The Man in the Tree: The Fantastic as a Bridge Between the Ideal and the Real

Weber Griffiths

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Honors Thesis

*THE MAN IN THE TREE:*
THE FANTASTIC AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE IDEAL AND THE REAL

by
Weber Griffiths

Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements for University Honors

Department of Theatre and Media Arts
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ABSTRACT


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This thesis explores the effect of genre on storytelling, specifically the effect of the Fantastic in creating, within narrative, intrinsic meaning. In life and fiction, there exists a gap between what is ideal and what is real, a gap of mortality. Human’s struggle with this gap results in many forms of creation and meaning making. The Fantastic, as defined by literary critic Tzvetan Todorov, seeks to bridge this gap. In this examination, we take Todorov’s literary critique and apply it to four films of modern fantasy, showcasing the language and mechanics of the genre and its effectual way of bridging this gap of mortality in contemporary media. The first of these films is The Secret of Kells where I breakdown its use of setting and design. Next is Tonari no Totoro (My Neighbor Totoro), where I examine the use of structure and perspective. I then observe the thematic patterns and motifs of the film Where the Wild Things Are, concluding with a holistic look at all the elements previously examined in the short film The Man in the Tree.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Finally to my parents: This little movie is for you both. It’s about the pain of family and the love of family and how they are often hard to separate. Anything meaningful and profound that comes from this is because of you, Mom and Dad. I love you both, and our family, eternally.
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I. Introduction

There was once, according to legend, a great musician and poet who could bring even the Gods to tears with his song. Though talented and beautiful, his life saw great tragedy when his wife perished from the bite of a serpent. And so in her youth was spirited away to the life after. With grief and determination, the great poet descended to the gates of hell itself in search of his lovely wife, “to try to rouse the sympathy of the shades…[where] he passed them among the thin ghosts, the wraiths of the dead…”¹ and to the throne of the Lord of the dead himself. He didn’t seek adventure and glory as many who had come before had. He sought only his beloved partner, stolen in her prime. His songs moved all the ghosts and ghouls of the underworld to weep, and even the Lord of the dark place could not deny him his wish. The fragile ghost of his wife would accompany him out of the palace of the dead, but on one condition. The great poet and musician, who had made the dead to cry, could not look back at his wife who would follow silently as he departed the valley of shadow. If he did, his gift would be taken back from him.

And so, he departed. He set off up the gloomy path out of the underworld. Ever nearer the end of his journey he drew. But as he did, his anxiety grew. No sound of person or place could he perceive behind him. Had he been tricked by the God of death? Had his beloved become lost, no longer following? As anxiety grew and his desire to see her burned, the great poet turned round, mere steps away from the entrance of hell. In a

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moment so fleeting, he saw the visage of his wife, grey and cold, who had followed so quietly for so long. Then she disappeared. Dying now a second time, it is said she uttered no complaint, “What was there to complain of, but that she had been loved…” And so, the great musician who had walked the paths of the dead and returned found himself again alone, “Grief, anxiety, and tears his nourishment.”

* * *

The poetics and beautiful imagery of the old tales don’t alone solidify their place in modern thought and story. They speak to us in some deep way that goes beyond form and antiquity, and so their influence is spoken and seen in stories through time. The gloomy parts of our imperfect lives feed on these tales for many reasons. Neil Gaiman, the prolific and popular modern fantasy writer, said (paraphrasing an earlier quotation by author G.K. Chesterton) in the opening of his novel *Coraline* that, “Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.”

It should not be so bold a claim to assume that the ancient stories of dragons and bereaved men walking through hell and back are not simply imaginative and primitive attempts at objective record keeping. These stories fill a gap in our understanding of mortality, they teach us about ourselves and our lives. The role of the Fantastic in story telling is varied and has a history deeper and richer than this paper may ever presume to even imply. The genres effects though cannot be understated.

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2 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 225-227
Great scholars have dissected with skill and insight the effect and allegorical power of ancient mythologies. As far back as Plato and Aristotle, we have been taught how the stories we tell are not mere fancy. Plato stated, “We shall persuade mothers and nurses to tell our chosen stories to their children, and by means of them to mould their minds and characters…”⁴ Fanciful storytelling is not simply about fleeting moments of excitement and entertainment that ultimately result in something meaningless and empty. Fantastic stories serve a greater purpose in the human experience with mortality. Marcel Schneider in his work *Histoire de la littérature fantastique en France* states eloquently, “The fantastic explores inner space; it sides with the imagination, the anxiety of existence, and the hope of salvation.”⁵ Schneider, like many, saw the potential and universal sway of the Fantastic in storytelling beyond entertainment and mystery.

Much of the academic breakdown in this paper will be rooted in the work of Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Fantastic* – primarily in his observation of what qualifies as ‘Fantastic’ in literature as well as to why this qualification makes potent the form and function of such storytelling. I will take his concepts, and the many he borrows from other scholars in the field, and apply them to stories in modern cinema specifically. The conventions and effect of the Fantastic on stories in cinema is universal. As such, several films from distinct nations and cultures around the world will be examined together, concluding with my own humble contribution, *The Man in the Tree*. It must be noted that the work of Todorov is valuable for us here but certainly not the epitome of our study. As a literary critic, Todorov is able to give us plenty of insight into modern media and

storytelling. There is limitation to the application though, and so his ideas and theories will often serve as a springboard into more contemporary media analysis where necessary and fitting.

What effectually allows the Fantastic to teach and expound is its inherent ambiguity. It is neither, as Todorov explains, uncanny nor marvelous. Uncanny presents itself as fantastic until it explains with complete rationality the reasoning behind the unexplained. Detective stories are an example of these types of narratives. The Marvelous is, on the other end, where the magic and unexplainable wonder of the world is given and taken without question, needing no explanation. This is often the style of fairytale and fantasy works; *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, Grimm’s Fairy Tales, etc. Distinctly, the Fantastic is neither explainable nor unexplainable. Todorov tells us that the genre functions in a liminal space. Franciscan friar and writer Richard Rohr defines this type of space as, “…where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown. There alone is our old world left behind, while we are not yet sure of the new existence… This is the sacred space where the old world is able to fall apart, and a bigger world is revealed.”⁶ The Fantastic occupies this space. In my own terms it is a space between what we will call the ideal (i.e. the marvelous) and the real (i.e. the uncanny/real world). In true allegorical fashion, this narrative space or gap mirrors our own lives and existence. Every person is faced with a life that sees a gap between the ideal and the real. And so, the Fantastic brings us stories that dwell symbolically in this liminal space. A space of growth and understanding not just for the characters but ourselves as well.

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It is important to remark though that such interpretive examinations of genre are not holistic in their pronunciations. Todorov explains that, "No matter how many thousands of words are collected, one does not thereby discover the principles, even the most elementary ones, of the functioning of a language." This is to say our examination and research in not in vocabulary but in grammar. In nearly all languages, certain words and phrases digress from given rules…that is the nature of semiotics. Thus this exploration seeks to explore and analyze repeated mechanics seen through different cultures and mythological backgrounds in modern films. Such examination enables the viewer to perceive the ideal and the real and thus help us understand the gap of mortality that the narrative seeks to fill.

These mechanics will be examined through three different films; The Secret of Kells (2009) directed by Tomm Moore and Nora Twomey, Tonari no Totoro (1988) directed by Hayao Miyazaki, and finally Where the Wild Things Are (2009) directed by Spike Jonze. These films were selected because of their ability to not only manifest the marvelous ideal of fantasy but also because of their ability to visualize the reality of an unfantastic world. After this examination, with a clear base of understanding concerning the grammar of the fantastic, we will examine my own work The Man in the Tree.

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II. The Secret of Kells

Cartoon Saloons inaugural feature film *The Secret of Kells* (2009) tells the story of a young boy named Brendan in 9th century Ireland living under the confining yet protective rule of his stern Uncle, Abbot Cellach. Fearing the ever-encroaching violence of North Men, Abbot Cellach becomes obsessed with the construction of fortifications around the Abbey of Kells. Wanting to protect the people, he forbids anyone from leaving the safety of the Abbey, especially his young nephew.

After the appearance of a fleeing refugee named Brother Aidan, Brendan’s eyes are opened to the mysterious and beautiful illuminated manuscripts he brings with him. Brother Aiden tells Brendan of a future manuscript that will “turn darkness into light” and encourages the young boy to help him in creating it. Such help though will require him to go outside the walls and gather the material necessary to color and illustrate the manuscript. Despite the strict rule of his uncle, Brendan ventures outside the confines of the Abbey and stumbles into the world of the fairy Aisling, a young and energetic sprite who agrees to help Brendan. While out in the forest though, Brendan also encounter the dark Crom Cruach, the God of death in ancient Irish mythology. With the North Men growing ever nearer and Abbot Cellach’s authoritative protectiveness becoming ever more intense, Brendan is forced to not only confront the evils of the fairy world outside the walls of the monastery, but the fear and pride of his uncle and his home.

* * *

*The Secret of Kells* proves to be a potent story and at first glance, a firmly entrenched exercise in fantasy. Beyond a simple story full of color and quirky character
though, the film showcases the effective use of several mechanical tools of Fantastic storytelling. First, the film is able to create a literal separation of space within the narrative, an effective tool in symbolically creating ‘the gap of mortality’ within the genre. This allows us as the viewer to see characters develop and change as our protagonist moves between spaces, literally and symbolically bridging the gap between the ideal and the real within the film. Second, *The Secret of Kells* presents and expresses deep cultural attachment born from the personal histories of the artists involved. By speaking to the Celtic history of Ireland, the film is able to deliver a tale rooted in a setting of divergent personal identities and cultures. This space between an idealized fantasy and a reality-based history creates the liminality of the Fantastic in tone and milieu. Lastly, the style and form of the piece invites the audience to suspend disbelief to the point where the reality and magic of the film becomes a reality all its own. This serves to underline the literal separation of space in the film as well as the subtextual ones.

The setting of our fantasy narrative can in essence be divided into two spaces. The titular abbey of Kells and the mystic wilderness beyond its walls. The abbey of Kells is an actual historical location in Ireland, an ancient church founded by St. Columcille in the middle of the 6th century A.D. The film’s director, Tomm Moore, was inspired by Japanese and American traditions in animation and wanted to create what he called, “Something uniquely Irish.”

Using real locations and centering the plot of the film upon the illuminated manuscript of the Book of Kells, Moore positions the story as part of Irish

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history. The abbey of Kells then is the location within the film that represents reality, or the history of a real people and place.

The Irish wilderness on the other hand, full of wonder and magic, exemplifies the fantastical or rather the ideal world within the narrative. Moore relates how “the stories of the Celtic and pre-Celtic people form a big part of [Irish] fairytale tradition”9 (Cohen) and uses the images and ideology of folklore and fairy tale to create a world completely apart. This world is inhabited by the fairy Aisling and the Gaelic god of death Crom Cruach, being a wild and mystical place. Full of twists and turns, intricate patterns and designs, and a natural abundance, the forest outside the walls is neither literal nor historical, but complete fantasy. In the dark parts of the woods, Brendan even states to Aisling (referring to fairytales about the forest) that, “you should not be afraid of imaginary things.”10

These two separate settings of the film are a literalized expression of the metaphorical separation of space found in the Fantastic. Between these two locations is a symbolic gap, a gap between the real (the Abbey of Kell) and the ideal (The magical forest) which the film spends its runtime seeking to bridge. That is the role of Fantastic stories; bridging a gap between what we know is real and the fictional ideal of existence. It must be noted that ‘ideal’ used in this context is defined as “existing as a mental image or in fancy or imagination only” and/or “relating to or constituting mental images, ideas, or conceptions.”¹¹ In The Secret of Kells, this gap is made tangible with large walls and emphatic physical separation.

The story’s antagonist is not the encroaching North Men or even the dark Crom Cruach, but rather the overly protective and zealous Abbot of Kells, Brendan’s uncle. He is the creator of the wall that separates the two worlds. He dwells completely in the grim certainty of ‘the real’ and consistently attempts to prevent Brendan from crossing the wall into the forest beyond. Each location though has characters that represent the good and bad of both extreme conditions. In the Abbey of Kells, the bad is seen in the North Men, faceless evil seeking only riches and material plunder. The good is symbolized though by Brother Aiden, who motivates and encourages the artful expression of Brendan as he seeks to bridge the gap between the Abbey and the Forest.

In the Irish Wilderness, the evil is made manifest by Crom Cruach, a pagan god who seeks to infect and poison the magic of the woods with darkness. It wants to blind the characters from seeing the beauty around and must be defeated before the character

can ‘see’ using the demon’s glass eye. In opposition to this evil stands Aisling the fairy who rescues Brendan from imprisonment and darkness several times over. These symbolic characters serve to underline and emphasis the metaphorical nature of both locations. Both contain good and virtue as well as evil and vice and it is up to the protagonist to overcome the evil of both and embrace the good of each in order to fulfill his own personal journey.

Brendan continually crosses back and forth between these two locations, developing and growing as a character. He is full of fear and imperfection in the beginning of the film, and Brother Aiden comments that, “Something I cannot see stops him…if he is ever to light up the page, he’ll have to turn around and stare whatever it is in the face.”¹² By moving between locations, learning and developing in this ‘gap of mortality’ Brendan is able to overcome the evil of each setting, embrace the good of both, and reconcile with his family…concluding with a gorgeous montage of the animated Book of Kells opening up to the teary eyes of his Uncle. By becoming a fixture in the liminal space of both the real and the ideal, Brendan is able to bridge the gap and become more whole as a character…a vicarious experience for us the audience.

The Fantastic does not only express ambiguity and separation of space in its settings though, it can be found in the milieu and tone of a piece. *The Secret of Kells* reflects the history of the people and the places it was born from. It is an excellent example of Celtic antiquarianism in the modern day and uses the history and culture of those who created it to inform the audience of larger thematic threads seen throughout the

history of the Gaelic faery folklore. In this regard, the milieu and tone of the piece dwells in the middle space of Irish Christianity, or more holistically Celtic Christianity, creating a story whose tone and milieu are firmly rooted in a cultural space of convergence.

Celtic Christianity is defined by its hybridized expression of traditional European Christianity and ancient Celtic/Gaelic pagan mythology. Several telling points throughout The Secret of Kells show us this mixture and showcase an interesting blend that roots the film and the viewers in a liminal space between modernity and antiquity; tradition and mythology. By setting the film in this place and time, the power of the Fantastic is made manifest deeply in the artistic character of the film. It is not enough to simply place charters in separate spaces in narrative, the overarching expression of the piece must also itself seek a liminal quality. The Secret of Kells accomplishes this by constantly overlapping and combining the concepts of Irish mythology and European Christianity into a cultural and artistic expression of ambiguous style.

This is seen in the very beginning of the film, with the opening narration given by Aisling the faery. She declares cryptically, “I have lived through many ages…through the eyes of salmon, deer, and wolf…I have seen suffering in the darkness, yet I have seen beauty thrive in the most fragile of places. I have seen the book, the book that turned darkness into light.” This book is of course the Book of Kells. The book is a historic illuminated manuscript of the four Gospels of the New Testament believed to have been created sometime around the 8th and 9th century. So our film opens up with a pagan creature, speaking of her own magical immortality, describing this Book of Kells (Christian scripture) as a light in the darkness. A poetic and expressive blend of
Christianity and mythology creating a tonally expressive opening to a film that will continue to blur these lines.

This tone will carry over into several events that prove pivotal to the plot and progression of our protagonist Brendan as he traverses not only literal liminal spaces, but thematic ones as well. At one moment Aisling, in order to free Brendan from the tower of the Abbey, sings a song about Brother Aiden’s cat Pangur Bán. This name is based off an ancient poem of the same name written by an Irish Monk. It transforms the cat into a spirit who then frees Brendan from his locked room, enabling him to escape into the woods and find the eye of Columcille. Again we see how the ancient “pagan” magics and characters singing the songs and poems of early Christian monks work together in harmony and create a liminal space of tonal expression. In this case it literally frees our protagonist from entrapment and enables his progression as a character. Another example of this blend is St. Columcille himself, who is introduced early in the film as the holy Saint and near-deity of illuminated manuscripts and himself represents an idealized amalgamation of the pagan and Christian ideologies in early Ireland. He is described as having a third eye and a third arm that gifted him in the creation of powerful texts. These descriptions are animated stylistically and reflect a mythological retelling. They also introduce the very important seeing stone called the Eye of Columcille, which at moments throughout the film will present itself as a Christian symbol and at others a mythological symbol (The eye of Crom).

After Brendan obtains the crystal seeing stone late in the film, Brother Aiden wonders how he could have gotten it, remarking that is had been destroyed. Brendan states, “There is more than one story about the eye. There is more than one dwelling place for the dark one. And he had more than one eye.” We see in this moment how our protagonist understands and fills in the gap between these two conflicting ideologies and puts them together into one cohesive whole. This is a reconciliation between worlds for our hero, pushing our protagonist towards catharsis and character development and fulfilling key elements of the Fantastic genre.

This liminal quality found in the films setting and its tonal milieu is only accentuated by the *Secret of Kells* expression in its music, art, and characters. The music incorporates a variety of traditional Irish instruments including the clairseach, tin whistle, and fiddle to evoke the spirit and culture of Ireland. With these instruments, haunting choir ensembles and rhythmic percussion is interwoven to evoke and suggest more ancient Gaelic roots. This incorporation of more contemporary Irish songs and more ancient folklore melodies transports us to a space apart. In tandem with the music, the art style of the film uses the designs and patterns of early monastic Christian art to place the characters and audience firmly in the place of medieval Christianity. The Celtic knot and framing devices reminiscent of triptych art visually plant the film in a liminal space of expression.
The Secret of Kells showcases an excellent execution of Fantastic storytelling through its persistent and ever-present visualization and tonal representation of liminal space. This space (A key mechanic of the Fantastic) symbolizes the gap between the ideal and the real the audience faces in their life and promotes vicarious catharsis in the form of our protagonist Brendan as he navigates this gap both literally and metaphorically. This expression is near universal in its application and is not something only expressed in Celtic cultures though of course. A protagonist moving from one world to another previously unknown and learning previously unknown truths about the world they came from as a result of their sojourn into the new and magical is a very common mechanic of the fantastic and an important quality of our next film from Japan.

III. Tonari no Totoro (My Neighbor Totoro)

Hayao Miyazaki’s film Tonari no Totoro (My Neighbor Totoro) was released in 1988 to commercial and critical acclaim. It tells the story of a young family in post WWII Japan who move out into the wooded countryside of Japan in order for them to be closer to their ailing mother in the hospital. The old and decrepit house they move to is
surrounded by forests and offers up an adventurous atmosphere for the two young children of the family, Satsuki and Mei. As they initially arrive, the two little girls run around the property with excitement and wonder. They are even told by the shy neighborhood boy, Kanta, that “You live in a haunted house!”\(^{14}\) stoking their imagination further.

While they adjust to this new house and to the new friends and neighbors around them, the two little girls encounter magical spirits in and around their home. Mei, the youngest is eventually led to the large and endearingly cute Totoro inside a giant camphor tree by several of these spirits. In excitement Mei tries to share her discoveries with her sister and father but she is unable to retrace her steps into the woods. Her father reassures her though and states, “You probably met the king of this forest.” They go to the local shrine to pay their respects and again Mei and Satsuki’s father reassure the little girls that if they are lucky, they will see the King Totoro again. Slowly the line between the home and forest begins to blur as the little girls continue to encounter Totoro and his spiritual companions, including a sentient cat shaped bus.

As they continue to meet and interact with these magical creatures, the little girls are told that their sick mother is not ready to come home, despite what they had been told. Upset and distraught after being unable to contact their father, Mei decides to visit her mother, bringing a cob of corn to share with her. After Mei runs off, Satsuki tries and fails to locate her. She then enlists all her neighbors to find the little girl and eventually turns to Totoro and his Cat bus for help. After much travail and with the magical help of

Totoro and company, the sisters are reunited. They arrive at the hospital and find their mother is safe and sound. Both sisters decide to leave Mei’s corncob on the windowsill of their mother’s hospital room, reassured of her safety. As credits roll, the audience is treated to a montage of Mei and Satsuki as they are reunited with their mother coming home from the hospital.

* * *

* My Neighbor Totoro is perhaps one of Studio Ghibli’s most famous works, and its impact has been felt the world over. Though this analysis is not aimed at understanding a particular sort of Japanese expression of the Fantastic, it does showcase how the tools used in the genre are universal in their impact and effect, from Ireland to Japan. Much like The Secret of Kells, My Neighbor Totoro understands and expresses qualities of liminal space quite well. The film though executes particularly strong mechanics of the Fantastic in its narrative voice. Additionally the film continually questions the reality of the situations befalling the protagonists and offers up a uniquely Fantastical character/audience perspective. Are these spirits and adventures with Totoro and company real? Are they dreams? By interacting and participating in the idealized magical realm in and around their home, both Mei and Satsuki learn to understand and handle the problems and troubles of their real-world struggles. This, much like the expressive use of space and setting in the Secret of Kells, enables our protagonists (and the viewer) to bridge the gap between the ideal and the real in their turbulent lives.

Using the mechanics of the Fantastic as laid out by Todorov, we will examine how My Neighbor Totoro functions within the rhetoric of the genre. First by its exaggerated and often figurative expression throughout that creates ambiguity. Second,
through its particularly character perspective and the vicarious experience offered by its relatable characters. Lastly an understanding of its structure and the use of linear culmination that ends with realized idyllic expression. Using these rhetorical devices, the film is able to effectively bridge the gap between the ideal and the real within the reality it presents while also teaching the audience the same.

The style and form of My Neighbor Totoro is certainly expressive and colorful. This exaggerated approach to reality though serves more of a purpose than simply tonal and emotional resonance. The form is an expression of the rhetorical and thematic impact of the film. “The supernatural is born of language, it is both it's consequence and it's proof: not only do the devil and vampires exist only in words, but language alone enables us to conceive what is always absent; the supernatural.”15 The exaggerated form of the film is My Neighbor Totoro’s language, speaking the supernatural into existence. Roger Ebert noted that, “My Neighbor Totoro' is based on experience, situation and exploration not on conflict and threat.”16 The situation and exploration of the film is key in creating the exaggerated reality of the magical in contrast with the realism of a normal and modern world.

15 Todorov, The Fantastic, 82
One moment in the film particularly points to how the exaggerated reality of the world of *My Neighbor Totoro* forms the films cinematic language, building and creating a sense of ambiguity and reconciliation between the ideal and the real. Both Mei and Satsuki are given by Totoro a small package of seeds which they plant with excitement, waiting for them to sprout. As they sleep one night, the girls are awakened by the ritualistic dancing of Totoro around their planted seeds. They quickly rush out to join him and his spiritual companions in dance. As they participate the seeds sprout with incredible speed and grown into a ginormous tree. As their father works busily, he misses as the small company hops on a levitating top and fly around the town accompanied by the film’s exuberant musical score. The scene concludes with Totoro and the two girls playing wooden ocarinas high up in the trees. The music catches the attention of their studious father in the house who smiles, but ultimately remains invested in his work.

The next morning, Mei and Satsuki wake up in their bed and go outside to find that the seeds have sprouted in their little garden. They excitedly dance and exclaim, “We did it!” The giant tree from the night before is nowhere to be seen and the previous night’s events are brought into question. Was it all a dream? Or was it something else altogether? This sequence at first glance is simply about fanciful magic and playfulness, and certainly it is to a degree. Its impact on the structure of the Fantastic though is crucial. This ambiguity establishes an exaggerated reality that stands at odds with an objective and normal reality; a reality not only the girls face on the daily but that the audience does as well. The subsequent aftermath in the morning places an immediate emphasis on the ambiguity of the event. This is the nature of exaggeration within stories.
of the Fantastic, and a crucial part of the language by which the genre creates meaning. There are extraordinary events that transcend and bend the rules of reality. These events raise doubt within the narrative. *My Neighbor Totoro* is able to position its magical and exaggerated style squarely within this framework of ambiguity and doubt. Todorov stated that, “The fantastic confronts us with a dilemma: to believe or not to believe?”17 This dilemma in *My Neighbor Totoro* doesn’t encourage mystery or reality based ‘crime-solving’ on the part of the protagonist or even the audience. Rather it is a question of a more philosophical nature.

Both Mei and Satsuki are faced with the dilemma of their mother’s illness. Her coming home and the future of their family is not certain. They are in a very real way faced with a question of whether to believe in the reunification of their family or to not believe in it. This state of unknowing is reflected in the exaggerated and ambiguous reality of Totoro and the Japanese fables that surround him. With a colorful and incredibly fanciful style and form, the film is able to invite not an interrogation of reality but an acceptance of ambiguity within reality. To the little girls, the question of whether Totoro exists or not is a nonissue. He exists without a doubt, in the same way that the question of their mother returning home from the hospital is without question. And so the exaggerated reality of the fantastic maintains ambiguity while also demanding acceptance. We do not interrogate the doubts as an audience and as such are able to overlay the ideal and magical world of Totoro with the real and common world of Mei and Satsuki. This is the function and mechanic of exaggeration and fancy in the Fantastic, bridging the gap between the ideal and the real via the rhetorical language of the

17 Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 83
narrative. The mystery of the ambiguous language and exaggerated style are not riddles to be solved, but experiential and vicarious expression that seeks to reconcile fantasy with reality.

This mechanic is further reinforced by the films dominating perspective. The character and narrative POV overlap with the figurative expression and style of the film, ultimately solidifying the Fantastic grammar throughout the narrative. The story is told through the eyes of Satsuki and Mei, the young protagonists of the story. They represent what Todorov calls the “represented narrator,” a character and perspective from which the audience can readily identify with and trust. By all accounts they are both normal and fun-loving children. Their youthful perspective though inevitably implies unreliability. They are young and naive, more prone to flights of fancy and imagination. "This narrator's discourse has an ambiguous status... emphasizing one or the other of it aspects: as the narrator's, the discourse lies outside the test of truth."18 My Neighbor Totoro thus fulfills this import aspect of POV within the Fantastic narrative language; relatable and vicarious narrators who the audience can understand, but a POV which raises doubts concerning the truth of the narrative.

We are introduced to this perspective from our two protagonists at the very beginning of the film as they explore their new and decrepit home. As Mei and Satsuki run from room to room, they are asked by their father to open up the kitchen. They run off to the other side of the house and open the door, bathing the room in light. As they do, hundreds of small black creatures scatter. They are scared and intrigued, tentatively

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18 Todorov, The Fantastic, 86
exploring the room. They tell their father who proceeds to investigate, but he finds nothing. He claims they must be dust bunnies who run from sunlight. As the two girls explore more of the house, they encounter even more of these creature, but never in the presence of anyone else. This type of perspective will carry throughout the film, creating doubt and ambiguity about the reality of these magical encounters. Mei and Satsuki are the only characters who ever encounter the magical. This means the occurrence of the fantastic is completely written within the perspective of the narrators, colliding with the consistent reality of the normal world and the adults around the two sisters (Who admittedly are very often supportive and believing, but ultimately detached from the magical world). The film’s perspective is thus rooted squarely in the eyes of Mei and Satsuki, a “ambiguous status” in the Point of View.

This perspective culminates near the end of the film, showcasing the third and final mechanic of the Fantastic language employed by the story. The syntactical structure in the Fantastic, as Todorov describes it, is composed of necessary sequential events that must ultimately culminate into a realized fantastic occurrence. This culmination must in essence play off the doubt of the film by giving the audience and protagonist a realized manifestation of the Fantastic that seemingly eradicates the doubt and ambiguity.

As Satsuki frantically searches for her little sister Mei near the end of the film, she receives distressing news that a sandal has been found in a local pond. Her neighbors fear this means poor little Mei has drowned. Desperate for help, Satsuki runs to the large camphor tree by her home and begs Totoro for help finding Mei. The magical ambiguity of the two sisters adventures shifts in this moment. Satsuki is now asking that the real world and magical world work together. Totoro immediately roars for the Cat Bus, which
Satsuki boards in wonderment and awe. With incredible speed the Cat Bus and Satsuki find Mei sitting alone on the side of the road, sad and scared. Using the powers of the magical world around them, they are able to not only reunite but travel to their mother in the hospital. While there they hear comforting words between their parents and see that their mother is happy and safe. For a moment, Mei and Satsuki’s mother even believes she can see the two girls in the tree outside her window…the only instance in the story where a character other than Mei and Satsuki perceive, even just for a moment, the magical world.

The culmination in *My Neighbor Totoro* is not incredibly boisterous or emphatic, but it is culminative and Fantastic in execution. The moment when the protagonist asks, whether literally or not, for the magical world to express into the literal world is a moment of Fantastic climax. Satsuki asking for Totoro’s help in fixing a real-world problem is the ultimate culmination of the Fantastic events of the story, visualized quite well with her entering the Cat Bus. As she enters the bus she is struck with wonder and surprise, showcasing a crossover of the magical and the real in that moment.
Totoro and his spiritual friends facilitate in this moment the culmination of the fantastic by making manifest their effect in the real world. This realization of the Fantastic is the creation of the bridge between the real and the ideal, both symbolically and literally. It is underlined by the mother seeing her daughters in the tree outside her window and the magically placed corncob on the windowsill. The ambiguity for that moment is completely banished from the narrative, resulting in a realized magical expression in the film.

This culminative mechanic of the fantastic invites not just the characters but the audience as well to see the story before them as more than mere fancy. Seeing the ideal world interact with and affect the real-world reinforces the thematic expression of the film. These stories help us understand and harmonize the ideal and the real of life in expressive and artistic experience. Certainly, the mechanics of My Neighbor Totoro exemplify the semiotics and mechanical grammar of the Fantastic genre well, but as with most signs and signals theses mechanics are a means to an end…to thematic impact. While The Secret of Kells is able to beautifully express liminal space, and My Neighbor Totoro executes genre narrative mechanics expertly, both qualities ultimately serve to underline and speak to the strong themes of the Fantastic, a quality particularly strong in the next film we will discuss.

IV. Where the Wild Things Are

The 2009 feature film Where the Wild Things Are, directed by Spike Jonze, tells the story of Max, a young and rowdy boy with a wild imagination, and his journey to a
mysterious Island full of magical and troubled creatures. Based off the 1963 children’s book of the same name by Maurice Sendak, the film is a playful and often surprisingly dark story of a troubled little boy who must navigate a complicated fantasy world while also coming to terms with his own troubled relationships back home.

The story begins with Max, clad in a wolf costume onesie, wreaking childhood havoc in his small home. He is adventurous and creative, but lonely and isolated, unable to connect with his sister and mother. Max, feeling alone and abandoned by his family, fights angrily with his mom, and runs away from home after biting her. She yells that he is “Out of control”\(^\text{19}\) and chases after him into the night. As he runs and hides, he finds a mysterious boat on the shore of a small pond. He boards the little vessel and is whisked away as the calm pond turns to a large lake and then eventually a turbulent ocean that takes him far away to an uninhabited and mysterious island.

He lands and quietly starts to explore the small island, only to discover large and scary monsters rough housing and fighting with each other in a large forest. One of them is actively destroying small houses and the creatures argue amongst each other. Soon though, they discover Max and surround the small, scared boy. They are suspicious of him and talk about how they are going to eat him and that he better not be hard to eat. He yells at them to stop though and claims he has powers from a faraway land. Max quickly asserts himself telling stories of his “adventures” and all the heroic deeds he has done. The monsters are astonished when he claims he was an all-powerful king. They ask him to be their king so that hopefully he can make everything right with them. They want to

keep the sadness away and not be lonely. He tells them he has a sadness shield that keeps out all the sadness and that he will destroy loneliness.

Max believes this is his chance to do what he wants and have nonstop fun and control. As his first act of king he initiates the wild rumpus. Max soon discovers though as he tries to rule that there is much distrust, anxiety, and loneliness in all the wild monsters around him. The Wild Things lash out at each other and sometimes act angrily and violently, especially Max’s best friend among them, Carol, who often throws tantrums and is especially vindictive towards another Wild Thing, KW. As things become harder and Carol more erratic, KW talks with Max alone and discusses how hard things are. Max, realizing how his mother and family need him, decides to return home.

With the help of the Wild Things Max sets off to return to his family, bidding farewell to the monsters, especially Carol. Max tells him he isn’t really a King and they both tearfully say goodbye to each other with a wolf cry. After the departure, Max returns home to a distraught mother who tearfully embraces him. She falls asleep at the kitchen table next to Max as he eats a small dinner she prepared. Max happily stares at her with love as the film ends.

* * *

Certainly, the nature of the semiotic structure of genre is wrought with problematic construction. Rick Altman said pointedly about his work *A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre* that “As often happens with attempts to reduce complex phenomena to a simple formula...I remained haunted by certain aspects
of my neat and manageable semantic/syntactic approach."^{20} There are always exceptions and questions to a “formulaic” breakdown of genre. The Fantastic in film and media follows recognizable patterns in tonal and narrative tropes, as we have seen in *The Secret of Kells* and *My Neighbor Totoro*. The creation of liminal space and abundant ambiguity in both style and structure create stories with pointed thematic weight. Many of these mechanics can be seen throughout *Where the Wild Things Are* and are certainly evidence of its place within genre.

Ultimately though, the Fantastic as mechanical formula is simply a means to an end. It is an expression of contextual and social ideology that affect and impact the audience. *Where the Wild Things Are* is at its core an expression of internal character development in the form of fantastic and otherworldly imagery, an effective externalization of the internal that lies at the heart of the thematic expression of the Fantastic. *Where the Wild Things Are* serves as an excellent example of thematic characteristic within the genre through its use of two types; themes of the other, and themes of self.

When we discuss theme of the other, we are discussing in essence, “the structuring of the relation between man and the world.”^{21} This is the relationship our protagonist has with the world around him, and the nature of that relationship as a turbulent and complex reality that seems at odds with the desires and objectives of the protagonist. Circumstance concerning his or her reality are limiting or unideal and they seek after a more idealized circumstance. Again the characters seek a conciliation

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^{21} Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 125
between the ideal and the real. The Fantastic takes this dissatisfaction and thematic expression of the relationship between man and the world and externalizes its inner conflict in the form and shape of marvelous expression.

*Where the Wild Things Are* takes Max’s turbulent and unsatisfied reality and transcribes it onto an allegorical fantasy island filled with monsters and magical circumstances. This is thematic expression of Fantastic themes of the other. In one very telling moment during the film Max goes on a small trip with the Wild Thing KW, who Carol is spiteful and angry with. KW is friends with Bob and Terry, spending time with them by the beach to the chagrin of all the other Wild Things who are jealous and feel neglected. KW says Max should go talk with them because they are smart and know everything. They arrive at the beach where two owl creatures fly up above. KW throws rocks at them and knocks them out of the sky, to the surprise of Max. She goes and grabs them and introduces them as Bob and Terry, saying that “they love it when I do this to them.” Max is a little shocked and unimpressed but asks for their advice anyway. They just squawk and don’t help, leaving Max even more confused and unhappy. KW doesn’t seem to notice and keeps acting aloof, suggesting that Bob and Terry come and live with rest of the Wild Things. Max is worried about Carol but agrees. As KW brings Bob and Terry to the fort they are constructing, Carol is upset and throws a tantrum.
This event is one example of the externalized theme-of-the-other seen throughout the film. The Wild things around Max represent the many others in his life and his rocky relationship with his mother is transcribed onto the relationship between KW and Carol throughout. This moment with KW allows Max to have a third person perspective on his own relationship with the world around him. It is an examination of his mother, who is divorced and seen with a boyfriend at the beginning of the film. Max sees the parallels of his mother’s situation to his own. He is able to see Carol’s behavior as his own as well and how he has been sabotaging his own happiness and relationship with his mother because of his jealousy and envy. This is an allegorical and external manifestation of Max’s relationship with the world around him, resulting in a thematic catharsis and realization on Max’s part about his own relationship with his mother and his responsibility to her and his family.

Themes of self concern an altogether different relationship, that being “the relation of man with his desires.” Whereas themes of the other are concerned with the outer world and our characters relationship with it, theme of self deal with the protagonist’s relationship to the inner world, his or her own inner desires and urges. In

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22 Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 126
modern Fantastic media, these inner desires are made manifest again through fantastic, 
externalized expression. The character now experiences a reconciliation not with the 
world around them, but with themselves and their desires. The Fantastic sets out to put 
the protagonist through a thematic transformation, altering not only his perception of the 
world but his perception of self though fantastic and idealized imagery and allegory.

*Where the Wild Things Are* often puts Max in situations where he must face his 
own image in the form of Carol, a metaphorical externalization of Max’s own behavior 
and thoughts. When Carol shows Max the miniature city he has built with sticks and 
mud, we must travel as a character and audience far away from the other Wild Things 
(the external world) and across empty deserts to reach Carol’s hide away. In the desert 
Max and Carol share with each other anxieties about the Sun dying and everything 
turning to dusts. Carol mentions that “this part of your kingdom is not so good.” It is a 
melancholy journey through Max’s own inner anxiety and isolation which ends with their 
arrival in Carol’s secret cave. The large and majestic city he has built in miniature, where 
all the Wild Things live in harmony, represents Max’s own inner desire, and hopes for his 
family and his life. Carol talks about how they were going to build this world, but people 
stopped coming. He tells Max thoughtfully, “It was going to be a place where only the 
things you wanted to have happen would happen…if that’s not going to happen, I guess 
I’ll just end up eating my feet off.” It is an idealized world Carol has built and feels he 
has lost. With encouragement from Max though, they decide to realize this idealized plan 
and build the city. Though initial work is successful, strife and anger begin to sprout with 
KW and the other Wild Things. It is revealed to Carol that Max is not actually a King,
and he throws a tantrum as a result. During this rampage, Max yells at Carol, “You are out of control!” mirroring his own mother’s words at the beginning of the film.

This inner journey to an idealized world and the attempt then from Max to realize his inner desire through fantastic aid ends in disaster and discord. This theme of self showcases the innate desire of Max to bridge the gap between the ideal and the real in his own mind. It is a thoughtful and allegorical examination of his own inner desires, hopes, and idealized goals. These themes are common and crucial in the development of the Fantastic, and results in character catharsis which requires the protagonist to reconcile his idealized inner desire with the reality of his circumstances. This catharsis usually expresses itself through sympathetic synthesis. In *Where the Wild Things Are*, we see Max understand and even mirror his mother causing him to rethink not only his own inner desires and actions, but his actions towards those around him.

Both themes of the other and themes of self are seen throughout *Where the Wild Things Are* and showcase beyond aesthetic and mechanical composition how the genre of the Fantastic in media functions in thematic terms. It is externalizing internal character development that showcase the continual bridging of the ideal with the real in the life of the characters and the audience.
V. The Man in the Tree

Certainly, there is an amount of implicit or even explicit hubris that comes with the examination of one’s own work of fiction. More especially when placed next to considerably larger and more profound pieces of modern media. *The Man in the Tree* though is a work that seeks to emulate and understand the tools we have discussed, an exercise in Fantastic expression.

The short film begins with the arrival of a father and son at a house deep in the woods. The little boy, Will, is quiet and forlorn. He carries a small book with him written by his mother. She has just passed away and his relationship with his stoic father is very strained. Will decides to take a walk in the woods around his home to remember his mother and get away from his seemingly cold and detached dad. While out in the woods he discovers a pitch-black tree and a faceless loathsome spirit who is trapped within it. The spirit knows much about Will and promises to return his dead mother to him in exchange for something. The Man in the tree asks Will to return and cut down the black aspen he emerged from; to free him from his prison. The Man tells Will his father is a liar, and that the little boy deserves his mother more.

Will returns home not sure what to do. The row between him and his father worsens though, and his desire to see his mother increases. Unable to retrieve an axe to cut down the tree, Will decides to meet with the Man in the middle of the night anyway. When he arrives though, the Man is not happy with him and demands he returns quickly and cut down the tree as his mother does not have much time left. The Man quietly disappears behind the dark tree, revealing a woman off in the distance. Will recognizes it
as his mother and immediately gives chase. He wanders in the dark but is unable to find her. The next morning Will sits in his room distraught. He overhears a phone call from his father in the next room and sneaks out to eavesdrop on the conversation. He hears his father say over the phone that he hasn’t told Will something about his mother yet.

Will confronts his father who clumsily tries to comfort him, hinting that Will’s mother took her own life. Will angrily yells at his father and locks himself in his room where he decides to return to the Man. Will steals an axe from the house and runs into the woods, chopping down the tree angrily. Upon doing so, the tree disappears, and Will’s axe turns pitch black like the tree. The Man appears behind him and tells the little boy that he must do one more thing before he takes him to his mother. He takes Will’s hand and takes him back to his home and his father. The Man demands Will enter the house, telling him that there must be “blood for blood, a father for a mother.” Will looks inside the house and sees his father crying in the living room, holding his mother’s book. Will is surprised to see emotion like this from his father. The Man pressures Will forward who quickly ask him to stop. Will explains that he needs both hands to do what the Man wants. The Man reluctantly lets go of his hand. Will runs off, no longer wanting to be with the Man and do what he says. The Man appears in front of him though and stops him at the edge of the woods in the front yard. Will glares at the man and swings the axe at him. It passes through the Man like shadow and sticks into a tree next to him. The tree turns black, and the axe disappears. Will slowly backs away to return home, the Man not following or pursuing. As Will turns to leave the Man tells him he will be there in the yard, right where Will left him. The Man disappears behind the tree and Will returns to
his crying father. Will enters the house and embraces his dad, the film ending with a shot of the black tree in the woods, ooze dripping down its side.

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The purpose of *The Man in the Tree* is to express a human story that dwells and focuses on the allegorical narrative tools of fantastical stories. Older mythologies and folktales inform these mechanics, as well as the examples of modern media given beforehand. By using liminal spaces within the story’s setting, narrative structure of events reflective of the genre, and ultimately expressing thematic patterns of the Fantastic

*The Man in the Tree* seeks to tell an allegorical human story whose truth lies in interpretation as opposed to realistic depiction.

Much like *The Secret of Kells*, *The Man in the Tree* puts the characters in two distinct setting that are bridged by our main protagonist. Will moving between these spaces creates a liminal expression and a metaphorical bridging of both the real world and the ideal magical world beyond. Will is the only character to move between both the forest and the house throughout the story, with his father Edward dwelling completely within the house and the Man completely within the woods (until he is invited by Will into the in-between space outside the house, which we will discuss later). Will moves between these very different spaces freely though often with some effort. When he is in either space, he is being drawn to the other. When in the house he is drawn to the forest because of what it represents about his mother and the promise of her return. When he is in the woods, the Man continually encourages his return home either to get an axe or, when freed, to return to his father. This forces Will to be continually in between both locations and never settled in one.
The quiet and clinical setting of the house and the cold and empty forest serve as two different parts of a greater conflict. As Will travels between them he is forced at the end to no longer be passively driven between the two but into proactive decision. He brings the Man in the Tree into the yard outside his home, only to realize the evil he brings with him. It is here in this in-between space that Will learns his greatest lesson and decides affirmatively to take control of his feelings and ultimately return to his father. This catharsis for Will showcases how the setting of the narrative and the relationship of both locations represent a thematic bridge between the ideal and the real within Will’s own perception of reality. The magical and the ideal synthesize with the real to create character growth and development within the spaces created throughout the film.

As discussed in our examination of *My Neighbor Totoro*, *The Man in the Tree* also aims to execute mechanics of the Fantastic in its narrative construction, specifically that of character perspective. The story is told entirely through the eyes and perspective of the protagonist Will, a young 10-year-old boy. This point of view colors the audience’s perception of the events that unfold and presents a “represented narrator” that the audience sympathizes with and believes, but also subconsciously doubts and questions. Will’s father never interacts or sees the Man or the magic around him, making Will the only character who encounters the idealized reality. This ambiguity is crucial in the development of Fantastic narrative voice and throws into doubt the magical events of the story.

The ambiguity of the idealized world of the forest ultimately culminates in the final moments of the film, when Will decides to abandon the Man at the edge of the yard as soon as he realizes the dangerous and real implications of what has been up to that
point a detached magical and surreal happening. The question as to the magical happenstices of the film are never validated or confirmed though, inviting the audience to not unravel the mystery as much as to embrace the ambiguity of the Fantastic. This mechanical use of perspective throughout enables the audience to continually interrogate the meaning and purpose of the reality-bending idealized world and the real world in order to draw conclusions about their meaning and relationship to each other and to the protagonist Will.

Both these tools ultimately culminate in the Thematic expression of the short film, mirroring elements discussed in *Where the Wild Things Are. The Man in the Tree* expresses both themes of self and themes of the other through its symbolic storytelling and Fantastic attributes. Will’s interactions with the Man showcase a consistent self-reflection on his inner desire. A desire to have his mom back and to be rid of his father who he believes is unloving and uncaring. The Man in this thematic sense represents deep self-reflection on Will’s inner desire and wants. Will also must face his own relationship with his father and how his desires and wants affect others around him.

When Will steals the axe from his house after the argument with his father (and the subsequent chopping of the tree) we see an example of the expression of themes of the other. Will acts in this moment by rejecting his father and the world outside of himself, stealing the axe from the house and leaving his father behind. When the result of his inner desire is made manifest on the front porch of the house, Will begins to understand the reality of his situation. The Man asks Will to enter the house and destroy his father. Will refuses, and completes the thematic expression of both concepts of self and the other. He understands and comes to terms with his one inner desires of self while
also recognizing the importance of his relationship with others and his responsibility towards them.

This thematic realization is another example of the ultimate purpose of the Fantastic in media; a bridge between the idealized and unreal world and the normal real world our protagonists and the audience face. The Fantastic thematically desires to promote allegorical self-reflection with its protagonist and its audience by revealing the nature of the main characters’ relationship with themselves and their relationship with the world around them. The Man in the Tree attempts to express these themes within the structure of the genre, ultimately serving as a narrative attempt to bridge the gap between the ideal world and the real world of not just our main character, but the audience at large.

VI. Conclusion

“Our own society is full of stories of gods and heroes, and these narratives tell us about ourselves in the same way that the story of the Trojan War characterize the ancient Greeks.”23 As we examine the Fantastic, it becomes clear that myth and legend are not failed religions or histories of the past, but complex expressions of culture, ideology, and ultimately personal reflection. Like the ancient poet Orpheus we discussed in the

introduction, a man’s journey into hell is less about the reality of our past and much more about the reality of human nature and spirit.

The gap of mortality is the space between the ideal and real that exists in the life of all in the world. American Unitarian preacher Jenkin Lloyd Jones said eloquently, “Life is just like an old-time rail journey ... delays, sidetracks, smoke, dust, cinders, and jolts, interspersed only occasionally by beautiful vistas and thrilling bursts of speed.”24

The idealized desire of the individual is only interspersed largely between movements of all too real jolts, delays, and dirty journeying. The role of story then and the narrative Fantastic is to make plain the gap and bridge our idealized dreams and human spirit with our realized and common mortality.

We will not journey down to hell to recue our fallen loves, nor do we live in medieval abbeys under siege from monstrous and faceless men. We will not be whisked away to a magical island full of Wild Things that expose and teach us our flaws, and we won’t encounter magical kami in the forests behind our house (Or dark men with magical powers). Our spirit asks these things of us though, and so we tell these stories because they teach us and heal us. The ambiguity of the world is made manifest in the Fantastic with vivid and powerful liminal space and quality, pushing character towards inner reflection and, ultimately, a catharsis. The characters are not asked to defeat dragons but rather to heal themselves with intelligence and understanding; with growth of character and understanding.

Todorov sought in his work to explain the characteristic of the Fantastic, and to showcase its potency as part of a larger grammatical function in storytelling. His ideas continue to enhance our understanding of modern media and its expression of the Fantastic. Fantastic media does not simply show us the gap but pushes the audience towards affirmative realization concerning it. An idealization of the reality of our lives. The films mentioned above push the audience towards a realized expression of the power found in creation, heritage, home, and living relationships. The gap of mortality then is less about circumstantial shortcoming and more about understanding and intelligence. That is to say what separates us from an ideal life and existence is not circumstance but rather an understanding of our circumstances. In the real world, a world that is common and mundane, there exists bountiful and beautiful creation, rich and diverse heritage, warm homes of various shapes and sizes, and profoundly imperfect relationships.

Bridging the gap through the grammatical language of media then is about teaching the audience the nature of that gap. Through liminal space, ambiguous perspective and narrative culmination, the thematic expression of the fantastic allows the audience of these films to bridge the intellectual gap between the ideal and the real. The Fantastic reaffirms life and meaning in an imperfect world.
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Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “ideal,” accessed March 6, 2021,


Appendix I

External Link to *The Man in the Tree* (2021),
dir. Weber Griffiths

[https://vimeo.com/484655773](https://vimeo.com/484655773)
Appendix II

*The Man in the Tree* Shooting Script

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**THE MAN IN THE TREE**

Written by

Walter Griffiths

WHITE - 09/24/19
BLUE Rev. - 10/11/19
PINK Rev. - 10/30/19
YELLOW Rev. - 05/21/20

854 East 350 North, Provo UT, 84606
801-560-2006
1 EXT. ASPEN GLADE - MORNING

SUPERIMPOSE TEXT: It is no crime to lose your way in a dark wood - Ovid

TILT DOWN:

Reveal, a yellow aspen forest. The trees stir quietly. A beautiful place.

2 EXT. ESTATE YARD - MORNING

WILL (11), a small boy with dark hair and a backpack slumped over his shoulders, stands next to a Tesla Model S in a well kept yard surrounded by tall trees.

Behind him is a square house, contemporary and stylish.

He clutches a small book to his chest.

EDWARD (45), a dark and cold looking man with pitch black hair, gelled harshly but stylishly, is at the rear of the car unloading bags.

His pants and tie are black, complimented by a black vest. He drops the last bag on the driveway and looks at Will.

Will stares at the trees, away from Edward. He looks down at the book in his hands. The Missing Tree by Erin Byrne.

Edward looks at Will and then to the book.

3 INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Will enters and takes the place. Modern, sleek, and sparse. He slips off his backpack.

Edward brings in luggage silently while Will walks to a wall of pictures, all meticulously hung in symmetrical black frames.

Pictures of the family, including Edward and Will, as well as ERIN BYRNE (40). She has black hair and a radiant smile.

Below the pictures is a long low-lying table/bookshef. On its surface and shelves are an assortment of books and objects, all meticulously placed.

The books seem more decoration than practical, and the objects reflect a Celtic/Gaelic taste. They are all minimalist and simple in design.
In the center of the table, on a black stand, sits a large wooden axe. Sleek and new, like everything else. On its blade, a Celtic knot is engraved.

Will stops and looks at a picture of Erin.

A candid B&W. Her hair is done up and she has a note pad and pencil in her lap. She is distracted though, looking out over the forest surrounding her.

Edward walks behind Will and sets down the luggage. He looks up to Will.

EDWARD
Will, Take your stuff to you room.

Will looks to his Dad.

WILL
Do you even miss her?

Edward is stung by the question.

WILL (CONT'D)
Because I do. At the funeral, you didn’t even cry.

They stare at each other, a distance between them.

EDWARD
It won’t help. To miss her like that.

Will stares at his Dad a moment longer and then turns to leave.

WILL
I’m going on a walk.

Edward watches Will walk to the door, stoic.

EDWARD
I love you.

SLAM. The front door closes.

EXT. ASPEN FOREST - DAY

The SOUNDS OF THE FOREST. Trees blow gently in the wind.
Will stomps through the undergrowth. He walks deep into the wood. It becomes darker and quieter as he marches.
Will stops and takes in his surroundings. He SNIFFLES, as if about to cry but he stops and squares up. He turns and faces his house, now lost in the trees.

He looks down at his book. He wipes its cover off gently and opens it to the first page. A pressed leaf lays on the page.

On the page next to it, a message is written in pen. "For Will, the first published book of my first published story. I love you - Mom"

The SOUNDS OF THE FOREST fade and reverberate strangely. Will gently picks up the leaf.

A SOUND. Will looks towards it. A ways off, a little clearing catches his eye. A strange tree stands in the center.

It is strangely quiet.

EXT. ASPEN CLEARING - DAY

Will enters the clearing of aspens. The tree in the center is pitch black. Will stares at it curiously.

A STRANGE SOUND. Will turns around. Nothing. He glances around cautiously.

WILL

Dad?

STRANGE and UNEARTHLY SOUNDS echo softly all around.

Behind Will, a DARK FIGURE emerges, like an inky shadow, from behind the black tree, as if by magic.

Will turns back around, and sees the shadow. He falls onto his back with a YELP, dropping his book.

The shadow is tall but stooped. He looks to Will and then to his book.

The Man moves towards it. Will scrambles back out of the clearing.

The Man stops and bends down. He gingerly grabs the book with a pitch black hand.

The Man looks back to Will.

THE MAN IN THE TREE

I need something from you...

Will is silent. The Man looks to the black tree.
THE MAN IN THE TREE (CONT'D)

...I am trapped.
WILL
Who are you?
The Man turns to Will and steps forward, stopping at the edge of the clearing.

THE MAN IN THE TREE
Help me...
The Man holds out the book, inviting Will to take it.

THE MAN IN THE TREE (CONT'D)
...and I will take you to your mother.
Will stares and does not move.

THE MAN IN THE TREE (CONT'D)
She is not gone...not like some have told you.
The Man's hand remains extended, holding out the book. Will takes it gingerly. He stares at the cover thoughtfully.

WILL
You mean my Dad.
The Man turns away and walks around the black tree at the center of the clearing.

THE MAN IN THE TREE
I would not trust your father. He is a liar; a secret keeper. He does not care that she is gone.
The Man stops by the tree and gently places one hand on its surface.

THE MAN IN THE TREE (CONT'D)
An unloving father.
(beat)
Cut down this tree, and free me...
He turns and looks into the distant woods, opposite Will.

THE MAN IN THE TREE (CONT'D)
...and you and your mother will walk in the woods together again.
He looks back, directly at Will.

THE MAN IN THE TREE (CONT'D)
Return tonight during the witching hour...time is short.
The Man disappears behind the tree. Will is still.

He slowly stands and walks to the tree. The SOUNDS OF THE FOREST return.

Will circles the black aspen. Nothing. Will stares at the tree and then across to the distant woods.

EXT. ESTATE YARD - EVENING

Will walks back into the yard around his home, clutching his book to his chest. He looks back at the forest and then to his home.

He takes a deep BREATH and scowls with determination.
INT. LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Will approaches the wall of pictures. In front of them on the table, rests the Celtic axe.

Will stops and stares at it. He reaches out and feels the blade. It is sharp.

   EDWARD (O.S.)
   Will?

Will jerks his hand away and spins around in surprise. Edward stands a ways off. He holds an expensive leather attaché.

   WILL
   Dad!

Edward looks at Will. Silence.

   EDWARD
   How was the walk?

   WILL
   Lonely.

They stare at each other, a distance between them.

   EDWARD
   It’ll get better. Just takes times.

Will stares at his Dad for a moment. He looks at the axe and then his father.

He frowns and walks out, ignoring his Dad.
INT. WILL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Will sits on his bed, staring out a window towards the woods.
The room is sharp and straight like the rest of the house. A small desk lamp illuminates the space.

The Wishing Tree is open on his lap. Will holds up the pressed leaf, light shining through its delicate shape.

He notices his small clock. It reads 10:00 PM. Will looks to his window.

KNOCK KNOCK.

EDWARD (O.S.)

Lights out.

Will looks to the door.

WILL

Dad?

The door opens and Edward peers in.

EDWARD

Yeah?

Will stares pointedly at his dad.

WILL

When's the witching hour?

Edward gives Will a confused look.

EDWARD

3AM I think, why?

Will stares.

WILL

Have you ever lied to me?

Edward stares back.

EDWARD

No, I haven't.

Will turns and looks out his window, placing the leaf back in his book.

Edward is silent for a bit. After a moment, he quietly turns off Will's lamp and begins to leave the room.
As he closes the door, Edward stops and looks back to Will.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
Will, your book...Put it away for a while. It will help.

Will doesn't respond. Edward SIGHs.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
Good night.

He gently closes the door. Will turns and looks at the clock on his nightstand. 10:01pm.

The WIND BLOWS, shaking the trees.

CUT TO BLACK.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Will peers out his door. The house is dark. Will hears Edward's voice from the living room on the phone.
Will tip toes to the edge of a wall and peeks around. He sees Edward walking around the living room, holding a box.

EDWARD (O.S.)
(on the phone)
Yeah, I’m still selling the house.
I’ll list it when Will and I leave.

Will looks to the axe. Right across from Edward. Will frowns. He looks back to Edward. He sets down the box. It is labeled “Erin”.

EDWARD (O.S.) (CONT’D)
I know, but it’s better this way...better for him...He went for a walk. He and Erin did it all the time.

Will looks at a clock. 2:50AM. He retreats behind the wall and looks at the front door.

EDWARD (CONT’D)
He won’t have anything to do with me, but...he’s keeping it together...

Will listens to his Dad as he stares, face hardening.

OMITTED

EXT. ASPEN FOREST - NIGHT

Will walks through the woods, empty handed. He looks for the clearing. He spots it and stops.

He looks back towards his house and then back to the clearing.

EXT. ASPEN CLEARING - NIGHT

Will enters the dark clearing, the black tree shimmering in the midst. It is quiet.


A STRANGE SOUND. Will turns back to the tree. The Man emerges from its shadows. He stumbles back in surprise.
WILL
I-I don't have an ax yet, I--

THE MAN IN THE TREE
You should not have come then.

WILL
I-I-I need more time!
The Man walks over to Will, pushing him towards the edge of the clearing.

THE MAN IN THE TREE
So you don’t love your mother?

Will stumbles back out of the clearing. The Man stands immediately at the edge.

He stares at Will for a while. Will stares back, scared.

The Man turns slowly and walks back toward the tree. He stops near it and looks back to Will.

THE MAN IN THE TREE (CONT’D)
She is fading, but perhaps there is time still...perhaps, if you hurry.

He disappears into the tree. As he moves, he uncovers a white shape far in the woods behind him.

A WHITE FIGURE.

Will squints, attempting to make out what it is.

A WOMAN, black hair blowing in the night breeze. The woman from the family pictures.

ERIN BYRNE.

WILL
Mom.

Will takes off across the clearing and into the woods, toward her.

EXT. ASPEN WOOD – NIGHT
Will stumbles in the dark and looks around. Nothing. Will looks desperately but can’t find her. She has vanished.

WILL
Mom!?!?

EXT. ESTATE YARD – MORNING
The sun peeks over the woods. It is quiet. BIRDS CHIRP.

Will wanders into the yard, face sullen. He looks to the house.
INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Will sneaks quietly through the door. He hears Edward in the kitchen. He is on the phone.

Edward's voice shifts. Will hears FOOTSTEPS coming from the kitchen. He retreats behind a wall.

Edward walks into the living room, shaking a Blender Bottle.

EDWARD
No I haven't told him...when he's ready to hear it. It's too fresh.

Will frowns.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
I told him she was in an accident...

Will backs away, but bumps a table. THUD.

Edward turns around.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
Will?

Will takes a sharp BREATH in and turns the corner facing his father.

WILL
What didn't you tell me!?

Edward stares at Will, phone to his ear.

EDWARD
I'm going to have to call you back.

Edward hangs up the phone. They stare at each other, a distance between them.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
Mom was sick, Will...

Edward does not know what to say. It is quiet. Will turns and storms out of the room.

EDWARD (CONT'D)
Will!? 
INT. WILL'S BEDROOM - MORNING

Will runs into his room and SLAMS the door. He begins pacing, flustered.
18A
INT. HALLWAY - MORNING
Edward arrives and tries the door. It’s locked. He KNOCKS.

18B
INT. WILL’S BEDROOM - MORNING
Will paces as Edward KNOCKS. He stops and looks at the door.

    EDWARD (O.S.)
    Will?!

    WILL
    Did you lie to me?

Edward stops knocking. It is quiet.

    EDWARD (O.S.)
    She was very sad and...she loved you. Sometimes people they...they get sick and...they can’t keep going--

    WILL
    Maybe she was sick of you!

Silence.

19
INT. HALLWAY - MORNING
Edward stands in the hall outside Will’s bedroom, a dark silhouette.

20
INT. WILL’S BEDROOM - MORNING
Will sits on his bed, arms wrapped around his knees. He stares out his window towards the woods. He tears up a little but quickly rubs them away.

    WILL
    You did lie to me, Dad.

Silence.

    EDWARD (O.S.)
    I did...I’m sorry.

Will looks to his door. It is silent.
A DOOR CLOSES down the hall. Will frowns and looks at his nightstand.

WILL’S POV: The Wishing Tree by Erin Byrne.

He looks out his window, towards the forest.

INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING


Will sets the book on the table and gently lifts the axe off its stand. He checks for Edward before rushing away.

On the table is The Wishing Tree. Left behind.

EXT. ASPEN WOOD - DAY

Will cradles the axe in his hands, running through the woods.

EXT. ASPEN CLEARING - DAY

Will bursts into the clearing.

WILL

Hey! I’m here!

The Man walks out from behind the tree, eyes glowing.

THE MAN IN THE TREE

She fades...hurry.

Will grasps the axe tighter. The Man moves away from the tree.

Will steps up and pauses. Tears form in his eyes. He quickly brushes them away.

Will lifts the axe and begins attacking the tree. The Man watches, silent and still.

Will chops the tree down.

The tree falls and hits the ground with a quiet SWOOSH, not at all like the sound of a tree hitting the ground. Will is sweating, exhausted.

He stumbles back BREATHING hard. It is silent. Completely.
Will looks at the axe in his hand. It is pitch black now, like the tree.

Will looks at the fallen tree. It is gone. The clearing is empty. Will spins around, eyes frantic.
WILL

Where is she?

Will turns. The Man is standing immediately behind him.

THE MAN IN THE TREE

She is close. But, we must go to your father first.

The Man reaches out his hand, offering it to Will.

Will doesn’t move. He looks to the axe in his hands and then back to the Man, who is motionless.

The Man looks to the axe.

THE MAN IN THE TREE (CONT’D)

I can’t go alone. Don’t you want to see your mother?

WILL

Why are we going to my dad?

THE MAN IN THE TREE

There is something you must do...before I can take you to her.

The Man stares at Will.

THE MAN IN THE TREE (CONT’D)

Then...you will see her.

There is a long pause. Will’s hands fidget with the axe. The Man’s hand remains extended, eager.

Will takes a hand off the axe and grab the Man’s hand.

THE MAN IN THE TREE (CONT’D)

We are bound to each other now.

Together they turn and enter the woods, toward Will’s home.

EXT. FRONT PORCH - DAY

The Man and Will stop in front of the front door, holding hands.

Will looks at the door before him. The Man looms above him.
THE MAN IN THE TREE
Take the axe...enter the house.

Will looks down at the axe in his hand. A soft NOISE comes from inside. Will looks up.

24B
INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY
Will peers through the window next to the door.

24C
EXT. FRONT PORCH - DAY
Will sees Edward sitting on the couch. In his lap is Will's book. Edward holds up the small pressed leaf. He is crying. Will notices and looks away.

THE MAN IN THE TREE (O.S.)
Enter the house.

Will looks at his feet and then back up at his father.

The Man leans in close to Will.

THE MAN IN THE TREE (CONT'D)
Blood for blood...a father for a mother.

The Man's face is very close to his. He pulls Will towards the door.

WILL
Wait!

The Man stops and looks at Will.

WILL (CONT'D)
(beat)
I need both hands.

The Man is motionless. He relaxes his grip on Wills hand

Will yanks his hand out of the grip immediately and dashes off the porch.

24D
EXT. ESTATE YARD - FOREST EDGE - DAY
Will runs across the yard. He glances back at the porch. The Man is no where to be seen.

Will turns back to the woods.
The Man is standing directly in front of him right at the edge of the yard.

Will stumbles to a stop.

THE MAN IN THE TREE

Will.

Will swings the axe in his hand, aiming for the Man. It passes clean throw the black robes like shadow.

THUNK.

The axe sticks into the trunk of an aspen next to the Man. Will lets go and stumbles back. He stares at the Man.

The Man stands still. The tree next to him is now pitch black. The axe is gone.

Will slowly backs away.

The Man, eyes fixed on Will, turns and walks behind the Aspen.

THE MAN IN THE TREE (CONT'D)

I'll be here Will...

The Man disappears behind the tree.

Silence. Will turns and runs to the house.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Edward sits with Will's book on his lap. He is distraught. Will watches from the doorway. Edward hasn't noticed him.

Edward turns and looks at the front door.

Will is standing quietly. Edward stares, unsure what he should do.

Will crosses the room grabs his Dad in a hug. Will cries gently as he holds Edward.

Edward hugs Will back.

EXT. ESTATE YARD - DAY

The Man in the Tree stands ove; the black axe at the edge of the yard, looking at the house.

The trees stir quietly.
THE END