

“The loveliest lies of all”: Death, Closure, and the Banishment Tale in Patrick McHale’s  
*Over the Garden Wall*

by

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Dalhousie University is located in Mi’kma’ki,  
the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi’kmaq.  
We are all Treaty people.

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## **DEDICATION**

To the banished and the bereaved.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a poststructuralist examination of Patrick McHale's *Over the Garden Wall* television miniseries and graphic novels *Tome of the Unknown* and *Distillatoria* (termed the "primary canon") as a postmodern adaptation of the conventions of the Proppian fairy tale. Foregrounding Vladimir Propp's morphology in this discussion is essential in that Propp helps us consider which conventions of narrative structure continue in popular contemporary children's literature and media; thus, this thesis maintains that the primary canon's centralisation of the banishment function of Propp's morphology to create a new Proppian tale type—the banishment tale—critiques the function of conventional endings in children's literature. Moreover, given the banishment function's association with liminality and instability, the primary canon engages in discourses of death and selfhood. Consequently, this thesis argues that the primary canon challenges the assumption of a universal "truth" through closure by *deferring* closure and finding meaning in death.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In the opening of the first episode of Patrick McHale’s animated television miniseries, *Over the Garden Wall*, the crooning, gentle voice of the narrator (Jack Jones) sounds over various images from a world that recalls the charming, timeless quality of childhood folk and fairy tale picture-books. Threading these scenes together, however, is an undercurrent of uncertainty, of unease in the characters’ actions and expressions that the otherwise idyllic backdrop belies, expressing a kind of foreboding that the narrator calls attention to in his lyrics. He sings,

Led through the mists by the milk-light of moon,

All that was lost is revealed.

Our long bygone burdens mere echoes of the spring,

But where have we come? And where shall we end?

If dreams can’t come true, then why not pretend? (McHale, “The Old Grist Mill”

00:00:10–00:00:46)

It is this kind of self-reflexive awareness and play operating at the intersection of loss, revelation, and limbo that makes up the curious texture of *Over the Garden Wall*, both the eponymous television miniseries and the graphic novel series that followed its popular reception (and both of which make up what I will hereafter refer to as “the primary canon”). The primary canon follows half-brothers Wirt (Elijah Wood) and Greg (Collin Dean) as they are banished to “The Unknown,” an atemporal, aspatial realm haunted by a spectral presence known only as the Beast (Samuel Ramey), and attempt to find their way home. They are thrust into a world that rapidly and constantly adapts folk and fairy tale conventions. This form of play is specifically mobilised through the primary canon’s centralisation of the banishment function first outlined in Vladimir

Propp's morphology of the folk and fairy tale. Ultimately, the primary canon fixes the brothers in an apparently endless, looping space of banishment that confronts states of death, articulated by the primary canon's deferral of the closure necessary to escape this banishment in accordance with the teleology underlying Propp's morphology. By adapting the conventions of the Proppian fairy tale to create what I shall term "the banishment tale," the primary canon invites a closer reading of the untethered, liminal positionality of the protagonists and their experiences of death. More importantly, by creating the banishment tale, the primary canon interrogates how closure functions to generate meaning in the Proppian fairy tale.

The ten-episode television miniseries entitled *Over the Garden Wall* ran on the Cartoon Network from 3–7 November in 2014. Its largely positive reception, popularity, and cult following in online fan circles in part prompted the subsequent creation of several graphic novel series and standalone graphic novels by KaBOOM! Studios. This paper will focus on what I shall term the "primary canon," being the television miniseries, the 2016 *Tome of the Unknown* graphic novel series, and the 2018 standalone graphic novel *Distillatoria*. The primary canon operates as what Henry Jenkins calls a "transmedia story," or a story which "unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (Jenkins 95–96), with the television miniseries as the "anchor property" and the graphic novels its "transmedia extensions."<sup>1</sup> Despite the primary canon offering a wealth of discursive avenues to pursue, there is relatively little published scholarship on it. Moreover,

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<sup>1</sup> While *Tome of the Unknown* occurs between episodes of the miniseries and *Distillatoria* follows immediately after the events of the last episode of the miniseries ("The Unknown"), this paper will consider both *Tome of the Unknown* and *Distillatoria* as media distinct from the miniseries (and each other) with different narrative structures.

scholarship on the primary canon to date solely addresses the television miniseries and is largely concerned with the function of children's media to instruct or entertain (González, Willsey, and Horáková). However, I argue that the primary canon has specific structural features that are particular to the Proppian fairy tale that may be analysed more closely to consider how the primary canon critiques the function of endings in children's literature. While many such endings are comic, as in the return home or the resolution of a problem, endings in the primary canon can also be tragic as in confronting death.

As such, this paper will take a poststructuralist approach in its examination of the primary canon as a postmodern adaptation of the conventions of the Proppian fairy tale. Foregrounding Propp's morphology in this discussion is essential in that Propp helps us consider which conventions of narrative structure continue in popular contemporary children's literature and media. This is especially pertinent given how popular contemporary works such as the primary canon are not only interested in engaging in complex structural play but are also interested in using this play to discuss certain topics. For instance, I argue that the primary canon's creation of the banishment tale challenges the assumption of a universal "truth" through closure and finding meaning in death. Moreover, with the introduction of its transmedia extensions, the primary canon refuses to adhere to a singular "truth" about closure and death and constructs itself as ambiguous and therefore open to interpretation; thus, this paper understands the primary canon as postmodern in the sense of what Barthes terms a "writerly text." Consequently, this paper will not attempt to discern any one "true" meaning of the primary canon but will instead "appreciate what *plural* constitutes it" (Barthes 5), or what the miniseries coins as "the loveliest lies of all" (McHale, "The Unknown" 00:10:19–00:10:24): mortality,

selfhood, loss, and the ideological and formal systems that are mobilised to make death meaningful.

## Chapter 2: Plot: Deferring Closure in the Banishment Tale

As I mentioned in the Introduction, there are structural features of the primary canon as a postmodern adaptation of the conventions of the Proppian fairy tale type that facilitate its critique of the construction of conventional endings. This thesis will consider three of the structural features that the primary canon adapts most radically: plot, setting, and character archetypes. This chapter will concentrate on the plot of the banishment tale, outlining how the primary canon centralises the banishment function of Propp's morphology in order to defer closure, thereby calling into question the teleology in which the end of a narrative produces its meaning.

### 2.1 Adapting Propp: The Creation of the Banishment Tale

Published first in Russian in 1928 and translated into English in 1958, Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folk Tale* was a foundational text that proposed an innovative method of classifying and analysing fairy tales through a compositional scheme and set of conventions. In *Morphology*, Propp identified thirty-one functions, or what Propp terms as "an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action . . . they constitute the fundamental components of a tale" (21), and their subfunctions. Propp also identified seven character archetypes—such as the hero, the villain, and the helper—who perform these functions.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, Propp discovered that while tales differed in terms of how many of these functions, subfunctions, and character archetypes were present in each tale (i.e., not every tale contained all thirty-one functions), their structure was fundamentally the same in that all tales followed the same teleology. As Propp puts it, "morphologically, a tale (*skázka*)

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<sup>2</sup> Jack Zipes condenses these thirty-one functions into eight functions in *When Dreams Came True* (3–4).

may be termed any development proceeding from villainy (A) or a lack ( $\alpha$ ), through intermediary functions to marriage (W\*), or to other functions employed as a dénouement” (92). Underpinning this teleology is the banishment function, where the protagonist is banished or departs from their home.<sup>3</sup> This is a key function. The protagonist must be motivated in some capacity to leave the stability of their home (either by force or by choice), they must (if only temporarily) navigate the unstable placeless-ness of their position as they pursue their end-goal, and they must encounter some form of closure (the ending of the narrative experienced by protagonist) that resolves their banishment and ensures their return to stability (even if the form of stability has changed). Ultimately, there can be no closure without the protagonist first being lost in some way. The primary canon recognises the significance of the banishment function but, rather than resolving the banishment function, the primary canon instead centralises it to create the banishment tale.<sup>4</sup> This new tale type leaves the banishment function unresolved, suspends the protagonist(s) in a liminal state where encounters with death, dying, and the afterlife are emphasised, and ultimately defers closure and so resists the teleology assumed in Propp’s morphology. I will provide an outline of the primary canon’s creation of the banishment tale below.

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<sup>3</sup> Propp defines the banishment function (the eleventh function of the tale signalled by  $\uparrow$ ) rather simply as “the hero leaves home” (39). Zipes suggests, “Departure or banishment of the protagonist, who is either given a task or assumes a task related to the interdiction and prohibition, or to the desire for improvement and self-transformation” (3).

<sup>4</sup> I should specify that the television miniseries on its own is not a banishment tale. It is only with the introduction of its transmedia extensions that the creation of the banishment tale begins, with *Distillatoria* in particular challenging the miniseries’ formal closure by asking the question, “What if the resolution of banishment rather than formal closure was the site where the meaning of a narrative is produced?”

First, one of the more disruptive aspects of the canon's postmodern adaptation of Proppian conventions is that the banishment tale does not begin with an initial situation (signalled by  $\alpha$  in Propp's *Morphology*) by which to contextualise the brothers' banishment, nor does it include the eighth function (signalled as function 8 (A), being villainy, and/or 8a (a), being lack or the desire for something). The exclusion of the villainy function is of particular significance, as Propp argues that the eighth function "is exceptionally important, since by means of it the actual movement of the tale is created" (30). All Proppian fairy tale types must begin with an act of villainy or a lack or desire for something if the tale is to progress (if the tale is to be a "tale" at all). Instead, the primary canon begins *in media res* with the banishment of the brothers from their home (↑). In the first minute of the first episode of the television miniseries ("The Old Grist Mill"), as they walk through darkened woods in The Unknown, Wirt interrupts Greg's nonsensical rambling in a moment of sudden self-awareness when he realises that they are both far, far from home—in more sense than one, as later confirmed by the secretive Woodsman who happens across the boys and informs them, "You're more lost than you realise" (McHale, "The Old Grist Mill" 00:03:22–00:03:24). Greg meets Wirt's increasingly frantic questions with characteristic simplicity: "Where are we?" "In the woods." "What are we doing here?" "Walking home." Greg's unerring cheer and straightforward answers defer any close examination of the events that led to his and Wirt's banishment from home and instead re-direct any attempt to retroactively establish a "fixed order" for the plot of the banishment tale to focus instead on their banishment.

The brothers then meet Beatrice, a talking bluebird who fulfils the donor character type, who entreats Greg to free her from where she is trapped in a bush (D<sup>4</sup>). Greg complies and frees her (E<sup>4</sup>). Beatrice, now bound by "bluebird rules" ("Hard Times

at the Huskin' Bee" 00:04:48–00:04:49), then also takes on the function of a magical agent by putting her abilities at Greg and Wirt's disposal. In the miniseries and *Tome of the Unknown*, the brothers are also aided by several other characters in The Unknown who help them locate Adelaide of the Pasture, the Good Woman of the Woods, who purportedly can help them find their way home (F<sup>9</sup>). The brothers are led through The Unknown by Beatrice (G<sup>3</sup>) until they encounter the Beast, with whom each brother engages in a contest of wills in a double struggle (H<sup>2</sup>), with Wirt eventually defeating the Beast in this contest (I<sup>2</sup>) and finding the way home with the help of Greg and Beatrice (K<sup>2</sup>). The brothers return home (↓), where they realise they had nearly drowned in a lake after avoiding a moving train. It is at this point that the miniseries appears to be a closed narrative, with the banishment function resolved and closure achieved. However, *Distillatoria* troubles this resolution by calling into question the integrity of that closure and by centralising the banishment function. In *Distillatoria* the brothers' "return" home is revealed to be a shared hallucination after the brothers and Beatrice, still in The Unknown after the events of the television miniseries, fall into a carnivorous pitcher plant and succumb to the psychoactive properties of the plant's digestive fluids. This new antagonist places various temptations in the group's path to entice them to remain in their shared hallucination (Pr<sup>4</sup>). Ultimately, the brothers and Beatrice manage to ward off these temptations and escape the pitcher plant (Rs<sup>7</sup>); however, their victory is short-lived as they once more depart from their home (even if that home was imagined) to resume their banishment in The Unknown (↑), where "there were more Unknown days to come, some awkward, some pleasant, but always full of new mysteries, and so on and so forth" (Case). In the primary canon as a whole, the brothers' tale remains centred on the banishment function, as the banishment function is ultimately never resolved.

## 2.2 “You have to *wake up and live*”: Deferring Closure in *Distillatoria*

By isolating and focusing on banishment specifically, *Distillatoria* defers a central element of the Proppian tale’s teleology: closure. It is here that I should clarify the relationship between closure and death. Closure here refers to the final function of the Proppian tale;<sup>5</sup> it is “the impression that exactly the point where the work does end is just the *right* point” (Carroll 2). Moreover, closure puts an end to the play of meaning in a narrative in that closure “transpires when all of the questions that have been saliently posed by the narrative get answered” (4); thus, when a Proppian narrative concludes, there is no room for further deliberation on its content.<sup>6</sup> As such, the end of the narrative more often than not acts as the site where the “true,” fixed meaning of a narrative is produced. In regard to the relationship between closure and death, there is the obvious connection that death in itself operates as a kind of closure, particularly when death is viewed in secular terms as the cessation of life. However, in the primary canon the characters encounter death as it operates in multivalent, fluid terms, where encounters with death are frequently encounters with discourses and sensations associated with death, such as the afterlife and grief. Moreover, the primary canon challenges teleology by asking the characters to find meaning in *banishment* rather than death. *Distillatoria* demonstrates this challenge.

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<sup>5</sup> Propp attributes closure to the marriage of the hero and their ascension to the throne (signalled by W) or “other functions employed as a *dénouement*” (Propp 92), such as the terminal functions of “a reward (F), a gain or in general the liquidation of misfortune (K), an escape from pursuit (Rs), etc.” (92). Zipes identifies closure as “the success of the protagonist” (Zipes 4), which “usually leads to (a) marriage; (b) the acquisition of money; (c) survival and wisdom; or (d) any combination of the first three” (4).

<sup>6</sup> Until a sequel, an adaptation, or transmedia extensions of the narrative are produced, of course.

If the television miniseries is viewed in isolation from *Tome of the Unknown* and *Distillatoria*, then it might appear to conform to the teleology outlined by Propp's morphology. Wirt and Greg successfully defeat the Beast and return home, but doubt is cast onto the validity of this closure because the miniseries opens and "closes" with the narrator gesturing to the miniseries' writerly concerns: thus, the narrator first proposes, "If dreams can't come true, then why not pretend?" (McHale, "The Old Grist Mill" 00:00:38–00:00:47), and ends the miniseries by calling all characters' endings "the loveliest lies of all" ("The Unknown" 00:10:19–00:10:24). *Distillatoria* crystallizes this doubt when the closure of Wirt, Greg, and Beatrice's narrative arcs in the miniseries is interpreted as *threatening* rather than comforting. At a physical level, this closure is threatening because the longer the characters remain in their shared hallucination, the closer they are to death in *The Unknown*, where they are steadily being eaten alive by the pitcher plant. Banishment presents Wirt, Greg, and Beatrice with the possibility for change and facilitates the exploration of ideas of "self" in fluid, transformative terms. By contrast, closure requires Wirt, Greg, and Beatrice to give up this possibility for change and to instead conform to the conventions of Propp's morphology. In doing so, they are denied the ability to explore selfhood and are instead assigned universal character types, in which their sole purpose is to perform the functions assigned to their static character types in order to drive the conventional plot toward closure. Consequently, *Distillatoria* makes it clear that closure is not something to be desired but feared. I will elaborate on this point below.

Noël Carroll notes that "closure yields a feeling of completeness" (2), in that all character arcs and plots are satisfyingly resolved. In the miniseries, Beatrice's narrative

arc ends with her revealing that she and her family were once human.<sup>7</sup> She lifts their bluebird curse and ends her self-imposed expulsion from the family unit, allowing her and her family to finally return home. Beatrice is last seen in the final episode (“The Unknown”) in an image of idyllic domesticity, with Beatrice and her family, now human, gathered in their home to a meal. In *Distillatoria*, Beatrice is confronted with an uncanny repetition of the final episode’s domestic image, with her human family seated at Wirt and Greg’s kitchen table around an uneaten meal. Their pre-twentieth century clothing is at odds with the distinctly modern setting they occupy and, unlike in the miniseries, there is no empty chair for Beatrice to occupy to symbolise her acceptance back into the family unit. More importantly, Beatrice is still in her bluebird form. In response to Beatrice still being a bluebird, Beatrice’s mother demands that Beatrice “put on [her] human flesh. No feathers at the kitchen table!” (Case) and asks her questions such as “where’s your human flesh? Did you get it dirty?” (Case). The unsettling wording that her mother uses to refer to her human form establishes two critical aspects of Beatrice’s identity: one, it emphasises Beatrice’s Otherness in the real world by conflating her bluebird form with impropriety (“no feathers at the kitchen table!”) and by constructing it as something to be concealed; and two, it implies that Beatrice’s human form is entirely superficial. Her human form forecloses all subjectivity by making her just another static, replicable character wearing “human flesh.” It should be noted that, while Beatrice is in her bluebird form, which is exclusive to her banishment, she has the freedom to explore and change her identity, to play with meaning in a way that she could not when in her human form. In *Distillatoria*, if Beatrice is to re-join her family and

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<sup>7</sup> It is discovered in the episode “Mad Love” that Beatrice and her family’s bluebird curse was the result of Beatrice throwing a rock at a bluebird.

experience the “feeling of completeness” (Carroll 2) that closure brings, she must “put on [her] human flesh” and give up her selfhood and this possibility for change. This articulation of closure is so threatening to Beatrice and her selfhood that she is forced to flee if she is to preserve her bluebird form, insisting that ““This isn’t right. It’s like a bad dream!”” (Case). The terror of the experience is such that she wakes herself up from her, Wirt, and Greg’s shared hallucination.

It is at this point that Beatrice realises that she and the brothers are essentially part of a conventional plot. In this conventional plot, the pitcher plant turns character types into “alluring objects” (Propp 56) to be placed “in the path of the hero” (56), such as Wirt being given the chance to present himself as the typical fairy tale hero who unites with his romantic interest, Sara. This conventional plot mobilises a transcendent, universal truth that Wirt and Greg are all too eager to take stock in after the uncertainty of their time in *The Unknown*: namely, that all narratives come to an end when progress and stability have finally been achieved. If Beatrice is to save Wirt and Greg, she must destabilise the conventional plot’s claim to coherency and stability. Beatrice returns to the conventional plot—willingly letting herself slowly drown in the pitcher plant—and demonstrates to Wirt that the conventional plot is not constituted by a singular, stable “truth” but rather that it is constituted by *multiple* truths that cause the conventional plot to constantly change and shift. Consequently, the conventional plot is not coherent at all, proven by the fact that Beatrice is able to change herself back into her human form, telling Wirt, ““It’s just a dream, Wirt. I can be whatever I want to be in a dream! So can you!”” (Case). Like the reader of the writerly text, Wirt and Beatrice realise that they “gain access to it [the conventional narrative] by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one” (Barthes 5); co-creation and the potential for

disruption and change are the solution to their entrapment in this conventional plot. Moreover, following her own encounter with closure, Beatrice stresses that, in this conventional plot, closure's cessation of the play of meaning is equal to certain death, urging Wirt "to *wake up* and *live*. For you and Greg!" (Case). By associating "living" with their return to banishment and "dying" with the resolution of their banishment (even if that resolution is a hallucination), Beatrice implies that it is banishment that produces meaning rather than the closure that would end the play of meaning. Ultimately, in *Distillatoria*, it is not closure that brings comfort in the face of death or uncertainty, but the return to banishment, to liminality, instability, and the possibility for change. If Wirt and Greg are to come out of the siren-call of the conventional plot alive, Wirt must exercise suspicion on any claim to stability, coherency, or rationality—despite how comforting this claim may be—and return to the banishment function.

### Chapter 3: Setting: The Unknown, Thresholds, and Death

Integral to the Proppian fairy tale is how characters are defined in relation to setting. The fairy tale hero is defined as such by their ability to depart from home, successfully adventure into the space of banishment in pursuit of an object, and return home (even if “home” is now another kingdom or realm). There is a teleological trajectory through space at work in the conventional fairy tale, not unlike the linear sequence and fixed order of Propp’s morphology. But the setting of the banishment tale is one of liminality, where thresholds and in-between structures are given cognitive and affective primacy. Moreover, the fairy tale hero’s trajectory in the banishment tale does not progress but rather loops in an ongoing encounter with crisis. Here the hero is at their most vulnerable but also at their most self-aware, forcibly brought into close proximity with those life (and death) processes that they must negotiate if they are to cross the threshold.

#### **3.1 “I’m lost in your wherever this is!”: Anisotropic Space and Death**

The first detailed description of The Unknown occurs in the first episode of the television miniseries (“The Old Grist Mill”), when the narrator notes, “Somewhere lost in the clouded annals of history lies a place that few have seen—a mysterious place called The Unknown, where long-forgotten stories are revealed to those who travel through the wood” (McHale 00:01:02–00:01:20). Images of a dense, fog-strewn forest accompany his words, followed by Wirt and Greg attempting to navigate its seemingly endless space. The television miniseries writers Sean Edgar and Patrick McHale first imagined The Unknown in the miniseries pilot, *Tome of the Unknown*, as “the place between life and death, between dreams and reality. American folklore, classic fairy tales, Victorian ghost stories, and dream logic all combine to create a never-ending and

ever-changing landscape full of strange inhabitants” (29), a vision that was kept in the final version of the miniseries and one which in particular emphasises The Unknown’s liminality.<sup>8</sup> However, far from The Unknown operating as the typical liminal folk and fairy tale forest that exists in isolation from the “real” world (being dominant society and its inhabitants), as the canon develops it becomes clear that The Unknown as a setting is far more complex. First and foremost, let me distinguish between the various spaces at work in the canon. The Unknown is the space of banishment, a typical fairy tale-like setting where Wirt and Greg’s numerous fantastical adventures occur. “Home” is the space of closure and is revealed in the ninth episode (“Into the Unknown”) as the “real” world of 1980s America.<sup>9</sup> Between them is the threshold, a space of suspension. Just as The Unknown and home depend on specific conventions for their construction and operation as functional settings, so too does the threshold rely on specific spatial dynamics if it is to operate *as* a threshold. Manuel Aguirre’s work on “geometries of terror” will be helpful here.

Aguirre notes how Gothic fiction situates the threshold or border between the everyday world and the numinous world<sup>10</sup> of the Other *as* “a part of the Other” (5), where “we straddle it [the threshold] pondering whether to cross it or not—and we are

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<sup>8</sup> Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner have discussed liminality on useful terms. In “Betwixt and Between,” Turner is primarily concerned with what van Gennep identifies as the “margin” (or liminal) phase of the *rites de passage* process, with the liminal phase being an intervening period between the separation and aggregation phases in which “the state of the ritual subject (the ‘passenger’) is ambiguous; he passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (47). Turner emphasises that liminality works “as a process, a becoming” (46).

<sup>9</sup> The “realness” of the real world is up for debate given that it is represented as a historical world rather than the contemporary one familiar to the primary canon’s 2010s audience.

<sup>10</sup> See Rudolph Otto’s conceptualisation of the numinous and its manifestation as *das ganz Andere* (“the wholly Other”) in *The Idea of the Holy*.

already on the Other side . . . in treading it [the threshold] we have already entered the Other. We therefore become as fearful of the threshold as we were part of the realm that lies beyond it” (5). The Gothic hero demonstrates “an asymmetry in the relationship between our two spaces [the familiar and the Other]: it is easy to enter the Gothic castle, hard to come out—the reason being that its structure makes the castle’s space, literally or metaphorically, *larger inside than outside*” (6). Put another way, “the Gothic space is anisotropic, i.e., it exhibits different properties in different directions” (6). The space of the threshold in the primary canon is certainly anisotropic when understood in these terms. Encountering or defining the cognitive and affective role of the threshold *as* a threshold between the familiar and the Other (even if the threshold is ultimately part of the Other) depends on the position of Wirt and Greg in relation to place and object. For instance, in the television miniseries, *The Unknown* is constructed as the space of the Other and home as the familiar when Wirt views *The Unknown* as a hostile environment (the place) working in opposition to his goal to escape their banishment (the objective). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the opposite occurs in *Distillatoria*, where home becomes the Other and *The Unknown* as the familiar when it is home that becomes a hostile environment preventing Wirt and Greg from *returning* to their banishment. Let me examine the *Distillatoria* case.

*Distillatoria* opens with Greg, Wirt, and Beatrice once again setting off into *The Unknown*, only for them to lose their bearings in a strange fog that leads to the group tumbling over a precipice and into the waiting waters below. The drowning imagery that follows is an unmistakable call-back to when Wirt and Greg are first revealed to have nearly drowned in the real world in the miniseries episode “Into the Unknown.” However, the drowning imagery is also a reference to the anisotropic space of the

threshold, in that the formal qualities of the space that lays on the other side is dependent on the side from which this space is viewed. For Wirt and Greg in *Distillatoria*, the real world on the other side of the lake is just that—real, familiar, safe, and stable, as exemplified by the appearance of Wirt’s schoolmates who help them out of the lake and Wirt and Greg’s return to their home in the suburbs. For Beatrice, however, who has inexplicably joined Wirt and Greg, this space is undeniably Other, as Beatrice tells Wirt with increasing distress, ““You made it home. Great! But what about me? I never meant to come here with you. This isn’t *my* home! This place is *really weird!*”” (Case). Beatrice has a point here. Beatrice’s breaching of the threshold is the first indication that all is not as it seems in the primary canon. As a magical agent, Beatrice’s presence is only required up to the fulfilment of the hero’s goal of either defeating the villain or fulfilling a lack—the magical agent does not appear to have any significance or play any role after this point in Propp’s morphology, which would account for Beatrice’s absence when Wirt and Greg wake up back in the real world at the end of the television miniseries. The magical agent is bound and defined by the rules of the place it originates from. Beatrice, as a magical agent originating from The Unknown, cannot function within the rules of the real world, for, as Wirt points out, in the real world ““there’s no talking animals here, or magic, or curses, or whatever!”” (Case). What is familiar to Wirt and Greg is grotesque, unstable, and Other to Beatrice despite the fact that all three characters crossed the same threshold in the same way.

For Wirt and Greg, the relief of seemingly resolving their banishment is shortly interrupted by what Aguirre calls the “liminalization of ordinary space” (14), in which characters “vainly strive to reach the end of a seemingly finite construct, only to find that in some obscure but perfectly predictable way the structure is endless *or grows before*

*them* into unsuspected complexities, detours, obstacles—thresholds” (14), which ultimately “deprives it [ordinary space] of solidity, making it less (or more) than real, placing it in between brackets, as it were. Hence both its numinosity and its terror” (14). This is certainly the case in *Distillatoria*, where the stability of the familiar and everyday (intimately linked to the idea of closure) is deliberately troubled, defamiliarized to the extent that it becomes wholly threatening to Wirt and Greg. The truly terrifying aspect of this liminalization begins in Act Two of *Distillatoria*. After Greg and Wirt are re-established in their home and both have gone to bed, Greg wakes up in a panic, recalling the events of the miniseries but interpreting them simply as “bad dreams” (Case). When Greg ventures out of his room, he comes into conflict with three storm clouds passing as angels from the miniseries episode “Babes in the Woods” in the hallway of his home. In “Babes in the Woods,” Wirt, consumed by his dejection at their situation, assigns Greg the responsibility of leader. As the leader, Greg decides that he ““needs to dream up a good way of leading us home”” (McHale, “Babes in the Woods” 00:13:59–00:14:01). And Greg does just that. On the verge of hypothermia and thereby suspended in the murky middle-ground between life and death, Greg’s spirit ascends from his freezing body into Cloud City, where he has the opportunity to ask for one wish from the Queen of the Clouds. Cloud City is a strange, Rubber-hose animation-style take on what a young boy might imagine Christian Heaven to look like. Its angelic inhabitants operate as a metaphor for Greg’s ethos, which is this: in the face of uncertainty, one must default to fairy tale logic where “you can do anything if you set your mind to it” (“Babes in the Woods” 00:13:18–00:13:20), including ignoring the reality of the situation in favour of wish-fulfilment.

While in Cloud City, Greg must defeat the North Wind and his gang of storm clouds in a series of cartoon-like capers if he is to win his wish. In *Distillatoria*, these antagonistic storm clouds appear in the real world initially attempting to impersonate the angels of Cloud City until Greg argues that if they were “*really* angles [sic], you wouldn’t have had the bad manners to come over uninvited!” (Case), at which point the storm clouds slowly peel off their angel appearances in visceral clumps of flesh. They are a much more gruesome representation of the grim reality that undergirds Greg’s otherwise hope-oriented ethos: that Greg’s exaggerated childhood innocence and blind optimism more often than not defers acknowledgement of his internalised fears rather than confronts them. Moreover, their presence in Greg’s home seems to initiate what becomes a rapid distortion of the logic and safety of the real world. More and more of The Unknown begins to infect the real world the closer Wirt and Greg come to succumbing to death via the carnivorous pitcher plant. Initially, Wirt and Greg are too caught up in the euphoria of seeming to have cheated death and returned home to recognise the danger for what it is: they have not resolved their banishment and have instead trapped themselves in a conventional plot driving at a conventional ending. In this conventional plot, Greg’s fairy tale logic can be sustained without question and threats such as the storm clouds are just the left-overs of “bad dreams” that can be encountered without repercussions (Greg overcomes the storm clouds using the same cartoon logic he first used to defeat them in “Babes in the Woods”). Wirt can prove himself as a fairy tale hero who successfully resolved his and his brother’s banishment in The Unknown, who crossed the threshold of The Unknown and re-established stability with their lives still intact, and who is now “completely worthy” (Case) of his romantic interest’s affections. As previously mentioned, Beatrice implores Wirt to “*wake up* and

*live. For you and Greg!’*” (Case) when she realises the precarity of their situation in this conventional plot, but by crossing the threshold, Wirt is now in a space where home is inextricable from the Other.

In the liminal and untethered threshold, signifiers that represent the real world as familiar and stable are inverted, revealing it as unfamiliar and unstable. In the television miniseries, prior to the revelation that Wirt and Greg are not from The Unknown, Wirt’s (and to a lesser extent Greg’s) behaviour, references to the real world, and responses to The Unknown are inconsistent in relation to The Unknown’s implicit rules, expectations, and logic of folk and fairy tale narratology. For example, Wirt demonstrates a pre-existing knowledge of folk and fairy tale conventions in the second episode of the television miniseries, “Hard Times at the Huskin’ Bee,” expressing distrust at “magic talking birds leading us to fairy godmothers in the mysterious [woods]” (McHale, 00:13:03–00:13:06) and choosing to instead rely on what he deems as a familiar, and therefore safe, absolute “truth” to guide his navigation of The Unknown: that there is a rational, coherent system that uses normative binaries to sustain the separation between the familiar and the Other, home and The Unknown. As Marina Warner notes, “the drive to define or delimit ‘home’, to name and circumscribe the abode and the milieu to which one belongs and where one feels safe, leads to naming and defining things—and people—out there beyond the fence, on the other side of the perimeter wire” (328). For Wirt, by distinguishing the familiar from the Other, home from The Unknown, he can construct his sense of identity in structural terms. But the primary canon as a postmodern adaptation specifically constructs The Unknown as a space of irrationality, banishment, and instability in order to trouble Wirt’s attempt to construct his identity through the totalising terms of rationality and closure. While Wirt is suspended in the threshold

between these two settings, he has no choice but to acknowledge the ruptures and gaps that undermine the coherency of the “truth” he adheres to. Beatrice begins this destabilisation by pointing out that, during his banishment, Wirt as a person has developed in such a way that he no longer fits into the real world. She instead comments that, in *The Unknown*, ““you’re like a hero and stuff . . . If I was you I wouldn’t even want to go home”” (McHale, “Lullaby in Frogland” 00:18:55, 00:19:10–00:19:11). Wirt is initially resistant to this idea. However, the more Wirt attempts to cling to the absolute truth that guides him, the more precarious his and Greg’s position in *The Unknown* becomes and, curiously, the more “Other” the concept of home becomes.

For instance, in order to cast doubt onto the entanglement of the concept of home with closure and to maintain the placeless-ness of the banishment function, the primary canon ensures that Wirt and Greg have limited access to any iteration of “home,” such as public establishments and private homes. When the brothers do gain access to these locations, they are either constructed as intruding on or as being intruded upon *by* that space in dangerous or unsettling circumstances. For example, in the sixth episode of the miniseries, “Lullaby in Frogland,” Wirt and Greg encounter the home of the seemingly fairy godmother-like Adelaide of the Pasture. When Wirt and Greg enter Adelaide’s home, a location that until this point has been touted as a safe-haven where the brothers may finally find the way home, they realise that Adelaide’s home and this space of reassuring textiles, soft colours, and cosy warmth are a trap created by Beatrice to rob the brothers of their bodily agency and movement,<sup>11</sup> where Adelaide binds the brothers in a

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<sup>11</sup> It is explained in this episode that Beatrice made an agreement with Adelaide that Beatrice would find two children to help Adelaide with chores in exchange for a pair of scissors that would lift Beatrice’s curse. However, Adelaide reveals that she wants the children—now Wirt and Greg—for child servants, to “fill their heads with wool . . . [to

web made of spools of thread to prevent their escape. Despite his misgivings about being lost in The Unknown, at no point in the space of banishment does Wirt lose his bodily agency. More importantly, in the space of banishment, encounters with death are never *final*, meaning that while the brothers may experience the ontological terror that comes with death, dying, and the afterlife, the actual cessation of life and therefore the cessation of the production of meaning is not possible if banishment rather than death shapes the narrative. Instead, in The Unknown, the multivalence of death can be safely encountered and the play of meaning can continue. Consequently, Adelaide's home, meant to be a space of stability and a sign of closure, is now a space of terror and absolute death, reconstituting elements that make up conventional images of "home" such as domesticity into something monstrous and Other.

Furthermore, in *Distillatoria* it is not the sudden appearance of otherwise unsettling or strange figures of The Unknown in the real world that is constructed as Other—in fact, Wirt and Greg largely respond to these Unknown intrusions with dismissal or apathy—but rather spatial markers of closure and home. One such marker is Sara, Wirt's romantic interest. While in The Unknown, Sara operates as Wirt's tether to the real world. With Wirt returned to the real world, Sara no longer fulfils this function and is gradually subjected to the same liminalization as the space around Wirt as a result. When Wirt begins to acknowledge the ruptures and gaps in the real world first pointed out by Beatrice and thus begins to doubt the conventions that had previously underpinned his ideas of selfhood and home, Sara suddenly becomes monstrously Other,

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become] just like little sheep and follow my every command” (McHale, “Lullaby in Frogland” 00:21:27–00:21:34).

a corrupt, terrifying force that is part Sara and part Edelwood tree.<sup>12</sup> She grows to a monstrous size and begins to destroy the very foundations of Wirt's home, both literally in the sense that she causes immense damage to Wirt and Greg's house and the surrounding area and conceptually in the sense that, by tearing apart the physical image of Wirt's home, Sara tears apart the conventions that Wirt uses to constitute "home." In this anisotropic space of banishment, home is suddenly constructed as a space to be escaped from rather than returned to. In *The Unknown*, there are more possibilities for identity-formation, symbolised by fantastic creatures, whereas in the "real world" the totalising conventions not only limit the possibilities but *inhibit* them through fear—of the death of selfhood rather than the transformation of it. But once again, despite his nostalgia and goal of returning home, Wirt has changed too much for his old conception of the real world they departed from to truly fit into it anymore. As McCort points out, "elements of horror can be viewed as beneficial for young readers and viewers because they encourage children to recognize that there are real dangers in the world they will have to confront, unveiling the terror in the familiar" (22). In this case, the terror in the familiar is the fear of the familiar becoming Other in the brothers' absence, that once-stable notions of home and selfhood are capable of becoming (or have always been) monstrous. While Wirt initially resists the concept of re-crossing the threshold into *The Unknown*, of deferring closure again by acknowledging that the banishment function has not been resolved and that he and Greg are not yet truly prepared to cross the liminal

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<sup>12</sup> Edelwood trees are large, oak-like trees that populate *The Unknown* and which are revealed in the episode "Songs of the Dark Lantern" to be the petrified souls of lost children. The bark of the Edelwood trees is frequently twisted into grotesque faces and human-like shapes, and dark oil oozes from the trees' bark and leaves.

threshold into the real world, the anisotropic effect of the threshold helps Wirt to realise that the alternative is much worse.

Wirt, Greg, and Beatrice escape the pitcher plant and once again find themselves in The Unknown, which has not changed even if they, to a certain extent, have. Curiously, once Wirt and Greg are resituated in The Unknown in *Distillatoria*, there is no mention of their plans to return home, no urge to escape their banishment or to cross the threshold. Instead, there is only the narrator's promise of "more Unknown days to come" (Case) set to the backdrop of a picturesque, comforting sunset among fireflies. As such, there is a clear affective and cognitive shift in how the characters interact with the space of banishment. The threshold between The Unknown and the real world is no longer simply a numinous precipice, but is rather an in-between space in which Wirt, Greg, and Beatrice may use its anisotropic qualities to navigate how they derive meaning from spaces such as home and The Unknown.

## Chapter 4: Archetypes: The Banished, The Threshold-Keeper, and the Bereaved

Propp identified seven archetypes, almost all of which appear in the primary canon but only three of which the primary canon prioritises: the hero, the donor, and the villain. However, as a banishment tale, the primary canon recontextualises these archetypes to better suit its plot and setting, articulating the more liminal aspects of these archetypes in order to comment on or emphasise the centrality of the banishment function and the deferral of closure. More importantly, the primary canon confronts the precarity of stable, universal character archetypes of the hero, donor, and villain established by Propp's morphology by demonstrating how these characters can reflect multiple archetypes at once.

### **4.1 Adapting Propp: Creating the Banished, the Threshold-Keeper, and the Bereaved**

Propp's *dramatis personae* are integral to the overall conceptualization of the morphology, as it is through them that the functions are performed. They are largely static characters whose fixed quality makes them replicable in the memetic distribution of the fairy tale, and if they do exhibit any sort of variability, then it is only for the purpose of more specific categorisation of certain wonder tales, such as the division of the hero into the "hero-seeker" and the "victimized hero."<sup>13</sup> The banishment tale follows suit insofar as it maintains identifiable character types, but it challenges the static quality of the archetypes by subjecting them to the same fluidity and instability inherent to the banishment function. For this reason I have renamed the character archetypes from the

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<sup>13</sup> See Propp, p. 36.

hero, the donor, and the villain to the banished, the threshold-keeper, and the bereaved to better distinguish them from their Proppian sources.

In the banishment tale, the banished is still identifiable as the hero in that they are clearly the protagonist of the narrative, but their motivations and selfhood have shifted slightly to accommodate the banishment function. They remain “that character who either directly suffers from the action of the villain in the complication (the one who senses some kind of lack), or who agrees to liquidate the misfortune or lack of another person” (Propp 50) but, unlike Propp’s hero, who is almost always guaranteed closure as a result of their actions, the banished never receives that closure. They may work toward closure, but it is always deferred. In regard to the threshold-keeper, this character is intimately linked to the Otherness of the threshold as a result of their own inherent liminality. As Propp points out, the donor “is usually encountered accidentally—in the forest, along the roadway, etc.” (39), frequently places, edges, or borders that are transitional in nature, and always appears after the hero is banished or has departed from home. Moreover, it is the threshold-keeper who distributes the magical agent(s) to the banished, implying that the threshold-keeper has access to the world and tools of the Other. Threshold-keepers may be considered as symbols of the Other, such that if they were to appear in a moment when closure seems to have been attained, this would signal that the closure is false. If the threshold-keeper crosses the threshold separating the spaces of banishment and closure, the space on the other side is yet another space of banishment or Otherness, just slightly reconfigured for narrative purposes, or it is an enchantment of some kind, like Wirt and Greg’s home in *Distillatoria*.

In regard to the bereaved, Propp defines the villain’s function as “to disturb the peace of a happy family, to cause some form of misfortune, damage, or harm” (29),

where the act of villainy always precedes the banishment of the hero and the defeat of the villain precedes the hero's return. However, in the banishment tale, nothing precedes the banishment function, which operates as the start and the "end" of the tale as a whole. Instead, the bereaved is the manifestation of the lack or interdiction that would normally propel the hero forward. I chose "the bereaved" as a term in part because the villains of the primary canon's banishment tale are always in some way in a state of loss, or their motivations are centred on loss. The Beast feeds on the banished when they are utterly lost (spatially and psychologically), while the Woodsman is motivated toward his (albeit unknowing) villainy by the loss of his daughter Anna. All three character archetypes—the banished, the threshold-keeper, and the bereaved—are specifically attuned to discourses of death and liminality.

#### **4.2 "You're more lost than you realise": The Banished**

A consistent theme throughout the primary canon is the weight of guilt, loss, and responsibility intensified by the characters' proximity to death and dying and the various structures and ideologies that are conventionally mobilised in order to navigate these sensations, either to succumb to them, like Wirt and the Beast, or to bring them into dialogue with hope and empathy, like Greg, Beatrice, and the Woodsman. Wirt, Greg, Beatrice, the Beast, and the Woodsman present a spectrum of responses to some rather heavy ontological and psychological anxieties, with the primary canon taking care to iterate that there is no one response, no one true solution to how the characters should navigate these kinds of terror. Because there is no guaranteed sense of closure to these fears in the world of the unresolved banishment function, the primary canon asks the characters to instead reassess and redefine where they draw meaning from.

The Woodsman introduces the theme of responsibility when, gesturing to the Beast's lantern that the Beast carries, he tells Wirt, "Everyone has a torch to burn and this here's mine. . . . This is my lot in life, this is my burden" (McHale, "The Old Grist Mill" 00:03:49–00:04:03). Wirt is told by Woodsman that his responsibility is to escape their banishment, though Wirt is clearly unwilling to bear the weight of this responsibility, particularly when it is later revealed that it was Wirt's hubris that led to the brothers' banishment (and drowning) in the first place. As the tale progresses and the precarity of their situation leads to more frequent encounters with dangerous or disruptive forces with no sign of closure in sight, so Wirt grows increasingly hopeless and embittered by their situation. This is a dangerous shift, the inhabitants of The Unknown tell him, for it makes Wirt more susceptible to the Beast's will. As the Woodsman tells the brothers, "Keep high in both body and spirit and you shall be safe from him [the Beast]. Fall ill or lose hope and your life shall pass into his crooked hands" ("The Ringing of the Bell" 00:01:41–00:01:51). Wirt does not heed this warning. In "Babes in the Woods," Wirt and Greg start to exhibit early signs of hypothermia in the frozen, foggy wasteland of The Unknown. Moreover, in this episode, the conventions that Wirt had previously relied on to define himself in relation to the world around him have been well and truly destabilised. Consequently, the combination of the immanence of physical death and the inability to rely on closure as the site of meaning production when closure is constantly deferred results in Wirt yielding to their banishment. Even his speech patterns begin to reflect the looping quality of the space of banishment, demonstrated in the following passage:

Greg? . . . Can we please stop pretending we're gonna get home? . . . Can we admit we're lost for good? This fog is deeper than we can ever understand and we

are but wayward leaves scattered to the air by an indifferent wind. Can we just admit we're never gonna get back home, Greg? Can we do that? ("Babes in the Woods" 00:13:03–00:13:17)

Untethered in this way, Wirt cannot bear the weight of his responsibility to find a way home and succumbs to what is the most terrifying form of death in *The Unknown*: the total annihilation of self by way of consumption by Edelwood trees.

By contrast, Greg's position as the banished tempers the weight of responsibility with hope. Unlike Wirt's pessimism and rapid shifts between attempts to rationalise the encroaching potential of death<sup>14</sup> and romanticise their hopelessness, Greg's optimism and "you can do anything if you set your mind to it" ("Babes in the Woods" 00:13:18–00:13:20) ethos offers a gentler encounter with precariousness. In *Tome of the Unknown*, when Wirt argues that Greg should not find pleasure in *The Unknown* because "we may never get home!" (*Tome of the Unknown*), Greg views their banishment in quite different terms: "Wirt, that doesn't make sense. Either we're gonna get home, and there's no need to worry about anything, or we're *not* gonna get home, and we should just enjoy being here. Right?" (*Tome of the Unknown*). In this moment, Greg fits what Zipes describes as the "wondrous protagonist" (6): "In the wonder tales, those who are naive and simple are able to succeed because they are untainted and can recognize the wondrous signs. They have retained their belief in the miraculous condition of nature, revere nature in all its aspects. They have not been spoiled by conventionalism, power, or rationalism" (6). His similarity to this wondrous protagonist is reiterated in "Babes in the Woods." In this episode, faced with the imminent death, Greg assumes the weight of

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<sup>14</sup> See Zygmunt Bauman's discussion of the rationalisation of death in *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*.

Wirt's responsibility, meaning that it is now up to Greg to find them a way home. However, Greg, as this wondrous protagonist, differs from Wirt in that he finds this way home through the transformative, "miraculous" potential of The Unknown as a space of banishment rather than through the stable, rational quality of closure. His adventures in Cloud City shortly follow, where it is revealed that his wish is to negotiate the possibility of Wirt resolving his banishment, and thus reaching closure, by having Greg take his place in the Beast's "crooked hands." For Greg, a character for whom closure has no bearing on his construction of selfhood or on his motivations as the banished, the outcome of his banishment does not matter, and meaning takes the form of knowing that he gave his brother a chance of redemption.

#### **4.3 "He is the death of hope!": The Threshold-Keeper and the Bereaved**

In opposition to the ideal wonder tale hero, the villain archetype consists of those who "use words intentionally to exploit, control, transfix, incarcerate, and destroy for their benefit. They have no respect or consideration for nature and other human beings, and they actually seek to abuse magic by preventing change and causing everything to be transfixed according to their interests" (Zipes 6). The Beast certainly fits this description at a superficial level, but it is the emphasis on loss as a motivation that identifies him as the bereaved rather than simply a villain. The Tavern Keeper in the episode "Songs of the Dark Lantern" offers this description of the Beast in her song: "He lurks out there in The Unknown, / Seeking those who are far from home, / Hoping never to let you return" (McHale, "Songs of the Dark Lantern" 00:19:15–00:19:26). For the Beast, the terror of banishment and the loss experienced by the banished can be used to his advantage. While the Beast is called "the death of hope" ("The Old Grist Mill" 00:09:35), since his appearance almost always precedes someone becoming an Edelwood tree, he actually

operates as an extension of the banishment function. The Beast goads other bereaved into bearing his lantern by offering to defer closure; the Beast can place what the bereaved has lost into the lantern, thereby keeping its “spirit” alive in the flames of the lantern (the caveat being that those flames must always be kept lit by Edelwood oil) and preventing the “end” of its life. As such, the Beast, though called “the death of hope,” can actually provide some hope (though through less than savoury means). Moreover, the terror of the Beast’s own loss—the loss of his lantern (which is revealed to contain the Beast’s soul)—also operates as a motivation for his bereavement. He too seeks to defer closure.

Beatrice and the Woodsman are tricky characters because they frequently echo both the threshold-keeper and bereaved character types. I have already touched on Beatrice’s role as the threshold-keeper in previous chapters. As the bereaved, Beatrice’s motivations are fuelled by the loss of her family, with Beatrice telling Wirt in episode five of the miniseries (“Mad Love”), ““I am never going back [home] until I can make them human again. I’d do pretty much anything”” (00:06:57–00:07:01). Like the Beast, Beatrice views life and death as a matter of exchange. She justifies her decision to deceive Wirt and Greg by viewing them as simply ““lost kids with no purpose in life”” (“The Old Grist Mill” 00:12:49). To ignore the ethical implications of the loss of two, seemingly purposeless lives in exchange for the chance to bring back multiple lives (her family), Beatrice views teleology through what Zygmunt Bauman calls the “rationalisation” of death, where “death stopped being the entry into another phase of being which it once was; death has been reduced to an *exit* pure and simple, a moment of cessation, an end to all purpose and planning” (Bauman 130). To Beatrice, the end of Wirt and Greg’s narrative arcs is simply that: an end.

The Woodsman also participates (though unwittingly) in this exchange of life for life to defer death. However, unlike Beatrice, the Woodsman is repulsed by the idea of rationalising this exchange, particularly when children's lives are at stake, arguing, "One cannot trade the souls of children as if they were tokens!" (McHale, "The Ringing of the Bell" 00:10:56–00:11:00). The Woodsman cannot rationalise death in the way Beatrice does because he believes in the idea of an afterlife, particularly after the abrupt death of his wife and presumed death of his daughter in *Tome of the Unknown*. As such, the Woodsman's bereavement brings into question the lengths to which he and other bereaved are willing to go to remember or preserve the (after)life of the dead or lost. The Woodsman's responsibility is this: to preserve the soul and memory of his daughter, he must sustain the light of the Beast's lantern by the foul oil of the Edelwood trees. His loss motivates him to (albeit unintentionally) commit what is otherwise an ethically questionable act by cutting down the petrified souls of children and feeding them to the lantern, allowing the Beast to consume the children by proxy. When the Beast reveals the true nature of the Edelwood trees, the Woodsman argues that had he known where the trees originated, he would not have continued his bereavement plot. To this the Beast asks two chilling questions: "Would it have mattered? Would you have just let your daughter's spirit burn out forever?" ("The Unknown" 00:15:10–00:15:15).

The same implication is directed toward Wirt, who, upon discovering that Greg had switched their places and that Greg is slowly being consumed by Edelwood, is offered the choice to become the new lantern-bearer for the Beast in order to sustain Greg's memory and spirit, even if Greg's body dies: "As long as the flame stays lit, he will live on inside. Take on the task of lantern bearer? Or watch your brother perish?" ("The Unknown" 00:17:47–00:17:57). There is a brief moment where Wirt,

overwhelmed by grief and regret, considers becoming the bereaved like the Woodsman. Unlike the Woodsman, Wirt would become this new character type with full knowledge of the ethical implications of cutting down the Edelwood trees. In a reversal of Beatrice's bereavement plot, Wirt's bereavement plot would facilitate the loss of multiple souls (the souls of the petrified children that make up the Edelwood trees) in exchange for the deferral of the loss of one soul (Greg's). Wirt would be able to defer the closure of Greg's narrative arc, but at what cost? Instead, Wirt must re-evaluate how he finds meaning in the narrative. He can no longer find meaning in closure because closure engenders the death of his brother; however, he cannot find meaning in the *deferral* of closure either, for this deferral is dependent on his shift to the ethically dubious bereaved plot. Rather, Wirt must find meaning in banishment itself, which necessitates his return to the banished plot and his return to the very place he initially sought to escape: The Unknown. Armed with this knowledge, Wirt frees what remains of Greg's body and soul from the Edelwood before Greg is totally consumed and enters The Unknown once more. As the banished, the brothers' banishment is never resolved because closure is deferred indefinitely; however, there is meaning to be made in being lost together.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Rather than adhering to the conventional plots and characters in fairy tales established by scholars such as Vladimir Propp, the primary canon calls into question the role of endings in these tales. To do so, the primary canon creates the banishment tale, a postmodern adaptation of the conventions of the Proppian fairy tale that centralises the banishment function and defers closure. The banishment tale interrogates how such conventions assign the production of meaning to closure not only by deferring closure, but also by adapting certain structural features of the Proppian tale—plot, setting, and character archetypes—to reflect the liminality of the banishment function in order to ask its characters to find meaning in that liminality and all its terror rather than in closure. Despite its sometimes bleak nature, the primary canon is ultimately a banishment tale that creates a relationship between hope and terror—of finding or making hope in a way that engages death as a multivalent, multi-purpose component of meaning-making outside of the stronghold of conventional fairy tales.

### **5.1 Places for Expansion and Implications of the Study**

This project was in large part motivated by the lack of scholarship on the *Over the Garden Wall* graphic novels after the publication of the television miniseries. However, due to constraints in scope, I was unable to incorporate the whole corpus of the *Over the Garden Wall* canon into my discussion, and as such many places for future expansion are centred on the graphic novels that I did not analyse. Additionally, there is room to consider the role of visuality in the primary canon and the larger *Over the Garden Wall* canon. As mentioned in the Introduction, the miniseries' reception was largely positive, with many reviewers admiring *Over the Garden Wall* for its whimsical mood, music (provided by the folk band The Blasting Company), unusual characters, and

aesthetic. While the graphic novels sustain the tone and general appearance of the miniseries (particularly *Tome of the Unknown* and *Distillatoria*, which are both illustrated by Jim Campbell, one of the main storyboard artists for the miniseries), the introduction of different illustration artists for each issue of the 2016–2017 graphic novel series and the standalone graphic novels provides a new lens through which to view the primary canon as a whole, particularly in terms of visuality and character-specific representation of certain themes.

Nevertheless, this thesis has demonstrated the discursive potential of the banishment function in postmodern works such as the primary canon that specifically target fairy-tale conventions. This paper foregrounds Propp's morphology to demonstrate how Propp enables us to evaluate what narrative conventions are still in circulation or are radically changed as part of contemporary children's literature and media's interest in structural play. In the primary canon, as the centralisation of the banishment function defers closure, it defers the cessation of the production of meaning that the ending of a narrative usually entails by suspending the narrative in a loop where there *is* no end, thereby facilitating the endless play of meaning for its characters. Moreover, this paper has shown how contemporary children's literature and media such as the primary canon adapt conventions established by Propp's morphology to advance certain discussions or topics. Thus, the primary canon centralises the banishment function of Propp's morphology precisely because the function's association with liminality, instability, and the possibility for change allows the primary canon to engage in an open-ended discussion about discourses of death without the primary canon dictating one, "true" response to these discourses.

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