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**Heroes in Patrick McHale's *Over the Garden Wall*:
A Reading of the Modern Epic**

A Thesis Presented

by

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Abstract of the Thesis

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The presented Thesis asserts Patrick McHale's *Over the Garden Wall* as a Modern Epic. It identifies the piece as Dantesque in its structure of a journey through an underworld, while noting that Dante is not the hero of his own epic. The argument is made that while Dante is too inactive in determining his fate to be given the title of epic Hero, McHale's protagonists Wirt and Greg follow the structure of epic heroes, of the ancient tradition. The purpose of two protagonist on the same personal journey that is a spiritual odyssey, is maintained as a catalyst that allows for the role of epic hero to be fulfilled.

The second section of this text compares the condition of those residing within the Unknown to those who face cyclical punishment within Dante's *Inferno* and identifies the significance of specific sinners encountered by the heroes. One of these being Beatrice, who is argued to serve as both guide and a shattered morality seeking to be repaired.

Thirdly there is a large focus on the role of burden in *Over the Garden* as it is the fear of burden which acts as a major threatening force to Wirt's ability to reach his epic climax and assume his role of epic hero. Greg's role as a catalyst for Wirt's transformation is also discussed as Wirt is compared to the likes of Aeneas and Odysseus. The largest part of this comparison is Wirt's similar active pursuit of his destiny which contrasts greatly to Dante's consistent role as the delivered and not the deliverer. These ideas are expanded upon within the fourth section which also explores the key element of descent into the underworld, in ancient epics and their culmination in epiphany.

The penultimate discussion leads with an argument for the Beast mirroring Satan as the figure has appeared in literature of antiquity. Additionally this section describes Wirt's epic climax further placing him line with the likes of Odysseus and removing him from the likes of Dante the traveler. As this text concludes Wirt is acknowledged as self-delivered and deliverer.

Dedicated To

Mrs. and Dr. Reverend Gene Bishop

To Big Mama

To Dorothea Demar Wilson and Joshua Eugene Wilson

And to all seventeen of my monstrous, little babies

I Love Y'all



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Frontispiece provided by commission: Artist, Cindy Z Khan

~I: Welcome to the Inferno Kids~

Two souls wander lost in the dimness of a strange and horrid wood. A monster stalks them, wishing for their souls to be forever misplaced. The weak of will, will succumb to the forest, eternally trapped between bitter life and a crueler mold of death: *Over the Garden Wall* is Dante's *Inferno* for children. It is a program that has been mistakenly identified as "a not so grim fairy tale for adults" (Lowry 1), one that relies too heavily on subtitles and thusly isolates children (Sepaniak 1). Regardless of the misconceptions and widespread belief that complexity and maturity are beyond a child's grasp, this remodeled walk through the *Inferno* is intended to entertain its target audience and functions much as children's media does. Children's animations today serve to replace the oral tradition of storytelling, and in some cases present us with new epics. Like Dante's, work *Over the Garden Wall* follows the basics of traditional epic, and it also borrows from the *Inferno* what have been established as elements of a *spiritual odyssey*.¹ *Over the Garden Wall* is an epic, which follows these structures while correcting a major issue in Dante's epic: Dante's *Inferno* is an epic without an epic hero. His fate is ruled over much more by the presence of his guides than heroes such as Odysseus and Aeneas Dante is in need of constant guidance and seems incapable of making any decisions on his own. This problem is corrected in *Over the Garden Wall* as the presence of a second soul lost along the same path, allows Wirt to become a true epic hero. Burden and responsibility are heavily tossed upon Wirt's shoulders as the older child, and it is the acceptance of burden that allows Wirt to step into the

¹ My Italics. Spiritual Odyssey refers to a long journey or wandering that is not only physical, but is a wandering of the mind and spirit.

role of deliverer as opposed to the role of the delivered. His revelations and active participation in his destiny ultimately leads to the salvation of many souls in this work.

We are given two protagonists when this story opens, Wirt and Greg. All that we know of these half-brothers is that they are lost. They do not know where they are, or how it is they came to be there. They are only certain that the place where they currently stand is not home and that they do not belong there. The place where they stand is revealed to be the Unknown and is described as “a place that few people ever see, where long forgotten stories are revealed to those who travel through the woods” (McHale S01 1). Greg and Wirt are presented with their task immediately. They must leave the woods, they must find their way home, and they must at all costs avoid an ominous figure referred to only as, *the Beast*² Throughout their journey Wirt and Greg are tested as they meet the residents of the Unknown and learn the fates of those who become forever lost in the dark woods. This is an immediate disparity to be drawn in arguing that *Over the Garden Wall* follows the structures of an epic. We are presented with two heroes as opposed to the solitary Odysseus or the solely heroic Aeneas; there are two souls making the journey home. One might say that this distracts wholly from the idea of displaying this animation as an epic, but that is a hasty statement and overlooks the essential factors of both traditional epics and epics that seek to restructure the traditional model, such as *Inferno*.

Inferno's place as an epic is often debated and some claim the differences between it and works like Homer's writing are too vast. There is support for Dante's work as one of the greats, but not necessarily an epic poem. Conversely critics such as David Thompson and William Franke argue in support of Dante's work as an epic, one that creates a precedence for another epic tradition. Franke states:

² My Italics

Dante's *Inferno* demands to be understood as the culmination of a series of visits to the underworld in ancient epic tradition [...] The epic quest in each of these models pivots, in various ways, on a visit to the world of the dead, a *discensus ad infernas*, as a climactic episode in its center. However Dante makes this episode the general framework for the whole poem: from beginning to end, Dante's Poem represents a voyage through the world beyond the grave. In this respect, Dante's *Inferno*, and indeed the whole *Divine Comedy*, is conceived primarily as an expansion of the ancient epic motif of the *katabasis* or "going down" of the protagonist to the underworld for a revelation of his destiny from beyond the threshold of death. (252)

Franke establishes Dante's *Inferno* as a work of the ancient epic tradition that enhances and expands upon a major element of the ancient framework. It takes a common reoccurrence from across these tales and uses it at the forefront of its story. Similarly, *Over the Garden Wall* borrows elements of the spiritual odyssey from Dante's framework whilst still retaining aspects of the ancient epics. This is accomplished through the journey undertaken by our two protagonists and with Wirt's ability to become a hero of ancient epic tradition. Additionally, the journey we see the brothers beset upon invokes more of the inspirations for Dante's work in the presence of guides that are more out of the way than those guides in *Inferno*. The overbearing presence of Dante's guides is noted in "The Epic character of the Divina Commedia and the Function of Dante's Three Guides as T.K Seung expresses, "The central function of Virgil and Beatrice as Dante's guides and teachers is to administer grace to his helpless and powerless will and restore its health and freedom" (Seung 357). This is not the case in the ancient epics such as Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus has a guide in the form of Athena. Athena remains minimalist in her

involvement often disguising herself rather than appearing before the hero in a divine form. And although she does have a hand in saving Odysseus from a death at sea, as Homer tells us “Now Athene daughter of Zeus, planned what was to follow”, (Lattimore, Homer 98 Line 382) Athena is not responsible for Odysseus’s ultimate victory and does not always intervene. Odysseus does not rely on her intervention either, but relies on his own might and cunning.

Dante as a hero is powerless and without the ability to bring himself grace his judgement and salvation are extremely dependent upon the views of Beatrice and Virgil, both of whom must deem him successful in his endeavors and approve of the directions he takes in journey both on the physical paths which he approaches as well as the path of his soul and morality. McHale’s epic does not suffer this flaw. In fact it seems to stand in opposition to this sort of hero without the power of choice. Wirt and Greg are both consistently faced with the issue of choice and are only hindered by moments of indecisiveness. This is especially the case where Wirt is concerned; the forlorn teenager is at first very inactive in his salvation, and in this way he mimics the image of Dante that Seung describes as “just too powerless and too helpless a creature to assume a heroic role” (352). What distinguishes Wirt from this incapable semi-hero is successfully taking an active role in correcting his dejected train of thought and finding himself back on the proper path in his life. This is only made possible because of Greg’s role as a second protagonist, one who is innocent and acts as a major responsibility for his brother.

Neither, Greg or Wirt are lost in the nine circles, but the location of their story is certainly reminiscent of the Hell that Dante builds in his epic. Wirt and Greg awaken on the outskirts of the Woods, just outside of the Unknown. There is no way back to wherever it is they came from, they can only move forward, deeper into the woods before they can escape it. We can compare this opening set up to Dante’s as it is written, “Midway in the journey of our life / I came to

myself in a dark wood, / for the straight way was lost” (Hollander, Dante I line 1-3). Just as Dante is lost in a dark and unfamiliar wood, so too are the two young boys. It could be argued that the setting of an old and dark wooded area for a children’s story is classically archaic and isn’t necessarily comparable to Dante’s setting as Book I opens. Many fairy tales take place in the woods; the issue of avoiding the big bad wolf and the threat of being gobbled up by a witch in the woods is a near customary fairy tale setting. *Hansel and Gretel*; and *Little Red Riding Hood* are not allegories for the journey of a soul, but there is something that makes the dark woods of *Over the Garden Wall* feel eerily familiar to the strange place where Dante awakens early on. And that major detail is the nature of the warnings which the protagonists of each story are given before embarking on their quests.

In Dante’s work the gate which leads to the inferno delivers a message of woe and misery, a stark and bleak omen for all those who chose to pass into hell and all those who are destined to remain there: “THROUGH ME THE WAY INTO THE CITY OF WOE, / THROUGH ME THE WAY TO EVERLASTING PAIN, / THROUGH ME THE WAY AMONG THE LOST”³ (Hollander, Dante III line 1-3). Similarly, Wirt and Greg are told of the terror of the Unknown before they begin their long walk in search of home. They are offered counsel by a man who slaves away working in the woods of the Unknown, this man known only as the Woodsman tells the brothers, “Beware the unknown, fear the Beast and leave these woods... if you can. It is your burden to bear” (McHale S01 1). The Woodsman delivers this warning as he points Wirt and Greg further into the woods, making it clear that the only way to find their home is to pass through it. This places them into the path of several foul entities,

³ Text as it appears in book III

including that ominous figure which the Woodsman fears will get its clutches onto the children. And so the tone is set and the boys must make their way without succumbing to the Unknown.

Burden will come to mind again and again as Wirt is unable to accept the weight of being troubled, of being tasked with a necessary undertaking. Great burdens are expected to befall the hero of an epic--their undertaking is common place in the ancient tradition. This is evident throughout epics, such as when Aeneas is reprimanded for straying from his tremendous task: "Oblivious of your own world, your own Kingdom! / [...] What have you in mind! What hope, wasting your days in Libya? / If future history's glories do not affect you, if you will not strive / for your honor, think of Ascanius, / think of the expectations of your heir" (Fitzgerald, Virgil IV Line 364 and 369-372). Aeneas faces his transgression in his destiny, in attempting to live an indulgent life free from his burden. Similarly Wirt is guilty of ignoring his burdens for some time as well. He blames his brother repeatedly for their misfortunes, including their being lost, and claims that his younger sibling is always making a hail of mistakes. This trend is continued even as Wirt is scolded by the Woodsman: "Boy you have it backwards. You are the elder child, you are responsible for yours and your brother's actions" (McHale S01 1). Wirt receives his reprimand from a sort of guide that is not directly active in the flow of his fate, just as Aeneas is reprimanded by Mercury, who delivers a message, but forces nothing upon the epic hero. Aeneas must accept his fate for the sake of others as well, just as Wirt must accept his responsibility for Greg in order to become an epic hero. And so McHale's epic hero is not alone. He is joined by a second pilgrim exists in the form of a younger brother whom he sees a nuisance, a scapegoat, as the reason for his becoming lost and does not yet recognize him as a task or burden and an essential catalyst for his transformation into an epic hero. In this sense while Greg is also trapped within the Unknown alongside his brother he has the special distinction of playing a dual role.

He is a tool of salvation *and*⁴ an epic hero. Just like Greg Wirt's role as an epic hero in this personal journey of the soul can only be obtainable because there is a second soul on this journey. Greg's role as a catalyst and hero develops as the boys are faced with navigating numerous routes through the Unknown.

~II: Two Souls on Many Paths~

The theme of finding ones way is an obvious link between *Inferno* and *Over the Garden Wall*. The boys are repeatedly presented with the challenge of choosing a path and like Dante is guided by Virgil, Wirt and Greg are constantly offered guidance by those whom they encounter in the Unknown. Among their guides are Beatrice the Bluebird, whom is the first to greet the boys when they awaken in the Unknown just as Dante is later guided by a woman of the same name. The decision to follow or abandon Beatrice's guidance of severe importance for both Wirt and Greg. A general theme of *Over the Garden Wall* is that choice is a pertinent issue. The choices the boys make seem to be directly affected by how they react to the Unknown. Greg seems more content with himself and his situation. The Unknown does not frighten him and when Wirt questions where they are and where they are going, Greg calmly and assuredly answer, "We're in the woods, we're walking Home" (McHale S01 1). Greg captures a spirit of innocence and does not have a tendency to worry; there are times at which he overrules his older brother's decisions such as when Wirt attempts to locate the town of Pottsville-- he points them

⁴ My Italics

in one direction and Greg decides to go the opposite way. This leads to the discovery of the Bluebird Beatrice again. She is found caught in a bush of thorns, when she is freed she chooses only to speak to Greg and suggests that they “ditch” (McHale S01 2) Wirt. This is one of the earliest instances in the ten chapters of the story in which it is implied that Wirt is the child that truly is lost and that Greg is secure in his will and in his spirit. These sort of hints come up quite a few times. To start with, Greg is content with the idea of following Beatrice as his guide and Wirt is weary of her and certain that because she has the ability to speak that she should not be trusted. In what is a very terrifying scene, Greg is confronted by an enormous, ravenous, black dog. The dog snaps and growls at Greg, who remarks to the creature, “You have beautiful eyes” (McHale S01 1). There is no sign of fear or concern for his life. He makes his decisions with a clam certainty and they seem to consistently bring about good fortune.

Wirt as he is before taking up his mantel, is troubled by choice and burdened by that which he fears. He fears the Woodsman who offers to guide the boys home and thinks it is best to run away from his aid. He fears Beatrice’s guidance as well and when confronted with choice he becomes solemn, such as when he is asked if he believes that the Beast truly the roams the Unknown he replies, “I don’t know. Sometimes I feel like I’m just a boat upon a winding river twisting towards a black sea, further and further, drifting away from where I want to be, *who* I want to be” (McHale S01 1). When we break down Wirt’s feeling and put them into context we are left with someone who is lost and who does not possess a strong will. Consider what this scene is meant to tell us about Wirt. As we watch him sprawled out, with his helpless expression and we hear the uncertainty in his voice as it drifts in and out. While he relays his feelings it conveys to us that he is uncertain and does not feel as if he has the powers of choice or determination. He compares himself to a drifting boat, but not one that is sailing upon a chosen

course. He is moving away from his goals, from his desires and does not have the ability to change course or to place himself back onto the right path. This is a strange response to the question that was posed; is the Beast out in the woods? The question of belief or disbelief begets a forlorn sensation of moving away from a desired identity, a desired place in the world.

Wirt's heavy dejection makes him out to be a direct allegory to Dante in his lost state. While Greg is also lost, his presence in the Unknown may also be to serve as another form of guide, or rather an example for his older sibling. He is clearly a foil to Wirt's pessimism and indecision. Wirt's state of misery can be noted as common place in this particular type of epic (Matthews). Wirt's saving grace is the power he develops in himself to be hero for Greg. This can only be accomplished once he is free from dejection. Dejection is the tempting and easily lived upon path that leads one astray in these narratives of spirit. Melancholy is an apparent link between this work and Dante's and can also be seen as a connecting characteristic in other works that were inspired by the epic poem. Maria Fumagalli writes of the structures of Dante's work in other contemporary epics such as Walcott's *Omeros*, stating, "The structure of *Omeros* is definitely Dantesque: we can very nearly consider the book as the re-enactment of the same spiritual journey by different characters led by alternating guides [...] Characters unfold mostly through dialogue they engage in, a technique clearly reminiscent of Dante" (Fumagalli 20). Dialogue is certainly a crucial part of developing the characters of this epic, perhaps more so than in *Omeros* or in *Inferno* because this is an epic that is also visual and has only been written to be performed. How these characters interact with one another is displayed in what actions they take as well as what line they share together and because of the presence of acting certain nuances can be added into the story that we are meant to hear. An example of which is the

change in Beatrice's hostile tone towards Wirt or Wirt's confidence in his speech, like the stifling of his once dominate stuttering.

In these ways we are given the development of these characters and their relationships. This is also the case when it comes to Wirt's relationship with Greg. It is only through Wirt's words that we learn that two are half-brothers. The news is presented with hostility and loathing. It is also revealed that Wirt has a tendency to place the fault for his woes upon Greg as they speak to one another and Wirt exclaims, "Once again you ruin my life [...] You and your stupid dad" (McHale S01 9). This is a hint that suggests much to us about their home life and how they lived before coming to wake up in the Unknown. Greg seems to suffer at the hands of Wirt's wrath, a wrath that is misplaced and wrongfully projected onto the younger pilgrim. Wirt needs Greg to bear the brunt of his frustrations rather than being made to work through them.

The importance of Wirt's relationship to Greg is not at first apparent to the epic hero. One may consider that Greg is Wirt's first guide in the Unknown and is the most present influence on what paths Wirt may desire to take. It is necessary to keep in mind Greg's disobedience leads to the discovery of Beatrice and aside from his literal changing of paths Greg does not respond to the Unknown in the same ways that Wirt does. Greg's young innocence may be taken into account as a reason for his lack of fear, but regardless of whether his youth is a source of naïveté or if he is brave beyond his years, Greg is capable of escaping the Unknown unassisted due to his strong will and ability to choose. It is this aspect of the character that gives him his dual functionality. He is not just a guiding influence for Wirt, but is also a pilgrim on his own journey as well. He has the ability to leave and gains it because he seeks the power to do so. Greg makes a wish, hoping to gain the ability to lead Wirt home. He says, "I'm supposed to be the leader now, but I don't know how" (McHale S01 8). This revelation and new found

determination finds Greg in a scene that makes heavy use of some angelic imagery. This is Greg's moment of triumph, this is the climax in his homeward bound tale. All issues are seemingly resolved, however Wirt's soul is still lost at this point and is unable to leave with Greg. By the time Greg finds salvation Wirt's will has crumbled. This is a point which shall be returned to later on.

Returning to the paths offered to the boys, one is very reminiscent of limbo in *The Inferno*. The boys come across a town called Pottsville. Pottsville is not inhabited by those who suffer in fear of the Beast. In this place the Beast is never mentioned and those inhabitants are not lost from the light. They are joyful and enjoy their harvest. They are welcoming of the boys and believe that they must have come to join them. Wirt and Greg are invited to stay much like Dante is welcomed by the great poets in Limbo, "And then they showed me greater honor still, / for they made me one of their company, so that I became the sixth amidst such wisdom" (Hollander, Dante IV line 100-102). Essentially these worthy individuals, who are not seen as sinners, but are still not Christians, do not suffer the second death that is experienced by those who are in the lower circles of Hell. This is an interesting point of comparison for a few reasons. The inhabitants of Pottsville are skeletons of those whom have died and have been dug up by inhabitants whom have already arrived. They dress themselves as if they were living replacing the flesh of their limbs with bundles of wheat and their faces with painted pumpkins. They are those who have passed on and now live a second life, not in a paradise, but not in a place of punishment either. They are led by a black cat named Enoch. Symbolically, we can consider Enoch's existence as a black cat relative to the notion of living many lives. This is one aspect of the significance of his name, but there are others. Enoch is a figure in both Jewish and Christian religious texts that is thought to have never experienced death. It is described that "he did not see

death, for God took him” (Genesis 5:22-29)⁵. Those whom reside in Pottsfild⁶ do not experience a second death, no forms of punishment and go about their discussions and habits as if they were living. This is very similar to the lack of suffering of those great poets in Limbo. When comparing these two states of Limbo one should make note of the residences. Just as Dante’s tranquil section of the world is full of “virtuous pagans” that offer a “philosophical route to happiness” (Steinberg)⁷, the residents of this Limbo are happy, peaceful folk who are ruled over by what appears to be a symbol of a biblical figure. Perhaps a bridge is being drawn here between those who are without sin, but still misplaced in Dante’s and McHale’s epics.

The function of limbo in these epics is similar in that they tantalize their pilgrims with an opportunity to abandon their journey. Enoch invites the boys to stay and live among them. Wirt fears the skeletons and Enoch as well and while he learns that they will not cause harm to himself or to Greg he makes the decision that they should attempt to make their way home. Enoch is disappointed by Wirt’s decision, therefore he inquires again, “You’re sure you want to leave? Oh well, you’ll join us someday” (McHale S01 2). Enoch’s statement could suggest that Wirt will end up back in Pottsfild upon his death or it may simply reference that death is an inevitable outcome to life. The inclusion of Pottsfild and its part as the first location that our protagonist explore once they enter the Unknown very much invokes the concept of Limbo as it is used in *Inferno* both as the first stop on a long Odyssey of the soul and as a place that is immune to horrors of what lies just beyond it. Despite the undead residents Pottsfild is shown to be the most joyful place within the Unknown. The idea that the Beast is not a concern stands out

⁵ Enoch is an ancestor of Noah. He lived a very long life and when it came to an end, it is said that he never died. He instead was taken by God.

⁶ Pottsfild may be a reference to a Potters field: A field in which farmers, and laborers are buried in unmarked graves; Note the new arrivals in Pottsfild are dug up in the corn fields.

⁷ No Page Numbers are provided in this publication

as it suggests that it is also a place of peace and that those who reside within the town are not lost. They are where they need to be in physicality and in spirit. This visit to a purgatory like location is also a vital interaction for Wirt as he begins to develop into the hero of this epic. He makes a firm choice, a decision on his own. He is afforded a chance to stay and live in happiness.

Acknowledging Pottsfield as a representation of bliss, it plays a role that occurs throughout ancient epics. The heroes of *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid* are also seduced with the opportunity to abandon their tedious quests. As was previously mentioned with Aeneas' desire for an indulgent life, this trend befalls Odysseus's tale as well. Homer speaks of Odysseus's chance for bliss as Kalypso offers to him:

Son of Laertes, and seed of Zeus, resourceful Odysseus/ are you still all so eager to go on back to your own house / and the land of your fathers? I wish you well, however you do it/ but if only you knew in your heart how many hardships you were fated to undergo before getting back to your country, / you would stay here with me and be the lord of this household, / and be an immortal [...]. (Lattimore, Dante P.93 Line 203-209)

Odysseus rejects this offer just as Aeneas rights himself and returns to the path of his destiny. It is true that Dante also rejects the chance of peace that was offered to him by the great thinkers, however unlike Odysseus and Wirt, Dante does not directly make this choice or enforce his own decision. He is removed and forced along his path by his guide, Virgil, "The company of six falls off of two / and my wise leader brings me by another way / out the still, into the trembling, air, / And I come to a place where nothing shines" (Hollander, Dante IV Line 148-151). Dante does not make a firm choice like Wirt does. He goes along with what is decided by Virgil as his guides are the ultimate determinates in his success. Wirt makes his decision without

being chided along or whisked away. This subtle declining of comfort is a sign that Wirt is beginning to realize the weight of his situation and takes it more seriously. He begins to take his role as deliverer more seriously. Purgatory serves as a form of temptation and comfort in this epic and the hero does not partake in it, pushing aside his moral shortcomings and tattered sense of free will. In this instance Wirt begins to piece his shattered sense of self back together, though this moment is not enough to heal him completely. Greg is still necessary for Wirt's salvation. The role which he plays in aiding Wirt whilst begin a hero on his own journey of the spirit continues to unfold as the characters interact.

It has been established that the brothers are lost and that one is more so lost than the other, but it is also crucial to recognize how it is that the boys came to be lost. When we begin the story we are not made aware of how this situation came to be and the boys do not recall. It is not until the ninth Chapter, "Into the Unknown" that we are shown the circumstances that caused the two boys to lose their way. Unsurprisingly the blame for their predicament falls onto Wirt's shoulders. This is troubling news as we constantly observe Wirt blaming Greg for them being lost and also accuses his younger sibling of causing them to become more so misplaced. Wirt lacks the sense of responsibility he desperately needs in order to be fully realized as an epic hero. The Unknown is in fact a place between life and death and the boys have the ability to return, so long as they keep their will. Their lives were placed in danger when Greg jumped over the wall of The Eternal Garden (a cemetery in their home town) and landed on a train track on the other side. They are nearly hit by train, roll downhill and begin to sink to the bottom of a dark lake before they awaken in the unknown (McHale S01 10). Wirt is too distracted to make the sensible decision that where he and his brother stood, was a place of danger. He fears that which is unknown to him; how a girl named Sara will react to learning that he has feelings for her. Sara is

a large factor in Wirt becoming melancholy, but she isn't mentioned by him. We see her in the penultimate chapter which chronologically takes place first in the series. A gift that Wirt had prepared for Sara, but never intended to present, to her ends up in her possession and he is so mortified that after jumping over the wall he immediately begins to berate Greg (as he feels it's Greg's fault that Sara received the gift). So much time is spent venting his frustrations that Wirt does not notice that the train is coming until it is nearly too late. The fear of what could be, or could not be is enough to bring Wirt to make a poor decision and place his younger brother in harm's way. Considering Wirt's role in getting the boys lost it may be the case that Greg never did belong in the Unknown, he is only there for the sake of Wirt's destiny. This idea is further reinforced by Greg's ability to leave the Unknown without Wirt. He ascends to a land called Cloud City and is offered a reward for his bravery and ability to keep his will. Because of his adherence to the proper path and strong will Greg is afforded the opportunity to go home; despite his own flaws. Greg admits later on that he feels responsible for himself and his brother being lost in the Unknown, because he has stolen a rock from his neighbor's garden; he proclaims, "I'm a stealer" (McHale S10 10). He has the spiritual strength to escape this inferno, while Wirt is essentially doomed to fail in his odyssey of the spirit. Wirt's path is a long and treacherous one.

~III: Sinners in the Woods~

The winding paths that lie within the wood of the Unknown are home to many creatures that receive punishment for some transgression passed. There are a great number, each with punishments that differ from one another, but most of which are cyclical in nature much like those penances described in *Inferno*. These punishments are perhaps not as graphic as those

described in Dante's work, but are still disturbing. The purpose of these may be similar to that of the sinners and punishments depicted in *Inferno*, to serve as a warning. They are an example of what should not be done and a reminder of the righteous path; it is better to remain upon it than to be lost and eternally punished. The penances found in the Unknown are expertly woven into the narrative. In the musical introduction to *Over the Garden Wall* we get a glimpse of the sinners of the Unknown. One of the more startling of the images we see is of a young girl named Lorna standing amongst the bones of an eerie catacomb. The moment is brief, but is eye catching. Lorna spends her time in the Unknown essentially enslaved to an old witch known as "Aunty Whispers" (McHale S01 7). Lorna is forced to complete one task after another in rapid succession, seemingly without rest; at the conclusion of one chore there is another to begin. Lorna is without the ability to refuse her chores as her freewill is overridden with the ringing of a bell.

Lorna's position as a Warning for Wirt as a pilgrim is a complex one. At first glance Lorna's state is a pitiable one, but in actuality her condition is one that is meant to benefit the other residents of the Unknown. When she is idle Lorna becomes a ravenous beast that devours any unfortunate visitors she may encounter. Among her many tasks she is regularly made to sort the bones of her victims. In its unending nature Lorna's punishment is cyclical. The origin of her transgression seems to be her nature in itself. Lorna is a monster and is made to pay for this. Her crime is one that she does not choose to commit, just as she does not choose to atone for it, but is forced to. She is endlessly tired and without the power to make her own decisions. She is able to break free from her sorry state with Wirt's assistance. Because of Wirt's function as an epic hero Lorna may be viewed in differing light. One on hand we have Lorna as a monster that is slain by the actions of our epic hero; Wirt's Cyclops or his Gorgon. She is done away with, no longer

capable of causing any harm as the spirit that compelled to behave so poorly has left her body. On another hand, looking at this situation from a perspective more in line with structures of Dantesque epics, Lorna is given salvation by Wirt. Wirt acts as a deliverer for Lorna giving her peace and restoring her freedom. There is no longer any need for to be controlled by Aunty Whispers who served to keep Lorna from becoming ravenous when idol, and so the cycle of her torture does come to an end.

Lorna never wished to devour anyone, it was a part of how she functioned due to forces outside of her control. What's most strange about this occurrence is Wirt's offer to help Lorna with her eternal chores. This is an odd thing because Wirt has up to this point been very much avoiding his own burdens, although occasionally acting in a way that would suggest that he is beginning to accept them. Comparatively, in the case of Lorna he openly volunteers himself to be saddled with the weight of another person's torch. The results of this harkens back to one of the overarching themes of the program. That theme being that everyone has separate burdens and that they must be carried by those who were meant to bear them. Lorna's attack being brought on by a lapse in carrying her own burden present for one of two reasons. Either this is a warning once again reinforcing the importance of carrying a burden and handling a task or this is an early instance in which we see Wirt fitting into his role as an epic hero, one who is capable of his own salvation and the salvation of others. This does not take away from Greg's function as a second hero and a catalyst for Wirt's awakening. Greg's presence and interactions with Wirt are still a vital part in keeping Wirt from suffering the curse of not being the true hero of his own epic.

The pilgrims encounter a second sinner whose torment appears to have no end in the form of Quincy Etticot. The exact nature of Quincy Etticot's crime is never made known to us. All we are told is that he has amassed a large fortune by some means that resulted in him having

“filthy hands” (McHale S01 6) and for which he feels extreme guilt. He believes that a specter haunts his large mansion seeking to take his soul into the abyss “never to return”. Quincy has amassed countless riches, but fails to enjoy them as he is generally too frightened to entertain any guests, is for some reason confined to his mansion; his place of torment and spends all of his time fearing the end of his life. He dreads that he may be losing his sanity. It is implied that Quincy Etticot is already dead⁸, he may be a soul eternally suffering for his transgressions. Quincy Etticot is surrounded by the possessions which he was so willing to perform his dirty tasks in order to obtain, but he cannot enjoy them. He exists in an eternal stupor of fear, wary that he may receive a just retribution for his sins and unaware that he is already suffering through that retribution. Salvation does come to Quincy Etticot in the form of assistance from the two pilgrims. Although Quincy is not freed from an evil spirit, or slavery he is freed from some of his guilt laden delusions. This is an effort that is made possible more so by Greg than by Wirt. Greg is the one who convinces Quincy to go and search for the specter who is believed to be vengefully haunting his home. Despite his repeated protests Greg guides Quincy Etticot on towards the truth. Greg acts as deliverer for Quincy. He brings him salvation just as he will play his role as hero and steer Wirt in the direction of the proper path.

Another sinner appears throughout the epic in the form of Beatrice. The bluebird Beatrice is the first creature that the boys speak to in the Unknown. She attempts to gain the trust of Wirt and Greg in order to lead them through the Unknown to a witch whom she claims can solve both their dilemma and her own. Beatrice was not born a bluebird. She was a human girl who threw a rock at a bluebird and as punishment for assailing the innocent creature Beatrice was transformed along with her entire family. Beatrice’s only way to salvation is to deliver Wirt and Greg to the

⁸ Quincy Etticot’s name appears on a Tombstone in the Eternal Garden, a graveyard in Wirt and Greg’s home town.

Witch Adelaide where they will be made into mindless servants in exchange for a pair of scissors that will return Beatrice to human form. While there is a definite way to end Beatrice's punishment the nature of the solution conflicts with her still intact moral center. Beatrice is a transgressor on the more complicated end of things. This type of transgressor is depicted in W.H.V Reade's *The Moral System of "Dante's Inferno."* In this work Reade seeks to identify and classify several aspects of the leagues of separation in *Inferno*, distinctly the gravity of various sins and the types of sinners capable of committing them. Beatrice is in line with what Reade calls *passio*. Reade comments, "Previously, I had distinguished from the man who believes that a good end justifies a bad means [...] But a really different case is that of an agent who ascends to a certain principle and knows therefore, that a certain kind of act is wrong, yet gives way under the stress of passion and does the thing which normally, his will rejects" (Reade 185). Striking the bluebird was a momentary weakness in Beatrice's moral fiber.

Beatrice's desire to sacrifice Wirt and Greg for the wellbeing of her family is also only momentary as she cannot bring herself to go through with the arrangement Beatrice is wracked with guilt from several angles. She feels remorse for harming the innocent bluebird, she blames herself for her family's poor condition and she recognizes that another crime would be committed in trading the lives of Greg and Wirt: they should not have to suffer for her mistakes. Because of this realization Beatrice resolves to accept her fate and regains a desire to help the lost boys get home. Beatrice embraces the themes of redemption and correcting one's path that is heavily strewn throughout McHale's work making it comparable to Dante's epic.

McHale's Beatrice plays a role similar to that of Dante's as they both act as guides to some capacity. The bluebird does attempt to initially mislead Wirt and Greg, but later changes her perspective and works to free them from the Unknown, offering legitimate advice and

keeping the boys from danger. Comparably Dante's Beatrice begs for the traveler to be given guidance in the form of the poet Virgil. Virgil becomes instrumental in Dante's successful venture through the inferno, a journey that he would have otherwise made alone. Here, an important distinction is to be drawn between the Beatrice of Dante's work and that of McHale's. Dante's Beatrice is ultimately a guide and a force of divine interference. McHale's epic hero has the opportunity to ignore his Beatrice as a guide completely and most essentially does not follow her guidance in general. This is an aspect of Wirt that helps him to fit the bill of a traditional epic hero much more so than Dante does as a traveler. Beatrice and other guides along the way are too involved in Dante's fate. Wirt's skepticism and mistrust of Beatrice place him in a position to make moves without her or her interference. A similar relationship exists between Wirt and the Woodsman. The juxtaposition of the two guides is clear as one does originally intend to mislead Wirt and Greg and the other has done nothing but be honest, giving clear, helpful advice. Still the two stand as forks in the road for Wirt to either trek upon or ignore completely. They do in some sense serve as a warning for Wirt and Greg just as the sinners in *Inferno* did for Dante. They are both symbols of the misery of those who lose their way and become lost in the cycles of punishment that are littered throughout the Unknown.

~IV: The Journey of Our Life~

There are two sinners who exist connected to one another, Woodsman and the Beast. The crimes that have caused these two to exist within the realm of the Unknown and are never made know to *Over the Garden Wall's* audience. However, we can be lead to assume that both have committed some form of wrongdoing, as they live in the Unknown in a state of suffering just as

Lorna, Quincy Etticot and Beatrice do. The Woodsman suffers unending toil as he must chop down Edlewood trees and grind them into oil in order to keep lit a lantern; he describes the task as his “torch to carry” (McHale S01 1) and notes that everyone has some form of “burden to bare” (McHale S01 1). The Edlewood trees with which he must keep “the dark lantern” (McHale S01 4) lit are made from the souls those who have lost their will and become permanently lost in the Unknown. The Woodsman is the character who first delivers any message of the importance of burden.

The Woodsman is the most adamant about the importance of Wirt and Greg escaping from the dark woods. The Woodsman does serve as an example of transgressor in this Dantesque epic, but also plays the role of guide to our heroes more in the vein of the guides found in the epics of ancient tradition. It is he who first informs Wirt of the weight of responsibility, he is the one to play the part of chastiser and urges Wirt on as Mercury urged on Aeneas. He corrects Wirt’s misguided need to blame his brother for his poor situation. Just like the guides found in *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid* the Woodsman is a passive guide, offering advice and not forcing anyone’s hand. He does what he can to warn the boys and even though his cries fall upon death ears he harbors no ill will towards them. The Woodsman seems to be the resident of the Unknown with the most knowledge of the Beast and would thusly play a tremendous role in Wirt and Greg’s salvation if he were to play that sort of role. He can’t quite be as instrumental in aiding Wirt and Greg as Virgil is to Dante or again our epic hero would be cheated out of the opportunity to earn the title properly.

There are some similarities in how one may view the Woodsman’s interactions with the two young pilgrims to that of Virgil’s with Dante. One such example can be found in *Dante’s Drama of the Mind*, by Francis Fergusson. In this work Fergusson largely explores the mental

growth of Dante as he goes along his travels in the *Divina Commedia* and comes to explain the relationship Virgil has with the traveler as one that equates to his maturity. Fergusson writes, “Virgil, hovering over his charge⁹, can explain things to him only bit by bit, as the occasion offers, and as the Pilgrim himself needs to know. Virgil, is in this effect, leading him from childhood, to maturity” (Fergusson 52). Looking at this statement it is clear that this view of Virgil’s role supports the idea that while he is a constant presence, eternally “hovering” (Fergusson) at the forefront of Dante’s journey that this is also done with some effect of discretion. I would not argue that Virgil is not a large part of Dante’s success, he is and in his constant influences along with those of Beatrice he makes it impossible for Dante to stand up as the hero of his own epic; I am however arguing that in viewing Fergusson’s stance on Virgil’s place in the epic I can see that Virgil’s influences are in some instances subtle and may actually afford Dante the opportunity to go about becoming the hero just as Wirt does. The major difference between McHale’s epic and Dante’s is that this is not the option that the poet, Dante goes for. The Woodsman’s relationship to Wirt as guide is more successful in its discreet and minimal manner.

Virgil offers Dante knowledge, but does not truly offer him choice or put him into any position of power. The Woodsman creates the opposite effect. He only gives Wirt warnings; these are warnings which would help Wirt in his mission however, they are never enforced. The Woodsman never steers either the boys in any finite direction. He does instruct Wirt to take his brother north and to avoid the Beast (McHale S01 1), yet any instructions on how best to leave or where the Beast actually was were left out; he never forces the boys to begin walking on in the first place. There is no inclusion of the Beast’s methods or his motivations in the Woodsman’s

⁹ His charge referring to Dante

warnings either. These warnings are an obscure guidance that do not directly have any influence on Wirt. This credit is something that goes to McHale's decisions as a creator. He could have easily had the Woodsman play a larger role more along the lines of Virgil, but in choosing subtlety, absolute power is not put into the hands of the Woodsman and so the epic hero that exists in Wirt has the ability to develop as his own will is implemented in his salvation. In his interactions with the Woodsman Wirt makes clear choices. There is an instance in which the Woodsman cuts down a tree in order to halt the brothers on their path in a vain attempt to save them from an encounter with the Beast. He begs for the boys to listen, but Wirt instructs Greg to run and they take the path that was originally obstructed regardless of warning. This is a fitting outcome as Wirt was informed by a group of residents in the Unknown, "'You're a pilgrim'. 'You're a traveler on a sacred journey' 'The Master of your own destiny' [...] 'You don't need any directions pilgrim. You follow that compass inside your heart'" (McHale S01 4). It has been reinforced repeatedly that Wirt needs to make his own decision and become self-reliant. He is made aware that he is on a journey, that his wandering is a sacred thing and that it is his will that determines the outcome.

Wirt's decision to ignore the Woodsman and head down the obstructed path is a momentous occurrence in the epic because it allows for the creation of the final conflict. Wirt's destiny is not to topple an army, nor must he sail safely through Scylla and Charybdis (Lattimore, Homer), nor shall he build an empire, but he has a burden that must be addressed. This burden is responsibility and little by little as the journey goes on he learns to hold onto the weight of it. At this point one could argue that Wirt has failed as a hero and that only Greg deserves the title, as before the final conflict comes to face the brothers, Wirt's soul is lost. He begins his transformation into an Edlewood tree as Beatrice's betrayal and his fear of the

Woodsman dwindle away what hope he had left of being able to return home. Wirt perishes in the Unknown, but is saved by the second hero of the epic, Greg. Greg's selfless actions are what earn him the title of epic hero and not just that of guide in this story. His decision to use his wish to switch places with his brother in this version of the underworld is what makes up his climactic moment and solidifies that in order for there to be a hero of ancient tradition in this epic of spirit there must be to be two heroes on the same journey. Greg's sacrifice gives him a place as hero and suddenly removes Wirt from the role of being too powerless, too weak, and too frail of will to be a hero of epic tradition. This addition of a second hero is what saves Wirt from falling into the same vein as Dante the traveler who is not the hero of his own epic. Wirt is saved from a passive fate because of Greg and is given the opportunity to handle confrontation. His fate will determine the fate of all others in the tale. Wirt's salvation is necessary in order for any salvation to befall the rest of the cast in this contemporary epic.

There is more context hidden beneath Greg's sacrifice as well. In his offering up his own soul to save Wirt, he sends Wirt on the most crucial aspect of any of the epics of ancient tradition. He allows Wirt to face death and to return from it with his life and a revelation of destiny. To reach the underworld is an essential part of all of the ancient epics from which Dante's work gains its figure models. It is true that the Unknown is already the underworld in a sense, *Over the Garden Wall* more closely follows Dante as a model. And although the model which Dante has provided has a primary focus on a hero who is already in the underworld, while they are already lost in the Unknown there are still opportunities for Wirt and Greg to both suffer what could be looked upon as a second death. There is the oblivion of becoming a lost soul destined to be ground into oil. When Aeneas comes to stand amidst the dead he is still living and comes seeking knowledge of the future. When Wirt and Greg come to this dark wood they are on

the brink of death and awaken. The boys are looking for the chance to return to life as well as to return to the morally correct path, their straight way. When Wirt loses his soul in the Unknown this is when he truly descends into an underworld. It is after he returns from this state, by virtue of Greg's actions that he is stricken with epiphany, epiphany that plays out in the performance. We see Wirt concerned for Greg's safety and accepting the blame for having come to be lost. It is not coincidence that it is through escaping with his soul that Wirt fully takes up his mantle of epic hero.

Defining Wirt as an epic hero we can look to Dean A. Miller who draws a distinction between models of epics heroes, "If there is a line to be drawn between the "hero in myth" and the "epic hero" (a line that may very well be forced) it will usually separate that area where the gods and their overarching "cosmic history" operate, and that zone in which man ostensibly stands alone in his unique story, responsible for it and for himself" (Miller 48). Applying Dean's definition Wirt absolutely fits into the category of epic hero. He exists within a place of myth, but in his own time and is solely responsible for his own quest from beginning to end. This is attributed to the fact that he is the reason he has come to the Unknown on this journey and as the hero of this epic, despite any interference or prodding from outside sources of help, be they divine or otherwise, he is the only one capable of bringing himself to a state of triumph. Though it is true that he shares the role of hero with Greg, up until a certain point, in the end the title is placed upon Wirt's shoulders alone. He cannot burden his younger brother with the task of being the hero of the epic, just as he cannot place any of his other burdens upon Greg. While Greg's climatic moment came in the form of self-sacrifice Wirt's exists as a challenge of will. The final roadblock on his journey to return home and to right his forlorn spirit stands menacingly in the form of the Beast. This dark creature wishes for the brothers' demise. He is an ultimate test for

Wirt who has been warned of the creature's dark heinous several times at this point in the epic. He has already failed once before awakening as the hero that he needed to become and faces the Beast, thusly facing his fears of burden, of failure and of uncertainty.

~V: To Stand at the Lowest Point~

The Beast plays a role similar to that of Satan in antiquity. He seeks to mislead and deceive in order to trap souls for his benefit. The physicality of the Beast differs from Dante's Satan in that he is mobile, moving throughout the Unknown and in that he speaks. He is not chained and silent like Dante's representation; however both are sinners and both wish to lead souls into damnation. The Beast's place as a deceiver and tormentor is described in song as the boys are warned, "[...] he lurks out there in the Unknown, seeking those who are far from home, hoping never to let them return [...] better be wise and don't believe his lies" (McHale S01 04). This is not the only song in which the Beast's deceitful nature is a feature. The Beast is the great monster of this epic. He is the ultimate threat to salvation the last foil to victory. The Beast continuously beckons to those who are lost in the Unknown, "Come wayward souls, who wander through the darkness, there is a light for the lost and the meek. Hard woe¹⁰ and fear, are easily forgotten, when you submit to the soil of the earth" (McHale S01 10). Listening to it, the song would easily make viewers feel uneasy, the performance is a boisterous, powerful one, but the lyrics are a call for the weak to give themselves up to the Beast. He specifically beseeches those who are lost from their proper path, those who are meek and therefore possess a brittle will. Because of the nature of his chosen victims, the Beast stands as an ultimate road block for the

¹⁰ This lyric is debated. Hard Woe and fear is the lyrics as listed in Closed Captioning for the program; however the lyric is often misheard as "sorrow and fear"; the misheard lyric is more widespread among viewers.

boys' return. Wirt has consistently been unsure of himself, his uncertainty and his fear are the reason he initially comes to be trapped within the Unknown. His lack of will is what has gotten him lost. There is essentially a way out, a way to quit constantly placed within the background of his struggle, a seductive offer that would afford him a false ending to his suffering. The pain of emotions, sorrow and fear are promised to disappear, all burdens will be lifted.

This tempting idea of the end of burden stands in complete opposition to the warning which The Woodsman had given to Wirt in the first chapter of this tale. Everyone is meant to carry a burden, everyone has a heavy responsibility to bear; Wirt's is to get himself and his brother home, but previously he would rather have not dealt with suffering in any of its forms. Wirt as he once was, was the ideal victim for the Beast. The Beast's mobility is not the only major distinction which separates him from the most infamous sinner in *Inferno*. At the frozen floor of Hell resides a silent Satan, one who is not only without words because he does not speak, but because he is not spoken to. In what is an extremely strange decision Dante does not have the supposed hero of his epic exchange any words with Satan. This is an odd choice considering the nature of the rest of the poem. Dante spends the entirety of his journey speaking with sinners whom he passes on his descent. He must reach the lowest point and come to an understanding before he can ever hope to ascend up out of the despair that is the nine circles of Hell. The purpose of his journey is to speak with those who have fallen from the right path, learn how they have come to fall and seek to preserve his own spirit. If this is the case then why would he omit speaking to the sinner who is farther fallen from the path? This anticlimactic moment completely robs Dante's pilgrim of a fantastic opportunity. Dante does not confront the source of all sin. Dante does not exchange words with the entity that has fallen farthest from the straight way. Dante does not engage with this rare chance. He had up until that point of *Inferno*, under Virgil's

guidance, learned of the spiritual paths of others in order to better understand his own, but when faced with chance to learn from the most egregious transgressor. Dante's guides cause him a great disservice once more. Virgil advises him that they should not stay and so they don't, not for any longer than it takes to marvel at the sight of the sinner and do nothing more.

This is yet another issues that is handled in a matter that is in line with the traditional models in McHale's epic. Wirt confronts the enemy of his spiritual salvation. He does so in a direct manner and while there is understandably a visible fear in his appearance and an audible sense of dread in his voice¹¹ at this stage of the performance Wirt does not falter and in this way he has overcome the fear of being burdened by embracing his momentous tasks in order to be rid of them in the only legitimate way he can, by taking care of them. Wirt has the power to save himself unlike Dante whose salvation is not truly determined by his own strengths. Divine intervention is not what leads Wirt out of the dark woods of the Unknown. He his saved by his own cunning and a courage which he is able to muster when confronted with the burden of Greg's fate. The string of burden which is wrapped so tightly around the narrative comes full circle in both Wirt's realization of its weight and Beatrice's acceptance of burden as well. When the offer is given for Beatrice to leave the Unknown with the boy she claims that she must return to her own home and confess her transgressions to her family; she must admit to them that she is responsible for their transformation into bluebirds as well.

If Wirt and Greg both play the role of hero and protagonist, then it would not be a bold statement to claim that Beatrice has a role in this journey as a secondary player. She serves as a guides for the boys, a temporary adversary and also lives on as an example of one who has been

¹¹ Wirt's voice cracks as he speaks to the Beast, his stutter also returns in this performance, but he stifles it and continues the conversation.

punished and seeks atonement. Similarly to Wirt, a moment of powerful emotion is what lands her into trouble to begin with. Her lashing out at the bluebird had caused her to become lost from her straight way her misplaced wrath is comparable to Wirt's unnecessary, forlorn attitude. Beatrice need not have struck out in wrath at an innocent. Wirt should not have fallen into a dismal state over uncertainty and fear of what may or may not have happened concerning Sara's feelings or possible lack thereof for him. The fact that it is a new sense of responsibility that brings Beatrice to look out for the brothers' wellbeing fits in nicely with the overarching threads of *Over the Garden Wall*. Beatrice is just as capable of receiving grace and while that may come in the form of Wirt offering the scissors which she needs in order to clip her wings and become a human again, her grace is still something that is actively earned and worked towards. Beatrice is most assuredly an important piece of this epic journey. She demonstrates to the audience the importance of atonement and does so without expecting any sort of reward, or any form of grace. Beatrice does not anticipate being saved from her unfortunate state, she only anticipates that she will have to face her family in honesty and admit to them, her previously hidden involvement in their curse. Her decision to act selflessly in the face of losing everything she had hoped for makes Beatrice's character into a noble one. And while she cannot bring the boys home or guide them there, her willingness to try is admirable.

Returning to the discussion of Greg and his role as a second epic hero as well as a catalyst for Wirt's transformation, a crucial factor in this subject is Greg's stolen rock. As mentioned earlier Greg blames himself for his brother coming to be lost in the Unknown because of his theft of a rock from his neighbor's garden. This is a petty crime, indeed. No one is likely to go after the young boy or label him as a hoodlum for this action. He pulled the weeds from Mrs. Daniel's garden and came upon the rock, deciding that he fancied it, he took it with him. To us

the crime is negligible, Greg is only a child. The action of picking up a rock from a garden is simply playful and almost expected of one as young Greg as is portrayed to be. Still in Greg's mind this action was a punishable one. He adamantly confesses to Wirt, "I'm a stealer [...] It does matter. You have to return it for me, okay?" (McHale S01 10). Wirt expresses to Greg, the lightness and unimportance of his transgression, but Greg disagrees. He is serious in his intentions to have the rock returned. Greg has constantly been active in seeking out his destiny on his journey, often ignoring Wirt's instructions in favor of following his own path, ignoring Wirt's plans despite asking for them and making his way to a state in which he can leave the Unknown on his own. Greg is also placed into the position of becoming an Edlewood tree because he makes the choice as an epic hero to sacrifice himself so that Wirt may take up the mantle of epic hero, giving Wirt a chance to face death and return from it. Wirt ends up returning the favor as Gregory makes the classic return from the world of dead in turn, becoming an Edlewood tree and returning from that fate just as Wirt was able to.

Whether or not Greg received any form of revelation from his "going down" remains to be seen in this miniseries. He already feels that he has "beat the Beast" (McHale S01 10) despite turning into an Edlewood tree for Wirt's sake. He proclaims that his will is victorious even as he admits to his misdeed of stealing the rock. Greg's soul begins to become a part of the forest, but this is only because of Greg's choice to act as an epic hero. In truth he has not been corrupted, his will and his way are already strong and this is what allows his proclamation to ring true in the face of his impending doom. When Greg sees Wirt return, acting on his epiphany, Greg pleads with Wirt. Greg begs his older brother return the rock for him, Greg can sense some change in Wirt and his attitude. He wishes to pass the burden on to the new hero of this epic, but like with other burdens encountered along the way, there is no passing them along to others, "You can

give it to her yourself” (McHale S10 1) is the response Wirt gives his fading brother, either out of denial that he would fall or hope that he would live, but much more likely out of recognition that this was Greg’s torch to carry.

Wirt’s torch is something that he comes to recognize and bear the weight of.

Interestingly, his shying away from burden is not the only thing that holds him back in his potential to becoming a true epic hero. He is also afraid of some aspects of his own personality. He did shy away from his talents in the arts, his musical abilities and his overall intelligence. He seems to have a fear of being judged or marked an outcast for his differences. This is another obstacle that he is meant to overcome in order to defeat the Beast as his confidence in his intellect and his ability to reason are what allow him the power to discern his way through the Beast’s lies and misgivings. Compare this with the supposed hero, Dante. His personality and personage have very little to do with his fate in his epic. Again his fate is more largely dictated by the guides that constantly protect him, teach him and instruct him in all manners of his journey. Who Wirt is as a person is essential in who he is as an epic hero, making him much more in line with the heroes of ancient tradition. Consider one of the defining traits of Odysseus, his great cunning and intellect. Odysseus does not reject his gifts of cognizance or his ability to work his way through the toughest of issues with the strength of his mind. Wirt cannot be a hero while he rejects his talents either and engages in most of his heroic feats while embracing his personal characteristics. Wirt’s journey is one of the body and spirit. It is a journey that moves from a place of immaturity to one where burden is an accepted and expected part of life. This is the journey of his soul and his mind from a state of melancholy to one free of the fears of uncertainty. As an active pilgrim Wirt fulfills the role of epic hero in a Dantesque epic performed for children.

~VI: Conclusion~

Over the Garden Wall continues to reveal itself as a modern epic and an Odyssey of the soul as it closes. Burdens, responsibility and will have danced at the front of the stage in this tale and when all comes full circle our protagonists manage to escape from this strange afterlife and return to their home. The triumphs of the hero are in turn the triumphs of the many as Wirt corrects his path. Wirt's budding decisiveness and will inspire Beatrice to change her ways and she is ultimately rewarded with her human form. Wirt over comes his fear of unknown circumstance and in accepting his own eccentric personality and his wit he is able to see through the lies that the Beast tells, freeing the Woodsman from his service and putting an end to the Beast. The dark lantern holds the soul of the Beast, not the soul of the Woodsman's daughter, or that of anyone that the Beast has ever claimed to reside within it. The lost souls that became trees for grinding into oil were used to keep the Beast alive. How the Beast comes to an end connects a crucial string, in one of the most pertinent themes in this epic. Again this is the theme of accepting one's burdens and being able to live with them. Wirt is the one to realize the truth of the Beast, but rather than handle the act of physically defeating the creature himself, he shares his knowledge of how to do so with the Woodsman stating, "I've got my own problems to take care of, this one is yours. My brother and I are going home" (McHale S01 10). A lack of willingness to carry his own burden, is what puts the Beast into the position of his own downfall. His trickery and attempts to pass his "torch to carry" (McHale S01 1) onto others made him vulnerable. When belief in his lies was lost, so was his soul. It is very possible that had the Beast been willing to carry his own torch he would not have been defeated with such ease. As an antagonist who is largely inactive the Beast places his fate in the hands of others. He wishes to keep his soul alight, but does not wish to carry the burden of doing so by his own hands. The life

which the Beast is living is a stark contrast to the type of life that McHale's epic teaches the audience that it should live; we should strive to live lives of activity, ones in which we are the heaviest deciding factors in our destinies. Wirt comes to accept the weight of being burdened, he accepts responsibility for his brother's safety and admits that he is the reason that they became lost to begin with. Wirt is no longer the lost boat he had described, out of control and unable to guide or direct his own destiny. He's managed to ferry himself across the river, even without his two coins.¹²

Over the Garden Wall is one of many examples of animations which follow structures and archetypes of traditional literatures. It is the story of a long journey back home, reminiscent of many great epics. And like *The Inferno*, and Homer's *Odyssey* the journey is more than a physical one. There is a journey of the spirit as well and a gaining of maturity, a sense of responsibility that branches from the main characters to the other players of the piece. As Odysseus travels on his long way home, his absence forces a maturity to blossom in young Telemachus; just as the changes in Wirt's behavior allow Beatrice to right herself and allow the Woodsman to gain clarity. The presence of Greg as a second hero of this epic forces his brother to take his place as an epic hero as well. Because of their dialogues and interactions together Wirt and Greg both avoid falling into the trap that Dante's hero did. They are not inactive as they feel a need to bring salvation not only to their own spirits, but to one another in turn. With Greg as his catalyst, Wirt becomes an epic hero of the ancient tradition. In this epic, this spiritual odyssey all paths are righted when will is properly placed and all carry their torches. Fittingly the final scene of the series shows Greg placing the stolen rock back into Mrs. Daniel's Garden

¹² Wirt and Greg take a ferry across a river, they need two pennies for payment, but don't have. Instead they are allowed to remain onboard in exchange for Wirt playing the bassoon.

having laid down the final burden, the last torch has been extinguished. It is carried to its final destination and dealt with, it is not cast aside, nor is it ignored or forgotten. It is a responsibility like so many in McHale's work that allow the pilgrims of this tale to be heroes of their own epic journey.

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