

TREES IN TWEEN FANTASY: CONNECTING
THE SPIRITUAL AND THE NATURAL

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
with a Major in Literature
May 2016

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DEDICATION

For the TREES of Baylor University,
Who enticed me to attend school there, and under whose branches I read—
Shakespeare; Wordsworth, Byron, and Keats; Dickens and Hardy;
Momaday and Silko; and C. S. Lewis

For the TREES at Texas State,
Whose leaves whispered songs of renewal and encouragement as I studied—
Aesop; Saint Brigid; George MacDonald, E. Nesbit, and L. Frank Baum;
Salman Rushdie and Thomas King; and Terry Pratchett

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis was completed under the guidance of Dr. Marilyn Olson, whose input was always available, and whose experience and knowledge in the field of children's literature was invaluable. I'd like to thank Professor Susan Hanson for her advice about various trees and for introducing me to beautiful and inspiring works by nature writers. Also, I appreciate the guidance of Dr. Susan Morrison, whose class on women of the medieval era was one of my favorites in graduate school.

I may never have embarked on this journey if several of my former high school students hadn't encouraged me to pursue this degree, so I thank them for their faith and encouragement. Although my current work has taken me out of the daily classroom routine, I was reminded many times while writing this thesis of the good conversations about teens and literature that I've had with my former colleagues in La Vernia ISD and my current teammates on the curriculum team at Comal ISD.

Finally, I must thank my whole extended family, who fostered my passion for reading in too many ways to count. To my husband, Steven Verm, I especially give my love and gratitude: for holding down the fort at home and for putting up with my computer in the dining room because it has the best light. Our love for fantasy literature is one thing we have in common—after all, our son's name comes from a favorite character in a fantasy series. To my son Taran Christopher, thank you for being the voice of the young adult, for picking out your favorite novels, and for letting me know which fantasy stories had the most magic and the best trees.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, interest in young adult literature, and more particularly the response to teen fantasy novels, has inflated from enthusiasm to something more akin to fanaticism. One has to wonder just what it is about these novels—or the themes and messages of the authors writing them—that inspires countless numbers of youth, and adults, to yank them from the shelves and devour them.

What Is Tween Fantasy?

Fantasy literature itself is not a new phenomenon, and neither is children's literature, the overarching branch of works under which the young adult label sits. So, in order to understand the root cause for the recent popularity of young adult fantasy, it's important to investigate a brief chronology of its influences. The recent surge in attention given to fantasy works and fiction for children has much to do with the Harry Potter series that entered the market in the years just before the new millennium. In addition, fantasy literature and children's stories have a rather intermingled history, from roots in the era of romanticism that praised the innocence of children and lauded simplicity and nature, to the golden age of children's literature that produced such early fantasies as *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, *Peter Pan*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *Five Children and It*, and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

The changing ideas about adolescence in the late 1960s and early 1970s heralded the first works of what is now referred to as young adult literature. As this evolution was happening in the children's literature arena, the fantasy domain also experienced a development of sorts, due to the publication of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* in the United States during the middle 1960s; the book had already been published in England,

but in the 1960s, it was garnering international fame. Tolkien's work and that of C. S. Lewis contribute greatly to the themes, symbols, setting, and plot of fantasy stories, and fantasy authors of the 1970s and 1980s, such as Lloyd Alexander, Susan Cooper, Ursula Le Guin, and Madeleine L'Engle created stories for young people using the archetypes that inspired them in the works of these masters.

By the late 1990s, other cultural shifts, such as the advent of social media, the effect of terrorism, and the urgency of protecting the environment, influenced the world into which the Harry Potter books were born. In the years that followed J. K. Rowling's success in the publishing market and at the box office, the sales skyrocketed for works of children's fiction that qualified under the umbrella of both young adult and fantasy labels. An ever-changing field of study, because the interests of teens transform with the moment and because scholarship in the area is still developing, tween fantasy discourse fluctuates as new novels enter the landscape or new authors appeal to the teenage populace. This is the atmosphere that generated series books such as *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games*, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, *The Secrets of the Immortal Nicholas Flamel*, and *The Thickety*.

Because young adult literature and fantasy works have continued to besiege the contemporary market over the last 20 years, this type of literature is more than a passing fad. The genre, if it can be called that, has come to stay, and scholarly discourse must keep up, as these books are worthy of serious study not always allowed them by more traditional schools of thought. This thesis explores the recent attention given to the growing ranks of books that belong to the tween fantasy category; in other words, those novels and series published for children ages 8 to 14. This most interesting niche, situated

between literature for young children and works for youth in their later teen years, sometimes elicits the name preadolescent literature or garners the title middle grade novel. Tween literature and a more familiar category, young adult literature, sometimes coexist together under a blanket of works in the teen spectrum, and their relationship will be discussed more specifically in the next chapter. The primary emphasis of study for this thesis, however, is tween literature—so dubbed, because it literally falls “between” the literature of an older “teen” audience and that of children. This unique category focuses on readers in the precarious threshold between innocence and knowledge; it uses clear archetypes and simple metaphors that are easy to understand, but that convey universal themes and essential messages; and it connects to its readership by using young protagonists who experience the world with a heightened awareness of the senses, a full heart, and an open mind.

How Does It Connect To Readers?

The importance of tween fantasy can be measured by the sheer number of fans who read it. Also, its fan fiction, its video games, movies, and action figures, its online presence in the form of wikis and chat rooms, all attest to the influence of its alternate worlds. Today, educators use these novels in the classroom to captivate their students and foster a love of reading, and adults read the books for fun, without fear of embarrassment for enjoying what used to be called a guilty childlike pleasure. This testimony prompts questions about methods tween authors use to communicate their stories or to connect with their readers.

The integral idea of connections is particularly germane to the study of young teenagers and the literature they read. Tween authors not only *create* connections with

their audience, they write about their protagonists *making* connections in the world of the novel as well, because the majority of tween readers are in the process of figuring out their *own* connections: fighting through angst about where they belong, overcoming feelings of teenage isolation, gaining knowledge about the ups and downs of life, and learning who they are and who they can become. An important philosophical concept that fantasy works and children's literature have in common is nature's ability to connect with the human psyche. The symbols and archetypes of nature enable tween writers to clearly define the themes and ideas they promote in their literature. Many times, nature elements are more effective than other metaphors at conveying information, because they affect the senses and can be seen, heard, and touched; therefore, individuals, especially young people, respond to them more readily.

Why Does It Need Trees?

An icon of nature that particularly resonates with the notion of connections is the tree. Trees literally connect with the earth and the sky through their roots and branches. Trees are varied but similar, powerful yet beautiful; although they represent ancient histories and faraway cultures, they are understood by contemporary society and citizens of all places. In the real world, trees convey the connectedness of the environment as habitats for animals and plants in the wild, and they embody the connections between nature and humanity by being the subject of various poems, songs, and stories through the ages. In children's literature, trees impart knowledge and provide respite from the chaos of daily life. In fantasy, trees play an important role in portraying not only the landscape and the scenery of a story, but the authorial vision of the environment within the pages of the book and the culture beyond. That environment is not only physical—

trees transport readers to the imaginary realms like no other device or symbol. Trees connect to the universal human condition and represent both spiritual and natural forces at work in the world.

Trees, integral in literature and in life, resonate with people, and tween authors use trees as emblems to convey their themes and messages. This thesis suggests that trees, the living embodiment of spiritual and natural connections, enhance the link between the message of tween authors and their teenage audience. This research also celebrates trees as symbols of connectedness and espouses trees as the medium through which authors examine and illuminate the spiritual and sacred, or the natural and real.

The goal of this body of work is to investigate recent publications of popular tween fantasy, particularly those works that exist in series: it will focus on novels belonging to the influx of literature subsequent to and including the publication of the Harry Potter books, and will incorporate series books as recently published as February 2016. Divided into two overall chapters denoting both the spiritual and the natural, this thesis will first discuss trees as spiritual conduits and sacred representations, and then will cover trees that represent authentic nature or other aspects of the palpable and real. Sections within each chapter identify significant trees from recent tween fantasy novels and explain the importance the trees hold in the stories themselves.

II. CONNECTIONS TO THE SPIRITUAL

Half-Bloods and Pines: The Sacred Tree in *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*

A little over ten years ago, Rick Riordan published his first fantasy novel for children. Inspired to write down the stories he told his own two boys, his first work about Percy Jackson, *The Lightning Thief*, highlights the adventures of an ADHD teenage hero whose quirky attributes mirror traits Riordan claims his son and he both possess (Riordan, *Online World of Rick Riordan*). The release of the Percy Jackson series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, came at a time when both the fantasy market and the children's literature domain were garnering their most recent acclaim from the spike of sales and the increase of attention in the years after the first Harry Potter novels were published. Riordan, a former secondary teacher of both Mythology and English, has appeared on the New York Times bestseller list many times since the inception of the Percy Jackson stories (Riordan, *Online World of Rick Riordan*). Authoring various offshoots to Percy's world, including books based on Egyptian and Norse lore, and writing an adult mystery series to boot, Riordan has a knack for delivering exactly what his audience craves.

With that said, an intriguing story arc involving a tree begins in the first novel of the series, dominates the second book, threads through the third and fourth novels, and culminates with the fifth and final book of the series. This story arc centers around a lone pine tree set atop Half-Blood Hill on the perimeter of a place called Camp Half-Blood—the pine, important to Percy and his friends, is referenced frequently in the stories. Something about this tree resonates with both the fantasy environment and the children's literature culture present in Riordan's books. There's something sacred and meaningful

about the pine and the tale woven around it; so much so, that it's worth a closer look at the pine's passages within the overall story to get to the bottom of its enchantment. What, specifically, is the pine's appeal? How does it contribute to the story of Percy Jackson as a whole? What does it add in the way of meaning or symbolism that conveys a sense of the sacred to its readers? How does it speak to readers within both the fantasy and children's literature spheres? And ultimately, why does this pine tree facilitate the idea of the sacred within the context of Riordan's works?

Before exploring these questions about the pine tree, it is important to examine the placement of *The Lightning Thief* and other books of the series within the larger spectrum of literary classifications. Studying the novels through a specific literary lens—or lenses—will more clearly disclose the role of the tree within them. Riordan's Percy Jackson books, which clearly belong to the tween category discussed in this thesis, are sometimes linked with the young adult (YA) label, a category typically geared for teenagers, ages 10 to 17. The YA category, mentioned previously for its relationship with tween literature, is situated, like its younger counterpart, somewhere between the rather nebulous labels of children's literature proper and adult literature in its many forms. This teen spectrum, or the collective grouping of literature for preadolescents and teenagers, can be a contentious topic of discussion among scholars, who sometimes cynically suggest that classifications are determined by the marketing strategies of the publishing houses. It's important to note that, although the two groupings of literature may have some overlap, the tween readership is generally considered younger in age than the teenagers of the YA label.

In the last 10 years, although scholarly documentation and the prevalence of voices in the field have increased, the opinions are varied, and there is not a consensus. In his works, Perry Nodelman tends to see preadolescent literature and YA literature as part of children's literature as a whole, and in most of his discussions of children's literature, he does not separate the teen spectrum from the rest. Caroline Hunt and Karen Coats, however, contend that teenage literature deserves its own category, and in addition, needs more scholarly discourse and attention.

In her 1996 article, "Young Adult Literature Evades the Theorists," Hunt claims that of the "critical texts, produced over the fifteen-year period from 1980 to 1995, . . . not a single major theorist in the field deals with young adult literature as something separate from literature for younger children . . ." (226). She identifies and explains the background behind several problems in the field, and begins with the thought that "[t]heorists in the wider field of children's literature often discuss young adult titles without distinguishing them as a separate group, and without, therefore, indicating how theoretical issues in young adult literature might differ from those in literature for younger children" (224). Although Hunt recommends some solutions in her article, many of the same issues she describes continue to occur today within the discourse of adolescent literature.

Writing almost 15 years after Hunt, in 2011, Coats, too, suggests that "a persistent obstacle in the serious study of YA literature that might be worth considering is the lack of a clear demarcation in the field" (322). She goes on to admit that some scholars are clearer than others, and mentions that "at my university, we have separate courses for preadolescent and young adult literature. Hence, my colleagues and I can argue about the

fine (or less fine, depending on perspective) distinctions between those two categories” (322). Coats and her colleagues agree that a protagonist’s age is a factor, but they differ about other distinctions (322). For example, she states that:

My own distinctions tend to be more ideological in nature—I argue that a book that has what I call a closed moral universe, that is, a plot line that features punishment for the wicked and reward for the good, is more likely to be preadolescent, whereas a book that calls the moral universe into question, . . . is clearly YA. (322)

Her colleagues assert that sex is a clear factor in determining the difference between YA and preadolescent, because YA “has sex in it” (322). Coats goes on to allude to the idea that “[m]ost universities don’t have the opportunity to separate preadolescent and YA literature, and hence include the middle grade novel in their YA courses” (322). She says that since other scholars also include middle grades in their discussion of YA literature, “it may be that fine distinctions are more fiddly and pedantic than necessary for developing the critical conversation regarding YA literature, but it seems to me that the concerns of a sixth grader . . . are quite different from the concerns of a 16-year-old, and so their literature would differ in significant ways” (322).

Riordan makes some distinctions, as well, about the subject matter of his books for children. In an answer to a question about the content of his books based on the sexual orientation of one of his later characters, he writes these words on his website:

I’ve been lucky enough to teach all sorts of students They made me a better teacher and a better writer for children, and they all deserve my support. I am committed to writing appropriate books for the middle

grades. This means no bad language, no gratuitous or explicit violence, and no sexual content beyond what you might find in a PG-rated movie—expressions of who likes whom, holding hands, and perhaps the occasional kiss. The idea that we should treat sexual orientation itself as an adults-only topic, however, is absurd. Non-heterosexual children exist. To pretend they do not . . . would be bad teaching, bad writing, and bad citizenship. Having said that, a good book, like a good classroom, should raise questions, not insist on a particular set of answers. It certainly should not ignore difficult questions. (Riordan, *Online World of Rick Riordan*)

Distinguishing the difference between sexual orientation and sexual activity, Riordan's words place him in a similar category to Coats' colleagues. He delineates that sexual activity beyond "an occasional kiss" would be inappropriate for a middle grade novel, but that the idea of sexual orientation, which is often one of those "difficult questions" faced by a variety of children and teens, is not.

In Riordan's tween literature then, as in the preadolescent literature that Coats describes, there seems to exist a shelter from adult drives and motivations, while at the same time a safe place to ask questions and find answers about the innate human condition and the essence that makes one person different from another. This definition of literature as a questioning process and a haven to find answers is part of the union with the sacred, and distinguishing the pine tree of Riordan's story as a metaphor to facilitate the sacred is appropriate for a tween novel. It's important to remember, then, that authors of tween fantasy, such as Riordan, use trees to convey meaning and reinforce for their readers the connections to the text: in this case, a link to the spiritual and sacred of asking

questions. Riordan, in his Percy Jackson series, uses the pine to convey the sacred, and as such, his readers are drawn to that story arc as a pivotal moment within his works as a whole.

In discussing the pine, it is necessary to look at the ways in which all trees convey a spiritual aspect, and then study those findings in Riordan's series through the lenses of children's literature and fantasy respectively. This chapter will do that, and in addition, will then focus on pines more specifically, while finishing with a brief commentary on the trope in both children's literature and fantasy where trees are turned into humans, or humans into trees, as is the case, ultimately, in the Percy Jackson novels with the pine tree in particular.

It's a Tree

Trees convey the sacred—their roots reach deep in the earth to absorb minerals, water, and other things important to their growth, and their branches stretch to the sun, gathering light in their leaves and absorbing elements of the air as well. It almost seems as if trees take care of themselves; however, they also convey a symbiotic relationship with the nature around them. Trees do it all: they literally provide shelter, shade, timber, paper, but they also provide inspiration and tranquility. Trees are people's link to the past, as so many trees live well beyond humans. Trees exist in stories and manifest themselves as keepers of knowledge, purveyors of secrets, and vessels of darkness or power. Each season, trees physically represent the cycle of life; they stand for both a type of hope, strength, endurance, constancy, *and* a kind of mystery, frailty, vulnerability, and change. In her book, *Lives of Trees*, Diana Wells claims, "Our long relationship with

trees is a story of friendship” (1). After explaining the long history of humans both destroying and revering trees, Wells comments that:

In many cultures certain trees were selected as being especially holy and thought to have souls of their own, or souls of certain gods, or even of dead humans. In Greek mythology humans were quite often changed into trees to save them from a fate that the Victorians called ‘worse than death.’ The words ‘tree’ and ‘truth’ share the original Old English root, *treow*. Trees are steadfast, linking the other two realities of the dark earth and the bright sky. (2)

Sandra Kynes, in *Whispers from the Woods: The Lore and Magic of Trees*, says that “trees are remarkable because they seem to defy gravity. A tree trunk can . . . hold such a heavy load of branches and leaves. For this reason alone it is no wonder that ancient people considered them with great awe” (3).

In Riordan’s series, his readers are introduced to the pine tree at the same time as they’re included in the knowledge that the title character, Percy, is a demi-god, and that he’ll fight monsters throughout the books, mostly those of Greek myth. In fact, it’s when Percy’s mother has been driving him toward Camp Half-Blood at the beginning of the story that they’re attacked by the Minotaur, and the audience reads about the tree as a refuge and safety for Percy. Percy tells about the situation:

‘Climb out the passenger’s side!’ my mother told me. ‘Percy—you have to run. Do you see that big tree?’

‘What?’

Another flash of lightning, and through the smoking hole in the roof [of the car] I saw the tree she meant: a huge, White House Christmas tree-sized pine at the crest of the nearest hill.

‘That’s the property line,’ my mom said. ‘Get over that hill and you’ll see a big farmhouse down in the valley. Run and don’t look back.’
(Riordan, *The Lightning Thief* 48-49).

From the moment of its advent in the story, the tree is sacred: a haven indicating safety and a line marking where the camp begins and the real world of the novel ends.

In addition, the tree of the series conveys wonder and awe because of its connection to the mystical details of the plot. As the story progresses, Percy will learn more about the supernatural qualities of the tree. Percy’s satyr friend Grover will explain that the tree represents sacrifice, and it came to Half-Blood Hill after three gods, Zeus, Hades, and Poseidon, were arguing about their children. Monsters were chasing the daughter of Zeus, Thalia, and her two other demi-god friends on their way to find safety at camp. Grover reveals the legend to Percy:

‘A satyr was assigned to be her keeper, . . . but there was nothing he could do. He tried to escort her with a couple of other half-bloods she’d befriended. They almost made it. They got all the way to the top of that hill.’

He pointed across the valley, to the pine tree . . . ‘They were about to be overrun when Thalia told her satyr to take the other two half-bloods to safety while she held off the monsters. . . . The satyr didn’t want to leave her, but he couldn’t change her mind, and he had to protect the

others. So Thalia made her final stand alone, at the top of that hill. As she died, Zeus took pity on her. He turned her into that pine tree. Her spirit still helps protect the borders of the valley. That's why the hill is called Half-Blood Hill.' (Riordan, *The Lightning Thief* 114-115)

Thalia's sacrifice caused the creation of the pine; therefore, the tree represents not only the symbol of her death, but the symbol of her selfless act, defending her friends. That act of kindness, in itself sacred, manifests as a shield, protecting the entire camp from harm. The sacred quality of the tree, linked to Thalia's sacrifice and protection, continues to be consecrated by the retelling of the legend to new campers as they arrive at Camp Half-Blood.

Trees, a common symbol in children's literature, often represent protection, sacrifice, and the boundary between two different worlds—similar to the sacred tree in Riordan's series. Trees and other natural elements in *The Secret Garden*, by Frances Hodgson Burnet, demonstrate these characteristics, as does the forest of Narnia in the C. S. Lewis stories, or the trees, particularly the mysterious yew, in Lucy M. Boston's *The Children of Green Knowe*. Many children's texts use nature to demonstrate a wisdom, affinity, knowledge, or kinship that is conveyed through an experience with trees.

Taking a closer look at Nodelman's work with children's literature can provide a further connection to Riordan's tree. Nodelman, in *The Hidden Adult*, creates a list, based on six texts he studied, of what he defines as "qualities" of identifying characteristics for children's literature (76). Some of those characteristics cynically explain "adult desires" associated with childhood or childlike attributes (80), but others illustrate concepts that

correspond with facets of the tree in Riordan's work. For example, Nodelman claims of children's literature that, "These simple, straightforward texts tend to 'resonate'—to imply more subtle complexities than they actually say" (77). He also alleges that, "Innocence, identified as a key characteristic of childhood, becomes a central subject of these texts—not just what they describe but what they work to suggest attitudes about" (77-78). Finally, he says,

In making home central, the texts imagine physical space as meaningful and symbolic—invest their setting with meanings, make them representations of what the characters mean to themselves and to each other. The physical worlds they describe tend toward allegory and have ideological import.

In order to make the point that home is safe, the texts imagine children as not perceiving its benefits; childhood desire is equated with the desire for freedom from home and safety, childhood with rebellion against adult values. (80)

In Riordan's work, the tree represents a "straightforward" icon that implies more "complexities" than are actually written within the work; the image of the pine standing guard at the limits of Half-Blood Hill does this, as well as the reference to the height and majesty of the White House Christmas tree. Also, the "innocence" that the tree suggests comes from the faith the characters hold in the protection the tree gives for all campers, supported by the legend of Thalia's bravery, and by the way Grover, who is really the satyr of his own tale, waits to reveal that information to Percy.

The tree of Riordan's series also represents the safety of "home" that Nodelman explains. Home, as in Camp Half-Blood for Percy, is explained in terms of its "setting" that has an "ideological import" specifically conveyed by Riordan's tree. The tree symbolizes the haven of home, a protection from magical monsters, and a place to learn skills necessary to safeguard demi-gods against the forces against them in the world. Percy, as Nodelman describes, will leave the safety provided by the tree on the grounds of Camp Half-Blood to go on quests; he'll return and leave again throughout the books as the series progresses, but the tree, a constant, will continue to represent the safety necessary for Percy to understand the human condition and to reflect on the essence—good and evil—of all things.

In addition to their presence in children's literature, trees are important features in the world of fantasy. Some of the most famous trees in fantasy are those created by J. R. R. Tolkien and the aforementioned Lewis. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy introduces Old Man Willow to readers, in addition to the ancient group of tree-like entities, the Ents. The ability Lewis has to make the trees of his *Chronicles of Narnia* series come alive both literally and metaphorically gives his book quiet power through setting. Lucy Pevensie's quest through the wardrobe and into the trees is iconic among fantasy scenes. Influenced by the trees of William Wordsworth's romantic poetry, Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendental musings, or George McDonald's protective beech tree in *Phantastes*, the ethereal quality created by trees in the novels of Lewis and Tolkien is a hallmark of modern fantasy that Riordan adopts in his own work. The pine tree of Riordan's Percy Jackson series embodies an almost metaphysical image through its ability to capture the essence of Riordan's themes—protection, security, loyalty, bravery,

sacrifice, a crossover of boundaries, and a mingling of realms—through its simple portrayal on Half-Blood Hill.

It's a Pine

Pine trees encompass all the aspects of trees in general, but in addition, they carry a sense of longevity, health, and regeneration, most likely associated with the trait of being evergreen. Kynes lists pines as having attributes and “powers” associated with “fertility, good fortune, healing, health, immortality, love, prosperity, protection, purification, regeneration” (208). Wells describes pines as adaptable, and says they “are widespread, can grow in poor soil, and adapt to very different climates” (261). These attributes can be ascribed to the pine in Riordan’s story as well because that tree is a special symbol of protection, regeneration, and adaptability, especially as demonstrated in *The Sea of Monsters*. This second book of Riordan’s *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series focuses primarily around the same sacred pine. The arc of “Thalia’s tree” (47), in fact, frames the greater story of Percy’s quest to save the tree from a poison that threatens to kill it and consequently destroy the “magical borders” that surround Camp Half-Blood (47). At the outset of the story, Percy and his friend, Annabeth, return to camp for the summer, only to find that the pine on Half-Blood Hill was no longer “strong and healthy” (47). Percy relays his encounter with the tree:

But now, its needles were yellow. A huge pile of dead ones littered the base of the tree. In the center of the trunk, three feet from the ground, was a puncture mark the size of a bullet hole, oozing green sap.

A sliver of ice ran through my chest. Now I understood why the camp was in danger. (47)

Percy's ensuing quest is to locate the same Golden Fleece of Jason and the Argonauts (86-87), which will restore the sacred pine tree because the Fleece emanates "nature magic" that "could cure Thalia's tree" (87).

By the end of the story, Percy has recovered the Fleece and brings it back to camp in order to heal the pine:

. . . [they] draped the Golden Fleece over the lowest bough, the moonlight seemed to brighten, turning from gray to liquid silver. A cool breeze rustled in the branches and rippled through the grass, all the way into the valley. Everything came into sharper focus . . .

Gradually, the needles on the pine tree started turning from brown to green.

Everybody cheered. It was happening slowly, but there could be no doubt—the Fleece's magic was seeping into the tree, filling it with new power and expelling the poison. (Riordan, *The Sea of Monsters* 254-255)

The transformation of the pine in this passage coincides directly with the idea of regeneration mentioned earlier. In addition, the pine conforms to the idea of adaptability because, really a girl-turned-tree, it adapts to its environment on the hill and uses its spirit to protect the land, it loses needles and gains them again, and it is poisoned, then cured.

Choosing a pine as the tree used in a story about a boy who encounters Greek gods is particularly apt as the pine has connections with both Dionysus and Pan. Wells explains that "the exuberant Greek god Dionysus sometimes held a thyrsus in one hand and a wine cup in the other" (262); the thyrsus is a "wand tipped with a pinecone" that some attribute to the concept of fertility (262). In Percy Jackson's world, Dionysus—or

Mr. D, as the campers call him—is the director of Camp Half-Blood, and the owner of the farmhouse mansion down the hill from the sacred pine. In Riordan’s story, Zeus punished him and “appointed him director of Camp Half-Blood to dry out for a hundred years” (Riordan, *The Sea of Monsters* 57). Pan, another god associated with the pine, plays a role in Riordan’s stories as well, because Grover, the satyr, often asserts his loyalty to Pan, and in several books he’s seen completing quests to find Pan. In *The Meaning of Trees*, Fred Hageneder explains that:

. . . in the ancient Mediterranean the pine was strongly associated with life force, vitality, death and resurrection, and particularly with the vigour of the spirit of vegetation: Pan in ancient Greece. . . . In Greece, many an old pine tree was dedicated to Pan, the hairy and horned personification of the forces of nature, and would have a shrine or altar next to it . . .” (140)

In Riordan’s series, the pine hearkens back a time of myth and legend that increases its relationship to the sacred. The power of symbols and stories used in myth also relates to both children’s literature and fantasy.

Riordan’s portrayal of the sacred pine associates his story more closely with the ancient quality of myth and gives credence to the union of myth with children’s literature. Through the years, myth and children’s literature have been connected. Eve Bearne describes the paradox of this affiliation in her attempt “to look at myth and legend as vehicles for moral teaching” (183). She discusses the idea that the morality of myth is “sometimes highly ambiguous” (183), and continues with the admission that the “appeal of myth for young readers is remarkable, since the content of the stories is very much related to the adult world . . .” (187). Bearne goes on to explain, however, that

“[s]ymbol, metaphor, imagery, oblique meanings abound as the myths give shape to the big matters of existence” (187). In Riordan’s work, the “metaphor” is the pine, and the “big matters” are those concepts such as demarcation of boundaries, regeneration of life, and adaptability to new situations, that demonstrate the sacred essence of the tree. Bearne maintains:

This is not the stuff of children’s literature as many people would understand it. Life as reflected in these stories is perilous However, it may well be that because of the elemental and fundamental issues which myth presents, the stories recommend themselves to readers who are, like the mythic figures they read about, shaping and facing up to their growing experience of everyday reality. (187)

Bearne continues by saying that “[t]hese great stories somehow allow the . . . reader to handle difference and sameness” (188). A “paradox” of legend is that while the “stories take the imagination of soaring, they are also familiar, and so, in a sense, secure” (188).

Works of fantasy also demonstrate this duality of imaginative thinking combined with a sense of security. Coats, in her study of YA literature, describes fantasy as a way to “cope with this sort of dissonance” (326). In her article, she addresses modern “monsters” (326-327), that have roots in myth and legend as well. She explains:

. . . teen characters are cast as both the plague and its cure; their bodies are powerfully and potentially monstrous, but they have the ability and the responsibility to hold their power in check, and use it for good. They are at the threshold of possibility, and the fate of the world rests on their ability

to respond ethically and with restraint in the face of profound obstacles, including their own inner demons. (327)

Coats' solution to "respond ethically and with restraint" suggests the type of security described by Bearne in regard to the use of myth; the "monstrous" power that Coats defines seems a close resemblance to the imaginative notions present in Bearne's definition.

Lewis, too, comments on fantasy and myth. He claims that "[t]he value of the myth is that it takes all things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by the 'veil of familiarity' " (Lewis, *On Stories* 90). Myth then, for Lewis and others, suggests simultaneous creativity and sanctuary. Riordan's sacred pine—tied to lore that's appreciated in both the children's literature culture and the fantasy domain—allows readers a sense of security and steadfast connection with the essential quality of the world, such as the sanctuary found in myth, and it provides a sense of creative imagination as the link to a girl named Thalia who will ultimately help Percy Jackson save his world.

It's a Girl

One trope in the literature associated with trees includes the transformation of those trees into humans, or the reverse, humans into trees. Works of fantasy and children's literature alike have used this device to bring their characters closer to the natural world, through an insistence that they commune spiritually with nature, as punishment for something the characters did previously to harm nature, or as a way to camouflage characters and provide them protection in a harsh and precarious environment. The trope may have its roots in mythological stories such as that of Apollo

and Daphne, or that of Attis. Daphne and Attis are both said to have become trees: Daphne was turned into a tree to help her escape Apollo's advances, and Attis was transformed into a pine out of sympathy for his castration.

Important to Riordan's story is the dual nature of his sacred pine: it is at once the pine that protects Camp Half-Blood, and it is the girl, Thalia, who protects her demi-god friends. The readers know in the first pages of *The Lightning Thief* that Thalia was turned into the watchful pine. In *The Sea of Monsters*, the readers empathize with the campers who mourn the pine's illness and impending destruction, and then work together to repair the pine by using the Fleece Percy attains on his quest. In the last part of the second novel, readers are surprised to find that the Fleece "did its work too well" (Riordan, *The Sea of Monsters* 277). Percy describes what he finds on Half-Blood Hill:

There at the base of the tree, a girl was lying unconscious. Another girl in Greek armor was kneeling next to her.

. . . The tree itself looked perfectly fine, whole and healthy, suffused with the essence of the Golden Fleece.

‘It healed that tree,’ Chiron said, his voice ragged. ‘And poison was not the only thing it purged.’ (277)

Percy runs over to cradle the girl who is underneath the tree, while everyone else stands around, "stunned" (278). He asks the girl who she is, but before she can answer, Riordan has Percy say, "That's when I knew. Even before she said it." (278). Percy realizes that the gods have given themselves "another chance to control the prophecy" (279), and that's when the girl replies, "I am Thalia . . . Daughter of Zeus" (279).

This metamorphosis, pine tree to girl, emphasizes the idea of the sacred. The tree's act of healing, its transformation into human flesh, its reincarnation, and its literal regeneration into something more than it was previously, are all embodiments of the sacred at work in the world. The tree, personified once again, becomes the girl who shares the prophesy with Percy. This girl, Thalia, will lead her own quest and be part of the major action in the third book of the series, she'll only make a brief appearance in book four, but by the time of the final book, *The Last Olympian*, she will be established as a warrior and the leader of the Hunters of Artemis (171-173). In fact, at the end of that book, when Zeus is rewarding all the valiant demi-god heroes of the series, Riordan writes that Zeus promises Thalia "help in filling the Hunters' ranks" (347).

In the final pages of *The Last Olympian*, Riordan does his best to reinforce the sacred quality of the pine by bringing his story full circle. The pine, no longer Thalia, but still the guardian of Camp Half-Blood, remains on Half-Blood Hill. The sacred tree, that first strong image of safety, protection, regeneration, and adaptability conveyed in *The Lightning Thief*, continues to perpetuate those ideas in its new form at the end of the series. The pine, sacred and enduring, represents not only the cycle of life, but the cycle of myth and the idea that ancient legend affects Riordan's works. Riordan closes the saga of the tree with these words, "The guard dragon Peleus curled contentedly around the pine tree underneath the Golden Fleece and began to snore, blowing steam with every breath" (Riordan, *The Last Olympian* 380).

Riordan succeeds in portraying the pine as sacred by combining the elements of good fantasy with those of children's literature; the two categories of literature function in tandem within his series to convey the appeal of Percy Jackson's universe. The

spiritual lore of trees, the sacred image of the pine, and the otherworldly persona of the girl connected with the tree, all work in combination with the ideology, audience, motif, and important themes at play in Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series.

Under the Whomping Willow: Harry Potter's Coming of Age

As people grow and mature, they shoulder the traditional roles of adults while shedding the inclinations and pastimes of their youth. The mantle of adulthood, as it is demonstrated in the world of novels, can come in the form of responsibility, acceptance, knowledge, awareness, purpose, burden, truth, understanding, or connectedness. A character who comes of age as an adult often endures a symbolic rite of passage within a story, especially in fantasy books, because those tales inhabit the space of myth and lore and employ symbols and archetypes to represent their worlds. Works of fantasy, particularly series books revolving around a young central character, include physical quests or intellectual pursuits that could be connected with the sacred or spiritual coming of age story. In the Harry Potter novels, Harry must become a man before he can fulfill his destiny to confront Lord Voldemort. In J. K. Rowling's third book of the series, *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, the Whomping Willow represents Harry's rite of passage, because he must pass through the tree and learn important truths before emerging again to embrace his life's purpose.

The Whomping Willow makes its first appearance in Rowling's second Potter book, *The Chamber of Secrets*, when Harry and Ron arrive at Hogwarts in their magical car, instead of the traditional Hogwarts Express, and land in the branches of the strange tree by mistake. After much thrashing and banging from the whip-like tree limbs, the boys and their car are let loose, but this scene initiates readers into the grim antics and

ornery behavior of the tree, which will be important later. Rowling's book two provides a foundation for the character of the tree upon which the third book builds. The Willow, on the perimeter of the Hogwarts property, marks a line between the safe interior of the school grounds and the periphery of the wild forest area on the outskirts of the castle. In book three, the evil dementors mark time in this exterior directly beyond Hogwarts, waiting to feed on Harry's memories of his tragic past. Only after his passage through the tree and out again, can Harry confront these dementors head on and combat their soul-sucking kiss. Connections made to the Whomping Willow within the series contribute to its importance as a symbol of transition from innocence to knowledge and boy to man.

The Willow represents a specific rite of passage in the series, and is especially germane to the third book, which incorporates many elements generally ascribed to the processes of growing up. *The Prisoner of Azkaban* marks Harry's thirteenth year, the pivotal age whereby a youth is considered a full-fledged teenager. The earlier books of the series focus more on Harry's learning of the wizarding craft and his exposure to the world of magic, whereas the third book investigates his confrontation with, and acceptance of, his past and his purpose. In book three, he also faces two enigmas of traditional adult psychology: the notion of the sins of the father and the question of humanity's inherent good or evil. In this book, Harry begins to understand that he is more than the product of his two parents and people are a combination of both bad and good. He encounters choices that require the wisdom, grace, and sacrifice of a mature adult. Sharon Black discusses the influence of the Potter series on youth in modern culture, and claims Harry enters "the wizarding world where he can learn the lessons and develop the strengths that allow him to mature" (244). In her article, "The Magic of Harry Potter:

Symbols and Heroes of Fantasy,” Black compares the views of two different child readers and explores the ideas of Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment* and Joseph Campbell’s *Hero With a Thousand Faces*; she suggests the Potter books are a “set of modern symbols for the processes and truths that have been represented by hero and journey symbols through the ages” (244). In *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry confronts fears, acquires tools, makes decision, and discovers truths about his friends, his family, and his future. The third book illustrates the trials of growing up; furthermore, the significance of that fundamental life change is emphasized by the Whomping Willow, an integral representation of Harry’s coming of age.

Passing Through

Since ancient times, willow trees have been associated with change, growth, creative thinking, perseverance, and healing—attributes often ascribed to teenagers in the process of becoming adults. In *Folklore and Symbolism of Flowers, Plants and Trees*, Ernst and Johanna Lehner list willows as symbols for the “Powers of Resurgent Spring” and “Patience and Perseverance” (128). Colin Tudge, in *The Tree*, describes willows as a “pioneer species” because they “provide the charcoal needed to make gunpowder” (200). He also reveals that they “stabilize [river] banks” (174), “purify the water” (174), comprise the blade of the “finished cricket bat” (175), provide fuel “as a source of biomass to supply energy without exacerbating global warming” (175), and are “rich in salicin, . . . the stuff of aspirin” (175). In her book, *Lives of Trees*, Diana Wells corroborates the idea of willows, aspirin, and “curative properties” (341), and she elaborates on other facets of the willow by writing that “[b]etween the clustering flexible branches were secret places that could shelter young lovers” (341). Wells explains “[t]he

botanical name *Salix* was from the tree's Latin name" and suggests "since the Latin *salire* means 'to leap,' it describes willows growing so fast they seem to 'leap' " (341).

Assigning such qualities to willows in general, reinforces their legitimacy as emblems of growing up because persevering, fortifying, energizing, healing, and leaping can all be associated with the change from teen to adult. More specifically, those aspects transfer to the Willow in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* and connect with other traits that tree represents, such as gaining knowledge and accepting responsibility. Harry must pass through the branches and roots of the Whomping Willow before he discovers truths and learns his fate. As in any rite of passage, he comes to the tree as an innocent, overcomes physical difficulty during the passing, and participates in ritualistic and ceremonial actions.

Much as a teen's bar mitzvah or quinceanera represents the transition to adulthood, Harry's encounter at the Whomping Willow symbolizes his path toward maturity. Harry comes to the tree a child, with no concrete knowledge of what awaits him, and leaves an adult, eyes symbolically opened; that is, he approaches the tree knowing nothing of his connection with the previous generation or the integral part he plays in the fight against Voldemort, and leaves understanding his bond with his friends, his affiliation with the past, his capacity to make change, and his role in the battle for good. In "Sneaking Out after Dark: Resistance, Agency, and the Postmodern Child in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series," Drew Chappell writes that "[r]eaders may find specific cultural messages in Rowling's work, signaled through a postmodern situating of childhood . . ." (292). Chappell explains that the Potter series "suggests to young readers that they can embrace qualities of postmodern childhood—ambiguity, complexity, agency, resistance" (292), and that the Hogwarts "students are treated as 'becoming'

(changing, developing) rather than ‘being’ (fixed, developed)—a modernist construction” (289). Although complexity and agency are demonstrated by Harry and his friends, to affirm that Harry remains in a perpetual stage of postmodern “becoming” would deny him the achievement indicated by his trial with the tree, and thereby discount both his capacity for innocence and the value of his later experience.

Evidence of Harry’s innocence, prior to the ordeal with the tree, comes from the scene in which he wakes in the night to see the Grim, “a gigantic, shaggy black dog” (Rowling, *The Prisoner of Azkaban* 303), following Crookshanks, the pet cat belonging to Hermione, Harry’s friend. As he looks outside the bedroom window for a second take at the animals, he sees only that the “[t]he grounds were still and quiet. No breath of wind disturbed the treetops in the Forbidden Forest; the Whomping Willow was motionless and innocent-looking” (303). At that moment in the plot, Harry does not fully understand what he sees in the vicinity of the tree—that the Grim is a man in disguise, that the man knows him, and that under the tree is a tunnel used for safety, concealment, and privacy. Preoccupied about an upcoming quidditch match, Harry dismisses his questions to go about everyday life. This nonchalant behavior will change once he passes through the branches and trunk of the Willow.

In addition to signifying the advent of responsibility and knowledge, the typical rite of passage is hard fought. For Harry, moving beyond the Whomping Willow takes determination, some skill, and much luck, similar to the running of the gauntlet in earlier times. The process of passage, fraught with difficulty, includes hardship and battle; but as in other trials, the experience steels Harry for his ensuing encounter and better equips him to understand what happens next. Black discusses the use of symbols and metaphors in

regard to real-life struggles depicted in fantasy literature, and uses the words *unreal* and *true*, which she borrows from both Bettelheim and Campbell (240; 244). For example, although the Willow is *unreal*, the idea that a child might “strive and struggle, but . . . overcome challenges” through a specific rite of passage (245), is *true*. Therefore, in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, the *unreal* metaphor of the Whomping Willow becomes what Black names the “raw materials to experiment with reality” (240), and the Willow symbol guides readers “toward understanding those truths” (244).

In book three, the first words that remind readers about the Willow happen in Chapter Nine. At a heated moment during a quidditch game, Harry has a mishap with a dementor and is “lying in the hospital wing” (Rowling, *The Prisoner of Azkaban* 179), talking with his friends, and learning that during the encounter his favorite broomstick “got blown away” and “hit the Whomping Willow” (182). The reaction Harry and his friends have about this incident further prepares readers for the difficult nature of the tree.

Harry’s insides lurched. The Whomping Willow was a very violent tree that stood alone in the middle of the grounds.

‘And?’ he said, dreading the answer.

‘Well, you know the Whomping Willow,’ said Ron. ‘It—it doesn’t like being hit.’

‘Professor Flitwick brought it back just before you came around,’ said Hermione in a very small voice.

Slowly, she reached down for a bag at her feet, turned it upside down, and tipped a dozen bits of splintered wood and twig onto the bed, the only remains of Harry’s faithful, finally beaten broomstick. (182)

On the night that Harry and his friends, Ron and Hermione, pass through the tree, it is dark, they are chasing their pets, and the group inadvertently finds itself in “the shadow of the Whomping Willow” (335). In that instant, the tree “hit Harry so hard across the face he was knocked off his feet . . .” (335). The Willow, a relentless opponent, continues to attack Harry and his friends, and “its branches were creaking as though in a high wind, whipping backward and forward to stop them going nearer” (335). Ron suffers a broken leg and Hermione a cut on the shoulder as Harry tries “to find a way through the vicious, swishing branches” (335). The battered group watches their pets disappear beyond the tunnel at the base of the tree, and eventually they learn the trick of touching “a knot on the trunk” (336), but not before they accumulate the bruises and bumps indicative of their trial. Common to most rites of passage, Harry’s path through the tree is a challenge.

Harry and his friends encounter the Whomping Willow on that notable evening in a manner redolent of ceremonial ritual. This ritualistic presence encompasses repetitive and cyclical actions and events, such as touching an exact spot on the tree trunk, following a map created and used by one’s elders, duplicating actions that occurred a generation before, and associating those actions with the advent of the full moon. Earlier in the novel, when Harry talks to Remus Lupin, his teacher and mentor, Lupin comments that “[t]hey planted the Whomping Willow the same year that I arrived at Hogwarts. People used to play a game, trying to get near enough to touch the trunk. In the end, . . . we were forbidden to go near it” (Rowling, *The Prisoner of Azkaban* 186). Before Harry and his friends enter the tree, they do understand Lupin knew Harry’s father in his school days (241), but they do not yet know the full extent of Lupin’s relationship with Harry’s

parents, Lily and James, or his connection with Sirius Black, Harry's godfather. They are also not aware of the exact connection between Lupin and the tree, nor do they know Lupin becomes a werewolf during the full moon, and has done so since his days as a student at Hogwarts. In addition, when Harry and his friends use the Marauder's Map to discover the tunnel hidden beyond the Whomping Willow, they do not realize the map, given them by Ron's prankster brothers (193), was originally created by Lupin and his school chums, the generation which includes Harry's parents. After they pass through the tree, Harry and his friends will discover the truth: that Lupin, the Potters, and Black worked to thwart Voldemort, that this previous generation continues to struggle with anguish and betrayal, and that Harry can heal the wounds of the past and fortify the group for the future. By this section of the novel, however, the reader has only been given enough clues to surmise that the past, present, and future will intertwine.

Both the Marauder's Map and the moon confirm the ritualistic atmosphere of Harry's approach to the tree by reinforcing the link to time and place. For example, when Harry's least favorite teacher, Severus Snape, confronts him about the map (Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban* 285), the map, "[a]s though an invisible hand were writing upon it" (286), produces rude words for Snape from its creators, Mr. Moony, Mr. Prongs, Mr. Padfoot, and Mr. Wormtail (287). Harry does not yet realize these are the nicknames for Lupin, his father, and their friends. The passage demonstrates that Snape, too, is connected to Lupin's generation, when he makes insinuations to Lupin about the map, " 'You think a joke shop could supply him with such a thing? You don't think it more likely that he got it *directly from the manufacturer?*' " (288). The implication that Snape not only knows Lupin created the map, but also witnessed the boyhood antics of Lupin

and his friends, establishes the interrelation between characters and generations, clearer to the reader than to Harry at this time. This relationship between past and present contributes to the cyclical nature of the ritual taking place beneath the Willow, and makes the map a sort of talisman, and part of a ceremony that binds the two generations.

Also, the integral role of the moon to the story is particularly fitting because willows are associated with the moon, and the moon with ritual. In Fred Hageneder's book, *The Meaning of Trees*, he discusses examples from mythology, history, and literature that indicate willows are the moon's tree (179-181). Lupin's affliction, becoming a werewolf during the full moon, is further connected with the Whomping Willow in the story, because Lupin will eventually explain to Harry that the tree "was planted because I came to Hogwarts" (Rowling, *The Prisoner of Azkaban* 353). The tunnel beyond, and the shack at its end were built for Lupin when he was a student. He tells Harry, "Once a month, I was smuggled out of the castle, . . . to transform" (353), and the Willow "was placed at the tunnel mouth to stop anyone coming across me while I was dangerous" (353). Harry will soon discover that Lupin's transformation under the moon established a kinship between his group of school friends, because those boys, including Harry's father and godfather, protected Lupin during this ordeal and accompanied him to the tree and the shack beyond. The Whomping Willow, the location where past and present collide, connects the map and the moon of the previous generation to the map and moon in Harry's ritual.

Learning Truths

Through the ages, trees have not only been linked with awe and wonder, but also with knowledge and learning. According to Sandra Kynes, in *Whispers from the Woods*:

The Lore and Magic of Trees, “dendrochronology has become an important scientific tool that has aided other disciplines by helping to correct flaws in radiocarbon dating” (5), and the “matching and overlapping” of “tree ring ‘signatures’ ” has helped “compile an unbroken record” and furnished a “time capsule that preserves ‘snapshots’ of the environment” (5). Hageneder suggests that in addition to aiding the environment, offering shelter, and providing nutrition, trees “have given us wood with which to make our tools, weapons and toys, not to mention timber for houses, fences, boats and bridges. But perhaps most significant of all, trees have provided fuel for fire, which, once it was tamed hundreds of thousands of years ago, became the engine of civilization” (6). Hageneder goes on to say that “[i]n the Germanic languages, most terms for learning, knowledge, wisdom, and so on, are derived from the words for tree or wood” (8). Further connecting trees to knowledge, he explains:

A druid was a most knowledgeable person. . . . And this very knowledge came from the woods, not only because a druid trained for up to 20 years in remote forest academies, but also because all original knowledge came from the trees. . . . All ancient cultures, whether they prayed to one god or many, acknowledged trees as being able to elevate the human consciousness to higher forms of perception, and to receive messages from the higher planes (or the deeper Self). (8-10)

J. K. Rowling’s Whomping Willow, aids Harry in doing just that—focusing on answers he needs to find in order to understand what he must do next.

After passing under the limbs and through the body of the tree, Harry and his friends traverse the tunnel connecting the Whomping Willow and the Shrieking Shack.

The shack, a dilapidated building, sequestered from the surrounding area and rumored to be haunted, holds the deep secrets Harry seeks. At the heart of the shack rests the knowledge Harry needs in order to cross the boundary from child to man; in other words, he will learn that his actions, not the behavior of his parents or teachers, impact his future and his life's purpose to oppose Voldemort. The base of the Willow forms the avenue to the Shrieking Shack, and therefore the path by which Harry will discover the truths that impel him to make adult choices and help him discover his destiny.

Once in the Shrieking Shack, the first lesson confirmed for Harry is that he and his friends continue to be a united front. Although they've been fighting in the previous chapters of the book and are still disgruntled with each other upon leaving the castle grounds for the tree, they come together without question; first, they support each other in their initial encounter with Black, and then again, they disarm Snape when he follows them to the shack. During their battle with the tree at the beginning of the night's ordeal, Ron had been snatched away from Harry and Hermione by the Grim, who escaped through the tunnel with Ron and his pet rat, Scabbers. Hermione and Harry discover Ron as they enter the shack from the tunnel.

'Ron—are you OK?'

'Where's the dog?'

'Not a dog,' Ron moaned. His teeth were gritted with pain. 'Harry, it's a trap. . . . *He's the dog . . . he's an Animagus.*'

Ron was staring over Harry's shoulder. Harry wheeled around.

With a snap, the man in the shadows closed the door behind them.

A mass of filthy, matted hair hung to his elbows. If eyes hadn't

been shining out of the deep, dark sockets, he might have been a corpse. The waxy skin was stretched so tightly over the bones of his face, it looked like a skull. His yellow teeth were bared in a grin. It was Sirius Black. (Rowling, *The Prisoner of Azkaban* 338-339)

Knowing an Animagus is a wizard who can turn into an animal, but not knowing Black was such a wizard, Harry, Ron, and Hermione unite in this surprise moment, thinking at first that Black—the Grim they'd seen previously—had come to the shack to kill Harry. In the heat of the moment, when Harry's anger overtakes him and he wants "to attack . . . to kill" (339), it's his friends' "two pairs of hands" that "grabbed him and held him back" (339).

. . . Hermione gasped in a petrified whisper; Ron, however, spoke to Black.

'If you want to kill Harry, you'll have to kill us too!' he said fiercely, though the effort of standing upright was draining him of still more color, and he swayed slightly as he spoke.

Something flickered in Black's shadowed eyes.

'Lie down,' he said quietly to Ron. 'You will damage that leg even more.'

'Did you hear me?' Ron said weakly, . . . clinging painfully to Harry to stay upright. 'You'll have to kill all three of us!' (339)

What follows is a tussle with Black, and then Lupin's arrival to the shack in time to disarm Harry, who's pointing his wand at Black in an irresolute attempt on his godfather's life. It is after this first united front that Harry, Ron, and Hermione discover

Black's motivation for hiding (344-357), confirm Lupin's identity as a werewolf (344-347), learn Scabbers is an Animagus "by the name of Peter Pettigrew" (348), and ascertain all had been fast friends with Harry's parents in school and were involved in what happened prior to their deaths (349-357). As Harry and his friends work together to establish the remaining truths, Snape reveals himself by "pulling off the Invisibility Cloak, his wand pointing directly at Lupin" (357), and then at Black (358-360).

Harry made up his mind in a split second. Before Snape could take even one step toward him, he had raised his wand.

'Expelliarmus!' He yelled—except that his wasn't the only voice that shouted. There was a blast that made the door rattle on its hinges; Snape was lifted off his feet and slammed into the wall, then slid down it to the floor, . . . [h]e had been knocked out.

Harry looked around. Both Ron and Hermione had tried to disarm Snape at exactly the same moment. (361)

The importance of the friends' combined magic and reliance on one another during their encounters at the shack reinforces Harry's need for friendship and teamwork as he becomes an adult. He learns that, even amidst their own disagreements and struggles, his friends, Ron and Hermione, will come to his aid. Harry, stronger with his friends, will need their assistance throughout the rest of the series as he prepares to confront Voldemort and fulfill his purpose. From his experience passing through the tree, Harry learns that as he grows and changes, his companions will support him through the trials ahead.

While in that space beyond the Whomping Willow's limbs and roots, Harry also learns the importance of certain superficial truths about Remus Lupin, Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew, and Severus Snape. Their outward appearance—werewolf, Animagus, pet, professor—and their presence as persons closely connected to his father's school days, forces Harry to face some conclusions about his father's behavior, his previous misconceptions, his relationships at Hogwarts, and his own mysterious past. The revelation that Lupin is a werewolf seems less surprising to Harry than the fact that Lupin, Black, and Pettigrew were his father's group of peers and that, according to Lupin, "they did something for me that would make my transformations not only bearable, but the best times of my life. They became Animagi" (Rowling, *The Prisoner of Azkaban* 354). The Marauder's Map further confirms their allegiance to each other and their hidden status as Animagi, because "Sirius and James transformed into such large animals, they were able to keep a werewolf in check" (355), and their "roaming the school grounds" together prompted them "to write the Marauder's Map, and sign it with . . . nicknames. Sirius is Padfoot. Peter is Wormtail. James was Prongs" (355). As the older generation continues to reveal its secrets to Harry, he begins to process this knowledge and connect it to the circumstances in his own life. He learns that as "[t]hey transformed . . . Peter, as the smallest, could slip beneath the Willow's attacking branches and touch the knot that freezes it. They would then slip down the tunnel" to join Lupin (354-355). During this conversation in the shack, Harry also gains insight on Snape's personal dislike for him, which stems from Snape's antipathy for his father and friends. "We were in the same year, you know" (357), explains Lupin, "and we—er—didn't like each other very much. He especially didn't like James. Jealous, I think . . ." (357). The relevance of

discovering these external specifics about the personas and the affiliations of the previous generation helps Harry come to terms with the psychological issues he must conquer as the child before becoming the man.

In addition to the more obvious extrinsic realities, the time within the tree reveals deeper motivations and perceptions about who did what long ago. The question of humanity's inherent good or bad and the concept of the sins of the father confront Harry as he attempts to sort out what is true and what is not. In the shack, Harry comes to realize that trouble, blame, and disagreement cause huge rifts that even time has difficulty managing. When Snape enters the shack, he looks at Black and utters, "Vengeance is very sweet" (Rowling, *The Prisoner of Azkaban* 360), but Harry attempts to get Snape to see reason and listen to the rest of the information his father's friends try to relay. In the end, although the initial grudges happened in their childhood, there is too much animosity between Snape and the other men to make any positive headway.

. . . 'Get out of the way, Potter.'

'YOU'RE PATHETIC!' Harry yelled. 'JUST BECAUSE THEY
MADE A FOOL OF YOU AT SCHOOL YOU WON'T EVEN
LISTEN—'

'SILENCE!' . . . Snape shrieked, looking madder than ever. 'Like
father, like son, Potter! I have just saved your neck; you should be
thanking me on bended knee! You would have been well served if he'd
killed you! You'd have died like your father, too arrogant to believe you
might be mistaken in Black—now get out of the way, . . . (361)

In addition to the troubles with Snape, the betrayal of Pettigrew and his direct involvement in the deaths of Harry's parents cause contention, scrutiny, and fear in the old alliances of the previous generation. “ ‘You sold Lily and James to Voldemort,’ said Black, who was shaking . . . ‘Do you deny it?’ ” (374).

Learning that his father was mean to Snape—discovering that any remnants of lasting relationships failed to survive because of jealousy, competition, pranks, and treachery on the part of the school boys at Hogwarts long ago—exemplifies the sins of the father motif. Harry must recognize that cycle before he can move from its grasp. What he observes after passing through the Willow allows him to embrace his father's past in order to create a new trajectory for himself—one in which he learns to accept Snape's foibles as baggage from his father's doing, and not as byproducts of his own undertakings at Hogwarts. Also, Harry's witness of the fractured solidarity between his father's friends demonstrates to him the very real nature of people. Not one man of the previous generation possesses all good or all bad inclinations: each is an amalgam of good and bad. According to Chappell, “On the surface, Harry's world seems full of binaries, . . . [b]ut as Harry and his friends age, they discover where they had expected clear divisions and certain answers, they instead find subtleties and uncertainty” (283).

For example:

Voldemort, rather than acting out of ‘pure’ evil, is motivated by the hegemonic belief in the righteousness of ‘pure blood.’ Snape's mistreatment of his students reflects his own experiences as a student at Hogwarts and his desire to hide his true loyalties from Voldemort, an act which Harry will at long last come to terms with, . . . (283-284)

The rite of passage through the Willow teaches Harry to understand people; the nature of humans and wizards is not one dimensional, but a combination of both benevolence and evil. Understanding this concept will help the adult Harry lead his school mates, contract alliances and conduct business to ensure the safety of his wizarding friends, and allow him to challenge Voldemort in later books.

Finally, and deeper still, Harry not only accepts the circumstances handed him by the previous generation, but he learns he has the power to make decisions outside those situations, and he can exact change and promote good on his own and with his generation of friends. Although he's just learned of Pettigrew's treachery and knows his adult mentors in the room wish Pettigrew to die, Harry argues to save him.

Black and Lupin stood shoulder to shoulder, wands raised.

'You should have realized,' said Lupin quietly, 'if Voldemort didn't kill you, we would. Good-bye, Peter.'

... 'NO!' Harry yelled. He ran forward, placing himself in front of Pettigrew, facing the wands. 'You can't kill him,' he said breathlessly. 'You can't.'

Black and Lupin both looked staggered.

'Harry, this piece of vermin is the reason you have no parents,' Black snarled. 'This cringing bit of filth would have seen you die too, without turning a hair. You heard him. His own stinking skin meant more to him than your whole family.'

‘I know,’ Harry panted. ‘We’ll take him up to the castle. We’ll hand him over to the dementors. . . . He can go to Azkaban . . . but don’t kill him.’ (Rowling, *The Prisoner of Azkaban* 375)

In this moment, Harry exemplifies the independence and authority of an adult by making his own choices. He continues this pattern by responding to Pettigrew’s jubilation with “disgust” (376), and replying, “I’m not doing this for you” (376). The willingness of his father’s friends to follow Harry’s plan, confirms his new adult status.

No one moved or made a sound except Pettigrew, whose breath was coming in wheezes as he clutched his chest. Black and Lupin were looking at each other. Then, with one movement, they lowered their wands.

‘You’re the only person who has the right to decide, Harry,’ said Black. ‘But think . . . think what he did. . . .’

‘He can go to Azkaban,’ Harry repeated. ‘If anyone deserves that place, he does. . . .’

. . . ‘Very well,’ said Lupin. (376)

After his venture through the tree and down the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack, Harry’s readiness to assume responsibility and his ability to direct the actions of others allows him to adopt his true purpose as the chosen one. Chappel argues that, different from “[p]ostmodern theories of childhood” which maintain that “there is no developmental ‘endpoint,’ no temporal marker that indicates a transition from child to adult” and also explain that “both children and adults are in multiple states of being and becoming all at once” (289), adults in the Potter novels “persist in trapping the students in the becoming

space, denying them knowledge and privileges because they have not reached [a] . . . developmental marker” (290). In fact, neither of these positions is true as the tree clearly symbolizes Harry’s transition from child to adult, and by the end of the *Prisoner of Azkaban*, he’s earned his state of “being” and his maturity. The knowledge Harry gains from his experience with the Whomping Willow prepares him to create his own path as the adult who will ultimately face Voldemort in the end of the series.

In myth and lore, the willow is said to represent “activities that are receptive and reflective” (Hegeneder 178), in other words, the willow represents knowledge and learning. In fact, “in Irish legend the willow appears . . . as the provider of wood for harps” (180). The harp, used by bards “who underwent rigorous training in many disciplines . . .” (180), was the instrument that “engendered in the people a sense of beauty, belonging, gratitude and respect for all life” (181). Harry’s reception of a new purpose, his renewed respect for the lives of others, and his reflection on the knowledge he’s gained within the Whomping Willow act as catalysts for his subsequent actions within the Potter series.

Emerging Again

Once Harry completes his trial beyond the tree in the Shrieking Shack, he returns through the same passage and, like a phoenix from the ashes, emerges from the Whomping Willow with his new truths—those of knowledge, awareness, and understanding. Again, the willow tree is the superlative example to convey such transformations. In her book’s introduction, “Living Entities; Living History,” Kynes remarks on the known “flexibility” of “trees such as willows and birches” (4), and she explains the importance of that flexibility by writing, “trees have enough ‘give’ to move

with the wind and not be blown down under normal weather conditions” (4). Although shaken by his ordeal, Harry, too, forges ahead. Another pertinent story comes from Chinese legend. Wells includes this summary of the tale in her chapter on willows:

Perhaps the most famous willow is that on the willow pattern plates designed in the eighteenth century in Staffordshire, England, when things Chinese were popular. The design is based on the Chinese legend of a rich man’s daughter, Koong Shee, who loved her father’s secretary, Chang, and refused to marry the man her father had chosen for her. On the plates, the angry father chases the lovers who are trying to make it across the bridge over which hangs a weeping willow. They make it across the bridge to an island and hide in a little house. The father and the rejected suitor catch up and burn down the house where the lovers are sleeping. Koong Shee and Chang perish, but their souls rise again and are shown as two birds flying in the sky above the willow tree. (342)

Wells closes her chapter by connecting this Chinese story with an English legend about Alexander Pope dismantling a basket of “willow twigs” (340), and “planting” them “in his garden to see if they might grow” (340). In the end, Wells concludes, “just as a new live tree can sprout from seemingly dried out willow branches, so could the souls of two lovers rise from the ashes and fly away, free as birds” (342). For Harry, the flight represents his awareness of new found knowledge and his acceptance of the burden of his fate. He emerges from the tree, or rises from the metaphorical ashes, a new man, and an adult in the spirit of nature’s law.

In his first acts of adulthood, Harry seeks not only to proclaim the truth, but assumes responsibility for the night's deeds and accepts the state of his immediate future as he starts toward Hogwarts with the others:

Harry had never been part of a stranger group. Crookshanks led the way down the stairs; Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron went next, looking like entrants in a six-legged race. Next came Professor Snape, drifting creepily along, his toes hitting each stair as they descended, held up by his own wand, which was being pointed at him by Sirius. Harry and Hermione brought up the rear. (Rowling, *The Prisoner of Azkaban* 378)

It's in this procession that Sirius and Harry make plans for a happy future together. Sirius would be "free" (379), and Harry would get to live with his godfather instead of the Dursleys (379). These dreams will not see fruition because of what happens next, but that in itself indicates Harry has matured as a result of his experience within the tree.

After emerging from the Willow, Harry endorses his life's purpose and personal burden by protecting his friends, both immediately and then again in the next chapters when he and Hermione use a time-turner to circle back over the events already discussed. In a decision difficult for most adults, while in possession of a tangible way to change time in his favor, with ready knowledge of future events, he chooses instead to support his friends by sacrificing his own wish to discover more about his parents and get closer to his godfather, Sirius. In a position to watch their own comings and goings beneath the tree only hours before, Harry and Hermione observe the Willow take in all of the nightly visitors and then send them out on their way (Rowling, *The Prisoner of Azkaban* 403-

409). In this fashion, Harry not only participates in the sacred event, he reinforces his own rite of passage by viewing its recurrence.

Once through the portal of the Whomping Willow and out the other side, grown up Harry must fight to defend his friends from their foes and from themselves. In the original layer of time, he runs after the dog Sirius and the werewolf Remus while chasing the rat Pettigrew (Rowling, *The Prisoner of Azkaban* 380-382). Caught up in the moment, Harry reaches the fringe of the castle woods only to be encircled by dementors who have been lurking in wait most of the novel (382-383). In the throes of a soul-sucking dementor's kiss, Harry attempts and fails to conjure the Patronus charm that will save himself and his friends, but he sees the Patronus issue forth from the other side of the woods and marvels at what he believes to be the figure of his father conjuring it (383-385). Black writes that:

By the third book Harry is ready to go beyond the physical. He now must face his deepest feelings and greatest fears, objectified in the dementers, . . . and the weak but evil wizard whose betrayal brought about the deaths of his parents; he is eventually able to deal with these challenges through mental and emotional strength. (243)

That's just the sort of strength, fortitude, and presence of mind he gains through his experience at the Whomping Willow. Harry later tells Dumbledore, the headmaster, in the last pages of the book, "I thought it was my dad who'd conjured my Patronus. I mean, . . . I thought I was seeing him" (Rowling, *The Prisoner of Azkaban* 427). Harry then says, "It was stupid, thinking it was him" (427), but Dumbledore imparts this wisdom: "You think the dead we loved ever truly leave us? You think that we don't recall them

more clearly than ever in times of great trouble? Your father is alive in you, Harry, and shows himself most plainly when you have need of him” (427-428). The Harry that emerges from the Willow is better prepared to hear and accept those words.

In fact, because of his experience passing through the tree, learning vital truths, and emerging an adult, the Harry in the second layer of time witnesses the original happenings, and recognizes that to best help his friends he must first find the power to help himself. He establishes his connectedness with the adult world by realizing the vision he saw of his father must be instead his own adult form. Ultimately, with this thought, and with the understanding that he already saw himself perform the spell, Harry summons the Patronus to save them all.

And then it hit him—he understood. He hadn’t seen his father—he had seen *himself*—

‘EXPECTO PATRONUM!’ he yelled.

And out of the end of his wand burst, not a shapeless cloud of mist, but a blinding, dazzling, silver animal. He screwed up his eyes, trying to see what it was. . . .

The Patronus turned. It was cantering back toward Harry . . . It was a stag. It was shining brightly as the moon above . . .

It stopped . . . as it stared at Harry with its large, silver eyes. Slowly, it bowed its antlered head. And Harry realized . . .

‘Prongs,’ he whispered.

But as his trembling fingertips stretched toward the creature, it vanished. (Rowling, *The Prisoner of Azkaban* 411-412)

In this climactic juncture of the book, the moment he conjures the Patronus in the form of his father's Animagus figure, Prongs, Harry Potter discards the sins of the father, rejects the question of humanity's inherent good or evil, and assumes the burden of his life's purpose to thwart the psychological and corporeal manifestations of Voldemort. Harry could not have produced the Patronus had he not entered the Whomping Willow a child and come out a man. The Whomping Willow is the passage by which Harry Potter comes of age.

III. CONNECTIONS TO THE NATURAL

“I Always Liked Climbing Trees”: Rick Riordan

Connects More Than the Nine Realms

Some contend that all good literature makes connections with its audience—that literature’s very purpose is the art of connecting. While artful connections may or may not be true of *all* literary works, certainly some forms of literature inspire these connections, whether through aesthetics, storytelling, or an astute combination of both. Fantasy literature, then, clearly inhabits this space because it incorporates aesthetics, or an appeal to the five senses, into the heart of its storytelling, which elicits emotions that transcend the intellect. When J. R. R. Tolkien included his essay “On Fairy-Stories” in *Tree and Leaf*, he said of this precursor to modern fantasy, “It is the mark of a good fairy-story, . . . that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, . . . a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art . . . (69).

In recent decades, before Rick Riordan published *The Sword of Summer* in 2015, but long since Tolkien wrote his *Fellowship of the Rings* trilogy, scholars such as Kathryn Hume, Brian Attebery, and Marek Oziwicz have deliberated the influence, endurance, and importance of fantasy. Hume asserts that, “Fantasy and mimesis together are equally important impulses, and their interaction must be studied . . . to progress in . . . [an] understanding of literature” (25), and that “. . . literature includes fantastic elements, even as it includes mimesis” (22). In *Stories About Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth*, Attebery discusses his methods to “avoid” a “border war” (33), and

says in reference to his *Strategies of Fantasy*, that he “proposed in an earlier book that all genres are what logicians call fuzzy sets” with “degrees of membership” (*Stories About Stories* 33). Attebery claims, “Fuzzy set theory does not say much about history, audience, or purpose, but it does not conflict with those perspectives either, so long as we remember to ask not only ‘To what extent is this story a fantasy?’ but also ‘How does this story relate to prior and subsequent instances of the fantastic?’ ‘Who is this story addressed to?’ and ‘What cultural work does this story undertake by being part of the fantasy category?’” (*Stories About Stories* 34). Oziewicz, writing in response to Hume, Attebery, and others, in *One Earth, One People*, discusses a fantasy category he names “mythopoeic fantasy” (4), and posits that its “holistic stance” is “informed by the conviction of interconnectedness of material and non-material phenomena” (4). He goes on to explain that “holistic criticism saw fantasy as represented best by stories of the quest for personal growth, knowledge and understanding which assist the reader, via symbolic and metaphorical images, in becoming more aware of the human potential” (4), and it “aligned itself with . . . essentialism, and Jungian, religious and spiritual perspectives” (5), versus the “. . . behaviorism, Freudianism, and secularism” (5) found in “reductionist approaches” (4).

The studies of Tolkien, Hume, Attebery, and Oziewicz facilitate the idea that fantasy stories, more than other literary works, possess the ability to use nature metaphorically, and by using the natural world to convey meaning, they enhance connections between characters, themes, ideologies, and readers. In addition, present-day fantasy novels for teenage readers acknowledge nature’s importance, and more specifically, these books portray symbols in clear terms that visually and graphically

appeal to teens. In this way, Jungian archetypes have gone contemporary. Notably, Rick Riordan uses the tree as such a device. First, in his series *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, Riordan weaves a story arc about a pine tree throughout each of the books. More recently, Riordan uses the iconic tree, Yggdrasil, in the first book of his new series, *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard*. In this novel, *The Sword of Summer*, the tree literally connects the nine Norse realms of legend, but it also provides Riordan an avenue to connect the book's ideas with his tween audience, to connect the readers with symbols of world importance and with other mythic texts, and to connect the actions of the novel to its characters, the characters to Magnus, and Magnus to himself.

This chapter will take on each of those topics by delineating first what's within the text, then moving outside the text to other sources, and concluding with a global and universal outlook, affiliated with both ecology and the human spirit. Because *The Sword of Summer* is the first installment of Riordan's series, more emphasis is placed on explaining the function of Yggdrasil's connection to the realms than on the tree's relationship to the doom and gloom of Norse mythology that is linked to the World Tree in the greater myth. Riordan touches briefly on Ragnarok (58; 142), the end-of-days scenario for the Norse, and conveys the bittersweet paradox of brutality and bravery involved in the daily repetition of war on the battlefields of Valhalla (121-128); it is interesting, therefore, to speculate on further associations he'll make with the tree in subsequent novels. Before delving into the connections associated with the tree of this novel, it's important to understand Yggdrasil in all its contexts.

Stories of the World Tree

In *Children Into Swans: Fairy Tales and the Pagan Imagination*, Jan Beveridge explains, "In mythology, trees with their branches and fruit are reservoirs of symbolic

meaning” (208). In her chapter on trees (205-213), she summarizes the Norse story surrounding Yggdrasil:

The single world-supporting ash tree rose like a pillar up to the heavens. It was nourished from water at its roots filled with wisdom and knowledge. Around the tree’s branches four sacred deer moved about, eating shoots. The primal tree represented the meeting place of the secular and divine worlds, and it was constantly regenerating itself. (208)

Manuel Lima substantiates the importance of Yggdrasil to Norse culture in *The Book of Trees: Visualizing Branches of Knowledge*. He writes, “Norse mythology across the pre-Christian Scandinavia and northern Europe—a region once covered by dense forest—is filled with tales of Yggdrasil, a huge ash that binds the earth, hell, and heaven together” (19). In *Folklore and Symbolism of Flowers, Plants and Trees*, Ernst and Johanna Lehner describe the tree’s complex system and structure:

The trunk rooted in the primordial abyss of *Hel*, the subterranean source of matter, bears three stems. The center stem runs up through *Midgard*, the earth, which it supports. It issues out of the mountain *Asgard* where the gods assemble at the base of *Valhalla*. This heaven of the Norse heroes can only be reached by *Bifrost*, the bridge of the rainbow. The stem spreads its branches over the entire sky; their leaves are the clouds, their fruits the stars. (20-21)

The Lehnners continue with explanations of “the second stem . . . in *Muspellsheim*, the warm South” and “the third stem . . . in *Nifleheim*, the cold North” (21). They also corroborate the stories of the “mythological world tree” as an “evergreen ash which

overshadows the whole universe” (20). Interestingly, Fred Hegeneder, in *The Meaning of Trees*, disagrees with this view, and claims:

The ash had nothing to do with the Norse World Tree, Yggdrasil, as has been commonly believed. The *Eddas* describe this poetically as the ‘evergreen needle-ash,’ which is a metaphor for a conifer, the yew tree.

The ash is neither evergreen nor has it needles. The myth of a ‘World-ash’ is a 19th-century misconception that, unfortunately, lingers on. (105)

Information related to the debate between ash and yew does not have much bearing on Yggdrasil’s characterization in *The Sword of Summer*, but the small controversy does imply that the tree is deeply ingrained in myth, and its mysterious origins permeate its archetype in oral history and written word. Suffice it to say, Yggdrasil’s iconic branches seem to hold more than the nine realms of Norse myth in balance.

Indicative of the fragility of this balance is the mischievous squirrel, who, according to Diana Wells in *Lives of Trees*, “ran up and down” the tree “to report on how things were going in the two worlds” (26). Riordan, in his story, makes use of the squirrel’s antics, true to the Norse myth, and emphasizes the squirrel’s unique position as an instigator whose pranks could potentially threaten its own well-being as a denizen of the tree. Tied to the ritual and lore of the tree, however, it can’t help but be what it is. The teen protagonist, Magnus, speaks about the squirrel’s role with his good friend, the dwarf, Blitz.

‘Ratatosk . . .’ I couldn’t finish the sentence. Just saying his name made me want to curl up in the fetal position.

‘Yeah,’ Blitz said. . . . ‘He’s the most destructive creature in the World Tree. He spends his time running up and down the trunk, carrying insults from the eagle who lives at the top to Nidhogg, the dragon who lives at the roots.’

. . . ‘Why would a squirrel do that?’

‘To damage the tree,’ Blitz said. Ratatosk keeps the eagle and the dragon whipped into a frenzy. He tells them lies, rumors, nasty gossip about each other. . . . Ratatosk makes sure the two monsters stay angry and in competition with each other, to see which one can destroy their end of Yggdrasil faster.’

‘But that’s . . . crazy. The squirrel *lives* in the tree.’

Blitz grimaced. ‘We all do, kid. People have destructive impulses. Some of us want to see the world in ruins just for the fun of it . . . even if we’re ruined along with it.’ (Riordan, *The Sword of Summer* 267-268)

In this way, the tree and those things associated with it in the novel, appropriately correlate with the innate aspects of human nature. Those aspects, too, have implications for Ragnarok, mentioned earlier. The passage, here, of Yggdrasil and Ratatosk, alludes to the end-of-days scenario a bit. So, in Riordan’s book, the tree retains elements of the Norse myth, and it’s the symbol of all life and the connection between worlds; it’s also the physical portal to each of the nine realms, and its scenes are coupled with ironic humor, characteristic of Riordan’s style. For example, Yggdrasil’s portal to Boston corresponds with the famous *Make Way for Ducklings* statue in the city: “Nine Worlds? Nine ducks? The symbolism screams *portal!* This spot is the crux of creation, the center

of the tree, the easiest place to jump from one duck—I mean one world—to another” (Riordan, *The Sword of Summer* 255).

Connections within the Text

On a superficial level within the novel, Riordan’s interpretation of Yggdrasil is the device connecting all aspects integral to the plot. More than a piece of the setting, the tree is the structure whereby the plot is formed and the story conveyed; it’s the glue to Riordan’s character interactions and the mortar to his overall theme. Within the story, the literal function of the tree is to connect the Norse worlds that Magnus and his friends encounter—ironic, of course, because Yggdrasil arises from non-literal myth, legend, and fantasy. Nonetheless, the tree functions to bind the storylines together in a cohesive manner. For example, after Magnus inadvertently joins the host of warriors in Hotel Valhalla near the beginning of the story (Riordan, *The Sword of Summer* 56-58), his friends Blitz and Hearthstone climb the World Tree to enter his room through an atrium (149-152), and then they whisk Magnus back to Boston’s Fenway Park via the tree’s magic (159-160). Later, Magnus and his friends head back through the tree using the *Make Way for Ducklings* statue (257-261), and then as the plot develops and unfolds, they emerge into the worlds Folkvanger (270-271), Nidavellir (285-286), and Jotunheim (345). The tree is the vehicle connecting the action of Riordan’s story.

Beyond the surface of general plot development, the tree—as motif—represents a certain connectedness or kinship within the story as it progresses, and it provides a foundation to support the much deeper musings of near transcendental thought. In a critical scene of the novel, before he can fully embrace his fate as a warrior of Valhalla, Magnus relays his history with trees and reflects on the peace trees bring him. As he

contemplates the unusual circumstances of his recent adventures, he's on the floor of his room in Hotel Valhalla, staring up through the trees of his atrium. These "large oak trees" in the "middle of the suite" (Riordan, *The Sword of Summer* 64), are in some way connected to Yggdrasil, as it is through their branches that his friends will fall, later in the book, while they're climbing the World Tree looking for him (149-152). Focusing on what he cares for most, Magnus remarks:

Gazing up through the tree branches at the blue sky, I had trouble breathing. . . .

Lying in the middle of the atrium, I breathed in the fresh air and hoped my lungs would settle down. . . . What shook me wasn't just the fact that I was dead, stuck in a bizarre Viking afterlife . . .

What really hit me: for the first time since my mom died, I was in a comfortable place, alone and safe. . . . Now, I was free to think.

. . . All those trips to the parks, the mountains, the lakes. . . . Had my mom been deliberately preparing me to survive on my own? Almost as if she'd known . . . but that wasn't possible. Then again, having a Norse god for a dad wasn't possible either. (69-70)

These trees, an extension of Yggdrasil, help Magnus target important thoughts as he mentally prepares for what might happen next. This significant passage connects Magnus with trees in general, the trees of childhood camping trips with his mother more specifically, and the branches of the World Tree in particular. Riordan's illustration of the connection in this particular scene of the story allows for believability later, when Magnus learns he is the son of Frey (102-104), the "god of spring and summer . . . and

wealth, abundance, and fertility” (105). The scene also portrays a moment when nature bolsters Magnus and allows him to gather his wits before heading to the crowded mead hall for his first assembly with the other warriors (83-89), where he’ll see the Norns appear from “the roots of a tree” to “read” his fate (99-100), and where he’ll first learn of his impending quest (102). In addition, throughout the novel, Magnus continues to be inspired by the natural world and maintains a connection with nature; this special kinship generates a “warm buttery” glow of “residual power” around Magnus (341), and gives him the ability to heal his friends in various stages of the book (151; 340; 465).

Trees not only help Magnus understand his own thoughts within the story, they invariably connect him to his friends and companions. There are, of course, two levels to this connection, the physical and the emotional; Yggdrasil plays a role in both. The physical connection between Magnus and the warriors of Valhalla is demonstrated by the splendor of the tree in the great hall. He sees the tree for the first time when his Valkyrie partner Samirah—Sam for short—brings him to Hotel Valhalla’s dining facilities, the “Feast Hall of the Slain” (Riordan, *The Sword of Summer* 79). Magnus sees Laeradr, a tree of Norse legend that stands guard in the hall: Laeradr is commonly associated with Yggdrasil, as Yggdrasil’s branches connect the worlds, and Laeradr’s branches rest in the world of Asgard, the home of Valhalla. Several scholars remark on the affiliation, and although the trees are usually referenced by different names because of their functions, they are the same. In his book *Odin: The Viking Allfather*, Steven S. Long writes that the “tree named Laeradr” is “part of Yggdrasil” (20). The magnificent appeal of Laeradr, which he sees first, provides Magnus with a glimpse of the more colossal aspect of the tree to come:

Tiers of long tables like stadium seating curved downward from the nosebleed section. In the center of the room, instead of a basketball court, a tree rose taller than the Statue of Liberty. Its lowest branches were maybe a hundred feet up. Its canopy spread over the entire hall, scraping against the domed ceiling and sprouting through a massive opening at the top. Above, the stars glittered in the night sky. (79)

The tree's association with the awe of the living world reflects the power of nature, and further connects to Magnus, who has an affinity with such things. Nature, represented by animals circling the branches of the tree, also spills forth in the form of nourishing water.

. . . From somewhere high in the tree, water ran down grooves in the bark and formed one powerful torrent that cascaded off a branch in a roaring white curtain. It crashed into a pond the size of an Olympic pool between two of the tree's roots.

'The stag's horns spray water nonstop,' Sam said. 'It flows down the branches into that lake. From there, it goes underground and feeds every river in every world.'

'So . . . all the water is stag-horn runoff? I'm pretty sure that's not what they taught me in earth science.' (80-81)

Physically connected to the hall in this way, Magnus partakes in the festivities at the warrior banquet, solidifying his role as "one of the *einherjar*" (60), and inaugurating him into "the chosen of Odin, soldiers in his eternal army" (60).

The friendships he makes with the other teenagers in his wing of the hotel are also initiated by an experience with the tree. On the night after his first banquet hall

experience, Magnus stays awake thinking about the prophesy the Norns delivered at dinner (Riordan, *The Sword of Summer* 99-100). Deciding that, “if I stayed awake thinking any longer, my brain would overheat” (107), Magnus ends up in the atrium, “sprawled on the grass, gazing at the stars through the tree branches” (107). He explains that his sleep is interrupted:

A sharp sound startled me awake—a branch crackling. Someone cursed.

Above me, the sky was turning gray in the predawn light. A few leaves helicoptered through the air. Branches bobbed as if something heavy had just scrambled through them. (107)

This passage draws attention to what happens next. In the silence that follows, Magnus discovers a note under his door from T. J., “the guy across the hall” (108). It says, “*Hi, neighbor. Join us in lounge 19 for breakfast. Down the hall to the left. Bring your weapons and armor*” (108). At the subsequent breakfast with his hallmates, T. J., the half-troll X, Mallory Keen, and Halfborn Gunderson, Magnus learns more about the worlds and their relationship with Yggdrasil.

T. J. pushed his empty plate away. ‘Magnus, I don’t know if it helps, but the Nine Worlds aren’t really separate planets. They’re more like . . . different dimensions, different layers of reality, all connected by the World Tree.’

. . . ‘The World Tree is the tree in the feast hall?’

‘Nah,’ Mallory said, ‘The World Tree is *much* bigger. You’ll see, sooner or later.’ (113)

These characters, introduced to Magnus through their conversation about the tree, will be the heroes called upon at the end of the book to combat the evil Surt's army, as Magnus, Sam, Blitz, and Hearthstone face Surt's partner, Fenris Wolf (448-458).

The tree not only introduces allies who become part of the physical force against Surt, it reinforces the rapport between Magnus and his long-time companions Blitz and Hearthstone, who he did not know were a dwarf and elf until his experiences in Hotel Valhalla. In fact, the dwarf and elf come searching for Magnus by climbing through the World Tree and falling into his room by way of the atrium. Magnus explains:

I walked to the atrium and stared at the stars through the trees. I wondered what sky I was looking at—what world, what constellations.

The branches rustled. Something dark and man-shaped toppled out of the tree. He landed at my feet with a nasty crunch.

‘OW!’ he wailed. ‘Stupid gravity!’

My old buddy Blitz lay on his back, . . . cradling his left arm.

A second person dropped lightly to the grass—Hearth, dressed in his usual black leather clothes . . . (Riordan, *The Sword of Summer* 150)

On this surprise visit, from two men with whom he sought camaraderie and shelter during his homeless days on the streets of Boston, Riordan has Magnus remark:

‘Guys, don’t take this the wrong way, because I’m really glad to see you. But why are you falling out of my trees?’

‘Kid,’ Blitz said, ‘for the past twenty-four hours we’ve been climbing all over the World Tree looking for you. We thought we found you last night, but—’

‘I think you might have,’ I said. ‘Just before dawn I heard
somebody moving in the branches.’ (152)

These friends, from the life Magnus led prior to his involvement with the Norse worlds, seek him out through the World Tree and show their continued desire to protect and defend him. Although he’s now a member of the einherjar of Valhalla, this exchange between friends, provided by the tree, enhances their bond, and demonstrates their connection to each other.

Yggdrasil continues to demonstrate its ability to strengthen the emotional connections between friends by forcing the characters, Sam, Blitz, Hearthstone, and Magnus, to work closely together in the midst of peril. Having “leaped into the World Tree” for the first time via portal from Boston (Riordan, *The Sword of Summer* 260), Magnus and his group of friends manipulate the branches of the tree:

I ALWAYS LIKED CLIMBING TREES.

. . . On the World Tree, every branch would hold me. The biggest ones were wider than Interstate 93. The smallest were as large as your average redwood. As for Yggdrasil’s trunk, it was so immense it just didn’t compute. Each crevice . . . [led] to a different world, as if someone had wrapped tree bark around a column of television monitors glowing with a million different movies.

The wind roared, ripping at my new denim jacket. Beyond the tree’s canopy I saw nothing but a hazy white glow. Below was no ground—just more branches crisscrossing the void. . . . I felt woozy and

unbalanced—as if Yggdrasil and everything it contained, including my world, was free-floating in primordial mist . . . (261)

The tree is an integral portion of the book: the four core friends continue “navigating the narrower branches” (263), picking their way “through a maze of lichen patches that looked like burned hills . . .” (263), and searching for their next “destination” (263).

While they’re maneuvering through the tree in this fashion, Ratatosk finds them and gives chase. Magnus explains:

The squirrel’s battle cry pierced my eardrums. A thousand insults were packed into that one sound, all of them invading my brain, drowning out any rational thought.

. . . I fell to my knees. A sob built in my chest. I probably would have died then and there if Blitz hadn’t hauled me up with all his dwarven strength and slapped me across the face. (265-266)

The tree motif works to deepen the relationships between Magnus and his friends. The added trust, provoked by the escapades within the branches of the tree, seals their coalition with one another. By linking story elements to characters, and characters to each other, the tree collectively connects Magnus and his friends to the mission of the novel by transporting them to the crux of the action in a plot to retrieve the Sword of Summer and keep it from the hands of evil. This allegiance is vital because the friends will use their united strength to band together against the forces of Surt.

Connections to Other Texts

Riordan, a parent and former teacher, provides information on his website explaining his interest in, and the inception of, many concepts appearing in his books. At

the forefront of those discussions is mythology in its many forms and the fantasy works of Tolkien. Riordan says, “The first book I remember reading for fun was the *Lord of the Rings*. I probably read it ten times. I also liked Greek and Norse mythology . . .” (Riordan, *Online World of Rick Riordan*). Sue Corbet, in her article about Riordan in *Publisher’s Weekly*, elaborates:

. . . he had been a reluctant reader himself, until an English teacher, Patricia Pabst, gave him the right book in eighth grade. ‘She gave me *Lord of the Rings*, and that led me to Norse mythology, and from that came my interest in Greek mythology,’ Riordan recalls. ‘That was my doorway into becoming a reader.’ It was also after reading Tolkien’s masterpiece that Riordan, encouraged by Pabst, first started writing his own stories. (Corbet)

During the launch of *The Sword of Summer* in October 2015, Riordan acknowledged in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* that Norse mythology has some “unique challenges” and some “ridiculous” scenarios (Holub). Riordan explains to interviewer, Chris Holub, that:

The Norse myths are a lot more gruesome. They have a lot of blood and violence. I mean Valhalla is basically about killing each other all the time every day. So turning that into a funny scene for kids was definitely a challenge. The first big battle they have in Valhalla, I had to struggle with, how do I present this accurately but also in a way that’s not completely terrifying? (Holub)

About the outlandish things that happen in Norse mythology, such as a tree that holds nine worlds, or a squirrel that runs up and down it tempting destiny by challenging an eagle and a dragon, Riordan says, “I think that just sort of reinforces what kids expect anyway, that the world is kind of absurd. . . . We certainly have things that ridiculous in real life. And I think the Vikings themselves played a lot of that for humor too” (Holub).

The tree, Yggdrasil, comes directly from Norse myth and legend, and Riordan doesn’t do much to tamper with the stories beyond the different interpretations that already exist. His humor, too, pays homage to what he says of Viking humor—that he doesn’t “think they necessarily took it all at face value” (Holub). In the first few pages of *The Sword of Summer*, Magnus refers to his Norse roots in a way that resembles metafiction. He and Uncle Randolph have a talk while they drive the streets of Boston in Randolph’s car:

. . . just to make small talk, I asked. ‘So who’s trying to kill me?’

. . . ‘Magnus . . . I’ve made my life’s work studying the Norse exploration of North America.’

Wow, thanks,’ I said. ‘That really answered my question. . . . Fine . . . I’ll humor you. Norse exploration. You mean the Vikings.’

Randolph winced. ‘Well . . . *Viking* means *raider*. It’s more of a job description. Not all Norse people were Vikings. But, yes, those guys.

(Riordan, *The Sword of Summer* 24)

Randolph continues driving and explaining while Magnus makes jokes:

‘A millennium ago, Norse explorers came to this land. . . . The captain of these explorers . . . was a son of the god Skirnir.’

‘A son of a god. Really, anywhere . . . is good. I can walk.’

‘This man carried a very special item . . . something that belonged to your father. When the Norse ship went down in a storm, that item was lost. But you—you have the ability to find it.’

I tried the door again. Still locked.

The really bad part? The more Randolph talked, the less I could convince myself that he was nuts. His story seeped into my mind—storms, wolves, gods, Asgard. (27)

Riordan closes this exchange with a final question from Magnus:

‘Give me one . . . clear answer, without rambling and the history lectures. You said you knew my dad. Who is he?’

Randolph placed his hand over mine, which made me squirm. . . .

‘On my life, Magnus, I swear this is the truth: your father is a Norse god. Now, hurry. We’re in a twenty-minute parking spot.’ (28)

Riordan’s incorporation of Yggdrasil into the plot, makes it an integral force in the later narrative and adventures of Magnus, reinforcing Riordan’s own interest in the combination of Norse legends, fantasy, and contemporary teenagers. Riordan remarks that, “I’ve loved the Norse myths for just as long as I’ve loved the Greek myths. . . . I finally got to address the Norse myths in my [new] series . . .” (Riordan, *Online World of Rick Riordan*). Yggdrasil, whose roots and branches link nine realms, represents the ideal metaphor to connect Riordan’s work with the mythology he loves.

It’s no secret that Tolkien loved trees, too, and the way Riordan represents Yggdrasil and other natural elements in his story, is very like the way Tolkien

approached nature in his works. Riordan's tree connects with Tolkien's work. Liam Campbell, in "Nature," from *A Companion to J. R. R. Tolkien*, writes that "[w]hen visiting the writings of Tolkien, one is immediately struck by the sheer multiplicity of represented, reconceived, and imagined natural elements" (Campbell). He continues by investigating "nature and natural phenomena" in Tolkien's work and studying them "conceptually, thematically, stylistically" and how their "presentation . . . is almost always central to the narrative or poetic design" (Campbell). Arguably, Riordan's Yggdrasil works in this manner as well. Conceptually and stylistically, like Tolkien who wrote "natural scenes . . . with a rich and striking graphic intensity" (Campbell), Riordan presents the Norse tree with specific natural elements that demonstrate its size and magnitude. For example, when Magnus and his friends are climbing the tree, they battle those prominent natural elements to jump from world to world:

Hostile winds buffeted us from side to side. Branches swayed, throwing deep pools of shadow and brilliant patches of light across our path. A leaf the size of a canoe fluttered by.

. . . Changing branches might sound easy, but it involved sliding down ten feet from one curved surface to another, with the wind howling and the branches swaying apart. (Riordan, *The Sword of Summer* 262-263).

Thematically, of course, Riordan's tree represents connections. The metaphor of connection runs throughout the story as, centered around Yggdrasil, Magnus learns who he is, develops friendships, and supports the cause against Surt. Campbell suggests that Tolkien, too, concentrated on connections; in early works, he "consistently foregrounded

place and nature” and “[t]his interaction between aspects of nature and character . . . offered glimpses of elements that would become characteristic of his more expansive and famed writings” (Campbell).

Riordan’s portrayal of Yggdrasil, similar to Tolkien’s work, is central to the narrative design of *The Sword of Summer*. Campbell claims that Tolkien’s “Treebeard and the Ents also . . . offer this binding of character and environment” (Campbell); that when “Gandolf refers to Treebeard as ‘the oldest living thing that still walks beneath the sun’ ” (Campbell), Tolkien imparts “voices of nature which have an authentically ageless perception; they speak with a deeper perspective: that of the Earth itself” (Campbell). Cynthia Cohen, in her discussion of Treebeard, concedes “Tolkien’s exposure to Old Norse literature and texts mentioning giants . . .” (112), and indicates that the tree persona contributes to the effect of the overall story because Tolkien seems “to intentionally blur the visual boundaries between Ents and trees” (114). The mysterious, vast, and noble quality of the Ents and Treebeard permeate both the contextual design and the plot of Tolkien’s work. For Riordan, this means the attention he gives to Yggdrasil conveys the tree’s status as the one thing keeping all the worlds together. Magnus needs the tree, as he too, works to save the worlds. The repetition of Yggdrasil’s function throughout the story and the passages delineating the friends’ jumps between the worlds promote the ancient power of Yggdrasil’s presence. Even the contrast between the contemporary characters balancing on the archaic branches gives credibility to the tree’s stabilizing influence because it endures history and survives beyond generations.

Connections beyond the Text

Through the image of the iconic tree, the structure of the story, the characters, and the actions merge with Riordan's passion for myth and his love of Tolkien to create a novel that contains universal implications about making connections. These broader implications—appreciating the environment and supporting human relationships—though not directly stated by Riordan, make their way to the surface of his pages, inspired by the roots and branches of Yggdrasil. The importance of the environment clearly asserts itself in Riordan's work, and the World Tree is a facet of the reliance on nature to convey humanitarian messages of togetherness. In *The Sword of Summer*, Riordan has Magnus, Sam, and Hearthstone follow Blitz as he “leaped through the rift” to get to the tree (259). Riordan, emphasizing teamwork through the metaphor of Yggdrasil, has Magnus say, “I grabbed Hearth's left arm while Sam took his right. Together, we leaped into the World Tree” (260). Throughout the book, the appreciation that Magnus shows for nature is exemplified in his reverence for and awe of Yggdrasil in all its forms. His transcendental outlook almost becomes ecocriticism. Comments Riordan makes on his website, however, circumvent direct links to scholarly ecocriticism because of his predilection to avoid any strict ecological stance besides one that confirms the environment and humanity are connected. He says:

I don't consciously put messages in the books, because my job is telling a good story, not preaching. However, I do pick up on themes from Greek mythology that still resonate in the modern world, and certainly man's relationship to nature is one of those. I've always been fascinated by the

god Pan, and his reported death in ancient times. It seemed a very relevant theme for modern readers. (Riordan, *Online World of Rick Riordan*)

Riordan's main objective is to promote modern concepts that engage readers as members of the human race—reluctant and avid readers, young people and old. His use of nature and the environment, through archetypal symbols such as the World Tree, contributes to this heightened awareness of contemporary issues.

Oziewicz, in substantiating his definition for “mythopoeic fantasy” (84), writes that it’s “a story which provides an imaginative experience of a world in which metaphysical concepts are objective realities and the protagonists’ responses to those realities reflect on their lives” (84). Riordan’s version of nature in general, and Yggdrasil more specifically, corresponds with this view that Oziewicz maintains. The “imaginative experience” and its “metaphysical concepts” affect “the protagonists’ responses” and illustrate the link between the actions Magnus takes, the natural world, and the broader ecological spectrum. *The Sword of Summer* further fits the definition of Oziewicz, who explains of mythopoeic fantasy:

. . . it is an account of the adventures of psychologically human heroes, with the plot taking place, at least partially, in some secondary or alternative world. . . . Constructed from a variety of artistically re-imagined . . . mythic elements—mythopoeic fantasy may use old, classical mythologies as much as contemporary myths produced by our civilization and present in our daily lives. . . . Although not humorless, mythopoeic fantasy is serious and presents its mythic elements as true—as fully believable. At the same time it is a visionary genre: a story about what it is

to be human, to live in the world, to participate in a value system, and to imagine a future for oneself and for the entire human race. (84)

Important here is the message that the archetypes are “believable” and the “artistically re-imagined” world—such as the nature evident in Tolkien or Riordan—transmits the humanitarian message about “what it is to be human” in a way that connects with readers. Riordan’s Yggdrasil resonates in this way.

In addition, although Oziewicz contends “mythopoeic fantasy is not restricted to a children’s audience” (83), he admits it is a “crossover genre whose . . . plots with young protagonists, quests, magical objects and worlds to be saved reflect the genre’s grounding in mythic and oral traditions of humankind” (83). These concepts are no stranger to children’s fantasy or the fantasy fiction for young adults. Teenagers engage with texts that invite them in and show them ways to effectively manage their own surroundings and psychological issues, or navigate physical and intellectual matters of the world at large. Riordan, a former middle school teacher (Riordan, *Online World of Rick Riordan*), writes for this adolescent audience, a group who in some ways constantly redefines itself, as is the nature of teens.

The idea of mythopoeic fantasy correlates with the teenage paradigm of finding oneself because it advocates the concept that “human life is a search for meaning defined especially by our relation to transcendence” (Oziewicz 33). In “Children’s Fantasy Literature,” David Gooderham brings this argument into the arena of children’s literature by explaining that the “themes of invention, construction, and achievement” become a text’s “thematic and ideological center of gravity” when the “ventures of the protagonists take the form not merely of brave adventure, but of clever and resourceful contrivance”

(179). Gooderham's version of the transcendence suggested by Oziewicz is cleverness and resourcefulness. If children are resourceful enough to overcome conflict or clever enough to solve the situations they face, then they're able to transcend their childlike qualities and embrace the intricacies of growing up. This works as well for the teens in Riordan's novels. The device demonstrating transcendence for Magnus is the World Tree of Riordan's invention. Yggdrasil, in *The Sword of Summer*, is a metaphor for kinship and a symbol that Magnus has connected with the Norse culture and understands his part within it. With this knowledge, Magnus then navigates Yggdrasil to solve his immediate issues with Surt, and uses the tree to connect with his companions in the attempt to thwart evil in the nine realms.

Yggdrasil, then, helps Riordan connect with the greater sphere of children's literature and with the domain of fantasy in particular. His work, through the metaphor of Yggdrasil, answers questions originated by Attebery, mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, and adapted thus: 1) to what extent is the story a fantasy, 2) how does it relate to prior instances of fantasy, 3) who is it addressed to, and 4) what cultural work does it undertake by being part of the fantasy category (Attebery, *Stories About Stories* 34). In answer, Riordan's story makes use of nature, similar to that of Tolkien's fantasy worlds, and in philosophical design, it resides with other mythopoeic fantasies. Riordan describes fantastical and other worldly adventures, but combines this with an adept use of mythic archetypes that provide some mimesis in the form of teenage angst, escapades, and discovery. Written for teens, but read by adults too, the book works to address connectedness in all things: with humanity and the environment, with history and culture,

with friends and companions, and with the inner self. Throughout the story, Yggdrasil guides the plot, and emphasizes with its archetypal metaphors, the idea of connections.

Like Hume, Attebery, and Oziewicz, Ursula Le Guin also examines theories and ideas connected with fantasy. Studying Jung's archetypes and fantasy constructions together, she writes that "[t]he great fantasies, myths, and tales" can "speak *from* the unconscious *to* the unconscious—symbol and archetype" (62), and "[t]hough they use words, they . . . go straight to the thoughts that lie too deep to utter" (62). A noteworthy fantasy author in her own right, she says of Jung's philosophies, that his "terminology" changes the "way a growing tree changes leaves" (62), but there are "[t]hese regions of the psyche Jung calls the 'collective unconscious,' and it is in them, where we all meet, that he sees the source of true community . . . of art, grace, spontaneity, and love" (63). Riordan's archetypal tree connects the community of his novel, the myths and stories outside his novel, as well as issues of society and culture beyond. Yggdrasil, as metaphor, speaks to the heart, the mind, and the soul and becomes a perfect conveyance of aesthetics and storytelling in one—just as fantasy is the consummate vehicle to make those connections. Le Guin affirms, "It is fantasy because fantasy is the natural, the appropriate, language for the recounting of the spiritual journey and the struggle of good and evil in the soul" (68). She adds, "[t]hat has been said before—by Tolkien himself, for one—but it needs repeating. It needs lots of repeating . . ." (69). Of course, from *The Sword of Summer*, Riordan would use the words of Magnus Chase, "Together, we leaped into the World Tree. I ALWAYS LIKED CLIMBING TREES" (260-261).

The Forest Beckons: Trees as Darkness and Light

in *The Thickety* Series by J. A. White

Trees, used as metaphors in fantasy and children's works, capture the essence of nature and portray its wisdom, healing, and knowledge. As an archetype, trees go further to reinforce ideas of shelter, protection, cycles, and routines; trees represent a connection with new life and a unity with ancient energy. It is true that trees convey many messages associated with the good of the world. Although much about trees does establish their link with these qualities of happiness and light, trees, as real embodiments of nature, also represent what's ugly, old, withered, tangled, knotted, thorny, poisonous, wicked, and downright scary. Trees, bare and gnarled, are a common emblem in contemporary Halloween settings used to evoke horror or dread. Trees provoke fear in tales of the deep wild forest where children of fairy land lose their lives or encounter demons. Trees, whose leaves whisper through the cruel wind on a stormy night, or whose branches scratch, grab, and contain their victims, rank high on the list of story symbols that cultivate an atmosphere of suspense, mystery, power, and evil for readers. Ancient and mighty, trees can exhibit characteristics that inspire awe and surpass regular human understanding. These types of trees represent very real forces of darkness at work in the world.

Tween fantasy author J. A. White uses just such trees—those that lie at the edge of human understanding and that inspire mysterious power—in *The Thickety* series for middle grade readers. The first three books, *A Path Begins*, *The Whispering Trees*, and *Well of Witches*, employ this real quality of trees, especially dark power and the mystery and fear that comes from the unknown. The fourth, and reportedly final, book of the

series is in production and has a projected publication date of 2017 (White, J. A. *White Books*).

White's trees, similar to the trees of other fantasy or children's literature, establish the atmosphere of the fantastic within each book of *The Thickety* and are integral to creating the fantasy environment within the series as a whole. In addition, the trees help the main character, Kara Westfall, answer questions about herself as she discovers magic in grimoires, in her heart, and in the environment of the forest around her small town of De'Noran. The mysterious grimoires, magical spell books belonging only to witches, play an important role throughout the series, because, in addition to tempting their owners, they connect to trees by means of their pages made from paper.

The trees of the novel make it possible for Kara, who supports and protects her brother Taff, to learn lessons common to protagonists of tween novels, whose pages invite their characters to learn who they are or why they matter in the world: "who they are" often has to do with what they know, where they come from, and what gifts and talents they possess, and "why they matter" encompasses what they do with those gifts and talents, how they use any knowledge they gain, and why they should care about the things that happen to them. *The Thickety* series engages in all of these questions and themes, and the trees of the novel act as agents in Kara's development as the story progresses.

Farah Mendlesohn's well-crafted taxonomy that includes four fantasy categories, defined in *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, will explain some aspects of the dark trees in *The Thickety*, as will Peter Hollindale's seminal 1995 article, "The Adolescent Novel of Ideas," and Fiona McCullough's more contemporary 2011 critique of young adult

literature in *Children's Literature in Context*. Before delving into the theory behind the trees of the overarching series, it's necessary to briefly recap how the trees work within the surface plot of the individual novels.

In the first book, *A Path Begins*, the small antiquated village of De'Noran is surrounded by an ominous forest, called the Thickety, which is separated from the perimeter of the town by an area of magical brush called the Fringe. The Thickety grows and continuously encroaches on De'Noran, making life difficult for a group called the Clearers, who work perilously hard to smoke out the weeds of the Fringe, which is the borderline between the people of De'Noran and that same foreboding collection of trees, which sometimes is called "the Dark Wood, or the Forest of Forbidden Gift, or just Sordyr's Realm. But mostly they called it the Thickety" (White, *A Path Begins* 51). The Children of the Fold, as the citizens of De'Noran are called in this book, oppose all magic, especially the use of grimoires to conduct spells, by following the teachings and parables created long ago by Timoth Clen. Magic is heavily associated with the Thickety and the dark mage, Sordyr, who, legend claims, haunts the forest enticing witches to follow his way instead of the ways of Timoth Clen. This idea, introduced by Kara near the beginning of the series, conveys the important connection between the Thickety and an evil presence. While looking out at the trees of the Thickety, she remembers the stories told by her dead mother:

The stories about this forbidden place were many and varied.

Ancient trees scratch their names on you while you sleep. . . . Kara didn't believe all the stories, but she was certain that Sordyr, the ruler of the Thickety, was no tall tale.

Oh yes, Mother had told her. The Forest Demon is as real as you or I, though he cannot cross the borders of his kingdom, thank goodness. But be wary nonetheless. Never journey past the Fringe, for though the Thickety is closed to most, I fear he may make a special exception for you.

Suddenly a gust of wind caught the branches of the trees, black leaves shuddering madly like the rush of a waterfall and something else, some other sound she was sure she recognized. . . .

‘No,’ Kara said, stepping back. ‘No. It was just the wind.’

She walked faster, trying not to think about it. Surely it must have been her imagination.

For just a moment, she’d thought the trees had whispered her name. (83)

The words of this passage communicate the concrete presence of evil and a capacity for the unpleasant that correlate with the whisper of the trees and the atmosphere of hushed suspense created by the “black leaves” and “some other sound” that seems like her name spoken on “a gust of wind” (83).

The dark mood of the book continues as Kara finds a grimoire, discovers her own talent for magic, connects with animals through spell work, and becomes obsessed with the pages of the grimoire that she uses to cast spells. Through all of this, the trees of the Thickety cement their place as an integral feature of the plot: in the forest when Kara, trance-like, is called there to receive her grimoire from Sordyr (White, *A Path Begins* 121-133); later, when she conjures the first animal creature, the gra’dak, to do her bidding near the edge of the Thickety among the Fringe (162-167; 176-177); and when

she gleefully spawns animal after animal under a “copse of red willows” in her ecstasy at reclaiming the grimoire from a well-meaning friend (232).

The Fenroot, an important tree introduced in *A Path Begins*, relates to the magic of the Thickety by representing the antithetical non-magic practices of the Fold within the first book. Important in subsequent books as well, this “increasingly rare” tree (White, *A Path Begins* 240), written about in the lore, must be placed in the center of “a community that properly honored Timoth Clen” (240). Interestingly, the Fenroot, an extension in some ways of the Thickety, becomes the center of magical forces, because, at the base of this tree, later in the book, Kara faces Grace Stone, a girl her age and an adversary who stole Kara’s first grimoire and made it her own (432-438). During their encounter and the ensuing chase and battle between the two girls (439-469), Grace casts her Last Spell and uses the final page of her grimoire (469), resulting in her presumed destruction by hands that pour forth from the grimoire to grip hold of her and pull her inside the pages and into oblivion (470).

Her final spell will not be revealed to readers until almost a year passes in the storyline of the book. No longer under the effects of Grace’s malicious magic, which finally dissipates as the village continues to recover under the leadership of Kara’s father, the town groups again around the special Fenroot tree in a jubilation of sorts (White, *A Path Begins* 477). In this ceremony that begins as a thanksgiving, Kara realizes for the first time that there’s something not quite right about her father, his charismatic leadership, and “how instantly and completely the villagers obeyed him” (482). In the moment that they’re gathered around the Fenroot, her father leads the people to question

her magic as he examines her in this public forum, and Kara, “with shocking clarity” (483), finally understands what has happened:

This was Grace’s Last Spell.

‘You’re not my father,’ Kara said.

The thing in her father’s body nodded. ‘I am Timoth Clem, destroyer of Witches, Voice of the One True Way, returned to all of you in your time of direst need.’

She expected the crowd to laugh this claim away. But she saw only smiles and tiny nods, as though this was only confirmation of something they had known for some time.

Timoth Clem folded his arms across his chest. ‘Do your duty, my Children.’

The first stone hit her in the back of the neck. It was small, not much more than a pebble, but it stung. The second stone was much larger and missed her entirely, skipping off the bark of the Fenroot tree. (483)

Kara, chased from the village by increasingly larger stones, jumps on Shadowdancer, her horse, grabs Taff, and escapes the Fold of De’Noran by plunging into the sinister, yet open, branches of the Thickety.

In front of her, the trees of the Thickety peeled open, revealing space just large enough for a single horse and two riders. Shadowdancer hesitated, but Kara screamed ‘Go!’ and the mare galloped through the hole. Taff buried his face in Kara’s arm and murmured something soft. ‘It’s going to be all right.’ Kara said, but she didn’t really believe it. She

was suddenly struck by the suspicion that her entire life had led to this point, that everything—her mother’s death, Grace, the grimoire—had been an elaborate web to trap her in this place. (488)

In this way, by the end of the first book, the power of the Thickety has both condemned and saved Kara throughout the story. An apparently ambivalent force, not fully understood by its human characters, with a penchant for evil, but a capacity for good, the Thickety, a representation of what’s real and natural in the world, manifests control over the plot of the series.

The second book, *The Whispering Trees*, about the forest surroundings and its history and place within the world of the novel, outlines the adventures of Kara and Taff as they make their way through the Thickety to the secret village of Kala Malta, which harbors followers of Sordyr and is hidden outside the forest borders. Predominately about the Thickety’s connection to both dark beauty and perilous nature, *The Whispering Trees* has Kara and Taff follow an unpredictable witch named Mary Kettle to escape the grasp of Sordyr, who remains a fundamental part of the forest and its creatures. In this novel, Kara learns that she is *wexari*, a witch who can do magic without an evil grimoire.

‘Me?’ Kara asked.

‘Yes, *wexari*! You!’

‘That word again. I don’t even know what it means!’

Mary buried her face in her hands. ‘I’m sorry. I forget how little you know sometimes. A girl with a talent for witchcraft is rare enough, but for every thousand witches there is only one *wexari*. One who does not need a grimoire to cast spells.’

‘But I *do* need a grimoire! I’ve never used magic without one.’

‘Don’t be so sure. My guess is that you’ve been using magic for years without realizing it. See, *wexari* are different from other witches in a number of ways. They aren’t beholden to a grimoire—though they can certainly use one—and their magic is more specific. Some *wexari* can control the weather. . . . Your talent involves animals—though that may evolve as your powers grow.’ (White, *The Whispering Trees* 86-87)

The focus of this book involves specific characterization—of Kara, of Sordyr, and of the magic at work in the Thickety—which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Other important passages of the novel involve the children’s entrance to Kala Malta (300-305), their first encounters with a young village girl named Safi (364-365; 386-388), the discovery of the true purpose for Fenroot trees (369-371), and the introduction of Rygoth (342-352), an ancient *wexari* juxtaposed against Sordyr.

Throughout this second book, the importance of trees continuously comes to the forefront. For example, as the children enter Kala Malta, they notice a fence “constructed from numerous branches woven tightly together like a net. It looked, from this distance, as though it could be easily climbed, and yet something about the fence disturbed Kara.” (White, *The Whispering Trees* 305). Later, when Kara and Taff attempt a quick escape from the village, they learn more about the trees of this fence:

They walked in silence until the fence surrounding Kala Malta loomed before them. It was absurdly tall, but Kara thought there were enough nooks and crannies to allow them to climb it. She gripped a lower limb, expecting to feel cold bark but feeling something else instead.

The fence moved; you saw it . . .

‘No,’ Kara said, snatching her hand back as though from a flame.

‘He couldn’t have. That’s too terrible, even for him.’

Slowly, not wanting it to be true, Kara pressed an ear against the fence. . . . At first she heard nothing, and then—there it was, what she had felt and not wanted to be true: the frantic beating of a heart.

The branch opened its eyes. (317)

It turns out that the fence is a conglomeration of people, “their arms and legs transformed into branches and twisted into the pattern of the fence” (317), that Sordyr used in his construction of Kala Malta. These tree people, whose flesh itself becomes the timber of the tall fence, are bound and connected to line the perimeter of the town. Kara notes:

‘Sordyr did this . . . [w]ith his seeds. Just like with Shadowdancer.

He turned these people into this . . . thing.’ The branches were just a blur of motion now; if they tried to climb the fence, the thorns would slice them into pieces. ‘That’s why he didn’t bother putting us in a cell. Kala Malta itself is a prison.’ (318)

Trees promote the natural and real aspects of the dark, powerful, and mysterious Thickety that surrounds Kala Malta, and calls to Kara, Safi, and Taff in their dreams.

The Fenroot in this novel, too, contributes to the darkness and the cryptic nature of magic at work in this world. Hiding in secret, Kara watches as “several burly men shaved the bark from the Fenroot trunks” (White, *The Whispering Trees* 369), and “sawed” and “chopped the dark wood into tiny pieces” (369). The pieces of the wood are then made into pulp for paper (370-371), and that paper, magically sewn during the night

by the adults in Kala Malta (372-374), creates the pages for the grimoires used by witches. In this way, the magic of the series, is tied directly to trees, which themselves are linked with the Thickety, a place of power not easily understood by the inhabitants in the world of the novels, yet directly used by them in the construction of their own magic. At the back of the warehouse where they make the grimoires, Kara discovers storehouses for vast amounts of grimoires (375), which will be used to bring about the destruction of their world (377-378).

Although the third book, *Well of Witches*, primarily takes place beyond De’Noran, Kala Malta, and the Thickety itself, the power of the magical forest environment remains a superior influence over the novel. In stark contrast to the Thickety and its immediate surroundings on the remote island habitat, the land across the water, called “the World” within the first two books and “Sentium” in the third, is an almost post-apocalyptic version of Oz, because of its central city, Penta’s Keep, and the four outer realms that provide resources by “dedicating” themselves “wholly and completely to a specialty that complemented the other three regions, forcing them to rely on one another” (White, *Well of Witches* 223). Those resources, in the form of “power sources” such as “glorbs” from Ilma (225), “glassblowers” who “bend light” from Lux (225), “[e]xcellent hunters” that have perfected the art of interpreting sound in Auren (227), and those who “[m]ake medicine” through unorthodox methods in Kutt (228), rely on the strictures of science, far removed from any magic, especially that connected with wild trees. The Thickety’s influence, then, can be felt in the overabundance of scientific elements in Sentium, and the idea that “Sablethorn, for countless centuries a school for good *wexari*, had to be destroyed” (229), in order to make way for the safe and reliable progress of science over

the unpredictable, yet natural, inclination of magic. Although the Thickety was confining and claustrophobic in the first two books of the series, the absence of shelter, protection, grimoires, and rules about magic that the characters encounter in the third book as they travel in Sentium conveys an emptiness not present in the Thickety's environment. There are no certainties about people, behavior, or destinations in Sentium, whereas in the Thickety, and its villages of De'Noran and Kala Malta, even the wild chaos of the war between magic and no magic is predictable.

Beyond mere plot structure, the trees of White's novels also serve to highlight the deeper literary elements of character development, motif, and theme. The portrayal of Sordyr, the most important example, exhibits this connection to the trees of the Thickety itself. Discovering her grimoire amidst the trees of the Thickety in the first book of the series, Kara is confronted by Sordyr for the first time:

The figure of a man stood at the edge of the darkness. A pumpkin-orange, hooded cloak draped around his body and flowed through the trees like mist. He was far taller than a man should be, at least seven feet. Shadows obscured his face, and for this, Kara was grateful. She knew that if she looked into his eyes, a part of her would be lost forever.

His hand reached out to her, clearly revealed in the glow of webs above them. Branches, shifting and curling like fingers, but branches nonetheless.

. . . With a single branched hand, Sordyr reached into his chest, pushing through the barklike skin. Kara heard digging sounds, and a moment later he produced a large, black seed, covered with dirt.

He held out the seed to her. (White, *A Path Begins* 128-129)

The passage, characterizing Sordyr's relationship to the Thickety by his "branched hand" and "barklike skin" (129), also illustrates Kara's demeanor, as strong-willed, stubborn, and crafty, because she does not accept the seed he offers, and instead, makes her way out of the Thickety and back to De'Noran.

In the next book, Sordyr is described as "flowing through the trees like mist" (White, *The Whispering Trees* 38), and Mary Kettle exclaims to Kara that "[t]he Forest Demon must remain rooted to the earth at all times—he cannot cross stone" (39-40). In this scene, Sordyr beckons to Kara, "Just one step. That's all it takes. . . . I have such things to teach you. You think you know magic. You think you've learned the extent of your power" (41). Again, Sordyr will offer a seed that Kara refuses, he'll call her *wexari* for the first time (43), and instruct his "branchwolves" to bring Kara to him (45-54). Kara, Taff, and Mary will continue to evade Sordyr as they navigate the Thickety and Kara learns the ways of *wexari*. At the climactic end of the book, Kara will face Sordyr again, and through the new knowledge she's gained on her quest and with the teamwork provided by her friends, she will defeat him by embedding a "bone shard" into his neck (487).

From the shard's entry point a crimson glow was spreading across
Sordyr's body, changing the bark into something new.

Skin. Human skin.

. . . Sordyr thrust his branch hands forward, too quick for Kara to
react, and she braced herself for the sharp rush of pain as the branches
sliced through her body.

Before that could happen, however, Mary slipped between them, shielding Kara's body with her own. (489)

In the aftermath, Mary is bleeding and wounded; the children surrounding her aren't sure what to do, but a man slips toward them to help:

'Let me,' said a man's voice, gently removing Kara's hand from Mary's wound. There was nothing remarkable about his appearance: brown hair, green eyes, hooked nose. He looked to be around her father's age, maybe a little older.

And then Kara saw the orange cloak—far too large now—wrapped around his body.

'No!' she shouted. 'You're him! Sordyr!'

'Not anymore,' he said. "Let me see if I can just fix this one last thing before my powers vanish completely.' He opened his fingers and a few grains of black soil vanished into Mary's wounds.

. . . 'She'll need rest,' he said, 'and certain medicines from the Thickety. But she will live.' (489-490).

In an ironic twist, Sordyr is exposed as the walking and breathing part of the Thickety, "from the tangled mass of wiry branches" on his head (479), to the roots of his feet that "pull away" and are "instantly replaced by reinforcements" every time "his foot touches the ground" (340). He both kills Mary *and* revives her. This paradox within Sordyr himself, demonstrated by his own behavior in the final battle with Kara, accentuates the ambiguity and dark mystery of the Thickety, his counterpart, as well.

While readers pause to understand the interrelationship of Sordyr and the Thickety, Rygoth rises from the ground and reveals that she “made” Sordyr “into a monster” of the forest because he had used his roots to trap her beneath the ground (White, *The Whispering Trees* 492). She explains that she kept using her spider’s venom “to keep him doing exactly what” she wanted (493). Kara, feeling duped, responds to Rygoth’s words, “This wasn’t about freeing Sordyr from you. . . . It never was. It was about freeing you from him. You fooled me . . .” (493). As the novel ends, the new evil of Rygoth permeates Kara’s world, and she’s left contemplating the purpose of the Thickety and wondering if perhaps reality may be different from what she first thought. Using the Thickety and its magic to demonstrate the reversal and permutation of ideas that exists in the real world of today, White encourages his tween readers, through the eyes of Kara, to think about possibilities. The real world, like the Thickety, is convoluted. Grounded in what’s real, it demonstrates a confluence of both good and evil, an ambiguity that exceeds understanding and evokes raw power present in the natural world and exemplified best by trees.

With an understanding of their role within the novels, it becomes easy to place the trees of *The Thickety* series into the greater taxonomy that Mendlesohn has created for fantasy fiction. Mendlesohn writes about four categories of fantasy which she claims should be taken as “observations” more than mandates and insists that “they are powerful only to the degree that they remain arguable” (Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* 13). Her taxonomy, she says, “needs to be understood in the modern context” (12), and with the knowledge that it is not her “intention here to argue that there is only one possible taxonomic understanding of the [fantasy] genre” (12). With that said, she explains that:

If the taxonomy I suggest is to succeed as a critical tool kit, it must work across the more commercial definitions of fantasy, as well as the categories of children's and adults' fantasy, dark fantasy, and light and comic fantasy. It must help to explain some of the more anomalous texts: those that find their genre coat of the wrong cut or color, rough to the touch or tight around the sleeves. (12)

Mendlesohn's categories—the portal-quest, the immersive, the intrusive, and the liminal—are “determined by the means by which the fantastic enters the narrated world” (12). She posits that:

In the portal-quest we are invited through into the fantastic; in the intrusion fantasy, the fantastic enters the fictional world; in the liminal fantasy, the magic hovers in the corner of our eye; while in the immersive fantasy we are allowed no escape. (12)

The novels of *The Thickety* are at their core an immersive fantasy described by Mendlesohn, but there are brief detours within the series toward the portal-quest type of fantasies, especially in the passages that depict the specific features and omnipresent nature of the Thickety itself.

Knowing that the world of the Thickety is an immersive fantasy, helps situate the portrayal of its trees within a more defined lens to use for analysis. According to Mendlesohn:

The immersive fantasy is a fantasy set in a world built so that it functions on all levels as a complete world. In order to do this, the world must act as if it is impervious to external influence; this immunity is most essential in

its relationship with the reader. . . . The immersive fantasy is both the mirror of mimetic literature and its inner soul. (Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* 67)

White, through the Thickety and the surrounding environment, has created a “complete world” that is “impervious to external influence” in the way that Mendlesohn describes. It makes sense, then, that the Thickety’s ambivalent nature and congruence of dark and light “mirror” the reality that tweens find in the contemporary world. It also becomes clear that the trees of the Thickety function as a compass or gateway to discover more about the “inner soul” of the characters, which leads to a catharsis of sorts when investigating the themes, and thereby affects readers as they sift through reflections of the darkness of the real world in order to identify its light.

Mendlesohn explains that in the immersive fantasies she discusses, “the characters with whom we ride are antagonists within their world. It allows them to question it while staying within the shell of immersion” (Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* 73). In *The Thickety* novels, Kara is just such a character—ostracized by De’Noran even before she discovers her magical abilities, she saves the people of the Fold with her magic despite their aversion to her talents, and she seeks shelter from them in the wild Thickety which fights her and desires her at the same time. Becoming *wexari*, and part of the animalistic nature of the Thickety allows her to live in that paradoxical moment where she is antagonist to the elements, but protagonist for the greater cause within the overall story, that of getting to the bottom of the Thickety’s relationship with the outer world of Sentium.

There are glimpses, too, of the portal-quest within White's novels, but only as they relate to the Thickety's juxtaposition with the human villages and the overall construct of Sentium. Mendlesohn explains the portal-quest fantasy: "In both portal and quest fantasies, a character leaves her familiar surroundings and passes through a portal into an unknown place. Although portal fantasies do not *have* to be quest fantasies the overwhelming majority are . . ." (Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* 23). Mendlesohn discusses Tolkien's works and suggests that "Frodo moves from a small, safe, and understood world into the wild, unfamiliar world of Middle-Earth" (24), and although some of Tolkien's work can be understood as an immersive fantasy, moving "from the Shire into the big wide world" constitutes a portal fantasy (24), as described by Mendlesohn. In White's work, the portal happens when Kara, in the last pages of the first book and the initial pages of the second book, emerges through the branches of the Thickety and is immersed within its structure and must discover its intricacies in order for her and Taff to survive. After Mary helps them learn their way and they become part of the village of Kala Malta, however, the story continues as an immersive fantasy.

One reason the portal-quest only captures a portion of *The Thickety* books is because of the idea Mendlesohn proposes that the "portal fantasy is one of companion-audience, tied to the protagonist and dependent upon the protagonist for explanation and decoding" (Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* 23). The "reader position" of the immersive fantasy, however, may be "dependent on the protagonist's absorption of sight and sounds" (23), but "is not required to accept his or her narrative" (23). This is the case with *The Thickety* series, because Kara, who seems to be the predominant protagonist, is understood from the beginning as an unreliable narrator: her obsession with the original

grimoire, her desire to change her outcast position within the town, and her code of ethics which has her protecting her brother at all costs hampers her ability to maneuver the Thickety in the “entry, transition, and exploration” experience that Mendlesohn characterizes of the portal-quest (23). Although she is unreliable, Kara is not a naïve narrator, which also helps to locate the series as an immersive fantasy over the portal-quest type.

Through all of this, the real trees of the Thickety remain tied to the immersive quality of the fantasy—bound by their functional existence in the natural world, to suppress into submission the populace of the novel. In stark contrast, the portal fantasy uses what Mendlesohn calls “the reverie” (Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* 51), which in many works, such as those of Terry Brooks that she mentions, “reinforces the sense that we are tied companions” (51). The reverie undermines the immersive fantasy; there is no reverie in *The Thickety* books. In the series, White shows the reader the Thickety as it is, through the understanding of those who have lived within its borders: the reader does not see it as a surreal place of reverence that “greets” the narrator “for the first time” (54).

The trees of White’s series also provide a framework for the crucial ideas of and about adolescence that come to the surface in his novels. Much like Hollindale, who argues the import of “the adolescent novel of ideas” (85), or McCulloch, who posits that “children are a source of constant concern” (28), White demonstrates through his trees the significance of preadolescent discovery that becomes a venue for the adult understanding of the intermingling of darkness and light within the contemporary world.

Hollindale writes about something he terms “the adolescent novel of ideas” (85), and says that these books represent those stories that “can often be read with pleasure by the age group I call *preadult*” (85). He sarcastically quotes Alice Thomas Ellis when he suggests that “they can certainly be ‘read with real pleasure by grown-ups’ ” (85-86). Hollindale continues, borrowing a phrase from Betsy Hearne’s critique of Virginia Hamilton, by explaining that his “ ‘adolescent novel of ideas’ embraces those books which ‘grow the mind a size larger’ ” (86). Certainly, White’s *The Thickety* series belongs to Hollindale’s category. Though the readers see good attributes in his character, Kara, there are also some bad qualities exhibited in several decisions she makes, and that causes readers to stop and ponder. In addition, the trees of the Thickety itself baffle readers with their ambiguous nature, and the power that unfolds in the Thickety via Sordyr’s reign causes readers to question events of the novel. That questioning demonstrates, in Hollindale’s words, the outlet provided by the category he names. He claims that “a highly intelligent and demanding literature has emerged which speaks with particular directness to the young adult mind—the mind which is freshly mature and intellectually confident, mentally supple and relatively free of ideological harness” (86). In White’s novels, perfect for the “young adult mind” described by Hollidale, some characters die and others do bad things; White does not shy from the difficult, and says as much on his website when he answers the following two questions:

[1] What genre is it?

It’s mostly fantasy, since it takes place in a make-believe world. However, a lot of scary things happen as well, so I think you could also call it a

horror novel. Or you could just combine the two and say *The Thickety* is dark fantasy.

[2] What age is your book for?

That's a hard question. I'd like to think that anyone would enjoy my book, child or adult! . . . There really isn't an age that's too *old* to read *The Thickety*. But is there an age that's too young? Sort of. An advanced 8-year-old reader could probably *read* the book, but that doesn't mean he or she *should*. This isn't the type of kid's book where everything ends up okay at the end. Terrible things happen. Characters die in some pretty awful ways. If that sort of thing doesn't bother you and *your parents are okay with it*, I hereby give you permission to read my book. (White, J. A. *White Books*)

Although White's not apologizing for difficult passages that appear in his novels, he is clarifying his readership to circumvent any trouble he may receive from parent groups about the dark nature of his works. This dark ambiance fits directly with Hollindale's argument about ideas and grounds it in the contemporary tween novel forum. That White does not write only of the happy and light in the world, but causes his young readers to contemplate their place and function in reality, and that his characters do not subscribe to an easy path and are met at every juncture with choices and decisions that they juggle and sometime get right, says much about his notion of childhood and what he perceives to be the ability of his young readers. White, like Hollindale, advocates a tween reader who is alert, intellectual, and not hampered by an excess of subconscious paradigms—a

readership who takes events at face value, especially because White portrays the grim reality of the world through his dark trees of the Thickety.

In her work, McCulloch proposes that “[c]hildren are associated with the nation in terms of how the future is regarded, as they will always be tomorrow’s citizens . . .” (28). It is this thought that drives her critique of the “social and cultural contexts” of childhood (3-28), and prompts her to investigate the importance of the changing child culture on popular literature. One idea she explains, which stems from the 1970s appreciation for romanticism, is that childhood includes the “importance of freedom for the individuals to develop their full potential and become healthy adults” (24). This concept spurred several organizations to advocate for different rights of the child and continues to affect childhood concerns in contemporary times when addressing the notion of “the family” as it extends to the image of childhood (25). These views, in a way, connect with the interpretation of White and Hollidale, whose focus specifically pertains to tweens and their ability to grapple with important ideas. That tweens must be left to cogitate and deliberate difficult precepts in preadolescent texts, or middle grade novels, is part of their “freedom” to “develop their full potential” on the way to becoming the “healthy adults” McCulloch mentions. The trees of White’s *The Thickety*, provide just enough dark material over which the preadolescent mind can ponder and reflect. The trees, a metaphor for the real and natural powers that exist in the world, illustrate through symbol the difficult path that Kara must navigate before she comes into her own—this path of branches and brambles, resembles the road that contemporary tweens face before becoming adults.

Trees comprise the foreground, the background, and essential nuances of characterization and theme throughout *The Thickety* series; furthermore, White conveys trees within the structures of fantasy taxonomy to communicate ideas about life that are important to the teenage novel in general and, therefore, to the tween fantasy novel in particular. The darkness of the trees in the series insinuates the ambiguous nature of reality, if not the very real presence of evil that exists not only in nature, but in the world as a whole. For tweens, and adults for that matter, it is essential to understand the darkness of life—only then can there be greater appreciation for the good, and a sincere willingness to walk in the light.

J. K. Rowling's Child Snape and the Trees of Belonging

When the last of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books, *The Deathly Hallows*, appeared on newsstands, bookshelves, and digital reading devices in 2007, the prevailing controversy and conjecture among fans and media was over Severus Snape, Harry Potter's Potions instructor turned Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher turned headmaster. Snape, often portrayed as the antagonist to Harry's protagonist in the books, developed into a paradoxical figure over time—he ridicules Harry and his friends and openly dislikes Harry's father, yet he seems a loyal member of the Order of the Phoenix, the group working against the evil Lord Voldemort, and is unwaveringly supported by Harry's favorite mentor, Albus Dumbledore, the revered first Hogwarts headmaster of the series.

Snape's background and motivations perplexed and intrigued readers because they could not confirm him as a villain or hero: Did he really consent to spy on Voldemort for Dumbledore, or did he support Voldemort and his clan of Death Eaters?

Why would he join with a band professing to protect Harry, when he shows frustration for most things Harry does? Rowling perpetuates this guessing game until the very end of the series, when Snape meets his demise at the hand of Voldemort, in a scene many fans deem anticlimactic, because it doesn't immediately address their questions. Instead, Rowling has readers figure out the answers along with Harry through the next passages of the novel. Harry, in hiding, witnesses Snape's death (Rowling, *The Deathly Hallows* 656-657), approaches the "dying man" although "[h]e did not know why he was doing it" (657), and collects the "[s]ilvery blue" memories offered by "the man he hated" who "seized the front of his robes and pulled him close" (657). Harry will begin to understand the reasons for Snape's enigmatic behavior only after he dives into the memories using the Pensieve (663), a memory exploring device, in the headmaster's office. Harry takes Snape's memories there once he's gathered them (662).

Although not in first person, the majority of the Potter series is written through the lens of Harry; therefore, it is fitting for readers to recover from the shock of Snape's death, sort out the mysterious details of his life, and brace for what's ahead along with Harry, as he views Snape's memories through the Pensieve (Rowling, *The Deathly Hallows* 663-690). In order for both Harry and readers to understand and appreciate Snape's sacrifice, and to eliminate residual confusion and resentment, Rowling garners sympathy and support by linking Snape to the natural world. Enter the tree—the evidence of Snape's connection to humanity, and thereby confirmation of his solidarity with Harry's cause.

As Harry observes Snape's memories, he becomes part and parcel of the scenes unfolding there. The memories are shown to Harry in chronological order of Snape's life

through short snippets and flashes; literally, Snape's life is flashing before Harry's eyes. The most important memory to secure reader affirmation for Snape and reconcile the mean teacher he was with the adult willing to sacrifice now, is the second snippet of time revealed to Harry. This flashback passage takes place under the protection of trees in a secluded bower. An integral part of the overall story, the trees of this short scene illuminate Snape's connection to humanity by emphasizing his need to belong.

The important passage, hardly four pages long, begins by describing the trees that will highlight the very human interests of the child Snape, which readers will then transfer to the adult.

The scene dissolved, and before Harry knew it, re-formed around him. He was now in a small thicket of trees. He could see a sunlit river glittering through their trunks. The shadows cast by the trees made a basin of cool green shade. Two children sat facing each other, cross-legged on the ground. Snape had removed his coat now . . .

‘ . . . and the Ministry can punish you if you do magic outside school, . . . ’

‘But I *have* done magic outside school!’

‘We’re all right. We haven’t got wands yet. They let you off when you’re a kid and you can’t help it. But once you’re eleven,’ he nodded importantly, ‘and they start training you, then you’ve got to go careful.’

There was a little silence. Lily had picked up a fallen twig and twirled it in the air, and Harry knew that she was imagining sparks trailing from it. (Rowling, *The Deathly Hallows* 665-666)

The “thicket of trees” described by Rowling provides the perfect image of refuge, privacy, seclusion, and security for two child confidantes to whisper secrets and longings while exploring a new world of magic together. The “shadows” and the “cool green shade” convey an atmosphere of natural protection from outside cares and a palpable defense against earthly troubles. For child Snape and Lily Evans Potter, Harry’s mother, the trees constitute shelter and form a sanctuary to forget differences and share commonalities. Put simply, the trees are a place of belonging.

Consequently, this passage unveils Snape’s childhood desire to belong, by showing his zeal at being considered knowledgeable in all things magic as he imparts information to his new friend Lily, to whom the magic world is as yet unfamiliar. Lily’s “imagining” of “sparks trailing” from a wand is directly instigated by Snape “importantly” explaining such things. The trees become an unequaled cover for shared experience—a sentiment Snape has not had before these stolen moments with Lily. The next lines of the story further demonstrate the idea of belonging:

Then she dropped the twig, leaned in toward the boy, and said, ‘It *is* real, isn’t it? It’s not a joke? Petunia says you’re lying to me. . . . It *is* real, isn’t it?’

‘It’s real for us,’ said Snape. ‘Not for her. But we’ll get the letter, you and me.’

‘Really?’ whispered Lily.

‘Definitely,’ said Snape, and even with his poorly cut hair and his odd clothes, he struck an oddly impressive figure sprawled in front of her, brimful of confidence in his destiny. (Rowling, *The Deathly Hallows* 666)

The child Snape claims that magic and an education at Hogwarts are “real” and includes himself and Lily in an “us” statement exemplifying the significance of their conversation under the trees. Snape suggests that he and Lily exist within a greater community of magic. Lily and her sister Petunia, however, come from what the Potter books call a Muggle family. Although some wizards and witches are Muggle-born, Muggles are generally those people who do not know about or have contact with the magic world; essentially then, a Muggle, such as Lily’s sister, Petunia, is a person who has no magic. Snape maintains a sense of companionship with Lily nonetheless, and the impression of fellowship portrayed by his lines is evident. Snape’s answer of “Definitely” in his dialogue with Lily, and his “impressive figure” and “confidence in his destiny” describe a Snape different than what readers have come to know in earlier books. The young Snape exudes a hopefulness and yearning for intimacy that’s missing in the adult character. This prompts readers to wonder what transpired to create a Snape devoid of these feelings. So eager to belong when a child, Snape does not show interest in such companionship as a man. Rowling uses this concept, and the refuge among the trees, to evoke sympathy from the readers.

A feeling of belonging often elicits attitudes of caring, and the Snape in this passage, much to the surprise of Rowling’s readers, demonstrates a type of kindness. After he explains how they’ll receive their invitations to school, Lily, unsure her Muggle heritage will be welcome at Hogwarts, confesses her insecurity to Snape. He explains:

‘But you’re Muggle-born, so someone from the school will have to come and explain to your parents.’

‘Does it make a difference, being Muggle-born?’

Snape hesitated. His black eyes, eager in the greenish gloom,
moved over the pale face, the dark red hair.

‘No,’ he said. ‘It doesn’t make any difference.’

‘Good,’ said Lily, relaxing: It was clear that she had been
worrying.

‘You’ve got loads of magic,’ said Snape. ‘I saw that. All the time I
was watching you . . .’

His voice trailed away; she was not listening, but had stretched out
on the leafy ground and was looking up at the canopy of leaves overhead.

He watched her . . . (Rowling, *The Deathly Hallows* 666-667)

The fact that Snape “hesitated” before answering promotes the idea that he was thinking how best to frame his words, or perhaps re-evaluating his own prejudices about the Muggle-born. Either way, aware of the wizard world, and knowing that some in that world care only for full-blood ancestry, he spares Lily’s feelings and plies her with a compliment regarding her own magic skills. “It doesn’t make any difference,” he insists, appeasing his friend and further revealing to readers his desire for comradeship and fellowship.

Lily is a true friend in return: “stretched out on the leafy ground” and assessing her companion, she talks and listens. She knows Snape has trouble at home, and though he appears reluctant to discuss it, all matters feel safe to express under “the canopy of leaves” and the protection of the trees.

‘How are things at your house?’ Lily asked.

A little crease appeared between his eyes.

. . . '[T]hey're arguing,' said Snape. He picked up a fistful of leaves and began tearing them apart, apparently unaware of what he was doing. 'But it won't be that long and I'll be gone.'

'Doesn't your dad like magic?'

'He doesn't like anything much,' said Snape.

'Severus?'

A little smile twisted Snape's mouth when she said his name.

'Yeah?' . . . He turned red again and shredded more leaves.

(Rowling, *The Deathly Hallows* 667)

What transpires between Snape and Lily under the trees indicates a deeper and more meaningful relationship than just a fleeting infatuation. Although the “little smile” and the “red again” face might demonstrate a boyhood crush, Snape’s true motivation and fondness for Lily stems from a desire for belonging. Since he’s the only child of an “arguing” set of parents, a would-be wizard in a Muggle world, and a lonely boy with a fairly empty childhood, Snape’s isolation is clear.

The wish to belong—especially to a girl such as Lily Evans, who has “loads of magic” and a vibrant, infectious personality—empowers Snape’s virtues, but also facilitates his vices. Harry, immersed in the memory he witnesses through the Pensieve, sees Snape’s jealousy and greed firsthand, when the privacy of the bower and the intimacy of the moment is invaded by Lily’s sister, Petunia.

Then a small rustling nose behind Harry made him turn: Petunia hiding behind a tree, had lost her footing.

‘Tuney!’ said Lilly, surprise and welcome in her voice, but Snape had jumped to his feet.

. . . ‘What d’you want?’

Petunia was breathless, alarmed at being caught. Harry could see her struggling for something hurtful to say.

. . . There was a crack: A branch over Petunia’s head had fallen.

Lily screamed: The branch caught Petunia on the shoulder, and she staggered backward and burst into tears. (Rowling, *The Deathly Hallows* 667-668)

Because Snape wishes so strongly to be alone with Lily, a friend with whom he feels safe and connected, his magic gets the best of him and causes the “branch over Petunia’s head” to “crack” and fall. Snape, not having felt such an affinity with others before, will do anything to prolong the sense of fellowship he feels with Lily. The child Snape snatches greedily at these experiences in the shelter amidst the trees, and jealously clings to every moment spent talking and sharing together.

As Harry watches the final portion of the memory unfold, he recognizes Snape’s vices, but sees, for perhaps the first time, the motivation behind them.

Lily rounded on Snape.

‘Did you make that happen?’

‘No.’ He looked both defiant and scared.

‘You did!’ She was backing away from him. ‘You did! You hurt her!’

‘No—no I didn’t!’

But the lie did not convince Lily: After one last burning look,
she ran from the little thicket, off after her sister, and Snape looked
miserable and confused. . . . (Rowling, *The Deathly Hallows* 668)

To be human is to exhibit the good with the bad, the virtues with the vices. Snape, the “defiant and scared” child lies to his friend out of expediency, fear, and self-defense, but he feels “miserable and confused” when she runs from “the little thicket” and leaves him isolated and alone once again. The need to belong is so strong it motivates him to behave badly; whether the magic he used was subconscious or not, its visceral, palpable energy besieges Snape and prompts him to strike out at Petunia in order to leave him more time in confidence with Lily.

Watching Snape’s boyhood misery, and seeing his best behavior coupled with his worst actions, all for the opportunity to maintain a sense of belonging, conveys quite a different perspective of Snape than Harry originally thought. Lily will continue to appear in Snape’s memories that come next, and Harry will follow their relationship as he concentrates on the rest of the flashbacks; however, the memory of the scene in the thicket is specifically important because Harry recognizes Snape’s desire to connect with Lily as similar to his own longing for closeness with his mother and all the associations she represents. Understanding that the man Snape is not too different from Harry himself, allows Harry to accept what’s past and enables him to view Snape’s previous actions in a less disagreeable light. Watching the child Snape with Lily in the sheltered and protected space among the trees reminds Harry that the sense of belonging is a powerful human need, sometimes overwhelming, for both himself and Snape.

In the aftermath of Snape's death at the hands of Voldemort, the perception of child Snape's need to belong uncovers those feelings in the adult Snape as well, and reinforces his connections to humanity, helping Harry, and thereby readers, to perceive that Snape's actions, spying on Voldemort and carrying out Dumbledore's plans, were difficult and most likely disagreeable for him. The tree memory elicits sympathy and provides opportunity, not only for Harry to understand Snape, but for readers to embrace his human qualities, linked to his defense and protection of Harry, Lily's son, and validated by his experience among the trees of belonging.

IV. CONCLUSION

In the course of this study, research from both fantasy critics and children's literature scholars strengthen the argument that trees provide important connections in tween fantasy, especially demonstrated in the novels of the Harry Potter series and in the subsequent series books of young adult fantasy in the new millennium. Trees, as archetypes, have a rich and varied history of representing both the spiritual world and the natural environment. That authors use trees as metaphors to convey their themes is not surprising; furthermore, that tween authors use the tree as an icon to reinforce connections is especially believable because the roots and branches of trees easily transfer this message through their visible form.

The chapter on spiritual connections provided by trees explains the sacred quality trees bring to a work and explores ways that trees engender reflection and deliberation on difficult subjects encompassing all possibilities of the human psyche. This chapter also emphasizes the cyclical nature of trees, and explains their embodiment in the essence of seasons, history, legend, and relationships. Trees symbolize wisdom, knowledge, and ritual, through rites of passage and coming of age stories. The children's literature commentary in this section derives from specific scholars such as Perry Nodelman, Caroline Hunt, Karen Coats, and Eve Bearne. Sharon Black and Drew Chapell provide Harry Potter scholarship, and the works of other critics such as Seth Lerer, Jack Zipes, C. W. Sullivan, Bruno Bettelheim, and Joseph Campbell are used in periphery to establish background on theory and information regarding the space where children's literature, fantasy, legend, myth, hero stories and fairy tales meet.

In the chapter about the connections that trees make to the natural and the real, the words of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, regarding the constructions of fantasy inspired by real nature and authentic myths, connects to the studies of Kathryn Hume, Brian Attebery, and Marek Oziewicz, as they investigate fantasy versus mimesis, fuzzy set theory, and mythopoeic fantasy. Ursula Le Guin interprets the archetypes of Carl Jung in her own words, and along with David Gooderham, Liam Campbell, and Cynthia Cohen, she sheds light on both human nature and natural elements present in fantasy stories. Looking at mythology through the eyes of Edith Hamilton and Stephen Long helps solidify the lore of Greek and Norse gods, while Peter Hollindale and Fiona McCulloch explain approaches of exploring meaning in young adult novels and children's texts. At the edge of these investigations about the link between trees and the natural world, Farah Mendlesohn's classification of four types of fantasy constructions and Richard West's contemporary discussion of Tolkien contribute to an awareness of the various kinds of fantasy creations designed in the past, the present, and presumably, the future.

While the majority of this thesis explores various trees in tween fantasy one at a time, the overall conglomeration of the works, theories, arguments, and research exemplifies and supports the paradoxical implication alluded to in the introduction—the concept that trees are important because in their one embodiment, they represent both the spiritual and the natural at the same time. This phenomenon is fairly singular to trees and contributes to the reason that authors use trees as an avenue to explore the idea of connections. This thesis accentuates those connections and highlights the significance of trees as symbols in tween fantasy.

Trees particularly help tween authors convey messages to their audience about the best ways to connect with individuals, society, and the world beyond, whether through sacred acts or real relationships. Fantasy books provide specific appeal in the way they portray trees as part of a natural environment that can be idyllic, pastoral, breathtaking, ethereal, magical, astonishing, secretive, mysterious, melancholy, oppressive, or malevolent. Trees are all those things—as an emblem, they provide understanding, and emotional and intellectual access, for youth and teenagers who are navigating life, seeking their route in the world, and discovering their own way. Tweens are looking to comprehend a variety of connections and recognizing these connections in the icon of the familiar tree eases the trials of adolescence.

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