

“THERE IS ONLY SURRENDER”: OVER THE GARDEN WALL’S PORTRAYAL  
OF ANXIETY AND GUILT

by

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“There is only surrender”: Over the Garden Wall’s portrayal of anxiety and guilt

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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to my family for all their love and support, and to my thesis director Dr. Teresa Michals for her hard work and patience.

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## ABSTRACT

“THERE IS ONLY SURRENDER”: OVER THE GARDEN WALL’S PORTRAYAL OF ANXIETY AND GUILT

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This thesis examines the 10-episode Cartoon Network miniseries *Over the Garden Wall* in light of previous children’s literature and media. In particular, it investigates how chronic anxiety is portrayed in its teenage male protagonist. By reading the miniseries through a mental health framework rather than an exclusively moral one, this thesis explores the ways in which *Over the Garden Wall* presents male anxiety sympathetically as opposed to labeling it as a cowardly failing the protagonist must overcome. It compares this chronic male anxiety with the focus of female characters’ emotional lives: a determinate process of guilt and atonement. Though these emotions do intersect, the plot emphasizes the *male* character’s anxiety and the *female* characters’ guilt, which is unusual for children’s media. By addressing how the male and female characters are portrayed in regards to these particular emotions, this thesis hopes to encourage exploration of an otherwise understudied element in children’s literature.

## INTRODUCTION

### Discussing Fear and Gender in Children's Literature

Many stories for children center on their characters' relationship with fear. This is true both in contemporary print literature and in media such as film and television, despite the many differences between these forms. This project reads contemporary children's TV serial *Over the Garden Wall* in the context of prior representations of fear and gender in the traditional boys' adventure story. *Over the Garden Wall* (OTGW) is a 10 part animated miniseries created by Patrick McHale that aired on Cartoon Network in November 2014. The show stars two brothers who travel through a dangerous world far away from their 1980s home, and deal with all of the perils they encounter. With its focus on the boys experiencing adventures on their journey home, it is a contemporary version of the boys' adventure story with a fairy tale twist. This project wishes to explore *Over the Garden Wall's* unusual portrayal of the intersections of gender and fear within a work that is primarily considered part of children's media.

Since the late nineteenth-century, gender and fear have had a complicated relationship in children's literature. In general, the more strongly a story advocates for gender difference, the more true external danger it will contain—and the more decisively it will refuse to explore complex internal emotional states. As Claudia Nelson has shown in *Boys Will Be Girls*, Victorian school novels, for example, focus on the internal lives of

their child characters. They tend towards a “pseudodomestic setting” and create stories that are “didactic and frequently aimed at a dual-gender audience” (Nelson, 117). Boys and girls in these stories and in their intended audiences are treated rather equally. These stories center on an “evangelical code of introspection and selflessness” which both genders in and out of the story are expected to attempt to aspire to (Nelson, 117). Moreover, these characters rarely encounter external danger: instead, their adventures consist of exploring their internal moral life within a more domestic setting. These stories encourage internal considerations, but these considerations do not necessarily center on issues of fear and anxiety so much as issues of virtue and guilt.

In comparison, the Victorian boy’s adventure story is all about a child confronting true external dangers in the world outside of the home, often at the expense of rich internal reflection on the protagonist’s part. As Nelson observes, this genre also departs from the school story’s “ambiguous treatment of gender” (117). Boy’s adventure stories “have nothing but admiration for the extroverted boy who gets out and acts, and nothing but contempt for his introverted brother who stays home and thinks,” as thinking and introversion are unnecessary “if a boy leads an exciting life” (117). Nelson describes a shift from androgynous treatments of boys and towards an understanding of boys as something entirely different from girls—of masculinity as something entirely different from femininity. According to Nelson, adventure stories from the late 19th century “devalue the feminine ethical system that more respectable works promote and replace it with Darwinian masculinity at its bloodiest” (127). In the adventure story’s female characters, fear is often considered gender-appropriate and tied to a sense that a girl’s

rightful place is in the home and out of the danger the boys seek. Generally, these stories do not require female characters to conquer their fearfulness; instead they learn to rely on a male protector or to avoid danger. Although children's literature continues to evolve in the modern day, understanding the long-lived boy's adventure story formula and its tendency to place active, courageous, and unreflective boys at its forefront is a good place to start investigating how fear and gender are represented in children's literature (127).

The major critical discussion surrounding fear in children's literature focuses, in fact, on fear outside of literature. Rather than looking in depth at the way these texts represent fear in their characters, critics tend to concentrate on the possible traumatic danger or therapeutic benefits of inducing fear in young readers. For example, in his Caldecott Medal acceptance speech, Maurice Sendak responds as a whole to the question of why he would create a "crazy, scary" children's book like *Where the Wild Things Are*. He suggests that while we should only "avoid frightening children" in the sense that we should "[protect] them from experiences beyond their capabilities," avoiding frightening subject matter altogether "denies the child's battle with disturbing emotions" (145, 153-154). In coming to this conclusion, Sendak acknowledges the fact that his characters, too, deal with these "disturbing emotions." In particular, he notes that all his characters "need to master the uncontrollable and frightening aspects of their lives" (152). His real goal, however, is addressing the concerns adults have about the frightened children reading about these characters. Further, Sendak names Max as his "bravest...creation": even as he addresses the potential fear of his readers, he strikes his most famous creation from the list of possible examples of fearful characters in children's literature (152).

This project acknowledges this existing conversation surrounding the effects of frightful stories on children while keeping its focus on the way fear and anxiety is represented in characters. Fearful and anxious characters themselves remain understudied, but many authors and critics have addressed concerns about the effects of fear on children readers. Sendak is joined by fellow author Catherine Storr. In her talk on “Fear and Evil in Children’s Books”, she explains why she believes that “horror and fear are necessary to children” (31). Critic Jackie E. Stallcup distinguishes between “bibliotherapy” inherent in “modern ‘fear-alleviating’ books” as opposed to “eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts [that] were designed to frighten young readers into obedience” (125). Jennifer Sattaur’s article on societal fear in *Harry Potter* focuses more on the moral issue of characters who are fearful of a black-and-white definition of evil and comparisons to real-world terrorism than on what it means that these characters are fearful. Even Karen Coats’ chapter on Neil Gaiman’s works in *The Gothic in Children’s Literature*, which briefly discusses character’s fear, ultimately focuses on the audience of “outwardly stable, well-loved children” Gaiman’s stories are meant for (91). Finally, none of these authors discuss any aspect of gender in conjunction with fear, even in regards to child readers. This project recognizes the intersection of gender, fear, and character depiction as an area that has been understudied and intends to both contribute and stimulate further discussion.

*Over the Garden Wall* serves as a remarkable example of children’s media for its positive portrayal of its protagonist Wirt, who is a chronically anxious teenage boy. Since the beginning of the twentieth-century, the requirement for girls to stay out of trouble has

gradually decreased, to the point that most 21st century children's media would scoff at the idea of girls being left out of the danger of an adventure simply because they are girls. Less has changed for male protagonists. In contrast to the increased portrayal of girls as brave heroines, movement towards allowing boys to deal with fear without facing the moral judgment inherent in labeling it cowardice has been slower. The way that *OTGW* presents Wirt's anxiety as an ongoing challenge to cope with makes it stand apart from previous examples of fearful characters in children's literature, especially fearful boys.

Stories that deal with fear tend to rely on two different sets of assumptions. They either place the characters within a moral framework wherein cowardice is a vice in minor characters and an even more shameful failure in major ones, or frameworks based on psychological development that present fear as a natural but childish feeling which the protagonist will soon outgrow. The outliers to these two frameworks are comic male characters, as they can demonstrate cowardice as a running gag, rather than as a struggle the audience is expected to take seriously. The humor of *Scooby Doo, Where Are You!* depends on Shaggy, the fearful teen, and his equally cowardly Great Dane Scooby-Doo. More often, serious protagonists—or, more accurately, serious male protagonists—have been required to triumph over the weakness of cowardice by the story's end. For example, Edmund in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, makes cowardly decisions based on his fear of the White Witch, and must redeem himself through Aslan's grace to be accepted back into his family. Historically, society has encouraged moral condemnation of cowardice, but as time goes on, more medical and less stigmatic language is being used. In his historical study of cowardice in the military, Chris Walsh

explains how cowardice has become “less a cause for shame” as “medical vocabulary, and the diagnostic, therapeutic trend of which it is a part” have gained prominence in the 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-centuries (132). This trend extends to civilians, and to children’s literature as well. As discussed above, when contemporary children’s literature does concern itself with the experience of fear, it generally does so out of a desire to protect children from unpleasant feelings, not to shame them out of being cowards. This project works with an awareness of the implied relationship between audience and story, but it is not a reception or reader-response study. Instead, this thesis intends to discuss how the therapeutic trends Walsh describes shape representations of characters’ experience of fear and anxiety in children’s literature.

This project also focuses on chronic anxiety rather than discrete fear. Most children’s literature that attempts to instruct its intended audience on methods of dealing with fear rarely deal with ongoing anxiety so much as momentary fears (Stallcup). Generally, momentary fears are more acceptable within narratives. Additionally, boys are more and more encouraged to express their feelings in general, and it is much less likely that a boy in a children’s story will be outright described as a coward by the narrative. This is especially true if it is truly fear that the character experiences. Fear as an instinctive response to an externally perceived danger has always been acceptable emotion among boys, so long as that fear is temporary and based on a true danger. For example, Jim’s fear in *Treasure Island* is not baseless and leads him to engage in heroic actions. Therefore he is not considered a coward, even though he continues to have nightmares years after his adventures have ended. It is anxiety—chronic fearful feelings

borne out of one's internal thought processes—that both older and newer texts have trouble accepting in young male characters. Although they might not be considered cowards by the narrative or by other characters, these anxious male characters are more often than not relegated to the wings, and the visibility of their character development arc is limited. Anxious Neville Longbottom may be a major character in the *Harry Potter* series, but he is not Harry Potter himself. Although Neville does eventually find the courage expected of him, he and his anxious—and, often, more feminine—ways remain a backdrop to Harry's heroics. Children's literature and media has come a long way in regards to its treatment of gender, but boys are still not quite allowed to take center stage and feel chronic anxiety at the same time.

If a character is anxious and prominent, they are likely female. Although Hermione in the *Harry Potter* series is most certainly a brave Gryffindor, so too is she someone who worries endlessly about her grades even as life-or-death adventures take place. While this is, to an extent, played for laughs, this sort of characterization is still much more typical of female characters. Still, this demonstrates how portrayals have evolved from prior examples such as the nearly totally helpless Snow White in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, who runs screaming from her own imaginary dangers. *Over the Garden Wall* builds upon and beyond Snow White's mindless fear and Hermione's misplaced worries and portrays female characters whose concerns are largely external. Beatrice, the girl cursed as a bluebird, and Lorna, who is possessed by a monster that forces her to eat people, struggle with guilt over the things they have done rather than



with anxiety or fear. Despite the legitimate moral judgments implied in these examples, the show still portrays even these struggles primarily through a mental health framework.

### **Over the Garden Wall's Distinctions**

By treating anxiety primarily as a mental illness rather than a moral failing or a joke meant for comic relief, *Over the Garden Wall* can act out issues of personal and social acceptance, as well as personal growth. If the show relied on an older moral framework, it would likely ask the audience to laugh at someone's fear at best, or punish the fearful boy and demand reformation at worst. By making its anxious protagonist a teenage male, *OTGW* draws attention to the fact that previous children's media presentations of the issues of anxiety and fear are strongly marked by gender difference. Finally, by depicting issues of guilt in its female protagonists as emotional struggles to be dealt with rather than deserved punishments for transgressions, the show further distinguishes itself as an example of how mental health can be treated in literature and media intended for children.

*Over the Garden Wall* resembles much 20th- and 21st-century work for children in rejecting the earlier framework of cowardice in favor of a psychological understanding of fear and anxiety. However, it goes even farther than its contemporaries by focusing on the issue of chronic anxiety in its main male protagonist. This is reflected in the story's setting as well as its plot. The series centers on two brothers who have become lost in the woods and, over the course of the series, try to find their way home. In their search, the boys encounter numerous fantastical characters, and discover that they have not simply stumbled into a forest but into another world entirely. This world is called the Unknown,

and it is an in-between place. Patrick McHale, the series creator, describes the Unknown in terms that suggest strong interest both in fantasy and in psychology, particularly dream states, memory, and the unconscious. He explains that the Unknown is a place that is

“about reality versus fantasy, and about dreams versus wakefulness. The

Unknown is literally the unknown. There are stories that were once told, and are gone forever. Words that have been spoken and forgotten. Ideas that have been thought, but lost...The Unknown is all that stuff” (McHale).

Aligning with these ideas, the boys enter the Unknown when they nearly drown and are, therefore, unconscious for the duration of the story. Of course, this in-between nature of the Unknown invokes an even older moral framework: this world is a sort of Purgatory. It is a place where error must be overcome through some amount of suffering and journeying, an idea which McHale invokes by naming the character who guides the boys Beatrice. Overall, however, the Unknown is not quite as simple as a straightforward journey through Purgatory to moral redemption. *Over the Garden Wall* tackles a world of grey areas and blurred lines, and does so while addressing issues of mental health that are, themselves, not as easy as black-and-white. Additionally, while the show drops hints that the boys' minds impact the way the Unknown works, it cannot be reduced to a journey through their minds or dreams. The Unknown seems to exist independently from these boys and continue on without them, implying that it is a secondary magical world and not just a dream.

That said, the character's minds and mental experiences are what make the show distinct from previous examples of children's literature and media that deal with fear,

anxiety, and guilt. Wirt develops from a self-involved young man who frets rather than acts, to a caring older brother who is willing to take risks he had never considered before, no matter how anxious he may feel. Beatrice's experience of guilt over her own wrongdoing is also distinct from those previously offered in children's literature and media. *OTGW* reverses expectations in giving the male character anxiety to cope with and the female character specific actions to atone for, rather than the other way around. Neither situation is unheard of individually, but placing them in juxtaposition with each other highlights the rarity of these configurations of character struggle and gender, particularly in media meant for children. By presenting Wirt's anxiety as something he merely learns to cope with better rather than overcome entirely, the show invokes mental health rather than morality. At the same time, the narrative has no problem observing that Beatrice has done morally wrong things. Shifting the moral lens to Beatrice's arc gives her story an association with reason and rationality that is typically reserved for male or masculine characters, whereas Wirt's learning to better manage his emotions is an arc almost never given to male characters—unless they are coping with anger as Max famously does in *Where the Wild Things Are*.

## **Methodology**

This project is organized into two major chapters. The first focuses largely on what makes the treatment of anxiety in *OTGW*'s main character Wirt so distinct. It does this largely through a comparison with *Scooby-Doo Where Are You!*, which *OTGW* happily pays homage to even as it moves beyond it. Beyond comparing and contrasting

the show with its predecessor, this chapter consists of a close-reading of Wirt's character arc and how his growth represents a distinctive treatment of teenage male anxiety. The second chapter builds upon this investigation by turning to two of the female characters in *OTGW*, Beatrice and Lorna. It argues that the way their negative emotions are represented is not only remarkable in its own right, but also highlights what is distinctive about the representation of male anxiety in Wirt. This chapter compares and contrasts these characters with treatments of fear, anxiety, and guilt in Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Lastly, this thesis includes a short coda discussing issues of audience in regards to additionally released materials and fan works for *Over the Garden Wall*.

It should also be noted at this juncture that, although there are brief discussions of the visual aspects of all three animated works, this thesis primarily focuses on plot and characterization. The figures that are included more often illustrate a plot point than comment upon the visual elements at play. The scope of this project only allows for tangential discussion of issues of imagery and animation that more strictly film or animation studies readings will hopefully explore in the future.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study will use the critical lens introduced by two major theoretical sources within the purview of children's literature and animation. The first, Perry Nodelman's *Hidden Adult*, not only provides a wealth of thought on the definition of children's literature, but also serves as a methodological model for this project, as will be discussed later in this section. The second major source, Alan Cholodenko, is the first major

theorist on animation studies. Cholodenko draws on ontology and metaphysics in his discussion of how animation demonstrates “The Illusion of the Beginning”.

Cholodenko’s theory not only acts as support through its focus on animation, but more specifically how it supports this project in expressing issues of in-betweeness—an important theme in *OTGW*.

Nodelman argues that adult ideals of children are the driving force behind the literature that adults create for children. He claims that this relation between author and audience defines children’s literature as a genre. Children’s literature is

“a specific genre of fiction whose defining characteristics seem to transcend specifics of time and place, cut across other generic categories such as fantasy or realism and even remain consistent despite variations in the ages of intended audiences” (81).

What is most important for the purposes of this project is Nodelman’s belief that what ultimately defines a piece of work as children’s literature is an intended audience of people who are considered children, whose difference in age from the author’s own is considered “a matter of significance” (81).

McHale himself insists that the show is for “EVERYONE” (“Behind the Potatoes and Molasses”). While this claim obviously includes children, it makes it clear that McHale imagines an audience for his work that just as equally includes adults. This project acknowledges the creator’s interest in a mixed-age audience, but narrows its scope to investigate the serials’ meaning in the context of children’s literature and cartoons aimed primarily at children. This decision is based on the network and timeslot

in which the show first appeared. The serial was originally broadcast by Cartoon Network, which targets viewers between the ages of seven and sixteen, rather than networks like Adult Swim or Comedy Central, which air cartoons aimed at older viewers at later times of night (“Adult Swim/CN Split”). Thus, although McHale imagined adults among his viewership (and, as the coda discusses, was right to do so) this project weighs the context in which the show was initially presented more heavily for the purposes of forming an understanding of the show.

Nodelman’s *Hidden Adult* explores how children’s literature is grounded in adult standards. He believes that children’s literature “offers both what adults think children will like and what adults want them to need, but it does so always in order to satisfy adults’ needs in regard to children” (242). This idea is the key to Nodelman’s theory of the “Hidden Adult”. He states that,

“The unconscious of a text of children’s literature is the adult consciousness...so children’s literature can be understood as simple literature that communicates by means of reference to a complex repertoire of unspoken but implied adult knowledge” (206).

It is important to consider the adult world that children’s literature—including visual media such as cartoons—is created in. Thus, although the creators of *OTGW* had both older viewers and children in mind, the things they chose to include or not include reflect a certain image of what children both want and need. In investigating the show’s treatment of the complex emotions of anxiety and guilt in children, this project therefore investigates the adult image of the wants and needs of children that the show implies.

This project also mimics Nodelman's organizational structure. In *Hidden Adult*, Nodelman begins his project by exploring a few key texts as examples of his particular viewpoint on the definition of children's literature (1-81). The examples he chooses range across time and subgenres of children's literature, but demonstrate different aspects of his argument while equally proving his overall point. This project intends to mimic this structure by choosing a handful of key examples to compare to its reading of *Over the Garden Wall*. Although Nodelman devotes an entire chapter to introductory readings of each of his example texts, the focus on *OTGW* in this project is better served by direct comparisons within its chapters.

Where Nodelman's theory suggests origins and history, Cholodenko's theory of animation stays more present and active. The particular essay that informs this project, "'The Illusion of the Beginning'", discusses the difficulties raised in isolating the true beginning of a piece of artwork, particularly in the case of animation. Invoking Borges, Derrida, and Baudrillard, Cholodenko founded animation studies on the idea that "Insofar as animation has to do with endowing with life and with motion, it bears a privileged relation to the beginning" ("The Illusion of the Beginning"). That is, the life-giving quality inherent in animation helps it to illustrate how art is not created in a vacuum. Any piece of art that is created reflects the ideas and symbols already present in the world at its time of creation such that it is impossible to pinpoint the exact, true beginning of any individual piece. Although it might seem easy enough to say that the true beginning of an animation as an animation is when it is able to move, animation is a multipart process. Even if we went all the way back to the first concept sketch, Cholodenko suggests that

“In drawing, in the drawing of anything, the sketcher is at all times being drawn in ways that exceed him” (“The Illusion of the Beginning”). Artists are influenced by their teachers, their inspirations, and simply (although possibly most profoundly) by the world of symbols and ideas that they are exposed to within their society. Additionally, animation is unique in its presentation of images that do not literally move but merely seem to due to the illusion of consecutive frames. Cholodenko argues that in “Articulating the animate upon the inanimate, animation draws drawing, that is, draws death to life and life to death at the same time, as it simultaneously draws motionlessness into motion and motion into motionlessness” (“The Illusion of the Beginning”). Animation is, essentially, paradoxical. It is both alive and dead. This is so relevant to the story of *Over the Garden Wall*—which details the ongoing adventures two boys encounter while at the point of drowning—that it almost could not be told in any other form. This project takes Cholodenko’s theory into account in its understanding of the in-betweenness at the heart of *OTGW*’s story.

Additionally, this project also combines Cholodenko’s theory with Nodelman’s to create a unique understanding of animation meant for children. Because shows like *Over the Garden Wall* pull from so many sources, it is impossible to isolate any one origin for its treatment of the issues of complex teenage emotions. Although there is no question that adults’ control plays into the choices made in creating and marketing this series, and influence its consumption by children, the fact is that all adults were children once. More particularly, the creators of *OTGW* were teenagers and children in the 1980s, and that is the time period in which Wirt and Greg’s homeworld is set. Thus, although they are now



adults, it is likely that at least some of what makes up *OTGW* comes from a childlike source. The show, as McHale says, is for everyone—including the child he once was. Separating out the inspiration and choices that are made from a totally adult perspective from those influenced by the children the creators remember being would be as impossible as deciding what the true beginning of the creation of *Over the Garden Wall* was. We can certainly point to predecessors and other factors that influenced what *OTGW* became, but we can never truly settle on a single thing that sparked the entire process. The best we can do is discuss what *OTGW* has begun to do differently from its predecessors and thereby begin a discussion of how this reflects what has changed in the world since these predecessors were created. This is what this project intends to do.

Beyond the world of the arts, this thesis also largely reads *OTGW* through a mental health framework, and looks to psychopathologist Peter Muris for guidance. Children's literature in general has moved towards presenting children characters through psychological lenses more than moral ones. Kristin N. Taylor observes a shift from viewing children as "miniature adults" towards viewing them as "complex beings with unique needs that differed from their adult counterparts and whose development was undoubtedly worthy of study" in her reading of sentimentality in *The Wizard of Oz* (380). She notes that while "we can never know for certain if Baum was familiar with such psychological literature, his children's novel can be interpreted as a part of the emerging emphasis on the child's emotional well-being" (381). Similarly, while we cannot be certain of *OTGW*'s creators' awareness of anxiety as defined by mental health professionals, their efforts reflect a shift in the way literature and media understand and

portray children's mental health. Readings of Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, a story with many thematic and aesthetic similarities to *OTGW*, by Richard Gooding as well as Kara K. Keeling and Scott T. Pollard also emphasize the title character's psychological development as a child ("Coraline, Uncanniness, and Narrative Form", "Food and Orality in Coraline"). While reading literature through psychological frameworks is not new, the increased emphasis on psychological development in child characters is symptomatic of a shift in the literature itself.

Thus, this project's interest in anxiety and guilt continues this trend. Truthfully, the show could be read through a number of psychological frameworks with varying levels of success. The status of the main characters' family set-up—the boys are half-brothers, and Greg's father is Wirt's step-father—could easily suggest psychoanalytical readings of Wirt's anxiety and relationship with his less typical family set-up, for example. Similarly, more emphasis could be placed on how Wirt's anxiety intersects with his status as a male teenager, leading to a reading more directly centered on gender and sexuality as the key to Wirt's anxiety. It was necessary in forming this project to narrow its scope in order to avoid discussing all these possible ways in which a psychological reading could be applied to *OTGW*'s story.

For the purposes of this project, which is also interested in the unusual ways in which the serial represents the female characters' guilt, it was important to find a framework that considered both anxiety and guilt at the same time, just as the serial does. Further, Peter Muris' work grounds this project in actual psychological theories of guilt and anxiety in children in particular. Muris' work centers on issues of anxiety, guilt, and

shame in children and adolescents, and his studies help to define the symptoms represented in the characters in *OTGW* (“Guilt, Shame, and Psychopathology in Children and Adolescents,” “Relations Among Behavioral Inhibition, Shame- and Guilt-Proneness, and Anxiety Disorders Symptoms in Non-Clinical Children”). These studies also help to demonstrate a few key principles that this project builds its case around. First, in “Relations Among Behavioral Inhibition, Shame- and Guilt-Proneness, and Anxiety Disorders Symptoms in Non-clinical Children”, Muris and his colleagues identify “significant gender differences”—namely that girls tend to report more guilt, shame, and anxiety symptoms than boys do (211). Note that this particular study was done through self-report questionnaires, and that some of the items the children were asked to respond to might be things that children would not want to admit to. In particular, the statements in the Behavioral Inhibition Questionnaire, such as “I am shy when first meeting new children” and “I get upset when being left in new situations for the first time”, may be the sorts of things that any child would be hesitant to admit to (210). The fact that more girls admitted to having the anxious or guilt/shame-related thoughts and feelings indicated by the questionnaires might just imply that more girls thought these were acceptable things to acknowledge. This concern aligns with this thesis’ belief that, generally, culture leads boys to believe that feelings of anxiety are not masculine and therefore should be hidden or ignored. Although it does not address the effect of cultural expectations on self-perception or presentation, Muris’ work at the very least highlights that there is a significant difference between the genders in young people when it comes to self-reported feelings of anxiety, shame, and guilt. Additionally, despite

the fact that Muris' studies tend to focus on children from the ages of 8-13, I believe their terms are also useful for examining Wirt as a slightly older character. Secondly, Muris' work identifies correlation between issues of anxiety and shame in children that is higher than the correlation between issues of anxiety and guilt ("Guilt, Shame, and Psychopathology"). Muris and his colleagues define guilt as being "concerned with a negative evaluation of a specific behavior", whereas shame is defined as a "negative evaluation of the global self"—"I did *that* wrong" versus "*I* did that wrong" ("Relations Among"). This aligns with this thesis' reading of the characters of Wirt, Beatrice, and Lorna. Wirt is anxious, and feels ashamed of his hobbies and how they do not live up to traditional masculinity. His emotional life is internally focused due to his anxious nature. Beatrice feels guilty about causing her family to be cursed and for misleading the boys, but she is not, at heart, an anxious person, and keeps her focus external. Lorna feels both guilt for having hurt people and shame for being a "monster", but because she is a minor character, the issue of anxiety is not explored.

It is important to note that although this project wishes to read these issues through a psychological framework, it is not possible to totally abandon moral concerns. Both Beatrice and Lorna are presented as characters who have done bad things, and their guilt for doing these things is presented as appropriate. In this way, the serial does operate within a moral framework: there are clear rights and wrongs, and the show does reveals a didactic impulse in its portrayal of these characters learning from their mistakes. However, the plot does not center on these moral questions, but rather on the question of how to cope with uncertainty and with the anxiety this uncertainty brings. By reading the

serial through a primarily psychological framework which takes Muris' findings in regards to gender into account, this project is able to keep the focus on the issues the show itself seems most interested in. Ultimately, although the show does have a moral compass, and while it does conclude with characters having learned lessons, it does so by acknowledging the psychological development these characters are going through both due to mental illness and due to their being children. Where earlier media used labels such as coward to expedite this process and have characters move from being "cowards" to "not-cowards" neatly, *OTGW* ends with the sense that these characters will continue to learn and grow after the show ends, which aligns much more closely with modern psychology's understanding of mental health as an ongoing project rather than a more black-and-white moral structure.

In terms of gender, it is particularly striking that the plot of *OTGW* rejects shame over who one is as a useful prompt to moral reformation. Unlike his predecessors in children's media, Wirt is presented as an anxious male character who needs to learn to manage uncertainty a bit better. He is not labeled a coward or shamed into a redemption arc as is Edmund in *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. According to Muris' definitions, the male characters that are shamed in these older texts appear to feel guilt in addition to or instead of shame, even as they proceed to atone for their sins because others label them as bad, fallen people. In any case, boys who are labeled as "bad" try to make up for this differ greatly from Wirt's arc, where he learns how to better cope with his anxiety symptoms. Wirt's struggle with uncertainty predates his larger mistakes in the serial, and thus although guilt might contribute to his motivation, his growth is not

entirely based on it. Ultimately, although he feels momentary guilt as anyone might, this emotion is not key to his development as a character the way it is for the girls.

That said, Wirt's experience of shame at the end of the series is still significant. In the final episodes, Wirt's guilt at continued mistakes turns into shame at being a person who makes such mistakes. When Wirt feels this shame, it is a crippling emotion that actually prevents growth, rather than an appropriate punishment that motivates reformation. The fact that Muris' work defines guilt as the emotion that leads to attempts to amend the situation and shame as something more paralyzing supports a more psychological reading of *OTGW*. Thus, if anything, Wirt feels shame more than guilt. In both Muris and *OTGW*, guilt is borne out of a person's own realization that they have violated their own morals, if not a larger group's morals as well. Beatrice and Lorna feel guilt, but Wirt moves quickly through guilt into shame by blaming himself, which serves as a symptom of his anxiety, not of a morally justified punishment within a more didactic framework.

By disassociating Wirt, the boy, from guilt, and instead associating the female characters with guilt, *OTGW* further defines Wirt as a character who is not meant to be a stand-in for the audience through which children learn a moral lesson. The audience is meant to identify with Wirt, but they are not meant to follow Wirt's story and learn the lesson that cowardice is a moral failing. Instead, viewers are made to sympathize with Wirt and his struggle with anxiety as a mental illness.

This project ultimately argues that this show demonstrates an overall movement in children's media towards presenting moral failings as symptoms of psychological

development rather than two-dimensional cowardice and evil. Wirt is anxious, not a condemned coward. Beatrice makes mistakes and feels guilty for them, but is never made out to be evil. When the characters do bad things, they do so because of mental illness or simple immaturity, and the consequences the characters encounter are proportionate. *OTGW*'s narrative emphasizes growing and learning, and does not overtly punish or reward the characters so much as allow them to recognize their own failings and improvement. Like much contemporary work for children, *OTGW* offers stories in which child characters learn and grow through more natural and less didactic processes. A framework made up of Nodelman's Hidden Adult, Cholodenko's always-already movement forward, and Muris' psychological definitions of anxiety, guilt, and shame guide and ground this reading.

## CHAPTER 1

*OTGW* does something unusual in children's literature and animation by focusing, sympathetically, on irrational anxiety in a male character as an ongoing mental health issue rather than a comic trait or a moral failing to overcome once and for all. Although it pays homage to shows like *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!*, *OTGW* repeatedly subverts the tropes it borrows in order to use them to accomplish very different ends. As a miniseries with a well-defined developmental arc for its central character, *OTGW* uses the central character, Wirt, to explore some of the ways that a mind can create anxieties. In the vein of Muris' studies, it also explores how symptoms of anxiety such as preoccupation with one's inner world can paralyze action in the outer world through "avoidance behavior" ("Relations Among Behavioral Inhibition" 210). *Scooby-Doo*'s protagonist Shaggy is remarkable as a character in his own right, and relevant to this study because he is a fearful teenage male whose peer group does not reject him, and who is not punished by the plot of the story. The audience, too, is clearly supposed to feel affection for Shaggy and his goofiness. Still, Shaggy's chronic fears are tied to his goofiness, rather than to any implications that he is suffering from an anxiety disorder in a mental health sense. *Scooby-Doo* depends on irrational fear as an endlessly repeated gag—one that is particularly funny because a fearful teenage boy (and his fearful Great Dane) contradict traditional ideas of masculinity. In contrast, *OTGW* does not use the fearful boy as a



comic figure. Instead, it asks viewers to empathize with Wirt and his fears as they might with a teenager with diagnosed anxiety. Although the show reveals these fears to be irrational creations of Wirt's own mind rather than physical, external dangers, this revelation does not imply that they are gags that do not have an ongoing impact on Wirt's mental health. Moreover, *OTGW* does not claim that a tendency for anxiety can be completely cured through magic or individual effort, nor that it can be laughed away.

Wirt's story is one of gradual improvement rather than miraculous recovery. In order for Wirt to have such an arc, his story must begin in a place where his anxiety is, if not exactly rewarded, at the very least not actively discouraged. The Unknown, in all its strangeness, seems to prove Wirt's anxiety right in the first half of the series. He should not be making decisions because the world is dangerous, and should only act if the world's inhabitants—who must know better—tell him to. As far as Wirt can see, things go better when he allows others to take charge. Thus, Wirt's anxiety wins, and he stops making decisions for himself, even if he does not want to admit that this is what he is doing.

The second half of the series, however, demonstrates that Wirt is better off actually trying to make decisions and confront the risks they bring. As the arc completes, Wirt makes moves to improve upon his anxiety and not allow it to paralyze him. By splitting the narrative chronologically at the point when the boys discover Beatrice's apparent betrayal, there is an obvious change in Wirt's understanding of himself and of the world he is interacting with, and it is this that allows him to develop in a way distinct from previous examples of fearful boys in children's media. This chapter takes advantage

of this structure and of the ways in which it both resembles and departs from its predecessor *Scooby-Doo* to explore the distinct ways in which *OTGW* deals with issues of male fear and anxiety as a piece of children's media.

### **Anxious but Sympathetic Wirt, Fearful but Comic Scooby**

One of the things that allows *Over the Garden Wall* to stand out amongst its children's media predecessors is the range of issues that Wirt is anxious about, including his ability to live up to traditional masculinity. The show allows Wirt to have and discuss these anxieties on screen. Wirt struggles both with whether he is traditionally masculine enough in having artistic, feminine-coded hobbies, and also with how to carry out the traditional masculinity of having a crush on a girl. It is likely he even worries about whether he worries too much. None of these worries are things that boys are typically allowed to voice or show in children's media.

As Eve Sedgwick observes in "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay", effeminate boys often fall victim to the "tradition of assuming that anyone, male or female, who desires a man must by definition be feminine," and that, according to psychologists like Richard Friedman, being appropriately masculine is synonymous with "any self-esteem and, ultimately, for any *self*" (20-21). Although Wirt does not voice concerns about his being perceived as homosexual, and does indeed have a crush on a girl, there is still a sense that his fears regarding his hobbies are all about whether he is being too feminine, and therefore he might be seen as an effeminate homosexual and nothing else. Sedgwick's article, published in 1991, sums up the world which Wirt is growing up in as one that publically "[wishes] that gay people *not exist*" and therefore also wishes that

effeminate boys *not exist* (23). Thus the media Wirt took in—and the media that predates *OTGW* itself—was much more likely to at best ignore and at worst actively discourage the gender variation Wirt recognizes in himself and proceeds to worry about.

Even worrying in and of itself is more feminized than masculinized, historically. Worrying has long been seen as something girls and women engage in far more than men, particularly in American culture. In his study of gender in 19<sup>th</sup> century humor, Alfred Habegger observes that the phrase “‘Take it easy’” is more often spoken by men than women, and accurately “sums up [Americans’] unspoken masculine ethos” from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to this day (887). Habegger argues that it is in this way that early comedy works operate on the assumption that *women* worry and *men* tease them about this worry, not the other way around. This arrangement has carried through into more modern works such as sitcoms, where the men are goofballs and the women are fretting nags. Children’s media—even the more progressive works of today—can sometimes fall prey to these tropes as well, such as the character Candace in *Phineas and Ferb* constantly trying to tattle on her easygoing male siblings. Yet Wirt, who is viewed as and seems to identifies as male, almost never takes it easy, and it is the female Beatrice who has little patience for his worrying. Thus it is important to consider how the anxiety in a person who is seen as masculine is expressed, and the fact that Wirt’s particular worries revolve around masculinity makes them all the more distinct.

Further, Wirt is not only a boy but also a teenager. As discussed in the Introduction, the children’s media that *does* address fear tends to center on young children, regardless of gender, often as a means to help child readers through these fears

themselves. But even in those cases, the fears tend to be external rather than internal. Wirt's younger brother Greg is a good example of this more common way of representing fear. Greg is surprised by and chased by monsters: a familiar sight, particularly in cartoons, and one that drives home the idea that Greg, as a young boy, is allowed to have these run-ins with the frightening and spooky. This may be because he carries on like normal the instant they are over, without any lasting effects. In fact, Greg is generally quite fearless. There are few things that Greg remains afraid of beyond the instant he is startled—the closest he ever gets is when he appears frightened of the Woodsman when he and Wirt believe the Woodsman is actually the Beast. This external fear—like the externalized fear he might demonstrate in the moment when being chased by other monsters—is common in ways that Wirt's anticipatory-yet-not-comic anxiety is not.

When children's stories do acknowledge young children's internal fears, they mark them as something silly that children eventually grow out of—something that is still “normal.” A young boy who is worried about monsters under his bed—which is an externalized fear—is far more culturally accepted than a teenager worrying about how others might think of him. Wirt is well beyond the age when fears of the dark would be understandable in these terms, and worries about being a culturally acceptable teenage boy are very rarely presented sympathetically in media. Teenage boys are just not supposed to have these concerns, although girls—particularly teenage girls—might talk of nothing else in the same exact programs.

Wirt stands out as a character who is allowed anxiety as a teenage boy, without these character traits being used for comic relief. This reflects a reluctance on the part of

authors and artists to raise the very real issue of anxiety in teenage boys. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, about 20% of 13-18 year old males are diagnosed with anxiety disorders, not to mention the many who remain undiagnosed (“Any Anxiety Disorder Among Children”). Thus Wirt’s personality is based in reality. Yet media creators who create work meant for children tend emphasize the possibility of teenage male anxiety as something to laugh about. For example, *Scooby-Doo* repeatedly uses Shaggy’s anxiety as a means to advance the plot and define him as a character. It does not use it to encourage sympathy or identification with young people who struggle with anxiety as a mental health issue. Rather than presenting Shaggy as a teenage boy with a diagnosable anxiety disorder, *Scooby-Doo* presents his anxieties in the same manner as his unintelligent or goofy mistakes, such as when he holds a map upside down and gets his friends lost (see Figure 1) (“Mine Your Own Business”). Further, his anxieties are tied to this goofiness rather than to any sense that he suffers distress from anxiety in a mental health sense which might garner something more like sympathy. While the show was progressive in having male characters be less brave than female ones, its framework did not allow it to explore mental illness the way *OTGW* does.



Figure 1: Shaggy holds the map upside down and gets his friends lost.

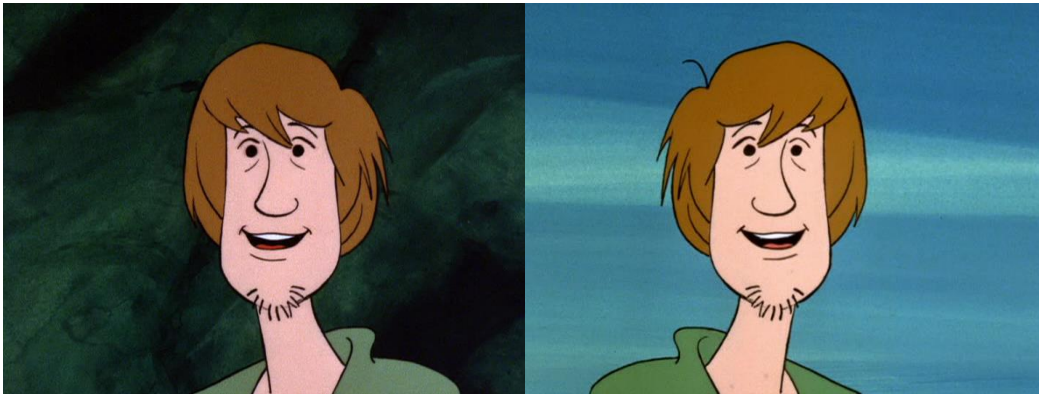
Shaggy's anxiety is, ultimately, played for humor, and so the audience is clearly meant to take even worries about exploring legitimately dangerous places like abandoned mines as funny rather than dramatic. A boy who is spooked by a player piano or a tree branch is a caricature and, as his friends often call him, a "clown" far more than a figure meant to represent mental illness ("Mine Your Own Business"). The audience is meant to laugh at him in the moment and with him after the fears are resolved as unfounded. Just as Scooby is ridiculous as a giant, cowardly dog, Shaggy is made ridiculous because he is a teenage boy who wears his fears on his sleeve. In comparison, Wirt's anxieties are

presented with humor, but he is not made into a clown as Shaggy is by being presented as silly.

The fact that Shaggy, unlike Wirt, is a character in a formulaic series, makes the comic nature of his fears even more obvious. The other characters in *Scooby-Doo* launch right into solving mysteries without even really discussing it because this is just what they do every week, and every week the monster ends up being an adult in a mask. For Shaggy to be so resistant to checking out the town and its mysteries is silly, as both he and the audience knows that the gang runs into these exact situations all the time and there is never any real danger. Thus, his fear is humorous, which is the show's thematic goal. *OTGW*, on the other hand, is a more dramatic serial with a story arc that develops from the beginning to the end. This allows Wirt to improve and better cope with his anxieties as time goes on rather than reliving the same exact fears over and over again for the audience's amusement.

It is worth noting that, at its most simple, *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* might have avoided major character transformations during its run partly due to practical, behind-the-scenes reasons in addition to story-based ones. The original *Scooby-Doo* series was created in 1969, just as television animation for children was taking off in popularity (Bendazzi 235). Smaller animation studios like Hanna & Barbera, which produced *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!*, had more to prove to the networks than film studios like Disney, and therefore creators did their best to save time and money. The eponymous founders of Hanna & Barbera were embarrassed by the decrease in quality they saw when the studio switched to an assembly-line process, but it was likely

economical choices like these that allowed the show to stay on the air long enough to become household names and franchises that continue to this day (Bendazzi 235-237). Within this process, anything that could be reused was, and even within a single episode, frames and backgrounds were often recycled (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** The same frame is recycled within a single episode.

This same thriftiness can be seen in the storytelling as well, and much of the humor of the show's gags stems from the fact that viewers are aware that these same jokes and story elements repeat from episode to episode. Developing character arcs would prevent this recycling and make the entire process of creating episodes take more time and money to complete. The characters of Shaggy and Scooby cannot have a story arc the way Wirt does, as the show's weekly mystery formula would not work if Scooby and Shaggy overcame their fearfulness and no longer needed goading with Scooby snacks in order to engage in obviously dangerous plans (see Figure 3).





Figure 3: Scooby bargains for more treats in exchange for walking into danger.

Thus, Scooby and Shaggy remain ever-anxious characters. This stasis allows *Scooby-Doo* episodes to work within a similar formula every week—a formula *Over the Garden Wall* pays homage to with its “Mad Love” episode as discussed later in this chapter. *Over the Garden Wall*, in large part due to its nature as a short 10 episode serial, had more resources and time, and therefore was able to create story and character arcs that shows like *Scooby-Doo* were unable to at the time.

More importantly, this formulaic approach to storytelling in *Scooby-Doo* also reflects how the show is primarily considered a comedy, which *OTGW* is not. Scooby’s fearfulness is comic—who would expect a Great Dane who is larger than his owners to

be so easily spooked? By maintaining the status quo of Scooby being a big, scared dog, running gags like Scooby bargaining for more Scooby Snacks before he will agree to walk directly into danger are possible in every episode. Notably, many of the gags surrounding Scooby's fearfulness are of this anticipatory kind. Scooby sees the danger they are in and is reluctant to participate in clue-gathering or schemes to capture monsters. Scooby is capable of doing brave things, however, and sometimes volunteers to help out if the outcome seems fairly obviously a positive one, although the narrative often reverses these situations for the purposes of further comedy, such as having him accidentally rescue that week's monster rather than one of his friends ("Mine Your Own Business"). Additionally, the formulaic nature of the series drives home the affection both the viewer and the other characters are meant to have for these anxious characters. Even as both Scooby and Shaggy repeat the same anxieties and their associated gags week after week, their friends are at most momentarily annoyed, and do not seem to have any real problem with the patterns their friends fall into. The brief chastising the two fearful characters get at "clowning" is always presented as friendly teasing. Ultimately, the other teens love their friends and accept them as they are, which was very progressive. Despite all their differences, this acceptance of anxious male characters in a popular animated series may have helped make possible *OTGW*'s own exploration of the subject.

In addition to having the chance to develop, Wirt differs from characters like Shaggy in that his anxiety is tied to masculinity in ways that the Shaggy's is not. Shaggy's anxiety is mostly implicit, as nobody ever says that they are in danger of being

hurt or killed by the monsters they encounter or by the vindictive adults behind the masks. Presumably this external danger is what Shaggy and Scooby are afraid of, and this sort of worry is not exclusive to masculine people at all. It is notable, of course, that the two girls in the group are not shown to be anxious or afraid the way Shaggy and Scooby are, but this seems to be tied more to the fact that the girls are considered sensible and intelligent. Nearly every confusion Shaggy has is corrected by Velma, the book-smart girl, such as when he mistakes a “cigar store Indian” for a ghostly Miner (“Mine Your Own Business”). This does not, however, seem to lead to any concerns that he should be smarter than the girls, or be braver than them. Shaggy seems unaware or unconcerned with his failure to align with traditional masculinity, and traditional masculinity is inherent in this joke reversal of the expectation that boys are both smarter and braver than girls. This unawareness may also factor into the humor of the situation—that is, he is not smart enough to realize how his lack of intelligence could be seen as undermining his masculinity. Still, the fact that the show’s stars include male characters who do not fully fit masculine ideals is part of the reason why characters like Wirt are more prevalent today. Ironically, Wirt’s greater awareness that his anxiety does not align with traditional masculinity makes this anxiety more serious.

Wirt is a character whose anxieties are borne out of issues of masculinity. In “Mad Love”, he shares his secrets that are “too secret” with Beatrice, and at the top of the list is a fairly typical masculine, teenage concern—having a crush on a girl—but when pressed he adds playing clarinet, and “secretly whispering poetry to [himself] in [his] room at night”, things that are perhaps more personal and unique to Wirt in particular

(“Mad Love”). He frets about these things being weird, and Beatrice immediately tells him that they’re not—that they’re “just character traits” (“Mad Love”). When Beatrice goes on to ask what else he likes to do, Wirt looks surprised (see Figure 4)—as if he expected these revelations to be a much bigger deal (“Mad Love”).



**Figure 4.** Wirt is surprised Beatrice wants to hear more about his hobbies.

Surely a teenage boy who enjoys clarinet and poetry is strange or worth ridiculing! The arts are for girls, and Wirt is a boy! Yet Beatrice sees no problem with any of this, and actually asks him for further information on his hobbies, which is probably the thing he is more anxious about—although he is still very much anxious about having a crush on a girl, despite this being a traditionally accepted thing for a teenage boy to do.

Wirt’s anxieties deal both with failing to fully enact masculinity by winning a girlfriend and with failing to enact masculinity at all by instead enacting femininity.

When he is afraid of what others might think of his hobbies, Wirt is worrying that he is not masculine enough, or that these are actually feminine interests. Wirt never explicitly states that he worries about liking “girly” things, but the fact that he sees these interests as something he must literally keep a secret for fear of what others think implies that he is aware of what it looks like for someone who presents as male to enjoy these things. As far as his anxiety surrounding his crush goes, it is important to consider that the manner in which a boy is able to admit he likes a girl is fairly limited. Wirt makes a mixtape, which falls under the purview of accepted methods, but filling that mixtape with clarinet and poetry might not (“Into the Unknown”). In this way, Wirt adds concerns about performing masculinity “correctly” to his fears of being masculine “enough”. These anxieties prove that Wirt knows the “rules” of masculinity: teenage boys don’t like poetry; teenage boys don’t play clarinet; and teenage boys don’t *admit* to liking the girls they like, but rather prove that the girls like them when they successfully ask them out.

Finally, Scooby and Shaggy differ from Wirt’s anxieties in that they are generally based in actual external danger even as they are played for laughs. Wirt experiences anxiousness based on anticipated or imagined outcomes of social situations more than anything else. He is anxious about what people will think of him, and he is anxious about making poor decisions. On the other hand, Scooby and Shaggy are afraid of very real external threats such as monsters they have actually seen, or the simple fact that their group seems to attract the attention of such monsters everywhere they go. This contributes to what makes Scooby and his owner Shaggy’s fearfulness so comic. They seem to be the only ones aware of how ridiculous it is for teenagers to investigate these

situations, whether they are actually supernatural or not. Even so, the narrative tends to also have the two of them afraid of completely benign objects and events for the purposes of a joke complete with a laugh track, and thus it is clear that no matter how potentially understandable the characters' anxiousness and fearfulness might be, they are meant to be comic characters. The following section explores the core and origins of Wirt's anxiety, things that characters who are simply fearful for comic purposes do not really require in order to keep the laughs coming.

### **Decision-Making Anxiety**

The anxieties Wirt feels about masculinity are not what make him most distinct as a character in children's media. At the core of Wirt's concerns regarding his masculinity is a deeper, more pervasive fear of making and enacting decisions for himself and as a leader of others. The story *Over the Garden Wall* tells is more than just the crushes and embarrassing hobbies that have been explored (infrequently) in children's media before. It is about anxieties that stay with a person into adulthood—anxieties that truly alter how a person behaves, and can be seen as real mental illness. As mentioned before, children's media often discusses fears of the dark or of strangers or of dogs. However, as Jackie E. Stallcup argues, these explorations tend to be of the didactic sort, meant to teach the child reader that it is okay to be afraid, because that fear is a temporary feeling, one that the reader will soon outgrow through the help of the “bibliotherapy” the book provides (125). The characters in these instances tend to be reader-inserts which demonstrate how fear can be conquered rather than fully-fleshed out characters (125). If Wirt were simply a boy who is worried about a girl finding out he likes her, he might fall under this more

didactic category of characters as well. Instead, Wirt's surface anxieties serve as symptoms of his deeper, core anxiety regarding making decisions and facing the consequences of his decisions. This makes him more than a way for viewers to place themselves in the story, especially because the key thing he struggles with is not explicitly stated so much as suggested by the more obvious anxieties.

Wirt's core struggle with making decisions is demonstrated most clearly in the way his surface anxieties revolve around his relationship with his younger half-brother Greg. Elder brothers looking out for their younger siblings is another "rule" of masculinity, and it is one Wirt violates due to his reluctance to be any sort of leader or decision-maker. Unlike other big brother figures in other children's media—for example, Fred in *Scooby Doo*, Peter in *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, or Julian in *Five on a Treasure Island*—Wirt has no interest in being the leader or even being the slightest bit responsible for Greg. Older siblings in general are often asked to care for their younger siblings, of course. But the trope tends towards elder brothers being seen as *leaders* of their younger siblings, as is the case in the examples listed above, in contrast to the emotionally nurturing role of older sisters, such as Wendy in *Peter and Wendy*. Being a leader means making decisions for both yourself and others, and Wirt's avoidance of identifying as or acting as a leader is symptomatic of his core anxiety surrounding decision-making. The Woodsman even warns Wirt to take responsibility for his younger brother in the very first episode, making it clear that this is something Wirt fails at ("The Old Grist Mill"). Although Wirt does not agonize over being a responsible older brother

so much as avoid the issue altogether, this is the first of many clues that lead towards the core of Wirt's actual anxiety.

In the first act of the story, when Wirt's anxiety is first being established and he has not start to overcome it yet, Wirt shows little interest in protecting or leading Greg despite his role as the elder brother. When Greg starts to get annoying, Wirt decides to walk further ahead of the other boy, unconcerned about him getting further lost ("Hard Times at the Huskin' Bee"). This distancing may come from his reluctance to attach himself to Greg as an actual brother, given his careful definition of their relationship as step-siblings when he sings in the tavern in "Songs of the Dark Lantern". Despite the fact that Wirt's mother must have re-married years ago, Wirt refers to her new husband as his "stepdad" and as "your [Greg's] dad", distancing himself from this man and thereby from Greg ("Songs of the Dark Lantern", "Into the Unknown"). This distance makes it easier for Wirt to blame their being lost on Greg, and to thrust all responsibility off onto Greg once he has fallen into despair at Beatrice's betrayal ("Babes in the Wood"). Wirt wants nothing to do with responsibility and finds Greg's interest in the concept annoying at best. Being a true leader and thereby being truly responsible for Greg would aggravate his decision-making anxiety, and so he avoids it.

More often, however, Wirt is simply paralyzed by the possibility of making a decision that has a negative consequence, and thus he chooses not to make any decisions at all. Throughout the first half of the serial, Wirt is actually very capable of *doing* things on a moment's notice, but he usually needs another person to give him a push. Wirt is able to leap into action only if he has someone else decide what he should do for him.



Returning to the comparison with *Scooby-Doo*, this is similar to the way that Scooby is ordered around by the gang, but even Scooby—who is a dog—still bargains for treats in exchange for following orders (“Mine Your Own Business”). Wirt does not require goading or bribery, and instead often leaps into action the instant he receives a direction. He is so relieved to have someone else take decision-making out of his hands that he doesn’t even bother to think these actions through long enough to become anxious about them. Beatrice even lambasts Wirt for his tendency to blindly follow orders in “Schooltown Follies.” She calls him “a pathetic pushover who relies on others to make all his decisions”, and Wirt responds by, stubbornly, proceeding to only do exactly what he is told—which he can ironically only do by making a decision to allow others to decide. But it is more common for Wirt to avoid decision-making because making decisions makes him anxious, and therefore he only accomplishes things if he is told to by someone else.

In fact, as discussed before, Wirt initially seems to flourish in the Unknown because it so often takes decisions out of his hands. If things do not just happen to him or at him, he has someone around to tell him what he should do instead. More than once, Wirt is actually made the hero of the story because he follows someone else’s suggestions in the moment. In “Schooltown Follies” he only unmasks the gorilla because someone tells him to “do something”, to which he responds by running forward with his eyes closed and tripping his way to victory. He only rescues Beatrice in “Songs of the Dark Lantern” because the people in the tavern tell him to, and he is himself surprised he is even doing that much, remarking, “I guess I’m really doing this.” It is no wonder that the

Beast thinks he can convince Wirt that he must carry the lantern or “watch [his] brother perish”, since this bargain is essentially a manipulation that leaves Wirt with the horrible choice between sacrificing himself or letting his brother die (“Into the Unknown”). In agonizing over this impossible choice, Wirt might become so paralyzed by his anxiety that the Beast is able to claim him in this way instead. Either way, the Beast wins—and so does Wirt’s anxiety. Wirt lets others make decisions for him so he does not have to work through the anxiety born out of his internal focus. All the consequences for his internal “what ifs” are taken out of his hands.

The Unknown’s positioning as an in-between space also seems to justify Wirt’s lack of interest in taking charge, as it ultimately presents two seemingly impossible choices: to return to the world he was just humiliated in or to give up entirely and drown (“Into the Unknown”). While this may seem extreme, there is no clear explanation for what it is that allows the boys to return home in the final episode, and therefore it is possible the option to return was always there and Wirt was avoiding making that final choice to do so. If it was always there, then the only border of the Unknown is Wirt’s indecision, which is by definition insubstantial and wavering. This lack of clear borders keeping the boys in the Unknown aligns with Cholodenko’s theory of the “Illusion of the Beginning.” The Unknown does not begin or end at any specific point, nor is it totally separate from the “real” world. While it may be that it was up to Wirt to choose to go home, it is unclear, just as the Unknown itself is unclear. It is this total lack of clarity that makes it very easy for Wirt to choose not to choose—after all, if the world cannot do so, why should he?

So, in the first half of the series, Wirt encounters situations where blind followership and limited decision-making is reinforced. The Unknown initially seems to prove Wirt's anxiety right. He should only act if the world's inhabitants – who know better – tell him to. Blindly following directions allows Wirt to save the day in more than one instance, but that is something that only truly works in the Unknown. In the “real world”, an attacking gorilla would not end up being a man in a suit, and it would be utterly foolish to blindly run at one in an attempt to defeat it (“Schooltown Follies”).

When it comes to something premeditative Wirt's anxiety has time to build due to the uncertainty of something *potentially* negative happening as a result of a choice Wirt has thought through. An excellent example of this is when Wirt sees Sara has found the tape on which he has bared his soul to her through music and poetry and he nearly has a panic attack (“Into the Unknown”).



Figure 5: Wirt looks on in horror as Sara finds the tape.

Sara has not even listened to the tape—and cannot know, in that moment, that it came from Wirt—and yet in a serial saturated with monsters and dark forests, Wirt’s expression in reaction to this is more horrified than at any other time (see Figure 5) (“Into the Unknown”). That expression reflects the various negative outcomes Wirt has already considered for this situation in anticipation of Sara receiving the tape, and how these thoughts compound into an anxiety that runs deeper than the momentary fear Wirt feels in the face of external danger. His crush on Sara and his interest in things like poetry trouble Wirt because their outcomes are uncertain but *could* be negative. The fact that he does not know for certain that Sara will like him back is what has him initially tossing out the tape he has made for her. Once again, Cholodenko’s theory that it is impossible to know the true beginning of things in animation is illustrated in Wirt’s character arc. In this brief moment, because he is unable to perceive the boundaries of Sara’s acceptance,

Wirt avoids creating a beginning and tosses the tape out. However, Sara's happiness at seeing Wirt and hope that he will join the group in the cemetery implies that his crush on her and prior interactions with her have already created a beginning to this story ("Into the Unknown"). Further, as much as Wirt hopes to avoid beginning anything by not choosing to share his feelings, this too is a sort of decision and it has consequences. Chiefly, it would leave any revelation of his feelings for Sara up to someone else as he is choosing not to tell her himself. Wirt clearly is not happy with this possibility either, as he goes on to take advantage of the unreality of Halloween and puts on a costume in order to venture out and find Sara. However, even once he has found her, he still avoids making the final decision to give her the tape ("Into the Unknown"). There is no question that Wirt wants something in this situation, but the uncertainty of what his own actions might lead to keeps Wirt from making any sort of decisions to actually get that thing he wants.

The anticipatory nature of this decision-making anxiety conflicts with typical social constructions of masculinity. Boys and men are often encouraged to be less cautious than girls and women are. Being hesitant to make decision means one is being cautious, and while this might be wise, masculinity calls for this caution to be limited if not thrown to the wind altogether. The rules of masculinity say that men take risks, in part due to the fact that successful risk-taking is seen to improve one's reputation, which is particularly important to young men with interest in impressing potential mates (Daly and Wilson 66-67). Therefore, men not only make decisions, they make risky ones. This is demonstrated in how leadership roles are typically given to males in stories containing

mixed-gender groups. Fred in *Scooby-Doo* decides how the group splits up to search for clues. Peter in *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* is the Pevensie's default leader not only because of his age but also because of his gender. In making risky decisions, looking ahead to possible consequences is not entirely discounted, but the more one does so, the more feminized one appears. Boy leaders make decisions rather quickly. Additionally, even if a boy leader takes some time to weigh options, he still ultimately makes a decision. To avoid making decisions entirely is, if not exactly feminine, certainly not masculine. The surface anxieties Wirt demonstrates speak to greater cultural assumptions about masculinity and decision-making. Masculine boys do not coyly hint at their crushes through song, at least not one played on clarinet; they are supposed to boldly and directly ask girls out. Masculine boys do not contemplate poetry and architecture and clarinet fingerings; they lead groups of friends on adventures. These traits make Wirt stand out in the cultural landscape in general, but particularly in children's media as a model of a male character that grows out of passivity and into improved decisiveness in the way that "girl power" media has done with female characters, as will be discussed in Chapter 2.

### **Endicott: The Warning Wirt Gives Himself**

Wirt is not the only character in the serial who is reluctant to make decisions for himself, nor is he the only character to experience anxiety that is gendered as masculine and is largely internal. Quincy Endicott, the old tea baron who fears he has lost his mind, is the most dramatically and obviously anxious character in the series, outdoing even Wirt in his constant reiterating of his concern that the ghost he has seen proves that he

has gone or is going mad—an entirely internal fear based in issues of masculinity. He is not externally afraid of the ghost, but of his own slipping grip on his sanity. It is significant that the conversation where Wirt describes his major insecurities happens in the same episode wherein Wirt and the others encounter Endicott. This fact alone draws attention to him as a figure Wirt could, perhaps, learn from or recognize himself in, but Wirt instead spends more of the episode alone with Beatrice, while Greg encourages Endicott to take them to the room where he claims to have seen a ghost.

Suddenly, this episode resembles an episode of *Scooby Doo*, with the larger group splitting into two halves to solve the mystery of the haunted mansion. This plot device makes the anxiety and paranoia that some characters display not seem as out of place as it might in another episode with another setting. The spooky setting and mystery to investigate pay homage to *Scooby-Doo*, as does the anxiety that a number of characters feel. What *is* surprising is that Wirt is less anxious than usual in this episode. Instead, Fred the horse takes on the role of the anxious protagonist, worrying that “Endicott is a crazed lunatic who did away with the lady of the house” (“Mad Love”). Fred is shown to be jumping to anxious conclusions, but ultimately his concerns are external rather than internal. Greg, for his part, remains as unaffected by anxiety as ever, and urges Endicott to “face his fears” (“Mad Love”). Thus, fearless Greg is aware that Endicott is afraid, but sees no reason at all to be fearful himself, even in the face of a potential external danger. As all this is happening, the episode gives Wirt and Beatrice a not very spooky quest of finding two pennies, which gives neither of them any true external danger to experience fear over. Instead, they discuss their emotional struggles—Wirt’s being his anxieties over

proper masculinity. Even in this, Wirt hardly frets, as he sees it as only fair that he share his concerns just as Beatrice has. Ultimately, the episode concludes with Wirt actually solving the mystery of the haunting (“Mad Love”).



Figure 6: Wirt smiles as he explains the mystery of the haunted houses.

Wirt appears amused (see Figure 6) at the misunderstanding as he explains it, much as the teens look satisfied in explaining the mysteries at the end of *Scooby-Doo* episodes (see Figure 7). Thus the mystery of Endicott’s mansion is tied up with all the ghosts unmasked, including those of Wirt’s anxieties.





Figure 7: The teens explain the mystery at the end of an episode of *Scooby-Doo*.

“Mad Love” establishes Wirt and Beatrice’s major emotional and mental health struggles with anxiety and guilt respectively in the appropriate setting of a mansion owned by an anxious character who is accused of being guilty of murder. These emotional struggles are emphasized as being key to the story at large given the time devoted to them. They are also clearly intended to be viewed sympathetically rather than with amusement, as they are professed in a totally separate scene from the humor of the ghostly misunderstandings. Truly, if anyone might be laughed off as a comically anxious character in this episode, it is easily-startled and theatrical Quincy Endicott. However, his purpose is not simply to make the audience laugh as he both frets endlessly and

immediately trusts that the boys are truthfully his nephews. As a character who is even more anxious than Wirt, his presence draws attention to the improvements Wirt makes in this episode and in subsequent ones in regards to coping with his anxiety. Unlike Endicott, Wirt is able to resolve what led to the supposed hauntings and move forward. In this resolution, *Over the Garden Wall* revises the finale of every *Scooby-Doo* episode. While the Scooby gang repeatedly unmask monsters who are actually greedy adults, Wirt unmasks Endicott's apparent external fear of a ghost as a truly internal fear of going mad. Wirt helps this adult understand that his anxiety was not based in external reality. Moreover, unlike a *Scooby* episode, when Wirt and Greg leave the mansion, their story continues to develop. For example, the fact that Greg threw their coins away factors into the plot of the following episode ("Lullaby in Frogland"). Similarly, the goofy mystery may be solved, but Wirt's own anxieties still need to be dealt with. Endicott serves both as an exaggerated example of what anxiety can become, and as proof that anxiety can be overcome to some degree.

Ultimately, the plot homage to *Scooby-Doo* allows Wirt to actually take a step away from being trapped within his anxiety and spend some time talking it out—or "unmasking" it—instead. This single episode is close to the serial's turning point. It suggests that there are more things that Wirt can unmask and reveal to be less dangerous than previously assumed. This makes this episode significant in Wirt's development and characterization. This episode both highlights anxiety as a theme and allows Wirt to actually have a conversation about it. In this conversation, Beatrice suggests that Wirt's anxieties are unfounded, and he proceeds, in the next episode, to continue talking to her

about the most anxiety-filled moment of his life prior to entering the Unknown (“Lullaby in Frogland”). And this is where the homage to *Scooby-Doo* ends as far as Wirt is concerned. Where Scooby stays continuously cowardly for the sake of comedy, Wirt is able to develop and grow from his *Scooby-Doo* style adventure and thus garner audience sympathy.

*Over the Garden Wall* uses fantasy elements to reflect on the irrational or unconscious fears within its main characters. Endicott, a minor character, is unmasked as a metaphorical representation of Wirt’s anxiety. He is shown to be a construct the Unknown has built out of Wirt’s mind. Just like in an episode of *Scooby Doo*, there are several clues that lead to this conclusion.



Figure 8: Books on architecture and interior design lay on Wirt's bedroom floor.

The first clue occurs when Beatrice and Wirt are discussing their secrets and Wirt notices the room they are in is built in a different architectural aesthetic than the other rooms. This observation surprises Beatrice, leading Wirt to ask if he “should not know that sort of stuff” (“Mad Love”). The fact is, that Wirt *does* know these things, and we know he does because of the architecture books in his room in “Into the Unknown” (see Figure 8). Wirt is uncertain about how his interest in architecture might be seen, and the mansion happens to draw attention to its architecture in a way Wirt immediately notices. This is

just one way Endicott is directly linked to Wirt's anxieties surrounding being a teenage boy. The second clue, from "Into the Unknown", is the fact that Endicott's name appears on a tombstone in the cemetery (see Figure 9).



Figure 9: Wirt and Greg hide behind a gravestone bearing Quincy Endicott's name.

Wirt and Greg hide directly behind this stone—notably, when Wirt is hiding from Sara—which gives him the opportunity to read the name and internalize it. Whether or not Endicott ever actually was the person buried in that plot, Wirt's exposure to his name makes it possible that Endicott's existence is influenced by Wirt's presence in the Unknown. If he is even partially made from Wirt's mind, his trembling, desperate anxiety is understandable. He is what Wirt struggles to keep under the surface—to keep as buried as possible. Wirt's anxieties manifest as a person who is terrified by the female presence that haunts him, but even *more* terrified by the possibility that he is going mad. Endicott

claims to have fallen in love with the ghost in the portrait, but is paralyzed by the possibility that he has invented her. Neither character is keen on discovering the truth of their situations, regardless of the possibility that the outcome could possibly be positive rather than negative. Notably, in both cases the outcome *is* largely positive, although the final resolution of Wirt's relationship with Sara and his other friends back home is less solid than that of Endicott and Marguerite. But their anxieties lead them to avoid the issues rather than make moves to resolve any uncertainties. It is up to outside forces—usually happy-go-lucky Greg—to force these characters through their stories.

Where Wirt worries about *taking* control, Endicott worries that he is *losing* control, and although Wirt does not spend much time with the character on screen, Endicott serves as a cautionary tale that Wirt (unconsciously) helped build for himself. If Wirt continues down an indecisive path, he might lose control of his life completely, and it is only by beginning to take risks and make decisions that he might retake some of that control. Endicott, despite being the adult in the situation, makes no decisions in the entire plot. Once the mystery has been solved, Endicott is happy and comfortable in his home once again, but he himself did none of the actual work to get to this conclusion. The fact that he *needs* Greg to drag him through his own home in order for his story to move towards a resolution demonstrates what happens when one grows into an adult who chooses not to choose, just as Wirt has been noted to do in the episodes prior.

This episode serves as a transition from many of the early episodes where Wirt simply does what he's told to Wirt making more of his own decisions. It is through realizing that he can make other choices—that he can decide beyond the options and

orders others give him—and then facing the risks associated with owning his own decisions that he is able to break free of the Unknown and save himself and his brother in the second half of the serial (“The Unknown”). The fact that Wirt is the one who is given the lines that solve the mystery in “Mad Love” suggests that Wirt may be, at this point, beginning to recognize the unhealthiness of the paralyzing anxiety Endicott has expressed, and is on his way to dealing with his anxiety by unmasking possibilities he had not previously considered. This is supported by how Wirt goes on to share more about his crush on Sara with Beatrice in the following episode (“Lullaby in Frogland”). Rather than staying frozen and burying everything like a frog in the mud, Wirt decides to open up, which is a significant improvement for him.

## **Act II: Coping Improves**

By the time we reach the second half of the serial, Wirt is beginning to come out of his shell in ways that contrasts strongly with the first half, and by the final episode he has made obvious improvements with regards to coping with his anxiety. As noted earlier, Wirt is making strides towards better managing his fear of decision-making by making Sara the tape and heading out to find her. But this is still only a partial step forward as he immediately wants to take the tape back after Greg sticks it into Sara’s jacket (“Into the Unknown”). He only starts making real decisions once he discovers Beatrice’s apparent betrayal in “Lullaby in Frogland”. Wirt blames himself for this outcome, saying he “shouldn’t have trusted anyone”. Suddenly, the protection the Unknown has afforded him is gone. He has made a decision—to follow Beatrice and to befriend her—and it has had an outcome that could have been dangerous and definitely is

unpleasant and painful. Suddenly, he is right back where he was in the real world, living in uncertainty, and his anxieties surrounding making decisions seem totally justified.

Interestingly, this realization does not cause Wirt to totally break down or give up as one might expect—at least, not at first. After the boys leave Beatrice behind, Greg asks after her and Wirt states that he “doesn’t need Beatrice” and that he’ll “figure this out on his own” (“The Ringing of the Bell”). Greg takes this to mean Wirt has a plan, but when he asks for details, Wirt gets defensive and tells Greg that he can “do anything [he wants]”, including going to find Beatrice instead. Greg does not quite follow what this means, and definitely fails to realize that this implies Wirt does not actually have a plan. What he does have, suddenly, is the responsibility to come up with one, and while this obviously makes Wirt uncomfortable, he is still accepting this responsibility enough to get defensive about his lack of certainty about what they are going to do next. Having lost Beatrice as a guide both through the forest and through individual decisions *because* of a decision he made, Wirt finally sees that the Unknown does not protect him the way he thought it did.





Figure 10: Wirt kicks the lantern out of the Woodsman's hand.

As if to drive this fact home, the Woodsman arrives to warn them about the Beast's plan to claim Wirt and make him a part of the forest. Because they have mistaken the Woodsman for the Beast, the boys panic, but after a few seconds of thought he kicks the lantern out of the Woodsman's hand (see Figure 10). This is a simple decision, but it is still a *decision*, and Wirt made it without Beatrice or another character egging him on. Greg and his frog have already run off, and Wirt is alone to face the Woodsman and he is the one to save himself.



**Figure 11: Wirt smiles after successfully escaping from the Woodsman.**

This is major for him, and Wirt recognizes this when Greg praises him and he replies, “See? I’ve got it under control. I don’t need Beatrice.” To an extent, Wirt’s stubborn side and his hurt are what is coming out here, but he is still smiling (see Figure 11) as he says this—clearly pleased that his actions have turned out right for once.

This whole episode is full of Wirt trying out being in charge and taking risks. Wirt goes on to decide that they should wait out the rain in a nearby cottage, and even gives Greg a scolding, big brother-sounding order to “take that frog out of [his] pants.” He actually physically wrestles Greg to the ground when he insists on claiming that he and Wirt are burglars—something the more passive Wirt from the first half of the series would not likely do.



Figure 12: Wirt blushes at suggesting Lorna run away with him.

It is this sort of newfound attitude that allows him to suggest Lorna try and escape Auntie Whispers with them, even as he blushes at the implication (see Figure 12). Greg remarks that “something weird is going on”, and although he likely means the awkward teenage flirting, it is true that all of this is weird for Wirt. Sara appears to be his friend and he can hardly speak to her, yet here he is asking Lorna, who he has just met, to run away with him. In fact, by asking to help her clean, he is effectively attempting to rescue her, which is much more like the big brother type than Wirt had been before Beatrice’s betrayal. Without the buffer Beatrice allowed, Wirt is the one who offers to “talk things out” with Auntie Whispers after she warns them that they will be gobbled up, which is a very risky move for the anxious boy to make.

Unfortunately it turns out that it was Lorna who was the episode's real monster. Wirt briefly takes action in combatting her, but his ability to do so is not enough to convince him that he is capable of making his own decisions. Ultimately, when Greg exclaims that Wirt "saved the day twice today", all Wirt can manage is a dejected "Yeah, I guess". After all, he asked a dangerous girl to come along with them, just as he trusted Beatrice to lead them in the first half of the series. Auntie Whispers hammers this idea home by warning them that her sister Adelaide "must not be trusted".



Figure 13: Wirt is reminded of his mistakenly placed trust in Adelaide and Beatrice.

Of course, the boys have already run into Adelaide and know she is dangerous, and Wirt's expression grows tight (see Figure 13) at this further proof that he keeps making decisions to trust the wrong people. This episode where Wirt makes such big strides in

his risk-taking leaves him feeling that he “just [doesn’t] know what [he’s] doing out here anymore” and that he doesn’t “know if [they’ll] ever get back home”.



**Figure 14: The Beast watches as Wirt admits he has no plan.**

Wirt’s last pieces of dialogue in this episode are him admitting he lied about having a plan, and a deep sigh as he and Greg are isolated into a dim circle of light in the background of the image (see Figure 14). The image puts the Beast directly in the foreground, as if he is about to eclipse the shrinking Wirt. The episode ends with the Beast’s insistence that he will claim Wirt—that “There is only me. There is only my way. There is only the forest, and there is only surrender”, the last line falling heavily on an image of Wirt frowning and hanging his head as he walks (see Figure 15).



Figure 15: Wirt begins his fall into despair.

The Beast is proven right when Wirt spends the following episode, “Babes in the Wood”, surrendering to his anxiety. For the first time, Wirt correctly identifies the Beast’s singing, and he waxes poetic, calling the Beast, “The sitting cricket of our inevitable twilight, singing our requiem”. This leaves little doubt regarding Wirt’s attitude towards their situation. At this point, he is as negative as he could possibly be, whether he genuinely thinks they will die or not. His laments continue when he asks Greg to stop pretending they are going to get home, saying “This fog is deeper than we can ever understand. We are but wayward leaves, scattered to the air by an indifferent wind”. This does sound more depressed than anxious, but it still reflects his core anxiety and the fact that, after making decisions to trust two dangerous girls, he feels that he was right to submit to this anxiety, as he is bad at making these decisions.. He even attempts to push Greg into this sort of mindset as well when he blames him for their being lost. Boys who

avoid making decisions and committing to actions do not “goof around and get into trouble”, and since it was Greg who did the goofing around in the first place, Wirt claims it is not his responsibility to get them home. Wirt lays down to sleep and rolls to face away from Greg, annoyed at his insistence on trading the roles of “leader”. Thus he totally rejects his role as a big brother and ignores the advice-warning the Woodsman gave him in the first episode. Having done so, he takes on total passivity for the major chunk of this episode: he literally sleeps through it. Wirt allows his anxiety and despair to paralyze him to the point that “the Beast [claims] him”—just as depression and anxiety can seem to “claim” their sufferers (“Babes in the Wood”). This anxiety and despair is associated with repeated comments regarding how he is unsuited for leadership and is not capable of getting them home, which imply at the very least lack of confidence in who he is, if not also shame in who he is. As Peter Muris’ work observes, shame—in this case, Wirt’s shame over being the sort of person who makes poor decisions—correlates with behavioral inhibition, which in this case manifests as Wirt’s refusal to contribute to continued efforts to get home (“Relations Among Behavioral Inhibition” 211).

While Wirt has become “too lost” to go home, Greg has a complete old-school cartoon adventure in another layer of the Unknown contained within his dream. Unlike Wirt’s reality on the ground, this sequence is meant to be comic relief. In fact, everything about how this adventure in the clouds is presented, from the cycling backgrounds during chase scenes, jingly ragtime piano, and ridiculous solutions to problems, makes it clear that this is a world colored by Greg’s existence just like Endicott was formed by Wirt’s.



Figure 16: Greg flees the North Wind in a cartoon-style run cycle.

Everything is simplified and cartoonified, just like Greg is simple and goofy (see Figure 16). For Greg, the North Wind can be bottled way, but down on the ground, Wirt can only shiver (see Figure 17).





Figure 17: Wirt shivers in the wind on the ground.

Juxtaposing the image of Wirt tangled in the dark trees of the Beast's forest with the lighthearted homages to early animation Greg explores in this episode highlights just how seriously the show takes Wirt's struggle. Greg battling the North Wind has much more in common with a chase scene in *Scooby-Doo* than Wirt's surrender to the Unknown and the Beast.

Wirt's despair and surrender is deadly serious within *Over the Garden Wall's* narrative, such that there is no question that the audience is meant to sympathize. Considering the fact that the boys entered the Unknown through nearly drowning, this implies that Wirt has truly lost his will to live, and that leaving his fate "solely in the Beast's hands" means giving in to death. By giving up, he is lost in the Unknown, both literally and figuratively. Wirt chooses to no longer choose—to put no effort into swimming upwards—because the consequences of his choices and, in fact, his entire

future, is unknown anyway. Previously, Wirt was happy to dwell in the Unknown, as his lack of knowing was due to his allowing others to choose for him. Of course he had no way of knowing what was going to happen in that case. Indecision on his part meant that whatever happened could not possibly be his fault, good or bad. But the fact is he does make some decisions in the Unknown—trusting Beatrice and Lorna—and he sees that these have negative consequences. Not knowing what the consequences of his own actions are means not knowing if he will have to take the blame for anything bad that might happen. By making the even more extreme decision not to decide *at all*, Wirt unknowingly allows himself to drown. Indecision is, in this instance, just as dangerous as decision.

It is significant that it is a decision on Greg's part to *unknowingly* sacrifice himself that begins to reverse the damage done to Wirt. It proves that sometimes danger and risk pay off. In exchange for Greg's life, the Beast reverses the damage done to Wirt both in the physical sense that Wirt is able to escape the encroaching branches and in the psychological sense that Wirt is immediately distressed by realizing Greg is gone. At this point in the story, Wirt is more capable of and invested in his role as big brother, and Greg's sudden disappearance in the external world is able to outweigh his own internal despair. Thanks to Greg's decision to help Wirt at the expense of his own safety without knowing or considering this negative consequence, Wirt's emotional and physical paralysis lifts. Wirt leaps into action, moving before he can think straight—something the anxious boy from the first half of the series only did with prodding from others. Even

after slipping and hitting his head, Wirt gets right back up and keeps going, ultimately falling through the ice into a body of water.

This callback to the way that they entered the Unknown in the first place juxtaposed with Greg's unknowing sacrifice makes an important point: that dangerous, unpleasant things can happen no matter what decisions you make. Deciding not to decide will not necessarily protect you, just as Wirt's deciding not to decide would seemingly have led to him drowning. The first time Wirt fell into the water in "Into the Unknown" was a totally random set of circumstances that Wirt did not directly decide to put himself into, and that only came to be because of decisions others made. Wirt did not want to go to the cemetery but felt he had to after Greg put the tape in Sara's jacket. The cops did not have to show up and play a joke on the kids and drive Wirt and Greg up on top of the wall, and Sara did not have to find the tape just when Wirt was in the precarious position of sitting on top of the wall. The only decision Wirt really makes is to go over the wall, and even that is pressured by the outside force of the joking cop. Immediately after this decision, Wirt is forced into another action when a train suddenly appears and he and Greg end up rolling down the hill and into the water to escape. So when Wirt falls into the water once again in "Babes in the Wood", the fact that he ended up in that situation because he *chose* to run off blindly implies that external dangers are always a possibility, no matter what decision—or lack thereof—is made. This is carried further when Beatrice rescues Wirt from the water. It is always possible that someone you trust might hurt you, but that does not mean you should never trust anyone. Ultimately, trusting Beatrice in the first half of the series is what saves him here, and so, just like Greg's sacrifice, sometimes

a risk ends up being worth the pains associated with it—including simply enduring feelings of anxiety.

## **Optimism and Improvement**

None of this is, of course, explicitly stated. No character in *OTGW* ever comes out and says that anxiety is something one has to learn to cope with in order to avoid becoming paralyzed by it. But in the end, Wirt is *less* anxious but not *totally* lacking anxiety. He says that he does want to listen to the tape he made for Sara with her at some point, but is still visibly nervous about it. This moment offers the audience a resolution that is distinct from previous children's media ("The Unknown"). We are meant to sympathize with him wanting to improve, but not being totally cured either. After all, this scene takes place in a hospital. Wirt is healing. Wirt is getting better. And the audience does not laugh, and is not disappointed that he is not suddenly perfect. The serial's final song further undermines the idea of a total cure or reformation when it refers to "golden memories" as "The loveliest lies of all" ("The Unknown"). Perfect, golden memories of what we have done are lies—lovely lies, but lies nonetheless. Everything is imperfect, just as Wirt is. Further, when the singing frog wonders "If dreams can't come true, then why not pretend?", this suggests that *because* one cannot be sure of perfect, golden outcomes, one should try being optimistic—that is, pretending that good outcomes are more likely than bad ones, even if that is not truly the case. This is, at the very least, better than falling into despair as Wirt did while Greg was dreaming in "Babes in the Wood", and it is better than wandering the forest for the rest of his life as the Beast asks Wirt to in the finale ("The Unknown"). Ultimately, despite all its dark imagery and the

threat of true danger throughout the serial, *Over the Garden Wall* uses Wirt as a figure of mundane (if clinical) anxiety to communicate a sense that staying optimistic can help one cope.

In many ways, the unusual qualities this chapter has focused on in Wirt are necessary for this idea to come across. A nervous girl would not stand out in this spooky setting, as we have previous examples of girls demonstrating fear and anxiety. Instead, Wirt's teenage boy anxiety is unusual and therefore more obviously important. Similarly, a small boy might be too easily reduced to a comic character, or might harken back too closely to storybooks about fears of the dark. Because Wirt is a teenage boy, and because his portrayal resists previous tropes like those used for characters like Shaggy and Scooby, a subtle message about coping with ongoing, chronic anxiety is possible.

## CHAPTER 2

Over the course of its ten episodes, *Over the Garden Wall* features a Tavernkeeper who looks like Betty Boop and multiple nods to *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, including a richly detailed forest that gives independent life to characters' internal emotional states. Greg even plays at being Shirley Temple while singing his "Potatoes and Molasses" song, expanding the range of references to include children's films of the era as well. This formal awareness of the past draws attention to how gender in children's media has developed. Wirt is not the only character who the serial presents unusually in regards to gender and mental health. Beatrice and Lorna are both female characters who struggle with guilt far more than anxiety. Despite the frightening nature of the events and setting in *OTGW*, these girls do not scream and fret. Their stories intersect with Wirt's, but they do not revolve around him and his story the way that female characters are often made to. Beatrice in particular is more concerned with solving her own problems in the first act, and spends the second act feeling guilt upon guilt for how her selfish actions have hurt her family and Greg in addition to Wirt. While this could be read as a didactic message for girls to put others before themselves, Beatrice never totally transforms into a devoted mother-figure as might be expected in earlier stories centered on girls' moral development and place in the home. Instead, her attempts to atone for her sins earn her forgiveness—something that is, if anything, more typical of male figures in

children's literature. Just as Wirt's story arc is distinct from previous male examples, Beatrice's story arc aligns more with that of characters like Edmund in *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* than with female examples, making her equally distinct as a character.

Even as this chapter centers on the female characters, it must return to Wirt's characterization and dealings with anxiety in order to fully express how their interconnected stories make them all distinctive examples within children's media as a whole. This chapter works within a framework influenced by Peter Muris' studies on guilt, shame, and anxiety which argue that because it is caused by external mistakes, guilt is not tied to anxiety the way shame is. In Muris' terms, Beatrice's guilt, prompt "attempts to fix the situation" where shame would only cause "defensive and avoidance behavior" ("Guilt Shame and Psychopathology"). She is not ashamed of who she *is*, she is guilty about what she has *done*, and so her focus remains on the external world. This framework leads to a reading of the guilty female characters in *Over the Garden Wall* as both distinct from other examples of children's media which condemn female characters who make mistakes, and complementary to Wirt's anxious internality. This chapter also uses Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* to explore the ways in which Beatrice and Lorna differ from earlier representations of female characters, both good and evil, in children's media.

## **Good Girls and Guilty Girls**

To begin with, the contrast between the emotional lives of the girl characters and Wirt's own highlights how distinctive Wirt's own emotional life is. While Beatrice shows

brief moments of situational anxiety, she is not at all chronically anxious. It might be better to define her momentary situational anxiety as instances of her being *cautious*—such as when she urges the boys to leave with her when the harvest festival in “Hard Times at the Huskin’ Bee” turns creepier than it already was. Largely, her caution springs from awareness of her external world. In the few instances when she *does* turn inward, it is not to worry about a potential, hypothetical outcome as a fretting Wirt might. Her uncharacteristic wistfulness in a later scene reflects guilt about the past, not worry about the future or shame about who she is (“Lullaby in Frogland”). She knows that she has tricked and betrayed the boys into coming with her to win the scissors that can make her and her family human again. This deceit is no longer acceptable in light of her having gotten to know Greg and, more importantly, Wirt. While she teases Wirt for following orders blindly in the third episode (“Schooltown Follies”), by “Mad Love”, Beatrice sees there is more to him than meekness and anxiety, just as the audience does. As she gets to know Wirt, she stops scolding him and starts encouraging him, as when she asks him to play bassoon, insisting that even if nobody else wants to hear him try, she does (“Lullaby in Frogland”). This sort of positive encouragement follows a mental health framework more than a moral framework. Rather than calling him a coward and condemning him for his fearfulness, she meets him where he is and supports him as a friend. In addition, Beatrice is a female friend encouraging Wirt rather than a male sidekick kicking him in the side.





**Figure 18: Beatrice looks embarrassed after admitting she wants to hear Wirt play bassoon.**

Although Beatrice's bashful look after she admits to wanting to hear him play bassoon (see Figure 18) could be seen as hinting at romantic feelings, it could just as easily suggest she is embarrassed at speaking so frankly about any sort of feelings. In any case, no romantic relationship is developed between the two.



Figure 19: The Tavernkeeper in “Songs of the Dark Lantern” both looks and sounds like Betty Boop.

In general, Beatrice’s treatment has more in common with more modern portrayals of female characters like those presented in cartoons like Cartoon Network’s earlier original series *The Powerpuff Girls* than to the early stories *Over the Garden Wall*’s aesthetics and tropes pay homage to, like Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Fans of early animation and film can easily spot many of the homages made to characters like Betty Boop in “Songs of the Dark Lantern” (see Figure 19) and the Blue Fairy from *Pinocchio* in “Babes in the Wood” (see Figure 20).



Figure 20: The Queen of the Clouds appears as *Pinocchio*'s Blue Fairy does and offers Greg a wish.

In an interview, the show's creator Patrick McHale admits that these homages were part of an effort "to figure out why the story was being told in animation", and that although some of the show is "reminiscent of early Disney shorts" like in the case of the episode "Babes in the Wood", many of the homages were simply born out of "hanging out with [the] animation people" who worked on the show ("Talking Homage"). McHale and his staff looked to examples such as Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* to "see how people had adapted stuff into animation before" ("Talking Homage"). The audiovisual choices McHale and his staff made in these homages as well as in the collaborative process of creation under McHale's supervision demonstrate the impact Disney's example had on the show. Although *OTGW* nods to multiple inspirations, the aesthetic of the forest that makes up the Unknown owes the most to the frightening forest depicted in Disney's

*Snow White*. As Disney's first full length animated feature, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* stands out as a visually rich treat even over seventy years later, and one that took advantage of its complex painted backgrounds to visually illustrate the subjective emotional states of characters within the scene (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*). More specifically—and more relevant to *OTGW*—the forest's appearance reflects Snow White's internal state upon discovering the Queen wants to kill her.



Figure 21: Snow White flees through a forest distorted by her own fear.

When Snow White runs fearfully through the forest, we see it as dark and filled with trees that her mind has transformed into clawed creatures with frightening faces (see Figure 21).



Figure 22: As Snow White recovers, the forest recovers its true appearance.

When she recovers from her panic, the forest fades back into a colorful paradise, filled with furry, nonthreatening animals (see Figure 22).



Figure 23: The second episode's visuals reflect its lighter tone.

*Over the Garden Wall* has similarly rich and detailed backgrounds throughout, with brighter colors and more peaceful settings appearing in the portions of the story that are lighter in tone (see Figure 23), compared to grimmer settings for grimmer moments (see Figure 24).



Figure 24: The final episode contains darker themes and equally dark visuals.

Additionally, the framing and colors chosen to portray the Unknown tend to reflect Wirt's mental state. When Wirt is moody, so is the setting, no matter how cheerful Greg might be in the same frame (see Figure 25).





Figure 25: Wirt's negative emotions are reflected in the Unknown's appearance, but Greg's are not.

Despite this visual homage, *OTGW*'s female characters have almost nothing in common with Snow White herself. A minor character, Lorna, seems almost a parody of Disney's good domestic heroine, and certainly reverses many expectations for such a character. Lorna spends most of her screen time cleaning her cabin in the woods, as Snow White famously and eagerly cleans for the seven dwarfs. But Lorna is clearly unhappy and is compelled to clean by magic, not by choice (see Figure 26) ("The Ringing of the Bell").





Figure 26: Lorna frowns as she discusses how she is forced to clean.

Furthermore, we soon discover that Lorna is not sweet-natured or virtuous, and that her paleness and cough actually reflect the fact that she is cannibalistic and possessed. Wirt does not rescue her as the Prince rescues Snow White from death, but rather narrowly escapes her with his life. Unlike Snow White, who is victimized by the Queen in disguise, Lorna has been compelled by the spirit possessing her to kill and eat people, making them her victims instead (“The Ringing of the Bell”). Ashamed of what she has done, Lorna does not tell Wirt the truth, even as she agrees to run away with him in the hopes that “Perhaps this time could be different” (“The Ringing of the Bell”). Snow White, perfect princess that she is, has nothing to be ashamed of, and nothing to lie about. Lorna’s relationship with a powerful older female figure similarly reverses Disney’s scenario. It originally seems that Lorna is abused by an evil witch, Auntie Whispers, just

as Snow White is abused by the evil Queen. In the conclusion of the episode, however, Auntie Whispers is revealed to be far more benevolent than previously assumed, and Lorna freely chooses to remain in the forest with the woman who had earlier appeared to be keeping her captive. In comparison, Snow White ends with Snow leaving the forest and the horrible things she has been through behind forever.

This reversal of expectations regarding Lorna and Auntie Whisper's characters is something that might be better appreciated by the members of the audience that are *not* children. Nodelman's theory of the Hidden Adult spends less time on adults as individual consumers of children's media like *OTGW* and more time on how parents purchase the media they think is best for their children, but the fact remains that parents and adults do consume media like *OTGW* with or without their children. It is these adults that are more likely to realize that Lorna's reversal of expectations is more than just a clever twist, but also that it says something about what we expect of young, sick women in this sort of media. The serial shows awareness of how this complexity will likely fly over children's heads when Greg remarks with surprise that Lorna is the "people-eater" and that "just goes to show you stuff" ("The Ringing of the Bell"). Greg, as a child, is unable to put into words what exactly about this situation is surprising and different, and serves momentarily as a Greek chorus explaining the plot twist. This, in addition to the particularly frightening image of Lorna chasing the boys, makes this episode an instance where the Hidden Adults both behind the scenes and in the audience are a little more visible than elsewhere in the serial.

Beatrice appears in more of the show's episodes and is a more complicated character than Lorna, and she is equally opposed to the Snow White model, especially in terms of fear. When Snow White is urged to run away into the woods by the Huntsman, she falls into a panic which literally changes the world around her into something more frightening. In comparison, when Beatrice is shooed out of the tavern with a broom, she threatens the Tavernkeeper with a curse ("Songs of the Dark Lantern"). Additionally, Beatrice shares none of Snow White's maternal instincts. The closest Beatrice gets to nurturance is encouraging Wirt, but this seems to be something she is embarrassed—not eager—to do ("Lullaby in Frogland"). Finally, the most obvious difference between Beatrice and Snow White is the fact that, while Snow White is surrounded by animal helpers, Beatrice *is* an animal helper. Beatrice has been transformed into a bluebird and only appears in human form in two brief scenes. She is in this state as punishment for throwing a rock at a bluebird which implies that, unlike Snow White, who enlists animals to help her clean, Beatrice is the one who needs taming ("Mad Love"). Snow White requires the animals' help to guide her through the forest to a safe place to sleep, but Beatrice is, herself, the animal guiding the boys to their destination. Still, Beatrice does not stop being a human girl entirely upon being cursed into being a bluebird. She still has her family, her memories, and the ability to speak—all things that tie her directly to her original human form. Similarly, after she is returned to her human form, her family teases her about their brief stint as bluebirds. The forms are connected, and do not truly begin or end with one another, fitting with Cholodenko's theory of the illusory beginning, which is totally unlike Snow White's consistent status as a sweet princess. Beatrice grows and

changes and it is difficult to pin down when this growth and change begins and ends, but Snow White is essentially the same girl in every situation and never truly learns or changes.

The animations differ in their resolutions for the female characters as well. In *OTGW*'s finale, both Beatrice and Lorna are shown to remain in the forest of the Unknown despite all its attachments to their previous difficulties and struggles. They do not get to move on to a castle or to "civilization" and leave their pasts behind as Snow White does after she is revived by the Prince. Despite his attempts to rescue Lorna, Wirt is not a prince who swoops in to save the girls from their situations. Wirt even makes himself an obstacle for Beatrice by hiding the magical scissors she needs to change her family back ("The Unknown"). Lorna in particular chooses her own resolution by deciding to stay with Auntie Whispers ("The Ringing of the Bell"). Beatrice's resolution and final appearance on screen is with her family. In comparison, her goodbyes with Greg and Wirt are only captured in audio, not shown on screen ("The Unknown"). Where Snow White sings and pines for her Prince throughout the film and is ultimately whisked away over the horizon to live happily ever after with him, the girls in *OTGW* have other concerns, and their final resolutions reflect this fact.

These differences reflect the major difference between the emotional center of Snow White's story and both Beatrice and Lorna's: Beatrice and Lorna both have struggles with guilt which they can only partially recover from. Although Wirt forgives Beatrice and gives her the scissors that will save her and her family from life as birds, he also stresses that he was, indeed, legitimately angry at her ("The Unknown"). Similarly,

although her family is teasing her in reminding her of the curse, the fact is they are not pretending it did not happen (“The Unknown”). In contrast, the movement from the forest to the Prince’s castle implies a strong desire to forget the unpleasantness of the Queen’s disruption of Snow White’s life. The way Snow White happily waves goodbye and immediately leaves with the Prince implies this is all too likely.

### **Curses and Paralysis**

Beatrice also differs from Snow White in that although she is cursed as Snow White is, that curse does not paralyze her. While we do not know much about Beatrice before she is cursed, the fact that the curse was caused by her throwing a rock at a bluebird implies that she is, from the beginning, an active rather than reactive person (“Mad Love”). Snow White is active, of course, but her activities are domestic and based in necessity. Cleaning is a chore that needs doing, throwing rocks at innocent animals is not. She is also active in the scenes in which she runs through the forest and dances with the dwarfs, but these are instances of provoked, reactive actions. Stoning a bird is a decidedly violent action that sweet Snow White would never subject her wildlife entourage to. The nature of both girls’ curses reflect both their personalities and the reasons why they were cursed. The Queen wants Snow White dead because she is, unknowingly, the Queen’s competition. Snow White is a victim through and through in this situation. She has not truly broken any rules, and has only been active in reaction to others’ actions. Her victimhood is fully played out in her being put into a magical sleep which paralyzes her just as much as she has been paralyzed by convention up until this point. Contemporary reimaginings of Snow White and her tale, such as the *Fables* comic

series and the live action television series *Once Upon a Time*, have resisted the passivity presented in Disney's take, as have later Disney heroines. Although Disney's Snow White's is an important precursor, her example of victimhood is out of date.

Beatrice, as a contemporary fairy tale heroine, is active both before and after her curse. She is not paralyzed, neither figuratively nor literally. It is her own fault she is in this situation and she recognizes that she must be the one to solve it. Beatrice is not a victim. Instead, she is a wrongdoer attempting to make up for what she has done wrong. When Beatrice threatens the broom-wielding Tavernkeeper with a curse, she shows that she knows that violence against innocent animals is what caused *her* curse. Had Beatrice been paralyzed like Snow White, she never would have had the opportunity to learn from her mistakes—including the ones she makes while actively attempting to atone for her first wrongdoing.

This too draws attention to Wirt's mental paralysis when it comes to making decisions. Despite being in what might appear to be a hopeless situation, Beatrice has already found a possible solution to her problem at the start of the serial. It proves to be the wrong solution, and she immediately uses deception to make this solution work, but ultimately she comes onto the scene as a person who has decided what her goals are and is making moves to achieve them. She follows the boys from the moment she sees them (see Figure 27) and designs ways to manipulate them into doing what she wants, like pretending to be tangled in a bush (see Figure 28).



Figure 27: Beatrice's first appearance, just before Wirt realizes he and Greg are lost.



Figure 28: Beatrice pretends to be tangled in a bush in order to trick Greg and Wirt into following her.

Wirt, on the other hand, almost immediately begins agonizing over whether he and Greg should ask the Woodsman for help, and then follows this up with further agonizing over whether they should try to get away from the Woodsman once they've followed him to the cabin ("The Old Grist Mill"). He is so paralyzed by indecision that he literally lays down as he waxes poetic about his uncertainty—making him look an awful lot like Snow White in her glass coffin (see Figure 29 and Figure 30).



Figure 29: Snow White lays in a cursed sleep in her coffin.





Figure 30: Wirt lays on a fainting couch to wax poetic.

Even cursed as a bluebird and left with limited options for solving this problem, Beatrice is active and decisive from the instant we see her, making Wirt's indecisiveness even more obvious in contrast.

In their mobility and agency, Beatrice and Lorna actually have more in common with the Queen than Snow White, despite the fact that the Queen is an antagonist. Both Beatrice and Lorna associate with witches, and *Snow White*'s Queen uses black magic to achieve her goals. Lorna has actually hurt more people than the Queen manages to, given the fact that the Queen only puts Snow White to sleep, and Lorna has killed enough people to necessitate the task of "sorting the bones" ("The Ringing of the Bell"). What sets the girls in *OTGW* apart from the Queen is that they are capable of making up for what they have done: they are mixed characters, and are neither entirely evil nor entirely good. Lorna is cured and, immediately forgiven for all of her cannibalism because it was

the spirit that made her do it. In the first act Beatrice is entirely motivated by her desire to atone for her first mistake, and she spends the second act trying to atone to Wirt and Greg. Upon reuniting, Wirt initially wants to send Beatrice back home, intent on saving Greg himself, but Beatrice refuses, saying she cannot go home until Greg is safe (“The Unknown”). It is this selfless choice that causes Wirt to accept her help once again, and by the end of the episode he has forgiven her fully. Additionally, Snow White is a good, maternal character, whereas the Queen is an evil mother. Lorna and Beatrice, however, are not mother-figures at all. Despite their traits aligning more with the evil Queen than with Snow White’s virtuous maternal nature, the girls are ultimately accepted as “good guys”. Further, despite the obvious allusion to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in Beatrice being a guide, neither she nor Lorna are beatific, but neither are they evil.

Part of what marks the Queen in *Snow White* as a villain are her masculine traits such as assertiveness. Both the Queen and Beatrice have no problem ordering others around, but the major order the Queen gives is clearly evil: she orders the Huntsman to murder Snow White and cut out her heart. Elizabeth Bell argues that it is her sexuality that requires the Queen to be an evil figure. In labeling female Disney villains “femme fatales”, she observes that these characters “[live] and [think] only for themselves as sexual subjects, not objects” and it is this trait makes them “doomed women” (116). *Snow White*’s Queen is the first in a very long line of both male and female Disney villains whose evilness is emphasized by their gender transgressions. Li-Vollmer and LaPointe cite Bell’s earlier work in their study of male villains who transgress gender, and ultimately conclude that the later male villains call back to the Queen in their “sissified

embodiment of evil” (104). In a cartoon which at least pays visual homage to *Snow White* (see Figure 31 and Figure 32), Beatrice is able to transgress gender norms by being assertive without being condemned in the story’s finale.



**Figure 31:** The highly detailed landscape of the dwarf’s cottage, wherein Snow White takes refuge.



Figure 32: The highly detailed, similarly composed image of Lorna's cottage, where Wirt and Greg take refuge.

In contrast to the Queen, Beatrice is not *sexually* assertive, but she is assertive towards a boy, which violates typical gender roles. Similarly, Wirt's anxiousness could earn him the label of "sissy" which more recent Disney villains have been given by critics, but it does not have this meaning in *Over the Garden Wall*. Like Beatrice, Wirt's gender transgressions are not signs of evil.

In the cases of the two sister witches, Auntie Whispers and Adelaide, traditional gendered indications of evil and good are reversed. Both characters are voiced by men. Moreover, both men—Tim Curry and John Cleese, respectively—are famous for their gender-bending roles in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Cleese raises his voice to a higher pitch for Adelaide, but Curry's voice stays low for Auntie Whispers. This, together with the initial glimpse of their character designs, would usually mean that Auntie Whispers is evil and Adelaide is good, just as the

Queen's throaty voice marks her as evil next to Snow White's sweet soprano. Further, their motivations and titles are misleading. Beatrice makes her deal with the evil Adelaide assuming she "just [wants] some yardwork done", and the boys go along with Beatrice based on her endorsement of Adelaide as the "Good Woman of the Woods" ("Hard Times at the Huskin' Bee", "Lullaby in Frogland").

Ultimately, what really drives home this reversal of roles is their appearances. In the first few seconds of her appearance, Adelaide is a frail woman tucked into her bed, insisting she is sick—much like the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood ("Lullaby in Frogland"). This, along with her pointy witch's hat, suggest her true nature just before she reveals herself for what she really is—a black widow spider, complete with a web of yarn (see Figure 33) and an hourglass shape on her back (see Figure 34).



**Figure 33:** Adelaide plays a string game with yarn.



**Figure 34:** Adelaide bears a red hourglass on her back as a black widow spider does, and wears a pointed witch's hat.

To drive her evilness home further, she melts just like *The Wizard of Oz*'s Wicked Witch of the West. These connections solidify Adelaide as an evil female despite her initial façade as a frail, good old woman. Meanwhile, Auntie Whispers first appears as the oversized, imposing woman who is keeping Lorna prisoner, but by the end of the episode her bulging eyes simply make her tears at losing Lorna all the more obvious (see Figure 35) (“The Ringing of the Bell”).



Figure 35: Auntie Whispers weeps as she admits she believes Lorna will leave her.

The homage Auntie Whispers' design pays to the evil witch Yubaba in *Spirited Away* makes it likely that viewers familiar with this film will assume she is evil just as Wirt does. Her position as an overseer of female menial labor also helps to create this initial impression.





Figure 36: Snow White cleans the steps of her stepmother's castle in rags.

Just as Snow White cleans the steps of the castle in rags on her stepmother the Queen's orders (see Figure 36), Lorna too is cleaning on the orders of someone who is not her blood relative. Auntie Whispers' masculine stature and voice compounded with this make it all too likely that Wirt and the audience will mistake her for a villain. Given the fact that they appear in back-to-back episodes and are sisters, one could compare these two witches to the Queen and her two forms. In one form, she is in second place for fairest in the land, and in the other she is hideous enough to be seen as nonthreatening and in no way be identified. While in the Queen's case, her deviance from feminine beauty signals



her further fall into irredeemable evil, Auntie Whisper's dramatic ugliness and large size do not align with her being more evil than her sister.

Additionally, neither of these characters is as truly assertive as the Queen and Beatrice are. Adelaide uses her possession of the magic scissors to manipulate Beatrice into violating her own moral code or to give up her freedom, but does not simply give orders. In fact, she intends to fill the boys' heads with wool in order to get them to listen to her, and admits she only does what she does because the Beast tells her to ("Lullaby in Frogland"). Auntie Whispers is only able to order Lorna around thanks to the bell that controls the spirit possessing her, and immediately assumes Lorna will leave upon being exorcised ("The Ringing of the Bell").

Evil or not, these female characters are not assertive the way Beatrice and the Queen are, and this further highlights Beatrice's distinct treatment as a character. She is cursed, powerless, and yet still assertive, unlike the sister witches. She is assertive and thereby masculine, and yet, unlike the Queen, she is unpunished for her gender transgressions.

## **Girl Power**

Unpunished assertiveness in female characters is not an entirely new phenomenon, of course, as is seen in the example of the tomboy figure. In the first of Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* series, *Five on Treasure Island*, the tomboy who insists on being called George is described as a "naughty girl" for this particular gender transgression, but her parents go along with the nickname even so (10). George asserts that she simply "won't be" a girl at all, as she can "climb better than any boy, and swim

faster too” (12). Thus, the assertiveness George displays throughout the story is associated with masculinity, and it is perhaps for this reason that it is never truly a problem for her in her family’s eyes or in anyone else’s. For all intents and purposes, George *is* a boy. In this way, George’s assertiveness is different from Beatrice’s, at least insofar as Beatrice does follow at least a few rules of femininity. When she returns to human form in the story’s finale, she is shown to be wearing a dress and her hair is tied up neatly (see Figure 37) (“The Unknown”). Where George equates being assertive with being a boy, Beatrice does not have to fully sacrifice her femininity in order to enact these traits.



Figure 37: Beatrice, returned to human form, wears a dress and bound hair.

Of course, Beatrice *does* spend most of the story cursed into the form of a bluebird, but her character design in this form includes big eyes and a petite size which often requires that she hitch a ride on the boys' shoulders, much like the birds Snow White attracts (see Figure 38 and Figure 39 ). Even in bird form, Beatrice is presented as more feminine than masculine.



Figure 38: Bluebirds help Snow White to clean.



Figure 39: Beatrice's character design strongly resembles the birds in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

That said, Beatrice is far from the first character to avoid sacrificing femininity in exchange for power and assertiveness. *The Powerpuff Girls*, an early Cartoon Network original series, followed the “girl power” trend of the 1990’s by introducing three incredibly powerful superheroes in the form of kindergarten age girls (Hains 1). In her article examining the show and its claims of “girl power”, Rebecca Hains defines the concept of “girl power” as it appeared in the 90’s as an effort to prove that “‘feminine’ and ‘empowered’ are not antonyms” and that this means “Girls can make their own decisions, speak their minds, raise their voices, and be aggressive, while engaging in the production of normative femininity” (1). While Hains acknowledges the importance of *The Powerpuff Girls* “as a keynote text in the girl power genre,” she also questions the show’s philosophies in ways that demonstrate some significant differences between the assertiveness and power the Powerpuff Girls and Beatrice each claim (1).

In particular, Hains comments on the flawed logic in presenting characters who “enact without embodying the new female strength” implied in “girl power” (3). The Powerpuff Girls are “coded as clearly feminine” just as Beatrice is, each drawn with “extraordinarily large, saucer-like eyes”, “the tiny, asexual bodies of five-year-olds”, and always wearing “a little dress, white stockings, and Mary Jane shoes” even “when fighting villains” (20). They are given “thin, not tough” bodies just like other girl power icons, thus raising the question of why characters who are shown to possess physical strength are not allowed to *look* physically strong (3). Beatrice’s representation dodges this question by placing all her strength in her personality. The choices made for her design reflect this. A human trapped in the form of a bird, regardless of gender, would have to rely on the strength of their personality alone. Thus *OTGW* avoids this problematic element of “girl power” which has troubled prior animation. As Hains observes in discussing *The Powerpuff Girls*, “thanks to the show’s cartoon medium, quite literally any representation would be possible” (19). The creators carefully chose Beatrice’s particular form, and in doing so highlight just how strong her personality is as she bosses Wirt around, despite his physically outclassing her just by virtue of being a human being.

Still, it is important to acknowledge how the rhetoric of “girl power” associated with *The Powerpuff Girls* and other children’s media of the time allows Beatrice’s character to be what it is. That is, in these stories, being a powerful girl is a good thing. Of course, “bad” female characters do exist in *The Powerpuff Girls*, but it is not their power that makes them bad. It would be a massive contradiction for female villains

facing the *Powerpuff Girls* to be condemned for being powerful. Where *Snow White*'s Queen previously stood as an example of a female character whose access to and claiming of power contributed to her status as an irredeemable villain, children's media in the "girl power" era resisted this tendency. Although such media was not without its examples of flawed, sexist reasoning behind villainizing female characters—such as *The Powerpuff Girls*' Sedusa whose "name and...powerful hair indicate that, in her acts of villainy, she relies entirely on her feminine wiles"—there is a clear movement away from power alone marking the fact that female characters deserve death or jail (Hains 25).

The power Beatrice possesses is, therefore, a variation on "girl power" as presented in 90's animation like *The Powerpuff Girls* in addition to a departure from "good" female characters like Snow White in early animation and tomboys like George in early 20<sup>th</sup> century children's literature. Further, *Over the Garden Wall* stands as a non-Disney fairy tale told in the era after the "girl power" trend, and its choices reflect attempts to avoid, if not fix, the problems in the trend while still building upon the positive sentiments it introduced. Girls are no longer forced into the box of fearful damsel, nor are they diminutive powerhouses. Both Beatrice and Lorna are allowed to be both feminine and complex thanks to their struggles with guilt, which is further highlighted by their relation to Wirt and his more highly gendered portrayal.

## **Gendered Struggles**

Ultimately, Wirt's struggle is far more gendered than Beatrice's, and this makes them both distinct from their children's media predecessors, and even further distinct thanks to their juxtaposition with one another. Beatrice's goal-orientation makes Wirt's

indecision stand out all the more, and thus the gender reversal of their dispositions cannot be ignored. However, even as they subvert typical boy-equals-hero and girl-equals-damsel tropes, they do not totally shed the trappings of their gender roles in order to do so. As mentioned above, Beatrice remains feminine even as she displays masculine traits. Wirt spends much of the time dressed in a somewhat feminine manner, as his cape could be mistaken for a dress, but in the flashback episode in the latter half of the serial, he is shown with his cape blowing out behind him (see Figure 40) (“Into the Unknown”).



**Figure 40:** Wirt stands in front of a fan to make his cape blow in the wind triumphantly.

Interestingly, this occurs during a scene in which he is wrestling with his anxiety and actively resisting its pressure to remain paralyzed and indecisive. The heroic stance and cries of “Yes!” reflect this momentary triumph over his anxiety. This would seem to

associate masculinity with bravery, however, when he stands up to the Beast there is no dramatic breeze blowing his cape back like Superman's (see Figure 41).



Figure 41: Wirt prepares to threaten the Beast.

More importantly, his voice actually cracks, making it momentarily higher and more feminine ("The Unknown"). It is moments like these that make Wirt's gender so key to his struggle, especially compared to how Beatrice's gender rarely affects hers.

Finally, it is important to note that none of the major female characters truly struggle with anxiety. It has already been established that Beatrice is cautious but not fearful, and that Lorna is, at most, afraid that her secret will be found out. The brief expressions of worry that Lorna and Beatrice show are based in their guilt for their external actions, not in chronic and internalized anxiety. The closest the show comes to



showing a female character experiencing anxiety alone is when Auntie Whispers suddenly confesses that she believes that Lorna will leave now that she has been cured (“The Ringing of the Bell”). Wirt is surrounded by female characters who stay oriented on the external world, and so his focus on his internal world and all the anxieties built up within it stand out all the more.

## CODA

### Additional Materials

*Over the Garden Wall* not only stands out in its themes and treatments of those themes, but in more practical ways as well. The tradition of heavy merchandising for children's media dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when John Newberry sold a ball and pincushion based on his famous characters Master Tommy and Miss Polly (Bernstein). However, not only do the creators of *Over the Garden Wall* create commercial tie-ins to the series, but fans also produce original works of art that contribute to or engage in a dialogue with the canon of the original work ("Behind the Potatoes and Molasses"). This thesis' focus is on the rich and complicated connections between the original series and children's literature and media, but both the creator sponsored and fan created works made in the series' afterlife and fandom show that McHale was right to claim that *OTGW* is for EVERYONE. Particularly, *OTGW*'s active online fan community is made up of twenty-somethings producing and sharing art and stories amongst themselves. They are not, generally, created with an audience of children consumers or learners in mind, and therefore this essential element of Perry Nodelman's definition of children's literature is missing in these creations.

Following the serial's broadcast in the fall of 2014, *Over the Garden Wall*'s creator Patrick McHale released five comic books and a cassette containing Wirt's

mixtape of clarinet and poetry entitled *For Sara* (Brown). Each of these additional works build upon the original serial's story, or are literally taken from it as the retro *For Sara* cassette is. They tell stories set either shortly before the serial's first episode or detail miscellaneous adventures within the Unknown. Two of the comics focus on the backstories of minor characters, but the first comic released reveals Wirt's poetic inner monologue, and issue #3 depicts Beatrice beginning to feel guilty for having misled Wirt and Greg. While these multimedia productions lay beyond the scope of the current thesis, future investigations of *Over the Garden Wall* may be better able to address how they play into the overall narrative, and what it means for a story with an audience of children to exist in multiple forms. Additionally, these works seem to target an older audience, and they have been enthusiastically received and re-worked by this older audience.

In particular, the reasoning behind presenting these particular stories in another form is worth considering. In an interview, McHale is careful to clarify that cut material—episodes and scenes that did not make it into the final broadcast version of the serial—are not canon: “The only stuff that’s canon is what’s in the show and what’s in [the Boom! comics]” (“Behind the Potatoes and Molasses”). Thus these comics are a part of the miniseries’ canon, but they are not simply material cut from the original broadcast. Presumably this extends to the *For Sara* tape as well, given Wirt’s voice actor’s involvement in its creation (Brown). McHale implies these stories were newly written when the idea of creating comic extensions of the miniseries was suggested (“Talking Homage”). The idea for an actual cassette tape was conceived during “early meetings about promotional material”—likely also late in the production process for the series

itself (Brown). All of these additional stories and bits of character development therefore were not even drafted until after the miniseries had aired. In this way, the beginnings of these additional stories and pieces of media which take place before or during the serial's in-universe timeline further reinforce Cholodenko's theory that animation has no easily defined beginning.

This lack of clear boundaries is carried into the lack of clarity in who these pieces of media were meant for: children or adults. While few comics are not available at least in easily accessible digital form nowadays, the cassette was a limited edition release (Brown). Thus many fans were totally unable to get their hands on this piece of the canon story. This sort of merchandising is particularly unfriendly to child fans. The tape was not advertised like a toy, and was not available on the Cartoon Network website and instead had to be purchased from a third party (Brown). The likelihood that child fans were aware the tape even existed is extremely low. It is, perhaps, more likely that children would become aware of the comics, but unlike the original serial, they had to be purchased individually. While a child may have simply caught the original broadcasts of the episodes on cable, they would have had to specifically request their parents purchase the comics for them. This means that child access to these extensions of *OTGW*'s world is entirely up to adult discretion in ways that the serial itself was likely not.

Although children had easy access to the original broadcasts of the series on Cartoon Network, such access cannot be assumed in regards to this merchandise. Yet the creator identifies these materials as part of the larger story. Is there something about these individual aspects of the story that those involved considered too adult—or, to return to

this project's main concerns, too scary? Does this change in access imply a desire to limit child access, and did McHale produce these materials with a slightly more adult audience in mind?

There is evidence to suggest this could be the case. The *For Sara* tape in particular contains a few instances that might be considered too racy or controversial, and would have been less likely to make it to broadcast had they been incorporated into the original miniseries. At one point, Wirt attempts to improvise a poem for Sara in which he counts off each of his fingers, and upon reaching five makes mention of “grasping” her love, which he immediately stumbles over bashfully upon realizing the implication of his words, saying that it is “not very good” (The Blasting Company). During another poem, Greg bursts into the room and it is implied that, in his anger at being interrupted, Wirt strikes his younger brother. Lastly, if one listens to the very end of one side of the tape, it turns out that Wirt has recorded over a recording of himself and his biological father (The Blasting Company). Although the original serial does not entirely shy away from mentioning the fact that Wirt's biological father is absent from their family set-up, it would be reasonable to assume that creators did not expect children to be interested in the question of what exactly happened to Wirt's father, as it is not key to the plot. Similarly, the sex and violence present in the first two examples are uncharacteristic of the rest of the miniseries. The show deals heavily with emotional crushes, but it does not extend to sex or sexual feelings at any point. Along the same lines, although the show contains some violence, this violence comes from the context of their adventure rather than a domestic dispute between brothers.

The comics do not tend to test boundaries of what is acceptable in terms of sex and violence for a child audience the way the tape does. They do, however, delve into darker and more explicit discussions of death, although this in regards to the minor characters of the Highwayman and the Woodsman's wife, neither of which have any direct impact on Wirt or Greg (Over the Garden Wall #2, Over the Garden Wall #4). The original miniseries never explicitly discusses death or dying in this way, beyond the (humorous) suggestion that the Woodsman might be an axe murderer ("The Old Grist Mill"). Even when Greg is very clearly dying, nobody uses the word as they do in the comic. This alone, however, does not seem enough to label the comics as more "adult" or more "scary" than the original miniseries.

## **Fandom**

This thesis was also unable to explore the extensive fandom surrounding the series, and the implications that this active fandom has for its true audience. McHale himself acknowledges in an interview that he "[has] no idea what kids think," but sees "a lot of positive stuff" on the internet ("Talking Homage"). Given the show's status as a miniseries with no official sequels rather than an ongoing series, it is online discussion and fanworks rather than the regular airing of new episodes that have helped *OTGW* to gain and keep fans. Websites like Twitter and Tumblr have helped both to create communities of fans and to allow these fans to interact with the creators. McHale himself maintains a Tumblr blog where he posts behind-the-scenes material like storyboards and answers questions from fans ("oldesidelinghill"). While McHale is also a frequent Twitter user, it is on his Tumblr blog that he and fans continues to discuss *OTGW*. When

McHale talks about *OTGW*'s internet fandom, he likely means Tumblr. Searching through the *Over the Garden Wall* tag on Tumblr turns up thousands of individual results. This is where the fandom truly lives, and fans are continuing to create art, stories, and costumes to this day.

While some of these contributions may be from child fans with access to the site, the quality of the work being produced heavily implies the large majority of fans are at least teenagers.



Figure 42: A frame from a fan comic by Tumblr user starfletrambo.

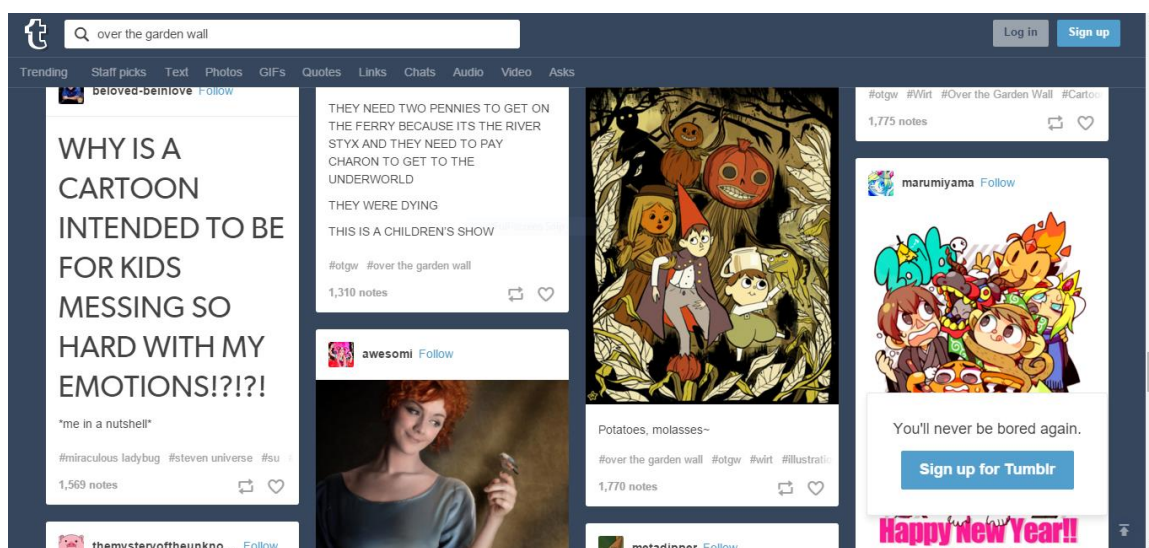


Figure 43: A search for *Over the Garden Wall* on Tumblr.

Figure 42 depicts Tumblr user starfleetrambo’s lengthy comic crossover with another contemporary animation series with a mixed age audience, *Gravity Falls*. The Tumblr search in Figure 43 contains skilled art and costume work, as well as distressed adult users commenting on their own perception that *Over the Garden Wall* is a “children’s show.” In this way, the show only lives up to McHale’s claim that it is for “EVERYONE” and resists the still-common assumption—even among fans—that animation is only meant for children (“Behind the Potatoes and Molasses”). Although there is no way to know whether child fans are viewing these posts and simply not contributing noticeably themselves, the fact remains that the face of the *Over the Garden Wall* fandom is older teens and young adults. Notably, it is through Tumblr that many fans share the additional materials such as the *For Sara* cassette which are in limited supply. It is highly unlikely that child fans would be able to obtain the technology required to create digital files from the cassette, and thus the circulation of this material



relies on older fans. When it comes to the online fandom, it is the children that are hidden, not the adults, which differs drastically from Nodelman's theory of children's literature.

Further study into this issue of the different audiences of *Over the Garden Wall* would build upon the groundwork which this project begins to lay. The fact that the show takes place in the 1980s, may contribute to the investment and interest shown by these older fans. Nostalgia, however, does not seem to be the only explanation. While it is true that many fans grew up in the 80's and 90's, this sort of identification alone would not likely be enough to sustain the fandom for over a year. The additional material that has come out after the miniseries no doubt contributes to their interest, but the only material that truly speaks to a nostalgia for a childhood in the 80's and 90's is the limited edition *For Sara* cassette. Further, the show itself only portrays the characters outside of the Unknown in less than two full episodes. The nostalgia factor alone does not seem to be enough to explain the continued strength of *OTGW*'s fandom.

So what does sustain the older fans' interest? Does it relate to this project's central focus in the way *OTGW* departs from many conventions of children's literature in its portrayal of anxiety? Is there particular attention paid within fandom to the portrayals of gender present in the show? These are all questions that would help to create a fuller picture of the ways in which *Over the Garden Wall* stands out as an example of media whose audience includes children. Additionally, although this project did not attempt to measure the response of an actual child audience, the size and strength of the adult

fandom does raise questions about how much success the serial had in reaching children, and what effects, if any, it had on them compared to adult fans.

## **Final Thoughts**

Ultimately, these are all areas this project viewed as secondary to its main objective: investigating the portrayal of anxiety in male characters within *Over the Garden Wall*. Through close reading and comparison both to other examples of children's media and to the other characters within the serial itself, this project hopes to convey the distinctive, sympathetic treatment of anxiety in Wirt's character. By stressing a mental health framework over a moral one, *Over the Garden Wall* is able to present a character who learns to cope with an illness he might have for the rest of his life, a remarkable accomplishment in media for children.

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