campbell). An immediate correlation to this is seen in Wirt's infatuation to Lorna and her requited affection that in the end proves to be near-fatal to both the brothers.

Yet, ironically, despite Greg's heightened alert persona, he is either unable to comprehend, or reluctant to notice, the unrequited compassion Wirt expresses towards him. Greg's attention to detail and

consideration for others outside himself, place his character in an emotionally stable condition that directly contrasts the older brother archetype. Where Wirt, who should act to lead and protect his younger brother, repeatedly lacks compassion for Greg, or the maturity to accept responsibility for their actions. This is clearly shown at the end of Chapter 1, after the boy's escape from a wolf creature destroys The Woodsmen's mill: "WIRT. You're always messing up, Greg. THE WOODSMEN. "Boy, you have it backwards. You are the elder child! You are responsible for you and your brother's actions" (Over the Garden Wall). This apparent reverse of the older brother, younger brother archetype sets a strong foundation for the argument that Greg is the Messiah-hero figure of the story.

Throughout the New Testament travels of Christ, there's a reoccurring theme of providing food and sustenance to those in need. For instance, in John 21, Jesus aids some of the disciples in catching full boat-load of fish, or in Matthew 14:13-21, Jesus feeds five thousand people with just five loaves and two fish (BibleGateway). Greg displays this displaced archetype of providing food in Chapter 3 where he transforms the school's boring potato lunch into a delicious meal using a jar of molasses. The animal children of the schoolhouse rejoice and all come together in song and celebration of Greg's creation.

Apart from this, several allusions are made throughout the story that lead the audience to believe that Wirt, not Greg, is the Messiah-hero of the story. In Chapter 4, when the residents of the tavern demand that Wirt reveal his identity, the butcher confronts Wirt:

"THE BUTCHER. I know who you are-you're a pilgrim!

WIRT. Like the guys who eat turkey and cranberry sauce?

THE BUTCHER. No you're a pilgrim!

WIRT. A pilgrim?

THE BUTCHER. You're a traveler on a sacred journey. You're the master of your own fate! The hero-" (Over the Garden Wall).

However, Wirt's shortcomings of hopelessness, fear, and lack of self-confidence as a hero and a person inevitably overcome his alleged title and find him without the will-power to carry on his journey with Greg. "Can we admit we're lost for good? That this fog is deeper than we'll ever understand. Can we just admit we're never gonna get back home?" He lifelessly bestows the title of leader to Greg, and in his hopelessness becomes vulnerable enough for The Beast to enslave him within his sleep amongst the forest. Greg, who dreams of a meeting with a deity goddess queen of the clouds, wishes to take the place of Wirt to save his life.

In making this sacrifice, the Messiah-hero cycle of the story comes to a close, as does the season of autumn which the journey has taken place during up to this point. As Greg walks away with The Beast acting as a human-sacrifice, snow begins to fall on a sleeping Wirt signaling the beginning of winter and the Apocalypse myth cycle. Greg fulfills his role as the Messiah-hero and the catalyst for which Wirt is called to action to realize the worth of his full potential by confronting The Beast and saving his half-brother while assuming his correct role as the older brother archetype. This task must be taken up by Wirt to be completed on his own, for in order to live up to his potential Wirt must start relying and trusting in his own abilities, and stop relying on others to make decisions for him.

The apocalyptic winter cycle of "Over The Garden Wall" takes both the panoramic and participating approaches. We see firsthand the destruction of the forest with start of the apocalypse cycle and the end of the four seasons as winter envelops the beauty vibrant colors of autumn with cold and snow. Wirt faces the perils of the snowstorm and the onslaught of the winter cycle in an attempt to track down The Beast as save his brother-having now assumed the Messiah-hero role. Furthermore, the story also takes a participating approach in that both half-brothers see a new order in their own lives and ultimately save each other from The Beast and his realm of The Unknown.

Wirt and Greg's guide, Beatrice, has Latin roots meaning: bringer of joy. Her name is a displacement of Dante's guide of the same name from the 'Divine Comedy' the epic poem written by

Dante Alighieri (Campbell). While leading the boys to Adelaide, a supposed mystical woman who could help the half-brothers leave The Unknown, Beatrice acts as an antithesis to her own name often bringing pain and misery to the boys, specifically Wirt. "BEATRICE. Greg, don't you want to be more like your brother? Just always doing what you're told-just a pathetic pushover who relies on others to make all his decisions" (Over the Garden Wall)? As it is later revealed in Chapter 6, Adelaide does not intend to aid Wirt and Greg, but rather turn them into permanent human slaves until the end of their lives. Beatrice proves to bring them nothing but anguish and guides them to peril rather than safety. However, during the winter of the apocalypse cycle, Beatrice saves Wirt from freezing to death and chooses to help reunite the half-brothers in an attempt to right the wrongs she committed.

The Woodsmen that Wirt and Greg often encounter throughout The Unknown is a displaced archetype of the hunter/woodsmen from The Brothers Grimm story "Little Red Riding Hood." Both carry an axe as their weapon and each remains nameless throughout each of their respective stories. The lack of coherent, specific identity might imply the statement of their character being seen in their actions rather than in their name. Likewise, Wirt and Greg's first encounter with The Woodsmen takes place during their encounter with a mutated wolf-like beast that pursues them through The Woodsman's mill. The hunter in "Little Red Riding Hood" is also first seen when he hears the cries of the woman and slays the wolf-freeing both the grandmother and little red riding hood from its stomach. Also, it might be important to note that inside The Woodsman's mill Greg offers to leave a trail of candy so they won't get lost anymore. This is a displaced reference to "Hansel and Gretel" another Brothers Grimm story. The Woodsman, tormented and manipulated by The Beast, eventually fulfills his archetype of providing salvation in Chapter 10 when defeated by The Beast while trying to defend the half-brothers. Wirt, who realizes the folly of The Woodsman's actions throughout their journey, uses this insight to disprove the argument of The Beast, discover their weakness and take up the Woodsman's axe to free his brother.

Without the Woodsman in either story, “Over the Garden Wall” or “Little Red Riding Hood” both children would have surely perished under the forces of evil desiring to envelop them.

The Unknown in “Over the Garden Wall” acts as a state of limbo for Wirt and Greg, causing them to wander in a land of mystery until introspective revelations about each other are realized. Both characters display Messiah-hero aspects and in turn each come to aid the other to defeat the ultimate evil. However it is Wirt's fate to realize his own potential and self-worth of his intellectual talents and Greg's to act as the sacrificial catalyst in which escape from The Unknown and The Beast is made possible. Wirt ultimately rises to meet his Coming of Age archetype, having assumed the role as the caring, self-confident older brother by the end of their journey. While Greg also fulfills his archetype as the watchful Messiah-hero enabling Wirt's growth and their journey to come to a close. As the story cycles through the autumn and winter seasons, direct correlations can be made to the hero and apocalypse seasons of the mythic cycle. The story intentionally incorporates this relationship to better relate “Over the Garden Wall” to past myths and stories that ultimately form deeper associations within its characters and audience.

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