

The not so subtle  
portrayal of  
supernatural  
elements in e.b.  
white's charlotte's ...



In children's literature, supernatural elements can be found throughout many novels and short stories. The definition of supernatural according to merriam-webster is " attributed to some force beyond scientific understanding or the laws of nature" (Webster). In E. B White's Charlotte's Web and Louis Sachar's Holes, nature is the catalyst to all the events that take place throughout the two novels. Nature and the supernatural are often in correlation with one another since many things in the world are still unexplained and may never fully be explained. Humans have an innate sense of wonder and awe and often times seek the answers to such unexplainable supernatural occurrences. In Charlotte's Web, the supernatural events that take place and portrayed mysticism of nature are the basis of the entire stories plot while in Holes, the supernatural elements of history, fate, and nature are the backbone to the events that unfold in the novel.

In E. B White's Charlotte's Web, elements of the supernatural can be found throughout the plot of the novel. The entire concept of this novel is based upon the supernatural ideas of talking animals, the " miracle" of words appearing in a spider's web, and the sense of wonder at the beauty found in the natural world that is often seen as as safe haven. In terms of talking animals, it is a universally accepted concept that animals do not speak, but in the world of fantasy and supernatural occurrences, this concept can be disregarded completely. Fern's mother, Mrs. Arable, follows the belief that animals simply cannot talk and worries about her daughters well being when Fern communicates the events that have recently taken place in the barnyard. Mr. Arable concludes that it is simply Fern's imagination stating

that “ she’s just got a lively imagination. Kids think they hear all sorts of things” (White 54). He then suggests that maybe a child’s ears hear more than an adult’s do. Adults are often too busy dealing with the hubbub of day to day life, while children take the time to listen to the surroundings. Adults also attribute what children say to overactive imaginations, as did Mr. Arable. This idea of overactive imaginations ultimately detracts from the supernatural essence of this novel, even though many of events that take place would be considered out of the ordinary if such things happened in reality.

Although the adults in this novel do not believe that animals speak, it is an odd contradiction that they are gullible enough to believe that supernatural forces are at work in order for the words to appear in a spiders web. According to Trudelle H. Thomas, “ The dopey adults who read these messages decide a supernatural sign has occurred – a miracle! Wilbur must indeed be very special to merit such praise” (Thomas 203). The adults are quick to dismiss the notion that an animal, let alone a tiny grey spider, is capable of communicating via writing. The concept of speaking animals could only possibly be understood by a child, whom due to their active imaginations, can comprehend. If a pig could receive a supernatural gift, the pig must be superior in one way or another. Wilbur’s life is ultimately saved by the end of the novel, but for no actual reason. The webs state that Wilbur is superior by saying he is “ Some Pig”, “ Terrific”, “ Radiant”, and “ Humble, although there is not actual evidence of Wilbur being such things (White 78, 94, 114, 149). The characters in this novel simply assume and believe the ordinary pig is anything but, due to the miracle of the web. If “ logical” adults

are to believe that words in a spider web could be caused by a possible miracle or supernatural phenomenon, who really has the active imaginations here? If kids hear more than what is actually said or done, does that mean that parents seek signs and meaning in occurrences that are not actually there?

Nature is often seen as a safe haven where love can blossom, as a saving grace, or as an outlet to the realities of life. In terms of *Charlotte's Web*, all three of these concepts apply. Almost the entire novel is placed in nature, and nature is where Charlotte and Wilbur develop and grow a selfless pure plutonic love for one another. E. B. White states that "Wilbur never forgot Charlotte. Although he loved her children and grandchildren dearly, none of the new spiders ever quite took her place in his heart. She was in a class by herself" (White 184). The love he has for Charlotte is carried out long after her death through the many generations of her offspring, although no one love surmounts to the love he has for Charlotte. Wilbur can never replace his love for Charlotte, due especially to the fact that she had dedicated a good portion of her life to saving his life. Wilbur in return sacrifices his life in a sense and dedicates it to the caring of Charlotte's offspring, generations after she is gone. Nature is where these loves develop and without the natural surrounding itself, there wouldn't even be a story to tell. It is in nature itself, specifically a spiders web, that ultimately saves the life of an all too ordinary pig.

Charlotte's natural ability to form a web is heightened to a supernatural circumstance due to humanities natural draw to nature as a source of supernatural activity. According to Sue Mischeff, "Charlotte's web is a true-to-  
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life spider's web built by an all-too-realistic spider who devours flies in seemingly bloodthirsty ways. Is she evil, or just doing what comes naturally?" (Missheff 132). Charlotte is simply an ordinary spider with an extraordinary gift. Charlotte selflessly performs these acts out of love due to the fact that she is never given credit for such feats, and instead, Wilbur is the one given praise. It is in nature itself that Charlotte produces a web that she naturally creates due to her biological instincts in order to be the saving grace Wilbur needs to stay alive. Misheff also states " It is [Charlotte's] imagination that transcends the natural way of things and inspires her to save her friend through her masterful weaving of words" (Misheff 132). This transcendence of natural ways is what leads the human characters in the novel to seek this miracle of nature as a source of escaping reality. The human characters, specifically the adults, use this " supernatural phenomenon" as a possible source of hope, awe, or a sign to something more. Children in the novel are depicted as simply being intrigued and in awe of such occurrences, rather than seeking more from what it is, a spider web. Nature is seen in this novel as being Wilbur and Charlotte's safe haven in order for their friendship to grow, it is where Wilbur is ultimately saved, and it is where humans go to seek more than what is simply put in front of one's eyes.

In the novel *Holes* by Louis Sachar, the theme of fantasy and/or the supernatural is prevalent throughout the story. The entire novel centers around the supernatural occurrences of fate and nature being a source of refuge. In terms of fate, the book is crawling with instances where fate has brought characters together. An instance of such supernatural occurrences

as told by Pat Pinset, the author of " Fate and Fortune in a Modern Fairy Tale: Louis Sachar's Holes", " Magic formula[s] are not lacking either, from the curse that ruined Elya, to the song that Elya should have sung to the old woman on the mountain in Latvia but that, much later, his great-great-grandson sings to her great- great-great-grandson, Zero" (Pinset 207). Elya Yelnats and his descendants were bestowed their curse due to the breaking of Elya's promise to carry Madame Zeroni up the mountain where the piglet she gifted him had drunk. Madame Zeroni's great- great-great-grandson Zero, or Hector Zeroni, crosses paths with Elya's great-great grandson 100+ years into the future after that incident due to fate. Fate brought these two descendants together after both were arrested for two separate charges of theft that are seemingly unrelated, but we later learn this to be untrue. Zero states that " I should have just kept them. [...] If I had just kept those old smelly sneakers, then neither of us would be here right now" (Sachar 184). It is supernatural fate that Stanley finds the Clyde Livingston sneakers Zero originally stole and attempts to bring them home for his father's Zeroni curse induced failed shoe stench remedies. Fate also brings the boys together in order to break the curse that was placed by Hector's great-great-great grandmother Madame Zeroni. After escaping from Camp Green Lake and seeking refuge on God's Thumb, Stanley carries Zero up the rest of the mountain once he has fallen ill and is too weak to continue any farther on his own. Stanley then proceeds to sing him the song Madame Zeroni had requested Elya to sing to her when he promised to carry her up the mountain all those years before, ultimately fulfilling the obligation to a Zeroni. At this moment in time, the curse is lifted. It is fate that has brought Stanley's and

Hector's families back together in order to break the curse in a setting that is all too familiar.

Nature is heavily portrayed as a refuge to both Stanley Yelnats and Hector Zeroni (Zero) in the novel. Nature saves the lives of Stanley and Hector not only once, but three times throughout the novel. Kirsten Møllegaard's article "Haunting and History in Louis Sachar's Holes" explores the concept that landscapes are haunted by their pasts and states that

[Holes illustrates] the turn to the supernatural in the process of recovering history

emphasizes the difficulty of gaining access to a lost or denied past [...]. In Holes,

storytelling constructs the reality of the characters. Stories provide frames for

understanding bizarre occurrences, seemingly arbitrary acts of violence and injustice, and

for establishing bonds and meaningful relationships between people (Møllegaard 139).

It was stated earlier that fate brought these two young men together, but along with fate, the surroundings themselves brought Stanley and Zero closer than ever. This can be seen when Zero escapes from Camp Green Lake, he is protected from the environment by a piece of this land's history that has long been forgotten. Zero is being protected by Sam's old

overturned boat that provides him nutrients from the jars of decaying peaches he names sploosh. When searching for Zero, Stanley stumbles across the overturned boat as well and seeks refuge from the heat under this haunted piece of history, luckily finding Zero during the process. After hiding out underneath the boat and eating the last of the sploosh, Stanley decides that in order to survive, him and Zero must climb God's Thumb. Ever since Stanley had arrived to Camp Green Lake, he had a heightened attraction to God's Thumb and referenced back to the story of Stanley's great grandfather finding and seeking refuge on God's Thumb when he was robbed by Kissing Kate. After a treacherous climb up the mountain and ultimately fulfilling the obligation to carry and sing the obscure song to a Zeroni, Stanley and Zero are saved by the abundance of onions and water at the top of God's thumb. Nature provided Stanley and Zero a place to recuperate and ultimately saved their lives once again when they encounter the yellow spotted lizards when recovering the suitcase full of treasure where Kissing Kate's lipstick tube was buried. According to Sam the onion man, "The lizards don't like onion blood" (Sachar 224). No one knows this though since this knowledge was lost in history when Sam was murdered. Nature, or in this case onions, saves the boys' lives when they are caught digging up the suitcase. Nature also saves them due to the fact that the hole was filled with yellow spotted lizards. If Stanley and Zero had been caught without the immediate danger of being surrounded by poisonous lizards, Stanley would never have obtained his family's treasure and Zero most likely would have been severely punished or even possibly killed. In relation to Møllegaard's theory that the landscape is haunted by the past and ultimately draws people together and



sets events into motion and nature being used as a refuge, the story of Holes draws heavily on the supernatural qualities of nature.

Both Holes and Charlotte's Web use nature as a form of supernatural refuge. The novel Holes plays on the concepts of fate and nature as a form of refuge, while Charlotte's Web focuses in more on the supernatural ideas of talking animals, the "miracle" of words appearing in a spider's web, and the sense of wonder at the beauty found in the natural world that is often seen as a safe haven. Although these novels have different plots, themes, and motifs, both stories have undeniable traces of supernatural nuances throughout the entirety of the stories being told.

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