

GILTS, GOBLINS, AND GARDENS: THE FOUNDATIONS OF MY YOUTH

Katie O'Donnell

Writer's comment: I took English 180 (Children's Literature) last spring quarter and our assignment was to write a paper on anything concerning some of the books we had read. I remember John Boe telling us that the most important thing was to write something that we would want to keep, even if it didn't get a high grade. With this in mind, I began my paper. The ideas came easily to me and seemed to flow with the consistency of a wave rolling across the ocean. Since I felt a personal connection to the paper—the words and sentences came out of my mind passionately and dropped onto the paper. I knew from the first sentence that this was a paper I would definitely have to keep and cherish.

— *Katie O'Donnell*

Instructor's comment: One of the depressing facts of my own college education was that I later threw away every paper I wrote. I saw then (and still see) no reason to have kept them. Thus I frequently tell students that they should write papers they actually would want to keep. I am delighted that one student in English 180: Children's Literature actually followed this advice and produced such a paper. "Gilts, Goblins, and Gardens" has proved personally valuable to its author as well as prize worthy to the editors of this volume. Katie O'Donnell's essay performs the admirable trick of being both intensely personal and intelligently literary. While using children's literature to reflect on what she lost in growing up, she shows in the grace of her language that she has gained something as well: an intelligent understanding of what in childhood is worth reclaiming. From her paper I see how proclaiming "I don't want to grow up" can be a thoughtful act.

— *John Boe, English Department*

Certain elements in children's literature make me feel nostalgic for the past when I lived a more carefree and perhaps careless lifestyle with my eyes and ears wide open. Now, a college student and adult struggling to juggle school, work, and future career planning, I often forget the simple things that brought me pleasure when I was a child. The stresses I have encountered while growing older-taking on added responsibilities and accumulating prejudices-have clouded my childlike, innocent, and fun view of life. This childishness, which was reawakened by reading *Charlotte's Web*, "Goblin Market," and *The Secret Garden*, is something I'd like to bring to life again. I miss it, and I'm tired of repressing it just so I can appear to be a mature adult. There are some characteristics in me that were rooted in childhood and still survive to express themselves today, like my love for animals. But these are few. The majority of things I learned, believed, and valued as a child have escaped me and perhaps lie dormant somewhere in my subconscious. My sense of beauty and healing power in nature has diminished since I moved away from my rural childhood home, as well as my relationships with my sisters, who were more easy to get along with when I was young. I regret losing these parts of me with age, and after reading these books I wish more than ever to bring them back, because they did form who I was as a child-and everything stems from childhood. This is when I was my real self, naive at heart and innocent at play.

As a child I related to *Charlotte's Web* and I still do. One thing that has always concerned me is the beauty, treatment, and protection of animals. When asked why I'm a vegetarian, the words seem to flow almost from instinct: "Because I don't believe in killing animals for our pleasure." Being a vegetarian is particularly hard, especially when the menus in most restaurants are 90% meat. It means something to me to be a vegetarian, and it sets me apart from the majority of the population in a positive and unique way. But I usually don't think about where my love of animals came from because I've come to just accept it as part of me. But, when I think about it, I realize it came from my childhood. As a child, I developed relationships with animals to the point where I didn't just think of them as merely animals. Fern echoes me when she says, "The pig couldn't help being born small, could it? If I had been born small at birth, would you have killed me?" She, like me, equates animals to humans and this is what formed such a strong bond between myself and animals at a young age.

I'm glad this relationship has carried on through the years. It makes me proud to know that something I had such a strong, innocent, and unmodified belief in, as a child, still manifests itself in my being. Part of the reason why this connection has stayed with me, I think, is that I felt a maternal instinct to take care of and protect animals when I was young. As a woman now, I still feel this instinct-it hasn't gone away. Fern treats Wilbur like a son when she pushes him around in a stroller and is "seated on the floor in the corner of the kitchen with her infant between her knee, teaching it to suck from the bottle." Likewise, as a child I treated my pets and any animals like babies and I still do. So, when I read *Charlotte's Web* I feel a personal connection and a reassurance that some of my childhood is still with me-and I'm not afraid to express it.

But more important are the beliefs, values, and knowledge gained during my childhood that are no longer expressed. The close relationships I had with my sisters have dwindled as a result of growing up and growing into more complicated and difficult times. When we were little we played together, shared our imaginations, and were our childish selves. This openness and willingness to share our thoughts kept us close. I find it harder and harder the older I get to hold a conversation about something we all agree on. The communication lines between us have been torn down by a hurricane named Time. We've grown up and we live in different areas and I find myself struggling to get along with them because we've grown apart. It was so much easier when we were kids. Even if we got in a fight one day, the next we'd be playing together down in the fields behind our house.

Rossetti reminds me, in "Goblin Market," of the strength and value in sister-sister bonds. She

expresses Laura and Lizzie's closeness when she says they rested "Golden head by golden head/ Like two pigeons in one nest/ Folded in each other's wings." I think of my sisters and I falling asleep one by the other after a long day of running and playing. It seemed so easy back in those days-we played all day together and then rested together. We did everything together. We became one. The activities that we did brought us closer together, and gave me a certain sense of serenity that I no longer experience. This makes me sad because I wish I were still as close to my sisters as I was in childhood. I wish it were that easy now.

Rossetti also portrays Laura and Lizzie as a couple of birds, free to make their own decisions and live on their own. My sisters and I also felt this sense of freedom together, as if something separated us from the rest of the world. We were fearless. We built a nest for ourselves out of imagination and were fully content living in it. They helped enrich the color in my imagination and my life felt boundless. I cannot say the same for today. Aging has darkened my imagination and put boundaries in every direction I stretch.

In addition to the closeness and freedom my sisters and I shared, we also evolved a trust that is no longer as strong today. I have found that no friendship I have now compares to what I had with my sisters. Perhaps being family took our friendship to a higher level. Similar to how Laura depends on Lizzie-to save her after she is poisoned and weakened by the goblin men-there were many situations where I trusted my sisters to be there for me.

For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands.

This quote reminds me of a time when I was six years old and it had been raining the night before and in the morning the ground was muddy and wet. My friend's mom wouldn't let Kim come out and play with me because she knew she would come back dirty. I was sad for a few minutes until I walked back home and saw my sisters suiting up in raincoats getting ready to head out on an exploration along the creek. My spirits were quickly revived and I knew I was welcome. I didn't feel as if I owed any explanations or as if I had to ask to join. I was accepted no matter what because I was a sister. My sisters were always there, rain or shine. I regret not being able to keep that relationship and I find it hard to establish relationships like that now. The relationships I have with people now are mature and there isn't much room for error. My sisters were much better at forgiving and forgetting in their childhood than they are now, as was I.

Something that was fun during childhood, that is nonexistent in my life now, was my power as a big sister. Back in the days of my childhood, being a big sister gave me what seemed like legal rights. Now, people can't even tell the difference between the youngest and the oldest of us. It was fun being older because that meant I could tell my little sisters lies and they would believe them, or I could make them do things for me, but most importantly-the oldest got the front seat of the car on an outing. And that meant you were special because you were riding closest to mom and in an important seat. Now, if I tell people lies, they call me a liar. And I certainly can't trick anyone into doing something for me-"Hey, I'll get you a brownie if you write that term paper for me." It just doesn't work anymore; the magic of childhood fun has diminished. Sometimes it seems that everything in my life is so serious. Mary in *The Secret Garden* reminds me of myself and my anger when a little sister would make up an excuse to not come out and play. Colin says, "I'm always ill, and I'm sure there is a lump coming on my back . . . And I am going to die besides." Mary retorts with something I would have said: "You're not!" But my response would have been more like, "No, you're not. And anyway today we're going to the creek to catch tadpoles and you're going to miss out." I had a way with making things seem very important and cool just because I was older. I miss this.

Another good thing about my sisters was that I never had to “behave” around them as I did around my parents or other adults. Adults were alien to me because I didn’t understand their ways. As a result, I became separated from adults, and more dependent on my sisters, animals, and nature. Of course, I needed my parent’s financial support, but I did not require much emotional support. My sisters and I spent a lot of time on our own and I grew to expect independence-to need it and want it. From my independence stemmed a confident attitude and ability to think for myself. I was never scared to express my opinion as a kid-I would blurt it out left and right. However, now I see myself much more dependent on my parents, both financially and emotionally. Additionally, I strive to fill socially accepted roles and in so doing depend on others perceptions of me as a student, adult, and woman. These modifications have led me to be less independent than I would like to be. It is only when I consider my real, pure, independent childish self that I can answer questions as to why I like to be alone a lot. I also struggle to be as outspoken as I once was, mainly because I have lost that confidence that came with the independence of a childish self.

Nature is what gave birth to my independence, since I spent most of my childhood days playing outside. Until I read *The Secret Garden*, I had forgotten how much time I spent in nature as a child and how those experiences shaped who I was to become. The smells of the grass and flowers, the heat that drew me outside seemed to soothe and nurture me. I felt a connection with the rest of the earth. This connection is what I sometimes forget when I spend too much time in classes and libraries. I feel my appreciation for nature has dwindled. How could this happen when I used to be so close to it? Once again, time-and the emergence of emphasis on other more important things-has affected my life. But this is where I went wrong, because nothing is so important to forget about the nature in which you live. I like when Mr. Craven tells Mrs. Medlock to “Let her [Mary] run wild in the garden. Don’t look after her too much. She needs liberty and fresh air and romping about.” My mother always told us fresh air was good for us, but now I need to remind myself. Like Mary, who feels a mother-like presence in the blooming rosebushes, I too felt the presence of mother nature. Colin refers to nature as magic, saying “There is Magic in there-good Magic. . . You can feel it in your bones and muscles. . . Everything is made out of Magic, leaves and trees, flowers and birds.” There definitely was something magical about nature when I was a child, and there still is.

Nature also presented me with my first encounters of fear and desire. When I was a kid, if I saw something I wanted, I went right after it and there was no stopping me. I was similar to Laura in “Goblin Market,” who is tempted by the...

Wild free-born cranberries,
Crab-apples, dewberries,
Pine-apples, black berries,
Apricots, strawberries;
All ripe together
In summer weather.

She goes after the delicious-looking fruits and thinks little of the harm the goblin men could do her. The only thing that matters to her is to obtain those fruits that she desires so badly. It was this kind of fearlessness I came across when I was a kid. Since my favorite fruit-strawberries-didn’t grow in our yard, I often snuck into our neighbor’s yard and stole some of his. The thrill was great and I had so little fear. Now, as an adult, I suppress my feelings of desire and let fear take over when the situation gets sticky. I don’t go after things as boldly as I used to. Now I worry about the consequences of my actions too much, because that’s what I was taught when I was growing up. This is how I became too mature.

I seldom take the time to figure out why I am the way I am. These books made me think about my current relationship with my sisters, about how close we used to be. I think that if we set aside the mature adult topics of money, careers, politics, and other boring things and instead do more things like we did

when we were kids (when the adult world didn't exist) we'd get along better. We all need to struggle to find that inner child in us that once let us get along so well and we need to let those feelings of silliness and openmindedness resurface. As for my independence-at least I know now that I still have it within me. I've just been keeping it behind a guarded gate because I began to depend on people too much after childhood. I realize that this is what keeps my inner spunkiness from showing itself, and that if I spent more time on my own, I would become more comfortable and confident with myself. That way I could act more like my childish self and blurt things out and chase after dreams with unending endurance. Someday I hope to get back that liveliness I captured as a child, even if I get back only a little bit at a time. As for the undying love for animals I established as a child-I don't need any work in that area.