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“Where have we come and where shall we end?”: An Examination of Patrick McHale’s Over the Garden Wall as a Contemporary Otherworld Journey

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“Where have we come and where shall we end?”: An Examination of Patrick McHale’s *Over the Garden Wall* as a Contemporary Otherworld Journey

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Abstract

Voyages to the underworld, upperworld, and worlds aside have historically populated global literary and theological traditions. Any analysis of an otherworld voyage must take into consideration the deeply set theological origins of this trope. However, in addition to the more traditional underworld, upperworld, and Purgatory voyages there exists a fourth type of otherworld journey: the fantastic. The fantastic otherworld journey utilizes many of the conventions of these other journeys, but differs in its agenda. The purpose of the fantastic otherworld journey is not to convert, but rather to appeal to the imagination. Cartoon Network's *Over the Garden Wall* (2014) is a contemporary example of a fantastic otherworld journey. The miniseries offers an extended exploration of a uniquely Americana otherworld, referred to in the show as the Unknown. *Over the Garden Wall* is concerned less with the leaving-and-returning narrative of more traditional otherworld journeys, and more with a being-and-returning narrative structure instead. While more traditional otherworld journeys hinge much of their emphasis on the character's departure from the commonsense reality and arrival in and navigation of the otherworld, *OtGW* opens in the in-between: with two boys lost in the woods. By analyzing the otherworld voyaging tradition through an animation studies lens, the otherworld becomes a shared audiovisual space in which protagonist and spectator experiences intersect. Examining this intersection through Slavoj Žižek's concept of "anamorphosis" and Scott McCloud's concept of "closure" reveals how the animated otherworld, and more specifically the Unknown, participates in and diverges from the traditional otherworld journey.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Over the Garden Wall (2014) is an American animated television miniseries created by Patrick McHale for Cartoon Network. The majority of the miniseries takes place in the Unknown, a whimsical world with a hint of the macabre. The show is centered around Wirt (Elijah Wood) and Greg (Collin Dean), two brothers lost in the woods. With the help of a talking bluebird named Beatrice (Melanie Lynskey) and the mysterious Woodsman (Christopher Lloyd), Wirt and Greg journey through the Unknown in search of a way back home. *OtGW* is comprised of 10 episodes, 11 minutes each; the show aired over the course of a week (3-7 November 2014). This limited-release style contributes to the show's novelty in our binge-obsessed, media-on-demand culture, and contributes to the sense of visual and musical nostalgia that is woven throughout the show. McHale has maintained that *OtGW* will not have any future seasons, though McHale has alluded to the possibility of companion pieces ("Behind the Potatoes and Molasses"). There is an *OtGW* comic book series that explores content not part of the original television series. The episodes in the miniseries are identified as "Chapters," which, in addition to the miniseries' rich (yet oftentimes ambiguous) literary roots, contributes to the textual nature of the show. What is particularly interesting about this series' adaptation of the otherworld trope is that the audience does not experience the boys' arrival in the Unknown, but rather experiences their realization that they are not where they are supposed to be. The Unknown as an *other* world functions ultimately as a limbo space where the boys must fight against the Beast (Samuel Ramey), and earn their freedom or risk becoming part of the otherworld landscape forever.

A quick online search of *Over the Garden Wall* results in three "genres" of artifacts: where to watch it (Hulu, Amazon Prime, Cartoon Network), how it ranked commercially upon its release, and reactionary opinion pieces also predominantly published in wake of the show's original 2014 airing. The tone expressed in the majority of these opinion pieces is that *Over the Garden Wall* is not your average children's animated program. In fact, many of the articles zero in on the "dark," "funny," "beautiful," and "existential" nature of the show's animation style and content. But what *scholarship* has been done on the miniseries specifically? In reality, very little. Interestingly, the show is older in terms of popular culture and newer in terms of academia—being five years old at the writing of this thesis makes it a veritable memory in terms of current animated programming, on Cartoon Network or otherwise. There have only been three academic papers written on this show in the interim between its release and the writing of this thesis. Thus, this thesis hopes to contribute to that small corpus of scholarship. What this show is exceptionally good at, among many other of its qualities, is getting people to talk about it. The ambiguity of the literary references, the many "Easter eggs" hidden throughout the show, and its commitment to character development inspires an almost collaborative relationship between the artifact and its spectators. This show's take on the otherworld trope is particularly interesting because the Unknown looks remarkably like New England in the fall and sounds very similar to the Americana folk music tradition.

McHale credits much of *OtGW*'s mood to the music. Complimenting the visual aesthetic, the music not only enhances the Americana tone of the show, but is also used heavily for "storytelling purposes" (McBride). More specifically, McHale notes that the music is designed stylistically from "music…before the 1950s" so as to contribute to the "sincere and timeless" tone of the Unknown (DeVoe). At the root of Americana as a concept is nostalgia—what qualifies as Americana is typically situated in the appeal of the past, of small-town USA. Americana includes material objects (e.g. apple pie) as well as "people, places, concepts, and historical eras which are popularly identified with American culture" ("Americana"). Live-action television shows like *M*A*S*H* and *Little House on the Prairie* are simultaneously participating in and contributing to this concept of Americana in the entertainment industry. Explorations of Americana are not uncommon in popular media; however, *OtGW* locates this aesthetic in the otherworld, not in "reality." Unlike *The Phantom Tollbooth* and *Journey Back to Oz*, both explorations of American animated otherworlds, *Over the Garden Wall* reimagines the otherworld as distinctly and recognizably *American*, not simply "other" or bizarre. The autumnal palette and New England-esque design, in addition to images such as the one-room schoolhouse and steamboat, construct an otherworld that is familiar (at least to American audiences) and simultaneously disconcerting. The creatures and characters that populate these nostalgic settings are distinctly *off*. This off-ness destabilizes the comfort of the nostalgia created in the miniseries.

While the Americana aesthetic will certainly play a role in the analysis of *OtGW* in this thesis, the framework is rooted in theory. Analyzing *OtGW* through a theoretical lens allows for a new discussion of the otherworld trope. This framework is constructed of two concepts: anamorphosis and closure. Slavoj Žižek's concept of anamorphosis will be used primarily to deconstruct the Unknown as an otherworld location, as well as to examine how otherworld locations more generally are anamorphic in nature. Scott McCloud's concept of closure will be used in tandem with Žižek's anamorphosis to conduct a close-reading of the show and some of its prominent themes. The themes of lostness, burden, and exposure are recurrent to varying degrees in otherworld literature, but they are the driving themes in this miniseries in particular. By combining these two concepts, it becomes clear that closure is complicated in anamorphosis, and this complexity renders a spectator's engagement with the Unknown unstable as well. In the Unknown, Wirt and Greg, and the spectator, are forced into spaces of non-closure.

To conduct this analysis, this thesis is organized into three main chapters: Literature Review, Historical Overview, and Analysis and Discussion. The Literature Review provides scholarly context for *Over the Garden Wall*. At the writing of this thesis, there have only been three academic works published on this artifact. Of these three articles, only one is a peer-reviewed piece published in an academic journal. The other two articles are student theses. The Literature Review chapter will also provide some important information on animation studies as a discipline, and a discussion of what the animation form does to and for the otherworld trope. Finally, the Literature Review section gives context to the otherworld as a literary trope, with particular emphasis on the different iterations of the otherworld in global and theological literatures.

The Historical Overview section of this thesis is designed to provide readers with some historical context for the otherworld in American animation. While the scope of this thesis is limited to animated material produced in the United States, this trope is by no means limited to U.S. animation. However, given the vastness of this trope in particular, and the animation industry writ large, this thesis is only concerned with American animations that deal with and explore the otherworld. This section is not a fully comprehensive list of all American animated material that depicts the otherworld, but is rather designed to initiate the reader into this subgenre. By situating *Over the Garden Wall* within its predecessors, its innovations and departures from the traditional trope are made more apparent.

Finally, the Analysis and Discussion portion of this thesis will establish the theoretical framework of Žižek's anamorphosis and McCloud's closure, and then specifically examine *Over the Garden Wall* as an artifact through these concepts. In this section, a more thorough discussion of the Americana aesthetic will also be included. By combining these elements, *Over the Garden Wall* and the Unknown offer us a unique experience of the otherworld trope that not only contributes to the existing animated and literary otherworld material, but creates a new approach to it entirely.

Chapter II: Literature Review

To facilitate an analysis of *Over the Garden Wall* as an artifact of the animated otherworld, I have organized my Literature Review into three sections: *Over the Garden Wall*, animation studies, and The Otherworld. These sections will examine selections of available scholarship conducted in these areas to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how *Over the Garden Wall*, animation studies, and the otherworld intersect. Contextualizing the otherworld historically, eschatologically, and as a literary trope will allow for more clarity in its usage as a concept in this thesis. Animation studies is a rather emergent critical discipline and offers considerable insight into the relationships formed between form, content, and spectator. Finally, *Over the Garden Wall* is a fairly recent miniseries (released in 2014) and as such has not been exhaustively critically examined. To date, it has not been examined in the context of the otherworld explicitly, though references to its "otherworldliness" are unavoidable given the nature and content of the show. The discussion of this scholarship will provide a holistic foundation for the subsequent chapters in this thesis.

Over the Garden Wall

There have been three notable scholarly examinations of this show thus far, those include: Kristiana Willsey's "'All That Was Lost is Revealed': Motifs and Moral Ambiguity in *Over the Garden* Wall" (2016); Kelsey DuQuaine's "'There is only surrender': *Over the Garden Wall*'s Portrayal of Anxiety and Guilt" (2016); and Krysta Purcell's "An Onomastic Analysis of *Over the Garden Wall*" (2016). A few preliminary observations of these three texts are that a) each text was written by a woman, b) each text was released in 2016, and c) Willsey's text is the only peer-reviewed piece, published in the journal *Humanities*. The other two articles are products of university students, DuQuaine a graduate student, and Purcell an undergraduate.

With these preliminary observations in mind, what do these three articles' examinations of *Over the Garden Wall* reveal about the show?

Kristiana Willsey's article "'All That Was Lost is Revealed': Motifs and Moral Ambiguity in *Over the Garden Wall*" was published in 2016 as part of the fifth volume of *Humanities*. This article was published as part of a special issue titled: "Fairy Tale and its Uses in Contemporary New Media and Popular Culture." This issue features 12 articles focusing on a broad range of fairy tale traditions (from East Asian to Western) and how they function for young, tech-savvy consumers in an evolving media landscape. Willsey situates *Over the Garden Wall* as being a fairly unique example of perhaps an emergent "third-wave" of fairy tale storytelling. Willsey asserts that the miniseries "responds to recent postmodern fairy tale adaptations [such as the *Shrek* films or *Hoodwinked!*] by stripping away a century of popular culture references and [uses] motifs…as an artist's palette of evocative, available images" (39). In short, in privileging "imagery and mood over lessons, *Over the Garden Wall* captures something that has become vanishingly rare in children's media: the moral ambiguity of fairy tale worlds" (40). Willsey does not examine *OtGW* through a singular theoretical lens, but rather addresses and explores its uniqueness as a contemporary fairy tale—where it participates in fairy tale traditions, and where it departs from them. She does make use of Henry Jenkins' concept of "convergence culture" to distinguish the closed-circuit content of the show and its continued existence in fan-produced media and art. Additionally, Willsey examines *OtGW* through the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index (ATU Index) to demonstrate how the miniseries pays homage to, but does not exclusively rely on, traditional "tale types" as outlined by the Index. What Willsey's article contributes to the burgeoning corpus of *Over the Garden Wall* scholarship then is two-fold: she has brought this artifact to the public, academic eye, and she has acknowledged the show's subtle adaptation (and rejection) of the traditional fairy tale tendency to moralize. *Over the Garden Wall*, according to Willsey, is distinctly *non*-moralizing.

Kelsey DuQuaine's graduate thesis "'There is only surrender': *Over the Garden Wall*'s Portrayal of Anxiety and Guilt" was written for George Mason University's English MA program and was completed during the spring semester of 2016. DuQuaine approaches her analysis from a mental health and Gender Studies framework in her examination of chronic male anxiety in the show. She too, like Willsey, acknowledges the need to explore *Over the Garden Wall* through a lens other "than an exclusively moral one" (viii) in order to more fully understand the emotional richness of the characters presented therein. DuQuaine's research takes place at the crossroads of the "male character's [Wirt] anxiety and the female characters' guilt," a comparison that is "unusual for children's media" (viii) where complex emotions such as anxiety and guilt are not typically explored, or if explored, they are not often deeply explored together. DuQuaine uses Perry Nodelman's *Hidden Adult* as her methodological model. In addition to utilizing Nodelman's model, she also uses his work to unpack children's literature and its various iterations and definitions. Secondly, DuQuaine uses Alan Cholodenko's theory "The Illusion of the Beginning." Cholodenko is one of the first major theorists in animation studies. It is important to note that Willsey's article was published in July 2016 while DuQuaine's thesis was completed during the spring semester of 2016, therefore, interestingly, these articles could not have referenced each other and were published independently. Both articles discuss to different degrees the role morality does (or does not) play in *Over the Garden Wall*, with DuQuaine's examination more specifically considering how character psychology operates in the Unknown.

Finally, Krysta Purcell's undergraduate honors thesis "An Onomastic Analysis of *Over the Garden Wall*" was written for Appalachian State University's English department's Bachelor of Science program in May 2016. What is notable about this work's publication date is that it too, given the timeline of these three articles, could not make reference to either Willsey's or DuQuaine's respective works. Purcell takes an entirely different approach to examining *Over the Garden Wall* in that she does not explore morality nor mental illness, but the role names and naming play in the show. This linguistic analysis reveals the varied and deeply-set folkloric roots of *Over the Garden Wall* and how, subtly, names and naming "fulfill many essential roles" such as "plot development," "characterization, imparting literary allusion, and conveying complicated character dynamics" (2). She makes use of Frank Nuessel's *The Study of Names: A Guide to the Principles and Topics* to establish the foundation for her study. Purcell's contribution to the study of this artifact is one that is perhaps slightly more tactile than Willsey's and DuQuaine's in that Purcell links the names of the show to naming traditions both contemporary and past, both American and European, and both secular and Christian. Viewers experience the "familiar ambiguity" of the show not only through a non-moral (or ambiguously moral) or psychological lens, but through a linguistic one as well.

The strange mosaic created by the comparison of these three articles is one that mirrors the tone of the various opinion pieces floating around on the internet: this show is weird; this show is dark; and the complex, ambiguous nature of this show begs further examination. This thesis intends to contribute to the corpus of existing scholarship on this miniseries by analyzing it as an animated adaptation of the otherworld voyaging literary tradition, while continuing the discussion of this show's many ambiguities.

Animation Studies

> "Thinking about what animation can do and the way it can make us feel requires approaches that consider the radically different ways in which animations engage the imagination and the body." (Husbands and Ruddell 13)

In addition to the examination of the content of this show, it is important to also examine its form. *Over the Garden Wall* is an *animated* miniseries and therefore a discussion of the role animation plays in our engagement with and understanding of the Unknown as an otherworld is necessary. Animation studies as a discipline is considerably newer as compared to film studies if for no other reason than that animation traditionally has been relegated as predominantly children's media and therefore less worthy of formal academic examination and discussion. However, given the vast diversity of animation in today's global media market, it has become an important field for scholarship, ranging in areas of focus from cultural studies, technology advancement, craft, and many more. Because of the sheer diversity of animation, there is no one-size-fits-all theory used to examine animation artifacts. Indeed, the "relationship between practice and theory is especially acute in the field of" (Ward 91) animation studies, perhaps even more so than in the realm of film studies. This acuteness is due "to the notions of craft and artistry that are attached to animation as an activity" and, of course, "the fact that animation is so diverse" (Ward 91). Animation is at one and the same time "a rich, multifaceted activity, seemingly existing in many different places at once, and it is an intuitive, magical process" (Ward 91) that has permeated the visual arts industry from independent artifacts like *Over the Garden Wall* to enhancing live-action films in post-production. But what does this "diversity" in animation look like?

The Animation Studies Reader edited by Nichola Dobson is a collection of essays that explores the nature of animation from a variety of academic angles. While certainly not the only

Animation studies repository, it provides a comprehensive look at what topics are of imminent significance and contemporary relevance to animation scholars actively working in the field. While not all of the essays in this reader are relevant to this thesis, there are a handful that hold relevance for the study at hand. The first essay in this collection by Lilly Husbands and Caroline Ruddell, "Approaching Animation and Animation Studies," identifies some key considerations in the burgeoning field of animation studies for the uninitiated. Husbands and Ruddell highlight that

> what makes animation different from live-action [is that]…First, animation is produced *frame-by-frame* or in computer-animated increments, whereas live-action cinema is filmed in real time. Secondly, animation is entirely *constructed*, whereas live-action has a 'profilmic world' that exists in front of the camera. (Husbands and Ruddell 6)

This distinctly constructed form in animation does not operate in the same way (or is not found) in traditional live-action cinema. If there is no universal theoretical approach to examining animation (or at least, not yet) then it is important to "consider how we recognize [animation] visually, particularly alongside live-action" (Husbands and Ruddell 7). The many distinguishing features between animation and live-action is at least one place to start unpacking the rich world of animated media.

Of course, Husbands and Ruddell acknowledge the changing relationship between animation and live-action filmmaking. They use the example of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* as a "simple enough [way] to distinguish between the animated and live-action components" (7) in a film. In this example, there is a clear distinction between those characters that are animated and those who are real actors alongside them, but this gulf between animated and live-action material has lessened in more recent films. It has become increasingly "difficult to identify the use of animation techniques to 'doctor,' alter or enhance live-action images," (Husbands and Ruddell 7) especially in the popular world of Marvel and DC superhero films where there is an undeniable marriage of the animated and live-action traditions. These compositing techniques or "the combination of animated images and live-action images into one single image…complicate the *recognition* of animation" (Husbands and Ruddell 7) in today's film industry. Thus, so far animation is characterizable by its uniquely constructed nature, but perhaps is less so by its recognizability in today's film industry. Husbands and Ruddell offer two more distinguishing features of animation that are useful for contextualizing animation in this study: the illusion of life and metamorphosis.

For Husbands and Ruddell, the illusion of life created in animation comes "in part from the creation of movement, because movement suggests life as opposed to the stillness of death" (8). Movement in animation is, again, *constructed* frame-by-frame, and that is where the "illusion" of it originates (Husbands and Ruddell 8). This is in contrast with live-action films where movement is captured by the camera rather than created by the creative team (Husbands and Ruddell 8). It is important to note that just because there is created movement, does not necessarily mean that an illusion of life is also (and always) created. Indeed, just because a company logo wiggles back and forth on the screen does not signal to viewers that the logo is "alive," whereas the "wiggling" of a character, such as Mickey Mouse, appears "alive" by "virtue of his movement" (Husbands and Ruddell 8). So, again, we arrive at a "theory" of animation, examination of the illusion of life, that does not adequately address all forms of animation: it is not necessarily a property of *all* animation.

On the other hand, metamorphosis in animation stems from its highly constructed nature. Animations possess the immense potential at any given moment to transform *from one thing into another* by virtue of the form's incrementality (Husbands and Ruddell 9). Each motion, each movement is stylized and purposefully presented, but also readily changeable according to the creative team's decision *to make it so*. This changeability "raises the question of how we might engage with such images and their transition from one thing into another" (Husbands and Ruddell 9) and how such images function in terms of continuity of content. The "plasticness" of animation—the "temporal, metamorphosing elasticity of animated bodies, objects and spaces"—has "profound effects on spectators' bodies" (Husbands and Ruddell 13) and how we engage phenomenologically with animated material. In short, animation is utterly "unique in its representation of graphic and plastic universes and impossible spaces and in its 'ability' to transcend physical laws which govern our experience" (Husbands and Ruddell 11). The animated plane becomes one of infinite possibility, opportunity, and expansivity unlike anything that can be achieved by traditional live-action filmmaking.

John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, although not concerned with animation specifically, sheds light on the richly visual nature of the animated form. What has made animation such a diverse medium is that "seeing comes before words" (Berger 7) and animation is a pointedly visual endeavor. Words are used to shape and describe what we see, to explain the visual world, but seeing fundamentally precedes worded communication. Thus, there is something primal about the animated form that enables us to engage with its material in a starkly different fashion than through literature. And because of the highly stylized and constructed nature of animation, what we are engaging with is purposeful, by which I mean non-accidental. In live-action filmmaking, even though it too is highly stylized, there is still a margin of error possible for overlooked details (an out-of-place, accidental soda can or coffee cup, for example). In animated media, everything that is in the frame was deliberately drawn there (whether by hand or computer). However, even though that which is available to be seen is deliberate, we still do not see everything in any given frame of animation. The way we see things "is affected by what we know or what we believe" (Berger 8) or indeed what we are looking for. Just as in live-action film, in animation we "only see what we look at…To look is an act of choice" (Berger 8). In viewing a film, animated or otherwise, we are never looking "at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves…Our vision is continually active" (Berger 9). The plight of film, again, animated or otherwise, is that what we can see (or have access to) is dictated by the frame. We do not have access to the whole world, only that which is shown to us. And, even the material presented in the frame is often more detailed than we can apprehend all at once.

Our perceiving and experiencing of the animation form are multifaceted and malleable. The examination of animation "in spectatorial terms opens up opportunities to explore not only what animation *is* but also what it can *do*—what it can *show* us and enable us to *feel*" (Husbands and Ruddell 10). What distinguishes animation from other visual art forms is that, as we experience it, it "is in a constant state of becoming," and when it is "arrested for definition or analysis it ceases to be fully what it is while in motion" (Husbands and Ruddell 10). Examining animation as a text becomes challenging because it is distinctly *extra*-textual, it exists outside of the confines of the written word. Animation must be considered as a whole, with attention given to its audiovisual style, technique, medium, and other components of its formal aesthetics (Husbands and Ruddell 10). But what becomes clear is that thinking about what animation can do and "the way it can make us feel requires approaches that consider the radically different ways in which animations engage the imagination and the body" (Husbands and Ruddell 13). This "radical engagement" of animation departs from traditional live-action film because of its form and the possibilities opened for spectator involvement by the animated image.

The study of the otherworld through an animation lens, rather than a strictly literary or traditionally textual one, is intriguing insofar as it becomes a shared audiovisual and textual space into which simultaneously the protagonist and the spectator venture together. Animation's unique incorporation of the spectator into its world adds another layer of the uncanny to an already considerably uncanny trope—these upside-down, inside-out worlds engulf the character and spectator into one "shared" landscape where the anxieties and desires encountered are two-fold addressed by the character and the spectator alike. The animated otherworld is at one time *seen* by the protagonist (and spectator) and also seen *awry*.

The Otherworld

Voyages to the underworld, upperworld, and worlds aside have historically populated global literary and theological traditions. The voyage to the underworld, often "portrayed in religious epics and enacted in rituals, dramas, and games," is commonly "associated with initiatory death and rebirth" (Zaleski 3). Conversely, to represent states of "ecstasy, divination, and royal or prophetic consecration…many traditions favor the symbolism of ascent to higher worlds" (Zaleski 3). Voyages to an underworld or paradise are by no means limited to a specific religious, spiritual, or cultural tradition; indeed, these voyages are, to varying degrees, part of the literary fabrics of all global literatures. Scholars have investigated otherworld journey motifs "in primitive and tribal religion; in Oriental, Mesopotamian, and Greek mythology; in the works of Homer, Plato, and Vergil; in the multiple stands of Hellenistic religion; in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature; and in Zoroastrian, Islamic, and medieval Christian traditions" (Zaleski 4). In Western culture, return-from-death stories

> developed within and alongside the apocalyptic traditions of late antiquity, flourished in the Middle Ages, declined during the Reformation, and reappeared in connection with some of the evangelical, separatist, and spiritualist movements in the nineteenth century. Today these tales have returned full force in the form of 'near-death' testimony… (Zaleski 5)

Contemporary afterlife or "near-death" experiences in many ways echo the otherworld voyaging tales of these older traditions. One crucial similarity that links these return-from-death stories is their agenda: conversion and/or salvation. A journey to-and-from Paradise would encourage the traveler to conduct himself according to the doctrines that will ensure his acceptance into this place of eternal redemption. On the other hand, a journey to-and-from Hell would prompt the traveler to change his, or society's, ways in order to prevent eternal damnation. If Paradise is one location in the otherworld voyaging tradition, and Hell is another, then there is also a "third place," or Purgatory.

Conceptually, Purgatory emerges in the Catholic tradition during the twelfth century (Le Goff 1). In its original iterations, Purgatory was a trial space—a place where souls must confront their sins in order to achieve eternal rest in Paradise. A soul's time in Purgatory could be "shortened by the prayers, by the spiritual aid, of the living" (Le Goff 4), thereby creating an active link between the living and the dead. The gradual emergence of Purgatory "required and entailed a substantial modification in the spatial and temporal framework of the Christian imagination" (Le Goff 2). Such frameworks necessarily shape how society operates—living and thinking customs are organized around a shared understanding of space and time. To introduce Purgatory into the Christian canon, then, was to

> change the geography of the other world and hence of the universe, to alter time in the afterlife and hence the link between earthly, historical time and eschatological time, between the time of existence and the time of anticipation—to do these things was to bring about a gradual but nonetheless crucial intellectual revolution. It was, literally, to change life itself. (Le Goff 2)

The incorporation of this "third place" into the ideology of Christian society fundamentally changed society's orientation to and relationship with life, death, and the spaces in between. Purgatory's intermediacy is sustained through several key characteristics, two of which include its temporal and spatial intermediacy. In terms of time, Purgatory "falls between the death of the individual and the Last Judgment," while spatially, Purgatory is "also in an in-between position, between Hell and Paradise" (Le Goff 6). An understanding of Purgatory cannot be severed from its origins in the Christian faith system, and so to use this term is to refer at once to its historical and spiritual contexts. However, "limbo" or "liminal" spaces participate in the in-betweenness of Purgatory, less the religious baggage that the latter term carries.

Any analysis of the otherworld must take into consideration the deeply set theological ties this particular trope has, but this thesis is concerned with a fourth type of otherworld journey: the fantastic. The fantastic otherworld journey utilizes many of the conventions of the underworld, upperworld, and Purgatory journeys, but differs in its agenda. The purpose of the fantastic otherworld journey is not to convert, but rather to appeal to the imagination. This fourth type of otherworld travel, "neither so lofty as celestial ascent nor so profound as descent into the abyss," (Zaleski 4) is concerned with imaginative exploration and immersion. Carol Zaleski writes that the protagonist of fantastic journey tale “sets forth to find another world by exploring the remote reaches of this world: the far east or west, the edge of the ocean…” (4). This description of the fantastic otherworld journey implies an intentionality on the part of the protagonist—the otherworld is *sought out* by a traveler, and often arises from the accessible, i.e. contiguous, environment. I would like to amend this definition of the fantastic journey by concentrating on those tales concerned with noncontiguous, temporally-bound otherworlds, like Wonderland. In Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, the protagonist, Alice, does not “set out” to find Wonderland, but rather, stumbles upon it. It is revealed to her. Wonderland is also not a readily accessible space—she cannot come and go as she pleases from this location.

Thus, for such an expansive term and trope, it is necessary to limit the scope of the otherworld in this examination. For the purposes of this research, the otherworlds explored herein are those located *on the side* of reality. I have chosen to use the term “otherworld” here very specifically, as opposed to “afterlife” or “underworld,” in order to clarify that the otherworlds of this study are those that exist outside of a religious, particularly moralizing, tradition. Furthermore, I distinguish the otherworlds examined in this thesis from afterlife and underworld tales because the characters of *Over the Garden Wall* are not dead, they are suspended in a liminal space between life and death. The examples I provide in the Historical Overview section are also not concerned with afterlife or underworld journeys, but rather those journeys to the otherworld that happen on the side. In a future study, it would be interesting to examine how afterlife and underworld animation intersects with otherworld animation, but for the purposes of this study they will not be comprehensively considered.

In addition to limiting the scope of this research to non-religious otherworlds, and excluding the terms “afterlife” and “underworld” where characters are specifically deceased (or die and are resurrected), it is also important to recognize the noncontiguous nature of the otherworlds in this study. The otherworlds encountered by characters examined in this thesis are temporally-bound, noncontiguous locations by which I mean characters cannot freely travel to and from these locations and, frequently, these locations exist for a time and, once the journey is completed, are gone. Thus, in this examination I will be exploring noncontiguous, temporally-bound, non-moralizing otherworlds wherein the characters are not deceased, but indeed *return home* at the conclusion of their journey. I have come to identify this specific otherworld trope as ABA otherworld journeys.

It is important to outline the specifics of the otherworld in this way because the otherworld in *Over the Garden Wall*, the Unknown, is quite unique and veers from some of the more traditional characteristics of the ABA otherworld. Firstly, Wirt and Greg find themselves lost in a forest with no knowledge of how they got there. Typically, there is some situation or circumstance that triggers the otherworld for the protagonist(s). It is only at the end of the miniseries that we learn that Wirt and Greg are in a limbo space following an accident that resulted in them falling into a river. Secondly, there is a distinct ambiguity about the purposes of Wirt and Greg's respective journeys. This is fairly typical of non-moralizing otherworld tales (such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*) but is distinct from the more religious roots of this trope. Finally, at the end of the miniseries, we see the various characters of the Unknown going about their lives post-Wirt and Greg's journey. The continued ambiguity of the temporal nature of the Unknown is another distinctly interesting feature of this show.

In an interview conducted by horror and science fiction author Steve Kozeniewski, McHale purposefully keeps his descriptions of the Unknown ambiguous. Kozeniewski interprets that the "Unknown is where your soul goes when you're in between life and death," but that the

Unknown is “not a metaphor, it’s a real place” (“Behind the Potatoes and Molasses”). McHale asserts that maybe the show (and the Unknown) is “also about reality versus fantasy, and about dreams versus wakefulness” (“Behind the Potatoes and Molasses”). According to McHale,

> 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. And there's plenty of stuff mankind has never thought of, and will never think of. The Unknown is all that stuff. If there is more to the universe than what humans can perceive (and of course there is) then maybe everything that can ever be conceived is floating around somewhere unseen and unknown in some abstract way. So maybe Wirt and Greg get a glimpse of it, and make sense of these abstract concepts the best way they can understand it… (“Behind the Potatoes and Molasses”)

With no conclusive definition of the Unknown or its “purpose,” McHale leaves the door open for any number of otherworld interpretations. The shape of the Unknown shifts and changes depending on the angle it is examined from. The Americanness of this otherworld space adds an interesting layer of tangibility to its environment—this other place resembles real places that are accessible in this world. Contrasting its ambiguity against a highly stylized and indeed real landscape, the Unknown becomes an otherworld that is *here* as well as *there*. Situating this animated otherworld in the context of other animated otherworlds helps delineate the qualities and characteristics of what an otherworld can look like, and how it can function in and through animation.

Although this study will not tell us the whole story about American animated otherworld journeys, it will provide a new perspective on the question of how we might interpret the otherworld trope in an animation, and specifically American, context. I have not attempted to write a fully comprehensive examination of animated otherworld journeys, but rather to present an artifact of interest in this subject and to learn from its continuations of this tradition, as well as its divergences. In order to navigate the labyrinth of American animated otherworld material, we must do more than simply identify and catalogue the recurrent and contrasting motifs. We must determine a common thread that will not be undone by variations in content and will help us to account for both similarities and differences without partiality. That common thread is story: the otherworld journey, animated or otherwise, is a work of the narrative imagination. As such, the otherworld journey, and specifically the *animated* otherworld journey, is shaped not only through its contemporary adaptations of this ancient trope, but also by its form. The present study is intended to focus our attention on the narrative and imaginative nature of the "fourth" otherworld as presented in animation.

Chapter III: Historical Overview

Literary tropes necessarily evolve over time in response to and alongside socio-cultural advancements. The popular "prince/princess" storyline in many ways falls flat with contemporary audiences, but practically drove Disney's film and merchandising industries during the 1980s into the early 2000s. This storyline has been adapted to reflect contemporary empowerment movements and to accommodate more diverse character interactions and plots. This trend of gradual evolution extends to the otherworld trope as well. In the age of interactive media, audiences are more accustomed to interacting with "other" spaces than ever before. Likewise, the animation industry writ large has adapted to changing technologies and spectator expectations. It is important, then, to contextualize the animated otherworld in order to understand its ever-evolving landscape. How have the circumstances of the animated otherworld adapted over time? What purpose does the animated otherworld serve in contemporary animation as compared to earlier iterations? This chapter is focused on providing an overview of the American animated otherworld in order to situate *Over the Garden Wall* as part of this evolving tradition.

Unlike other genres of literature that see spikes in popularity, like the vampire or zombie literatures that have experienced this relatively recently, otherworld tales have existed consistently for an exceptionally long time in literature and have not experienced a particular "spike" in popularity at any given juncture. The animated otherworld has been a subject of interest since the industry's inception. Similar to literary otherworlds, animations that involve otherworlds are fairly popular, as the animated form lends itself well to this trope. In the earlier days of American animation, the trend of blending animated and live-action material together became particularly popular in short films. Oftentimes, these short films would show animators creating characters on the page that would come to life either on the page, or even come off the page entirely. This blending of the "real" with the "animated" added a new dimension to the otherworld landscape. Animation itself became an "other world" that was populated by mischievous, comical, and oftentimes rogue animated figures that would not "obey" their animators. The evolution of these shorter animated pieces into feature-length films made more complex content possible, and, by extension, more complex otherworlds as well.

This study is not the first to undertake an analysis of the otherworld in animation. In fact, Charles Gardner, a self-proclaimed animation enthusiast, published a very comprehensive list of under- and upperworld journeys in animation on the website *Cartoon Research*. The three-part series, titled "Go to Hades," explores "Afterlife cartoons," noting animation's unique ability to create vivid and immersive otherworlds. The earliest "Afterlife cartoon" Gardner lists is *When Hell Freezes Over* (1926). In this short animation, protagonists Mutt and Jeff venture out into the forest to retrieve some wood to heat their frozen apartment. While out, they encounter a mysterious hooded figure who reveals a devil hiding beneath his cloak. The devil captures the pair and together they disappear in a puff of smoke into the underworld. The rest of the animation details the perils they face while in the underworld. Their return is marked by a "fade-to-black" transition[1], where both Mutt and Jeff are back in their frozen apartment. Mutt delivers two blows to Jeff's head, each of which results in a bump resembling devil's horns, and consequently knocks Jeff out. Gardner lists several other examples of under- and upperworld animation, including: Disney's *Silly Symphony* "Hell's Bells" (1929), "Golf Nuts" (1930), Fleischer/Paramount's "Swing You Sinners" (1930), "Hide and Seek" (1932), "The Air Race"

[1] Transitions such as these are common in otherworld animations. They details of the return are left vague so as to create or perpetuate any ambiguities surrounding the otherworld and its existence.

(1933), a Betty Boop cartoon "Red Hot Mama" (1934), and many, many others dating into the mid-sixties. This thesis diverges from the focus of Gardner's series in that the otherworld of interest here is that of the fantastic nature, not of the mortal one. As is demonstrated by Gardner's series, there are countless examples of various otherworld journeys represented in animation. Analyzing these examples as a corpus of work raises new insights regarding the development of this trope generally, and in animation.

Disney's *Alice in Wonderland*, released in 1951, marks one of the first feature-length animated adaptations[2] of a literary otherworld. At the feature-length level, spectators spend more time exploring Wonderland with Alice, and greater detail in terms of landscape and content is given to developing the otherworld. Some other animated otherworld films that followed *Alice in Wonderland* were *Peter Pan* (1953), *Return to Oz*[3] (1964), *The New Alice in Wonderland*[4] (1966), *The Phantom Tollbooth* (1970), *Journey Back to Oz* (1972), and *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1979). Each of these films is adapted from either a British or American novel (or series of novels) and, in the case of *Alice in Wonderland*, *The New Alice in Wonderland*, *Return to Oz*, and *Journey Back to Oz*, the same novels are being adapted multiple times. While this is by no means a comprehensive list of all animated feature films concerned with otherworlds, and does not factor in shorter animations during this time like Pink Panther's "Psychedelic Pink" (1968), during these thirty years there is a fascination with turning the literary otherworld into an animated one. Although there were several films made about the

[2] Of course, Disney's *Alice Comedies* series of the 1920s derives some of its inspiration from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The 57 "episodes" in the series are unrelated insofar as a cohesive plot is. These episodes are united by a live-action Alice exploring various animated landscapes.
[3] A television special.
[4] A television special.

otherworld during this time, these films do not constitute a "spike" in production in the same way that zombie and vampire genres experienced have in more recent years.

The otherworld, particularly in animation, changes in the 1980s. On May 25, 1979, six-year-old Etan Patz disappeared in Manhattan, New York. In many ways, his disappearance marked the beginning of the "missing child" movement. Patz was the "first missing child to have his photo on a milk carton" and President Ronald Regan later declared May 25, the day of Patz's disappearance, National Missing Children's Day (Chen). With the rise of "stranger danger" rhetoric during this decade, films that depicted children wandering off were less palatable to movie-going audiences. These films were oftentimes animated or otherwise geared towards children (*Alice in Wonderland*, for example), so families, and particularly children, were the target audience. Adventuring into otherworlds is glorified in these films—the protagonist is enveloped in a fantastical environment full of magic. Wonderland, Neverland, Oz, and Narnia are all enticing destinations for children, especially children who are yet unable to distinguish between animation (or fantasy) and reality. Moreover, the protagonists in these films were children themselves, so in addition to children having a difficult time distinguishing reality from fiction, they were also more likely to personally identify with the main character(s). Thus, there was a growing fear that children would be encouraged or inspired to wander off in search of far-off or fantastical lands by these films.

In the wake of the "missing child" movement, children's films that deal with the otherworld have developed certain strategies to circumvent parental anxiety. One strategy is to have multiple protagonists go on the adventure together, thereby protecting each other from any dangers encountered in the otherworld. Another is to have protagonists ask permission from an authority figure to go on their adventure, thereby notifying a guardian "on the outside" of their whereabouts. While the "stranger danger" era is less of a contemporary social focus, the effects of that era on otherworld animation are still present today. *Over the Garden Wall* satisfies the first strategy by pairing brothers Wirt and Greg up together to navigate the Unknown, but at no time does the miniseries include the boys' parents. Arguably, there are parental-like figures in the Unknown for the boys to seek guidance from, most notably the Woodsman (though his character is fraught with his own challenges and is not a consistent source of help for the brothers). Their companionship in Beatrice provides another safety bond. The evolution of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) rating system, whereby the MPAA determines films' and television shows' audience suitability, has helped curb parental anxiety about the content and messages their children are exposed to. With a rating of PG, *OtGW* is not intended for young children, and an older audience would be better equipped to engage with the show's themes of lostness, burden, and exposure.

In this section, however, *Over the Garden Wall* is not the direct focus. Due to its long-standing history, it is important to examine how the otherworld trope has been depicted over time. This section is designed to provide some historical context as to the tradition of the otherworld specifically in American animation. Of course, there are so many examples even within the limited scope of American animation that not all of them can be included here, but this chapter will provide an overview of four notable examples of animated ABA otherworlds in the American tradition, and will also provide three examples of tales that are not of the ABA otherworld tradition that this study is particularly concerned with. The first four examples analyzed in this section are *Betty Boop in Mother Goose Land*, *Betty Boop in Blunderland*, Pink Panther's *Psychedelic Pink*, and *Adventure Time*'s "Puhoy." These examples explore different ways the otherworld can be packaged and presented, yet still adhere to the ABA structure. The second three examples are *Betty Boop Crazy Town*, *Betty Boop Zula Hula*, and *Rick and Morty*'s "Mortynight Run." These three examples are demonstrative of other iterations of the otherworld trope, but do not align with the ABA otherworld this thesis is particularly concerned with (wherein the otherworld is temporally-bound and non-contiguous).

While keeping my focus on *American* animated otherworlds, it is still important to recognize that this trope is by no means limited to the United States. Indeed, much of the corpus of American animated otherworlds has been inspired by literature abroad, Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) and Laika's *Coraline* (2009) being just two notable examples of American-made films based on international (in these cases, British) novels. Additionally, there is an entire genre of otherworld journey literature in Japan called *Isekai*. *Isekai* is a genre of "fantasy anime where a character travels from the world they know to an unfamiliar one" and, typically, an isekai series will place "a person in a magical realm of fantasy and/or terror" (Lindwasser). As was alluded to in Chapter 2, this trope exists to some degree in all global literatures, but for the purposes of this study I am only examining selections from the American tradition. In a future study, it would be interesting to conduct a cross-examination of different iterations of animated otherworlds. Because of its deeply psychological nature, the animated otherworld offers a rare visual, as well as textual, insight into the collective anxieties and desires of populations. Comparing these otherworlds would create a very particular window through which to examine different cultures.

It is also important to acknowledge the difference between an animated short film, a series, and a full-length feature film. Each of these different styles of animated storyline can achieve varying levels of detail in their development of the otherworld. For example, full-length features like *The Phantom Tollbooth* (1970, based on Norton Jester's novel by the same name) and Hal Sutherland's *Journey Back to Oz* (1972) can achieve more in the way of otherworld development than the animated shorts of Max Fleischer's *Betty Boop* cartoons. In the realm of the series, such as *Rick and Morty* and *Adventure Time*, not all episodes are concerned with the otherworld and, indeed, these characters might encounter several otherworlds over the course of the series. Thus, the nature of the animated otherworld is not only affected by virtue of its being animated, but also by the style of animated media it is created in. This overview sheds light on the various appearances of, interactions with, contents of, and even disintegrations of animated otherworlds: under what circumstances does the otherworld appear to the character, what does the character encounter there, and how does the character make their way back home? In establishing some of these recurrent patterns, *Over the Garden Wall*'s Unknown becomes that much more distinctive in its departures from established American animated otherworld traditions.

In this section I will be examining the following animated shorts as examples of the ABA-style animated otherworld: *Betty Boop in Mother Goose Land* (1933), *Betty Boop in Blunderland* (1934), *Psychedelic Pink* (1968), *Adventure Time* "Puhoy" (2013). The reasons for choosing these four in particular is a) they are all short animations, the *Betty Boop* and *Pink Panther* examples are animated short films while *Adventure Time*'s "Puhoy" is a short episode in a series; b) they provide very clearly different animated otherworld experiences for examination; and c) they demonstrate some of the various ambiguities characteristic of this trope.

I will also examine three animated shorts for their deviations from the ABA-style of otherworld trope I am particularly interested in in this thesis. The following animations are indeed journeys to another world, but they are do not fit into the criteria of the ABA otherworld that I previously defined: *Betty Boop Crazy Town* (1932), *Betty Boop Zula Hula* (1937), *Rick and*

Morty “Mortynight Run” (2015). The reasons for choosing these three in particular is a) they are also all short animations, again the *Betty Boop* cartoons are short films while *Rick and Morty*’s “Mortynight Run” is a short episode in the larger series; b) they each provide different ways the animated otherworld might manifest, but not quite adhere to the ABA-style; and c) they raise interesting questions about the functions of the animated otherworld.

The goal of this section will be to provide a precedent for scholarly examination of the animated otherworld and situate *Over the Garden Wall* in an ongoing and deeply diverse tradition. In providing some context for this trope in animation, my exploration of the Unknown becomes more exigent: what does the Unknown tell us about contemporary anxieties and desires *in light of* the history of the animated otherworld?

***Betty Boop in Mother Goose Land* (1933)**

The lines between reality and fantasy are blurred right from the outset in this short animation. Betty, dressed in a nightgown, is reading *Mother Goose* nursery rhymes to herself in bed. Within the first minute, in a moment of the surreal, a face appears on Betty’s pinky toe as she reads the “Three little piggies” rhyme. The toe mouths along with the rhyme as Betty recites it. Much of this short, like other Betty cartoons, is narrated by Betty singing. She begins to sing a song about wanting to “go on a journey” with Mother Goose and appears to fall asleep, but continues to sing. The space between awake and asleep is unclear at this point. Mother Goose flies off of the nursery book cover and grows until she is large enough to carry Betty on her broomstick. Betty wakes. “Come and join the family” says Mother Goose before changing Betty’s nightgown into her standard “little black dress” attire. Betty hops on the back of the broom and they fly out of the bedroom window. As Betty flies off with Mother Goose, her house calls out “So long Betty, I’ll keep the home fire burning” before promptly bursting into flames.

All that is left of the house as Betty flies away are cinders. The destruction of Betty's home as she abandons it for Mother Goose is a fairly unique image. Typically, when characters go off to the otherworld, they are still able to come home, and oftentimes their home remains unchanged regardless of how much time has passed during their adventure. To complicate the distinction between what is real and what is other, when Betty "returns"[5] home she is back in her bed (presumably) in her house that, earlier, had set itself on fire.

Betty's journey to the otherworld is facilitated by her riding on the back of Mother Goose's broom, as it flies through the clouds and up a large, multi-gated mountain. The location of Mother Goose Land is atop this Mount Olympus-esque mountain. Upon arriving in the otherworld, Betty is greeted by familiar characters from children's nursery rhymes. Betty greets the characters in return, by name. This is another interesting detail that sets this animation aside from others like it: Betty is *aware* that the otherworld she is in is Mother Goose Land and can recognize and address the characters she encounters there. The surprise for Betty does not come from the environment she finds herself in as she's "been here before" in the book, but rather from her interactions with the characters. What follows is a montage of the otherworld, further confirming the weirdness of Mother Goose Land. Among some of the strange things we are privy to are characters that change shape, size, animals that can talk, and role-reversals of animals and humans. In true otherworld fashion, things are "not as they appear" here. In fact, although Mother Goose Land is populated by the many whimsical, but otherwise harmless, characters of her nursery rhymes, when Betty encounters Miss Muffet's spider, things take a darker turn.

[5] The scene fades from Betty dancing in front of the characters she's met in Mother Goose Land to Betty back in her bedroom, reading.

The chase sequence between Betty and the spider that replaces the jovial dancing and singing sequence earlier has a tangibly sexual (and/or predatory) tone to it. When the spider catches up to Betty and holds her captive, he attempts to kiss her, and she resists. Attempting to free herself from the spider's grasp, Betty's efforts are assisted by black birds that peck and poke at the spider. The black birds employ many tactics to help Betty to freedom, one of which is to successively fly between the spider's legs and "tickle" him with their wings. Eventually this uncomfortable tactic works and the spider drops Betty in an attempt to fight off the birds. He is captured in a spider's web and the birds hoist him into the air and drop him, from which height he plummets back to the ground and is defeated. The interactions between Betty and the spider are such that they tow the line between appropriate and inappropriate conduct. Perhaps exacerbating these interactions is Betty's classic costume. Although Betty's sexualized costume is unsettling when compared with her age[6], the combination of her attire and her age is made more unsettling juxtaposed against the world of Mother Goose, the popular nursery rhyme characters therein, and Betty's interactions with the spider. Mother Goose Land is perhaps not as innocent (or safe) as it seems.

The short film is concluded with Betty reunited with the other nursery rhyme characters, all of whom are dancing and singing once more. This scene of joviality fades to Betty sitting in her bed, dressed in her nightgown, reading her *Mother Goose* book. The nursery rhyme characters are on the bed with her, dancing and singing still (though they are smaller now compared to Betty). Mother Goose flies back onto the cover of the book to assume her position

[6] Betty is aged somewhere between 13-16 in the earlier short animations. There is a Fleischer studios promotional poster in which Better is declaring that she made her first film eight years ago when she was 16 and that she is still 16, and she will always be 16.

while the other characters appear to jump into the pages. The camera zooms in on Mother Goose who, from the book cover, loses her hat, wig, and teeth while laughing. Betty's return home contributes to the uncertainty of when reality and the otherworld start and end. Betty's home is intact, after previously bursting into flames. Betty finds herself on her bed surrounded by miniature versions of the nursery rhyme characters she had just been carousing with. And Mother Goose, in more ways than one, appears to be uncontrollable on or off the page. For all of its ambiguities, *Betty Boop in Mother Goose Land* is an example of the ABA-style otherworld journey primarily because we see Betty's departure-and-return (even if the details are fuzzy) and the non-moralizing nature of the film. This short piece dabbles with blending the "mature" with the "innocent" in the otherworld in a way that *OtGW* does not exactly do. The overtones in *Mother Goose Land* are of a more playfully sexualized nature, while *OtGW* breaks barriers between the mature and innocent in terms of intra- and interpersonal struggle.

***Betty Boop in Blunderland* (1934)**

The first shot in *Betty Boop in Blunderland* is of a "Wonderland puzzle" with an image of Alice and the White Rabbit on the box cover. This overt homage to a literary text is consistent with the short animation *Betty in Mother Goose Land*—the environment Betty will interact with is not a surprise to the spectator, at least in terms of content (not necessarily delivery). Another consistency between *Blunderland* and *Mother Goose Land* is the immediate ambiguity between "reality" and "otherworld." As Betty is working on the puzzle, singing to herself, she begins to yawn. A nearby grandfather clock comes alive and chimes in with her singing, "It's time to go to bed." Betty does not acknowledge the clock's transformation, but as if on cue begins to drift off while working on the puzzle. When it appears that Betty has dozed off, the white rabbit, part of the puzzle Betty completed before falling asleep, comes alive. The rabbit places a flower from the puzzle in the sleeping Betty's hand and hops to a nearby vanity mirror. The rabbit knocks on the mirror, a small door appears, and the rabbit goes through, blowing a kiss back to Betty on his way. Betty wakes up, looks through the mirror, sees that her clothes have changed in the reflection (from her "little black dress" to a Betty-esque Alice costume), and follows the rabbit through the mirror. In both *Blunderland* and *Mother Goose Land*, Betty changes clothes as she transitions from "reality" to the "otherworld."

As is to be expected, size, shape, and movement are all upside-down and inside-out in Blunderland. Now in the "otherworld," Betty follows the rabbit and asks, "Where am I?" She follows the rabbit to an animate "subway station" and follows him down a hole. While falling down the hole, Betty encounters strange objects. Space does not function in the usual way and some of the objects she encounters seem to take on a life of their own. At the bottom of the hole and through a tunnel (labeled "Exit"), Betty comes to a second door (also labeled "Exit") which she must shrink herself (again) to get through. Audiences who are familiar with Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* are also familiar with the whimsical rules of Wonderland, and so Betty's shape- and size-shifting is not particularly jarring. However, what is more interesting is Betty's address of characters in Blunderland. When she comes across the Mad Hatter, she says, "The crazy Mad Hatter" without having been formally introduced to him. She *recognizes* Carroll's characters and therefore demonstrates a level of awareness that Wirt and Greg in the Unknown cannot tap into/do not have[7]. Not only does Betty recognize the Mad Hatter, but she physically pulls "The Duchess," "The Froggie," "Humpty-Dumpty," the "Mock Turtle," the

[7] In fact, Wirt and Greg regularly misname or mis-recognize individuals in the Unknown. A notable first example of this is in "The Old Grist Mill" episode when Wirt and Greg think they have defeated the Beast, when in reality they only "defeated" a seemingly cursed dog. For much of the miniseries they cannot definitively ascertain whether the Woodsman is in cahoots with the Beast, or if the Woodsman is trying to help them.

"March Hare," and "everybody else" from the Mad Hatter's hat. Not all of these characters she identifies are of Carroll's creative universe, however. Humpty-Dumpty belongs to the world of nursery rhymes and not of Alice's Wonderland. This blending of literatures contributes to the ambiguity of Blunderland and the barriers between "otherworlds." On a side note, Betty is, to a degree, responsible for releasing or manifesting the characters of Blunderland.

With all of the characters assembled in an open space, Betty sings to them and continues to identify them by name. Following this musical interlude, and similar to *Mother Goose Land*, there is a montage comprised of a series of scenes involving the *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass* characters. Finally, the Jabberwocky emerges out of the Mad Hatter's hat and steals Betty away from the other characters. The characters follow in close pursuit of the Jabberwocky to help Betty, but their many attempts fail. Eventually, the Jabberwocky, Betty, and the characters arrive at a cliffside and the characters and Betty topple over, leaving the Jabberwocky at the edge. They land safely and the scene fades back to Betty's room where the characters turn back into puzzle pieces. Betty wakes up to see the white rabbit tiptoeing away from the puzzle. She grabs him and says, "Come here you rascal" and puts him back into the puzzle. In both *Blunderland* and *Mother Goose Land*, the possibility that Betty's adventures were merely dreams is undermined by the characters' return to Betty's room or house and her waking interactions with them. In *Mother Goose Land*, Betty is back on her bed in her nightgown singing with the miniature nursery rhyme characters before they jump back into the pages of the book. In *Blunderland*, Betty captures the escaping rabbit and puts him back in the puzzle, where he belongs. Clearly the rules of the "real" and the "other" are not hard and fast in these short animations, but there is something strange going on in terms of waking and dreaming spaces. *OtGW* in part presents as a limbo space between life and death for Wirt and Greg, but those boundaries are blurry as well.

***Psychedelic Pink* (1968)**

The Pink Panther's *Psychedelic Pink* takes a different approach to the otherworld in that it is not based on any specific cultural referents. The short film opens with the Pink Panther walking in a characteristically pink-hued landscape that is already "other" in many ways. For starters, the shape and construction of "reality" is abstract and in many cases incomplete. There are no fully formed "roads" or pathways on which Pink Panther walks, there are few clear indicators when the walls start and the floor stops, and the backdrop in general is more akin to an art project than reality. In any case, Pink Panther is walking along (somewhere) and in the background we see a large artistic rendering of a pointing finger gesturing in the direction of Pink Panther's travel. Above the hand is written, "To the Happening." Shortly thereafter, Pink Panther arrives at a mysterious door with a large eye in the center of it, labeled as the "Bizarre Book Shop" whose wares seem to be "gifts" and "wierd books" [sic]. The large eye in the center of the door blinks as Pink Panther is walking by and catches his attention, apparently putting some kind of spell or hypnosis on Pink Panther, enticing him to come inside. The door opens and he walks through into total darkness. The door shuts behind him. He continues into the otherworld.

The landscape of this otherworld continues in many ways the trippy art that the "real" world was comprised of; however, the common laws of reality do not seem to apply here. Gravity is strange (books are floating in the air), books come to life, space (depths and widths of objects) is unpredictable. As Pink Panther navigates this strange "book shop," he is accompanied by a guide of sorts, the bookkeeper. Interestingly, the bookkeeper is the only element of this otherworld that is nondescript *and* black and white. Everything else here is vibrantly colored, and the primary inhabitant of this odd landscape does not seem to fit in here. Pink Panther continues to interact with the strange environment he finds himself in and as his time in the otherworld progresses, it becomes obvious that he does not belong there and cannot stay. Pink Panther's actions gradually cause more and more trouble for the bookkeeper, resulting in the "death" of one of the books and several instances of injury for the bookkeeper. Eventually, fed up with Pink Panther's presence, the bookkeeper fashions a makeshift gun out of a letter "F" and chases Pink Panther into an elevator. The pair fall down the elevator shaft, and the scene fades back to Pink Panther, hypnotized outside the bookstore. He shakes himself awake and the door with the large eye opens as it did before. The bookkeeper invites Pink Panther in, but Pink Panther passes on the offer and walks away. The bookkeeper goes inside and the camera zooms in on the large eye. The last scene is the eye projecting its hypnotic gaze out at the audience.

There are clear differences between this short animation and the Betty Boop ones, the most notable of course being the technicolor versus black and white animation styles. Pink Panther was produced over thirty years after the Betty Boop shorts and in that time considerable advancements in animation technology made luxuries like color possible. Another evolution is the inclusion of a "laugh track" that underscores the Pink Panther theme song throughout the short film. The laugh track was a popular addition to sitcoms in the 1950s-1970s and so, conventionally speaking, the laugh track in *Psychedelic Pink* is consistent with trends of the era. The laugh track does add an odd dimension to the otherworld, however. The lines between spectator and subject are complicated—are we reacting to the subject or to the laugh track? Or both? In a way, the laugh track is part of the soundscape of the otherworld in this short film, especially as laugh tracks are not as common now as they were during that period. The question of whether Pink Panther's adventure was all a product of hypnosis remains plausible, but the arrival of the bookkeeper in the end adds just enough uncertainty that it is hard to definitively say one way or another whether the otherworld Pink Panther interacted with was a physical space or a mental one. This trend of ambiguity around the circumstances of the otherworld is the primary link threaded between these different examples.

***Adventure Time*'s "Puhoy" (2013)**

The circumstances for Finn's arrival in the otherworld is steeped not in happenstance or daydreaming, but in relationship frustrations. Finn is lamenting that his girlfriend, Flame Princess, did not laugh at his joke and now he is concerned about the state of their relationship. In an effort to try and cheer him up, his friends Jake the Dog and BMO make a pillow fort for the three of them to enjoy. When attempts to cheer Finn up fail, Finn decides he needs some time alone to "fester" about his love life, and he crawls into the pillow fort. The pillow fort appears to be endless until Finn arrives at a small pillow door. As has been consistent in the Betty Boop and Pink Panther short films, space and time become warped when Finn goes through the pillow door. He arrives in a vast, colorful landscape entirely made out of pillows. When Finn turns back to the door to return home, the door is gone and Finn is stuck in the pillow town. Unlike the previously examined short animations, Finn is very clearly awake when he arrives in the otherworld. He has not dozed off or been hypnotized and is immediately cognizant that his "way home" has disappeared. He decides to venture into the nearby village.

The village is populated by small, animated pillows and Finn's arrival is marked by his act of defeating the "blanket dragon" with his "sharp pillow" (sword). He becomes something of a local celebrity in this pillow town and a "celepillobration" is thrown in his honor. During the "celepillobration," Finn seems distracted by the day's happenings, but he is approached by Mayor Quilton's daughter, Roselinen, who asks Finn to dance. Finn determines that he must find his way back home through the portal and enlists the help of Quilton. The scene shifts back to

Finn and Jake's treehouse, where Jake and BMO are still enjoying their rainy day inside. Time back home has not changed very much, while for Finn in the pillow town a whole day has passed. When the scene shifts back to Finn, even more time has passed. Finn is now an adult and has made a living in the pillow town. Finn has married Roselinen and together they have two pillow children. Somehow Finn has been able to adapt to the pillow customs, and even eat the pillow food. Quilton arrives to relay to Finn that archaeologists have located the mysterious door that led him to their world all those years ago. Quilton informs Finn that the door shows up periodically, but that they have no more concrete information than that. Check-ins between Finn's world and Jake's continue to indicate that Jake and BMO are still enjoying the same afternoon that Finn went into the fort, while Finn continues to age in the pillow world.

Finn's search for the "wandering portal" takes him a great many places into his old age, but eventually he decides to stop seeking the door and to go home with his family. More time passes until we see a dying Finn surrounded by his family. In his last moments, the pillow world swirls to black and ancient Finn is traveling through darkness. In that darkness he encounters odd deities when suddenly he is back in the pillow fort, a young teenager again. Almost no time has passed in the treehouse since his departure. Jake asks if Finn is feeling better and Finn, unsure of how he feels, says, "I just had the number-one wildest dream." He is about to relay his adventure to Jake when he is interrupted by a phone call from Flame Princess, who finally laughs at Finn's joke. The pillow town, Finn's family, are all forgotten.

"Puhoy" is yet another iteration of the otherworld trope, including how characters come upon the otherworld, what they do while they are there, and how they get back. What sets "Puhoy" apart from the other short films analyzed here is that it is an episode situated in the context of a longer series. Moreover, the episode is approximately 12 minutes long and roughly eight of those minutes are spent in the otherworld, which is longer than any of the other short films analyzed here. This episode, more so than the others, leaves the "it was all a dream" possibility open—Finn does not recount his adventures to his friends, cannot remember his adventures himself, and carries back with him no souvenirs of his time in the pillow world. The ambiguity here is placed on Finn's departure to the otherworld, not his return—we never see him "doze off," and so can never definitively confirm whether his adventure was just a dream. Another characteristic of the more contemporary pieces is their creativity. "Puhoy" is not based on the worn out Wonderland or nursery rhymes that earlier explorations of the otherworld were often prone to reproduce.

***Betty Boop Crazy Town* (1932)**

The opening sequence of *Crazy Town* depicts human (i.e. non-animated) hands holding a book with the names of the creators listed on its pages. This live-action and animation crossover, while brief in this particular example, is consistent with other short films of the era. The hands flip over the page to reveal a cartoon Betty atop a train with the title of the book *Crazy Town* below the still image. Soon after the page is flipped, Betty and the train come alive and we transition from the live-action world of the book and reader to the animated world of Betty. By beginning with the book and reader, automatically Betty and her ensuing adventures are products of this book and not, as with examples discussed earlier, seemingly standalone animations. Therefore, in a way, Betty is in the "otherworld" while the reader occupies "reality." The "reality" of Betty is necessarily fictionalized by the presence of the book.

Everything about *Crazy Town* is consistent with the weirdness of *Mother Goose Land* and *Blunderland*, however what is different about *Crazy Town* is that the whole town is crazy, and therefore that is established as "the norm." At no time does Betty experience the same "dozing off" or spiriting away like she does in these other examples. Much of what is crazy in *Crazy Town* seems to be for the sake of "being crazy," and not necessarily serving any more interesting purpose than that. Indeed, this experience feels more like a vacation Betty takes to observe and be shocked by the odd characters that populate Crazy Town. Her role is as a spectator to the goings on here. There is an unsettling moment when Betty loses her shoe and her big toe comes to life, similar to her pinky toe coming to life in *Mother Goose Land*. I'm not sure if this continues to be a trend in other Betty Boop short films, but that detail does seem like an odd one to repeat twice. The short film ends with Betty and Bimbo kissing in Crazy Town.

While entertaining, *Crazy Town* does not participate in the more traditional "otherworld" trope in many ways outside of its inherent strangeness. This strangeness, however, is so over the top that it becomes trivial and lacks the direction or purpose that otherworld strangeness tends to have. The only theme here is "crazy," and this animation consistently pays tribute to that.

***Betty Boop Zula Hula* (1937)**

In *Zula Hula*, Betty and Grampy are "plane wrecked" on a tropical island after their airplane is knocked from the sky by literal fists of lightning. From the outset of this short film, like many of those examined here, the laws of nature are not working in the ways we have come to expect them to. The lightning attacks Grampy's plane, even cuts the plane's wings off using giant scissors. Grampy saves the day by deploying a conveniently packed "plane umbrella" that allows Grampy and Betty to reach the ground safely. These clues are certainly part of the "off-ness" of the otherworld, but their arrival on a desert island, and their eventual departure from it, are not contestable—they crash, then they fly away.

Problematically, this short film depicts the local islanders as jet-black, large-lipped, wide-eyed savages with non-descript sex or gender designations. They speak literal gibberish and threaten the oasis that Grampy has built for Betty. As the islanders approach them, spears drawn, Grampy rigs up the engine of the plane to play music from some pipes. The music successfully placates the advancing islanders, who begin dancing wildly. Grampy and Betty briefly dance along to the music as well. With the islanders distracted, Grampy fixes the plane and he and Betty escape. Aside from the clearly dated caricature depictions of the islanders, this short film does not participate in the otherworld in the same way as the first two Betty Boops analyzed in this chapter. This island and wherever Betty and Grampy came from share the same contiguous space: they landed there, and then they were able to fly away again.

***Rick and Morty*'s "Mortynight Run" (2015)**

The otherworld that Morty interacts with in this episode is one produced out of a virtual reality videogame. At the Blips and Chitz arcade, Rick (Morty's grandfather) puts a VR helmet on Morty's head and immediately Morty is transported to another world, where he wakes up as a young boy, Roy. Roy is startled awake by a nightmare about an old man who put a helmet on his head, which his mother quickly dismisses as a bad dream. What follows is a montage of Roy growing up, pursuing football, living a lackluster home life, getting a mediocre job at a carpet store, being diagnosed with cancer, beating cancer, working into his old age at the carpet store, and, finally, falling off of a ladder to his death. As soon as Roy hits the ground after falling off the ladder, the screen reads: GAME OVER, and we are back in the Blips and Chitz arcade. Morty rips the helmet off of his head in shock, having just lived a long life as Roy. Morty asks, "Where's my wife?" to which Rick responds, "…you were just playing a game. It's called 'Roy.' Snap out of it." Rick puts the helmet on himself so that he can "thrash" Morty's "Roy" score.

This example raises interesting questions about what constitutes an "otherworld" in terms of the digital and Internet ages. While this style of otherworld is not the focus of this particular thesis, it seems hasty to write off virtual reality (and even space travel) as non-otherworlds. What sets the virtual otherworld apart from the non-virtual is that it is *created* by people—the creators of the VR experience, the players who interact with the environment. There is a collaborative element that perhaps does not exist, or not in the same way, in more "traditional" ABA otherworlds. Whereas the otherworlds of Betty Boop, Pink Panther, and Finn seemed to just "appear" in response to certain circumstances, Morty's otherworld experience was the product of a game. In theory, he can return to this VR otherworld as many times as he wants and, although how he conducts himself in the game necessarily changes the outcomes, the environment would largely remain the same or similar (part of a closed-circuit, pre-determined selection of available environments). Likewise, space travel poses an equally interesting question in regards to the boundaries and rules of the "otherworld." Technically, if alternate universes are not in play, any space travel is conducted as part of the contiguous universe and therefore, while distant and "other," is not necessarily "otherworld." However, the umbrella trope of "otherworld" is so vast that these examples and others like them are just as important to the corpus of otherworld literature as those examined here.

Animation in general has changed in numerous ways since its earliest days, and so has the animated otherworld. There are far more examples in addition to these that would be worth examining, but this selection provides at least some historical context for the American animated otherworld tradition. The most notable similarity between the ABA otherworlds examined here is the ambiguity surrounding the leaving-and-arriving of characters. The lines between "reality" and "otherworld" are often obscured by odd transitions or out-of-place physical artifacts. *Over the Garden Wall*'s otherworld, the Unknown, participates in and further complicates this tradition of ambiguity.

Chapter IV: Analysis and Discussion

> Led through the mist/By the milk light of moon/All that was lost/Is revealed/Our long-bygone burdens/Mere echoes of the spring/But where have we come/and where shall we end?/If dreams can't come true/Then why not pretend? ("Old Grist Mill" 00:10-00:45)

Any analysis of *Over the Garden Wall*'s Unknown as an animated otherworld must take into consideration its many departures from the other animated otherworlds examined in the Historical Overview section of this thesis. Chief among those departures is the extended nature of the Unknown as an otherworld location. We cannot use the same tactics to deconstruct the Unknown as we do *Adventure Time*'s "pillow town"[8] or Betty Boop's "Mother Goose Land" or "Blunderland" because *OtGW* is a comprehensive exploration of the otherworld, whereas these shorter works are merely glimpses. Not only are these other examples much shorter, but *OtGW* does not have any *direct* external referents. For example, in *Betty Boop in Blunderland*, the characters and environment that Betty encounters pay homage to Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. We expect to see the Mad Hatter, the Jaberwocky, the Queen of Hearts, and other such characters. In *Betty Boop in Mother Goose Land*, we expect to see characters from nursery rhymes like Little Miss Muffet and Old King Cole. In both instances, Betty experiences, to a degree, what we expect her to, even if those experiences are delivered in an unexpected fashion (the order we encounter characters in or what they are doing in relationship to Betty's presence). *Adventure Time*'s "Puhoy" is unique like *OtGW* in that it also does not have a direct "parent" text; however, "Puhoy" is a 12-minute episode, eight minutes of which Finn spends in the

[8] From season 5, episode 16 "Puhoy." The village is never formally named.

"pillow town." As compared to the 80+ minutes of the Unknown in *OtGW*, there are steep differences in achievable detail.

Feature-length films such as *Journey Back to Oz* and *The Phantom Tollbooth* operate in a similar way—we expect certain characters, events, and environments in these films based on our experiences with the books they are adapted from. Because *OtGW* does not have such a parent text, spectator expectations of characters, plot, and landscape are not pre-arranged. Indeed, the spectator's relationship with closure in *OtGW* is constantly being challenged, even undermined, because we cannot anchor our expectations, or our "leaps of faith," in familiarity. Thus, *OtGW* does something that, arguably, the other animated otherworlds that are based on *literary* otherworlds do not, and perhaps *cannot*, do. That is, *OtGW* forces the spectator into a position of anamorphosis and non-closure in the same way it forces Wirt and Greg into these liminal and inconclusive spaces, too. The spectator can no longer rely on external knowledge to help guide them through. We are, like Wirt and Greg, on our own in navigating the upside-down, sideways, and inside-out weirdness of the Unknown. In short, while Alice leaves her garden for Wonderland, the Darling children leave London for Neverland, Milo leaves his bedroom for The Lands Beyond, and Dorothy leaves Kansas for Oz, Wirt and Greg are simply *in* the Unknown, having no knowledge of their leaving-and-arriving. What this demonstrates is that *OtGW*'s narrative structure is entirely different than the examples listed here (and others examined in this thesis). In order to conduct an examination of *OtGW* it is necessary to recognize this foremost distinction.

Developing a theoretical lens through which to analyze the Unknown as an animated otherworld in *Over the Garden Wall* is a tricky endeavor given the fluidity of animation studies as a discipline and the expansive (and certainly non-cohesive) nature of the otherworld trope.

However, two components of a theoretical framework emerge from these two characteristics of *Over the Garden Wall*: its form (animation) and its content (the otherworld journey). To help satisfy the issue of its form, I will use Scott McCloud's concept of closure, as explained in his book *Understanding Comics*, to discuss the contributions of animation (or cartoon) to this show. According to McCloud, "closure" refers to the phenomenon of "observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (63). He goes on to contextualize this concept in terms of the everyday, pointing out that we "often commit closure, mentally completing that which is incomplete based on past experience" (63). Closure is an essential component of how we recognize and relate to other people (63). To help satisfy the issue of its content, that of the ABA otherworld journey, and to specifically analyze the Unknown as an otherworld location, I will apply Slavoj Žižek's concept of anamorphosis, as outlined in *Looking Awry*. Anamorphosis describes a state of reality, or perception of reality, which requires the viewer/participant to occupy a particular vantage point in order to identify or engage with it. Oftentimes anamorphosis is the product of anxieties or desires warping perceptions of reality such that they are no longer consistent with the "commonsense" or shared reality.

Comparisons between the commonsense reality and anamorphosis are not readily obvious nor available in the Unknown. Indeed, while Wirt and Greg express an understanding of "home" and that where they find themselves is not "home," for the duration of their stay in the Unknown they are unaware that "home" and the Unknown do not occupy the same, contiguous space. This interesting inversion of the traditional otherworld narrative structure leads to several important questions regarding the organization of an analysis of *OtGW*'s content. If *OtGW*'s focus is not centered around a character's leaving-and-returning like these other otherworld tales are concerned with, then what is *OtGW* emphasizing about the otherworld and character interactions in/with it? In what ways does this shift in narrative structure change how the protagonists (and spectators) engage with the Unknown? How would the otherworldliness of this show change if the narrative started where the series ends, with Wirt and Greg on Halloween night? Žižek's concepts of the commonsense reality and anamorphosis function slightly differently in this narrative structure as well. The ambiguity of the Unknown's "start" and "end" render character, Wirt's in particular, judgments about what is normal and what is other more difficult to distinguish. This ambiguity exists on and through many levels. On one level, the Unknown appears to have existed before Wirt and Greg's arrival and continues to exist after their departure. This is alluded to in the opening and ending sequences of the show where characters of the Unknown are depicted going about their lives. During the ending sequence, we see toys crafted in Wirt and Greg's images sitting on a shelf in the Unknown. During the opening sequence, the Unknown is described by the "narrator" as a place

> somewhere lost in the clouded annals of history…that few have seen, a mysterious place called the Unknown, where long-forgotten stories are revealed to those who travel through the wood. ("Old Grist Mill" 01:00-01:18)

The Unknown's "placeness" is emphasized throughout the series, which contributes to the ambiguity between what is "commonsense" and what is not. On a secondary level, as mentioned earlier, *OtGW* is not the reimagined, animated product of another text, though it is undoubtedly an amalgamation of many, many literary and textual references. There is no roadmap for spectators, and so, necessarily, closure is postponed, undercut, or canceled altogether.

The half-brothers Wirt and Greg function in many ways like two halves of a whole. As the older brother, Wirt experiences a combination of rejection and acceptance of his role as the "navigator" and "protector." Plagued by his own teen insecurities, Wirt's journey through the

Unknown is one of caution and questioning—what can and should he do are recurrent themes connecting his actions in and interactions with the Unknown. Greg, on the other hand, is frequently a source of comic relief during their journey. Greg's optimism and curiosity balances Wirt's anxieties. However, it is Greg who challenges the Beast for the boys' freedom from the Unknown. Greg is offered the opportunity to escape the Unknown, but refuses to leave without Wirt. In a series of seemingly impossible trials, Greg wins the brothers' freedom, only to succumb to the landscape of the Unknown himself. With the help of an emboldened Wirt, the boys are able to escape the Unknown by exposing the Beast as conquerable, thereby eliminating his power over them. By exposing the Beast as fallible, Wirt and Greg are able to break free of the Unknown. "Exposure" is an important element of the otherworld, whether it is ultimately positive or negative. In *OtGW*, exposure of characters or situations often leads to unexpected results or revelations, further demonstrating the complexity of McCloud's concept of closure in this miniseries.

Conventional approaches to survival do not necessarily ensure a safe passage through the otherworld. Greg's more whimsical methods are, arguably, what assist in the brothers' journey the most. The rules are different here, and Greg is able to adapt accordingly. By Greg's example, we see Wirt confronting some of his personal limitations—the struggle of leaving childhood and emerging into adulthood. Children are often the protagonists of more contemporary otherworld journeys. Oftentimes these child protagonists encounter adult themes of rejection, fear, lostness, and burden in the otherworld; by juxtaposing Greg's whimsy against Wirt's anxiety, *Over the Garden Wall* is able to represent the importance of hope in the face of despair. The show does not, however, moralize either attitude. Instead, these complex emotions coexist in Wirt and Greg's interactions, as well as in each character individually. Before a thematic analysis of the

Unknown can be conducted, an understanding of the key characters that populate the Unknown, whom Wirt and Greg interact with, is important. Indeed, while the landscape of the Unknown is eerily familiar (New England in the fall), the inhabitants of the Unknown are far from normal. The duality of lightness and darkness, a recurrent theme throughout the show, is also present in Beatrice, Wirt and Greg's traveling companion and otherworld guide.

Beatrice, a talking bluebird, is a complex character in that she initially presents herself as a guide for the boys, but has the ulterior motive of turning the boys over to Adelaide, the Good Woman of the Woods. Beatrice is motivated to turn the boys over to Adelaide (as child servants) in exchange for a pair of magical scissors that will turn her and her family back into humans. It is revealed that, at some point before the boys' arrival in the Unknown, Beatrice was responsible for the curse that turned her family into bluebirds, and was left with no choice but to strike a deal with Adelaide. Initially, Beatrice's interactions with the boys are curt and businesslike as she tries to hurry their journey in the direction of Adelaide. Over the course of their travels, however, we see Beatrice form a relationship with Wirt and Greg that complicates her situation. Ultimately, Beatrice refuses to give the boys over the Adelaide, but not before they hear of her initial intentions. Not only does Beatrice's character play into the "not as it seems" reality of the otherworld physically (she is in fact human), but she also demonstrates this internally. The otherworld, much like the commonsense reality, is populated by characters who are more complex than "good" and "evil," and Beatrice's character exemplifies this. The Woodsman is another character who contributes to this complexity.

Arguable, the Woodsman is the only "parental" figure of the miniseries. He is the first character the boys come into contact with in the Unknown, and interactions with him are woven throughout their journey. In their early interactions, the Woodsman offers the boys refuge in his mill, which the boys ultimately destroy. The boys' initial rejection of the Woodsman serves as an interesting parallel for their complicated family life back home. Wirt identifies the boys' relationship as half-brothers when he sings to the tavern folk in Chapter 4, "Oh, my name is Wirt and his name is Greg. We're related because my mom remarried and then gave birth to him with my stepdad" ("Songs of the Dark Lantern" 06:36-06:46). It is revealed that the Woodsman is a parent, and that his burden in the Unknown is to keep a lantern holding his daughter's spirit lit in order to keep her "alive." In the boys' final confrontation with the Beast, Wirt inadvertently realizes that the lantern is not housing the Woodsman's daughter's spirit, but is the vessel keeping the Beast alive instead. Similar to the dichotomous personalities of Wirt and Greg, the boys' interactions with the Woodsman epitomize interactions between children and adults. The Woodsman provides the boys with foreboding advice, and the boys in turn reveal that the anxieties of the Woodsman are unfounded, or founded on lies.

Unlike Beatrice and the Woodsman, both of whom become more explicitly detailed as independent characters throughout the miniseries, Jason Funderberker (the frog) and the Beast are two of the most influential, but mysterious, characters of the show. Aside from being the first and last character we see in the show (he is playing the piano in the intro and outro), Jason Funderberker is the boys' near-constant companion (save for a stint in "Lullaby in Frogland" when they are briefly separated). He is complex in that he is the only other living link between the commonsense reality and the Unknown for the boys, and is able to travel into and out of the Unknown with the brothers. As an amphibian, perhaps his ability to survive in multiple environments should not be so surprising, but Jason Funderberker becomes more than just a traveling companion. In fact, an ongoing gag of the miniseries is the frog's many name changes. Interestingly, although the frog is Greg's charge for much of their time in the Unknown, it is

Wirt who eventually names him Jason Funderberker in the final chapter of the miniseries. This is significant because Funderberker is the name of a boy back home who is also vying for Wirt's crush Sara. By naming the frog Funderberker, the lines between the Unknown and home seem to be blurred further (or brought closer together). Upon the trio's return home, the frog is the only character with physical proof of the Unknown's existence—he is carrying Auntie Whispers' bell in his stomach. Jason Funderberker is one among many details of this miniseries that obscures the boundaries between the commonsense reality and anamorphosis and, much like the Beast, there is no definitive explanation for his role in the Unknown.

The Beast is the lurking shadow that stalks the boys' journey in the Unknown. His form is largely unclear, except for the dark outline of his many antlers, his glowing eyes, and the quick flash of exposed organs and torn flesh revealed by the light of the lantern in the boys' final struggle for freedom. It is revealed that the Beast is sustained by the lantern carried by the Woodsman. The lantern requires oil from the edelwood trees, which are revealed to be grown from lost souls trapped in the Unknown. This revelation is important because it demonstrates that the Beast is not an immortal force, but rather requires a power source (the lantern) to function. It is only after Wirt realizes that the Beast can be defeated that the boys are able to leave the Unknown together. In fact, it isn't the boys who defeat the Beast at all, it is the Woodsman who ultimately extinguishes the lantern. The idea that the Unknown serves as a kind of limbo place between life and death makes sense within the context of the soul-hungry Beast. However, after the Beast is defeated, the Unknown does not cease to exist. Indeed, in the closing sequence of the show we see the reunion of many of the characters the boys encountered on their journey—the Woodsman with his daughter, a human Beatrice with her human family. The direct equation of the Beast with death (or even the devil) falls apart in this sequence. "Life" goes on in the

Unknown, just as the boys are able to return to their lives as well. If the Unknown is not a product of the Beast, then what does that mean for its purpose as an otherworld? By decentering the Unknown as a trial space between life and death, the "otherness" of the Unknown is emphasized. This place is not easily packaged into a standard "otherworld trope" box.

It is worth mentioning that even a closed-circuit show like *Over the Garden Wall* is difficult to completely unpack in any singular sitting. However, in order to analyze the Unknown as an animated otherworld, I have divided my analysis into three sections, centered on demonstrating Žižek's anamorphosis, McCloud's closure, and the poignantly Americana aesthetic of this miniseries through close-readings of a selection of scenes. In each section I will be using key scenes to demonstrate the function of my framework, what purpose it serves in analyzing this show, and how the framework helps to unpack the characters' journeys "through the woods." Given the inversed narrative structure, an episode-by-episode analysis seems counterintuitive (even counterproductive). *OtGW* is not a show about leaving-and-returning, but is rather a show about being lost. The "how" of Wirt and Greg's arrival in and departure from the Unknown is not as important as the "what" of their actions while they are there. By decentering the emphasis from the leaving-and-returning structure, spectators are forced into lostness alongside the protagonists. No one is quite sure what is going on, but something (everything?) is very distinctly *awry*. To complement my framework, the three themes I will be referring to in this analysis are: *Lostness*, *Burden*, and *Exposure*. To varying degrees, each episode deals with these themes and an inter-episode analysis of them will provide a more comprehensive understanding of what the Unknown is and how it functions for the characters. I will be applying my theoretical framework in tandem with select supplementary sources to scenes from *OtGW* coupled with these umbrella themes in order to demonstrate how this show can be analyzed through Žižek's concept of anamorphosis and McCloud's concept of closure.

Slavoj Žižek's "Anamorphosis"

In *Looking Awry*, Žižek unpacks Lacanian psychoanalysis through his examination of contemporary popular culture, primarily focusing his analysis on examples from film (such as Hitchcock's *Vertigo*). The notion of "looking awry" or looking askew at an object, rendering said object disproportioned, reveals that our "subjective impressions [are] multiplied because of our anxieties and sorrows" (33). Žižek likens this fracturing of the subjective view of the objective thing to a "glass surface sharpened, cut in such a way that it reflects a multitude of images" where, "instead of the tiny substance, we see its 'twenty shadows'" (32) as a result of our subjective (anxious, desirous) perspective. For Žižek, there are two realities or "substances": the commonsense reality and anamorphosis. Regarding the commonsense reality, he writes that

> On the level of the first metaphor, we have the commonsense reality as "substance with twenty shadows," as a thing split into twenty reflections by our subjective view; in short, as a substantial "reality" distorted by our subjective perspective (inflated by our anxiety, etc.). If we look at a thing straight on, from a matter-of-fact perspective, we see it "as it really is," while the look puzzled by our desires and anxieties ("looking awry") gives us a distorted, blurred image of the thing. (34)

Regarding anamorphosis, he writes that

> On the level of the second metaphor (anamorphosis), however, the relation is exactly the opposite: if we look at a thing straight on, i.e., from a matter-of-fact, disinterested, "objective" perspective, we see nothing but a formless spot. The

> object assumes clear and distinctive features only if we look at it “from aside,” i.e., with an “interested” look, with a look supported, permeated, and “distorted” by a *desire*. (34)

It seems, then, that the otherworld, a fantasy space which “functions as an empty surface, as a kind of screen for the projection of desires,” (30) is a product of the intersection of the commonsense reality (where things are as they appear *unless* our looking is distorted by our subjectivity) and anamorphosis (where things *must* be distorted by our subjectivity in order to be seen at all). A character occupies the commonsense reality until an anxiety, a desire, sends them *awry* and they find themselves in a state of anamorphosis, where their anxiety, their desire, becomes their primary mode of seeing (and being).

In Chapter II of this thesis, I outlined some of the different iterations of the otherworld in past and contemporary traditions, with emphasis on how historical otherworlds have come to shape our creation and understanding of current otherworld stories. In light of Žižek’s theory of anamorphosis, it is relevant here to unpack the Unknown as an anamorphic space (or place). In *Looking Awry*, Žižek provides an example to illustrate his distinction between the commonsense reality (or just “reality”) and anamorphosis. The example he uses is that of Patricia Highsmith’s short story “The Black House.” The story involves a group of local townsmen who recount tales of their youthful transgressions (frequently sexual or illegal in nature) in and around the “black house”—a decrepit, rotting house said to be occupied by a murderous hermit. Through their shared recounted experiences, the “black house” becomes a symbol of their “wilder days” and bonds this group together. It is important to note that the “black house” is a *physical location* that each man has interacted with (or *claims* to have interacted with) in different ways. Therefore, the necessary characteristics of the "black house" to take note of are that it is a *shared* physical space that is associated with (youthful) transgressive behaviors.

In adulthood, the "black house" serves as the location for these stories and these stories serve as a social adhesive between the now-grown men. Each man can relate to the "black house" in similar but slightly different ways. Each man knows *not to go back to the "black house."* Therefore, the "black house" is also a *forbidden* physical space and a shared *fantasy* space that the men collectively upkeep together. The townsmen's engagement with the "black house" becomes an agreed upon ritual that no one violates. The "black house" remains a distant (but nearby) location where they can relive their youth. This system is disturbed, however, when a newcomer arrives in town. The new arrival, also male, cannot understand the allure of the house because he does not share a history (real or imagined) with it. He takes it upon himself to reveal to the townsmen that the house is just a house—no murderous hermit, nothing interesting about it. After confirming that the house is indeed *just a house*, he returns to the tavern and relays this information to the townsmen who, having their collective fantasy space destroyed, revolt against and attack the newcomer, who later dies from his injuries.

The relevance of the "black house" story to this thesis is not situated in its otherness, indeed the house is readily visible and accessible to the townsmen and therefore is not an *other world*, but rather is situated in its usefulness for demonstrating Žižek's concept of anamorphosis. The "black house" was "forbidden to them [the townsmen] because it functioned as an empty space on which they could project their nostalgic desires, their distorted memories" (32). By revealing that the house "is nothing but an old ruin, the young intruder reduced their fantasy space to an everyday, common reality," ultimately annulling the difference between reality and fantasy space and depriving the men of an outlet for expressing their desires (32). The look of the townsmen which is "capable of discerning the fascinating contours of the object of desire where usually there is seen nothing but a trivial everyday object" is quite literally a "look capable of seeing Nothingness" (32). The townsmen, through anamorphosis, were able to see their fantasies out of nothing. By looking at the house awry, it became a collaboratively constructed playground. A distinction to make between the "black house" and the otherworld is that the otherworld is not the direct (or directed) creation of the traveler, but rather appears to exist independently of the traveler. In many of the otherworld examples explored in this thesis, the otherworld appears to a traveler who is facing a crossroads in their commonsense reality (often inspired by rejection, boredom, or isolation). The otherworld does not appear to those who go looking for it. Rather, the otherworld *finds you*. Or, in the case of *Over the Garden Wall*, it finds Wirt and Greg.

How then can we use this model of the "black house" to better understand the Unknown? The distinction between the fantasy "black house" and the physical "black house" is the source of anamorphosis for the townsmen in Highsmith's story. When fantasy and reality become blended such that they are indistinguishable, anamorphosis arises. That is, when one's subjectivity necessarily alters the perception of objective reality. However, the Unknown is not a fantasy space in the same way the "black house" is. Indeed, the Unknown appears to exist outside the control of the characters we encounter in it. Unlike the "black house," the Unknown is not the creation of any particular person or entity. The men sustain the "black house" through their collective fantasies, whereas the Unknown is sustained by what? Certainly, there are hints throughout the miniseries suggesting that the Beast is the "lord" of the Unknown, but this proves to be incorrect when Wirt exposes his weakness: the lantern. This exposure of the Beast as vulnerable, and not an eternal threat, is similar to the revelation that the "black house" is just a house, not a mythical place. By exposing the Beast as fallible, Wirt and Greg are able to break free of the Unknown. This is obviously a positive outcome for the boys, while the townsmen's realization that the "black house" is nothing and therefore their fantasies are also nothing is negative. When the Woodsman finally extinguishes the lantern, thereby defeating the Beast, the Unknown does not cease to be, but continues on as a location for various reunions of the wayward characters with loved ones lost. It is not the perspectives of fantasy and reality which generate anamorphosis in the Unknown, but the perspectives of "home" and "other." The concept and existence of home renders the Unknown an anamorphic space. The simple understanding that "here" is not "there" is what forces Wirt and Greg, and spectators, into anamorphosis. Home and the Unknown are not explicitly separated as two distinct spaces (like the fantasy and physical iterations of the "black house"); however, there are several references, made by Wirt in particular, to home throughout the miniseries.

Žižek's concept of anamorphosis helps unpack the Unknown as an otherworld space, even though his example of the "black house" and the Unknown is not a one-for-one comparison. The intersection of Žižek's anamorphosis with McCloud's closure occurs then when the character (and spectator), finding themselves in the otherworld (or anamorphosis), can no longer commit closure—the world does not permit it—or the closure they are attempting to commit is repeatedly interrupted or incomplete. In the otherworld, the logical leaps of faith that function normally in the commonsense reality no longer apply. Thus, setting aside the fact that animation, in the sense of its filmic motion, commits closure for the spectator in terms of form, closure in content cannot be completed while the character (and spectator) occupy anamorphosis.

In anamorphosis, closure is canceled.

In the otherworld, closure is canceled.

In the Unknown, closure is canceled.

Scott McCloud's "Closure"

Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* examines the *form* of comics and how its form intersects with its content. The sheer vastness of the comics form is akin to that of animation: these arts are, in part, defined by their indefiniteness. Thus, despite the comics approach taken by McCloud, much of his commentary is concentrated on the *cartoon* and can be readily applied to the world of animation. A cartoon is, at its most basic level, an abstraction of the real and so, for McCloud, "When we abstract an image through cartooning, we're not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details" (31). To abstract the real into a cartoon is to essentialize it, or at least something, an element, about it. By reducing an "image to its essential 'meaning,' an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't" (31). Cartoons, more so than realistic art, "*focus* our attention on an idea" and this is an "important part of their special power" (31). There is a universality to cartoon imagery that is not present in realistic art, at least not in the same way. The more "cartoony a face is…the more people it could be said to *describe*" (31) and so, the medium of the cartoon can appeal to a broader audience, and also represent a broader audience. When we interact with a photo or realistic drawing of a face, we "see it as the face of *another*" whereas when we participate in the "world of the *cartoon*…[we] see [ourselves]" (36). The cartoon character is at one time everyone else *and also you*. Thus, the universality of the cartoon image adds a dimension to the animated otherworld that the literary otherworld cannot quite achieve in the same way.

In the animated otherworld, there are two simultaneous experiences of the otherworld at play—that of the character encountering the otherworld and that of the spectator encountering it as well. Both character and spectator have access to the audiovisual cues that populate and define the animated otherworld. This shared space of the animated otherworld differs starkly from the literary otherworld in that the literary space occupied by the character is necessarily different (even inaccessible) than that space which is occupied by the reader. The reader envisions their own environment for their own visualization of the character; their experiences of the otherworld do not, and cannot, overlap. Character and reader do not share a *seeable* space. However, in the world of animation, the audiovisual space occupied by the character and the spectator is the same; the cartoon form makes possible spectator participation, rather than observation exclusively. In the world of cartoons, "There is no life here except that which you give to it" (59). In animation, spectator becomes *participant*.

We arrive then at McCloud's concept of "closure." For McCloud, closure is the "phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (63). We "commit closure" in our daily lives, that is, we complete "that which is incomplete based on past experience" (63). Our very perception of what is "real" is "an act of *faith*, based on mere fragments" (62) that we observe and then fill in the blanks around. In film, animation included, closure takes place "continuously—twenty-four times per second, in fact—as our minds, aided by the persistence of vision, transform a series of still pictures into a story of continuous motion" (65). In the animated otherworld, there are two manifestations of closure: closure relating to the craft, and closure relating to the otherworld and the character's interactions with it. In *Over the Garden Wall*, the spectator is constantly engaged with closure not only through its animated form, but also through the piecemeal presentation and experiences of the Unknown. Repeatedly, we are forced to commit closures that, ultimately, are inaccurate or inconclusive—closure, as conceived by McCloud, is frequently not achieved (or achievable) in the Unknown. A feature of the Unknown that makes the possibility of closure difficult is the characters' near-constant state of being lost.

Perhaps a hallmark of all otherworld tales is finding oneself to be lost; however, the emphasis on characters' lostness in *Over the Garden Wall* is such that it impacts all characters, not just the protagonists, and is a driving force behind character and spectator dis-ease. In fact, direct references to lostness are so frequent that it is impossible to ever settle into the environment of the Unknown. Wirt and Greg (and spectators) are reminded constantly of their non-belonging. The utilization of the term lostness to describe one of the core themes of *OtGW* is to establish that the lostness experienced by the protagonists and other characters is not one plagued by "meaninglessness," "emptiness," or "futility."[9] For the purposes of this examination, this term is more closely related to "ambiguity" or "aimlessness," rather than terms that connote a kind of senselessness. To be lost is not to necessarily be without purpose. In fact, lostness seems to be a virtue of the Unknown—it appears to be an important step for these characters to eventually complete their journeys. However, there are limitations to the lostness that travelers through the Unknown can experience—if you are lost for too long, the Beast will catch up to you and you will become part of the otherworld landscape forever. To explore this theme in light of the concept of closure, I will be examining select key scenes from the show that demonstrate not only Wirt and Greg's grappling with lostness, but also other main characters' experiences as well. The first scene will be the opening scene between Wirt and Greg as they come to the realization that they are in the woods. The second scene will be from later in their journey, when the boys are growing tired of their condition in the Unknown.

> Wait, wait a second. Uh, Greg, where are we?
>
> In the woods.

---

[9] Indeed, a quick synonym search for "lostness" results in a long list of words burdened by the baggage of pointlessness or purposelessness.

> I mean, what are we doing out here?
>
> We're walking home.
>
> Greg, I think we're lost. We should have left a trail or something.
>
> I can leave a trail of candy from my pants!
>
> No. Though I am lost, my wounded heart resides back home in pieces, strewn about the graveyard of my lost love… ("The Old Grist Mill" 01:32-02:04)

This opening exchange between protagonists Wirt and Greg establishes the tone of lostness for the entire show. Indeed, their being lost (and trying to get back home) is the primary motivator for the majority of their actions as they traverse the Unknown. The opening scene begins with the boys walking through a dark wood while Greg lists off the worst names he can think of for his pet frog. In the midst of this list, Wirt realizes that perhaps they are not where they are supposed to be. What is particularly interesting is that there is nothing distinctive about the woods: it is just a forest. *OtGW* does an excellent job of positioning rather simplistic character designs against rather realistic backdrops. McCloud writes that there is a "*universality* of cartoon imagery" that allows spectators to see themselves in the cartooned characters (31). Indeed, when we "look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face" we see it as "the face of *another*," but when we enter "the world of the *cartoon*—[we] see [ourselves]" (36). The distinction between the cartoony faces and physiques of Wirt and Greg allow spectators to project themselves onto these near-blank canvasses. The landscape, however, is much more presentational, rather than representational, in that it resembles a place we could access here, as part of the commonsense reality the spectator inhabits. Spectators are not expected to "identify with brick walls or landscapes," so backgrounds "tend to be slightly more realistic" in animated media (McCloud 42). McCloud points out this tradition in the *TinTin* comics, where "very iconic characters" are paired with "unusually realistic backgrounds" in order to allow "readers to mask themselves in a character and safely enter a sensually stimulating world" (43). The realness of the environment combined with the simple character designs enhances the sensation of being lost in the spectator.

Wirt's questions in this exchange situate the brothers' lostness in two ways: firstly, that they are unfamiliar with their surroundings (i.e. *physically* lost), and secondly, that they aren't sure what they are doing (i.e. *existentially* lost). This distinction suggests that the lostness the brothers face is not one that can simply be remedied with a map, and instead extends beyond conventional disorientation. Establishing this layered lostness from the beginning not only sets up the rest of the show, but also the other characters the boys encounter, as well as their interactions with the Unknown. Of course, it is worth acknowledging that not only is being lost a convention of the otherworld trope, but so is being lost *in the woods*. Folklorically, the woods (or a forest) is a transformative space that is often replete with obstacles or challenges for the protagonist to overcome. It is only after they have successfully completed their trials that they are able to leave the woods. While *OtGW* is not based on a direct text, it is the frequent (but subtle) details like this that keep the spectator engaged and guessing *what will happen next*? Forcing the spectator into an ambiguously familiar space enhances this show's constant disruption of closure. The next scene renders the lostness experienced by Wirt and Greg far more dire, as it comes later in their search for a way home and they are worn down by the trails of the Unknown.

> Look, we've reached land! Feel the dirt! Smell that tree. We must be almost there.
>
> Greg? […] Can we please stop pretending we're going to get home?
>
> Huh?

> Can we admit we're lost for good? That this fog is deeper than we can ever understand? That we are but wayward leaves, scattered to the air by an indifferent wind? Can we just admit we're never gonna get back home, Greg? Can we do that?
>
> Wirt, you can do anything if you set your mind to it. That's what the old people say.
>
> […]
>
> Greg! You need to stop acting ridiculous all the time. […] Look, do you even know why we got lost in the first place? It's 'cause you were goofing around and getting into trouble like you always do.
>
> Really? It was all my fault?
>
> Yeah, so…it's not my job to get us home, okay? I'm done. ("Babes in the Wood" 01:28-02:21)

This exchange comes much later in the boys' journey through the Unknown and the lack of answers they have found regarding their condition has begun to affect their momentum. Their journey, which seemed purposeful in the beginning, has deteriorated considerably after several failed attempts at finding home. Everything the boys have tried to do has not brought them any closer to home. A notable consistency between these two scenes is that of blame. Wirt consistently places the blame for the brothers' situation squarely on Greg's shoulders. In both this scene and the former scene, exactly *how* the brothers ended up lost remains a mystery and this ambiguity shifts the importance from the *how* of their lostness to the *now*. With no clear past and no clear future, the brothers are forced to face their condition, over and over again, in a limbo space, unable to commit existential closure—where are they and how did they get there?

Closure is complicated not only by virtue of the otherworld (where things are regularly not as they appear), but is also complicated by this condition of forced and sustained lostness.

In addition to lostness, "exposure" is a recurrent theme of otherworld literature, and the Unknown as an otherworld location. The "things are not as they appear" constant in the otherworld renders closure incredibly difficult. If closure is based on past experience, and in the otherworld past experiences are not reliable, then closure is necessarily undermined. Two important exposures in this show will be analyzed in this section: Enoch and the pumpkin villagers in "Hard Times at the Huskin' Bee," and the source for the edelwood trees in "The Unknown."

> Welcome back, Larry.
>
> He looks exactly the same.
>
> What in the…
>
> Yeah, Larry! Whoo!
>
> Edward, this one's for you!
>
> They're all skeletons.
>
> Thanks for digging up the life of the party
>
> What a wonderful harvest. And what about you? You sure you want to leave?
>
> ("Hard Times at the Huskin' Bee" 09:42-10:02)

"Hard Times at the Huskin' Bee" is the first chapter in which the true weirdness of the Unknown is exposed. In this chapter, Wirt and Greg have spent the night wandering the woods after their harrowing encounter with the Woodsman. Upon reconnecting with the talking bluebird, Beatrice, the trio eventually arrive at Pottsfield, a seemingly "normal place with normal people" (06:09-06:12). Of course, there is no such normal place with no such normal people in the Unknown, as the boys continue to find out. The people of Pottsfield are not as they appear: they are in fact skeletons in pumpkin disguises. As punishment for arriving in Pottsfield uninvited, trampling crops, and interrupting the festivities, the boys are sentenced to "a few hours of manual labor" by Enoch, the apparent leader of the pumpkin people (07:07-07:12). The boys head out to the fields where they work by harvesting corn and pumpkins. Wirt is pleased that they will be done soon with their punishment, but Beatrice asks Wirt what his plan is after he's done with the manual labor. Wirt admits he doesn't know what his next move will be. Beatrice asks Wirt why Enoch has them digging holes in the field, to which Wirt replies that they are probably for planting seeds. Beatrice responds, "Maybe they're going to bury you out here" (08:21-08:23). Wirt at first blows off this comment, but when Greg unearths a skeleton, Wirt begins to panic. Wirt turns to Beatrice and asks her to pick the locks around their ankles and to help them escape.

As soon as Greg unearths the skeleton, Wirt's perception of what is happening is altered dramatically by the anxiety of realizing they are digging their own graves. Prior to the unearthing of the skeleton, Wirt appears nonchalant at the prospect of staying in Pottsfield with the pumpkin people. However, once Greg finds the skeleton at the bottom of his hole, Wirt is thrust into anamorphosis. What is at the bottom of the hole is just a happenstance skeleton and yet what Wirt sees as a result of his anxiety and the presence of the skeleton is not a hole for seeds but rather his own grave. The seemingly benign (albeit creepy) people of Pottsfield are threatening now and it becomes imperative that they find a way out of town. When the procession arrives, the villagers ask Wirt if the holes have been dug and Wirt tries to stall while Beatrice is working on the locks. In a vain attempt to distract the villagers and delay his inevitable murder and burial, Wirt realizes that Greg and Beatrice have escaped and that he has been left behind. Left with no choice but to continue sidetracking the villagers, Wirt fails at first to realize that the skeleton Greg unearthed has risen from the grave and is dancing behind him. This is one example where closure is canceled for Wirt and for the spectator. The spectator is put into the position of Wirt where, based on the available evidence, the only possible outcome is Wirt's death and burial at the hands of the Pottsfield villagers. The leap we make based on the presented fragments is proven incorrect. Wirt is not digging his own grave; he is digging up someone else's.

This scene, the arrival of Larry (and later Edward), to the Pottsfield harvest party, is demonstrative of animation's unique ability to envelope the spectator and the protagonist in the same environment. Cartoon's ability to "*focus* our attention on an idea" through abstraction makes scenes like these all the more chilling to experience (McCloud 31). Wirt's attentions are so narrowed down that objectivity, or at least an objective perspective, is impossible. The disconcerting jolt of Larry's arrival shakes Wirt (us) out of a fixation with certain and impending death. This scene is at the same time about death and, in a way, life, which yet again challenges the comforts of a more traditional closure experience and expectation. Closure is disrupted repeatedly throughout this show, but one of the bleaker exposures involves the edelwood trees. The trees, when ground into oil by the Woodsman, are the source of power for the Beast's lantern. There are several layers of interrupted closure involving the edelwood trees and their true identity.

> Woodsman, I knew you would come. I have something for you.
>
> Oh! Oh! What have you done?!
>
> Why, I've given you another edelwood.
>
> No!
>
> He will burn nicely in the lantern.

> No! I won't do this!
>
> You've been grinding up lost souls for years.
>
> I didn't know! I didn't know this is where the edelwood trees came from!
>
> And would it have mattered? Would you have just let your daughter's spirit burn out forever? Feed the lantern. ("The Unknown" 03:17-03:51)

In the final chapter of the show, the Beast reveals to the Woodsman where the edelwood trees come from. The Beast shows the Woodsman to Greg, who is trapped in an edelwood tree, and reveals that this is how edelwoods are grown—from the souls of lost travelers. The Woodsman, upon realizing that he has been grinding up lost souls in order to keep his daughter's spirit alive, breaks down in disbelief. There are several different exposures happening in this scene. Firstly, it is exposed to the Woodsman that he has been using lost souls for his own purposes. Secondly, it is exposed that the Beast is responsible for trapping and harnessing lost souls. Thirdly, it is exposed that the boys are more "lost than [they] realize" ("The Old Grist Mill"). The fact that Greg solved the Beast's puzzles is not enough to secure their escape. Spectators, who have been molded throughout the duration of the show to identify with these characters, embrace "the imaginary as the symbolically real, perceiving themselves as active participants in the depicted narrative" (Bishop 167). This image is frightening for younger audiences who are more easily swayed by the grim scene animated before them and who might more readily identify with Greg's character as reflective of themselves, as well as for older audiences who have more of an understanding of the Woodsman's predicament—the desire to preserve something important at the expense of others. This revelation, even though it ultimately results in the defeat of the Beast, taints the entirety of the Unknown. How long has this been going on for? How many souls were fed to the Beast? These questions will never be answered, but they weigh heavily over the mythos of the Unknown. However, although the cartoony appearance of the characters seems to be at odds with the intensity of their burdens, the Unknown is not solely a place of darkness. In fact, throughout much of the plot the boys are responsible for healing the Unknown, or at least relationships therein.

Character and spectator closures are interrupted in the Unknown by nature of its otherness. Otherworlds are inherently difficult to navigate and are designed to undermine expectations. After all, otherworlds are trial spaces designed to test travelers, and only those who are readily equipped may emerge victorious. However, the Unknown prevents closure not only because of its otherness, but also because of its Americanness. The Unknown is not a foreign place but a familiar one, at least in terms of its landscape.

Americana

Underpinning the entirety of *Over the Garden Wall* and this analysis of it is the distinctly (and uniquely) Americanness of the show. Indeed, the focus of this thesis has been to contribute to the discussion of American animated otherworlds, but what *OtGW* really is, is not an American animated otherworld, but an *animated American* otherworld. Unlike any other short or feature-length animation discussed in this thesis, *OtGW* takes place not in a fantastic, unrecognizable otherworld, but rather in "our own backyard," that is, New England. The familiarity of the otherworld landscape further complicates an already complicated environment for the protagonists as well as (and perhaps more so) for the spectators. But what is "Americana" and how does it manifest?

Defining "Americana," much like defining "America," is a near-impossible endeavor—the concept is just as diverse as the nation it is born from. However, Americana is most often associated with and used to describe music. Americana is not so much a genre as it is "a radio format, like ‘easy-listening’ or ‘hard rock,’ both of which encompass a host of genres and subgenres” (Parrett). Therefore, when viewed from a musical perspective, “Americana” represents a confluence of musical styles, including, but not limited to: country, folk, rock and roll, blues, and rhythm and blues (Parrett). In *OtGW*, the jazzy, folksy band The Blasting Company produced the music in such a way that replicated, or paid a modern homage to, pre-1950s American music. In fact, Elijah Wood has said that “if this show were a record, it would be played on a phonograph” (Maas). While music certainly plays an important role in creating the Unknown as an otherworld for the spectator, music is not the only element that contributes to this concept of “Americana.” At the heart of Americana is nostalgia.

Nostalgia in the Unknown is created in part from the environment—an old schoolhouse, a steamboat, a mill, a rural town—as well as the music. These “scenes and places, wattages and personages…belong—inextricably, unmistakably—to this country and this country alone” (Sides). The rural, small-town aesthetic is certainly modeled after the picturesque American countryside, where red barns, orchards, and wide-open spaces are replete. Take Pottsfield, for example. The village of Pottsfield resembles a modest farming community one might find on an autumnal country drive. While the villagers of Pottsfield are far from your typical, small-town folks, they are participating in a perfectly normal “husking bee,” reminiscent of a nineteenth century event where communities would come together to harvest and shuck corn (“The Husking Bee”). This show, in many more ways than mentioned here, represents “America—a town of a few thousand, in a region of wheat and corn and dairies and little groves” (Lewis). Of course, like feelings of uncanniness, nostalgia is a particularly personal response to stimuli and therefore *OtGW*’s aesthetic might not produce these sensations in all spectators; however, the linkages between historical nineteenth and early twentieth century America are unmistakable in this show and so an acknowledgement of this phenomenon is relevant and indeed important in order to construct a more thorough understanding of what *OtGW* is achieving.

While there is no "Main Street USA" scene or location in this miniseries, arguably the entire package could be said to evoke a similar image. Walt Disney's recreation and synthesis of "Main Street USA" in his theme parks was made possible through "an abstracted image that is tempting to confuse with reality" (Francaviglia). Disneyland and Disneyworld are crafted in such a way that positions visitors in a sustained state of suspended disbelief—for all intents and purposes, Main Street USA in Disneyland is like all other, and simultaneously *no other*, small American thoroughfare. In a similar way to McCloud's analysis of cartoons, abstraction of landscapes allows for spectators to see something of themselves reflected back. In capturing the "essences of other towns to produce a small-town image that has a nearly universal appeal" (Francaviglia), the Unknown is at one moment able to lull spectators into a sense of security, and at the next shake them from that security by repeatedly interrupting closure.

If anamorphosis then is created for Wirt and Greg in this show from the juxtaposition of "home" and the otherworld, then anamorphosis is also, and perhaps simultaneously, created for the spectator by the juxtaposition of "America" or "Americana" and the Unknown. American audience's expectations are consistently challenged throughout this show—the old schoolhouse is full of animals, the steamboat full of frogs, the mill is used to grind up souls, and the rural town belongs to skeletons. Unlike Wonderland, Neverland, Narnia, and Oz, where things are always and inherently topsy-turvy, the Unknown is familiarly unfamiliar. This renders *Over the Garden Wall* particularly disconcerting, and it contributes to a so far underrepresented interpretation of an American otherworld in animation specifically, but in popular culture more generally.

The ambiguity around the boys' arrival in and departure from the Unknown is compounded by the fact that in the end it is Wirt who rescues the trio from drowning—they are not saved by an external force, but save themselves. Had the boys been rescued from the water unconscious, the Unknown might be aligned more with an afterlife otherworld experience. However, with Wirt conducting the rescue himself, the Unknown is less a location of resuscitation and more a location of resilience. This can be said for all of the main characters Wirt and Greg encounter in the Unknown. During the closing sequence, we see reunions between the Woodsman and his daughter, and Beatrice and her family—both iterations of reunion hinged on individual (and collective) resilience. With the removal of the Beast as the oppressive force in the Unknown, the otherworld is restored to its weird and wild, but no longer dangerous ways. While the themes and scenes examined in this section are by no means an entirely comprehensive selection, they do provide insight into the heaviness of *Over the Garden Wall* as a show, and the Unknown as an otherworld.

The show's aesthetics mirror the intensity of the show's content with a focus on autumnal, and winter, colors. The seasons change and become more harrowing as the boys' journey continues deeper into the Unknown. The relationship between the landscape and the characters' struggles keeps time unstable. Spectators are not able to locate themselves seasonally, in addition to all of the other destabilizing influences at work in this show. The complexity that is achieved in *Over the Garden Wall* is impressive and immersive, but the ambiguities might also be a symptom of the extended otherworld narrative. Perhaps the otherworld is not meant to be an extensively explored landscape because it functions on temporal and physical limitations. Despite some of the pitfalls of the extended otherworld exploration, the Unknown offers spectators a glimpse into the nature of a uniquely *American* otherworld—one that is, much like reality, plagued by existential uncertainty.

Chapter V: Conclusion

The otherworld trope has been and continues to be culturally important because of its inherently transformative nature. Characters who encounter and engage with the otherworld undergo transformations, emotionally and even physically, while audiences of all ages can participate in and grow from these transformations as well. The immersive nature of animation allows for these transformations to cultivate a more involved relationship with spectators who, through the suspension of disbelief, are able to engage with the animated otherworld in ways literary otherworlds cannot foster. *Over the Garden Wall* uses the animation form to construct an otherworld that is particularly jarring because of its "Americanness." The Unknown looks familiar, but at every available moment this familiarity is underscored by incongruous characters and character interactions. The Unknown contributes to the vast corpus of otherworld literature in its originality and unpredictability.

This study of the otherworld trope in general, and the Unknown more specifically, has taken particular interest in the narrative structure of otherworld tales. When the emphasis is placed on the leaving-and-returning of characters, the focal point of the story is journey: what circumstances result in the otherworld, how to navigate the otherworld, and how to return home from the otherworld. This is the most linear, and arguably most common, approach to crafting otherworld tales. This structure is commonly used in religious and/or moral otherworld tales, where the protagonist starts their journey as uninitiated, participates in the afterlife (Paradise, Hell), and returns to the populace with guidance on how to achieve their eternal reward, or avoid eternal damnation. There is a lesson to these tales. Even non-moralizing or non-religious otherworld tales like *The Phantom Tollbooth* that are concerned with the leaving-and-returning structure offer advice: *you* have the power to harness your life. *Over the Garden Wall* does not adhere to this structure. Instead, it inverses it.

By inversing the leaving-and-returning narrative structure, *Over the Garden Wall* removes the emphasis from the "lesson" and instead situates spectators in the here-and-now of the action. We cannot accurately guess the moral of the tale because we do not have an understanding of how Wirt and Greg ended up in the Unknown in the first place. This inversal also makes possible the utilization of Žižek's anamorphosis and McCloud's closure. Our subjectivity is filtered through the subjectivities of Wirt and Greg, leaving spectators as agog as the protagonists at the objective reality of the Unknown. Our external (and internal) referents are limited or nonexistent, and so we cannot rely on past knowledge to connect the dots. In some ways, the Unknown demonstrates the narrative limitations of the otherworld—this trope works *because* it is other. When the otherworld becomes the norm, it is less able or even unable to function as a transformative space. By the end of the show, when the events preceding the boys' arrival in the Unknown are revealed, we are too decentered to neatly adjoin this information to our experiences in the Unknown. In this way, this miniseries all but requires a second, or third, or tenth viewing in order to stitch the intricate details of the story together. This is the show's most important strength: it prompts discussion.

In an entertainment industry that profits from quick remakes and predictable sequels, *Over the Garden Wall* offers spectators a taste of a bygone era, where stories come to an end and are not perpetually in limbo of extension. As an independent, limited release artifact, *OtGW* can explore the otherworld trope in a way that is different than short animations, series, or feature-length films. The Unknown is narratively different than the other animated artifacts examined here, as well as visually different. The Americana aesthetic contributes to the weirdness of this otherworld by virtue of its recognizability. Thus, *Over the Garden Wall* employs a myriad of tactics to challenge spectator expectations of the otherworld, and its complexity is far from comprehensively and conclusively analyzed. Scholarship on this and related animated artifacts will continue to enrich our fictional worlds, as well as contribute to an understanding of spectator-character interactions in animation. By inversing the conventional otherworld narrative, the Unknown sets itself apart from Wonderland, Narnia, Oz, and Neverland by forcing us to ask: Where are we, and how did we get here?

For Future Study

Although this thesis does not extensively analyze race or ethnicity in *Over the Garden Wall*, or in American otherworld animation more generally, there is a contemporary socio-cultural exigency for a study of animated depictions of race and ethnicity in the otherworld. At its outset, early twentieth century American animation was dominated by European American animators and therefore all content produced during this time was filtered through that demographic. As Christopher Lehman writes in his essay published in *Animating Film Theory*, the animators of this era "were like the ventriloquists of vaudeville; although their puppets were made of sketches instead of wood, the drawing still functioned as extroverted extensions" of the animators ("African American Representations" 253). This relationship between the European American animator and, in particular, the African American subject, is fraught with issues of representation, appropriation, and segregation. Indeed, no other ethnic group during this early period of American film is represented by both "animation and live-action to construct identity and culture" as much as African Americans are ("African American Representations" 252). The animation/live-action relationship of African American subjects lends these early cartoons to otherworld storylines, or at the very least grossly novelizes, stereotypes, and *creates* African American subjects.

In the Historical Overview section, I analyzed otherworld elements of four Betty Boop cartoons, ranging from 1932 to 1937. Max Fleischer's productions sought to "appropriate African American performance as accurately as possible" (253-254), while other animators and studios of the time erred more on the side of caricature and authorship of African American performance. In some of Fleischer's Betty Boop cartoons from 1932 to 1934, African American "caricatures cross social boundaries that are taboo for the live-action African Americans" (255). Frequent characteristics of African American caricature includes "jet-black bodies, large eyeballs to more easily animate expression, and large mouths to more easily animate dialogue" (253). In *Betty Boop in Mother Goose Land* (1933), Betty and the Spider have an extended kidnap/chase scene. The Spider, depicted as a jet-black, large-eyed, wide-mouthed villain, is an example of this caricature. *Mother Goose Land* then is an example of such films that "dangerously flirt with the movie industry's banning of male-female relationships of different skin colors" (255). Additionally, "such closeness of European American women and African American men violated social customs of color-based segregation" (255) in the United States at the time. The Spider is just abstract enough to skirt issue with the production codes of the American film industry writ large, but elements of African American caricature are unmistakably there.

The African American caricature in early American animation was not limited to these jet-black, large-eyed, wide-mouthed characterizations. In the post-Motion Picture Production Code era (established in 1930), animators halted the production of more progressive African American images, opting instead to return to the more passive African American figures that imitated depictions in literature and more aligned with Production Code standards and expectations. What emerged was the usage of frogs in animation to depict African Americans, primarily due to their large mouths. These frog caricatures “cavorted in a muddy swamp and, becoming excited by their music, usually ended the cartoons by breaking their instruments” (“Black Characterizations” 39). Interestingly, *Over the Garden Wall*’s recurring frog character, ultimately named Jason Funderberker, is the musical narrator in the opening sequence of the show. In the episode “Lullaby in Frogland,” we see a host of frogs gathered on a steamboat where they are eventually entertained by music. The title of the chapter, “Lullaby in Frogland,” is reminiscent of jazz standard “Lullaby in Birdland;” jazz and the depiction of jazz players was a common African American motif in pre-Code American animation. At the end of the steamboat voyage, all of the well-dressed frogs disembark and immediately enter a muddy swamp to hibernate. This episode in particular would obviously require a more in-depth analysis, but there does seem to be some homage or harkening back to African American imagery in early American animation in this episode in particular.

What becomes apparent in even this limited discussion is that depictions of race and ethnicity in the American animated otherworld is a subject needing further analysis. Some future research questions might include: How do depictions of race and ethnicity function in the American animated otherworld? How do depictions of race and ethnicity function in non-American animated otherworlds? What real-world implications do these depictions have for contemporary American audiences? International audiences? The usage of animal or animal-esque creatures to depict various races and ethnicities is clearly rooted in early animation and an examination of perhaps how these images have (or have not) evolved over time would provide insight into past and contemporary stereotyping tendencies.

In addition to race and ethnicity, there is also a need for analysis of gender and sexuality in the American animated otherworld. Does the otherworld location allow for more fluidity with regards to gender and sexuality than non-otherworld storylines? There is an undeniable comfort in the fantastical nature of the anamorphic otherworld that separates it from the commonsense reality: in anamorphosis, everything is inherently awry, and so there is no threat of challenging what's "real." Contemporary animation has made considerable gains in its depictions of gender and sexuality, and these gains have not been limited to adult-oriented programming, but rather, to a degree, include children's programming as well. In *Over the Garden Wall*, we see challenges to gender norms in Wirt's persistent anxiety and sensitivity[10] and Beatrice's betrayal. But the sustained otherworld storyline is not as common as episodic otherworlds and so, as with depictions of race and ethnicity, analysis of gender and sexuality in the animated otherworld is most often constrained to episodes, rather than series. *Over the Garden Wall* is unique in this distinction—the whole miniseries *is* the otherworld—whereas shows like *Adventure Time* merely explore the ABA otherworld on an episode-by-episode basis (ex., "Puhoy!"). Nevertheless, these glimpses into otherworlds are important and distinctive, and offer a lot of material worth comparison and cross-examination.

The final area of future study that extends beyond this thesis is the consideration of non-ABA otherworld storylines. Further study into this trope would require a broader approach. Does space count as an otherworld? Does *Adventure Time's* "Land of Ooo" count as an otherworld in and of itself? Does Rick's stint playing the videogame "Roy: A Life Well Lived" at Blitz and Chitz arcade in *Rick and Morty*'s episode "Mortynight Run" count as an otherworld? In *Over the*

[10] Kelsey DuQuaine examines this more extensively in her thesis, "'There is only surrender': *Over the Garden Wall*'s Portrayal of Anxiety and Guilt" (2016).

Garden Wall, is the Unknown the commonsense reality for those characters Wirt and Greg encounter? Does it matter? There is an endless stream of bizarre and singular examples of the otherworld trope and its diversity is as varied as it is timeless. Literature has explored the concept of voyaging to an *other* world for millennia, and the available content for this trope is only expanding in the digital and Internet ages. It would be a disservice to this genre if these other otherworld storylines were not also considered alongside the ABA otherworld that is extensively (and exclusively) considered in this thesis. All of this is to say that the otherworld offers a rich and weird landscape for historical and socio-cultural research, as well as an extensive platform for educators, particularly at (but certainly not limited to!) the university level.

In her article "At the Bottom of a Well," Dr. Juliette Wood outlines her approach to teaching the otherworld trope at the university level. The main objective of her course is to "establish a method and set a tone using folktales drawn from various sources that will engage students" (48) in broader theoretical issues concerning the folk- and otherworld tale. Wood acknowledges that such courses are popular among students due to existent familiarity with "fantasy literature, fantasy-adventure films, graphic novels, and role-playing games" (48). Wood asks her students several salient questions regarding the journey to the otherworld narrative theme:

> How were encounters between Otherworld beings and their human counterparts conceived? What is the function of the encounter in different contexts? What are the conditions or circumstances for the encounter? Were the encounters understood as historical, or possibly historical, events, or as pure entertainment?

> Are there differences connected with the different genres and times of composition? (48)

Examining how the otherworld functions across time, cultures, and mediums provides myriad lenses through which to understand past and contemporary socio- and pop-cultural norms (including how those norms came to be and what they mean in and for society). Wood also acknowledges that, for such a pervasive trope, studies "of the Otherworld in the folktale are rather unevenly distributed," with most of the emphasis placed on "Western models" (48). This means that, in addition to all of the angles of otherworld research mentioned here, there is a market for more diverse courses and course material on otherworld stories.

What this thesis demonstrates is that the otherworld trope is historically, socially, and culturally significant, and that its study is far from conclusive. Cartoon Network's *Over the Garden Wall* offers audiences of most ages the opportunity to step into a unique anamorphic space that leaves them adrift from fully concrete external referents, placing both protagonists and spectators into a state of non-closure throughout its duration. It is an additionally unique artifact in that it is contained to a miniseries, and the content of that miniseries is almost exclusively (with the exception of the last two episodes) concerned with the otherworld. By examining texts like *OtGW*, it becomes possible to combine the fantastical with the theoretical, thus rendering it multifunctional: it is both entertaining and intellectually intriguing. The directions of research into this trope are equally varied as the trope itself.

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