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Kathie C. Morgan

Graduate School of Education, Liberty University, kcjohnso@liberty.edu

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WAITING WITH BATED BREATH
INTIMATIONS AND ANTICIPATION OF ETERNITY VIEWED THROUGH
CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Kathie Carwile Morgan
Liberty University

Author Note

Kathie Carwile Morgan, Professor, Graduate School of Education, Liberty University
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kathie Morgan, Ed. D.,
School of Education, Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA 24502.

Contact: kcmorgan@liberty.edu

Abstract

Children's literature writers often allude to man's hope for a better day or place and that better future. They write tales of searches, exploration, wonder, struggle and discovery. The anticipation of the next birthday, next holiday, next Christmas, surely are not just man's desire for the material. These longings, found in the soul of everyman, are spoken of and realized in the writings of countless authors that write specifically for children. This indescribable longing represents man's sense of being "out-of-time" and "out-of-place" in the temporal environment and the desire for eternity that throbs in the longings of children and adults. This paper will examine children's fantasy literature, with an eye toward Heaven, connecting that acknowledgement of religion and philosophy to the writings that express an author at his best...in the stories for children.

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Have you ever longed for a drink of cold water, or perhaps even a chip of ice to moisten your dry chapped lips? Do you perhaps remember coming out of surgery or preparing for surgery and knowing that there was water somewhere but not being able to have it just yet? Can you perhaps remember comforting yourself that the water was actually there and that sometime, oh, yes, sometime in the future, you would have water?

Most of life is lived in anticipation: going off to college, reaching the end of term, graduating, finding a great job, falling in love, having a happy marriage. Each longed for event arrives and is then accomplished with satisfaction yet there is left an inexpressible longing for more, that feeling of, "Is that all there is?" This feeling is patted and smoothed down with the happy thought that next week there will be a trip to the mountains...and, "Won't that be wonderful?" Each time there must be that bit of let down, before the new desire is set up as the event that will meet all our hopes and desires.

This recognition, longing (hunger even) is grounded in a sense of timelessness has been acknowledged by humans throughout the ages. There is that inexpressible longing, best expressed as a hope for a happy time or a possession that will meet a need or desire, or even the desire for the presence of a loved one. Yet, once that desire is realized, once the day is done, the object acquired, the loved one reunited with, the soul immediately begins to search again, hope again, and look forward to...again! There is within the

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human capacity the recognition of hope, a recognition of eternity, if you will, even though, as yet, we live in a mortal body and in a place firmly fixed to this time called the “present”. C. S. Lewis referred to this experience as *Sehnsucht*, a German term that lacks a good, concrete English translation, but is generally described as intensely missing, yearning, desire, craving, longing, nostalgia, eagerly waiting, or inexpressible longing. The concept is so immaterial as to be virtually indefinable according to Blocher (2006):

Sehnsucht is one of those German words that it is almost impossible to translate adequately. Along with world weariness, the stage director and author Georg Tabori called Sehnsucht one of those quasi-mystical terms in German for which there is no satisfactory corresponding term in another language. Tender longing goes hand in hand with the painful knowledge that the thing longed for will never quite be attained. Indeed, you even get the feeling that the granting of an eagerly awaited wish could immediately bring about the destruction of the desired object. If it is true that the word Sehnsucht is untranslatable - and indeed most languages make do with the word desire or longing or nostalgia - this in no way means that the feeling of Sehnsucht is a state of mind peculiar to German speakers. The feeling of Sehnsucht is universal. (Speech, 2006)

Lewis comes closest to describing this concept in *The Problem of Pain* (1940/2001). He writes:

You have stood before some landscape, which seems to embody what you have been looking for all your life; and then turned to the friend at your side who appears to be seeing what you saw—but at the first words a gulf yawns between you, and you realize that this landscape means something totally different to him, that he is pursuing an alien vision and cares nothing for the ineffable suggestion by which you are transported . . . All the things that have deeply possessed your soul have been but hints of it—tantalizing glimpses, promises never quite fulfilled, echoes that died away just as they caught your ear. But if it should really become manifest—if there ever came an echo that did not die away but swelled into the sound itself—you would know it. Beyond all possibility of doubt you would say 'Here at last is the thing I was made for.' We cannot tell each other about it. It is the secret signature of each soul, the incommunicable and unappeasable want . . . which we shall still desire on our deathbeds . . . Your place in heaven will seem to be made for you and you alone, because

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you were made for it—made for it stitch by stitch as a glove is made for a hand. (150,151,152)

The arts are perhaps more focused upon the expression and capture of every emotional state, and we see in works of art an attempt to capture this concept, as in the evocative music of Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven":

*There's a feeling I get when I look to the west,
And my spirit is crying for leaving.
In my thoughts I have seen rings of smoke through the trees,
And the voices of those who stand looking.
Ooh, it makes me wonder,
Ooh, it really makes me wonder.*

*And it's whispered that soon if we all call the tune
Then the piper will lead us to reason.
And a new day will dawn for those who stand long
And the forests will echo with laughter.*

(Stairway to heaven; Led Zeppelin IV 1971)

Would man crave something that did not exist? Does the soul of man long for the future merely as a hope for better times, or is that longing a recognition that man was made for an eternity where all happiness, all "getting" and "gathering together", all Christmases and birthdays are in the moment. Lewis states:

Of course, you and I tend to take it for granted that this Time series – this arrangement of past, present and future – is not simply the way life comes to us but the way all things really exist. We tend to assume that the whole universe and God Himself are always moving on from past to future just as we do. (Lewis, Mere Christianity 1952)

Is it not possible, in fact, probable that the human soul was created for timelessness? Isn't this really what we are missing and seeking? Eternity will not exist

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as a moment by moment experience, 5:00 p.m. (Work for the day is done, hurray!), 5:01 p.m. (Oh, happy day, I am free!), 5:02 p.m. (I am so excited to meet “x” for dinner.”), 5:03 p.m. (“Where shall we meet?”) progression of events. C.S. Lewis goes on to state that *“of course you and I tend to take it for granted that this Time series – this arrangement of past, present and future – is not simply the way life comes to us but the way all things really exist.”* (Lewis, *Mere Christianity* 1952) Eternity is now. It won’t be anticipated, it will just be. There will be no tomorrow to anticipate; no longed for reunions, no expected holiday to the ocean. It will always be... always now. Always experiencing the best of the best. Always. NOW. If man has been designed for eternity, then it makes sense that his soul would feel somehow trapped or misplaced in a temporal body. This temporal body would always be looking for and catching glimmers of the home land; being reminded of and missing another dimension. Scripture proclaims man’s innate knowledge and recognition of eternity in Ecclesiastes 3:11 *“He hath made everything beautiful in its time: also he hath set eternity in their heart, yet so that man cannot find out the work that God hath done from the beginning even to the end.”* (*Holy Bible, NKJV* 1982)

Just as Socrates with his deep pondering and questioning came to believe in a Creator God, who was pure goodness and exists out of time – that recognition of the timelessness and the inconsolable longing of the soul causes man to sense, seek and yearn for the immaterial without knowing or ever having experienced just what that yearning represents. Plato went so far as to call all that we experience in this life “the shadows”... only a representation of reality or eternal truth. If we live in the “Shadowlands”, those intimations of immortality stem from truth that humans innately possess. Just as the bird

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in winter flies south, our souls know that we, too, will fly. There is an instinct that causes the human to seek. Aristotle proclaimed that a “prototype” (that inward “knowing” that there has to be something we want and are missing) and this “knowing” by its very existence precluded an original design (the real thing itself...God and eternity).

(Hindson, E., and Caner, E. 2008)

If we, as humans, can imagine a Heaven then...there must be a Heaven, an eternity, upon which that idea is based. What we desire must have its fulfillment, else what would the soul know about it. If we are lonely, it is because we are made for fellowship with others, we may not know where these others are or how to find them, but we do know enough to know that there is hope for the fulfillment of our desire. No one can escape anticipation without a damaged soul. Anticipation, hope, and looking ahead are such a vital part of the human experience that a life without hope and anticipation of the immaterial “something” becomes a life of desperation, depression and despair. Literature often draws on and makes use a need that the soul recognizes. Adult literature (especially romance novels, science fiction and fantasy) stir up this craving within, then attempt to satisfy that desire within us with stories that demonstrate the longing being fulfilled. C.S. Lewis (The weight of glory and other addresses 1949/1979) states:

Now, if we are made for heaven, the desire for our proper place will be already in us, but not yet attached to the true object, and will even appear as the rival of that object. And this, I think, is just what we find. (pg. 3, 4)

Adults are not alone knocking with anticipation at the door of desire. We humans are born to and early on recognize this sense of waiting with bated breath. Children

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spend their days excitedly waiting for Christmas, Valentine's Day cards, birthday gifts, trips to Grandma's house, sleepovers and the like. In fact, children seem in many respects to live a life more in recognition, acknowledgement and agreement with this concept. It can be argued that this sense of expectancy is even more pronounced in childhood and is recognized by writers and lyricist alike. Pink Floyd's "Comfortably Numb" includes these lines:

*When I was a child I caught a fleeting glimpse,
Out of the corner of my eye.
I turned to look but it was gone.
I cannot put my finger on it now.
The child is grown, the dream is gone.*
(Comfortably numb, from *The Wall* 1979)

Children's literature abounds with examples and references to the search for and ultimate satisfaction of this longing. Writers tend to write what their readers want to read or at least what the writer wants the reader to know. Writers from Charles Kingsley in *The Water Babies* (1863/1995) to J. K. Rowling in her *Harry Potter Series* (1997 – 2007) have used this device (longing). Some writers have incorporated the quality of seeking without actively acknowledging it, perhaps not even seeing it themselves but making it a part of the story, playing upon that need, the inconsolable longing, through their children's tale to bring our desire to fruition.

The techniques used to create this sense of longing or waiting anxiously for joy and ultimate happiness are as far-flung in fantasy from the wish for "Neverland" in Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1911) to the great adventure quest in Ende's *The Neverending Story* (1979/1984). In "The Piper at the Gates of Dawn", chapter seven of *The Wind in the*

Willows (Grahame 1908) Ratty and Mole hear the magical sounds of Pan piping at dawn and Ratty exclaims,

So beautiful and strange and new! Since it was to end so soon, I almost wish I had never heard it. For it has roused a longing in me that is pain, and nothing seems worthwhile but just to hear that sound once more and go on listening to it forever"... "Oh, Mole! The beauty of it! The merry bubble and joy, the thin, clear happy call of the distant piping! Such music I never dreamed of, and the call in it is stronger even than the music is sweet! Row on, Mole, row! For the music and the call must be for us. (pg. 107)

The ecstasy expressed by Ratty to Mole is the ecstasy felt the moment we catch that sparkle, that hint from Heaven. That moment speaks to our deepest hopes; we see it then, grasp it for a second...and...it is gone! But, every child knows that in truth and in reality, the manifestation of all our longing...that real object of our desire... really IS there. It peeps at us in the unlikeliest moments, taunting and beckoning, hinting at eternity and joy, then dashing away, leaving us with the haunting ghost of that rare moment. We are left again with the desire to recapture that second of time when we could feel our heart's desire.

Seeking home is another way to portray this indefinable yearning. The incurable longing inside each human heart is something to do with being at home, something to do with finding the place where we fit, where we know and are known, where we are happy and warm and loved. This knowing that there is a "homeplace" and the expectation and realization that it is attainable has been acknowledged in the literature written for children since the beginnings of children's literature and even in the writings of children. From *The Old Testament*, in some of the earliest Hebrew writings we read the boy shepherd

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David proclaim, “*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever,*” Psalm 23:6 (*Holy Bible, NKJV 1982*) referencing his hope and expectation.

In children’s stories, the expression of yearning is often exhibited as a more tangible object of desire such as the desire of an orphan for a home as in Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) or the intense homesickness of a child as in Spyri’s *Heidi*. (1880/1981) The longing for home is universal and is expressed in perfect prose by Dorothy in *The Wizard of OZ*; not as in the movie version, “*There’s no place like home!*”, but as Dorothy tells the Guardian of the Gate of Emerald City while seeking an audience with the Great OZ:

“I want him to send me back to Kansas,” said Dorothy.

“Where is Kansas?” asked the man, with surprise.

“I don’t know,” replied Dorothy sorrowfully, “but it is my home, and I’m sure it’s somewhere.” (Baum 1900)

Even Mole has his moments of “homesickness” in Grahame’s (*The Wind in the Willows* 1908) children’s classic. As Mole and Ratty tramp through the winter evening, we catch the yearning, the intense hunger for home:

We others, who have long lost the more subtle of the physical senses, have not even proper terms to express an animal’s inter-communications with his surroundings, living or otherwise, and have only the word “smell”, for instance, to include the whole range of delicate thrills which murmur in the nose of the animal night and day, summoning, warning, inciting, repelling. It was one of these mysterious fairy calls from out of the void that suddenly reached Mole in the darkness, making him tingle through and through with its very familiar appeal, even while as yet he could not clearly remember what it was.

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Home! That was what they meant, those caressing appeals, those soft touches wafted through the air, those invisible little hands pulling and tugging, all one way! (pgs. 72, 73)

Book after book written for children highlights the theme of finding ultimate home. In the final book *The Last Battle* (Lewis 1956/1994) from *The Chronicles of Narnia*, we read these words:

It was Unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. He stamped his right forehoof on the ground and neighed, and then cried: "I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it til now this land. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this." (pg.213)

In the writing for children, authors often make use of a quest or a puzzle or mystery that represents the indefinable yearning. Children's literature includes hundreds of books that incorporate mystery and quest; everything from the old *Nancy Drew* (Keene 1930) and *Hardy Boys* (Dixon 1927) *Mystery Series* to *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* (Tolkien 1937) and *Treasure Island* (Stevenson 1883). The "quest" for an answer enthralls and captivates. Children love a search, a treasure hunt, a puzzle to solve, and these books speak to a soul seeking what we all have in common. These books provide an answer (temporary though it may be) to the question, Where is my delight? I know my joy is here somewhere, I caught a glimpse of it...I just need to find it!

In *The Secret Garden* (Burnett 1911/1986) Mary's desire to unlock the secreted and hidden-away door to the lost and neglected garden represents the longing for that indefinable "something" that will fill all our needs and make us happy.

She looked at the key quite a long time. She turned it over and over, and thought about it. As I have said before, she was not a child who had been trained to ask permission or consult her elders about things. All she thought about the key was that if it was the key to the closed garden, and she could find out where the door was, she could perhaps open it and see what was inside the walls, and what had happened to the old rose-trees.
(pg. 71)

The desire fulfilled is, of course, the garden opened, developed, growing and enjoyed. This ideal represents our deepest desires realized. The quest in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (Lewis 1952) takes the Pevensie children, Lucy and Edmund, and their unfortunately named cousin, Eustace Clarence Scrubb, into the unexplored and uncharted far reaches of Narnia seeking and questing. Aslan (the son of the Emperor-Over-the-Sea) ultimately allows the children, along with the mouse, Reepicheep, into the place of the “utter East”. Here, Reepicheep is permitted entrance into Aslan’s Country in complete bliss and his life’s desire is realized. Reepicheep quotes the ancient prophecy he has been seeking and following his whole life:

*Where sky and water meet,
Where the waves grow sweet,
Doubt not, Reepicheep,
To find all you seek,
There is the utter East.* (Lewis 1952)

This is a portrayal of the great warrior, Reepicheep, (mouse though he may be)...seeking, desiring, longing for and finally, finally entering a portrayal of Valhalla. This is what all seek to find...Heaven. As Reepicheep takes his coracle and paddles away, the reader’s heart is not broken, but accepting and glad that Reepicheep has at last found his “utter East”. Job, in ancient history speaks of the experience of expecting and

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looking for that change. *“If a man dies, shall he live again? All the days of my hard service I will wait, till my change comes.”* Job 14:14 (*Holy Bible, NKJV 1982*) This expectation and longing is just as recognized and prevalent in children’s literature as in adult literature and most often omits the cynicism and doubt that plays a part in adult literature.

The anagogical* theme running through children’s literature is there wherever we look. It takes our heart’s best hopes, dreams and desires and gives in return the expectation of a future of fulfillment and gratification. The longing will always be there as long as we live, but through the literature of childhood we can find solace and we can be comforted. Yes, we love life here on this beautiful Earth. We love it, and yet, children along with the rest of us, recognize and acknowledge that this must be only the Shadowlands. *“Because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them.”* Rom. 1:19 (*Holy Bible, NKJV 1982*) We all want to be real, we sense that there is more to this business of being real than we can catch in our mind or hold in our senses, but we know it is there. Being real is what we were destined for, what we seek. In *The Velveteen Rabbit* (Williams 1922/1983) we read these words:

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day.”

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It isn’t a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt...It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who

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have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand." (pgs. 4, 5)

This place does remind us of home, and every now and again we get those little "letters" from home, from our Father. Those letters might be the twinkle on a crystal of ice that catches the eye on a frosty winter morning suddenly gripping and turning our heart making us yearn for the indefinable "something". It could be the game of knights with swords and shields that suddenly catches us up into that place of indescribable longing. Or, the sound of the flap of canvas as the wind suddenly fills the sheets on a sailboat that we affectionately think of as our own *Dawn Treader*. Our Father is saying, "Hey, Child, I love you and you have a place here with me. Come home...don't forget...come on home when your job is done...come home. You are going to love it here!"

*Anagogical – That aspect of experience that is directly concerned with the presence in it of the eternal and the divine; pertaining to the spiritual significance of events or circumstances. (Hein 1998/2002, 287)

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