

The Gothic Nightmare in *Over the Garden Wall*

Patrick McHale's ten-episode miniseries *Over the Garden Wall* first aired in 2014, and although it had a brief moment of fame, it has become a classic fall rewatch for many young adults due to its use of Gothic tropes in animated television, which taps into the child's fear of growing up. The story serves as an American retelling of Dante's *Inferno*, with each of the ten episodes set in a different era of Gothic literary history. The show aired on Cartoon Network and was primarily enjoyed by an older adolescent audience, since most younger children skipped over the show's muted colors and atmosphere for flashier titles. This audience demographic is primed to understand the Gothic nightmare of the show— the liminality of adolescence— with a personal connection, since this age group is the same as Wirt's, the main character of the show. *Over the Garden Wall* uses Dantean structure and Gothic tropes of liminality, the uncanny, and the sublime, to portray the adolescent pressures of self-definition and responsibility as a Gothic nightmare, encouraging the audience to accept the fear they feel in response to their own adolescent experience.

In the Unknown, Wirt's struggles with responsibility and identity become more consequential than in the familiar world, as ordinary older-sibling expectations suddenly carry deadly repercussions. In the first episode, "The Old Grist Mill," the Woodsman reprimands Wirt for blaming Greg for the monster's attack, saying, "You are the elder child! You are responsible for you and your brother's actions!" This is a statement that will resonate with much of the show's target audience, as many adolescents with younger family members likely have heard or felt a similar sentiment. Wirt is hyper-aware of this responsibility, but avoids fulfilling it because, as a teenage boy, he is drastically unprepared to care for Greg's needs while also navigating the Unknown's dangers. Additionally, Wirt's romantic anxieties around his school crush, Sara, stem

from his lack of confidence in his own self-definition and obsession with how others perceive him. The ninth episode flashes back to Wirt and Greg's familiar world before they reached the Unknown, and when Wirt finds out Jason, a classmate, is also vying to ask out Sara, he spirals, shouting, "I can't let her hear that tape! ...Sara and Jason Funderberker are going to start dating, and then they'll hear that tape, and then they'll just sit and listen to it, and laugh..." Because he lacks certainty in his identity, he has no confidence that Sara could choose him over Jason, and his frenzied actions cause him and Greg to tumble into the Unknown, where he must come face to face with these fears. For example, in the episode "Songs of the Dark Lantern," Wirt and Greg stumble upon a tavern full of people obsessed with archetypal titles. After a relentless interrogation on his identity, Wirt is dubbed "The Pilgrim" by the tavern folk, due to his romantic qualities, establishing Wirt as a narrative parallel to Dante, the famous pilgrim journeying to find his angel, Beatrice. Though he protests that he does not neatly fit the role, the tavern folk hail him as a noble pilgrim anyway, forcing a label onto him in the same way adolescents often feel when stepping into an adult setting. When Wirt's identity crisis and brotherly responsibilities are magnified by the framework of the Unknown's Gothic liminality, the audience's feelings of terror compel them to reflect upon their own experiences of growing up.

The setting of the Unknown sets up the standard trope of the dark and unnavigable forest, but instead of a place of refuge, it presents a dangerous barrier from the familiar world. Wirt and Greg's journey begins on a crisp Halloween night, but as they travel deeper into the Unknown and under the Beast's influence, the weather gradually shifts to a deadly winter storm. Through this transition, the autumnal season itself becomes a liminal state, as nature's threshold between life and death. Additionally, by centering Greg and Wirt's journey in autumn, the season also represents the liminal stage of adolescence, the passage between the new life of childhood and

the approaching hardship and death of adulthood. The Unknown contains both transitory states, and because of its name, the location becomes a shorthand for dangerous uncertainty and liminality throughout the show.

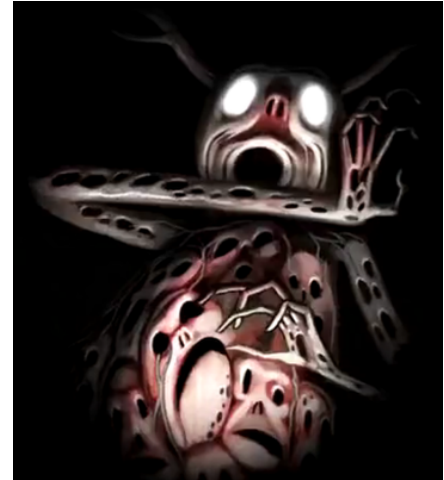


The show's ambiguous time period is another instance of liminality, as it is not revealed until the ninth episode that Wirt and Greg are from the modern era, with each previous episode taking place in a different era of American history. By touring different historical periods and Gothic tropes of isolation and identity, the series emphasizes that Wirt's experience of adolescence as a Gothic nightmare is not anomalous to the modern age but reflects the broader literary tradition. For example, in the episode "The Ringing of the Bell," set sometime between 1650 and 1690, a pale-faced girl in a misty cottage is trapped by an angry, unpredictable spirit and undergoes an exorcism to regain control over her identity. In the episode "Schooltown Follies," Wirt joins the ranks of an 1890s schoolhouse teaching young animals to calculate, and Greg attempts to help the forlorn animals find joy and music in their solemn orphanage-like environment. Each of these characters experiences the same kind of Gothic nightmare that Wirt inhabits, and by helping other adolescents conquer their struggles with growing up, Wirt gains confidence that he can navigate his own coming-of-age nightmare and escape the Unknown.

Another way the show depicts the Unknown as an intimidating liminal space is through the use of the sublime in its visual storytelling. The establishing shots often feature vast, beautiful autumn forests before showing Wirt and Greg travelling in a grim and pathless scene. By juxtaposing the immensity of the forest with the insignificance and fragility of the characters, the Unknown takes on an awe-inspiring and indefinable quality. The Gothic trope of sublime

settings in nature reinforces the viewer's growing fear that this liminal space will overpower Wirt, and that the pressure of the adolescent experience that led him here is all-consuming, threatening to push him into despair.

Over the Garden Wall is anomalous as a children's show because several scenes are genuinely scary or disturbing, utilizing the uncanny to break the viewer's immersion and keep them engaged with the underlying message. One example of this is in the aforementioned episode "Songs of the Dark Lantern." While Wirt is interrogated on his archetypal title, the "Highwayman" suddenly asserts his role and sings a seemingly random song, moving about the screen with disturbingly stretched and distorted proportions. Until this moment, the art style remains largely the same, so when this consistency is so suddenly broken, the viewer is forced to question what is going on, drawing attention to the conversation afterward, where Wirt is titled "The Pilgrim." This scene effectively utilizes the uncanny to unsettle the viewer, linking them to Wirt's emotional state and prompting them to grapple with the same psychological issues he faces. In one of the scariest moments of the show, the Beast's true form is revealed just before the Woodsman extinguishes the lantern that keeps its life force going. This image is flashed for less than a second, and the cartoon art style is paired with an uncanny hyper-realistic rendering that results in a terrifying moment that cements itself in the mind of any age viewer. The show's uncanny and disturbing visuals parallel the barrage of expectations placed on adolescents with the terror of the Beast's Unknown, demonstrating that the youths in the audience are capable of facing both horrors while also validating the fear they experience in their own nightmarish adolescence.



The series' ten-episode structure mirrors Dante's journey through the *Inferno*, with the Unknown functioning as a child-friendly yet unmistakable substitute for Hell. When Wirt's seemingly inconsequential teenage trials are framed within this Gothic liminal descent, they are magnified to a scale of epic intensity. Dante begins his poem "midway" through life's journey, but by focusing on Wirt's own midpoint between childhood and adulthood, the show highlights how Wirt feels profoundly unequipped to take on the pressures facing him, just as Dante grapples with understanding the significance of his encounters in Hell. In the second episode, "Hard Times at the Huskin' Bee," Wirt and Greg arrive in Pottsville, a cornfield town where the residents anticipate an eternal harvest while dressed in pumpkins. This town correlates to Dante's Limbo, where the souls are forever waiting for a salvation they cannot reach. The enigmatic mayor of Pottsville, Enoch, functions as a gentler parallel to King Minos from Canto 5, eerily wrapping his serpentine ribbon body around Wirt and Greg to "judge" their crimes, sentencing them not to torment, but a few hours of manual labor. Wirt expects to be condemned for his lack of belonging in the community, but this moment of grace prompts him and the audience to reflect upon their own experiences of judgment or ostracism. In the eighth episode, "Babes in the Wood," the series invokes one of the *Inferno*'s most harrowing images when Greg sacrifices himself to the Beast and begins to turn into a tree, directly referencing Dante's "Wood of Suicides." Just as doubt and despair kept the souls trapped until they surrendered to suicide, the Beast's power over the Woodsman arises from cultivating his guilt, imprisoning him in a perpetual cycle of service. Through these motifs, the series utilizes Dante's imagery to dramatize the overwhelming pressures placed on adolescents, showing that Wirt's struggles are a Gothic nightmare of epic proportion, and not to be taken lightly. By utilizing Dante's structure, the show

takes on a universality that any demographic can relate their experiences with and establishes that Wirt's juvenile struggles will be depicted with the earnestness and magnitude they deserve.

Over the Garden Wall utilizes Gothic stylistic tropes and Dantean structure to dramatize adolescent psychological pressures, turning standard coming-of-age experiences into a truly scary Gothic nightmare. The forest setting serves as a liminal space between childhood and adulthood, with unsettling, uncanny visuals that make the Unknown a terrifying place of transition and uncertainty. The episodic structure of Dante's *Inferno* heightens Wirt's adolescent responsibility beyond ordinary teenage concerns, showing that his struggles are a universal experience of the liminality of life. Unlike most coming-of-age stories, this show does not portray Wirt's reactions to his struggles as overdramatic or unreasonable; rather, it acknowledges his anxiety with a deadly seriousness. The young audience is comforted and validated because Wirt's experience is portrayed at a scale that is equal to the magnitude of emotion he is feeling, assuring the audience that there is nothing unreasonable about feeling fear in response to these challenges. Through Wirt's descent into the unknown, *Over the Garden Wall* reveals that the experience of growing up is a journey through a Gothic nightmare, filled with terror, responsibility, and self-discovery.

Works Cited

McHale, Patrick. *Over the Garden Wall*. Cartoon Network, 2014.