

5-15-2014

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Recommended Citation

Wainwright, A. (2014). In the cool of the woods : an original story on burgeoning self-identity for 6s and 7s. *New York : Bank Street College of Education*. Retrieved from <http://educate.bankstreet.edu/independent-studies/69>

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In the Cool of the Woods:
An Original Story on Burgeoning Self-Identity
for 6s and 7s

By
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Education
Concentrations in Childhood Education and Literacy

Bank Street College of Education,
2014

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Abstract

In the Cool of the Woods is an original picture book written for children of the ages of six and seven. The story describes an afternoon in the life of Maxine, whose mother insists that she leave her side and go have an adventure. Maxine reluctantly does so and meets her cousin Laura at the edge of the woods. With Laura as guide, the magic of the woods is revealed, and soon Maxine is guiding the pair of girls in discovery. At the end of the day, Maxine leaves the woods having undergone a remarkable experience that has changed her relationship with the world around her.

In writing *In the Cool of the Woods*, several themes sprung from the overarching thrust of burgeoning self-identity that guides the story. Those themes are: the natural break from the mother that occurs at six and seven and how that break informs a child's concept of self; the significance of storytelling and narrative in shaping a child's identity; and the role physical environment, particularly the natural world, plays in helping guide a child's sense of self in relation to the greater world. The themes are examined from child development and sociological perspectives. Several books that can be read as companion pieces to *In the Cool of the Woods* are also reviewed, and various possibilities for its reading are put forward.

Table of Contents

Introduction	p. 4
<i>In the Cool of the Woods</i>	p. 6
Rationale	p. 33
Breaking from the Maternal: A Shift in Understanding of Self	p. 39
Stories and Play in Identity Formation	p. 45
The Role of the Woods	p. 52
Children's Literature: Inspiration for and Companions to <i>In the Cool of the Woods</i>	p. 55
Reflection	p. 60
References	p. 63

Introduction

As I considered the culminating project that would bring my tenure as a student at Bank Street College of Education to a close, the elements of my studies that have had the greatest impact on my philosophy about teaching immediately surfaced. Those elements are: the interaction between children and their environments; the significance of developmental stages; and the importance of children's literature—and, more generally, storytelling and narrative—as tools for scaffolding growth and understanding in children. Moreover, as literature and writing have always played powerful roles in my life, an ideal culminating project would honor that significance. For these reasons both professional and personal, I chose to write an original children's story and examine its themes from a child development perspective. The following rationale will explain my writing process and my choices of themes. The sections that follow the story will look closely at how those themes unfold in both the story itself and in the age for which the story was written.

In this, my second year teaching in a second grade classroom, I feel fortunate to be given a daily window into the remarkable changes children undergo at this age: from egocentric to empathic; from relatively unconsidered extroversion to a drawing inward as they become much more alert to their position in the world. In coming to know the age, I at once have come to know a significant period in my own childhood with newfound acuity. The result of this crossroads between understanding of children and understanding of self is the original children's story, *In the Cool of the Woods*, and discussion that follow.

The shaping event that I describe in the story, in which the characters Maxine and Laura act as doubles for me and my cousin Mia, respectively, invites different readings depending on one's age. The adult reader might see the magical creatures of the woods as clear creations of the girls—particularly as they recall their own childhood play in which magic likely, at some point, played a part. For the reading child, I hope that her interpretation might allow for greater, if subconscious, shades of appreciation. I hope that she might see magic as possible in the world around her, but also as something that emerges from within. It is on this self-generative process that occurs at the ages of six and seven that the following work, both creative and critical, focuses.

In the Cool of the Woods

By

Adelaide Wainwright

[Illustration: small watercolor of magical plants]

“Go run outside and have an adventure,” Maxine’s mother said. In the big, bright spaces of her great-uncle’s house, grown-up party sounds jingled and rang: deep laughter, tinkling ice in glasses. Maxine scowled. She didn’t want to go! She wanted to watch the dancing hem of her mother’s dress as she moved about. She wanted to stay close by.

[Illustration: Maxine surrounded by adult legs, a scowl on her face as she looks around]

“Go on, now,” her mother insisted with a firm voice and crossed arms. When Maxine leaned around her to catch a look at the party, her mother sidestepped into her path. “Alright!” Maxine shouted, and puffed up her chest. Then she turned on her heels and reluctantly stomped away.



Out in the driveway, the sun shone off every little pebble, casting them in gold. Maxine scooped up a handful and flung them one by one at a tall elm tree standing guard at the edge of the wood.

[Illustration: Close-up of Maxine's hand filled with glinting stones]

Suddenly, from the shadows between the trees popped a girl Maxine's age and, in many ways, her twin. Long, brown hair hung straight down both their backs and their eyes shone green in the bright sunlight. It was her cousin Laura.

[Illustration: Laura is a small figure at the edge of the woods; Maxine's back is facing the reader in the foreground]

“You shouldn’t throw rocks at the trees, you know,” Laura said. When Maxine had last seen her cousin, they were almost babies. Now Laura, in her floating dress, looked mysterious and strange. Maxine put her hands on her overall-ed waist to look tough.

[Illustration: Laura and her airy dressed are framed against the woods, which have streaks of watercolor—the first in the book]

“Oh, yeah? Who cares about the trees anyway?” Maxine demanded. Laura bent her head and narrowed her eyes at Maxine like you do when you are thinking very hard. Then she walked quickly from her place at the edge of the woods and took Maxine gently by the hand. “I’ll show you,” she whispered.

[Illustration: Close-up of Laura’s face, with the expression described]

Maxine looked over her shoulder. She caught a glimpse of her mother's dancing dress as it passed across a window of her great-uncle's house. But she let herself be pulled by Laura out of the sunshine and into the shadows of the trees.



Without the bright light of the sun to heat up and wash the earth, the woods felt cool and smelled darkly of dirt and rotting branches. But they also shimmered with more shades of green than Maxine could count. She stayed close behind her cousin's floating white dress.

[Illustration: Washes of watercolor that evoke the darkness and the many shades of green, along with the two girls seen from behind, Maxine almost directly behind Laura]

Quick as a bird diving out of sight, Laura dropped to her knees. She carefully pulled a large white stone, smoothly polished and round, from the nook between the roots of a tall tree. She cupped it in her hands and held it up for Maxine to see.

[Illustration: Close-up of Laura's hand, recalling Maxine's hand holding up the pebbles from the driveway. The stone is washes of blue, pink, and white watercolor.]

Maxine paused, then leaned in close. In most places, the rosy color of Laura's hands came through the stone and turned it pink. But in others, tiny roads of bright white ran through it. The surface was covered with little holes. In fact, they looked very much like...

[Illustration: Maxine's face hovering over the stone is illuminated with its colors]

“Rooms,” Laura whispered, “where the Tree Keepers hold their meetings.”

Maxine raised an eyebrow at her strange cousin. Tree keepers?! But she had to admit, there was something odd about the stone. It seemed to glow even in the darkness of the trees.

[Illustration: Maxine’s skeptical expression is shaded with watercolor to demonstrate her initial, tepid embrace of the magic of the woods]

In a hushed voice, Laura told Maxine the story of the day she wandered into the woods, bored by a party just like the one back at the house—the party that Maxine had almost forgotten!—and discovered the stone glowing in that same nook of the tree. “And that was just the beginning,” Laura said.

[Illustration: Maxine and Laura are seated on the ground facing each other, Maxine’s knees tucked up to her chin, Laura sitting cross-legged holding the stone]

Laura placed the stone back where she had found it and led Maxine deeper into the darkness of the woods. There was so much to show Maxine.

[Illustration: The stone is shown small and glowing in the crook of a trees roots]

They checked under the ruffled leaves of ferns for the glinting light of what Laura had named the Fern Creatures. Maxine rubbed her eyes but it was still there: a living, twinkling light in the damp, jewel green that she could not deny.

[Illustration: Maxine and Laura's torsos are drawn pulling back the leaves of large ferns. Yellow and green lights glow underneath.]

Maxine followed Laura's pointing finger to the curve of a narrow brook. What peeked above the surface but beady eyes... so many of them! Yet they popped back down just as soon as Maxine could sharpen her focus.



“How can this be happening?” Maxine asked herself. “How could this morning’s plain old world hold so many waiting secrets?”

[Illustration: Maxine’s face illuminated with green and blue light, mostly in watercolor]

For a moment, she imagined the party back at her great-uncle's house: her mother's dancing skirt, and the drinks clinking in glasses. She smiled a knowing smile at her cousin, grabbed her hand, and took the lead...

[Illustration: Maxine pulling Laura deeper into the woods, just as Laura had first pulled Maxine]

... as they raced through the woods for hours, turning up magic.

[Illustration: The shades of color and magical lights of the woods are brought out in watercolor]

Together they flipped over heavy rocks to find greeting creatures, who would give a quick wave before scurrying out of sight.

[Illustration: One of the girls' relatively large hands is shown lifting a large rock, from beneath which a tiny hand waves]

They scrambled over an old stone wall and startled a swarm of Fliers, who vanished into a patch of sunlight.

[Illustration: The girls making their way over the wall, tiny winged creatures flying up above them]

They lay down with their faces against the soft earth, catching glimpses of the long fingers of Mushroom Keepers. These curled their mushroom's gills around them as they shyly hid themselves away.

[Illustration: Close-up of several golden and spotted mushrooms with long fingers curling from between the gills]

Maxine and Laura closed their eyes and let the sounds of the woods and all the wood's creatures hum gently in their ears. They felt the earth cool beneath them and a stray beam of sunlight warm on their eyelids.

[Illustration: The girls' torsos seen from above, their faces illuminated, the earth dark around them]

As she drifted into a light sleep, Maxine could swear she felt Fliers land briefly on her hands and in her hair. She imagined them brushing loose strands off her cousin's shoulders with their hazy wings.

[Illustration: Close-up of Laura and Maxine's sleeping heads with winged, fairy-like creatures lighting upon their hair]

Maxine and Laura woke to a change of temperature in the air. The sunlight had disappeared from between the trees. It was replaced with the bright violet of the end of day.

[Illustration: The silhouettes of the dark trees seen from the perspective of the girls on the ground with the colors of twilight between their branches]

“Come on,” Laura whispered, “time to go back.” The two girls followed the drifting laughter of grownups—the party had moved outside.

[Illustration: Laura and Maxine seen from behind, walking hand and hand side by side out of the woods into the light—and pencil strokes—of the driveway]

As they reached the edge of the woods, they turned behind them to find a glow to the places their feet had fallen. It was as if the woods would hold a path for their return. The cousins leaned together, thinking of adventures to come.

[Illustration: The girls seen from behind, brushstrokes of watercolor in their arms, feet, and hair, looking back at the illuminated trail they have left in the woods]

Rationale

The artist who realized that his artistic activities were less a function of his own directives than those of others... had rewritten the meaning not only of those activities but also of his very self; what he might do in the future to create an environment more conducive to his own true interests and desires. (Freeman, 1991, p. 92)

The creation of an individual, with a unique identity, is both a creative act of nature and an interaction between the individual and his infinitely variable environment. As one considers the simultaneously formative influences of both innate, biological changes and advances and the multitudinous external influences on a child's development, the dynamic relationship between the normative biological and the infinitely various external provides a shifting backdrop against which a child's story of self unfolds. When that child is in her earliest years, that backdrop is fairly prescribed by biology; she is in many ways bound to motor reflexes and neural responses built in to her physiology (Williamson & Anzalone, 2001). Though exterior influences play a great role in her development even at this early stage, the relationship between biology and environment is perhaps at its least balanced, significantly favoring the former over the latter. Yet as the child grows in age, that relationship becomes increasingly complex as her physical and cognitive abilities develop to the point that she becomes keenly aware of herself in terms of her surroundings, and of those people with whom she has the closest contact. This change occurs with a uniquely fascinating sense of drama at ages six and seven. As the latter is the age I have taught for the last two years, I thus feel I understand it better than most any other. It is also around this age that a seemingly inconsequential and semi-

private experience of my own helped shaped my sense of self—a little artist with self as subject, coming to see how my adaptation to the influences of the world could change my experience in it. So it is both for the age I teach and for the child I was then that my ideas for my original story, *In the Cool of the Woods*, first took hold.

When I was approximately six or seven, I went with my mother, father, and brother (my immediate family) to visit my grandparents on the eastern tip of Long Island. I grew up in Northern California, so both the physical landscape and the distinct social environment of the culture to which my father's family belongs were exotic to the young me. The ocean was balmy whereas mine was cold; the flora more understated but no less mysterious than the redwood forests and dry chaparral I knew so well from frequent hikes with my family back home; and the people seemed to exude what I could not then name but clearly felt as a sort of staid glamour and luxurious reserve. In California, I could already tell that there was an easy looseness to life compared to what I found when I visited our family “out East”.

Yet we had been visiting nearly every summer in my seven-year memory, so there was nonetheless a good deal that was accessible and familiar during our visits—mainly my grandparents and their beautiful house, my aunt and uncle, and my first cousins. I felt comfortable there. But, in spite of the comfort of those surroundings as well as those of the world I inhabited in California, difficulties in my immediate family (beyond the quite obvious and inescapable tension of my parents' fights) were becoming more evident to me. Namely, there was something about my charming, gregarious, and lovely mother that was not quite right.

Like many modern children, my bond with my mother was—and happily remains—deeply felt. In spite of her quirks, she fell very much into the cross-cultural concept of the “good mother”: “Whether we call it mythology, ideology, or folk wisdom, there exist in all societies ideas about good mothers, women who are nurturant, kind, and self-less,” (Birns & Hay, 1988, p. 3). My mother displayed each of these characteristics (I like to think naturally, though cultural influences surely had their effects), and, furthermore, engaged me creatively and intellectually at every turn. Compared to the more buttoned-up mothers of my friends, my mother’s at times eccentric behavior delighted me and provided me with a different paradigm through which to regard and ultimately challenge the world. Yet at the age at which I began to see her differences as something others might find undesirable, I remember feeling pulled closer to her in search of protection from the critical gaze of the world and as a protector of her, in turn. As it would turn out, my mother’s struggles and heroic triumphs over what I would soon discover to be her battles with mental illness would shape our relationship to this day.

During that summer trip to Long Island, I felt that pull particularly strongly. I worried about her, and wanted to stay close to her side. That same trip, while on an atypical visit to my great-uncle’s house where a slew of less familiar faces (my father’s cousins along with their spouses and children) were amassed, an incident occurred that literally pulled me away from my mother’s side and thrust me into a world of extraordinary magic. My second cousin Mia—who I barely knew but deeply admired for her one year of greater experience in the world and a subtle confidence she possessed even then—shepherded me into the woods running along my great-

uncle's property and there showed me the habitations of each variety of fairy. This was a world in which she had clearly invested a great deal of time and imagination, and which became real enough for me that afternoon to throw me with greater abandon into the books I already adored, as well as into my interactions with my peers as a powerful influence onto my emerging understanding of self.

So I wrote *In the Cool of the Woods*, which describes this trip into the woods as a fictionalized account of a powerful, personal experience, but also as a narrative of more universally experienced changes that occur in most children's lives around this age. In my students, I see the sometimes regressive but typically continuous shift away from their parents and toward their peers as the most compelling external relationship in their world. At age six, "The importance of friends now rivals the importance of parents and teachers in the child's social development," (Wood, 2007, p. 75). And at seven, they travel even farther away from their parents emotionally as they begin to both turn inward and make "best friends":

Sevens can be extremely moody, sulky, and sometimes depressed.

They are often content to spend long periods in their rooms, alone by choice, reading or listening to music or playing with animals and dolls.

At school, too, they like to be by themselves and appreciate quiet corners for reading or working. They also like working with a best friend, although relationships may be on one day and off the next.

(Wood, 2007, p. 86)

In addition to the story itself, I hope to have conveyed something of these developmental transitions through the example illustrations. I chose

watercolor pencils as my medium as they allowed me to gradually pull out greater degrees of looseness from the pencil strokes, mimicking the protagonist's change as she moves away from the structured adult world of her mother and toward the more nebulous, evolving world of magic she shares with her cousin.

My hope is that this story goes beyond illustrating the anxieties of external influence that occur around the shifts in development described in Wood's statements above. I hope that it might, in theory, provide the six- and seven-year-olds who read it or have it read to them an accessible example of the magic they have the potential to uncover during these shifts: both in naturally pulling away from their parents (particularly their mothers) and taking part in the intimate bonds they are beginning to forge with their peers. If it were to give a child flummoxed by more serious circumstances such as mine at that age some pleasure or solace, all the better. But if it were simply to show through the power of story what all children of this age are capable of, my intent for it would be fulfilled.

Following my original story *In the Cool of the Woods*, I will explore the ways in which the major themes of the work—namely, movement away from the maternal and toward one's peers as reflection and scaffold of one's forming concept of self; the importance of play and story in bolstering this shaping of identity; and the significance of immersion in the natural world as a catalyst for self-exploration and —definition—are supported by developmental and sociological theory. I will also review several works of children's literature that share some of these themes and, in some cases, acted as inspirations for the type of story I hope to have written. My

closing reflection will include possible applications for reading the story in various settings.

Breaking from the Maternal:
A Shift in Understanding of Self

When she digs in her heels and scowls at the thought of separating from her mother's side, Maxine invokes the urgency of a bond that begins, on the side of the mother, even before birth. She demands adherence to an attachment that, if increasingly complex, has thus far been the touchstone for her understanding of the human social realm in addition to the primary scaffolding that has supported her cognitive and emotional development. The true significance of this attachment began in infancy and is, according to the works of preeminent attachment theorist John Bowlby, a biological function.

As Cassidy describes Bowlby's evolutionary stance on attachment: "genetic selection favored attachment behaviors because they increased the likelihood of mother-child proximity, which in turn increased the likelihood of protection and provided survival advantage," (1999, p. 4). As an infant, the bond of Maxine to her mother insured the child's survival. At that point, the foundation for a "persistent, not transitory" (p. 12) affectional bond were laid. Maxine as infant was likely distressed when her mother was absent and found minimally compensatory comfort in the soothing of a stranger. Though her mother loved her, the biological imperative of this bond as a shaping force in her early understanding of her place in the world was one-sided; Maxine depended on her mother as a sort of translation mechanism for the growing number of sensory, cognitive and psychological inputs of the world.

However, at the time of the story, Maxine's understanding of the world has grown radically richer and clearer—and less dependent on her mother as the lens

through which the external is negotiated. She has reached the beginnings of what Piaget termed the concrete operational stage of development. In this stage:

we see that children are overcoming many of the limitations in their reasoning about the social world... They are beginning to take intentions into account in their moral judgments. They also are increasingly aware of the subtle social relationships in the family, peer group, and larger society. (Miller, 2002, p. 55)

As the concrete operational stage is characterized by a marked decline in egocentrism (Lightfoot et al, 2009), Maxine's relationship with her mother has become complicated by the fact that she has begun to see her from a newly achieved, multi-faceted perspective. No longer is Maxine's mother the person-object whose primary purpose—from Maxine's earlier vantage—was to nurture, protect, and guide her. Now Maxine possesses the empathic capabilities to more distinctly perceive her mother as a being unto herself, with her own motivations outside of her critical role in Maxine's life. A cognitive development has bred this emotional awareness: "Thought now is decentered rather than centered, dynamic rather than static, and reversible rather than irreversible," (Miller, 2002, p. 56). Maxine, and children her age, are beginning to be able to modify their thinking to incorporate the feelings of others into their decisions and actions—the feelings of the mother included. Unlike the anxiety of separation as displayed by an infant or young child whose reliance on his mother is paramount, Maxine's anxiety of separation may likely be influenced by the fact that she is able to see her mother's desire to be apart from her, or rather more likely to participate in the adult sphere of the party, as legitimate and real. In other words,

Maxine may understand her mother's insistence that she "go run outside and have an adventure" for what it simultaneously is: a desire for her temporary independence alongside a desire for her child's independence and exploration of the world beyond her.

While the relationship between mother and child is in some respects inarguably biological, a sociocultural perspective on the same gives it deeper, more nuanced meaning. It is remarkable to note that according to Elizabeth Badinter, "mother love" is a relatively new invention, and that "it was only during the period of the Enlightenment that the survival of children became to be seen as important and mothers were urged to take care of their own children [rather than sending them out to wet nurses, as wealthy women did, in their early years]," (Birns & Hay, 1988, p. 4). Though this view is a radical departure from the biological function of attachment that Bowlby asserts, it is important to recognize that elements of motherhood and thus the mother-child relationship are in some regards culturally and socially constructed.

We can assume that overlapping but distinct sociocultural spheres influence Maxine's relationship with her mother. Given that the story is implicitly set in the United States (one can assume this from details about its author), the greatest sphere of influence is that of our collective consciousness as an albeit extremely diverse nation. As Maxine and her mother are Anglo-American, like I, that aspect of their culture has also played a role in the shaping of their relationship. Therefore, the dominant thrust for individualism in our national consciousness is particularly true for Maxine's ethnic group: "Anglo-American culture is generally considered to stress values associated with individualism, such as self-confidence, individual

achievement, and independence,” (Harwood et al, 1995, p. 82). So Maxine’s mother’s request that her daughter explore the world around her is typical to the ideals of her society: that at this juncture in her development, Maxine takes on greater degrees of responsibility for her own identity and success, or her “self-maximization” (Harwood et al, 1995). The mother is embodying and performing these societal ideals but in so doing performing what, depending on the culture, may be seen as forcing an unnecessary schism between her child and herself.

From a feminist perspective, the ideal of individualism as it falls under the umbrella of various cultural narratives is patriarchal by nature: “Stories of development, fairy tales and romantic myths, stories of what is good and worthwhile are all told from the perspective of the patriarchy,” (Debold et al, 1993, p. 30). Alternatively, it may be interpreted that by providing the initial nudge that would lead her to the magic of the woods, Maxine’s mother is acting as a catalyst for an imaginative world of thinking and feeling that may be construed as clearly feminine in a positive sense. “Rather than protecting a daughter only through teaching her to fit into a culture that is deeply hostile to her integrity and power, a mother can fight against the oppressions that violate her own and her daughter’s spirit, thus connecting with and protecting her daughter,” (Debold et al, 1993, p. 31). Maxine’s mother may have been asserting her own needs, but she has also pushed her daughter into a transformative experience.

Alone in the driveway, Maxine is in temporary limbo: guideless, directionless. As a child of her age, she is moving away from the central force of her mother and beginning to understand herself more in terms of her peers (Wood, 2007). With the

arrival of Laura as guide to the magic of the woods, she is able to stretch her relationship to the world and is thus operating in Lev Vygostky, sociocultural developmental theorist's, zone of proximal development in which:

a more competent person collaborates with a child to help him move from where he is now to where he can be with help. This person accomplishes this feat by means of prompts, clues, modeling, explanation, leading questions, discussion, joint participation, encouragement, and control of the child's attention. (Miller, 2002, p. 377)

Laura, familiar with the woods and its inhabitants and therefore a "more competent person" in spite of her closeness in age to her cousin, uses many of the above cues to scaffold Maxine's quickly flourishing imagination. She begins by insisting on her cousin's attention, then explains how she came to discover the world of the woods (from a situation very much like Maxine's), models in what sorts of places to discover the creatures, and ultimately cedes control when Maxine has demonstrated her own generative abilities. Because a peer rather than her mother performs this scaffolding, Maxine is not the predominant beneficiary. A social exchange has occurred between Maxine and Laura, and the reciprocal nature of this exchange means a deepening of both of their sets of experience. "The first notions of reciprocity emerge during the self-reflective stage of middle childhood, when friendships are viewed in terms of equality without commitment... Informal rules for getting along... provide a foundation for mutual respect and affection," (Laursen & Hartup, 2002, pp. 32 – 33). In this mutually beneficial arena of friendship, and in the

forming of one's sense of self as an agent in the world, the importance of play is supreme.

Stories and Play in Identity Formation

When Maxine crosses over between the structured world of her great-uncle's house, the grownup party, and the anchoring force of her mother into the world of magic found/made by Laura in the woods, she transitions between a realm in which the action plays out in spite of her into a realm in which she takes ownership and authorship of the actions that transpire. In this regard, *In the Cool of the Woods* is very much a story within a story: a creation narrative told by two girls to each other. By narrating to each other through words and actions the story of the woods, the cousins—particularly Maxine, given that we have a greater sense of her trajectory—are performing an activity that has a direct effect on their relationship with the world at large and their understandings of their positions in it. In the case of Maxine and for all children of this age, storytelling allows for a trying on of one's potential—a chance to confront anxieties and engage with desires (Watson, 1994). Thus Maxine's leap away from her mother is enriched by her own powers of imagination and projection.

As discussed, children of Maxine's age have reached the developmental stage at which their cognition allows for a more nuanced comprehension of the world. It is therefore no wonder that “seven is an age where children are driven by curiosity and a strong internal desire to discover and invent,” (Wood, 2007, p. 88). This innate thrust toward invention corresponds with an outward impulse to narrate one's experience, real or created. In so doing, children of this age are performing an essentially human accomplishment that they will continue to enact throughout their lives: the act of self-

authorship. “Not only is an author the originator and creator of his story, he is also responsible and accountable for it. As such, as authors of our own lives, we are necessarily responsible and accountable for our thoughts, feelings and actions in the world,” (Tappen, 1991, p. 11). Through carrying on the realization of Laura’s magic in the woods, Maxine demonstrates personal power. She is unfettered by the strictures of adult reality and so is allowed a sort of dominion in her and Laura’s imaginary world, much more than she was back at the hem of her mother’s dress. That she chooses to rule over that world benevolently and with wonder speaks to the responsibility one takes when writing the narratives of one’s life, even at such an early age. In part because of her newly deepened empathic abilities, Maxine can see herself not in conflict with the creatures of the woods but as a compassionate cohabitant of their sphere. She has gone from aimlessly throwing rocks at a tree to investing the woods with sentient caretakers, and in so doing has written into her identity a greater sense of accountability to the world around her.

Yet no story occurs in a void. In spite of their young age, Maxine and Laura have enough experience with the world and with the narratives of their culture to be heavily influenced by them. As Tappan quotes MacIntyre, ““I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” (1991, p. 10). Maxine finds herself a member of a specific culture with stories of its own, but also of the greater modern culture from which she has learned the formulas and foundations for magic. By reading and being read to (and as children who read or are read *In the Cool of the Woods* would ideally likewise experience) stories in which magic is given shape—i.e. the broad genre of

fantasy—Maxine can build on what she knows about the genre to write her own narrative of magic into being. In this regard, one of the fundamental purposes of children’s literature has been served:

Literature may also *provide form for experience*. Aside from birth and death, real life has no beginnings or endings, but is instead a series of stories without order, each story merging with other stories. Fiction, however, makes order of randomness by organizing events and consequences, cause and effect, beginning and ending. (Lukens, 2006, p. 6)

So by reading stories such as *In the Cool of the Woods*, children of six and seven might discover the possibilities of a foray into a new and mysterious place, deliberately limited by the constraints of time and place in that story, and come to transfer that discovery onto their own possible experiences, just as I imagine Maxine has done.

Children’s literature is the most concretely available form of storytelling for children—much more fixed than the more transient forms of oral storytelling and narrative through play—and thus provides a highly accessible point of access for children’s understanding. A defining feature of children’s literature in contrast to these other forms is its set state, bound between covers that can be opened repeatedly to find the same tale told with the same words and pictures. It is in the comfort of texts’ familiarity and in their existence out of time—as stories existing in the specific time in which they are set and unfold and as stories on which the reader may spend as much time as he or she desires ruminating on pages, phrases, and pictures—that

children's literature possesses a unique and profound capacity to scaffold children's deepening observations and understandings. Lukens argues that, following the primary role of literature to give pleasure or entertain, its function is to provide just such guidance:

It is not explicitly the function of literature, either for children or adults, to try to reform humans, or to set up guidelines for behavior; however, it is the province of literature to observe and to comment, to open individuals and their society for our observation and our understanding. (2006, p. 4)

By establishing the primary themes found *In the Cool of the Woods*, it is of course my hope as its author that it achieves such observation and commentary in its own focused manner.

Like a good number of children's books, *In the Cool of the Woods* frames its narrative through the genre of fantasy, or rather the subgenre labeled "fantastic stories" by Lukens: "stories realistic in most details but still requiring us to suspend our disbelief," (2006, p. 20). Though an adult reader might struggle to interpret the magic that occurs in the forest as more than pure imagination, the reading child familiar with children's stories of this subgenre may be more inclined to do as it demands—to suspend disbelief—and understand the creatures of the woods to be more than representational of inner quandaries made external. For a child, particularly the child who has had a quasi-rapturous experience in the natural world, this may require little effort. "Nature introduces children to the idea—to the *knowing*—that they are not alone in this world, and that realities and dimensions exist alongside their

own,” (Louv, 2008, p. 296). This conviction in our sharing of this realm with alternate realities (magical others included in such) is a quintessential wonder of childhood. But that conviction, even as it becomes assimilated into greater skepticism, additionally helps define a child’s perspective on the world around her. Fantasy and magic provide a territory of relative safety, much like in play with a more sophisticated person, in which a child can engage in a her zone of proximal development. Magic allows for a testing of limits, or a trying on of roles, which may allow for a child to consider several of her own potentialities. It is of note that in fantasy books for children, “fantasy often begins in a setting of reality and moves to a fantasy realm, then back again,” (Lukens, 2006, p. 164). Such is the case in *In the Cool of the Woods*, which speaks to the intrinsically daring nature of ventures in magic: it requires strength to enter into them, to try on the powerful roles they inspire, and it is comforting to then return to what one knows.

Like those of children’s literature and fantasy, the lens of gender performance helps guide the tone and content of Maxine and Laura’s story. Moreover, their play is arguably influenced by their perceptions of the feminine. They observe it in the literature they read but more concretely in the women they know best. This experience likely has led them to distinct narrative modes in their play: “As girls move into the world outside the family, they carry with them the seeds of a female culture that has led them to value empathy, caretaking, and orientation to the needs of others,” (Tarullo, 1994, p. 72). In the midst of her rupture from her mother, Maxine is given the opportunity through the dramatic play in the woods to engage in the sort of caretaking orientation toward the world around her that is most closely associated,

societally, with the role of the mother. She is able to close an associative loop, so to speak, as she gently observes and comingles with the creatures of the woods.

In enacting a traditionally feminine role, Maxine is not only writing herself into what she identifies as her gendered position in the world, she is using play to cope with her anxiety about her distant mother. For children experiencing any degree of anxiety, play can act as a remarkable tool for processing the causes of their stress:

First, play can act as a catharsis to organize unfocused emotions and express them in a harmless way. Second... by using fantasy characters and plots, a child can create a concrete embodiment of the unfocused fears and can distance herself from these fears as she deals with them. Third, by actively controlling the event rather than passively being a victim, the child gains control over the rate and amount of incoming stimuli. (Watson, 1994, p. 34)

Though Maxine's anxiety, on the surface, is simply that of separation, it may be understood by the reader as a possible stand-in for an array of other anxieties often experienced by children, particularly those surrounding the struggles they face at the early beginnings of middle childhood to place themselves in a world that has begun to take on, because of their development, a great deal more complexity.

Children's needs to organize their dramatically evolving understanding of the social world at this stage can, according to one study, be best scaffolded by the specific type of play taking place in *In the Cool of the Woods*: sociodramatic play. In one study, "the highest level of play, games with rules was the category of play most strongly associated with peer popularity, social competence, and social cognitive

development,” (Rogers & Sawyers, 1988, p. 67). In this sort of play, ideal for sixes and sevens, their desire for rules and boundaries (Wood, 2007) is given shape by a decision making process about those rules and boundaries through discussion with their peers. In *In the Cool of the Woods*, the reader does not listen in on the sort of exchange that one often hears on the playground between seven-year-olds, one in which the rules of play are verbalized and decided upon before the play takes place. The story format—by nature of being intended for readers of age six or seven—demands a level of *in media res*; children of this age are keen to dive into a story, so the extensive conversation in which my cousin and I likely engaged is subsumed by the action of the story in the fictional version. But those rules are, regardless, in a manner prescribed by Laura, and it is to Maxine’s great pleasure and vital gain to play along. That gain is one of increased independence, self-awareness, and agency in the world—as the microcosm of their play resounds with the greater drama of life.

The Role of the Woods

Just as no story, be it written on page or into one's existence, can be authored without external social and cultural influence, so the environment in which the stories and experiences of children take place can have a significant impact on their themes and directions. It is therefore no accident that my original experience in the woods and thus the experience of Maxine and Laura occurred in a wild, natural place—unstructured by man but supported by the elements of nature that breed a sort of exploration and discovery for children distinct from that of their homes or classrooms. As through play and narrative Maxine has expanded her own sense of self in relationship with the world—away from her mother, and increasingly towards independence—the woods have helped shaped her emerging identity: as a moral, exploratory, and creative person.

In the limbo of the driveway, Maxine throws pebbles at the trees. It may be a physical act of little thought or consequence, but in as much it represents an egocentrism typical of a slightly younger child. In her shift into the woods and with Laura's guidance, she is able to see the trees (and the ferns, and the mushrooms) as rich places of possibility; in the narrative of their fantasy play, they become homes to allies. This empathic foray into the natural world corresponds with her developmental potential:

Social understanding and social responsibility are built on children's desire to understand and feel effective in the social world, to initiate and maintain connection with others, and to reach out to those in

distress. Researchers have found that such basic components of social responsibility as empathy, moral sensibilities, the understanding of social conventions, and political awareness emerge prior to the age of eight. (Berman, 1997, p. 22)

So Maxine is equipped with the cognitive capacity to view the woods not as just a backdrop for her experience, but rather as possessing the potential dynamic for interaction and therefore care. In this strengthening of her emerging moral life, Maxine is coming to understand that her actions have ramifications beyond the immediate—that there is an interplay of cause and effect in her participation in the world. Though she is at the very initial stages of what is termed “political awareness” by Berman above, the woods as environment for her play have by their nature gently prodded her to consider the experience of others, even if those others are creatures of her and her cousin’s creation.

Because their play occurs in a natural environment, the form given to Maxine and Laura’s budding morals is sensitivity to the natural world. In tandem with this sensitivity occurs a freewheeling and playful act of scientific classification: close observation of the different micro-environments of the woods and the inhabitants of each. There is therefore an educative quality to their experience. “Children have a natural talent for observing, naming, and ordering plants and animals... The elementary school years are well spent in expanding on and elaborating children’s observing and classifying talents,” (Elkind, 2007, p. 143). So the cousins perform a sort of abstract science study that, though it provides an initial step in the

development of their understanding of the natural world, is deeply meaningful because it stems from their own initiative and curiosity.

And by acting on this curiosity, Maxine has accessed another part of her burgeoning identity; she is both becoming a young scientist and a young artist. Edith Cobb believed that “Creative thinkers... return in memory to renew the power and impulse to create at its very source, a source which they describe as the experience of emerging not only into the light of consciousness, but into a living sense of kinship with the outer world,” (Louv, 2008, p. 94). It is the poet’s, the writer’s, the painter’s drive, then, to return to the source of creativity, the fresh and startling perspective that she is a participant in the world and that her agency as an actor in it can lead to remarkable ends. This is the gift and possibility of the developmental stage in which Maxine is becoming herself, and this fount of creative potential is augmented by the sumptuous, inherently generative quality of the natural world. The woods are her inspiration as she creates a story uniquely potent in its implications for her understanding of self.

Children's Literature: Inspiration for and Companions to

In the Cool of the Woods

Though the following selection of children's literature is very far from exhaustive, the books discussed below may act as either exemplary representatives of both the sort of stories that, as both a child and adult reader of children's books, have inspired my thinking about the themes covered in *In the Cool of the Woods* or as companion works for parents and educators in search of other resources that cover these themes.

Sylvester and the Magic Pebble, by William Steig

In this classic picture book, Steig captures both the impulses toward independence and self-reflection that are typical of the six and seven year old. Out on his own in the countryside (for the story takes place during a more innocent era in which the limits to children's environments were less strictly cordoned by adults) the title character discovers a magic pebble that will grant whatever he wishes—a type of magic particularly alluring to a child of an age at which her sense of her place in the world is rapidly deepening. When Sylvester finds himself in danger, he wishes himself into the form of a stone and thus spends a year in isolation from his desperately searching parents, keenly aware of the seasonal changes taking place around him in the natural world of which he has become a part.

Though the reunion between parents and child provides the story's climax and denouement, as a child reader, I remember being most compelled by the time

Sylvester spend alone in nature. Both terrified and envious of the experience, I would imagine the sensations of his rock existence and wonder at the magic not of the pebble, but of his access to a mystical world in which coyotes might light on your back or grasses grow up around you.

The Polar Express, by Chris Van Allsburg

The Polar Express is a Christmas story, and therefore not a good fit for readers of all backgrounds or in all school environments. However, similar to my experience as a child reading *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*, I clearly remember my awe and delight at the protagonist's experience in this story—not that of meeting Santa Claus, but of sneaking out on his own into the night to participate in the magical world of children. In *The Polar Express*, the narrator recalls waiting for the sound Santa's sleigh bells on Christmas Eve (he believes in spite of a friend's insistence that there is no Santa) and instead hearing a mysterious train pull up into the snow on his street. The train is full of children also in their pajamas, heading to the North Pole. As it wends its way northward, descriptions of the real magic of nature bolster the magic of the Santa Claus narrative. The interaction between children urging each other on away from the influence of their parents in their imaginative quest, along with the lovely descriptions of the wintry, separate world of nature, have made *The Polar Express* an oft-opened source of inspiration for me.

Where the Wild Things Are, by Maurice Sendak

Aside from being yet another classic and childhood favorite, *Where the Wild Things Are* aligns with many of the themes explored in *In the Cool of the Woods*—it was a clear inspiration. The mother of the protagonist, Max (a subconscious proto-Maxine, perhaps) pushes him away to his room without dinner, not for her own freedom but because of Max’s poor behavior. To Max’s delight, the walls of his room “became the world all around” and he sets out on an adventure of imaginative discovery, encountering huge, magical beasts that he tames with his own domineering confidence. It is an ideal book for children of six and seven as they chart their place in the world; it inspires self-assurance in the face of increasingly complex and potentially frightening environs and demonstrates the power of dramatic play in writing one’s own identity (in this case, as an explorer and a king) into being. Like *In the Cool of the Woods*, *Where the Wild Things Are* concludes with Max’s return to the safety and comfort of his mother, but with the subtle suggestion that the magic he has created awaits him whenever he so desires.

Miss Rumphius, by Barbara Cooney

This book offers a challenge set in place by a grandfather to his granddaughter—to make the world more beautiful—and charts that child’s growth into adulthood as she pursues her own desire to explore the world but struggles to find how she will fulfill that request. Though this book is a departure from the others in that the protagonist is an adult, it is narrated by a child (the protagonist’s great-niece) who wonders at her own place in the world. Her great-aunt acts much as Laura does for Maxine: as a knowledgeable leader who, through her storytelling, allows for

the unfolding of the narrator's imagination and her questioning of her position and potential in the world. Miss Rumphius' choice to make the world more beautiful by engaging with nature (specifically, by spreading lupine seeds) speaks to the moral imperative of environmental accountability—of helping to nurture the beauty of the natural world rather than passively observe it.

Fish is Fish, by Leo Lionni

Fish is Fish is something of a cautionary tale. A tadpole discovers himself to be not a fish but a frog and relishes the freedom that comes with his amphibious nature. He returns to the pond where he was born to tell his old friend, Fish, of the marvelous sights he has seen. Fish becomes frustrated by the limits of his surroundings and flings himself to shore. Once safely returned to his pond, he is able to see its startling beauty with a fresh perspective. Though the ultimate lesson of the book might seem to conflict with the notion of children achieving a rich sense of self through new experience, it speaks to the possibilities waiting in one's close proximity as one's consciousness is expanded. This may be by the fantastical tales of a peer, or by the developmental leaps in social and personal awareness that naturally occur at six and seven.

Flotsam, by David Wiesner

In this visually astounding wordless picture book, a curious boy (as indicated by the microscope he carries with him) discovers an underwater camera at the beach. When he develops the film inside, he finds photographic evidence of a wildly magical

world under the surface of the ocean. He also uncovers how the camera links each child who uses it to the children around the world and across time who have experienced its magic in the past. Beyond its inspiring exploration of a magical realm, *Flotsam* is an intellectual challenge to its young readers, encouraging them to parse a narrative without words and thus engage themselves that much more actively in their understanding of the text. It is thus a mode of imaginative transport, and compels the reader to consider her relationship with worlds seen and unseen, real and imagined.

Reflection

As I come to the close of this writing process, another layer of this creative and critical exploration of self-authorship has been revealed to me. For development does not end with the extraordinary revolutions of childhood; it continues throughout life as we carry on with the task of negotiating our understanding of ourselves in relationship with the world. At this notably loamy juncture in my path, my identity is punctuated by two elements of my existence: my vocation as a teacher of children, and my transition into motherhood, which lies only days away. It is likely no accident that a central theme of *In the Cool of the Woods* is the protagonist's break from her mother and into emerging independence. Through my discussion of the developmental impulses and interactions that lead to such a break, I performed a sort of internal reassessment as I considered, from the limbo of very late pregnancy, what it meant to be a daughter at the age of six or seven and what it will mean to have a daughter of my own so soon.

In spite of the significance of my grappling with that shift through, in part, the writing of this culminating project, it has been all the more revelatory to come to understand how the themes and developmental shifts discussed in this work play such critical roles in my self-identity as a teacher. I know now more firmly than I did before embarking on this work how the magic of this age—the magic of growing into an empathetic, creative, and critical person, and the magic of fantasy—are elements of childhood that I aim to model and scaffold for my students at every possibly turn. This I do, and aim to do with ever-increasing thoughtfulness, by providing time and

arenas for self-exploration and peer transaction through play and creative ventures of all sorts and at perhaps unexpected points in the academic day. I likewise hope to engender in them the same revelatory experiences with children's literature that so influenced my own emerging understanding of self in relationship to the world just as their cognitive capacities for empathy and understanding are primed to do so. For among the infinitely complex interactions children have with their environments—physical, social, cultural, natural, and more—the unique endowment of printed stories to provide loci of simultaneous comfort and tests of one's identity is remarkable.

So I imagine, with all humbleness as to its potential, that *In the Cool of the Woods* might offer such an experience to reading children. That experience would vary depending on the environment and scenario in which it is read. A whole class read aloud might prompt conversations about times students have discovered something unexpected and astonishing when they took a risk in a new place. It would also encourage students to apply comprehension strategies such as making predictions about how Maxine's character might change based on their background knowledge about stories in which magic occurs. Smaller groups, such as guided reading groups, might provide the atmosphere of intimacy and trust that would facilitate more personal conversations, such as how it feels to want to stay close to someone important to you and what sort of experiences you have had when separation from them occurred, along with more challenging inferences about the characters. Finally, a child's independent reading of the story might offer, in some respects, the richest experience of all. For in that scenario, she could be carried away by her imagination

to grapple with her anxieties and aspirations and perhaps come away from the reading with a more complex and aware sense of self.

So my parting hope—as I complete my degree and consider my growing practice and philosophy as a teacher—is that, as educators, we regard the extraordinarily numerous influences on each child’s story, honor those influences, and foster the influences within our control that will best allow that child to author herself into being. For such a remarkable act, though it is performed by every person, is nothing less than artistry. We are teachers of young artists, creating their identities into being with the media of both their fundamental human attributes and their external worlds.

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