More than Death: Traversing the Enchanted Ravine with Archetypal Children in Ray Bradbury's Illinois

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In the realm of American literature, few authors possess the ability to intertwine childhood innocence with the existential mysteries of the universe quite like Ray Bradbury. Through his evocative prose and keen insight into the human psyche, Bradbury invites readers on a journey through the liminal spaces of the mind and cosmos. Central to this exploration is the enigmatic entity of the ravine, a spectrally animate wilderness that serves as a playground for both juvenile curiosity and metaphysical introspection. In this essay, I apply a multidimensional analysis of Bradbury's Illinois tales, focusing on the profound significance of the ravine as a nexus of gothic ontology.

This examination unfolds in two parts. First, I delve into the aestheticized representations of universal childhood motifs within Bradbury's stories, juxtaposing them against the darker undercurrents of existence. Here, the ravine emerges as a threshold between the mundane and the metaphysical, beckoning characters to traverse its depths and confront the existential anxieties lurking within. Drawing from the insights of Isabella van Elferen and other scholars, I explore the gothic elements inherent in Bradbury's narrative, particularly the suspension of temporal norms and the transcendent whispers that echo through the ravine. Through a philosophical lens encompassing Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and New Materialism, I touch upon the ontological complexity of Bradbury's world, where the distinction between human and non-human entities blurs, and the natural world pulsates with its own mysterious agency.

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In the second part of my analysis, I delve deeper into the convergence of childhood innocence and cosmic awareness within Bradbury's protagonists. Through their encounters with the ravine, these characters navigate the existential terrain of Kierkegaardian eternal anxiety, confronting the ephemeral nature of life and the interconnectedness of all things. Here, I draw parallels between Bradbury's narrative and other literary works, such as Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, to elucidate the profound bond between children and the natural world. Traversing the liminal realm of Bradbury's gothic ontology, a narrative landscape teeming with existential significance and metaphysical depth unfolds. Through the lens of the ravine, Bradbury invites readers of all ages to commune with the ineffable mysteries of existence, transcending the boundaries of childhood and embracing the gothic as a conduit for existential exploration. This article thus serves as a journey through the haunted wilderness of Bradbury's imagination, where the whispers of the ravine echo the timeless truths of the cosmos. The theoretical frameworks of Jane Bennett (vital/new materialism), Mircea Eliade (the sacred and profane), and Timothy Morton (mesh and entanglement) serve as the cornerstone for this inquiry, with Kierkegaard's notion of anxiety, as well as Piaget's model of psychological development, providing an additional framework.

The Clean Slate of American Gothic

Henry James's 1879 proposition leaves little on the table for American (gothic) writers to work with:

> [O]ne might enumerate the items of high civilization, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life until it should become a wonder to know what was left. No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class—no Epsom nor Ascot! Some such list as that might be drawn up of the absent things in American life […][1]

James's observation illustrates the reason for Edgar Allan Poe's disoriented topography and opens a new array for thematic exploration. Poe would famously draw from his educational sojourn in England and the exploration of gothic elements discoverable within and without oneself. His "The Fall of the House of Usher,"[2] while preceding James by several decades (1839), is situated somewhere in the metaphysical hinterland at the threshold between the oneiric and the diurnal, as well as the mundane and the Dionysian. Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*[3] (1851) resonates with the historical shadow of American history, with the author drawing from the fascination with Salem's haunted past and a particular, curiously designed house he frequently

[1] Henry James, *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (London: Macmillan, 1879), 43.

[2] Edgar Allan Poe. "The Fall of the House of Usher" in *Tales of Mystery & Imagination* (Norwalk, CT: 1975).

[3] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Collected Novels* (New York: Library of America, 1983).

visited.[4] H.P. Lovecraft would later come up with shadow realm counterparts to the New England towns that imbued him with profound fascination (Providence, Marblehead, and Elizabeth) or xenophobic loathing (New York City). Then, there is the psychogeography of Stephen King's Maine, a fictional playground that renders suburbia and the northern east coast a supernatural playground and exerts a touristic influence towards the actual topography. The American gothic has fared quite well despite James' conundrum. At its best, it has even been amplified by the particular constraint that James identified.

Ray Bradbury's Illinois stories are located near these fictionalized representations, with parallels to writers like Stephen King, who frequently cites Bradbury as a palpable influence and pays literary homage to certain motifs quite directly, such as the sundial's kinship to Bradbury's ferris wheel in his recent *Fairy Tale.*[5] Bradbury's Illinois is the innocent canvas upon which children can inscribe their existence and be received as ontologically equal creatures. This is the magic playground where the reach of disenchantment is successfully warded off. It is also the place associated with Ray's beloved grandfather, Samuel Hinkston Bradbury. The loss of his grandfather foreshadows a demarcation in the author's biography. The playfulness and experience of the extended family he associated with childhood and his later exploits and first success in California likely gained poignancy through the absence of his early spiritual mentor. Thus, Bradbury's fictional Illinois town of Green Town, is also haunted by the shadow of death. However, the notion of transience here is far more sophisticated and poetic than the blatant introduction of serial killers or supernatural specters. Bradbury's Illinois stories reverberate with Kierkegaardian anxiety, of which the Danish philosopher distinguishes two types.[6] Whereas temporal or aesthetic anxiety revolves around the imminent consequences of one's doing—punishment and retribution by parents, peers or juridical institutions and their representations in the psyche—religious anxiety determines one's relation to the divine or eternal. The latter also allows for secular interpretation: from a child's perspective, mischievous behavior may come with short-term consequences of an undesired nature, but there is also a quasi-eternal perspective that arises as the result of maturation and familiarization with the surrounding world.

Religious or eternal anxiety informs us about the potential finality imbued in every moment of our lives. Disrespecting parents, underappreciating friends, failing to bid farewell to a beloved person, all these events could be the last interaction one gets. It is this type of anxiety, always originating subjectively and through growing awareness, that amplifies many of the Illinois stories, with their seemingly unbreakable bonds of friendship or the significance of rituals. Before we consider the ravine's role in surmounting that which the child here is about to lose, let us examine the surprisingly prolific tradition of utilizing gothic elements and settings in narratives focusing on juvenile characters.

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[4] The house now serves as an actual museum, and its architecture has been tailored more distinctly towards its description in the novel. This a rare case of fiction literally restructuring the material plane.

[5] Stephen King, *Fairy Tale* (New York: Scribner, 2022.)

[6] Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Oriented Deliberation in View of the Dogmatic Problem of Hereditary Sin* [1844], trans. Alistair Hannay (New York: Liveright, 2015).

Constructing Childhood

In (post-)modern narratives, the use of darkness and horror elements in plots centered around children has become widespread. However, children's literature and the gothic seemed mutually exclusive until the 19th century. John Locke and others advocated keeping children away from frightening experiences. Locke believed that children's books should avoid gothic elements, fearing potential trauma. This perspective shifted in the Victorian and Edwardian eras with many writers using gothic settings that amplified the child's characterization. Jean-Jacques Rousseau envisioned an archetypal "pure child," a concept evident in characters like Bradbury's Pipkin in *The Halloween Tree*. The 19th century saw a departure from didacticism, introducing darker elements in the "Golden Age" of children's literature. Locke wrote:

> The first step to get this noble, and manly steadiness, is, what I have above mentioned, carefully to keep Children from frights of all kinds, when they are young. Let not any fearful Apprehensions be talked into them, nor terrible Objects surprise them. This often so shatters, and discomposes the Spirits; that they never recover it again; but during their whole Life, upon the first suggestion, or appearance of any terrifying Idea, are scatter'd and confounded […][7]

Locke insisted that to serve as proper didactic material, children's books should as far as possible avoid the inclusion of gothic elements since these would lead to trauma that could either alienate the child from literature for the rest of its life or, worse, create a dark blot on the clean page that is the foundation for healthy development. What a person will amount to is ultimately determined in their formative years, so this foundation should be strong, steadfast, and exclusively constructive and positive. Others, including Mary Wollstonecraft, agreed. To educate a child was to provide it with literature that included the best possible usage of role models, aesthetic depictions of beauty, and aspirations towards responsible use of power in its later adult life. Jean-Jacques Rousseau even inadvertently coined his own brand of archetypal children. As society corrupts and pollutes with mischief and mundane arbitrariness, the "pure child," the only stage of life that revolves around innocence and seeing the world for what it is (beyond the mundane affairs of adults), should be preserved as long as possible.[8] We can see this virtuous child archetype at work in *The Halloween Tree*. Joe Pipkin is

> [t]he grandest boy who ever fell out of a tree and laughed. The finest boy who ever raced around the track, winning, and then, seeing his friends a mile back somewhere, stumbled and fell, waited for them to catch up, and joined, breast and breast, breaking the winner's tape. The jolliest boy who ever hunted out all the haunted houses in town, which are hard to find, and came back to report on them and take all the kids to ramble through the basements and scramble up the ivy outside-bricks and shout down the chimneys and make water off the roofs, hooting and chimpanzee-dancing and ape-bellowing.[9]

[7] John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 176.

[8] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile; or On Education* (London: Penguin, 1991).

[9] Ray Bradbury, *The Halloween Tree* (New York: Knopf, 1972), 9.

Pipkin uses his heightened perception of the world *and* his superior physical prowess not as features to rule over his peers but to elevate their own childhood experience, all the while sporting self-reflection and inspirational powers. He is, in short, "the greatest boy who ever lived," the quintessential Rousseauian child, and seems to be aware of the fact. Rousseau's idea of the archetypal child revolves around purity and innocence, traits to be further developed by providing the right kind of intellectual and pedagogical nourishment. "Pip" appears unperturbed by the mind-numbing and monotonous indoctrination of educational institutions that Rousseau perceived and lamented during his time. He is of such profundity that his friends consider it a tragedy for this prodigal child not to reach adulthood and grow into a kind and inspiring man, and they do not hesitate to sacrifice one year from their respective lifespans to save him.

The 19th century would deviate from dogmatic didacticism and the avoidance of darker elements. While tailored around a theological exploration of Christian morals and perspective, Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies, A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby* (1863) has its young protagonist drown in the opening stages.[10] Interestingly, the novel also hints at an inherent bond between children and the natural world, a privileged relationship from which adults are excluded. In the latter half of the century, child protagonists continued to be juxtaposed against an unknown and often ominously Gothicized natural world. Lewis Carroll's eponymous Alice, for instance, encounters a shadowy reflection of Victorian society, where she becomes an outsider and faces a lack of ontological certainty as she ventures down a rabbit hole.[11] Here, the secondary world mirrors the protagonist's burgeoning adolescence by having her suffer contorting changes in size, hallucinatory images, and the impossibility of coming to terms with language itself. J.M. Barrie's *Peter and Wendy* (1911) can be considered the provisional climax of this gothic proliferation, as its protagonist identifies the correlation between growing up and mortality and literally flees to a secondary realm of never-ending childhood beyond the confines of time and (adult) space. The two world wars abruptly halted this development, as children's literature during and in the immediate aftermath of both temporarily returned to its anti-aestheticist notion of "worthwhile intellectual nourishment" in the education and upbringing of children. The second half of the 20th century saw a gradual reintroduction of these elements, as novels like C.S. Lewis's *Narnia,* Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958)[12] Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* (1968-2001)[13] and recent YA books by the likes of Pullman and Rowling collected darker characteristics and settings over which their juvenile protagonists' triumphs would receive even more significance.

The Bradburian Child

> In any event, the romanticism that gave rise to a gothic preoccupation with the divided self (a.k.a. the "Shadow," a.k.a. the "beast within") also gave rise to an enduring counter-

[10] Charles Kingsley, *The Water-Babies, A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby* (London: Macmillan, 1863).

[11] Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (London: The Folio Society, 2016). Both *Alice* novels can be considered the threshold into a new age of children's literature, as narratives never fully returned to the seemingly clear and easy demarcation in readership, setting, or narrative after this.

[12] Philippa Pearce, *Tom's Midnight Garden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

[13] Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea* (Berkeley, CA: Parnassus, 1968).

> symbol. That symbol proved to be the archetypal child - an image of spontaneous joy often associated with nature, or communion with nature.[14]

Ray Bradbury's portrayal of children challenges traditional views. His Illinois stories depict children entangled with gothic elements, defying the didacticism of the past. Characters like Pipkin embody Rousseau's virtuous child, using heightened perception not to dominate but to enhance shared experiences. The 20th century witnessed a reintroduction of dark elements in children's literature. Bradbury's approach contrasts developmental models that view psychogenesis and psychodynamics as largely separated domains, suggesting that the archetypal child trope allows readers to reconnect with their own formative experiences. Bradbury's literary children encapsulate the innocence and magic of childhood, whilst challenging the notion of children as inherently different from adults.

Bradbury's underage characters, in many stories invariably confronted with the darkness and primeval lure of the ravine, are multi-faceted and heterogeneous. His *Something Wicked This Way Comes*[15] gives readers the dichotomy of inherently contrary but inseparable childhood friends in William Halloway and Jim Nightshade, "born only two minutes apart" but "separated by midnight Halloween."[16] Two sides of the childhood coin. One of them "touched by reason" and "given to thought," the other "all impulse" and "untrammeled in imagination." The two comprise the full spectrum of the Dionysian and the Apollonian, providing the necessary verisimilitude in contrast to the ever-virtuous and larger-than-life Pipkin. While the latter serves as the object and the beneficiary of overcoming the story's inherent anxiety, benefiting from his exaggerated portrayal, the former two boys function as mediators and stand-ins for the juvenile, or young-at-heart, reader. Consequently, they require more distinct and nuanced characterization. Then, there is *Dandelion Wine*'s Douglas Spaulding, a distillation of Ray Bradbury's childhood self.[17] Douglas commands the wide spectrum of child experience, as he is both adventurous and ruminating. Throughout the novel, Douglas gradually familiarizes himself with the all-encompassing anxiety that receives uncanny representation through the ravine but also purifies the individualism of the magic summer he experiences. That last summer before adolescence beckons. His self-awareness revolves around the fact that "YOU CAN'T DEPEND ON *PEOPLE* BECAUSE…"[18] well, they have a penchant for disappearing.

The novel's juxtaposition of Bradbury's own fascination with the idea of "live forever" against the gradually pervasive hand of death becomes one of the key tensions Douglas must reconcile towards the story's denouement. To preserve his child-like virtue (adventurousness, openness, enchantment) while becoming a responsible adult (empathy, awareness, equilibrium), he is faced with a binary ontological opposition: "The town. The wideness. The houses. The ravine. Douglas blinked back and forth. But how to relate the two, make sense of the interchange when…"[19] The answer that ultimately saves him is right in front of him and encapsulated in the

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[14] Gregory G. Pepetone, *Hogwarts and All: Gothic Perspectives on Children's Literature* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012), 209.

[15] Ray Bradbury, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (London: The Folio Society, 2019).

[16] Bradbury, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, 67.

[17] Ray Bradbury, *Dandelion Wine* (New York: Library of America, 2021).

[18] Bradbury, *Dandelion Wine*, 524.

[19] Bradbury, *Dandelion Wine*, 378.

eponymous dandelion wine. The wine thus serves as proof of the veracity of that one magical summer, symbolically and literally combining the individual's experience with the myriad phenomena witnessed in nature.

Whether one considers *Dandelion Wine* and the other Green Town novels children's literature remains debatable, illustrating the difficulties scholars face when trying to define the latter genre. The second half of the 20th century saw significant proliferation concerning plot subjects and thematic diversity, which also contributed to a widening of readership. However, it is fair to say that Bradbury agrees with Wordsworth's notion that "The Child is father of the man."[20] In fact, Bradbury demonstrates an aesthetic kinship with the Romantic poet about the value of childhood, steeped in the ability to rejoice in the ephemeral moment and enveloping beauty.

There exists a congruency in the concept of the archetypal child, as it (a) possesses an interior link with nature[21] and (b) is bound to lose that enchanted rapport with the natural realm as it grows up. The autobiographical energy imbued in both *Dandelion Wine* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes* is, with the introduction of fictional exaggeration and supernatural elements, naturally diluted and far from naturalistic. Rather, we find here the reminiscence and rumination of an adult about a former period in his life, likely adding enhanced re-enchantment and a healthy dose of nostalgia. The child is intrinsically familiar, although in an ineffable way, with the distinction between the cultural and the natural. As Bachelard explains, dwelling in secluded, natural spaces can prevail one's true nature, unspoiled and uncorrupted by civilization and society.[22] The gothic spin here is that this superior awareness of nature actively involves the ravine, a reminder of mortality and the transitional nature of individual experience.

The use of gothic elements against which the juvenile characters in the Illinois stories are pitted may come as no surprise to the 21st-century reader, as the collective unconscious of postmodern readership has become accustomed to the use of such binary symbolism in *Harry Potter* (1997-2007),[23] *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000)[24] or the post-existentialist fairytale that is Cornelia Funke and Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2019).[25] Here, the natural and adult worlds confront child protagonists with dark magic, malignant scheming and the combined force of their political or natural power. Harry Potter must die to conquer the malevolent force of Lord Voldemort; *Pan's Labyrinth*'s Ofelia must trust the supernatural forces only she can perceive; the boys in *The Halloween Tree* must cross time and space to retrieve their valued friend; and Will and Jim must overcome the evil nature of Mr. Dark by *embracing* him, reconciling Pepetone's "beast within" with the spontaneous joy of the archetypal child.

For a while, the reception of children in literature and an underage readership were influenced by Jean Piaget and his model of cognitive development.[26] Piaget proposed that individuals progress through several distinct developmental stages, each characterized by different

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[20] William Wordsworth, *Poems of William Wordsworth* (Hoboken, N.J.: Generic NL Freebook Publisher, 2000), https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2008645&site=ehost-live

[21] For Romantics due to the child's temporal proximity with birth and its origin in heaven.

[22] Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 187.

[23] J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997).

[24] Philip Pullman, *Northern Lights* (New York: Scholastic, 1995).

[25] Cornelia Funke and Guillermo del Toro, *Pan's Labyrinth. The Labyrinth of the Faun* (New York: Katherine Tegen/Harper Collins, 2019).

[26] Jean Piaget, *The Construction of Reality in the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1954).

sensory and cognitive abilities, which in turn shape their ways of perception. A child's world and its connection to an outside reality was inherently and naturally different from an adult's. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, there was a departure from Piaget's conceptualization of children as fundamentally distinct from adults. Instead, many contemporary perspectives recognize that individual self-development extends beyond the formative years of childhood and continues into adulthood. This development aligns with our study, as the correlative growth provides potential for self-identification and reminiscence of prior developmental stages (mirroring the Bradbury-Douglas Spaulding relationship).[27]

If one is to take Piaget's concept at face value, demarcations in readership and representation of children in literature would have to be carefully constructed around the specific age and developmental status of characters (ideally converging with the intended audience). Bradbury's literary children could not be further from this notion. In his fictionalized Illinois, readers of all ages find portrayals of chimeric juvenile beings, sporting the free and innocent nature of the archetypal child on the one hand while infused with the adult nostalgia of reminiscing about the things lost in the process of growing up. The child really is "father of the man" and *Dandelion Wine* in particular aims to recapture the magic of bygone, formative years. Bradbury himself analyzed the book's writing process as "the boy-hid-in-the-man playing in the fields of the Lord on the green grass of other Augusts in the midst of starting to grow up, grow old, and sense darkness waiting under the trees to seed the blood."[28] Real boys turned men may have missed the one-way trip to Neverland, but they can always reconstruct the promise and lure of their childhood Eden, perhaps exaggerating in the process and thereby providing a universality of experience to their readers.

The characters here, Bradbury assures us, really are real—even "the Lonely One," the dark figure who is so significantly entangled with the ravine. Of course, they are not *actually* real. There may have been a John Huff and a version of Douglas Spaulding, but their adventures are the product of a translation from childhood reminiscence into fiction. However, the veracity of the gothic aspects is more important to this study. The lingering ravine ("deeper, darker, and more mysterious than ever"[29]) confronts Bradbury's characters with a palpable focalization of anxiety. In equivocal fashion, it also haunts the reader.

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[27] See for example: Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: Norton, 1980). Erikson considers the development of personal identity as an ongoing process with procedural experiences and psychological changes continuing into the advanced stages of lifespan. Erikson proposes eight stages of psychosocial development, and the fifth stage, "Identity vs. Role Confusion," is particularly relevant to the development of personal identity during adolescence. However, Erikson's theory goes beyond adolescence, and he acknowledges that identity development continues to evolve through adulthood. In the later stages of Erikson's model, such as the seventh stage ("Generativity vs. Stagnation") and the eighth stage ("Integrity vs. Despair"), the focus is on issues related to personal and social identity, as well as reflection on the overall meaning and integrity of one's life. This concept aligns comfortably with the narratological aspects of Bradbury's fictionalized Waukegan.

[28] Ray Bradbury, "Just this Side of Byzantium (An Introduction to Dandelion Wine)" in: Ray Bradbury, *Novels & Story Cycles* (New York: Library of America, 2021), 827.

[29] Bradbury, "Just this Side of Byzantium", 829.

The Ravine as *Axis Mundi*

In *The Halloween Tree* (1972), a group of boys find themselves traversing the liminal zone between the quotidian and the supermundane. In a manner that echoes the mythological figure of Orpheus, they are pulled towards the wisdom of bygone ages. Ancient Egypt, Britain before, during, and after the Roman invasion, and the advent of Gothic cathedrals, all in one night. All to save their friend Pipkin, the quintessential virtuous child. While their adventure reverberates with significant anxiety from the beginning, with Pipkin at the threshold between life and death, they must first maneuver the most nearby liminal area, situated "[at] the edge of town and the place where civilization fell away in darkness."[30] The ravine clearly indicates that the constructivist rulebook of the mundane world, and its disenchanted rapport with natural laws and materialist ontology, is left behind.

> The ravine, filled with varieties of night sounds, lurkings of black-ink stream and creek, lingerings of autumns that rolled over in fire and bronze and died a thousand years ago. From this deep place sprang mushroom and toadstool and cold stone frog and crawdad and spider. There was a long tunnel down there under the earth in which poisoned waters dripped and the echoes never ceased calling Come Come Come and if you do you'll stay forever, drip, forever, rustle, run, rush, whisper, and never go, never go go go…[31]

This is the nocturnal world of Bradbury's fictional version of Waukegan, where inanimate things are imbued with phantom agency, and the primordial prevails over civilization. It echoes Kierkegaardian anxiety, as it invites one to "Come Come Come" but "never go go go." Traversing the ravine is thus no mean feat, as the boys become aware of the superimposed role of this metaphysically heightened sphere. This is a place where darker things lurk, things that predate humankind and its arbitrary civilization. However, in line with Kierkegaard's observation that meaningful existence can only be derived from confronting the all-encompassing anxiety inherent to the human condition, the boys travel on.

The ravine also encompasses the concept of sacred space, albeit in slightly inverted fashion. In his study of the crypto-religious archetypes that secularized humanity has inherited from previous cultures, Mircea Eliade explains the concept of sacred space and its relation to the profane realm of culture:

> One of the outstanding characteristics of traditional societies is the opposition that they assume between their inhabited territory and the unknown and indeterminate space that surrounds it. […] The world (that is, our world) is a universe within which the sacred has already manifested itself, in which, consequently, the break-through from plane to plane has become possible and repeatable. […] The sacred reveals absolute reality and at the same time makes orientation possible; hence it *founds the world* in the sense that it fixes the limits and establishes the order of the world.[32]

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[30] Bradbury, *The Halloween Tree*,15.

[31] Bradbury, *The Halloween Tree*,15.

[32] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion* [1957], trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1959), 29–30.

Eliade's idea of sacred space enveloping the profane realm of the civilized world can be observed throughout children's and fantasy literature of the 20th century. In J.M. Barrie's *Peter and Wendy* (1911), gothic imagery and setting are juxtaposed with the *Neverland* realm of interminable childhood.[33] After receding between and around the two world wars, secondary worlds proliferated in the fantasy boom of the late 1960s to 1980s with *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950)[34] setting the stage for J.R.R. Tolkien's mythopoeic *Middle-Earth* novels and the re-introduction of gothic elements in combination with the motif of the sacred realm. Some significant examples here are Peter S. Beagle's *The Last Unicorn* (1968),[35] Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising Sequence* (1965-1977)[36] and the fantasy movies of the 1980s, such as Ridley Scott's *Legend* (1985)[37] or Jim Henson's *Labyrinth* (1986).[38] From a cultural-historical standpoint, these works and their inherent yearning for aesthetic escapism clash harshly with the events they are juxtaposed with, such as the perpetual threat of the Cold War and the national and global disenchantment that was the Vietnam War (1955-1975).

Bradbury's stories seem, in contrast, much more like aestheticized representations of universal childhood motifs. Inherently aware of the underlying darker aspects of existence, the ravine becomes an avenue towards metaphysical and ontological renegotiation for the juvenile characters who dare traverse it. The whispers they encounter serve as reminders that the conventional spatiotemporal boundaries of the everyday world are disrupted; what follows may involve matters of life and death, or worse, infringe upon the sanctity of the soul. As Isabella van Elferen has observed, the gothic genre thrives on the suspension of temporal norms, whether manifested through the hypnotic rhythm of goth music or the eerie presence of disembodied voices. These whispers represent a quintessential gothic trope within the soundscape, evoking a sense of timelessness.[39] This suspension of the flow of time adds a gothic touch to the sacred qualities of the ravine. Entering may signify a commitment to "stay forever," a concept further explored in the narrative. Positioned at the outskirts of the rural community, this cosmologically significant threshold serves as "an opening by which passage from one cosmic region to another is made possible (from heaven to earth and vice versa; from earth to the underworld)."[40] The retrieval of a beloved friend's soul aptly demands a confrontation with the most deep-seated anxieties. Bradbury's portrayal of a perpetually haunted natural world through the ravine serves to subvert classic narratives typically associated with haunted castles or country houses, themes which James once deemed off-limits to American writers. Instead, Bradbury's narrative delves into the realm of primordial magic and communication with the divine, offering a different perspective on the supernatural. As Eliade noted, however, this sacred space entails a transgression from the balance between the sacred and the profane, a journey that can unfold in both upward and downward

[33] J.M. Barrie, *Peter and Wendy* (London: The Folio Society, 2006).

[34] C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (London: The Folio Society, 1996).

[35] Peter S. Beagle, *The Last Unicorn* (London: Gollancz, 2023).

[36] Susan Cooper, *The Dark Is Rising Sequence* (New York: Margaret K. McElderry, 2013).

[37] *Legend*, directed by Ridley Scott (1985; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios).

[38] Labyrinth, directed by Jim Henson (1986; Culver City, CA: TriStar).

[39] Isabella van Elferen, "Goth Socio-Musical Reality," in: Isabella van Elferen and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, *Goth Music: From Sound to Subculture* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 68.

[40] Eliade, *The Sacred and Profane*, 37.

directions. The fictional topography holds a profound encounter for underage characters suspended between childhood innocence and the weight of adulthood, involving final farewells and a cosmic confrontation within and beyond.

The Animate Ravine: Noumenal Playground for Boys

As readers delve into the mysteries of the spectrally animate wilderness and its profound connection to non-human perspectives, they find themselves immersed in the heart of Bradbury's Illinois tales. The child protagonist's acute sensitivity to the hidden aspects of nature becomes a transformative experience, deviating from conventional gothic tropes. Within the haunting whispers of the ravine, readers encounter the essence of Kierkegaardian eternal anxiety—a poignant reminder that cosmic mysteries persist even in adulthood, beckoning introspection and, perhaps, a return to the unfiltered perception of childhood. The focus of attention here shifts to the enigmatic entity that lies just beyond the boundaries of civilized existence: the ravine. In the 21st century, a surge of interest in the non-human realm within philosophy has emerged. Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), a subset of Speculative Realism, and New Materialism have led a non-human turn. The latter branch of ecocriticism delves into the intricate connections between humans and the natural world, redefining concepts like nature and ecology.

OOO (Object-Oriented Ontology) seeks to address a dilemma identified by Immanuel Kant and subsequent idealists in the 19th and 20th centuries. Both Kant and the Speculative Realists agree on a pivotal proposition: the world, in human terms, is divided into two realms. The *phenomenon* shapes our perception and understanding of objects based on surface features as they relate to our senses and intellect, while the *noumenon* resides beneath this superficial layer, holding the true essence of the object. Kantian idealists and phenomenologists, constrained by their inability to access the noumenon directly, concentrate on the phenomenon, thereby fostering what OOO critiques as "correlationalism." OOO posits that noumenal aspects do manifest adjacent to our experience, opening avenues for comprehension through intellectual inquiry. Moreover, OOO asserts that inanimate objects exhibit comparable ontological complexity to humans, challenging anthropocentric ontologies.[41] The descriptions of the ravine in Bradbury's works exemplify encounters with the noumenal, evoking contradictory and myriad impressions in the child protagonist's mind. Language, limited to external facets, hints at the hidden core, as seen in acoustic and visual portrayals of the ravine.

Language falters in conveying the entirety of the complex relationship between the observer and the ravine, showcasing the exhaustion of perception, intellect, and language in the face of such complexity. This revelation can be unsettling, emphasizing the real world's richness beyond our constructivist understanding. In Bradbury's stories, it also acts as a material enchantment, heightening the child's experience and reconnecting them with the broader cosmic space—a materialist sublime. The correlationist perspective underscores the ontological undervaluation of any object, a concept children may readily identify with.

New Materialism, on the other hand, has also attempted to approach our understanding of the material world (and our location therein) from a revolutionary perspective. Rejecting, for

[41] Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology. A New Theory of Everything* (New York: Pelican, 2018).

example, the "élan vital," an immaterial spark that superimposes animate beings over inanimate objects, it instead looks for a materialist enchantment. As Jane Bennett puts it:

> Disenchantment does not mean that we live in a world that has been completely counted up and figured out, but rather that the world has become calculable in principle. Although it is true that "the 'rational calculation' of business, societal rationalization, and the diminution of 'tradition' all combined to destroy formal magical practices and beliefs," the disenchanting world nevertheless retains "fragmented but still powerful magical elements." It is quite possible for one to experience aspects of nature that currently defy understanding and still affirm the principle of the scientific calculability of the world. In a disenchanting world, the principle of calculability tends to overrule, even if it does not always overpower, experience. One might say, following Kant, that the calculable world functions as a "regulative ideal."[42]

While not necessarily supernatural, our experience of the noumenal world can correlate with our disenchanted mode of existence, allowing for metaphysical exploration. This experience is neither a panpsychist nor animistic revelation, as consciousness and personal agency are withheld by the regulative ideal. However, this does not mean that the natural world is exhausted by our limited means of expression and understanding. The materialist re-enchantment is us becoming aware of this fact, and the gothic mode serves as a particularly productive playing field for such aesthetic playfulness.

The re-enchantment of the reader through the gothic is amplified by our observations on the relationship between the archetypal children and the opaque elements they are confronted with. (Bradbury's) children are more perceptive of the world and can correlate new observations with their outlook on the cosmos without the amount of recalibration an adult would require. This delicacy of feeling towards the natural realm is not new to literary children. Utilizing the archetypal child trope in many of her books, Frances Hodgson Burnett perhaps achieved one of the most distinct representations of the child-nature convergence in *The Secret Garden* (1911):

> Sometimes since I've been in the garden I've looked up through the trees at the sky and I have had a strange feeling of being happy as if something was pushing and drawing in my chest and making me breathe fast. Magic is always pushing and drawing and making things out of nothing. Everything is made out of magic, leaves and trees, flowers and birds, badgers and foxes and squirrels and people. So it must be all around us. In this garden—in all the places.[43]

While clearly branching into a magical interpretation of the natural powers observed, this passage illustrates the amplification of the archetypal child by its correspondence with and observation of nature. The underlying principle of growth governs everything. Colin Craven, once sickly, undergoes a transformative journey in the garden, where he becomes aware of his own growth and gradual healing, whether sparked by vitality or not. The connection clearly enables an exegetic metaphorical reading, but on the diegetic level, children and nature demonstrate a powerful entanglement. As do adults, Burnett and New Materialism remind us, but we tend to forget.

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[42] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2010), 59.

[43] Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden* (London: The Folio Society, 2006), 218.

Bradbury's children also display this keen awareness of an unperceived connection to the natural world. In "The Night" (1946), one of the first forays into the mysterious liminal zone, this concept is established:

> You are only eight years old, you know little of death, fear, or dread. Death is the waxen effigy in the coffin when you were six and Grandfather passed away—looking like a great fallen vulture in his casket, silent, withdrawn, no more to tell you how to be a good boy, no more to comment succinctly on politics. Death is your little sister one morning when you awaken at the age of seven, look into her crib and see her staring up at you with a blind blue, fixed and frozen stare until the men come with a small wicker basket to take her away. Death is when you stand by her high chair four weeks later and suddenly realize she'll never be in it again, laughing and crying, and make you jealous of her because she was born. That is death. But this is more than death. This summer night wading deep in time and stars and warm eternity. It is an essence of all the things you will ever feel or see or hear in your life again, being brought steadily home to you all at once.[44]

Derived from experience, Bradbury here provides a rare observation of the child's sensitized mode of perceiving the world. The protagonist, after his first painful brush with death, has become acquainted with his "thrownness" (Heidegger's *Geworfenheit*[45]) into the natural and cosmic order. He is aware of experiencing something "more than death" that transcends beyond the confines of the individual experience of nature. Heidegger's concept refers to the idea that the individual, confronted with an ever-complex composition of objects (in space) and their dazzling oscillation between states (in time) renders a universal "meaning to life" impossible. The individual is thus tasked with devising their own take on a meaningful existence against these mind-shattering cosmic realities. The protagonist encounters a similar and ultimately sobering realization of this status. Noticing his mother's hand trembling when traversing the ravine, his perspective on adulthood is ruptured:

> Does she, too, feel that intangible menace, that groping out of darkness, that crouching malignancy down below? Is there, then, no strength in growing up? No solace in being an adult? No sanctuary in life? No flesh citadel strong enough to withstand the scrabbling assault of midnights?[46]

Against the eternal complexity of the ravine, even adults are stripped of their powers. When encountered at a young age, the noumenal aspect of nature serves as a stark introduction to a Kierkegaardian eternal anxiety. More shocking, even, is the realization that this link between oneself and the natural world exhausts personal identity and individuality. The lingering ravine is part of the same cosmos that also enabled one's own existence. Burnett's depiction of the entanglement with the natural realm is here inverted in horrific fashion, echoing Timothy Morton's reading of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and an equally terrible moment of realization:

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[44] Ray Bradbury, "The Night" in *The Stories of Ray Bradbury* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2010), 12. "The Night" (1946) was later revised by Bradbury and incorporated into *Dandelion Wine* (1957).

[45] Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* [1927], (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006). English edition: Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, New York: Suny Press, 2010).

[46] Bradbury, "The Night", 13.

> God creates Man and is horrified by what he sees of himself in the mirror of human flesh. The logic implied that God and monotheism cannot cope with ecology at all. Shelley's point is that everyone is afflicted with this idea, not just Frankenstein. Indeed, the creature was perhaps primed for it by all those Enlightenment reading materials he finds. […] Caring for such a being involves accepting the super-natural, that is to say, what goes beyond our concepts of nature, perhaps in an irreducible way. The monstrous is what we cannot predict.[47]

In Ray Bradbury's Illinois stories, the juvenile peek behind the phenomenological curtain at the noumenal enables a meaningful existence. The ravine becomes an integral part of existence, as it provides a rare realization of the ephemeral nature of each individual moment. It is also an integral part of the ineffable features of that same existence. A meaningful life, Kierkegaard would say, is only possible if we confront the primordial anxiety that encompasses the human condition. The ravine serves as a liminal zone that transcends the common dichotomy of civilization/nature in *The Halloween Tree*, a physical manifestation of anxiety in *Dandelion Wine*, and a reminder of the re-enchantment that becomes possible if the disenchanted adult way of observing the world is overcome. Children thus transcend their inherent societal inferiority, as they are more finely attuned to the world's underlying aspects that envelop them.

Gothic elements in stories centered around child protagonists may have become a common trope in literature. However, Bradbury uses this juxtaposition for emotional ontological renegotiation, not just contained by his own reminiscence. The ravine thus becomes a primordial remnant of bygone, cosmic ages. Henry James proposed a pessimistic outlook for American writers, and Bradbury responds by placing the secrets of the cosmos into the wilderness, an *axis mundi* particularly inviting to children, who obtain an elevated place on the metaphysical and ontological pedestal.[48] "You realize that all men are like this. That each person is to himself one alone. One oneness, a unit in society, but always afraid. Like here, standing. If you should scream now, if you should holler for help, would it matter?"[49] All individuals are faced with this anxiety, and Bradbury's answer to this final question, as far as his Illinois stories are concerned, seems to be: "This, too, will pass and you'd better enjoy the view while it lasts."

In conclusion, Ray Bradbury's Illinois stories invite us to reconsider the boundaries of childhood and gothic literature. The lingering ravine, with its profound implications, mirrors the perpetual dance between the human condition and the cosmic unknown. In embracing the gothic, Bradbury presents a universe where the archetypal child transcends mere literary convention, becoming a conduit for readers of all ages to commune with the ineffable mysteries of existence.

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[47] Timothy Morton, "Frankenstein and Ecocriticism" in: Andrew Smith [ed.]: *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein* (Cambridge University Press 2016), 156.

[48] It is worth noting that the re-enchantment described here contrasts with earlier Puritan reactions to the wilderness, as early settlers expressed concern about the uncharted territory being imbued by the devil and other malign forces. American philosophy and theology have oscillated between this benign/malign opposition. For a detailed exploration of this topic, see Roderick Frazier Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* [1967], (New Haven, CT, 2014).

[49] Bradbury, "The Night", 14.

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Abstract

This article examines Ray Bradbury's Illinois stories, focusing on "the ravine" as a liminal space that bridges the mundane and the supernatural. The characters' journey through this ravine echoes mythological and literary motifs, embodying Kierkegaardian anxiety and Eliade's concept of sacred space. The ravine, imbued with a spectral agency, represents a primordial realm predating civilization, challenging both children and readers to confront existential and ontological questions. By engaging with contemporary philosophical perspectives like Object-Oriented Ontology and New Materialism, the analysis traces how Bradbury's depiction of the natural world fosters a materialist re-enchantment and underscores the palpable connection between childhood sensibilities and cosmic mysteries. The article situates Bradbury's work within the tradition of gothic literature, highlighting his unique contribution to the genre through the ontological and metaphysical renegotiation experienced by his young protagonists.

Keywords Illinois, sacred space, object-oriented ontology, new materialism